

American Intervention in Israeli Politics: Past Experience, Future Prospects

David A. Weinberg

Introduction

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's visit to Washington in May 2011 highlighted major gaps between the governments of America and Israel. It also provided renewed basis for speculation that President Barack Obama secretly hopes to unseat Netanyahu's right wing government. Such speculation was rampant during the first year of Obama's presidency, with some analysts arguing that US pressure over the settlements was partly an effort to remove Netanyahu from office or pressure him to bring the centrist Kadima Party into his coalition.¹ However, such talk died down once the US adopted a more conciliatory posture by the middle of 2010.²

One way to assess the potential for US intervention in Israeli politics at this time is to survey the historical record. In fact, such behavior has been a recurring feature of American policy toward Israel since the 1970s, although there has been little systematic consideration of it to date. This absence is especially striking given the extensive attention paid to efforts by Israel and pro-Israel lobbyists to influence American policies toward the region. What then does the historical record imply about possible US efforts to shape domestic politics inside Israel today? This essay draws upon newly declassified American archives and interviews with numerous experts to address this gap.

The following article seeks to build a general theory of partisan intervention by the United States into Israeli politics in the effort to

David A. Weinberg is a doctoral candidate in political science at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. He previously served as a professional staff member for Middle East issues at the House Committee on Foreign Affairs.

strengthen certain individuals or parties over others. It first defines and contextualizes the subject matter of partisan intervention by presenting a broad range of examples of such intervention – by Israel, other governments, and the United States. The article provides extensive documentation for cases of US intervention into Israeli politics over the years. It then builds a theoretical model that focuses on the role and beliefs of the president to explain whether such intervention is likely to occur. The article also explains why certain features of partisan intervention make it distinct from other areas of the US-Israel relationship in which American domestic forces – including Congress, lobbyists, and organizational interests of the bureaucracy – tend to wield more influence.

Contextualizing Partisan Intervention

Does partisan intervention happen? Absolutely. A nation's foreign policy is frequently geared toward influencing the behavior of other governments, and officials sometimes decide that the most promising route for producing particular effects winds through another government's domestic politics. Although this practice may appear to be a violation of national sovereignty, deviations from the principle of sovereignty are par for the course in international relations.³

Israel itself engages in this sort of intervention, for instance in trying to build up favorable interlocutors among the Palestinians. The practice is so deeply seated that it precedes the State of Israel's independence, going back to the pre-state days of the *yishuv*.⁴ Years later, Labor Party governments sought to cultivate Palestinian partners through municipal elections in the territories in 1972 and 1976, and Likud subsequently sought to do the same by displacing those municipal bodies with more pliable village leagues.⁵ In the mid 1980s both sides of Israel's national unity government cooperated to build up Jordanian influence in the West Bank.⁶ Ehud Olmert's government scrambled to support Fatah leaders such as Salam Fayyad and Abu Mazen in the aftermath of the 2007 Hamas coup in Gaza.

Nor is the United States the only nation to pursue such a policy toward Israel. French President Mitterrand tried to bolster his friend Shimon Peres during Israeli elections in 1981⁷ and 1988.⁸ As prime minister of the UK, Tony Blair sought to boost the Israeli Labor Party in 1999⁹ and 2003.¹⁰ Egyptian officials tried to affect the outcome of Israeli elections

in 1981,¹¹ 1988,¹² and 1999,¹³ as did Jordan in 1988¹⁴ and 1996.¹⁵ At least twice these Arab states even endorsed Likud candidates for the post of prime minister: Sadat backed Begin in 1981 and King Hussein supported Netanyahu in 1996.

Dramatic Cases of US Intervention

Consider the Israeli election of 1996. President Clinton believed that a Likud victory would destroy the peace process and panicked once Labor lost its early lead due to Hamas suicide bombings in February and March.¹⁶ Clinton's team helped organize a thirty-nation summit at Sharm el-Sheikh to pledge support against terrorism and to join hands for a memorable photo opportunity with candidate Peres.¹⁷ According to one Clinton aide, bolstering Peres was "the be all and end all" of that conference.¹⁸ Clinton then took Peres back to Israel on Air Force One to address pro-peace rallies together and pledged new US aid when Peres soon thereafter came to Washington. The White House was in regular contact with the Peres campaign staff, and they coordinated their public messages to maximize joint political impact.

