

The Wrong Message at the Wrong Time

by [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

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Articles & Testimony

Although some of the arguments for decreasing U.S. military assistance to Israel stem from understandable impulses, implementing such ideas now would only embolden enemies and make conflict more likely.

When authors as diverse as Nicholas Kristof, Jacob Siegel, and Liel Leibovitz all write about ending U.S. military assistance to Israel, it is noteworthy. Writing in *Tablet*, Siegel and Leibovitz **are convinced** (<https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/end-american-aid-israel>) that the aid gives the U.S. a veto over Israeli actions, makes money for U.S. weapons manufacturers, and feeds the commonly held fiction among Israeli critics that Israel is handed a blank check. This last point, Leibovitz and Siegel legitimately argue, is not only untrue but serves the purposes of those who accuse advocates for Israel in the U.S. of serving Israel's interest at the expense of America's. The dual loyalty implication is not subtle and has long been an anti-Semitic trope. Siegel and Leibovitz see ending military assistance to Israel as a way of taking away this argument. Although valuable, for them that is a secondary reason for ending the military assistance. Siegel and Leibovitz believe Israel will be better off without it: It will reduce American leverage on Israel, mean Israel's hands won't be tied by Washington, and permit Israel to benefit from being "able to shop on the open market" and no longer be tied to U.S. equipment and its cost overruns and technical problems.

Kristof's perspective, appearing a few days later in *The New York Times*, is different. He looks at the high costs of \$3.8 billion a year in military assistance to Israel as being unnecessary because it is a country that is no longer poor and has a per capita income greater than Japan and a number of the Western European members of NATO. Moreover, he looks at how that money could be used to help poor countries like Niger desperately in need of assistance. To be fair, Kristof is talking about beginning a discussion and not abruptly cutting our military assistance

to Israel, but clearly the aim is to get there.

The intent of Siegel, Leibovitz, or Kristof may not be to contribute to those who are increasingly critical of Israel—and who would love to see the U.S. apply real pressure on it by cutting off military assistance and ending political support for it. But that will surely be the effect of their articles. Yes, even those who are generally supporters of Israel may favor applying pressure at a time when Israel's government includes messianic nationalists and ultrareligious parties—and is pushing an agenda that many Israelis believe is threatening to the democratic identity of the country. These Israelis, and their supporters in the U.S., want to show that the costs of the Netanyahu government's policies are high, and are taking a terrible toll on support for Israel in America and internationally. The Knesset's recent adoption of the law **revoking the reasonability provision (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/israels-new-law-holds-implications-security-and-us-relations>)** in court rulings will only add to this impulse.

Understandable, perhaps, but is cutting military assistance the right tool for that? No, it is not. Siegel, Leibovitz, and Kristoff generally act as if cutting off assistance would have little or no effect on the way the Iranians and Hezbollah would read the situation and American support for Israel. Already, the turmoil in Israel is being read by both as a sign of Israeli weakness, with Hezbollah's actions over the last few months ranging from having an operative carry out a terrorist act in Megiddo to permitting Hamas to fire rockets from southern Lebanon to increasingly provocative acts along the border, demonstrating that Hassan Nasrallah is becoming far less risk-averse. Cut off American assistance now, or say we will plan to do so, and the Iranians and Hezbollah will up the ante and make a conflict far more likely. Does Israel need a multifront conflict? Would that serve America's interests?

Israel's senior military and intelligence officials are not looking to go to war now, and to a person would oppose the cutoff of American military assistance to Israel, and not because they have some financial stake in assistance from America. The retired IDF general, Gershon Hacoen, who Siegel and Leibovitz cite in support of their call for ending aid, is not representative of the thinking of Israel's senior security leadership. Moreover, the argument that Israel should not want to be tied to American military equipment is simply wrong-headed. Every Israeli leader wants to preserve Israel's qualitative military edge, and it is American equipment that provides it. Our weapons remain cutting edge, highly sought after by everyone, and Israel needs not just F-35s but F-15Is for long-range missions. Moreover, Israel's development of Iron Beam—a laser-based defensive system that can be a cost-effective game-changer in countering tens of thousands of Hezbollah rockets and drones—requires more security assistance from the U.S. to make it operational sooner rather than later. (Iron Beam will also be beneficial for our military and is another example of how our security assistance to Israel **also benefits our forces (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/series/asset-test>)**.)

One should not only think of the impact of cutting security assistance on Israel and Iran/Hezbollah, but also on others in the region. U.S. presidents have repeatedly said our commitment to Israel is “ironclad”—and a cutoff of military assistance could, of course, be tied to reaffirmations of our commitment to Israeli security. But at a time when the Saudis, Emiratis, and others in the region doubt our staying power in the region, the announcement that we are cutting military assistance to Israel will reinforce their view that we are leaving the Middle East. That will surely feed their instinct to further hedge bets—hardly something likely to serve our interests.

Bottom line: Whether thinking about what is in our interests or Israel's, cutting military assistance to Israel at this time is wrong-headed. It will send the wrong signal at the wrong time, and increase the risk of conflict in the region.

Dennis Ross, the William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute, formerly served in senior national security positions with the Reagan, Bush, Clinton, and Obama administrations, including as Clinton's top Arab-Israeli envoy. This article was originally published [on the Tablet website](https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/news/articles/wrong-message-wrong-time)

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