

**INTERDEPENDENCE IN
U.S.-ISRAELI RELATIONS**

by *Shmuel Katz*

AMERICANS FOR A SAFE ISRAEL

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Washington's behavior toward Israel reflects a perception that Israel is a "poor relation" because of the aid it receives. But the relationship is actually one of interdependence. A friendly Israel is essential to American global security not only because of its geopolitical value, but also because it has developed the capability to actively serve U.S. interests.

It was in its struggle to be born despite the onslaught of seven Arab states in 1948 that Israel became physically involved for the first time in the world conflicts between East and West. The Arab states had been armed by Britain, while the

United States, for its part, collaborated with Britain in preventing any arms from reaching the beleaguered and nearly empty-handed Jews. It was only when the Soviet Union intervened and—via Czechoslovakia—provided the Jews with the bare bones of an arsenal that they were able to turn the tables on the aggressors.

The British aim of preventing the emergence of the Jewish state, as provided for in the Mandate for Palestine, had been pursued consistently for years. Its consummation in 1948, a bare three years after the destruction of six million Jews in Europe, could hardly have had any other consequence than the subjugation—indeed, if Arab threats were fulfilled, the destruction—of the Jewish community of Palestine.

Manifestly, the price paid by Israel for its military victory in the War of Independence could have been considerably reduced if it had had adequate arms. In the fifteen months of war, Israel had six thousand casualties, 1 percent of the population. In terms of the U.S. population, this would have meant about two million lives lost. The only serious contribution made by the United States to the war, apart from the embargo on arms, was the severe

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diplomatic pressure on Israel not to complete its victory—specifically not to clear the Gaza area of Egyptian occupation.

The motive for the Soviet Union's intervention was simply to ensure the expulsion of British power and influence from Palestine, a task only the Jews were capable of performing. After nearly thirty years of anti-Zionist persecution, deportation, and death in Soviet prisons and labor camps and the suppression of every manifestation of Jewish religion and nationhood, the Soviets in 1946-47 discovered a margin of common interest with the Jews of Palestine and, albeit in signals alone, showed their sympathetic interest in the war of the Jewish underground to put an end to British rule. It was the Soviet delegate who played a prominent role in the United Nations special session on Palestine in April 1947, the session that spelt the beginning of the end of the British mandate. (The confluence of interest between the Soviets and the Jews did not last long beyond the establishment of the state; Zionism was soon restored to its prominent position in Soviet demonology.)

It must be said in fairness that it was not the shapers of U.S. policy in 1948 who themselves initiated the policy that, if consummated, would have made the rebirth of a Jewish state impossible. The dominant threads of State Department thinking on Jewish nationalism and Palestine had existed for many years,¹ and its thrust was wholly negative. In the critical years of pre-World War II Nazism, the United States allied itself with the British in ensuring that not more than a handful of Jews could escape Hitler's inferno. U.S. policy was dramatized in 1939 by the example of the *St. Louis*, a ship with a human cargo of Jewish refugees from Eastern Europe that was denied entry into the United States. Documentation of the American record during the Holocaust has been the subject of so many studies that it does not require any repetition here.²

If it was possible, then, for the United States to watch impassively the murder of six million Jews in Europe by the Germans, it is not difficult to understand its cold indifference to the fate of the mere half million in Palestine fighting for their lives against the effort by seven Arab states to complete the work begun by the Germans. It consequently posed no problem of conscience in Washington to send to jail any American who, evading the embargo, tried to send a few old rifles to the Jews of Palestine.

Moreover, Washington energetically urged the provisional Israeli government, when the pan-Arab onslaught was imminent, to refrain from declaring independence—and thus to return the Jewish community, unarmed as they were, to the combined mercies of the British and their client Arabs in Palestine; and thus also to ensure that the gates of Palestine would be kept shut to the emaciated survivors of the Displaced Person camps of Europe.

