

RIDING OUT THE STORM

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For the past four decades, Israel and the U.S. have had a close and cooperative strategic and diplomatic relationship, albeit one that has been punctuated by short and occasionally intense disagreement. The foundation of this alliance includes a history of shared democratic values and threat perceptions, as well as similar understandings of international politics in general, and in the Middle East in particular, based on Hobbesian realism. The differences reflect occasional conflicting interests in the region, and competing perceptions, particularly on the prospects for success of peace negotiations.

The shared foundation has led to collaboration in a number of dimensions, including strategic intelligence, the development of advanced military technology (most notably, missile defense systems such as the Arrow and Iron Dome), and in efforts to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (through such methods as the Stuxnet computer worm). Diplomatically, and despite differences on the Palestinian issue, the U.S. has generally supported Israel at the United Nations and other international fora, often vetoing hostile resolutions in the Security Council and opposing political warfare and false allegations, such as the Goldstone report on the 2008-9 Gaza conflict presented to the UN Human Rights Council. The safety net provided by American support, in turn, has allowed Israel to take risks and avoid some actions that would otherwise have been necessary to ensure vital security interests.

However, this special relationship has been shaken in recent years by America's strategic retreat from the Middle East, exemplified by the accelerated withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq, inaction in Syria (including the last-minute decision not to use force following the repeated use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime), the policy



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of “leading from behind” in Libya, contradictory approaches to Egypt, and so forth. When President Obama has used force, as in the recent air strikes against ISIL, he has acted as a reluctant warrior, reducing America’s deterrence image and thereby also weakening U.S. allies—particularly Israel.

Under the Obama administration, the realist-based aspect of U.S. foreign and defense policy has been overshadowed by a more idealistic or Kantian approach, based on the view that international law and institutions such as the United Nations are useful and can reduce or even eliminate the need for military force. Engagement and negotiations as the basis for resolving conflicts, particularly regarding the Iranian nuclear weapons program, have taken center stage in U.S. foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East. Obama’s first major foreign policy initiative, beginning with a carefully orchestrated speech in Cairo, embodied this overall approach to international relations and conflict.

For Israel, this emphasis on international institutions and engagement, as well as declining U.S. military involvement in the region and a much weakened deterrence image, is a major concern. For many years, Israeli deterrence has been boosted by American strength and, as in the case of Iraq in 1991 and again in 2003, direct military intervention. Repeated U.S. pledges to defend Israel against attack were important in providing reassurance and stability—in high threat situations, Israel could afford to wait, based on the assurances received from Washington.

Not so now. Although President Obama and other U.S. officials continue to intone that “America’s got your back” and “you are not alone,” these words have lost a great deal of credibility among Israelis. For instance, in the effort to force Iran to halt its drive toward nuclear weapons, the absence of a cred-

ible U.S. military threat has removed a very important source of pressure on the regime. In addition, the Obama administration’s emphasis on engagement and negotiations with foes, including Iran and the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, and its abandonment of old allies, such as Egypt’s Hosni Mubarak, has exacerbated the friction with Israel.

These tensions are not new. They have characterized the relationship for the past six years, coinciding with the terms of the Obama presidency and the Netanyahu coalition government. The personal animosity between the two leaders (notwithstanding similar traits) and the intense political warfare that has replaced the bipartisan tradition in U.S. policy toward Israel, has only contributed to the friction. What’s more, the same pattern can be expected to continue for the remainder of President Obama’s term in office—although the recent U.S. midterm elections, in which the Republicans won control of the Senate, might help mitigate the White House’s policy on key issues such as Iran or Israel-Palestinian relations.

The Iranian nuclear conundrum

Iran, and particularly its illicit nuclear program, has been at the top of the Israeli strategic agenda for two decades, and continues to be a source of both shared concerns and friction during the Obama-Netanyahu era. Frequent meetings and public exchanges between the two leaders and various government officials have highlighted these issues.

In terms of official policy objectives, Washington and Jerusalem have generally agreed that the Iranian effort to acquire nuclear weapons violates the NPT, poses a fundamental and unacceptable threat, and must be halted. And in many ways, successive Israeli leaders built their policies of contain-

ing Iran around the assumption and repeated promises of close coordination with Washington.

