

Israel at 75 Is Threatened but Strong

It can no longer take its relationship with the U.S. for granted, but it may not need to.

Walter Russel Mead May 15, 2023



The flags of Israel and the United States were projected on the ramparts of Jerusalem's Old City on Feb.11, 2020. PHOTO: AHMAD GHARABLI/AGENCE FRANCE-PRESSE/GETTY IMAGES

It's been 75 years since the Jewish community in British Palestine rejected a last-minute plea from the Truman administration and declared independence as the last British forces left the embattled land. It wasn't the most auspicious moment. One day earlier, the strategically located Gush Etzion bloc of Jewish agricultural settlements fell to Arab assailants following a bitter siege.

Disregarding Truman's pleas and warnings from Western military leaders that they faced certain defeat, the Jews of Palestine voted for independence. They went on to win the War of Independence, thanks largely to an influx of Soviet-bloc weapons from Czechoslovakia, but 75 years later questions about its future still swirl around the Jewish state.

In recent weeks we've seen rocket attacks from Gaza, reports that [Russia will deliver](#) advanced fighter jets to Iran, and the [readmission of Syria](#) to the Arab League. A few months ago, Israelis were speculating over the likelihood that [Saudi Arabia would join the Abraham Accords](#). Today, they are working to understand the ramifications of the [China-brokered](#) Saudi-Iranian thaw.

But the most important question facing Israelis today is the future of their relationship with the U.S. There is nothing written in the stars that guarantees its permanence. For the first 25 years of Israel's independence, American presidents were more interested in cultivating Arab leaders and blocking the Israeli nuclear program than in aligning with Jerusalem. Only after Richard Nixon concluded that an Israeli defeat in the 1973 Yom Kippur War would empower the Soviet Union across the Middle East did Washington move toward a strategic relationship.

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What drives any change won't be BDS activists pressing boycott, divestment and sanctions and observing "Israel Apartheid Week" on college campuses. It won't be the activities of the so-called Israel lobby, either. Those forces provide the mood music for the relationship, and at the margin and on certain very specific issues have an effect. But the real forces lie elsewhere.

American policy toward Israel depends less on poll numbers than on how a given U.S. president sees American interests world-wide and where Israel and the Middle East fit into the administration's global foreign policy. For the past half-century, American presidents generally believed that the Middle East, thanks to its oil reserves, was a high priority in America's strategy of global engagement and that a close relationship with Israel on balance strengthened America's position in the region and beyond.

Today, though, many Americans, especially progressive Democrats, believe that U.S. interests in the face of climate change require a rapid global shift from fossil fuel. Many others, especially among Trump-friendly Republicans, question whether the U.S. should remain globally engaged. The future of the U.S.-Israel relationship depends on how these two debates are resolved.

How much does the Middle East matter if the world is moving away from fossil fuel? In the 18th century, the lucrative Caribbean sugar industry was a major focus of Franco-British competition, and in 1763 France was willing to cede Canada to Britain in exchange for the return of a handful of small Caribbean islands. Fifty years later, the Caribbean was a strategic backwater. If something similar is happening in the Middle East, shouldn't the U.S. gradually divest its responsibilities there?

Similarly, if isolationist perspectives among Democratic progressives or Republican populists dominate the agenda, U.S.-Israel relations likely will cool. Even if oil remains an important global commodity, the U.S. no longer needs Middle East crude. Why, neo-isolationists ask, should America spend money and risk war to protect oil destined for Europe, India, China and Japan?

Navigating an American withdrawal would be challenging but not catastrophic for Israel. Other potential partners are waiting in the wings. Narendra Modi's India would eagerly embrace a closer technological and military relationship with the Jewish state. China, Russia and even Turkey would see serious benefits in a strategic relationship with Jerusalem.

But the likelihood of a wholesale American withdrawal from the Middle East is likely overestimated. The energy transition will probably take longer and be less total than greens hope. And global geopolitical competition is more likely to buttress American support for limiting Chinese influence in the Middle East than to promote isolationist sentiment at home.

In any case, Israel today is orders of magnitude stronger, wealthier and more influential than it was in 1948. History offers no guarantees and problems remain, but the citizens of this extraordinary state have every reason to look forward with hope.