

Concept

The Israeli - US 'Special Relationship'

Introduction

The concept 'The Israeli – US Special Relationship' describes the unique characteristics of the political, security and economic connections between Israel and the US. This concept has become one of the cornerstones in Israel's National Security Strategy.¹

Background

The term 'special relationship' was first coined by Winston Churchill in 1946 to describe the Anglo-American pact during the Second World War.² The Israeli – US 'special relationship' began during the Eisenhower Administration at the end of the 1950's when Israel was first perceived as a strategic asset to the US. These relations deepened after the Six Day (1967) and Yom Kippur Wars (1973) and became further entrenched following the peace accord with Egypt (1979). Israel has since been the largest recipient of foreign aid from the United States.³

Over time, this relationship has become a central pillar of Israel's National Security Strategy⁴ and reflects the implementation of Ben Gurion's principle of prioritizing close strategic cooperation with a superpower.⁵

The Security Dimension

The special relations in the security realm were first shaped in the 1960's and 70's and have a number of characteristics:

■ Maintaining Israel's qualitative edge

- **Arms Deals** – The US sells large amounts and various types of weapons systems to Israel and is committed to maintaining its qualitative military-technological edge.⁶ A permanent delegation from Israel's Defense Ministry is based in New York to purchase weapons.

¹ This concept does not analyze the reasons or motivations for the existence of these special relations. It should be pointed out, however, that prevalent arguments suggest that these special relations primarily depend on shared strategic interests between the two states. See for example: Roni Bart, "Obama, Mitchell Israel and what Lies Ahead", [INSS insight](#) January 2009.

² See Jan Fichtner, [The Special Relationship Between Great Britain and the USA – Myth or Reality?](#) GRIN Verlag, 2007.

³ See Robert J Lieber, [U.S-Israel Relations Since 1948](#), **Middle East Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 2, No. 3, 1998.

⁴ According to some analyses, solid American support is more important to Israeli deterrence than its military successes. (see: Gidi Grinstein, [Don't get too excited about the Security Memorandum with the US](#) 8/19/07). Recently, Israeli President Shimon Peres announced that Israel's greatest asset – most moral and strategic - is the relationship with the US. See: Jeffrey Goldberg, [The Atlantic](#) 5/6/09.

⁵ See Alan Dowty, ["Israeli Foreign Policy and the Jewish Questions"](#), **MERIA**, Volume 3, No. 1, 1999.

⁶ The first significant arms deal took place in 1965-66 when the US sold Israel Skyhawk combat jets and additional weapons systems. See Gerald M Steinberg., ["Israel and The United States: Can the Special Relationship Survive the New Strategic Environment?"](#) **Middle East Review of International Affairs**, Vol. 2, No.4, 1998.

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Moreover, the two sides work closely regarding Israel's need for weapons stocking and replenishing in times of emergencies.⁷

- **'Controlling' the sale of weapons to Israel's neighbors** – Several times the US has frozen the sale of weapons to states 'surrounding' Israel such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt due to the fear of altering the region's 'strategic balance' against Israel.⁸
- **Aid during emergencies** – The US has proven in the past that it is willing to sell, transfer, lease or lend Israel the means to defend itself during emergencies.⁹

■ **Strategic Coordination and Cooperation**

- **Pre-coordinating Israel's military steps** – Israel generally coordinates strategic military operations with the US or at least updates the administration in advance¹⁰ via the 'hotline' between the Pentagon and Israel's Defense Ministry.¹¹
- **Military training and joint work groups** – Joint IDF-US armed forces exercises are frequent occurrences while regular Israeli-US working groups take place to discuss a wide range of common strategic issues.¹²
- **Joint weapons development** – Israel and the US are jointly developing weapons systems and Israel uses American aid to develop Israeli weapons such as the Merkava tank and the Arrow rocket system.¹³ At the same time, the special relations have also forced Israel to 'sacrifice' the LAVI airplane project.¹⁴
- **Coordinated intelligence against terrorism and common enemies** – Israeli-US intelligence cooperation, which first began during the Cold War, today primarily focuses on the issue of fighting global terrorism.¹⁵

⁷ Recently, the number of shells and bombs the IDF has access to during war time has increased by \$200m in order to save US airlifts intended to resupply stocks. Amir Oren, [Ha'aretz](#), 8/23/08.

⁸ Take for example, the sale of weapons the American Administration planned with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states as an attempt to deter Iran (4/07) that was frozen after Israeli opposition. See [YNET](#) 4/05/07.

⁹ In light of the lack of weapons Israel suffered from in the Yom Kippur War (10/73) the US airlifted planes, helicopters, ammunition and spare parts. It also placed US Patriot missiles (to counter incoming missiles) before and during the First Gulf War. See [Israel and The United States: Can the Special Relationship Survive the New Strategic Environment](#).

¹⁰ See Amir Oren, [Ha'aretz](#) 8/23/08

¹¹ As an example, the Israeli bombing of the Syrian reactor (9/08) was closely coordinated with the US (according to foreign sources) See Amir Oren, [Ha'aretz](#) 5/9/08.

