



Strengthening the Foundations of U.S.-Israel Ties at a Time of Change in the Middle East

By Brian Katulis and Dan Arbell April 22, 2015

Tensions between the United States and Israel soared earlier this month in the aftermath of the announcement of the framework agreement on Iran’s nuclear program. President Barack Obama declared that “a historic understanding with Iran” had been reached,¹ while Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in stark contrast, stated that the understandings reached in Lausanne “threaten the survival of Israel.”² Media outlets rushed to report on a tense telephone conversation between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu and the wide gaps that exist between the leaders’ positions on the Iran issue. This divide on Iran is just the latest in a series of tumultuous episodes between the two countries.

Yet despite these differences, the United States and Israel remain closely aligned on a wide range of regional security issues, and they continue to coordinate closely on military, intelligence, and economic matters. The U.S.-Israel relationship has been the centerpiece of U.S. Middle East strategy and a main pillar of Israel’s national security strategy for decades.

No doubt, relations between the two countries during the past six years have been unstable. Structural changes in the strategic environment facing both countries have compounded differences in the worldviews and styles of American and Israeli leaders. This current turbulence in relations, however, needs to be placed in a broader historical and strategic context: The United States and Israel have had differences before, yet they continued to work closely toward greater alignment on shared security and diplomatic goals.

Two major dynamics since the turn of the new century have altered the strategic landscape in the Middle East and contributed to strained ties between Israel and the United States. First, the 2003 Iraq War expanded Iran’s influence across the region, undermining the interests of both Israel and the United States as Tehran destabilized governments in Lebanon, Iraq, and the Palestinian Territories through the use of proxies such as Hezbollah and Hamas. At the same time, Iran’s nuclear program increased in scope and capability until the 2013 Joint Plan of Action, or JPOA, an interim agreement in which the P5+1—the five permanent U.N. Security Council members and Germany—provided limited sanctions relief for Iran in exchange for a freeze of part of its nuclear program.³

Second, the Arab uprisings that began in 2011 created chaos and turmoil across the region, including along Israel's borders with Egypt in the Sinai and with Syria in the Golan Heights. The weakening of governing institutions has allowed Islamist terrorist groups to flourish in the vacuum. If Israel once feared the strength of Arab states, its new concern is Arab weakness.⁴

On top of this new strategic context, the policy and political differences—as well as contrasting leadership styles—between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have increased the strains on relations between the United States and Israel. In terms of policy, in addition to the significant divide over how to deal with Iran's nuclear program, the United States and Israel are split over whether or not a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is viable. Lack of progress on the Palestinian front and disagreements on Iran will continue to limit the potential both Israel and the United States have to use their considerable power to undertake a proactive strategy for change.

Furthermore, the relations between the two countries are both blessed and burdened with vibrant democratic political systems and media environments. These political and media climates spill over into each other. Despite the strong knowledge of each other, the experience of the past six years demonstrates that Israelis and Americans can miss and misread important political trends.

For example, many Israelis do not realize that Americans are increasingly focused on domestic economic challenges rather than foreign policy questions and are wary of getting deeply engaged in the combustible and complicated fights playing out across the Middle East. Another domestic trend overlooked by Israelis is the broader transition in the United States' political demography: President Obama won two elections with an emerging coalition of young, minority, female, and regionally differentiated white working-class and college-educated voters, while Republicans have prospered in mid-term elections with a coalition of “older, whiter, more rural, and evangelical voters” who turn out in disproportionate numbers.⁵

Similarly, many Americans do not grasp how Israeli politics have been changed by the wave of terror that followed the collapse of the Oslo peace process early in the previous decade⁶ or how continued threats from Hamas, Hezbollah, and Iran have altered Israeli attitudes toward security. The biggest shift has been away from hope that the peace process with the Palestinians would achieve tangible results in the wake of the Second Intifada; most Israelis are pessimistic about the prospects for a two-state solution to the conflict, even as they remain supportive of the concept in theory.⁷

The past six years offer useful lessons for what works when it comes to political engagement between Israel and the United States and what does not. The political shifts in both countries came at a time when there was greater openness to a wider range of political and policy questions—and shifts in the media landscape and the growth of new media opened doors to a greater diversity of voices in the debates within Israel and the United States.

Until recently, one clear lesson from the past six years is that attempts by groups in both countries to make support for Israel a partisan wedge issue created more mistrust through misinformation. Despite decades of strong support for Israel from members of both parties in the United States, some right-of-center, pro-Israel advocacy groups tried and largely failed to monopolize support for Israel from conservatives.⁸ Some of Prime Minister Netanyahu's actions—most notably his March address to Congress⁹—have given the appearance that Israel is seeking a special relationship with one political faction in the United States. At a time of change and uncertainty in the Middle East when Israel requires continued support and the United States seeks steady, reliable partners, neither country can afford to allow the bilateral relationship to become the exclusive property of one party or ideological bloc.

