



Dov Zakheim, pictured here, says most countries we sell weapons to use them in ways that serve the U.S. national interest. Courtesy Department of Defense

DON'T ASK, DON'T TELL: Cuddling with George W.

An Interview with Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim
by Jon Reingold

President Bush's Under Secretary of Defense Dov Zakheim has been a crucial part of the President's team since the 2000 election, when he served as a senior foreign policy advisor. He has written several books on foreign policy, including the 1996 work *Flight of the Lavi: Inside a U.S.-Israeli Crisis*. In this interview, Zakheim outlines the classic Rumsfeld stance (which is often in sharp contrast with Secretary of State Colin Powell's views) on foreign policy. Zakheim discusses controversial issues, from selling arms to foreign countries to U.S.-Saudi relations to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

BardPolitik Benjamin Franklin said "They that can give up essential liberty to obtain a little temporary safety deserve neither liberty nor safety." Do you agree with the recent expansion of powers given to the FBI? In general, how should the United States best balance freedom and security?

Zakheim Obviously, the decision of the Attorney General was made with the President's backing. I'm a member of the administration, I do support both what the President intends to do and Attorney General John Ashcroft's decision. On the larger question, it presupposes, if you're using the Franklin quote, that this some-

thing temporarily worthwhile as opposed to a long-term loss of security. On the one hand, I believe Ashcroft, that the FBI has no intention of trampling on any individual rights. On the other hand, there's no indication at all that this is a temporary matter. One of the points the President has made about the war on terrorism is that this is going to be a long-term effort and the war we're fighting is not only shadowy, which is why it's so important the FBI has the focus it has now taken on, but also it is an implacable foe. These people are just not ready to give up. They have cells in literally dozens of countries. The United States has interests all over the world. Therefore, they can attack us in lots of different places. That's why it's absolutely critical, within respecting individual rights, which I think Mr. Ashcroft has made clear he wants us to do. We go as far as we possibly can to monitor these people. Every passing day shows new revelations that a little bit more information might have saved more lives. It is not a trampling of the public's ability to function in freedom. On the other hand, it seems to me we risk trading away that freedom if we don't have the precautions the FBI is taking.

BardPolitik What are your thoughts on the Office of Homeland Security? Should it be a department? Does it really have any authority currently?

Zakheim The President makes those decisions—not me. So I'm comfortable with whatever the White House is comfortable with, quite frankly. In terms of authority, the President has made it clear that Mr. Tom Ridge is his advisor on homeland security matters and he has a significant degree of influence. I don't think it's appropriate for somebody in the cabinet department to talk about something like that.

BardPolitik Besides economic motivations, why should the United States continue to export weapons around the world to allies and potential allies, when there is no guarantee the countries will use them in our best interest as well as theirs?

Zakheim Historically, the number of cases where people actually used the equipment we gave them in ways we

didn't want [them to] is relatively low. Some of the major critiques of arms sales tend to be generalized rather than specific. There are cases where people protested, for instance, sales to Saudi Arabia. But if you look at the record there, the Saudis used the arms we sold to support us in the Gulf War. One shot down some Iraqi fighters—not exactly something that was against American interests at the time. Some people argue that we shouldn't export to the Israelis. I think there's a pretty strong case that the Israelis have used their weapons [mainly] for interests that we share with them, in terms of their security. If you look around the world to the places we've sold equipment, of course there have been exceptions, but in many ways [the] exceptions prove the rule. We're

I'm comfortable with whatever the White House is comfortable with, quite frankly.

pretty careful about what we sell and when we sell it. [Look] how long it took to sell F-16As to Taiwan, a country with which we are friendly. For a variety of regional political reasons it took a long time to get that done. [The first] President George Bush made that decision after many years of study.

BardPolitik Do arms transfers/sales lead to stability or instability?

Zakheim Overwhelmingly, I think from America's point view it has contributed to stability. The one egregious case wasn't so much *our* sales, but the sales of some of our allies to Iraq.

BardPolitik In your book, *Flight of the Lavi* you mention that the Israeli Ministry of Defense and Israeli Aircraft Industries (IAI) are "one and the same." In your estimate, is this substantially different than what some call "the iron triangle" (from Gordon Adams' book of the same title) or what Eisenhower deemed the military

industrial complex in the United States, consisting of Congress, the military, and the defense industry?

Zakheim It's important to clarify that I was writing about the early and mid 1980s and so I'm not up to speed on the degree of the government's holding of IAI. But the fact is, at that time, and I believe still to some extent today, there is an Israeli government holding of the industries that is very different from the American defense industry. "The iron triangle" [...] really reflects the relationship between the contractors, the Defense Department, and Congress. The Defense Department does not own any defense industry. What we have is a monopoly situation where we are the only

This is not a purely one-way street, it is not some kind of Salvation Army feeling for the downtrodden. The relationship (between Israel and the United States) is robust precisely because Israel is no longer this embattled tiny little state of Holocaust survivors. Now, a half-century later, Israel is a viable state and it's clearly a democracy that is not to be minimized, particularly in a region where there are not many democracies.

buyer for some of these companies. Of course, they lobby the Congress and in many cases the Congress is responsive to that lobbying. That's very different than the situation in Israel or in France where the government has had a stake for many years in the industry itself. At one point the Israeli director general of the Ministry of Defense was actually still serving as an official of IAI. Of course it would be a major violation of the conflict of interest laws if it took place here.

BardPolitik You describe industrial offsets (subcontractors in foreign countries working for American companies to generate revenue to buy American arms) as a sophisticated form of barter. Is this a win-win situation for the United States, or is it a form of corporate welfare for U.S. defense contractors?

