

# Friends with Benefits: Why the U.S.-Israeli Alliance Is Good for America

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**The bilateral relationship is based on tangible, steadily increasing security and economic interests, not just shared values.**

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At the final presidential debate of the 2012 campaign season, President Barack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney mentioned Israel some 30 times, more than any other country except Iran. Both candidates called the Jewish state "a true friend," pledging to stand with it through thick and thin. Some political commentators criticized these effusive declarations of support as pandering, suggesting that the candidates were simply going after Jewish and pro-Israel votes.

But if support for Israel is indeed such a political winner, then it's at least in part because the voters know best. The U.S.-Israeli alliance now contributes more than ever to American security, as bilateral cooperation to deal with both military and nonmilitary challenges has grown in recent years. The relationship may not be symmetrical; the United States has provided Israel with indispensable diplomatic, economic, and military support totaling more than \$115 billion since 1949. But it is a two-way partnership whose benefits to the United States have been substantial. The other, less tangible costs of the U.S.-Israeli alliance -- mainly, damage to Washington's reputation in Arab and Muslim countries, a problem also caused by American interventions and decades of U.S. support for autocratic leaders in the Middle East -- pale in comparison with the economic, military, and political gains it affords Washington.

U.S.-Israeli security cooperation dates back to heights of the Cold War, when the Jewish state came to be seen in Washington as a bulwark against Soviet influence in the Middle East and a counter to Arab nationalism. Although the world has changed since then, the strategic logic for the U.S.-Israeli alliance has not. Israel remains a counterweight against radical forces in the Middle East, including political Islam and violent extremism. It has also prevented the further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction in the region by thwarting Iraq and Syria's nuclear programs.

Israel continues to help the United States deal with traditional security threats. The two countries share intelligence on terrorism, nuclear proliferation, and Middle Eastern politics. Israel's military experiences have shaped the United States' approach to counterterrorism and homeland security. The two governments work together to develop sophisticated military technology, such as the David's Sling counter-rocket and Arrow missile defense systems, which may soon be ready for export to other U.S. allies. Israel has also emerged as an important niche defense supplier to the U.S. military, with sales growing from \$300 million per year before September 11 to \$1.1 billion in 2006, due to the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq. Israel's military research and development complex has pioneered many cutting-edge technologies that are transforming the face of modern war, including cyberweapons, unmanned vehicles (such as land robots and aerial drones), sensors and electronic warfare systems, and advanced defenses for military vehicles.

The U.S.-Israeli alliance has paved the way for the countries to cooperate on far more than just traditional security issues. In part because of the long-standing political and security relationship between the United States and Israel, most Israelis know the United States and harbor positive feelings toward it. Israeli companies looking for a global market for their products have often viewed their American counterparts as partners of choice. So today, Israeli civilian technological innovations are helping the United States maintain its economic competitiveness, promote sustainable development, and address a range of non-military security challenges.

Dozens of leading U.S. companies have set up technology incubators in Israel to take advantage of the country's penchant for new ideas, which is why Bill Gates observed in 2006 that the "innovation going on in Israel is critical to the future of the technology business." Likewise, Israeli high-tech firms often turn to U.S. companies as partners for joint production and marketing opportunities in the United States and elsewhere, creating tens of thousands of American jobs. And although Israelis make up just three percent of the population of the Middle East, in 2011 Israel was the destination of 25 percent of all U.S. exports to the region, having recently eclipsed Saudi Arabia as the top market there for American products.

U.S. companies' substantial cooperation with Israel on information technology has been crucial to Silicon Valley's success. At Intel's research and development centers in Israel, engineers have designed many of the company's most successful microprocessors, accounting for some 40 percent of the firm's revenues last year. If you've made a secure financial transaction on the Internet, sent an instant message, or bought something using PayPal, you can thank Israeli IT researchers.

