Israel Foreign Policy Essay, Research Paper

Israel is located in the Middle East, along the eastern coastline of the Mediterranean Sea, bordered by Lebanon, Syria, Jordan and Egypt. It lies at the junction of three continents: Europe, Asia, and Africa. Long and narrow in shape the country is only 290 miles in length and 85 miles in width at its widest point. Israel is a country of immigrants. Since its creation in 1948, the population has increased seven-fold. Today, its over six million inhabitants represent many different cultures and traditions, including Jews from Ethiopia, Morocco, the Soviet Union, Europe and America. Jews from around the world have immigrated to Israel and make up 80% of the Israeli population. The other 20% is made up mostly of Arabs. (Encyclopedia Britannica)

On May 14, 1948, immediately following the proclamation of the state of Israel, President Harry S. Truman extended recognition to the new state. This act marked the beginning of a relationship based on common values and characterized by deep friendship, economic support and mutual respect. The similarities between the two countries are notable: both are vibrant democracies anchored in liberal traditions; both began as pioneer societies; and both are still receiving and integrating new immigrants. Israel is the only democracy in the Middle East, a region dominated by authoritarian and military regimes. In a very unstable region of the world, Israel stands out as the only country with regular, competitive elections, a free press, and free speech. By supporting Israel, the U.S. stays true to its historic national commitment to strengthen fellow democracies. In addition, Israel is a reliable strategic partner in the fight against terrorism, the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction by rogue regimes; state-sponsored terrorism; the potential disruption of access to Middle East oil; and the spread of Islamic radicalism. The U.S. Israeli partnership has also been cost effective, avoiding the expensive deployment of American troops. No U.S. troops have ever been required to protect Israel, while by comparison America maintains 135,000 troops in Europe and spends nearly $80 billion each year on the defense of Europe.(Country Study, 234) Maintaining Israel’s military advantage has proven an efficient way to ensure that American interests will prevail against the forces of terror, authoritarianism, and extremism. Despite constant tensions with Arab neighbors, border disputes, full-out war, terrorist threats, and a yet unresolved Palestinian problem, the U.S. has remained loyal to Israel. America’s long-standing commitment allows Israel to negotiate with its former and current adversaries from a position of strength. Israel can take risks for peace only because of unwavering American support; this support has also prodded Israel’s Arab neighbors to deal directly with Israel. (JSOURCE)

The Clinton administration has played a key role in the Middle East peace process by actively supporting the agreements between Israel and the Palestinians, Israel’s peace treaty with Jordan, negotiations with Syria and efforts to promote regional cooperation, including an end to the Arab boycott. Pledging to maintain Israel’s qualitative edge, it has also committed itself to minimizing the security risks that Israel might incur in its pursuit of peace. Moreover, the United States has recently taken several important measures to back Israel in its war against terrorism. The continuing and deepening amity between Israel and the United States has been defined by various American administrations in terms ranging from the preservation of Israel as a ‘basic tenet’ of American foreign policy, with emphasis on a ’special relationship’ between the two states, to a declaration of an American commitment to Israel. (Country Study, 245) By the early 1980s, Israel was regarded by the United States as a strategic asset and was designated, in accordance with legislation passed the previous year, as a major non-NATO ally. Congressional backing for Israel is bipartisan. Support for annual military and economic assistance, the peace process and Israel’s struggle against terrorism have been hallmarks of Congress’ commitment to United States-Israel friendship, as was the passage of legislation (1995) recognizing Jerusalem as the united capital of Israel and calling for the establishment of the United States embassy in Jerusalem by May 1999. The special relationship encompasses mutual economic, political, strategic and diplomatic concerns. Israel currently receives some $3 billion a year in security and economic aid, and bilateral trade has been enhanced by the Israel-United States Free Trade Area Agreement (1985). (JSOURCE) A growing number of joint ventures sponsored by Israeli and American industrial firms have been established, and several American states have entered into ’state-to-state’ agreements with Israel, involving activities ranging from culture to agriculture.

Israel has expressed eagerness to share with the international community skills learned from its own development experience: overcoming harsh climatic conditions, inadequate water resources, decertification, disease and epidemics, and finding solutions to socioeconomic problems. This desire led to the founding in 1958 of MASHAV – The Center for International Cooperation within the Ministry of Foreign Affairs. MASHAV is currently cooperating with 141 countries, authorities and international agencies to promote technical cooperation programs in various fields. Cooperation efforts include countries in Africa, Asia, the Commonwealth of Independent States and Latin America. (Country Study, 285)

It is Israel’s fervent wish to maintain good relations with all countries, with their governments and their peoples… (David Ben-Gufion, 1952) With memories of centuries of persecution and the devastating experience of the Holocaust and the decades-long Arab Israeli conflict, Israel’s foreign policy has been geared to advance peace by resolving the Arab -Israeli conflict, while ensuring the country’s security promoting cooperation with all nations.