The blatant anti-Semitic motivation of that policy—which is now commonly admitted—was provided with a full coating of pseudo-strategic apologetics: Palestine, it was claimed, was to be saved from Soviet penetration by continued British control (the Jewish community was, the British insisted, riddled with communism).

The thread of fundamental support for the Arab cause (though not absolutely identified with the Arabs' historic aim of eliminating the Jewish state, and made palatable by the pretense that that *is not* the Arab aim) has persisted in an uneasy dichotomy to this day. It was only when Israel inflicted a total defeat on the Arabs in 1967—having once more received practically no military aid from the United States—that the Defense Department authorities in Washington realized that Israel had developed a unique degree of military striking power in its zone. Threatened by a coalition of Arab states that boasted that Israel would be overrun and destroyed, Israel won a swift and complete military victory. From that point on, Israel began to receive military aid from the United States. While Washington continually proclaims almost complete identification with the declared immediate purpose of the Arabs — to get Israel to restore the *status quo ante* 1967, and simply return to Arab hands the springboard for their 1967 aggression—there has developed a relationship, in effect a conditional alliance, which will be binding on the United States only *vis à vis* the Soviets.

The guiding principle of that alliance, if analyzed by the yardstick of Israeli experience, may accurately be defined as follows: Aid must be given to Israel because it has become strategically indispensable in the United States' global stance, but never aid it enough to inflict a decisive defeat on its would-be destroyers.

Such an Israeli victory was in sight in 1973 when, after a disastrous opening to the Yom Kippur War and sustaining heavy losses, the Israeli forces stood poised against Cairo, and even

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Damascus was in reach. Then-U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger intervened with an exercise of diplomatic pressure (to which the Israeli government foolishly succumbed) and brought about such a reversal of roles that Israel came out of the war and its aftermath a defeated nation — after losing three thousand men. Kissinger even persuaded the inept Israeli defense minister, Moshe Dayan, to believe that the Soviets had threatened to intervene. Under repeated pressure, for two years thereafter Israel not only relinquished all the territory it had captured in that startlingly successful defensive war, but made additional territorial concessions to further Kissinger's policy of appeasement of Egypt.

It is most relevant, however, to recall one of the main reasons for Israel's heavy losses in the eighteen days of the war. Three years earlier, at the end of what came to be known as the War of Attrition in 1970 (largely a succession of air and artillery duels over the Suez Canal zone), American diplomacy supervised a cease-fire. Israel made it an essential condition for agreeing to the cease-fire that a "standstill" would be enforced so weapons would not be moved to forward positions on the Suez Canal. It was particularly concerned over the presence in Egyptian hands of Soviet SAM-6 missiles, against which Israel did not yet have an effective defense. Israel signed the agreement only with the solemn undertaking that these missiles would not be moved to forward positions on the canal.

Within twelve hours after the signing, the Egyptians moved missiles forward to the canal. Israel protested, demanding that the United States, in the spirit of the cease-fire agreement, press Moscow and Cairo immediately to move the missiles back. Washington, however, solved the problem in a more convenient way—in the spirit of Admiral Nelson at the Battle of Copenhagen:

*The Admiral's signal bade him fly,
But he wickedly wagged his head,
He clapped the glass to his sightless eye,
And "I'm damned if I see it", he said.*

For weeks the fiction was persisted in, while Washington was cajoling Jerusalem not to insist on the removal of the missiles. Finally the Israeli government backed clown, in exchange for a substantial **electronic countermeasure** package.

