

# US-Israel Relations: The Rise and Fall of a Strategic Partnership

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## Abstract

The article uses neoclassical realism to analyze the evolution of US-Israeli relations from its modest beginnings in the 1940s and 50s, to its 'special' status today. It is argued that the United States only began to seriously support Israel after Washington decision makers started to perceive the Jewish State as an important proxy in fighting Soviet influence in the Middle East, particularly following the Six Day War of 1967. However with the end of the Cold War Israel's worth in pursuing American interests in the region quickly faded, a change that was brought into sharp perspective when in the First Persian Gulf War, Israel became a liability for the Americans. The article further argues that in the long run the strategic interests of the US in the region and subsequently the net strategic value of Israel for achieving such interests will be the primary driving factor behind US foreign policy. As a result factors such as the personal convictions of American politicians, the Jewish-American vote and the Israeli lobby would only be able to delay and dampen the future deterioration of the 'special' relationship between Washington and Tel-Aviv.

**Keywords:** US-Israel relations, US foreign policy, Israeli foreign policy, the Israel Lobby, Cold War rivalry.

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## Introduction

Analysts have raised several factors to explain the relationship between the two countries. These factors include the Israel lobby, statesmen who were sympathetic to the Israeli cause like Harry S. Truman, John F. Kennedy, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger, securing the votes of Jewish-Americans, “moral obligations” to the Jewish state and the existence of “shared values” such as "freedom" and "democracy" between the two countries (Walt and Mearsheimer, 2007). While all of these factors might have been influential to the development of the special relationship to some extent and in specific time periods, this article will demonstrate that the perceived strategic interests of the US in the Middle East have been the primary driving factor in the growth of the relationship between the two countries. This will be established by taking a historical look at the relationship. The essay will then examine how following the end of the Cold War the strategic value of Israel has been diminishing and how this will eventually result in a reassessment of US policy in the region.

**Theoretical Framework:** In the *Theory of International Politics*, Kenneth Waltz (1979) lays the foundation of Neorealist IR theory by isolating structural variables and ignoring state level variables. The theory’s main assumption is that unlike domestic politics, the state of international affairs is one of anarchy. His theory also takes states as the main actors of this arena and assumes that they rely on self-help to ensure their survival. All these are core realist assumptions and are shared by scholars such as Carr, Morgenthau, Mearsheimer and even classical writers such as Machiavelli, Hobbes and Thucydides. However what makes Waltz’s theory unique is that by distinguishing

between structure and process he is able to build a theory that is both parsimonious and powerful. His theory is based on the assumption that the position of units in the system is not a property of the units themselves but rather a property of the system and thus by studying the system one can find regularities in state behavior. Another logical conclusion to this assumption is that the structure only changes when the arrangement of its parts changes and not by any change in process level variables. Thus by isolating the third image from the first and second images, Waltz aims to explain the constraints imposed on the units by the structure. Therefore the third image is influencing and affecting the first two images, not the other way round. A well-devised structural theory will explain how states with vastly different unit level variables will behave similarly due to the impositions of the structure (Waltz, 1979:79-101). Nevertheless while neorealism provides important improvements over past realist approaches, it has been criticized for completely ignoring domestic level factors such as the ideological orientations of decision makers. This weakness of Waltz's theory is caused by its assumption that all states are homogeneous units of the international system (Rosecrance, 1981: 700-708). To address these weaknesses neoclassical realism brings unit level factors into the analysis, while at the same time accepting many of neorealism's assumptions.

Neoclassical realists assert that a state's foreign policy is driven primarily by its place in the international system and its relative material capabilities. This is a major area of commonality with neorealist theory. Where it differs from structural theory is that it argues that a state's relative power in the system is not directly translated into foreign policy. Rather its impact is dependent on unit level "intervening variables" which act in between the independent (relative power capabilities) and dependent (foreign policy) variables. Neoclassical realists for example stress that the perception of decision makers and domestic state structures are key to how states view the international system and how they define their country's interests. By



accounting for intervening variables that ‘translate’ the independent variable, realist theory becomes more complex but at the same time results in greater accuracy and specificity (Rose, 1998: 166-167). Neoclassical Realism also differs from constructivism in that the main driver of a state’s foreign policy is its relative power capabilities and the other factors pointed earlier only act as intervening variables, whereas constructivism sees norms as constituting the very identity and interests of states. Also there are objective structural constraints and incentives on state behavior in neoclassical realism and as a result anarchy is not what states make of it. As future sections will demonstrate neoclassical realism can be successfully used to analyze how the ideology of decision makers, shaped and influenced by political lobbies, has affected American policy in the Middle East in negative ways.

