

Israel and the US: That Bad?

Oded Eran

The first part of President Obama's term sparked a major public outcry both in the US and Israel that reached unprecedented dimensions of populism, sensationalism, and irresponsibility. Many commentators either lacked or ignored the relevant historical perspectives, and in several cases relied on gut feelings rather than on factual evidence.

Tensions between the Israeli and US administrations indeed exist, mostly on the issue of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but they must be examined in their historical and political perspectives before a conclusion is reached that President Obama has in fact broken away from previously held norms in the bilateral relations. The issue is so central, sensitive, and crucial to Israel's long term strategic assessment that it cannot and should not be dealt with in a populist manner.

Since 1967 the major bone of contention between Israel and the US has been the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. There was hardly a moment when the two countries agreed on the three core issues in this conflict: borders, Jerusalem, and, to some extent, refugees. The US position on the principal core issue – borders between Israel and its neighbors – was pronounced as early as December 1969, when then-US Secretary of State William Rogers said, "Any change in the pre-existing lines should not reflect the weight of conquest and should be confined to insubstantial alterations."¹

On December 22, 1969 the Israeli cabinet not only rejected the Rogers Plan, as it became known, but also adopted a response that David Korn, a senior American diplomat at the time, regarded as a rebuke. The Israeli statement said, "If these proposals were to be carried out, Israel's security and peace would be in very grave danger. Israel will not be sacrificed by any

Dr. Oded Eran, director of INSS

power policy, and will reject any attempt to impose a forced solution upon it." And, "The proposals submitted by the US cannot but be construed by the aggressive Arab rulers as an attempt to appease them at Israel's expense."² Israel, in other words, indirectly accused the US administration of endangering Israel's security and appeasing the Arabs. Significantly, this language was used by a Labor Party-led Israeli government.

The 1969 Rogers formula has remained the cornerstone of US policy on this issue, notwithstanding subsequent shifts in nuance and context. Even the April 14, 2004 letter by President George W. Bush to Prime Minister Sharon, for example, should not be construed as a change in policy. President Bush wrote, "In light of new realities on the ground, including already existing major Israeli population centers, it is unrealistic to expect that the outcome of final status negotiations will be a full return to the armistice lines of 1949." But then the President added, "It is realistic to expect that any final status agreement will only be achieved on the basis of mutually agreed changes that reflect these realities."³ He thus subjected changes in the 1967 lines to Palestinian consent.

More specifically, it is sufficient to say that the Palestinians calculate the built-up settlement areas as less than 2 percent of the West Bank, while the very far reaching proposal of former prime minister Olmert suggested that Israel retain 6.5 percent, albeit with an almost 1:1 land swap.⁴ The Clinton parameters of December 2000 range between 4-6

percent, certainly less than the 8.5 percent that is on the western side of the security fence according to its current demarcation. In other words, US ideas on borders have long been at odds – at least somewhat – with Israeli approaches.

The building of Jewish suburbs beyond the pre-1967 lines, both in East Jerusalem and the West Bank, has caused severe tensions between Israeli governments and US administrations. All US presidents opposed this construction, and President George H. W. Bush went further when in September 1991 he persuaded the US Congress

to delay granting US guarantees to loans Israel raised in the US for fear that some of the funds would be used for settlement building. Following the Labor Party victory in the June 1992 election, the US president and

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the Congress approved the loan guarantees. The US has over the years reduced more than \$1.5 billion from the loan guarantees, equal to the sum Israel has been estimated by the US to have spent on building settlements.

As an expression of displeasure with Israel and in a move to push Israel to accept certain US proposals and ideas on how to advance the Arab-Israeli peace process, at least two former US administrations have threatened Israel with the suspension of US arms shipments to Israel. Note that President Obama's administration has resorted to none of the measures or language used by some of the previous US administrations. Furthermore, the US has recently added \$205 million to the already substantial aid package for the Israeli Iron Dome project against short range rockets.

The Israeli, American, and international press predict that the US will come out with its own blueprint for the solution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Even if the White House indeed issues such a formula without consulting and informing Israel in advance, it will not constitute a deviation from a familiar pattern of communication between the two governments. The norm has been the two surprising one another rather than conducting prior consultations and maintaining coordination.

The US surprised Israel with the 1969 Rogers Plan, with the October 1, 1977 agreement with the Soviet Union on the guidelines for the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, with the September 1, 1982 Reagan Plan, with the December 15, 1988 opening of a dialogue with the PLO, and with the December 26, 2000 Clinton proposal. It is quite possible that if and when President Obama decides to issue his own plan on how to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, most Israelis – perhaps with too short lived memories – will not juxtapose it with the list above.