At the height of the Yom Kippur War three years later, Sen. Henry Jackson, in a speech in Los Angeles, angrily recalled that 1970 violation

whose net effect is to imperil the effectiveness of the Israeli Air Force as a means of preventing both cross and Canal fire and an actual crossing of the Canal itself. . . . The tragic fact is that young Israeli pilots are at this very hour paying with their lives for the failure.³

A remarkable set of circumstances, similar in many respects to the Suez Canal episode, came to light five years later. That story came out of Saudi Arabia. It is no secret that Saudi Arabia has been consolidating the means for a direct military deployment against Israel. It has invested staggering sums, chiefly from oil income, in acquiring numerous and diversified weapons, but its military organization has not been regarded as adequate for the effective intake and assimilation of those weapons. The accepted assessment of most Western experts has been that a considerable proportion of these weapons would ultimately reach the hands of poorer allies, such as Egypt or Jordan. Saudi units did, indeed, participate in the Yom Kippur War, but they did not make any significant impression. Nevertheless, in 1977-78, information had been coming in about a new air base in Saudi Arabia, planned by Americans and with their participation in its construction. This air base was being built in the northwest corner of that enormous kingdom at a place called Tabouk, only 215 kilometers southeast of Eilat in Israel.

The Israeli chief of staff, Gen. Mordechai Gur, had previously called the public's attention to the building of the Tabouk air base and to other developments in Saudi Arabia. He cautioned:

We are talking here of an immediate concrete threat. In terms of potential, a very serious force is being built up in Saudi Arabia. . . . With the combination of American and European equipment and American training, they will before long reach a quantitative and qualitative level that will have a definite effect on the fronts.

Many Americans, and of course many Israelis, were disturbed by these developments. Why did Saudi Arabia need a new air base so near the border with Israel? And what was its interest for the United States, which was assisting in its construction and

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equipment? One of the people who was concerned was Mark Siegel, a senior member of the Carter White House staff whose chief task was to represent the administration to the Jewish community in the United States. He approached the National Security Council (headed by Zbigniew Brzezinski) and asked for information about the air base at Tabouk. In reply he was told that the airfield was civilian in character. Siegel also interested himself in another subject: the declared intention of the administration to sell to Saudi Arabia sixty of its newest plane, the F-15, a proposal that had already aroused congressional opposition. On this question, too, he was given a soothing answer: The plane was of a purely defensive character.

Siegel, in his official capacity, appeared at a Jewish conference, where he explained the administration's policy and relayed the anodyne information about the airfield at Tabouk and about the F-15. A storm of protest broke out in the auditorium, accompanied by catcalls and insults. Shocked and frustrated, Siegel went to the Department of Defense at the Pentagon the next day, and there he discovered that his colleagues at the National Security Council had indeed deceived him. It turned out that the airfield was of the most sophisticated type and that modern Hawk missiles capable of striking almost any target in Israel had already been installed there. As to the F-15, not only is it suitable for every kind of combat use, but its degree of effectiveness as an assault weapon is so great that its introduction into the area would have a revolutionary effect. At the time, experts asserted that the F-15 was the most sophisticated aircraft in the world—and the most dangerous to Israel.

Siegel, who saw in this incident a clear sign of an anti-Israeli policy developing in the U.S. administration, resigned from his post with a slam of the door that reverberated throughout the United States and far beyond its borders.

This was not all. The administration went on misleading the public about the Tabouk airfield. It was no longer claimed to be "a civilian field," but it was officially explained that it was intended for defense of the oil fields and against possible attack by Iraq. Only, nobody explained why an air base should be built 800 to 1,000 kilometers away from its declared targets yet only 215 kilometers from the Israeli border. In its readiness to sell these planes to Saudi Arabia, the U.S. administration was taking an even more direct responsibility upon itself. Before this, though

selling tremendous quantities of armaments to Saudi Arabia, Washington had cautiously refrained from giving them the most sophisticated types of weaponry. The decision to sell the F-15s represented a sharp change in U.S. policy towards Israel. Knowing that the Senate, most of whose members were sensitive about Israel's security, was unlikely to approve such a sale, the administration resorted to a stratagem: It announced that if the Senate did not approve the sale of these sixty planes as well as seventy-five F-5s to Egypt, Israel would not be sold fifteen F-15s and seventy-five F-16s that it had been promised.⁴

