The Next President's Mideast Mess

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Articles & Testimony

Try as he might, there's just too much for Obama to fix in the next two years.

Even God, it seems, is tired of the Israeli-Palestinian dispute -- and the never-ending standoff between Barack Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu. When a third intifada threatened to erupt recently following Israel's temporary closure of Muslim prayer at the Al-Aqsa Mosque in response to stone-throwing against Jewish worshippers at the Western Wall below, Palestinian leaders called for a "day of rage," and Israel dispatched more than 1,000 riot police to prepare for the worst. Commentators across the political spectrum competed with "I-told-you-so" predictions about the start of another Palestinian uprising.

And then it poured. A torrential, almost biblical rain kept Palestinian crowds down and Israel's powder dry -- for the moment, at least.

It will likely take an even more dramatic brand of divine intervention to prevent a slew of worsening Mideast problems -- renewed Israeli-Palestinian tensions, Islamic terrorism, Iranian nukes and so on -- from landing squarely on the desk of the next U.S. president, whether it's Hillary Clinton or anyone else. All indications are that President Obama is going to try to make a difference in his last two years, especially in securing what he reportedly believes could be a transformative nuclear agreement with Iran. But the overwhelming odds are that most of these problems will still be unresolved by the next inauguration -- and that the 45th president's tenure will be as engulfed by the Middle East as Obama's has been.

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The Al-Aqsa episode occurred in the wake of the latest in a series of mini-crises between Washington and Jerusalem that have also raised the odds against a breakthrough. Most recently it was the "chickenshit" fracas, when journalist Jeffrey Goldberg reported that a senior U.S. official -- almost surely reflecting the view of the president himself, given Goldberg's record of access to the Oval Office -- had used this unusual epithet in response to Netanyahu's alleged preference to prioritize political survival over risk-taking for peace.

That in turn came on the heels of another mini-crisis, when the White House refused to grant a meeting to visiting Israeli defense minister Moshe Yaalon, who had previously insulted Secretary of State John Kerry's "messianic" badgering about peacemaking. Squeezed in between was a mini-crisis (or two) about Washington's denunciation of Israeli building projects in contested areas in and near Jerusalem, which the State Department said called into question Israel's commitment to peace.

And that's not all, as you might expect, since this is the Mideast. All of this followed a more serious crisis during the 50-day Hamas war, when the White House -- irate, if not well-informed, about Israeli fire-control policy against rockets launched from Gaza urban areas -- placed temporary administrative impediments to the standard release to Israel of Hellfire missiles from prepositioned stocks. In doing so, Obama shook what he likes to term the "unshakable" U.S.-Israeli defense cooperation relationship.

That added up to no fewer than four U.S.-Israel spats in just three months. Throw in the fact that Israel was on the receiving end of nearly 4,000 Hamas rockets over the summer and that, in September, Obama effectively declared war on the murderous Islamic State, also known as ISIL, the aspiring caliphate that has gobbled up large chunks of Iraq and Syria and now has Israel (along with peace partner Jordan and other Sunni Arab allies) in its sights, and this pattern of crisis seems especially abnormal for allies as close as the United States and Israel.

And we haven't even talked about Iran yet. Israelis and their friends on Capitol Hill -- not to mention Mitt Romney -- were outraged by Obama's not-so-secret missive to Iran's supreme leader, sensing another concession from Washington with the approaching November 24 deadline for the nuclear talks. Ayatollah Khamenei responded not with a letter of his own but with a nine-point "how-to" plan for the destruction of Israel, which only deepened contempt for what many view as the White House's naivete toward Iranian intentions.

The question is, what now? On one hand, with midterm elections having produced a more Republican, Israel-friendly (and Netanyahu-admiring) Congress, and with Barack Obama now a lame duck, Jerusalem has reason to think that the worst is now over. Indeed, it may be a good time for the president to decide to avoid head-on collisions with Israel and focus the last quarter of his presidency instead on the long list of common challenges the two countries face.

