

## Not Just a Strategic Asset, but a Bonanza

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Articles & Testimony

**A**dapted from remarks given at the Nixon Center debate "Israel: Asset or Liability?" with Chas Freeman on July 20. [Read \(http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=183319\)](http://www.jpost.com/Opinion/Op-EdContributors/Article.aspx?id=183319) the Jerusalem Post's summary of Ambassador Freeman's remarks. [See \(templateC13.php?CID=538\)](#) comprehensive coverage of the debate, including complete video.

I don't think there is anyone who would disagree with the contention that there is no country in the Middle East whose people and government are so closely aligned with the United States; in some countries, the people are pro-American, in others, the government, but in Israel, it is unabashedly both.

Our two countries share ways of governing, ways of ordering society, ways of viewing the role of liberty and individual rights, and ways to defend those ideals. Some realists tend to dismiss this soft stuff as having no strategic value; I disagree. This commonality of culture and values is at the heart of national interest; it manifests itself in many ways, from how Israel votes at the United Nations to how its people view their role as being on the front line against many of the same threats we face.

It is to America's advantage to have in Israel an economy that is so closely associated with ours and that is such an innovator in the IT field, in high-tech medicine, and in green technologies, like the electric car.

Indeed, the strength of our relationship helped turn Israel from an economic basket case into an economic powerhouse -- and our economic partner. Just ask Warren Buffett and all the other American investors who view Israel as a destination worthy of their capital.

It is to America's advantage to have had a close working partnership with Israel for the last thirty-plus years in the pursuit of Middle East peace. Some bemoan the peace process as "all process, no peace" and critique the strength of the US-Israel relationship as an impediment to progress, not an ingredient of it. I disagree. First, I would argue that a strong Israel, with a strong US-Israel relationship at its core, has been central to what we know as the peace process.

And second, in historical terms, the Middle East peace process has been one of the most successful US diplomatic initiatives of the last half-century.

In the words of one knowledgeable observer: "The peace process has been a vehicle for American influence throughout the broad Middle Eastern region. It has provided an excuse for Arab declarations of friendship with the United States, even if Americans remain devoted to Israel. In other words, it has helped to eliminate what otherwise might be seen as a zero-sum game."

That sort of praiseworthy peace process was born out of the 1973 war, when two interlocking developments began to take shape -- the growth of the bilateral US-Israel strategic relationship, which took off in economic and military terms, and the emergence of a peace process in its current, American-led form.

Since then, the Arab-Israeli arena has changed dramatically in favor of US interests. Over the past thirty years, we have seen peace agreements between Israel and the most powerful Arab state (Egypt) and the state with the longest

border with Israel (Jordan). We have also seen thirty-seven years of quiet on the Syrian border and seventeen years of diplomacy between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. That is also a huge and positive difference.

Indeed, the first twenty-five years after the establishment of Israel, the regional situation could be described as continuous war with periodic outbursts of diplomacy. The second thirty-five years -- the period since 1973, the period since the take-off in US-Israel strategic relations -- can be described as continuous diplomacy with periodic outbursts of war.

Since 1973, there has not been a regional war or a state-to-state conflict in the Arab-Israeli area. We have had limited wars -- Israel versus Hizbullah, for example -- but nothing that engulfed the region. That's a huge and positive difference.

We tend to forget the context -- the fear of regional war -- that dominated the Arab-Israeli arena for years. For more than thirty-six years, it hasn't happened. Of course, it may happen again and the circumstances on Israel's northern border may be leading in that direction.

But let's look at what we know: The peace process over the last thirty-five years has essentially evolved into a process to resolve issues between Israel and the Palestinians.

These issues are difficult, complex, and highly emotional. The failure to resolve them can lead to bloodshed and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, as we saw in the second intifada. But despite all those ups and downs, it has never reverted into regional war.

Indeed, one of the great achievements of US-Israel cooperation, manifested through their partnership in the peace process, is to have reduced the Arab-Israeli conflict to an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Look at the experience of the second intifada, for example: approximately 4,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis dead in the worst outburst of intercommunal violence since 1948.

Despite this, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan survived and not one Arab state intervened to provide military support to the Palestinians; in fact, the only state to lend military support to the Palestinians was Iran.

The observer I referred to earlier as praising the peace process for eliminating the zerosum game of Middle East politics -- a peace process whose oxygen is the strength and vitality of the US-Israel relationship -- was Chas Freeman.

And then there is the long list of military-related advantages that Israel brings to the United States directly, by its own actions and through the bilateral relationship. I will cite just a few:

- Since 1983, American and Israeli militaries have engaged in contingency planning, and Israeli facilities can be made available to the United States if needed. American forces have practiced the use of many Israeli facilities, ranging from Ben Gurion Airport to pre-positioning sites. All four US armed services routinely conduct training at Israel Defense Forces facilities.
- The US has deployed an X-band early warning radar for missile defense on Israeli soil.

