

The US should step back from its special relationship with Israel*

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Background

History of the US/Israel special relationship

1948, Support for the new nation: When David Ben-Gurion declared the creation of the State of Israel in 1948, advisers to US President Harry S Truman were split over whether the US should recognise the fledgling state. Clark Clifford, his legal counsel, argued that he should because the Jews deserved a sanctuary after the horror of the Holocaust. The new state, he pointed out, would come into being whether Truman recognised it or not. Secretary of State George Marshall and most of the foreign service disagreed. Recognition would look as if Truman was angling for Jewish votes and might arouse Arab hostility, jeopardising access to petroleum resources in the region. Marshall's point about Jewish votes, however, seems to have convinced Truman to take Clifford's advice: In a statement to four American envoys from the Middle East who warned him of the adverse effects of a pro-Zionist policy, he declared: "I am sorry, gentlemen, but I have to answer to hundreds of thousands who are anxious for the success of Zionism: I do not have hundreds of thousands of Arabs among my constituents."

1956, Suez – US becomes dominant power in the region: In the early days of Israel's statehood, its young pilots made do with second-hand Messerschmitts and third-hand Spitfires. Until General de Gaulle imposed an arms embargo, the Israelis were flying Mirage jets. Two factors altered this state of affairs: the decline of Britain's influence in the Middle East, and the Cold War. The first of these came to a head during the Suez Crisis of 1956 when President Eisenhower pulled the rug from under Britain's attempt, in collaboration with France and Israel, to retake the Suez Canal after it had been nationalised by Egypt's nationalist leader Gamal Abdel Nasser. At the time, the US was seen as the hero of the hour by Arab governments. But Suez, marking the decline of Britain and France as the dominant Western powers in the region, set the stage for the US to become more involved in Middle Eastern politics and at the same time turned the region into a focus for rising tensions in the Cold War. The US had already begun to equate rising nationalism in Muslim states with Communism. In 1953, the CIA (with Britain's MI6) had helped to oust Iran's elected prime minister Mohammed Mossadeq in favour of the pro-Western Shah. The Suez crisis convinced Eisenhower of Soviet ambitions in the region. He announced what became known as the Eisenhower Doctrine: The US would send weapons and cash to any Middle Eastern nation

threatened by Communism. In this context, Israel - a capitalist democracy with a strong domestic US constituency - seemed a natural ally.

1973, Yom Kippur war – Cold War flash-point: Then came the 1973 Yom Kippur War when Syria and Egypt tried to recapture lost territory. The war led to a dangerous escalation of Cold War tensions when Israel, which had been re-supplied with American arms and ammunition after threatening to go nuclear, ignored a ceasefire brokered by secretary of state Henry Kissinger and his Soviet counterpart, and the Soviets threatened to send in their own troops to enforce it. In response, the US declared a worldwide nuclear alert. The Soviets backed down, but the crisis marked the beginning of US efforts to achieve peace in the Middle East through negotiation.

1978, Peace process: The peace process, as it is now generally known, has tended to follow a familiar pattern: tortuous negotiations, followed by dramatic agreement or near agreement – the Camp David accords (1978), the Oslo accords (1993), the Road Map for Peace (2002) – and then disappointment as the negotiating partners disagreed over questions of interpretation. Israel has continued to occupy territories it took in the 1967 Six Day War and dot them with Jewish settlements, to the chagrin of a series of US presidents. The Oslo accords gave the Palestinians authority over some areas, but moderate Palestinian politicians have been unable or unwilling to restrain violent extremism.

2001, 9/11 and resentment against the US: The belief among many Palestinians and Arabs more generally that Israel has never been prepared to grant them real autonomy, has fomented anger in the Arab "street" against the US as Israel's staunchest ally and key financial backer. For many years, few Americans felt that any of this was relevant to their daily lives. But 9/11 changed all that. When Americans asked the obvious question "Why do they hate us so much?", it seemed to many that part of the answer lay in the way Osama bin Laden had exploited the image of the US as the friend of Israel to win support in the wider Arab - and Muslim - world.

American geo-political interests in the region

Securing oil supplies: The special importance of the Middle East to America has always rested on the region's dominant position in the supply of oil. Although the USA is itself a large producer, it nevertheless imports almost one quarter of its oil from the Middle East, and disruptions to oil supplies from the region have been closely linked to the most disruptive economic shocks of the post World War II period.

