"U.S. & Israel: Military Peak, but Political Uncertainty"

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By Yaakov Katz

JERUSALEM—The war with Iran that began on Feb. 28 will be remembered as the moment the U.S.–Israel alliance reached its highest point—and its most politically dangerous one.

On the battlefield, what we witnessed was unprecedented. For the first time in history, the American and Israeli militaries fought as a single, unified force. American and Israeli F-15s and F-35s flew side by side in simultaneous strike packages. They shared intelligence, relied on the same refueling tankers and divided up targets inside joint command centers, where Israeli officers adopted English as the primary language of the war.

This was not the old model of the alliance, where one side supplied weapons and political backing while the other did the fighting. This was something entirely different.

From the first days of the war, the division of labor between CENTCOM and the IDF was clear. The U.S. focused on protecting its regional bases from ballistic missiles and drones, while also targeting the Iranian navy and working to reopen the Strait of Hormuz.

Israel, meanwhile, concentrated on the regime itself—its institutions, its command structure, its senior leadership and the missile stockpiles that threatened the Israeli home front.

The moment that perhaps best symbolized this partnership was the strike that killed supreme leader Ali Khamenei. According to the account that has since emerged, the CIA obtained precise intelligence from a human source about Khamenei's location. That intelligence was passed to Israel.

Israel then launched a massive air operation into Tehran, sending roughly 100 aircraft to strike the compound and eliminate not only Khamenei but also other senior officials around him.

Whatever one thinks of the war, it represented a historic moment in the relationship between Washington and Jerusalem. It involved not only intelligence sharing or diplomatic backing. It was a level of trust and battlefield cooperation unlike anything the two countries had ever demonstrated. In some respects, Israel functioned in the role that Britain filled during World War II.

But, while American and Israeli pilots were flying together over Iran, the public foundation of that alliance inside the U.S. was eroding.

America's public support is slipping

A pew survey published on April 7 found that 60 percent of American adults hold an unfavorable view of Israel, up from 53 percent just a year earlier. Only 37 percent said they viewed Israel favorably. That is a stunning figure, considering that for decades Israel has been one of America's closest allies and one of the largest recipients of U.S. military assistance. Even more troubling is the trajectory. Since 2022, favorable views of Israel have fallen by roughly 20 points.

The generational breakdown paints an even bleaker picture. Pew found that roughly 70 percent of respondents under the age of 50 expressed unfavorable views of Israel. Among Democrats, the numbers were even more alarming, with about 80 percent holding unfavorable opinions.

Republicans remain more supportive, but, even there, the numbers are not what they once were. Fifty-eight percent reported favorable views, while 41 percent said they viewed Israel unfavorably.

A Gallup poll showed a similar trend right before the war broke out in late February, when, for the first time in 25 years of polling, more Americans said they sympathized with the Palestinians than with the Israelis. The margin was not significant, but the trend was impossible to ignore. Support for Israel had dropped sharply in just a year, and the country's favorability was hovering near a historic low.

Think about the contrast for a moment. On the one hand, the U.S. and Israel carried out what may have been the most sophisticated and ambitious joint military operation in the history of their alliance. On the other hand, the very public on which that alliance rests is drifting away.

That is not something Israel can ignore. Alliances are not sustained just by generals, intelligence sharing and political friendships. In democracies, they endure because the public supports them and because voters believe they have value. Once that support cracks—especially among young people—the strategic consequences may take time to appear, but they ultimately do.

For decades, Israel's strength in the U.S. rested not just on shared values and common enemies, but on bipartisanship. Republicans and Democrats disagreed about many things, but Israel largely remained above the fray.

This allowed Israel to assume that whoever was in office and whatever political reality reigned in Washington, the underlying foundation of support remained bipartisan and broad enough to withstand it. Now, with the consensus frayed on both sides of the aisle, that assumption no longer holds.

What makes the current moment even more concerning is that Israel's critics are no longer confined to one political camp. The hostility is on both extremes.

