

How Election-Year Politics Shape US Policy Towards the Israel-Iran Nuclear Dispute

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KARIM SHANAHAN, OCT 25 2012

The Influence of Domestic and Election Year Politics on Shaping U.S. Foreign Policy in the Iran-Israel Nuclear Dispute

Iran's defiance of the international community in the quest to realize its nuclear ambitions has resulted in an international crisis with long-reaching effects. As Iran makes strides towards enriching uranium sufficient to create a viable nuclear weapon, regional stability in the Middle East weakens. The Israeli government views Iran's possession of a nuclear weapon as an existential threat, and, as such, has threatened to attack Iranian nuclear facilities. President Obama faces the challenge of preventing Iran from realizing its ambition to create a nuclear weapon and showing solidarity with and support of Israel, while also averting regional instability in the Middle East and avoiding a potential war. These external forces combined with domestic pressures, particularly pleasing his constituency without alienating Jewish voters in America, have an indelible impact on U.S. foreign policy and the particular plan of action necessary to mitigate crisis in the Middle East.

Christopher Hill defines foreign policy succinctly as "the sum of official external relations"[1] pursued by a state or actor. The term foreign policy typically conjures up images of interdependent states in an increasingly globalizing world choosing the best strategies to protect their greater national interests. These interests generally involve military, economic, political, and diplomatic concerns and considerations. It seems apparent that the actions, resources, and decisions of other states influence foreign policy choices; nevertheless, the impact of domestic politics on the creation of foreign policy cannot be understated.

This impact on policy creation can best be seen and identified where there is a conflict between interests at home and abroad. Barbara Farnham explains, "The nature of the political context suggests that except in cases of extreme threat to national security, domestic imperatives will not be easily traded off against international interests." [2] Similarly, Bruce Jentleson sees the president's ability to act as being heavily influenced and restricted by domestic politics. He describes it as a competition for power between parties, branches, individuals, and institutions, including the media and interests groups. The president has power, but this power is limited by congressional ratifications and confirmations. The lobbying of interest groups and the media, especially in today's world of around-the-clock political news, can severely hinder or increase presidential power. By shaping public opinion, the media can place real-time pressure on policy makers. This tactic of influencing policy officials has been evident since the Vietnam War, but really rose to prominence during the Persian Gulf War when America was able to tune in to see the attack as it was being waged in Iraq. During the Persian Gulf War, the role of the media, and, in particular, its role in foreign policy, became "more graphic and more evident than every before." [3]

Jentleson contends that the news media has three "modes of influence" [4] on the creation of foreign policy. The first is agenda setting, which simply means the media has the ability to influence what the general public is exposed to and thinks about. Issues that perhaps are not on the radar of the majority of American minds can easily become a hot topic with the right amount of media coverage. He writes:

The media plays a crucial role in determining which issues get focused on and which do not. Conversely, there are

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foreign policy issues that despite their importance don't get media coverage and thus don't get on the agenda—whole “forests” may fall down with no television cameras in sight.[5]

The next logical step after setting the agenda, and the next influential tactic, is shaping public opinion. Simply put, the way in which the media portrays an issue directly affects the way the public will perceive it.[6] By giving a particular issue more coverage than another, the media plays a direct role in determining which issues become a priority to the public and which are seen as less noteworthy. It makes sense that heavy coverage of significant international crises and events can influence foreign policy decisions. One such example is the powerful and penetrating news coverage of the 1979 Iranian hostage crisis, during which Iranian students stormed the American embassy. As the crisis dragged on and media scrutiny continued, it became a focal point of criticism for President Carter during an election year that many feel contributed greatly to his defeat in 1980. According to Peter Bourne, “Because people felt that Carter had not been tough enough in foreign policy, this kind of symbolized for them that some bunch of students could seize American diplomatic officials and hold them prisoner and thumb their nose at the United States.”[7] The hostage crisis is emblematic of how the media's coverage of a foreign policy issue can quite literally and directly affect the political process by shaping public opinion and allowing a consensus to grow. It also ties in with the media's third mode of influence, according to Jentleson, which is direct influence on policy makers. Essentially, the ability of around-the-clock news to repeatedly discuss top stories, show memorable or graphic images, and replay video hour after hour forces the hand of policy makers within the legislative and executive branches of government to respond immediately and in a way that will be best received by the news-watching public.[8] Jentleson summarizes the media's direct impact on foreign policy makers by saying:

