



Is U.S. Military Aid to Israel Really Exceptional?

Comparing the Costs of American Security Partnerships

By Noam Yakoby | October 2026



Iron Dome air defense system (photo: Hamara)

Key Points

- U.S. military aid to Israel is frequently portrayed as uniquely large and disproportionate. Assessments based on foreign assistance alone omit other substantial forms of U.S. spending on security partnerships. Aid to Israel is highly visible as a foreign assistance line item, while the larger costs of defending treaty allies, through permanent troop deployments, overseas bases, and deterrence infrastructure, are recorded within the U.S. defense budget.



- When placed in the broader context of U.S. alliance management, assistance to Israel appears far less exceptional. Historical estimates place the gross annual baseline costs of U.S. military presence in Europe, Japan, and South Korea at approximately \$29.1 billion, \$5.2 billion, and \$3.3 billion, respectively.¹ These figures primarily capture personnel, basing, and associated operating costs and do not include the full costs of military equipment, reinforcement capabilities, and broader deterrence infrastructure. By comparison, the United States provides Israel with approximately \$3.3 billion in annual military assistance and an additional \$500 million annually for joint missile defense cooperation; most of these funds are spent on U.S.-produced defense equipment.
- Unlike many U.S. treaty allies in Europe and East Asia, which host large permanent American military deployments, Israel does not rely on a comparable permanent U.S. combat presence. U.S. assistance instead strengthens Israel's independent defense capabilities while contributing to American regional deterrence, intelligence, defense industrial capacity, technological innovation, and operational expertise.
- The analysis does not conclude that American aid to Israel should continue in its current form. However, it challenges the claim that U.S. aid to Israel is uniquely disproportionate by placing it within the broader context of American spending on other security commitments. Accordingly, as American and Israeli leaders develop their next Memorandum of Understanding, they should evaluate U.S. expenditures in support of Israel within this comparative perspective.

Section I: Introduction

U.S. military assistance to Israel has become an increasingly contentious element of American foreign policy. Across segments of the political spectrum, from the progressive left to the populist right, a familiar narrative has gained traction: Washington sends billions

¹ The Europe estimate reflects the gross cost of the U.S. military presence as calculated by IISS. The Japan and South Korea figures are derived from GAO estimates of the total cost of the U.S. military presence and are presented before adjusting for host-nation contributions. The Europe estimate refers to 2018, while the Japan and South Korea figures represent annual averages for 2016-2019.



of dollars to Israel while pressing domestic needs remain unmet. In political commentary, social media, and public debate, Israel is frequently portrayed as an exceptionally costly beneficiary of American resources, with the scale of U.S. assistance often invoked as evidence of misplaced national priorities.² This skepticism is also reflected in public opinion: a September 2026 Marquette Law School Poll found that 55% of American adults believe the United States provides Israel with too much military assistance.³

One shortcoming of this debate is not the scrutiny of foreign aid itself, but the limited comparison with other forms of U.S. security expenditure. U.S. military assistance to Israel is highly visible, centrally reported, and politically salient. By contrast, the costs associated with maintaining permanent troop deployments, overseas bases, and deterrence infrastructure in support of formal treaty allies are embedded within the U.S. defense budget and are therefore less readily identifiable. Evaluated within this broader framework of alliance management, U.S. military assistance to Israel appears considerably less exceptional.

The differences between American security partnerships extend beyond their financial costs. Unlike many U.S. treaty allies that host substantial American military forces, Israel relies primarily on its own armed forces for defense, with U.S. support taking the form of military assistance rather than a comparable permanent American combat presence. The U.S.-Israel partnership also generates strategic benefits for the United States through regional deterrence, intelligence cooperation, defense industrial support, technological innovation, and operational knowledge. With the current U.S.-Israel Memorandum of Understanding set to expire in 2028, evaluating these strategic returns alongside the financial costs is particularly relevant.

² ABC News, “‘This Week’ Transcript 4-19-26: Amb. Mike Waltz, UAE Minister of State for International Cooperation Reem Al Hashimy, Rep. Ro Khanna & Mentalist Oz Pearlman,” April 19, 2026, <https://abcnews.com/amp/Politics/week-transcript-4-19-26-amb-mike-waltz/story?id=132174957>; *Congressional Record*, 119th Cong., 2nd sess., July 15, 2026, H4518–H4519 (remarks of Rep. Thomas Massie), <https://www.govinfo.gov/content/pkg/CREC-2026-07-15/pdf/CREC-2026-07-15-pt1-PgH4480.pdf>.

³ Charles Franklin, “New Marquette Law School National Survey Finds Democrats Expand Lead on Congressional Ballots; Trump Approval Declines,” Marquette Law School Poll, September 16, 2026, table 27, <https://law.marquette.edu/poll/2026/09/16/mlspsc35-1/>.



Section II: Comparative Framework and Limitations

This paper places U.S. military assistance to Israel within the broader context of American spending on overseas security partnerships. It compares two distinct instruments: direct military assistance and the maintenance of U.S. military forces and infrastructure abroad. These arrangements are not directly interchangeable. Unlike NATO allies, Japan, and South Korea, Israel is not a formal U.S. treaty ally, and Washington has no comparable treaty obligation to defend it. Moreover, American military deployments overseas serve purposes beyond the defense of host countries, including power projection, intelligence collection, logistical support, and regional deterrence. Their costs therefore cannot be attributed exclusively to the defense of individual allies.