On the left, progressive lawmakers like Ilhan Omar and Rashida Tlaib have for years framed Israel as a colonial aggressor and human-rights violator. Their rhetoric, once seen as marginal, has steadily moved into the mainstream of

progressive discourse. What used to be the language of the activist fringe is now heard in congressional offices, on university campuses, in major NGOs and in large parts of the Democratic coalition.

But what is newer—and in some ways more dangerous—is the shift in sectors of the right. Listen to some of the arguments coming from far-right media personalities like Tucker Carlson, Candace Owens and, at times, even Megyn Kelly, and the overlap is impossible to miss. The language may differ in tone, but the substance is the same: Israel is manipulative, drags America into war and has interests that are not aligned with America.

This is why anyone who cares about the future of the U.S.-Israel relationship has to ask three questions.

- First, how did we get to the point where the relationship has become so polarizing?
- Second, can that erosion be reversed?
- And, third, if it cannot, what does that mean for Israeli security, which remains deeply dependent on American support, assistance and diplomatic backing?

One of the difficulties in discussing this issue is that people tend to blame whichever political side they already oppose. For many Israeli centrists, liberal American Jews and Democratic voters in the U.S., the culprit is obvious: Benjamin Netanyahu. He is the Israeli prime minister who, in their view, turned Israel to the far Right, aligned with Kahanists and the ultra-Orthodox and moved Israel away from the shared values.

In addition, these people accuse Netanyahu of politicizing the relationship with Washington, identifying Israel too closely with Trump and the Republican Party and turning one of the country's most vital strategic assets into a domestic political tool.

While this is an exaggeration, there is always a foundation of truth. One recent example came in late January when Netanyahu declared that Israeli soldiers had "lost their lives" in Gaza because of an "arms embargo" imposed by the Biden administration.

That framing was political and designed to serve Netanyahu at home and shift the blame from his decisions and policies to President Joe Biden. It turned a strategic disagreement between allies into a domestic talking point. By doing so, it treated Israel's most important alliance not as a national asset to be protected but as a political football to be kicked around for short-term gain.

It was not the first time Netanyahu had done this.

One of the clearest examples was in 2015, when he traveled to Washington to speak before Congress against the nuclear deal—the JCPOA—that President Barack Obama was promoting. Netanyahu believed the deal was dangerous, and, while he was right on the substance, the manner in which he chose to fight it—by publicly aligning with Republican leadership against a sitting Demo-

cratic president—was seen by many Americans as blatant interference in U.S. domestic politics.

Three years earlier, during the 2012 presidential campaign, Netanyahu hosted Republican candidate Mitt Romney in Jerusalem for a high-profile visit that was widely interpreted as an implicit endorsement. And, during Netanyahu's first term as premier, in the late 1990s, his relationship with Bill Clinton was also tense and politically charged.

From the perspective of many Democrats—and especially American Jews, who mostly vote Democratic—Netanyahu long ago became a partisan figure on the opposite side of America's own political divide.

There is a counter-narrative, one that resonates deeply with many Israelis, especially on the right, and cannot be dismissed. According to that view, Netanyahu did not politicize the relationship out of recklessness but because he believed that defending Israel required standing up even to friendly American presidents when their policies endangered the Jewish state.

It is an argument that draws on Golda Meir's famous line: If the choice is between being dead and pitied or alive with a bad image, we would rather be alive and have the bad image.

There is truth in this argument since, after all, Israel's leaders are not elected to win editorial-page approval in *The New York Times.* They are elected to keep the country alive. If an American administration is pursuing a policy that Israeli leaders believe will endanger the country, they have an obligation to speak out.

The problem is that this entire conversation is too simplistic. Hinging the relationship on one person such as Netanyahu ignores the demographic and ideological changes reshaping both countries, as well as the complicated history of the U.S.-Israel relationship itself.

While U.S. president Harry Truman's immediate recognition of Israel in 1948 was historic. The following two decades were characterized by strategic distance. Washington did not want to alienate the Arab world and refused to sell weapons to Israel during Israel's War of Independence and also during the 1956 Sinai campaign. The U.S. viewed the new state with sympathy, but not as a strategic partner.

