

The American-Israeli Alliance under New Administrations: The Israeli Perspective

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I will begin by defining the term “alliance.” We actually do not have a formal American-Israeli alliance. I think that the right term to use would be “special relationship.” There have been discussions in the past about formalizing this relationship in the form of a pact or an alliance, or by having Israel join a group like NATO, which would create a formal defense relationship between the United States and Israel. Actually, at the time of the Clinton administration, when in early 1996 it seemed that an Israeli peace settlement involving full Israeli withdrawal from the Golan Heights was on the horizon (which would result in massive repercussions for Israeli security), the issue of negotiating a formal defense pact between the United States and Israel was finally put on the table, although on both sides there was no universal enthusiasm for the idea of such a formal commitment. The predominant view in the Clinton administration held that the United States might be willing to establish a formal defense pact as the final act of ending the Arab-Israeli conflict, and not just the Israeli-Syrian conflict. It maintained that formalizing the relationship and offering a US defense guarantee to Israel when other aspects of the Arab-Israeli conflict, particularly the Palestinian question, had yet to be resolved seemed premature and harmful.

On the Israeli side, not everybody was certain that Israel wanted the full spectrum of mutual obligations that such a relationship entails, for instance, consultation before taking any action. In fact, if a state has a formal defense relationship of this sort, it cannot take certain actions without consulting with, or at least informing, the senior partner in that

relationship. And so the issue was abandoned, although in any case, the Israeli-Syrian negotiations at the Wye Plantation collapsed in mid-course.

And so Israel and the United States have continued maintaining a very close relationship, with some periods of tension – as in almost every relationship – and with some familiar aspects, exemplified by the very strong statements by President-elect Obama, President Bush, President Clinton, and other major US leaders about an unshakable American commitment to Israel's survival and security, and by ongoing intelligence sharing, strategic dialogue, and close cooperation. If we think, for instance, of the Israeli destruction of the “non-existent Syrian reactor,” I would imagine that Israel did not do it without close consultation with the United States, and many other examples abound.

The second issue at hand is understanding the origins of this close American-Israeli relationship. Very briefly, without getting into a long review, I would just like to point out that this has not always been the case. Actually, the first ten years of the US-Israel relationship, 1948 to 1958, were fraught with tension, and secretaries of state like Dean Rusk and John Foster Dulles were not considered great friends of Israel. Indeed, the United States recognized Israel only minutes after its declaration of independence, but between that point and 1958 there were many moments of tension. It was only after the failure to create a working relationship with revolutionary Arab nationalism under Nasser that the Eisenhower administration came to the conclusion that it had to work more closely with its friends, Israel, Turkey, Iran of the day, and Ethiopia. Then Israel and the United States became strategic partners, and that relationship was reinforced over the years and later reached the level of intimacy and strength that the American-Israeli bond has nowadays.

The third issue to be discussed is what happens when administrations change. Of course the relationship is not just a direct line of progression from '58 to the present. As I indicated, there were ups and downs and changes, and some of them were the direct result of a change in administration. Oftentimes, when one team leaves and a new team comes in, a change in policy, a change in emphasis, or a change in orientation occurs, and I would like to give a number of examples.

The most striking one was the shift in policy of the Carter administration. The Carter administration replaced the Nixon-Ford administration, which

had a massive impact on the Middle East and on Arab-Israeli relations. In fact what is nowadays referred to as the “peace process,” although at the time it was still not a full-fledged peace process, began under the Nixon-Kissinger administration, in late 1973, and it was characterized by the philosophy of not seeking a comprehensive agreement, but rather implementing a step-by-step, gradual approach. Very important breakthroughs happened in those years and the administration had a very clear view of what it intended to do in the Middle East.

By contrast, President Carter started his administration armed with the Brookings report, which as a full prescription on how to resolve the Arab-Israeli conflict was a very ambitious plan. He came in and from day one began to implement that program, which was very different from the policy of the previous administration. This policy brought him onto a collision course with Prime Minister Rabin. It is difficult to think of a more difficult visit that an Israeli prime minister had in the United States than Rabin’s very bad visit with President Carter in March 1977. Begin replaced Rabin soon thereafter, and then President Carter pushed for the publication of the joint American-Soviet declaration that confounded President Sadat. In this sense, President Carter was actually responsible for pushing Sadat and Begin into each other’s arms. The result was both Camp David and the Egyptian-Israeli peace with which President Carter is credited sometimes, albeit not for the right reasons. After President Carter was defeated at the end of his first term, the words that President Reagan did not like to hear the most were “Camp David,” since Camp David was Carter’s legacy. Therefore, Camp David was neglected under President Reagan, and a very different policy for the Middle East was implemented.

The transition from Reagan to Bush was relatively smooth, so much so that the opening of the US-PLO dialogue – the failed dialogue of the 1980s by Secretary of State Shultz, a great friend of Israel – was held in order to facilitate the transition to a new policy by the new administration. In many respects it was a seamless transition. The Bush administration is a classic example of an administration that was not considered friendly by many Israelis – neither the president nor the secretary of state, Jim Baker. But the perspective changes by looking at the balance of what the administration accomplished for Israel, including the 1991 Gulf War, the arrival of Ethiopian Jewry, the departure of Jews from Russia, and the

beginning of the peace process in Madrid. This is an impressive list of accomplishments by an administration that was not seen, at least at the outset, as very friendly, and that actually had quite a tense relationship with the government of the Israeli prime minister, Shamir. When Rabin was elected the atmosphere changed, but this occurred only at the very end of that administration.

