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ANATOMY OF AN ALLIANCE

In New Middle East, Tests for an Old Friendship

By [STEVEN ERLANGER](#)

JERUSALEM, Nov. 12 — Even before the American elections, a certain wariness had crept into the intimate friendship between [Israel](#) and the United States. The summer war in Lebanon produced questions in Washington about the competence of Prime Minister [Ehud Olmert](#). In Jerusalem, there were worries about the American approach to [Iran](#) and the Palestinians.

In theory, the two countries share a vision for a modern Middle East in which a thriving Israel would be accepted by its neighbors. But the Israelis balk at President Bush's embrace of regional change through promotion of Arab democracy. They view his effort as naïve and counterproductive, because it brings Islamists and Iranian clients to power.

Although Israel was grateful to see [Saddam Hussein](#) overthrown, officials here have long focused on what they consider a much bigger concern: preventing Iran from gaining nuclear weapons. They say the American policies that have empowered Iranian-backed militias in Iraq have been counterproductive to Israel's interests.

That concern is bound to be the subtext when Mr. Olmert goes to the White House on Monday. And now the Democratic sweep has created fresh concerns that the administration, whose muscular approach to Islamist terrorism and Iran has brought comfort here, will turn more to accommodation and compromise. President Bush has chosen as his next secretary of defense [Robert M. Gates](#), who in the past has been highly critical of the administration's refusal to engage in dialogue with Iran.

The defeat for the party of Mr. Bush, "possibly the friendliest president we've ever had," said Zalman Shoval, a former Israeli ambassador to Washington, "raises question marks regarding the administration's ability to promote its diplomatic and security objectives."

In war or peace, most Israelis say they believe they have only one true ally in the world, the United States. The relationship is extraordinarily tight, especially since 9/11 and the beginning of the campaign against terrorism.

But Israel is haunted by the specter of a nuclear-armed Iran, despite Israel's own nuclear deterrent. Iran has called for Israel's destruction, flouted the [United Nations](#) by continuing

to enrich uranium and has just announced that it has a new longer-range missile.

“Many Israelis feel that the free world under the leadership of the U.S. is facing a similar situation to Europe in the 1930s, when they watched the rearming of the Nazi Reich,” said Yuval Steinitz, a senior member of Parliament’s foreign and defense committee. “No one could predict the global catastrophe 10 years later, and Iran may be the same.”

Mr. Bush says his stance on Iran is unchanged: he will never accept a nuclear-armed Iran. Yet Israelis have been increasingly anxious about the Bush approach, seeing recently a tendency to delay confrontation through further negotiations. They worry that because of Iran’s ability to further inflame Iraq, Mr. Bush is hesitant to take any steps that could lead to confrontation. And Israelis are worried about what concessions an administration seeking to build an anti-Iran alliance in the Arab world might ask of them on the Palestinian question in order to bolster that alliance.

Both [Hezbollah](#) in Lebanon and [Hamas](#) in the Palestinian territories are armed, radical, Iranian-backed Islamic groups sworn to Israel’s destruction. And each has been empowered and legitimized by elections that Mr. Bush demanded, and Israel’s summer war involved fighting both of them.

Lebanon: The Pressures of War

All these strains were heightened by the war against Hezbollah, set off by the capture of two Israeli soldiers, and the global criticism of Israeli tactics in Lebanon.

Halfway into the war, on July 30, Secretary of State [Condoleezza Rice](#) was in Jerusalem, telling the Israeli defense minister, Amir Peretz, of her concern about killing civilians. Mr. Peretz listened but did not reveal what he knew: eight hours earlier Israel had killed more than two dozen of them in the village of Qana.

When a senior aide told her of wrenching television coverage of the deaths, Ms. Rice cut the meeting short and accepted a Lebanese request that she not travel next to Beirut, as planned, with a draft cease-fire resolution. She got Israel to accept a 48-hour cessation of most airstrikes which, in her view, was broken within hours.

