Israel, America,
And the War on Terror

Relations between the United States and Israel have been turbulent since the September 11 terror attacks on New York and Washington. Within hours after the attacks, a dramatic outpouring of support was seen throughout the Jewish state—including candlelight vigils across the country, a spontaneous blood-donation drive late that same night, and the immediate declaration of a national day of mourning. Alongside the empathy felt by a great many Israelis, the first few days also gave rise to a quiet hope throughout the country that perhaps this horrific turn of events might assist Americans in understanding the nature of Israel's own decades-long battle with terrorism.

Within a week of the attacks, however, Israelis were taken aback by the State Department's campaign to craft an international coalition against terror, which appeared to be leaving out Israel while seeking to include prominent terror-sponsoring regimes such as Syria, Iran, and Yasser Arafat's Palestinian Authority. In October, disillusionment turned to alarm when American coalition efforts translated into direct pressure on Israel to exercise restraint in its own fight against Palestinian terror. In particular, many Israelis were genuinely hurt by the Bush administration's criticism of Israel's policy of targeting terrorist gang-leaders, at a time when the United States was conducting a similar policy against the Taliban in

Afghanistan. Israeli newspapers spoke freely of a "crisis" in relations with the United States, and the Israeli media widely reported on what was believed to be a growing resentment of Israel among the American public, supposedly driven by a belief that America's support for Israel was ultimately to blame for the attack on the United States. "An evil wind is blowing in recent days in the American press," announced reporter Eitan Amit in the daily *Yedi'ot Aharonot* of September 23. In the minds of many Americans, he reported, "the United States is paying for its friendship with Israel with the blood of its citizens."

In early December, after the fall of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and a string of suicide bombings in Israel's major cities, the tone in Washington shifted in a direction far more favorable to Israel: Administration officials began to speak more critically of the Palestinian leadership, stopped talking about a "cycle of violence," and began asserting Israel's right of self-defense against terror. When Israel declared the Palestinian Authority to be a "terror-sponsoring entity" and Yasser Arafat to be "irrelevant," and then followed these declarations with major anti-terror operations in the Palestinian territories in mid-December, the Bush administration did not protest, but instead insisted that Arafat had to crack down on terrorist groups. American delegations also started to arrive in Israel to express their solidarity with the Jewish state—most notably the high-profile visit of New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani, Mayor-elect Michael Bloomberg, and New York State Governor George Pataki on December 9. It was Pataki who best summed up the new mood when, after taking part in a public candle-lighting ceremony on the first night of Hanuka, declared that "the special bonds that connect our two peoples are stronger than ever before."

These abrupt swings in attitude reflect, in part, the difficulties facing a superpower suddenly thrown into a long-term conflict with an unforeseen enemy and seeking to forge effective alliances amidst rapid changes. They also may reflect the internal struggles that have long characterized

American policymaking, regularly putting the diplomats at odds with those charged with defending American security, with the president navigating among the differing courses of action they offer.

But it would be a mistake to view these shifts, as have many Israelis, as reflecting a fundamental uncertainty among Americans or their leaders regarding the basic relationship between Israel and the United States. On the contrary, a good look at what is happening in America reveals a far more consistent trend of American support for Israel, which has only become more deeply entrenched, and has taken on new meaning, since September 11. In the wake of the terror attacks, the strategic interests of Israel and the United States have been brought into greater convergence than at any time since the end of the Cold War. At the same time, these interests have been translated into moral terms, putting the two countries clearly on the same side of a larger conflict. This commonality of interests and values is reflected in the attitudes of Americans, which have become more positive towards Israel, and also in the concrete cooperation that has already begun to take place between the countries. Indeed, for many Americans, Israel is no longer simply a friendly democracy locked in perpetual conflict with its neighbors, but also now an important source— perhaps *the* most important source—of expertise and inspiration in fighting the war on terror.

Such a shift in both the reality of American and Israeli interests and in the way Americans tend to view the Jewish state may have opened up the possibility of a new period of deepened American-Israeli relations, which could potentially have a far-reaching effect on Israel's position in the world. But for this to happen, Israelis will have to take notice of the change, and act accordingly—lest the opportunity be squandered, and the Jewish state risk further isolation and frustration in its own efforts to secure a peaceful life for its citizens.

