

Obama and Israel: Two Years Back, and Two Years Ahead

Mark A. Heller

Obama at Midterm

Half-way through a president's first term of office is a convenient moment for an interim assessment of his performance. The midterm elections in November 2010 provided American voters with an opportunity to do just that, and their verdict was decidedly negative. In what was universally understood to be a referendum on Barack Obama's performance, the Democrats suffered the most dramatic rebuke to an incumbent president's party in six decades, losing over sixty seats (and their majority) in the House of Representatives and, with the loss of six Senate seats, just barely retaining control of the upper chamber.

The severity of the setback prompted frenzied speculation about how Obama would respond during the rest of his term on the issues that dominated the election – jobs, taxes, debt reduction, bailouts, economic stimulus, and health care. Many observers believed that he would perforce look to compromise with the opposition in order to permit the government to function with some semblance of normality. A few thought that he might even embrace the strategy of “triangulation” adopted by Bill Clinton following a similarly stunning loss in the 1994 midterms, that is, catch the Republicans off guard by appropriating some of their pet policies. Others speculated that he might persist in his policies, as did Harry Truman in 1946, in the hope that he could recoup political capital by campaigning against an obstructionist, “do-nothing” Congress in the next presidential election. Needless to say, the choice will be clarified, if at all, only once the new Congress is underway.

Dr. Mark A. Heller, principal research associate at INSS

And if a seemingly decisive election provided little certainty about domestic governance over the next two years, the implications for foreign policy were even more obscure. After all, the election was almost exclusively about the administration's economic performance. Apart from issues that ostensibly bore directly on the economic wellbeing of Americans, such as outsourcing and Chinese foreign exchange rate policy, the rest of the world did not figure in this campaign to any noticeable degree; even the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were barely mentioned. The makeup of the new Congress offers only a few hints about its orientation. The Tea Party movement – the ideological trend that powered the Republican revival – has not formulated a coherent foreign policy approach, though it is known to be highly critical of foreign aid. Republicans in general are skeptical about the new Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty negotiated with Russia. They are also assumed to favor an even more hard line position on Iran and advocate more enthusiastic support for Israel.

Those assumptions prompted some Israelis and some American supporters of Israel who harbor suspicions about Obama's basic posture to draw encouragement from the election results. Their reasoning was that given Obama's need to find some *modus vivendi* with Congress over the next two years, Congressional sentiment and his own political weakness would constrain any inclination to apply pressure on Israel for concessions in order to promote peace agreements on the Palestinian and/or Syrian track. The same factors might also encourage a more muscular approach towards Iran and limit the administration's ability to accommodate Turkish policies or Egyptian initiatives on the question of Israeli adherence to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty. But others, even those who share the concerns about Obama's attitude toward Israel, pointed out that while Congress and public opinion might prevent the administration from undertaking the most extreme (hence, least likely) actions deemed hostile by Israel, the fact remains that Congress, whatever its composition, plays a decidedly secondary role in the formulation and implementation of American foreign and defense policy, especially those aspects, such as voting behavior on UN Security Council resolutions, that do not directly emanate from Congressional allocations of funds.

True, Congress has some reserved powers in foreign affairs, such as the Senate's prerogative to ratify Cabinet-level and ambassadorial

appointments and international treaties and to approve declarations of war. Moreover, Congress controls the “power of the purse.” As a result, the legislative branch can obstruct and sometimes stymie presidential initiatives, and the threat of such action may oblige a president to incorporate Congressional preferences into his own programs (as, for example, Richard Nixon did when he was forced to attach the Jackson-Vanik Amendment to his proposal to grant the Soviet Union most favored nation status as part of his policy of detente).

Nevertheless, Congressional defiance or coercion of presidents in these matters is the exception rather than the rule. The president’s constitutional position as commander-in-chief endows the executive branch with the kind of moral as well as legal authority to which Congress and public opinion ordinarily defer, even in matters of considerable controversy (e.g., renouncing control of the Panama Canal). Thus, while a president never has completely free rein to pursue any policy that strikes his fancy, he does have considerable latitude to advocate ideas and actions designed to promote his interpretation of the national interest (or his own political agenda). This was certainly true when Obama’s party controlled both houses of Congress before the midterm elections, but it remains true, beginning in 2011, when it controls only one. Moreover, as some particularly anxious Israeli or pro-Israel observers have pointed out, there is even a chance that Obama, stymied in domestic matters where he has no option but to accommodate the resurgent Republicans, might redouble his activism in foreign affairs, which could work to Israel’s disadvantage.

