

The United States and Israel: the Netanyahu Era

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Background

The Israeli parliamentary elections of June 23, 1992 were held amid a crisis in American-Israeli relations. President George Bush's decision of February 1992 to link Israel's request for \$10 billion in loan guarantees for immigrant resettlement to a freeze of construction in the West Bank became a major issue in the Israeli elections campaign. Bush's refusal to provide the funding helped defeat the Likud party and bring to power a Labor government headed by Yitzhak Rabin.

One week after the Rabin government was inaugurated the new Prime Minister decided to drastically reduce settlement construction in the West Bank and suspend plans to build 7,000 housing units. This move paved the way toward President Bush's decision of August 11, 1992 to approve Israel's request for the loan guarantees without insisting on a complete suspension of settlement activity in the occupied territories. The resolution of the loan guarantees crisis restored the American-Israeli alliance.

Seven years after the loan guarantees issue had been resolved, Labor leader Ehud Barak won the Israeli prime ministerial elections of May 17, 1999. His victory followed three years of incessant crises in American-Israeli relations, during which Netanyahu was perceived in Washington as untrustworthy and unreliable. It now seems likely that once again a leadership change will help remove at least some of the sources of

friction that had strained relations between Washington and Jerusalem, and thus inject new life into the special relationship.

Sources of Friction

American-Israeli relations during the Netanyahu era were characterized by growing American skepticism and doubts concerning Netanyahu. Starting from the decision of September 1996 to open the Hasmonean Tunnel in the Old City of Jerusalem, Netanyahu's policy and statements dismayed Clinton and his foreign policy advisors.

The crisis was exacerbated by Netanyahu's attempts to influence the domestic American scene. These included his courtship of Clinton's domestic opponents, including the Christian evangelical leader, the Rev. Jerry Falwell and several Republican leaders in both houses of Congress. It also included the Prime Minister's efforts to mobilize the Congress, American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, and a variety of other American Jewish organizations to constrain the administration's actions and plans in the Palestinian sphere. These efforts culminated in a strongly-worded letter, drafted by AIPAC in April 1998 and signed by 81 U.S. senators, who called upon Secretary of State Madeleine Albright not to pressure Israel. Finally, Netanyahu made a last-ditch attempt during the Wye conference to release Jonathan Pollard as an inducement for signing the accord with the Palestinian Authority.

Clinton Reactions

Netanyahu's actions prompted Clinton, Albright and Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs Martin Indyk to resort to harsh rhetoric, in contrast to special coordinator for the peace process, Dennis Ross, who based his strategy upon persuasion and conciliation. These American reactions included Clinton's refusal to meet Netanyahu during his November 1997 visit to the U.S. as well as during the period immediately preceding the Israeli elections of May 1999. It also included Albright's statement of November 14, 1997, in which she directly linked the U.S. inability to form a regional coalition against Iraq to the continued stalemate in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on a second further redeployment. In January 1999, Albright also refused to meet Sharon during his trip to the U.S. Albright also repeatedly threatened "to reevaluate the whole U.S. approach to the peace process," accompanied by similar threats from a host of named and unnamed administration officials.

Albright also reprimanded the Netanyahu government for resorting to "unilateral action" that threatened the peace process. Although such measures may have been technically legal, she added, they were still incompatible with the need to build confidence between the parties. And while the secretary of state understood that the composition of Netanyahu's right-wing government

limited him, she became increasingly frustrated with actions perceived as contradicting earlier Israeli promises and commitments.

American Jewish Crisis

These growing strains were accompanied by an acute crisis within the American-Israeli paradigm. This crisis emerged over the 1997 battle between non-Orthodox groups and Israel's government and Orthodox officialdom over the conversion bill. The bill was designed to ensure that officially-recognized conversions in Israel would be those performed only by Orthodox rabbinical authorities.

The dispute, amid the division of the American Jewish leadership over Israeli peace policy, became evident during the period of June 1996-May 1999. Several national and local Jewish leaders and federations employed harsh rhetoric and threatened punitive measures unless Israel stopped the conversion bill.