The later case of Jonathan Pollard must be viewed in this context. He could no doubt have acted as Siegel had done: resign his post and bring to the attention of Congress and the media what he knew of the treatment of Israel by the U.S. Defense Department. In the circumstances, not only was he punished far beyond the limits of logic and of equity but, as Professor Allan Dershowitz of Harvard has cogently pointed out, what was ignored was his motive. He was reacting to a variant of the behavior principle laid down for defense relations with Israel. He had discovered that intelligence, possibly vital, certainly of great importance to Israel's security, was being withheld from Israel by the Defense Department. It was not information whose possession by Israel would in any sense endanger U.S. security. It was information relating purely to military dispositions by Arab states that affected *Israel's* security. Among the items of intelligence were preparations by Syria for chemical warfare. The motive for withholding such information was subsequently found in the public domain by a senior Israeli official, Moshe Blumkin, deputy director of Israel Aircraft Industries. He said: "There are official American statements in documents which state explicitly that it is not in the American interest that Israel should be given added strength." A report by the U.S. State Department's controller stated that Israel is very sensitive to loss of life, and it is its supreme ambition to have in hand sufficient strength to enable it to win a war with the minimum number of casualties. In this document the fear was expressed that a surplus of power might create too great a temptation to Israel and this would upset the balance of power in the Middle East.⁵

Considering the tremendous superiority and weight of arms in the air, on land, and at sea enjoyed by the Arab states over Israel, it would seem the essence of collegiality and politeness

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that Israel should be afforded the maximum of intelligence on the enhancement of that superiority. The question inevitably arises as to what the reaction of Washington would be to the withholding by a declared ally of the United States of information vital or merely important to America's security.

Yet Washington's behavior reflects (with, as it happens, tragic consequences for Pollard) a major distortion of the basis of the real relationship between the United States and Israel. Somehow, Israel has been made to assume the image of a poor relation entirely dependent on American charity; a relationship that is supposed to justify frequent hectoring and threats from sources in the State Department. Whenever an Israeli action or omission causes displeasure in the State Department, or runs counter to its views, broad hints are conveyed, usually to news-hungry Israeli journalists, that aid to Israel will be curtailed or at least that the whole question of aid to Israel might be reappraised. When a State Department official was recently reproached in Israel by a private citizen for such reactions, the official retorted, "But you are on the dole, aren't you?"

The notion that Israel is on a "dole" provided by America has the most pernicious implications and consequences. It is a notion that has been implanted worldwide. Every American who reads newspapers knows that it is frequently stated as a fact that Israel is so completely dependent on U.S. financial aid that if only the United States wished it, Israel would have to agree to whatever was demanded of it by Yasser Arafat, King Hussein, or President Hosni Mubarak. Those demands are in substance almost identical with those of the U.S. State Department: that Israel give up Judea and Samaria and Gaza, captured in repelling the combined onslaught of the Arab states on Israel's previously attenuated borders in 1967. The Arabs proclaim incessantly that the United States has the power to subjugate Israel to its will and is inhibited from doing so only by the influence of American Jews. They believe, or have persuaded themselves, encouraged by sources in Washington, that sufficient pressure on their part, the threat of war, certainly the violence practiced by terrorists, will ultimately have the effect of compelling the U.S. government to "close the faucet" and cut off supplies to Israel. The myth of Israeli dependence encourages Arab violence and Arab hopes of subjugating Israel.

What is no less serious is the *spirit of dependence* that prevails in a large part of the Israeli public. Even among those regarded as Israel's "hard-nosed" or "hawkish" citizens there exists a sense of "what can we do? We know that it is wrong to agree to some demands of the United States, but we are, after all, dependent on them."

