

# Save Them from Themselves

by [Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Mar 22, 2015

Also available in

[العربية \(/ar/policy-analysis/anqdhwhm-mn-anfshml\)](/ar/policy-analysis/anqdhwhm-mn-anfshml)

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS



[Robert Satloff \(/experts/robert-satloff\)](/experts/robert-satloff)

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute, a post he assumed in January 1993.



Articles & Testimony

## If Obama and Netanyahu don't find a way to rebuild burned bridges, the U.S.-Israel alliance and the interests it represents will suffer.

It's time for an intervention. Friends of the U.S.-Israel relationship shouldn't let their leaders drive drunk on confidence. If they do, they may inadvertently steer a precious alliance right off the cliff. Yet right now, Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu are each empowered by a different kind of confidence.

For the President, it is born of the reality that he has fought (and won) his last campaign, that he will never again face the voters (and those "donors" to whom he accused Sen. Robert Menendez of kowtowing), and that he has a free hand in his final 20 months to leave a lasting imprint on American foreign policy.

For the prime minister, on the heels of a sizable victory when many expected a narrow defeat, his confidence comes from a different source -- apparent political invincibility at home, which makes him near certain to be a welcome guest at the White House long after the current incumbent has packed his bags and decamped for Chicago.

Obama is leaving; Netanyahu is staying. As different as the realities are, they are both liberating. And with liberation comes the potential for delusion.

Reasonable people can disagree about the source of dysfunction between the two leaders. In a policy sense, my view is that the "original sin" was Obama's decision in his first days in office to do precisely that which Republican Sen. Tom Cotton so provocatively warned the Iranians the next President could do with an Iran nuclear accord not endorsed by Congress -- namely, rip up a "non-binding" presidential agreement. In this case, Obama annulled an agreement between George W. Bush and then-Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon over West Bank settlement building. Instead, the President demanded a total Israeli settlement freeze, even extending to disputed neighborhoods of Israel's capital city, an idea that Israelis across the political spectrum rejected. It was a non-starter from which Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy never fully recovered.

For their part, Netanyahu and his cabinet colleagues repaid that and other heresies in full with a woeful series of needless provocations, wagged fingers and ad hominem attacks, culminating in the regrettable sight of a foreign leader lambasting the negotiating strategy of a sitting President from the rostrum of the U.S. Congress.

In a political sense, the venom between the two runs deep. It was, of course, more than a bit cheeky for candidate Netanyahu -- first friend to Republican megadonor Sheldon Adelson, who's also the owner of Israel's most pro-Netanyahu newspaper -- to deride the influence of "foreign money" in Israel's just-concluded election campaign.

But it shouldn't be forgotten that candidate Obama also waded into Israeli domestic politics when he told an audience in Cleveland in 2008 that being "pro-Israel" did not mean being "pro-Likud" -- a term he didn't use with affection. Netanyahu, then the Likud prime minister-in-waiting, took notice.

All this is context to the current situation, which has unimaginably high real-world stakes. On Iran, the clock is ticking down to a March 31 deadline for a framework nuclear agreement.

Netanyahu may have broken lots of diplomatic china in his unseemly partnership with the President's domestic political adversaries in his Congress speech, but his core arguments were right. Why has the goal of preventing Iran's nuclear ambitions morphed into the limited objective of managing Iran's nuclear program? Do the terms of the emerging agreement really constitute the best deal possible, just because the negotiators say so? And shouldn't the context -- Iran's appetite for regional domination through terror and intimidation -- have an impact on the negotiations?

These questions have not only fallen on deaf ears in the White House, but in just the last two weeks, the administration has sent a series of bouquets to the Iranians that only seem designed to court their approval at the nuclear talks. These include deleting references to Iranian and Hezbollah terrorism from the Director of National Intelligence's annual global threat assessment; minimizing the role of Iranian-led Shiite militias in the fighting against the Islamic State in Tikrit; and raising the prospect of direct talks about the future of Syria with Iran's local ally, the genocidal dictator Bashar Assad.

Individually, all these steps could be dismissed as examples of ordinary government error and inefficiency. But taken together, they seem more like elements of a concerted plan to win over Iran's "supreme leader," Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. Any Israeli prime minister would be apoplectic at what appears to be Washington's eagerness for a nuclear accord.

Here is where an intervention will be useful. If a framework deal is reached at the end of the month, there will be 90 days for the two sides to reach a final agreement. During that time, Obama will face a choice on how to use that time.

Will he use the months to personally reach out to allies -- Israel as well as nervous Arab states -- to discuss their very real concerns and vulnerabilities, and to reach detailed, binding understandings on what the U.S. will do in response to every possible type of Iranian infraction and violation? Or will he reject ideas of outreach to traditional allies as something that may spook the Iranians and undermine prospects for the deal, instead focusing his efforts solely on enticing Tehran across the finish line?