If not managed carefully, actions and statements can do further damage to mutual trust between the two countries, and that mutual trust is essential to mounting a successful joint strategy that benefits both countries.

The strategic rationale for the U.S.-Israel partnership must evolve with the changing geopolitical and regional context. With the major changes underway in the Middle East and the world, the United States and Israel need to take proactive steps to manage their relationship and leverage their unique capabilities to adapt to the new environment emerging in the region. The two countries should cooperate to take the following five key steps to advance the common interests and values that the two countries share.

1. Enhance joint strategic planning and elevate the bilateral strategic dialogue

There is no deficit in the continuous contact between top officials of both countries, but there are too many frameworks and too little content. Both the United States and Israel suffer from reactive crisis management and lack of long-term strategic planning for their national security policies. One key tool both countries can use more effectively is the existing strategic dialogue framework, which brings together American and Israeli government officials at the deputy-minister level.¹⁰ This framework needs to be upgraded by increasing the level of seniority of the participants and needs to be more focused. The latter can be accomplished by holding a more in-depth discussion on a narrower set of issues, including medium- and long-term aspects of regional security, and by discussing cooperation around more effective strategies for combating terrorist networks that are operating in places such as the Sinai in Egypt.

2. Advance a more proactive regional strategy together

When looking at the world and the region, the United States and Israel face many similar challenges and share several overarching interests, such as a stable and secure Middle East, which includes promoting peace between Israel and its neighbors; preventing the global and regional spread of weapons of mass destruction; and increasing counterterrorism efforts in light of the rapidly evolving landscape. Military and intelligence cooperation between the United States and Israel remains strong, but both countries need to conduct more advance joint strategic planning on all fronts, including planning for contingencies on the Iranian nuclear issue. If an agreement with Iran is reached, intelligence cooperation between the two countries will be crucial in order to ensure that Tehran abides by its commitments.

3. Prevent unhelpful moves on the Israeli-Palestinian front and try to move the parties toward a resolution

A basic challenge in U.S.-Israel relations today is that the United States continues to pursue a negotiated agreement between Israel and the Palestinians that establishes a Palestinian state roughly along the 1967 border lines with negotiated land swaps.¹¹ In contrast, recent Israeli governments wish to maintain the status quo for as long as possible. Prime Minister Netanyahu made this clear during his election campaign when he effectively ruled out a Palestinian state as long as he was in office. Netanyahu retracted this commitment subsequent to his re-election, but his credibility on the issue has been badly damaged.¹² Israeli leaders need to come to terms with the fact that the United States has an enduring interest, expressed across administrations, in a two-state solution. If they do not, continued tensions with the United States will be inevitable.

4. Advance a mutually agreed framework for updating the U.S.-Israel relationship

U.S.-Israel relations remain based on the letter and spirit of the Camp David agreements of the late 1970s. The future framework should be based on two pillars of partnership: security and economics.

On security, the two countries need to reform their military cooperation. Recent legislation upgraded Israel's status from a U.S. "major non-NATO ally" to the new category of "major strategic partner."¹³ This creates opportunities for enhanced cooperation in the fields of homeland security, joint development of weapon systems, and the expansion of the reserve of U.S. weapon stockpiles in Israel. Work on the next generation of missile and rocket defense—building on the success of the Iron Dome,

a defense system that has proven effective in protecting people in Israel from rocket attacks originating in the Gaza Strip¹⁴—offers a particularly rich area for cooperation agreements that would continue to serve as the foundation for regional stability as well. But this foundation is in need of a major update in order to remain relevant.

On economics, American and Israeli leaders should create a new conceptual framework for the relationship in which Israel and the United States support efforts to expand economic ties between their private sectors. To this end, opportunities for joint nonsecurity flagship projects in the fields of space, science and technology, energy, and water should be explored.

5. Insulate long-term common strategic interests from domestic politics and tactical disputes

Various groups in the United States and Israel have wasted much time, energy, and resources in attempts to affect politics in both countries. Leaders in both countries need to take greater care with the bilateral relationship. Israeli leaders who speak openly about the decline of U.S. power in the region send the wrong signals to the adversaries of both Israel and America.¹⁵ Statements from U.S. leaders that hint that America is seeking alternative partners or pursuing strategies that might run contrary to core Israeli interests are similarly counterproductive.¹⁶

A constructive step that the two governments and civil society groups in both countries can take is to have broader and more inclusive dialogues in order to help decrease the gaps in understanding about the diversity of views that exist within Israel and the United States.

Conclusion

The United States and Israel are at a pivotal juncture in their bilateral relationship. As two powerful countries that have common interests and shared values, they need to find a more constructive pathway to advance a proactive strategy to deal with emerging challenges in the region. Too much time, energy, and focus have been squandered on tactical and reactive crisis management—often responding to crises that are manufactured for political reasons. The time has come to update the strategic rationale for the bilateral relationship in light of changes in the Middle East.

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