

ISRAEL AS A U.S. “STRATEGIC ASSET”: MYTHS AND REALITIES

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If asked to point to the main victims of the recent crisis in the Middle East, most objective observers might express sympathy for the innocent Israeli and Lebanese civilians killed or injured in the fighting between the Israeli military and Hizbollah guerrillas. And they'd be right. But in the pundits' world of Washington think tanks and policy positions, the conflict seems to have taken down a less tangible target: the neocon paradigm of Israel as a valuable U.S. asset in the Middle East. The Beltway warriors themselves, of course, are alive and kicking; the “chicken hawks” have not reported any major casualties. To these desk soldiers, an act of “war” is launching a blazing op-ed or participating in a fiery verbal exchange on FOX News. A “war casualty” is a lost debate in the battlefield of ideas, and a “victim” is an ideological ally who — God (or Reverend Moon or Rupert Murdoch) forbid! — lost a cushy and powerful job somewhere along the Boston-Washington corridor.

The failure to defend one's ideological turf or policy paradigm is considered a dangerous sign of impending defeat, or at least a sign that you are about to be buried alive in the editorial offices of the *Weekly*

Standard or the ideas shelter of the American Enterprise Institute. Indeed, much of what the neocon ideologues have been doing since 9/11 is protecting their cherished policy paradigm — the Imperial Democratic Crusade in the Middle East — from challengers who dare demonstrate that freedom is *not* on the march in Mesopotamia. This is reminiscent of how, in the 1930s, communist ideologues explained with dialectical precision why the Ribbentrop-Molotov Pact made so much sense from a Marxist perspective.

We in the reality-based community are familiar with the many tipping points in Iraq that have come, gone and reappeared again, including the formation of the new government in Baghdad and the killing of terrorist mastermind Abu Musab Al Zarqawi. The lengths to which neoconservatives have gone to protect that besieged paradigm might serve as a study on “How to Win a War You've Lost.” A few weeks ago, I attended one of those off-the-record forums in Washington. A top Bush administration official insisted that the raging civil war in Iraq was not a, well, “civil war” but “sectarian strife” ignited by “death squads” led by “Saddamists” and “Sadists.” (A few days later a top U.S.

general admitted that what is happening in Iraq looks like a civil war.)

Now the Israel-Hizbollah conflict has forced administration officials and their neocon allies to mount a fierce “paradigm protection effort.” Hence, against the backdrop of horrifying images from Lebanon, Israel and Palestine, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice explained to reporters that the scenes of death, destruction and human misery were actually “birth pangs of a new Middle East.”

But even the most skilled Hegelian neocon seemed to have found it difficult to engage in one of these you-need-to-break-an-egg-to-make-an-omelet exercises in confronting the latest challenge to the dogma: Israel’s failure to decimate Hizbollah. From the neoconservative perspective, the plot line of the current Middle East movie is obvious: Iran and Syria encouraged their proxy in Lebanon, Hizbollah, to deliver a blow to America’s proxy in the Middle East, Israel, as a way of shifting the Mideast power balance toward Tehran and Damascus. Then, according to the script, Israel was supposed to deliver a counterblow to Hizbollah to shift the power balance back toward Washington. The expected conclusion was an American-Israeli win over the Iranian-Syrian team. Instead, the best-case scenario is looking more like a draw; in the worst-case scenario, there is the perception of a Hizbollah victory.

“We have been driven into something we didn’t want to do,” Anthony H. Cordesman, a military analyst at the Center for Strategic and International Studies, told *The New York Times*. “Far from Israel being the American proxy in a war against Iran, we’ve become Israel’s proxy in its war against Hizbollah,” he said. “Israel’s

miscalculations have been so serious that its only hope for victory is to have the United States and the international community do for Israel what it can’t do militarily, which is defeat Hizbollah, assemble an international force in Lebanon, and bring some sort of endgame to all this.”¹

Something not very funny happened to the neocon democracy-spreading paradigm on the way to southern Lebanon. And serious damage has been done to that other favorite neoconservative paradigm: that the United States should regard Israel as a major strategic asset in the Middle East. This paradigm is in turn rooted in yet another neoconservative axiom: what’s good for Israel’s strategic interest is good for America, and vice versa.

ROMANCING THE SOVIETS AND THE EUROPEANS

Israel, according to the tale concocted during the Cold War, is America’s strategic asset in the Middle East, its unsinkable aircraft carrier in the Eastern Mediterranean. After Israel’s victory in the 1967 Six-Day War, the intellectual predecessors of today’s neoconservatives popularized the idea of Israel as a U.S. strategic asset in the Middle East, promoting the U.S.-Israel relationship as a strategic alliance in order to mobilize support for Israel, which had, after all, defeated Egypt, a Soviet ally.

