

# An Israel-United States Defense Pact?

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Since the establishment of the State of Israel, the deepening and strengthening of ties with the United States has always been a central, essential issue in its foreign and defense policy. In this context, the possibility of establishing a formal defense pact with the United States has arisen from time to time. There are a variety of different aspects to the creation of such a pact, which also raise a number of central questions and dilemmas. Since the end of the Cold War and with the progress made in the Middle East peace process, some complex elements have been added. It is clear that the nature of such a pact in the current period would be significantly different from one during the Cold-War era.

There are three reasons for discussing the subject of a defense treaty between Israel and the U.S.:

When Israel-Syria negotiations are resumed, a defense pact is likely to serve as part of American "compensation," offered in exchange for Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights, or within the framework of American guarantees for developing a "package" of security measures, which would undoubtedly constitute a central component of such an agreement.

The subject of a defense pact might also arise within the context of the possible "leakage" into the region of nuclear materials or weapons from Russia. If proliferation of nuclear arms in the region expands, creating a multi-polar nuclear system, a defense pact would be likely to moderate or preclude the development of dangerous conditions.

Assuming the peace process continues,

it is likely that a regional security system will be established; an important component of this regime would be an Israeli-U.S defense pact.

## Historical Background

There are three sources for the special relationship between the United States and Israel. First, two "soft" factors: the deep identification of the American society with democratic, westernized Israel, whose goals are perceived as identical to those of the U.S.; and the American Jewish community (whose influence, however, is conditional, to a great extent, on the generally warm and admiring attitude of the American public toward Israel). Finally, there is the "realist" perception of American national interests (the "hard" factor).

The soft factors once constituted the foundation of support for Israel, but as the Cold War intensified in the Middle East, so did the perception that Israel and the United States had mutual interests in the region. Nonetheless, the U.S. constantly had to cope with the dilemma of balancing its relationship with Israel against its interests in the Arab world. However, as the Israel-Arab conflict de-escalated, the magnitude of this dilemma diminished.

During the first two years of its existence, the State of Israel opted for a strategy of "non-alliance" with either of the large blocs. With the outbreak of the Korean War, however, Israel adopted a distinctly pro-western orientation. Ever since, the concept of establishing a formal defense treaty between Israel and one or another of the western powers has arisen

from time to time. It was actually Great Britain that proposed the idea of British-Israeli strategic cooperation in 1950, but Israel rejected the suggestion. In 1954, Israel initiated contacts aimed at the possibility of joining NATO or establishing a formal bilateral defense treaty with the U.S. After a pause in the mid-1950s, the possibility of a defense pact arose again - this time with France (an idea that both sides were very hesitant to implement). Over the years, the idea of joining NATO or establishing a bilateral treaty with the U.S. surfaced on various occasions. The U.S. hesitated over this issue over the course of time, primarily because of concern for the negative influence such a treaty would have on its relations with the Arab world.

After the 1967 Six-Day War and the intensification of the conflict between Israel and its neighbors, a new logic emerged for a formal U.S.-Israel defense pact. This time, the initiative came from American statesmen and academics, who suggested a defense treaty as a mechanism to fortify Israel's security and to persuade Israel to relinquish the territories it had conquered during the 1967 War in exchange for peace. Now it was Israel that recoiled from the idea, because the Sinai, the Golan, and the West Bank were perceived as the ultimate guarantees of its security.

The idea of a defense treaty arose again in the 1970s and in the 1980s. During the Cold War period, the U.S. viewed Israel as a "strategic asset" and a stabilizing influence in the region (thus emphasizing the "hard" factors). Israel clung to this

perception in the hope that mutual strategic interests would serve as a foundation strong enough to formalize defense relations between the two countries, despite the absence of a solution to the problem of the territories occupied in 1967. The 1982 Lebanon War and the continuation of the regional conflict, however, prevented such formalization, and it appeared that the U.S. would not be prepared to protect Israel's borders if those borders included the occupied territories. In the absence of a formal defense treaty, in early 1987 Israel's status was defined, for the first time, as a Non-NATO Ally.

The idea of a defense treaty last came up during the latter days of the Peres government, in April 1996, again at Israel's initiative. The 1996 elections, however, and the establishment of the Netanyahu government, deferred this possibility. When the Israeli proposal was made, the prevailing official assessment in Israel was that significant progress would be achieved in the Israel-Syria negotiations, and that the U.S. would be favorably predisposed toward the idea of signing a defense pact with Israel. Considering the Clinton administration's generally very sympathetic stance toward Israel, it can be assumed that Israeli willingness to advance toward Israeli-Syrian peace would create an amenable foundation for a positive U.S. attitude toward a defense pact.

### **Pros and cons of a defense pact**

A U.S.-Israel defense pact would be likely to serve Israel politically, strategically, and militarily.

