

## Don't Bite the Hand That Feeds

By Barbara Opall-Rome

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu professes to know America.

"I spent a significant part of my life in the United States. I studied there, I worked there, my beloved father taught there, and my English ain't too bad either," he told celebrants at a recent US Independence Day event in Herzliya.

But in the context of the US aid package that awaits his signature, he's missing the point. While the English language hasn't changed all that much, America has. So has Israel.

And that's the problem.

The America he knew so well as a teenager in the mid-60s and from his college days in the mid-70s no longer views Israel as a fledgling and besieged state in existential need of support.

The Reagan-era America he knew as a diplomat through much of the 1980s no longer views the Jewish State as USS Israel, its forward-based aircraft carrier of stability in the Eastern Med.

Just ask former Joint Chiefs Chairman Martin Dempsey, who repeatedly warned that Israel's oft-threatened attack on Iran – while fully within Israel's sovereign right to self defense – would have been destabilizing at best and, at worst, a catalyst for dragging America into a regionally-engulfing war.

Most of today's America views Israel with varying degrees of affection and annoyance; admiration and angst.

Today's America marvels at Israel the start-up nation, yet shudders at the increasing jingoism and self-righteousness of a country entrenching itself ever more inextricably into its next half-century of Occupation.

At the tribal level, most American Jews no longer feel an obligation to make Israel's desert bloom; the global cyber hub in Beersheba promises to bear more fruit than decades of American coins in the JNF pushke.

At the policy level, Washington is legislatively committed to preserving Israel's Qualitative Military Edge, yet is no longer willing to subsidize Israel's now-flourishing defense industry through so-called Offshore Procurement (OSP), a 30-year-old crutch conceived to help finance the defunct Lavi fighter program.

Yes, a plurality of Americans still view Israel favorably and, according to a Pew Research Center poll from last year, some 48 percent of respondents think the level of US support for Israel is about right.

But in this continuing saga of the next ten-year aid deal, Netanyahu is misreading the script.

So let's be clear.

The proposed US package is not compensation; neither for the Iranian nuclear deal that Netanyahu sought to torpedo nor for progress toward a two-state peace, which the prime minister has pushed farther into the distance through his newly bolstered coalition of rejection.

The deal on offer is reaffirmation of Washington's commitment to Israel's security and an important instrument of US foreign policy aimed at enhancing regional stability.

It is not an enabler for Israel's addiction to military might in the absence of grand strategy and diplomatic initiative.

Like the package that expires in Oct. 2017, the proposed follow-on deal is viewed by Washington as an investment in Mideast peace.

The notion that peace can only be achieved through strength is still valid, yet the Netanyahu government is doing its best to dilute the rationale that a militarily stronger and secure Israel is more apt to take the courageous steps needed for achieving that goal.

US Foreign Military Financing (FMF) grant aid is not a birthright; it's a privilege earned from shared strategic vision and like-minded democratic values.

There's a world of difference between preserving Israel's qualitative edge against any combination of regional adversaries and blindly rewarding self-injurious policies and behavior that can threaten that edge.

Neither the Administration nor Congress signed up to cover the excessive bloat in Israel's defense budget, especially in an election year when veterans affairs funding and calls for rebuilding the US military are hot-button campaign issues. Veterans of the US armed forces can only envy the retirement package and benefits that await counterparts retiring after serving similar time in the IDF.

Nor should the Administration or Congress fund indirectly, through the OSP mechanism, investment redundancies that are rife within the Israeli military-industrial complex.

When Israel opts to spend some \$1.2 billion annually on local research, development, procurement and fuel purchases, it cannot expect Washington to beef up its bottom line. That \$1.2 billion represents some 38.7 percent of Israel's total FMF account; money that Washington believes should be spent in America on US-made platforms and major subsystems.

Netanyahu needs to be more sensitive to his government's grating demand that US defense firms reward Israel by spending in Israel 35 percent of the value of all US taxpayer-funded Israeli procurement deals. These mandated offsets are politically incorrect and cannot be rendered more palatable by calling them industrial participation.

The \$30 billion Israel will have received by the end of the current FMF agreement is just a baseline for a spectrum of perquisites that include more than \$3 billion in missile defense, \$1.8 billion in US prepositioned stockpiles available for Israel's emergency use and some \$3.8 billion in US-backed loan guarantees available to Israel in times of extraordinary need.

The proposed package considerably ups that baseline while retaining the aforementioned perquisites.

Beyond all that, the Obama administration has worked in subtle ways to preserve Israel's edge -- to the consternation of key US lawmakers and US defense giants Boeing and Lockheed -- by slow-rolling prospective fourth-generation fighter sales to Qatar, Kuwait and Bahrain. Additionally, it has assured Israel it won't even start offering the fifth generation F-35 to Gulf states for at least a decade.

It's been 20 years since Netanyahu's July 1996 speech to Congress, when he told lawmakers he believed Israel "has reached childhood's end, that it has matured enough to begin approach a state of [economic] self-reliance." Since then, Israel has prospered while America continues to battle stagnation.

Barring a wholesale collapse of common values and strategic affinity, Washington is unlikely to wean Israel off the teat of US grant aid. The top line of President Obama's offer becomes the bottom line a decade from now.

In the name of the unshakable bonds that bind the two countries -- and as a good faith gesture for returning Israel to the apolitical, bipartisan issue it once was -- Bibi should sign already.

And in his impeccable English, he should say, "Thank you very much."

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