

# The United States as an Honest Broker

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Articles & Testimony

**E**conomist.com has been hosting an ongoing debate about whether the Obama administration is an honest broker between Israel and the Arabs. The following is the contribution by Michael Singh, the Ira Weiner fellow at The Washington Institute and former senior director for Middle East affairs at the National Security Council (NSC).

In deliberating over whether President Barack Obama is an "honest broker" between Israel and the Arabs, it is worth considering what this role entails. Historically, the term "honest broker" was applied to German Chancellor Otto von Bismarck (by Bismarck himself) in connection with the 1878 Congress of Berlin. The Congress aimed in part at resolving tensions between Russia and Austria-Hungary -- Germany's partners in the "Dreikaiserbund" or Three-Emperors League -- over the Balkans.

Bismarck's status as an "honest broker" rested on two attributes. First, he claimed impartiality for Germany in the dispute, as his interest was in the conclusion of an amicable deal that preserved the tripartite alliance rather than in the substance of the dispute itself. This impartiality should not be confused with indifference or disinterest, as though Bismarck was a neutral third party; indeed, Germany in pursuit of its own national security had a significant stake in a resolution. Second, Bismarck's Germany was allied with both key parties -- Russia and Austria -- and Bismarck enjoyed a unique diplomatic profile in the region.

So is America suited to take up Bismarck's "honest broker" mantle with respect to the Arab-Israeli peace process? Like Germany, America can claim a good measure of impartiality in the dispute itself. With some significant exceptions, it has refrained from taking positions on the "core issues" -- borders, refugees, Jerusalem, and security arrangements -- and has instead pushed for a mutually acceptable agreement. The reason for this is clear: America believes that a peaceful resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian dispute would advance American interests.

Nevertheless, American impartiality only goes so far. America has insisted, out of concern both for the region's peace and stability and the welfare of the Palestinian people, that the future Palestinian state be democratic and peaceful, rather than ruled by a terrorist organisation such as Hamas. Furthermore, Israel is America's closest ally in the region, and indeed one of its closest in the world. Successive presidents, including Barack Obama, have declared their commitment to Israel's security, a commitment that reflects not only a hard-headed calculation of national security interests but also the deep social and cultural ties between the two states.

Far from tarnishing America's "honest broker" status, however, these positions are vital to it. Steadfast American opposition to Palestinian rejectionists and financial assistance to Palestinians (which in 2008 exceeded that of any other country) bolsters the leadership of the Palestinian Authority, who rely on international support for the domestic risks they take by negotiating with Israel. On the other side, Israelis -- fairly or not -- perceive America as their only reliable ally. These close relationships, together with its close ties with most of the other states of the region, put America in a unique position to serve as an honest broker.

Thus, as was the case with Bismarck, it is not indifference or equidistance that makes America an "honest broker" in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict; if seeking these attributes, the parties would more likely turn once again to a

disinterested but friendly country like Norway. Rather, America's status rests upon the combination of impartiality with respect to the particulars of an agreement, strong relationships with and ability to provide assistance to both key parties to the dispute, and a unique diplomatic standing in the broader region. Thus we can dismiss two of the arguments often made in marshalling a case that America is not an honest broker -- that it is too close to Israel on the one hand, or not close enough to Hamas on the other. Maintaining the trust and confidence of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority are critical to successfully convening and concluding negotiations, as any agreement will require both to stake much on the good faith and reliability of the United States and its assurances.

Being an honest broker is not a zero-sum game. Strong American relations with one party to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict need not detract from relations with the others. Indeed, insofar as they seek a resolution to the conflict, a close American relationship with Israel benefits the Palestinians, and vice versa. This is not to say that a "tough" approach to one party or another is inconsistent with being an honest broker, simply that such an approach should be carefully aimed at making progress toward a resolution and calibrated to preserve future co-operation.

In this respect, the Obama administration's decision to take a stand on the issue of "natural growth" in settlements was tactically unsound. Securing the agreement of hawkish Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing coalition to the sort of settlement freeze (near-comprehensive but with an exception for "natural growth") that prevailed under Prime Ministers Sharon and Olmert would have been a significant accomplishment and served as a good basis for future progress. "Natural growth," on the other hand, is a peripheral issue, with little relevance either to Palestinians' quality of life or to the ultimate disposition of territory in the West Bank. As time has passed, the fracas over this issue has stalled the peace process and shifted its focus from Arab-Israeli to American-Israeli relations.

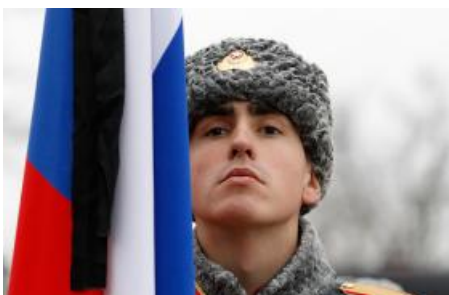
According to recent polling, the dispute has already taken a toll, having diminished Israelis' confidence in the United States. That confidence -- which former Israeli prime minister Ehud Olmert recently wrote was vital to Israel's decision to pull settlers out of Gaza and engage in the Annapolis peace process -- is a valuable asset indeed. Its diminution would not only put in question the United States' effectiveness as an honest broker in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but would be a setback for America, Israel, Palestinian Authority, Arab leaders, and others who face common threats across the region and for whom American-Israel cooperation is of mutual benefit. The test now for President Obama is to manoeuvre out of the present crisis with that co-operation intact, and with the stage set for progress on the peace process, Iran, and the rest of America's Middle East agenda. ❖

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