

HOW INDEPENDENT IS ISRAEL?

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The Jewish state has grown dramatically over the last seven decades. But it enjoyed greater freedom of action in its earliest years, when it wasn't so closely tied to the United States.

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On Israel's Independence Day, it is customary for the Central Bureau of Statistics to summarize some of the basic facts about the transformation of Israeli demography and living standards since the state's founding in 1948. This is always an encouraging [read](#). Israel's Jewish population, for instance, has grown nearly tenfold in the intervening years, from 700,000 to almost 6.4 million. When independence was declared in 1948, Israel's Jews constituted a mere 6 percent of the world Jewish population; today they are at 43 percent. Moreover, 75 percent of Israel's Jewish population is native-born, more than twice the percentage in 1948. Back then, there were only 34,000 vehicles on the roads; today there are three million. And so forth.



US President Barack Obama shakes hands with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu during a meeting September 21, 2011 at the United Nations in New York City. MANDEL NGAN/AFP/Getty Images.

Israel has indeed grown dramatically—in population, wealth, and military prowess. These are all grounds for celebration. But has Israel seen a comparable growth in its *independence*? That is, has there been a comparable expansion of its ability to take the independent action it must take if it is to protect its interests and survive as a Jewish state? Or is it possible that in these respects Israel was actually more independent in its early

years and that it has grown less so over time, especially with the deepening of its relationship with its principal ally the United States?

Let me explore this latter possibility with a quick trip through history. Israel's security and sovereignty as a Jewish state rest on three events to which precise dates may be assigned: 1948, 1958, and 1967.

- In 1948, Israel declared independence. Just as important, the way it waged war, and the way the Arabs waged war, resulted in the flight of 700,000 Palestinian Arabs and determined that the new state would have a decisive Jewish majority. 1948 gave birth not only to a legally but also to a demographically Jewish state.
- In 1958, still subject to Arab threats to eliminate it, Israel commenced construction of a nuclear reactor at Dimona in the Negev. Subsequent progress secured Israel's existence against any conceivable threat of destruction by Arab states.
- Finally, in 1967 Israel broke through the narrow borders in which the Jewish state had found itself after the 1948 war, giving it exclusive military control of the land mass from the Mediterranean to the Jordan valley—a control Israel is determined to preserve in any peace scenario. Israel's victory also finally persuaded many Arabs that they would never defeat it outright, thus creating the incentive for later peace treaties.

These three actions laid the foundation of Israel's secure existence as a sovereign Jewish state—demographically, militarily, geographically, and politically. But here is an often-overlooked fact: the United States vigorously warned Israel against all three of these actions, and threatened that taking them would leave Israel on its own and “alone.”

Let's begin again with 1948. Britain had turned over its mandate for Palestine to the United Nations, which in November 1947 voted to partition the territory into two states, one Jewish and one Arab. Initially the Truman administration supported partition, but then began to backtrack in favor of a UN trusteeship over the whole. As Palestinian Jews contemplated whether to declare independence, Secretary of State George Marshall issued the first U.S. “alone” warning to Moshe Shertok (later Sharett), the foreign-minister-in-waiting. “I told Mr. Shertok,” Marshall [reported](#) to President Harry Truman,

that they were taking a gamble. If the tide [of Arab hostility] did turn adversely and they came running to us for help they should be placed clearly on notice now that there was no warrant to expect help from the United States, which had warned them of the grave risk which they were running.

This admonition so shook Sharett's confidence that David Ben-Gurion practically had to

quarantine him on his return.

It was, then, in defiance of an American warning that Ben-Gurion declared independence on May 14, 1948. Of course, it is true that Truman immediately recognized Israel, much to Marshall's chagrin. But the United States also imposed an arms embargo on both Israel and the Arabs. Since Arab states had access to British arms, this effectively left Israel to scramble for weaponry, ultimately provided by the Soviet Union via Czechoslovakia.

