

General Jones' Message: Lessons in the Conduct of American–Israeli Relations

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On April 21, 2010, General James Jones, National Security Adviser to President Obama, appeared as a guest speaker for the Washington Institute for Near East Policy and delivered what were termed as “remarks.” These subsequently appeared on the White House website and are probably the most comprehensive and detailed administration statement concerning policy towards Israel and Middle East-related issues at this point in time. A few of the general’s utterances can provide us with both current insights and more lasting and profound readings of the American–Israeli relationship spanning the sixty-two years of Israel’s independence.

“We will never forget that since the first minutes of Israeli independence, the United States has had a special relationship with Israel. And that will not change,” said General Jones.

In this context, the historical perspective is indeed of great importance. The history of American–Israeli relations is a checkered and multicolored one. Before describing the scope and depth of the present-day alliance, it is extremely important to describe how this special relationship came about and what, if any, are its limitations.

Minutes after David Ben-Gurion declared the birth of the State of Israel, President Truman announced that the United States was according it *de facto* recognition. The Soviet Union followed and accorded it *de jure* recognition, a higher level of international acceptance. Prior to that, and up to the last minute, intense differences of opinion in the administration as to the viability of a Jewish state resulted in conflicting advice to the president as to how to respond to the impending act of Ben-Gurion. None other than Secretary of State (and renowned World War II leader) General George S. Marshall led the argument against the establishment of a Jewish state at that critical juncture. Indeed, even after this partial American

recognition, the United States maintained an arms embargo on Israel throughout its War of Independence, and were it not for critical supplies, albeit limited in both quantity and quality, from Communist bloc sources (mainly Czechoslovakia), the newly constituted Israel Defense Forces (IDF) would have been hard put to defend itself. This embargo was lifted years later.

Notwithstanding this state of affairs, Ben-Gurion, one of the towering figures of the twentieth century, had no doubt as to how Israel should position itself, either in the international community of nations or in relation to the American-led Western alliance that confronted the Soviet-led bloc in the Cold War. He purged the IDF senior command of Soviet sympathizers, including illustrious generals who fought valiantly and effectively in the War of Independence, and he publicly allied himself with the aims and values of Western democracy, despite the fact that several million Jews living in the Soviet Union and Communist bloc states were cut off from their brethren by the “Iron Curtain” that bisected Europe.

In May 1951, Ben-Gurion traveled to the United States and was absent from his three-year-old country on Independence Day that year. In meetings with President Truman and CIA Director-General Walter Bedell (“Beedle”) Smith, the Israeli prime minister affirmed Israel’s unconditional support of, and identification with, the West in its ongoing confrontation with the Communist bloc, thereby establishing a unique strategic relationship between Jerusalem and Washington. It was understood that this relationship would transcend any other considerations, political or diplomatic, although it was never put in writing and its exact character never spelled out. In large measure it was unilateral and did not entail any specific commitment on the part of the US.

In the 1950s, Israel found itself in dire economic straits. During Ben-Gurion’s 1951 visit to New York, Israel was celebrating the doubling of its population, from 600,000 to 1.2 million. Most of the new immigrants were Holocaust survivors or refugees from Arab states, and they arrived in Israel destitute and often in frail health. Most of them were housed in tents or in small prefabricated dwellings and had to endure the ravages of rain-soaked cold winters in acutely difficult circumstances. The American government was neither asked to provide nor offered any economic relief to Israel in those days.

Five years after the Ben-Gurion visit, American–Israeli relations were put to a severe test. Israel, in collusion with Britain and France, all three of which were allies of the US, went to war with Egypt over its nationalization of the Suez Canal and the closure of the Straits of Tiran. None of them had informed Washington and the reaction from President Dwight D. Eisenhower was not slow in coming. Whereas Israel had succeeded in overrunning the Gaza Strip and the entire Sinai

Peninsula, French and British forces failed to advance into Egypt from the Port Said area, where they had made an amphibious landing. Israel was confronted with a joint US–Soviet order to immediately withdraw from Sinai, Gaza, and two off-shore islands; Ben-Gurion felt he had no option but to comply.