#### **I- 1948-1957: Modest Beginnings**

In May 1948, the Zionist regime proclaimed "independence" and the United States along with the Soviet Union were the first countries in the world to recognize the newly established state. At the time Harry S. Truman, the US president, decided to recognize Israel contrary to the advice of his foreign minister George C. Marshall who argued that such a move would hurt US-Arab relations and ultimately undermine US influence in the Middle East (Hadar, 2006). Truman however had a personal conviction for the establishment of a Jewish state in Palestine. Apart from this move however, there was little support from Washington for years to come. In fact in the first couple of years after the Second World War, the British and the French, especially the former, were the Western countries most engaged in the Middle East. It wasn’t until 1953 when Secretary of State John Foster Dulles made an extended tour of the region that the US started to slowly get involved in the region (Cohen, 2007). Israel itself had chosen a path of “neutrality” towards the power struggle between East and West until 1950. Although Israel enjoyed good economic

and diplomatic relations with the Western world, it did not want to alienate the Soviet bloc especially because it was receiving most of its immigrants from that part of the world. However in June 1950 Israel slowly started to lean towards the Western camp by voting in favor of the US sponsored UN resolution authorizing military intervention in Korea. Hence US-Israeli relations were quite limited in the 1948-1953 period (Cohen, 2007).

In July 1952, the Free Officers movement of Egypt toppled the country's monarchy in a bloodless coup. By 1954-1955 the relationship between Egypt and Israel had sharply deteriorated with some elements of the Israeli government pushing for a "preventive" war before Egypt would get too strong. Israel was especially worried about the arms deal Egypt had secured with the Eastern bloc made through Czechoslovakia in 1955. In response Israel put a lot of effort and lobbying to secure arms from the United States. These efforts were fruitless however. On October 12, 1955, Abba Eban the Israeli ambassador to Washington wrote to Moshe Sharett, the Israeli Prime Minister at the time, that Israel could not count on the United States to balance the Soviet arms deal with Egypt by selling arms to Israel. He recommended to the Prime Minister to attack Egypt before it became too strong (Shlaim, 2001). Israel did not lose hope of buying weapons from the US however and Sharett (now acting as foreign minister) went to Washington in November 1955 to pursue such a deal. The Americans again refused the Israeli request, partly in protest of Israel's brutal commando attack on Syria by Colonel Ariel Sharon that killed fifty Syrians. Later on the Americans took the lead in passing a resolution in the Security Council that strongly condemned Israel and threatened sanctions in case of future attacks. Desperate for US arms, Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion sent Isser Harel the head of the Mossad secretly to Washington to negotiate with Allen Dulles, the brother of John Foster Dulles and the head of the CIA. Ben-Gurion had instructed Harel to reason that the supply of arms to Israel would prevent a war between Israel and Egypt



where as the refusal of arms to Israel would force it to go to war (ibid, 157). This strategy was used by the Israelis to exploit the American policy that aimed to curtail escalation of hostilities in order to block Soviet efforts to gain influence in the Middle East. In a last attempt, Ben-Gurion himself wrote a letter to President Eisenhower on 14<sup>th</sup> February 1956, protesting the denial of arms to Israel and stating that if Israel got a negative reply to its arms request, “then we have only one task: to look to our security,” in effect threatening to go to war with Egypt if Eisenhower still persisted with his refusal. In the end however, the Americans decided to reject the supply of arms to Israel and this was formally conveyed to the Israelis in April 1956. This brought about an important turning point in Israeli foreign policy because Ben-Gurion now decided to look to France, which had already started supplying Israel with arms, as the country’s strategic partner. A deal involving 72 Mystere fighter planes, 200 AMX tanks and large amounts of ammunition was signed between Israel and France, giving the country a military edge over Egypt.

The Suez War of 1956 was an important milestone in US-Israeli relations. The war was a surprising military success. A week after the launch of the military operation the whole of the Sinai Peninsula was in Israeli hands. However Israel had to retreat due to immense US pressure. The Soviet Union had threatened to intervene militarily to resolve the crisis and the war was quickly turned into a global crisis with the possibility of igniting a war between the superpowers. The Americans were furious with the British-French-Israeli alignment since they had warned them prior to the war to refrain from any military operations and use diplomacy instead. After the war the US insisted on an immediate and unconditional Israeli withdrawal and privately Ambassador Eban was told that if Israel refused, all aid to Israel including the aid from American Jews would be suspended and that the US would not oppose efforts aimed at expelling Israel from the United Nations (Shlaim, 2001:180). With the French and the British bowing to international pressure, Israel had no choice but to

also retreat.

Not only did the Suez War fail to topple Nasser, but rather it had the opposite effect of strengthening him in the Arab world who now saw him as a national hero standing up to “Imperialist-Zionist” forces bent on stealing Arab land and wealth. The crisis also strengthened the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East, which up until now had mostly been on the sidelines of Middle East politics. The war also taught Britain and France that all their moves in the region had to be coordinated with the United States. Britain had already started to lose its position as global superpower long before the Suez War however the war put this into clear perspective for regional and world actors. The war marked the collapse of British and French influence in the region and the commencement of a more serious involvement by the US and the USSR. Israel also learned that without the support of the United States it would be left out in the cold, even if it were able to decisively beat its opponents militarily. Moreover the war resulted in a serious deterioration of Israel’s relations with the USSR. Israel’s opponents now had a superpower on their side and Israel needed a superpower on its side more than ever.

