Israel and the US must focus on core mutual interests

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 17.08.2023

In a recent Foreign Affairs article, former IDF Gen. Amos Yadlin argues that in order to entice Washington into taking a stronger stance against Iran and facilitating a deal between Israeli and Saudi Arabia, Israel must make "goodwill gestures."

These would include: Ending the process of judicial reform, preventing the construction of Jewish homes in Judea and Samaria, and more actively supporting Ukraine. While the idea that a country must prioritize its national interests and then negotiate with its allies to promote them is sound, Yadlin's proposals would not bring about the desired results, as they are not in the core interests of either country.

Yadlin's proposal fails to distinguish between core American interests and mere political preferences. For example, while opposing Iran's nuclear program and normalizing relations with the Saudis are key Israeli and U.S. interests, judicial reform is a purely domestic issue. It has no effect on American interests.

Likewise, neither preventing Jewish construction in Judea and Samaria nor "solving" the Palestinian issue is a priority for Washington.

Finally, while Ukraine is significant to the Biden administration, a change in Israeli policy would have a negligible impact on the outcome of the war. It would also bring Israel into direct conflict with Russia. This would be highly detrimental to Israel's national security and thus American interests in the Middle East.

None of these issues are important enough to change Washington's calculus in regard to a war with Iran or security guarantees to Saudi Arabia.

Yadlin correctly states that Israel wants the United States to put unrelenting pressure on Iran. But such a policy carries risks of escalation that U.S. President Joe Biden is simply not willing to take. No Israeli goodwill gesture will convince him otherwise.

Yadlin asserts that "Biden is the only world leader who is capable of taking steps

that will stop Iran from ever acquiring a nuclear weapon." This is incorrect. America indeed has the power to strike a devastating blow to Iran's nuclear facilities, but it has not convinced anyone that it would actually follow through on its threats.

While Israel may not have the same overwhelming firepower, Iran sees Israeli threats as credible. Indeed, the only reason Iran does not yet have nuclear weapons is the military threat posed by Israel.

Thus, it is in the interest of both Jerusalem and Washington for Israel to continue its threats to strike. In this context, Biden can negotiate with Iran if he so desires, while Israel maintains its credible threat.

Yadlin suggests that Israel and the U.S. could "establish the foundations of a new Middle East security architecture in which participants share intelligence, air defenses, logistics and other resources to protect freedom of navigation and coordinate additional steps against Tehran."

This is an excellent idea because it would be in the interests of all involved. But the key to its success is Israeli assertiveness, not a public display of Israeli subordination to Washington.

As for Saudi-Israel normalization, it cannot succeed unless Biden abandons some of his previous policies vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia. However, this would be in America's interests, not a result of Israeli goodwill gestures. As long as the U.S. turns a cold shoulder to Saudi Arabia, Riyadh will seek to deepen its cooperation with China and Russia. Therefore, in the context of great power competition, pursuing Saudi-Israel normalization is a core U.S. interest. Moreover, the only reason Saudi Arabia is interested in normalization with Israel in the first place is because of Israeli power and assertiveness in the region, which have made Israel an asset to the Saudis against their primary threat—Iran.

To more closely align itself with the U.S., Yadlin suggests that Israel take steps to reduce its technological exposure to China. It's a good suggestion, but it is already Israeli policy. Yadlin criticizes Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu for strengthening economic cooperation with China a decade ago, but at the time it was uncontroversial.

Yadlin also suggests strengthening Israel's connections with U.S. allies India,

Japan and South Korea. This is a great idea, but he fails to note that it was Netanyahu who spearheaded Israel's growing connections with India over the past decade.

Yadlin's proposals on Ukraine are more problematic. Israel's cautious position on Ukraine has been maintained by all three of its most recent governments, which spanned the political spectrum. Israel faces serious security threats that could be exacerbated by a direct conflict with Russia. At the same time, the amount of direct assistance it could provide to Ukraine is negligible relative to the larger economies of Europe and the U.S.

Yadlin claims that Moscow is "too busy" to hinder Israel's freedom of action in Syria, but Russian planes are still active in Syria's skies. Moreover, because Iran is actively supporting Russia's war effort in Ukraine, when Israel takes direct action against Iran—such as the strike on an Iranian drone facility in Jan. 2023—it directly benefits Ukraine.

A policy based on mutual U.S.-Israeli interests would be for the United States to encourage such Israeli operations, as they indirectly serve U.S. interests in Ukraine.

Moreover, Yadlin's claim that Israeli policy is distancing Israel from the West is incorrect. Given their newfound realization that security threats still exist, Western European countries have become more eager to cooperate with Israel and purchase its military equipment. For example, Germany recently decided to purchase Israel's Arrow 3 missile defense system.

Yadlin's proposals for the Palestinian arena are even more misguided. He is correct that Palestinian terror attacks have been on the rise. But he reverses the order of cause and effect by asserting that Israeli policies on Jewish construction and Jewish prayer on the Temple Mount are the source of the Palestinian "inflammation."

In fact, it is the Palestinians who are undertaking illegal land grabs across Area C of Judea and Samaria. Moreover, the idea that more Jewish residents of Judea and Samaria are somehow an obstacle to peace implies that, for some reason, any Palestinian political entity must be Judenrein—empty of Jews. A fifth of Israel's population is Arab; the Palestinians should be capable of the same degree of tolerance. Moreover, what U.S. interest is served by the demand that a future

Palestinian state be “cleansed” of Jews?

Biden sees no alternative to maintaining the façade of “working toward the two-state solution,” but he has no intention of making the Palestinian issue the linchpin of U.S. regional policy. Furthermore, strengthening the Palestinian Authority and its hopes of replacing Israel does not serve U.S. interests. A Palestinian state would be a failed and hostile state aligned with Beijing and Moscow, not Washington.

Yadlin promotes the view that Israel’s value to the United States is a result of its willingness to subordinate its national security policy to U.S. preferences. In fact, Israel has become a strategic asset to the U.S. because it has insisted on taking responsibility for its own security.

On occasion, Israeli policy does not align perfectly with that of the U.S. The two allies must try to have honest conversations when this is the case. By doing so, it will become clear what each other’s core national security interests are and which are merely preferences. In their strategic dialogue, Jerusalem and Washington should check their sentimental disagreements at the door.

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