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UNCERTAIN COMMITMENT

ISRAELI ASSESSMENTS OF U.S. POWER

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Israelis believe the United States is projecting weakness in a region that has no mercy for the weak. The Israeli elite do not doubt U.S. power and military capabilities as much as they question how the United States will use its assets to shape regional trends and events that directly affect Israeli interests. They fear that America's political influence is declining and its unwillingness to use unilateral military action to solve regional threats will come at their expense. Moreover, U.S. demands for the ouster of the Egyptian president, Hosni Mubarak, a longtime ally and pillar of regional stability, stunned many Israelis who fear that U.S. support for popular Arab protests fundamentally destabilizes the region. Israeli assessments reflect a deep sense of uncertainty and anxiety over the trajectory of U.S. policy and its potential impact on Israeli security and interests.

More specifically, Israelis see America's unwillingness to threaten Iran with military force not only strengthening Iran's resolve but making a nuclear-armed Iran inevitable. The United States has the capability to stop Iran's nuclear weapons program, but Israelis doubt whether the United States has the "stomach" for such a fight. The question lies at the center of Israeli strategic calculations, and in many ways Israelis see U.S. resolve on Iran as the test of U.S. global power. They fear the United States will fail the test, leaving Israel alone to face the burden of a nuclear Iran.

Although most Israelis are confident that the United States will remain the world's dominant military power for the foreseeable future, many see rising powers like China, Russia, and Turkey increasingly challenging U.S. policy on a range of issues. Some even point to the slow evolution of a multipolar international order in which the United States has less influence to shape trends and outcomes. This poses serious diplomatic constraints for Israel, which relies on strong U.S. diplomatic support, especially in international forums. Israelis fear a U.S. shift toward multilateralism may become irreversible and will further deepen their own international isolation.

More broadly, U.S. indecision and passivity raise fundamental Israeli questions about the long-term U.S. commitment to Israel's security. For nearly half a century, America has sustained a level of political and military support that has guaranteed Israel's security. If U.S. support is in doubt, then Israeli decisionmakers believe they will have to rely even more on their own military strength and assets to protect Israeli interests. The consequences could be destabilizing for both Israel and the United States.

The impressions cited in this chapter came from a series of discussions in Israel during May and October 2010 with several dozen Israeli officials and former officials, journalists, and academics. The discussions, which were conducted almost exclusively in Hebrew, included conversations with Israelis from a broad cross section of Israeli politics and society.



Obama's Worldview

As most Israelis see it, America's passivity stems largely from President Barack Obama's strategic orientation, which emphasizes multilateralism and dialogue over unilateral military action and traditional alliances.¹ The president's talk of engagement with U.S. adversaries and his outreach to the Muslim world early in his presidency contrasted sharply with the language of preemptive force and unilateralism with which Israelis identified during the George W. Bush years. Israelis had grown accustomed to U.S. presidents showering them with attention and friendship. The contrast was stark, and it created a deep uncertainty about how Obama's different approach would affect Israel.

Bush's friendship and strong moral support were reassuring to Israelis. His public affection for Ariel Sharon, whom he called a "man of peace," complemented strategic outlooks that saw Israel's battle against Hamas and Hezbollah as the same as the U.S. war against al Qaeda. Bush's warm embrace eased Israeli concerns about the negative strategic consequences of his policies, many of which undermined Israeli interests. Bush's democratization policy helped bring Hamas to power in 2006, and the execution of the war in Iraq raised many questions about U.S. judgment and capability in the Middle East. The release of the National Intelligence Estimate in November 2007, which concluded that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons program in 2003, was another blow to Israeli confidence that the Bush administration was taking the Iranian threat seriously. But for all

1. In expressing these perspectives, Israelis tend to focus on their own strategic environment and overlook the fact that President Obama has increased U.S. troop levels in Afghanistan and stepped up the use of drones and targeted killings of al Qaeda operatives in Pakistan and throughout the broader Middle East.

of Bush's strategic shortcomings, Israelis took comfort not only in his unflinching support but also in his projection of U.S. strength.

To most Israelis, President Obama is different. He displays an inherent sympathy for a vague notion of global equality that has shaped his attitudes toward the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and, more important, toward the U.S.-Israeli relationship. Whereas George W. Bush unapologetically identified with Israel's challenges, Barack Obama sympathizes with both the Palestinian and Israeli narratives. The president's early position on the siege of Gaza, his public demand for a settlement construction freeze, and his Cairo speech were three critical moments that shaped Israeli attitudes and perceptions of Obama in his first half year in office.