Israeli innovators have also come up with novel solutions to the water and food security challenges posed by population growth, climate change, and economic development. By necessity, given the geography of the Middle East, Israel is a world leader in water conservation and management and high-tech agriculture. Israel recycles more than eighty percent of its wastewater -- the highest level in the world -- and has pioneered widely used techniques of conserving or purifying water, including drip irrigation and reverse osmosis desalination. And a number of Israeli companies are leaders in the development of renewable energy sources; BrightSource Industries, for example, is building a solar power plant in California using Israeli technology that will double the amount of solar thermal electricity produced in America. These innovations, bolstered by the substantial American investment in Israel, contribute to long-term U.S. domestic and foreign policy objectives relating to sustainable development.

To be sure, the alliance with Israel has not been without risks or costs for Washington. The 1973 War between Israel

and its neighbors brought America to the brink of conflict with the Soviet Union and prompted an Arab embargo on oil exports to the United States. Following the 1982 Israeli invasion of Lebanon, the Reagan administration dispatched U.S. marines to help stabilize the country, which ultimately resulted in costly attacks on American diplomats and military personnel there. And U.S. diplomatic and military support for Israel has reinforced negative attitudes toward the United States in many Arab and predominantly Muslim countries.

But these costs should not be overstated. Beyond leading to largely symbolic UN votes against U.S. positions, Washington's support for Israel has hardly damaged the United States' ties with its Arab and Muslim allies. Standing with Israel certainly has not hobbled U.S. policy toward the region as much as the war in Iraq or Washington's backing of autocratic Arab regimes. Meanwhile, no Arab ally of the United States has ever, as a result of its pro-Israel posture, refused to cooperate with Washington on counterterrorism or denied its requests for access, basing, or overflight rights.

In fact, the U.S.-Israeli alliance has at times helped spur closer U.S.-Arab relations, on the theory that only the United States could convince Israel to make concessions in negotiations; this was part of the logic behind Egypt's shift away from the Soviet Union and toward the United States in the 1970s. And even during the past decade of close U.S.-Israeli cooperation, and despite an impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, Arab ties with the United States have largely flourished: bilateral trade and investment are booming, as U.S. exports to the Middle East in 2011 reached an all-time high of \$56 billion. Defense cooperation is as close as ever, indicated by the several multi-billion-dollar arms deals that Washington has struck with Gulf allies in recent years. Moreover, several states, including Egypt and Jordan, along with the Palestinian Authority, share intelligence with Israel and at various times have worked behind the scenes to enlist Israel as an intermediary with Washington. This has been the case even with Egypt's post-revolutionary government. All this underscores the fact that self-interest, not ideology, is the primary driver of the Arab states' relations with Washington.

Despite the ties that continue to bind the United States and some Arab countries, the last two years of upheaval have brought turmoil to many of Washington's traditional allies in the region. At a time of great uncertainty, particularly as tensions with Iran mount, the United States is even more likely to depend on its somewhat stable nondemocratic allies, such as Saudi Arabia, and its stable democratic allies, such as Israel and Turkey, to secure its interests in the region. If anything, recent events have reinforced the logic underpinning U.S.-Israeli strategic cooperation.

The benefits to the United States of its relationship with Israel belie the argument that the alliance is based solely on the two countries' shared democratic values, on the popularity of Israel in American politics, or on the elusive pursuit of progress in the peace process. It is a relationship based on tangible interests -- and will remain so for the foreseeable future.

It isn't always easy being Israel's ally (and Israeli actions don't always make it easier). The country faces many challenges, including the unresolved conflict with the Palestinians, internal socioeconomic gaps, voices around the world that deny its right to exist, and now Iran's nuclear program. Israel has made uneven progress toward addressing these issues and needs to do more to remain an attractive partner for the United States. But its past successes in incorporating huge numbers of immigrants, bridging deep social divides, and showing remarkable resilience in the face of war and terrorism provide reason to believe that Washington can continue to count on its closest partner in the Middle East, and will continue to benefit from its alliance with the Jewish state.

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