This was a turnaround. After World War II, the top U.S. diplomats and military officials who guided U.S. foreign policy, led by then-Secretary of State George C. Marshall, had opposed the idea of establishing a Jewish state in Palestine and pressed President Harry Truman not to recognize the new state, arguing that such a move would harm the U.S. position in the Arab Middle East. It was the Soviet Union

that provided much of Israel’s early military and diplomatic backing, while many of the socialist-Zionist leaders of the new state toyed with the notion of adopting a “neutralist” and “anti-imperialist” posture in the evolving Cold War. Indeed, this led some American observers to warn that the Jewish state could become a pro-communist base in the Middle East.

Similarly, it was France, not the United States, that served as Israel’s main source of arms and munitions in the 1950s and early 1960s, even helping to develop its nuclear arsenal. In fact, Israeli statesmen like Shimon Peres, who had played a leading role in developing the alliance with France, proposed that the Jewish state embrace a “European orientation” in its foreign policy and form close military and economic ties with the emerging Franco-German grouping in Western Europe. Peres, reflecting the perspective of French and West German “Gaullists” at that time, was concerned that the United States and the Soviet Union were in the process of moving towards diplomatic détente and the establishment of a global “condominium” that would erode the ability of Western Europe to create its own independent political-military power, including an effective nuclear military strategy. In that context, American pressure on Israel to end its own nuclear military program was perceived by Peres and other “Europeanists” in Israel to be driven by similar geostrategic goals of the administration of President John F. Kennedy: to cooperate with the Soviets at the expense of Israel and the West Europeans. Israel’s relationship with Europe also benefited from the increasing diplomatic and economic support that West Germany provided the Jewish state, where many Holocaust survivors had found a home.

The Israeli alliance with France and the European direction of its foreign policy reached a peak in the aftermath of the 1956 Suez campaign, during which it cooperated with Paris and London in an effort to oust Egypt’s Gamal Abdel Nasser from power (a move that faced powerful American and Soviet opposition). Indeed, Israeli and French interests were seen to be compatible — the French were trying to suppress the struggle for independence in Algeria, which was backed in turn by Nasser, Israel’s own nemesis. But with the return to power of Charles De Gaulle in Paris and his decision to bring an end to French rule in Algeria, the relationship between Israel and France experienced a cooling-off period and eventually growing tensions, after Israel rejected the aging French president’s advice not to attack Egypt in 1967 in what became known as the Six-Day War.

THE NEOCONS: THE FIRST GENERATION

The 1967 War was, indeed, a turning point in the U.S.-Israeli relationship. The administration of President Lyndon B. Johnson, which was trying to deal with the bloody military quagmire in Vietnam, had given Israel the green light to launch the attack on Egypt, a client state of the Soviet Union in the Middle East. LBJ and his aides were hoping that the blow inflicted by Israel on the Soviets’ partner would help offset in a geostrategic sense the losses that the United States was experiencing in Southeast Asia in fighting an insurgency backed by Soviet ally North Vietnam. At the same time, some of LBJ’s political advisers, such as Supreme Court Justice Abe Fortas, speechwriter Ben Wattenberg, UN Ambassador Arthur Goldberg, and the

brothers Walter and Eugene Rostow, argued for backing the Jewish state. In this way, the Democratic White House occupant, who was fighting for his political life, would be able to regain the support of American-Jewish liberals who had opposed U.S. military intervention in Southeast Asia. (The same kind of political advice would be given to President George W. Bush by his neoconservative advisers who suggested that a U.S. attack on Israel's enemy, Iraq's Saddam Hussein, would help him gain political backing from American-Jewish voters, the majority of whom had not voted for him in 2000.)

But even after 1967, when Israel and the United States were strengthening their diplomatic-military ties (and after Egypt had broken diplomatic relations with Washington, and Moscow had severed its diplomatic ties to Israel), there was recognition in

both Washington and Jerusalem of the strategic constraints on their relationship. America could not maintain its position as a great power in the Middle East without establishing its presence in the Arab world, in particular, its position in Saudi Arabia and the oil-rich Persian Gulf. By the same token Israel's friendship with America could not substitute for acceptance by its Arab neighbors. Hence, Washington's never-ending efforts to try to bring about peace in the Middle East began as part of

a strategy to reduce the costs — including Arab-Israeli wars — of its involvement in the Middle East. Indeed, Washington's ability to play the role of an honest broker between Israel and Egypt (and Syria) was only made possible after the administration of President Richard Nixon under the direction of Secretary of State Henry Kissinger decided to move towards renewing diplomatic ties with Egypt and bringing it eventually into the American fold.