The first step in understanding the present improvement in American support for Israel is to recognize the convergence of interests that has taken place between the two countries since September 11. In the past, support for Israel was often seen in the United States as a matter of ideology—a product of America's fundamental support for democracies around the world, or of a sense of historical or religious commitment to the success of the Jewish state. Such support was often criticized as exacting a real price in terms of more narrowly defined American interests: To take Israel's side against the Arab states meant sacrificing concrete benefits for abstract or sentimental gains, a sacrifice which many Americans could not understand or were unwilling to support.

In the past few months, however, the abstract has become tangible, while the seemingly concrete has proven ephemeral. America's century-long diplomatic, military, and financial investment in the Arab world has netted very little of the kind of cooperation that the United States most needs as it searches for reliable allies in a new war. The Arab country on which Americans were counting the most, Saudi Arabia, revealed itself as fickle and unhelpful in efforts to bring an end to the al-Qaida terror network, a fact that Americans noticed and will not soon forget. But while such "concrete" interests were failing to pan out, America's long-term ideological commitment to Israel was being converted into the currency of loyalty in time of war, of brotherhood in arms against a common enemy. For the war on terror, it has become increasingly clear, is not a question of American retaliation against Afghanistan or al-Qaida, but a struggle against a much broader enemy that despises everything for which the West stands. Israel fits very clearly into the camp of loyal allies, for not only is it sympathetic to America's plight, but it has been locked in the same conflict, against the same enemy, for many years. This comity of interests has a powerful logic to it, one that is likely to work its way into any long-term American strategy.

Indeed, this logic has already begun to play itself out throughout the American political system, including at the highest levels. In a number of major speeches, President George W. Bush has repeatedly driven home the point that the American campaign is not only against those who actually attacked the United States, but against terrorism as such—an equation which naturally places Israel on America's side. In his speech before the United Nations General Assembly on November 10, for example, Bush made the parallel between al-Qaida and Palestinian terrorism all but explicit:

> We must unite in opposing all terrorists, not just some of them. In this world, there are good causes and bad causes, and we may disagree on where that line is drawn. Yet there is no such thing as a good terrorist. No national aspiration, no remembered wrong can ever justify the deliberate murder of the innocent. Any government that rejects this principle, trying to pick and choose its terrorist friends, will know the consequences.

In the American public discourse, these words refer to Israel's enemies: It is they, far more than anyone else, who have turned "national aspirations" into a justification for terror. In a similar vein, Bush declared after a December 5 meeting with Norwegian Prime Minister Kjell Magne Bondevik that "those who want to commit terror against the United States or our friends and allies must be aware that they will be hunted down. And those nations which harbor a terrorist or feed a terrorist or hide a terrorist or clothe a terrorist had better beware of the United States and our friends, because they will be brought to justice." Especially in light of the immediate context—the comment came after Bush had answered several questions concerning the future of the Palestinian Authority—the reference to terror against America's "friends and allies" carried a clear message about Palestinian terrorism, which has been the foremost terrorist threat to an American ally.

But Bush did not even need to go so far in painting Israel's enemies as those of the United States. By drawing the line on the grounds of broader moral principles, rather than casting the conflict as against a specific enemy; by acting to shut down the financial apparatus of Hamas and Hezbollah and not just al-Qaida; by repeating over and over the refrain that there can be "no good terrorists and bad terrorists"—the Bush administration has offered its country a logic of war and a logic of how to choose its friends. It is a logic that inevitably places Israel among America's most significant allies in the new conflict, and Israel's enemies just as squarely among America's enemies, and among the potential targets for subsequent phases in the campaign.