If the President makes the wrong choice, both Israel and the Arab states will draw their own conclusions -- if they haven't already. The latter will go their own way, probably to develop their own nuclear infrastructure as a deterrent against Iran's, thereby fueling the very proliferation the Iranian nuclear accord is supposed to prevent. Israel too will see itself as a free agent, and the chances that it may decide, at a time of its choosing, to act independently against what it will view as the unrestrained menace of Iran's nuclear ambitions go way up.

If that happens -- namely, if Israel someday takes direct measures against Iran that blow apart a deal negotiated by an American President -- the U.S.-Israel relationship will truly be in uncharted waters. That is why it is so important

for friends to help the President make the right choice.

While differences over how to prevent an Iranian nuclear bomb are the most urgent item on the U.S.-Israel agenda, differences over how to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian dispute are the most emotive. Within hours of Netanyahu's victory, the issue already triggered a bilateral crisis, even before he had a chance to form a new government.

To be sure, the lasting images of Netanyahu's reelection campaign weren't pretty. He had a sordid Willie Horton moment in calling out supporters to counter Arabs he said were voting in droves, and he made desperate last-minute comments that seemed to reject the idea of a negotiated two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. He will have to account for his statements, first and foremost in the court of Israeli public opinion.

But even before the President called Netanyahu to congratulate him on his victory, the White House exploded in indignation at Netanyahu's comments about the peace process. Senior officials briefed journalists that the administration was "reevaluating" its approach to diplomacy, a word that conjured up memories of the 1970s-era "reassessment" of relations that was designed to press Israel on peace concessions. Launching a shot across Israel's bow, Obama aides told reporters that a new U.S. policy might include endorsing a UN Security Council resolution that would, against the wishes of Israel's democratically elected government, define terms of a final settlement. For Obama, such an act would leave a dangerous legacy of having ended 40 years of principled U.S. effort to promote direct negotiations between the parties.

All this, apparently, was based solely on hearing Netanyahu make a provocative statement in the heat of what was widely believed to be a close election campaign. No one in the administration seems to have called up the prime minister to ask what he meant by his statements -- namely, was he foreswearing forever the possibility of territorial compromise or was he saying that further concessions now, while Palestinians are pursuing their effort to vilify Israel in the International Criminal Court, are out of the question?

If officials had telephoned Jerusalem, they would have heard what Netanyahu told MSNBC's Andrea Mitchell the very next day: "I don't want a one-state solution; I want a sustainable, peaceful two-state solution, but for that, circumstances have to change." Given the recent war with Hamas in Gaza, the suspension of security cooperation by the Palestinian Authority and the emergence of Jihadist threats on multiple borders, this is not an unreasonable position.

But the administration couldn't help itself -- without waiting for the prime minister to explain his words, it pounced. Even worse, though, the administration refused to accept Netanyahu's clarification once he made it, with the President's spokesman still insisting -- despite direct statements to the contrary -- that "it's pretty clear that Israel is no longer committed" to a two-state solution. If that is the White House's inclination the very day of Netanyahu's reelection, the prospects for the next 20 months are beyond gloomy.

It's important to note that an intervention is a two-way street. I hope that Israeli friends of the U.S.-Israel relationship are already talking to Netanyahu about how important that relationship is to Israel's deterrent posture and how urgent it is to find a way to work constructively with the Obama administration, notwithstanding the current enmity.

Despite poll numbers that show unprecedented levels of sympathy for Israel in U.S. public opinion, there are some deeply worrisome trends. These include growing disparities of support for Israel between Republicans and Democrats, which should concern any Israeli leader who cares about the long-term health of the relationship.

Whatever water has flowed under that bridge already, the governing principle moving forward should be "do no further harm." No, America and Israel are not equal partners. Some argue that, in our Darwinian world, the smaller nation needs to defer to the bigger one. Others argue that what's at stake matters more to the smaller state so the bigger one should give sway. Both are true. And in that contradiction lies hope that that the confidence energizing the two leaders -- President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu -- will produce real leadership.

## RECOMMENDED

---



### ARTICLES & TESTIMONY

#### [How to Make Russia Pay in Ukraine: Study Syria](#)

Feb 15, 2022

Anna Borshchevskaya

(/policy-analysis/how-make-russia-pay-ukraine-study-syria)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Bennett's Bahrain Visit Further Invigorates Israel-Gulf Diplomacy](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Simon Henderson

(/policy-analysis/bennetts-bahrain-visit-further-invigorates-israel-gulf-diplomacy)



### BRIEF ANALYSIS

#### [Libya's Renewed Legitimacy Crisis](#)

Feb 14, 2022

Ben Fishman

(/policy-analysis/libyas-renewed-legitimacy-crisis)

TOPICS

Peace Process (/policy-analysis/peace-process)

U.S. Policy (/policy-analysis/us-policy)

Proliferation (/policy-analysis/proliferation)

REGIONS & COUNTRIES

Israel (/policy-analysis/israel)