“Israeli foreign policy is chiefly influenced by Israel’s strategic situation, the Arab-Israeli conflict, and the rejection of Israel by most of the Arab states. The Goals of Israeli policy are therefore to overcome diplomatic isolation and to achieve recognition and friendly relations with as many nations as possible, both in the middle east and beyond.” (Country Study, 230)

Israel and Egypt signed a peace treaty in 1979, marking the end of 30 years of relentless hostility and five costly wars. The treaty was preceded by Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s visit to Jerusalem in 1977, at the invitation of Israel’s Prime Minister Menachem Begin, as well as the signing of the Camp David Accords in 1978, which constituted a basis for peace between Egypt and Israel and between Israel and its other neighbors. The accords also addressed the need to solve the Palestinian issue, following a five-year interim phase of autonomy for the Palestinian Arab residents of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) and the Gaza Strip. President Sadat and Prime minister Begin were jointly awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for their achievement. The peace implemented between Israel and Egypt consists of several major elements, including the termination of the state of war as well as acts or threats of belligerency, hostility or violence; the establishment of diplomatic, economic and cultural ties; the removal of barriers to trade and freedom of movement; and withdrawal by Israel from the Sinai peninsula, with agreed security arrangements and limited force zones. Israel completed its withdrawal from the Sinai in 1982 according to the terms of the treaty, giving up strategic military bases and other assets in exchange for peace.

Although Egypt was ostracized by other Arab states following the signing of the treaty, most have since reestablished relations with Egypt and reopened their embassies in Cairo. The headquarters of the Arab League, which had been transferred to Tunis, were reinstated in Cairo in the early 1980s. Having to overcome 30 years of distrust and hostility, normalization of relations between Israel and Egypt is a long and arduous process. Yet, embassies and consulates have been established by both countries, and meetings between government ministers and high-ranking officials take place regularly. Reciprocal visits of businessmen and experts in various fields have also become commonplace. Airline and bus routes operate daily between the two countries, and a decision to establish a permanent joint committee for the development of tourism has been reached. Scientific cooperation includes marine agriculture technology, development of environmental protection resources, cancer research and joint projects on the prevention of pollution in the Gulf of Eilat. Agricultural cooperation is growing steadily; in 1995 alone more than 700 farmers from Egypt took part in courses on agricultural subjects in Israel and on-the-spot courses by Israeli experts in Egypt were attended by 300 participants. As the first state to sign a peace treaty with Israel, Egypt assists in the ongoing negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

Since 1994, three North African Arab states – Morocco, Mauritania and Tunisia – have joined other Arab countries and chosen to take the path of peace and reconciliation by forming diplomatic ties with Israel. Initiated in different ways at various levels, relations between Morocco and Israel were formalized when Israel opened a liaison office in November of 1994 in the Moroccan capital, Rabat. Four months later, Morocco opened its office in Israel, thus formally establishing bilateral diplomatic relations. The Islamic Republic of Mauritania and Israel concluded an agreement at the Barcelona Conference in November 1995, in the presence of the Spanish foreign minister, to establish interest sections in the Spanish embassies in Tel Aviv and Nauakchott (the Mauritanian capital). Mauritania opened its diplomatic mission in Tel Aviv in May of 1996 and indicated its wish to fully normalize relations with Israel. Following a timetable worked out by Israel, Israel opened an interest office in Tunisia in April 1996, and Tunisia reciprocated six weeks later. Diplomatic relations with the Maghreb countries are especially important because of Israel’s large population of North African emigres who retain an emotional attachment to the countries where their families lived for many centuries. This affinity is an asset which may lead to more profound relationships and make a practical contribution to the peace process.

As a result of the ongoing peace process in the Middle East, the Gulf States have shown interest in relations with Israel for the first time since 1948. Initial contacts were followed with a series of reciprocal visits by high-level officials. In May 1996, Israel opened a trade representation office in Oman to develop economic, scientific and trade relations, with emphasis on water resources utilization, tourism, agriculture, chemicals and advanced technologies, while Oman opened an office in Tel Aviv in August 1996. In May 1996, Israel set up a trade representation office in Qatar to facilitate development of an ongoing economic and commercial relationship. Qatar is expected to open a similar office in Israel to promote mutually beneficial activities and projects.

The State of Israel was admitted to the United Nations as its 59th member on 11 May 1949. Since then, it has participated in a wide range of UN operations and has endeavored to make its full contribution to UN organizations dealing with health, labor, food and agriculture, education and science. Israel plays an active role in the work of non-governmental organizations, conducted under UN auspices, which deal with issues ranging from aviation to immigration, from communications to meteorology, from trade to the status of women.

Some UN resolutions have been of crucial significance for Israel, among them Security Council Resolutions providing an agreed framework for settling the Arab-Israel dispute. Over the years, the UN has been active in bringing about a cessation of hostilities between Israel and its Arab neighbors by appointing mediators, extending UN auspices to cease-fire and armistice agreements and stationing UN forces between the adversaries.

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