The encounter was tense from President Obama's first days in office. Obama celebrated his inauguration in the aftermath of the Israel-Hamas war, which clouded an unprecedented occasion in U.S. history. Two days later at the State Department the president announced a new peace envoy to promote Israeli-Palestinian talks. More alarming for many Israelis, his talk about Palestinian suffering in Gaza seemed to hint at a nuanced shift in policy toward the Hamas-controlled territory as he declared, "As part of a lasting cease-fire, Gaza's border crossings should be open to allow the flow of aid and commerce, with an appropriate monitoring regime. . . ."² That was just the beginning.

The Palestinian issue and Israeli settlement construction quickly became key sources of bilateral tension between the Obama administration and Netanyahu government. President Obama's approach to restarting direct talks by focusing on an Israeli settlement construction freeze in the West Bank and East Jerusalem was seen by many Israelis as not only overly ambitious and idealistic, but ultimately counterproductive. Ironically, even those Israelis who supported negotiations toward a Palestinian state believed that U.S. actions made an agreement less likely.³

More egregious for many Israelis was the Obama administration's argument that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was undermining broader U.S. security and national interests, a concept that Israelis overwhelmingly rejected. "The absence of peace between Palestinians and Israelis is an impediment to a whole host of other areas of increased cooperation and more stable security for people in the region, as well as the United States," Obama said.⁴ Israelis became fixated on this

2. "Transcript: President Obama Delivers Remarks to State Department Employees," *Washington Post*, January 22, 2009, www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2009/01/22/AR2009012202550.html.

3. Israeli columnist Ari Shavit, for example, wrote that the Obama administration adopted a "tough love policy" toward Israel, which, he argued, is potentially damaging to the relationship and irreversible. "Without a strong Israel, a Middle East peace can neither be established nor survive," he wrote. The following year, tension between Obama and Netanyahu would also rally opposition forces in support of the Netanyahu government's Jerusalem construction policy. In March 2010, for example, Otniel Schneller, a member of the Knesset affiliated with Kadima, distributed a letter supporting the Israeli government's decision to build additional housing units in Jerusalem. According to Schneller and press reports, nearly two-thirds of Knesset members supported or signed the letter. See Ari Shavit, "Is a Crushed Israel in America's Best Interest?" *Haaretz*, July 2, 2009, <http://haaretz.com/hasen/spages/1097244.html>; and Rebecca Anne Stoil, "MKs to PM: Stand Up to US on Jerusalem," *Jerusalem Post*, March 19, 2010, www.jpost.com/Israel/Article.aspx?id=171326. Another editorial in Israel's leading daily, *Yediot Ahronot*, for example, argued that the "problem with American policymakers is that they see the Middle East through the lens of their own culture." See Mordechai Kedar, "Atzor et Obama" [Stop Obama], *Yediot Ahronot* (Ynet), May 13, 2009, www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-3713501,00.html.

4. The White House, Office of the Press Secretary, "Remarks by President Obama and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Press Availability," May 28, 2009, www.whitehouse.gov/the_press_office/

“linkage” that Obama and his national security team articulated between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and America’s broader interests in the Middle East.⁵ This idea later spurred a broader debate over Israel’s strategic value to the United States, which alarmed many Israelis.⁶

By mid-2009 the crisis of trust in U.S.-Israeli relations was unmistakable. Many Israelis were convinced that the Obama administration was trying to orchestrate the collapse of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s coalition in the hopes of bringing about a Kadima-led government that would be more willing to negotiate a Palestinian agreement. In an interview with National Public Radio, President Obama explicitly admitted that he was taking an approach to Israel different from that of his predecessors. “Part of being a good friend is being honest,” he said. “And I think there have been times where we are not as honest as we should be about the fact that the current direction, the current trajectory, in the region is profoundly negative, not only for Israeli interests but also U.S. interests.”⁷ The interview was a rare display of public frankness in U.S.-Israeli dialogue. It deepened Israeli concerns that President Obama sought to fundamentally change the relationship.

