

Obama and Israel: A Preliminary Assessment

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The beginning of the Barack Obama presidency looked promising for American–Israeli relations. The new president created the impression that he would continue the historical “special relationship” between the two states, as almost all American presidents have done since the establishment of Israel.¹ During his election campaign, Obama defined Israel as a major US ally and declared his unequivocal support for close US–Israeli relations. American Jews enthusiastically cast their ballot for Obama, and two American Jews, Rahm Emanuel, whose father is an Israeli, and David Axelrod, became key officials at the White House.

Obama came to office with a new and idealistic foreign policy agenda and a commitment to change the status and international image of the US, especially in the Middle East and the Muslim world.² He especially wanted to realign the international system and to effectively combat global terrorism. However, he sought to accomplish these goals with a very different strategy than that of his predecessor. That is, he planned to replace President Bush’s exclusionary foreign policy, unilateralism, use of force, and preventive war with multilateral diplomacy, close cooperation with allies and international organizations including the UN, engagement with adversaries such as Iran and Syria, and resolution of thorny international conflicts such as the Palestinian–Israeli one.³ He also placed the wider Middle East at the top of his foreign policy agenda.

In the February 2009 Knesset elections in Israel, President Obama hoped for a victory by the centrist party Kadima because he thought it would be more amenable to his ambitious plan to resolve the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. Tzipi Livni, the party head, however, did not garner sufficient strength to form a coalition government. Her rival, Benjamin Netanyahu, established a center-right coalition government. He invited Kadima to join his coalition but Livni refused. Although Obama and Netanyahu ostensibly subscribe to conflicting political ideologies, both men have demonstrated sufficient pragmatism to recognize the limits of ideology—Obama

during the first months of his presidency and Netanyahu during his first term as prime minister.

President Obama, for example, planned to participate in the April 2009 UN Durban Review Conference Against Racism as part of his desire to alter the US policy towards the UN. The previous World Conference Against Racism, held in Durban, South Africa in 2001, had been hijacked by Arab and Muslim states who adopted extreme anti-Israeli and anti-Western platforms and resolutions. In response, the US withdrew from the conference. A similar obstacle emerged with the second conference. Leaders of the gathering, “distinguished champions of human rights” such as Iran, Libya, Cuba and Russia, prepared extreme draft resolutions that again singled out Israel for harsh condemnation, demonization and delegitimization. The resolutions were also critical of the US and the West. President Obama dispatched officials to the UN to examine whether these draft resolutions could be modified. The officials returned empty handed and Obama determined that under these conditions the US would not participate. That decision however, was inspired much more by the UN’s flagrant refusal to consider the US position rather than by the harsh anti-Israeli resolutions.

During his first term as prime minister (1996–1999) Netanyahu demonstrated considerable pragmatism. He implemented an agreement to withdraw Israeli forces from Hebron and transfer control over the city to the Palestinian Authority (PA). In October 1998, he joined a conference with President Bill Clinton and Palestinian Authority leader Yasir Arafat and signed the Wye River Memorandum, which required Israeli transfer of additional territory in the West Bank to the PA. He even secretly negotiated with Syria via his American confidant Ronald Lauder. While serving as minister of finance in the government of Ariel Sharon (2001–2005), Netanyahu first voted for unilateral Israeli disengagement from Gaza, and later expressed regret in having taken that decision.

Obama’s Middle Eastern Policy

Despite the promising potential for continued cooperation between the US and Israel, President Obama’s actions in his first eight months in office have created the impression that he has departed from the “special relationship” between the two allies and may be seeking a visible confrontation with Israel. The president’s actions have included:

- The Cairo speech and the elevation of Egypt to the number one US ally in the Middle East;
- The obsession with the settlement freeze to the point of exclusion of all other problems in the Palestinian–Israeli relations;

- The linkage he created between the resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict and the America’s ability to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons;
- The first caustic meeting with Netanyahu in May 2009 compared to the cordial welcome he offered to several Arab leaders, including Mahmoud Abbas, the seemingly inept head of the PA;
- The release of a photo showing him placing his feet on the table while talking on the phone to Netanyahu, an ostensible display of disrespect to the Israeli prime minister;
- The deliberate omission of Israel from his visits to the Middle East. These actions and policies have raised serious questions about Obama’s attitudes toward Israel.