This logic has not been limited to official declarations of the Bush administration. On Capitol Hill, for example, representatives from both parties have explicitly drawn a link between the threats faced by Israel and America, and have demanded that the United States back the efforts of its ally to fight back against terrorism. In a hearing of the House Committee on International Relations on October 24, Secretary of State Colin Powell was subjected to a grilling by disgruntled representatives over his criticism of the Israel Defense Forces' targeted killings of terrorists. The prevailing sentiment was summed up by the ranking Democrat in the committee, Representative Tom Lantos of California:

> If Israel targets terrorists who are responsible for the murder of large numbers of innocent private citizens, whether it's in a discotheque or in a pizzeria or elsewhere, I think it is the ultimate of hypocrisy to have State Department spokesmen criticize our democratic allies for actions we ourselves engage in.

On November 16, eighty-nine members of the Senate sent a letter to President Bush urging the administration to stop pressuring Israel in its conflict with the Palestinians. "The American people would never excuse us for not going after the terrorists with all our strength and might," the

letter said, as reported in *The New York Times*. "Yet that is what some have demanded of the Israeli government after every terrorist incident they suffer. No matter what the provocation, they urge restraint." Senator Arlen Specter, a Republican of Pennsylvania, was more direct in an interview with *The New York Times* that appeared on November 17. "Powell talks about the 'cycle of violence,' that suggests that one produces the other, and that there is a moral equivalency, which is not true. Terrorists killing civilians is totally unjustified, and Israel's response is self-defense."

The underlying assumption on Capitol Hill has been hard to miss: The United States and Israel are engaged in the same war, the means being used against both of them are similar, and it is therefore incumbent upon the United States to stand by its long-time ally.

Opinion leaders have conveyed this sense in even stronger terms. The well-known attorney Alan Dershowitz wrote in a November 2 column that "It is wrong for the U.S. to demand more of Israel than it asks of itself. Both nations are at war with evil forces determined to destroy the democratic values we jointly espouse…. We must stick together to defeat the forces of terror." In a letter to President Bush on September 20, some forty noted conservatives—including former UN Ambassador Jeane Kirkpatrick, former Secretary of Education William J. Bennett, *Weekly Standard* publisher William Kristol, columnist Charles Krauthammer, and political theorist Francis Fukuyama—called on the administration to "fully support our fellow democracy [i.e., Israel] in its fight against terrorism." But perhaps the strongest statement was made by William Safire in *The New York Times* on October 25. Safire averred that "at a moment when the U.S. is dispatching bombers and soldiers to kill the assassins of 6,000 of our citizens harbored by the Taliban in Afghanistan, it is the height of hypocrisy to demand that our ally refrain from hunting down killers harbored by the PLO." Placating the Arab world at Israel's expense would only backfire, Safire argued, resulting in "intensified attacks on America." Instead, "the proper response to our ally's self-defense is to understand Israel's lonely anguish and applaud its resolve."

The sense that Israel and America are engaged in the same war, and that the Jewish state therefore deserves the support of America, can be seen even more clearly within the general public, where support for Israel has intensified since September 11. A Gallup poll in the week following the attacks, for example, found support for Israel's side in the Middle East conflict to be at its highest point since the Gulf War: In the poll, 55 percent of Americans reported siding with Israel, up from 41 percent a month earlier. (At the same time, only 7 percent sided with the Palestinians, down from 13 percent a month before.) And this underlying support did not subside in the weeks following the attack: According to a CBS News/*New York Times* poll taken at the end of October, 60 percent of Americans reported having a favorable attitude towards Israel, moderately higher than the result of the same poll taken in previous years.

Just as significant has been the shift with regard to U.S. policy towards Israel, as a number of national polls have consistently shown about three-fourths of Americans in favor of maintaining or deepening the present strong ties between the two countries. One survey conducted in early October for ABC News put the number at 81 percent; another, conducted for NBC News and *The Wall Street Journal* in early November, put it at 77 percent—with 28 percent of Americans calling for even closer relations with Israel than exist at present. On the question of what America's formal stance should be in the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians, an increasing number of Americans favor abandoning the neutrality of recent years in favor of a clearly pro-Israeli stance. The last time Gallup had asked Americans what position the United States should maintain in the conflict was in July 2000, and the results then were virtually identical with those of the previous years: 74 percent favored formal neutrality, while 16 percent favored officially taking Israel's side. After

the attacks, however, support for neutrality dropped to 63 percent, with 27 percent now in favor of taking Israel's side—an 11-percent shift in Israel's favor. (In both polls, about 1 percent of Americans favored taking the Palestinians' side.) Moreover, a large portion of Americans have been critical of the State Department's attempts to apply a different standard to Israel than to America in their respective wars against terror. In a poll conducted for the Anti-Defamation League at the end of October, over half the respondents called "hypocritical" the State Department's attitude towards Israel's targeted killings of terrorists.

