

Too Close For Comfort?

Reassessing America's special relationship with Israel.

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Eleven minutes after Israel announced its independence in 1948, President Harry Truman recognized the new state, and American support has been crucial to -Israel's survival and a cornerstone of U.S. foreign policy ever since. But as Washington's focus has shifted toward Iraq and Afghanistan, and as President Obama has begun new overtures toward moderate Arab states such as Egypt, some are questioning whether that policy still serves the national interest. Should the U.S. step back from its special relationship with Israel? That was the topic of last week's Intelligence Squared U.S. debate at New York University.

Arguing in favor of reassessing the relationship were Roger Cohen, a former foreign editor and a columnist for The New York Times, and Rashid Khalidi, professor of Arab studies at Columbia University and an adviser to the Palestinian delegation at the 1991–93 peace talks.



Arguing for keeping the relationship intact were Stuart Eizenstat, former U.S. ambassador to the European Union and undersecretary of state, and Itamar Rabinovich, former Israeli ambassador to the United States and professor of Hebrew and Judaic studies at New York University



The moderator was John Donovan of ABC News. Edited excerpts of the debate:

COHEN: In life, when we fail, we call it stupidity to burrow deeper into failure. Measured by any standard, American policy toward Israel has failed. We are no closer to peace. Israelis and Palestinians are farther apart than ever. What makes America's relationship with Israel special is its uncritical nature, even when U.S. interests are being hurt, and also the incredible largesse that the United States shows toward Israel—over the past decade, almost \$60 billion. To what end is this money being used? The ongoing Israeli settlement program in the West Bank has grown to 450,000 Israelis beyond the [1967] borders, a repressive apparatus of settler-only highways, reserved military areas, and "separation wall"; of Israelis in their fast cars booming down these superhighways, while Palestinians on their donkey carts make their way on dirt tracks to their orchards.

"Two states for two peoples" is the declared U.S. objective, [but] the U.S. is bankrolling the very Israeli policies that are dashing these hopes by making two states almost unimaginable.

America's perceived complicity in Israeli violence carries a heavy price. It is a potent terrorist recruitment tool. If America is to pay the blood, the treasure, and lost peace of mind that comes with supporting Israel, it should be ready to speak openly and critically of Israeli mistakes when needed. For if there are not two states, there will be one state, and, sooner or later, the number of Palestinians in it will outnumber the number of Jews, and what then will remain of the Zionist dream?

EIZENSTAT: For the United States to stand back from its special relationship with Israel would betray the very principles of morality upon which U.S. foreign policy is based. It would mean abandoning the only democratic, reliable ally in the region. What message would this send to other allies? America has to stand behind its allies, or it will not have many left anywhere. It's a specious argument that President Obama's outreach to the Muslim world is inconsistent with a special relationship with Israel. This is not a zero-sum game; we can and do have both. The Arab states know that Israel can make concessions because it has a dependable American ally. To step back from that relationship would undercut the very basis of the only bipartisan foreign policy we have in this country.

KHALIDI: Let me list a couple of the problems that result from this special relationship. One is an almost total deafness to public opinion in Palestine and in the Arab world. Everybody knows there is a big fat U.S. thumb on the scales when the United States acts as a mediator. In the recent war in Gaza, it wasn't really a war: there were 1,400 people killed on one side and 14 on the other. Everybody knows we are funding, financing, supporting diplomatically, and selling the weapons that do these things. The United States has to pull away from this special relationship with Israel if it is to play an effective role in making peace.

RABINOVICH: What does "special relationship" mean? It does not mean the tail is wagging the dog. I was an ambassador to Washington and a peace negotiator [who] worked very closely with the United States. And I know how many disagreements we have had. I saw Bill Clinton, a close friend of [Israeli Prime Minister] Yitzhak Rabin, argue fiercely, and I've seen Rabin yield to Clinton because he was the president of the United States, the senior partner.

[Our] very close military and strategic alliance is defined, among other things, by the fact that Israel does not want American troops in Israel. Not having to station troops in that part of the Middle East because Israel is there is a huge advantage to the United States. Remember, when Al Qaeda attacked the World Trade Center, the first reason they cited for attacking the U.S. [was] that the U.S. [had] troops on sacred Muslim soil.

DONVAN: Stuart Eizenstat argued that turning away from Israel would be an immoral act because Israel has been such a loyal ally for so long. I want to ask him, what would actually happen to Israel if the U.S. created more distance?

EIZENSTAT: The United States would lose the influence it has used to encourage Israel to make the concessions it has made. And Israel would be completely alone. I can tell you, it would send a chill down the spine of every ally we have in Europe and around the world if this relationship were abandoned. Because they would say, we will be next.

COHEN: Nobody is arguing that Israel should cease being an ally. We are just saying that when President Obama says he wants settlements to stop, and settlements continue, and Prime Minister [Benjamin] Netanyahu declares that some settlements are Israel's for all eternity, there should be consequences. President Obama [has] gone a long way in words. But when it comes to actions, the Palestinians see more of the same. Can we be imaginative? The Hamas charter, calling for the annihilation of Israel, is vile; it is unacceptable. But can we look for new forms of engagement? Can we think outside the box?

RABINOVICH: You know, President Obama [has begun] distancing from Israel. His expectation was that the Muslim and Arab world would applaud. The real reaction was, give us more, we will not come to the negotiations, you have to deliver Israel. And Roger, when you say, think out of the box about the Hamas charter, I don't know how to think outside the box about that. I would rather be in the box. You can negotiate with a secular nationalist movement like the Fatah. Hamas is a radical religious fundamentalist organization, and you cannot negotiate with it.

COHEN: Our policies up to now have failed. But any adjustment in U.S. policy toward Israel is extremely difficult. There is a state called Florida, with a large Jewish community, a calculation not lost on America's leadership. President Obama, I understand, has been told by some Jewish congressmen, if you want your health bill, step back on Israel.

EIZENSTAT: This is a dangerous canard, that 2 percent of the U.S. population has somehow got its hand around the neck of American foreign policy. American policy toward Israel is supported by a bi-partisan majority because the American public recognizes that Israel and the United States share common interests and common values. And those are always counterbalanced by the oil interests, defense interests, [and] major business interests.

RABINOVICH: Maybe you should elect a president from Alaska, where there are no Jews.

KHALIDI: [Laughs] You would like that.

Intelligence Squared U.S. polls the audience twice—before and after the debate—and the winner is determined by which side swung more votes to its position. In the first poll, 33 percent favored a pullback in American relations with Israel, 42 percent were opposed, and 25 percent undecided. After the debate, 49 percent favored a pullback, 47 percent were opposed, with 4 percent undecided. The side arguing for a reassessment won.

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