

The American-Israeli Relationship: Between Crisis and Common Cause

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The Agenda of Change

With elections in America and Israel and new governments emerging in both countries in 2009, changes in tone and substance in the bilateral relationship over the last year could have been expected. President Obama's agenda of change, a critical factor in his election campaign, struck a resonant chord within America but touched foreign policy issues in different ways. There were strong elements of continuity to be found regarding Iraq and the surge policy finally adopted in Afghanistan, as well as other issues on the foreign policy agenda.

Conversely, regarding the Israeli-Palestinian track there was a dominant feeling in the new administration that change was vital and that the process abandoned for seven years by President Bush finally needed to be resolved. Like previous administrations seeking to emphasize departure from previous policies, the Obama approach tended to downplay that there had in fact been significant progress on the ground since the meeting in Annapolis in the fall of 2007, though the conflict as a whole had remained unresolved.

In the wake of Annapolis there was an ongoing channel of direct negotiations between senior Israelis and Palestinians that discreetly found a balance between interim and final status issues to be broached, without creating a sense of crisis or drama. In addition, the Palestinian Security Forces trained by General Dayton developed a greater capacity to maintain law and order in their areas of deployment, and there was greater working coordination between the respective security forces, more confiscation

of illegal arms, more stability within Palestinian cities in the West Bank, high economic growth, enhanced investment, and greater movement and access in the West Bank. While progress was made, significant problems remained and it was evident that the parties still needed time before a deal could be put together.

In Israel, the sentiments that guided the elections were change of a different kind. People in Israel had emerged from another two wars, in Lebanon and Gaza, not overly inspired by prospects of peace, with an array of problematic internal issues and the evolving threat of a nuclear Iran. The Annapolis process was overshadowed by the events in Gaza, though the situation of relative calm in the West Bank during Operation Cast Lead showed that the progress on the ground was real. The outcome of the elections in Israel produced a new coalition government that would approach the negotiations with the Palestinians differently. Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech at Bar Ilan University in June 2009 detailed his overall approach to a two-state solution with the Palestinians that essentially would recognize Israel as a Jewish state and guarantee the demilitarization of the Palestinian state.

All of these elements of change fashioned the somewhat ironic and problematic outcome. The differences between Israel and the United States regarding the Palestinian issue emerged at a time when the situation on the ground had clearly improved and was the best since the outbreak of the second intifada in 2000. The circumstances that unfolded during 2009 seemed to transform the conflict into an Israeli-American dispute and propelled the issue of Jerusalem to center stage in a way that would almost guarantee a stalemate. The "crisis" in US-Israel relations to a large extent occurred regardless of the question whether there was an actual deal on the table ready to be made between Israel and the Palestinians. Furthermore, at this stage the "crisis" has not appeared to serve any wider strategic interest or the peace process it was designed to stimulate.

In parallel, the region itself has continued to undergo major changes that have impacted heavily on the respective national security interests of both America and Israel. The strategic challenges for both have assumed greater and more significant proportions, and the need for frequent and intense consultation and coordination has rarely been higher.

The bilateral relationship between America and Israel constitutes a mutual strategic interest of the first order, and given the scope and severity of threats in the region, the timing of the present difficulties was particularly severe. It appears that major facets of the relationship, particularly the strategic ones, have continued to operate on the working professional level, despite intermittent tensions at the more senior political level. Though the bilateral relationship is experiencing difficulties these problems are reversible, and in the past both countries have shown the ability to overcome more complex differences.

Distinct and Overlapping Strategic Agendas

Over the last decade the range of American interests in the Near East and Western Asia has undergone profound transformation. They include active involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan; contending with the Iranian nuclear and missile threat, the situation in Lebanon, Hizbollah, Syria, Yemen, the threat of al-Qaeda, the Palestinian territories (the West Bank and Gaza), and the moderate Arab world feeling threatened by Iran; and maintaining oil prices at a reasonable level. All of these problems have become more intractable, and the demands on America's resources and assets have grown considerably without any quick and easy solutions at hand.

Because the United States is perceived as the leading superpower in the world, there is still a tendency to underestimate the impact and weight of the present strategic challenges it faces in the Middle East and South Asia, as well as with regard to North Korea. These are times that even the United States will look to its friends and expect its allies to help in sharing this burden, just as those allies expect American support and assistance in their times of need.

