

Obama and Netanyahu: A fractured alliance becomes open conflict

By David Horovitz

Very publicly, very nastily, and very worryingly, we are witnessing the collapse of an alliance.

Not between the United States and Israel — the ties run too deep, and the common interests (if not necessarily the common values) are abiding. But between their current leaderships, the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government.

Each regards the other as arrogant, incompetent, wrongheaded and ill-intentioned.

And here's what's new: Neither much cares anymore about hiding it. A fracturing partnership has given way to open conflict.

How and why has it come to this?

Building over the pre-1967 lines

The Obama administration, most emphatically including the president and the secretary of state, believes that Israeli building anywhere over the pre-1967 lines deepens Palestinian and wider Arab hostility to Israel and, by extension, to the United States — especially when there are no Israeli-Palestinian peace talks going on. It believes settlements are destroying international support for Israel. It is aghast at the announcement of more construction plans in recent days, as the drumbeat of a possible third intifada — weeks of Palestinian violence in Jerusalem escalating and spreading to the West Bank — grows louder.

The administration's opposition might be less vehement if Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu publicly declared that he would not be approving new construction outside East Jerusalem's Jewish neighborhoods and the major settlement blocs, areas Israel intends to retain under any permanent accord, and if he backed Palestinian building in West Bank areas that would come under Palestinian sovereignty under such an accord.

But as things stand, the criticisms are coming fast and bitter, with administration spokespeople openly musing on whether Israel "wants to live in a peaceful society" and warning that East Jerusalem housing plans will "distance Israel from even its closest allies." The use of the term "chickenshit" by an unnamed administration official to describe Netanyahu in [an article by Jeffrey Goldberg on Tuesday](#) marks a descent into outright vulgarity that may well be unprecedented in the annals of US-Israel ties.

Netanyahu has made his choice: He is evidently less concerned by the consequences for Israel's ties with the US of ongoing construction beyond the 1967 lines than he is by the consequences for his domestic political well-being of a halt to that construction

The Netanyahu government, for its part, most certainly including the prime minister, believes that it is not settlements, but Palestinian and wider Arab refusal to come to terms with Jewish sovereign legitimacy, that lies at the core of the Israeli-Arab conflict. If anything, Netanyahu may well consider that more settlement building, not less, could ultimately pressure the Palestinians toward viable compromise.

Netanyahu has always felt that President Barack Obama goes untenably easy on the now violence-inciting, genocide-charging Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, a failed leader much more interested in bashing Israel at the UN than in seeking to regain control over Gaza from Hamas. He feels that this US administration has it in for him anyway. And the rhetoric with which the prime minister has responded of late to US criticism — invoking “American values” in defense of building in East Jerusalem, and asserting that pressure to halt construction reduces peace prospects by bolstering Palestinian intransigence — would appear to signal that Netanyahu has made his choice: However dangerous and irresponsible this may seem, he is quite evidently less concerned by the possible consequences for Israel’s ties with the US of ongoing construction beyond the 1967 lines than he is by the possible consequences for his domestic political well-being of a halt to that construction.

Indeed, the flurry of building approvals in recent weeks might well signal that Netanyahu has Israeli elections in mind; experience suggests that his political standing at home only improves when he is perceived to be defying international pressure.

The consequences of a very angry United States

In his “chickenshit” article, US journalist Goldberg, well connected to the Obama administration, wrote that US anger over Netanyahu’s settlement policies is “red hot.” He quoted the unnamed senior official describing the prime minister provocatively as “scared to launch wars,” on the one hand, and unprepared to “do anything to reach an accommodation with the Palestinians or with the Sunni Arab states” on the other. Goldberg assessed that the ties between the two administrations are the worst they’ve ever been — a conclusion that is certainly shared by many in Jerusalem.

Ahead of next week’s US midterm elections, recent evidence of that US anger has been limited to rhetoric, and to preventing Defense Minister Moshe Ya’alon from meeting with Joe Biden, John Kerry and others in Washington last week — no mean sanction, that. Pretty soon, though, things could get still more unpleasant.

