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Rand Paul Is Right About Aid to Israel

By [Benjamin Friedman](#)

It's about time that a U.S. senator had the chutzpah to say what freshmen Rand Paul did recently on CNN: the United States should stop giving foreign aid to everyone, including Egypt and Israel. Paul may go too far in opposing all aid, but he is right that the case for subsidizing the Israeli military collapsed long ago. (He's right about Egypt too, but I'm focusing here on aid to Israel since that claim generated more controversy and needs more defending). Being pro-Israel does not require arming it with our tax dollars forever. Israel can now defend itself and then some.

Washington's reaction to Paul's comments was predictable, bipartisan and vacuous. Democrat Nita Lowey, ranking member of the House subcommittee that oversees foreign aid, called Paul's comments "shocking" because Israel is a democracy and an American ally. Lowey failed to explain why that means Israel deserves far more aid than all the other states that fit that billing. The Washington Post's "Right Turn" blogger, Jennifer Rubin, labeled Paul an isolationist, gleefully claimed that he stands alone on the issue, but did not address his argument.

Even J-Street, the moderate pro-Israel group, said that it was "alarmed" because Paul's proposal would "undermine the decades-long bipartisan consensus on U.S. support for Israel." Six Democratic senators used the same words in a letter urging the House Appropriations Committee to reject Paul's suggestion. J-Street and senators that crib its press releases evidently think "support" is a synonym for "gets three billion dollars in annual U.S. military aid."

Paul's critics pretend that U.S. aid to Israel serves American security interests, rather than reflecting ideological sympathy. And they confuse sympathy with check-writing.

The well-spring of U.S. support for Israel has long been ideology, not self-help. During the Cold War, the United States had two main security interests in the Middle East. First, we wanted to prevent the Soviet Union from gaining control of oil fields and using the export earnings to build its military. In retrospect, there was never much of a threat that Gulf States would succumb to Soviet domination. But in 1948 that prospect concerned James Forrestal and George Marshall, the secretaries of defense and state, enough to advise President Truman against recognizing Israel. Similar fears constrained U.S. support for Israel throughout the Cold War. Second, we wanted to avoid political instability that would cause an oil price shock and economic damage here. We never had much ability to control events in the Middle East, but aligning with Israel certainly did not help.

After the 1979 Camp David accords, codifying peace between Egypt and Israel, U.S. aid to Israel was supposed to reward peace. But the notion that American largesse, rather than Israeli security concerns, kept Israel from going to war with Egypt was always dubious. And relations between those states have minimal impact on American security. Peace there serves our moral sensibilities, not our safety.

In recent years, U.S. military aid to Israel has become even less tethered to a strategic rationale. The Israelis know that our domestic politics prevents us from trading aid for concessions to Palestinians. So they take our money but not our advice. What our spending does buy is ill will among Palestine's supporters, including jihadist terrorists. If we did not fund Israel, terrorists would not suddenly love Americans, but it might make some of them less inclined to kill us.

If US foreign policy were based on security alone, we would have cut Israel off long ago. But, sensibly, we are ideological. A rough history, especially the Holocaust, made Jews, including American Jews, believe in the necessity of a Jewish state. Americans in general identify with that plight and support a plucky democracy against aggressive illiberal enemies.

We can have an ideological policy towards Israel because the security stakes there are low. It is useful when US policies win friends in the Middle East but hardly crucial to our welfare. Outrage at Israel does not stop Gulf States from shipping oil at market prices these days. And though no one puts it this way, Americans are not nuts to risk a little more terrorism to support Israel. For most of us, terrorism is not a major risk.

The problem with aiding Israel is not that we are being ideological. We can afford that. The problem is that Israel no longer needs our charity. Israel's backers in Washington talk like it is 1948, when Israel was poor and surrounded by aggressive neighbors. Even in 1970 Israel had almost ten times more GDP per capita than either Egypt or Syria, according to UN statistics. Today Israel has calmer borders, and its vibrant technology sector increases its military superiority over its rivals (Paul says our aid is fueling an Egyptian-Israeli arms race, but Egypt quit racing). Without our three billion dollars in aid, Israel's military budget would still be more than three times that of Lebanon and Syria combined and more than Iran's. And that ignores Israel's qualitative military superiority and its nuclear weapons, which deter attack.

Senator Paul is right that it is time to stop treating Israel like a perpetual ward, issuing it subsidies and instructions it ignores. If Israel faced conquest, we would be right to defend it. But we should do our friends the favor of acknowledging that they have the ability to prevent that without our help.

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