Still, it was two more weeks before Ms. Rice, President Bush and Vice President [Dick Cheney](#) suggested to the Israelis that the war was starting to undermine Israel’s long-term interests. Even then, Mr. Bush and his aides did not demand a cessation of hostilities, waiting instead for the Israelis to reach the same conclusion.

Asked in a recent interview with The New York Times whether the administration had to get the Israelis to stop their attacks, Ms. Rice said no. “I wasn’t going to give the Israelis

military advice,” she said, adding that she “had a lot of sympathy for what the Israelis were dealing with.”

It was another example of Washington’s intimate relationship and patience with Israel.

The reluctance to confront is mutual, said Yossi Alpher, a former negotiator who runs a Web site promoting Israeli-Palestinian Internet dialogue, bitterlemons.com. “I’d love Israeli leaders to sit down with Bush for a mutual soul-searching, and say, ‘We’re concerned, dear Mr. President, that your plans are hurting us, that part of the audacity of the radical Islamists we fight comes from your decision to enfranchise them,’ ” he said. “But we don’t dare to.”

Israel, he noted, has been highly skeptical of the idea of pushing democracy among Arab nations where the only organized opposition parties are linked to militants. It is a lot safer from Israel’s perspective to deal with stable, if autocratic, states like Jordan and Egypt.

When Ms. Rice “looked at the damage in Beirut and said these are ‘the birth pangs of the new Middle East,’ I cringed, because I thought the Bush people had learned their lesson after the election of Hamas,” Mr. Alpher said. “For Israel to manage, we need more of the old Middle East, not the new Middle East.”

Those anxieties persist despite Mr. Bush’s fidelity. As the Lebanon war showed, Mr. Bush has been reluctant to impose the kinds of restraints on Israel that his father employed, to press talks with the Palestinians in the style of [Bill Clinton](http://www.whitehouse.gov) or even to push Israel to ease up on Palestinian travel.

That has pleased many of Israel’s supporters, including those among an increasingly vocal, fiercely pro-Israel community of evangelicals, who visited the White House at least once during the Lebanon war to voice support for allowing the air attacks on Hezbollah to continue unabated.

As President Bush prepares to meet Prime Minister Olmert, the man the White House backed while privately coming to doubt his political and military judgment, there are questions in Israel and Washington about how the two will deal with potential disagreements over Iran and the Palestinians.

The Threat of a Nuclear Iran

Mr. Bush’s aides say the fighting in Lebanon in July and August was more important than it appeared because of Hezbollah’s relationship with Iran.

“We saw the conflict this summer as much more than just a border war between Israel and

Hezbollah,” said R. Nicholas Burns, under secretary of state for political affairs. “It was clear from the very beginning of this conflict that Iran was behind Hezbollah, providing the financing and the long-range rockets that held the Israelis hostage.”

“Israel and the United States, as well as many of the Arab states, see the same threat we do,” he continued, “an Iran that is expanding its influence and fundamentally trying to destabilize the Middle East through its proxies.”

But Israelis worry that Mr. Bush may dither over Iran. “Our big worry is that they will wait too long to act, after it is too late to stop the Iranians from gaining the knowledge to build a bomb,” said one senior Israeli official, who was not authorized to speak publicly, after long, recent discussions with top Bush administration officials. “Are they committed to keeping the Iranians from actually building a weapon? I think so. Are they committed to keeping them from putting together all the parts they need? I’m not sure.”

The Israelis say Washington was disappointed in their performance against Hezbollah. They are right: inside the White House, said one senior official there, who agreed to speak about internal deliberations on condition of anonymity, “Bush and Cheney believed that this would be another Six-Day War, or on the outside, two weeks.”

“They believed it because that’s what the Israelis said,” the official said.

For Israelis, this failure to deliver poses a risk that cannot be ignored, especially when Iran is on the table.

