



Doomed to Succeed: The U.S.-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama

Thomas Donilon, former national security advisor to President Obama

Excerpts from a transcript of his remarks at a Washington Institute book release event

October 26, 2015

"Reading the Carter chapter [of Dennis Ross's new book], I was struck by something that doesn't get enough notice. The durability of the contributions made by President Carter, particularly in the Camp David Accords, is extraordinary. It doesn't get noted enough. The Camp David Accords are an important pillar of Israeli regional security, and they remain so today. They were tested during the Morsi Muslim Brotherhood period, and though the Brotherhood did not embrace the accords and would not directly engage at the political level with Israel, they respected the accords, and they remained in place during that period and they remain in place today, and Egypt is one of the most important coordinating relationships for Israel in the region. Arising out of those accords is a core part of our assistance regime, the security and economic assistance to Israel and Egypt...

"Dennis makes the point that there are consistent assumptions that leaders embrace, which he calls myths: The need to distance the United States from Israel to gain Arab responsiveness, the high cost of cooperation with Israel, and the belief that solving the Palestinian problem is the key to improving the U.S. position in the region, the so-called linkage, which Dennis labels the 'biggest myth of all' in a prior book. There are other things driving this process, however, such as a president seeing historic leadership context and the opportunity for achievement. That is what drove President Clinton in 1992. He came at an extraordinary moment in American history. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the Gulf War, the United States was at an unparalleled level of power and influence in the world and could take on a challenge like this. Additionally, there were not some of the problems looming today. Iran was nowhere near the threat that it is today. It was virtually exhausted after the Iran-Iraq War. There was an Israeli leader, Yitzhak Rabin, who had decided as a matter of...increasing strategic depth for Israel, which he called 'expanding the circle of peace,' that he was going to engage directly and intensively in the peace process, starting with Syria.

"Dennis, working with Secretary Baker, pushed away the taboo of direct talks between Israel and Arab nations through the Madrid Process. A story in the book makes this point, with Martin Indyk briefing then-governor Clinton, saying that if you put U.S. power behind Rabin's intentions, there is a possibility of achieving four Arab-Israeli peace agreements during the president's first term. It was the context and the opportunity for achievement, as opposed to a cost-benefit analysis on Israel versus the Arab countries.

"If you look at the decisions that the Bush 43 administration made, that was also about perceived opportunity as well. They rejected the Clinton approach because of an anything-but-Clinton view with respect to foreign policy.

"President Obama had a set of circumstances very different from President Clinton. You had the peace camp greatly diminished in Israel following the intifada...The 2006 Palestinian Authority parliamentary elections, which brought Hamas to the stage, fractured the PA, Hamas threw Fatah out of Gaza, and there was a much weaker Palestinian partner to deal with. The threat of Iran was much different for President Obama than President Clinton. Iran was moving headlong toward development of a nuclear weapon. Israel faced Iran, Hamas, and Hezbollah, all committed to its destruction. It was a very different context, and U.S. relations with the Muslim world were in a much more complicated place after the Iraq war and in the midst of the United States pursuing the most aggressive counterterrorism campaign against violent fundamental groups ever undertaken...

"Given all of the positive conditions that President Clinton faced, a decade of achievement, why didn't it close? Consider what was on the table: the Clinton Parameters, a Palestinian state in all of Gaza and most of the West Bank, a capital in East Jerusalem, security arrangements built around an international presence, a right of return to the new Palestinian state, and an end to the conflict. Yasser Arafat walked away from this. The facts are not in dispute with respect to the core offering, which was accepted by Ehud Barak and rejected by Yasser Arafat. A tragic example of the impact of personality on policy outcomes.

"In my own experience, we viewed Israel as an ally, and we view Israel as part of the U.S. global alliance system, which is a unique asset. No other nation in the world has the alliance system that the United States has, and it is a unique asset to be attended to constantly...The engagement we had was not just at the political level, but also at the professional level between intelligence and military services, which was critically important. In a region with so much politics, ideology, and mythology, it was important for our decisionmakers to do their best at acquiring ground truth, and come as close as we could with respect to the analytics. This made a big difference in terms of decisionmaking and assurances between all sides.