With the Clinton administration there was a stark difference between the meeting that Prime Minister Rabin held with the candidates, Clinton and Gore, when he came to the United States in the summer of 1992, and Rabin's first meeting with President Clinton at the White House in March 1993. In fact, when Rabin met with Clinton and Gore, he was quite tense, because of Carter. Clinton was another former Democratic governor from the south, and there were stories about his friendship and relationship with friends of Americans for Peace Now, as well as anxiety that he might get to office and immediately push for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. And of course what actually happened was the beginning of a beautiful friendship, and it is difficult to think of a period of closer personal relationships between a president and a prime minister, and of closer collaboration between the two administrations. The relationship was in fact so close that some graduates of the American peace team complained about the close coordination between the Clinton administration and the Israeli government, a complaint to the effect that if there is such close coordination between the administration and Israel, then the Arab parties to the peace process will become suspicious and uncooperative. Accordingly, they held that the United States needed to distance itself a little bit from Israel if it wanted to be an effective broker.

When the Clinton-Gore administration ended and the Bush administration came to office, there was again a very stark change of policy. The famous ABC, "anything but Clinton," applied very clearly to the Middle East. A predominant criticism was in fact that Clinton spent too much time in the Middle East – exemplified by the famous twenty-four trips by Secretary of State Christopher to Syria – and without a sufficient amount of success. Actually the peace process collapsed at the very end of the Clinton administration, and then came in a new administration with an entirely different philosophy: the US did not need to spend its time on frustrating Arab-Israeli negotiations, but needed to address the main arena,

which was in the east, in Iran and Iraq. The plan was to deal with both these countries, to pacify the eastern part of the Middle East, which would produce a spillover effect, bringing peace and stability into the core area of the Middle East. At that point, the US would go back to making peace between Israelis and Arabs. We know that it didn't quite work out, but the message was clear.

And now we are on the eve of the entry of a new administration, and it is difficult for me to recall a period in which there has been so much speculation about the new administration and the Middle East, for a number of reasons. First, there is currently very profound involvement by the United States in the Middle East. Let us remember that unlike earlier periods, the United States now is militarily present in a massive way in the Middle East. This was not the case before. The size of the expeditionary force that the US has in Iraq, the issue of how to end the war in Iraq, and the whole debate about Iraq – these all were and still are very important issues, although they were less important at the end of the campaign and more important at the beginning of the electoral race. In any case, Middle East issues were very much on the electoral agenda.

Second, candidate Obama's and then President-elect Obama's attitude toward the Middle East was a big electoral issue. And the questions are: is Brzezinski close to Obama, is this or that member of the peace team really an adviser to Obama, and what does it mean for the relationship with Israel? These were important electoral issues, particularly during the primaries, less so during the general election. I remember vividly the debate in Pennsylvania between the two Democratic candidates, Obama and now Secretary of State-designate Hillary Clinton, which highlighted a major difference in their attitude towards Iran. On that occasion Senator Clinton said very clearly that should Iran attack Israel there should be a massive response, which she developed into potentially establishing a guarantee to Israel and to Arab states with regard to the Iranian nuclear issue. Candidate Obama was not as forthcoming on this topic as was Senator Clinton.

And then I listened very carefully when President-elect Obama introduced his choice for secretary of state, Hillary Clinton. He conveyed that this is an important appointment at a time in which important issues are on the agenda of the United States, and the first issues on the international arena that he mentioned were Iran and the Palestinian question. So clearly

the Middle East is going to be an important foreign policy issue. I also expect the return to active engagement in the Arab-Israeli peace process, and there is going to be a clear difference with regard to the policy of the Bush administration, namely, less war and more diplomacy.

In addition, some of the issues that we experienced briefly over the years may very well become relevant again when Arab-Israeli and Middle East diplomacy are on the table. And if there is going to be serious engagement with Iran and a discussion of the Iranian nuclear issue, the Iranians will probably raise the nuclear potential of other actors in the region and questions of linkage may come up. Or if Secretary of State Clinton will raise the idea of a nuclear guarantee, it may to some extent equal the notion of a formal pact. In fact, a guarantee doesn't come for free, and it is not just a guarantee. Discussing the possibility of a guarantee contains the underlying assumption that the Iranians are going to have nuclear power, and it has its thrust. And then of course guarantees also come with commitments for the other side. So I expect a vivid deliberation on both sides around the notion of a formal relationship and guarantees as we move along in a new Middle East diplomacy.

Finally, when we speak about the American-Israeli alliance under new administrations, the emphasis clearly is on continuity and change on the American side. What happens when a new administration comes in? But it is also important to remember that the weaker part in this relationship, the junior party, Israel, also has discontinuities in its policy. So it is very important to look not just at the American side, but also at what the Israeli side brings to the table. It is crucial for the president of the United States to know that the prime minister of Israel is a partner he can fully trust; that there is full disclosure – as the idiom goes, “what you see is what you get,” and if this is the case, then the relationship is of one nature. When there is suspicion and lack of full trust, then the relationship is of an entirely different kind.

In conclusion, Israel should prepare itself for March, which we have seen in previous cases is a crucial month. The new administration will be in place, and hopefully an Israeli government will be formed after the February elections. And at some point in March, maybe April, there will be the famous first visit to the White House. That is going to be crucial in forming the initial relationship between the new president and the new

prime minister. And my advice to the Israeli prime minister for that visit is, do not just be charming. Come ready, come with a plan. It is much better not to be the passive recipient of American ideas, but also to try to shape the agenda by putting Israel's own plan on the table.