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## THE U.S.-ISRAEL STRATEGIC RELATIONSHIP IN THE 1990s

Dore Gold

**Increased U.S. Attention to the Middle East / Drawing the Line Between Europe and the Middle East / Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean / Trends in Soviet Naval Deployment / Non-Soviet Threats to America / Factors Affecting American Deployment / What Israel Can Offer / Arab Opposition Neutralized / Separating the Strategic and Political Tracks**

The strategic relationship between Israel and the United States is one of the most secretive subjects in the U.S. Department of Defense and the Israeli Ministry of Defense. Yet over the last seven years a considerable number of public statements have been made -- particularly on the American side -- allowing a degree of analysis.

Since this strategic relationship is relatively new, let us look first at how U.S. security policy in the Middle East developed in the late 1970s and early 1980s, a period which formed the context of the creation of this new relationship.

### **Increased U.S. Attention to the Middle East**

While a vast literature has been written on every aspect of NATO policy, for example, very little has been written on U.S. security policy in the Middle East. One of the reasons for

this is that the United States really did not have a very well-defined security policy towards the Middle East until the late 1970s. When the Cold War broke out, American planners initially focused on the defense of Western Europe and the Far East. As far as the area in between was concerned, the U.S. simply did not have the resources for making the same full-fledged commitments. Therefore, this area was always dealt with on an ad hoc basis. The United States came up with doctrines and quick answers, but never really had a thoroughly thought out security policy for the area. In both the Far East and Europe, the United States had operational commands of the U.S. military which were responsible for planning the defense of each region. But there was no specific military command for the Middle East in the U.S. military for planning the operational defense of the region. According to

Daniel J. Elazar, Editor and Publisher; Zvi R. Marom, Associate Editor; Mark Ami-El, Managing Editor  
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the memoirs of Zbigniew Brzezinski, President Carter's National Security Advisor, it was the Carter doctrine which elevated the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region to a par equivalent to Europe and the Far East in American strategic planning.

From a review of the historical documents since World War II, one first notes the successive collapse of British power in the region from 1947 to 1972. American containment in the Middle East was based on the concept that should the Soviet Union come roaring across from Soviet Central Asia into Iran, the United States would deter the Soviet Union with nuclear weapons, not with conventional forces, for 10 or 15 days, and then escalate, like in Europe. So America's containment policy in the Middle East was based on the threat to use nuclear weapons, to the extent to which Americans had to think about this issue at all.

When the Soviets reached nuclear parity with the U.S. in the mid-1970s, in 1977 the National Security Council began to review the question of whether nuclear deterrence in peripheral zones could continue to apply in such a situation. The National Security Council's response to this strategic question was that the United States should have the capability to rapidly insert conventional forces into peripheral areas to deal with the Soviet threat because the credibility of a nuclear response in peripheral zones was now seen as very minimal.

This theoretical analysis was actually verified in 1979 during the Carter Administration when the Soviets invaded Afghanistan and there was basically no opposing force in the Middle East to prevent the Soviets from doing whatever they wanted.

After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, the United States became preoccupied with fears that the Soviets were that much closer to the Persian Gulf. There was also nothing to stop them from entering northern Iran, as they had done during World War II.

So in this period, American planners began to consider a new American security doctrine in the Middle East based on the

need to have conventional military options in the area to counter the Soviet Union and for the defense of the Persian Gulf, the oil supply line of the West. As a result, the United States began to look for possible partners in the evolving American security relationship to the Middle East that began to emerge.

When the United States started looking around for possible partners in the region, one of the decisions that began to emerge was that Israel was basically not relevant to the problem of defending the Persian Gulf from the Russians. Israel was far from the Gulf and there were all sorts of local political complications to consider if one tried to involve Israel into any kind of defense scheme. As a result of this thinking, the U.S. saw Israel as less relevant to the Gulf, but far more involved with the Eastern Mediterranean region.

