

# Obama and Israel: Hot or Cold?

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## Washington should not allow its differences with Israel to define the bilateral relationship, much less highlight them in the vain hope of winning the esteem of Israel's foes.

Is the Obama administration's relationship with Israel close or cold? According to Eli Lake, writing in the most recent issue of *Newsweek*, it is both. Lake, in reporting the apparent delivery of "bunker-buster" bombs by the U.S. to Israel, provides additional substance to an argument often made by defenders of the administration's approach to Israel: that despite any strains in the political relationship over the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, U.S.-Israel military and security ties have never been stronger.

That the military-to-military relationship is strong is not in dispute -- it has been growing broader and deeper for many years, and the Obama Administration has maintained this trajectory. That the strength of this relationship attests to the good health of the U.S.-Israel alliance, however, is questionable.

The ties between the U.S. and Israel are based on many things, not least a deep historical and cultural affinity. However, those ties are also based on shared strategic interests. The United States provides military assistance to Israel not out of charity, but because it is in our interest to do so (indeed, this is the rationale behind most foreign assistance). Israel is a powerful, competent, and cooperative partner in a region of the world that is vital to American security and prosperity. Our assistance not only protects Israel, but also provides for our common defense against threats such as Iran's nuclear and missile program and transnational terrorist groups. These threats and Israel's cooperation in dealing with them are not merely hypothetical, as demonstrated by the Israeli strike on Syria's clandestine nuclear program in 2007. We seek to safeguard Israel's security in order to advance our own.

Providing for Israel's security, however, involves more than good military-to-military ties. It also requires a good political relationship, for two reasons. First, the threats faced by the United States and Israel (and our other allies) in the Middle East have both political and military dimensions, and often the former are more important than the latter. Frequent, close, and candid political contacts are vital in any alliance for dealing with potential threats (and

capitalizing on opportunities) before they metastasize into matters that must be dealt with by generals. Second, many of the steps the United States would like Israel to take (or, in some cases, refrain from taking) would be eased by the assurance of strong U.S. backing for Israel, whether at the United Nations or in regional and global capitals. As is the case throughout the Middle East and elsewhere, our political and security relations with Israel are inextricable.

Many observers have suggested that our military support for Israel should be traded for Israeli concessions in the peace process (indeed, this was the implicit bargain offered by the United States to Israel in November 2010 -- military hardware in exchange for an extension of the settlement freeze). This sort of zero-sum thinking has a simplistic appeal but does not stand up to the rigors of the real world. A more patient and nuanced approach views our security relationship with Israel -- and indeed our regional security efforts -- and advancing the peace process as mutually reinforcing. The reasons are simple: first, an Israel both consumed with external threats and worried about the reliability of U.S. backing is one which will hunker down, not take risks for peace; second, to the extent Israel and its neighbors are focused on similar threats, such as Iran and terrorism, our efforts to counter those threats can serve as a rare point of cooperation, even if implicit, among them and improve the regional political atmosphere.

The United States should not be uncritical of Israel, nor should we expect that we will not have differences, including publicly, with Israeli leaders. The reality of any alliance is that however extensively overlapping our interests, they are not identical. But we should treat those differences -- as we do with other close allies -- as obstacles to be overcome as we pursue a close and cooperative military and political relationship. We should not allow them to define the relationship, much less highlight them in the vain hope of winning the esteem of Israel's foes.

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