President Obama and his aides believed that there was substantial support for the establishment of a Palestinian state and a settlement freeze among most Israelis and American Jews. They were convinced that tough pressure on the Netanyahu government would force him to change his policy. The results of that pressure, however, were counterproductive and yielded considerable criticism of Obama both in Israel and the US. Under pressure, Netanyahu modified his position on the establishment of a Palestinian state. At a major speech held on June 14, 2009 at Bar-Ilan University’s Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, he accepted the principle of “two states for two peoples” deemed by Obama as critical for any resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict. However, Netanyahu added certain conditions, such as Palestinian recognition of Israel as a Jewish state, which the Palestinians swiftly rejected. Given his political ideology and the constraints of his coalition, it was extremely difficult for Netanyahu to make the Bar-Ilan statement. However, President Obama’s reaction was only lukewarm.

Since the beginning of the Oslo peace process, a majority of Israelis have been ready to accept the establishment of a Palestinian state. But after almost a decade of Palestinian terrorism, serious doubts have emerged about the Palestinian willingness to settle the conflict. It is not at all clear that the two-state solution will provide an efficacious resolution of the conflict given the present conditions in the West Bank and Gaza. The reasons for that skepticism is the failure to make any progress despite the complete withdrawal from Gaza and Lebanon, as well as the dismantling of all the settlements in Gaza and even a few in the West Bank. Moreover, the subsequent rise to power of Iranian proxies on Israel’s borders, Hizbullah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, and the military operations that those proxies provoked have only reinforced Israeli doubts. The impotence of Fatah and the PA, along with the two failures of the Palestinians to accept unprecedented Israeli concessions and peace proposals successively offered by Prime Minister Ehud Barak and President Bill Clinton in 2000 and by Prime Minister Ehud Olmert

in 2008, are also seen as evidence of the Palestinians' inability or unwillingness to "get their act together."⁴

For his part, President Obama has completely ignored the effects of all these events on most Israelis, Americans and American Jews. Public opinion in Israel supported Netanyahu in resisting Obama's demand for a complete settlement freeze that includes Jerusalem and the big blocs of Jewish cities and towns in the West Bank such as Ma'ale Adumim. The Cairo speech and the pressure on Israel to introduce a settlement freeze led the Arabs to believe that they do not have to contribute anything to the process as Washington will do all the work for them. Obama's obsession with the settlement freeze led Israelis to believe that either he does not understand Middle Eastern politics or that he is seeking a highly visible confrontation with Israel in order to improve the US image in the Arab and the Muslim world.

President Obama's timetable for complete resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict was determined by the American political clock, not the clock of Middle Eastern realities. The American leader clearly wants a major success in foreign policy in the next two years to ensure his reelection in 2012. During their last year in office, presidents Clinton and Bush respectively adopted similar fast and totally unrealistic timetables in the hopes of achieving a breakthrough in Arab–Israeli relations. Both efforts failed. In addition, President Obama conveniently ignored one of the most serious obstacles to conflict resolution: Hamas. The challenge is ensuring that a Palestinian state in the West Bank will not be ruled by an Iranian extremist and fundamentalist terror proxy. President Obama's and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's solution is a Fatah-Hamas government of national unity. They probably assume that such a government will be dominated by Fatah, but the reality is likely to be exactly the opposite.

At least for the foreseeable future, Iran is the major challenge for Israel, not the Palestinian–Israeli conflict—and President Obama's handling of Iran has been problematic to say the least.⁵ The US, Israel and many states, even Arab and Muslim ones, agree that nuclear Iran represents the major threat to security and stability in the world. On several occasions, the president stated that Iran should not be allowed to acquire nuclear weapons, but his approach to the problem is based on a false assumption. It always sounds pragmatic to negotiate with enemies, but the problem with Iran has never been a lack of negotiations. For several years, with American blessing and support, the EU via a team consisting of the UK, Germany and France (EU3) conducted intensive negotiations with Iran aimed at halting the Iranian nuclear arms program. These negotiations have failed because Iran is determined to acquire nuclear bombs.

Iran wants negotiations with the US for three reasons: to earn more time to complete the nuclear arms project, to acquire legitimacy for the Islamic fundamentalist regime—especially after the recent rigged presidential elections—and finally to prevent a potential American or Israeli military strike. Israel calls for much wider and tougher sanctions against Iran, and on a moral basis opposes negotiations with a regime that has repeatedly called for its destruction. Israel suggests that if President Obama were to decide to start negotiations, he should set a short deadline, and in case of failure take the necessary actions such as harsher sanctions and military blockade of the Persian Gulf. So far, the president's plan to engage Iran has not produced any results and Israel is worried that the American leader will reach this difficult dilemma: either allow Iran to become a nuclear power or use military force. Israel further worries that if this dilemma were to materialize, President Obama would accept a nuclear Iran rather than use force.