Then came the president’s Cairo speech, which marked a turning point that convinced many Israelis that President Obama was intent on rebuilding U.S. ties with the Muslim world at their expense and that he was hostile toward Israel and Israeli interests. The speech equated Jewish suffering in the Nazi Holocaust with Palestinian suffering and displacement. For Israelis the Cairo speech was a double blow: not only did it raise Palestinian displacement on equal moral ground with the Holocaust, but the president, who was only 250 miles from Tel Aviv, chose not to visit Israel.

Despite these concerns, most Israeli critics could not point to any concrete examples of how President Obama’s approach directly undermined their security or interests. Indeed, despite unprecedented political tension during the first 18 months of the Obama administration, strategic cooperation continued growing as the president pledged additional funds for Israeli defense systems and granted Israel access to the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter, which the Bush administration delayed. While the majority was critical, dissenting Israeli voices took a more balanced approach, and some Israeli government professionals privately acknowledged that President Obama’s outreach to the Muslim world made sense from the U.S. perspective and that it was counterproduc-

Remarks-by-President-Obama-and-President-Abbas-of-the-Palestinian-Authority-in-press-availability/.

5. The Iraq Study Group (Baker-Hamilton Commission) made a similar argument.

6. The issue was later addressed by General David Petraeus, then commander of CENTCOM, before the Senate Armed Services Committee. Petraeus argued that “the conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR. . . .” Secretary of Defense Robert Gates echoed a similar sentiment shortly after the Petraeus testimony, claiming that “the lack of progress in the peace process has provided political ammunition to our adversaries in the Middle East and in the region, and that progress in this arena will enable us not only to perhaps get others to support the peace process, but also support us in our efforts to try and impose effective sanctions against Iran.” For the Petraeus testimony, see Senate Armed Services Committee, “Statement of General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army Commander, U.S. Central Command, Before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the Posture of U.S. Central Command,” March 16, 2010, <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Petraeus%2003-16-10.pdf>; and for the Gates comments see Department of Defense, “Media Availability with Secretary Gates and Israeli Defense Minister Barak from the Pentagon,” April 27, 2010, www.defense.gov/transcripts/transcript.aspx?transcriptid=4616.

7. Liz Halloran, “Obama: U.S. Needs To Be ‘Honest’ With Israel,” National Public Radio, June 1, 2009, www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=104798978.

tive for Israelis to raise such loud protests regarding U.S. policy.⁸ Such sentiment was the exception, and relations deteriorated further still.

In March 2010 Vice President Joseph Biden visited Israel to reassure Israelis and repair ties. Instead, the Jerusalem Planning Committee issued an ill-timed announcement that Israel would build 1,600 housing units for Jewish families in East Jerusalem, which sparked a major political crisis between the two governments. In the aftermath both sides recognized that such deep political tension was counterproductive, and they worked hard to repair damaged ties. President Obama firmly backed Israel's position after the Gaza flotilla incident and announced plans to provide an additional \$205 million to fund Israel's development of the Iron Dome short-range rocket defense system.⁹ In July 2010, President Obama warmly welcomed Prime Minister Netanyahu to the White House and publicly reinforced his administration's commitment to Israel's security. Prime Minister Netanyahu seemed to grudgingly accept America's strategy for confronting Iran through United Nations Security Council (UNSC) sanctions, and some commentators argued that U.S. and Israeli positions on Iran were converging.¹⁰ Most important, the strong relationship built between Admiral Michael G. Mullen, chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and Gabi Ashkenazi, then chief of the General Staff of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF), played a crucial role in maintaining close strategic cooperation during a period of heightened political tension.

Yet, if Israelis had grown more accustomed to President Obama toward the close of 2010, their public criticisms reemerged during the waves of public protest that swept Tunisia and then Egypt in January and February 2011. Many Israelis blamed Obama for supporting the ouster of Hosni Mubarak as president of Egypt. For three decades Mubarak had been one of Israel's most important strategic partners and anchor of regional stability. Mubarak's departure created a new set of uncertainties for Israeli policymakers. More broadly, they feared that the president's support for popular Arab uprisings would create hostile regimes on Israel's borders and beyond. In a public gathering, Amos Gilead, director for political-military affairs at Israel's Ministry of Defense, expressed Israeli concerns, stating, "Look around the Middle East: If there is a democratic process here, it will bring, for sure, hell."¹¹

Ramifications for Israel

Ongoing Israeli mistrust of President Obama's policy approach directly influences Israeli policy debates in three critical ways. First, if Israeli decisionmakers believe the United States is reluctant