This was the reason for Israel's failure to preempt the Syrian-Egyptian attack in 1973; for its failure to reject Kissinger's demand for a cease-fire when victory was within grasp; and then for the crowning act of all, the two-stage retreat in Sinai—at Kissinger's demand. The Sinai was won at great cost after Israel was attacked without warning on Yom Kippur, and its surrender converted a great Israeli victory into an ignominious defeat. The Yom Kippur War has remained a trauma from which Israel has to this day not recovered. Egypt, on the other hand, celebrates annually the "victory of 1973."

More recently, when Arafat, arch-enemy of Israel, returned to Tripoli, Lebanon, in 1983, with his PLO force, was encircled by Syrian troops and shelled by Israel, it was Israel, due to pressure by Washington, that enabled him and his followers to go free. There is no evidence that the United States issued any specific threat to Yitzhak Shamir, then prime minister of Israel. Going along with Washington has simply become second nature, because Israel is "dependent" on the United States.

On several occasions Washington has "punished" Israel for actions deemed unpalatable, usually by withholding arms supplies contractually paid for. Another example is Israel's destruction of the Iraqi atomic reactor, which Israel had every reason to believe was designed for its destruction. The United States joined in the chorus of excoriation heard in many of the countries friendly to the Arabs and cancelled planned negotiations for a defense pact with Israel (these negotiations resumed later).

Manifestly, from the point of view of U.S. global security, this policy is an absurdity. Even if Israel was in any serious sense dependent on the charity of the United States, it would surely be imprudent to weaken it so as to make it fall prey to its enemies. Assuming that Israel acceded to the essential demands being made on it—to withdraw into the 1949 armistice lines or thereabouts, proclaimed a "death trap" by the moderate Israeli statesman Abba Eban—it should be evident that political power in the vacuum thus created would be filled by the "Palestinians," and

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thus willy-nilly overnight there would come into existence an armed satellite of the Soviet Union. That power has over the years given every possible form of support to the PLO, including training facilities and arms. It has surely provided for itself, against the day of "victory," by concluding a mutual defense pact or similar agreement with the PLO. In short, the Soviet Union would become the predominant power in the Middle East. No-body can believe that any of the Arab states would prevent such a consummation. American policymakers should also bear in mind that withdrawal of Israel into the armistice lines of 1949—the "death trap"—would be only the first phase of the overall Arab plan for Israel's elimination. Consequently, they may take for granted what such a consummation would mean: Within a short period of time there would be a new war in the Middle East. The Arabs would make new demands on the rump state of Israel, or rather they would raise the additional demands they had been holding in reserve for the second phase in the dismantlement of Israel, such as "the right of return" to Jaffa, Haifa, and other cities of the "refugees of 1948." It cannot be assumed that Israel would consent to commit suicide. It would resist, and would have to face not only a "Palestinian" army, but once again the forces of the coalition of Arab states.

It is not surprising that many people in Israel, and indeed in the United States, believe that, notwithstanding the easy friendly relationship between Americans in general and the people of Israel, and the tolerance of American society, there persists in the State Department, which controls U.S. foreign policy, an element of anti-Semitism — identified in his day by President Truman—that beclouds even geopolitical concerns. It is hardly necessary, moreover, to recall other examples of ignorance, near-sightedness, or obtuseness in American policy on other issues that have proved inimical to American interests.

What truth is there in the claim that Israel is completely dependent on the United States? It is, even on its face, absurd. If Israel is, as it is often described, an ally or even "our most [or only] dependable ally," this means ineluctably that between the United States and Israel there subsists a condition of interdependence manifest no less—and in some senses more—than in the relationship between the United States and Western Europe.

A friendly Israel is essential to America's global security not only because of geopolitical facts, but because Israel has devel-

oped a capability of actively serving American interests, particularly in the Middle East. A threat by any enemy of the United States to the eastern Mediterranean and its shores would be met, certainly in the first phase of a conflict, by Israeli forces. It is the one area of vital American interest where *no U.S. forces are stationed*. Military experts in the United States have asserted that the Israeli air force could "take care" of the Soviet fleet in the eastern Mediterranean. (A small but effective Israeli navy would also be on hand).