The Obama administration has argued that resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict—and in fact of the Arab–Israeli conflict—is vital for the effective containment of Iran's nuclear ambitions. His assumption is that as long as these conflicts are not resolved it will be difficult for the pro-American Arab regimes to align themselves with the US. This linkage is strange. The strategy assumes that the Arab states have no independent interest in containing Iran and that they subordinate their vital security interests to Palestinian interests. Despite the heavy rhetoric in favor of the Palestinians, this subordination has never occurred. In Israeli eyes, any linkage between Iran and the resolution of the Palestinian–Israeli conflict would be entirely counterproductive. Israel cannot afford to take the risks involved in establishing a Palestinian state in the West Bank, in which Iran continues to support, equip, and train Hamas and Hizbullah as its proxies. Nuclear Iran would make another Hamastan in the West Bank a security nightmare to Israel. Thus, weakening Iran and preventing it from becoming a nuclear power are prerequisites for Israeli backing for the establishment of a Palestinian state in the West Bank.

President Obama decided to make Egypt the key US ally in the Middle East. He delivered his speech in Cairo and has already met with President Mubarak three times. Mubarak shares many of the American leader's convictions and assumptions about the conditions needed to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict. Yet, while Obama has called upon the ostensibly pro-American Arab states, including Egypt, to adopt new confidence-building measures toward Israel such as allowing Israeli airlines to fly over their territories, establishing semi-diplomatic and commercial offices, and opening the borders for businessmen and tourists, Mubarak has said that these measures will come only after Israel signs peace agreements with all of its Arab neighbors. If the Arab states do not offer any reciprocal gestures and concessions, then Obama's continuing insistence on a settlement freeze would be seen as excessive, one-sided and unfounded.

Public Opinion and Israel

The “special relationship” between the US and Israel relies on common values, a similar history, the Judeo-Christian tradition and mutual strategic interests. Americans have internalized these foundations and have consistently supported Israel and a strong US–Israeli partnership.⁶ The well-being of Israel and American–Israeli relations has also been a very important issue for American Jews. The strength of the pro-Israel lobby in Washington (AIPAC) has been primarily based on these trends. Most presidents and lawmakers have been aware of the strong support for Israel in American public opinion, and over the years have acted upon the deep-seated favorable sentiments for the Jewish state.

President Obama owes much of his popularity and victory in the 2008 elections to his ability to mobilize public support for his domestic and foreign policies. He appears frequently in the news media and visits symbolic places both in the US and abroad. His appearances contain specific messages designed to cultivate public support for his ideas. His aides constantly monitor trends in public opinion and attempt to formulate efficient communication strategies to shape them.

Despite these efforts, American public opinion does not support Obama’s promotion of Egypt to be the key US ally in the Middle East. A poll taken by the Rasmussen organization at the beginning of August 2009 reveals that only 39 percent of the public consider Egypt as a US ally while 9 percent view that country as an enemy; for 42 percent Egypt falls somewhere in between. In striking contrast, 70 percent of the respondents consider Israel a US ally, nearly twice the finding for Egypt.

President Obama’s highly publicized outreach to the Arab world notwithstanding, according to a July Rasmussen poll, only 21 percent of the American public believe that US relations with the Arab world will improve in the next year. More respondents, 25 percent, believe they will actually get worse, while 44 percent think they will be about the same. Overall, only 48 percent say Obama’s Middle East policy is about right, while 35 percent think that he is not supportive enough of Israel.

Although there has been a visible tilt in Obama’s attitude towards the Palestinians, in March 2009 a Gallup poll revealed that the American public’s views toward the Israeli–Palestinian conflict have not changed: nearly 6 in 10 (59 percent) say their sympathies in the conflict lie more with the Israelis; just 18 percent side with the Palestinians. Additionally, 63 percent of Americans expressed a favorable view of Israel while only 29 percent had an unfavorable view. By contrast, the Palestinian Authority is seen in a mostly negative light, with only 15 percent viewing it positively and 73 percent negatively.

