



On the brink

Despite all the rancor, American-Israeli ties haven't been permanently damaged by the uneasy relationship between Obama and Netanyahu

THE CURRENT crisis in US-Israeli relations is the worst in the history of the “special relationship” between the two allies. Clearly, the bitter fallout from Benjamin Netanyahu’s controversial speech to Congress against the emerging US-led nuclear deal with Iran stems partly from the prime minister’s uneasy personal relationship with US President Barack Obama.

But it should also be seen in a wider historic context.

Since the establishment of the state in 1948, a major crisis in American-Israeli relations has erupted almost every decade. But unlike the present one, they all focused on specific issues and lasted no more than a few days or, at most, a few months. Three examples well illustrate the pattern.

During the 1956-57 Suez-Sinai crisis, in collaboration with France and Britain, Israel defeated the Egyptian forces and occupied the entire Sinai Peninsula. US President Dwight Eisenhower, who had been left in the dark by the three attacking states, demanded complete, unconditional and immediate Israeli withdrawal, and threatened to cancel the tax exemption status of American Jewish donations to Israel. Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion complied.

At the beginning of 1975, in the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, US Secretary of State Henry Kissinger negotiated an interim agreement between Israel and Egypt. When Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin rejected several key elements, Kissinger retaliated with a “reassessment” of US-Israel relations. He refused to process Israeli requests for weapons and, coming so soon after the traumatic war, this was sufficient to alter Rabin’s position.

Another major confrontation occurred in 1991-1992 between the George H.W. Bush

administration and the government of Prime Minister Yitzhak Shamir over Israeli settlements. Shamir wanted American guarantees for a \$10 billion loan needed to absorb a million Soviet Jews. The US agreed but, in return, demanded a complete freeze on settlement building in the West Bank and Gaza as a positive peacemaking gesture. Bush and Secretary of State James Baker thought Shamir had agreed but were surprised to discover the opposite. Baker was so angry that he publicly gave out his phone number urging the Israelis to contact him when they got “serious about peace.” Shamir lost to Rabin in the 1992 elections.

Unlike the earlier crises, the present one has been on almost every key issue, from the Iranian race to obtain nuclear weapons and policies toward radical Islam, to negotiations with the Palestinians and the periodic confrontations with Hamas.

Obama and Netanyahu have both been in office since early 2009, a rare concurrence of parallel service in US-Israel relations. Unfortunately, over this relatively long period, the mutual acrimony soared to unprecedented levels and adversely affects many aspects of the relationship.

Both leaders contributed to the downward spiral. At the beginning of his first term, Obama sought reconciliation with the Muslim world at the expense of the relationship with Israel. He visited Ankara and Cairo, grossly exaggerated the Islamic contribution to America, and suggested that the Holocaust led to the establishment of Israel and the concomitant Palestinian plight. For his part, during his first visit to the White House, Netanyahu lectured Obama on the fundamentals of the Arab-Israeli conflict, implying that the inexperienced president had a lot

to learn about the Middle East.

Obama failed to give Netanyahu his due for the 2009 Bar-Ilan speech, in which for the first time he supported the two-state solution. A day after the address, the White House released a photo of Obama in telephone conversation with Netanyahu, with the soles of his shoes prominently displayed on the presidential desk. Everywhere in the Middle East this was interpreted as an expression of disrespect.

The crisis worsened during Obama’s second term and Netanyahu’s third government. During Netanyahu’s previous administra-

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tion, defense minister Ehud Barak, liked and trusted by the Obama administration, served as the main contact for American-Israeli relations. When serious disagreements erupted, he mediated between Obama and Netanyahu. There was no such lightning conductor in the outgoing Netanyahu government.

In March 2013, at the beginning of his second term, Obama finally visited Israel. However, he refused an invitation to address the Knesset and instead delivered a speech to thousands of invited students and young people. Over Netanyahu’s head, he openly urged them to apply pressure on the Israeli



government to reach an agreement with the Palestinians.

