

ABOUT THAT \$38 BILLION

In my essay “[A Verbal Holocaust](#)” ([Bulletin](#), October 2016), while stating my support for the worthy aims of the “Black Lives Matter” movement, I condemned the platform of the specific organization Movement for Black Lives that used the terms “genocide” and “apartheid” to describe Israeli policies as nothing other than hate speech. I discussed the lack of merit and context in the use of those terms. But there was another charge that I did not address – until now. While I am no longer interested in that particular MBL organization, the calumny they promote demands response.

Their platform states that “The U.S. requires Israel to use 75 percent of all the military aid it receives to buy U.S.-made arms. Consequently, every year billions of dollars are funneled from U.S. taxpayers to hundreds of arms corporations, who then wage lobbying campaigns pushing for even more foreign military aid. The results of this policy are twofold: it not only diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs, but it makes U.S. citizens complicit in the abuses committed by the Israeli government.” Other political organizations and writers have complained that Israel has recently been promised by the Obama Administration another \$38 billion in direct U.S. military aid, and that Israel is by far the largest recipient of such aid.

Is that anti-Israel or anti-Semitic hate speech? Yes. Here’s why.

The United States spends \$600 billion to \$1 trillion a year on its military. And the United States has made a new \$38 billion commitment of military aid to Israel – that is, \$3.8 billion a year for ten years. Now, as our members of congress like to say, \$3.8 billion is a tiny proportion of annual military spending, about 0.5 percent. But \$3.8 billion here, \$3.8 billion there, eventually it starts to add up to real money.

This \$3.8 billion is in fact by far the largest *direct* grant that the U.S. makes. However, it is small when considered in its context, which includes the \$150 billion a year the U.S. spends to maintain overseas military bases, or expenditures on peace-keeping forces. Israel has insisted on relying on its own forces, not American troops, and so spends a far larger portion of its budget or GNP on military than most other countries. This means that the United States is spending more money “protecting” other countries, and instead of protecting Israel through maintaining a U.S. military presence, the U.S. is subsidizing Israeli arms purchases to help Israel defend itself. That is the

conventional thinking, anyway. The claim that U.S. military support of Israel is way out of scale to U.S. military support for other countries is unfounded. Whether this support is a good idea or not is a different question.

The MBL statement is anti-Israel hate speech because it singles out Israel for condemnation from a large field, as if Israel is the primary culprit in perpetuating the “military-industrial complex” and alone drives the political aspect of the military procurement system. Now, if the context had been a principled critique of United States military policy, or the international arms industry, then Israel would have been a fair target along with its peers. And, broadly speaking, I might agree with such a critique, because I think that everyone would be better off with less spent globally on armaments. It is deeply ironic that MBL finds it objectionable when the one black guy doing 70 (or 55) on the highway is the one guy who gets pulled over and shot, but when MBL sees the Hebrew National Wiermobile approaching at any speed, MBL immediately flips on the anti-Israel siren.

The MBL complaint observes that Israel has to spend this grant on U.S. armaments. The effect is simply that Israel is getting a giant 50 percent-off coupon or rebate for the hardware it is purchasing from the United States – that is, Israel is paying wholesale, while the Saudis are paying retail. Due to the complex and convoluted procurement system, the result of this discount to Israel is to lower the unit price of the hardware, primarily the F-22 Raptor aircraft. When the U.S. gives Israel a \$3.8 billion coupon toward its purchase, the U.S. itself ends up with a lower price for its own F-22 purchases, and so recovers some of the taxpayer dollars in that way. Were it not for the discount, Israel might not buy any at all, because it needs a fleet, not just isolated planes. Convoluted and complex? Military Marketing 101.

But the United States gets something even bigger in the deal. It is not just that the U.S. enjoys the military might its proxy projects without having to maintain a U.S. base and troops, and it is not just a way to increase the scale of its weapons programs. Here is why part of Israel’s right wing joins with the anti-Israel left in opposing the deal, though for different reasons: The deal restricts Israel’s *own* weapons development and exports. Israel is spending billions of its own money, in addition to the “grant” from the U.S. government, to buy U.S. weapons, instead

Continued on **Page 14**

\$38 billion

Continued from Page 13

of developing its own competing products. Israel is agreeing to an extensive set of restrictions against selling Israeli, American and other hardware and technology. In other words, America is paying one of its chief competitors to limit its presence in the international arms market.

