

U.S. Fails To Ease Israeli Angst

Does Washington's Shifting Agenda Blunt Tel Aviv's Regional Edge?

By BARBARA OPALL-ROME

A recent charm offensive by U.S. President Barack Obama's administration has yet to reassure Israelis and key U.S. lawmakers, rattled by tense exchanges with the Netanyahu government over Mideast diplomacy, Iran strategy and weapon deals with Arab states.

From an effusive White House meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu early last month to an unusually public accounting of the strategic agenda by a senior State Department official, U.S. pledges of "unbreakable bonds" and "unshakable ties" have become mantras in Washington.

But with plans to introduce air attack capabilities to the Lebanese Air Force, a major multibillion-dollar air power package to Saudi Arabia and other efforts to boost the military muscle of adversaries in the region, Israelis — like Hamlet to the queen — are beginning to wonder: Doth this administration protest too much?

"We truly appreciate the value of ongoing discussions, and we know the Americans are listening to our concerns," one senior Israeli military officer said. "But that does not change the fact that, qualitatively and quantitatively, our neighbors are becoming stronger."

The officer, a member of the Israel Defense Forces General Staff, said Israel will not object to the Saudi package or a planned F-16 deal to Oman or to troop transports and a range of precision guided munitions planned for the United Arab Emirates.

"We have to pick and choose our agenda items, and the decision [from Defense Minister Ehud Barak] is to work with the Americans to dilute their impact on us," he said.

The officer declined to discuss what technological, basing or logistical caveats, if any, will be put on those sales in the wake of a late July meeting between Barak and U.S. Defense Secretary Robert Gates.

But Israeli defense and political leaders say

that weaponry to Lebanon is another story. The issue is among several that both sides hope to resolve by a semi-annual series of meetings planned later this fall.

Andrew Shapiro, assistant U.S. secretary of state for political-military affairs, declined to discuss the Saudi sales, saying he would not talk about weapon sales that have not yet been announced to Congress.

Shapiro did say generally that sales to Saudi Arabia and other Arabian Gulf states aim to bolster their ability to defend against the common Iranian threat.

As for Lebanon, he said, "Our goal is to bolster the institutions of the Lebanese state."

The U.S. is financing a \$100 million training and equipment package for Lebanon, which includes the first transfer of UAVs and Light Attack Armed Reconnaissance Aircraft, and plans another \$100 million in 2011.

Commitment to the Edge

Shapiro reiterated the U.S. commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge, or QME.

"From my perspective, our relationship with Israel is unique and exclusive," he said. "It's the only country where — in addition to shared values and decades of close strategic cooperation — we are committed by law to maintain their military edge."

In a statement, Pentagon spokesman Maj. Chris Perrine said, "We will continue to ensure Israel's QME," and noted that Israel will be one of the nations to fly the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. A signing ceremony for Israel's first batch is tentatively planned for mid-September.

But Israeli officials and pro-Israel supporters in Washington worry about an acceleration of U.S.-Lebanese security ties in recent weeks.

In meetings in Beirut with senior Lebanese leaders, Alexander Vershbow, U.S. assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs, said the \$100 million arms package and nearly \$1 billion in U.S. economic and military aid provided since the 2006 Lebanon War aims

to empower the government of Lebanon to exercise its authority over the entire country. And in a separate July 29 visit, Michael Vickers, U.S. assistant secretary of defense for special operations and low-intensity conflict, noted that the Pentagon is providing millions of dollars to train and equip Lebanese special operations forces.

"The Israelis have their concerns, which we talk about, but at the same time, it's in their interest and in the regional interest to have a stronger Lebanese state to resist outside pressures," Shapiro said. "We've had a very good record with security assistance to the Lebanese. We've not seen any evidence that any of the weapons we've given them has bled out to any external parties."

But U.S. lawmakers from both parties expressed concern about U.S.-provided aircraft and other weapons making their way into the hands of Hezbollah or, far worse, the sovereign Lebanese Air Force turning such weaponry against Israel.

Rep. Howard Berman, D-Calif., put a hold on the \$100 million package to Lebanon the day before a violent border clash between Lebanese and Israeli troops earlier this month.

The hold is not binding and the administration could legally move forward with the deal.

But one Capitol Hill source said to do so "would be a huge sign of disrespect; a slap in the face to Congress and to a prominent member of the president's party."

Not everyone is worried about the arms deals. Asked about the major package to Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states, another Capitol Hill source said, "If the Israelis are OK with it, why should we object?"

More worrisome, Israeli officials and their supporters say, are the so-called "tough decisions" — another mantra — that Israel is expected to make for the sake of Mideast peace and the administration's larger policy objectives in the region. Given the White House's preoccupation with missions in Iraq and

Afghanistan — and Obama's oft-stated desire to become more of "an honest broker" than his predecessors — many fear Israel will be pressured to make short-sighted concessions that threaten its longer-term security.

When asked, for example, about widely reported concerns within U.S. Central Command that lack of progress on an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal endangers U.S. troops in theater, Maj. Gen. Charles Cleveland, U.S. Special Operations Command Central commander, replied, "It's not that it directly threatens our forces, but it certainly complicates the environment in which we have to operate And the more complicated the environment, the more our forces are at risk."

Shoshana Bryen, senior policy director at the Jewish Institute for National Security Affairs, Washington, said, "Emphasis on the requirement that Israel 'take tough decisions' implies that Israel has the key to peace, not its enemies. That if Israel doesn't take the decisions the administration thinks it should, the American commitment to provide technology and money for Israel's defense... could stop."

Ties That Bind

A Pentagon policy official said there have been some 75 high-level meetings between Israel's MoD and the Pentagon in the past 17 months. "We're talking at the level of deputy assistant secretary and above, and it's all in the interest of strengthening and deepening this important relationship," he said. "This administration has done so much to generate trust and confidence. Some of it you see, and a lot more of it you don't see."

He and other U.S. officials noted new and planned initiatives aimed at preserving the Israeli QME, including signing an early August agreement between MoD and the Pentagon's Missile Defense Agency to develop Israel's planned upper-tier Arrow-3 missile interceptor, adding \$205 million for Israel's lower-tier Iron Dome system, and improving military-to-military training and operational coordination.

The Pentagon also notified Congress on Aug. 5 of a potential \$2 billion transfer of jet and diesel fuel to the Israeli Defense Forces in the next three to five years and has pledged expedited review of additional requests. □

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