In other words, the midterm elections, whatever their implications for domestic politics and policies, have no clear and decisive consequences for American foreign policy in general, or US-Israel relations in particular, and any attempt to trace the likely course of American policy over the next two years must continue to focus on the inclinations of the president and his foreign policy team. For Israel and its supporters in the United States, Obama’s presumed attitude toward Israel is therefore still far from a trivial matter.

The midterm elections, whatever their implications for domestic politics and policies, have no clear and decisive consequences for American foreign policy in general, or US-Israel relations in particular.

The Obama Enigma

There are essentially two variants on the suspicion that Israel needs to be even warier of Obama than of almost all his recent predecessors. The first is that personally he is at least indifferent if not hostile to Israel. This assessment is not based on Obama's public career (because of his meteoric rise to power, he had virtually no established record on international affairs) or on any documented statements; he has not been heard (or at least not been reported) to have expressed anti-Jewish or anti-Israel sentiments – unlike President Richard Nixon or George H. W. Bush's secretary of state, James Baker. Instead, suspicion of his predisposition is grounded in the biography of a man too young to personally remember the Holocaust, the founding of Israel, the 1967 Six Day War, or the identification of Jews with the civil rights movement in the United States when it was led by Martin Luther King, Jr. Likewise he was too removed in his formative years from any socialization in the American version of the Judeo-Christian tradition to develop much empathy for Jewish historical narratives and Israel's place in them. Moreover, there is an element of "guilt by association" in the suspicion of Obama, namely, the notion – propagated during the Democratic primaries and especially during the presidential campaign in 2008 – that he might have been influenced by his Muslim father (whom he barely knew), by a few childhood years spent in Muslim-majority Indonesia, or by connections in Chicago with such individuals as the Reverend Jeremiah Wright (a purveyor of sermons with anti-Semitic themes in the church that Obama attended, whose message Obama has denounced) or Rashid Khalidi (a Palestinian-American professor and former adviser to the PLO, whom Obama has kept far away from his administration). In the most extreme variant of "things are not always what they seem" thinking, Obama was even accused by conspiracy theorists of being a kind of *morisco* – a term used in post-*reconquista* Iberia to describe Muslims who had overtly converted to Christianity but secretly continued to adhere to Islam.

Interestingly, concerns about possible insensitivity stemming from Obama's personal history were not confined to Israel. Some Europeans, for example, felt that the lack of any European resonance in his biography might result in their being ignored or taken for granted. That theme seemed to gain traction when Obama decided not to attend a US-EU

summit scheduled for May 2010 (but canceled following the White House announcement).¹

The second source of anxiety is that Obama's world view or meta-theory of international relations can produce behavior objectively harmful to Israeli interests or national security. Obama, along with much of the electorate, was eager to dispel the criticism, voiced perhaps even more by friends and allies than by adversaries, that especially under George W. Bush the United States had become something of a rogue state, too quick to resort to force and insufficiently attentive to the strictures of international law and the procedures of international institutions. Obama seemed to believe that much of the friction in American foreign relations could be reduced if the United States abandoned this approach and instead consulted more with others and reached out proactively to accommodate their views and interests. Since the views and interests of most others in the global arena have not normally reflected much sympathy for Israeli perspectives, there continues to be some apprehension that efforts under an Obama administration to "reset" the tenor of international relations might come at Israel's expense.

On this matter too, Israel was not alone in its apprehensions. Some with close ties to the United States, notably Japan, India, and some countries in Eastern Europe worried that an American outreach to their regional rivals would entail diminished support for their own needs or preferences. This sometimes translated into the accusation that Obama was willing if not to consciously undermine American allies in order to cultivate American adversaries, then at least to proceed on the basis of a potentially dangerous naivete.