On January 5<sup>th</sup> 1957 the ‘Eisenhower Doctrine’ was proclaimed which promised military aid and cooperation from the United States against any overt aggression by nations “controlled by international Communism.” This gave Israel a much-needed opportunity to better its relationship with the United States. Although France still remained Israel’s main arms supplier and backer, however in the years after the war US-Israeli relations started to get warm. It is critical to understand why the United States had kept its distance from Israel up until the Suez War of 1956. Several key factors can be noted:

First, in the decade after World War II the main region of competition and rivalry between the two superpowers was Europe. The Cold War started to take shape when the interests of the two remaining superpowers after the war started to collide in central Europe. The Soviet Union started to consolidate its control on



territories the Red Army had liberated during the war in East and Central Europe while the United States started to consolidate its control and influence over West Europe and thus to contain the expansion of Soviet influence according to the containment strategy of the Truman Doctrine. Accordingly the rebuilding of Western European economies with the help of US aid made possible with the Marshall Plan, the integration of West Germany into Western's Europe American zone of influence and the creation and consolidation of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) were America's main foreign policy objectives after the Second World War (Kanet, 2006). The issues of the Middle East did not come up on the US's main strategic objectives in a period when the Cold War received most of America's energy. At the time, the only significance of the Middle East for the United States was the continuous and uninterrupted flow of oil, which was needed mainly for the reconstruction and rehabilitation of Western Europe's economy. Gradually however the competition between 'East' and 'West' was dragged into arenas other than Europe starting from the 1950s. The main reason for this was that the two superpowers came to realize in the mid-late 1950s that confrontation in Europe would lead to mutual annihilation through nuclear warheads. Thus superpower rivalry in the 1960s mainly took place in the developing world such as South America, the Middle East and to a lesser effect in Africa (Kanet, 2006).

Second, US foreign policy decision makers correctly believed that a strong and overt support for Israel would alienate Arab allies like Saudi Arabia which were the main suppliers of oil to Western countries. At the time it made little sense to strongly support a small and weak state for the price of losing allies that controlled vast amounts of lands and the world's main source of energy for decades to come. Moreover, alienated Arab countries would become receptive to Soviet influence, which up until then had little power in the region. So while Washington supported Israel's "right to exist" however this



support was sidelined by more important goals like preventing Arab countries like Egypt from falling under Soviet influence. Even after the Free Officers Revolution of 1952 the US tried to keep a good relationship with the populous and influential Arab country. In fact the Israelis were very aware of this and thus worked hard to drive a wedge between the two countries. The prime example of these efforts was the 'Lavon Affair' of 1954. In July 1954, Unit 131 the psychological warfare department of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) initiated a bombing campaign in Cairo and Alexandria in which Israeli intelligence agents attacked sensitive American and British sites. On July 23rd, which was the anniversary of the Free Officers Revolution, Israeli agents tried to blow up cinemas showing American and British films but were caught during the operation by Egyptian officials. The event caused a lot of controversy in Israel and resulted in the resignation of Defense minister Lavon and chief of Military intelligence Col. Binyamin Givli (Morris, 2001:282). The operations were clearly aimed at worsening the already declining relationship between Egypt and the US. In the end Israel's attacks and provocations on its neighbors were largely successful in pushing away Arab countries like Egypt and Syria from the United States. In a bipolar world system going through a Cold War, this helped the Soviet Union use the distance between these countries and Washington to bring them under its own influence and "protection."

Third, one of Washington's central goals with regards to the Middle East was to maintain stability. Based on this objective, the US highly opposed any forms of confrontation and escalation that might lead to war. The main argument behind keeping the Middle East stable was that any major confrontation would open up opportunities for Soviet influence, as the Suez War had done. A war in the Middle East would also divert attention and resources that were badly needed in other regions such as Europe and Korea. An unstable Middle East would also hamper the continuous flow of energy, which was and has always been a central component of Washington's strategy in the



Middle East. Stability in the region was one of the central factors behind Washington's decision to not provide arms to Israel. At the time it was perceived that a superiorly armed Israel would not hesitate to attack its neighbors. This is precisely why Ben-Gurion threatened the Americans that if they did not provide them with arms, then Israel would have to launch a war preemptively.

The above factors were the primary reasons why the US did not support Israel strongly or overtly during the years leading to the Suez War. This historical period also shows us that while personal and moral convictions can influence US policy, as they did in the recognition of the newly established Jewish State, their impact are only temporary if they come into conflict with America's strategic interests in the Middle East. This is inline with the assumptions of neoclassical realist theory in which structural constraints and incentives form the major contours of a state's foreign policy and 'intervening variables' such as personal convictions and perceptions only affecting policy temporarily.