It could be argued that Israel maintains an air force (among the best, and perhaps the very best, in the world) in defense of *its own* security, but that is what alliances are about. That is why the Israeli army, defending itself against attack by a common enemy, would equally be defending American security. It would be doing so substantially with the help of American arms. That is what an alliance is about. A substantial body of information published in recent years, in professional and political journals, through investigative reporting and in congressional hearings in both houses, bears testimony to the weight and the variety of the Israeli contribution to Western security.

It is a universal commonplace that Israel's intelligence services are beyond compare, and they have functioned time and again to the benefit of the United States and its allies. Indeed, no element in Israeli intelligence that could be of service to the United States has been withheld from the intelligence services of the United States or its Western allies.

What is less well known is the scope and volume of Israel's ongoing research and development, technical and technological, and its application of battle experience, the consequences of which are reflected in improvements to American weapons, the production of new weapons, and the need imposed (by Israeli successes) on the Soviets to abandon existing weapon systems and replace them by new ones.

Professor Stephen Spiegel has pointed out that the scope of the Israeli contribution extends far beyond the confines of the Middle East.⁶

Among U.S. allies, Israel is starkly exceptional. The United States maintains substantial armed forces of its own — some 300,000 men—in the territories of its allies in Europe and more than 100,000 in the Far East. The cost of its European commitment amounts to an estimated 56 percent of the defense budget,

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or \$170 billion out of \$300 billion; the Far Eastern commitment (estimated proportionately) is \$68 billion.

No American soldiers are stationed in Israel; Israel maintains its armed forces completely at its own cost — resulting in the highest percentage of a national budget going to defense of any country in the world. Israel receives not a cent from the U.S. defense budget. In its contribution to U.S. security, its role and attitude is that of an ally; yet for receiving foreign aid, it has become a poor relation.

(Israel receives about \$3 billion in foreign aid, on condition that it spend \$1.4 billion in the United States, thus providing work for an estimated fifty thousand to seventy thousand workers. Since it received not grants but loans from the United States, Israel now pays interest, at the rate of \$1.3 billion.)

Israel's treatment by the United States cannot be justified. There is, however, an explanation: If Israel were removed from the list of "beneficiaries" of foreign aid, there is a danger that the bill would not receive a majority in Congress. Some members of Congress only vote for the bill because they want to ensure aid for Israel.

A second reason is that the Pentagon would oppose the addition of \$3 billion to its defense budget. Israel has to suffer humiliation, abuse, and in the end—through the encouragement given to the Arabs—casualties, because a major power is unable to organize a transfer of \$3 billion from one arm of government to another and is incapable of explaining the adjustment to Congress and to the Pentagon.

It is surely possible to establish a relationship of sanity and equity, as between allies, by concluding a *contractual* agreement which will not be influenced by political prejudices, to ensure to Israel not a "grant" but payment for "services rendered."

Is this a problem that a major world power is really unable to solve?

Notes

1. See Philip J. Baram, *Department of State in the Middle East 1919-1945*.
2. In an appreciation of David J. Wyman's book, *The Abandonment of the Jews* (New York, 1984), Frank Feidel has written of "the appalling extent to which the United States (and Great Britain) in the face of overwhelming evidence of the Holocaust, refused to help rescue victims until very late in the war. Roosevelt, the State Department, the Armed Forces, the news media, and the American people all share some of the blame. We were not our brothers' keepers and we must bear the burden

of shame for our negligence." (Frank Feidel, Bullitt Professor of American History, University of Washington, Seattle.)

3. Inserted in *Congressional Record*, October 18, 1973.
4. See also my book *The Hollow Peace*, chapter on "The Strategic Weakening of Israel" (Dvir: Tel Aviv, 1981).
5. *Ma'ariv*, Tel Aviv, August 21, 1987.
6. See his articles in *Commentary*, June 1983 and more exhaustively in *Orbis*, October 1985.

