

## Israel and America



# A Desperate Embrace

by Joel Schalit

**I**N THE WEEKS IMMEDIATELY FOLLOWING THE SEPTEMBER 11 ATTACKS, some of the most frequent guests on American news programs were Israeli diplomats and security consultants who were asked to share their battle-hardened wisdom on the tragedy. Nearly every time they spoke, it was though they were all reading a variation of the same script: *Now America knows what it's like to be subject to Islamic terrorism. Now America understands that we are struggling against the same enemy. Now America understands why it must support Israel in its fight against Arafat—because behind him stands Osama Bin Laden.*

The most disconcerting thing about hearing such testimony was how utterly calculating it appeared to be. America had just weathered its first domestic attack since Pearl Harbor, and “experts” were spinning the event as though it were an opportunity to shore up American support for Israel’s fight against the Palestinians. Behaving as though they’d already bought the argument, networks repeatedly broadcasted scenes of jubilant Palestinians celebrating Al Qaeda’s attacks on the streets of Nablus and Ramallah, as if to document what their Israeli guests were saying.

For conspiracy theorists searching for evidence that Israel disingenuously goaded America into invading Iraq, such examples provide a triumphant degree of validation. However, what’s more important is asking why Israelis were so quick to link their own struggles to those of the United States. Despite Israel’s longstanding strategic alliance



A displaced Lebanese woman walks past an anti-U.S banner in the southern port city of Sidon, Lebanon.



with the U.S., it was not in Israel's best security interests to blur the distinction between its own conflicts with the Arab world with those of its patron. In 2001, Israel's conflicts were relatively contained and far more localized than those being fought in the region by the United States. At peace with neighboring states, Egypt and Jordan, and having just withdrawn from Lebanon in the summer of 2000, Israel needed to keep its focus on the second Palestinian uprising. Certainly, the last thing Israel needed was to add to its already impressive collection of enemies. Especially when it was trying to get rid of them.

### Israel's Alliance with the U.S.

NEVERTHELESS, ONE DOES NOT NEED a doctorate in Middle Eastern political psychology to understand why certain members of the Israeli establishment promoted this problematic position. The fact that the September 11 attacks were carried out by Arabs, and were primarily a response to American foreign and military policies in the Middle East— particularly since the first Gulf War—represented an ideal opportunity to reinvigorate a strategic alliance that had benefited Israel enormously since the Six Day War in 1967. Indeed, irrespective of one's political positions on Israel's relationship with the United States, it would almost be impossible to conceive of Israel's continued existence over this period of time without American military and economic support.

September 11 offered Israel an unparalleled opportunity to maintain the high level of intimacy that had existed between the two countries during the Clinton years and that Israelis feared was threatened by a new, potentially less friendly Republican administration. What better opportunity to renew the emotional bonds between the two countries (and to maintain the military and economic ties Israel needed) than to point out to the American public that both countries faced a growing Islamist threat? Israelis were happy to tell Americans that the anger directed against them was not the fault of American-led sanctions on Iraq, American support for authoritarian regimes, or American control of Middle Eastern oil: the problem, Israel could say, was one they shared—a history of ethnic conflict that cast both Jews and Americans as reviled Westerners.

What went unspoken, however, was how much Israel needed U.S. political support. Though Israel's conflicts with neighboring states were contained, its struggle with the Palestinians was raging in 2001. The Israeli security apparatus had seen Israel's withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 as a rehearsal for leaving the Occupied Territories—and was stunned when the Oslo peace process failed. With the second intifada, Israel saw itself as having no choice but to hitch its wagon to American efforts to combat Islamic terrorism and impose a new regional Pax Americana. The model was America's victory over Iraq in 1991, which helped push the Palestinians and Syria toward the negotiating table. In this model, whatever was not accomplished by negotiations would be imposed by force—the force of Israel's counterinsurgency campaign against the Palestinians, and that of the United States waging an all-out war on any regional powers providing material and financial succor to the new Palestinian resistance.

Called upon as America's most militarily powerful ally in the Middle East, Israel did everything in its power to support the Bush administration's new strategic doctrine in the region. The problem with the position that Israel took, however, was that it gave little thought to the possibility that America would not prevail politically or militarily over its adversaries as it had in the first Gulf War, and, most importantly, in the Cold War. Nor did Israel take into account the possibility of how its alliance with the United States would constrain Israel's ability to make decisions on its own behalf, without having to prioritize U.S. interests over its own.

The renewed relationship between Israel and the United States that developed in 2001 was in fact a desperate embrace, in which each party's attempt to gain strength from the other has only led to a deeper collapse. Every new crisis created by the War on Terror managed to encourage their most illiberal political tendencies to come to the fore, to the point that in each of the ally's misfortunes, they would look for opportunities to advance their respective political ambitions. The problem is that none of the analyses that identified these openings reflected the military and economic realities that have emerged in the Middle East since President Clinton first assumed office.

