Israel should decline the offer of an American defense treaty

written by Dr. Yitzhak Klein | 01.10.2023

As part of the trilateral negotiations between Israel, Saudi Arabia and the United States, talk of an American-Israeli defense treaty is in the air. The Saudis want such a treaty with the United States, and the Saudi-Israel peace treaty is in the interest of both nations. Contrary to what is commonly assumed, it is not in Israel's interest to sign such a treaty with the United States. The security of both countries will be stronger without it.

An American-Israeli security treaty does not mean that Israel receives a carte blanche to do whatever it feels necessary to defend its security, safe in the conviction that the United States will protect it against the worst. On the contrary, such a guarantee will come with the requirement that Israel do nothing that the United States perceives as reckless or provocative, which would have obligated the United States to save Israel from any mess it gets into.

The United States will expect Israel to conform to its own perception of Israel's security needs. A security treaty may also lead the United States to question Israel's desire to obtain certain weapons systems (with American aid, i.e.at American expense,) or to preserve Israel's qualitative military superiority in the Middle East. After all, an American administration can argue, we're here to protect you, so what do you need all this stuff for?

U.S. wants Israel to get off the fenceFundamentally, the best guarantee for Israel's security – for any nation's security – is the autonomy to decide when its security is at stake and to act accordingly. No treaty with a foreign nation can take the place of a nation's ability to decide on its own what it needs to do to defend itself. Today, Israel serves America's current security needs in myriad ways that a defense treaty will not reinforce. What Israel needs from the United States is what it already possesses: An American guarantee that if it sells weapons to potential enemies of Israel, America will provide Israeli access to the weapons Israel needs to ensure its qualitative superiority.As democratic nations in a world challenged by rising authoritarianism, Israel and the United States share fundamental interests. That does not mean that their interests are in every

respect equivalent. America's perception of Israel's security needs will always be colored by the United States' perception of its own interests, and America's perception of what it needs to do to live up to any security guarantee it gives to Israel will not always be congruent with what Israel believes needs to be done. Too often American policy – like many nations' policies – will be governed by myopia and short-term interests. Contemporary examples abound. The United States wants Israel to get off the fence and provide arms and military technology to Ukraine. No NATO ally in Europe is as directly threatened by what Russia can do to harm its security as Israel is, yet this apparently does nothing to reduce American impatience with Israel. The current American administration pays lip service to the idea that Iran must not obtain nuclear weapons, yet it is as clear as day that the United States will do nothing effective to prevent Iran from obtaining these weapons and wants Israel to refrain from doing anything either. The current administration is a prisoner to the perspective that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is Israel's fault and that it is incumbent upon Israel to do less against the threat of Palestinian terror, even if it has to pay a price in Israeli civilian lives. To be frank, all these American policies threaten vital Israeli security interests, and Israel cannot comply with them. The American-Israeli alliance is an important asset for Israel, but even today it comes at a price, in terms of the constraints it imposes upon Israel's ability to defend itself. America is large and powerful enough to survive many years of foolish policy, but this is not necessarily true of all America's allies – as Taiwan is likely to discover to its cost in a few years' time. America's long-term security interests are best served when Israel is strong, independent, and can take care of itself, even if America sometimes wishes it had more control over Israel. Israel's greatest asset in the United States is the respect most Americans have for our democracy and our independence: Our commitment, from the days of Ben-Gurion, to defend ourselves and never to submit to the temptation to let someone else do our fighting for us. An Israel dependent upon American security guarantees will become just that – a dependent state, the object of contempt rather than admiration. An American-Israeli security treaty represents a Faustian bargain for Israel – giving up more control over our own security in return for someone else's promise to do the job for us. We should think back to 1975, the year the United States walked away from South Vietnam, an American ally, and let it fall. That year Golda Meir warned her people that an American security guarantee was a false promise that Israel should never rely upon. Israel should heed that warning today.

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