

Israel's 'Clean Break' From US Gathering Momentum - OpEd

When the Russian and Ukrainian delegations met in Turkey last week and reached an initial understanding regarding a list of countries that could serve as security guarantors for Kyiv should a final agreement be struck, Israel appeared on the list. One might explain Israel's political significance to the Russian-Ukrainian talks based on Tel Aviv's strong ties with Kyiv, as opposed to Russia's trust in it. But this is insufficient to rationalize how Israel has managed to acquire relevance in arguably the most serious international conflict since the Second World War.

Immediately following the start of the war, Israeli officials began to circumnavigate the globe, shuttling between many countries that are directly or even nominally involved in the conflict. Early last month, Israeli President Isaac Herzog flew to Istanbul to meet with his Turkish counterpart, Recep Tayyip Erdogan. This meeting was "a turning point in relations between Turkey and Israel," according to Erdogan.

Though "Israel is proceeding cautiously with Turkey," Lahav Harkov wrote in the Jerusalem Post, Herzog hopes that "his meeting with... Erdogan is starting a positive process toward improved relations." These "improved relations" are not concerned with the fate of the Palestinians under Israeli occupation and siege, but with a proposed gas pipeline connecting Israel's Leviathan offshore gas field in the Eastern Mediterranean to southern Europe via Turkey. This project will improve Israel's geopolitical status in the Middle East and Europe. The political leverage of being a primary gas supplier to Europe would allow it even stronger influence over the continent and would certainly tone down any future criticism of Tel Aviv by Ankara.

That was just one of many Israeli overtures. Tel Aviv's diplomatic flurry included a top-level meeting between Prime Minister Naftali Bennett and Russian President Vladimir Putin in Moscow and a succession of visits to Israel by top European, American, Arab and other officials.

US Secretary of State Antony Blinken landed in Israel on March 26 and was

expected to put some pressure on Tel Aviv to join the US-led Western sanctions on Russia. Little of that has transpired.

For years, Israel has hoped to free itself from its disproportionate reliance on Washington. This dependency took on many forms: Financial and military assistance, political backing, diplomatic cover and more. Many Palestinians and others believe that, if the US ceased its support for Israel, the latter would simply collapse. However, this might not be the case, at least not in theory. Writing in March 2021 in *The New York Times*, Max Fisher estimated that US aid to Israel in 1981 “was equivalent to almost 10 percent of Israel’s economy,” while in 2020, the nearly \$4 billion of US aid was “closer to 1 percent.”

Still, this 1 percent is vital for Israel, as much of the funding is funneled to the Israeli military, which in turn converts it into weapons that are routinely used against Palestinians and other Arab countries. The Israeli military technology of today is far more developed than it was 40 years ago. The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute placed Israel as the world’s eighth-largest military exporter between 2016 and 2020, with an estimated export value of \$8.3 billion in 2020 alone. These numbers continue to grow, as Israeli military hardware is increasingly incorporated into security apparatuses across the world, including the US, the EU and also in the Global South.

Much of this discussion is rooted in a document from 1996, entitled “A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm.” It was authored by Richard Perle, former US assistant secretary of defense, jointly with top leaders of the neoconservative movement in Washington. The target audience of that research was none other than Benjamin Netanyahu, who was then the newly elected Israeli prime minister. Aside from the document’s detailed instructions on how Israel can use some of its Arab neighbors, in addition to Turkey, to weaken and “roll back” hostile governments, it also made significant references to the future relations Tel Aviv should aspire to develop with Washington.

Perle urged Israel to “make a clean break from the past and establish a new vision for the US-Israeli partnership based on self-reliance, maturity and mutuality — not one focused narrowly on territorial disputes.” This newly “self-reliant” Israel “does not need US troops in any capacity to defend it.” Ultimately, such self-reliance “will grant Israel greater freedom of action and remove a significant lever of pressure used against it in the past.”

An example is Israel's relations with China. In 2013, Washington was outraged when Israel sold secret American military technology to China. Tel Aviv was quickly forced to retreat. Eight years later, despite US demands that Israel must not allow China to operate its Haifa port due to Washington's security concerns, the port was officially opened in September 2021.

Israel's regional and international strategies seem to be advancing in multiple directions, some of them directly opposite to those of Washington. Yet, thanks to continued Israeli influence in the US Congress, Washington does little to hold Tel Aviv accountable. Meanwhile, now that Israel is fully aware that the US has changed its political attitude in the Middle East and is moving in the direction of the Pacific and Eastern Europe, Tel Aviv's clean break strategy is moving faster than ever before. However, this comes with risks. Though Israel is stronger now, its neighbors are also getting stronger.

Hence, it is critical that Palestinians understand that Israel's survival is no longer linked to the US, at least not as intrinsically as in the past. Therefore, the fight against Israeli occupation and apartheid can no longer be disproportionately focused on breaking up the "special relationship" that united Tel Aviv and Washington for more than 50 years. Israel's independence from the US entails risks and opportunities that must be considered in the Palestinian struggle for freedom and justice.

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