These numbers reflect not merely support for the Israeli position against the Palestinians, but an underlying identification with Israel's predicament. Since September 11, many Americans have come to see Israel as a fellow traveler in the odyssey of terror: A country that has for decades been facing the very threat, and living under the very conditions, that Americans now widely believe to be their fate. "The acrid and unexpungeable odor of terrorism, which has hung over Israel for many years," wrote columnist George Will just hours after the event, "is now a fact of American life. Tuesday morning Americans were drawn into the world that Israelis live in every day." Martin Peretz, editor and publisher of *The New Republic* and a longtime supporter of Israel, perhaps put it best when he wrote that "we Americans no longer need any instructions in how it feels to be an Israeli. The murderers in the skies have taught us all too well. We are all Israelis now."

The underlying commonality of interest between Israel and the United States has not only been reflected in words and sentiments, but has also been demonstrated at the level of cooperation between the two sides, reflecting the American understanding that Israel might well be the best source of guidance and inspiration in learning how to fight and live with a war against terrorism. This has been evident, for example, in America's

efforts to shore up security in everything having to do with air travel. Lapses at major American airports had a great deal to do with the tragedies of September 11, and Israel's experience in this regard has been widely seen as the principal model for emulation. "El Al aircraft do not get hijacked," said senior Pentagon advisor Richard Perle. "We would be making a great mistake if we did not benefit from Israel's experience and expertise." On October 1, *The New Republic* published an essay by Gregg Easterbrook analyzing El Al's methods and arguing that they should serve as a model for airlines in the United States. Boston's Logan Airport, the takeoff site of two of the four airplanes hijacked on September 11, quickly hired Raphael Ron, who had just finished a five-year tenure as head of security at Tel Aviv's Ben-Gurion Airport, to help revamp its security.

More significant has been the assistance Israel has afforded the United States in gathering the intelligence and security expertise needed to prevent further attacks in the United States, and to prosecute its war in Afghanistan. In the weeks following the attacks, high-level Israeli delegations aimed at helping America plan its strategy and tactics for Afghanistan began arriving in Washington. According to a report in *Ha'aretz* of October 14, the Americans were particularly interested in Israel's experience in fighting Hezbollah in southern Lebanon. Moreover, even though America has the broadest and most technologically advanced information-gathering network in the world, the CIA has been taking full advantage of Israel's network of operatives who speak Arabic and Farsi, and who can, for example, administer polygraph tests in those languages. According to the political commentator Zev Chafets, in an article appearing in *Newsday*, "for all practical purposes, Israel's intelligence establishment is now functioning as a branch of the U.S. war effort"—a fact that the Israeli press has proudly reported as well.

But it is not only in the areas of military tactics and intelligence that Americans are beginning to see Israel as a source for guidance. In New York City, for example, family service organizations have begun seeking

out the help of Israeli counselors in dealing with the families of victims of the attack there. On the delicate question of how to balance civil rights and due process with the unique needs of an effective fight against terror, *The Wall Street Journal* ran an article proposing that America adopt Israel's policy of allowing unusual interrogation procedures in "ticking time-bomb" cases, when timely information extracted from a caught terrorist could potentially save the lives of many innocents. And when the *Atlantic Monthly* sought to help Americans grapple with life under the threat of terror, it ran an essay in its November issue showcasing Israel as the country "where terrorism has been a fact of ordinary life for decades—and where ordinary life defeats terrorism." It was this sense of respect that led Chris Matthews, host of MSNBC's political talk show *Hardball*, to assert in late September that Americans would now have to view themselves much as Israel sees itself: As a moral nation, dedicated to protecting its citizens without initiating a "blood war" in which a great many civilians would be killed—and which seeks peace as the final outcome. As Matthews put it, "We need to feel American, think Israeli."

