

When Israel and France Broke Up

Пише: Gary J. Bass
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IN the face of rising tensions between the United States and Israel over housing construction in East Jerusalem, the Obama administration [has rushed to reassert](#) what Secretary of State [Hillary Clinton recently called the “unshakable bond”](#) between the two countries.

No doubt, that relationship rests on enduring foundations, including broad American public sympathy for a besieged democracy, a mutual strategic interest in resisting Arab extremism and a sense of moral duty to preserve the Jewish people after the Holocaust.

But if Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu tries to push his luck on settlements or the peace process, he would do well to remember an unnerving precedent: Israel’s loss, in 1967, of what had been a robust alliance with France.

The French-Israeli relationship began in the mid-1950s, when Israel became a major customer for the French arms industry. But the bond was not merely commercial: at the time France was trying to quash a rebellion in Algeria, and it shared with Israel a strategic interest in combating radical Arab nationalism. In 1956, France and Israel even fought together against Egypt in the Suez crisis.

The tacit alliance, championed by Israel’s deputy defense minister, Shimon Peres, deepened during the late ’50s and early ’60s through military cooperation and cultural exchanges. French technical assistance helped Israel get nuclear weapons, and France supplied the advanced military aircraft that became the backbone of the Israeli Air Force.

The relationship only grew warmer when Charles de Gaulle, the World War II hero, took over as French president in 1959. He recognized the historic justice of a Jewish “national home,” which he saw “as some compensation for suffering endured through long ages,” and he heaped praise on David Ben-Gurion, Israel’s founding prime minister, as one of the “greatest leaders in the

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West.”

The bilateral bonds ran outside the government, too, with strongly pro-Israel public opinion, both among French Jews and non-Jews. But with the end of the Algerian war in 1962, de Gaulle began mending France’s ties to the Arab world and the relationship came under strain. For a while, France tried to balance its relationships: Israeli officials were heartily welcomed in Paris, and de Gaulle continued to speak of Israel as “the ally and friend” of France.

This double game, however, ended when the Six-Day War in 1967 forced France to pick a side. In a shock to its Israeli allies, it chose the Arab states: despite aggressive moves by Egypt, France imposed a temporary arms embargo on the region — which mostly hurt Israel — and warned senior Israeli officials to avoid hostilities.

When Israel launched a pre-emptive strike on June 5, France condemned it — even as Israel’s nearly immediate aerial victory was won largely with French-made aircraft.

A few months later de Gaulle bluntly told reporters that France had “freed itself ... from the very special and very close ties” with Israel, nastily adding that Jews were “an elite people, sure of itself, and dominating.”

This was not a sentimental stance: de Gaulle had made a strategic decision to bolster France’s stature in the vast Arab world, which in 1967 meant largely abandoning Israel. France proceeded to make the arms embargo on Israel permanent, sought oil deals with the Arab states and adopted increasingly anti-Israel rhetoric.

Of course, American public support for Israel is even more deeply ingrained than it was in France, and it is hard to imagine that anyone in President Obama’s staunchly pro-Israel White House is contemplating anything like de Gaulle’s sudden reversal.

Still, there are potentially disquieting similarities. Like de Gaulle after Algeria, President Obama understands the strategic importance of improving relations with the Arab and Muslim worlds after years of bloodshed in Iraq and Afghanistan. And so long as the Israeli-Palestinian peace

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process remains stalled, Washington's relationships with Israel and the Arab states may look to some in the administration like a zero-sum game.

In the same way that many French officials tried to balance France's relationships in the Middle East after the end of the Algerian war, Mr. Obama undoubtedly hopes that he can reach out to the Arab world without damaging ties with Israel. But this history suggests that Mr. Netanyahu would be wise to ease the strain on the alliance before any words are uttered that cannot be unsaid.

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