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Obama's Reelection: Implications for Israel

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Much has been written about President Obama's reelection in terms of his attitude toward Israel in general and Prime Minister Netanyahu in particular. First, there is an assumption that the difficult relationship between the two leaders will assume greater weight during Obama's second term: once Obama no longer need worry about reelection he can freely express his reservations about Netanyahu without incurring a steep political price, and "take revenge" for unwelcome "behavior" during the President's first term, including Netanyahu's open support for Mitt Romney.

A second assumption is that a second term president is especially conscious of his historical legacy, and will therefore aim for breakthroughs on important issues if the chance for success is greater than the risk of failure. Clearly for Obama, resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a priority, both for its own sake and for facilitating the promotion of United States interests in the Arab and Muslim world. New Obama initiatives in this area are liable to lead to clashes with the Israeli government, which will oppose them. Unlike during his first term, President Obama will this time not hesitate to steamroll over Israel's objections (assuming he can enlist Abbas's support for his initiatives). In this context, one also hears that the result of the election, especially the percentage of Jews who voted for Obama – only slightly lower than the usual Jewish support for a Democratic presidential candidate (about 70 percent), despite the tremendous efforts to convince Jewish voters that Obama is bad for Israel – both damaged the image of a powerful Jewish lobby, and demonstrated that most American Jews support Obama's policy on issues related to Israel, including the Israeli-Palestinian issue and his policy on Iran. Absent the threat of the Jewish lobby and Israeli influence on the United States, nothing need deter Obama from seeking his revenge of Netanyahu.

Notwithstanding the difficulty of predicting the conduct of an incoming American administration, and despite the reasonable assumption that the personal relationship between leaders exerts a certain effect (whose importance, however, should not be exaggerated), there are several reasons why so clear-cut a scenario of this sort is unlikely to unfold. First, President Obama will almost certainly focus on domestic issues. If he

manages to extricate the United States from its financial crisis and help promote the needs of America's middle and lower classes, he will be remembered as one of the more successful presidents in United States history. Indeed, the American public is not focused on foreign policy, as was made amply clear during the presidential campaign, and the chance of this changing is slim. It is therefore likely that Obama's foreign policy will continue to be guided not necessarily by a comprehensive, initiating, ambitious strategy, rather by acceptance of the limits of American power, attention to burning issues, a preference for multilateral work and coalitions that allow cost-sharing among partners, and a propensity to lead from behind whenever convenient. This is not to exclude the possibility he will take advantage of opportunities that arise.

Second, even a second term president is not free of political constraints. Obama will need Congressional cooperation in order to advance his ambitious domestic agenda, and the results of the mid-term Congressional elections are very important, lest the Senate join the House of Representatives and move to Republican control. In addition, unlike the assessments on the eve of the election, there has been little erosion of Jewish support for Obama precisely because he avoided a confrontation with the Netanyahu government and extended much assistance to Israel, and therefore his Israel policy still carries much political weight.

A third reason is President Obama's personality. First term predictions that Obama would be an ideological president dissipated. He demonstrated pragmatism and was wont to apply rational considerations and avoid emotional reactions. Foreign leaders commented frequently on the difficulty in creating a warm personal relationship with him: conversations were always on point and lacking in sentiment. The second Obama administration, therefore, will presumably be guided by cost-benefit considerations more than emotion.

These factors will affect the key political issues important to Israel. Despite the potential for friction between Israel and the United States over the Iranian nuclear project because of different views of what constitutes the so-called red lines, there is still a common interest in stopping the program. Therefore, close cooperation between the two nations will presumably continue. The joint effort could be put to the test in at least two scenarios, first, if the United States makes a deal with Iran that includes elements unacceptable to Israel. Nonetheless, since Israel would likely be unable to derail any deal acceptable to both the US and the EU, Israel must make every effort to help shape a deal before it is concluded but avoid creating the impression that it is trying to thwart a reasonable deal. The second scenario is that diplomatic activity and sanctions do not succeed and Iran's nuclear program approaches the point where Israel thinks military action is unavoidable. The United States would strive to retain the final say on military action and would likely use every means to pressure Israel, and perhaps with fewer

inhibitions than this past year, in order to prevent an Israeli attack. Here too, however, the President would likely continue both security cooperation and military assistance to Israel, and not "throw Israel under the bus," as charged by the Republicans.

As for the Israeli-Palestinian issue, it seems that "once burned, twice shy" applies to Obama. It is obvious to the President and his advisors that as long as there is no change in the positions of the two parties, the chances for success are even lower than during his first term in office because of the transformations in the Arab world. Netanyahu will be helped by the fact that many in Obama's circle are angry with Abbas, who is seen as having impeded progress in the talks no less than Netanyahu. Obama will likely become more actively involved should either threatening developments or positive opportunities arise, e.g., a Palestinian appeal to the UN General Assembly for recognition as a non-member nation or the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. A Palestinian appeal to the UN could represent an opportunity for Obama to settle accounts with Netanyahu without damaging America's interests, if only by studied avoidance of acting against the Palestinian initiative even if the United States ultimately opposes it. The collapse of the PA is an emergency situation with the potential of harming American interests, so the administration would likely go labor to prevent this. While an opportunity for Israeli-American cooperation, it could easily prompt the administration to pressure Israel to grant benefits to the Palestinians in order to strengthen the PA. In all, however, the creation of opportunities usually depends on initiatives by both Israel and the Palestinians, especially the Israelis, or on the emergence of a difficult situation. Absent a significant political change on one side, the chances that both parties will present initiatives are small.

In the case of a security flare-up in the south (the Sinai and Gaza Strip) or the north against Hizbollah, the administration will likely not deviate from supporting Israel while making efforts to contain the crisis and prevent escalation. Especially in the reality of the Arab Spring, escalation could easily harm relations with the Arab world and damage this critical American interest.

It is still not clear if Obama will again embrace an ambitious arms control strategy. During his first term, the President seemingly adopted a realistic understanding of America's limited abilities to progress in this area beyond slow, measured steps, given the Republican control of the House. There is still potential for friction with Israel around future attempts to convene a WMDFZ conference following the cancellation of the conference scheduled for December 2012, and attempts to reach an understanding with the Arabs, especially Egypt, where the new regime, like its predecessor, views WMD as a key issue.

Finally, Syria: there are some efforts to propel the American administration to support outside military intervention in Syria, given the strategic interest of damaging the axis of resistance led by Iran. However, it is doubtful that Obama and his advisors can be persuaded to take on yet another military conflict in the Middle East simply to serve a strategic interest such as this. They doubt that such intervention will ultimately create a new reality less damaging to American interests than the status quo, given the nature of the opposition to the Assad regime. Should there be a change in their approach it will in all likelihood result from cumulative public pressure due to the worsening humanitarian crisis in Syria. Even then the administration will likely try to avoid spearheading direct military intervention and prefer a course of action with fewer risks, such as the creation of no fly zones and humanitarian corridors.

Even if President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu do not turn over a new leaf in their personal relations, promotion of America's interests will continue to guide the incoming Obama administration in its relations with Israel. One of the manifestations of the relations will be continuing security cooperation. How to resolve the Iranian nuclear crisis and the way to resolve it on the one hand, and the Palestinian issue on the other, will expose disagreements between Israel and the United States. Israel will hopefully clarify its positions on the Iranian issue in a dialogue behind closed doors. Regarding the Palestinian issue, Israel should do everything in its power to minimize the areas of disagreements with the US and gain the administration's understanding for steps that will not preclude the two-state solution.