Nuclear non-proliferation: The USA has an interest in limiting the spread of nuclear weapons. As one of the nuclear superpowers, nuclear proliferation reduces the gap between US might and that of others. The Obama administration has also expressed a strong ideological preference for a world free of nuclear weapons. Israel is generally regarded as being in covert possession of nuclear weapons. Pakistan, a Muslim state on the periphery of the region, has an "Islamic bomb". No other states in the region currently have nuclear weapons, although Iran is generally thought to be working towards developing its own bomb.

Combating terrorism: The Middle East has been a source of terrorism aimed at the USA for over 30 years. Palestinian-sponsored violence became a feature of the 1970s and 1980s; Libya, Syria and Iran were all variously implicated in anti-Western violent plots. But it was the growth of al-Qaida and the attacks on the USS Cole, the Nairobi embassy and the 9/11

attacks on the Twin Towers that have defined the current terrorist threat. The US has been especially targeted by al-Qaida, arguably more directly so than Israel.

Neutralising rogue and failed states: US hawks see Iran and Syria as basically hostile and untrustworthy states. They are thought to be seeking nuclear weapons and to have no particular regard for treaty obligations. Together with North Korea, Cuba, Zimbabwe, Belarus and Burma, they constitute the group that Condoleezza Rice, George W Bush's last Secretary of State, called the "outposts of tyranny".

Constraining Russia and the new Cold War: The Middle East was at the front line of the Cold War and the US worked hard to minimise Soviet influence there. Some Russian foreign policy analysts still see the future of their power lying in a Moscow/Almaty (Kazakhstan)/Tehran axis of oil and gas producing states. Even if Russia's influence in the region is not a major threat today, it could become so. Memories and repercussions of the Cold War will continue to influence US/Middle Eastern relations.

Israel's national interests

The existential threat: Israel's Middle Eastern neighbours have all, at various points since 1948, wanted to see it destroyed. Israel's number one national interest has quite naturally been its survival in a mostly hostile neighbourhood. Hamas, the organisation that won the elections for the administration of Gaza in 2004, says in its founding charter: "Israel will exist and will continue to exist until Islam will obliterate it." Israel's primary national interest is therefore survival.

Internal security: Israeli civilians have been killed by rocket attacks from South Lebanon and from Gaza as well as by terrorist attacks inside the country. Domestic security is closely related to Middle Eastern geo-politics in Israel.

US military and economic assistance: Israel receives about \$3billion per year of aid from the US government. It is the biggest recipient of US aid (excluding post-war Iraq).

America's support for Israel has destabilised the Middle East and damaged US relations with the Muslim world

Agree

- [Arab and Muslim anti-Americanism is fuelled by the US's special relationship with Israel](#)
- [Israel is a key reason for al-Qaida's success](#)
- [America's uncritical support of Israel has undermined the United Nations and international law](#)
- [Attempts to repair relations with the Muslim world are rapidly undermined by Israel](#)

Disagree

- [Bin Laden's grievances are not about Israel](#)
- [It is in America's interests to support the only true democracy in the Middle East](#)
- [The US's battle against terrorism is the same as Israel's battle against terrorism](#)
- Arab and Muslim anti-Americanism is fuelled by the US's special relationship with Israel

In its failure to twist Israel's arm, its refusal to exert real pressure to halt settlement expansion on the West Bank, and its massive military aid budget to Israel, America is seen to have a built-in bias towards Israel. It was not always like this, says *Christian Science Monitor* writer Peter Grier. During the Second World War Arab states - and even Iran - saw the US as both a bulwark against invasion and a counter to the traditional power interests of Britain and Russia. The US role as a symbol of hope was one that would last until the 1960s in many Muslim countries. Today much of the Arab world sees the US solely as Israel's co-sponsor. Among other things this perception is making America's task in Iraq and Afghanistan much harder.