#### **Drawing the Line Between Europe and the Middle East**

Institutionally, that distinction was drawn when for the first time since the end of World War II the United States had to create a Middle East military command. If there was to be a command, it had to have command boundaries, but where were the command boundaries for the Middle Eastern command, officially known as the U.S. Central Command -- USCENTCOM?

As the issue of its boundaries was discussed, the question arose as to where Israel precisely belonged. Previously, most of the Middle East from the Mediterranean to the border between Iran and Pakistan were the responsibility of the U.S. European Command (USEUCOM) based in Germany. U.S. European Command, whose focus was the defense of NATO Europe from the Russians, had had peripheral responsibilities for the defense of the Middle East and Africa. When CENTCOM was created, the United States decided to retain Israel, Lebanon and Syria within the area of responsibility for the U.S. European Command. Egypt, the Arabian peninsula, the Gulf States, Jordan, Iraq, Iran -- everything eastward until the Pakistani-Indian

border -- fell under the responsibility of the new U.S. Central Command. CENTCOM was also responsible for naval operations in the Red Sea and Persian Gulf; beyond Bab al-Mandeb and the Straits of Hormuz, the U.S. Pacific Command (USPACOM) retained responsibility for the Indian Ocean. In terms of North Africa, everything westward of Egypt -- from Libya to Morocco -- was still the responsibility of the U.S. European Command. Therefore, this distinction became institutionalized in the U.S. military of Israel being strategically relevant for the Eastern Mediterranean and not for the Persian Gulf. Those lines were drawn in January 1983. Strategic cooperation was renewed and really institutionalized in October-November 1983, once these lines had already been drawn.

#### **Israel in the Eastern Mediterranean**

So any analysis of the question of Israel's strategic importance to the United States must begin with the strategic importance of the Mediterranean to the United States. Will the Mediterranean continue to be of strategic importance? If so, what kind of partnerships will be needed for the defense of the Mediterranean? From this perspective, changes in the Persian Gulf region are not as critical as changes in the Mediterranean region for the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship.

Looking at the question of the strategic importance of the Mediterranean, there are really two questions for the United States: 1) To what extent is there any residual Soviet threat in the Mediterranean that can be anticipated in the future? 2) Are there non-Soviet threats in the Mediterranean?

#### **Trends in Soviet Naval Deployment**

To answer the first question, I recently conducted a study of Soviet naval deployments -- measured in terms of out-of-area ship days -- for Soviet combat vessels far away from Soviet ports, comparing deployment trends from 1985 to 1988. It is generally known that the Soviet Union has

been pulling back from distant deployments of dubious value throughout the world, especially in far away places in the Third World, and there are very clear cutbacks in Soviet ship days.

From 1985 to 1988, there was a 21 percent drop in the deployment of Soviet combat vessels in the Atlantic Ocean, a total cutback in Soviet deployment in the Caribbean, a drop of 59 percent in the Pacific, and a 40 percent drop in the South China Sea. In the Mediterranean there was a drop of about 20 percent, a smaller drop than in other areas. However, what is unusual about the Mediterranean in comparison to other areas of the world is that it is the only area which saw actual increases in Soviet deployment of certain very important combat vessels such as their newer VSTOL (Very Short Take Off and Landing) Kiev-class aircraft carriers. These are not as sophisticated as the American ones, but there has been a general increase in their deployment in the Mediterranean over the last three years, as well as for their heavy guided missile cruisers. There is also an increase of about 25 percent in the deployment of submarines, which is the heart of the Soviet fleet. This seems to indicate that of all the oceans of the world, the Mediterranean remains of critical strategic importance to the Soviet Union from their own deployment patterns. Therefore, American planners must look at where residual Soviet power lies, in the event that at some future date there is a reversion of current Soviet policy and America has to deal with a renewed Soviet military threat.