## **II- 1957-1967: The Formation of a Strategic Partnership**

As with most wars, the Suez War of 1956 changed the strategic balance of power in the region. For one thing the Egyptians and the Syrians became much closer to the Soviet Union, which started to supply them with stronger military and political support. On the other hand Israel who had kept a modest relationship with the Soviet Union was now completely distanced from the Kremlin who had threatened Israel with military intervention during the war. In effect American hopes for a non-polarized Middle East were shattered and the Americans had to readjust their policies accordingly. Also the Soviet Union was now involved in the Middle East and the US had to "contain" its influence one way or another. Thus the strategy of blocking Soviet influence in the region had to change to containing Soviet influence in the region. Washington's strategy however changed only gradually. In the years after the war the US still kept a

distant and cold relationship with Israel. For example in winter 1957, Ben-Gurion initiated a strong diplomatic campaign to associate Israel with NATO. France strongly supported the move, however under strong pressure from the US, NATO rejected Israel's plea for association (Shlaim, 2001: 191).

The following year was a troublesome year for Western powers. In May 1958 a civil war began in Lebanon and a group of Iraqi Free Officers toppled the pro-western Hashemite kingdom of Iraq. The Arab country, which was Britain's foremost ally in the region and the focal point of the 'Baghdad Pact' meant to counter the Soviet Union, had now fallen to pro-Nasser and to some extent pro-Soviet forces. Iraq was also a major supplier of oil for the West. These events were largely due to the strengthening of pro-Nasser forces in the Arab world, which occurred as a consequence of the Suez War. The 1957-1967 period also witnessed the increased involvement and influence of the Soviet Union in the region especially with regards to sensitive arms transfers to its allies. For example in the 1956 Suez War, Egypt used old Mig-15 and Ilyushin-28 planes. However, the country was able to acquire Mig-17 planes in 1957, Mig-19 planes in 1960 and the highly sophisticated Mig-21 in 1962. The Soviet Union also supplied Egypt with bomber planes like the Tupolev-16, SA-2 surface to air missiles as well as T-54B tanks. The two countries signed a \$500 million arms deal in June 1963 followed by another \$300 million deal two years later (Gat, Nasser and the Six Day War, 5 June 1967: A Premeditated Strategy or An Inexorable Drift to War?, 2005).

Whereas previous Israeli pleas for arms had fallen on deaf ears in Washington, new calls for arms transfer were now viewed favorably. Israeli efforts to obtain the highly important ground to air Hawk missile system, which would make Israeli skies secure from Egyptian fighter planes, was successful in 1962. The Kennedy administration in Washington which had refused the transfer of the missile system just a year ago reversed its decision and transferred the Hawk missile system among other arms to Israel (Shlaim, 2001:209-



211). This was a turning point in US-Israeli relations since the US had reversed its policy of refusal to transfer sensitive military technology to Israel. In December 1962 Kennedy told Golda Meir the Israeli foreign minister that the US “has a special relationship with Israel in the Middle East really comparable only to that which it has with Britain” (Walt and Mearsheimer, 2007:25). In a September 1963 letter to the Israeli Prime Minister Levi Eshkol, Kennedy specified the new American policy, which made it clear that in the event of an Arab invasion of Israel, America would send its Sixth Fleet to Israel’s aid. In 1964 the Kennedy administration authorized the sales of over 200 M48A battle tanks to Israel (ibid). Also a few years earlier the United States had learned through its sophisticated U2 spy planes that a plan in Dimona that was described by the Israelis as a “textile factory” was in fact a nuclear plant (Shlaim, 2001:208). Although Kennedy supposedly put “pressure” on Israel including a plan that would give American scientists yearly inspection rights, however Kennedy’s lax approach to this matter in effect gave Israel the opportunity to develop its first nuclear bomb. In June 1964 Eshkol’s visit to Washington was the first official visit of an Israeli Prime Minister to the United States. This was a highly significant and symbolic step in the relationship of the two countries. A month earlier Khrushchev had gone on an official visit to Egypt to take part in celebration ceremonies for the completion of the first phase of the Aswan Dam which the USSR had helped finance a few years earlier and after the United States refused to fund it (Gat, *The great powers and the water dispute in the Middle East: A prelude to the six day war*, 2005). By now it was clear more than ever that the Middle East had been polarized with the two superpowers supporting the opposing parties. The reason for Washington’s gradual shift in strategy in the 1957-1967 period with regards to Israel can be summarized in the following points:

First, in the 1960s the Cold war was dragged into other areas of the world such as East Asia, the Middle East, South America and

Africa. In Africa the Soviets had started to support progressive West African government such as Ghana, Guinea and Mali. In the American continent the revolution in Cuba led by Fidel Castro who later built the country according to Marxist principles was a major source of success for the Soviets and a major threat for the Americans. This led to the 1962 Cuban missile crisis that brought the two superpowers to the brink of war. Cuba would also be a base to export socialist-communist values to South American countries. The main region of confrontation between the two powers in the 60s was Vietnam where the Americans directly intervened militarily to confront the North Vietnamese government and the Vietcong. In this period the Soviets were actively increasing their direct involvement in third world countries in order to lure them away from their traditional ties to the West (Kanet, 2006). The competition for world dominance between the two superpowers had in reality spread to all parts of the world. This led to the policy of 'Offshore Balancing' in which the influence of a superpower exercised through a regional ally would be balanced by an ally of the other superpower. Accordingly the influence of the Soviet Union in the Middle East mainly exercised through the strengthening and arming of Egypt would be balanced by the arming and support of Israel by the United States. The United States was also deeply troubled by the rising influence of the Soviet Union and the unrest and toppling of pro-western governments in countries like Iraq and Lebanon. The United States feared that the West was losing its influence in an important part of the world and as a result it had to reassess its policies accordingly.