The alternative scenario, in which Israel competes full-throttle in the international arms market, would entangle Israel even more in international conflicts and questionable civil wars than is already the case. It would likely work at cross-purposes to United States policy. Until they found more advanced and abundant arms, much of the armaments used by Hezbollah against Israel was originally supplied by or manufactured in Israel – arms earlier supplied to Iran or the South Lebanon Army.

Ancient Hebrew law, discussed in the Talmud (Avoda Zara) and other primary sources, generally prohibited the provision of arms to idolaters and criminals. While idolatrous cults, *per se*, may not be the greatest threat to humanity or to Israel in our day, there is a relevant core idea. Do we really want Israel to provide weapons to governments or agents that hold as a core value conquest of territory or conversion to their exclusive true religion or economic system, through force of arms, or to actors who believe in their own racial superiority or entitlement, or who do not comply with international norms? Will anyone be better off if Israeli policy makers are impelled by the desire to survive or by greed to become a true giant of weapons sales?

While we might agree wholeheartedly (or not) that the United States should spend more on educating and caring for its own resi-

dents than on maintaining its global military position, the reality of our federal budget process is not well described by the claim that this foreign military aid "...diverts much needed funding from domestic education and social programs." If Mr. Netanyahu calls to decline this year's subsidy, do we think Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell is going to say, "Oh, good, now we have \$3.8 billion more to spend on medical care and education in *this* country"? But the language of "diversion" is itself the diversion from the reality, and serves to imply that We the People have had educational and medical services taken away from us and the money shipped off to Israel. It is just not so.

If one is anti-Israel, then of course any aid to Israel would be objectionable. But the implication of this \$38 billion complaint is that Israel is exceptionally bad because of this very aid and its impact on Americans. This circular logic is not resolvable by a satisfying answer to the \$38 billion complaint, because those who hate Israel will just move on to the next item on their list of why the State of Israel is monstrous. The reasons for hating Israel are fully fungible.

For more on the subject of U.S. military aid to Israel, see Hillel Frisch, "[Myth: Israel is the Largest Beneficiary of US Military Aid](#)," The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 10 February 2017.



Another Message from Rabbi Tilsen

Yeah, I still think so.

LETTERS

Take careful aim lest we miss target

President Bush, with the backing of Congress and the public, has declared war on terrorism. Indeed, it is time America took the lead along with Israel and other democratic nations in this struggle.

But we must correctly identify the target. The target is those organizations and countries that use violence and threat of violence against innocents as a weapon to advance their cause. The target is those individuals who follow a creed of racism, hatred and violence.

The correct target of the anti-terror effort does not include the vast majority of Arabs, Muslims, and others of Middle Eastern origin whether in America or elsewhere. Arabs and Muslims in America are peace-loving and law-abiding citizens.

Like in every community, there

are exceptions to that rule, and those exceptions are appropriately dealt with through our police, criminal justice system and immigration services.

It is a disgrace and an affront to American values to defame or attack Arabs, Muslims and others simply because of their religious beliefs or ethnic background. Like all citizens they must be free to practice their religion and express their political views, even when they differ from those of the majority.

It is ridiculous to blame Israel for all of the conflict in the Middle East and thereby for the violence coming from that region. Israel had nothing to do with the war between Iran and Iraq, nothing to do with Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, nothing

to do with the civil wars in Yemen. While Israel shares responsibility for the conflict with Palestinians, this is only one part of a much larger set of problems. America is right to support Israel as a partner in promoting democracy and security.

If we must divide the world into "us" and "them," then at least let's be clear who we mean by "them." Let's take careful aim lest we miss our target or shoot ourselves in the foot.

Rabbi Jon-Jay Tilsen

New Haven

Editor's note: Jon-Jay Tilsen is rabbi of Congregation Beth El-Keser Israel, the corresponding secretary of the New Haven Area Rabbinical Assembly, and president of the Greater New Haven Board of Rabbis.

New Haven Register, Sunday 30 September 2001, p. B2