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On: 02 June 2014, At: 09:53

Publisher: Routledge

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American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy

Publication details, including instructions for authors and subscription information:

<http://www.tandfonline.com/loi/uafp20>

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Published online: 02 May 2014.

To cite this article: Blaine D. Holt (2014) The Gold Standard: U.S.-Israel Military Relations, American Foreign Policy Interests: The Journal of the National Committee on American Foreign Policy, 36:2, 111-118

To link to this article: <http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/10803920.2014.905366>

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The Gold Standard: U.S.–Israel Military Relations

Blaine D. Holt

ABSTRACT There is no more cohesive military-to-military relationship than the one cultivated, over many years, by the United States and Israel. What began with a trickle after America’s official recognition of the Jewish state in 1948 stands today as a deeply integrated and highly capable enmeshment of forces; in addition, the two nations have enviable industrial might, bolstering the two defense establishments that support their respective militaries. Regional security and relative stability as well as game-changing technologies are some of the important products that support the vital interests of both countries. Although many strategic factors that underpin the relationship are in flux, the military relationship remains strong and is well-positioned to be advanced to the next level with careful policy choices now.

KEYWORDS bilateral; Camp David Accords; cooperation; David Ben-Gurion; defense; FMS; IDF; joint; Menachem Begin; military cooperation; missile defense; MOU; political; QME; security; Six-Day War; strategic; support; Tripartite Agreement; U.S.–Israel relationship; Yom Kippur War

Military-to-military cooperation is an important layer in Israel’s defensive shield, beyond whatever news items about certain joint exercises may communicate. These relations reduce the heavy burden entailed in defending Israel. The recent military confrontations in Lebanon 2006 and in Gaza 2008–2009 and 2012 are reminders of the changing nature of the warfare in which Israel finds itself.

—Oded Eran, Senior Researcher, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv¹

“The Gold Standard” may well be one of the most clichéd and overused phrases used to communicate any field’s leading program or effort. However, in considering the military-to-military relationship between the United States and Israel, this trite descriptor may be more than appropriate. In May 1948, President Harry Truman courageously offered de facto recognition of the new state of Israel over the objections of key advisers, including the pre-eminent George Marshall. The act heralded the beginning of one of history’s most complex, albeit constant, international relationships.² As America’s resolve was tested by the Russian blockade of Berlin along with the fear of perpetuating an arms race in the Middle East, an immediate lash-up between the infant Israeli Defense Force (IDF) and the demobilized U.S.

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military would be anything but possible. Israel turned initially to the French for the military assistance that would be central to their doctrine and inventory, with the United States largely on the sidelines until 1962 when President John Kennedy dramatically moved U.S. policy in the direction of Tel Aviv's repeated requests for assistance by selling the Hawk anti-aircraft missile system to Israel to help defend against its Soviet-armed Arab neighbors.³

At present, the bilateral relationship in the military sphere is the envy of strategists and planners around the world. Joint and combined exercises, staff colleges and fellowships, interoperability training, and joint research and development are some of the jewels in the crown that suits both countries well. Even with impressive military cooperation with France and Great Britain before the 1967 Six-Day War, Israel maintained close relations with the United States and its military as a long-term strategy as evidenced by critical cold war intelligence sharing as early as 1956.⁴ Today's relationship boasts robust intelligence cooperation in addition to all the measures that yield two very capable, ready forces that have confidence in their ability to meet the bilateral challenges posed by leaders in Washington and Tel Aviv. And, while U.S.–Israeli bonds at the political level have ebbed and flowed, military-to-military relations have grown steadily, while remaining pragmatic and professional, over the last 50 years. The benefits of these efforts are many and range from relative regional stability to strategic access and influence. Is the growth curve sustainable? Leaders in both countries would do well to consider recent developments and trends that could adversely affect these bonds and also seek out opportunities to improve further cooperation, with the goal of contributing to Israel's, the region's, and, indeed, global security. The relationship between the two militaries may well be the benchmark or the Gold Standard—but how leaders in both capitals interpret changes in the strategic environment and structure policy accordingly will determine the standard's staying power and ultimately affect the vital interests of both.