Second, another important threat to US hegemony in the region were pro-Nasser nationalist movements in the Arab world. These nationalist movements were mostly anti-imperialist and thus anti-Western in nature. In Washington's view the fall of Iraq and Lebanon was a clear warning of the trend in the Middle East. According to this perspective Egypt was the main source of anti-Western movements trying to overthrow conservative Arab regimes. The Egyptian military



involvement in the Yemeni Civil War in 1962 following a revolution by pro-Nasser officers who overthrew King al-Imam Badr further fueled this feeling in Washington (Gat, Nasser and the Six Day War, 5 June 1967: A Premeditated Strategy or An Inexorable Drift to War?, 2005). Thus Washington came to the conclusion that Nasser was a threat to its interests in the region and if left unrestrained would topple Washington allies like Saudi Arabia, Jordan and the Gulf countries. The policy of the Soviet Union was quite the opposite. Nikita Khrushchev who succeeded Stalin went back to the ideas of Lenin, which stressed that nations of the colonial world would become de facto allies of the working class and the first socialist state namely the Soviet Union. Supporting their struggle for independence from Western imperialism would ultimately contribute to the weakening of the Western world especially the United States. Thus the Soviet Union supported Nasser's efforts in Pan Arab Nationalism (Kanet, 2006).

### **III- After 1967: Consolidation of the Strategic Partnership**

In the Six Day War of 1967 Israel was able to prove to Washington that if it was provided with the necessary military and political support it would be able to advance the interests of itself as well the interests of Washington. The humiliating defeat of the Arabs meant an indirect defeat of the Soviets, at a time when the Vietcong had bogged down the US in Vietnam. In effect Israel's victory in 1967 also boosted US morale. In fact some officials in Washington even joked about sending Moshe Dayan (the IDF's chief of staff) to Vietnam (Chomsky, 1999). President Lyndon B. Johnson saw the Israeli victory over Soviet clients as offsetting to some extent the geostrategic losses Washington had suffered from the Soviet's North Vietnamese ally (Hadar, 2006). The victory also meant that the policy the US had taken to counter Soviet-Egyptian influence in the region had worked. The logical conclusion would be to strengthen a policy that seemed to be working. The war also gave pro-Israeli power

brokers in Washington the best opportunity to promote Israel as a “Strategic Asset” in a highly important region of the world.

Vietnam had showed the United States the immense costs of direct military intervention. This led to the proclamation of the ‘Nixon Doctrine,’ which stated that the United States should avoid direct military intervention in third world countries and instead rely on proxies like Israel. This meant that US proxies like Israel would be given the role of regional gendarmes who would preserve a balance of power in the region favoring the United States. Also if the Suez War started the polarization of the Middle East then the Six Day War solidified this polarization. In fact the Soviets became so involved in the region that during the next Arab-Israeli war dubbed the ‘War of Attrition’, the Soviet Union quickly transferred large amounts of arms to Egypt as well as thousands of Soviet technicians including two hundred pilots in order to prevent another Israeli victory. Increased Soviet involvement in the region also brought increasing American involvement.

The factors stated above resulted in an atmosphere that gave the Nixon administration, particularly Henry Kissinger, the National Security advisor, the opportunity to beef up the already strong relationship between the United States and Israel into a strong strategic partnership that was arguably unparalleled in US foreign policy. While Israel received the larger benefit of such a partnership, it was perceived in Washington that the Jewish state reciprocated in important ways. Israel was perceived as playing a vital role in countering and containing Soviet influence particularly after the Six Day War. Moreover the country acted as an effective tool in managing regional crisis for Washington. Israel’s surprising victories over its Arab opponents damaged the USSR’s reputation while increasing American prestige, particularly during the Vietnam War when it was badly needed. Also Israeli victories displayed the limited value of Soviet support when compared to that of the Americans, helping lure countries away from the Eastern bloc. Indeed such



realignment took place in Egypt when Anwar Sadat broke off ties with Moscow. Israel also passed on very valuable intelligence to the US during the Cold War. Israeli spies for example were able to provide the Americans with a copy of Khrushchev's secret speech of 1956 in which he denounced Stalin. Israel also provided the US military with access to advanced Soviet military technology that were captured in the 1967 and 1973 wars (Raviv and Melman 1994). This is why some scholars such as Steven Spiegel and Abramo F.K. Organski have argued that US aid to Israel was a "bargain" given the significant benefits they got in return (Walt and Mearsheimer, 2007).

