
The United States And The Security Of Israel

By

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Secretary Of Defense

[The following remarks were presented by Secretary Aspin at the American Israel Public Affairs Executive Committee Dinner at the Park Hyatt Hotel, Washington, D.C., on June 14, 1993.]

Thank you very much for your generous words, and for the opportunity to talk about the dramatic changes in the world today. We've just seen the effects of some of those changes over the weekend. U.S. forces were involved with the forces of other nations in a United Nations military operation in Somalia.

Over the weekend, that United Nations force had to resort to military action to protect the hard-won humanitarian gains and restore order in Somalia's capital. U.S. forces took part. As President Clinton said, if U.N. peacekeepers are to be effective agents for peace and stability in Somalia and elsewhere, they must be capable of using force when necessary.

As for our own forces, from Operation Desert Storm to Somalia, the U.S. military has proved itself the most capable in the world, and it has proved itself adaptable to the new world.

Adapting to the new world is something I'd like to talk about tonight. It's a brand-new world. Many things have changed. We also see those changes affecting the security of Israel. Let's step back and assess the new forces in the world that affect it.

First of all, in the way we have traditionally viewed security matters—and I emphasize the word "traditionally"—you could say that Israel has never been safer. Let me list the reasons why I say that.

The Soviet Union has disintegrated. In turn, this has mitigated or removed a number of Israel's toughest security problems. Radicals in the Middle East no longer have a cut rate supplier of Soviet arms. Syria, Iraq, and Libya no longer have the Soviet security guarantee. Russia doesn't trust the Arab radicals. On the other hand, Russia does respect United Nations embargoes. Russia also is our partner in regional arms control efforts.

Iraq. The Gulf War reduced Iraq's war machine by about 60 percent. Since the war, Iraq has remained under strong international control and scrutiny, thanks to the various U.S. sanctions and international inspection regimes. Iraq cannot substantially rebuild its military as long as those measures are in place. The United States is committed to retaining our sanctions and inspection regimes until Iraq is in full compliance with all applicable U.S. Security Council resolutions. Even if those sanctions were lifted, it would take Iraq several years to reestablish its offensive capabilities against its neighbors.

Iran. Its war machine also is reduced significantly as a result of its long war with Iraq. However, Iran has declared its intention to augment its conventional forces.

Syria. Presently, absent a larger coalition of forces, Syria is the most serious conventional threat to Israel. However, Syria has lost its main arms supplier and backer.

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Egypt. Peace between Egypt and Israel has survived 14 years. Other Arab countries are no longer looking for ways to isolate Egypt.

Finally, Israel enjoys clear military superiority over any potential adversary—or likely coalition of adversaries. While Israel may have a numerical disadvantage, it has a qualitative edge, and highly trained and motivated personnel. With this military edge, Israel can win decisively and minimize casualties should it have to go to war.

These are major reasons why Israel should feel more confident than in the recent past. This is not to say that the traditional threats to Israel have vanished or that Israel's traditional enemies have discarded their harmful intentions. Iraq, despite its reduced military capability, is still the major military force in the Gulf. Iran is slowly rebuilding its armed forces and developing a defense industrial base. While Syria has lost the Soviet Union as its main arms supplier and banker, it continues to be heavily armed. It also continues on its plan to modernize its conventional forces.

So we still have to be vigilant about Israel's traditional threats. But under the old world standards, Israel is safer than at any time in its history. The old world threats arose because singly, or together in a coalition, the Arab forces outnumbered the Israeli forces.

Today, (1) it is difficult to imagine such a coalition coming together and (2) Israel's military might is superior to any potential opposition.

So to sum up, we still have to be vigilant about Israel's old world security threats, but they are in hand. At the same time, Israel faces a series of new threats. From one end of the spectrum, Israel faces the threat of ballistic missiles coupled with chemical, biological, or even nuclear warheads. From the other end, Israel faces the danger of direct and sudden violence to individual citizens. As one observer put it, today Israel faces the knife and the missile, but can handle anything in between. Let's examine some of the newly emerging threats Israel faces today.