One of the effects of the 1987 INF (Intermediate Nuclear Forces) treaty which removed intermediate land-based nuclear forces from Europe was that both superpowers began increased sea-basing of intermediate nuclear systems, which was completely permissible under the treaty. This seems to indicate that the relative importance of sea-based nuclear systems to both superpowers on the flanks of NATO has increased as a result of arms control in the center. As arms control increases

in Central Europe with the removal of short-range systems and a separation of conventional forces, then the importance of these sea-based weapons systems in the Mediterranean and the North Sea increases even more.

In terms of Soviet ground forces, one of the clear effects of the changes that are going on in Eastern Europe is that the nature of the Soviet threat to Central Europe will clearly change as the Soviet Union loses access to Eastern European countries and removes its forces from beyond the borders of the Soviet Union. While talk about a Soviet threat sounds like science fiction to many ears these days, nonetheless one has to think about these things. So American planners will now have to consider the greater likelihood of any Soviet threat, should it be renewed, appearing in the future along NATO's flanks rather than in NATO's center as a result of the changes that are occurring in Eastern Europe.

In a January 1988 report for President Reagan entitled "Discriminate Deterrent," by Fred Ikle and Albert Wohlstedter, which examined America's long-term strategy into the future, one of its conclusions was that if there were conventional arms control in Central Europe, the forces in the Soviet army are so enormous that they would simply be shifted to Soviet Central Asia, theoretically increasing their capabilities next to the eastern Turkish and Iranian borders. So in terms of land power, Soviet capabilities vis-a-vis the Middle East could rise as they decline in Europe.

#### **Non-Soviet Threats to America**

If we assume that the Soviet Union is in fact becoming less of a strategic factor for the United States, there is a whole other set of non-Soviet issues which still have to be considered. America is becoming increasingly preoccupied with non-Soviet threats coming from very capable Third World countries. And, in fact, those countries that are of particular concern to the United States comprise a belt of terri-

tory from Libya across to Syria, Iraq, Iran, and even to India. India has two aircraft carriers and has recently obtained a Charlie-class, nuclear-powered, cruise missile-launching submarine from the Soviet Union. These Third World countries are acquiring all manner of formidable weapons systems and should they decide to become expansionist in their own region, they could conflict with U.S. interests. In any case, as some of these countries are located in the Mediterranean and as it could be anticipated that they might threaten American interests in the future, there are good non-Soviet reasons for retaining a strong U.S. Sixth Fleet.

#### **Factors Affecting American Deployment**

Against this background we have to ask, will the United States have the same capabilities as in the past in order to meet either the return of the Soviet threat or non-Soviet Third World powers? There are at least two factors that are today inhibiting American military power in the Mediterranean that will have to be compensated for. The first is the reduction in the American defense budget. The big question in Washington is which of the scenarios for the future presented to the Pentagon will be adopted? Will it cut deeply into the navy, deeply into the army, or deeply everywhere? But if there is a reduction in American naval strength in the Mediterranean, that will be something that America will have to compensate for.

The problem of basing is a second problem emerging for the United States in the Mediterranean, one that already existed in the 1980s, but which will become more acute in the 1990s. During 1988 the United States had two airforce bases threatened in Southern Europe among NATO allies, one in Spain (Torrejon Air Base) and the other in Greece (Hellinikon Air Base). Will the NATO partners in the 1990s still be willing to accept the same level of American presence on their territories? Already in Germany the United States has been having problems conducting

low altitude airforce exercises and has had to transfer them to other places.

During 1990, the U.S. Department of Defense announced that it was closing five American bases in the Mediterranean (four airforce and one navy) including the Helinikon facility already mentioned. But against these economical shutdowns, the U.S. and NATO were planning in 1990 to invest nearly a billion dollars on a new U.S. air base at Crotone, Italy to replace Torrejon Air Base in Spain. In the net, the U.S. was indicating that it was still willing to invest money in the defense of the Mediterranean, despite its base closings. If there is a continuing American mission in the Mediterranean, for whatever purpose, and there is reduced base access for the U.S. Sixth Fleet -- either for economic or political reasons -- the Sixth Fleet is going to have to look for alternatives, and of course that leads to Israel.