OVERVIEW, PAST AND PRESENT

The status quo—disrupting Kennedy doctrine in 1962 was built on his belief that “it was easier to live

with an Israel that was getting the resources it needed to defend itself. Then Israel would not have to commit wild or unacceptable acts.”⁵ Kennedy's thinking has largely endured into contemporary times in some form. What the president intended to be a defensive-use-only weapon began a strategic precedent in military support that Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion had sought.⁶ In 1965, the Johnson administration would take the next step and include offensive weaponry with the sale of 210 M-48 Patton tanks—followed months later by A-4 Skyhawk attack aircraft. Despite a temporary arms embargo imposed by the United States on December 5, 1947, Israel won a decisive victory against the Soviet-equipped armies of Egypt and Syria and those countries' overwhelming numbers in the Six-Day War (1967); this conflict fastened even more firmly the military bilateral bonds.⁷

By 1968, when the first sales to Israel of the state-of-the-art F-4 Phantom became public, it was clear that the Johnson administration was resolute about providing Israel with a military advantage over its Soviet-backed Arab adversaries. The term that describes the U.S. support objective with regard to the balance of power in the Middle East endures today: Israel's “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME)—Israel would receive enough support to maintain military superiority and, thereby, keep the region stable.⁸ The course charted by President Johnson was laid for a robust and far-reaching military relationship. Maintaining Israel's QME remains a U.S. national interest.⁹ The Yom Kippur War in 1973 stressed the relationship and the principles of maintaining the Israeli QME versus competing U.S. policy objectives. The United States delayed responding to initial Israeli requests for arms and matériel with the aim of increasing U.S. influence in the Arab world at the expense of the Soviet Union. However, when policymakers in D.C. saw the heavy losses endured so early in the two-front campaign against Egypt and Syria, President Nixon ordered a massive-scale airlift. The resupply effort, consisting of tens of thousands of tons of war matériel (tanks, aircraft, ammunition, and, for the first time, precision-guided munitions [PGMs]) had limited effect in the north but provided a massive assist to Israel in the Sinai, helping to achieve victory over Egypt's vaunted Third Army.¹⁰ Perhaps the biggest impact of the airlift was the deterrent effect on Israel's opponents.

President Anwar Sadat of Egypt remarked that Egypt could not win a war with Israel and the United States just as the United States shifted the weight of its effort from one of combat support to Israel to a diplomatic one (led by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger) to secure the war's conclusion.¹¹ While the U.S. military commitment to the security of Israel deepened after the war, the Kissinger mission to Cairo marked a new sophistication in U.S. foreign policy in terms of committing itself to brokering a lasting Arab–Israeli peace. The common Western values and democracy treasured by the United States and Israel were held in the balance with the larger U.S. cold war imperative of extirpating Soviet influence from the Arab states. These diplomatic efforts—aimed at regional stability—continue post–cold war today; they have endured for decades, with successes and failures, while the military-to-military relationship continued to develop.¹²

The Camp David Accords, reached in 1978, secured a lasting peace between Egypt and Israel while shattering the Soviet monopoly of Arab alignment. This set the stage for the 1981 Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) of strategic cooperation between the United States and Israel. The MOU went beyond military aid and foreign military sales, calling for joint exercises as well as collaborative research and development of weapons technologies.¹³ Claiming that the United States would lose its objectivity in the peace process, the Soviet Union and the Arab countries did not support the MOU. The 1981 MOU laid the foundation for the 1983 and 1987 MOUs that established the Joint Political-Military Group (JPMG) and Joint Security Assistance Planning Group along with routine intelligence sharing.¹⁴ The 1987 MOU raised the bar considerably, establishing Israel as a non–North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) ally. This designation greatly expanded military-to-military opportunities as well as provided a path for Israeli companies to compete for military contracts and to purchase advanced weapon systems.¹⁵ The military relationship continues to grow, mostly unabated, despite ebbs and flows in the political or economic spheres.