The financial comparison focuses on identifiable annual baseline expenditures associated with U.S. military personnel, bases, and related operations in Europe, Japan, and South Korea. These estimates do not capture the full costs of American security commitments, including major equipment procurement, naval and air capabilities, nuclear deterrence, and reinforcement infrastructure. In Israel's case, the analysis uses the regular annual commitment of \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF), while treating the additional \$500 million in annual joint missile defense funding and supplemental wartime assistance separately. The comparison thus places different forms of American security spending in perspective without treating them as equivalent budget categories.

Several limitations qualify this comparison. The estimates for Europe, Japan, and South Korea come from different sources, accounting periods, and expenditure categories. For example, the Government Accountability Office reports U.S. military obligations for Japan and South Korea, whereas the figure used for Israel represents an annual assistance commitment. Furthermore, financial and in-kind contributions from host countries affect the net U.S. burden but are not consistently reflected across the available estimates. Similarly, although much of the military assistance provided to Israel finances American-produced defense equipment, the resulting benefits to the U.S. defense industrial base should not be treated as a direct reduction in its fiscal cost. These figures should therefore be understood as illustrative baselines rather than directly comparable estimates of the net costs of different security partnerships. The paper does not seek to establish which security



partnership is most cost-effective, but rather to demonstrate why U.S. military assistance should be evaluated within the wider context of American security expenditures. It subsequently examines the strategic returns of the U.S.-Israel partnership without attempting a comprehensive cost-benefit analysis of U.S. alliances.

Section III: Historical Context

Foreign Aid

Following World War II, U.S. foreign aid emerged as a major instrument of American foreign policy. Through the Marshall plan, the U.S. engaged in one of the largest foreign aid efforts in history to rebuild Europe and prevent the spread of Communism. In the context of the Cold War, America also sent substantial amounts of aid to South Vietnam, South Korea, and Taiwan. Similarly, John F. Kennedy's Alliance for Progress program provided economic assistance to Latin American countries at risk of falling to Communism. In later years, President Ronald Reagan sent aid to Latin American countries that supported efforts in the "War on Drugs."

In the Middle East, the US-brokered 1978 Camp David Accords and the 1979 Egypt-Israel Peace Treaty led to decades of U.S. aid to Israel and Egypt, which remain major recipients to this day. Later, the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan resulted in significant outflows of aid to help rebuild the war-torn countries.^{4,5} Over time, U.S. aid has evolved from a reconstruction tool to a flexible instrument of global influence. Through foreign assistance, the United States has helped sustain a world order with itself placed at the center.

⁴ On the humanitarian and development side, U.S. assistance helped India address severe food shortages and supported the Green Revolution in the 1960s. In 1965, American wheat shipments to India amounted to approximately one-fifth of the U.S. wheat harvest. In Africa, the United States provided substantial assistance to combat HIV/AIDS beginning in 2003 through the President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief (PEPFAR). See *American Experience*, "The Man Who Tried to Feed the World," PBS, December 21, 2022, <https://www.pbs.org/wgbh/americanexperience/films/man-who-tried-to-feed-the-world/>; White House, "Fact Sheet: The President's Emergency Plan for AIDS Relief," January 29, 2003, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/01/20030129-1.html>.

⁵ Council on Foreign Relations, "A Brief History of U.S. Foreign Aid," *CFR Education*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://education.cfr.org/learn/reading/brief-history-us-foreign-aid>.



Collective Defense Arrangements

Alongside foreign aid, a central element of American power lies in its global network of formal alliances, best reflected in collective defense arrangements. The most prominent example is the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), established in 1949, which formalized the military alliance between the United States, Canada, and much of Western Europe. Article 5 commits the parties to collective defense, stating that, “an armed attack against one or more of them in Europe or North America shall be considered an attack against them all.”⁶

The United States developed similar defense partnerships in East Asia. The 1951 U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty allowed for U.S. forces to remain on Japanese territory to maintain peace and security in the region.⁷ In 1960, the treaty was revised to allow the U.S. to establish bases in Japan in exchange for a formal American security guarantee. Today, more U.S. military personnel are stationed in Japan than any other country overseas.⁸ Similarly, the U.S.-South Korea alliance, formalized through the 1953 Mutual Defense Treaty after the Korean War, established a framework for continued American military presence on the Korean Peninsula.⁹

Collectively, these mutual defense arrangements have provided much of the world with security and stability. Taken together, the U.S.-led systems of foreign aid and formal defense treaties represent key U.S. approaches to both supporting and influencing partner countries.

Section IV: Costs of Foreign Aid

One of the most persistent misunderstandings in U.S. foreign policy debates concerns the relative size of foreign aid and direct defense spending. The following sections compare

⁶ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, “Official Texts: Article 5 – Collective Defence,” *NATO*, accessed October 5, 2025, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natolive/official_texts_17120.htm.