The (Brief) Historical Record

There was certainly an element of zero-sum thinking in all this speculation. Nevertheless, some of the new administration's actions did make it difficult to dismiss the concerns as mere paranoid ravings. For Israel, the most immediate alarm bell was Obama's clear signal that he meant to immunize himself against the criticism leveled against all of his predecessors that their involvement in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process had always been a matter of "too little, too late." The unspoken assumptions behind such criticism were that Israel was the major obstacle to a peace agreement and that America's leverage on Israel was

in any case infinitely greater than its leverage on the Palestinians and their Arab supporters. Thus “American involvement” was often a diplomatic euphemism for pressure on Israel, and Obama’s declaration of activist intent was interpreted by many as a willingness to conciliate Arabs and Europeans with the coinage of Israeli concessions.

Perhaps even more disconcerting was the political logic that appeared to lie behind this activism, namely, the conviction often held but rarely advertised with such candor by previous administrations that resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the key to promoting all of America’s other strategic objectives in the broader Middle East region – reducing Arab/Muslim enmity, containing if not defeating the threat of terrorism, undermining the appeal of al-Qaeda, facilitating the stabilization of Iraq and Afghanistan and the withdrawal of American forces from those countries, neutralizing Iran’s nuclear weapons program, weakening Iran’s regional influence and the power of its proxies (especially Hizbollah), and even promoting the liberalization of politics and society in that part of the world.² The clear articulation of such linkage theory by administration figures, even to the point of insinuating that the risk to American military personnel was elevated because of American support for Israel, not only seemed to augur more vigorous action in the diplomatic field but could also be understood as a heavy-handed attempt by the administration to undermine support for Israel in American public opinion.³

In fact, Obama’s activism in the Israeli-Palestinian arena was an integral part of his declared policy of “engagement” with the Arab/Muslim world. But for many Israelis, that too was hardly a source of reassurance. First of all, the physical dimension of engagement was manifested in high profile visits to major Muslim capitals – Ankara, Cairo, and Riyadh – but Israel was conspicuously absent from his itinerary. Furthermore, the rhetoric with which he tried to dramatize his desire to forge a “new beginning” in US-Muslim relations seemed to reflect considerable awareness (by him and/or his speechwriters) of the sensitivities of his hosts but little of those of Israelis. His June 2009 speech at Cairo University, for example, reaffirmed America’s commitment to Israel as a necessary and legitimate response to Jewish suffering over the ages, culminating in the Holocaust. But however well intentioned that message may have been, it struck many as ignorance if not depreciation of the historical Jewish connection to the Land of Israel, particularly the

centrality of Jerusalem to Jewish identity, and even an affirmation of the longstanding Arab complaint that the Palestinians had been made to pay the price for European crimes against the Jews.

The issue that caused US-Israel tensions to burst into the open was the question of settlements, or more precisely, the demand that Israel freeze construction in the settlements in order to allow PLO Chairman (and PA President) Mahmoud Abbas to return to the negotiations that he had suspended following Operation Cast Lead in Gaza in late 2008. In late 2009, Prime Minister Netanyahu responded to American entreaties and instituted a 10-month moratorium on construction activity. But the moratorium was only partial – it did not apply to Jerusalem – and it was grudgingly conceded, not least because there was no reciprocity, not even in the form of a symbolic confidence building measure that Obama had requested such as Saudi Arabia granting El Al over-flight rights – testimony, perhaps, to the limits of American influence if not of American understanding of political dynamics in the region.

More to the point, the moratorium did not achieve its stated objective; Abbas continued to refuse to renew negotiations until he was practically frog-marched into proximity talks, i.e., desultory indirect negotiations. But that “breakthrough” only came after an altercation marked by the kind of sourness not seen in US-Israeli relations since the standoff between Secretary of State James Baker and Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir almost twenty years earlier (also over the settlement issue). In March, during a visit to Israel by Vice President Joe Biden, low level officials in the Jerusalem District Planning Commission announced approval of a new housing project in an existing neighborhood inside the city’s municipal boundary but beyond the Green Line (the 1949 Armistice Line). That announcement was a considerable embarrassment to the administration and it produced pressure on Netanyahu, during a visit to Washington that same month, to refrain from future such provocations. Obama’s attempts to persuade Netanyahu included methods that were variously described as a “snub” or a “public humiliation.” Widespread domestic criticism of Obama’s approach,