Radicalism—both secular and religious—has gained momentum over the last decade. It continues to pose a special threat to regional stability and the peace process, and thus to Israel's security. Fundamentalists have grown in strength in Algeria, Sudan, Jordan, Egypt, Lebanon and Tunisia, and among Palestinians. Islamic extremists, in particular, are linked to state-sponsored terrorism and are infringing on the basic human rights of moderate, non-violent Islamic fundamentalist groups who want to work within the system. It is the growing militancy and violence associated with religious extremists that threatens Israel and Western interests in the region. It is not strict "fundamentalist" interpretations of Islam that concern us, but politically motivated violence and terrorism against Israel.

Over the next decade, Israel faces a growing threat from weapons of mass destruction. While only the spread of nuclear weapons could fundamentally alter the military balance in the region, and directly threaten Israel's survival, all weapons of mass destruction degrade Israel's security.

Syria, Libya, and Iran have chemical and biological weapons. All they need now are long-range missiles. All three are actively looking for them.

Libya wants to develop its own nuclear weapons program.

Iran and Iraq could obtain nuclear weapons by the end of the decade. The Iraqi effort is frozen right now by U.N.-imposed sanctions and inspections, but Iran is pursuing nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

We cannot allow these deadly pursuits to continue. It should remain a top priority of U.S. and Israeli security planners to stop the spread of nuclear weapons in the region, deter their use, and develop effective counter-measures.

The Clinton Administration is deeply committed to helping Israel cope with these dangers to increase the chances to achieve peace. You will recall when Prime Minister Rabin visited the United States in March, President Clinton made this commitment. As part of this commitment, the President has charged me with a new responsibility. It is to strengthen the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership. I am deeply honored to accept this challenge. I look forward to playing this role in bringing the U.S.-Israel relationship into the future in which Israel is secure and at peace with its neighbors.

My goal is to work with Mr. Rabin to recalibrate our strategic thinking in light of the changes in the world. This is a new process; it will allow us to do a number of things.

First, we will lay the intellectual groundwork for coping with the new security challenges, and to ensure that the national security establishments in both of our countries will be pulling in the same direction.

Second, we can define precisely the kind of threats that Israel faces today, and ensure that our resources are wisely used to face those threats.

Third, we'll take a new, close look at our joint security efforts, aiming at a number of goals. Let me spell out these goals.

Goal one: To maintain U.S. security assistance to maintain Israel's confidence in the peace process and help Israel provide for its own defense.

Goal two: To maintain Israel's high-tech military edge, consistent, of course, with our own national security requirements.

Goal three: To maintain close military planning, tangible security arrangements, close military-to-military contacts, and combined training and exercises.

Goal four: To make the best use of our combined defense industrial base. There are areas where we currently duplicate efforts, but shouldn't. For example, we can continue to work together on research and development, and explore new areas.

Goal five: To maintain a strong U.S. military presence in the region.

Goal six: To work with Israel to deter nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons proliferation.

These goals will guide us as we recalibrate our security partnership. But when Prime Minister Rabin and I meet, it's important that we begin by asking the right questions rather than working under the wrong assumptions.

There are two kinds of wrong assumptions we could make. The first is not realizing that the world has changed. We're not going to make that mistake. The second is thinking we know all the answers already. We don't. That's why these questions are so important. The list I have tonight isn't an exhaustive list, but it's a good start. These are the questions we can start with.

What is the best way to maintain the qualitative edge that Israel needs to deal with conventional weapons as well as weapons of mass destruction, which are making their appearance on the regional stage?

How can the United States and Israel work together in developing theater missile defenses that are the most capable in meeting existing and future threats? How are we going to get our friends and allies to promote mutually shared objectives in nonproliferation?

How does the United States maintain the defense expenditures necessary to meet all of our requirements? Specifically, as pressures grow on our own resources, how do we ensure that we have the forces forward deployed to protect our interests, including the security of our friends in the region?

How does the United States promote democratic values and political stability in the region to stem the flow of such threats as Islamic extremism and state-sponsored terrorism?

So that's our preliminary list of questions. I look forward to working with Prime Minister Rabin on the answers that will help us strengthen the U.S.-Israel security partnership for the new world.

I'd like to close with a piece of wisdom from the Old Testament. To quote "A faithful friend is a strong defense." The United States and Israel have been faithful friends for 45 years. We are committed to maintaining a strong defense of Israel. Together, we will protect the freedom, democracy, and stability that Israel has struggled so hard to achieve and maintain. Thank you very much.