

Israel: Not Just a Strategic Asset, But a Strategic Bonanza

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“Israel: Asset or Liability?”

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Thank you for the invitation to participate in today’s event. I have known Chas Freeman, a fellow native of Rhode Island, for many years. I believe we first met when I interviewed with him for a deputy assistant secretary’s job when he served in the Pentagon in the early days of the Clinton administration. I then hosted him several years later as a speaker at a Washington Institute conference, in spring of 2002. He was then, as I assume he will be today, his provocative self.

I did have some reluctance in agreeing to speak at this event. After all, I asked myself, why should I lend legitimacy to a question—“Israel: asset or liability?”—on which the overwhelming majority of Americans agree; on which the vast majority of strategists of both major parties agree; and on which the vast majority of military leaders and national security specialists agree, across the political spectrum? Today’s question bounces around a lot on the blogosphere, but, I am authoritatively told, not in the Situation Room. Still, it’s out there—perhaps on the fringes, but perhaps not only there—and it sometimes rears its head in ugly and even anti-Semitic ways. So, I thought—why not? A case as strong as this one deserves the light of day.

And there is a certain appropriateness in having it heard at the Nixon Center. Richard Nixon, as this room surely knows, was no romantic. And he was certainly no philo-Semite. But he was the first American president to recognize the strategic value of Israel to U.S. national interests. As President Nixon once said, “I am supporting Israel because it is in the interest of the U.S. to do so.” Even Professors Walt and Mearsheimer, who you won’t hear me quote approvingly very often, cite Israel as a U.S. strategic asset during those Nixon years: “By serving as America’s proxy after the Six Day War, Israel helped contain Soviet expansion in the region and inflicted humiliating defeats on Soviet clients like Egypt and Syria. Israel occasionally helped protect other U.S. allies (like Jordan’s King Hussein), and its military prowess forced Moscow to spend more backing its losing clients. Israel also gave the United States useful intelligence about Soviet capabilities.” All of that is an understatement, of course, but it underscores why this place—more than most other institutions—should have a natural inclination to recognize the strategic value of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

My task today is to make the case why Israel—and the U.S.-Israel relationship—is a strategic asset to the United States. In fact, I will go even further. I will argue that Israel, and the U.S.-Israel relationship, is—both in objective terms and compared to any other Middle Eastern relationship we have—a strategic bonanza to the United States. Not just an asset, but a bargain.

Let me make these points:

- It is to America's advantage to have a nation of friends, whose people and government are firm supporters of and advocates for American interests in the broader Middle East. I don't think there is anyone in this room who would disagree with the contention that there is no country in the Middle East whose people *and* government are so closely aligned with the United States; in some countries, the people are pro-American, in others, the government, but in Israel, it is unabashedly both. Our two countries share ways of governing, ways of ordering society, ways of viewing the role of liberty and individual rights, and ways to defend those ideals. Some realists tend to dismiss this soft stuff as having no strategic value; I disagree. This commonality of culture and values is at the heart of national interest; it manifests itself in many ways, from how Israel votes at the United Nations to how its people view their role as being on the front line against many of the same threats we face.
- It is to America's advantage to have in Israel an economy that is so closely associated with ours and that is such an innovator in the IT field, in high-tech medicine, and in green technologies, like the electric car. The Obama administration made the economic health and well-being of the U.S. the pillar of its National Security Strategy. Our partnership with Israel is a clear asset in this regard—not only does Israel's fiscal responsibility (a situation that contrasts with other U.S. allies in Europe) mean that Israel is not part of this problem, but with its high-tech economy, Israel is actually part of the solution. Indeed, the strength of our relationship helped turn Israel from an economic basket case into an economic powerhouse—and our economic partner. Just ask Warren Buffett and all the other American investors who view Israel as a destination worthy of their capital.
- It is to America's advantage to have had a close working partnership with Israel for the last thirty-plus years in the pursuit of Middle East peace. Some bemoan the peace process as “all process, no peace” and critique the strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship as an impediment to progress, not an ingredient of it. I disagree. First, I would argue that a strong Israel, with a strong U.S.-Israel relationship at its core, has been central to what we know as the peace process. And second, in historical terms, the Middle East peace process has been one of the most successful U.S. diplomatic initiatives of the last half-century.

