



Obama's Pressure Will Backfire

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers No. 102, March 25, 2010

<http://www.biu.ac.il/SOC/besa/perspectives102.html>

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The Obama administration is repeating a pattern of behavior towards Israel that, as in the past, will achieve exactly the opposite of what was intended. The intense and exclusive pressure on Israel will result in the hardening of Arab and Palestinian positions, and will scuttle, rather than initiate, real negotiations.

Barack Obama has already made history by being elected as the first black president in United States' history and by being the first to bring about a substantial reform of the American healthcare system. He was elected on the basis of his promises to change the world order. Obama would like to enter history as the man who promoted and achieved a comprehensive solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict, and who brought about reconciliation between America and the Muslim world. In problematic fashion, he regards Netanyahu and his government as the main element foiling his initiatives and aspirations.

March 2010 was supposed to be a month of reconciliation and overcoming misunderstandings and deteriorations in US-Israeli relations. Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's follow-up visit to Washington were carefully planned to achieve these objectives. Instead, the two visits revealed profound disagreements that the two sides have had difficulty overcoming.

Three recent incidents testify to the troubled relations between the US and Israel: the speeches by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Netanyahu to the annual conference of the pro-Israeli lobby AIPAC, which highlighted the

contradictory views on the building in Jerusalem; the meeting between Netanyahu and Biden that was described as fraught with disagreements; and the Netanyahu-Obama meeting that was closed to media coverage and not even photographed. The only friendly meeting was between Netanyahu and House speaker Nancy Pelosi. Congress supports Israel, reflecting the strong backing for Israel and its policies in US public opinion. Congress has already rebuked Obama for his treatment of Israel in a letter signed by 71 bi-partisan senators in August 2009.

Although the announcement of Israel's plans to build in Ramat Shlomo during Biden's visit to Israel set off a crisis, the United States exacerbated it. Senior Obama administration figures, who cannot stomach Netanyahu and do not trust him, wanted to exploit the crisis so as to improve the conditions for entering proximity talks, and to show that the US can pressure Israel and alter its policy.

Upon taking office, Obama sought to renew the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations immediately. He set a timetable of two to three years for reaching a solution and establishing an independent Palestinian state. This timetable was determined according to the time frame of the US political system and not according to the existing conditions in the region. Obama wants an historic achievement exactly before beginning his re-election campaign, to improve his chances for victory.

To resume the negotiations, Obama presented demands for concessions from the leaders of Israel, the Palestinians, and the pro-American Arab states. The only leader who acceded to the demands, albeit in partial and qualified fashion, was Netanyahu. In his June 2009 speech at the BESA Center, he accepted the principle of two states for two peoples. In November-December 2009, he announced a freeze on construction in the West Bank. In contrast to the past, which was characterized by winks back and forth between Jerusalem and Washington on the settlements issue, Netanyahu in fact clarified the limits of his undertakings and excluded Jerusalem from the freeze. For their part, however, the leaders of the Arab states rejected all of Obama's requests for gestures toward Israel, and the Palestinian Authority (PA) refused to resume the negotiations. Nevertheless, Netanyahu was the only one to draw harsh criticism from the Obama administration.

The criticism continued even when, with an eye to his visit in Washington and seeking to end the crisis, Netanyahu sent Hillary Clinton a letter in which he again partially accepted American demands for a resumption of the negotiations. The US demanded the cancellation of the building plan for Ramat Shlomo, the release of Fatah prisoners, the further removal of restrictions on

movement in the West Bank, and Israeli willingness to discuss final-status issues in the proximity talks and not only in the direct talks as Netanyahu had wished.

Since Obama has been in the White House, the Palestinian Authority has refused to renew negotiations with Israel and has set preconditions. Among other things, the PA has demanded that construction throughout the West Bank and Jerusalem be stopped and that the negotiations resume from the point where they ended with the Olmert government. Until more than a year ago, the building in the West Bank and Jerusalem did not prevent Mahmoud Abbas from holding intensive negotiations with the Olmert government.

The US demand for a total construction freeze hardened the Palestinian position. Even when Netanyahu announced a temporary freeze in the West Bank and the United States welcomed this step, the PA persisted in its refusal to restart the negotiations and demanded that the United States abide by its original position. Obama's policy achieved exactly the opposite of what it aimed to accomplish. It hardened the Palestinian position and delayed negotiations.

General David Petraeus, commander of US forces in the Middle East, has reported to Congress that the pro-American Arab states are losing their confidence in the United States because it is unable to bring Israel to the negotiating table with the Palestinians. The lack of negotiations and a solution to the conflict makes it hard for the pro-American Arab states to stand beside the US in stopping the Iranian race toward developing nuclear weapons. Petraeus added that the lack of a solution enables the radical Islamic terrorist organizations to recruit operatives and supporters. The inference was that Israeli policy thereby endangers the lives of American soldiers. These statements were quoted by Obama's adviser, David Axelrod, and other members of the administration. This is a grave assertion which could damage the US public's staunch support for Israel.

Petraeus' claims are baseless. Netanyahu criticized them in his speech to the members of AIPAC. Netanyahu said the situation is exactly the reverse, that Israel assists the United States in the fields of intelligence, weaponry, and warfare, and this assistance saves the lives of American soldiers.

Indeed, in the Obama era, American credibility has eroded in the Middle East. This loss is in no way related to Israel or to negotiations with the Palestinians. It began, in fact, with Obama's historic, conciliatory address in Cairo in June 2009. Arab and Muslim states, friendly and hostile, saw it as a revelation of weakness. Obama's credibility was damaged even further by the widening gap between

his declarations about US determination to deny Iran nuclear weapons and the ongoing failure to achieve that goal.

There is no connection between Islamic terrorist organizations and the state of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. Al-Qaeda, the Taliban, and the Sunnis in Iraq are fighting the United States because they view its values and culture as a threat to Islam and because of the ongoing US military occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan.

Petraeus' statements and the Palestinians' recalcitrance are among the causes for the Obama administration's decision to intensify the dispute with, and the pressure on, Netanyahu. Obama wanted to achieve better conditions for opening the proximity talks and to show the Arab states that the United States is pressuring Israel, and that pressure is bearing fruit. Hillary Clinton made statements in this spirit after she received Netanyahu's letter of clarification. This is apparently the main reason that Netanyahu has had a hard time in Washington.

Obama's approach can succeed only in the short term. In the longer term it will bring, as in all the previous cases, the opposite of what it seeks. The Palestinians and the Arabs have long dreamed that the United States will "do the work" for them; that is, to pressure Israel into accepting their terms for a settlement without having to make hard concessions themselves. The latest crisis plays into their hands and will harden their positions. Thus, it is likely to thwart, rather than improve, the chances for a comprehensive peace settlement.

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BESA Perspectives is published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family.