Furthermore, most Israelis will likely forget that Israel's record in not informing the US of major political initiatives is not much shorter. Partly as a result of the US-Soviet Union agreement of October 1, 1977, Israel and Egypt began secret talks that eventually led to President Sadat's visit to Israel and then to the 1979 Treaty of Peace. The US was not privy to the secret talks.

In December 1992 Israel launched secret talks with the PLO, which led to the September 13, 1993 Oslo Accord. The US, which was informed post factum, was left to host the signing ceremony on the White House lawn. Most of the negotiations between Israel and Jordan were also held

away from American eyes and ears. From this point of view, one can say that proximity talks between Israel and the Palestinians are a novelty. Ever since the peace treaty between Egypt and Israel this method was used only between Syria and Israel with Turkey as the go-between.

However, relating the conduct of President Obama vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to the general pattern in US-Israel relations does not mean the administration did not commit errors of judgment and policy. This can equally be said about the current Israeli government. Both the US and the Israeli governments failed in their assessment of the other. Israel overestimated the pressures that dealing with the global crisis would put on the administration, believing it would lower the Middle East on the president's agenda. It did not fully assess the connection Washington has drawn between dealing with Iran, pulling out from Iraq, and fighting in Af-Pak and the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Prime Minister Netanyahu has therefore failed to present to President Obama a viable action plan that could create a better climate in the bilateral relations. For example, indicating willingness in the first meeting in the White House to make a public statement in support of a two-state solution might well have reduced much of the tensions that later ensued between the two administrations. Instead, Israel is now seen as being coerced by the US into taking certain measures, including making a belated and reluctant statement recognizing the two-state solution.

Unless one attributes to the current US administration a deliberate policy of removing the term "special" when describing the relationship, the approach to Israel was not free of errors of judgment. While it is arguable whether President Obama's Cairo speech is an appeasement of the Arabs and Muslims, it was certainly an affront to the Jews and Israel to put the Holocaust on par with the suffering of the Palestinians. By now it is recognized, including in the US Congress, that President Obama erred in sidestepping Jerusalem while paying visits to several Muslim/Arab capitals.

A second error, at least in terms of rhetoric, appeared in a statement by General David Petraeus to the US Senate Armed Services Committee on March 16, 2010:

Insufficient progress towards a comprehensive Middle East peace: the enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR [area of responsibility].

Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of US favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of US partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qa-eda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas.⁵

Israeli journalists in Washington hurriedly reported that General Petraeus accused Israel of standing in the US's way of attaining its interests in the region. One needs very fine linguistic tools to interpret the statement differently.

On the other side of the equation, much has been written about the Israeli decision during Vice President Biden's visit in March 2010 to issue a building permit for 1,600 new housing units in a Jerusalem suburb beyond the 1967 line. Describing Israel's handling of this incident as clumsy is an understatement.

Both Israel and the US have employed the traditional "assets" in the battle of words. Well known American columnists have conveyed the sense of mistrust felt in the White House towards Prime Minister Netanyahu, while on April 15, 2010 the President of the World Jewish Congress published a full page letter to President Obama questioning, "Is it assumed worsening relations with Israel can improve relations with Muslims?" He continued, "Appeasement does not work."⁶

The two governments have for now embarked on an effort to lower the flames, as both deem these exchanges running counter to their immediate interests. But the lull is most likely temporary. Both the moratorium on building in the settlements and the four-month period approved by the Arab League for the proximity talks run their course in September. That may create the first bumper. Further down the road, the relations between the two countries could be rocked by a total collapse of the Israeli-Palestinian

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talks, be they direct or indirect, and/or the failure of the international efforts to stop the Iranian nuclear project.

The failure of the negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians may, under Palestinian-Arab pressure, drive the US and its partners in the Quartet into issuing a blueprint for establishing a Palestinian state. This would most probably occur without prior consultations with Israel, causing the widening of the rift between Washington and Jerusalem. Failure of the US to veto a resolution at the UN Security Council approving the Palestinian state and its territorial attributes might cause a serious crisis in the US-Israel relations.

The statement by General Petraeus clearly links the issues of the peace process between Israel and its neighbors with the US success of dealing with Iran, Iraq, and Afghanistan. Even an indirect attempt to pin a US failure on these latter fronts on a failed peace process could further exacerbate the relations with Israel.

