

Obama and Netanyahu Can't Afford to Disagree

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ABOUT THE AUTHORS



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It is widely known that the poor relationship between U.S. President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu stands at the center of U.S.-Israeli tension.

Yet, it is hard to be hopeful for a variety of reasons. They relate to differences of outlook between them in three key areas: the relationship between vision and trust, different attitudes toward timing and different approaches to the nexus between policy and politics.

First, there is a paradox between vision and trust. For cerebral Obama, who does not bond with foreign leaders instinctively, the one way to build trust is to share a common strategic vision.

This is not unique to the U.S. president. The history of American-Israeli relations illustrates that when the United States and Israel agree on a common strategic vision, as they did during the period of Ehud Barak, Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, Washington is less focused on where they differ.

The corollary is when they don't share a common direction, the United States is hard-nosed on the differences, as it was during when George Bush Sr. was opposite Yitzhak Shamir.

Therefore, Netanyahu needs to share with Obama how he envisions a two-state solution, and a plausible strategy to attain it. Obama feels he has this with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, even if Israelis remain skeptical.

Some believe Netanyahu does not have that vision, and that this is the main problem. However, it is also possible that given how politically explosive these issues are in Israel, Netanyahu fears misplaced trust could leak and be exploited by rivals at home.

So if the absence of a shared vision has contributed to a lack of trust, the absence of trust also contributes to a lack of shared vision.

A second set of issues are differences between the two over urgency, and cannot be divorced from the issue of a shared vision. Despite recent comments by U.S. armed forces head Gen. David Petraeus and U.S. Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, senior Administration sources sharply deny Obama only sees the issue of Israel through the prism of how it impacts American troops in Afghanistan and Iraq.

While the Palestinian issue is evocative in the region, there are over a dozen factors driving anti-Americanism in the region. Even if the Palestinian issue was solved, virtually all the layers of anti-Americanism would remain.

Rather, it is unclear if time is on Israel's side. Obama believes he has Israel's best interests at heart because he views the two-state solution as an answer to Israel's demographic challenges. Moreover, Obama sees Hamas rejectionism waiting in the wings in the West Bank in the event the current PA leadership is defeated due to the failure of peace. Finally, while it is hard to find any shred of evidence that the Arab regimes will take any steps against Iran based on progress toward peace, Obama believes movement in the peace process could only be helpful in creating a regional public environment against the regime in Tehran.

A third profound difference in outlooks between Obama and Netanyahu is how they view the relationship between politics and policy.

It seems to be hard for Obama to believe that Netanyahu has domestic political constraints when he has the option of putting forward a set of policies regarding a two-state solution that would enable opposition leader Tzipi Livni to join his government. In other words, Obama sees these constraints by Netanyahu as self-imposed.

Obama believes he knows what it is to act against his own base. He has done so by dispatching 100,000 troops to Afghanistan and staging strikes in Pakistan and Yemen.

Of course, Netanyahu sees it differently, especially given that the Israeli system is not presidential. He sees Obama not giving him political credit as a Likud leader for declaring support for a two-state solution or lifting most West Bank checkpoints.

Given the conceptual divide outlined above, it is hard to be overly optimistic about the basis of a new relationship. Yet neither leader has the luxury of disengagement. Obama and Netanyahu have to find common ground in addressing the massive challenge of Iran's nuclear weapon program, or else the consequences could be disastrous.

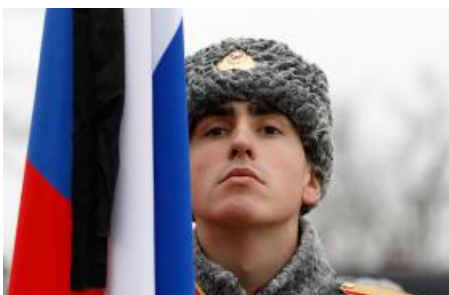
Moreover, even some European and Arab diplomats -- almost all of whom have traditionally favored pressure on Israel -- admit that such friction at the top of U.S.-Israel relations will not translate into progress for peace. They say an insecure Israel will not take risks for peace.

Trust needs to be built, and not as a favor to either leader, but because it is a necessity for anyone who wants to see a more stable Middle East.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler distinguished fellow and director of The Washington Institute's [Project on the Middle East Peace Process \(http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65\)](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/templateC11.php?CID=65). ❖

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