This carefully nurtured Israeli policy collapsed following the Iranian presidential elections of 2013, the Obama administration's subsequent embrace of Iran's new president, Hassan Rouhani, the opening of direct talks between the U.S. and Iran, and the partial lifting of sanctions. The differences, which go far beyond the personal disagreements between Netanyahu and Obama, are consistent with the wider decline of U.S. involvement internationally, as well as contrasting threat perceptions. Most Israeli officials view the Iranian leadership as seriously committed to "wiping Israel off the map," and therefore believe that a nuclear capability in the hands of Iran's ayatollahs will constitute an existential threat. The reported comment made by former Iranian President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (considered by some to be a moderate and pragmatist in Iranian terms) characterizing Israel as a small target that could be destroyed by a single nuclear weapon is often cited as proof of Iranian objectives. Holocaust denial and repeated genocidal threats against Israel, including a November 2014 publication of a "nine-step program towards the elimination of Israel," only serve to reinforce this analysis.

Israeli policymakers, both military and civilian and from across the political spectrum, also see Iran as a triumphalist revolutionary power, seeking to expand its influence while taking major (although not always conscious) risks. Following the removal of Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003, the Islamic Republic has gradually gained power in the region—a process that has accelerated with the decline of Egypt and other Sunni powers. Simultaneously, Iran's support for—and coordination with—proxies such as Hezbollah is continuous, and includes the supply of tens

of thousands of rockets and missiles to both. These arsenals, and miscalculations regarding Israeli responses, have helped to trigger wars in 2006 (Lebanon), 2008, 2012, and 2014 (Gaza).

While the Obama administration has repeatedly declared its opposition to Iran's efforts to acquire nuclear weapons, its willingness to compromise and avoid confrontation reflects the strategic view that, for the U.S., the threat can be contained and deterred. After the U.S. (reluctantly) learned to live with a North Korean and Pakistani bomb, the same would be true for a nuclear Iran. Indeed, compared to Pyongyang and Islamabad, the Iranian regime is considered stable and cautious. The American emphasis on engagement and avoiding military confrontation increased significantly following the carefully controlled Iranian elections in June 2013, in which Rouhani was elected president. The Obama administration welcomed him as a "reformer" representing an Iranian political faction seeking rapprochement with the U.S.

In sharp contrast, the dominant Israeli analysis views Rouhani as a core member of the regime, and as someone who played a central role in building the illicit nuclear program, cleverly leading "negotiations" with the Europeans between 2003 and 2005 without yielding significant concessions. The embrace of Rouhani as a reformer was dismissed in Jerusalem as naïve and wishful thinking—a justification to again avoid difficult policies, including further sanctions, or ordering military action against the nuclear facilities.

This strategic dispute sharpened in October 2013, when Israel was apparently surprised by a highly publicized resumption of negotiations between Iran and the "P5+1" (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany). Netanyahu and other Israelis were deeply disturbed by America's acceptance of the

reduction in financial and economic pressure on Iran in exchange for simply entering negotiations (which were in any case in the Iranian interest). From the Israeli perspective, the Obama administration acquiesced in the dismantling of the only significant leverage on Tehran—leverage that had been painstakingly built up over many years, including by Europe, Russia and even China. Instead of translating the resulting pressure into significant changes in Iranian behavior, however, the major trade and financial limitations were relaxed simply in exchange for opening negotiations.

In efforts to maintain some pressure on Iran (and on the Obama administration), members of the U.S. Congress (primarily but not exclusively Republican) introduced legislation that would have restored and increased the economic sanctions in the likely event of failure in the negotiations. This was consistent with Israeli concerns and policy, thereby adding even more to the friction with Obama.

In Jerusalem, the Netanyahu government predicted that, as in 2003, Rouhani would simply use the negotiations to gain more time in expanding Iran's nuclear weapons technology and capability. Indeed, following the expiration of the initial six-month deadline for agreement, the negotiations were extended—and, in November 2014, were extended yet again, all while Iran continues to develop its nuclear capabilities.

Friction over military action

For many years, beginning in the George W. Bush administration and prior to the election of Netanyahu, Israeli officials planned, prepared and presented options for limited military action targeting Iranian nuclear production and test facilities. The options included unilateral Israeli airstrikes, a U.S.-led operation, and joint action. For Netan-

yahu, and Israeli Defense Ministers Ehud Barak (who held the position for six years until 2012) and Moshe Ya'alon, the threat of military action was seen as the key source of pressure on Tehran's top officials. Some analysts argued that this threat was at least as important as the impact of economic sanctions in bringing Rouhani into negotiations.