For its part, the Clinton administration tried to exploit the split by mobilizing the "dovish" wing of the American Jewish leadership in support of its peace-making strategy. The administration hoped to constrain the leaders of AIPAC and the Conference of Presidents of Major Jewish Organizations, who remained largely supportive of Israeli policies.

The Palestinian State Issue

Against the backdrop of this intensifying crisis, the Clinton administration's boycott of Netanyahu encountered little opposition from the highly fragmented U.S. Jewish community. Clinton's close

relations with the late Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin and his successor Shimon Peres had won him the reputation of a staunch and loyal supporter of Israel.

As a result, the president was not vigorously opposed when he expressed increasing support for "the aspirations of the Palestinian people to determine their own future on their own land." Clinton's trip to Gaza to address the Palestine National Council in December 1998 and his message of May 1999 to Chairman Arafat, in which he alluded to the need "to fulfill the aspirations of your people," highlighted the close relations between the Clinton administration and the Palestinian Authority. Washington appeared to support declarations by the European Union in 1998 and 1999 – including the Berlin Declaration of March 1999 – which openly called for the establishment of a Palestinian state.

Domestic Constraints

Still, the Clinton administration's frustration with Netanyahu's style was rarely translated into policy that harmed the American-Israeli special relationship. The administration feared that an open confrontation with Netanyahu would prompt the articulate prime minister to mobilize American public opinion against the White House. In this context, Netanyahu's pledge to defy U.S. pressure might have been perceived in Washington as a dangerous prelude to such a campaign.

Thus, unlike the 1975 reassessment policy by the Ford administration, meant to press Israel into withdrawing from parts

of Sinai, Clinton's pique did not affect the tenets of the special relationship. The White House approved an Israeli plan to restructure Israel's annual aid package that would decrease economic aid and increase military allocations.

Instead of shying away from the peace process, the administration assumed additional responsibilities as a guarantor of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority in the January 1997 Hebron Agreement and the October 1998 Wye Accord. Washington was prepared to offer guarantees, commitments and inducements to both parties in a process that increased the U.S. role in the peace process.

The Strategic Dimension

Strategic ties between Washington and Jerusalem continued to develop during 1996-1999. Programs and frameworks for assistance and cooperation were maintained. These included the prepositioning in Israel of weapons and ammunition for use during wartime, and the development of anti-missile systems including the Arrow and Nautilus. The two countries met regularly in such panels as the Joint Political Military Planning Group, the Joint Security Assistance Planning Group and the Joint Economic Development Group. Some of these programs were even expanded during the Netanyahu era.

Along with the Wye River accords, the United States and Israel signed a memorandum of understanding, designed to enhance "Israel's defensive and deterrent capabilities" against the threat from ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction. Indeed, the joint

American-Israeli committee for strategic planning, established as part of the agreement to formulate ways for bolstering and institutionalizing military and technological cooperation, convened as scheduled on February 21, 1999, despite Israel's decision to suspend the redeployment stipulated in the Wye accords. The Israeli move did not reduce the administration's determination to reinforce Israel's strategic deterrence in the face of potential unconventional threats, primarily from Iran.

The administration regarded the October 1998 strategic memorandum as a confidence-building measure bound to affect the Palestinian realm by convincing

the Israeli Prime Minister to adopt a more reconciliatory policy. As a result of these U.S. hopes and expectations, the tension over the peace process, did not permeate the strategic setting.

Barak's Electoral Victory

Barak's victory is likely to reduce some of the strain that permeated American-Israeli relations. If the 1992 experience is to be repeated, a rapid resumption of the Middle East peace process is required to significantly improve U.S.-Israel relations. On the Israeli-Palestinian track, this includes an agreement to fully implement the Wye Agreement. It also requires the launching of negotiations on the final

status of the West Bank and Gaza, Palestinian sovereignty, the status of Jerusalem, the future of Israeli settlements, security arrangements, and the Palestinian demand for a return of refugees to their homes in what is now Israel.

The administration will seek to exploit any opportunity for progress in these talks during the rest of 1999 and before the forthcoming presidential campaign distracts the Clinton administration. The Clinton administration will also expect Israeli flexibility in renewed negotiations with Syria while assigning priority to the Palestinian track, where the White House has been more involved and feels is the key to a reduction in regional tension.