The Palestinian Authority has been gearing up to present a resolution to the United Nations Security Council demanding a timetable for an Israeli pullout from territories captured in 1967. It has been working to secure the nine votes in the 15-member council that would force a US veto — a move which would discomfit and isolate the US, ostensibly bolster international legitimacy for a Palestinian state, and lead to more pressure on Israel. The Palestinians’ increasing success in mustering global support is also in good part a function of the settlement enterprise: The more time passes since the 1967 war, the more Israel’s presence in the territories comes to be regarded as a colonial enterprise rather than the consequence of anti-Israel Arab belligerency. But the US has remained resolutely on Israel’s side to date. And the feeling in Jerusalem is that, even now, in mid-crisis, the US can be relied upon to veto a resolution that breaches the fundamental “land for peace” equation — i.e., that demands an Israeli withdrawal but does not condition this on the negotiation of adequate security arrangements for Israel.

The administration is only too aware that its repeated condemnations of Netanyahu’s settlement policies have either no effect or strengthen the domestic perception of the prime minister as the defender of Israeli interests

And yet, given the new nadir in US-Israel ties, the Palestinian best-case scenario may have just gotten better. Jerusalem is not aware of substantive contacts between Washington and Ramallah on the drafting of an alternative resolution that the US would support, but there is talk here of general contacts between Washington and Ramallah on the PA’s Security Council process. And there is an awareness that the Obama administration might just be tempted now to go the alternative resolution route, and include wording that reflects the longstanding US opposition to settlements.

It is worth recalling in this context that in 1980, the UN Security Council voted on Resolution 476, which stated that “all legislative and administrative measures and actions taken by Israel, the occupying Power, which purport to alter the character and status of the Holy City of Jerusalem have no legal validity and constitute a flagrant violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention.” The United States abstained, and the resolution was adopted by 14 votes to 0.

The Obama administration is only too aware that its repeated condemnations of Netanyahu’s settlement policies either have no effect or strengthen the domestic perception of the prime minister as the defender of Israeli interests. So, amid a palpable sense in the administration that it is being insulted on almost a daily basis, it is looking for more effective tools. The UN Security Council might just provide them.

That Arab Peace Initiative

The withering comments about Netanyahu by the official quoted in Goldberg’s piece also reflect Washington’s disappointment with the prime minister’s attitude to the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002. At the UN General Assembly, and at several press conferences over the summer, Netanyahu spoke of new opportunities to build relationships with moderate Arab states, but he has also made clear his rejection of the Saudi-proposed initiative as even a starting point for any such advances.

[According to Egypt’s foreign minister](#), the US didn’t even try to get Israel invited to this month’s Cairo conference on rehabilitating Gaza because the other participants simply didn’t want Israel there. Former chief peace negotiator Tzipi Livni blamed Netanyahu’s intransigence for that sorry state of affairs. The US emphatically agrees.

Common enemies such as Iran and Islamic State do offer the possibility of a certain amount of quiet cooperation between Israel and some other regional players — working to thwart threats. But there is no likelihood of more constructive cooperation toward a more harmonious relationship with Israel because, so long as the Israeli-Palestinian conflict rumbles on, these regimes dare not antagonize their own extremists. Which, like it or not, brings us back to those settlements again.

The Qatar dispute

Less centrally but still significantly, the two leaderships are also at bitter odds over Qatar.

Israeli officials are adamant that Qatar provides direct financial support for Hamas. In July, then president [Shimon Peres called it “the world’s largest funder of terror”](#) and told UN Secretary General Ban Ki-moon: “Qatar does not have the right to send money [to Gaza] for rockets and tunnels which are aimed at innocent civilians.”

Israel also notes that Qatar represents Hamas on the diplomatic stage, hosts the terror group’s leader (Khaled Mashaal), and saves Hamas from what would otherwise be complete diplomatic isolation (Turkey being an inconsistent ally).

The US, by contrast, claims Qatari funding for Gaza only indirectly helps Hamas. It deeply values its relationship with Qatar: quite apart from this year’s \$11 billion arms deal with the emirate, the US regards Qatar — which hosts a forward headquarters of the United States Central Command — as part of what it calls its security architecture for dealing with Iran.