On the other hand, if Obama is a lame duck, he's also a free bird. With two years remaining in office and no elections left to contest, the president now has the latitude to pursue relations on issues relevant to Israel without regard to the domestic political fallout -- or concerns about further riling Bibi. Depending on the path he follows, his party might protest and Hillary Clinton might move more quickly and dramatically to distance herself from the boss she so faithfully served as secretary of state, but lame-duck presidents have legacy on their mind, not payback from party bosses.

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There is little doubt that the game-changing breakthrough the president seeks most is a nuclear deal with Iran. Testing the possibility of turning a new leaf with the ayatollahs has been a constant of Obama's foreign policy; it explains his reluctance to aid the Green Revolution in 2009, his refusal to retaliate for Iranian troublemaking in Iraq prior to the U.S. withdrawal, and his willingness to face down senators from his own party who wanted to tighten sanctions in the wake of the interim nuclear deal last year. The president might now believe that there is an added bonus to a nuclear breakthrough with Iran in the form of cooperation against the Islamic State.

Although Jerusalem frequently praised the president for artfully arranging tight international sanctions that brought Iran to the negotiating table, the Israelis don't trust Washington's promises on the content of a putative deal. That's both because the administration has periodically surprised Israel on key issues, such as the secret talks in Iran that launched the current negotiations, and staked out tough positions to win political points only to dial them back when

they proved diplomatically inconvenient.

When, for example, the Israelis buckled under intense White House pressure and opted not to launch military action against Iran's nuclear program in autumn 2012, they were soon buoyed by the president's comments in his third debate with Romney that the goal of U.S. policy was to seek Iran's implementation of U.N. resolutions. At that critical moment in the election campaign, the president had effectively endorsed Israel's long-sought demand for Iran's full suspension of nuclear enrichment. But confidence that Obama would hold that line was short-lived; a few months after his reelection, the president's chief Iran negotiator dismissed that same stance as "maximalist" and equated it with Iran's own extreme bargaining position. With that comment, it was clear that the Persian bazaar was open and no one -- certainly no Israeli -- could be sure where the deal would be struck.

On the other enduring U.S.-Israel quagmire -- the Middle East peace process -- the president is reportedly weighing four options for his last hurrah: launching one more Sisyphean effort to reach a breakthrough accord between Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas; issuing a sort of "last will and testament" on peacemaking, laying out an American plan that Obama would bequeath to his successor; abstaining on, rather than vetoing, a Palestinian statehood initiative at the U.N. Security Council whose wording would be drawn heavily from the president's past pronouncements; and fighting a guns-a-blazing final shootout with Jerusalem over Israel's settlement policy, the item that the president and his advisers consider the most serious obstacle to diplomatic progress (and, it should be said, to Israel's long-term survival as a Jewish and democratic state).

Each approach has its appeal and, at a different time with a different president, some of these ideas might even be constructive steps toward peace. But in the current environment -- when a dithering Abbas still hasn't answered Obama's questions from the last go-round at peacemaking in March; when the president looks like he might end up as politically radioactive to his successor as George W. Bush was to his; when a volte-face at the Security Council would probably trigger a Republican effort to defund the entire U.N. infrastructure; and when the only two beneficiaries of a no-holds-barred face-off on settlements are likely to be Hamas and Israel's hard right -- all these ideas would pave a road to diplomatic hell, good intentions notwithstanding. None would achieve its objectives, and each would instead underscore either Washington's insanity, its irrelevance or its incompetence.

Short of these Hail Mary passes, a more modest approach could still yield important dividends. A real effort to work with Netanyahu and Abbas to scale back tensions in Jerusalem, create visible economic improvement for Palestinians, shore up vital Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation that miraculously still survives, inject some common sense into U.S.-Israel dynamics on construction for Jewish housing in Jerusalem and nearby communities and, through that process, begin to restore political appeal to the possibility of peace among both communities would be a legacy the president's successor might be able to parlay into diplomatic progress. A key component here would be to capitalize on changed regional dynamics, especially the growing entente between Israel and Sunni Arab states and the Saudi, Egyptian and Emirati-led counterrevolution against the Muslim Brotherhood (including its local version, Hamas).