⁷ Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S.–Japan Alliance,” *CFR Background*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/background/us-japan-alliance>.

⁸ *Ibid.*

⁹ Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S.–South Korea Alliance (Timeline),” *CFR*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-south-korea-alliance>.



the costs of foreign assistance and overseas defense commitments to place their relative sizes in perspective.

Global

Foreign assistance data is centralized and publicly reported, making it easy to measure. Although public discourse may suggest otherwise, foreign aid represents a small percentage of the federal budget: ranging between 0.7% and 1.4% of total federal outlays since 2001.¹⁰ In Fiscal Year 2023, the United States disbursed about \$80 billion worth of foreign assistance across all sectors, representing about 1.3% of federal outlays.¹¹ Of that amount, around \$16 billion (~20%) was classified as military aid. While annual spending fluctuates due to changing circumstances and policies, aid expenditures remained relatively consistent in recent years, hovering between \$40 billion and \$50 billion from 2008 to 2021, before spiking in 2022 and 2023, driven particularly by U.S. assistance to Ukraine following Russia's invasion. Similarly, military aid averaged about \$12 billion annually from FY 2001 - 2023 and generally represented between 20% and 40% of total aid from 2001 to 2023, with few exceptions.¹²

Israel

Israel has been a leading beneficiary of U.S. assistance for decades and has received more cumulative aid from the United States than any other country—standing at \$310 billion (adjusted for inflation) as of November 2024.¹³

From 1971 to 2007, the U.S. provided Israel with economic as well as defense support, but in recent years, almost all the American aid to Israel has been in the form of military assistance. In the 2016 Memorandum of Understanding between the United States and

¹⁰ Drew DeSilver, "What the Data Says About U.S. Foreign Aid," *Pew Research Center*, February 6, 2025, <https://www.pewresearch.org/short-reads/2025/02/06/what-the-data-says-about-us-foreign-aid/>.

¹¹ U.S. Department of the Treasury, Bureau of the Fiscal Service, "Statements of Changes in Cash Balance from Budget and Other Activities," in Financial Statements of the United States Government for the Fiscal Years Ended September 30, 2023, and 2022, accessed October 19, 2026, <https://fiscal.treasury.gov/accounting/us-financial-report/2023/statements-of-change-cash-balance>; U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *ForeignAssistance.gov*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://foreignassistance.gov/>.

¹² U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development, *ForeignAssistance.gov*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://foreignassistance.gov/>.

¹³ Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts," *CFR*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.cfr.org/article/us-aid-israel-four-charts>.



Israel, the U.S. committed \$3.3 billion in military assistance and \$500 million for joint missile defense cooperation annually for a decade. It is worth noting that the oft-cited total figure of \$3.8 billion in annual U.S. assistance includes the \$500 million allocated to joint missile defense programs. Unlike Foreign Military Financing, however, this funding supports jointly developed and co-produced missile defense systems that receive substantial financial contributions from both governments.¹⁴ As such, it is more accurately characterized as bilateral defense cooperation than as traditional foreign aid. In addition to America's regular annual contribution, Congress expanded military assistance to Israel following the October 7, 2023, Hamas-led attack.

In April 2024, lawmakers approved \$8.7 billion in supplemental Foreign Military Financing and missile defense funding for Israel, bringing total appropriations for these programs to approximately \$12.5 billion for fiscal year 2024.¹⁵ Since 2008, U.S. law also requires that the United States ensure Israel has a qualitative military edge (QME) compared to potential regional adversaries, meaning in practice that Israel has preferred access to the most advanced American military equipment.¹⁶

Section V: Costs of Forward Defense Commitments

While these aid figures may appear to represent substantial American outlays in support of allies, they should be viewed in the context of the significantly larger sums the United States spends on defense commitments in partner countries. Beyond foreign assistance, the United States invests billions in security infrastructure to protect allies. In this broader perspective, foreign aid represents only one component of the wider costs associated with maintaining the U.S.-led alliance system.

¹⁴ Jeremy M. Sharp, *U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel: Overview and Developments since October 7, 2023*, CRS Report RL33222 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 28, 2025), 19–20, 33, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/RL33222>.

¹⁵ Ibid.

¹⁶ Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S. Aid to Israel in Four Charts.”



Overseas Bases

As of 2024, the U.S. military managed or used at least 128 bases overseas in at least 51 countries.¹⁷ Unlike dollars spent on foreign assistance, which are clearly visible figures, these expenses are recorded within the Department of Defense's nearly \$1 trillion budget. Costs relating to overseas basing can most directly be broken down into military construction (MILCON), which captures the costs of building or expanding bases and operation and maintenance (O&M), which considers "base operations, maintenance, and related support activities."¹⁸ According to a 2024 Overseas Basing Congressional Report, for fiscal year 2023, MILCON projects abroad cost roughly \$5.4 billion while O&M and other expenses overseas were estimated at \$27.8 billion to \$31.7 billion. Taken together, the U.S. incurred approximately \$33.2 billion in gross costs on overseas military activities in 2023. That same year, the U.S. received \$714.2 million from Kuwait, Japan, South Korea, Saudi Arabia, and Poland to help cover the costs associated with stationing in the countries.¹⁹ Subtracting these reported contributions yields a rough adjusted estimate of \$32.5 billion in U.S. expenditures on bases abroad, which is over twice the cost of annual military aid globally, standing at roughly \$16 billion.

