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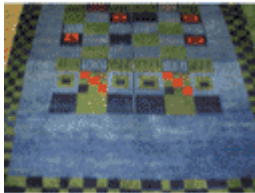
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It's Time for a Declaration of Independence From Israel

By Chris Hedges, Truthdig

Israel, without the United States, would probably not exist. The country came perilously close to extinction during the October 1973 war when Egypt, trained and backed by the Soviet Union, crossed the Suez and the Syrians poured in over the Golan Heights. Huge American military transport planes came to the rescue. They began landing every half-hour to refit the battered Israeli army, which had lost most of its heavy armor. By the time the war was over, the United States had given Israel \$2.2 billion in emergency military aid.

The intervention, which enraged the Arab world, triggered the OPEC oil embargo that for a time wreaked havoc on Western economies. This was perhaps the most dramatic example of the sustained life-support system the United States has provided to the Jewish state.

Israel was born at midnight May 14, 1948. The U.S. recognized the new state 11 minutes later. The two countries have been locked in a deadly embrace ever since.

Washington, at the beginning of the relationship, was able to be a moderating influence. An incensed President Eisenhower demanded and got Israel's withdrawal after the Israelis occupied Gaza in 1956. During the Six-Day War in 1967, Israeli warplanes bombed the USS Liberty. The ship, flying the U.S. flag and stationed 15 miles off the Israeli coast, was intercepting tactical and strategic communications from both sides. The Israeli strikes killed 34 U.S. sailors and wounded 171. The deliberate attack froze, for a while, Washington's enthusiasm for Israel. But ruptures like this one proved to be only bumps, soon smoothed out by an increasingly sophisticated and well-financed Israel lobby that set out to merge Israeli and American foreign policy in the Middle East.

Israel has reaped tremendous rewards from this alliance. It has been given more than \$140 billion in U.S. direct economic and military assistance. It receives about \$3 billion in direct assistance annually, roughly one-fifth of the U.S. foreign aid budget. Although most American foreign aid packages stipulate that related military purchases have to be made in the United States, Israel is allowed to use about 25 percent of the money to subsidize its own growing and profitable defense industry. It is exempt, unlike other nations, from accounting for how it spends the aid money. And funds are routinely siphoned off to build new Jewish settlements, bolster the Israeli occupation in the Palestinian territories and construct the security barrier, which costs an estimated \$1 million a mile.

The barrier weaves its way through the West Bank, creating isolated pockets of impoverished Palestinians in ringed ghettos. By the time the barrier is finished it will probably in effect seize up to 40 percent of Palestinian land. This is the largest land grab by Israel since the 1967 war. And although the United States officially opposes settlement expansion and the barrier, it also funds them.

The U.S. has provided Israel with nearly \$3 billion to develop weapons systems and given Israel access to some of the most sophisticated items in its own military arsenal, including Blackhawk attack helicopters and F-16 fighter jets. The United States also gives Israel access to intelligence it denies to its NATO allies. And when Israel refused to sign the nuclear nonproliferation treaty,



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the United States stood by without a word of protest as the Israelis built the region's first nuclear weapons program.

U.S. foreign policy, especially under the current Bush administration, has become little more than an extension of Israeli foreign policy. The United States since 1982 has vetoed 32 Security Council resolutions critical of Israel, more than the total number of vetoes cast by all the other Security Council members. It refuses to enforce the Security Council resolutions it claims to support. These resolutions call on Israel to withdraw from the occupied territories.

There is now volcanic anger and revulsion by Arabs at this blatant favoritism. Few in the Middle East see any distinction between Israeli and American policies, nor should they. And when the Islamic radicals speak of U.S. support of Israel as a prime reason for their hatred of the United States, we should listen. The consequences of this one-sided relationship are being played out in the disastrous war in Iraq, growing tension with Iran, and the humanitarian and political crisis in Gaza. It is being played out in Lebanon, where Hezbollah is gearing up for another war with Israel, one most Middle East analysts say is inevitable. The U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is unraveling. And it is doing so because of this special relationship. The eruption of a regional conflict would usher in a nightmare of catastrophic proportions.