If the potential for future tension in US-Israel relations is realized, it will reflect at least in part the belief that everything important in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and that the major onus for removing that irritant falls on Israel.

together with the undeniable fact that Abbas was still refusing to negotiate, eventually led the administration to ease its rhetoric – another Netanyahu visit to Washington in May passed much more harmoniously – and revival of direct negotiations in early September seemed to lay the issue to rest. In fact, it reemerged within a month, following the expiration of the moratorium and the renewed suspension of negotiations, when the administration asked for another, shorter freeze. This time, the request was not granted but the controversy was marked by less bitterness, even after the midterm elections were over. Still, it remained as a symbol of the proverbial loaded gun on the table, symptomatic of the unresolved differences between the United States and Israel on the future of the peace process.

The second major source of suspicion and concern is Iran. By extending an “open hand” to the Islamic Republic of Iran at the outset of his incumbency, Obama fueled suspicions that he might be preparing to accommodate the regime and its nuclear ambitions. This demarche provoked considerable anxiety in several Arab Gulf states, and some Europeans initially worried that it was cover for an American attempt to gain commercial advantage. It was Israel, however, that exhibited the greatest anxiety because Iran represents the most salient threat to its national security, and any sign that the United States might abandon its opposition to Iranian-sponsored terrorism and especially to Iran’s acquisition of a nuclear military capability triggered fear that Israel would have to confront this threat alone.

Looking Back, Looking Ahead

Against this backdrop, it is not surprising that Israeli approval of Obama and confidence in his future performance are rather low. Although reliable figures are elusive, the same is apparently true of Israel’s major supporters in the United States, Jews and evangelical Christians. The latter have never really been part of Obama’s natural constituency but the former certainly are. In 2008, according to most evidence, Jews supported Obama in overwhelming numbers (as they have done for all Democratic leaders, at least since the time of Franklin D. Roosevelt). Of course, Israelis (among foreigners) and Jews and other supporters of Israel (among Americans) are not alone in showing sharply reduced approval of Obama since 2008. Growing disillusionment is an almost universal

phenomenon, if only because expectations were so astronomically high that they could not possibly be met. What is significant for the purposes of this analysis is that reduced support is also evident even among the Arabs and Muslims targeted by Obama's policy of engagement. The reasons for that are varied: Americans began to leave Iraq but the country is nevertheless in shambles, American-led military operations in Afghanistan have produced considerable collateral damage in that country as well as in Pakistan, the Guantanamo detention facility has not been closed, anti-government Iranians (some, at least) are irate that Obama did not support the opposition more vigorously in the aftermath of the fraudulent elections in June 2009, pro-government Iranians (some, at least) are irate that he has organized a campaign of political isolation and economic sanctions against them, and Arabs (some, at least) are irate that he hasn't done even more to harass, weaken, and contain Iran. But one other major reason is the undeniable fact that Obama has been far less able to "deliver" Israel than many felt they had been led to believe he would, and far less willing to initiate and sustain a truly monumental confrontation with Israel because of Israeli resistance to his initiatives.

That gap between initial Arab/Muslim expectations and subsequent reality with respect to Israel suggests that widespread Israeli/Jewish perceptions and concerns about Obama, however genuinely held, do not necessarily tell the whole story of the last two years or provide a reliable signpost to his probable course over the next two years. It is, of course, extremely difficult for anyone except Obama himself (and perhaps not even he) to know what he profoundly thinks and feels about Israel. However, the record of his first half-term as president does not provide overwhelming evidence either of the indifference/hostility to Israel or the dangerously naive world view often attributed to him. Indeed, no intellectual contortions are needed to interpret his policies as generally consistent with the major thrust of American policies stretching back over several decades.

Indeed, Obama's broad world view may contain elements of idealism, but that idealism seems firmly tempered by an acknowledgment of human limitation, including his own. That explains why he disappointed the Norwegian parliamentarians who awarded him the Nobel Peace Prize when in his acceptance speech he stated that while peace is the noblest aspiration, it is sometimes necessary to wage war. And that explains why

he qualified his aim of bringing about a world free of nuclear weapons by admitting that this was unlikely to happen in his lifetime.