- First, it would amplify Israel's deterrent capability.
- Second, it would not only strengthen, but also formally institutionalize, the strategic relationship between the two countries. This would be particularly important if, at some point, the U.S. commitment to Israel or involvement in the Middle East were to weaken.
- Third, a defense treaty would contribute to regional strategic stability if nuclear capabilities in the region will proliferate.
- Fourth, a defense pact would be apt to serve, under certain circumstances, as an important component in a regional security system, should one be established.

### **Arguments against a defense pact**

Over the years, arguments have been raised in Israel rejecting a defense treaty out of hand, pointing its limitations and the potential price that might be extracted in exchange. These include the following:

- It should not be assumed that the U.S. would agree to a defense treaty without Israeli willingness to make far-reaching territorial concessions in the framework of the peace process. These concessions are undesirable for Israel, in and of themselves, and will harm its security.
- In the area of security, Israel has always relied upon itself and should continue to do so. Moreover, relying on a defense treaty might diminish the Israelis' motivation to fight for their country, since they might assume that Israel's security is assured, in any event, by an outside power.
- A defense pact would require broad and full coordination with the U.S. This would diminish Israel's freedom of action in

strategic and military matters.

- A formal American undertaking to send soldiers into battle on Israel's behalf might actually, over time, harm Israel-U.S. relations, in view of the growing opposition among the American public to sending military forces overseas.
- Precisely because of such opposition, it is not clear that the U.S. would indeed honor its commitments in the framework of a defense pact should the need arise.
- Existing strategic relations between Israel and the U.S. provide a sufficiently sound framework, which contributes to deterring Arab threats. It also promises other types of military support for Israel. Accordingly, there is no need to formally add more provisions.
- Finally, a defense treaty might harm the peaceful relations developing between Israel and the Arab states. The latter might view such a pact as reflecting Israeli "old thinking" and its suspicion and distrust toward the peace process.

### **Assessing the Arguments**

A balanced assessment of the arguments against concluding a defense treaty with the United States requires that the following points be taken into account:

- Various alternatives could be developed to resolve the security dilemmas associated with withdrawal from the Golan Heights. In any case, formalizing the security relationship with the U.S. is more important than continued control over the Golan.
- The concept of "self reliance" is an anachronism. The history of international relations is filled with defense pacts.

Different countries, including very powerful ones, chose - under conditions of real or potential conflict - to fortify their security through defense treaties with the United States. They were focused on the need to enhance their deterrence and to strengthen political and military cooperation with Washington. The efforts of European powers - like Britain, France and Germany - to obtain U.S. guarantees within the context of NATO did not diminish their national pride.

- In the past, Israel has already opted to coordinate its strategic actions with the U.S. When it avoided doing so (for example, during the war in Lebanon), it was ultimately harmed. In any event, Israel's defense relations with the U.S. are based on close coordination and both states will benefit if their coordination is deepened.

- Part of the American public is likely to fear that American soldiers might be injured as the result of a defense treaty with Israel. It would seem, however, that the "hard" and "soft" factors constituting the basis of American support for Israel will continue to predominate and influence many in the U.S. A defense treaty would not collapse because of such fears. By contrast, delays in the peace process caused by Israel will do more damage to the foundation of U.S. support. If a defense pact were presented as part of the peace-process "package," it would enjoy broad public support in the U.S.

- In any event, the likelihood of invoking the treaty to send large numbers of American ground forces into battle in Israel is extremely low. First, it can be assumed that the peace process will continue, making a broad regional war between Israel and its neighbors extremely

improbable. Moreover, the strength of the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) constitutes a weighty deterrent factor. Only total disintegration of the peace process due to internal problems within the Arab countries or as the result of unforeseen events might increase the probability of war. The very existence of a defense pact would serve as a serious deterrent to the initiation of war by the Arab side.

- Finally, if a conventional military conflict were to take place, it may be assumed that U.S. military assistance would come mainly not in the form of expeditionary land forces, but rather in the form of air support, which would not endanger the lives of large numbers of American soldiers. It would include air to ground attacks and the use of "stand off" weapons. The use of sea-to-surface and surface-to-surface missiles might also be a significant factor. In addition, the U.S. is likely to provide intelligence capabilities, through the use of airborne and space systems. In all these forms of assistance, hardly any American casualties are anticipated.

De facto, a very close system of cooperation already exists between Israel and the U.S. Nonetheless, there is no formal framework for high level consultations between the two countries, and no legal commitment to intervene militarily for Israel's defense exists. In the absence of these two components, Israel-U.S. relations sometimes seem shaky, due to various political differences. Former Israeli ambassador to the U.S., Prof. Itamar Rabinovitch, affirms that the absence of such a framework caused problems even during the period of the Rabin government, when the strength of the ties between the two countries was unprecedented. Only the special personal

link between Clinton and Rabin made it possible to overcome these difficulties.