Today, the United States and Israel conduct periodic reviews of the QME policy in the contemporary versions of the original working groups outlined in the MOUs of the 1980s. Concerns and possible changes are raised and addressed via the JPMG or

the Defense Policy Advisory Group (DPMG). Currently, Israel receives approximately \$3 billion per year in military aid per the 2007 MOU between the Bush administration and the Israeli government—valid for 10 years of funding.¹⁶ At the signing, former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs Nicholas Burns articulated U.S. strategic goals in connection with the aid and the MOU at a press conference:

We consider this 30 billion dollars in assistance to Israel to be an investment in peace—in long-term peace. Peace will not be made without strength. Peace will not be made without Israel being strong in the future. Of course, our objective as a country and our specific objective as a government is to contribute to that peace, a peace between Israel and the Palestinian people, the creation of an independent Palestinian state willing to live side by side in peace with Israel, and a general peace in the region that has eluded the Israeli people for 59 years but which is, we hope, the destiny of the Israeli people as well as the Arab peoples of the region. Our policy in this entire region is dedicated to that final objective.¹⁷

Today, the military-to-military relationship is the most extensive bilateral defense relationship in the world. Monetarily, the United States has invested more than \$70 billion in the military sector since 1949, with 40 percent of that going to Israel in the last decade.¹⁸ In the readiness, training, and education field, exercises from small tabletop dialogues to full-blown joint and combined ballistic missile defense exercises like the JUNIPER COBRA series or exchanges at staff colleges make possible the seamless operation of two technologically advanced forces as a combined force, even though they have never fought together. After decades, U.S.–Israeli research and development initiatives are yielding the cutting edge in multi-tiered missile and rocket defense systems such as Iron Dome and the Arrow systems. Breakthrough technologies across the military spectrum are a major boon to the Israeli defense industry. The 2007 MOU now allows Israel to spend up to 26 percent of its allotted foreign military financing funds for domestic defense purchases. Israel's military-to-military relationship has enabled it to take full advantage of the U.S. Department of Defense's Excess Defense Articles (EDA) Program—more than \$330 million in matériel has been transferred since 2001 to the IDF.¹⁹ The emergency U.S. stockpile of weapons or the War Reserves Stock Allies-Israel (WRSA-I) is the physical storage of U.S. weaponry in Israel—this can be purchased and issued to the

IDF at the storage sites if authorized by the U.S. president in time of war. WRSA-I inventories are currently authorized by the U.S. Congress to be at \$1.2 billion.²⁰ The U.S. and Israeli militaries and all the associated programs supporting the relationship preserve Israel's QME and contribute to counter or deter regional threats.

THE POLITICAL RELATIONSHIP: A TURBULENT HISTORY AND UNCERTAIN FUTURE

U.S.–Israeli ties go far beyond the mountains of agreements and memos of understanding used in a vain attempt to reduce this unique and very special relationship to a neat and easily understood series of bilateral conventions describing activities from agriculture to taxation; all codified in diplomatic language and filled with exquisitely mind-numbing minutiae. From the foundational 1917 Balfour Declaration to the present day, the political relationship moves forward despite the seemingly manic rises and falls from crises and key events that dot the timeline. When President Truman recognized Israel that established a strong foundation on which the two states could build a relationship. Truman held his position firm based on moral and religious grounds—considering the Israelis to be a persecuted minority.²¹ His belief that shared concepts such as liberty and democracy steeped in Judeo-Christian values were supported by many Americans sympathetic to Israel's struggle.²² And, while a moral basis is perhaps the strongest foundation for state-to-state relations to embark from, the unavoidable law of *realpolitik*, or nations putting their vital interests first and foremost, holds in both the United States and Israel.

