

Israel as a Strategic Liability?

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America's ties to Israel are not based primarily on U.S. strategic interests. At the best of times, an Israeli government that pursues the path to peace provides some intelligence, some minor advances in military technology, and a potential source of stabilizing military power that could help Arab states like Jordan. Even then, however, any actual Israeli military intervention in an Arab state could prove as destabilizing as beneficial. The fact is that the real motives behind America's commitment to Israel are moral and ethical. They are a reaction to the horrors of the Holocaust, to the entire history of Western anti-Semitism, and to the United States' failure to help German and European Jews during the period before it entered World War II. They are a product of the fact that Israel is a democracy that shares virtually all of the same values as the United States.

The U.S. commitment to Israel is not one that will be abandoned. The United States has made this repeatedly clear since it first recognized Israel as a state, and it has steadily strengthened the scale of its commitments since 1967. The United States has provided Israel with massive amounts of economic aid and still provides enough military assistance to preserve Israel's military superiority over its neighbors. The United States has made it clear that any U.S. support for Arab-Israeli peace efforts must be based on options that preserve Israel's security, and its recent announcements that it will consider "extended regional deterrence" are code words for a U.S. commitment that could guard Israel, as well as its neighbors, against an Iranian nuclear threat.

At the same time, the depth of America's moral commitment does not justify or excuse actions by an Israeli government that unnecessarily make Israel a strategic liability when it should remain an asset. It does not mean that the United States should extend support to an Israeli government when that government fails to credibly pursue peace with its neighbors. It does not mean that the United States has the slightest interest in supporting Israeli settlements in the West Bank, or that the United States should take a hard-line position on Jerusalem that would effectively make it a Jewish rather than a mixed city. It does not mean that the United States should be passive when Israel makes a series of major strategic blunders--such as persisting in the strategic bombing of Lebanon during the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, escalating its attack on Gaza long after it had achieved its key objectives, embarrassing the U.S. president by announcing the expansion of Israeli building programs in east Jerusalem at a critical moment in U.S. efforts to put Israeli-Palestinian peace talks back on track, or sending commandos to seize a Turkish ship in a horribly mismanaged effort to halt the "peace flotilla" going to Gaza.

It is time Israel realized that it has obligations to the United States, as well as the United States to Israel, and that it become far more careful about the extent to which it test the limits of U.S. patience and exploits the support of American Jews. This does not mean taking a single action that undercuts Israeli security, but it does mean realizing that Israel should show enough discretion to reflect the fact that it is a tertiary U.S. strategic interest in a complex and demanding world.

Israel's government should act on the understanding that the long-term nature of the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship will depend on Israel clearly and actively seeking peace with the Palestinians—the kind of peace that is in Israel's own strategic interests. Israelis should understand that the United States opposes expansion and retention of its settlements and its efforts to push Palestinians out of greater Jerusalem. Israeli governments should plan Israeli military actions that make it clear that Israel will use force only to the level actually required, that carefully consider humanitarian issues from the start, and that have a clear post-combat plan of action to limit the political and strategic impact of its use of force. And Israel should not conduct a high-risk attack on Iran in the face of the clear U.S. "red light" from both the Bush and Obama administrations. Israel should be sensitive to the fact that its actions directly affect U.S. strategic interests in the Arab and Muslim worlds, and it must be as sensitive to U.S. strategic concerns as the United States is to those of Israel.

The United States does not need unnecessary problems in one of the most troubled parts of the world, particularly when Israeli actions take a form that does not serve Israel's own strategic interests. This Israeli government in particular needs to realize that as strong as U.S.-Israel ties may be, it is time to return to the kind of strategic realism exemplified by leaders like Yitzhak Rabin. No aspect of what happened this week off the coast of Gaza can be blamed on Israeli commandos or the Israel Defense Forces. Israel's prime minister and defense minister had full warning about the situation, and they knew the flotilla was deliberately designed as a political provocation to capture the attention of the world's media in the most negative way possible. They personally are responsible for what happened, and they need to show far more care and pragmatism in the future.

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