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Ambassador Dermer and United States-Israel Relations

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In an address to the Foundation for the Defense of Democracies in Washington on May 1, 2014, Ron Dermer, Israel's ambassador to the United States, spoke at length about a number of subjects on Israel's national agenda, including the negotiations with Iran about its nuclear activity; the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; the Arab Spring; and US-Israel relations. Presumably his comments reflect not only his personal opinion, but also assessments and stances acceptable to senior Israeli leaders. This article considers primarily his positions on US-Israel relations, which by nature is an issue that involves much of the ambassador's own input as well.

In his talk, Ambassador Dermer stated that Israel today is a leading power in science and technology, particularly in medicine, water, and agriculture. Given that science is a dominant component in the security and economic strength of nations, Israel's status as a global power will likely grow stronger over the years. Ambassador Dermer elaborated specifically about Israel's capability in cyber warfare, which not only poses a great threat to the security of many countries, but is also a huge developing market. The ambassador indicated that in this field Israel is a major superpower – a natural partner for the United States. Israel, Dermer emphatically concluded, will be the most important US ally in the twenty-first century.

Later in his comments, the ambassador assessed that US-Israel relations will grow stronger in the future, given the interests and values of the two countries. The United States, noted Dermer, will find it difficult to disengage from the Middle East, even if it wishes to, because the major threats to it will emerge from the region. For this reason, so Dermer implied, it will need an ally with proven military power and interests and a value system comparable to those of the United States. Only with Israel will the United States be able to avoid having to choose between its interests and its basic values and the accepted norms of the American people. On this basis, Dermer contended, that while during the twentieth century Great Britain was the most important US ally, in the twenty-first century, it would be Israel.

Although the ambassador did not state this explicitly, his implicit conclusion is that both Israel and the United States must now understand the new level of their relationship. Until now, the dominant perception has been that it is a relationship between a superpower and a small, relatively weak country, and therefore an asymmetric relationship. The implicit conclusion was naturally that Israel was frequently in need of the charity of the larger power. Israel was always on the receiving end and the United States was on the giving end. This image, according to Dermer, must undergo a dramatic change. The ambassador did not state that the relationship between the two countries is becoming symmetrical. Nevertheless, he stressed that Israel is no longer a country that only receives; it is a respected player with capabilities possessed only by world powers, and can contribute very valuable assets to the other party.

The conclusion implicit in Dermer's comments is that in a relationship of this kind, Israel in no way should see itself as a country that must accept the demands of the US government. It can certainly feel free to refuse to accept the administration's requests if and when it believes that these requests could harm its essential interests.

Dermer also spoke about the disagreements between the United States and Israel on a variety of issues, including policy toward Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The ambassador rejected the argument that Israel's refusal to accept the outline proposed by the US government and an Israeli decision to act unilaterally in a way that is contrary to the position of the administration would necessarily lead to a deterioration in bilateral relations. Historical experience, he claims, proves that even when Israel has rejected the administration's positions and acted in contrary fashion, ultimately, the relationship between the two countries has not suffered harm, but has generally grown stronger. While the ambassador did not elaborate, the ostensible sense is that the United States appreciates and respects an ally that knows how to defend its essential interests, even in the face of threats by the US government. Therefore, even if there is tension in the short term because of Israel's "stubbornness," in the long run, it contributes to strengthening the relations between the two countries.

In this context, the ambassador mentioned the following main examples: a. In 1948, Israel declared independence, which was contrary to the wishes of the U.S. government. b. In 1967, Israel went to war in spite of an explicit warning from the president that if Israel acted alone, it would be alone. c. In 1981, Israel attacked the Iraqi nuclear reactor with the clear knowledge that the Reagan administration opposed such an attack. d. During Operation Defensive Shield in 2002, Israel refused to comply with demands by the Bush administration to stop the operation before its objectives had been achieved.

This way of thinking can perhaps explain the Prime Minister's steadfastness in the face of various demands by Secretary of State Kerry during his recent mission in the region, including a freeze on construction and the release of prisoners who are Israeli citizens as

part of the fourth round of prisoner releases. It may also explain the fact that Israel's defense minister was not deterred from criticism of the US government's proposed security plan. This mindset cannot but lead to the conclusion that the negative US attitude to an independent Israeli military strike against Iran, in and of itself, would not deter the government of Prime Minister Netanyahu from unilateral military action if and when it realized that this was its only remaining option for preventing Iran from going nuclear.

However, the picture presented by Ambassador Dermer of Israel's strength and the Israel-US relationship likely does not match the US administration's view. If Israel actually acts on the basis of this approach, it will most likely experience growing and ongoing conflicts with the United States, whether the US administration is Democratic or Republican. Furthermore, the ambassador's confident and decisive tone could give the US administration the feeling that Israel is "trigger happy" when considering whether to accept or reject US government requests, and that it will not hesitate to refuse these requests even if they do not involve harm to Israel's essential interests.