In the words of one knowledgeable observer: “The peace process has been a vehicle for American influence throughout the broad Middle Eastern region. It has provided an excuse for Arab declarations of friendship with the United States, even if Americans remain devoted to Israel. In other words, it has helped to eliminate what otherwise might be seen as a zero-sum game.”

That sort of praiseworthy peace process was born out of the 1973 war, when two interlocking developments began to take shape —the growth of the bilateral U.S.-Israel strategic relationship, which took off in economic and

military terms, and the emergence of a peace process in its current, American-led form. Since then, the Arab-Israeli arena has changed dramatically in favor of U.S. interests. Over the past thirty years, we have seen peace agreements between Israel and the most powerful Arab state (Egypt) and the state with the longest border with Israel (Jordan). We have also seen thirty-seven years of quiet on the Syrian border and seventeen years of diplomacy between Israel and the Palestine Liberation Organization. That is also a huge and positive difference.

Indeed, the first twenty-five years after the establishment of Israel, the regional situation could be described as continuous war with periodic outbursts of diplomacy. The second thirty-five years—the period since 1973, the period since the take-off in U.S.-Israel strategic relations—can be described as continuous diplomacy with periodic outbursts of war. Since 1973, there has not been a regional war or a state-to-state conflict in the Arab-Israeli area. We have had limited wars—Israel versus Hizballah, for example—but nothing that engulfed the region. That's a huge and positive difference.

I say all this because we tend to forget the context—the fear of regional war—that dominated the Arab-Israeli arena for years. For more than thirty-six years, it hasn't happened. Of course, it may happen again—there is always that fear—and the circumstances on Israel's northern border may be leading in that direction. But let's look at what we know: The peace process over the last thirty-five years has essentially evolved into a process to resolve issues between Israel and the Palestinians. These issues are difficult, complex, and highly emotional. The failure to resolve them can lead to bloodshed and violence between Israelis and Palestinians, as we saw in the second intifada. But despite all those ups and downs, it has never reverted into regional war. Indeed, one of the great achievements of U.S.-Israel cooperation, manifested through their partnership in the peace process, is to have reduced the Arab-Israeli conflict to an Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Look at the experience of the second intifada, for example: approximately 4,000 Palestinians and 1,000 Israelis dead in the worst outburst of intercommunal violence since 1948. Despite this, the peace treaties with Egypt and Jordan survived and not one Arab state intervened to provide military support to the Palestinians; in fact, the only state to lend military support to the Palestinians was Iran.

I forgot to mention that the observer I referred to earlier as praising the peace process for eliminating the zero-sum game of Middle East politics—a peace process whose oxygen is the strength and vitality of the U.S.-Israel relationship—was Chas Freeman.

And then there is the long list of military-related advantages that Israel brings to the United States directly, by its own actions and through the bilateral relationship. I will cite just a few:

- Since 1983, American and Israeli militaries have engaged in contingency planning, and Israeli facilities can be made available to the United States if needed. American forces have practiced the use of many Israeli facilities, ranging from Ben Gurion Airport to pre-positioning sites. All four U.S. armed services routinely conduct training at Israel Defense Forces facilities.
- The U.S. has deployed an X-band early warning radar for missile defense on Israeli soil. This facility supplements other American missile defense assets and is available for both America's regional missile defense architecture and our own reconfigured missile defense concept for protecting Europe from longer-range Iranian missiles.
- America began stocking war reserves in Israel fifteen years ago. Those stockpiles are hardly "minimal"—the total value is approaching \$1 billion. They're U.S. property and the Pentagon can draw upon them at any time. America has shown it is able to move military supplies from Israel to the Gulf; for example, it sent Israeli mine-plows and bulldozers to Iraq during the first Gulf War in 1991.
- Israel can be an extremely useful location for strategic logistics or power projection in the eastern Mediterranean, and in fact the United States Navy has conducted countless port visits in Haifa in support of U.S. operations.
- Israel has proven to be a prime source of effective counterterrorism/counterinsurgency tactics, techniques, and procedures, which have played a significant role in U.S. success (thus far) in Iraq
- Israel has also been an outstanding innovator in the technology, tactics, techniques, and procedures of unmanned aerial vehicles, which the U.S. now relies upon so extensively in Afghanistan.

