

Best Friends Don't Have to Ask

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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Articles & Testimony

When Israel cracks into its U.S.-funded weapons stockpile, even President Obama doesn't hear about it.

The latest ceasefire in Gaza, if it holds, probably won't bring lasting peace, but it might provide the militant group Hamas with an opportunity to retrench if not rearm. Israel needed no such respite: It replenished its stocks in late July -- prior to the ceasefire -- by tapping into the \$1 billion of pre-positioned U.S. war materiel known as the War Reserve Stockpile Ammunition-Israel, or WRSA-I.

Established in the 1990s by congressional legislation, WRSA-I is one of two American ammunition depots positioned abroad -- the other is in South Korea -- that allies can access on any emergency basis and later replace. Last month, during the height of military operations in Gaza, Israel withdrew tank and illumination rounds for grenade launchers and other unspecified materiel from WRSA as part of a foreign military sale. The last time Israel accessed this cache was in 2006, during its 34-day war with Lebanese Hezbollah.

Putting aside for the moment the question of why Israel -- after only three weeks of battling vastly inferior Hamas forces -- would need to replenish tank shells, WRSA-I is a strategic boon to Israel. The process is streamlined: No 60-day congressional notification is required, and there's no waiting on delivery. At the most basic level, WRSA was intended to prevent a repeat of the 1973 war, when the Nixon administration famously delayed a resupply airlift to Israel. The WRSA process is so efficient, in fact, according to a story published earlier this week in the *Wall Street Journal*, that the White House, to its chagrin, was unaware that last month's WRSA transfer had even occurred.

When WRSA was created, the stockpile was conceived as weapons systems and ammunition for rapid deployment to American forces in the region, and contained \$100 million worth of U.S. military materiel. At Israel's behest, over the years Congress has significantly plussed-up the program, and successive U.S. administrations have executed the legislative authorization. Next year, that value of WRSA-I should reach \$1.2 billion.

As funding for the stockpile has increased, the purpose of WRSA has likewise evolved. Today, WRSA-I is intended to

meet primarily Israeli, not American, military contingencies. In large part, this repurposing was due to the efforts of an unsung mid-level Pentagon bureaucrat named Keith Rowe.

At nearly 400 pounds, this tobacco-dipping former U.S. postal worker, who commuted two hours each way from his home in Pennsylvania to his North Virginia office, would seem an unlikely player in such an important U.S. policy initiative. An Evangelical Christian -- something he didn't necessarily advertise to his co-workers -- Keith may have held some spiritual affinity for the Jewish state. But he also clearly understood the strategic import of the U.S.-Israel alliance, and worked tirelessly to strengthen it.

Keith served as Israel director in the Defense Security Cooperation Agency or DSCA, a bureau in the Office of the Secretary of Defense responsible for weapons sales to foreign countries, and was an expert in the arcane "how-tos" of transferring weapons to allies. Perhaps his postal training came in handy.

In 2006, during the Israel-Hezbollah war, Keith pioneered an innovative bureaucratic technique within existing U.S. law to allow the Jewish state to utilize the U.S. stockpile. Along the way, he established the precedent for shipping U.S. weapons from Israel to Israel -- without the need for a cumbersome, politically fraught signoff from the White House.

To those unfamiliar with the complex world of military procurement, this accomplishment might seem trivial. But in the highly officious Defense Department milieu -- where creativity and initiative are not uniformly rewarded -- Keith's success in transforming WRSA was the bureaucratic equivalent of the elusive single-season golf grand slam.

Keith saw the new WRSA arrangement as a win-win, advancing both U.S. national security interests and the defense of an important regional ally. For its part, Israel saw WRSA as further institutionalizing the military-to-military relationship, and as a way to ensure that Israel would be equipped to fight the kind of short, intensive war it preferred given its heavy reliance on reserve forces and minimal strategic depth.

According to both Israeli and American defense officials, this latest withdrawal from WRSA-I was a matter of sourcing rather than an emergency requirement. Apparently, much of the equipment had impending expiration dates -- "almost obsolete," one former senior Israeli defense official told me -- making it a convenient and very inexpensive purchase for Israel to be used for training rather than operational purposes. The materiel, of course, will soon be replaced by fresh U.S. munitions to support Israel's next military campaign.

To be sure, WRSA-I is not without controversy. More than a decade ago, the negotiations almost stalled when Israel pressed Washington to pay the shipping costs. Several participants in the meeting recall the request prompted a scolding by a U.S. flag officer. "When you're given a present," the general reportedly told his Israeli interlocutors, "you can at least pay for the wrapping paper." (That's not usually how presents work, but today, Israel pays for the conveyance.)

Though few in the West questioned Israel tapping WRSA during the 2006 Hezbollah war, some criticized Washington providing Israel access to these munitions in the heat of last month's Gaza operations. The Obama administration, furious to learn of the WRSA transaction, subsequently delayed the transfer of Hellfire missiles and said it would better scrutinize future arms sales, according to the *Journal's* account.

Of course, Israel did not need the ammunition to defeat Hamas. But it might require access to this stockpile someday, and when it does, the war materiel will be there. Notwithstanding the current commotion about WRSA, the program remains an unambiguous demonstration of Washington's long-term commitment to Israel's capacity to defend itself.

Keith Rowe didn't live to see Israel tap into "his" stockpile last month. He died, too soon, of natural causes in 2011 at the age of 49. While his passing drew little attention in Washington circles, several senior Israeli officials -- including

the deputy director of the Israeli Ministry of Defense Mission in New York -- attended his funeral, to express both condolences and appreciation for what Keith had done for the relationship.

A few years before his untimely death, I had lunch with Keith. In his typically modest and understated way, he talked about how the changes he helped effect in WRSA had furthered U.S. interests in a volatile Middle East. Had he been around, Keith would have undoubtedly been pleased that the results of his efforts endure.

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