Of course, there is nothing new in a general sense of support and approval for Israel from the citizens and government of the United States. But since September 11, this sense of fraternity has taken on a new urgency, as America has suddenly found itself in a global conflict in which Israel is one of its closest and most experienced allies. This is assuredly a critical moment in the history of American relations with the Jewish state, and it contains the possibility of forging a deeper and more lasting alliance between the two states. For this to happen, however, it is crucial that Israelis understand the unique responsibility which faces their country—one which may have an impact not only on the fate of their own struggle against terror, but also on Israel's position in the emerging international order.

The first imperative facing Israel is to recognize that support for Israel is deeply rooted in the logic of America's war, and is likely to continue being so, regardless of temporary shifts in circumstances or policy. American respect for Israel is based not on Israel's willingness to give in to the demands of Washington, but on very much the opposite: On Israel's independence of mind, its experience and innovativeness in the struggle against terror, and its determination to fight terror as a moral cause—even in the face of sustained international pressure. Although short-term concerns cannot always be ignored, Israel's leaders need to understand that by fighting with resolve against terrorism, they do not threaten the long-term health of their relationship with their American ally. If Israeli statesmen make the case that the threat they are facing is exacting an intolerable cost in lives and in the damage it is doing to Israel's democratic liberties, they may well succeed in strengthening the sense that America and Israel are engaged in the same war, against the same enemy, and for the same reasons.

Moreover, Israel must act not only in defense of its own interests, but also out of a sense that its behavior may serve as a model for American action, and perhaps for the West as a whole. Israel should therefore pursue its war on terror with the same moral clarity that it asks of its allies. As the United States organizes itself for a prolonged struggle against terror, the actions of the Jewish state will continue to be seen by a great many Americans as an example of how such a war ought to be fought. Israel must therefore undertake a consistent policy of stiff retribution and deterrence while avoiding undue loss of life. Such a policy means not distinguishing between "good" and "bad" terrorists. It means steadfastly refusing to recognize terrorists or their sponsors—including neighboring states that have not yet come to understand that terror sponsorship carries a price. It means making sure that terror never pays off in political gain. And it means consistent, effective punishment for terrorist activity.

Finally, Israelis should think carefully about the implications that the new alignment may hold for their country's own long-range foreign policy aims. Even prior to Israel's founding, there has been a debate as to where the Jewish state ought to see itself fitting into the international strategic order. Since the days of the pre-state Peace Association ("Brit Shalom"), there have been Israelis who have argued that the country's political interests should be seen as being united with those of the Arab world. Others have advocated deepening ties with Europe, including the eventual incorporation of Israel into the emerging European Union. Both of these visions have a utopian and universalist air about them, in that they do not seem to reflect any parallel interest on the part of the nations with which Israel would be allied, and would necessitate Israel's abandonment of certain elements of its hard-won sovereignty, which few Israelis would knowingly accept.

But there is a third vision, one that is at once grounded in political reality and more attuned to the actual ideals that characterize the Jewish state: A strengthened membership in the community of Western nations under the leadership of the United States. This community is united not by a desire for political unification, but by a belief in the same democratic freedoms that Israel holds dear, while respecting the sovereignty and independence of nations to chart their course according to their own vision. For these states, terror and tyranny must be fought as a moral cause, not coddled. It is in this community that the Jewish state's moral aspirations have consistently found their greatest adherents, and that Israel's struggle for survival and achievement have consistently won the greatest sympathy. And it is only here that Israel may find its greatest freedom to explore and develop its own unique character as a Jewish state, while playing a significant role in world affairs as a moral actor.

Israel's position in the new alignment of nations depends on its continuing ability to act as a model for emulation, while pursuing its own independent understanding of right and wrong. Israel is, unfortunately, a

country more experienced than any other in fighting terror. This record includes remarkable successes, and these in turn mean that Israel has a unique part to play in the war on terror. But we will succeed in playing it only if we understand the profound shifts that have taken place since September 11, recognize the role that history has given us, and maintain our confidence in the rightness of our cause.

David Hazony, for the Editors
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