¹² See [Israel and The United States: Can the Special Relationship Survive the New Strategic Environment](#)

¹³ See Amir Oren [Ha'aretz](#) 8/7/08.

¹⁴ Between 1980-87, Israel tried to develop and create the LAVI fighter plane. Although the American administration financed the research and development of the project, it had no intention of financing the plane's manufacturing. Once it became clear that Israel was unable to continue to carry the manufacturing costs on its own and that the project could lead to a confrontation with the administration, the Israeli government decided to cancel the project. See 'The Lavi Project: The Decision Making Process 1980-87 Maarachot 1995 pp26-35

¹⁵ Recently, in light of the confrontation between Israel and Hamas in Gaza (12/08), Foreign Minister Livni and her American counterpart Condoleezza Rice signed a memorandum of security-intelligence understandings for jointly dealing with weapons transfers from Iran to Gaza. See Barak Ravid and Amos Harel, [Ha'aretz](#) 1/17/09.

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- **Coordination of Israel's nuclear policies** – Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity has been coordinated with the US since its inception. In a 1969 agreement between President Nixon and Golda Meir, the US Administration recognized Israel's nuclear option and relieved it from having to sign the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in return for an Israeli commitment to maintain ambiguity regarding its nuclear development.¹⁶

The Political Dimension

Israel and the US cooperate on a variety of diplomatic issues and those connected to international relations.

- **Central American role in any political process** – The US has been involved in almost every political agreement between Israel and its neighbors such as in formulating ceasefire agreements, mediating in the political process and taking an active role in peace agreements between Israel and its neighbors.¹⁷
- **No Surprises: political initiatives coordinated with Israel** – US political initiatives connected with Israel are generally coordinated in advance. Such coordination is primarily recognizable in the political process with the Palestinians.¹⁸
- **American diplomatic support** – Israel and the US work in almost full coordination in the UN.¹⁹ The US also customarily vetoes anti – Israel resolutions in the Security Council.

The Economic Dimension

The economic connections between Israel and the US are complex, multi-faceted and possess the following core characteristics:

- **Comprehensive aid under unique conditions** – Over the years, Israel has received economic aid - part of which is intended to stimulate Israel's economy²⁰ and part of which is used for security needs. The vast majority of the aid comes in the form of grants. Since 1998, the economic aid to Israel has been gradually reduced, and from 2008 Israel only receives money for absorbing immigrants and security needs.²¹ Israel receives aid at a more preferential rate than other countries, although its security aid is dependent on the purchase

¹⁶ During the 1960s, the US began to formulate a convention for the prevention of nuclear proliferation. A number of American administrations demanded Israel sign the treaty and reveal its nuclear plans until, as stated, the agreement between Nixon and Meir. It should be noted that some reports state that US has reconsidered its policies on this issue several times in recent years. See Michael Krepin, [Ha'aretz](#), 11/22/06; Roni Sofer [YNET](#), 5/06/09.

¹⁷ See Aaron David Miller, **The Much Too Promised Land**, Random House, 2008

¹⁸ See Miller for a criticism of this aspect.

¹⁹ In 1996 for example, Israel and the US voted the same on 95% of occasions. See Bard Mitchell B. and Pipes Daniel, [How Special is the U.S-Israel Relationship?](#), Middle East Quarterly, 1997.

²⁰ During the period of the economic crisis in Israel in the 1980s, the US Administration was the main source of aid to the country. See [How Special is the U.S-Israel Relationship?](#).

²¹ For a table describing the economic aid Israel has received since its establishment see McArthur Shirl, "[A Comprehensive Estimate of Total Direct U.S Aid to Israel: Almost 114 \\$ Billion](#)", **Washington Report on Middle East Affairs**, 2008.

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of American weapons. In contrast to other states, Israel also receives loan guarantees amounting to billions of dollars.²²

- **Funding political steps** – The US has historically funded political steps that were intended to ensure Israel's security. In certain situations the US has even 'compensated' Israel for its political concessions.²³
- **Free Trade Agreement** – The 1985 Israeli-American Free Trade Agreement was the first signed by the US outside of North America. The agreement grants an advantage to American companies that export to Israel and allows Israel to act as an international bridge between Europe and America.²⁴

²² Israel receives aid based on better conditions than any other country. All aid that is transferred to the Israeli government is not 'colored' in other words, is not allocated for any specific plans, and the government does not have to report on how it uses the money. The money is transferred in high sums at the beginning of every fiscal year which allows Israel to invest the money in US bonds or to use it in any other way. See Roni Bart, "[Israel and American Aid: Continue Forward or Reverse Course](#)," *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 10, No. 1, June 2007.

²³ Take for example, the aftermath of the peace agreement with Egypt (1979) in which Israel received \$3bn as compensation for withdrawing its forces from the Sinai desert, redeploying its troops and transferring its air force bases to the Negev. See [How Special is the U.S-Israel Relationship?](#).

²⁴ For the full agreement as it appears on the website of the Ministry of Industry, Trade and Labor [click here](#).