

Bush's parting gift to Israel

US Early-warning missile radar system Negev desert.

By [Jonathan Cook](#)

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Theme: [US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Almost unnoticed, Israel and the White House signed a deal over the summer to station an early-warning missile radar system, staffed with U.S. military personnel, in Israel's Negev desert. The media here described the Joint Tactical Ground Station, which brings Israel under the U.S. protective umbrella against missile attack, as a "parting gift" from President Bush as he prepared to leave office.

The siting of what is likely to become America's first permanent base on Israeli soil was apparently not easily agreed by local defense officials. Aware of the country's vulnerability to missile strikes, they have been trying to develop their own defenses - so far without success - against the varying threats posed by Palestinian Qassam rockets, Hizbullah's Katyushas, and Iran and Syria's more sophisticated arsenal.

In finally accepting that it must rely on the U.S. shield, Israel may have answered the Middle East's biggest question of 2008: will it launch a go-it-alone strike against Iran's presumed nuclear weapons program?

The local media reported that the early-warning station would limit Israel's freedom to attack Iran since it would be the prime target for a retaliatory strike, endangering the lives of U.S. personnel. Or as the Haaretz newspaper noted, Israeli officials viewed the radar system "as a signal of Washington's opposition to an Israeli strike on Iran's nuclear program".

Although ostensibly the warm relations between Israel and the US are unchanged, in reality recent events are forcing a reluctant Israel to submit to the increasingly smothering embrace of Washington.

Tel Aviv has long seen itself as a military ally of the U.S., largely sharing and assisting in the realization of Washington's strategic objectives. But it has also prized a degree of independence, especially the right to pursue its own agenda in the Middle East.

For some time, the key point of difference between the two has been over the benefits of "stability." U.S. planners have promoted regional calm as a way of maintaining American control over the flow of oil. In practice, this has meant keeping the Arab peoples, and Arab nationalism, in check by bolstering reliable dictators.

In contrast, Israel has preferred instability, believing that weak and fractious neighbours can

be more easily manipulated. A series of invasions of Lebanon to accentuate ethnic divisions there and the fueling of civil war in the occupied Palestinian territories have been the template for Israel's wider regional vision.

The implicit tension in the Israeli-U.S. alliance surfaced with the ascendance under President George W. Bush of the neocons, who argued that Washington's agenda should be synonymous with Israel's. The U.S. occupation and dismemberment of Iraq was the apotheosis of the White House's application of the Israeli doctrine.

The neocons' partial fall from grace began with Israel's failure to crush Hizbullah in Lebanon more than two years ago. All the evidence suggests that both Israel and the neocons regarded Hizbullah's defeat as the necessary prelude to a U.S. attack on Tehran. Israel's loss of nerve during the month-long war – attributed by critics like the former defense minister, Moshe Arens, to the general softening and feminisation of Israeli society – proved the country's once-celebrated martial talents were on the decline.

In the war's immediate wake, there was much discussion in Israel about how such a high-profile failure might damage the country's standing in the eyes of its US sponsor. Penance arrived in the form of the exculpations of the Winograd post-mortem – and with it the inevitable undoing of Ehud Olmert as prime minister. Washington's stables, meanwhile, were cleaned out less ostentatiously.

But where does this leave Israel? Certainly not friendless in Washington, as cheerleaders like AIPAC and the fawning of U.S. presidential candidates amply demonstrate. But the relationship is changing: it looks increasingly as though Israel is turning from U.S. ally to protectorate.

The consequences are already visible in the buckling of Israel's commitment to launch a unilateral attack on Iran. Months of bellicose talk have been mostly stilled. A few believe this is the quiet before the storm of a joint U.S. and Israeli strike. More likely it is the sign of an Israeli-fueled war agenda running out of steam.

Washington, already overstretched in the Middle East and facing concerted opposition to its policies from China and Russia, seems resigned to living with an Iranian nuclear bomb. In the new climate that means Israel will have to accept that it is no longer the only bully on the Middle East block. Israel is on the verge of its very own regional Cold War.

As in the earlier Cold War, this one will be played out through alliances and proxies. But there the similarity ends. Iran is emerging as a regional superpower, quickly developing the financial and military clout to sponsor other actors in the region, most obviously Hamas and Hizbullah. Israel, on the other hand, is losing ground – quite literally, as the radar base reveals. It can no longer impose its own agenda or build alliances on its own terms. Its strength is becoming increasingly, and transparently, dependent on U.S. approval.

The most immediate and tangible effects will be felt by the Palestinians, though their plight is not likely to let up any time soon. Just as before, Israel needs a long-term solution to the Palestinian problem, but cannot concede on the creation of a viable Palestinian state. Now, however, it no longer has the luxury of biding its time as it dispossesses the Palestinians. It needs to find a solution before an Iranian bomb – and an ever-more confident Hamas and Hizbullah – force a settlement on Palestine not to its liking.

Israel is therefore engaging in a frenzy of West Bank settlement building – up six times on a year ago – not seen since Oslo. It only appears paradoxical that, just as Israel’s leadership is intoning the end of a Greater Israel, the most influential and optimistic supporters of a two-state solution on both sides – including Sari Nusseibeh and Shlomo Ben Ami – have been reading the last rites of Palestinian statehood.

This disillusionment, it might be expected, would provoke a new resolution towards a one-state solution among Israeli and Palestinian peace activists. Nothing could be further from the truth. Even the Palestinian leadership’s growing threats that it might adopt a one-state campaign are little more than that: blackmail designed to galvanize Israeli public opinion behind two states.

Instead of a fledgling state, however, Israel is creating a series of holding pens for the Palestinians – or “warehouses,” as the Israeli peace activist Jeff Halper has referred to them – on the last vestiges of the occupied territories. For Halper, warehousing means containing the Palestinians at minimal economic and political cost to Israel as it steals more territory.

But is the warehousing of the Palestinians intended by Israel to be the equivalent of storing unwanted books? Or, to continue this disturbing metaphor, are the Palestinians being warehoused so that at a later date they can be given away – or, worse still, pulped?

The answer again suggests Israel’s growing dependence on the U.S. Washington has for some time been strong-arming the Sunni Arab world, especially loyal regimes like Egypt and Jordan, against Shia Iran. With its back to the wall, Israel appears willing to use this leverage to its own advantage.

Its leaders are increasingly thinking of “peace” terms that, passing over the heads of the Palestinians, will be directed at their neighbours in Jordan and Egypt. A regional solution requires a further entrenchment of the physical and political divisions between the two “halves” of the occupied territories, with control over the Palestinian parts of the West Bank handed to Jordan and Gaza to Egypt.

It is a sign of the terminal loss of faith in their leaders and Israeli good faith that the latest poll of Palestinians shows 42 percent want their government-in-waiting, the Palestinian Authority, dismantled. More than a quarter are ready to abandon the dream of independent nationhood, preferring instead the establishment of a joint state with Jordan.

Palestine’s fate, it seems, rests on the resolve of the Arab world. It is not a reassuring prospect.

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