

# Israel: still the chosen one?

Israel has acted as the West's sentinel in the Middle East for more than 40 years



PHOTO: Simon Norfolk

**A**t first sight Israel appears to have done well out of the Gulf War. In the run-up to the war relations between Washington and Jerusalem were at an all-time low. But Israeli 'restraint' following Scud missile attacks from Iraq won praise in America and across the West. The USA swiftly despatched Patriot anti-missile missiles and their crews to Israel. The *Washington Post* noted that 'a new pattern of mutual confidence is being woven between the United States and Israel' (21 January 1991).

Israel's image in the Western media underwent sudden and dramatic improvement. For more than three years of the intifada Israel has been depicted as Goliath to the Palestinian David. After the Gulf War began on 17 January Israel was once again presented as a weak embattled state threatened by hostile Arabs. Binyamin Netanyahu, the leather-

Daniel Nassim believes that a shift in US foreign policy poses a far bigger threat to Israel's future than any missile attacks from Iraq

jacket-and gasmask-wearing deputy foreign minister, has been hailed as Israel's 'first international media star since Moshe Dayan made the eye-patch a fashion statement' (*Washington Times*, 21 January 1991).

It all seems a long way from the events of October, when Israeli premier Yitzhak Shamir conceded that the USA was 'boiling mad' after the massacre of Palestinians in Jerusalem, and the Americans took the unprecedented step of backing a resolution critical of Israel at the United Nations. Even before the Gulf

crisis began US-Israeli relations had been strained by disputes over American aid to Israel, the settlement of Soviet Jews on the occupied West Bank, and whether UN troops should be allowed into the Israeli-occupied territories.

Many radical commentators interpret the US gestures of goodwill towards Israel as confirmation that the Zionist state will remain America's strongest, most important ally in the Middle East (see, for example, the interview with Noam Chomsky in this issue). Yet a closer examination of events suggests that,



despite appearances, Israel's position is more tenuous than ever before.

Take the despatch of US Patriot missiles to Israel. This move represents the reversal of the traditional relationship between Israel and the USA. Israel's traditional value to Washington has been as the local defender of US and Western interests in the Middle East. This time, however, it was a case of the Americans defending Israel against the Arab world.

The White House has never supported Israel out of any love for Jews. Washington pumped billions of dollars into Israel every year because it saw the Zionist state as a 'strategic asset'. The USA knew that Israel, as an artificial state built on the denial of Palestinian rights and totally dependent on Western patronage, would be a loyal ally. Israeli hostility to the Palestinians and any progressive movements in the region could be relied upon.

### Implicit threat

Now that the USA is intervening directly in the Middle East, with its massive task force in the Gulf, that particular rationale for giving full-blooded support to Israel has gone. In the past Israel was a mercenary for the USA. Today the Western powers' intervention on their own behalf dwarfs Israel's military capabilities, and raises serious questions about Israel's future value to Western imperialism.

The highly publicised policy of 'Israeli restraint' over the Gulf conflict is a sure sign that things are changing in the Middle East. In the past Israel always seized the slightest excuse to lash out at its Arab neighbours. Indeed its response was often entirely out of proportion to the original attack. In March 1978, for example, some Israeli bus passengers were killed in a shoot-out between police and Palestinian guerrillas from Lebanon. Israel's response was to invade southern Lebanon killing 2500 civilians and causing 265 000 people to flee northwards.

Despite the claims of the Western media, Israel's new policy of restraint is a sign of its political weakness rather than its moral strength. Any restraint has been imposed by the USA. The Americans have given Israel incentives not to strike at Iraq, including Patriot missiles and extra aid. They have also taken military measures to prevent a large-scale Israeli attack on Iraq, refusing to divulge satellite intelligence on Iraqi targets, and withholding the codes which would identify Israeli planes as friendly to the allies. Underlying all these measures is the implicit threat

that the USA will punish Israel severely if it retaliates.

The primary motive behind US policy today is not a concern to defend Israelis from a few near-useless Scud missiles, but a desire to maintain the presence of Arab states in the anti-Iraq coalition. If Israel launched an attack there would be domestic pressure on countries such as Egypt, Syria and Morocco to desert the US-led coalition, leaving America and Britain dangerously exposed as imperialist invaders. In this respect American praise for Israeli restraint against Scud attacks can be seen as a *continuation* of the policy which led it to condemn the October massacre in Jerusalem. In both cases Washington's first concern was to keep the coalition together.

Behind the immediate concerns over the Gulf coalition is a more fundamental shift in US foreign policy. In the past the relationship with Israel was at the centre of US strategy in the Middle East. Even before the Gulf crisis erupted the focus of American Middle East policy was shifting much more towards the Arab regimes. The changing emphasis was made possible by the end of the Cold War, and the demise of the Soviet Union as a regional power. In the past Soviet backing gave Arab regimes more room to manoeuvre in their relations with the West. Today this room is no longer available. Syria, for example, was until recently one of the USSR's main clients in the Middle East. But the sharp reduction in Soviet backing made it more susceptible to American pressure to join the anti-Iraq coalition. The Soviet Union, itself desperate for Western economic backing, has put pressure on Arab regimes to reach an accommodation with the USA.

### Pros and cons

These new circumstances have prompted the Americans to reassess the advantages and disadvantages of their relationship with Israel. Israel has been a staunchly reliable ally of imperialism. But it has also created enormous unrest and resentment against the West in the Arab world. Since the end of the Cold War the Israeli state has often been more of a liability than an asset. Israeli politicians are aware of the dangers of being dumped by Washington. Even after the dramatic upturn in US-Israeli relations, Labour MP Arye Eliav warned the *Jerusalem Post* that US strategists might conclude 'Israel has no more strategic importance for the West, owing to the collapse of Soviet power' (25 January 1991).

The subsequent suggestion from

James Baker, the US secretary of state, that the Palestine question might be linked to the Gulf conflict certainly rattled Israel. Although Baker's move was soon contradicted by the White House it could yet represent the shape of things to come. As the USA seeks to maximise its post-Gulf War influence over the Middle East, it may well be open to doing a deal with the Arab regimes at Israel's expense.

The USA is not about to drop Israel overnight. Reforging real political alliances is more difficult than redrawing lines on a map. The strength of anti-Western feeling stirred up among the Arab masses presents a serious barrier to the consolidation of a new US-led alliance. But for the first time since 1948 there is a possibility of the USA trying to control events in the Middle East without using Israel as a central pillar of its policy.

Unfortunately Israel's loss is unlikely to mean the Palestinians' gain. The aim of any switch in US policy would be to reorganise the West's domination over the Palestinian and Arab masses, not abolish it. Indeed the Western powers' real attitude to the Palestinians has been best illustrated by their recent warming of relations with Israel, at precisely the moment when the Israeli army was imposing the longest and harshest curfew on the West Bank and Gaza in the 24-year occupation, and launching its fiercest attacks for nine years on Palestinians in Lebanon.

### Bound to suffer

In the coming months the Israelis will probably seek to polarise relations between themselves and the Arabs and Palestinians, to try to put pressure on the USA to reassert support for Israel. That Israel should pursue such a high-risk strategy is a sign of its desperation. Whatever the outcome of these manoeuvres the Palestinians are bound to suffer as a result.

The Gulf War is demonstrating that Western imperialism is the major force for violence and oppression in the Middle East. The state of Israel has been an agent of American policy, not the driving force behind it. As such, the long-term deterioration in US-Israeli relations is nothing for supporters of the Palestinian cause to get too excited about. Driving the USA and the rest of the Western powers out of the Middle East remains the precondition for Palestinian liberation.