

MIDDLE EAST NOTES AND COMMENT

Dangerous Brinkmanship

by Haim Malka

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Last week's clash between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government should have come as little surprise. The two governments have differed fundamentally on settlements and Jerusalem since each entered office last year. What was less predictable, though, was that U.S.-Israeli differences would cast a shadow over U.S. power and security in the Middle East. For this reason, Israel's moves in recent weeks are self-defeating. Challenging the United States on settlements and East Jerusalem construction may provide short-term political benefits for the Netanyahu government, but Israel's long-term security relies on a powerful United States and close U.S.-Israeli ties. In yielding to near-term politics, the Netanyahu government put both at risk.

Trust between Binyamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama was tenuous from the start. The Obama administration came into office skeptical that a right-wing Israeli government would advance political negotiations with the Palestinian Authority, and Netanyahu's track record when he was prime minister more than a decade ago fueled those doubts. Israelis had their own concerns, questioning Obama's commitment to Israel's security. There were steady complaints in Israel that President Obama wanted to repair America's image in the Arab and Muslim world at Israel's expense.

But the tension runs much deeper. While the Obama administration seeks to manage multiple crises and challenges in the Middle East from Iraq to Afghanistan, it has come to see Netanyahu and his coalition as a wild card rather than a source of stability. The Israeli government's surprise announcement of plans for new Jewish housing in East Jerusalem during Vice President Joe Biden's visit was a prime example. While it was intended for domestic political effect, it resonated even more loudly diplomatically.

Israeli actions both reflect and further a belief that the United States is distracted, overburdened, and declining. The Israeli government sees an administration grappling with massive domestic hurdles as Russia, China, Iran and others

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Gulf Greenery

Going green is a mixed blessing, especially in arid regions like the United Arab Emirates. The country's huge increase in urban green space has stressed available water resources, and the UAE's ecological deficit—the gap between resource consumption and regeneration—is the highest in the world.

Important initiatives like MASDAR, the effort to build a zero-carbon city for 50,000, are underway but in some cases are overwhelmed by the larger growth occurring in the UAE. The construction industry grew nearly 50 percent per year between 2003 and 2008, and between 2007 and 2008 alone, construction and demolition waste in the U.A.E. increased 163 percent. Water demand has doubled since 2000, and is expected to double again by 2030.

Other environmental measures target individual as well as industry practices. In 2009, the Center of Waste Management in Abu Dhabi decreed that recycling was mandatory for all citizens and the Ministry of Environment and Water announced that plastic bags would be phased out entirely by 2013. Additionally, Abu Dhabi's Urban Planning Council recently established a set of environmental standards that all buildings must meet. In the water sector, efforts are underway to encourage greater use of treated wastewater for irrigation.

The challenges will continue, particularly as the UAE's construction industry is expected to grow nearly 20 percent per year between 2010 and 2013. With plans to more than double Abu Dhabi's population over the next twenty years, sustainability is not a choice—it is a necessity. ■ WP

Trouble in the Backyard: Yemen and the GCC

The Middle East Program at CSIS held a Gulf Roundtable featuring Dr. Bernard Haykel, professor of Near Eastern Studies at Princeton University, on March 2, 2010 to discuss prospects for GCC cooperation over Yemen. Haykel argued that Yemen's domestic troubles should be dealt with at a regional, rather than global level, and that improving the country's internal stability and economy should take precedence over uprooting al-Qaeda. He stressed that Yemen's problems are "much broader, much deeper, and much more significant than just the issue of al-Qaeda," and that Saudi Arabia, with its strong cultural and historical ties and robust financial situation, was better positioned to address them than is the United States. Click [HERE](#) to learn more about the event. ■

challenge U.S. global influence, and it questions both U.S. resolve and strategy to confront a host of regional issues, most importantly Iran's nuclear weapons program. Israel is not alone in this regard, but its lack of confidence is perhaps the most troubling because of the depth and breadth of the U.S.-Israeli strategic relationship. Turkey has also been challenging U.S. efforts to enlist international support for strong UN Security Council sanctions against Iran. Gulf Arab states are reluctant to commit to the international effort against Iran, despite the threats they face from a weakened United States and a nuclear Iran. Many of these doubts started in the Bush administration, but they have made the Obama administration a target for regional allies and foes alike.

Netanyahu's short-term political victories in this regard come with a price. Publicly undermining the Obama administration weakens the United States' ability to effectively manage regional challenges. A diplomatically weaker America has less influence to protect its own interests as well as those of its allies.

And of all the times to stir things up, this was an odd one. First, Vice President Biden was on a trip explicitly intended to improve relations. A long-time friend of Israel, he was not only rebuffed, but insulted.

Second, the seriousness and complexity of shared security problems in the Middle East necessitates closer U.S.-Israeli cooperation, not less. If the United States and Israel cannot coordinate on tactical diplomatic issues, how can they effectively coordinate on more pressing strategic challenges?

Third, prospects for the U.S.-brokered proximity talks' success were low to start with. The larger goal was to create a small amount of positive momentum between Israelis and Palestinians, and to demonstrate U.S. engagement on an issue of importance to many allies in the efforts to contain extremism in Iran, Iraq and Afghanistan. No one was about to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict, but the lack of any movement was making it more difficult for the United States to manage a wide range of security operations throughout the Middle East. All of those security operations are to Israel's benefit, and all are beyond Israel's capacity to manage by itself.

Whatever Israel's unease about U.S. strategy, there are few alternatives to it. For Israel, and the rest of the region, there is simply no substitute to U.S. leadership managing the Middle East in the foreseeable future. In order to do so, there must be at least some semblance of a political negotiating process between Israelis and Palestinians. Every United States president in the last three decades has agreed on that fact, whether or not he believed negotiations would lead to a resolution of the conflict. The Israeli move, whether intentional or not, attempted to change that consensus.

The Middle East is on the verge of changing in a fundamental way. U.S. forces will withdraw from Iraq later this year. The war in Afghanistan is intensifying, and Iran could be on the threshold of becoming a nuclear power. Looking forward, managing the region is likely to become more difficult. In all of this, the United States will need to coordinate closely with a wide range of actors in order to secure U.S. interests, and the interests of its allies as well. Coordination with Israel just became harder, as the Netanyahu government seems intent on putting domestic political interests above long-term strategic interests.

Israel may assert a right to build anywhere in Jerusalem that it chooses. But those political choices have implications that extend far beyond real estate. An assertion of Israeli power does not always strengthen Israel, especially when it comes at the expense of the United States, and letting Israeli politics shape Israeli security hurts both. The stakes are too high to lose sight of common strategic priorities at such a critical juncture. ■3/16/10

Links of Interest

The summary of CSIS's conference on terrorism in North Africa can be found [HERE](#).

Jon Alterman was quoted by the *New York Times* in "Iran's Ace (or Deuce): Its Oil Reserves."

Haim Malka was quoted by the *Associated Press* in "Analysis: Will Jerusalem spat undo peacemaking?"

Haim Malka was quoted by *National Public Radio* in "For Biden, A Case Of Heartburn In The Holy Land"

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