Even in noncrisis situations, “What will the press think?” is regularly asked in executive-branch foreign policy meetings. Editorials and op-ed articles have a remarkable influence. Highly critical opinion pieces in major papers such as the New York Times and the Washington Post have been known to prompt hastily called State Department meetings or to make officials forget about whatever else was on their schedule in order to draft a response.[9]

Michael Mastanduno also believes in the influential powers of the “new more assertive media.”[10] He explains that the media has the power to shape government responses to international events and that “the result is often hasty, ill-conceived policies that play to the immediate impulses of the public rather than to the long-term interests of the country.”[11] Mastanduno applies this theory to U.S. foreign policy decisions during the 1990s and determined:

... The Bush administration's last minute decision to send the U.S. military on a humanitarian missions was driven in part by the strong public reaction to the images of starving children conveyed by evening news programs. Similarly, the Clinton administration's subsequent and rather abrupt decision to abandon the military commitment was influenced by the visceral public reaction of outrage to the image of captured U.S. service personnel being dragged through the streets of Mogadishu.[12]

Government officials are well aware of the power of the media, particularly during an election year. President Obama and his advisors must be wary of being seen as another Carter in his dealings with Iran. If he comes across as being too soft, especially if Iran ends up developing the ability to produce nuclear weapons, Republican rivals will pounce and place the blame squarely on his shoulders. Every decision the Obama administration makes between today and the election will be thoroughly scrutinized by the media.

Interest groups also play a domineering role in policy creation. According to Jentleson, they “seek to influence foreign policy according to strategies aimed at various foreign policy actors.”[13] Perhaps the most powerful and influential interest group in the United States is the Israel Lobby. According to Glenn Frankel, the lobby is “a collection of American Jewish organizations, campaign contributors and think tanks — aided by Christian conservatives and other non-Jewish supporters — ... that sees as a principle goal the support and promotion of the interests of the state of Israel.”[14] The lobby's most powerful organization, known as the American-Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has a long history of using its influence to sway policy makers. Jentleson states that during the 1980s, “AIPAC broadened its efforts from being heavily focused on Capitol Hill to work also with mid-level officials in the State and Defense Departments who were involved in U.S.-Israeli relations.”[15] Mastanduno shares a similar viewpoint on the impact of interest groups, and how they take certain authority away from the presidency as

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far as shaping a certain issue. He notes:

Interest groups hoping to influence U.S. foreign policy have a variety of channels through which to exert political pressure. They can “push” on members of the House and Senate, on the White House, and on different agencies of the Executive. The decentralized structure also enables interest groups to play off one branch of government or agency against another, and thereby enhance their potential influence.[16]

Former U.S. Senator Charles Mathias elucidated the Israeli lobby’s influence when he stated: “as a result of the activities of the [Israeli] lobby, Congressional conviction has been measurably reinforced by the knowledge that political sanctions will be applied to any who fail to deliver.”[17] The simple reality in today’s political arena is that a single interest group, if powerful enough, can literally influence the foreign policy decisions of many elected government officials. For this reason, and due to the strength of the Israel lobby when it comes to Middle Eastern foreign policy decisions, the U.S. generally does what Israel wants it to do, even if it is not necessarily in the best interest of the United States. As John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt explain:

The thrust of US policy in the region derives almost entirely from domestic politics, and especially the activities of the ‘Israel Lobby’. Other special-interest groups have managed to skew foreign policy, but no lobby has managed to divert it as far from what the national interest would suggest, while simultaneously convincing Americans that US interests and those of the other country – in this case, Israel – are essentially identical.[18]