There were many in the American foreign policy establishment and State Department who saw this situation coming. The decision to throw our lot in with Israel in the Middle East was not initially a popular one with an array of foreign policy experts, including President Harry Truman's secretary of state, Gen. George Marshall. They warned there would be a backlash. They knew the cost the United States would pay in the oil-rich region for this decision, which they feared would be one of the greatest strategic blunders of the postwar era. And they were right. The decision has jeopardized American and Israeli security and created the kindling for a regional conflagration.

The alliance, which makes no sense in geopolitical terms, does make sense when seen through the lens of domestic politics. The Israel lobby has become a potent force in the American political system. No major candidate, Democrat or Republican, dares to challenge it. The lobby successfully purged the State Department of Arab experts who challenged the notion that Israeli and American interests were identical. Backers of Israel have doled out hundreds of millions of dollars to support U.S. political candidates deemed favorable to Israel. They have brutally punished those who strayed, including the first President Bush, who they said was not vigorous enough in his defense of Israeli interests. This was a lesson the next Bush White House did not

forget. George W. Bush did not want to be a one-term president like his father.

Israel advocated removing Saddam Hussein from power and currently advocates striking Iran to prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. Direct Israeli involvement in American military operations in the Middle East is impossible. It would reignite a war between Arab states and Israel. The United States, which during the Cold War avoided direct military involvement in the region, now does the direct bidding of Israel while Israel watches from the sidelines. During the 1991 Gulf War, Israel was a spectator, just as it is in the war with Iraq.

President Bush, facing dwindling support for the war in Iraq, publicly holds Israel up as a model for what he would like Iraq to become. Imagine how this idea plays out on the Arab street, which views Israel as the Algerians viewed the French colonizers during the war of liberation.

"In Israel," Bush said recently, "terrorists have taken innocent human life for years in suicide attacks. The difference is that Israel is a functioning democracy and it's not prevented from carrying out its responsibilities. And that's a good indicator of success that we're looking for in Iraq."

Americans are increasingly isolated and reviled in the world. They remain blissfully ignorant of their own culpability for this isolation. U.S. "spin" paints the rest of the world as unreasonable, but Israel, Americans are assured, will always be on our side.

Israel is reaping economic as well as political rewards from its lock-down apartheid state. In the "gated community" market it has begun to sell systems and techniques that allow the nation to cope with terrorism. Israel, in 2006, exported \$3.4 billion in defense products -- well over a billion dollars more than it received in American military aid. Israel has grown into the fourth largest arms dealer in the world. Most of this growth has come in the so-called homeland security sector.

"The key products and services," as Naomi Klein wrote in *The Nation*, "are hi-tech fences, unmanned drones, biometric IDs, video and audio surveillance gear, air passenger profiling and prisoner interrogation systems -- precisely the tools and technologies Israel has used to lock in the occupied territories. And that is why the chaos in Gaza and the rest of the region doesn't threaten the bottom line in Tel Aviv, and may actually boost it. Israel has learned to turn endless war into a brand asset, pitching its uprooting, occupation and containment of the Palestinian people as a half-century head start in the 'global war on terror.' "

The United States, at least officially, does not support the occupation and calls for a viable Palestinian state. It is a global player, with interests that stretch well beyond the boundaries of the Middle East, and the equation that Israel's enemies are our enemies is

not that simple.

"Terrorism is not a single adversary," John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt wrote in *The London Review of Books*, "but a tactic employed by a wide array of political groups. The terrorist organizations that threaten Israel do not threaten the United States, except when it intervenes against them (as in Lebanon in 1982). Moreover, Palestinian terrorism is not random violence directed against Israel or 'the West'; it is largely a response to Israel's prolonged campaign to colonize the West Bank and Gaza Strip. More important, saying that Israel and the US are united by a shared terrorist threat has the causal relationship backwards: the US has a terrorism problem in good part because it is so closely allied with Israel, not the other way around."

Middle Eastern policy is shaped in the United States by those with very close ties to the Israel lobby. Those who attempt to counter the virulent Israeli position, such as former Secretary of State Colin Powell, are ruthlessly slapped down. This alliance was true also during the Clinton administration, with its array of Israel-first Middle East experts, including special Middle East coordinator Dennis Ross and Martin Indyk, the former deputy director of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, AIPAC, one of the most powerful Israel lobbying groups in Washington. But at least people like Indyk and Ross are sane, willing to consider a Palestinian state, however unviable, as long as it is palatable to Israel. The Bush administration turned to the far-right wing of the Israel lobby, those who have not a shred of compassion for the Palestinians or a word of criticism for Israel. These new Middle East experts include Elliott Abrams, John Bolton, Douglas Feith, the disgraced I. Lewis "Scooter" Libby, Richard Perle, Paul Wolfowitz and David Wurmser.