With common values, the United States and Israel were well-aligned to join against communism and the influence the Soviet Union was exerting in the Arab world. However, the 1950 Tripartite Agreement between the United States, France, and Britain to limit arms sales to Israel and other countries in the region made the honeymoon initiated by Truman short-lived at best. France was the most willing security partner during the 1950s; however, Israel kept a lookout for diversification in its relationships, keeping a steady focus on opportunities to bolster relations with the United States. Perhaps the best

early evidence of Israel's sensitivity to the prospects of a tighter bond was Prime Minister Ben-Gurion's revising his approach with respect to Jewish immigration to Israel and the American Jew. Encountering resistance in terms of support from U.S. Jewish organizations and understanding how critical that might be to the larger relationship, the prime minister dropped his calls for American Jewish youth to join Israel, reaffirming that "they owe no political allegiance to Israel."²³ Israel found a strong constituency in the Jewish and Christian Protestant communities. Support for Israel has dominated U.S. presidential politics for decades despite tensions running high on both sides. While engaging at the presidential/prime ministerial level, Israel has consistently turned to groups like the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) to protest arms sales to potential adversaries or other U.S. actions deemed detrimental to the Jewish state.

In September 1981, for example, Premier Menachem Begin broke from the script of a planned state visit by publicly lobbying the U.S. Congress and media against the planned U.S. sale of the Airborne Warning and Control System (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia. This rise in tensions was the climax of a tough summer in which U.S.-supplied fighters were used by the IDF on targets in Iraq and Lebanon. Despite tense exchanges between Washington and Jerusalem, pragmatism won out and the landmark MOU of 1981 was signed. Only weeks after the signing, the Knesset extended Israeli law to the occupied Golan Heights, causing Washington to suspend the MOU summarily, thus dashing hopes for smooth relations going forward. Analyzing the same events through a military-cooperation lens, no crisis in the relationship at all can be seen during this same year. Even as U.S. Ambassador Samuel Lewis was receiving a wire brushing by Premier Begin for "punishing Israel," the military aid dollars continued to flow and associated programs kept operating.²⁴

In the political sphere, the *tête-à-tête* continues to this day. Without exaggeration, we can say that crises have been nearly infinite. The *intifadas*, Gulf War, third-party technology transfers, settlement construction, or weapons sales in the Arab world—the endless list of stressors between governments has been the background to this strategic alliance, with each nation acknowledging its vital interest with each other regardless of which party is in power in either

capital. This enduring status lends enough certainty for military leaders to continue the mutual investment in each other without breaking stride for some unfortunate or inconvenient blip on the geopolitical radar. By sharp contrast, the first casualty in U.S. bilateral relations with countries like China or Russia is usually that military-to-military contacts are severed when political trouble arises between capitals. Accordingly, gaining the trust and keeping continuity in personal relationships are very problematic; severing them denies all parties the ability to reap the benefits. In the case of partners or even potential adversaries, some level of military-to-military contact is useful to gain a better sense of the strategic intent of the other. As with NATO countries, Japan, and others, Israel is an ally. Understanding strategic intent is still important, but the additional aspects of readiness and interoperability make pragmatic dedication to these relationships essential.

The bottom line is that the region is too important to the United States to not have a staunch ally in Israel; while Israel depends on the United States as its sole guarantor of security. Former Mossad leader Efraim Halevy underscored this strategic enmeshment from the Israeli point of view in his 2006 memoir: "After all had been said and done, Israel was heavily reliant on U.S. support and aid both economically and militarily and it was unthinkable that it could act independently on a matter of vital U.S. global interest."²⁵ However, is this always to be the case? The strategic ground that the bilateral relationship is built on is hardly totally stable. Quite the contrary, strategic factors that bind the United States and Israel are changing. Globalization, domestic politics, demographic shifts, economics, technology and the current array of threats are some of the key areas that are experiencing changes that will affect the political discourse between the two countries and challenge future leaders.