One important consideration has been absent from the debate. US officialdom, including President Obama, Vice President Biden, and Secretary of State Clinton, all continue to emphasize the US commitment to Israel's security. During his visit to Israel, Vice President Biden stated,

I am here to remind you, though I hope you will never forget, that America stands with you shoulder-to-shoulder in facing these threats. President Obama and I represent an unbroken chain of American leaders who have understood this critical, strategic relationship. As the President said recently, "I will never waver from ensuring Israel's security and helping them secure themselves in what is a very hostile region." President Obama has not only stated those words, he has translated that vow into action in his first years in ways both known to the public and not known to you, as Prime Minister Netanyahu eloquently acknowledged the other day when he and I were meeting and had a short press conference that followed. Beyond providing Israel nearly \$3 billion in military aid each and every year, we have reinvigorated defense consultations and redoubled our efforts to ensure that Israel's...forces will always maintain a qualitative edge.⁷

Nonetheless, attention should be paid to the possible damage that has been dealt the overall Israeli posture of deterrence as a result of perceptions among many in the Middle East that statements such as

the one by Vice President Biden do not reflect the true state of relations between Israel and the US. The perceptions, valid or false, can become significant elements in a decision making process among the various Middle East players, a risk that has to be seriously considered by key US and Israeli politicians when they make public statements pertaining to bilateral relations.

Unrelated to the solution of the Arab-Israeli conflict, the two governments may find themselves at odds on a different nuclear issue, the one relating to the Israeli file. After failing some 50 years ago to find a way of monitoring the Israeli facilities, US administration opted to shelve the issue rather than allowing it to become a constant irritant. President Obama's ideological approach to the subject of non-proliferation has set off an alarm in Israel. In various official statements the president, secretary of state, and others have expressed the US determination to work for a world free of nuclear weapons. Secretary of State Clinton said in the opening statement of the NPT Review Conference on May 3, 2010, "We want to reaffirm our commitment to the objective of a Middle East free of these weapons of mass destruction, and we are prepared to support practical measures that will move us toward achieving that objective."⁸

The US had almost no option but to vote for the final document of the NPT Review Conference, which called for Israel to accede to the NPT and place all its nuclear facilities under comprehensive IAEA safeguards. It also called for a conference in 2012 on the establishment of a zone free of WMD, based on terms of reference from the 1995 Resolution on the Middle East. While the call for Israel to adhere to the NPT is not new, the idea of a regional conference is.

The White House issued a formal statement by National Security Advisor Jim Jones in which he stated that the proposed 2012 conference will draw its mandate from the countries in the region, that to ensure that it takes into account the interests of all regional states, the US has decided to co-sponsor the conference, and that along with other co-sponsors, it will insist that the conference operates only by consensus among the regional countries and that this consensus will be required

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for agreements, possible further discussions, and follow-up actions. To clinch all these stipulations, General Jones stated that, "The United States will not permit a conference or actions that could jeopardize Israel's national security. We will not accept any approach that singles out Israel or sets unrealistic expectations."⁹ The US deplored the fact that Israel was singled out in the final document and that Iran was not mentioned.

These assurances notwithstanding, the US vote is viewed in Israel with some alarm. The US not only failed to delete the specific references to Israel, but has painted itself as the one to block the 2012 conference from becoming an anti-Israel event and from adopting anti-Israeli resolutions, increasing Israel's dependence on the US's goodwill in this respect. Beyond the nuclear aspect, it will be interesting to watch what linkages will emerge between the US handling of this particular issue, the effort to block the Iranian nuclear project, and the overall peace process.

The second half of President Obama's tenure will be marked by significant developments in the broader Middle East. They will include the thinning of the US presence in Iraq, the crucial stage in blocking Iran's road to military nuclear capabilities, further stabilization of the situation in Afghanistan, and attempts to advance the peace process between Israel and its neighbors. The linkage between these issues – as well as the linkage to other important questions related, for example, to leadership changes in the region – is certainly a question on which the two governments differ. The differences of opinions are legitimate, but the governments should be careful to conduct the debate in a way which does not weaken them both.

Notes

- 1 Israel Ministry of Foreign Affairs website: www.mfa.gov.il.
- 2 Ibid.
- 3 Ibid.
- 4 Discussion by Dr. Saeb Erekat at INSS, May 16, 2010.
- 5 Armed-Services.senate/gov. (Hearings).
- 6 World Jewish Congress website.
- 7 White House website.
- 8 US Department of State website, May 3, 2010.
- 9 The White House, Office, Statement by the National Security Advisor, General James L. Jones, on the Non-Proliferation Treaty Review Conference, May 28, 2010, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/statement-national-security-advisor-general-james-l-jones-non-proliferation-treaty->