The bitter lessons of 1956 were to be learned over the next eleven years and translated into several basic tenets that have guided Israel through more than fifty further years of strategic cooperation and understanding. First and foremost, Israel understood that it was not enough for it to be a proven “winner” in its regional disputes; it would have to be a winner in a context that would conform to the interests of its ally. The US would always be playing from a position of strength; hence, no matter how close the interests of the two countries might be and how similar their shared values, there would and could never be absolute unity.

Nothing more poignantly exemplifies this than the issue of Jerusalem, which has always been a subject fraught with emotion. Since the first day of Israel’s existence, the US has never recognized Israeli sovereignty over any part of Jerusalem; it has not moved its embassy to Jerusalem, not even to West Jerusalem. Thus, when Israel liberated its entire capital in the 1967 Six-Day War, the US did not change its policy. Successive US presidents have not moved to implement a congressional decision to effect the transfer of the embassy. Whereas in the past, Washington advocated the internationalization of the city, it now champions the concept of the city serving as the capital of two states: the Jewish one, Israel, and the Arab one — the future state of “Palestine.”

The second lesson rapidly digested in Israel was that Jerusalem risks losing a great deal by acting unilaterally, especially when reverting to military action. Except in very rare cases, prior consultation is a *sine qua non*. The familiar sentence, “Never, but NEVER surprise the president of the United States,” is a dictum I learned very quickly when I entered the Mossad in 1961. In 1967, when tension suddenly arose between Egypt and Israel and Egypt compelled the United Nations to withdraw from the Gaza Strip, war appeared imminent. Israel did not seek “approval” for its preventive attack—but it did make absolutely certain that the US president understood what might happen in the days to come.

The third lesson learned was that “you must never lie to the president of the United States.” This tenet transcends mere truth-telling and calls upon Israel to avoid situations in which it gives evasive answers or attempts to circumvent the truth.

The fourth understanding that emerged from that period was that the creation of a strategic bond necessitated a relatively long period of time during which Israel would have to create strategic capabilities and assets that would make a true bond with it a continuously worthwhile proposition. Enormous effort was invested in developing these capabilities. When the time came to prove their viability in relatively favorable circumstances (such as during the 1967 war) or in much less favorable circumstances (such as in the 1973 Yom Kippur War), this policy was more than vindicated.

The fifth understanding that was that however much the United States would support Israel, whether in peace or war, Israel should not and could not rely on direct American military intervention of any kind to “save the day.” The United States would always act first and foremost in its own interest and in conformity to its assessments and not those of Israel. Under that caveat, as in the words of General Jones, the US “would never waiver in defense of Israel’s security... We provide billions of dollars annually in security... We have invigorated our consultations to ensure Israel’s qualitative edge.”

These major pillars of US–Israeli relations were forged beginning in 1967, and were finally consolidated in 1978–79, following the first peace treaty signed between Israel and one of its Arab neighbors—Egypt.

Forty years ago, Israel realized that in the final analysis, the US could not and should not be viewed as a guarantor of its freedom, survival, or its very existence. General Jones repeated a phrase used by all the key figures in the current administration: “There is no space—no space—between the United States and Israel when it comes to Israel’s security.” It is a stirring statement of unique support to be cherished and appreciated, but not a license for Israel either to depend entirely on its great ally or to act unilaterally. Indeed, in order to become a valuable ally, Israel has had to seek and nurture assets and capabilities of its own, of such caliber as to impress upon Washington that not only was the State of Israel here to stay, but that its activities and influence would stand the US in good stead. It was, and still is, imperative to leave no doubt in the mind of any American that, in the words of Ben-Gurion, Israel would never request or desire the sacrifice of the life of even one American serviceman in its defense. Israel has made invaluable contributions to the security interests of the US in a wide range of areas, and has done so not only out of self-interest but also out of deepest convictions. Some of these cannot be quantified in any shape or denomination. On the other hand, the value of Washington’s support for the Jewish state has been inestimable.