It is apparent that anti-American sentiment among enemies of Israel in the Middle East has grown exponentially as a result of continued American support for Israel. The U.S. has been the victim of terrorist attacks both domestically and abroad, after which, the responsible parties have specifically mentioned American support for the continued existence of state of Israel as a motivating factor. Despite this growing international movement of anti-Americanism, support for Israel and foreign policy decisions intended to strengthen the Israeli cause have remained steadfast. It should come as no surprise that Israel receives more foreign aid than any other state, with approximately twenty percent of the U.S. foreign aid budget allocated to them.[19] This fact is a testament to the power of the Israel lobby, and exemplifies how embedded it is in the American political system. Frankel states that the Israeli lobby “commands large majorities” in Congress, and cites AIPAC spokesman Josh Block as saying that working on Capital Hill is “like pushing at an open door.”[20] Ultimately, a politician’s goal is to stay in office, and the lobby knows this. They express their support through substantial campaign donations—donations that are a necessity for any politician’s campaign, particularly a president seeking reelection. The Israel lobby, and AIPAC in particular, will donate heavily to candidates known to be supportive of their cause. In turn, they will provide substantial funding for the opponent of any candidate who seems unsympathetic or insensitive to Israel. The AIPAC website maintains a history of how each member of Congress has voted on their key issues, and since 1990, “pro-Israel interests” have donated approximately \$57 million to campaigns and committees sensitive to their desires.[21] The Washington Post, as reported by Mearsheimer and Walt, estimated that upwards of sixty percent of all democratic presidential campaign funding comes from this group, despite representing less than three percent of the total population.[22] Democratic candidates in presidential campaigns heavily depend on donations from Jewish voters, and President Obama will keep this in mind when dealing with Iran in the upcoming months.

The Israel lobby’s disagreement with policy stipulations presented by President George H.W. Bush stands out as a telling example of their power to influence an election. As Frankel tells it, Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir sought a \$10 billion loan from the U.S., which the U.S. was willing to provide with the stipulation that Israel could not use the aid to expand settlements in the West Bank and Gaza Strip. AIPAC, with Shamir’s blessing, sent over 1000 members to Capitol Hill to lobby Congress, but backed off after President Bush put the spotlight on their activities while simultaneously portraying them as aggressive policy bullies. At the time, Bush was enjoying tremendous popularity on the heels of the Persian Gulf War; nevertheless, just one short year later, he was soundly defeated in critical, Jewish-heavy states like New York, Ohio, and Florida[23] costing him the election to President Clinton. As Mearsheimer and Walt explained, “Jewish voters have high turn-out rates and are concentrated in key states like California, Florida, Illinois, New York, and Pennsylvania. Because they matter in close elections, Presidential candidates go to great lengths not to antagonize Jewish voters.”[24] President Bush, unfortunately, learned this lesson the hard way. As former President Jimmy Carter told George Stephanopoulos in a 2007 interview, “it’s almost

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politically suicidal in the United States for a member of the Congress who wants to seek reelection to take any stand that might be interpreted as anti-policy of the conservative Israeli government, which is equated, as I've seen it myself, as anti-Semitism.”[25] President Bush discovered that it was not only members of Congress who needed to pander to the wants and desires of the Israel lobby. Even the president is not above their reach, and, as such, must keep their interests in mind. Undoubtedly, this fact is well known to the Obama administration, and only adds to the trickiness and uncertainty of the current Iranian nuclear dilemma, especially with the lobby's increasing tendency to lean to the right politically in the name of security.

The domestic politics within the U.S., especially with this being an election year for both Congress and the presidency, is essentially the sole controlling factor in how policy decisions regarding Iran will be made. Benjamin Netanyahu's government in Israel has naturally taken the hardline approach, threatening an attack of Iran and its nuclear facilities if Iran continues on its current course. President Obama has stressed a political and diplomatic solution to the crisis, noting the dangers that a strike on Iran would have on the stability of the region. However, Obama also knows the importance of not alienating his Jewish constituency. Li Guofu explains:

Traditionally, American Jews have supported the Democrats. But this time, they seem unhappy with Obama, whose new approach to deal with Iran and solve the Palestinian problem has been opposed by the Benjamin Netanyahu government in Israel. This presents Republicans the chance of winning over the Jewish lobby to their side, and the scramble to do so is on.”[26]