8. Former senior Israeli intelligence official, private interview, Tel Aviv, May 9, 2010.

9. The Obama administration argued that the Iron Dome system would help Israel take the necessary risks for peace. This was likely in response to Defense Minister Ehud Barak's discussions with U.S. officials in 2009, during which he reportedly argued that Israel could not make concessions on the Palestinian issue until it had the capability to protect itself from rocket attacks. While Iron Dome may give Israel some protection against short-range rockets, it does not address the larger strategic threat of ballistic missiles. Two Iron Dome batteries were deployed in southern Israel in March 2011 although there is still significant criticism of the system. For a brief history of the controversy, see Barbara Opall-Rome, "Israel Speeds Iron Dome Short-Range Defense System," *Defense News*, January 28, 2009, www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=3327047.

10. See, for example, "Indyk: U.S. More Likely Than Israel to Bomb Iran," *Atlantic*, August 16, 2010, www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2010/08/indyk-us-more-likely-than-israel-to-bomb-iran/61508/.

11. Barbara Opall-Rome, "Hedging against America," *Defense News*, February 14, 2011, <http://www.defensenews.com/story.php?i=5699414>.

to use force, or at least the threat of force, to solve regional security threats—most importantly stopping Iran’s nuclear weapons program—then it raises the urgency of decisive and perhaps even unilateral actions to protect Israeli interests. Second, Israelis believe U.S. policy is facilitating a slow evolution toward a multilateral international order, where the United States is increasingly constrained diplomatically and challenged by regional powers. Third, U.S. policy fuels Israeli doubts about America’s reliability as a strategic ally and raises difficult questions about its long-term commitment to Israel’s security. The deep uncertainty has significant ramifications not only for Israeli decisionmaking but for U.S. interests as well.

Confronting Iran

Most urgently, Israelis believe that the United States is not acting decisively to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program. This heightens the urgency for decisive action by Israeli policymakers to protect Israeli security. As Israelis see it, a nuclear Iran would fundamentally alter the regional security landscape and balance of power, denying Israel its regional hegemony and freedom of action. It would embolden Iran and its allies Hezbollah and Hamas and subject Israel to an ever-rising series of threats. Some Israelis have concluded that the United States has already accepted the idea of a nuclear-armed Iran and is moving toward a containment strategy.¹²

What is frustrating for many Israelis is that the United States has the military capability to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program but is reluctant to use, or at least threaten to use, that power. They believe cautious language by U.S. officials projects weakness instead of instilling fear in Iran. They point to President Bush’s threatening language in 2003 and Iranian fears of U.S. military action in the aftermath of the Iraq invasion as important examples of how the threat of force can influence Iranian decisionmaking.¹³ But many Israeli security officials argue that statements such as those made by Admiral Mullen that a U.S. strike on Iran would be “very, very destabilizing” with unintended consequences¹⁴ signal to the Iranians that the United States has no intention of using force to stop Iran’s nuclear weapons program. Israelis believe that U.S. passivity and indecision encourages Iran to pursue its nuclear program with acceptable costs.

Because Israel and the United States are so closely allied, Israelis believe that the perception of a weak United States in the region affects Israel’s own image and power projection. The IDF in particular watched its deterrent gradually erode following the unilateral withdrawals from Lebanon in 2000 and Gaza in 2005. The declaration by Hassan Nasrallah, secretary general of Hezbollah, that “Israel is weaker than a spider web”¹⁵ still haunts many Israelis, who fear that the image of Israel’s military prowess has eroded.¹⁶

12. See, for example, Ephraim Asculai, “A U.S. Volte-Face?” *INSS Insight* No. 166, March 8, 2010, www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=3862.

13. In making this argument, Israelis cite the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate although they were critical of its conclusion when first released.

14. Admiral Mullen used the same language to describe a nuclear Iran and a strike against Iran. See Admiral Michael Mullen (speech delivered at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, January 7, 2010), www.jcs.mil/speech.aspx?ID=1309.

15. Hassan Nasrallah first used the concept of a spider web to describe Israel following Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon in May 2000. See, for example, Hassan Nasrallah, “Speech during the Divine Victory Celebration,” August 3, 2010, <http://english.moqawama.org/essaydetails.php?eid=11970&cid=231>.