The change started in 1962, when resident John F. Kennedy approved the sale of Hawk antiaircraft missiles to Israel. Even then, the sale was justified on the grounds that these were defensive weapons. The deeper shift came only after the 1967 Six Day War, when Lyndon Johnson began to see Israel as a valuable regional asset and the U.S. gradually emerged as its chief arms supplier.

Then came the 1973 Yom Kippur War, when President Richard Nixon authorized Operation Nickel Grass, the airlift that resupplied Israel with weapons and equipment at a moment of existential danger. It was a pivotal shift in policy that demonstrated Israel's reliance on the U.S.

From Cold War distance to strategic alliance

But even that high point was followed by strain. In 1975, President Gerald Ford imposed what became known as a "reassessment," a diplomatic move designed to pressure Israel into territorial concessions. The 1980s were similarly mixed. President Ronald Reagan elevated strategic cooperation and deepened the military relationship, but tensions flared after Israel's 1981 strike on Iraq's Osirak reactor and again following the invasion of Lebanon in 1982.

The early 1990s brought renewed optimism with the Oslo process, but that too gave way to friction when Netanyahu took office in 1996 and clashed repeatedly with president Clinton.

Then came the Obama years, marked by some of the lowest personal chemistry ever seen between an American president and an Israeli prime minister. Yet, from Obama, the relationship moved to Trump, and from one of its most strained phases to one of its warmest. Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital, moved the U.S. embassy there, recognized Israeli sovereignty on the Golan Heights and brokered the Abraham Accords.

Most Israelis concluded from this that while the relationship was affected by personalities, it was still stronger than any one person. It was rooted in shared interests and values, as well as genuine friendship. The relationship, people believed, was dynamic, but it did not break.

That was true—until recently.

What is happening in America is not just about extremists on campus, social-media influencers or antisemitism.

It is about how regular Americans view Israel, the values Israel appears to project and the story it is telling the world today. It is about whether large parts of the American public still see the Jewish state as one that they share not only interests with, but democratic norms.

The war that erupted after the Hamas-led terrorist massacre on Oct. 7, 2023, landed on top of an existing American debate about Israel's direction—one shaped by the judicial overhaul crisis throughout 2023 and by a broader perception, especially among Democrats and many American Jews, that Israel's democratic character was changing.

Israel itself has shifted to the right—not only in domestic politics, but also regarding how it approaches security, territory, religion, identity and the use of force. The rise in Jewish terrorism in the West Bank, and the government's failure to allocate the resources needed to stop it, are part of this picture.

This "values" dimension is often dismissed in Israel as naive. It should not be. In American politics, values are not just fluff. They are how large parts of the Democratic Party decide which foreign actors are "like us" and which are not.

A rights-based framework now dominates parts of the Left, and Israel is increasingly viewed through that lens regardless of the enemy or how it fights.

That is how accusations of genocide and war crimes gain traction, no matter how the IDF conducts itself.

On parts of the right, the problem is different but no less serious. There an "America First" worldview questions why U.S. resources should fund overseas commitments at all, including to allies such as Israel.

Age makes a huge difference. Older Americans grew up viewing Israel as a vulnerable, threatened country surrounded by enemies, often through the prism of Holocaust.

Millennials and younger Americans view Israel differently. To them, Israel is a regional superpower with a purported nuclear arsenal and one of the world's strongest militaries and economies. They don't believe they have a moral debt to Israel, and they want the relationship to be looked at as a modern foreign-policy choice.

For Israel, the repercussions are dramatic. Yes, the relationship is mutually beneficial. Israeli intelligence, technology and regional capabilities provide enormous value to the U.S. Israeli operations help counter Iranian aggression, but this is still not a symmetrical relationship. It is obvious which side depends more heavily on the other.

Which means Israeli politicians who speak carelessly about America, who use the alliance for domestic political gain or who assume that support will always be there are playing with fire.

The overidentification with Trump comes at a price, since the pendulum will swing back and a Democrat will one day return to office. When that happens, Israel will face a new reality. In addition, the belief that Israel dragged the U.S. into the Iran war will carry a price, even if a Republican remains in office but adopts a more-isolationist posture. The assumption that military success can compensate for political alienation is dangerous and false.