With its emphasis on practical cooperation over high-profile breakthroughs, such a strategy would not win any Nobel Peace prizes. It would, however, go far toward preventing the unwelcome distraction of Israeli-Palestinian confrontation at a time when the administration should be focused on achieving results in the fight against ISIL. In any case, the president has already checked that box.

Regrettably, however, chances are slim that the president pursues this approach. Incrementalism, step-by-step, bottom-up -- these conflict-management ideas have all been dirty words in an administration that committed itself, from its earliest days, to the mission of conflict resolution. To some, that has been a badge of honor; to others, a mark of Cain. In either case, it is difficult to imagine that the president would embrace a contrary strategy in the twilight of his term. If Obama rejects all four activist options outlined above, he is more likely to run away from the peace

process altogether rather than invest in a less heroic version that could, as a byproduct, repair six years of strained relations between Washington and Jerusalem.

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For those inclined to despair, it's worth noting that the disputes that seem especially frequent and virulent in the Barack and Bibi era have typically been the norm in the history of U.S.-Israeli relations.

Indeed, going back to Israel's founding, when the Truman administration recognized Israel just minutes after its birth and then slapped an arms embargo on the Jewish state even as it fought for its survival, the relationship has been tested by two sets of tensions. First, there is the inner tension: Washington and Jerusalem have disagreed since 1948 in a way that America disagrees with no other country on the most basic aspects of Israel's national character -- what is the legitimate size of the state? What should its borders be? Where is its capital?

Second is the outer tension: Powerful segments of the Washington national security establishment have, since Israel's founding, viewed the Jewish state as a one-stop shop of burdens, problems and obstacles to developing mutually beneficial relations with oil-rich sheikdoms and other key players in the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Under normal circumstances, this combination of tensions would long ago have made America and Israel bitter antagonists, if not outright enemies. But these two democracies -- one, the world's oldest; the other, its most boisterous -- share remarkably deep political, cultural, historic, moral and emotional connections. These connections did not erase the tensions, but they did give birth to two policies that effectively mediated them -- the Arab-Israeli peace process (born in the Nixon administration) and U.S.-Israel strategic cooperation (born in the Reagan administration). The former was a way to turn the zero-sum nature of the Arab-Israel dispute into a win-win proposition in which Arabs regain land lost in war, while Israel gets the peace and security it has long craved; the latter was a way to inject useful, substantive content into bilateral relations and push the more disagreeable elements to the margin.

It might seem odd to say it in a region that knows so little good news, but both policies have worked beyond the wildest imaginations of the statesmen and bureaucrats who originally conceived of them. The peace process might not have yet brought lasting peace to the Holy Land, but it has succeeded in shrinking a broad regional confrontation that pitted Israel against the entire Arab world into a much more limited conflict between two communities competing for control of territory west of the Jordan River. At the same time, this shrinking of historic enmities has opened avenues for Israeli coordination with Sunni Arab states based on shared concerns about the spread of ISIL-style extremism and Iran's hegemonic ambitions. One implication is that the tensions in Jerusalem in recent weeks triggered more reaction in Washington than in any Arab capital except Amman, which has a Palestinian majority.

What makes the Obama-Netanyahu relationship seem so especially troubled is that it comes after 16 years -- namely, the otherwise very different Clinton and George W. Bush administrations -- in which the United States and Israel shared both an ideological outlook on peacemaking and a practical approach to problem-solving.

Much of that was a function of those presidents' emotional affinity for Israel; some of that, of course, was fate. Bill Clinton was blessed to have leaders he admired -- Yitzhak Rabin, Shimon Peres and Ehud Barak -- as partners for most of his term; similarly, Israel's leaders in the Bush years -- Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert -- were soulmates with the post-9/11 crusader. But Clinton also had a first-term Netanyahu as a counterpart for three years, and although he was no more enamored of Bibi on a personal level than Obama is today, the man that many friends of Israel only half-jokingly called "America's first Jewish president" found a way even to make diplomatic progress during that period.