In addition, the impression that he is less willing to use military force than his predecessors does not correspond with his surge in Afghanistan or his approval of the use of remotely-piloted vehicles to target terrorists in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Yemen, and the Horn of Africa. Moreover, his effort to reach out to Iran does not necessarily imply a deep conviction that engagement would be crowned with success in the form of an acceptable agreement. On the contrary, it can be convincingly interpreted as a sophisticated exercise in *realpolitik*, that is, a ritual designed to build the political capital that George W. Bush needed but did not have to facilitate a broader and more vigorous sanctions regime and eventually, if all else failed, preemptive military action against Iran's nuclear infrastructure.

On relations with Israel and American policy in the Middle East, the Obama administration has most explicitly embraced the notion of linkage, but it is hard to imagine that some variant on that theme was not present in the calculations of all previous administrations. Likewise, while the administration has experimented with the idea of a frontal confrontation with the Israeli government over the issue of settlement construction, every previous administration has also denounced settlements as obstacles to the peace process and some, especially those of Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush, made their objections known in an unequivocal fashion.

Apart from that, there is little difference between Obama's positions and those of his predecessors. He has endorsed a two-state solution to the conflict, but so did George W. Bush and Bill Clinton, both considered very good friends of Israel. On the question of borders, he has indicated that America supports only minor (and mutually acceptable) deviations from the 1949 Armistice line, but that has essentially been the position of the United States since 1969, when William Rogers, Nixon's secretary of state, declared that any border changes should be "insubstantial" and should not reflect "the weight of conquest." He has also repeatedly referred approvingly to the Jewish character of Israel, something that most Arabs have adamantly refused to do. Moreover, the Obama administration, like its predecessors, has continued to use American influence to prevent or preempt the adoption of resolutions hostile to Israel by the United Nations Security Council and has acted where it

could to mitigate anti-Israel resolutions in less authoritative UN agencies. It has also continued in other international forums to shield Israel from demands that the latter join the NPT or otherwise expose elements of its security effort that it does not want to expose.

Finally, bilateral strategic cooperation and support for Israel's defense posture have, if anything, intensified under Obama. American spokesmen at all echelons of government have insisted that differences on the peace process would not impinge on security ties between the two countries. Vice President Biden, even at a moment of supreme discomfort during his visit to Israel in March 2010, stressed that "there is absolutely no space between the United States and Israel when it comes to security, none."⁴ This commitment has in part been made manifest by ongoing support and funding for Israeli missile defense programs and by new agreements to provide the most advanced military technologies, including F-35 combat aircraft.

Of course, facts do not necessarily make for the entire truth, and it is possible that the Obama administration does what it does with less enthusiasm or more reservations than did previous administrations. Even if that is not the case, but especially if it is, the potential for future tension and conflict in US-Israel relations cannot be precluded. If that potential is realized, it will certainly be due at least in part to the way the entire complex of issues is occasionally framed by the administration at one level or another, that is, to the belief that everything important in the Middle East is linked to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and that the major onus for removing that irritant falls on Israel. But it will also be due to a perception in the critical center of the American body politic that Israel is not doing what can reasonably be expected of it. A major component of every Israeli government's agenda must therefore be to prevent the spread of such a perception.

Notes

- 1 Stephen Castle, "E.U. Notes a Distancing in American Foreign Policy," *International Herald Tribune*, December 17, 2010.
- 2 Ethan Bronner, "Why America Chases an Israeli-Palestinian Peace," *New York Times*, November 20, 2010.
- 3 Critics of US ties with Israel seized particularly on the comments of General David Petraeus, Head of Central Command, who told the Senate Armed Services Committee, "The conflict foments anti-American sentiment due to

a perception of U.S. favoritism toward Israel.” Mark Lander, “Opportunity in a Fight with Israel,” *New York Times*, March 16, 2010.

- 4 <http://www.america.gov/st/texttrans-english/2010/March/20100311123835eaifas0.9307062.html>.