16. In a conversation with youth leaders from the Hashomer Hatsair (Labor Zionist) movement, they quoted Hassan Nasrallah’s spider web theory and worried that Israel was becoming weaker because

To restore its image as a dominant military power Israel has resorted to military campaigns, often at the expense of diplomacy. The wars in Lebanon in 2006 and Gaza in 2008–2009, which in part aimed to restore Israel’s military deterrent, are prime examples. Future military confrontations will likely be even more devastating to both Israel and its adversaries.¹⁷ The IDF’s revised military doctrine, targeted against Hezbollah in particular, plans to use overwhelming airpower to inflict heavy damage on Hezbollah assets and Lebanese infrastructure to force a swift international cease-fire. Military planners consider such a cease-fire the most effective way of protecting their home front from sustained rocket and missile attacks and preventing Hezbollah from declaring a political victory. However, overwhelming force and potentially high civilian casualties could create political tension with the United States and jeopardize U.S. political cover for Israel, especially in international forums.¹⁸ Such confrontations could also pose diplomatic challenges for the United States in the future and complicate its broader regional policy.

Diplomatic Challenges

As Israelis see it, U.S. policies in the region not only strengthen its enemies but are exploited by U.S. allies as well. Israelis fear that a broader perception of U.S. weakness, combined with the administration’s preference for diplomacy and multilateral action, is slowly reshaping the international arena and directly undermining Israel’s diplomatic interests in two key ways. First, they believe that U.S. allies are pressuring the United States on key foreign policy issues such as non-proliferation. Second, many Israelis believe that U.S. diplomatic hegemony is eroding, which will constrain its future ability and willingness to protect Israel in the international arena. Any softening of U.S. diplomatic support, either as a result of a U.S.-Israeli crisis or external pressure on the United States, will fuel the international campaign to delegitimize Israel.

U.S. support for Israel in the United Nations and other international forums has been vital for Israel. According to one former Israeli official, “Israel could probably live without U.S. military assistance, but it could not survive without U.S. political support.” The country is at a natural disadvantage in an international system where the United States is less dominant diplomatically and less willing or able to advocate on behalf of Israeli interests.

Israel already faces a hostile international environment, and many Israelis believe the drive to delegitimize its existence is an emerging strategic threat. Senior Israeli political and defense officials, for example, have curtailed travel to Great Britain and other European countries for fear of arrest under universal jurisdiction laws. This deepens Israelis’ sense of isolation and fuels a fear that they have no one to depend on but themselves. Some Israeli analysts point to U.S. acquiescence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) Review Conference agenda promoted by

the ethos of self-sacrifice for the greater good was disappearing from Israeli culture and values. They also pointed to the overemphasis of low Israeli military casualties, primarily in the Gaza war, as a public and IDF barometer of success in that campaign. This trend was also noted in the Israeli media. Private discussion, Tel Aviv, May 6, 2010.

17. Jonathan Lis, “IDF Intelligence Chief: Israel’s Next War Will See Heavy Casualties,” *Haaretz*, November 2, 2010, www.haaretz.com/news/diplomacy-defense/idf-intelligence-chief-israel-s-next-war-will-see-heavy-casualties-1.322484.

18. Israel paid a high diplomatic price for those conflicts. The international outcry over Israel’s military tactics and high civilian casualties undermined Israel’s national security interests by alienating its allies and increasing international pressure on Israel through the UN’s Goldstone Report. The Gaza War in particular also drove a major wedge in Turkish-Israeli ties that were already waning.

Egypt as a sign that this shift is already in motion. The conference's final document called on Israel to sign the NPT but omitted any mention of Iran's nuclear program.¹⁹

Turkey is another source of Israeli concern. Israelis largely interpreted Turkey's vote against UNSC sanctions on Iran as a sign that regional powers are setting independent agendas that challenge the United States. Turkey analysts in Jerusalem argue that Turkish prime minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan in particular is emboldened by his perception of a weak United States and a stronger Turkey, which has led him to rebuff President Obama repeatedly on a number of issues.²⁰

Israeli concerns about the Obama administration's emphasis on multilateral action has led some Israeli officials to argue that Israel needs to strengthen its "networks of common interests" with other regional powers in preparation for a future multipolar world order in which the United States is less influential and less willing to manage global affairs.²¹ At the annual Herzliya Conference in February 2011, for example, Rafi Barak, director general of Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, claimed that the United States is "apparently no longer the global policeman." He continued by arguing that Israel should focus on "developing new and bilateral alliances."²² Emerging regional powers like China, India, and Brazil are the most attractive candidates, and many Israelis, especially those of Russian origin, view Russia as an important partner as well.