Nevertheless it is also important to point out that while Israel served the strategic interests of the United States in the region during the Cold War, the "special" relationship also came with costs, mainly due to the fact that the polarization of the Middle East, which made American involvement in the region more serious and overt, was in the first place largely created by Israel itself. In reality Israel created a problem that only had one solution: Israeli military power. Had Israel not been created and supported in the region, the Middle East would have been much more peaceful in the past six decades. With the creation of Israel and the subsequent wars with its neighbors the region was polarized into two camps. This automatically meant that the West led by the United States could not support both sides, losing potential allies in the process. These conflicts were also the central factor why the Soviet Union was able to penetrate the region as effective as it did. Had an Arab-Israeli conflict not existed it would be doubtful that the Soviet Union would be able to influence the region as it did. While the above costs associated with supporting Israel during the Cold War were largely unnoticed and ignored by Washington, the costs of the "special" relationship came into sharp focus after the end of the Cold War.

#### **IV- From Asset to Liability**

With the end of the Cold War, Israel's potential in delivering benefits



for Washington quickly started to fade away. The First Gulf War brought this development quickly into perspective. During the war the US prevented Israel from entering the 34-nation coalition that was built to liberate Kuwait out of fears that the move would antagonize Arab allies, a process that was repeated in the 2001 war in Afghanistan and the 2003 invasion of Iraq. During the 1991 war, Israel was even barred from retaliating against Saddam's Scud missile attacks. In fact the Iraqi dictator had attacked the Jewish state specifically to encourage an Israeli response and thus weaken the American coalition. This was a significant change to Israel's former position as the US's gendarme in the region. During the war William Waldegrave, minister of state in the British Foreign Office, told the House of Commons, that the US might be learning that the alliance with Israel "was not particularly useful if it cannot be used in a crisis such as this...Now the U.S. knows that an alliance with Israel that is of no use for this situation is useless" (Parsi, 2008:140-141). After the war Bernard Lewis commented that the "The change [in Israel's strategic value] was clearly manifested in the Gulf War...when what the United States most desired from Israel was to keep out of the conflict, to be silent, inactive and as far as possible, invisible...Israel was not an asset, but an irrelevance, some even said a nuisance" (Lewis, 1992:110-11).

This change in the net strategic value of Israel was heightened following the collapse of the Peace Process and the onset of the Second Palestinian Intifada at the start of the 21<sup>st</sup> century. Indeed even before the collapse of the peace process and the end of the Cold War, the occupation of the West Bank and Gaza strip and subsequent suffering of the Palestinians had been fueling anti-Americanism in the Arab and Muslim world. Harry Shaw, former head of the Office of Management and Budget's Military Assistance Branch, explained it well when he wrote in 1985-1986: "Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank is at cross-purpose with US interests and contrary to US policy. This lack of progress toward a peace settlement-for which



Israel and its Arab neighbors share responsibility, undercuts Arabs who are willing to live in peace and strengthens the influence of Islamic fundamentalists and other Arabs who have no interest in the kind of stable Middle East that would be compatible with US interests and Israel's security" (Shaw, 1985-1986:137).

The suffering of the Palestinians has also been instrumental in the rise of militant groups such as al-Qaeda. Senior al-Qaeda members including Osama Bin-Laden, Khaled Sheikh Mohammed and Ramzi Yousef have used the plight of the Palestinians to legitimize, even if this is done disingenuously, the terrorist activities of the group against the US. In fact these individuals do not use such arguments only for public relations purposes, but also as a tool for recruitment (Walt and Mearsheimer, *The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy*, 2007).

The lack of progress on a Palestinian state has also helped increase the standing and power of regional Islamist groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, as well as states such as Iran and Syria, all of which oppose US influence in the region. While Israel might argue that it is the one countering such countries and groups on behalf of the US, it is difficult to ignore that past Israeli actions has helped create these "problems" for US foreign policy in the first place, with Hamas emerging out of the First Palestinian Intifada and Hezbollah rising after the Lebanon War of 1982. The Palestinian issue has also been a rallying cry for both the Iranian and Syrian governments. Moreover, according to the Wall Street Journal, "Arab diplomats say countries such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, Kuwait and the UAE will find it difficult to publicly stand with the US on Iran and on broad regional stability unless Washington pressures Israel on a peace initiative" (Solomon, 2006). US support for Israel also made its counterinsurgency efforts in Iraq more difficult. In 2006, when the US tried to forge a Sunni coalition in order to prevent a deteriorating security situation, Sunni leaders indicated that the US had consistently taken Israel's side in its conflict with the Palestinians and as a result it

would be politically harmful for them to get close to the Americans (Walt and Mearsheimer, 2007:74). This is why the Iraq Study Group stated in December 2006 that the US “will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the United States deals directly with the Arab-Israeli conflict” (Baker and Hamilton, 2006:39).

