U.S.-Israel Ties after the Agreement

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PEOPLE HAVE DISMISSED TREMORS IN THE U.S.-ISRAELI PARTNERSHIP FOR MORE THAN A DECADE, YET BENEATH THE SURFACE THE SIGNS ARE CLEAR. The tectonic plates of three core assumptions of the partnership are shifting. While an earthquake is not imminent, the topography of the relationship is changing in important ways.

First, America's defense commitment to Israel is becoming more difficult to ensure. Many supporters of Israel declare this as an ironclad guarantee, and the United States has backed up its political declarations by spending almost $100 billion over a half-century to ensure that Israel's advanced weaponry gave it a qualitative military edge against its adversaries. The political commitment is so strong that the concept of Israel's qualitative military edge has been enshrined in U.S. law.

That aid has been crucial. U.S. support helped Israel neutralize conventional military threats from surrounding states and establish Israel as the dominant regional military force. Several of those states decided to make peace with Israel. Those countries that have been holding out have little illusion of ever defeating Israel on the battlefield, and even quietly cooperate.

The problem, however, is that Israel's primary threats are no longer conventional, but asymmetric threats from groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, and potential ballistic missile strikes from Iran. Israeli military leaders predict that Hezbollah will fire thousands of missiles and rockets at Israeli cities in their next war. Such strikes would paralyze Israel's transportation and industrial infrastructure while putting millions of Israelis at risk.

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Iran is a different kind of threat that many Israelis believe threatens their very existence. Israelis often worry that if Iran were to launch a nuclear weapon at Israel, they would at most have several minutes of warning. The idea of providing Israel with more advanced weapons platforms and ammunition such as the B-52 bomber and massive ordnance penetrators to mitigate Israeli anxiety and help smooth relations midjudge both the nature of Israel's threats and how Israelis perceive those threats. In reality, there is no weapon system or political guarantee that will cure Israel's anxiety on the Iranian nuclear threat.

Deterring surrounding Arab armies was relatively straightforward, but addressing these kinds of threats is increasingly difficult. In 2014, it took Israel seven weeks to subdue Hamas rockets, and doing so failed to change the strategic balance in Gaza. The problem is not all Israel's. U.S. military planners face their own challenges addressing asymmetric threats. In Iraq and Afghanistan, the United States deployed hundreds of thousands of troops and spent more than a trillion dollars to subdue nonconventional forces, but still struggled. While U.S. aid has helped Israel mitigate missile threats by building an integrated missile defense system, there is no commitment that can protect the Israeli home front or solve the deeper problems that

asymmetrical and unconventional threats pose.

Second, the partnership faces a growing strategic disconnect. Israeli and American perceptions have never been in complete harmony, but there was enough of a common organizing principle to overcome different strategic perceptions and priorities. In the 1970s and 1980s they were bound by the Cold War, in the 1990s by the shared project of Arab-Israeli peace, and after the September 11, 2001, attacks the global war on terrorism brought them together.

Today's Middle East provides little of the same unity. Israel no longer fits into U.S. regional strategy as it once did, in part because there is no coherent strategy, but rather a series of policies. The problem for Israel is deeper, however. Israel fears that the United States is disengaging from the region and recalibrating its policy to cooperate more closely with Iran. That fuels Israeli anxiety over a regional leadership vacuum that will leave it more vulnerable at a time of rising Iranian influence.

The governments of the United States and Israel have fundamentally contradictory policies on Iran, in addition to multiple strategic disagreements on everything from Syria strategy to advanced U.S. weapon sales to Arab governments. Further, many of these challeng-

es are only beginning. Verifying and implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action will cause ongoing tension and conflict over what constitutes Iranian violations and how to address them. And on top of all that, despite dim prospects for progress, the Palestinian issue will remain a fault line in U.S.-Israeli relations.

Third, Israel has once again become a partisan issue in American politics. It took Israel and its U.S.-based allies nearly four decades to turn U.S. support from a narrow partisan pursuit to a bipartisan staple of American politics. That consensus is breaking down, partly because the centers of Israeli domestic politics and U.S. domestic politics are diverging. The U.S.-Israel relationship was forged at a time when Israel was center-left, and Israel's subsequent rightward shift has not been matched consistently in the United States. Increasingly, the current Israeli gov-

ernment feels more comfortable with the Republican Party, and the prime minister rather publicly aligned with congressional Republicans in an effort to undermine the president's agenda on Iran. Congressional Democratic support for Israel remains strong, to be sure, but among the public, partisan differences on Israel are increasingly visible.

The next U.S. president will surely have warmer relations with Israel's prime minister, and upgraded levels of military assistance will help give the impression that the partnership has been reset. The U.S.-Israeli partnership will endure, but further tremors lie ahead. The two sides will not only need to manage those differences carefully, but also appreciate the ways in which the foundations on which the relationship was built are shifting. ◻