

43 of 48 DOCUMENTS

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ACCEPTED WISDOM TAKES A BEATING

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HIGHLIGHT: THE relationship between Israel and the United States has some of the organic qualities of a coral bridge. It is an elaborate, jagged structure that has grown by accretion over the years. Though subject to cracking in rough weather, it has proven remarkably sturdy, and capable of regenerating itself, from the days of the U.S. arms embargo during Israel's 1948-49 Independence War to the current era of the intifada, U.S.-PLO dialogue and Gulf crisis.

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Among this bridge's most noteworthy structural features is the breadth of its base - congressional support (from liberals and conservatives), the interests of different offices at different times within the executive branch, the devotion of the great majority of American Jews, and the surprisingly steady sympathy of the general American public.

Even when journalists flood the media with negative stories about Israel - popular U.S. support for Israel remains strong, though it is subject to dips while the media attacks are most intense. As with many issues, the public's views on Israel are at odds with the views prevailing in the "journalist class," among whom epidemic hostility to the Jewish State has developed over the last twenty years.

It is often stated that Israel's reputation has suffered in the United States. But the fact remains that Congress, a sensitive barometer of public opinion, has felt comfortable mandating increasingly favorable measures for Israel over the last fifteen years.

News commentators devote much attention to U.S.-Israeli disagreements, and commentary on the subject is often couched in dire language. This encourages one to mistake turbulence in the relationship for volatility. In fact, continuity is the hallmark of U.S.-Israeli relations.

ALL THIS is not to deny that there are problems.

Atop the list are the mutually reinforcing assumptions that have long served as conventional wisdom among U.S. policymakers:

* Moderate Arabs would be ready for ample cooperation with the United States - regarding the Cold War, oil policy, Iraqi aggression, whatever - only if (and if only) we could "solve" the Arab-Israeli conflict.

* Arab ambitions are now moderate and could be satisfied if Israel made limited withdrawals from the territories.

* The Arab-Israeli conflict is in essence not a war by the Arab states against Israel, but a fight between Israel and the "stateless" Palestinian Arabs. (A fourth assumption - that a solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict is urgent because war between the parties could ignite war between the United States and the Soviet Union - was a casualty of the demise of the Soviet empire.)

The current Gulf crisis can be seen as thoroughly discrediting the conventional wisdom in all three cases. First, the Gulf crisis vividly illustrates that when Arab states want to cooperate with the U.S., they do so, regardless of U.S.-Israel ties. Second, to the Arab masses the "occupied territories" from which Israel must be ousted include not only the land captured in the 1967 war, but all of pre-1967 Israel too. The eruption of mass Arab support for Saddam in the region (including Israel) has horrified Israeli doves precisely because it melts away the distinction between "the occupied territories" and Israel.

Finally, to assert that the crux of the Arab-Israeli conflict is the unfulfilled nationalism of the Palestinian Arabs is to imply that Iraq would cease to oppose the Jewish State if Yasser Arafat cut a deal with Israel for some territory. But Saddam is not the man to allow Arafat (or anyone else) to compromise Iraq's rejection of Israel.

Indeed, the idea that the Palestinian Arabs are a nationality unto themselves, distinct from other Arab peoples and entitled to self-determination as such, hardly squares with the popular Arab view that Iraq's invasion of Kuwait is an internal Arab affair of the one Arab nation. "Palestinian self-determination" is a potent concept in the war against Zionism, but the same Arab leaders who tell Westerners that their war against Israel is a fight for national self-determination for the "stateless" Palestinian Arabs side with Saddam in denying legitimacy to the "imperialist borders" that have "artificially" divided the Arab nation and frustrated its aspirations for national unity.

IF THE conventional wisdom in Washington about the Middle East were subject to skeptical, scientific reexamination, it would not survive the Gulf crisis. It would not, for that matter, have survived up until the Gulf crisis. But the conventional wisdom is made of stern stuff, and history teaches that its staying power far exceeds its validity. Therefore, though the Gulf crisis should promptly bring about a major improvement in U.S.-Israeli relations based on a clearer appreciation of Israel's security predicament and the limits of peace diplomacy, it almost certainly will not.

The many predictions that President Bush will eventually use the Gulf crisis as a springboard for a new Arab-Israeli peace initiative - one focussing on Israeli control of the West Bank as the core of the conflict - are probably correct. But the Shamir government commands unusually strong domestic support for a security-minded policy. If President Bush tries to push Shamir, the latter will be well-positioned to hold his ground.

Will this strain the relationship? Yes, in the great tradition. But U.S. support for Israel remains strong regarding issues that present clear pro-Israel and anti-Israel alternatives. When a government in Israel puts forward both a dovish policy option and a hard-line option (as occurred when Shamir and Peres each had top level positions in their National Unity coalition), many Americans (including American Jews) will prefer the dovish option. But the politically relevant American Jewish community and large majorities in the U.S. Congress can be counted on to oppose action to coerce Jerusalem, for coercion would be seen as anti-Israel rather than pro-dove. Building domestic (including congressional) support for pressure against Israel is even more problematical while memories remain fresh of masses of Palestinian Arabs demonstrating in solidarity with Saddam and calling for Iraq to hit Israel with chemical-armed missiles.

President Bush seems intent nonetheless on reviving his Arab-Israeli diplomatic efforts through twisting arms in Jerusalem. But his famed pragmatism will probably restrain him from a prolonged and vigorous exercise in banging his head against a thick coral formation. This should contain the damage all around.

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