The absence of a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians has brought such high costs to the US, that subsequent American presidents have tried hard to establish such a deal, even during times when the chances of success were slim. What is important to note is that in recent years these costs have been increasing due to the advent of cheap communications technology and live news networks as well as the spread of democracy (the ‘Arab Spring’) in the region. These developments have heightened the importance of Arab public opinion and have made US position vis-à-vis the conflict more difficult especially when a war or controversial incident breaks out. For example when Israeli commandos attacked a convoy of flotillas trying to break the siege on Gaza in 2010, the US supported the Security Council’s condemnation of the events and Obama subsequently “deeply regretted the loss of life” in a phone conversation with Benjamin Netanyahu (Haaretz, May 31, 2010). As a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report explained, the incident put “the United States in an extremely difficult position” (Ottaway, 2010). Haaretz took a similar line by saying that “the White House’s cautious response, which contrasted with an outcry against Israel’s actions in Europe and the Muslim world, reflected a difficult balancing act for Obama” (Haaretz, May 31, 2010). Meir Dagan, chief of the Mossad, told the Knesset’s Foreign Aid and Defense Committee after the incident: “Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden” (Dagan, 2010).

More recently, the Gaza war of 2014, in which harrowing pictures of Palestinian suffering were widely broadcast around the world particularly in Arab countries, badly hurt Washington’s image and prestige as a “fair” broker in the region. When Israel bombed a



UN school in Gaza, US officials could no longer hide their dismay at Israeli actions, with the State Department saying it was “appalled” by this “disgraceful” act and Samantha Power, US Ambassador to the UN, calling the strike “horrifying” (Power, 2014). The rare public criticism of Israel according to The New York Times exposed,

“A frustrating reality for the Obama administration: the government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu has largely dismissed diplomatic efforts by the United States to end the violence in Gaza, leaving American officials to seethe on the sidelines about what they regard as disrespectful treatment” (Landler, 2014).

Such events have made the US effort of keeping a “difficult balancing” of supporting Israeli actions while minimizing its consequences very challenging. In the recent Gaza war for example the US quickly replenished Israel’s diminishing ammunition stock and President Obama swiftly signed a bill giving \$225 million in “emergency aid” to Israel to further develop its Iron Dome antimissile system, while at the same time pressuring the Netanyahu government to accept a ceasefire and working hard to minimize the damage to American image due to Israeli actions.

Nevertheless this type of dual strategy has not always been possible to follow. On November 29, 2012 for example the US voted against a majority of countries that voted in favor of a Palestinian statehood bid at the UN. Zbigniew Brzezinski, national security advisor to Jimmy Carter, commented that:

The recent Palestinian statehood vote in the United Nations, in which the United States -- despite its intense efforts -- obtained the support of only eight other states out of a total 188 voting, marks the nadir of the dramatically declined global respect for U.S. capability to cope with an issue that is morally troubling today and, in the long run, explosive (Brzezinski, 2012).

The costs associated with supporting Israel are summarized nicely by General David Petraeus’s, former head of the US Central Command,

March 2010 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee:

The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [Area of Responsibility]. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. 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 and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas (Petraeus, 16 March 2010).

The spread of the 'Arab Spring' in the Middle East also means that the costs of supporting the occupation is not only limited to increasing anti-American sentiment among the region's public and the strengthening of Islamist movements, but also includes undermining the regimes of US allies such as Jordan, Saudi Arabia and oil rich Gulf states. For example Hosni Mubarak of Egypt was despised partly because of his complicity in Israel's blockade of Gaza (Walt, News flash: WINEP defends the 'special relationship', 2011). During the 2008-2009 Gaza War, a Carnegie Endowment for International Peace report explained,

As domestic opposition and the broader Arab public turn against the Egyptian position and accuse president Hosni Mubarak of complicity in Israel's continued attacks against the Palestinians, Egypt and other moderate Arab governments are losing their ability to negotiate an outcome that protects their interests (Hamzawy, 2009).

All these factors mean that the net strategic value of Israel for Washington has been declining, particularly due to the continuation of the occupation and the lack of a viable peace process. It is important to note however that the "special" relationship between the two countries has survived thus far, even if it has been tested several



times in the past few years. The continuation of this relationship despite the decreasing value of Israel can be attributed to the Israeli lobby, the need to secure the votes of Jewish-Americans as well as a sense of “moral obligation” to the Jewish state among American politicians. These factors however can only delay such a change and will not be able to indefinitely hold off a readjustment of US policy that is based on the new circumstances of the region.

Neoclassical realism asserts that when domestic intervening variables lead to the deviation of a country’s behavior from what structural factors predict (ideal foreign policy) the system punishes the state, resulting in the realization of past misperceptions and a correction of policy. This is why Rose (1998) asserts that even if the foreign policy of states might not track objective material power trends over the short to medium term, over the “long run a state's foreign policy cannot transcend the limits and opportunities thrown up by the international environment” (151). In line with the above predictions, Washington’s continuation of its “special” relationship with Israel has led to significant consequences.