## Lebanon

THE RESULTS OF THIS ALLIANCE are to be found in the second Lebanon war. Responding to a cross-border attack in which eight Israeli troops were killed and two were taken prisoner, Israel decided that it was time to destroy the Shi'ite militia organization Hezbollah once and for all. After Israel conducted massive air and naval bombardments of its installations and missile sites, followed by the introduction of Israeli ground forces into the southern part of the country, Hezbollah responded by firing thousands of missiles at northern and central Israel. By the end of the second week of the conflict, half a million Lebanese civilians were refugees, more than 600 were dead, and over one thousand reported wounded. On the Israeli side, fifty-two combined military and civilian deaths had been reported and hundreds of residential homes and buildings had been damaged. According to news reports, almost half of the country's northern population fled southward.

The most notable military aspect of this war was its unprecedented brutality. For the first time in the history of the Arab-Israeli conflict, a conventional war was directly waged on each side's civilian populations. Instead of just targeting Israeli military forces, Hezbollah's gunners fired rockets and missiles at dense urban areas. Instead of assaulting military installations, Israeli fighter-bombers and artillery aimed their fire at apartment buildings, houses, bridges, cars, and telecommunications hubs. Hezbollah offered no rationale for delivering their payloads onto civilian targets other than that they were acting in self-defense. Israel conversely explained that it was impossible not to cause civilian casualties because Hezbollah had dispersed its infrastructure and weaponry in urban areas and villages throughout the country. Nevertheless, the IDF and Hezbollah appeared to be operating according to the same set of principles. Functionally, everything was fair game.

The question is why both parties chose to risk such a conflict at this point in time. Being willing to offer up their respective civilian populations to such dire risk clearly meant that both Israel and Hezbollah perceived much higher stakes at play than a simple border skirmish. It gradually became clear that Israeli officials were conducting the campaign against Hezbollah as part of a much larger regional struggle. Israel pointed to evidence that the weaponry the Shi'ite militia was using was supplied and manufactured by both Syria and Iran (and in certain instances, operated by Iranian personnel). Israeli politicians and journalists began to piece together a picture of a war initiated by Tehran through Hezbollah, and fought on behalf of its interests, with Syria playing the role of facilitator. Israel was not fighting just to weaken Hezbollah, and found itself on the frontline of a new regional struggle being fought against a global Jihad aimed at Western liberal interests. Israel was fighting a vicious war at least partly on behalf of its U.S. patron.

The tragedy of this situation is how long it took for the rhetoric of Israeli security conservatives during the aftermath of September 11 to finally meet reality. For the first time in the country's history, Israel found itself in the position of being attacked as a surrogate for America by an Islamic guerrilla organization also acting on behalf of the interests of a foreign power. As easy as it might be to argue that such scenarios have always played themselves out during the Arab-Israeli conflict—first the United States versus the Soviet Union, now America versus Iran—there was never a time when the use of Middle Eastern countries in a game of strategic chess played by third-party states was so utterly transparent. Why? Because as the costs suffered by both Israel and Lebanon so clearly show, neither country had anything to benefit by going to war. The only winners would be those rivaling nations needing to keep one another's ambitions in check by promoting regional turmoil.

For neoconservatives in the West agitating for an American-led confrontation with Iran, the war in Lebanon was part of a larger strategy. Tehran had finally shown its hand and was actively engaged in the destabilization of the entire region, far beyond the confines of Iraq. Using fundamentalist Lebanese guerrillas as their proxy, it had finally opened up the front against Israel that it had been threatening ever since the elevation of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad to Iran's presidency in June 2005. And Israel, the United States' most loyal ally, had risen to the occasion and was conducting the war for America.

Perhaps the greatest irony of this conflict, however, is what a picture of powerlessness it paints of the United States during its fifth year of war. Unable to contain Iran's ambitions to expand its regional hegemony, incapable of quelling a civil war caused by its own invasion of Iraq, America has had to entrust Israel with the final responsibility for restoring its lost power of deterrence in the Middle East. Mirroring the Israeli failure to anticipate how a failed U.S. policy in the region might impact Israel, America has returned this trust to the Israelis for its own protection, with little to no acknowledgment of how Israel's war with Lebanon might further erode U.S. opportunities for regional dominance.

But America's prospects don't look good. Given the kind of shockwaves the Israeli-Lebanese fight has sent throughout the Middle East, it may just be a matter of time before Arab states that are allied with the United States, and distantly, Israel, experience rising levels of public discontent that they did nothing to prevent the immolation of Lebanon. U.S. forces will undoubtedly find Iraq more ungovernable than ever. Further, with Iran gaining regional power, it remains possible that whatever gains the Americans have made by occupying Iraq and Afghanistan, they may now undergo a process of reversal at the hands of an Iranian-sponsored regional uprising.

For the United States, Israel's friendship comes with a high price. As for Israel, it clearly has earned a great deal of respect from the U.S. by assuming such a remarkable burden. But maybe, just maybe, the price of being America's best ally has become a little too high. ■

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