The report notes that these figures may not account for "costs related to contingency operations, rotational deployments or training exercises involving units ordinarily based in the United States."²⁰ For example, the European Deterrence Initiative, which increases the presence of U.S. rotational forces in Europe, cost roughly \$4.3 billion in fiscal year 2023.²¹ A separate Quincy Institute study cited in the 2024 Congressional report estimated that overseas basing costs the United States approximately \$55 billion annually. Adding the costs of personnel stationed abroad further raises that estimate to roughly \$80 billion.²²

¹⁷ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R48123 (Washington, DC: Library of Congress, July 10, 2024), accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R48123>.

¹⁸ Ibid.

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress*, CRS Report R48123.

²¹ Office of the Under Secretary of Defense (Comptroller), *FY 2025 European Deterrence Initiative (EDI) Budget Justification Book* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2025), accessed October 5, 2025, https://comptroller.defense.gov/Portals/45/Documents/defbudget/FY2025/FY2025_EDI_JBook.pdf.

²² David Vine, Patterson Deppen, and Leah Bolger, *Drawdown: Improving U.S. and Global Security Through Military Base Closures Abroad*, Quincy Brief no. 16 (Quincy Institute for Responsible



Annual Global Foreign Aid	~ \$80 billion
Annual Global Military Aid	~ \$16 billion
Annual Global Overseas Basing	~ \$32.5 - \$80 billion

Europe and NATO

The North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) is a key pillar of United States security strategy. The U.S.' commitment reassures allies, deters Russia in particular, and projects American power abroad. While American expenditures related to defending North Atlantic allies are not as obvious as foreign aid, the costs are high, nonetheless.

As of March 2024, the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) oversaw 31 bases and 19 other military sites across the continent. Roughly 67,200 active-duty military personnel are permanently stationed in the region, with Germany (35,068), Italy (12,375) and the United Kingdom (10,058) hosting the most. Additional personnel are stationed in Europe at any given time on rotational deployments. In June 2024, the White House stated that “approximately 80,000 United States Armed Forces personnel are assigned or deployed to North Atlantic Treaty Organization [NATO] countries in Europe...”²³

Precise figures for U.S. spending on its military presence in Europe are difficult to isolate, but available estimates illustrate the scale of investment. In a 2019 analysis, the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) estimated that the United States spent approximately \$29.1 billion in 2018 on its military presence in Europe, including personnel costs, base operations, and the European Deterrence Initiative.²⁴ A separate 2025 IISS study

Statecraft, September 20, 2021), accessed July 25, 2026, <https://quincyinst.org/research/drawdown-improving-u-s-and-global-security-through-military-base-closures-abroad/>.

²³ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress*.

²⁴ Lucie Béraud-Sudreau, “On the Up: Western Defence Spending in 2018,” International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS), February 15, 2019, <https://www.iiiss.org/online-analysis/military-balance/2019/02/european-nato-defence-spending-up/>.



estimated that replacing key American conventional military capabilities in Europe in the event of a U.S. withdrawal from NATO would cost European countries approximately \$1 trillion, including procurement costs over an assumed 25-year lifecycle.²⁵ While this replacement-cost estimate is not directly comparable to annual U.S. expenditures, it illustrates the scale of the capabilities underpinning America's European security commitments.

Beyond the costs of maintaining its military presence in Europe, the United States also contributes directly to NATO-related military capabilities. In 2018, the IISS estimated an additional \$6.74 billion in U.S. expenditures on NATO funding, including common procurement and missile defense, bringing its estimate of direct American spending on European defense to approximately \$35.8 billion that year.²⁶

Against this backdrop, burden sharing has been one of NATO's most enduring debates. On June 25, 2025, NATO countries agreed to invest 5% of GDP annually on defense and related spending by 2035, an increase from the previous 2% target.²⁷ In its 2024 annual report, NATO estimated that 22 of 32 member countries met or exceeded spending 2% of GDP on defense.²⁸ According to NATO's 2025 Annual Report, total defense expenditure across the Alliance amounted to 2.65% of combined GDP in 2024. As a percentage of GDP, the United States spent 3.30% on defense in 2024, only behind Poland (3.76%) and Estonia (3.31%), and level with Latvia (3.30%). In absolute terms, the United States spent approximately \$967.7 billion on defense in 2024, nearly twice the approximate \$515.3 billion spent by European allies and Canada combined.²⁹ Many, including President Trump, have argued that NATO's mutual defense treaty and substantial U.S. spending allow allies to neglect their own defensive obligations in favor of relying on the American

²⁵ International Institute for Strategic Studies, *Defending Europe Without the United States: Costs and Consequences* (London: IISS, May 2025), accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.iiss.org/research-paper/2025/05/defending-europe-without-the-united-states-costs-and-consequences/>.

²⁶ Béraud-Sudreau, "On the Up: Western Defence Spending in 2018."