When are the old formulas no longer appropriate? Common Western values, representative democracies, and free market economic principles in a critical region are elements that make the relationship's value clear. It could be said that the linchpin that binds the United States and Israel is the more than \$3 billion in aid sent annually by the U.S. taxpayer with expectations of wielding influence in Israel and the region. Such enduring support has enabled Israel to grow to become the 28th richest nation

and to be on the cutting edge in many high-tech fields—many of which are defense-related. The Israel of today is well-integrated into the global economy, with expectations that its defense industry has the maximum freedom to explore market share in the global marketplace. However, friction is increasing in both countries over defense exports, with the United States demanding transparency and oversight, while Israel grows increasingly frustrated at restrictions imposed as an implied condition of support. Israel's efforts to contract with the Chinese People's Liberation Army (PLA) to upgrade one of its remotely piloted vehicles in 2005 resulted in suspension from the Joint Strike Fighter (JSF) development.²⁶ This was later resolved but did reveal the divergence of goals as Israel leverages its high-tech sector for economic gain and U.S. concerns about technology transfer mount. Demographically, the religious connective tissue between Americans and Israelis is showing signs of tearing. An extensive Pew poll released in October 2013 indicates that, in Israel, non-secularism or Jewish observance is on the rise, with a majority 57 percent indicating that they are observant of most Jewish orthodox strictures and traditions, while in the United States, secularism is on a the rise among Jewish and Christians alike. A recent poll conducted by the GFK market research firm indicates that U.S. public opinion has shifted on the peace process, with the majority now favoring a one-state, or democracy, solution if a two-state solution that protects the concept of a Jewish state cannot be reached.²⁷ While economic factors and public opinion are influential but not determinative of geopolitical outcomes, it is important to recognize that the underpinnings of the U.S.–Israel bond are evolving as the political and strategic environment has changed since President Truman's time. Perhaps a useful indicator that the relationship is under pressure can be found in the political debate in both nations. With budgets under intense pressure, support for Israel in terms of financial aid is softening among Democrats and Republicans.

As prominent politicians in the United States call for sharp reductions in foreign aid to Israel, a recent poll conducted by the Israeli Democracy Institute (IDI) found that 49 percent of Israel's citizens now believe that the country should seek out new allies.²⁸ Although strong voices in both countries supporting reduced or zero Israel dependency on the United

States sound like a complementary position, significant caution must be exercised with the following taken into consideration: the diminished U.S. regional influence and substantial increase in security risks for Israel. And, if the ties that bind loosen or unknot altogether, what is to become of the Gold Standard in military-to-military relationships?

ENDURING SECURITY COOPERATION FOR THE UNITED STATES AND ISRAEL

Despite the seemingly intractable decades-long issues, Israel is a high-tech industrial miracle whose talent runs deep in meeting the demands of an almost limitless market. A recent BBC story dubbed Israel the “Start-up Nation,” highlighting the entrepreneurial spirit in the private sector and the 650 start-up companies established in just the last year.²⁹ Foreign technology companies, most of them based in the Silicon Valley, acquired more than 200 Israeli companies in 2013.³⁰ Much of this engineering muscle is the result of serious capital investment and commitment to the joint research and development efforts between the two defense sectors. Unarguably, cutting-edge work in missile/rocket defense serves both countries. The spin-off benefit of incubating and concentrating all this science, technology, engineering, and math (STEM) power in Israel is its high-tech industry that it depends on today.

Another key factor to watch is energy. Israel is developing offshore gas fields, which began yielding natural gas in March 2013; they have real potential to make Israel an energy exporter, thus fueling additional growth.³¹ Energy is a two-sided coin for Israel. While exploiting its own gas reserves is a welcome windfall, falling prices as the result of the increasing global supply ramp up the threats in the region. Threats like Iran or spillover violence from conflicts between the Sunni and Shia would likely be intensified by cheaper oil and gas. No matter how Israel advances in its economic development, its security will remain its top priority for the foreseeable future. So, regardless of the level of aid flowing from the United States or the dialogue between leaders, the interests of both nations lie in preserving and enhancing the military-to-military relationship.