- Israel is a key reason for al-Qaida's success

The US and Israel are presented as partners against terrorism, but America's vulnerability to attack partly stems from its support for Israel. In the videotapes issued after the 9/11 attacks, Osama bin Laden claimed he was inspired to destroy the World Trade Center after watching the destruction of towers in Lebanon by Israel during the 1982 Lebanon War. He has consistently cited US support for Israel as a reason for the attacks. In his most recent audiotape message, issued in September 2009, he asserted that the main reason for the al-Qaida attacks on New York and Washington on September 11, 2001, was US support for Israel as well as "some other injustices". A 2004 report by Paul Rogers published on the Open Democracy website notes that al-Qaida has been greatly helped in its campaigns by "the particularly militant nature of the Sharon government in Israel together with its close links with the Bush administration. The activities on the West Bank two years ago and in Gaza more recently have been of huge help in gaining you more support across the region and beyond. The refusal of the Sharon government to acknowledge any deference to the International Court of Justice ruling on the barrier, coupled with the deafening silence from Washington, are further aids to [al-Qaida's] strategy."

- America's uncritical support of Israel has undermined the United Nations and international law

In the past 30 years, America has vetoed 34 resolutions that criticise Israel and seek to restrain its behaviour, says *Observer* columnist Henry Porter. Arabs have come to understand that the cards are stacked against them, yet in a way the resolutions stifled by Washington were unnecessary because many of the issues raised are covered by a resolution which was supported by the US in November 1967 - resolution 242, which underlines that Israel must return territory acquired in war.

- Attempts to repair relations with the Muslim world are rapidly undermined by Israel

Coming into office, President Obama demanded that Israel stop all settlements in the West Bank and Jerusalem to win a modicum of trust in order to jump-start negotiations, but Israel simply said no, says Andrew Sullivan, *The Atlantic's* political commentator. Israel, he suggests, remains unwilling to offer anything of substance to its most important ally and appears prepared even to humiliate the new president in order to undermine his appeal to Israel's enemies. As a result, Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian leader, all but said he was withdrawing from politics and the Arab and Muslim press went overboard in arguing that Obama's entire outreach to the Muslim world, as revealed in his keynote speech in Cairo in June, was a sham. "If paranoid Muslims wanted to find a piece of evidence for their conspiratorial notion that Israel controls US foreign policy, Netanyahu gave it to them on a platter". Zbigniew Brzezinski, former national security advisor to President Jimmy Carter, says that the massive aid which the US gives to Israel "is in effect a huge entitlement that enriches the relatively prosperous Israelis at the cost of the American taxpayer. Money being fungible, that aid also pays for the very settlements that America opposes and that impede the peace process."

- Bin Laden's grievances are not about Israel

In his videotaped message issued after the beginning of the US bombing campaign in Afghanistan, bin Laden said that the Islamic world "has been tasting this humiliation and...degradation for more than 80 years" - referring to the period after World War I when Britain and France were carving up the remains of the Ottoman Empire and imposing rulers with few legitimate ties to the ruled. The result, says Peter Grier, was a belt of instability and suppressed political aspirations that stretched from Constantinople to the Indian Ocean. The Palestinian-Israeli problem is just part of this much wider picture and in fact, apart from bin Laden, there has been no claim from anyone associated with the 9/11 attacks linking them to the Palestinian problem. Most of the evidence points to Saudi Arabian dissidents who resent their country - host to the holy site of Mecca and the Haj - becoming a Western military command centre and the introduction of accompanying alien values. There is evidence both that bin Laden only began to link 9/11 with the plight of the Palestinians fairly late in his campaign. Paul Rogers notes in *openDemocracy* in 2004 that al-Qaida's aim of establishing an independent Palestine that may involve the termination of the state of Israel is a "relatively recent addition, and stems from the...extreme policies of the Ariel Sharon government, as well as the manner in which these are overriding [al-Qaida's] supporters' long-standing mistrust of the Palestinian diaspora in the western Gulf states."

- It is in America's interests to support the only true democracy in the Middle East

The real threat to instability in the Middle East are the unpopular, authoritarian and anti-pluralistic governments that surround Israel. Other US allies in the region are authoritarian, or monarchies, or some combination of the two. In Saudi Arabia, the royal family could conceivably be overthrown by extremist religious factions, as happened to the Shah of Iran in 1979. Egypt faces the constant threat of populist Islamist instability. That won't happen in Israel. The Israeli government is the only reliable regime in the area and for that reason alone it deserves US support.