²⁷ CBS News, "NATO Members' Defense Spending: Which Countries Contribute the Most?" *CBS News*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/nato-members-defense-spending-countries-list/>.

²⁸ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *Secretary General's Annual Report 2024* (Brussels: NATO, April 2025), accessed October 5, 2025, https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/legacy-wcm/media_pdf/2025/4/pdf/sgar24-en.pdf.

²⁹ North Atlantic Treaty Organization, *The Secretary General's Annual Report 2025* (Brussels: NATO, March 26, 2026), <https://www.nato.int/content/dam/nato/webready/documents/publications-and-reports/annual-reports/sgar25-en.pdf>.



security umbrella. Here, it is worth noting that while NATO-wide defense expenditure amounted to 2.65% of combined GDP in 2024, Israel spent 8.8% of GDP on defense in the same year and 4.4% in 2022 (before the October 7th attack).³⁰

Japan and South Korea

In East Asia, the U.S. maintains a substantial permanent military presence in Japan and South Korea. These arrangements stem from the post-World War II occupation arrangements and evolved into enduring security partnerships during and after the Cold War.

The U.S.-Japan Mutual Security Treaty, first signed in 1951 and revised in 1960, allows American forces to operate from Japanese territory in exchange for a U.S. pledge to defend Japan in the case of attack. Today, U.S. Forces in Japan (USFJ) consists of roughly 60,000 military personnel as well as 35,000 dependents, 7,000 civilian and contractor employees, and 25,000 Japanese workers.³¹ Japan hosts over eighty U.S. military facilities and more U.S. service members than any other country in the world.³² According to the fiscal year 2025 Department of Defense Annual Base Structure Report, the total assessed value of US military bases in Japan (excluding land value) is over \$192 billion.³³ In 2021, the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) reported that the Pentagon “obligated \$20.9 billion for its presence in Japan... from 2016 through 2019... [for] military personnel, operation and maintenance, family housing operation and maintenance, family housing construction, and military construction.”³⁴ U.S. military obligations in Japan therefore averaged approximately \$5.2 billion annually between 2016 and 2019. Over the

³⁰ World Bank, *Military Expenditure (% of GDP) – Israel*, World Development Indicators database, accessed February 3, 2026, <https://data.worldbank.org/indicator/MS.MIL.XPND.GD.ZS?locations=IL>.

³¹ U.S. Forces Japan, “About U.S. Forces Japan (USFJ),” *U.S. Department of Defense*, accessed October 5, 2025, <https://www.usfj.mil/About-USFJ/>.

³² Council on Foreign Relations, “U.S.–Japan Alliance.”

³³ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment, *FY25 Base Structure Report* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Defense, 2025), accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.acq.osd.mil/eie/imr/rpid/docs/Base-Structure-Report-FY25.xlsx>.

³⁴ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Burden Sharing: Benefits and Costs Associated with the U.S. Military Presence in Japan and South Korea*, GAO-21-270 (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Accountability Office, March 17, 2021), <https://www.gao.gov/assets/720/713082.pdf>.



same period, Japan provided \$12.6 billion in direct financial support, including cash payments and in-kind contributions.³⁵

Similarly, the United States has maintained a mutual defense treaty with South Korea since the conclusion of the Korean War in 1953. As of March 2024, South Korea hosted 24,234 U.S. troops.³⁶ According to the fiscal year 2025 Department of Defense Annual Base Structure Report, the total assessed value of US military bases in South Korea (excluding land value) is over \$56 billion.³⁷ In 2021, the United States Government Accountability Office reported that the Pentagon obligated “\$13.4 billion for its presence in South Korea from 2016 through 2019.”³⁸ U.S. military obligations in South Korea therefore averaged approximately \$3.3 billion annually between 2016 and 2019. Over the same period, South Korea provided \$5.8 billion in direct financial support, including cash payments and in-kind contributions.³⁹

As discussed in Section II, these estimates capture only a portion of the expenditures associated with maintaining overseas military commitments. They should therefore be understood as illustrative baselines rather than comprehensive or fully comparable measures of the costs of U.S. security partnerships.

Even using these baseline estimates, U.S. military aid to Israel appears less exceptional when viewed alongside the broader costs of American security commitments. Historical estimates place gross annual U.S. personnel and basing expenditures at approximately \$29.1 billion for Europe, \$5.2 billion for Japan, and \$3.3 billion for South Korea. By comparison, the United States commits approximately \$3.3 billion annually to Israel in foreign military financing, most of which must be spent in the United States.

³⁵ Ibid.

³⁶ Congressional Research Service, *U.S. Overseas Basing: Background and Issues for Congress*.

³⁷ Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense for Energy, Installations, and Environment, *FY25 Base Structure Report*.

³⁸ U.S. Government Accountability Office, *Burden Sharing: Benefits and Costs Associated with the U.S. Military Presence in Japan and South Korea*.

³⁹ Ibid.



