

Doubts Grow Over Israel's Value as U.S. Ally

Posted by
Thursday, 03 June 2010 22:11 -

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Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON, Jun 3 (IPS) - Israel's disastrous raid in international waters Monday on a Turkish-flagged flotilla carrying humanitarian supplies to Gaza has resurrected a long-running debate over whether Washington's close alliance with the Jewish state really serves U.S. strategic interests. Ironically, one negative answer was provided in Jerusalem Tuesday by none other than the head of Israel's vaunted foreign-intelligence agency, Mossad.

Noting, among other things, the disappearance of the Soviet and Western blocs with the end of the Cold War, Mossad chief Meir Dagan told members of the Israeli parliament's Foreign Affairs and Defence Committee Tuesday that "Israel is gradually turning from an asset to the United States to a burden." That view was emphatically re-asserted the following day by one of Washington's most highly respected and centrist Middle East analysts in an essay entitled "Israel as a Strategic Liability?" that instantly became must-reading for regional specialists both in and outside the administration of President Barack Obama.

"At the best of times, an Israeli government that pursues the path to peace provides some intelligence, some minor advances in military technology, and a potential source of stabilising military power that could help Arab states like Jordan," wrote Anthony Cordesman, a long-time fixture of the foreign policy establishment at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS).

"It is time Israel realised that it has obligations to the United States, as well as the United States to Israel, and that it (has to) become far more careful about the extent to which it test(s) the limits of U.S. patience and exploits the support of Americans Jews," he went on, noting the Israeli government "should be sensitive to the fact that its actions directly affect U.S. strategic interests in the Arab and Muslim worlds..."

"This does not mean taking a single action that undercuts Israeli security, but it does mean realising that Israel should show enough discretion to reflect the fact that it is a tertiary U.S. strategic interest in a complex and demanding world," he wrote.

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"Israel's government should act on the understanding that the long-term nature of the U.S.-Israel strategic relationship will depend on Israel clearly and actively seeking peace with the Palestinians - the kind of peace that is in Israel's own strategic interests," he added.

Cordesman's observations were not new. Indeed, some variant of them have been expressed with increasing frequency by a growing number of mainstream analysts over the last four years, particularly since the tactically successful but strategically disastrous military campaigns conducted by Israel in Lebanon in 2006 and in Gaza 2008-9.

But the fact that Cordesman, a former national security adviser to the staunchly pro-Israel 2008 Republican presidential candidate, Sen. John McCain, felt moved to write so bluntly about the issue in the immediate aftermath of the lethal Israeli raid on Mavi Marmara suggests that the tide of elite opinion regarding the value of virtually unconditional support for Israel - especially for a government as aggressive as that of Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu - is turning.

"Tony Cordesman's authority derives as much from the fact that he is resolutely dispassionate and non-partisan as it does from his expertise, which is unmatched," said Amb. Charles Freeman, a top-ranked retired diplomat who renounced his appointment last year to chair the National Intelligence Council (NIC) in the face of intense opposition by the right-wing leadership of the so-called "Israel Lobby".

"When someone as balanced and centrist as Tony Cordesman begins to worry about the extent to which Israel is making itself into a strategic burden for the United States, Israel should pause for some self-reflection," Freeman told IPS.

Stephen Walt, a Harvard international-relations professor and co-author with University of Chicago Prof. John Mearsheimer of the controversial 2007 book, "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy", agreed.

"The fact that Cordesman would say this publicly is a sign that attitudes and discourse are changing," he said. "Lots of people in the national security establishment - and especially the Pentagon and intelligence services - have understood that Israel wasn't an asset, but nobody wanted to say so because they knew it might hurt their careers."

"It will be interesting to see how Cordesman is treated in the future, and whether more people will be inclined to say what they really think," he added.

The notion that Israel and its actions had since the Cold War increasingly become a "strategic liability" to U.S. interests in the region was a central thesis of Walt's and Mearsheimer's book, which came under immediate and sustained attack by the right-wing leadership of the Jewish and Christian Zionist communities.

The book itself was based on an article by the same name that the two men published in the London Review of Books in 2006 after a number of influential U.S. periodicals rejected it, apparently due to concerns that it was too controversial.

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Yet, in the wake of the Lebanon and Gaza military offensives, the election of Netanyahu's right-wing government and its resistance to the kind of two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict favoured by successive U.S. administrations, the question of Israel's strategic value has become increasingly pertinent.

Already on the eve of Obama's inauguration, the influential National Journal ran a symposium on the question: "Is Israel a Strategic Liability for the United States?" in which a surprising number of respected national security analysts answered in the affirmative.

When the Netanyahu government announced new Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem during a visit by Vice President Joe Biden in March, the issue re-surfaced with a vengeance. Biden himself was reported by the Israeli press as telling Netanyahu that such provocations endangered the lives of U.S. troops in Iraq and Afghanistan.

A few weeks later, the chief of the U.S. Central Command (CentCom), Gen. David Petraeus, warned lawmakers that "perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel ...fosters anti- American sentiment" throughout the region and had an "enormous effect" on "the strategic context in which we operate". The beneficiaries, he said, include Iran, al Qaeda, and other radical Islamist groups.

In his essay, Cordesman insisted that Washington's commitment to Israel, which he identified as largely "moral and ethical" given their shared democratic values and the legacy of the Nazi Holocaust, "is not one that will be abandoned".

"At the same time," he went on, "the depth of America's moral commitment does not ...mean that the United States should extend support to an Israeli government when that government fails to credibly pursue peace with its neighbors."

"...It does not mean that the United States should be passive when Israel makes a series of major blunders - such as persisting in the strategic bombing of Lebanon during the Israeli-Hezbollah conflict, escalating its attack on Gaza long after it had achieved its key objectives, embarrassing the U.S. president by announcing the expansion of Israeli building programmes in East Jerusalem at a critical moment in U.S. efforts to put Israeli-Palestinian peace talks back on track, or sending commandos to seize a Turkish ship in a horribly mismanaged effort to halt the 'peace flotilla' going to Gaza," he wrote.

*Jim Lobe's blog on U.S. foreign policy can be read at <http://www.ips.org/blog/jimlobe/> .