That Israel should expand its ties with regional powers is not a new argument. In a 2009 visit to Moscow, Israeli foreign minister Avigdor Lieberman chaired the first session of the Russia-Israel Strategic Dialogue. At the time one analyst argued that Lieberman sought to build a strategic partnership with Russia in part to balance Israel's overreliance on U.S. diplomatic, financial, and military support.²³ Trade and bilateral exchanges with Russia have increased dramatically in the last decade, jumping from approximately \$50 million in 1990 to nearly \$1.8 billion in 2008, including \$49 million worth of Israeli unmanned aerial vehicles in 2009.²⁴ Although Russia's military sales to Israel's enemies, primarily Iran and Syria, complicate bilateral relations, cooperation in a number of spheres will likely continue.

Israel has also built ties with China, but those relations are also complicated, and most Israelis largely conclude that China is not a viable or reliable strategic partner. For one, China is increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil to fuel its economy, and it gets nearly half of its total imports from the region.²⁵ More important, China has no moral or political connection to Israel, which has been one of the most important factors in the U.S.-Israeli partnership. Europe has also been a partner, and in the past, many of Israel's friends in Europe have advocated a closer Israel-NATO partnership. Although some Israeli policymakers have supported the idea, Israel's deteriorating ties with Europe and Turkey, a NATO member, make it unlikely as long as the Palestinian issue remains unresolved.

19. See, for example, Emily B. Laundau, "2010 NPT RevCon: Final Results and Implications for Israel," *INSS Insight* No. 185, June 3, 2010, www.inss.org.il/publications.php?cat=21&incat=&read=4113&print=1.

20. Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs official, private discussion, Jerusalem, May 5, 2010.

21. Kadima member of Knesset, private discussion, Jerusalem, May 5, 2010.

22. Barbara Opall-Rome, "Hedging against America."

23. Amir Mizroch, "Analysis: As US Harps on Settlements, Israel Aims to Boost Russian Ties," *Jerusalem Post*, May 31, 2009, www.jpost.com/Home/Article.aspx?id=144026.

24. Central Bureau of Statistics (Israel), "Imports by Country of Purchase and Exports, by Country of Destination," *Statistical Abstract of Israel*, 2009, http://www1.cbs.gov.il/shnaton60/st16_03x.pdf.

25. Saudi Arabia and Iran are China's two largest suppliers in the Middle East. U.S. Energy Information Administration, "China," *Country Analysis Briefs*, July 2009, www.eia.doe.gov/cabs/China/Oil.html.

Long-Term U.S. Commitments

For many Israelis, doubts about U.S. decisiveness and willingness to use force also raise fundamental questions about the long-term U.S. commitment to Israel's security. Israel's partnership with the United States is at the core of its foreign and national security policy, and America's overwhelming support has led many Israelis to believe that the United States is Israel's only true friend and strategic ally in the world.²⁶ Now, many Israelis question whether the United States would stand behind Israel at a moment of truth in a potential Israeli-Iranian confrontation.²⁷ If U.S. support is in doubt, then Israel will have to rely even more on its own military strength and assets to protect its interests, regardless of whether those capabilities are sufficient to confront Iran.

Despite the significant upgrade in U.S.-Israeli military cooperation under Obama, Israel's defense establishment "worries that they will pay a price for America's new strategic orientation."²⁸ They worry that the Pentagon's civilian leadership increasingly believes Israel's policies are undermining a range of U.S. interests in the region.²⁹ Many defense officials fear that ongoing political tension and a shift in U.S. strategic interests could erode Israel's qualitative military edge and prevent greater integration of U.S. and Israeli missile defense architectures. Although defense officials acknowledge that security cooperation has expanded dramatically during the last two years, they remain concerned about future weapons platform development and production, acquisitions, and the long-term sustainability of U.S. military aid.