“Most people in Israel are not satisfied by our performance in Lebanon,” said Moshe Arens, a former defense minister, foreign minister and ambassador to Washington. “So if Israel enjoys this preferred position as an ally of the U.S. and a valuable ally in the fight against terrorism and now is shown to be not that effective and maybe not even that valuable, and to some extent even disappointing, that could put something of a damper on what’s happening. My guess is that’s probably temporary, but I think we’re going through the phase.”

Itamar Rabinovich, a former Israeli ambassador to the United States who is president of Tel Aviv University, said that Israelis, no matter their appreciation for American support, could not hand over the problem of Iran to Washington. He said: “Can we rely on the United States alone and say we abdicate our responsibility for dealing with the matter, and let the United States do what it wants? No, by no means.”

In an indication of Israel’s concern, in late October Mr. Olmert brought a far-right party dominated by Russian immigrants into his weakened coalition, and picked its controversial leader, Avigdor Lieberman, as a deputy prime minister and strategic threats minister, with

the task of “strategizing” on Iran.

Earlier in October, in Moscow, Mr. Olmert said that “Israel can never abide this type of situation” where “a country like Iran has nonconventional potential.” He added, “When the head of a country says he wants to destroy us, it does not sound like an empty declaration, but something we must prepare to prevent through all acceptable and possible ways.”

Diverging Interests?

Senior Israeli officials know that Mr. Bush has a lot on his plate: a nuclear North Korea, a Democratic Congress, a weak approval rating and the bleeding of American power in Iraq. To win sanctions against Iran, he needs the support of Europe, Russia and China, all very critical of Israeli policies toward the Palestinians.

To enforce sanctions, particularly those blocking shipments of nuclear- or missile-related technology, he would need the cooperation of Iran’s Arab neighbors. So Israel has another worry: that Mr. Bush will try to build an anti-Iran coalition by pressuring Israel to make concessions to the Palestinians.

In September, Israel was abuzz over a speech by an American official that got little coverage in the American news media. Philip D. Zelikow, counselor to Ms. Rice, had addressed the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, considered sympathetic to Israel’s interests, on “Building Security in the Broader Middle East.”

Mr. Zelikow, in the last of 10 points, suggested that to build a coalition to deal with Iran, the United States needed to make progress on solving the Arab-Israeli dispute.

“For the Arab moderates and for the Europeans, some sense of progress and momentum on the Arab-Israeli dispute is just a sine qua non for their ability to cooperate actively with the United States on a lot of other things that we care about,” he said.

The message seemed perfectly clear to Israelis: the Bush administration would demand Israeli concessions on the Palestinian issue to hold together an American-led coalition on Iran. American officials were quick to insist that there was no change in American policy, and that Mr. Zelikow was speaking on his own.

But Mr. Zelikow’s close ties to Ms. Rice are well known, and the furor over his comments was amplified because they appeared to some to echo criticisms published in March in *The London Review of Books* by two American scholars, John J. Mearsheimer of the [University of Chicago](#) and Stephen M. Walt of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard.

They suggested that from the White House to Capitol Hill, Israel’s interests have been

confused with America's, that Israel is more of a security burden than an asset and that the "Israel lobby" in America, including Jewish policy makers, have an undue influence over American foreign policy. In late August, appearing in front of an Islamic group in Washington, Mr. Mearsheimer extended the argument to say that American support of the war in Lebanon had been another example of Israeli interests trumping American ones.

The essay argued that without the Israel lobby the United States would not have gone to war in Iraq and implied that the same forces could drag the United States into another military confrontation on Israel's behalf, with Iran. It urged more American pressure to solve the Palestinian question as the best cure for regional instability.

Some Israelis worried that the implicit charge of dual loyalty would be underlined by the trial of two former officials of the prominent pro-Israel lobbying group, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, on charges of receiving classified information about Iran and other issues from a Defense Department official and passing it on to a journalist and an Israeli diplomat. The trial is scheduled to begin early next year.