### **Conclusion**

As this paper has demonstrated historically speaking the main driving force of US policy towards Israel has ultimately been its own interests. It is worth recalling President Truman’s decision to recognize Israel despite the opposition of Secretary of State George Marshall. Scholars such as Kenneth Ray Bain (1979), Zvi Ganin (1979) and Michael Oren (2007) who have studied Truman’s decision argue that he was motivated by personal, moral and religious beliefs as well as his desire to gain the Jewish vote in the upcoming 1948 elections. However, as pointed out earlier, US support for Israel during this period was only limited to the recognition of the newly established Jewish state and did not extend to other areas such as arms sales for years to come. Moreover such factors are dependent on who is occupying the White House and whether he or she shares such

personal convictions and needs the Jewish vote in future elections. It is also important to note that some analysts such as Peter Beinart argue that a more critical stance on Israel does not necessarily translate into a loss of the Jewish vote during elections since most American Jews, especially among the younger generation, support a “two state solution” to the conflict (Beinart, 2012). Indeed such an argument is somewhat corroborated by the results of the last US presidential elections. Obama was able to win 70% of the Jewish vote in the 2012 elections despite being accused of having “thrown [Israel] under the bus,” as Mitt Romney put it (Rozen, 2012).

The influence of the Israeli lobby on the other hand is a complicated issue that needs an entire separate essay, however suffice to say that the power of the lobby has very real limits. During Obama’s first term, the lobby was unable to prevent or at least mask the very public clash between the American president and Netanyahu on the issue of Israeli settlements. Moreover the lobby has been unable to persuade the US to attack Iran or at least to accept the more aggressive “red lines” that Israel has been strongly and openly pushing for. The latter failure has made David Rothkopf, the CEO of Foreign Policy magazine, to conclude that Netanyahu has “killed the Israel lobby” and that the development showed how “estimations of Jewish political influence of all types are overstated” (Rothkopf, 2012). More recently the lobby has been unable to prevent a nuclear deal between Iran and the United States.

It is also important to note that even the lobby tries to influence policy making by portraying Israel as a strategic asset to the US. Typical reports of the Washington Institute of Near East Policy, an important part of the lobby, are titled “Asset Test: How the United States Benefits from Its Alliance with Israel” and “Israel: A Strategic Asset for the United States.” If however Israel’s strategic value continues to decline, it will be more difficult for such institutes to convince US decision makers to follow past policies. As Stephen M. Walt points out, the length of such reports produced by the Israeli



lobby are becoming shorter and their arguments are becoming older and less persuading (Walt, News flash: WINEP defends the 'special relationship' 2011).

The above discussion on the personal convictions of American politicians, the Jewish-American vote and the Israeli lobby is not aimed at proving the irrelevance of such factors in US decision making, rather it shows the very real limits of such influences. Indeed neoclassical realism, contrary to neorealist theory, accounts for the negative effects of such domestic “intervening variables” in influencing a state’s foreign policy away from ideal behavior. Nevertheless such deviations always result in negative consequences for the state, making the influence of such domestic factors only temporary.

In the end the strategic interests of the US in the region and subsequently the net strategic value of Israel for achieving such interests, will be the primary driving factor behind the two countries relationship, and the other factors discussed earlier will only be able to delay and dampen any upcoming change. The events of the last decade including the breakdown of the peace process, the eruption of the Second Palestinian Intifada, several wars in Gaza, the spread of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the fall of US allies such as Mubarak, as well as the rise of Islamist groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas, have all created a fast changing environment which demand a reassessment of US policy in the region. As a result, unless Israel is able to demonstrate its worth in this new environment, its position as a “special” ally will be undermined in the years to come.



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## امریکا و رژیم صهیونیستی: ظهور و سقوط یک همکاری استراتژیک

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این مقاله با استفاده از واقع‌گرایی نئوکلاسیک به تجزیه و تحلیل سیر تکاملی روابط امریکا و رژیم صهیونیستی از زمان شروع با اعتدال آن در دهه‌های ۴۰ و ۵۰، تا روابط «ویژه» امروز می‌پردازد. حمایت جدی امریکا از اسرائیل زمانی آغاز شد که تصمیم‌گیرندگان واشنگتن وجود یک دولت یهودی را در مبارزه با نفوذ شوروی با اهمیت ارزیابی کردند، این برداشت بویژه بعد از جنگ شش روزه در سال ۱۹۶۷ تقویت شد. با این حال بعد از جنگ سرد ارزش اسرائیل به عنوان مهره‌ای برای محقق کردن اهداف امریکا در منطقه رنگ باخت. در جنگ اول خلیج فارس اسرائیل به مسئولیتی برای امریکا تبدیل شد. مقاله تلاش دارد این موضوع را مطرح کند که در بلند مدت اهداف امریکا در منطقه و به طبع آن ارزش استراتژیک اسرائیل برای رسیدن به این اهداف، مهم‌ترین عامل در سیاست خارجی امریکا خواهد بود. در نتیجه عواملی مانند عقاید شخصی سیاستمداران امریکایی، رای یهودی-امریکایی و لابی اسرائیل تنها توانایی به تاخیر انداختن زوال روابط ویژه واشنگتن-تل‌آویو را در آینده خواهند داشت.

**واژه‌های کلیدی:** روابط امریکا-رژیم صهیونیستی، سیاست خارجی امریکا، سیاست خارجی رژیم صهیونیستی، لابی اسرائیل، رقابت جنگ سرد