

# U.S., Israel Still Need Each Other

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## Articles & Testimony

**A**fter two years of back-stabbing and finger-pointing, this week's Mideast "peace summit" at Wye Plantation, Md., has the potential for a real breakthrough between America and Israel. Given the common challenges these two allies face, this rapprochement may come just in the nick of time.

Ever since Benjamin Netanyahu's narrow May, 1996, election as prime minister, relations between Washington and Jerusalem have soured. Whereas Bill Clinton and the late Yitzhak Rabin had an unusually warm friendship, ties between Clinton and Netanyahu started out cool and went downhill from there.

> Some reasons are simple, such as the fact that each supported the other's political opponent, with Clinton campaigning for Labor's Shimon Peres and Netanyahu building close ties with congressional Republicans. They also disagree on policy, with Clinton keen to press on with the Oslo Accords as Rabin's legacy while Netanyahu believes that Oslo spells danger for the Jewish state. And given their remarkable similarity in personal strengths and weaknesses, the clashes might even be traced to that law of physics: "likes repel."

The result is that, in Washington, Netanyahu's "intransigence" has been seen as the root of virtually all evil, from the impasse in the Oslo process to the collapse of the Arab alliance against Iraq to America's isolation in the United Nations. It is not uncommon in the halls of government to hear Netanyahu mentioned in the same breath as Slobodan Milosovic and compared unfavorably with the president of the country listed by the State Department as the world's leading supporter of terrorism, Iran's Mohamed Khatami.

> Among Israelis, criticism of the still-popular Clinton is more muted, but his chief aides, including Secretary of State Madeleine Albright and the Foggy Bottom "peace team," are frequent targets. Accusations include naivete about Arab intentions, indifference to Israeli security concerns and zealotry in pursuit of a peace agreement at all costs.

Most recently, the United States-Israel relationship weathered nearly a year of bitterness due to the Clinton administration's insistence that the peace process could not move forward unless Israel withdrew from 13 percent of the West Bank. This was the first time since the 1956 war that Washington had ever issued to Israel what amounted to a territorial ultimatum and, as such, was a terrible precedent. But with Netanyahu's acceptance last month of a face-saving compromise that designates a parcel of the soon-to-be-returned land as a nature preserve,

the episode has passed.

Now would be the right moment for the two leaders to re-focus U.S.-Israeli relations. Though this week's summit already has a lengthy agenda with diplomatic success by no means assured, there will still be lots of time at Wye for the president and the prime minister to have a one-on-one, heart-to-heart talk. Their modest goal should be to forge a "strategic understanding" agreement, but understanding the truly important challenges that loom ahead.

> On the peace process, Washington and Jerusalem should have an honest conversation about the concluding chapter of Israeli-Palestinian talks that could very well begin at this summit -- the "final status" negotiations. Remarkably, U.S.-Israel ties have flourished for the last 30 years despite the fact that the two allies disagree on the most basic questions: What is the capital of Israel? Where should Jews be permitted to live in Palestine? What should be the final borders of the Jewish state? On these core issues of Jerusalem, settlements and territorial withdrawal, America and Israel have long held differing views. The United States-Israel alliance grew strong at least partly because the parties found a way to keep these differences under wraps and to focus on the larger picture: incremental progress toward peace. Now, with final status talks, these issues are about to burst out of the diplomatic closet and onto the bargaining table. Without a clear sense of how to manage their disagreements, the next phase of the peace process may make the last year's acrimony seem like the good, old days.

But there is a second topic they need to discuss, one that goes to the heart of Israel's existence and maybe America's, too. Israelis have prided themselves on self-reliance, but the age of missiles changes all that. Today, no small country -- even one with Israel's brains and brawn -- has the wherewithal to deter, defend and protect against hundreds of incoming ballistic missiles tipped with nuclear, chemical or biological warheads.

> With the virtual end of inspections in Iraq and Iran's test of a long-range missile, this frightening reality is not far off. The result is that, more than ever before, Israel's survival will depend on the depth of its partnership with America. Similarly, America's global role will depend on the leadership it provides for Israel and all threatened nations, from Jordan to Japan. Clinton and Netanyahu need to act now to put aside pettiness, partisan differences and peace process disputes to invigorate an alliance that is up to the challenge.



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