The Obama-Netanyahu relationship is thus more reminiscent of the cold, calculating, distant relationship of two ex-spies -- Bush pere, the former CIA director, and Yitzhak Shamir, a one-time Mossad agent -- than anything seen

since. That the former community organizer and the decorated army commando detest each other and wish each other political failure is well known. However, it is not very consequential. More significant is that each apparently believes the other has purposefully chosen to pursue policies injurious to his partner's strategic interests.

To caricature, if only slightly, views ascribed to Netanyahu, Obama's naive outreach to political Islamists (including the Muslim Brotherhood and Turkey's ruling AK party), his single-minded pursuit of detente with Iran and his refusal to hold Palestinian leader Abbas even partially accountable for stagnation in peace diplomacy, let alone for the Jew-hatred that spews forth from official Palestinian statements and media, suggest the American leader is an Islamist Manchurian candidate.

On the opposite side of the ledger, the president is said to be incensed by Netanyahu's slavish deference to Israel's neo-neanderthal right wing, his repeated announcements of provocative settlement plans that seem expertly timed to embarrass Washington, his creativity in finding excuses to avoid even the tiniest step toward compromise with the Palestinians, his timorous reluctance to use political power for any purpose other than to sustain political power and his unabashed embrace of the Republican Party, all of which points to the Israeli prime minister as not just an empty suit tailored by Sheldon Adelson but an unwitting recruiter for radical Islamists.

What is remarkable is that Barack and Bibi had such a deep well of mistrust of each other from the very start. Here, the original sin was, in my view, the Obama administration's refusal to affirm what insiders call "the Bush-Sharon letters" of April 2004. This was a set of understandings worked out between George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon that injected realism into U.S. peace diplomacy by recognizing that there would be no return to the 1949 armistice lines but that a resolution to the conflict would be governed by "new realities on the ground." That was a euphemistic reference to the existence of a substantial Jewish presence in blocs of settlements just east of the 1967 Green Line, whose growth would be governed by limitations agreed to by Washington and Jerusalem. The letters did not signify that Bush supported settlements; he didn't. Rather, they signaled his appreciation of the need to contain the U.S.-Israel dispute over settlements lest it undermine larger shared interests between the two countries.

By refusing to endorse the letters, Obama guaranteed that U.S.-Israel relations would face precisely the sort of mini-crises that have plagued his tenure. Indeed, by adopting an unrealistic Palestinian position on settlements, he even made life worse for Abbas by denying the Palestinian leader any wiggle room on the topic. Most importantly, Obama had taken the dramatic step of renouncing a presidential commitment. The rules had changed, and everyone in the Middle East -- Israeli, Arab, Iranian and Turk -- took note.

Netanyahu, of course, was far from blameless. By never using his strong domestic position to articulate a clear plan for peace that could attract American support and through a series of what seemed to Washington as spectacularly ill-timed provocations, he, his ministers, his handlers and his bureaucrats did an expert job confirming the Obama team's assessment that the prime minister was either untrustworthy or weak -- or even worse, both.

The result has been six years of a tortured, awkward relationship characterized by forced smiles, stabbed backs and leaked slurs. To be sure, each leader could argue he went the extra yard on behalf of the other -- for Netanyahu, this included a little-known but huge concession given to Washington in early 2014 to accept the 1967 lines as the basis for negotiations with the Palestinians; for Obama, this included an official visit to Israel in 2013 designed to repair the errors of the first term and put the relationship on surer footing. Both, however, could add that such acts were met with only ingratitude and insult.

Through it all, it is important to mention, the president identified three issues that would be cordoned off from the ill will in the bilateral relationship -- military cooperation, intelligence sharing and countering one-sided anti-Israel initiatives at the United Nations -- and he championed important initiatives in each arena. In this regard, generous U.S. funding for Israel's Iron Dome anti-missile system was the poster child of the administration's vaunted

commitment to Israeli security.