The last quarter of the twentieth century was a golden age in American–Israel relations. Both out of its own self-interest and with an eye to the regional scene that grew in importance for the US, Israel cultivated and expanded its contacts both in the heart of the Middle East and beyond Asia and Africa. Its secret dialogues, only partially known to the United States, created three major breakthroughs—with Egypt, Jordan, and the Palestinians. The United States was privy to none of these three initiatives; they were all hatched under a thick veil of secrecy. But when the details emerged, Washington was the first to know. Subsequently, all three endeavors resulted in signing ceremonies on the White House lawn. I believe that we could have never reached the breakthroughs with a third party—the United States—in the room, but we could never have consolidated the achievement without the White House. In each case, both sides needed the authority and prestige; in each case, Israel’s contribution to Washington’s Middle East prestige was a *sine qua non*.

Irrespective of the often-vitriolic anti-American propaganda to which Washington has been exposed, its peace-making capacity has been recognized by friend and foe alike. Washington alone has proven to be a deal maker—and Israel played a key role in creating the circumstances for this to come about. In the past, Moscow and Beijing have been cast as deal breakers or as those who can be effective spoilers. However, in this respect, the influence of both the Russians and the Chinese is in decline.

Close to forty years after the 1956 American–Soviet ultimatum to Ben-Gurion over the Sinai campaign, the US led a grand coalition to war against Saddam Hussein after he invaded and occupied Kuwait. Israel supported that war, but given the participation of Muslim Arab states (Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria) in the coalition, Israel was asked to refrain from any active or overt participation. Saddam reacted by lobbing missiles into Israel. Washington exerted extreme pressure on Israel not to respond. American Patriot anti-missile batteries were hastily dispatched to Israel and the American forces fighting against Iraq allotted a portion of their air power to silence the mobile launchers that the Iraqis had deployed against Israel in their western desert.

In the final analysis, the American effort proved ineffectual and many senior Israelis felt that the “protection” of Israel was not given adequate priority. Then-Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir held firm and did not cave in to the enormous domestic pressure exerted on him to order Israeli military retaliation. The Iraqi war of 1991 was traumatic for Israel. Overnight, Tel Aviv became a ghost city, with the population of the country donning gas masks whenever the warning sirens heralded a missile attack. Jerusalem’s unprecedented self-restraint was followed by a determined effort on the part of the US to launch a peace

process between Israel, Syria, the Palestinians, and Jordan. In order to maximize the chances of success, the US took active steps to influence the Israeli public to vote the incumbent prime minister, Shamir, out of office in the 1992 general election.

In 1995, Yitzhak Rabin, who had succeeded Shamir and who pursued an active peace agenda, was murdered by an Israeli who objected to the prime minister's policies. Rabin's default successor, Shimon Peres, lost a subsequent general election despite various US efforts to support him during the election campaign. Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister for the first time.

During the last decade, the US has become more involved in the peace making effort between Israel and the Arab world, with emphasis, of course, on the Palestinians. Washington's approach has become increasingly "regional."

This has become necessarily so because in the past twenty years, the US has fought two wars of its own in Iraq, the heart of the region. It is involved in almost daily military activity in a second nation, Yemen, and its forces are stationed in significant other countries, both Arab Muslim, like Saudi Arabia, and secular Muslim, like Turkey. The number one threat to the US, as personified in Muslim international terror, has its roots in the very heart of the Middle East and thus the ten year war in the AfPak region draws inspiration and more from the Sunni epicenter in this part of the world. American warfare and diplomacy thus naturally converge in the Middle East—both on the battlefields and at the negotiating tables. Israel is now a focal point inside the perimeters of an American theater of war. This is a relatively new experience that Jerusalem has yet to digest. On top of that, an Israeli-Palestinian peace has been cast as vitally necessary to enable Washington to unite the region in confronting the nuclear ambitions of Iran.

Much is being said and written about this threat to global defense and security, but the issue cannot be adequately addressed in this article. Looking back over decades of the "odd couple" relationship between Jerusalem and Washington, I think it would be accurate to say that the bedrock understanding between Ben-Gurion and Truman that was cast in 1951, almost sixty years ago, has weathered many a storm. The depth and breadth of this incomparable tandem has not only survived but has shown repeated signs of exceptional vitality. This not only augurs well for the future but also provides much and profound food for thought. In surveying the current scene, attention must be given both to the strength that this alliance provides to its parties as well as to the constraints that govern each one. My guess is that sixty years from now we shall still be debating the pros and cons of this impossible but simultaneously essential enduring link between these two nations, their interests, cultures, and values.