Ally/Region	Approximate U.S. Troop Presence	Gross Annual Baseline Cost to U.S.
Europe	~80,000	~ \$29.1 billion
Japan	~60,000	~\$5.2 billion
South Korea	~25,000	~\$3.3 billion
Israel	~ 0	~\$3.3 billion

Note: The Europe expenditure estimate refers to 2018, while the Japan and South Korea figures represent annual averages for 2016–2019. Europe, Japan, and South Korea figures represent estimates of U.S. expenditures associated with maintaining overseas military commitments and are not uniformly adjusted for host-nation support. Japan and South Korea provide financial and in-kind support that reduces the net U.S. burden; a comparable Europe-wide net-cost estimate is not readily available. For Israel, this comparison uses the annual \$3.3 billion in Foreign Military Financing (FMF). It does not adjust for funds spent back in the United States (the vast majority) and excludes approximately \$500 million in annual funding for joint U.S.-Israel missile defense cooperation, which finances jointly developed programs and is not directly comparable to the cost of overseas troop deployments.

Section VI: Strategic Returns on U.S. Investment in Israel

While fiscal costs provide one basis for comparing security partnerships, they do not capture their full strategic value. Permanent overseas deployments provide the United States with forward military presence, logistical capabilities, rapid crisis response, and power projection. Military assistance to Israel generates a different set of benefits, including regional deterrence, intelligence cooperation, defense industrial support, technological innovation, and operational knowledge. Without attempting a comprehensive comparison of the strategic returns generated by different U.S. alliances, this section examines the benefits of the U.S.-Israel partnership that are omitted when military assistance is treated solely as a fiscal transfer.



Regional Deterrence

The U.S.-Israel security relationship advances American regional objectives through a model distinct from that of many U.S. treaty alliances. While security partnerships in Europe, Japan, and South Korea rely in part on the permanent presence of American forces, the United States supports Israel as a highly capable partner that can defend itself while advancing shared strategic objectives. This approach allows Washington to sustain regional deterrence without assuming the recurring costs and risks associated with maintaining large permanent military deployments.

Recent events illustrate the strategic value of this approach. Israel's demonstrated ability to strike Iranian military and nuclear infrastructure complicates Tehran's strategic calculations and reinforces broader U.S. deterrence objectives. The 2026 Iran war further illustrated the military value of this partnership. In a March 4 briefing, Defense Secretary Pete Hegseth described fighting alongside Israel as "a true force multiplier," highlighting the coordination of American and Israeli operations against Iran.⁴⁰ By enabling Israel to provide for its own defense while imposing costs on shared adversaries, American military assistance reduces the need for a permanent American military presence comparable to those maintained in Europe and East Asia. While Israel cannot replace America's broader regional military posture, its independent military capabilities support Washington's deterrence objectives in the region.

Intelligence Cooperation

The intelligence dimension of the U.S.-Israel relationship represents a significant strategic benefit to the United States. Beyond the direct military capabilities supported through Foreign Military Financing, the partnership sustains a highly capable regional ally whose intelligence services provide the United States with valuable insight into threats affecting U.S. interests, including Iran, terrorism, missile proliferation, and regional instability. Israeli intelligence organizations have developed specialized expertise in human intelligence, signals intelligence, cyber operations, and counterterrorism as a result of

⁴⁰ U.S. Department of War, "Secretary of War Pete Hegseth and Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Gen. Dan Caine Hold a Press Briefing," March 4, 2026, accessed July 25, 2026
<https://www.war.gov/News/Transcripts/Transcript/Article/4421037/secretary-of-war-pete-hegseth-and-chairman-of-the-joint-chiefs-of-staff-gen-dan/>.



decades of operational experience in one of the world's most contested security environments.⁴¹

The perceived value of Israeli intelligence cooperation has also been widely acknowledged by U.S. officials and institutions. In the context of the Cold War, former U.S. Air Force intelligence chief General George Keegan reportedly characterized Israel's intelligence contribution to the United States as "equal to five CIAs."⁴² More recently, in 2026, the Senate Select Committee on Intelligence described Israel as "a critical United States security partner whose defense and intelligence capabilities provide a strategic advantage that contributes to enhanced operational effectiveness and technological superiority."⁴³ U.S. law-enforcement officials have similarly emphasized the intelligence cooperation with Israel. For example, the FBI noted that in "Israel, where terrorism is a perpetual threat and American citizens are frequently among those injured or killed in violence between Israelis and Palestinians, the FBI has a long history of working with the country's national police and intelligence agencies."⁴⁴ Although these assessments are difficult to quantify, they reflect the longstanding view that Israeli intelligence capabilities provide unique strategic value to Washington.

Intelligence sharing therefore represents an additional strategic return that distinguishes military assistance from a simple financial transfer. Cooperation with Israel gives Washington access to a partner capable of generating unique regional intelligence that would be costly and difficult for the United States to replicate independently.

Defense Industrial Support

Military assistance to Israel also generates economic returns for the United States, particularly by supporting the American defense industrial base, rather than functioning as

⁴¹ Ben Moscovitch, "Israeli Intelligence," *Foreign Policy Association*, accessed July 18, 2026, <https://fpa.org/israeli-intelligence/>.

⁴² Richard Bernstein, "Better Than 5 CIA's," *New York Times*, March 9, 1986, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.nytimes.com/1986/03/09/books/better-than-5-cia-s.html>.