Add all this up: Israel—through its intelligence, its technology, and the lessons learned from its own experience in counterterrorism and asymmetric warfare—has saved American lives. And when you add to this Israel's unique counterproliferation efforts – destroying nuclear reactors in Iraq (1981) and Syria (2007) – Israel's contribution to our security is even greater.

Bottom line: do a cost-benefit analysis of the U.S. relationship with Israel over the past thirty-plus years and the U.S. relationship with its Arab friends in the Gulf. What do you find? To secure its interests in the Arab-Israeli arena, the United States has spent about \$100 billion in military and economic assistance to Israel, plus another \$30 billion to Egypt and relatively small change to others. Our losses: a total of 258 Americans in the Beirut embassy and barracks bombings and a few other American victims of terrorism in that part of the Middle East. On a state-to-state basis, as I have argued, that investment has paid off handsomely in terms of regional stability. Compare that with the Gulf. Look at the massive costs we have endured to ensure our interests there, the principal one being to secure access to the region's energy resources at reasonable prices. The United States has spent more than \$1 trillion—\$700 billion on the Iraq war alone, according to the Congressional Budget Office—lost more than 4,400 U.S. servicemen, fought two wars, endured thirty years of conflict with the Islamic Republic of Iran and a global al-Qaeda

insurgency fed originally by our deployment of troops in Saudi Arabia. After all that, the Gulf region is still anything but secure. It's when you boil it down to this very simple arithmetic that I can say that our relationship with Israel helped produce a strategic bonanza for the United States at bargain prices.

Is it a fairytale marriage? Of course not. Do the two sides have differences, even profound ones, on some critical issues? Absolutely. Do certain Israeli actions run against the tactical advice and preference of various U.S. administrations? To be sure. But their common recognition of the strategic benefits they derive from this relationship has given the United States and Israel strong incentive to manage these differences fairly amicably over the years.

What about the argument that all this has come at a huge strategic price? Well, I can only say that I am glad we are at the Nixon Center because, at least here, true realists will see through the haze and see the world as it really is. Specifically:

- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where cooperation with an Arab country in the realm of counterterrorism, missile defense, Iran, Iraq, maritime security, or nonproliferation was significantly hindered by our relationship with Israel. Hint: the answer is at or close to zero.
- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where U.S. ties to Israel were a factor either in politics in Iraq and Afghanistan or in our ability to operate in those two countries. Hint: a senior U.S. diplomat resident in Baghdad explained to me recently how many times the issue of Israel even came up in the Iraqi election campaign this year, namely, zero.
- I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases where America's relationship with Israel has proven an obstacle to Arab government cooperation with the United States on measures to prevent Iran from achieving a military nuclear capability—in other words, all those substantive measures that Arab states tell the United States they would do to tighten the noose on Iran's nuclear weapons program but refuse to do because of the U.S. relationship with Israel. Hint: the real answer is less than zero. Arab states are aching for early and effective U.S. action against the Iranian nuclear program at least as much as Israel is.
- And, of course, I look forward to discussing all the examples of cases of Arab boycott of sale of oil to America or America's allies as a result of U.S. friendship toward Israel. After all, isn't that the usual critique, that our friendship with Israel threatens our access to the free flow of oil at reasonable prices? The fact of history is that ever since the U.S. began to build a strategic relationship with Israel—the past thirty-five years—there have been no such boycotts.

So, given the long list of advantages we derive from our relationship with Israel, to make the liability case, I expect to hear an even longer and much more specific and detailed list

of items where that relationship has impeded our ability to advance our interests on all these issues.