This honest-broker approach, reflecting a certain level of U.S. evenhandedness in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict,

made it possible for President Jimmy Carter to help mediate the historic peace agreement between Israel and Egypt in 1979. It also proved to be a major strategic achievement for Israel, demonstrating benefits to Israel of an evenhanded U.S. role in the Middle East, as opposed to using Israel as a strate-

gic asset there. Ironically, neoconservative pundits accused Carter at the time of being "anti-Israeli."

In any case, the constraints on the ability of Israel to play the role of a U.S. strategic asset in the Middle East became quite obvious during the administration of President Ronald Reagan. Some of his advisers — and some pundits, the early generation of today's neocons — argued that the Jewish state could and should become America's leading military ally in

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the Middle East during a time of renewed Cold War tensions, while depicting the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) as a stooge of the Soviet Union. To the Likud party, the policies of the Reagan administration seemed to offer Israel time to consolidate its hold on the West Bank and Gaza. The neoconservatives occupying top positions on Reagan's foreign-policy team encouraged the president to view the Arab-Israeli conflict through a Cold War lens and to identify Palestinian nationalism as an extension of Soviet-induced international terrorism. In that context, Washington could view Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands with benign neglect.

Indeed, in what could be seen as an audition for the role they would play under President George W. Bush, neocons like U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Jeane Kirkpatrick and Defense Department official Richard Perle tried to persuade Reagan that Israel could combat Soviet mischief in the Middle East by nonsense foreign-policy realism. They even proposed Israel as a model for U.S. recovery from "post-Vietnam syndrome" and for renewal of American energy and drive. Unilateral American intervention in places like Grenada and Libya began to resemble Israel's own iron-fist approach to Middle East issues. But the two countries found themselves increasingly alone in international organizations like the United Nations, where a visitor from Mars in 1985 would have found it difficult to decide, after listening to Ambassador Kirkpatrick and then-Israeli Ambassador Benjamin Netanyahu, which of the two represented the United States and which Israel. Moreover, reflecting the pro-Israeli position of the neocons, then-Secretary of State Alexander Haig gave Israeli Defense

Minister Ariel Sharon a "yellow light" to invade Lebanon in 1982 and punish the PLO, the alleged ally of the Soviet Union.

The Israeli invasion of Lebanon and the ensuing deployment of U.S. troops to that country following Israeli withdrawal from Beirut, resulted in major costs for the United States and Israel and forced the Reagan administration to reassess its relationship with Israel, leading among other things to Haig's resignation, the withdrawal of U.S. troops from Lebanon, and the erosion of neocon influence in the Reagan administration. At the same time, the Iran-contra affair was another demonstration of the harmful products of the "strategic alliance" with Israel. And the Palestinian intifada highlighted the destructive consequences of the neoconservative "strategic asset" formula and its operational implication of placing the Palestinian issue on the back burner. It was not surprising, therefore, that President Reagan and his aides ended up abandoning much of the neoconservative agenda vis-à-vis Israel in their last term in office. They instead tried to strengthen a "strategic consensus" with Arab allies that was aimed at containing not only Soviet pressure but also the rising power of a radical Shiite regime in Tehran. Israel was forced to adjust to the realities of this strategic consensus that led eventually to the U.S. decision to recognize the PLO.

BYE-BYE, COLD WAR, HELLO, GLOBAL INTIFADA

In a way, the end of the Cold War should have made the Israel-as-a-strategic-asset paradigm obsolete. But the decision by President George H. W. Bush to respond militarily to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Iraq revived the hopes of

neoconservative observers that Israel could once again provide Washington its strategic services against the common enemy in Baghdad. But it all proved to be a very short Indian summer for the moribund paradigm. If anything, Israel ended up a strategic burden as far as U.S. strategic interests are concerned. Against the backdrop of the continuing intifada, the Bush administration found it more difficult to mobilize the support of the Arab states for its military action against Iraq. Moreover, America had to spend much time and resources persuading the Israelis not to respond with military power to Iraq's scud attacks. In the aftermath of the U.S. victory in the Persian Gulf, President Bush and his advisers launched a major effort to revive the Israeli-Arab peace process, even demanding that Israel freeze the building of Jewish settlements in the occupied Palestinian territories. This strategy helped create the conditions for the Israeli-Palestinian Oslo agreement and the ensuing Israeli peace agreement with Jordan. (Again, as in the case of President Carter, the neocons bashed President Bush as "anti-Israeli.")