The discrepancy in these attitudes was doubtless a factor — though certainly not the only factor — in [July’s unmitigated Israel-US diplomatic fiasco](#), which saw Secretary of State John Kerry, believing he was serving the declared Israeli interest in securing a ceasefire with Hamas, negotiating with Qatar and Turkey, and forwarding to Jerusalem what the State Department insisted was merely a draft, but which the Netanyahu security cabinet treated as a concrete ceasefire proposal and unanimously, angrily rejected.

The Iranian nuclear program

Israel considers Obama's volte face on using force against Syria in summer 2013, after he concluded that President Bashar Assad had been gassing his own citizens, a landmark moment in the crumbling of US credibility in the region. Yes, Russian intervention secured an arrangement for Syria to give up most of its chemical weapons without a resort to force, but the view in Jerusalem is that the Iranians witnessed the president's hesitancy (which was reinforced by Britain's refusal to back a military strike), and chuckled heartily to themselves, confident that a similar disinclination would apply to the notion of using the military option against their nuclear program.

In Israel, the chance of a 'good deal' — which denies Iran enrichment and other potential bomb-making capabilities — is put at roughly zero

When Israel looks at the possible outcomes of the US-led P5+1 negotiations with Iran, it sees no possible reassuring scenario. The most likely imminent development is that the talks will be extended past the November 24 deadline — a problematic situation since it maintains a status quo which, Israel fears, allows Iran to get within a few months of a breakout to the bomb. A less likely but not impossible scenario is worse still — that November 24 will see the conclusion of a lousy deal, one that leaves Iran with an enrichment capability and the means to break out to the bomb within months, and will gradually see the lifting of sanctions. And the only other credible scenario is that the talks collapse altogether — but this prospect is seen as remote, because neither Iran nor the P5+1 negotiators wants it. Strikingly, the chance of a “good deal” — which denies Iran enrichment and other potential bomb-making capabilities — is put at roughly zero.

Has Jerusalem striven to make its concerns clear to Washington, to highlight its fear that a regime that seeks and routinely predicts Israel's destruction could attain the weaponry capable of achieving that ambition? Most certainly. Is there any sign that this effort has had any effect? No.

The crumbling of camaraderie

These are not the only points of bitter friction between the Obama administration and the Netanyahu government. But they are some of the central elements.

Fundamentally, the two leaderships are miles apart on settlement building and on how to grapple with the Palestinian conflict, on the right approach to handling regional instability including the murderous anarchy in Syria and the rise of Islamic State, on how to thwart Iran's bid for the bomb.

Israel needs the US far more — diplomatically, militarily, economically, existentially more — than the US needs Israel

Nonetheless, what used to prevail, to enable the bridging of such fundamental differences, was a clear sense of shared purpose. Now that has fragmented too, in what might best be described as a crumbling of camaraderie.

Netanyahu hopes to outlast Obama's second term, and hopes the administration will be somewhat constrained in the aftermath of the midterm elections — which may be a major calculation since, while Obama might become something of a lame duck president, that could also mean he would have nothing to lose. The Obama administration hopes (however implausibly) that Israelis will sober up and rid themselves of a leadership it deems to have ducked the “very difficult choices” that Obama urged on Netanyahu in [a nastily timed interview with Goldberg in March](#). (That piece appeared as the prime minister was on a plane headed to meet the president at the White House. Notably,

there was no similar Obama interview focused on Abbas's failures when the PA president visited Washington soon after.)

Two leaderships, each interested in seeing the back of the other. Two leaderships of nations that certainly still have shared interests, but no longer consistently find common cause in advancing and protecting those interests. Two leaderships of nations that also used to highlight their shared common values, but with a US administration now making crystal clear that it feels Israel under Netanyahu is moving away from those shared democratic, human rights-upholding, peace-loving values.

Truly a dismal state of affairs, with potentially dire repercussions — most especially for Israel, which needs the US far more (diplomatically, militarily, economically, existentially) than the US needs Israel. Truly a fractured alliance.

© 2014 The Times of Israel, All rights reserved.