This facility supplements other American missile defense assets and is available for both America's regional missile defense architecture and our own reconfigured missile defense concept for protecting Europe from long-range Iranian missiles.

- America began stocking war reserves in Israel fifteen years ago. Those stockpiles are hardly "minimal" - the total value is approaching \$1 billion. They're US property and the Pentagon can draw upon them at any time.

America has shown it is able to move military supplies from Israel to the Gulf; for example, it sent Israeli mine-plows and bulldozers to Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991.

- Israel has proven to be a prime source of effective counterterrorism/counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures, which have played a significant role in US success (thus far) in Iraq.
- Israel has also been an outstanding innovator in the technology, tactics, techniques, and procedures of unmanned aerial vehicles, which the US now relies upon so extensively in Afghanistan.

Add all this up: Israel -- through its intelligence, its technology, and the lessons learned from its own experience in counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare -- has saved American lives. And when you add to this Israel's unique counterproliferation efforts -- destroying nuclear reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) -- Israel's contribution to our security is even greater.

Do a cost-benefit analysis of the US relationship with Israel over the past thirty-plus years and the US relationship with its Arab friends in the Gulf. What do you find? To secure its interests in the Arab-Israeli arena, the United States has spent about \$100 billion in military and economic assistance to Israel, plus another \$30 billion to Egypt and relatively small change to others. Our losses: a total of 258 Americans in the Beirut embassy and barracks bombings and a few other American victims of terrorism in that part of the Middle East.

Compare that with the Gulf. Look at the massive costs we have endured to ensure our interests there, the principal one being to secure access to the region's energy resources at reasonable prices. The United States has spent more than \$1 trillion -- \$700 billion on the Iraq war alone, according to the Congressional Budget Office -- lost more than 4,400 US servicemen, fought two wars, endured thirty years of conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran and a global al-Qaida insurgency fed originally by our deployment of troops in Saudi Arabia. After all that, the Gulf region is still anything but secure. It's when you boil it down to this very simple arithmetic that I can say that our relationship with Israel helped produce a strategic bonanza for the United States at bargain prices.

Is it a fairytale marriage? Of course not.

Do the two sides have differences, even profound ones, on some critical issues? Absolutely. Do certain Israeli actions run against the tactical advice and preference of various US administrations? To be sure.

But their common recognition of the strategic benefits they derive from this relationship has given the United States and Israel strong incentive to manage these differences fairly amicably over the years.

What about the argument that all this has come at a huge strategic price? I know it is de rigueur to cite Gen. David Petraeus on this issue. But look closely at what General Petraeus actually said in his prepared testimony to the Armed Services Committee. In the section of his remarks titled "Cross-Cutting Challenges to Security and Stability," he cited eleven different items. The entire list bears mention: militant Islamic networks; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; ungoverned spaces; terrorist finance and facilitation; piracy; ethnic, tribal, and sectarian rivalries; disputed territories and access to vital resources; criminal activity; uneven economic development and unemployment; lack of regional and global economic integration; and, of course, insufficient progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace.

Would US interests be advanced if there were comprehensive peace? Of course.

Who argues to the contrary? But General Petraeus blamed neither Israel nor the US-Israel relationship for the lack of such progress; nor did he even hint that this issue is somehow the key to overcome the other ten major obstacles that he outlined.

And then there's the argument about the US paying for Islamist recruitment because of its relationship with Israel.

Again, in an echo of the long list of factors that Petraeus said pose challenges to security and stability, radical Islamists also have a long list of complaints against America, of which US-Israel relations is only one among many and not nearly the most important.

If you think Osama bin Laden is all about Israel, and not about America, let me quote a very learned fellow: "Mr. bin Laden's principal point, in pursuing this campaign of violence against the United States, has nothing to do with Israel. It has to do with the American military presence in Saudi Arabia, in connection with the Iran-Iraq issue. No doubt the question of American relations with Israel adds to the emotional heat of his opposition and adds to his appeal in the region. But this is not his main point."

That very smart fellow was Chas Freeman.

Bottom line: a disinterested, professional net assessment of the impact of Israel and the US-Israel relationship on US strategic interests in the Middle East would show that the 63 percent of Americans who told the most recent Gallup poll that they sympathize with Israel -- more than four times the percentage who sympathize with what the poll presented as the other side, Palestinians (I didn't like the wording, but it's their poll, not mine) -- that those 63 percent are pretty good strategists. They know that our relationship with Israel is not just good for Israel, it's good for America.

What we really need in the Middle East are more "Israels" -- not more Jewish states, of course, but more strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies. It would certainly be nice to have one or two in the Gulf.

The absence of those sorts of allies is precisely what has gotten us into such deep trouble over the past thirty years.

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