Peter Trubowitz believes that policy is viewed as the outcome of a political process dictated by a leader who wants to maintain his political power, and that both the distribution of power around the world and domestic politics influences strategic decisions in U.S. foreign policy. The amount of geo-political slack available to a president, along with a desire to please his constituency, is most instrumental in how he makes foreign policy decisions. Rational grand strategy rewards presidents, and the balancing of internal and external forces is crucial. The president cannot turn his back on grand strategies to solely focus on his constituents.[27] As such, President Obama cannot ignore external factors when shaping his foreign policy toward Iran. Regional stability in the Middle East is vital for the health of global markets, with particular regard for the price of oil. War with Iran would devastate stability in the region, but forgoing military conflict and possibly enabling Iran to develop a nuclear weapon would also immediately destabilize the region. Obama is facing an obvious catch-22, but has made it clear, most likely with his constituents in mind, that war is not the answer. In a March 4 address to AIPAC, Obama said, “Already, there is too much loose talk of war. Over the last few weeks such talk has only benefited the Iranian government by driving up the price of oil, which they depend on to fund their nuclear program.”[28] Trubowitz uses the term “guns versus butter” to illustrate the priorities of different political bases and how these priorities affect policy creation. He states, “Leaders ... are indisposed to pursue security strategies that harm the constituencies they depend on.”[29] President Obama's statements and actions have made it clear that, like David Clark, he wonders, “Who needs guns when there's a butter shortage?”[30]

Obama's credibility depends on both the Israelis and the Iranians. His electoral ambitions depend on two leaders who do not have a lot of respect for him— Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The fact that one is an ally and one an adversary puts Obama in a unique, and perhaps, even more vulnerable position. His presidential reelection campaign has and will continue to affect foreign policy decisions towards Iran. Obama is attempting to act as an experienced statesman by talking down to Republicans who are hawkish about going to war with Iran. However, with Jimmy Carter in mind, Republicans have been wise enough to frame this issue as a sign of Obama's weakness. Republican presidential nominee Mitt Romney made no attempt to hide this strategy when he said, “If we re-elect Barack Obama, Iran will have a nuclear weapon; if you elect me as president, Iran will not have a nuclear weapon.”[31] In a New York Times op-ed piece, Aaron David Miller writes:

The narrative is that a president caught up in election-year politics is at the mercy of the Israelis (pushing him to let them attack Iran or do the job for them), their supporters in America (even more worried about Iran with nukes), Congress (pressing the administration to be tougher), and the Republicans (waiting to pounce).[32]

President Obama must continue trying to be rational and balanced, while taking a position that reassures the Israelis

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that the United States is fully behind them. In order to please the Israel lobby and keep their voting power in his corner, he must make Israel feel secure and establish that their interests and U.S. interests coincide. By successfully reassuring the Israelis, Obama is hoping to hold off any preemptive attack on Iran by Israel. He needs to assuage Israel's fears without giving them a blank check on American foreign policy decisions, particularly because Israel's most likely course of action will be unacceptable to Obama's constituency back home. As Trubowitz mentioned, a leader who wants to stay in power must please his constituency, and Obama's primary constituency wants butter and not guns. With Obama's current strategy of supporting crippling economic sanctions on Iran, he is trying to signal to the Iranians that the U.S. is serious about the impermissibility of their nuclear program, while, at the same time, keeping the door open to a diplomatic solution. This is all very difficult to do, particularly during an election year with a powerful opposing party criticizing every decision the president makes.

With Republican candidates preying on the Israel lobby's fears of a nuclear Iran, there is great political risk domestically for Obama. This risk has increased with recent comments made by Prime Minister Netanyahu indicating his impatience with the sanctions and his insistence that Israeli will not "live in the shadow of annihilation."^[33] In an interview with CNN, Netanyahu stated that while the sanctions were having an obvious detrimental effect on Iran's economy, "they haven't rolled back the Iranian [nuclear] program—or even stopped it—by one iota."^[34] While he later claimed that a peaceful solution would be ideal, he also declared ominously, "If the sanctions are going to work, they better work soon."^[35] Iran's open defiance of a UN Security Council order to cease enrichment and all other nuclear activities until its true intentions can be ascertained,^[36] combined with Israel's assumption that the Security Council's measures will be inadequate in resolving the crisis, raise the questions: Will President Obama succumb to the pressures of the domestic political machine? Will he be able to satisfy the desires of the Israel lobby, his constituency, and the State of Israel sufficiently enough to avoid harming his reelection campaign? The jury is still out, but the answers to these questions will undoubtedly play a starring role in the success of his reelection campaign.

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