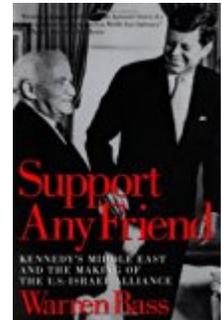


**Warren Bass.** *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance.* Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 336 S. \$26.00, paper, ISBN 978-0-19-517750-3.



**Warren Bass.** *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance.* New York and Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2003. 336 pp , , .

**Reviewed by** J. Ross-Nazzal

**Published on** H-Levant (January, 2005)

Middle East history and U.S. foreign policy or diplomatic history courses do not typically focus as much attention on the presidency of John Kennedy as they do on President Eisenhower or President Johnson. One reason for this could be because Eisenhower faced the Anglo-Franco-Israeli invasion of Egypt in 1956 while also dealing with the Soviet Union's invasion of Hungary. Johnson had the Six-Day War, UN Resolution 242, and the rise of the Palestinian Liberation Organization to deal with along with American involvement in Vietnam.

Furthermore, when you think of the foreign policy highlights of the Kennedy administration, it is too easy to recall the Bay of Pigs fiasco, the anxiety and ultimate successes of the Cuban Missile Crisis, and, of course, the Yemen civil war in which anti-monarchists (such as Egypt) fought against pro-monarchists (such as Saudi Arabia) in one of the many proxy contests of the Cold War. Nevertheless, as Warren Bass points out in *Sup-*

*port Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israeli Alliance*, the Kennedy administration is important because it "constitutes the pivotal presidency in U.S.-Israel relations, the hinge that swung decisively away from the chilly association of the 1950s and toward the full-blown alliance we know today" (p. 3).

Bass produces a blow-by-blow account of U.S.-Middle East foreign policy during the Kennedy administration while arguing that the end result (a change in the U.S.-Israeli relations) was not a goal of the Kennedy administration. While Kennedy, according to Bass, courted both Egypt and Israel, in the end the relationship with Israel blossomed while U.S. ties to Egypt floundered because "Israel was better able to take advantage of what Kennedy offered; Egypt was too much captive of its regional constraints, such as the crisis in Yemen and general inter-Arab political rivalry (p. 4). Overall, Bass chronologically examines what he considers the three key issues of the Kennedy

administration: Egypt's foreign policy and the Yemen war; the sale of HAWK missiles to Israel; and, U.S.-Israeli diplomacy related to the development of the Dimona nuclear reactor and Israel's development of its nuclear weapons program.

Bass begins by examining the Middle East from the presidencies of Woodrow Wilson through Dwight Eisenhower. While the chapter is well written, it seems unnecessary, as Bass could have merely summed it all up in a paragraph that explained the seemingly "cold" U.S.-Israeli relations during the Eisenhower presidency with the relatively warmer relations during the presidency of Kennedy. The book's main theme, that the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel began during the Kennedy administration, does not need a thirty-three-page introduction. Further, Bass's qualifier of "anti-Israel" to describe the UN resolutions being debated because of Israel's unprovoked invasion of Egypt, and the suggestion that Eisenhower demanded an immediate Israeli withdrawal from Egypt to short-circuit the "anti-Israel" resolutions detract from Bass's argument by focusing attention on something outside the scope of Bass's project, because of its argumentative nature. Were the resolutions truly against the state of Israel, as Bass believes, or merely a reaction to Israel's actions that were contrapositive to Israel's standing as a member of the United Nations?

The second chapter is a biography of Kennedy. As a U.S. senator, Kennedy's words suggested that he was pro-Israel or at least was concerned that the Soviet Union was becoming too strong in the Middle East. Thus he looked at Israel as a logical counterbalance to Egypt or Iraq. Nevertheless, this could also have been mentioned in a brief paragraph, as opposed to an entire chapter. One problem with this chapter (a problem that continues throughout the book, but is most evident in the second chapter) is Bass's use of words, phrases, and references that are simply not used in traditional foreign policy or diplomat-

ic history texts. For example, Bass uses the phrase "perfidious Albion" in place of "England," a phrase that Napoleon Bonaparte used when discussing that country. In the previous chapter, Bass refers to Secretary of State George Marshall as a "modern Cincinnatus" (p. 25). Cincinnatus was, of course, a Roman general who desired to retire and return to his simple farm instead of ruling Rome. Again, these references distract the reader from the writer's goal: namely to draw the same conclusion as the writer did. Instead, I had to put the book down to look up these and other references.

