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United States-Israel Relations: Is Anything Forever?

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The 112th Congress, elected in November 2010, convened on January 5, 2011. Various Israeli elements have expressed satisfaction with the election results – a resounding defeat for the Democrats and President Obama and a rise in the GOP's power – because they believe that Israel can take advantage of the Republicans' achievement to curb undesirable ideas and initiatives by the administration. Time will tell if their assessment proves right.

One of the few subjects on which there is unanimity in Israel has to do with the country's relations with the United States. Without a doubt, this relationship is special, if not unique. Some within the Israeli political establishment feel this relationship is immune to any change, and on more than one occasion this assumption has led Israeli governments to adopt positions that disregard Israel's tremendous dependence on the United States in matters of foreign policy and security. In other words, as far as these individuals are concerned, the fundamental assumption about the relationship is that it is forever – that what was once will be forever.

America's attitude to Israel rests on three major pillars. The first is the idealistic dimension in United States foreign policy: America's commitment to fight for and defend democracies abroad. Since Israel is a democracy, supporting Israel is an American interest. The second is the American Jewish community, which serves as a bridge between Israel and the American people. The third pillar is shared security and foreign affairs interests. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union was the common enemy in every way. Since the end of the Cold War, a shared interest has been the war on terrorism, as terrorism is viewed as a common threat and as such is supposed to ally the two nations (although unlike Israel, America has made no official declarations linking al-Qaeda terrorism to Palestinian terrorism aimed at Israel). In Israel's view, the Iranian threat, first and foremost the nuclear challenge, is another threat linking the two nations.

How strong are these pillars today? Are cracks appearing in them, liable to affect their stability? Official American statements reiterate the two nations' shared values and the commitment to Israel as a Jewish state. However, Israel's conduct in Judea and Samaria

on the one hand and the growing extremism and intolerance in Israeli society on the other are liable to erode Israel's image as a democracy in the eyes of the American public.

Within the American Jewish community there are segments unwilling to automatically accept Israeli government positions on the Palestinian issue (just as in a different vein they are unwilling to cede to Israel's official position on matters of Jewish ritual law) and are prepared to publicly oppose the Jewish establishment for its blind support of Israeli government policy. These voices are not unknown to the American administration. Consider, for example, the presence of National Security Advisor Jones at the anti-establishment J Street conference, although no official representatives of Israel attended; J Street is known for its public criticism of Israeli government policy. In addition, statements such as the one by General Petraeus, whereby the Israeli-Palestinian conflict creates an anti-American atmosphere and challenges the ability of the United States to promote its interests in the Middle East are disturbing; so too is the question posed lately (not for the first time) with greater force by certain circles about Israel being an asset or a burden. These are challenges to the prevailing Israeli assumption about Israel's contribution to the lasting, unshakable fact of the nations' shared interests.

President Obama's approach to international relations in general and to relations with the Muslim and Arab world and the Israeli-Palestinian issue in particular has differed from that of President Bush. In an attempt to learn from the mistakes of his predecessors, who postponed their attempts to solve the conflict to the end of their terms in office, President Obama decided to tackle the issue right at the start. There is no doubt that his decision to turn the end/freeze of Jewish settlement in the territories into a pivotal condition even before the start of the dialogue was one of the reasons the talks went nowhere. The Palestinians were able to stand on the side watching the US try to promote their interests without having to enter into the negotiations themselves. At the same time, a crisis developed in the relationship between Israel and America (one of its results being a loss of trust between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu, which may continue to mar their relations for as long as each is in office). The far-reaching, generous benefits package that America was reportedly willing to grant symbolized the great importance the administration – justifiably or not – attributed to extending the construction freeze for another three months, with the hope (it is unclear what this hope was based on) that in this period of time there would occur a significant breakthrough on some of the core issues. The failure of the American effort represented the end of a chapter from the administration's perspective; this will no doubt negatively affect future relations between the nations.

It remains to be seen if the president, whose status and chances for reelection do not depend on his success or failure to resolve the conflict but rather on his ability to stimulate the American economy and create jobs, will decide to become personally involved in the effort to force the parties to abandon their current positions and enter into negotiations on the core issues. Secretary of State Hillary Clinton's December 2010

speech at the Saban Forum did not indicate explicitly what approach President Obama may adopt should he decide to intensify his efforts on the issue.

Continued American activity, and certainly increased involvement, will yet again expose the fundamental differences of opinion regarding the strategy and tactics of negotiations. The Iranian nuclear issue, too, beyond the level of official declarations, also reveals disagreements between Israel and the United States, stemming from their different geographical locations and balance of interests. Unlike Israel, the United States does not view Iran as an existential threat, and clearly this impacts attitudes on how to resolve the crisis.

It should be noted that alongside political disagreements, the Obama administration has worked to intensify security relations between the nations, believing that strengthening Israel's security enlarges its room for political maneuvering in the context of negotiations. At the same time, it strengthens Israel's deterrence vis-à-vis the regional threats against it, first and foremost the Iranian threat and its regional derivatives.

In the final analysis, as a nation lacking alternatives in terms of strategic alliances, Israel must do its utmost to preserve the support of the United States, its only ally. Conduct that assumes symmetry in the relations, as well as some sort of determinism in terms of American support for Israel, jeopardizes this special relationship. It is imperative that Israel's leaders make every effort to maintain the relations, which, given the environment of change the United States is facing in the coming decades, cannot be taken for granted.