For Israel, the Iranian nuclear threat is proceeding at a considerable pace, particularly with the announcement by Iran that it would enrich uranium to the level of 20 percent. This constitutes another snub to the repeated mandatory calls to Iran by the UN Security Council and the IAEA to suspend its enrichment and reprocessing activities. Iran will likely continue to stall and play for time and evade international demands to curtail its nuclear activities. Tough, concerted, sustained, and unified

action led by the United States, Britain, France, Germany, Russia, and China could still have an impact on and modify Iran's nuclear ambitions. These are critical moments for Israel that will indeed determine whether Iran's attainment of a nuclear weapons capability is inevitable or not.

While these strategic agendas are not identical, they overlap to a great extent and are influenced by a rapidly changing region that feeds on the same actors, trends, and drivers.

A regional characteristic that has become more apparent is that the events and challenges in the Middle East have become more interconnected, beyond the question of political linkages between issues. In any analysis, for example, it is almost impossible to ignore distinct Iranian military and political involvement in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gulf area, the Palestinian territories (particularly Gaza), and the Sinai Desert. This Iranian involvement (also through proxies) has affected the course of events in Iraq and Afghanistan from the US point of view; the Second Lebanon War in 2006 and the Operation Cast Lead of 2008-9 in Gaza are examples from Israel's point of view. Understanding this connectivity is important from an analytical perspective and also vital in formulating political and diplomatic responses, devising counter strategies, and projecting deterrence.

For Israel, while there have been military clashes before in Lebanon and Gaza, the latest rounds of hostilities in both are clearly a result of greater Iranian involvement, whether in the supply of weaponry, missiles, rockets, military systems, training, doctrine, or major financial backing to Hizbollah in Lebanon or Hamas in Gaza. The elements of coordination between Iran and its proxies and partners, like Syria, are considerable and far more substantial than it appears to the public eye. While these clashes are confined largely to a specific geographical theater, they have much broader implications for Israel, the moderate Arab world, and the United States.

These asymmetrical and proxy conflicts, with Iran's quest for nuclear weapons in the immediate background, will be one of the fundamental challenges to the United States and Israel in the coming years. It will also challenge the strategic cooperation between them and demand new and creative responses. The development of responses offers vital learning curves that Israel and the United States can share. Such responses can

be effective, though they may take time to develop, as was the case with the prevention by Israel of suicide bombers during the second Palestinian intifada from 2002 onwards. Another example of this was the surge in Iraq initiated by President George Bush in his speech of January 10, 2007, which appeared to transform the situation in Iraq and the negative role of outside interests operating there. One key element of that latter turnaround was the determination by the United States to project an intense resolve to take the necessary steps to achieve the goals of the surge by addressing and deterring Iran and Syria.

The maintenance of deterrence with regard to Iran, Syria, and their proxies will remain a critical strategic factor for both the United States and Israel. Deterrence and disruption can still play a critical role with regard to curtailing WMD programs and lend vital credibility to ongoing parallel diplomatic efforts to curb these programs. While it was thought that a state has less classical deterrent power with regard to terrorist groups, this equation changes as terrorist groups begin to assume more powers and responsibilities generally associated with states, as in the cases of Hamas in Gaza and Hizbollah in Lebanon.

Both American and Israeli strategic agendas are considerable. No one can foresee the course of events over the next year and the extent to which both countries will be tested, whether in Iraq, Afghanistan, Gaza, Lebanon, or even Iran, bearing in mind the increasing connectivity between these issues. Another round of hostilities in Gaza or another provocation by Hizbollah in Lebanon cannot be excluded. Similarly no one can guarantee that a wider clash between Iran and Israel will not occur, or worse still, that all three situations will not erupt at once. This is one of the central reasons that senior Israeli and American officials talk of the need to “avoid any daylight” at this time between Israel and the United States.

Managing the Relationship

There is no real substitute to the depth of Israeli-US strategic cooperation on a number of different levels. Over the years there have been considerable exchanges, whether in the field of intelligence, different operational challenges in the conventional battlefield context, the realms of counterinsurgency, counterterrorism, counter proliferation, and other areas

that have a critical impact on overall national security like ballistic missile defense. For these reasons, the Israeli-American strategic relationship is mutually important, and a concerted effort is warranted to prevent the respective strategic agendas from drifting apart.