- The US's battle against terrorism is the same as Israel's battle against terrorism

Hamas is part of the wider axis of Islamist fundamentalist evil which the US has pledged to fight. "Israel is part of the free world and fights extremism and terrorism. Hamas is not," the moderate Kadima party leader and former foreign minister, Tzipi Livni, has said. "Large parts of the Muslim and Arab world realise that Hamas represents a greater danger to them even than it does to Israel", says Dan Gillerman, Israel's former ambassador to the UN. "Its extremism, its fundamentalism, is a great danger to them as well." Central to the Israeli message has been that, when it pulled out its military and Jewish settlers, Gaza was offered the opportunity to prosper. "In order to create a vision of hope, we took out our forces and settlements, but instead of Gaza being the beginning of a Palestinian state, Hamas established an extreme Islamic rule," said Livni. Israeli officials argue that Hamas, and by extension the people who elected it, was more interested in hating and killing Jews than building a country.

America should make its support for Israel conditional

Agree

- [Israel should be treated like any other powerful, stable, Western ally - close but not special](#)
- [Unconditional US support has been bad even for Israel](#)
- [Fighting al-Qaida does not imply fighting Hamas](#)

Disagree

- [The US is deluded to think it has any leverage](#)
- [Internal Israeli politics means the West Bank settlements will never be dismantled](#)
- [The US and Israel are too close for conditionality](#)
- [The US has to stay close to Israel - if only to keep tabs on nuclear-armed Israeli hawks](#)
- [The pressure should be put on the Palestinians, not Israel](#)

- Israel should be treated like any other powerful, stable, Western ally - close but not special

John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, a pair of academics from the Universities of Chicago and Harvard who are critical of Israel's influence on US foreign policy, argue that the end of the Cold War removed a central justification for the special relationship, as communism in the region was no longer a threat. "We show," say the authors, "that although Israel may have been an asset during the cold war it is increasingly a strategic liability...Backing Israel so strongly helps fuel America's terrorism problem and makes it harder for the United States to address the other problems it faces in the Middle East." As a huge military presence in the Middle East, Israel is no longer under existential threat. The US should therefore treat Israel as a normal country, like Britain, Germany, or Japan: close allies, but with whom Washington regularly gets tough if it feels US interests are at stake.

- Unconditional US support has been bad even for Israel

Daniel Levy of J Street, a non-profit group which advocated US leadership in the Arab-Israeli conflict, argues that the unconditional support given to Israel by successive US administrations has encouraged an aggressive expansionism which endangers Israel by keeping it at loggerheads with its neighbours and alienating Jewish communities around the world. Mark Almond, lecturer in Modern History at Oriel College, Oxford, agrees. Neither Israeli security nor Western interests are served by the policy of needlessly provoking Palestinians with the establishment of settlements in territory which even Israel itself officially concedes should be under Palestinian self-rule. "It is policies such as these, urged on by fundamentalist Jewish groups demanding the right to settle the whole of ancient Israel," which are as much a threat to peace as the behaviour of their Islamic counterparts. J Street argues that if the two sides cannot reach a deal then the US should cajole Israel and the Palestinians towards an agreement, even if that means pressing the Jewish state to give up more than it wants. Stephen Zunes, professor of politics at the University of San Francisco, argues that "The fates of American client states have often not been positive. Though differing in many respects, Israel could end up like El Salvador or South Vietnam, whose leadership made common cause with U.S. global designs in ways that ultimately led to untold misery and massive destruction. Israeli leaders and their counterparts in many American Zionist organizations have been repeating the historic error of accepting short-term benefits for their people at the risk of compromising long-term security."

- Fighting al-Qaida does not imply fighting Hamas

Hamas was elected by the Palestinian people of Gaza, so cannot be compared with terrorist organisations like al-Qaida which have no democratic mandate. Hamas's continued support derives from the fact that from the day the Israelis withdrew from Gaza, they set about ensuring that it would fail economically. "When the Israelis pulled out, we expected that the Palestinians in Gaza would at least be able to lead some sort of free life", says Diana Buttu, a former spokesperson of the PLO and a former legal adviser and negotiator during peace negotiations between Israeli and Palestinian organizations. "We expected that the crossing points would be open. We didn't expect that we would have to beg to allow food in." Hamas itself has rejected any link with organisations like al-Qaida. In 2006, Hamas political leader Khaled Meshaal said the movement had "its own vision" and did not need al-Qaida's advice.