Another dramatic example was President George H. W. Bush's use of housing loan guarantees (HLGs) to force Likud from power in 1992. Conservative Israeli leaders and some historians have long asserted that this was the Bush administration's goal, and while they were hard pressed to produce concrete proof,¹⁹ this was certainly the case. First, US memos demonstrate that Secretary of State James Baker explicitly urged Israel's Arab interlocutors to keep the post-Madrid negotiation process going so it would bolster the peace camp in Israel's upcoming election.²⁰ Second, the administration consciously kept Jerusalem out of calls for a settlement freeze for fear they would "kill Rabin" by including it.²¹ Third, a former National Security Council official from that period recently acknowledged on the record that Bush and his NSC advisors felt "we had to get rid of him [Shamir]. And [we] consciously devised a strategy using the housing loan process...this was very much thought through that this will impact Israeli public opinion. We [were] tilting against Shamir."²²

The United States also worked to oust Netanyahu after his first term in office. It floated vague public threats that US aid pledged through the Wye Accords would be withdrawn if the Prime Minister, who had reneged on his side of the deal, was reelected.²³ The administration worked hard to

persuade Arafat to postpone a Palestinian declaration of independence that had been scheduled before the vote, and at least one of Ehud Barak's foreign campaign advisors assisted him in Israel at the (informal) request of the president of the United States.²⁴

Contrasting Patterns

Not all American efforts to shape Israeli politics fit these particular trends. First, many examples are much less dramatic. After the 1982 Lebanon War, Ariel Sharon became persona non grata in Washington for at least a decade, and US officials frequently adjusted their policies to ensure none of their actions might unintentionally benefit him.²⁵ The Bush White House searched in 1989 for ways it could "help bolster Rabin's position within Israel," especially within the Israeli Cabinet.²⁶ George W. Bush's letter to Sharon on settlement blocs was solicited by Sharon himself to strengthen his hand in the Cabinet on disengagement,²⁷ and Bush's visit to Israel right after the Annapolis Conference may have been a bid to bolster Olmert before the Winograd Report was released.²⁸

Second, American presidents have not always gone to bat for the Labor Party, despite their typical aversion to the Israeli right wing.²⁹ Reagan advisor Howard Teicher writes that America's decision in 1983 to release technology-transfer licenses for the Lavi aircraft project was designed to strengthen Moshe Arens against Shamir and Levy within the Likud Party.³⁰ George W. Bush's gestures of support to Sharon and Olmert suggest that although US support was not Likud-directed in the past decade, neither was it directed at reviving Labor. Jimmy Carter once told the NSC that if he were Israeli he would probably vote for Yigael Yadin's Democratic Movement for Change in protest of Labor hegemony.³¹

Third, it is important to recognize that the US does not pursue evenly what might be considered equivalent opportunities to intervene. Major distractions sometimes preclude otherwise likely interventions. The Monica Lewinsky scandal probably blocked American efforts to undermine Netanyahu as early as Clinton would have liked.³² Regional wars in 1983-84 and 1990-91 led the US to minimize interference in Israeli politics despite severe frustration with Likud.³³ Carter's single-minded focus on pushing the peace process led him to accidentally hurt Yitzhak Rabin at the polls, instead of helping him against his rival Menachem Begin.³⁴

Could it Happen Today?

Skeptics might argue that partisan intervention by the United States is unlikely now because America is entering a presidential election year. Indeed, there is a longstanding notion that US presidents retreat from the Middle East peace process and are unwilling to pressure Israel during such periods.³⁵ However, this trend should be taken with a grain of salt: sometimes election years have less of an impact or even the opposite effect if the president feels personally concerned about his legacy in the region.³⁶