Elements that will ensure and augur well for the strategic relationship include the continued implementation of the Memorandum of Agreement signed in 2008 for Israel's security assistance for the next decade and continued harmonization between both countries' export control systems regarding the sale of defense equipment to third countries. Other issues of central importance will be the maintenance of America's commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge and the continued coordination between the two countries on arms control and disarmament initiatives. These will remain vital components in preventing any erosion in Israel's ability to defend itself or deter its adversaries.

In the minds of many Israelis, the Obama administration's attempts to reach out to the Arab and Muslim world have yet to be balanced by similar overtures to Israel. The Israeli public's perception of the administration has deteriorated and over time this could reflect on the overall American role and capability in helping Israel pursue peace opportunities with its neighbors. The March 2010 visit of Vice President Biden was designed primarily to reach out to the Israeli people, but the announcement regarding the extension of construction in the Ramat Shlomo neighborhood in Jerusalem undermined this and injected a new level of bilateral tension. That incident should not prevent additional efforts to improve the general atmosphere between the present administration and the Israeli public.

Similarly the Israeli public should not lose sight of the fact that the fundamentals of the bilateral security relationship that Joe Biden emphasized in Israel have remained strong, and that the "unshakable" US commitment to Israel's security has also been reaffirmed by successive American presidents, including President Obama. This is a cardinal factor in the preservation of Israel's strategic standing in the region and the world, particularly as the threshold of Iran acquiring a nuclear weapons capability approaches.

It can be assumed that the US desire and commitment to move the Israeli-Palestinian track forward will not grow weaker or less determined, and will remain a key national security interest of the United States. By

the same token, it should be recalled that the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also touches sensitive national security interests for Israel. Though prospects of major breakthroughs are not strong at this point, a more synchronized Israeli-American approach to talks with the Palestinians could emerge, despite the tensions in recent months and given the onset of proximity talks conducted through Senator Mitchell.

Some elements of convergence may be found in Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech at Bar Ilan University last year, the Israeli decision to adopt a moratorium on construction in the settlements in the West Bank, and Secretary of State Clinton's response to the moratorium on November 25, 2009 which has now become part of the administration's lexicon regarding the resolution of the conflict. The Secretary stated:

[The] announcement by the Government of Israel helps move forward toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. We believe that through good-faith negotiations the parties can mutually agree on an outcome which ends the conflict and reconciles the Palestinian goal of an independent and viable state based on the 1967 lines, with agreed swaps, and the Israeli goal of a Jewish state with secure and recognized borders that reflect subsequent developments and meet Israeli security requirements. Let me say to all the people of the region and world: our commitment to achieving a solution with two states living side by side in peace and security is unwavering.¹

A positive and dynamic peace process between Israel and its neighbors has generally tended to strengthen the tone and atmosphere of American-Israeli relations and also reinforce the sense of common purpose. Without positive momentum towards the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, valuable time could be lost, the bilateral relationship could become less intimate, and America will have no lack of other pressing issues in the region to address, including Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, as well as Iran. In that context it should be emphasized that while the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would clearly be a positive regional development, it would have little immediate impact in neutralizing or modifying the actual threats that America and Israel face, respectively and jointly, in the foreseeable future.

In the final analysis however, this is not a negotiation between Israel and the United States, and the Palestinian side, with the support of the Arab world, must also enter the equation for a political process to move forward and succeed. Other factors beyond Israeli or American control will also impact on the Palestinian ability to move forward. The present situation in Gaza, while relatively calm, is not stable and could at any time deteriorate to a renewed escalation of hostilities. At this stage no one can assess the likely course of this potentially volatile situation, but Hamas in Gaza continues to challenge the legitimate Palestinian Authority in the West Bank no less than it challenges Israel. Should there be a renewed possibility of moving talks forward between Israel and the PA, this could also be a factor in Hamas once again destabilizing Gaza.

Similarly, while the situation in Lebanon is also relatively quiet, that calm conceals massive Hizbollah rearmament that has tripled the rocket and missile arsenal existing before the outbreak of the Second Lebanon War – to around forty thousand. Recent press reports of Syria supplying Scud missiles to Hizbollah, as well as the transfer of other significantly advanced weapons systems, could well change the scope and severity of another clash with Lebanon. Clearly, such developments would also impact on American interests.

