

The Foolhardy Crisis With U.S. Jews That Threatens Israel's National Security

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Israelis must recognize that the American aid that has deterred major wars since 1973 is not automatic, and U.S. Jews are instrumental in securing it.

The current crisis emanating from the Israeli government's decision to [freeze](http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1.700530) (<http://www.haaretz.com/jewish/.premium-1.700530>) an agreement enabling non-Orthodox services at the Western Wall and renewed attempts to [refuse](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.797784) (<https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.797784>) recognition of conversions conducted by many Modern Orthodox and all non-Orthodox rabbis has been framed as a clash between Israel and Diaspora Jewry. This is an accurate but insufficient characterization. In fact, these developments represent a national security issue for Israel that should widely resonate inside the country.

While the Israeli media has devoted significant coverage to this crisis, the conventional wisdom in Israel remains that Israelis care little: Israel is divided along sharp societal lines -- the ultra-Orthodox support these moves while secular Israelis are indifferent. Neither side sees its identity as strongly linked to the Diaspora.

Yet Israelis should care about these developments, which could have a major future impact upon their security.

Although we are both modern Orthodox Jews, we are convinced that it is a mistake of historic proportions for Israel to be viewed as disrespecting non-Orthodox viewpoints. These cabinet decisions, of uncertain halakhic validity, run the risk of alienating the majority of American Jews, whose passion and support for Israel has contributed much to the U.S.-Israel relationship, including security.

Israel is justifiably proud of its close historic relationship with the U.S. Every Israeli prime minister comes to Washington, extolling the friendship between the two countries. Israelis believe that shared values and interests

have made this relationship unique over time, as it claims to have been the singular democracy in the Middle East since its establishment in 1948.

Indeed, the ironclad U.S.-Israel security ties over decades emanated from those shared ties and perception of shared threats in the Mideast. The U.S. military relationship, which did not begin until the Kennedy Administration provided Israel with Hawk surface-to-air missiles in 1962, has grown in depth and breadth beyond what could ever have been imagined then.

Just last year, the U.S. and Israel signed a ten-year \$38 billion memorandum of understanding for military assistance. Moreover, this agreement included several years of what is termed "offshore procurement," enabling Israel to spend American taxpayer dollars to promote its own industry and overseas military sales. It is safe to say that no foe of Israel in the Mideast could count on a patron providing such aid.

Israel also indirectly benefits from U.S. aid to Egypt and Jordan, with which it has peace treaties. Both of which are critical to maintaining its security. Taken together, 83% of U.S. military aid in the entire world goes to these three countries. Indeed, Israel's portion of that aid is triple that of each of the other two.

But aid to Israel is not automatic; it has required wide American public and bipartisan support to sustain it over time. American Jews have been instrumental in securing Congressional support for over \$100 billion in past U.S. assistance, including billions in offshore procurement that spurred the growth of Israel's military industrial base, apart from the new ten-year commitment of \$38 billion. This support has been based on Americans' sincere belief that Israel shares American values and interests.

The advent of major levels of U.S. military assistance since the late 70s has created a deterrent effect for Arab states. Israel has not had to face interstate wars with Arab states since 1973, as it did during the first 25 years of its life.

Moreover, in addition to its military assistance, for years the U.S. provided Israel with significant economic assistance, a key factor in its transformation to the "start-up nation" it is today.

Finally, since the 1970s, Washington has invested diplomatically to avert war against Israel, including funding and co-developing Israel's highly capable missile defense system. Without American assistance, and assuming comparable levels of Israeli military spending, Israel's quality of life particularly over the past three decades would have been sharply diminished.

The commitment of American Jews to Israel's security well-being goes back to July 1, 1945, when David Ben-Gurion met with a group of wealthy American Jews asking for their assistance so Israel could have sufficient arms, or else a Jewish state could not survive. He later rated his garnering of that assistance as one of his three biggest achievements of his life.

One cannot assume that such support is a given in the years ahead. Challenges unanticipated today could put considerable strain on the U.S.-Israel relationship. To add to that strain religious issues of access and conversion is nothing less than foolhardy, especially given the ongoing attenuation of American Jewish ties to Israel amid a generational decline in affiliation to Jewish institutional life.

Already the current polarization in American politics generally, and the potential weakening of bipartisan support for Israel amid policy differences over the Palestinian issue, is complicating U.S.-Israel relations as never before. In this light, it is inevitable that many liberal American Jews will interpret the Israeli government's response to the current religious crisis as suggesting that their support of Israel is dispensable, especially when a Republican Administration is closely aligned with a Likud government.

Until now, both Israel and American Jews have preferred not to emphasize the latter's role as both critical and stalwart supporters of the U.S.-Israel relationship. American Jews felt doing so could only diminish the merits of

their case, namely Israel's strategic value to the U.S. However, Israelis would make a major mistake to take that support for granted.

In short, the current crisis cannot be divorced from maintaining the overall vibrancy of strong U.S.-Israel relations. Israel cannot afford the loss of American Jewish support, which constitutes a critical hedge against the weakening of U.S.-Israel ties and a consequent lessening of American support in the face of future threats that it might confront. Respect for non-Orthodox forms of religious practice constitutes a national security strategic issue for Israel, one that cannot be minimized, ignored or wished away.

Israeli citizens must lose no time coming to grips with this reality -- as should its leaders and the national security establishment that supports them.

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