Presidential elections did little to prevent US activity on the peace process in 1988, 1992, 1996, 2000, or 2008, nor did they preclude major efforts to influence Israeli politics. Even though 2000 was a presidential election year, Bill Clinton engaged in a campaign to carefully frame and publicize the proceedings at Camp David to prevent PM Ehud Barak's pro-peace government from collapsing.³⁷ His efforts to highlight Barak's bravery and Arafat's obstinacy – though not necessarily inaccurate in important regards – were aimed at Israeli politics and took place in the midst of the Democratic and Republican Party conventions in 2000. Nor are such efforts exclusively the province of lame duck presidents at the end of their second terms. Clinton backed Peres during the year he himself stood for reelection, and George H. W. Bush fought what his team knew would be an "AWACs plus fight" over loan guarantees while preparing to run again.³⁸

Nor will a Republican majority in the House of Representatives necessarily dissuade a Democratic president who cares strongly about this issue.³⁹ Periods of divided government do not seem to stop presidential attempts to influence Israeli politics. Before Obama, the only periods in the last three decades when the US was not divided in this manner actually witnessed a lower rate of such attempts.⁴⁰ Also, the low rates of American attempts during Reagan's presidency cannot be causally traced back to divided government despite the chronological overlap. Nor did divided government reduce the willingness of presidents to pursue large scale involvement in 1992, 1996, 1999, or 2000/1. If anything, Netanyahu's efforts to turn a Republican-controlled Congress against the Clinton White House may have reinforced the president's aggravation and his desire to have Netanyahu replaced.⁴¹

Why Presidents Still Matter

Obviously, American domestic politics play a major part determining Washington's overall approach to Israel. However, compared to other topics such as arms sales or overall levels of aid, this specific issue area – conscious efforts to influence Israeli politics – is one in which presidential preferences matter more than usual. This pattern can be attributed to the extraordinarily controversial nature of the topic. If conducted in the open, partisan intervention would no doubt backfire, at home and in Israel. Thus, leaders still pursue these objectives but in a manner designed to minimize the risks of exposure from leaks. They tend to avoid formal decision making channels, operating on a strict need-to-know basis and issuing verbal orders instead of written directives.

Because these efforts cannot take place through formal channels, it becomes difficult for bureaucrats to build winning coalitions across the government to initiate this policy of their own accord, even if they do have strong preferences about Israeli politics and the peace process. Nor can they block such efforts because they are left in the dark about the president's true intentions. For instance, even though the top official in the State Department's Near Eastern Affairs bureau working full time on the peace process suspected Bush was trying to push Shamir out in 1992, he acknowledges that he never once saw anything tangible to prove it.⁴²

Under such restrictive circumstances, the only way officials can approve this kind of policy is if they are senior enough to dispense with formal procedure, limiting the pool to the president and his most trusted aides. And because presidents typically must not only approve but also initiate the effort, they thrust themselves into these situations on the basis of high resolve. This makes it quite difficult for Congress to block the president when he does seek to shape Israeli politics. Members of Congress rarely notice the president's smaller scale efforts to affect the internal balance of power in Israeli Cabinets, and they are often deterred from fighting the executive over more drastic interventions because he signals to them his determination and willingness to pursue such a fight.

For instance, President Bush the elder used exactly this approach in his efforts to squeeze Shamir out of office. Bush was informed that by linking the loan guarantees to a settlement freeze he would stir up a major domestic controversy. However, he persuaded Congress to back down in disputes over the HLGs in September 1991 and again in March 1992.

Both in public and in private, he threatened members of Congress with a drawn-out fight in which if necessary he would paint them as enemies of peace.⁴³ Indeed, the administration's legislative strategy was premised on getting out in front of Congressional leadership and pressuring them to avoid this fight.⁴⁴

Presidential Factors

To estimate the chances of American involvement in Israeli politics, one must give special consideration to certain features of the president himself. Presidents are predisposed to undertake partisan intervention toward Israel at higher rates under two background conditions: when they believe that the peace process is of high priority among US interests, and when they have a hands-on managerial style. Both reasons help explain why efforts to shape Israeli politics were less frequent under Ronald Reagan and George W. Bush. Both were noted for their ambivalent attitudes toward the peace process as well as their detached approach to making decisions within their administrations.⁴⁵