For a while, it seemed as though the notion of Israel's serving as a U.S. strategic ally was empty rhetoric to help President Bill Clinton win support from pro-Israeli voters and that most American efforts in the Middle East would be devoted to energizing the Palestinian-Israeli peace process. But after 9/11, and against the backdrop of the second intifada and the Iraq War, a new generation of neoconservatives had come to power. Those operatives, who had achieved enormous influence inside the administration of President Bush II as well as in Congress, the media and Washington think tanks, succeeded in marketing the notion that the

United States and Israel were now being brought together in a strategic alliance against "Islamofascism" and a global intifada. In their vision, this alliance would operate with the United States as sheriff and Israel as deputy. This translates into American regional hegemony with certain military tasks subcontracted to Israel. Israeli-Arab peacemaking was now placed on the policy backburner, with the late Yasser Arafat portrayed as a Palestinian twin of Osama bin Laden. And the neoconservative message has been that the United States needs to adopt more of the tough Israeli methods of dealing with Mideast terrorists (since they think Arabs understand only force); that is, to "Israelize" American foreign policy. Indeed, for a while, it looked as though the neoconservative fantasy that started taking shape after 1967 had finally been fulfilled.

As the Bush administration tried to promote this ambitious neoconservative agenda in Iraq, however, that country started looking more and more like southern Lebanon, the West Bank and Gaza under Israeli occupation. And in the process, not unlike what Israel had achieved in post-1982 Lebanon, the Bush administration has strengthened Iran and its Shiite allies in the Middle East, a consequence that runs contrary to both U.S. and Israeli interests. Now the same sense of irony could be applied to the disastrous outcome of the recent Israeli military operation in Lebanon. This too could help enhance the status of Iran and Syria in the region. As during Gulf War I, Israel turned out to be more of a burden than an asset for U.S. interests in the region.

Therefore, it was not surprising that Bush backers and neoconservatives were angry and confused by Israel's performance. In his unique form of Israel bashing, leading

neocon columnist Charles Krauthammer blamed Israel for not living up to its role as a U.S. strategic asset. "Hizbollah's unprovoked attack on July 12 provided Israel the extraordinary opportunity to demonstrate its utility by making a major contribution to America's war on terrorism," Krauthammer wrote. Suggesting that Washington had green-lighted Israel's attack on Hizbollah "as an act of clear self-interest," Krauthammer declared that "America wants, America needs, a decisive Hizbollah defeat." But America "has been disappointed."²

Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert's boasts about Israeli military success in Lebanon sounded more and more like Bush's "mission accomplished" in Iraq. Not that there is anything wrong with that, according to neoconservative commentator David Brooks. "And so it's clear that [the Israelis] didn't achieve what they thought they were going to achieve," Brooks explained on PBS. "Now the question is: Can they create a narrative of victory which will give them a chance to get out?"³

But, like the majority of Americans, the Israelis have not bought the spin. In fact, if Americans are now realizing that Israel might be a strategic burden and not an asset, some Israelis are discovering that they are not interested in playing the prescribed pro-U.S. role of strategic asset. After all, Israel, as *Ha'aretz* columnist Doron Rosenblum put it, "was not established in order to be a spearhead against global Islam or in order to serve as an alert squad for the Western world."

Moreover, the neoconservative paradigm would make Israel a modern-day crusader state, an outpost of a global power whose

political, economic and military headquarters are on the other side of the world. America's commitment to the security of the Israeli "province" would always remain uncertain and fragile, reflecting changes in the balance of power in Washington and the shifting dynamics of U.S. politics and economics.

At the same time, American policy makers need to recognize that the interests of Israel — a small Middle Eastern power focused on maintaining its security — are not necessarily compatible with those of the United States, a superpower with broad global interests that require cooperation with the leading Arab and Muslim states. In fact, taking into consideration the constraints on their relationship, Washington has never established a formal military alliance with Israel, whose status remains that of a client state that needs U.S. military support in order to preserve its margin of security while occasionally providing assistance to its American patron. As in the case of any other client state, Washington should ensure that the Israeli tail doesn't wag the American dog by drawing it into unnecessary and costly ventures, such as the current crisis in Lebanon.

In short, if Israel is limited in its ability to provide security services to the United States, American hegemony cannot make the Middle East safe for Israel. Perhaps it is not too late for the Israelis to figure out how to take a path toward normalcy in the Middle East that leads to peaceful coexistence with the Palestinians and their other neighbors in the next generations. Achieving that goal would advance the long-term interests of both Israel and the United States.

¹ *The New York Times*, August 5, 2006.

² *The Washington Post*, August 4, 2006.

³ The Newshour with Jim Lehrer, August 4, 2006.