Had the Yishuv, the pre-state Jewish community, been dependent on the United States in 1948, its leaders might have decided against pressing for independence. Alternatively, had the new state been dependent on the United States, the 1948 war might have ended in an early ceasefire, leaving Israel a "Jewish state" governed by a bare and dwindling Jewish majority—something like the Maronite Christians of Lebanon.

Next, 1958. With French assistance, Israel began construction of the Dimona nuclear reactor. The CIA immediately suspected the reactor's purpose, but would underestimate Israel's rate of progress. In May 1963, President John F. Kennedy [wrote](#) to Ben-Gurion, demanding that American inspectors be given access to the site: "We are concerned with the disturbing effects on world stability which would accompany the development of a nuclear-weapons capability by Israel." Possession of such a weapon, Kennedy continued, would spur the Arabs to seek a similar capability from the Soviets, and others would follow suit.

Then came a presidential threat: the U.S. commitment to Israel, Kennedy wrote,

would be seriously jeopardized in the public opinion in this country and in the West as a whole if it should be thought that this government was unable to obtain reliable information on a subject as vital to peace as the question of the character of Israel's efforts in the nuclear field.

Translation: you will be alone. Israel didn't ignore JFK's warning, but it also wasn't alone, since it still had the cooperation of the French. In the following years it proceeded to stonewall and conceal its actions until, by 1968, the CIA concluded that, in defiance of the United States, Israel had indeed acquired a nuclear weapon.

Had Jerusalem been dependent on Washington at the time, and had the U.S. already been a major supplier of its conventional weaponry, Israel probably would never have developed a nuclear program.

Finally, 1967. In the spring, Egypt closed the Straits of Tiran in the Red Sea, blockading Israel's southern port of Eilat. It also evicted UN troops that had been in the Sinai since 1957. Israel then asked the Lyndon Johnson administration to uphold an Eisenhower-era American commitment to keep the straits open.

President Johnson not only balked; he warned Israel not to act. The U.S. position, as he formulated it verbally to Israel's ambassador Abba Eban and in a [letter](#) to Israeli prime minister Levi Eshkol, was this:

I must emphasize the necessity for Israel not to make itself responsible for the initiation of hostilities. Israel will not be alone unless it decides to go alone. We cannot imagine that it will make this decision.

Once again in defiance of the United States, Israel did make this decision. In a preemptive act of self-defense, it flew French fighter aircraft on its way to ultimate victory, thus utterly transforming its overall strategic situation. When Jordan and Syria joined the fray, Israel swept through the West Bank and Golan Heights. Had Israel already then been dependent on the United States for its hardware, the events of that June might have unfolded very differently, leaving Israel in its narrow borders opposite emboldened foes still bent on its destruction.

It's important to stress that none of the three decisions taken by Israel in the face of U.S. opposition was arrived at lightly or insouciantly. If anything, the warning that, if Israel did act, it would find itself "alone" sounded even weightier at the time than it might today. Only recently, after all, the United States had left the Jews very much alone. It had done so in the 1930s when it [closed](#) its gates to the Jews of Europe desperate to escape Hitler's vise, going so far in 1939 as to [turn](#) away a refugee ship that had managed to reach American shores. During the Holocaust itself, Europe's Jews were once again left alone as the United States conspicuously refrained from initiating any rescue program.

Marshall, Kennedy, and Johnson had lived through these events. They could well have thought that warning the Israelis they would be alone would touch deep apprehensions and effectively deter them from acting.

But it didn't work, and for an obvious reason: in 1948, 1958, and 1967, Israel was not very reliant on the United States. Washington still believed in an "even-handed" approach as between Israel and the Arabs, and, though it huffed and puffed at Jerusalem, it also kept its distance. It lacked the leverage to make its "you'll-be-alone" warnings decisive.

Things changed after 1967, as successive administrations finally concluded that leverage could be achieved only by drawing Israel into the American orbit. The first step was to sell it Phantom fighter jets, and the rest followed. Over time, in the race to maintain its "military edge," Israel has been given access to the world's best military hardware and (for the most part) enjoyed the political backing of the world's greatest power. The tradeoff, however, is that in becoming ever more reliant on the United States it has sacrificed some measure of its freedom of action and thereby eroded its independence.