"The contours of the U.S. debate and policy approach toward Israel have changed dramatically since Eisenhower. Certain assessments have been made about U.S. interests that are very different. From the outset, President Obama made it clear that he had an absolute commitment to Israeli security. If we were going to pursue a peace effort, Israel could not take the required steps toward peace absent the United States providing clear assurance and Israel seeing that assurance manifested concretely.

"The president feels an emotional attachment to Israel. It may have been a mistake for him not to travel to Israel earlier in his term to express that connection and have the Israeli public see that commitment. There was a view that Israel could do better in terms of its approach to the peace process. This is a complicated matter that includes politics and a weak Palestinian Authority...We had substantive disagreements with respect to some of the steps taken. There were personality issues as well, but through all the disagreements, he did protect the security commitment...

"Iran loomed over the relationship, and in that respect there was a shared commitment to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon...We took a full range of steps to pressure Iran, working with allies and friends in...one of the most effective diplomatic pressure campaigns ever, and it led to the negotiations...

"The United States and Israel have a deep joint interest in seeing the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action implemented. The JCPOA will prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, most directly over the next one and a half to two decades. It has to be the case that having a decade and a half of rollback and freeze on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program is in the interest of the United States and Israel. Implementation is critical. There should be understandings as to the consequences of JCPOA violations, and those conversations are important among the parties enforcing the deal and between the United States and Israel.

"The agreement is properly seen as transactional at this point and focused on a nonproliferation security problem, not -- particularly given Iranian behavior and what we expect Iranian behavior to be -- some sort of transformational event between the United States and Iran. This means the United States needs to confront Iran's behavior in the Middle East. The United States needs to put in place a detailed set of deterrence steps to ensure that Iran complies with the agreement, and if it doesn't, that it sees the cost of noncompliance. Deterrence includes capabilities, and our declaratory policies, which are very important in the region, but also includes broader steps, such as deeper relationships and assurances with the Gulf Cooperation Council. This includes things such as extended deterrence. The United States and Israel would agree on all those points moving forward. There have been disagreements between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, but that doesn't negate these points with respect to common interests moving forward...

"My own approach was intensive engagement at the political and professional level with counterparts in Israel, and to not let things fester. There was a significant disagreement over the Iran accord, but we now need to look at our shared interests and goals...

"It was a mistake to drive the debate over Iran into partisan territory, because over the decades there has always been a bipartisan commitment to the relationship, and we saw some damage to that through the way the JCPOA debate unfolded. That was unfortunate and needs to be corrected. [The Obama-Netanyahu meeting on] November 9 will be an opportunity for some of that correcting....

"With respect to moving forward, it is in the interests of the United States to have a joint consultative group provide an accurate, fact-based analysis with respect to JCPOA implementation. It should be done at the professional and political level. In both countries, the military and intelligence services are professional and give leaders their best analytical advice. The best way for a common view with respect to Iranian JCPOA compliance is through joint professional consultative exchanges. At the end of the day, the political leaders need to look to their analytical teams for information to make serious decisions.

"With respect to Iranian negotiations, the line that was drawn was that the United States needed to ensure the conversation first. Once that was understood, we would brief Israel on the substance on the negotiations. For the first point, it was incumbent to ensure that the Iranian party was authorized by the state as well as the Supreme Leader. Prior to testing that, we kept this as a private channel. After that conclusion, we had intense briefings with the Israeli government, including soliciting their reaction for positions we might take in negotiations. It was important to test the Iranian team, because having an extended negotiation without the Supreme Leader's authorization would not have been productive...It is very important for the administration to work for JCPOA implementation and to have the mechanisms in place after the initial implementation period. This could take another six to ten months. There are a number of things to do, including oversight mechanisms....

"We should work through the next iteration of defense understandings with the Israelis, and we should make every effort to finish that before the end of the president's term. Regarding interim or partial steps to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a binary choice can lead to disengagement by the United States. When the United States is disengaged and things move in a negative direction, the vacuum is filled by forces against cooperation. Ideas around a political horizon and practical steps for both sides build confidence and show joint interest in calm and cooperation...

"Any future peace agreement will be based on the Oslo structures. Many practical advancements occur under Oslo. I agree with pursuing interim steps that reinforce the path to an agreement. It is important to ask why Secretary Kerry had to travel to Amman for concrete steps to reassure both sides with respect to maintaining the status quo of the holy sites. That is an important conversation to have with both sides."