Israeli questions about long-term U.S. commitments have resurrected an old debate in elite circles about Israel's dependency on the United States. In recent discussions with current and former Israeli officials across the political spectrum, many expressed the need to become more self-reliant and independent in order to prepare for a time when U.S. support might be less forthcoming. "Israel can only depend on itself," argued one former defense minister.³⁰ Others, such as former IDF chief of staff Dan Haloutz, argue that, although Israel's unique relationship with the United States is an unrivaled strategic asset, its dependence on U.S. military assistance is a strategic burden for Israel.³¹ Now many other Israelis, inside and outside of government, echo that sentiment and question whether current levels of assistance are sustainable in the long term.³²

Israelis pride themselves on being strong enough to defend themselves and never asking the United States to fight on their behalf.³³ Still—as many Israelis acknowledge—U.S. military assis-

26. Senior Israeli Ministry of Defense official, private discussion, December 2008.

27. Israeli Ministry of Defense official, private discussion, Tel Aviv, May 3, 2010.

28. Defense officials also noted that President Obama increasingly weighs in on decisions regarding strategic cooperation that past presidents left to the professional military level. Israeli Ministry of Defense official, private discussion, Tel Aviv, May 4, 2010.

29. In a briefing to the Knesset's Foreign Affairs and Defense Committee, Mossad chief Meir Dagan reportedly argued there was an "erosion" of Israel's strategic value for the United States over the last year. This was originally mistranslated in the English-language Israeli newspapers, which quoted Dagan claiming that Israel had become a strategic liability. See "Rosh Hamossad: Shekhika B'chashivuteinu L'Artzot Habrit" [Mossad chief: Israel less important to U.S.], *Yediot Ahronot* (Ynet), June 6, 2010, www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-3897456,00.html.

30. Moshe Arens, former Israeli minister of defense, private discussion, Tel Aviv, May 3, 2010.

31. Barbara Opall-Rome, "Israel's Lebanon War Chief Defends Strategy," *Defense News*, February 22, 2010.

32. Israeli security official, private discussion, Jerusalem, October 17, 2010.

33. Ehud Barak (speech at Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Washington, D.C., February 26, 2010), www.washingtoninstitute.org/html/pdf/EhudBarak.pdf.

tance plays a major role in Israel's procurement, its air force is dependent on U.S. spare parts, and its military production line relies heavily on U.S. components. U.S. military aid has ensured Israel's qualitative military edge, but it has also constrained Israel's defense industry, giving the United States essential oversight over Israeli defense production and exports.³⁴

Despite the debates and questions surrounding U.S. commitments, the reality is that Israel has no alternative to its strategic partnership with the United States. Israel's strategic and diplomatic environment is growing more complex, and its need for U.S. intervention on a range of diplomatic issues ranging from the fight against Iran's nuclear program to managing Israeli-Egyptian relations will be critical. Despite the perception that the United States is distracted and its influence is declining, there is no substitute: "Israel is dependent on a strong United States that can solve problems and influence events."³⁵ Most Israelis want and need the United States to remain strong and lead the region and the world, yet the crisis of doubt makes cooperation and coordination more difficult.

While Israelis overwhelmingly blame President Obama for creating tension in U.S.-Israeli relations, much of the Israeli elite is sober about U.S. priorities and how they might be diverging from Israeli priorities. Some Israelis inside and outside of government acknowledge that the United States has a much wider set of interests compared with their own more narrowly focused challenges. They understand that this gap in perspectives leads to different threat assessments and strategic priorities. Many also acknowledge that consecutive Israeli governments have lacked any strategic vision and consistently undermined Israeli interests through short-sighted tactical policies that have deepened the rift with the United States.

Looking Forward

Managing Israeli expectations and actions will likely become more complex in the months and years ahead. The danger is that ignoring Israeli perceptions and doubts makes Israeli decision-making more unpredictable and creates more friction with the United States. For Israel the stakes are high: as Israelis perceive U.S. power and commitment declining, they fear a parallel decline in their own military power.

In all of this Israelis do not necessarily see President Obama actively downgrading the relationship, but they believe his strategic vision and policies will resonate beyond his years in office, with significant ramifications for Israeli interests. Israelis are thinking about how a partnership with the United States might look different in the future, but they remain unsure about its contours or how they might shape it.

34. In 2007 Israel passed an expanded defense export control law to strengthen oversight. See Ministry of Defense (Israel), "Defense Export Control Law, 5766-2007," October 2007, www.exportctrl.mod.gov.il/NR/rdonlyres/7B53DDE6-AEE8-47BC-AEFA-1AF325FB96D0/0/Defense_Export_Control_Law.pdf.

35. Retired Israeli air force general, private discussion, Tel Aviv, May 4, 2010.