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The Return of Liberal Interventionism?

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US President Barack Obama recently appointed Susan Rice as national security adviser and nominated Samantha Power as the next US ambassador to the United Nations. Many viewed the Rice appointment as a response to Republican criticism of her role in the scandal over the Benghazi attack. Still, the two moves add a twist to the administration's foreign policy, and the Middle East should take note: liberal interventionism may be back. If so, this may signal definite advantages for Israel.

America's liberal interventionists believe the United States should use its power to intervene to stop massive human rights abuses, even if such moves have only a loose connection to the more standard concept of national interest. The doctrine reached its heyday in the late 1990s, when the end of the Cold War led to both unparalleled US power and the humanitarian crises of Bosnia, Rwanda, and Kosovo. The soul searching of the liberal policymaking elite after the Rwandan genocide and the decision – not coincidental – to intervene in Kosovo were liberal interventionism's high water marks. Susan Rice was converted to the doctrine when serving in the National Security Council at the time of the Rwandan genocide. Samantha Power became the camp's leading voice after three years as a war correspondent in the Balkans.

With the election of George W. Bush and the 9/11 attacks, neo-conservatism replaced liberal interventionism as the doctrine-du-jour. Then came the disillusionment with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the 2008 financial crisis. The new public mood called for "nation building at home." "Can America Be Fixed?" asked Fareed Zakaria in a recent issue of *Foreign Affairs*. *Foreign Policy Begins at Home: The Case for Putting America's House in Order*, was put forward by Richard Haass of the Council on Foreign Relations.

President Obama was associated with the liberal interventionism worldview, though not completely. His first term advisers straddled both the non-interventionist and interventionist camps. Joe Biden and Robert Gates urged caution on the use of military force. Meanwhile, then-Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, but especially Rice and Power, formed an interventionist camp that lobbied successfully for military action in Libya. Yet

despite that internal policy victory, the opening of Obama's second term seemed to spell decline for the liberal interventionists. New cabinet members John Kerry and Chuck Hagel are not viewed as part of the camp. Angst over the mounting crisis in Syria was matched only by angst over potential military involvement. Meanwhile, Washington became consumed first by the wrangling over cutting government deficits and then by the Benghazi, IRS, Associated Press, and NSA scandals.

Into this picture walk Rice and Power. Their entry does not mean that the United States will restore its defense budget, reverse its pivot to Asia, or impose a no-fly zone over Syria. But it does signal that Obama is personally interested in liberal interventionists sitting at the decision table. In an unstable Middle East where other powers have become active in arming supporters, even a subtle shift toward a more active US policy could have strategic implications.

For Israel, these developments are important – and in some respects, ironic. Israeli policymakers, as well as the public, have long viewed liberal interventionism with suspicion. The instinct of liberal interventionism is to support the weak against the strong and to promote idealistic objectives over realpolitik. Both on the Israeli street and in the halls of power, this perspective is suspected to be contrary to Israel's interests. Liberal interventionism has been associated with support for the Palestinians. The 2002 video clip of Samantha Power toeing a hostile anti-Israel line fits well with this preconception.

Yet the bias may be outdated, as may be the fear. The greater risk for Israel is not that the United States will arm Fatah gunmen to attack the IDF. The US is highly unlikely to turn its aid toward Palestinian militants, as Power strangely argued in 2002. Instead, the greater risk is that the United States will draw back from the Middle East entirely. Here Israel has a common interest with the liberal interventionists, just as it did with the neo-conservatives. Israel's interest is for the United States to exercise influence and power in the Middle East, containing uncertain forces such as Russia or China or hostile ones such as the Iranian regime or Sunni jihadists. If liberal interventionists endorse that goal – even if to promote human rights rather than help Israel per se – it would work to Israel's advantage.

Moreover, the liberal interventionists could help Israel on another key front: the battle for US public opinion. Liberal interventionists such as Power are opinion leaders among Democratic constituencies. In the long term, support for Israel in the United States will depend in large part on a continued strong position for Israel in US public opinion. Good standing among liberal interventionist elites could help Israel achieve that objective and buttress its bipartisan support. Israel and its supporters would do well, therefore, to opt for cooption, not confrontation.

Some leading American Jewish voices may have started, cautiously, on this tack. The strong support for Samantha Power from the Anti-Defamation League and Alan Dershowitz may prove leading indicators. The Israeli government, which must maintain distance in internal US matters, cannot follow suit in so open a voice, but it should not be seen as adopting an opposite position.

In meeting that threat of disengagement, liberal interventionists could be Israel's friends. It would be wise to start making those friends now.