#### **What Israel Can Offer**

Because strategic cooperation in essence has always had this Eastern Mediterranean focus, there are really only two parts of the Israeli military that could in theory be helpful -- the airforce and the navy. Any ground forces, whether or not they may be tied down by the intifada, are probably irrelevant for the strategic relationship. In any case, the bulk of the strategic relationship involves the issue of equipment and access for the American military. Israel clearly stands out as one of the alternatives for U.S. naval facilities as well as for airforce facilities. Few in Israel are concerned with the whole nuclear question in the same way that European peace movements are, so U.S. aircraft carriers or submarines pulling into Haifa are never confronted by demonstrators -- as had become a growing phenomenon in Europe. Security-wise, American servicemen and sailors feel relatively safe in Israel and do not have to worry about European terrorism or the lack of effectiveness of European security forces in stopping European terrorism. (I have even been told that Israeli prices are not bad by compari-

son to some of the other ports of call.) So all this adds up to Israel being a rather desirable place for the American military to have some kind of relationship.

In looking at a changing Europe, the question arises as to whether a continued U.S. military presence in the Eastern Mediterranean will be required at all. This relates to a projection as to whether the European Community will become a military power in the future, which seems doubtful. It is hard to envision European Community aircraft carriers coming in as the Sixth Fleet leaves or the Japanese coming into the Persian Gulf with their navy. So it appears that the United States will be stuck being a military power in the region for a long time.

#### **Arab Opposition Neutralized**

One of the key factors limiting U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation has always been the Arab reaction. Whenever military people used to consider cooperation with the Israelis, the traditional State Department response was that this would force the Arabs into the arms of the Russians. One of the interesting developments in the 1980s was that as the Arab world was preoccupied with the Iran-Iraq war, the Saudis no longer made linkages that they made in the 1970s. The Saudis did not tell the U.S. that they would not accept American protection from the Iranians unless the U.S. first stopped bringing its ships into Haifa.

This separation of political-diplomatic positions of the Arab states from their strategic ties to the U.S. did not cease with the end of the Iran-Iraq war. In fact, one can look at the general development of U.S.-Soviet relations as inhibiting that factor in the future simply because Arab leverage vis-a-vis the United States has been very severely damaged. It is no longer an option to play the superpowers off against one another. Therefore, that limiting factor that has always existed in the strategic relationship should not necessarily have as large an impact in the future. The only exception to this positive

trend has been Arab concern with mass Soviet Jewish immigration to Israel -- which the Arab states blame on Washington. If not taken care of, this issue could force the U.S. into a position of being defensive about its strategic ties with Israel.

### **Separating the Strategic and Political Tracks**

It is important to note that in the last year of the Reagan administration, as disagreement grew between the U.S. and Israel over the Shultz initiative, this disagreement did not spill over into the strategic relationship. The strategic and the political relationships seemed to be on two separate tracks. There could be political disagreement, the president could grimace, but the strategic relationship remained strong and one did not affect the other.

Today, the second level of Washington officialdom includes a very strong pro-Israeli American bureaucracy. The question will be whether Bush, Baker, and Scowcroft will make a political decision to allow disagreement on the peace process

to affect the strategic relationship. My guess is that they will not, because if Israel is of strategic interest to the United States, then hurting the strategic relationship is like shooting yourself in the foot. So considering the continued strategic importance of the Mediterranean to the U.S., the fact of declining Arab leverage to limit that relationship, and the assumption that there will be no spillover from political disagreement on the peace process to the strategic relationship, that as a whole the general result of developments that are occurring in Europe today should lead in a period of uncertainty to a strengthening of the strategic relationship rather than its weakening.

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Dore Gold is Director of the U.S. Foreign and Defense Policy Project at the Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies at Tel Aviv University. This Jerusalem Letter/Viewpoints is based on his presentation to the Jerusalem Center Fellows Forum.