

What Israel Can Do for America

by
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Too many Israeli and American Jewish leaders have a problem with the L-word, "linkage." They reflexively denounce any suggestion that progress toward Arab-Israeli peace will help America solve its own problems in the Middle East. They should change their approach, because what they are doing not only ignores reality; it harms American and Israeli interests.

The rejection of the L-word is often prompted by denial of the tragic, obvious fact that U.S. support of Israel is one the main reasons why Muslims throughout the world despise Americans. This support is used as a recruiting tool by jihadists who want to spill American as well as Israeli blood, and it inhibits moderate Arab leaders from cooperating with the U.S. to address a host of challenges, including the bloody chaos in Iraq. The whole world knows this is the case, but Israeli and American Jewish leaders often try to wish it away.

Recently, this mentality was demonstrated by the hue and cry over the report by the Iraq study group led by former Secretary of State James Baker and former U.S. Senator Lee Hamilton. It asserted that America "will not be able to achieve its goals in the Middle East unless the U.S. deals directly with the Arab-Israel conflict." The authors believe that in a time of widespread, anti-American rancor on the "Arab street," a U.S.-sponsored, Israeli-Arab peace process would make it easier for leaders of relatively moderate Sunni states to join America in a coalition that could help stabilize Iraq and isolate Iran.

Prime Minister Olmert's predictable response was that "the problems in Iraq ... are entirely independent of the controversies between us and the Palestinians" and that Israel opposed any attempt to connect them. A senior Israeli official told the New York Times: "Why should we want to link our own problem to a nightmare like Iraq? It's a terrible mess there."

At least judging from their public statements, these and other Israelis who have weighed in on the report seem oblivious to the fact that Americans – including American Jews – desperately crave an end to the ongoing catastrophe in Iraq. About 2,800 American soldiers have died there, including some of my neighbors in New York. Maimed, shell-shocked veterans of the Iraq war have started to become visible on my city's streets. I, for one, am a supporter of Israel who implores its leaders to try to help us get out of there as fast as possible.

I am not arguing that Israel should necessarily accept every recommendation made by the Study Group. If Olmert believes it is not in Israel's interests to negotiate immediately

with either Syria or the Palestinians, the U.S. should not force him to do so. But Olmert has expressed an interest in negotiating with both under the right circumstances. He and other Israeli leaders should clearly acknowledge that creating those circumstances as soon as possible will not only help Israel: it also might save American lives in Iraq.

There is at least a chance that Syrian-Israeli peace talks under American auspices will prompt President Bashar Asad to seal his borders with Iraq and stop insurgents who want to kill Americans from crossing back and forth, and stop making common cause with Iran, which sponsors America's fanatic Shi'ite enemies. There is at least a chance that jumpstarting Israeli-Palestinian peace talks will be an incentive for Saudi Arabia, Jordan and other states to use their leverage with Iraqi Sunnis to calm things down. Of course, the same coalition would also benefit Israel if it helped to isolate and enforce tough sanctions on Iran.

Heard any better ideas, lately? I haven't. Olmert is off the hook when it comes to the Syrians, for the moment, since the Bush Administration has nixed talks with Asad. But why shouldn't Israel embrace the basic premise that our two countries' fates are intertwined, and a solution to Israel's daunting problems will help solve America's?

Some fear that acknowledging the L-word will put Israel in a position where it is pressured to make concessions. But it is hard to believe that the Bush Administration would do more than ask Israel to talk seriously to its neighbors, since prodding it to make compromises before it is ready to do so would spark a fearsome domestic backlash.

Still, there is a tiny but admittedly tangible risk that if diplomatic initiatives are undertaken to address the Iraq war and the Israeli-Arab conflict simultaneously, a momentum could be created that would put pressure on Israel. Its supporters in the U.S. will need to ensure that this does not happen. But right now, Americans patrolling the streets of Baghdad are taking much greater risks.

Whether a peace process comes about on the basis of the Iraq Study Group's recommendations or another plan, America urgently needs to make it happen for its own sake, as well as Israel's. And it needs help from Israel and American Jews, not a panicky denial of the connection between Mideast peace and American interests.

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