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More than democracy, Washington wants stability in the Middle East. That means leaning against the interests of the Jewish state.

by Robert D. Kaplan

Losing Patience with Israel

Not since the days of Henry Kissinger's Mid-East shuttle diplomacy in the 1970s has America's foreign policy toward Israel been characterized by such an attitude of unsentimental realism.

After eight years of fighting, the stalemate in Afghanistan and the loss of 4,000 American troops in Iraq – not to mention the deaths of perhaps hundreds of thousands of Iraqis – has rendered the search for stability, rather than democracy, paramount, and created a climate in which interests are to be valued far more than friends.

Indeed, having sacrificed so much for the sake of the Middle East's future, America will not think twice about asking its friends—especially the one it bankrolls, and which is occupying densely Arab-populated land—to sacrifice, too. Many, both in the Administration and in the wider Washington establishment, have simply lost patience with what they see as Israeli intransigence over settlements in occupied territories. This may not be fair, or even wholly logical, for the issue of settlements is highly complex. But the reality is that Washington's quiet passions have turned decidedly against Israel.

Israel's supporters believe that because both the U.S. and Israel are democracies, the two countries share identical national interests. But Israel is half a world away from America, virtually surrounded by enemies on land, while America is an island nation bordered by two vast oceans. Because a nation's interests are governed to a great extent by its geographical situation, it's simply impossible for the two countries' interests to neatly overlap. Take the dilemma of Iran's nuclear program. Iran threatens Israel much more than it does America. It may very well be in Israel's best interest to attack Iran. But it is probably not in America's for Israel to do so, given America's exposure in Iraq. And an Israeli attack could destroy President Barack [Obama's efforts to reach out to the Muslim world](#). If you think the tension between the U.S. and Israel is high now, just wait until there's a significant spike in casualties in Iraq following an Israeli strike on Iran.

In the weeks after 9/11, there were a number of terrorist attacks in Israel, which inspired a certain sympathy in Washington. That's why, at the time, calls for Israel to make concessions as a means of fixing America's relationship with the Muslim world fell on deaf ears. But terrorist attacks in Israel are rarer now, and Israel's incompetent war in Lebanon in 2006 and its inconclusive one in Gaza last winter have made *it* look like the boorish regional aggressor. Moreover, in the past, America's military establishment admired Israel for its military innovation and derring-do. But Israel's inability to cope sufficiently with unconventional enemies in Lebanon and Gaza has reduced its appeal.

One striking indication of the extent to which Israel has lost American sympathy was the publication in 2007 of [The Israel Lobby](#), a controversial book by Stephen Walt and John Mearsheimer. The book alleges that it was Israel's supporters in America who played a pivotal role in influencing the Bush Administration to go to war in Iraq in 2003. Their argument has

several flaws and was roundly denounced by a majority of reviewers, but the fact that two highly distinguished political scientists—one from Harvard and the other from the University of Chicago, who have contributed significantly to their field in their other works—felt confident enough to go so far out on a limb on this sensitive issue is telling. Nobody takes such a risk without outside encouragement. Indeed, it is in the nature of these things that, for every reviewer's condemnation, one can assume that many others are quietly nodding their heads in agreement with the authors.

As for the matter of Israel's influence on U.S. policymaking, that will only wane as a new generation of immigrant elites – from Asia, the Muslim world, and the Indian Subcontinent – take their places inside America's civilian bureaucracy and military ranks. Israel is not central to the analytical concerns of these young, newly minted Americans. To them, it is just another country with which America must engage according to its interests. If anything, for this new generation—and, in fact, for the Obama Administration – it is countries like China, India, and Indonesia that are becoming the principal areas of focus. Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton's two trips to Asia](#) in the first six months of her tenure were arguably the Administration's most important expression yet of what it sees as the new geopolitical locus of the 21st century. The Israeli-Palestinian problem is increasingly becoming seen as a leftover irritant from a passing era.

All of this leaves Israel in an increasingly lonely position. With whom can it negotiate? With Fatah, which is relatively moderate, but lacks support among Palestinians themselves? With Hamas, which has support, but which demonstrates no proclivity to make peace?

Both politically and demographically, time is not on Israel's side. Now that Iran is weakened by domestic turmoil, it may actually be in Israel's best interests for America, Saudi Arabia, and other moderate Arab states to impose a peace agreement by leaning hard on the Palestinians, as America twists Israel's arm. The result would be the return of almost all of the West Bank to a fundamentally demilitarized Palestinian state, even as many Israeli settlements are dismantled. What other resolution can there be?

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