In reality, however, all these arenas were, in some way, infected by the poisonous atmosphere of the U.S.-Israel political relationship. This is evidenced, for example, by the brouhaha over deliveries of Hellfire missiles during the Hamas war and U.S. pique at Israel's periodic assassination of Iranian nuclear scientists as an unusually direct nonproliferation tactic. Most perplexing in this regard was the severity of White House pressure on Israel to ask its Capitol Hill friends to accept a waiver in U.S. law that would give the president a way out of suspending payments to U.N. agencies that recognize an independent state. Through it all, the Obama administration did not quite seem to realize that, in the eyes of allies and adversaries alike, political disputes have strategic consequences.

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Despite all the headaches the Middle East has provided him, Obama might see the region not as a vast expanse of quicksand that could smother what's left of his ambition but as fertile territory for legacy-building in the final years of his administration. By all accounts, a strategic breakthrough with Iran would meet that test. But even with his best efforts -- in the form of concessions in key areas of negotiations and willingness to cede considerable regional influence to Tehran -- the president might not be able to secure the supreme leader's agreement to a deal. Indeed, there are many possible reasons Iran might just not take yes for an answer. In that case, Washington almost surely would prefer a face-saving extension of the existing interim agreement rather than a total collapse of talks that could trigger a spiral of sanctions and retribution whose end cannot be infallibly foreseen.

In the current environment, Israel prefers an extension of the interim deal to either of the two other options -- a comprehensive agreement, whose terms will almost surely include far more Western concessions than even many dovish Israelis can accept, or diplomatic breakdown, which could very well end international sanctions on Iran and open the path toward nuclear breakout. As the clock ticks toward the November 24 deadline for these talks, however, Israel's ability to affect the outcome is limited. That is the reality encapsulated so eloquently in the "chickenshit" interview.

In terms of peacemaking, the president faces a dilemma. When he came to office nearly six years ago, he declared this a top foreign policy priority and appointed former Senate Majority Leader George Mitchell as his special envoy, and he could leave office with a concerted push to make his lasting legacy some form of progress here. This could either be trilaterally, as midwife to an Israeli-Palestinian agreement; internationally, at the United Nations; or bilaterally, via a clarifying face-off on settlements between Washington and Jerusalem. But two major U.S. diplomatic efforts have already come a cropper -- the 10-month settlement freeze that led to just two weeks of negotiations in 2010 and Secretary of State Kerry's dogged if quixotic peace effort in 2013 and 2014 -- and Obama probably doesn't want to emulate Bill Clinton, who devoted the last year of his presidency pursuing what proved to be an impossible peace dream.

But in the upwelling of more and more bad news, there could be a remarkable silver lining. The emergence of a new Middle East crisis unconnected to the Arab-Israel conflict -- the rise of the Islamic State -- might have the perverse effect of convincing regional players themselves to work together and, in the process, advance a long-sought U.S. policy objective.

Sunni Arabs and Israel have built their own quiet set of strategic understandings in recent years, based in large part on shared disappointment with Washington and fueled by a common sense of threat from both Sunni and Shiite extremists. While this has so far been muted and under the table, it is not crazy to imagine this carrying over into peace diplomacy. Thus, if Obama presses forward with a bold new peacemaking effort that proves nettlesome to Israel and a distraction to the Arabs, he might be confronted with what Jimmy Carter faced in 1977. That is the year Arabs and Israelis -- in that case, Egyptian President Anwar Sadat and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin --

came together to thwart Carter's ill-conceived idea of a joint U.S.-Soviet international peace conference by pursuing an initiative on peacemaking on their own, Sadat's journey to Jerusalem. Today, one should not discount Arab and Israeli leaders reacting with shared revulsion at ham-fisted diplomacy by the White House to create their own platform for regional peacemaking.

Imagine that: Arabs and Israelis coming together in unprecedented fashion to talk peace not because of a presidential initiative but to spite a presidential initiative. Now, that's a legacy.

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