In the 2012 presidential elections, Netanyahu was accused of openly siding with the Republican candidate Mitt Romney. Romney visited Israel with big donors including Sheldon Adelson, the billionaire casino mogul who backs both Netanyahu and the Republican Party. Although Obama used commercials featuring Barak and President Shimon Peres lauding his support for Israel, his aides continued to point fingers at Netanyahu for gross intervention on Romney's behalf.

As the situation deteriorated, both sides resorted to undiplomatic slurs. Secretary of State John Kerry was accused of being "obsessive" and "messianic" over renewed Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. The White House blamed Netanyahu for the failure of the talks, attacked his criticism of Obama's handling of the negotiations with Iran and a "senior official" called him "chicken shit."

The nuclear negotiations with Iran were scheduled to reach a critical stage at the end of March. Both sides sought a comprehensive agreement. Netanyahu was deeply concerned by the negotiations and the emerging agreement. Many senators and representatives, Republicans and Democrats alike, shared his concerns. The specter of a bipartisan-led plan to impose harsher sanctions on Iran, should the negotiations fail, had been raised. Obama could have used the threat as an instrument to obtain much needed Iranian concessions. Instead, he opposed the move, surrendering to an Iranian threat to quit the talks if harsher sanctions were imposed.

There was also a question about the Congressional role in the ratification of the agreement with Iran. Although Obama un-

necessarily sought Congressional approval for American military intervention in Syria after President Bashar Assad's use of chemical weapons, he announced that he would not submit for Congressional approval the much more significant agreement with Iran. Netanyahu, however, insisted that only Congress could influence or even stop the bad agreement Obama was about to conclude.

Matters came to a head when Netanyahu accepted an invitation from Republican House Speaker John Boehner to voice his concerns at a joint session of Congress, even though Boehner had not notified Obama. First Boehner said he was an autonomous leader and didn't have to inform Obama, but later claimed that due to the bad relations between the premier and the president, he feared the White House might prevent the visit.

The invitation sparked political storms both in Israel and the US. Obama immediately announced that he would not meet Netanyahu because his visit was scheduled to take place only two weeks before elections in Israel and a meeting might be seen as intervention in the Israeli electoral process. His real reasons, however, were different. He thought the speech was designed to embarrass him, limit his ability to complete the Iran deal, help the Republican-controlled congress defy his leadership and assist Netanyahu in winning reelection.

Israel has always enjoyed strong bipartisan support in Washington. The Republican invitation infuriated the Democrats, even those who supported the Israeli reservations, and severely undermined the traditional bipartisan spirit and attitudes.

Vice President Joe Biden, who is also president of the Senate, and Nancy Pelosi, the House minority leader, announced they

would not attend the speech. So did several other leading Democrats.

The speech also negatively affected the American Jewish community, which traditionally votes Democrat, and AIPAC, the pro-Israel lobby, which relies on bipartisanship and American Jewish support. There was also adverse fallout in Israel, where the opposition accused Netanyahu of orchestrating the speech purely for election purposes.

Netanyahu's problem was that he had embraced the right cause but chosen counterproductive means for addressing the inherent dangers in the agreement with Iran. His deep concern over the progress of the Iranian nuclear weapons program long predates the Israeli election; but the party politics he triggered, both in the US and Israel, seriously undermined his efforts.

Nevertheless, despite all the rancor, American-Israeli relations haven't been permanently damaged.

Although the present crisis is the worst in the history of the "special relationship," it stems primarily from a clash of personalities, two leaders who simply couldn't work together. American public opinion still overwhelmingly supports Israel and the favorable ratio has remained very high, even during the entire period of confrontation between Obama and Netanyahu.

A different US president and a savvy Israeli prime minister could, with much effort, restore the mutually beneficial and fruitful relations of the pre-Obama era. ■

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