In contrast, while U.S. officials periodically stated that “all options are on the table” in dealing with Iran, in practice they signaled a distinct reluctance for military force, thereby undermining the credibility of the Israeli strategy. This difference added considerably to the friction between the U.S. and Israel. In December 2007, during the final year of the Bush administration, a publicly-released summary of a U.S. national intelligence assessment claimed that Iran had ended work on a military nuclear option in 2003. This was quickly shown to be wrong, but was explained as part of an effort by U.S. defense officials to block any possibility that President Bush would order a military strike against Iran. This review reportedly surprised the Israeli government, and severely undermined the credibility of American assurances to coordinate with and guarantee Israeli security interests.

In parallel, Israel continued to periodically signal preparations for a unilateral strike, including large-scale air exercises and the test-firing of ballistic missiles. And for a number of years, the fear of Israeli unilateral action served as a form of pressure on the American side. It is possible that U.S.-Israeli cooperation in planting the Stuxnet computer virus in Iranian nuclear facilities, among other activities, was facilitated by Obama's fear of unilateral Israeli military action. (The results of this action are unclear—most likely, the virus caused a setback of some months to a year, but after that, the difficulties were clearly surmounted.) More broadly, however, the Obama administra-

tion's emphasis on engagement, negotiation, compromise and conflict avoidance, coupled with the withdrawal of combat troops from Iraq and Afghanistan and a reluctance to engage in other military actions, undermined the deterrence impact of military threats against Iran.

Beyond Iran, regional chaos

For decades, the dictatorial military regimes and monarchies that dominated the Arab world provided a modicum of stability to regional politics. But beginning in 2011, the misnamed "Arab Spring" caused a fundamental change in the region, negatively impacting both Israeli security and American interests. The intense conflicts between Sunni and Shi'a forces and their allies, such as the Assad regime in Syria, were in large part an unanticipated consequence of the ouster of Saddam Hussein and the U.S. war in Iraq. In other states, such as Egypt, Libya and Tunisia, the combatants include the Muslim Brotherhood and seek to impose their version of Islam on the wider societies.

For the most part, Israel has avoided involvement in these internal conflicts, recognizing that whatever radical *jihadists* might eventually emerge as the new rulers of these countries, they would constitute renewed threats. Friction with the U.S. erupted when the Obama administration supported the ouster of Egypt's military regime and its long-standing strongman Hosni Mubarak, accepting the Muslim Brotherhood under Mohamed Morsi as a legitimate, "democratically elected" government in its stead. From the perspective of Jerusalem, policymakers in Washington were either naively unaware of or indifferent to the terrorist threat posed by a Muslim Brotherhood government, including its close alliance with Hamas in Gaza and the *jihadist* bases in Sinai. One year later, following

mass demonstrations that led to Morsi's overthrow and the restoration of military rule, the U.S. response, including a short-lived cutoff in military assistance to Egypt, further highlighted the disconnect between Washington and Jerusalem.

American paralysis in the region was further emphasized in the case of Syria, where rhetoric demanding the ouster of Bashar al-Assad was not backed by concrete steps on the part of the White House. Furthermore, in August 2012, President Obama issued a public warning (a "red line") of dire consequences for Assad if the Syrian army were to use chemical weapons. When such attacks in fact took place, Obama prepared for military action to enforce his warning, but then backed down at the last minute, instead accepting a Russian government proposal based on implementing the Chemical Weapons Convention. Over the months that followed, large parts of the Syrian chemical arsenal were indeed removed, but at least some were retained by Assad's forces. The overall result was a further erosion of America's deterrence, and an enhancement of Assad's standing.

Similarly, Israel viewed the weak and hesitant American response to the sudden and dramatic appearance of the Islamic State (variously known as ISIL and ISIS) in Iraq and Syria as a further sign of decline. As the group marched through and captured significant parts of Syria and Iraq in the first part of 2014, massacring non-Sunni groups (and those Sunnis that refused to join it), the Obama administration agonized over policy options. Finally, after a series of televised beheadings and the impassioned pleas from the remnants of the surrounded Yazidi minority, President Obama announced that the U.S. would lead an aerial bombing campaign against the forces of the Islamic state, but would not put any American "boots on the ground" in harm's way in order to protect Yazidis, Kurds, Christians or others.

