

Israel Is Now America's Closest Ally

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President George W. Bush will soon make his second visit to Israel in less than six months, this time to celebrate the country's 60th anniversary. The candidates for the presidency, Republican and Democratic alike, have all traveled to Israel and affirmed their commitment to its security. So have hundreds of congressmen.

American engineers, meanwhile, are collaborating with their Israeli counterparts in developing advanced defense systems. American soldiers are learning antiterrorist techniques from the Israeli army.

Israel is the only Middle Eastern country where the American flag is rarely (if ever) burned in protest – indeed, some Israelis fly that flag on their own independence day. And avenues in major American cities are named for Yitzhak Rabin and Golda Meir. Arguably, there is no alliance in the world today more durable and multifaceted than that between the United States and Israel.

Yet the bonds between the two countries were not always so strong. For much of Israel's history, America was a distant and not always friendly power.

Consider the period before Israel's founding in 1948, during the British Mandate over Palestine. Though many Americans, Christians as well as Jews, were committed to building the Jewish national home, their government's policy was strictly hands-off. Palestine, in Washington's view, was exclusively Britain's concern, and the Arab-Jewish conflict was a British headache.

Accordingly, the Roosevelt administration raised no objection to Britain's 1939 decision to end Jewish immigration into Palestine, sealing off European Jewry's last escape route from Nazism. The U.S. indifference to Zionism deepened during World War II, when America feared alienating its British allies and angering the Arabs, whose oil had become vital to the war effort. Deferring to British and Arab demands, America confined hundreds of thousands of Holocaust survivors in displaced-persons camps in Europe rather than let them emigrate to Palestine.

America's ambivalence toward Zionism persisted after the war, as the battle against Nazism gave way to the anticommunist struggle. While a sizeable majority of Americans welcomed Israel's creation in May 1948, policy makers in Washington feared that such support would trigger an Arab oil boycott of the West and the Soviet take-over of Europe. Secretary of State George Marshall even warned the president, Harry Truman, that he would not back him for re-election if he recognized the newborn state. An ardent Baptist whose best friend was a Jew, Truman ignored these warnings and made the U.S. the first nation to accord de facto recognition to Israel. But buckling to State and Defense Department pressures, Truman also imposed an arms embargo on Israel during its desperate war of independence. Later, he arm-twisted Israeli leaders to relinquish land to the Arabs and to readmit Palestinian refugees.

Pressure for territorial concessions escalated under Truman's successor, Dwight D. Eisenhower, who also vetoed weapons sales to Israel. His secretary of state, John Foster Dulles, dismissed Israel as "the millstone around our necks," and threatened it with sanctions during the 1956 Suez Crisis. Israel is home to the Middle East's largest memorial to John F. Kennedy, but Kennedy similarly refused to sell tanks and planes to Israel, and warned that America's relationship with the Jewish state would be "seriously jeopardized" by Israel's nuclear program. Lyndon B. Johnson was the first president to invite an Israeli prime minister, Levi Eshkol, to Washington – 16 years after Israel's birth – but he then balked at Eshkol's request for American help against the Arab armies assembling for war in June 1967. "Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go it alone," Johnson replied, implying that

the U.S. would not stand beside Israel militarily.

The Six-Day War nevertheless inaugurated a dramatic change in America's attitude toward Israel. Israel's astonishing victory in that conflict instantly transformed the "millstone" into an American asset, a hardy fellow democracy and Cold War ally. Nixon regarded Israel as "the best Soviet stopper in the Mideast," and furnished the weaponry Israel needed to prevail in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter both ran on platforms highly favorable to Israel, and dedicated themselves to the search for Israel-Arab peace. By the end of the 1970s, an inchoate U.S.-Israeli alliance had emerged, sealed by the existence of a potent pro-Israel lobby in Washington and the extension to Israel of billions of dollars of American aid.

But the relationship was hardly friction-free. Israel's reluctance to forfeit territories captured in 1967, and its efforts to settle them, became a perennial source of tension. Presidents Ford and Carter threatened to withhold assistance from Israel unless it made territorial concessions. President George H.W. Bush denied Israel loan guarantees for resettling Russian immigrants in the West Bank. Israel's security policies also jolted the alliance – Ronald Reagan condemned Israel's bombardment of the Iraqi nuclear reactor in 1981 as well as its siege of Beirut the following year. Americans, in turn, irritated the Israelis with their transfer of sophisticated weapons to Saudi Arabia and their opposition to Israeli arms sales to China.

Such rifts have grown increasingly infrequent, however, and today there are few visible fissures in the U.S.-Israeli front. Yet America has never recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital – imagine if Israel refused to recognize Washington. Powerful interest groups lobby against Israel in Washington while much of American academia and influential segments of the media are staunchly opposed to any association with Israel.

How does the alliance surmount these challenges?

One reason, certainly, is values – the respect for civic rights and the rule of law that is shared by the world's most powerful republic and the Middle East's only stable democracy. There is also Israel's determination to fight terror, and its willingness to share its antiterror expertise. Most fundamentally, though, is the amity between the two countries' peoples. The admiration which the U.S. inspires among Israelis is overwhelmingly reciprocated by Americans, more than 70% of whom, according to recent polls, favor robust ties with the Jewish state.

No doubt further upheavals await the alliance in the future – as Iran approaches nuclear capability, for example. Israel may act more muscularly than some American leaders might warrant. The impending change of U.S. administration will also have an effect. But such vicissitudes are unlikely to cause a major schism in what has proven to be one of history's most resilient, ardent and atypical partnerships.