LEGISLATION

If the pending U.S.–Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2013 is passed, it will offer opportunities to strengthen further the partnership in the military domain. A new designation of “major strategic partner” is yet to be legally defined but seems to indicate a level above “non-NATO ally.” It would increase allowable stockpiling of weapons in Israel and improve cooperation in the cyber arena. Further cooperation is called for in the joint development of Israeli missile and rocket programs like Iron Dome, Arrow, and David’s Sling. These would afford greater opportunities to nurture the military bonds and increase interoperability and readiness in key areas that are complementary to the capabilities the United States is developing globally.

U.S.–ISRAEL MILITARY-TO- MILITARY: 2.0

Irrespective of the level at which U.S. foreign aid settles as the political leadership in both countries engage in dialogue and debate domestically, the relationship between militaries forged over five decades is valuable. A way to safely shepherd this evolving and dynamic military alliance through any political, economic, or diplomatic climate is to deepen the roots of the existing programs while looking at innovative options to form new initiatives. In other words, rather than looking for ways to sustain the status quo, the timing is optimal to move the relationship to the next level . . . version 2.0.

Deepen the Roots

We already have a great platform from which to build up the relationship. Exercises can always be increased in complexity in terms of scenarios and forces involved. The United States and Israel could offer more diverse multinational exercise and training opportunities to regional players, thus increasing their understanding of and internal stability in the face of a common threat like that posed by Iran. Staff college and liaison officer exchanges could also be expanded to include instructors and more staff billets in key headquarters. In the foreign military sales (FMS) realm, a bilateral review of the program and what the current benefits are to each nation’s defense industrial base would increase value. If FMS dollars

decrease for Israel down the line, a reasonable expectation would be that many Israeli defense products would fare well in U.S. acquisition plans as an offset. A commitment to increase the levels of joint research and development will not only boost cooperation, it will likely produce results (e.g., new technologies that bolster U.S. defense and protect Israel's QME). Of course, these are just a few examples of what is possible in taking the next steps. Trust and confidence in each other enables these possibilities and others.

Innovate!

Another way to view the relationship is from the standpoint of what new efforts could be undertaken to strengthen ties and add capability that is not present today. Defense fellowships in each other's top defense technology firms (which now stretch from Tel Aviv to the Silicon Valley) would open mid-to-senior level officers up to how the two nations collaborate corporately and what the most promising developments will be in the coming years. Placing fellows for a year in each other's top think tanks like the Council on Foreign Relations in New York City or the Interdisciplinary Center (IDC) in Herzliya would go far in exposing military officers to each nation's top issues through a whole-of-government and whole-of-society view. All of these offer ample opportunity to do scholarly work and debate and develop solutions to contemporary security problems. Ballistic missile defense and cyber operations are natural areas for the two militaries to collaborate, presenting fertile ground for innovation, especially in the younger generations of officers who are working at the cutting-edge in these fields. From alternative energy to nanotechnology, the join-up between the two militaries and their demonstrated problem-solving cultures are a synergistic opportunity, even in the face of declining resources.

CONCLUSION

Oded Eran of the Institute for National Security Studies in Tel Aviv correctly asserts that, "Military-to-military cooperation is an important layer in Israel's defensive shield." However, it could also be argued that this cooperation has been and remains an important layer in the defensive shield of the United

States. No one would disagree that the relationship with Israel has had more than a few rough spots, at times blossoming into outright friction. Yet, the military-to-military relationship remains a beacon in a sea of turbulence, continuing along a mostly sure and steady path. It should be stressed, however, that the original ties binding the two countries are gradually changing and evolving in untested ways. Divergent secular perspectives, economics, globalization, and technology are tugging at the connective tissue of the two nations. Nonetheless, behind a somewhat belligerent media that magnify political debate, where any criticism by or of a leader rates barrels of printer's ink, a unique and very successful bond remains between the two militaries and their associated establishments. As the path ahead in a geostrategic sense becomes clear, it is vital for both countries to understand that their investments in each other endure despite the rapidly changing variable in the equation. In reviewing bilateral relations and how they proceed whether aid or investment levels change, it is imperative that this Gold Standard be preserved and enhanced to assure the continuation of the layer in the defensive shield for both the United States and Israel.

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