While Obama and his staff constantly project a highly optimistic assessment of the chance to rapidly achieve Arab–Israeli peace, the public has remained highly skeptical. A Gallup poll found in June 2009 that only one-third of the respondents agreed with the statement that “there will come a time when Israel and the Arab nations will be able to settle their differences and live in peace”; 66 percent disagreed. According to Gallup, attitudes about the chances of Middle East peace are the most pessimistic they have been in more than a decade of polling on this question.

According to a June Rasmussen poll, 81 percent agree with Netanyahu that the Palestinians must recognize Israel as part of a peace agreement but only 27 percent say that it is even somewhat likely that Palestinian leaders will make such a concession, while only 6 percent say it is very likely.

Conclusion

President Obama’s present strategy in the Middle East was designed to open a new page in American relations with the Arab and the Muslim world. The US image in the Arab countries has never been positive, with recent wars in Afghanistan and Iraq contributing to still more negative feelings. The new strategy included a more “evenhanded” approach to Israel and a determined effort to resolve the Arab–Israeli conflict which Washington views as a prerequisite to improving the US standing in the Arab world and to contain Iran. President Obama felt that American–Israeli relations during the Bush administration were too close and sought to distance himself from Jerusalem. Obviously, the president believes that he has restored much-needed balance between diverse American interests in the Middle East. However, from the Israeli perspective, it seems that the “special relationship” between the two countries has been damaged and Washington has taken steps that could compromise Israel’s vital security needs.

Contrary to President Obama’s expectations, most Israelis, most Americans and most American Jews have held serious reservations about his policies in the Middle East and his attitudes toward Israel. At a White House meeting of a cherry-picked group of American Jewish leaders considerable dissatisfaction with the president’s Mideast policies was registered. However, it seems that the American leader did not come to listen to the representatives of the major Jewish organizations; he only wanted to secure his image and prevent further deterioration of his standing among American Jews. Seventy-one senators politely wrote President Obama on August 10, 2009 that he needs to better balance his Middle Eastern strategy: They disagreed with his one-sided pressure on Israel; they praised the Netanyahu government for taking positive steps toward peace, and told the president to obtain similar concessions from the Arab states.

Clearly, President Obama's strategy for the Middle East is not working. A confrontation with Israel of the kind that has developed at the beginning of his term serves neither American interests nor the cause of peace. He needs to better listen to voices that know and understand the realities of the Middle East and to American public opinion and members of Congress. At the end of the day President Obama will have to modify his policies and preferences concerning Israel and the Middle East. A substantial revision is also required to reduce the gap between his campaign promises and his actions as president.

Notes

- ¹ On the special US–Israel relationship, see Eytan Gilboa and Efraim Inbar (eds.), *US–Israeli Relations in a New Era: Issues and Challenges after 9/11* (London, 2009); Walter Russell Mead, “The New Israel and the Old: Why Gentile Americans Back the Jewish State,” *Foreign Affairs*, LXXXVII:4 (2008), 28–46; Michelle Mart, *Eye on Israel: How America Came to View Israel as an Ally* (Albany, 2006); Elizabeth Stephens, *US Policy towards Israel: The Role of Political Culture in Defining the Special Relationship* (Brighton, 2006).
- ² Barack Obama, “Renewing American Leadership,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August, 2007); Robert Dreyfuss, “Obama’s Evolving Foreign Policy,” *The Nation* (July 21, 2008); Robert J. Pranger, “American Foreign Policy: Types, Choices, Futures, Priorities.” *Mediterranean Quarterly*, XX:1(2009), 1–14.
- ³ Barry Rubin, “US Middle East Policy: Too Many Challenges and Yet a Single Theme,” *Middle East Review of International Affairs*, XIII: 2 (June 2009).
- ⁴ On Clinton’s efforts, see Bill Clinton, *My Life* (New York, 2004); Dennis Ross, *The Missing Peace* (New York, 2004). On the viability of a Palestinian state, see Efraim Inbar, “The Rise and Demise of the Two-State Paradigm,” *Orbis*, LII: 2 (2009), 265–283; Giora Eiland, *Rethinking the Two-State Solution* (Washington, DC, 2008).
- ⁵ Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: US Concerns and Policy Responses* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 2009).
- ⁶ See my *American Public Opinion towards Israel and the Arab–Israeli Conflict* (Lexington, 1987); “The Public Dimension of American–Israeli Relations: A Comparative Analysis” in Eytan Gilboa and Efraim Inbar, (eds.), op. cit., pp. 53–75.