- The US is deluded to think it has any leverage

AIPAC, America's pro-Israel lobby group, takes the position that any resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict can only be reached by the two sides on the ground, not by the imposition of conditions by the US. From a very different perspective, Mark Almond agrees with this analysis. George W Bush's policies were disastrous and leave America in a quagmire, he says, but even if the US could safely abandon the Middle East, "a gruesome fight to the finish between Israelis determined to hold on to all the land they have now and Hamas-inspired Palestinians determined to recover everything lost since 1948 cannot be ruled out." Solving the Arab-Israeli dispute is not an option for Obama, he believes. There is no basis for an agreement between the two sides in their current mood.

- Internal Israeli politics means the West Bank settlements will never be dismantled

Almost all Arabs - and continental Europeans - believe that Israel is America's creature and that if any administration were firm enough, the Israelis would come into line, says *Independent* columnist Bruce Anderson. But Israel has changed. The economy is stronger, and therefore less dependent on US aid, and the control of Israeli society has now passed from the old Israeli Labour Party Ashkenazi, the founding-father elite, to Jews from the Arab lands and Russian Jews. These tend to be deeply sceptical about the possibility of reaching any accommodation with the Arabs and are much less Washington-oriented than their predecessors. Besides, he argues, the idea of persuading Israeli settlers on the West Bank to move out is unrealistic. The forcible eviction of the comparatively few Israeli settlers in Gaza caused a lot of pain in Israel. The West Bank settlers would be a far more formidable obstacle. Their eviction could impose a breaking strain on Israel's political system.

- The US and Israel are too close for conditionality

It is "virtually unthinkable" that the US would ever sever, or significantly reduce, its ties with Israel, terrorist blackmail or no, argues Peter Grier. Too many cultural and economic links bind the two democracies for that. "It is the only really reliable regime in the area," says Shaul Gabbay of the Institute for the Study of Israel in the Middle East at the University of Denver. The *New York Times* book critic William Grimes agrees and takes issue with the Mearsheimer-Walt suggestion that the US should treat Israel as a "normal country": "It's not. And America won't. That's realism."

- The US has to stay close to Israel - if only to keep tabs on nuclear-armed Israeli hawks

US policy makers, says Henry Porter, know that Israeli defiance of resolution 242 and the subsequent resolutions passed with US help that reaffirm it have been a chronic destabiliser in the Middle East. But they point out that Israel has nuclear weapons and it is a fact of life that America is forced to intervene in the Middle East to prevent challenges to Israel's regional dominance- and, presumably to exert some sort of restraining influence on Israeli military hawks. It would, of course, be far more dangerous for Israel to act overtly on its own behalf as the great military power that it now is.

- The pressure should be put on the Palestinians, not Israel

The failure of the Oslo peace process in the 1990s showed that the Palestinian leadership was less interested in a viable state than in maintaining a state of war against the existence of the state of Israel. Many Americans believe that the rest of the Arab world uses the Palestinian question as a way to avoid facing up to their own need to reform and democratise; and that malevolent powers - the mullahs in Iran, the Wahhabists in Saudi Arabia - are aiding and abetting anti-Israeli terrorism and making a solution of the Israeli-Palestinian question impossible.

Wrap-up

There is a paradox. Though peace in the Middle East may be further away than ever, there is more potential international consensus as to the nature of that peace than there has ever been throughout the entire history of the state of Israel. In Washington, London, Jerusalem and Amman there is a surprising amount of agreement as to the broad outlines of a peace deal.

The Palestinians must have a state more or less equal in area to the territories the Israelis overran in 1967. The Israelis must have secure borders, recognised as such by the new Palestinian state and by Israel's Arab neighbours.

The hope among many governments has long been that an American administration would eventually impose such a peace on the two sides. This view seemed to underpin President Obama's landmark speech in Cairo last summer in which he sought to reach out to the Arab world by speaking of his sympathy for Palestinian "suffering" and the "humiliation" of occupation. In a major policy declaration, he also rejected the legitimacy of Israeli settlement in the West Bank saying: "It is time for the settlements to stop."

Obama's inability to shift Israeli policy on the issue has lost him credibility on both sides. Meanwhile Mahmoud Abbas, America's most important Palestinian ally, has been severely wounded by the US after he was persuaded to withdraw support for a UN report that accused Israel of war crimes during its winter offensive in Gaza. Facing uproar and fury from within his own party, Mr Abbas had to back down.

Mr Obama is not the first US president to stumble over the Middle East. Nor, probably, will he be the last.