Zakheim The biggest critique of that comes from economists who argue with some justice that there is a trade distortion effect, because offsets by definition imply we would buy things we wouldn't otherwise buy and therefore distort trade patterns. [But] more compelling than that is the [case for] national security. Offsets very often allow us to not only sell our products abroad and thereby enhance the economy, but, more importantly, they preserve and sometimes enhance key relationships that otherwise might dissipate. A good example of that is during the Cold War, when we sold to countries that might otherwise have bought from the Soviets. Clearly then the security case dominated. Even today, with the arms sales, given the sophistication of the arms we sell, usually we're also sending contractor personnel or military personnel over. There's an infrastructure that comes with these sales and it creates relationships with the purchasing countries that extend well beyond just the sale itself. These become real vehicles of U.S. diplomacy.

BardPolitik What do you see in store for the future of the U.S.-Israeli military relationship? Will both economic and military aid continue to flow indefinitely?

Zakheim Well, there's a fundamental difference between the economic aid and the security assistance. Israel's economy, even with Israel's current downturn, is still roughly equivalent to that of Spain. I don't think the United States is contemplating giving economic assistance to Spain, a highly developed country and a powerful contributor to the EU. [Since] Israel has the same per capita GDP, then one really can question why economic assistance is still necessary, and I think the decision has been made over the last few years to tailor that back.

The security assistance is a different issue, [because] there is still a commitment to Israel's qualitative edge, and until a peaceful resolution [occurs] in the Middle East the United States is committed to Israel's security, meaning security assistance. The level is based on the circumstances at the time, but the commitment is there.

BardPolitik What, if any, are the current strategic reasons for U.S. support of Israel, or are there only moral and political obligations?

Zakheim No, I think it's more. For starters, the fact is we do work very closely with the Israelis in a host of different ways. There's joint training and technical cooperation. We've made a major financial contribution to the Israeli Arrow Program (the program aims to provide Israel with the capability to defend against short- and medium-range ballistic missiles). We benefit from this as well when we buy Israeli equipment; night vision systems and other kinds of systems. This is not a purely one-way street, it is not some kind of Salvation Army feeling for the downtrodden. The relationship is robust precisely because Israel is no longer this embattled tiny little state of Holocaust survivors. Now, a half-century later, Israel is a viable state and it's clearly a democracy. That is not to be minimized, particularly in a region where there are not many democracies. That goes beyond morality to American national values. And even in the narrow military sphere, Israel has much to offer.

BardPolitik In your view, what is the best thing the United States can do for Israel right now to resolve the current impasse in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?

Zakheim There are a few things. One is what the President has made clear, which is that the commitment is unshakable. We cannot proceed further trying to pursue any kind of resolution between Israel and the Palestinians unless the Israelis have that degree of confidence that we're in their corner.

Number two, as the President has said and keeps demonstrating by sending the Secretary of State, the

CIA director, and others out there, we are committed to finding some kind of solution. It's not going to be easy. The Palestinians themselves are talking about the need to reform their own system, which I think is clearly warranted. Now, it becomes a question of how does the United States foster that. But clearly the Palestinians need to take the lead in cleaning up their own house, and that's what they want to do.

What they need to see and what Israel needs to see is that we're committed to reaching some kind of settlement. It is not doing either of these people any good to have their children killed, to have explosions, to have houses demolished—the whole nine yards. Every day brings a suicide bomber in Israel. Every day brings Israeli retaliation. The United States clearly enjoys the confidence of both sides and intends to use that.

BardPolitik In your opinion, why hasn't the United States severed ties with Saudi Arabia, given Saudi involvement in September 11, and the fact that the United States relies less and less on the Saudis for oil and is turning to other sources, such as Russia?

Zakheim First of all, the Saudi government was not involved in 9/11. There were individual Saudis. That's the equivalent of saying the people who blew up Oklahoma City represented the U.S. government. So, one has to be clear about that. The Saudis have cooperated with us. The fact that we rely less on Saudi oil only demonstrates that the argument people used to make that we relied on Saudi Arabia only because of oil is clearly no longer the case. If it was because of oil then we wouldn't relate the same way with them. So the original argument was kind of flaky to begin with.

The Saudis are a critical major player in the Gulf area. They are critical to [Persian] Gulf stability. They also have a major role as the repository of Islam's two holiest sites. And one should not minimize the importance of the Saudis publicly saying for the first time that they could entertain a Jewish state in the Middle East. For years many Saudis only said that privately and Israel's supporters have said, "Well why don't they say it publicly?" Well, now they have. What they say

about these matters resonates throughout the region and the fact that they did say it demonstrates that it's not a religious war. Because here are the custodians (the King of Saudi Arabia calls himself the custodian of the two holy mosques), here is the government that considers itself the custodian of all that is most holy in Islam saying it's prepared to live literally next door to a Jewish state, which means that this is not a religious war. That is a major development because they made it public. They're influential leaders, a force for stability. Instability in Saudi Arabia could destabilize the entire region, so this goes well beyond oil.

BardPolitik But the Saudis have also hinted that they want us out.

Zakheim One doesn't see very much "out" movement. And who are the Saudis doing the hinting and how is the hinting being done? I think that there's no great pressure for us to get out of Saudi Arabia. I think that the United States has good relations with many of the other Gulf states. Most of the Gulf governments, other than Iraq and Iran, frankly all want us around. And we're seeing now, in our efforts to pull India and Pakistan back from the brink of war, that were we not to have the kinds of improved relations with those two countries that we have now, we wouldn't even be a player in that.

It's extremely important to have good relations, because without those, we do not have the ability to bring our tremendous influence to bear.

Jon Reingold is a student at Bard College and attended the Bard Globalization and International Affairs program in spring 2002. He interned at the World Policy Institute.