The meat and potatoes of the book begins with an investigation of Kennedy's personal attempts to initiate a new chapter in U.S.-Egyptian relations, something that Bass calls "the most innovative prong of America's Middle East policy" (p. 64). Carefully, Bass recreates Kennedy's initiatives to Egypt that can be seen not only as a continuation of Kennedy's larger Third World strategy, but also as a change in U.S. foreign policy. "America's traditional Middle East friends had been the conservative monarchs," Bass points out (p. 65). Yet, Kennedy reached out to Nasser, a relatively reactionary anti-monarchist. Bass spends an entire chapter on examining how the situation in Yemen limited Kennedy's rapprochement. According to Bass, Nasser's focus and entrenchment in Yemen resulted in the realization by Kennedy (and later administrations) that Nasser was not as interested in progressive pragmatism as he was in inter-Arab politics (p. 101). In other words, Bass argues that Kennedy's attempts to thaw U.S.-Egyptian relations was prevented by Nasser's inability to shift his attention away from regional concerns.

One of the most important and troublesome chapters deals with the story behind the United States's sale of HAWK missiles to Israel. On one hand, "Israel's Missile Gap: How America Began Arming the Jewish State" is an excellent in-depth investigation into the trials and tribulations of

U.S.-Israeli relations that would have the immediate result of the United States bending the Tripartite Agreement by introducing the HAWK missiles into the Middle East, as well as long-term results, namely the establishment of the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel. Bass argues that the prime reason behind the change in U.S. policy was David Ben-Gurion's insistence that Israel was slowly falling under the Soviet-Egyptian shadow. He also argued that, if the United States did not counter Soviet arms in Egypt by supplying Israel with American arms, Nasser, whom Ben-Gurion argued was another Hitler, would overrun Israel. Other Israeli figures, such as Shimon Peres and Avraham Harman, argued that Israel faced particular threats: primarily Soviet jets and bombers "might well be able to deliver a knockout first punch by leveling Israel's handful of airfields" (p. 149). The result would be a shift not only in U.S. policy but also in U.S.-Israeli relations with the sale of U.S. ground-to-air HAWK missiles. Bass suggests that specific arguments, such as the one presented by Peres, were more successful in gaining U.S. anti-aircraft weapons than Ben-Gurion's generalist approach.

On the other hand, this chapter is problematic due, in great measure, to the author's inability to clearly define his terms. For example, he refers to the relationship between the United States and Israel as an "alliance" and even "a full-blown alliance." An "alliance" is a diplomatic term and a legal status between two or more nations. While the 1962 HAWK sale to Israel might well be the first step towards today's U.S.-Israeli relationship, it would be difficult to call that relationship an "alliance," let alone "a full-blown alliance." The United States does not have the same military treaties with Israel that it has with NATO members. While the United States is the main arms provider to Israel, there is no American obligation to come to the aid of Israel if it is ever attacked. While the relationship between the United States and Israel certainly contains many of the characteristics of an alliance, there are no treaties, Exec-

utive Orders, or other constraints on the United States, unlike American obligations with members of NATO, for example.

Another important chapter, both in adding to our understanding of the Kennedy administration as well as to the larger question today regarding the issue of Israel's nuclear weapons as a deterrent, is entitled "The Delicate Matter." In it, Bass examines the Kennedy administration's attempts to prevent Israel from acquiring weapons of mass destruction. While the players are different, the story is very familiar: a Middle East power is suspected of developing weapons of mass destruction. The United States insists on inspections, although the inspected party hides all evidence that it is using its nuclear reactor for anything but peaceful purposes. According to Bass, Israel's strategy was to allow U.S. inspectors access to Dimona, but not to provide any incriminating evidence to those inspectors. "Israel seemed bent on secrecy," argues Bass (p. 199).