Adjusting Expectations

Another aspect of peacemaking in the Middle East relates to the expectations of the American role. There is generally a twin assumption that the process will move forward when the United States wants it to and that pressure on Israel is necessary to achieve that momentum. This twin assumption was nurtured and strengthened in recent years. A closer historical analysis and a study of the last year might reveal a different conclusion, which President Obama himself recently conceded.

With all its power, the US cannot be a substitute for both sides wanting a peace initiative to succeed. When Israel and the Arab parties to the conflict have genuinely wanted direct contact for whatever reason, they have generally found the path to each other without American help. In addition, from an empirical point of view, direct contact with Israel has

generally yielded better results diplomatically from the Arab point of view than American pressure on Israel.

Historically and more recently there have been a number of instances where the initial contact and opportunity were fashioned without a substantial American role. They include the periodic contacts between Israel and Jordan going back many years, the initial contacts between Israel and Egypt leading to President Sadat's visit to Jerusalem in 1977, the Oslo process in the early nineties, the final stage of negotiations of the peace treaty between Israel and Jordan in 1994, and more recently, the trilateral contacts between Israel and Syria through Turkey, the contacts with Egypt leading to the "calming down period" with Gaza in 2008, and other instances involving prisoner exchange deals. One could also point out that important Israeli moves involving withdrawal from territory such as the unilateral withdrawal from Lebanon in 2000 and the disengagement from Gaza in 2005 were both moves conceived in Jerusalem and not elsewhere.

Yet while it is important to remember the crucial role of the sides themselves in creating and fashioning opportunities for direct contact and negotiation, the role of the United States is no less crucial in formalizing and sustaining the results of these contacts and negotiations. The massive role of the United States in Middle East peace efforts since the late seventies has been critical and helped the sides in pursuing efforts of genuine reconciliation.

In the final analysis, the American ability to create an opportunity for peace in the absence of a genuine desire by the parties themselves is limited. Overestimating the American ability in that sense tends to reduce the responsibility of the sides to face up to the tough decisions that need to be taken by them and not in Washington. A more realistic appraisal in this regard could also prevent a situation in which America and Israel argue over issues central to the peace process before they are ripe for negotiation and agreement between Israel and the Palestinians with a supportive Arab role.

Even though the prospect of reaching an agreement may not be within reach, this need not be a recipe for inaction. An ongoing process of dialogue and negotiation between Israel and the Palestinians can have an intrinsic value in itself. It can also serve wider American and Israeli interests in the region and provide diplomatic cover for encouraging wider cooperation

between Israel and other moderate Arab countries. Ultimately a functioning process would be the most promising foundation for incremental confidence building measures and a breakthrough at the appropriate time.

The Essential Challenge

The major strategic challenge for Israel and the moderate Arab world is Iran. The threat of a nuclear Iran projecting its subversive power through its proxies and terrorist groups will have massive ramifications on further nuclear proliferation in the region and on the global non-proliferation regime, as well as the physical security and stability of countries in the Middle East. Even an eventual resolution of the Arab-Israeli conflict could become a marginal regional factor if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold. While in the coming months the United States will face significant strategic challenges in Iraq and Afghanistan, Iran will dominate the minds of America's allies (Israeli and Arab) in the region for the foreseeable future. Iran will be a central and defining factor in the conduct of the strategic cooperation between Israel and the United States, as well as regarding the relations between America and its moderate Arab allies in the region.

US-Israel relations could be at the threshold of a defining moment in the context of a region that appears to be approaching "immense wars of the spirit," to borrow a phrase from Fukuyama. Will the Iranian threat and process with the Palestinians strain that bilateral alliance, or be the "common cause" that will strengthen and fortify the alliance, like the Madrid Peace Conference and first Gulf War in the early nineties?

It is vital that the respective strategic agendas of both countries remain in clear line of sight of each other. The fundamental challenge the relationship faces at present is how to formulate an overall strategy that rolls back the Iranian threat, provides progress with the Palestinians, and strengthens and fortifies the American-Israeli strategic partnership. There is a depth that has developed in this strategic relationship over the last thirty years that clearly indicates that this is more than possible. There is a strategic reality that indicates this is more than crucial.

Note

- 1 Embassy of the United States, <http://usembassy-israel.org.il/xarchives/1126b2009.aspx>.