

Netanyahu is from Mars, Obama is from Venus

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Benjamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama have spent four years bickering, instead of co-operating on policies that will best serve Israeli and American interests. As they begin Act Two — with both leaders having won fresh mandates from their respective voters — will they learn to get along?

When they meet this week, the Israeli Prime Minister and the American President will need to find a middle ground between their very different perceptions of international politics. The Israeli leader is a hard-core realist (or pessimist, if you prefer), who sees the dangers of what Thomas Hobbes (1588-1679) described as the “war of all against all” in the anarchy of international politics. Israel stands out as a solitary and vulnerable Jewish state in a hostile and dangerous Middle Eastern environment, whereby survival depends on a powerful military able to defeat all threats.

Obama, on other hand, is a liberal democrat who takes an idealist (or optimistic) approach. Like Immanuel Kant (1724-1804), he believes that disputes generally can be overcome through dialogue and compromise. For Obama, the use of military force is an undesirable last resort, reserved for a few sociopaths such as bin Laden, Gaddafi and the leaders of the Taliban. He has given priority to ending America’s military role in Iraq and Afghanistan, and renewed U.S. participation in the UN Human Rights Council, citing its lofty principles, rather than the unpleasant reality.

This basic contrast is central to understanding the differences between the two leaders on how best to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Obama stresses negotiations and engagement, and after four years of failure, he has not given up. In his recent State of the Union Address, Obama again declared that, “the leaders of Iran must recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution.”

In contrast, Netanyahu, as a Hobbesian realist, recently declared: “Words alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions must be coupled with a clear and credible military threat if diplomacy and sanctions fail.”

Netanyahu’s realism also reflects the history of anti-Semitism and Jewish vulnerability. In his 2011 address to a joint session of the U.S. Congress, Netanyahu declared: “Less than seven decades after six million Jews were murdered, Iran’s leaders deny the Holocaust of the Jewish people, while calling for the annihilation of the Jewish state.”

Political Realism also explains Netanyahu’s caution regarding the Palestinians. Tangible security assets — territory and strategic depth to reduce vulnerability to attack — are to be carefully protected, and expectations of breakthroughs toward stable peace are kept realistically minimal. Most Arab leaders are viewed as ideologically committed to the same mindset that caused them to reject the very existence of the Jewish state when it came into being in 1948.

In addressing the Knesset in May 2011, Netanyahu declared: “What were they yelling in Gaza yesterday? They were shouting that they want to return to Jaffa [within Israel’s pre-1967 borders.] What did the leader of Hamas say yesterday? ‘We want to see the end of the Zionist agenda.’” Any accommodation would require an explicitly stated realization on the part of Arab leaders and societies that destroying Israel is no longer their goal, and that their own vital interests are best served by an end to conflict, as has been the case with Jordan and (for now) Egypt.

Netanyahu's negotiation strategy is based on reciprocity: Unilateral concessions are dismissed as counterproductive and do not bring peace. Four years ago, in response to intense pressure from Obama, Netanyahu declared support for a "two-state solution," marking the first time that a Likud prime minister had accepted the principle of Palestinian sovereignty. Netanyahu also agreed to a 10-month freeze on settlement-construction activity. In return, he demanded Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation-

state of the Jewish people, in order to create a stable foundation for negotiations. But when Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas did not meet Netanyahu's conditions, the freeze ended, and four years have since passed without change. Obama obtained nothing from forcing Netanyahu's hand.

As Obama prepares to visit Israel for the first time as president, there are indications that he and Netanyahu have found some common ground. Netanyahu's new government will include ministers who see the dangers of his hard-line status quo on the West Bank, and are prepared for change. Meanwhile, American optimists have been confronted with case studies that support the argument for Hobbesian realism, from North Korea to Iran, and from the riots in Egypt to the killing fields of Syria.

Perhaps for the first time, the two leaders understand and respect their different perspectives on these immensely complex issues.

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