This does not mean Israel should stop fighting the wars that it needs to fight. It does not mean Israel should adopt policies purely to please American editorial boards or activist groups. But it does mean that Israel cannot behave as though there are no consequences to what it says, what it does and how it is seen.

When Israeli government ministers pop open bottles of champagne to celebrate the passing of a death penalty in the Knesset, Americans notice. When there is no political horizon to resolve conflicts after two and a half years of war, Americans notice. When Jewish terrorism in the West Bank is tolerated, and domestic democratic norms are under attack, Americans notice.

And they draw conclusions.

That is why the lesson of this war is not only military. It is political. Because what once looked like a relationship protected by bipartisan consensus is today exposed to demographic change, ideological realignment, culture-war politics and growing skepticism on both sides of the American spectrum.

From a security perspective, one of the most immediate challenges Israel faces is whether it will receive approval from the Trump administration to renew the 10-year aid package under which the IDF annually receives $3.8 billion in military aid.

The current MOU, memorandum of understanding—signed by the Obama administration in 2016—will expire in September 2027. That may sound like a while away, but in strategic terms it is around the corner, and, if Israel wants to secure a new agreement, discussions need to have begun already.

The next MOU matters for two reasons. First, because the aid is needed especially in a post–Oct. 7 reality, when the threats against Israel are not abstract. Second, it has value as a symbol of an alliance that illustrates that, no matter who is the president—Obama or Trump—the institutional relationship remains resilient.

Interestingly, in 2016, before Obama approved the MOU, there was a debate in the government about whether to close the deal with Obama or wait for the next president. Netanyahu ultimately chose to sign with Obama for one simple reason: He knew what he was getting. Hillary Clinton was expected to be supportive, but Trump was an unknown quantity at the time, and his "America First" rhetoric worried Israeli defense officials.

Fast-forward to 2021. Under President Biden, some inside the Israeli government quietly explored the possibility of beginning talks on a future MOU even though years remained on the current one. The logic was that Biden was also a known supporter of Israel and it would be better to lock in a deal while the opportunity existed. Then came Oct. 7 and the MOU talks were pushed aside.

There is already a growing understanding in Israel's defense establishment that the next package will be the hardest one to secure and that Trump is the last American president who would even consider offering a major long-term aid package. According to this thinking, whoever succeeds him—Republican or Democrat—would balk at a deal.

This is why some Israeli officials have proposed a new model—one based less on dependence and more on partnership. The idea would be to use the next MOU not merely to procure weapons but to deepen joint development, production and operational integration.

The recent war with Iran only strengthens that logic. If the two militaries can fight side by side as partners, then perhaps the alliance can be framed less as America subsidizing Israel and more as the two countries investing together in technologies, capabilities and systems that serve both.

That is an important conversation. But it should not create illusions. Although Israel can build greater defense independence, there are limits.

The IDF's reliance on the U.S. is not just about artillery shells or one-ton bombs. Every aircraft flown by the Israel Air Force except one is American-made—F-15s, F-16s, F-35s, Apache helicopters, Black Hawks, CH-53 helicopters, C-130s, Gulfstreams and Boeing refueling tankers.

This means that, if a U.S. administration wants to stop an Israeli war, it does not need to withhold one-ton bombs, as Biden did. All it needs to do is slow down the flow of spare parts for combat aircraft. Without spare parts, planes will not be able to fly, and, if planes cannot fly, Israel will not be able to fight.

Which is why the future of the U.S.-Israel relationship cannot be reduced to slogans. Israel needs to invest in independence where it can, but it also needs to invest more in strengthening support in the United States.

The same war that revealed the astonishing operational partnership has also exposed how vulnerable that alliance will be in the years ahead. This is the real danger, and, while Israel's leaders do not control the polarization in American politics, they do control how they treat the alliance and whether it receives the seriousness it deserves. They can decide whether to preserve it as a national asset or exploit it as a partisan tool. Only they can decide whether to govern in a way that widens the gap with America or narrows it.

Israel has spent decades building a relationship with the U.S. that no other country in the Middle East has ever had. It would be a historic act of negligence to assume that, because it exists, it will simply endure on its own.