⁴³ Senate Select Committee on Intelligence, "Intelligence Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2027, as Reported on May 20, 2026," May 20, 2026, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.intelligence.senate.gov/2026/05/20/intelligence-authorization-act-for-fiscal-year-2027-as-reported-on-may-20-2026/>.

⁴⁴ Federal Bureau of Investigation, "The FBI in Israel," March 27, 2017, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.fbi.gov/news/stories/the-fbi-in-israel>.



a simple transfer of resources overseas. Historically, roughly three-quarters of Foreign Military Financing provided to Israel was required to be spent on American-made defense goods and services, with the remaining offshore procurement exception being phased out; by 2028, all FMF allocated to Israel must be spent in the United States.⁴⁵

As a result, much of the funding appropriated for Israel returns directly to American defense contractors, supporting domestic manufacturing, sustaining production lines, and preserving skilled jobs throughout the U.S. defense sector. This demand also helps maintain production capacity for critical weapon systems that equip both Israel and the United States, contributing to the resilience of the American defense industrial base. These procurement flows support U.S. industry, but they do not reduce the fiscal cost of the assistance; other U.S. security arrangements also support American suppliers. The comparison is therefore not simply between money spent and money saved, but between two alliance models that generate different economic returns for the American defense industrial base.

The economic benefits extend beyond the immediate value of FMF. Israeli combat operations serve as highly visible demonstrations of the quality of American-made weapons under demanding battlefield conditions. The successful tactical use of U.S.-manufactured systems during conflicts such as the 12-Day War and 2026 Iran War may strengthen international confidence in American equipment relative to competing foreign platforms, supporting future U.S. defense exports. In this way, military assistance to Israel not only finances domestic production but also enhances the global competitiveness of the U.S. defense industry.

Technological Innovation

The U.S.-Israel security partnership also provides military benefits that extend well beyond the procurement of American defense equipment. Through decades of joint research, development, and operational cooperation, Israel has become an important source of military innovation for the United States. Israel's comparatively small defense establishment, combined with its continuous operational experience, enables the rapid

⁴⁵ Sharp, *Foreign Aid to Israel*.



development, testing, and refinement of new technologies that can subsequently be incorporated into American military capabilities.

Joint development programs such as Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow demonstrate the effectiveness of this collaborative model. Beyond these flagship initiatives, Israeli innovations in battlefield medicine, active protection systems, counter-IED and counter-tunneling technologies, targeting systems, and components used in the F-35 program have contributed to American military capabilities. The Congressional Research Service documents concrete examples of this contribution: the United States has purchased Israeli-developed Trophy and Iron Fist active protection systems for Abrams tanks and Bradley fighting vehicles, respectively, as well as night-vision equipment, laser rangefinders, F-35 helmets and wings, and portable satellite communications terminals.⁴⁶ Emerging fields such as laser defense and artificial intelligence offer additional opportunities for technological cooperation.⁴⁷

These innovations illustrate an important distinction between direct military deployments and security assistance. Overseas bases provide geographic access and military presence, alongside other military and intelligence benefits. By contrast, the U.S.-Israel partnership also provides access to an unusually dynamic defense innovation ecosystem that continuously develops and refines technologies under operational conditions. This makes military assistance an investment that produces technological returns extending well beyond the value of the equipment purchased.

Operational Knowledge

Beyond technological innovation, Israeli combat operations provide the United States with valuable operational knowledge that cannot be replicated through training exercises alone. For example, Israel has gained extensive operational experience through its combat use of the F-35. In testimony before Congress, U.S. Air Force Lieutenant General Michael J. Schmidt described the performance of Israel's F-35 aircraft as “absolutely outstanding” and

⁴⁶ Sharp, *Foreign Aid to Israel*.

⁴⁷ John Spencer and Liam Collins, “How Israeli Military Technology Continues to Improve the US Military,” INSS Insight no. 1975, Institute for National Security Studies, April 27, 2025, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.inss.org.il/publication/usa-army-idf/>.



noted their high mission-capable rates.⁴⁸ Lessons learned from these experiences are then shared with the U.S. military. Indeed, an official U.S. Air Forces Central account of joint F-35 exercises with Israel also documents mutual learning and the sharing of lessons between the two air forces.⁴⁹

More broadly, U.S. Army analyses have examined Israeli operations to identify lessons for American military doctrine, training, and medical preparedness. A 2026 U.S. Army study described Israel's recent wars as "a critical real world battle lab," while a separate 2025 Army analysis proposed specific changes to U.S. subterranean-warfare doctrine and training based on Israeli experience in Gaza.⁵⁰

Unlike simulations or peacetime exercises, these insights are derived from continuous combat against capable adversaries employing many of the tactics and technologies that American forces may face in future conflicts. Through its close military partnership with Israel, the United States gains access to operational experience involving American weapons that would otherwise be difficult and costly to obtain independently.⁵¹ These lessons therefore represent another strategic return on U.S. military assistance. Whereas permanent troop deployments primarily serve to maintain a forward military presence, partnership with Israel provides the United States with access to combat-tested operational knowledge without requiring comparable operational exposure by U.S. forces.

