

## Relationship Advice

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## Don't believe the loose talk of President Obama exacting vengeance on Benjamin Netanyahu -- the two leaders need each other too much to let old grudges get in the way.

In the wake of U.S. President Barack Obama's reelection victory, some have suggested that he will pursue a feud against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, given the two leaders' disagreements over how to pursue peace with the Palestinians and deal with the Iranian nuclear threat.

There is no denying that the relationship between the two leaders has been rocky. Yes, Obama believed Netanyahu had wrongly lectured him about borders in front of the media in the Oval Office in May 2011. Netanyahu has his own grievances: He was upset that he could not get a September meeting with the president to discuss Iran, for instance. As Israeli Interior Minister Eli Yishai put it the day after the U.S. election, "It seems like it is not such a good morning for Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu."

While it is safe to assume Netanyahu personally preferred Mitt Romney, he in fact did not endorse Obama's Republican challenger -- despite every Israeli reporter's efforts to entice him into doing so. As one Netanyahu aide put it privately, when it comes to the U.S. election, "our room to maneuver on this issue has the width of dental floss."

But at the end of the day, a settling of scores between Obama and Netanyahu is unlikely. It is counterproductive for the two leaders to focus their energies on the past when they are confronted by an array of challenges that will require them to work together.

Obama's cerebral style toward foreign leaders made Israelis skeptical of him, in part because it was a departure from the bear-hug style of President Bill Clinton. But it is also one reason the United States and Israel will now avoid a public feud. As Dan Shapiro, Obama's former top White House aide and current U.S. ambassador to Israel, told a panel in Tel Aviv on Nov. 7, "The president is a strategic thinker; his policies are not governed by emotion." He termed talks of Obama taking revenge against Netanyahu "ridiculous."

Too much is at stake for both countries to let old grudges dictate policy. It is no secret that the Obama administration views a new diplomatic initiative toward Tehran as integral to its sanctions policy. The potent international sanctions currently in place, combined with diplomacy, are the world's one hope of solving the Iran nuclear crisis peacefully. Nobody can guarantee that Iran will back off from its program, but a U.S.-led offer is still inevitable to test that proposition.

And Israel knows this. Contrary to perception, Netanyahu would also like to see a peaceful end to the crisis -- there is no Gen. Curtis LeMay figure in the Israeli government out to firebomb Iran. Whether it is in the format of bilateral U.S.-Iran talks or the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council plus Germany), the United States will want Israel on board with U.S. diplomatic efforts to avoid the prospect of an Israeli strike. This does not give Netanyahu any kind of veto over the U.S. offer to Iran, but it is hard to imagine that the United States would not welcome Israel's thoughts to ensure that the two countries do not act at cross-purposes.

This process will test the personal relationship between Obama and Netanyahu like no other foreign-policy issue -- and it will leave no time for petty score settling. Israel and the United States are going to need to be in closer consultation than ever about Obama's highest foreign-policy priority: namely, ensuring that Iran does not go nuclear and that a nuclear arms race does not break out in the region. Failure would mean the end of Obama's plans to promote nuclear nonproliferation, and it would also cripple U.S. credibility after three administrations -- Democrat and Republican alike -- have vowed that Iran will not get the bomb.

Moreover, those who are playing up the possibility of an Obama-Netanyahu feud believe that the laws of political gravity are suspended for a second-term president. In fact, while reelection can revitalize a president's mandate, political capital remains a finite commodity -- even for a second-term U.S. president. Just ask President George W. Bush, who saw his clout diminished in his second term by Hurricane Katrina, a failed attempt to privatize Social Security, and a debilitating war in Iraq. Bush allocated all his efforts to the 2007 Iraq surge, and administration officials at the time said not much political capital was left over for anything else. As it is, Obama is facing a divided Congress that he will need to win over for a grand budget deal in 2013, which will be central to resolving the country's economic crisis.

This is not an argument for Obama to avoid the Palestinian issue and focus solely on Iran. To the contrary, advancing a two-state solution is essential if Israel is to remain a Jewish, democratic state and not a de facto binational state, and for the Palestinian national movement to have a real future. Moreover, whatever the arguments between the parties at the U.N. General Assembly this month, when the Palestinian Authority is expected to pursue its bid for statehood, it is important that the Palestinian Authority does not go bankrupt. The collapse of the one existing institution that could potentially serve as the core of a new Palestinian state would not benefit the United States, Israel, or the Palestinians.

Once again, Obama is going to need Netanyahu's help to advance these goals -- and the president should assume that the Israeli prime minister will remain on the political scene for some time yet. Polls show Netanyahu is likely to win the Israeli election on Jan. 22, given his merger with the right-wing Yisrael Beiteinu party and his natural alliance with religious parties. Former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert may enter the race looking to unite the center, and he may hint in his campaign about his proven willingness to make tough decisions -- notably, a still officially secret strike against a Syrian nuclear reactor in 2007 and his willingness to make difficult concessions on peace to the Palestinians. The odds favor Netanyahu at this time, however.

An Obama swipe at Netanyahu would not necessarily hurt the current prime minister, but could boomerang against the president. Obama does not have Clinton's endless reservoir of support among the Israeli public, regardless of the important strides in bilateral security between the two countries over the last four years. One poll showed a majority of Israelis favoring Romney.

At the same time, Netanyahu can learn from the past as well. He is shrewd enough to realize that a broad-based unity government is essential if he wants to avoid the disproportionate influence of hard-line elements within his coalition, which could lead him to focus excessively on settlements. With the challenge of Iran and the Palestinian issue, a broad-based government will minimize the prospects of friction with Washington.

Of course, the Palestinians must also do their part for negotiations to be a success. They need to return to the table after leaving in September 2010 over demands for an extended settlement freeze in the West Bank. Obama has every right to insist that both Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Netanyahu provide a sense to the United States of not just what they are willing to gain, but what they are willing to concede if they want the United States to devote precious resources to a renewed push on the Israeli-Palestinian front.

These discussions won't be easy, and they will require close coordination between Obama and Netanyahu to achieve the leaders' mutual goals. Like it or not, the two leaders will look to manage their differences and find a way to work together better than they have in the past -- if only because they must.

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