

Forget Iran, it's Israel's Nuclear Gun Pointed at Obama's Head: The Myth of the US-Israel Special Bond

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It is possibly the greatest of American political myths, repeated ad nauseam by presidential candidates in their election campaigns. President Barack Obama has claimed that the United States enjoys a special bond with Israel unlike its relations with any other country. He has called the friendship “unshakeable”, “enduring” and “unique”, “anchored by our common interests and deeply held values”.

His Republican rival, Mitt Romney, has gone further, arguing that there is not “an inch of difference between ourselves and our ally Israel”. A recent Romney election ad, highlighting his summer visit to Israel, extolled the “deep and cherished relationship”.

But, while such pronouncements form the basis of an apparent Washington consensus, the reality is that the cherished friendship is no more than a fairy tale. It has been propagated by politicians to mask the suspicion — and plentiful examples of duplicity and betrayal — that have marked the relationship since Israel's founding.

Politicians may prefer to express undying love for Israel, and hand over billions of dollars annually in aid, but the US security establishment has — at least, in private — always regarded Israel as an unfaithful partner.

The distrust has been particularly hard to hide in relation to Iran. Israel has been putting relentless pressure on Washington, apparently in the hope of manoeuvring it into supporting or joining an attack on Tehran to stop what Israel claims is an Iranian effort to build a nuclear bomb concealed beneath its civilian energy programme.

While coverage has focused on the personal animosity between Obama and the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, the truth is that US officials generally are deeply at odds with Israel on this issue.

The conflict burst into the open this month with reports that the Pentagon had scaled back next month's joint military exercise, Austere Challenge, with the Israeli military that had been billed as the largest and most significant in the two countries' history.

The goal of the exercise was to test the readiness of Israel's missile-defence shield in case of Iranian reprisals — possibly the biggest fear holding Israel back from launching a go-it-alone attack. The Pentagon's main leverage on Israel is its X-band radar, stationed in Israel but operated exclusively by a US crew, that would provide Israel with early warning of Iranian missiles.

A senior Israeli military official told Time magazine what message the Pentagon's rethink had conveyed: "Basically what the Americans are saying is, 'We don't trust you'."

But discord between the two "unshakeable allies" is not limited to Iran. Antipathy has been the norm for decades. Over the summer, current and former CIA officials admitted that the US security establishment has always regarded Israel as its number one counter-intelligence threat in the Middle East.

The most infamous spy working on Israel's behalf was Jonathan Pollard, a naval intelligence officer who passed thousands of classified documents to Israel in the 1980s. Israel's repeated requests for his release have been a running sore with the Pentagon, not least because defence officials regard promises that Israel would never again operate spies on US soil as insincere.

At least two more spies have been identified in the past few years. In 2008 a former US army engineer, Ben-Ami Kadish, admitted that he had allowed Israeli agents to photograph secret documents about US fighter jets and nuclear weapons in the 1980s. And in 2006 Lawrence Franklin, a US defence official, was convicted of passing classified documents to Israel concerning Iran.

In fact, such betrayals were assumed by Washington from the start of the relationship. In Israel's early years, a US base in Cyprus monitored Israeli activities; today, Israeli communications are intercepted by a team of Hebrew linguists stationed at Fort Meade, Maryland.

Documents released this month by the Israeli air force archives also reveal that Israel eventually identified mysterious high-altitude planes that overflow its territory throughout the 1950s as American U-2 espionage planes.

In a sign of continuing US caution, Israel has not been included in the coterie of countries with which Washington shares sensitive intelligence. The members of the "Five Eyes" group, consisting of the US, Britain, Australia, Canada and New Zealand, have promised not to spy on each other — a condition Israel would have regularly flouted were it a member.

Indeed, Israel has even stolen the identities of nationals from these countries to assist in Mossad operations. Most notoriously, Israel forged passports to smuggle Israeli agents into Dubai in 2010 to assassinate Hamas leader Mahmoud Al Mabhouh.

Israel is far from a trusted ally in the US "war on terror". A former intelligence official told the Associated Press in July that Israel ranked lower than Libya in a list of countries helping to fight terrorism compiled by the Bush administration after September 11.

So why all the talk of a special bond if the relationship is characterised by such deep mistrust?

Part of the answer lies in the formidably intimidating tactics of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington. Thomas Friedman, the New York Times columnist, spoke for a growing number of observers last year when he wrote that the US Congress was effectively "bought and paid for" by Israel's lobbyists.

That power was all too evident last week when the Democratic national convention adopted an amended policy designating Jerusalem as Israel's capital, in opposition to both

international law and the vocal wishes of delegates.

But there is another, less spoken-of reason. Francis Perrin, the head of the French Atomic Agency in the 1950s and 1960s, when France was helping Israel develop a nuclear weapon against the wishes of the US, once observed that the Israeli bomb was really “aimed against the Americans”.

Not because Israel wanted to attack the US, but because it realised that — once it possessed the only nuclear arsenal in the Middle East — the US would rarely risk standing in its way, however much its policies ran counter to US interests.

For that reason, if no other, Israel is determined to stop any rival, including Iran, from getting a nuclear weapon that would end its monopoly.

Jonathan Cook won the Martha Gellhorn Special Prize for Journalism. His latest books are “Israel and the Clash of Civilisations: Iraq, Iran and the Plan to Remake the Middle East” (Pluto Press) and “Disappearing Palestine: Israel’s Experiments in Human Despair” (Zed Books). His website is www.jkcook.net.

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