Taken together, these considerations suggest that military assistance to Israel should not be evaluated solely as a foreign aid expenditure. Compared to maintaining permanent troop deployments elsewhere, in Israel's case, the United States receives a broad set of strategic returns, including regional deterrence, intelligence cooperation, defense industrial support,

⁴⁸ Sharp, *Foreign Aid to Israel*.

⁴⁹ 380th Air Expeditionary Wing Public Affairs, "Exercise 'Enduring Lightning II' Strikes Again," U.S. Air Forces Central, August 4, 2020, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/380th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/News/Display/Article/2298850/exercise-enduring-lightning-ii-strikes-again/>.

⁵⁰ Benjamin Baker, Angelina Gerardo, and Jacob Stoil, "Israeli Defense Force Medical Lessons Learned," U.S. Army, April 30, 2026, https://www.army.mil/article/292100/israeli_defense_force_medical_lessons_learned; Phillip Andrews, "Subterranean Operations: Israeli Defense Force Lessons from Gaza," Center for Army Lessons Learned, U.S. Army, September 10, 2025, https://www.army.mil/article/288356/subterranean_operations_israeli_defense_force_lessons_from_gaza.

⁵¹ John Spencer, "What Does America Get for \$3.8 Billion in Israel?" *Jewish News Syndicate (JNS)*, June 15, 2026, accessed July 25, 2026, <https://www.jns.org/opinion/john-spencer/what-does-america-get-for-3-8-billion-in-israel>.



technological innovation, and operational experience. While many of these benefits cannot be measured with the same precision as budgetary expenditures, they nevertheless affect the overall value of the U.S.-Israel security partnership. A comparison based solely on dollars spent therefore presents an incomplete picture of the relative costs and benefits of different alliances.

Section VII: Conclusion

Due to the highly visible nature of foreign assistance, debates over U.S. expenditures abroad often focus disproportionately on Israel. By treating Israel's military assistance in isolation, public discourse has created the perception that Israel represents a uniquely costly burden on American taxpayers. However, when placed within the broader framework of American alliance management, U.S. aid to Israel appears considerably less exceptional.

The United States also incurs substantial—and in some cases far greater—annual costs in maintaining security commitments to treaty allies through permanent troop deployments, overseas bases, and deterrence infrastructure. Indeed, historical estimates place the gross annual baseline costs of maintaining U.S. military presence in Europe, Japan, and South Korea at approximately \$29.1 billion, \$5.2 billion, and \$3.3 billion, respectively.⁵² These figures primarily capture personnel, basing, and associated operating costs and do not include the full costs of military equipment, reinforcement capabilities, and broader deterrence infrastructure. By comparison, the United States commits approximately \$3.3 billion annually to Israel in foreign military financing, the vast majority of which must be spent in the U.S., as well as \$500 million for joint missile cooperation. Further, the U.S. investment in Israel generates returns including regional deterrence, intelligence cooperation, industrial support, technological innovation, and operational knowledge.

This comparative framework carries important implications:

⁵² The Europe estimate reflects the gross cost of the U.S. military presence as calculated by IISS. The Japan and South Korea figures are derived from GAO estimates of the total cost of the U.S. military presence and are presented before adjusting for host-nation contributions. Comparable Europe-wide net-cost estimates are not available. The Europe estimate refers to 2018, while the Japan and South Korea figures represent annual averages for 2016-2019.



- American policymakers evaluating the U.S.-Israel partnership should assess military assistance within the broader context of U.S. alliance management, considering both its financial costs and its strategic returns relative to other security arrangements.
- Public debate over aid to Israel should evaluate these expenditures alongside the substantial—and in some cases far greater—costs associated with maintaining permanent military commitments abroad, rather than viewing foreign assistance as an isolated category of defense spending.
- As American and Israeli leaders negotiate the next Memorandum of Understanding, they should evaluate U.S. expenditures in support of Israel within this comparative perspective. This analysis does not argue for maintaining the status quo; indeed, there are compelling reasons, and growing support in both countries, for a gradual phasing out of U.S. assistance.⁵³ However, the scope and timeline of any aid drawdown should reflect a careful assessment of the existing arrangement relative to other U.S. security partnerships.

Taken together, the evidence indicates that the controversy surrounding U.S. aid to Israel reflects visibility and framing rather than scale alone. Foreign military assistance and permanent military deployments represent different instruments through which the United States advances many of the same strategic objectives. While one extends American influence by strengthening capable partners, the other does so through a sustained military presence. Both entail significant costs, but they also generate distinct strategic returns. Viewed within this broader framework of American alliance management, U.S. military assistance to Israel appears considerably less exceptional than it is often portrayed.

⁵³ Natalie Allison, “Netanyahu Backs GOP Effort to End U.S. Military Aid to Israel,” *Washington Post*, June 3, 2026, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2026/06/03/republicans-push-make-israel-pay-weapons-with-israels-blessing/>; Congressional Research Service, *Possible Changes in U.S. Military Aid to Israel: Considerations for Congress*, IN12695, June 4, 2026, <https://www.everycrsreport.com/reports/IN12695.html>.



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