President Obama clearly differs from Bush and Reagan in his longstanding concern that the US should be "constantly present, constantly engaged" in the peace process because resolving it is "a vital national security interest" for America.⁴⁶ On the other hand, his decision making style seems to be a contrary factor. His managerial approach as president has surprised many of his early supporters as surprisingly detached, including on other priority issues such as health care.⁴⁷ Secretary of State Hillary Clinton recently suggested that President Obama's decision to appoint his close advisor Daniel Shapiro as the current ambassador to Israel demonstrates a "personal commitment" to the Israel file, as could the news that Obama is planning a personal visit to Israel sometime soon.⁴⁸ Then again, recent reports that his administration is pursuing a "tactical withdrawal" from the peace process suggest that Obama's aloof style could do more to keep him from pursuing a partisan intervention in Israel than American domestic politics would.⁴⁹

Certain features of how the president interprets the immediate situation also matter for evaluating whether American partisan intervention is likely. Presidents only get involved in Israeli politics when they conclude – rightly or wrongly – that an impending Israeli political contest will be close enough that the outcome can be influenced. This

may be one of the reasons why the United States shelved hopes of undermining Netanyahu's government after Obama's first year in office, since Israel's new coalition government has been perceived to be quite stable.⁵⁰ Similarly, America's strong desire to support the Labor Party throughout the 1990s gave way to relative indifference since the party has become increasingly unable to challenge – let alone overtake – the leading candidates for prime minister.

The final relevant factor is whether the president believes American interests are affected by Israel's specific current leadership struggle. Often this factor boils down to whether he thinks Likud can be a genuine partner for peace. It may explain President Carter's surprising disinterest in trying to push Menachem Begin out of office because of his faith in Begin's genuine desire to reach an agreement. Similarly, in 1989 Washington was intrigued enough by the so-called Shamir plan that it pushed Labor politicians to keep a Likud-led coalition together, not tear it apart.⁵¹ However, by 1992 Bush and his team had rejected the idea that Shamir would be willing to move forward with the process, and Bush even took to calling Shamir "that little shit" behind closed doors.⁵²

In this regard, a report of a few months ago should be setting off alarm bells at the Prime Minister's bureau in Jerusalem. During Netanyahu's May visit to Washington, the *New York Times* revealed, "President Obama has told aides and allies that he does not believe Mr. Netanyahu will ever be willing to make the kind of big concessions that will lead to a peace deal."⁵³ If this reporting is accurate, it may be the clearest signal that US intervention could be in the offing once an electoral contest emerges in Israel. Unless Netanyahu wants to gamble his government's future on the hope that Obama will be aloof on this issue, he may want to seriously consider ways to change Obama's assessment of him before Israeli elections are called.

The scheduling of elections in Israel was a crucial turning point for US policy the last time Netanyahu was voted out of office. The Clinton administration quickly switched modes from trying to work with the prime minister to trying to topple him once new Israeli elections were called. Nearly overnight, orders came down from the White House to cancel negotiations over restructuring US aid in a manner that would have boosted benefits to Israel, for fear Netanyahu could point to successful talks as a sign that bilateral relations were on an even keel.⁵⁴

Conclusion

An important variable will be the diplomatic struggle begun in September at the United Nations and the recent Israeli-Palestinian prisoner swap. If these events ultimately create greater pressure on the administration to advance Palestinian aspirations and the Fatah-led PLO, it could feed into Obama's predisposition to pressure Netanyahu and provide him the pretext for doing so. Alternatively, these events could escalate into violence between the parties and a major resurgence of Hamas. This would likely strengthen the position of the Prime Minister's government and dissuade Washington from trying to influence Israeli politics in 2012.

Some may argue that any effort by President Obama to become involved in Israeli politics could only work to Likud's advantage because he is not trusted by the Israeli public. No doubt President Clinton's efforts to outmaneuver Netanyahu in his first term were aided by Clinton's extraordinary popularity in Israel. However, George H. W. Bush – not exactly beloved by Israelis – was similarly able to contribute to Shamir's downfall in 1992. This should serve as a cautionary tale for the current Israeli government. While it is certainly true that Obama is less popular in Israel than some of his predecessors, putting confidence in such arguments could be foolhardy.

Notes

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