Mr. Walt, in an interview, argued that the first President Bush had worked to restrain Israel, and that Mr. Clinton worked to attain diplomatic concessions to achieve a peace. But when this Bush administration took office, "they first had no use for the Mideast, then took a more balanced position, calling for a two-state solution, and then were completely won over by Israel's argument that it is simply fighting terrorism."

Former Israeli ambassadors to Washington like Mr. Rabinovich, Mr. Arens and Mr. Shoval all scoff at the Walt-Mearsheimer thesis, which echoes criticisms of Jewish influence as far back as the presidency of [Harry S. Truman](#).

But given the intensifying debate in Washington about Iran, Mr. Rabinovich said, the essay is "disturbing," as are the echoes of part of the argument in Mr. Zelikow's speech. Mr. Arens said that 9/11 created "an objective reality" of an antiterrorism coalition, led by President Bush, in which Israel is a crucial member. Mr. Bush is seen here as less interested in being an honest broker than in supporting Israel as a crucial strategic partner in the region.

The Iran confrontation, Mr. Arens said, will bolster that partnership. "The president said that he sees a clear and present danger with Iran arming itself with nuclear weapons and it's obvious that this is a clear and present danger for the state of Israel," he said. "Although a small country, we are not a minor party. When people talk about the possibility of a military option, what are they talking about? The U.S. or maybe Israel to take that move, not the U.S. or Germany or France."

He acknowledged, however, "That inevitably will lead people who are critical of the position of the president to be critical of Israel, because we are seen as a partner in this campaign,

and it is not a very big step to say that Israel is leading the U.S., or misleading the U.S., by the nose in this thing.”

The Post-Bush World

No Israeli knows if the next American president will be as tough on Iran or as loyal to Israel as Mr. Bush. If Mr. Bush does not act, Israelis say, by the time the next president takes office, in January 2009, Iran will be well on its way to a bomb, and Washington may not back Israeli responses.

Gidi Grinstein, a former Israeli negotiator who runs an independent policy center, the Reut Institute, says Israel and the United States share a larger goal on Iran but have “tension among their different objectives,” as indicated by Mr. Zelikow.

The Iran debate in Washington is serious but unfinished, Mr. Grinstein said, noting the divisions between those who argue that a nuclear-armed Iran can be contained and those who believe that Iran must not get the technology to build a bomb, much less the weapon itself.

Mr. Alpher, the former Israeli negotiator, is concerned that if Mr. Bush ultimately negotiates with Iran, “we need to ensure that the United States doesn’t sell us down the river.” It is fine for Israel to say that Iran is the world’s problem, he said. “But if the world solves it diplomatically,” he added, “will it be at our expense?”

The world looks different to nearly all Israelis across the political spectrum than it does to people in most other countries. “Unlike Bush, an Israeli leader looks at Iran through the prism of the Holocaust and his responsibility to the ongoing existence of the Jewish people,” Mr. Alpher said. “It may sound pompous, but at the end of the day it matters, and so we may be willing to do the strangest things.”

Gadi Baltiansky, a former Israeli diplomat in Washington and director of the Geneva Initiative, which promotes Israeli-Palestinian peace, argues that, given the stakes, Israel also pays a price for American policy, which can go against Israeli interests.

“The dilemma is that even this president, a true friend of Israel, after 9/11 divided the world into good guys and bad guys, and we’re one of the good guys, so fine,” he said. “Syria is a bad guy. But what serves Israel’s interests? Talking to them may be bad for the U.S., but not necessarily bad for us. But whether it’s Hamas participating in elections or Syria, it’s hard for us to say no to the United States.”

What matters most to Israel, officials here in Jerusalem say, is the level of support it receives from ordinary Americans, no matter their political party or religion. Despite the

anxieties here over Lebanon, Iran and academic essays, opinion polls show that Americans are solidly in support of Israel, with new support coming from evangelical Christians.

Mr. Arens, the former defense minister, said of the Europeans: “They don’t like us — what can we do? What else is new? We would like to be liked by everyone, of course, but it’s the relationship with the United States that really matters.”

David E. Sanger contributed reporting from Washington.

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