

COMMENTARY

Obama, Netanyahu, and the Future of U.S.-Israeli Relations

Anthony H. Cordesman

May 15, 2009

President Barack Obama's meeting with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu raises some of the most serious issues in U.S.-Israeli relations. It is premature to judge how the Netanyahu government will deal with either the Arab-Israeli issue or Iran, but both could be major sources of tension if the two countries do not go deeper than their usual dialogue. The United States and Israel are allies, but this scarcely means that they have identical strategic interests or that U.S. ties to Israel cannot be a liability as well as an asset.

The Arab-Israeli Peace Challenge

One needs to be very careful about assuming that Prime Minister Netanyahu cannot be persuaded to accept a meaningful peace and equally careful about assuming that a meaningful peace is possible as long as the Palestinian movement remains divided and major elements challenge Israel's right to exist. This, however, does not mean that President Obama is not right in promising a far more active and consistent effort to create such a peace, in focusing on the two-state solution, and in seeing clear U.S. leadership in seeking a final settlement as critical to dealing with the broader threat of terrorism and Arab anger against the United States.

A firm U.S. commitment to Israel's security does not mean that a U.S. president cannot confront an Israeli prime minister who tries to back away from the search for peace. It does not mean that the United States has to sacrifice its interests in the rest of the Middle East. Hopefully, Prime Minister Netanyahu will accept the new impetus that the United States has given to negotiations through the appointment of George Mitchell and that Israel cannot edge away from the two-state solution. Hopefully, Israelis will understand that a U.S. administration has no reason to tolerate the eccentricities and extremism of a foreign minister on the margins of Israel's political life.

If not, this should be a visit when the formula is not a celebration but the announcement of "full and frank" discussions and a categorical presidential statement endorsing an active and unfaltering search for a two-state solution even if this means open disagreement during the prime minister's visit. At some level, the United States must also press the prime minister on the issue of settlements, the treatment of Gaza, and Palestinian rights and needs in the West Bank and Jerusalem. For far too long, the hope that the Oslo Accords would trade territory for peace has led to a reality that trades terrorism for settlements.

Any such pressure on Israel, however, must be two sided. The failures in the peace process were failures by both sides. The corruption and failed governance of the Palestinian Authority was large a self-inflicted wound, as was the failure to capitalize on President Bill Clinton's peace efforts. It was Fatah's mistakes, corruption, and failures to create meaningful security forces that opened the way to the rise of Hamas and then lost Gaza. It is Hamas's violence and rejectionism that has divided the Palestinian movement to the point where even moderate Israelis are beginning to lose hope. The United States must push hard for Palestinian reform, for honest and effective governance, and for further progress in creating effective Palestinian security forces.

More generally, President Obama must make it clear at every relevant occasion that the United States intends to push Arab states—as well as Israel and the Palestinians—to look at the realities of peace. The fact is that both sides do not yet know the solution, they disagree in ways that make peace impossible, and they must now find ways to move beyond those disagreements. Sheer demographics, for example, make any major Palestinian right of return impossible. No peace can be

stable or secure without a radical aid plan to create a viable economy in the West Bank or Gaza. Both sides face painful adjustments in dealing with settlements and changes in the 1967 armistice lines. Israel needs years of guarantees in terms of limits to any military changes in the West Bank and Gaza. Giving the Palestinians some form of capital in Jerusalem while giving Israel much of what it has gained since 1967 will be a major challenge. So will basic issues like water, transit rights, and access to ports.

Put differently, President Obama must be at least as firm with the Palestinian and Arab leaders as with Prime Minister Netanyahu. He must show from the start that he will back his peace plans and George Mitchell all the way, even at the cost of both outside pressure and problems in U.S. domestic politics.

The Iranian Challenge

Both the Bush administration and the Obama administration have already made it clear that they oppose any Israeli strike on Iran. Senior U.S. officials, diplomats, and officers have all made it clear that any Israeli strike would seriously affect U.S. strategic interests in the Middle East and the Islamic world. They have given this “red light” for many reasons—none of which affect any love of Iran or confidence in its future behavior.

The United States has good reasons to oppose an Israeli strike. The first is that a mix of diplomacy, and incentives and disincentives, may still work. The second is that a preventive strike—particularly an Israeli strike—probably will not. Iran’s facilities are too dispersed, the scale of any parallel or duplicative centrifuge and other production facilities is too unknown, and any single attack would at best set Iran back for a limited period while giving it both the motive and “justification” to carry out a far more massive and dispersed nuclear-armed missile effort.

It is also one thing to conduct a raid sized to strike at a single Syrian reactor, or carry out a small long-range strike on Osriak, and quite another to carry out the scale of attack needed to do serious damage even to Iran’s three most critical nuclear facilities. It means a major Israeli air operation through Arab territory on a scale that Israel has never previously carried out. It means attacking an Iran that has a wide range of ways to retaliate: Hezbollah, Hamas, pressure on Iraq or Afghanistan, and asymmetric threats in the Gulf. It also means creating a whole new set of reasons to justify Iranian and jihadist political attacks on Israel and moderate Arab regimes.

The United States also cannot decouple totally from an Israeli action no matter how clearly its leaders send a red light. Many, probably most, Arabs and Iranians will see the United States as having at least covertly given Israeli permission. The United States will become a proxy target for Israel, and for Arab and Iranian anger, without getting strategic benefits. It may also have to clean up in terms of military action in the Gulf, Iraq, and other areas after an Israeli success, and the consequences of dealing with any serious Israeli failures would be far worse.

The United States has not abandoned its own military option, but it would have to be far larger than the one Israeli could mount, involve persistent restrikes as long as Iran continued trying to rebuild its program, and take on the character of a major regional contingency at a time when the United States is already involved in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and Pakistan is seriously threatened. It also is unclear that even if diplomacy does conclusively fail, the United States will not be better off by seeking to contain Iran, provide improved regional missile and air defenses, and provide the same kind of extended deterrence it once provided in the form of a nuclear umbrella over Europe. As we have learned, preemption and prevention are not the solution to every problem.

What President Obama should insist on is that Israel recognize that the United States is sending a “red light,” and this is an area where the United States needs time and freedom of action. One key step would be for the president to openly declare such U.S. opposition and speak in very broad terms about the “damage” it would do to the U.S.-Israeli strategic relationship. He could reinforce this with statements by the chairman of the Joint Chiefs, the secretaries of state and defense, and key intelligence officials.

Perhaps more quietly, however, President Obama needs to be prepared to give Prime Minister Netanyahu the same reassurances that he needs to be prepared to give every state around Iran and our key Arab allies. It should be clear that if

diplomacy fails, the United States will provide every possible assistance, it will not react to the improvements in Israel nuclear strike and retaliatory capabilities that may already be taking place, and it is prepared to help all of its allies create far more effective air and missile defenses.

At some point, President Obama should also be prepared to make clear to Iran that it cannot deploy nuclear-armed missiles without having U.S. nuclear forces targeted on Iran; that every step it takes to threaten Israel or any its neighbors will see a far greater increase in the threat to Iran; and that any nuclear strike by Iran on a U.S. ally will lead to retaliation in kind. Diplomacy, dialogue, and friendly relations are the far more preferable options for dealing with Iran, but it should be clear to the world—not just Israel—what the alternative will be.

Anthony H. Cordesman holds the Arleigh A. Burke Chair in Strategic and the Center for Strategic and International Studies in Washington, D.C.