It can be argued, of course, that a defense treaty will be signed only under circumstances in which relations are good in any event, but there is no way of knowing how things might change in the future. A formal defense treaty will serve Israel even if America's general interest in the Middle East diminishes. Even more so, if the U.S. commitment to Israel becomes weaker in the future due to deterioration in the basis of support for Israel (the "soft" factor), a defense pact will help to affirm America's obligation.

A defense treaty (against the background of peace or an ongoing process of peace agreements) will also become a stabilizing factor in the region. The U.S. role in NATO, as in the Pacific region after the end of the Cold War, can be described more as a contribution to regional stability than as a force clearly targeted against one power or another.

Indeed, the Arab countries are likely to relate with suspicion to a defense treaty between Israel and the U.S. At the same time, it should be noted that the position of most of the Arab leadership with regard to the U.S. has changed dramatically in recent years. Most of the regimes are, in fact, seeking to move closer to the U.S. Some of them, such as Egypt, rely entirely, from a military standpoint, on the U.S., even conducting joint military exercises with it. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states essentially rely on American security commitments against threats from Iran and Iraq. Extrapolating from this, further strengthening of ties between Israel and the U.S. will not necessarily be interpreted as hostile acts on the part of either Israel or the U.S.

Finally, a defense treaty is likely to be signed as part of a regional defense system. This model will, to a great degree, neutralize Arab objections to such a pact. This subject will be briefly discussed below.

### **The Nuclear Context**

The possible spread of nuclear weapons in the Middle East has implications for a defense treaty between the U.S. and Israel. It can be assumed that Israel will continue to be diligent over the long term in maintaining the nuclear capability attributed to it. In this case, nuclear proliferation would lead to the creation of a balance of terror in the region. The stability of this balance, however, is highly doubtful. In other words, in spite of the existence of nuclear weapons, a war might still erupt, and limited use might be made of non-nuclear weapons of mass destruction (e.g., in the event of another U.S.-Iraq crisis). A defense treaty would substantially strengthen the level of deterrence against such weapons being aimed at Israel. This would give extra confidence to Israeli decision-makers, enabling them to take extra care in weighing the possibility of responding with nuclear weapons to limited military provocations, or limited attacks with non-conventional, non-nuclear weapons.

At the same time, it seems that U.S. willingness to sign a defense pact with Israel will be contingent on Israel's consent to steps that would limit its nuclear capability. The U.S. appears to be aware that Israel will agree to such limitations only after a general and stable peace is established in the region, and even then, only gradually over a period of time. Under such conditions, it is likely that the

U.S. would be willing to enter a defense pact if Israel is prepared to agree, in the meantime, to limited steps in this regard - with the understanding that, through a slow process and with the creation of security and peace, Israel will advance (in the framework of region-wide agreements) in the direction of freeing the region from all weapons of mass destruction.

### **A Defense Pact and Regional Security**

Of no less importance is the matter of including a defense pact between Israel and the U.S. in the framework of a future "architecture for regional security." There are likely to be various models for this, depending, of course, on the nature of relations among the countries of the region. In general, three categories of possibilities may be considered:

- The establishment of comprehensive peace without regional defense agreements. The arguments noted above, both for and against a defense pact, would apply to this scenario as well.
- The establishment of comprehensive or partial peace in the framework of which a regional defense pact - or, at least, close regional defense agreements - might evolve between countries such as Egypt, Israel, Jordan and Turkey. The U.S. will be likely to join such a system as a full or partial partner. Some of the arguments in favor of a separate defense treaty will be weakened, since regional security will have reached a higher level of stability. A defense pact will actually be most important in such a context, in order to assure the continuity of the special strategic relationship between Israel and the U.S., and so that this relationship is not balanced by the over-all U.S. participation

in the regional security system.

- The creation of a regional collective security system in which some or all of the countries in the region are partners, the purpose of which would not be a military alliance but rather security arrangements between the participating countries. These would include agreements on arms control and various "confidence-building measures" (CBM). In this context, the need for a defense treaty would seem to decline, since such agreements, if they are stable, will greatly minimize the likelihood of aggression. On the other hand, the risk of internal political upheavals will continue to exist, so it is desirable that Israel would continue to maintain its special strategic relationship with the U.S.

### **Summary**

There are weighty arguments both for and against concluding a defense treaty between Israel and the U.S. Such a pact involves certain costs to Israel, but it is likely to amplify the country's general security and guarantee the special relationship between the two countries, even if one of the factors in the foundation of American support is weakened. The treaty would serve as one axis of stability within different regional- political- strategic structures expected in the future.