The erosion was evident as early as October 1973, when, deferring to U.S. pressure, Israel desisted from preempting an imminent Arab attack. To this day it remains a matter of dispute whether preemption was even possible by the point at which it was considered. Henry Kissinger, the American secretary of state at the time, has argued that it was not possible, but Golda Meir, then Israel's prime minister, later [testified](#) to the contrary. "My heart was drawn to a preemptive strike," she told the Agranat commission that investigated the war, "but I was scared. . . . 1973 is not 1967, and this time we will not be forgiven, and we will not receive assistance when we have the need for it."

In other words, the fear was that, by preempting, Israel would be alone—and that that would be disastrous. In the event, the enemy struck first, the fighting was desperate, and only a massive, last-minute resupply of American weaponry enabled Israel to emerge the winner in a war that cost it thousands of dead.

This has been the general pattern ever since: Israel is expected to show "restraint," if not to make concessions, in return for hardware and diplomatic backing. The earlier approach of ineffectual "you-will-be-alone" warnings was superseded by a "carrot-and-stick" approach, the carrot being the large military-assistance package.

The method's effectiveness was on display in 1979, a fourth crucial date, when the United States helped add yet another pillar to Israel's security as a sovereign state by mediating the peace with Egypt. This would render conventional Arab wars against Israel obsolete—no small benefit, although it is still an open question whether the peace concluded in 1979 was as fundamental to Israel's security as the achievements Israel made on its own in 1948, 1958, and 1967. Indeed, the peace with Egypt (as well as later with Jordan) rests no less firmly, and maybe more firmly, on those earlier achievements.

One Israeli understood the price of his country's growing dependence on the United States. In 1981, Israel destroyed Iraq's nuclear reactor and bombed a PLO headquarters in Beirut, surprising and angering Washington. True to the carrot-and-stick approach, the Reagan administration proceeded to suspend delivery of fighter jets. Israel's prime minister Menachem Begin, a man with an acute sense of national pride, rose in righteous indignation in a remarkable [statement](#):

Are we a vassal state of yours? Are we a banana republic? Are we youths of fourteen who, if they don't behave properly, are slapped across the fingers? Let me tell you who this [Israeli] government is composed of. It is composed of people whose lives were spent in resistance, in fighting and in suffering. You will not frighten us with "punishments." He who threatens us will find us deaf to his threats. We are only prepared to listen to rational arguments.

Such words from an Israeli prime minister would be unthinkable today, when Israelis have become accustomed to a degree of dependence on the United States that Begin's generation could never have imagined. The self-sufficient Zionist and Israeli "resistance" to which Begin alluded is a thing of the distant past. Today, it is hard for most Israelis to remember life outside the Pax Americana, before the era of the "unshakable bond" between the two countries.

But this is why, as Israel celebrates its nearly seven decades of independence, it is worth recalling that things were not always like this—and that during its first two decades, when it didn't depend on the United States, Israel's very lack of dependence served it well. Despite Washington's disapproval and admonitions, Israel achieved a number of crucial goals that still form the bedrock of its national security as a viable sovereign state. Had it instead become an American client earlier in its history, it would likely be a far weaker state today.

In this perspective, the Iran deal concluded by the Obama administration last year, and vigorously but futilely opposed by Jerusalem, leaves one wondering whether a scenario might yet arise, possibly sooner than the deal's expiration, in which Israel will wish it still possessed the freedom of action it enjoyed in its earliest years. Without the tools afforded by its American alliance, Israel would have very few options against Iran. But that very alliance may well foreclose even those options.

Israel declared independence 68 years ago, but being independent is a process, not a moment. That process is still unfolding, and it is still incomplete.

This article is based on remarks delivered at a conference on "U.S.-Israel Relations" held on May 6 at the Center for International Security Studies, Princeton University.