I know it is *de rigueur* to cite Gen. David Petraeus on this issue. But please look closely at what General Petraeus actually said in his fifty-six-page prepared testimony to the Armed Services Committee. In the section of his remarks titled “Cross-Cutting Challenges to Security and Stability,” he cited eleven different items. The entire list bears mention: militant Islamic networks; proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; ungoverned spaces; terrorist finance and facilitation; piracy; ethnic, tribal, and sectarian rivalries; disputed territories and access to vital resources; criminal activity; uneven economic development and unemployment; lack of regional and global economic integration; and, of course, insufficient progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace. Would U.S. interests be advanced if there were comprehensive peace? Of course. Who argues to the contrary? But General Petraeus blamed neither Israel nor the U.S.-Israel relationship for the lack of such progress; nor did he even hint that this issue is somehow the key to overcome the other ten major obstacles that he outlined.

So that we can save ourselves precious time, I am perfectly willing to stipulate the following: Arab leaders like to harangue to U.S. presidents, U.S. ambassadors, U.S. special envoys, and even U.S. generals about Israel. I don’t think we need to have a debate about that. The point in contention is whether their harangues have much strategic import. In other words, does Arab action match Arab talk. Instinctively, we all know that it doesn’t; until recently, we just lacked the data to support it. Thanks to outstanding research by my Institute colleague David Pollock, who crunched the numbers on a half-dozen indicators of U.S.-Arab relations for twenty Arab states over a ten-year period, we now have the data. And the results are crystal clear—the key principle is “watch what we do, not what we say.” And, importantly, this applies both to Arab governments and to Arab publics. Except for episodic and passing moments, like the period around the spring 2003 U.S. attack on Saddam’s Iraq, and notwithstanding public opinion poll data to the contrary, the actual, measurable trajectory of U.S.-Arab relations—travel, education, trade, security relations, etc.—has been consistently up.

And then there’s the argument about the U.S. paying for Islamist recruitment because of its relationship with Israel. Again, in an echo of the long list of factors that Petraeus said pose challenges to security and stability, radical Islamists also have a long list of complaints against America, of which U.S.-Israel relations is only one among many and not nearly the most important. In the early days of this conflict, when Usama bin Laden was first declaring war on “Crusaders and Jews,” the main target was U.S. forces in Saudi Arabia; more recently, as attempted Times Square bomber Faisal Shahzad declared in court, the major complaint was U.S. drone attacks in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Palestine is usually mentioned, but hardly ever as the headline; and, as my colleague Matt Levitt has pointed out, al-Qaeda rarely places such a high priority on fighting Israel that it actually targets Israel or Israelis. Remember—to both Salafists and Shiite radicals alike, America is the “Great Satan”; Israel is only the “Lesser Satan.” They hate us, our values, our pluralism, our culture. Israel is just a small part of that story. This isn’t just Rob Satloff’s view. Read the 9-11 Commission Report. That’s their view, too.

If you think bin Laden is all about Israel, and not about America, let me quote a very learned fellow: “Mr. bin Laden’s principal point, in pursuing this campaign of violence against the United States, has nothing to do with Israel. It has to do with the American military presence in Saudi Arabia, in connection with the Iran-Iraq issue. No doubt the question of American relations with Israel adds to the emotional heat of his opposition and adds to his appeal in the region. But this is not his main point.” That very smart fellow was Chas Freeman.

Bottom line: a disinterested, professional net assessment of the impact of Israel and the U.S.-Israel relationship on U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East would show that the 63 percent of Americans who told the most recent Gallup poll that they sympathize with Israel—more than four times the percentage who sympathize with what the poll presented as the other side, Palestinians (I didn’t like the wording, but it’s their poll, not mine)—that those 63 percent are pretty good strategists. They know that our relationship with Israel is not just good for Israel, it’s good for America.

In fact, I am tempted to say that what we really need in the Middle East are more “Israels”—not more Jewish states, of course, but more strong, reliable, democratic, pro-American allies. It would certainly be nice to have one or two in the Gulf. The absence of those sorts of allies is precisely what has gotten us into such deep trouble over the past thirty years. We’ve had allies who we have sold weapons worth billions and billions of dollars but who can’t patrol their own borders; who can’t secure the free flow of oil; who can’t take care of themselves without relying on the U.S. cavalry to come to the rescue. In a room of realists, this lesson should be clear: what we should really want as allies are countries that, with a strong America behind them, can take care of themselves and project our basic values in the process. In other words, we could use a couple more countries like Israel.