

Aiding and Abetting Apartheid

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[Susan Rice visiting Arrow missile base in Palmachim, 2014. U.S. Embassy Tel Aviv / Flickr]

On Wednesday, the United States and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding promising Israel \$38 billion in military aid over the next ten years. This represents, as National Security Advisor Susan Rice declared, “the single largest pledge of military assistance to any country in U.S. history.”

Israel has already been the world’s largest cumulative recipient of US foreign aid since World War II, having received more than \$125 billion, mostly in military assistance. Rice noted that the new aid commitment comes at a time of belt-tightening across the board, with mandatory sequestrations set to return in a few years, meaning further cutbacks in needed social programs. But this is worth it, said Rice, because of the “unbreakable bond,” the “ironclad bond,” “the unshakable commitment” between the United States and Israel. Israel will become the first foreign country in the world to receive the new, fifth-generation stealth aircraft, the F-35, and more generally the United States will continue to guarantee Israel a qualitative military edge over all its adversaries.

Wednesday’s signing ceremony was clearly a play to the Israel lobby, with American Jewish leaders prominently in attendance and Rice mentioning that the deal was also in the interests of the United States only at the very end of her remarks (“Our security is linked,” and “the deal will support American jobs.”)

Actually, though, Rice was right. The deal is not just an election year gift to AIPAC. For decades, Israel has served as one of the key pillars of US policy in the Middle East, along with Iran (before 1979), Saudi Arabia, and Egypt (after 1979). These have been the means by which Washington has been able to challenge radical nationalism and threats to US oil interests. Israel’s counterterrorism and intelligence cooperation, its prepositioning of US military materiel, and its periodic interventions in neighboring countries, have served Washington well, and arming Israel generates weapons sales to Gulf allies anxious about Iran’s influence and the general tensions in the region.

In Jerusalem, Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu also hailed the historic deal, trying to undercut his political opponents who claimed that his brazen interference in US politics last year (accepting a Republican invitation to denounce Obama’s Iran nuclear deal before Congress) had weakened US-Israeli relations.

In fact, Netanyahu’s critics were probably right that the prime minister’s antics had undermined the Israeli position. Obama promised at the time of the Iran nuclear deal that he would increase military support to Israel and the Gulf States. Under the current ten-year agreement, which runs until 2018,

Israel gets \$31 billion in military aid and another \$4.4 billion in congressional allocations for missile defense. Under the new accord, Israel will get \$38 billion, but this includes the \$5 billion in missile defense funds (\$500 million per year).

The totals are not very different. But given the inflation in the cost of advanced weapons systems, the new MOU actually offers Israel less per year in real dollars than it has been receiving under the existing ten-year agreement. Moreover, under the new agreement Israel is required to agree that it will not ask Congress for, nor accept, any additional aid in the next two years except in the event of war. The memorandum also discontinues a provision of the current agreement that permits Israel, alone among US aid recipients, to use up to a quarter of its US military aid for purchases from its own manufacturers — thereby subsidizing its domestic weapons industry, making Israel one of the top ten arms exporters in the world.

US military aid and technology will enable Israel to react more recklessly towards its neighbors, and this will invariably have a severely destabilizing impact on the region. (Recall how alarming the situation was in the Middle East when Israeli officials were constantly threatening to attack Iran.) As far as the Palestinians are concerned, however, the new weaponry won't have much direct effect. After all, you don't need fifth-generation stealth technology to blow up civilian houses in the Gaza Strip. Even the missile defense technology is basically irrelevant with respect to Palestinians since, as Norman Finkelstein has shown, it was not Iron Dome that led to such minimal Israeli casualties during Operation Protective Edge — it was the primitiveness of Palestinian rockets.

But the MOU will unfortunately have a profoundly negative impact on the prospects of achieving justice in Palestine. Washington did not just promise Israel \$38 billion in aid after Netanyahu personally intruded into US politics. The \$38 billion came after Israel has done many things — any one of which should have disqualified Israel as a recipient of US aid. Consider:

- The Leahy laws — two laws named after their sponsor, Senator Patrick Leahy — prohibit US military aid to any foreign military unit that has engaged in gross violations of human rights. In 2012 fifteen faith leaders called on Congress to condition military aid to Israel on its human rights compliance. In 2015, eleven US faith groups presented evidence of probable gross violations of human rights violations against Palestinians by Israeli security and military units. In 2016, Leahy and several Congressional colleagues asked the State Department to look into whether Israel and Egypt were in compliance with the law.
- In 2009, Amnesty International called for a cutoff of weapons to Israel because of its attacks on civilians during Operation Cast Lead. In early 2014, Amnesty urged the United States and other states to suspend weapons transfer to Israel, given that the “‘Trigger-happy’ Israeli army and police use reckless force in the West Bank.”
- In 2004, all fifteen judges of the International Court of Justice, including the American judge, declared the Israeli settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem to be illegal, and fourteen of the judges found the wall illegal. The Court held that “all States are under an obligation not to recognize the illegal situation resulting from the construction of the wall in the Occupied Palestinian Territory, including in and around East Jerusalem. They are also under an obligation not to render aid or assistance in maintaining the situation created by such construction. It is also for all States, while respecting the United Nations Charter and international law, to see to it that any impediment, resulting from the construction of the wall, to the exercise by the Palestinian people of its right to self-determination is brought to an end.”
- Human Rights Watch, in its 2016 report “Occupation, Inc.,” called on states to “Avoid offsetting the costs of Israeli government expenditures on settlements by withholding funding given to the Israeli government in an amount equivalent to its expenditures on settlements and related infrastructure in the West Bank.”

So by signing a memorandum of understanding with Israel to provide it with \$38 billion in military aid, beyond the harm of the weapons themselves, Washington was giving its financial support to Israeli behavior: to its war crimes, to its human rights violations, to its occupation, and to its settlements. It is essentially declaring that it will not hold Israel to account, that it will prevent (through its veto) the United Nations from holding Israel to account, and that it will use its economic clout to block any attempt to put economic pressure on Israel to get it to comply with international law.

These, more than any specific military transfers, ensure Israeli freedom to crush Palestinian self-determination. Obama and his administration can repeat their commitment to a two-state solution all they want, but promising Netanyahu \$38 billion just days after he announces that anyone who wants the removal of the settlements (to comply with international law) is an advocate of ethnic cleansing (offending even the Anti-Defamation League) makes clear that Washington will do nothing to actually encourage an end to the occupation.

There's some talk that Obama might now make one last push to get Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority to the negotiating table. But what possible leverage would Obama have? Commit war crimes, use excessive force against peaceful demonstrators, continue dispossessing Palestinians and expanding settlements: you still get \$38 billion in military aid. The message will be lost on no one.

After Israel's horrendous bombardment of Gaza in August 2014, a detailed needs assessment concluded that it would take \$3.875 billion for reconstruction and recovery. Donor nations pledged \$3.4 billion, but less than half of that amount has been received to date.

The World Bank estimates that discriminatory Israeli restrictions in Area C of the West Bank, most of which are directly linked to Israel's settlement and land policies, cost the Palestinian economy \$3.4 billion a year. So under the new memorandum every year Washington will be giving Israel military aid equivalent in value to what Israeli bombs and missiles have destroyed in Gaza and to the annual cost of Israeli settlement policy to the Palestinian economy. The irony is palpable, and the consequences for Palestinians appear grim indeed.

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