In addition, the U.S. began to consider cooperation with the Iranian regime in opposing the Islamic State. In contrast to the U.S., Iran and Hezbollah (the Lebanon-based Shiite force and terror organization), had boots on the ground in Iraq and Syria. This potential for cooperation further undermined American influence in the nuclear negotiations with Iran, adding to the existing Israeli concerns regarding the credibility of American security guarantees.

The perennial peace process

The issue of the post-1967 “occupied territories” and Israeli “settlements” in those areas has been a source of disagreement between Jerusalem and Washington for most of the past 47 years, occurring with greater or lesser intensity depending on the specific circumstances. In the absence of a peace agreement, all Israeli governments as well as the country’s High Court have rejected efforts to label the movement of Jews into the territories, including Jerusalem, as a violation of international law and the Geneva Conventions. But U.S. governments have generally disagreed, in part based on the different interpretations, but also in efforts to appease Arab allies and oil producers (particularly Saudi Arabia).

The violent failure of the “Oslo process” that began in 1993 increased the difference in perceptions and policy. American presidents—including Bill Clinton and now Barack Obama—pressed for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and confidence-building measures. However, for Israelis, the decline of American influence and the growing instability in the region have weakened the impact of U.S. carrots and sticks. In Israel, public opinion polls, election returns, and other indicators show that a substantial majority of the population supports a two-state agreement, but lacks confidence that the existing Palestinian leadership can

deliver such an outcome—or that the U.S. can guarantee Israeli security in the face of the basic risks inherent in territorial withdrawal.

Furthermore, in contrast to the enthusiasm of President Obama, Secretary of State John Kerry, influential pundits such as the *New York Times*’ Tom Friedman, and others, most Israelis do not see evidence that the conditions necessary for a stable agreement exist, among them a Palestinian renunciation of what they refer to as “a right of return” for refugees and their descendants, as well as recognition of Jewish historical rights in Jerusalem. Israelis are highly cognizant of the strength of Hamas, which took over Gaza in a violent coup in 2007, and could potentially do the same in the West Bank in the event of an Israeli withdrawal.

From the beginning of his presidency in 2009, and in the context of his Cairo speech and attendant effort to reshape America’s image in the Middle East, President Obama placed major emphasis on renewed peace negotiations, pressing Netanyahu to publicly accept the goal of a two-state solution and a nine-month settlement freeze. Obama adopted the power-gap interpretation of failed peace efforts, meaning that Israel, as the perceived dominant power, needed to make the concessions and take the risks. The Palestinians, as weak victims, could not be expected to compromise on key issues, such as refugee claims, that Israelis needed as reassurance.

In contrast, for Netanyahu and many other Israelis, the approach to peace based on the theory of “power equalization” is a dangerous illusion. The assessment of power is changeable and subjective (Palestinian terror as well as the Palestinian Authority’s Arab allies theoretically offset Israeli’s conventional military advantage) as well as irrelevant in the face of intense religious and identity-based conflict sources. Israelis see

Palestinian behavior as zero-sum, and lacking in movement toward a compromise in which the vital interests of both sides can be satisfied. As a result, they believe that Palestinian society, regardless of its leaders, is not ripe for the type of compromise necessary for a stable peace. From the Israeli perspective, and notwithstanding tactical changes, the ultimate goal of wiping Israel off the map is essentially unchanged since the Arab rejection of partition in 1947.

In addition, while the Palestinians—and, to a significant degree, the U.S.—emphasize borders based on the armistice lines at the end of the 1948 war, Israel has focused on security, including maintaining long-term control of the Jordan Valley (the long border area along the Jordan river) as a vital buffer zone. The American side has pressed for creative solutions, including the stationing of international forces in this area, while for Israelis such forces are seen as largely symbolic and unreliable.

As a result, when the initial Obama peace effort ended without a *quid pro quo* from Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas, Netanyahu rejected the U.S. demand for an extension in the unilateral Israeli building freeze. A diplomatic stalemate followed, and Netanyahu moved further in implementing a program of economic development and cooperation for the West Bank.