While this work is important because it is the first relatively full examination of Kennedy's policies towards Israel, it is, nonetheless, sticky in some areas. For example, Bass is certainly not strictly even-handed in his dealings with both Israeli and Palestinian officials. While he introduced Shimon Peres as "the future Israeli prime minister and Nobel Peace Prize winner" (p. 144), he noted only that Yasir Arafat, the co-recipient of that Nobel Prize, replaced Ahmed Shuqairi as the head of the Palestine Liberation Organization (pp. 76, 77).

When speaking of the Israeli government, Bass routinely calls it "Jerusalem," yet Jerusalem was not a unified city--Israel occupied only East Jerusalem during the Kennedy administration. "Jerusalem" did not become Israel's capital until after the 1967 War. Yet the biggest problem, as noted above, is the way that Bass plays fast and loose with terms such as "alliance" and "full-blown military alliance." He needs to define the former and he needs to provide evidence as to

when the latter commenced. Perhaps then, my major grievance with the book is Bass's tendency to stray away from his finely honed thesis: by looking at the actions of the Kennedy administration, one can see how the U.S.-Israeli relationship, that we know today, first began. The book was a much better read for me once I substituted "special relationship" for Bass's "full-blown military alliance."

Bass relies on a plethora of secondary source information from such noted Middle East experts as George Lenczowski, Steven Spiegel, and Philip Mattar, and documents from Israeli and American archives. He also sprinkles the book with newspaper articles and editorials, and notes or recollections from private conversations he has had with Israelis, such as Shabtai Teveth, who Bass describes as "Ben-Gurion's leading biographer" (p. 221). The research was well done and the problems associated with such an undertaking are neither surprising nor do they nullify Bass's thesis that the fulcrum from which U.S.-Israeli relations have turned ever since was established during the Kennedy administration.

Most books that examine U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East during the Cold War do not cover the Kennedy administration with the same depth and scope as other presidential administrations. One exception might be Steven Spiegel's 1985 work *The Other Arab-Israeli Conflict: Making America's Middle East Policy from Truman to Reagan*. Spiegel sheds light on what he considers to be the major themes of the Kennedy administration's Middle East policy: Kennedy's courting of Egypt; the tug-of-war between the White House (through the National Security Council) and the State Department regarding the steering of U.S. foreign policy; the Yemen crisis; HAWK sales; the Johnson Plan; and diplomacy over Israel's drive to procure weapons of mass destruction at Dimona. In other words, Bass covers the same themes as did Spiegel in 1985, which raises the question: what is the significance of the Bass text? It is im-

portant because it is the first book to examine, in depth and scope, the development of the "special relationship" that has characterized U.S.-Israeli relations ever since.

This is an important book because it is the first scholarly attempt to examine a presidency that traditionally has been overlooked regarding the development of the Middle East during the Cold War. It raises new questions regarding the development of the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel. Moreover, it challenges standing arguments, for example Bass's stipulation that the sale of American HAWK missiles to Israel was not an attempt of the U.S. government to slow or reverse Israel's drive to procure weapons of mass destruction, as the historian Douglas Little argued ten years ago. Thus, this book will necessarily facilitate further discussion and research among neophytes and subject-matter experts alike.

If there is additional discussion of this review, you may access it through the network, at <https://networks.h-net.org/h-levant>

**Citation:** J. Ross-Nazzal. Review of Bass, Warren. *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance.* ; Warren Bass. *Support Any Friend: Kennedy's Middle East and the Making of the U.S.-Israel Alliance.* H-Levant, H-Net Reviews. January, 2005.

**URL:** <https://www.h-net.org/reviews/showrev.php?id=10172>



This work is licensed under a Creative Commons Attribution-Noncommercial-No Derivative Works 3.0 United States License.