Washington was once willing to stay Israel's hand. It intervened to thwart some of its most extreme violations of human rights. This administration, however, has signed on for every disastrous Israeli blunder, from building the security barrier in the West Bank, to sealing off Gaza and triggering a humanitarian crisis, to the ruinous invasion and saturation bombing of Lebanon.

The few tepid attempts by the Bush White House to criticize Israeli actions have all ended in hasty and humiliating retreats in the face of Israeli pressure. When the Israel Defense Forces in April 2002 reoccupied the West Bank, President Bush called on then-Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to "halt the incursions and begin withdrawal." It never happened. After a week of heavy pressure from the Israel lobby and Israel's allies in Congress, meaning just about everyone in Congress, the president gave up, calling Sharon "a man of peace." It was a humiliating moment for the United States, a clear sign of who pulled the strings.

There were several reasons for the war in Iraq. The desire for American control of oil, the belief that Washington could build puppet states in the region, and a real, if misplaced, fear of Saddam Hussein played a part in the current disaster. But it was also strongly shaped by the notion that what is good for Israel is good for the United States. Israel wanted Iraq neutralized. Israeli intelligence, in the lead-up to the war, gave faulty information to the U.S. about Iraq's alleged arsenal of weapons of mass destruction. And when Baghdad was taken in April 2003, the Israeli government immediately began to push for an attack on Syria. The lust for this attack has waned, in no small part because the Americans don't have enough troops to hang on in Iraq, much less launch a new occupation.

Israel is currently lobbying the United States to launch aerial strikes on Iran, despite the debacle in Lebanon. Israel's iron determination to forcibly prevent a nuclear Iran makes it probable that before the end of the Bush administration an attack on Iran will take place. The efforts to halt nuclear development through diplomatic means have failed. It does not matter that Iran poses no threat to the United States. It does not matter that it does not even pose a threat to Israel, which has several hundred nuclear weapons in its arsenal. It matters only that Israel demands total military domination of the Middle East.

The alliance between Israel and the United States has culminated after 50 years in direct U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. This involvement, which is not furthering American interests, is unleashing a geopolitical nightmare. American soldiers and Marines are dying in droves in a useless war. The impotence of the United States in the face of Israeli pressure is complete. The White House and the Congress have become, for perhaps the first time, a direct extension of Israeli interests. There is no longer any debate within the United States. This is evidenced by the obsequious nods to Israel by all the current presidential candidates with the exception of Dennis Kucinich. The political cost for those who challenge Israel is too high.

This means there will be no peaceful resolution of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. It means the incidents of Islamic terrorism against the U.S. and Israel will grow. It means that American power and prestige are on a steep, irreversible decline. And I fear it also means the ultimate end of the Jewish experiment in the Middle East.

The weakening of the United States, economically and militarily, is giving rise to new centers of power. The U.S. economy, mismanaged and drained by the Iraq war, is increasingly dependent on Chinese trade imports and on Chinese holdings of U.S. Treasury securities. China holds dollar reserves worth \$825 billion. If Beijing decides to abandon the U.S. bond market, even in part, it would cause a free fall by the dollar. It would lead to the collapse of the \$7-trillion U.S. real estate market. There would be a wave of U.S. bank failures and huge unemployment. The growing dependence on China has been accompanied by aggressive work by the Chinese to build alliances with many of the world's major exporters of oil, such as Iran, Nigeria, Sudan and Venezuela. The Chinese are preparing for the looming worldwide clash over dwindling resources.

The future is ominous. Not only do Israel's foreign policy objectives not coincide with American interests, they actively hurt them. The growing belligerence in the Middle East, the calls for an attack against Iran, the collapse of the imperial project in Iraq have all given an opening, where there was none before, to America's rivals. It is not in Israel's interests to ignite a regional conflict. It is not in ours. But those who have their hands on the wheel seem determined, in the name of freedom and democracy, to keep the American ship of state headed at breakneck speed into the cliffs before us.

Chris Hedges is the former Middle East bureau chief for The New York Times and the author of "War Is a Force That Gives Us Meaning."

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