In 2013, however, Obama's newly appointed Secretary of State, John Kerry, reopened formal Israeli-Palestinian negotiations with a nine-month deadline. And as regional chaos increased and the U.S. sought cooperation from Jordan, Saudi Arabia and others, the standard arguments were repeated, particularly linking pressure on Israel to this virtual coalition. Regardless of his motivations, Kerry invested heavily in this process, repeatedly invoking the need to develop trust and confidence between Israelis and Palestinians—terms which do not resonate and

seem entirely disconnected from Middle Eastern realities of intense religious and ethno-national hatreds and violence.

It is likely that Netanyahu and the Israeli leadership will seek to manage the conflicts with the Obama administration on Iran and the Palestinians, while maintaining or even strengthening cooperation on other areas, such as strategic intelligence, counter-terrorism, regional instability and advanced weapons development.

The appointment of Martin Indyk as Kerry's deputy only added to the tension between Washington and Jerusalem. Indyk was deeply involved in the Clinton administration's failed policies to promote an agreement, including as Ambassador to Israel (during which time he became entangled in Israeli domestic politics, supporting losing candidate Shimon Peres over Netanyahu in the 1996 elections.) The Kerry-Indyk team was therefore seen by many Israelis, including government officials, as messianic and unwilling to take Israeli security requirements seriously.

Although expressing skepticism, Netanyahu and his government agreed to participate in the U.S.-driven process, hoping to prevent more friction with Washington. This entailed the release of still more Palestinian terrorists, again without any Palestinian *quid pro quo*. However, once more, no progress was made. The negotiations ended and terror resumed in June 2014, when three Israeli teens were kidnapped and murdered by Hamas members in an aborted effort to exchange them for more jailed Palestinian terrorists, touching off a cycle of violence that resulted in large-scale conflict between Israel and Hamas.

This conflict was accompanied by pronounced and highly visible disagreement between the U.S. and Israeli governments. Influenced by distorted media coverage which focused on allegations of disproportionate civilian casualties in Gaza, Kerry and other U.S. officials made disparaging comments regarding the Israeli military response and its unprecedented efforts to avoid civilian deaths. At one point, the media reported a halt in the delivery of some American weapons that were scheduled for transfer to Israel. (Later, however, the head of the U.S. Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, would publicly praise the Israeli military for avoiding collateral damage to civilians.) There were also reports of angry telephone conversations between officials in Washington and Jerusalem.

Following the war and the failed peace negotiations, the direct clashes increased, particularly over allegations of new Israeli construction over the pre-1967 “green line,” including in Jerusalem. A series of Israeli announcements regarding approval for new construction, although only in areas defined as “consensus blocks” near the Green Line which are to be retained by Israel in any conceivable agreement, were greeted in Washington by denunciation of “settlement construction” and as being “counter-productive” to peace. This time, however, the U.S. demarches seemed to have little impact on Prime Minister Netanyahu and other officials in his coalition, and did not appear to weaken his standing in terms of domestic public opinion.

Looking forward

After six years of the Obama presidency and the Netanyahu government, the prospects for significant change on any of these issues, or in the differences regarding the general perception of Middle Eastern conflict, are quite low—at least for the next two years. In Israel, Netanyahu remains the most likely leader

for the immediate future, and even if he were to be replaced by someone else, the policies that he has pursued would probably continue.

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As has generally been the case until now, the conflicts over settlements and peace efforts can continue to be compartmentalized and separated from the other issues. Although the U.S. under Obama might seek to leverage Israeli dependence on American weapons platforms (aircraft, advanced missiles, and other technologies) to increase pressure for changes in Israeli policies, this leverage will be limited. As noted, the decline in Washington’s influence and direct regional involvement has also reduced its impact on decision makers in Jerusalem. In addition, Republican control of Congress will also be a factor in countering the intensity of any future confrontations between the Obama administration and the Israeli government.

Looking beyond 2016 to the post-Obama context (and perhaps also the post-Netanyahu one), it is possible that the points of friction will decline, reflecting a different approach to regional threats and realities. Shared strategic interests and threat perceptions could well reassert their dominance, strengthening the pattern of close cooperation, while also resuming the policy of “agreeing to disagree” on the definition of defensible borders, arrangements in Jerusalem and other issues related to peace efforts with the Palestinians.

