

## THE TAIL WITHOUT A DOG

by Philip Brenner and Edy Kaufman  
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Lurking behind the Likud Party's defeat last week in Israel's elections was the precarious U.S.-Israeli relationship. Fearful that Likud's hardline stance on settlements would precipitate a rupture with the United States, Israelis sought salvation in the moderation of the Labor Party and its allies.

But even the Labor Party recognizes a new day is dawning in Israel's relationship with the United States. Israel is not about to become an obedient puppet. Rather, there is a growing recognition that Israel must loosen its ties to the United States and choose its own course before the United States leaves Israel in the lurch. Interestingly, Cuba's recent experience with its superpower ally provides salient lessons for Israel.

Not long ago analysts compared Cuba and Israel in terms of the leverage each held over the Soviet Union and the United States, respectively. While the superpowers provided large sums of military, economic and technical assistance to their distant allies, the resulting dependency did not promote subordination. Both recipients recognized that they offered important strategic and political benefits. It was more appropriate in the cases of Israel and Cuba, then, to say that the tail wagged the dog, not vice versa.

Despite many obvious differences, the similarities between the two countries go beyond this metaphor. Both Israel and Cuba have fundamental threats hovering at their borders. Their neighbors have isolated them from regional networks. Several times neighbors have threatened the existence of their very systems, which led Israel and Cuba to seek the protection of a strong power. Israel's nearby enemies still refuse to recognize her and maintain threatening postures. Cuba's principal worry, the United States, also refuses to discuss normalization of relations and continues to impose a hostile trade embargo against the island.

In response to these threats, Israel and Cuba have built the most sophisticated and successful military machines in their regions, and perhaps in the third world. Until recently, both relied on the continued support from a superpower for their defense, and each linked its armed forces and intelligence closely to its superpower ally. Israel's per

capita aid from the United States is about \$600 per year; Cuba's per capita aid from the Soviet Union was about \$500 annually in the late 1980s.

Each country views its destiny in almost messianic terms. Both have small populations -- Israel with 5 million people, Cuba with 11 million -- that have transformed their countries against great odds. Both placed extraordinary emphasis on educating their populations. Israelis believe they are fulfilling a divine injunction to redeem the country as a Jewish homeland -- they have made the desert blossom. Cubans believe they are the vanguard of the third world -- that they have become as light to the nations -- and their achievements in health care, education, and urban development are widely respected among poor countries.

Israel and Cuba have provided considerable development aid to third world countries. Each has been involved militarily, as well, in ways that appear to have served its patron superpower. But Israel and Cuba also angered and frustrated Washington and Moscow, because of independent policies toward key third world nations. Indeed, the greatest tensions between Israel and the United States, and between Cuba and the Soviet Union, have come from disputes about relations with other countries.

Now the Castro regime has no superpower ally to anger. The tail is without a dog. But the situation did not take Cuba by total surprise. Soon after the ascendance of Mikhail Gorbachev in 1985, Cuba realized that the Soviet Union was beginning to question the value of a costly relationship with its distant partner. The Soviet military remained a steadfast supporter of close ties to Cuba, but the small communist power could not rely on this one group in the Soviet power structure to maintain its life support.

As a consequence, and despite opposing efforts by the Reagan and Bush administrations, Cuba turned to Latin America to seek its salvation. In doing so, it swallowed bitter pills. One year ago in Mexico, an Ibero-American summit of heads of state representing Spain and virtually every country in the western hemisphere (though not the United States) embraced Fidel Castro, but demanded that Cuba improve its human rights practices. In the fall of 1991 a smaller summit, with Castro in attendance, made human rights its main agenda item. Castro listened, and did not walk out. Two months later, in a bow to Latin America, Cuba allowed Catholics to become members of the

Communist Party. In January, Castro announced that Cuba would no longer support efforts to destabilize countries in the region.

With Cuba facing serious hardships now, there is talk about "the day after". But there is no need to wait until such a date in order to find relevance for Israel in Cuba's situation. Though the particular circumstances of the Israeli-U.S. relationship differ from the Cuban-Soviet one, the parallels are striking. For Israel, the factors that have created a strong bond to the United States for decades are beginning to shift.

While many U.S. policymakers still appreciate how the Jewish people suffered during centuries of scattered exile, and particularly during the infamy of the Holocaust, this sympathy is diminishing from generation to generation. As with Cuba, only one organization in the government remains steadfast in its support for strong ties with Israel CC the U.S. Congress. But the great involvement of American Jews in congressional and foreign policy may be weakening with increasing rates of assimilation.

The Israeli-U.S. partnership, which evolved around shared democratic values, is still there. But the bond has been eroded by human rights violations inflicted on the Arab population in Israel, the West Bank and Gaza, and by the privileged status of Jewish settlers in the occupied territories. Principles such as "no taxation without representation" or "one person one vote" are so entrenched in the American mind that it is becoming increasingly difficult for Americans to accept the situation of the disenfranchised Palestinians.

At the same time, Israel's formerly unquestioned value as a "strategic asset" has become the subject of debate in the United States with the end of the Cold War. Indeed, Israel's own history is testimony to the fact that no perennial allies have sided with her in the past. Notably, it was only after 1967 that the United States became the main provider of military aid. Perhaps the greatest surprise about the U.S. debate is that the current shift in U.S. thinking took so long to appear.

Domestic U.S. exigencies also are serving to unhinge the United States from Israel. The recession and unfavorable unemployment trends make it more difficult for any administration in Washington to be disposed to support long-term, massive foreign aid funding, even for preferred allies. Such pressures already are evident with the open reluctance of the Bush administration to provide loan guarantees for the absorption of

ex-Soviet Jews into Israel without any preconditions. While the more than \$3 billion in economic and military assistance continues, the U.S. position still is an indication that unless the Israeli government bows to U.S. priorities in the region, it is likely that the gap will widen further.

Like Cuba, then, Israel must seriously contemplate a course without a superpower partner. Similarly, Cuba's solution to its crisis may be appropriate for Israel. Isolation brought both countries into partnerships with the superpowers, and the dissolution of the partnerships requires each to turn to its region. For Israel, that would mean negotiating seriously with neighbors that have wished to destroy it, just as the Castro regime has reached out to countries that once tried to overthrow it.

In dealing with these countries, as Cuba deals with Latin America, Israel will need to accept quite unpalatable agenda items. Even the Likud government began to do so at last month's peace talks. In its voting last week, the Israeli public has signaled that it is ready for greater concessions and reconciliation with the region, which is a bow to the reality that soon Israel, too, is likely to be a tail without its dog.

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