

The Obama Administration and Israel: Aberration or Harbinger of Change?

Written by Jonathan Sciarcon

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JONATHAN SCIARCON, AUG 29 2016

It would be difficult to argue that the Obama Administration has marked a high point in United States-Israel relations. While some aspects of the relationship, such as intelligence and military cooperation, may be closer than ever, the countries' leaders have been at near constant odds with one another, resulting in numerous public disagreements that have even been labeled as 'crises'. While some believe that the tensions between the US and Israel are largely the result of personal antipathy between the American president and Israeli prime minister, others contend that the issues between the two countries run deeper. The question is: will the Obama Administration's inconsistent relationship with Israel likely be viewed in hindsight as an aberration or will future historians view it as the beginning of a new, more distant, relationship between the two countries?

Believing that peace in Israel/Palestine was essential for the US' security interests in the Middle East, President Obama came to office in January 2009 with the goal of bringing about a peace deal between the Israelis and the Palestinians. However, Benjamin Netanyahu became prime minister of Israel shortly after, all but guaranteeing that Obama's plans would face opposition, as the former had long been critical of attempts at peace with Palestinians. In fact, Netanyahu was first elected prime minister in 1996 on an anti-Oslo Accords platform.

Although it would have been difficult to predict at the time, Netanyahu turned out to be a relatively popular leader and has held this post since. Thus, with an initial exception of two months in 2009, President Obama has dealt with a Netanyahu-led Israeli government during his entire term. This separates him from the post-1948 two-term US presidents, all of whom had dealt with at least two Israeli prime ministers. During Bill Clinton's time in office, Israel had four different leaders. The fact that Obama has effectively dealt only with Netanyahu provides ammunition to those who would argue that the former's relationship with the latter has dominated the ways in which their two states have interacted with one another since 2009.

Indeed, the two clearly do not get along well either personally or when it comes to discussing policy. As Peter Beinart has outlined, Obama's views of Zionism are informed by his liberal, internationalist outlook, whereas Netanyahu has adopted something close to the Revisionist Zionist views of his late father, Benzion Netanyahu. During Obama's first term in office, the major disagreements between the US and Israel revolved around Netanyahu's unwillingness to negotiate seriously with Mahmoud Abbas – his Palestinian counterpart in the West Bank – and his refusal to enact an indefinite settlement construction freeze in the West Bank. These diplomatic disputes became public, and Mitt Romney, Obama's Republican challenger in the 2012 Presidential Election, even tried to shore up his party's Evangelical Christian base and win Centrist Jewish votes by accusing Obama of having 'thrown Israel under the bus'.

The disputes during the second term have been even more public. Most notably the two countries' governments have clashed over the American led international effort to prevent Iran from developing militarized nuclear capabilities. On March 3, 2015 Netanyahu, apparently without having informed the Obama Administration, addressed a joint session of the US Congress in order to urge House and Senate members to vote against the nuclear deal that the US and its coalition had recently signed with Iran. While the ploy ultimately failed, with the Administration able to rally enough Senators to its side to create a veto-proof minority, it did set off a debate in both countries as to whether the US-

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Israeli relationship was at an historic low point.

However, months before this speech, Jeffrey Goldberg, writing in *The Atlantic*, announced that a crisis in the two countries' relationship had already arrived. Goldberg noted that key officials in the Obama Administration had come to view and privately refer to Netanyahu as a 'chicken-sh**' who lacked the courage to do anything but worry about his own political survival. Less than one year later, Michael Oren, Israel's American-born Ambassador to the US (2009-2013), penned several op-ed memoirs of his tenure attacking the Obama Administration for altering American foreign policy towards Israel. His most notable claim was that the administration had ended the previous policies of 'no daylight' and 'no surprises', whereby the US did not publicize any differences with Israel over policies and never publicly announced something that caught its Israeli allies off guard. At the same time, Ron Dermer, Oren's replacement as Ambassador, had reportedly so angered the Obama Administration in helping organize Netanyahu's speech to the Congress that he had been effectively barred from important meetings at the White House.

Since that time, the two countries have avoided large-scale public spats, though another essay by Goldberg in April 2016 – based on in-depth interviews with President Obama – highlighted how the Obama Administration had begun reassessing parts of its relationship with Israel. Most notably, this essay revealed that Obama had privately questioned the need for the US to ensure that Israel maintained a qualitative military edge (QME) over its direct and near neighbors in the Middle East. Ensuring that Israel maintained such an edge has been American policy since the early 1970s, when the US became Israel's chief international financial and military backer.

Does this mean that the current frayed relationship between the two countries has been a result of the interpersonal scuffles between Obama and Netanyahu? It has certainly contributed to the situation, though the problems appear to run much deeper. What we are witnessing, it can be contended, is less a result of clashing individual personalities and more a reflection of two diverging groups: the Israeli electorate and the Democratic Party. We are witnessing the beginning of the unraveling of unquestioned bi-partisan support in the US for Israel. The Obama-Netanyahu feud may have hurried this process along somewhat, but such public disputes were likely to erupt at some point in the near future anyway.

Why is it so? Over the past three decades, the Israeli electorate has slowly moved to the Right. Thus, the Center-Left in Israel today would have been the Center-Right two decades ago. A good example of this is the career of Tzipi Livni, a former Israeli foreign minister. She began as a Likud member, but left the party to join, and then lead, Kadima. The latter was essentially a Center-Right party. Yet, in 2009, it was viewed as the only hope of the Israeli Center-Left in a contest against the Right-wing Likud. At the same time, in the US, the Democratic Party shifted Leftwards on foreign policy. Furthermore, many younger Democrats under the age of 45, including Jews, have no memory of the 1948 or 1967 wars of Israel. The Israel they see is an occupying power with a QME over its neighbors and is led by lawmakers who make comments about Palestinians and Arabs that are similar to those Donald Trump makes about Mexicans and Muslims. Whereas young Democrats in the past often viewed Israel as culturally and politically similar to the US, this has begun to change with the rise of the 'Millennial Generation'. Younger American Jews, who largely vote Democrat, have led the debate over shifting American-Jewish attachment towards Israel.

How has this affected the Obama Administration's policies towards Israel? Amidst older Americans, who wield considerable political and economic influence, attachment to Israel is still strong. Thus, it should not be surprising that the US actually increased military aid to Israel during Obama's first year in office. However, aid alone does not tell the full story. While the Administration has continued to defend Israel at the United Nations, it has allowed its European and foreign allies to put more pressure on the Israeli government behind the scenes. A sample of this is that the Obama Administration has decided to avoid consistent criticism of Israel for settlement construction and maintenance, while letting Israel deal with some of the international consequences of such actions, which it was protected from in the past. It is a way of putting silent pressure on Israel so that the Administration does not face a strong public backlash for its unwillingness to fully support a friend.

Support for Israel is entrenched in the US' political system, especially among White baby boomers across the political aisle. It would not be surprising, however, to find the Democratic Party shift towards being a more neutral party in this case – and even house a significant wing critical of Israel – over the next decade or two, as Millennials

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gain more political-economic power. Such a shift would likely end automatic American support for Israel at the United Nations and subject Israel to even more international pressure to end its settlement project and enter into negotiations with Palestinians. This is not to say that such a change would happen under a potential Clinton Administration – which is likely to continue Obama-era policies – but to note that these are the early stages of a long-term shift in the US' political engagement with Israel. It may be surmised, in essence, that historians will pay less attention to tensions between Obama and Netanyahu and more heed to the growing tensions between an increasingly conservative Israeli electorate and an increasingly liberal American Democratic Party.

About the author:

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