

COMMENTARY

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Netanyahu is the Loser at the End-Game?

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The victory of President Obama represents not only a defeat for the Republican Party but an embarrassment for Prime Minister Netanyahu, who has made his disdain for the President and his policies no secret. It is crucial, however, to distinguish between their contrasting personalities and the overall U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship, which remains as strong as ever with unprecedented levels of cooperation in intelligence, trade, advanced technology and military collaboration. The animosity between the two leaders has not had an impact on these strong ties, but a new and serious clash between them during Obama's second term (assuming that Netanyahu leads the new Israeli government, which is likely) could have an adverse impact on U.S.-Israel relations. This may well come to pass if Netanyahu (or his successor) does not dramatically shift his policy toward the Palestinians to calm the persistent and volatile conditions in the regions, as shown by the recent flare-up between Israel and Hamas.

One of the first congratulatory messages President Obama received on his re-election was from Prime Minister Netanyahu, an act more cynical than sincere. The Netanyahu administration made every effort to extol the deep ties shared between Israel and the U.S. while expressing an eager willingness to continue working with President Obama. Deputy Foreign Minister Danny Ayalon was emphatic in his praise of Obama's commitment to Israel's national security, stating among other things, that Israel and the U.S. are "on the same page" in respect to Iran which amounted to nothing short of an 'apology with shame' designed to improve his boss's standing in the eyes of the re-elected president.

This, of course, stood in complete contrast to Netanyahu's past sentiments toward President Obama. Indeed, he has never missed an opportunity to undermine Obama, displaying on more than one occasion his blatant insolence for the Administration. In May 2011, Netanyahu used his speech in Congress to publicly discredit both official U.S. policy and the Palestinians. On 11 September 2012, he brazenly challenged Obama on Iran when he said that, "Those in the

international community who refuse to put red lines before Iran don't have a moral right to place a red light before Israel." He used his appearance at the U.N. General Assembly in late September to stress the urgency of curbing Iran's nuclear program, and struck a hostile tone about U.S. policy toward the Middle East just one day before the presidential elections in an interview on Israeli television. Obama's re-election has now put a serious dent in Netanyahu's until-now invulnerable political standing. Although Obama will not be vindictive against Israel, Netanyahu's alienation of Israel's most important ally was a colossal mistake and Obama is not likely to forget his arrogance going forward.

Too often, Netanyahu's policies toward the Palestinians and Iran have been opposed not only by officials in his government but by the Israeli public including Meir Dagan, former head of the Mossad, and scores of former security officials who fear a looming disaster for the State resulting from Netanyahu's misguided policies. They view the United States as the staunchest ally on which Israel can rely without any reservation. A majority of Israelis have expressed support for a two-state solution to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and oppose Netanyahu's repeated threat that he will not hesitate to take unilateral action against Iran's nuclear program even without the US' support and/or participation.

As the Obama administration defines its foreign policy goals for the second term, the focus of attention on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will certainly transcend the personal animosities existing between Obama and Netanyahu. The internal political dynamics in both countries are bound to shift as a result of Obama's reelection. For the American Jewish community, the most prominent concerns in this election were largely domestic, with Israel receiving lower priority, and an overwhelming 73% of American Jews support President Obama's handling of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Major lobbies such as AIPAC have now been relatively marginalized as a result of their blanket support for Netanyahu and may have to take a more subdued posture going forward as they have lost much clout compared to new groups such as J-Street, who now have a chance to create a more forceful public narrative in support of the peace process.

Differences may also emerge between Congressional leaders in the U.S. and the conservative Israeli government, which is expected to return to governing following the Israeli elections, albeit with potentially fewer seats than previously thought. Since an agreement based on a two-state solution is a prerequisite for avoiding a renewed conflict between the two sides and remains central to regional stability, the Obama administration will have to use its new leverage on Netanyahu to insist on the immediate resumption of peace negotiations, which remains in Israel's best national interest. In this regard, Netanyahu has much less room to manoeuvre than in the past particularly because the public demands a change in direction, especially in the absence of the retiring Defence Minister Ehud Barak, who is known for his unsurpassed national security credentials and on whom Netanyahu relied to boost his own commitment to national security.

The first manifestation of a weakened Netanyahu came in the wake of the Gaza flare-up and the Obama administration's efforts to work out a hasty ceasefire. Netanyahu had little choice but to accept the President's "recommendation" for the ceasefire, albeit it fell far short of Netanyahu's expectations. In fact, it has allowed Hamas to claim victory (however elusive) and further embolden and increase its popularity as it was recognized, by virtue of being the counter party to

the negotiation of the ceasefire, as a separate entity to be reckoned with at the expense of both Israel and the Palestinian Authority.

Now that the Obama administration finds itself once again deeply involved in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and in light of the Palestinian Authority's (PA) expected bid on 29 November 2012 to upgrade its status to an observer state at the U.N. General Assembly (UNGA), new differences between Obama and Netanyahu will certainly emerge. While both Israel and the U.S. are opposed to the PA's move, President Obama may use the occasion, due to the recent violence in Gaza, to not take harsh measures against the PA, as was previously intimated. He may use the Palestinian bid (following restrained public denunciation) to place renewed pressure on Israel and the PA to return to the negotiating table. Under any circumstances, Netanyahu will play with a weakened hand as President Obama will be less concerned with domestic pressure in support of Israel. He may now decide to push the PA to enter new peace negotiations in earnest and press Netanyahu to make meaningful concessions for Israel's own sake while risking little or no political capital.

Now that the PA has come out openly in support of Hamas (which precipitated the resumption of the unity talks led by Hamas' political guru, Khalid Mashaal), the PA's bid for Observer State status at the UNGA will be given greater credence as it will now be made in the name of all Palestinians, which Hamas will indirectly support. The PA's position may well be reinforced by what was recently stated by Mashaal: "I accept a Palestinian state according to 1967 borders with Jerusalem as the capital, with the right to return." This position is identical to the PA stance, which everybody knows is subject to negotiations. President Obama may well seize the new opening provided by the changing circumstances to resume peace negotiations for the purpose of reaching a comprehensive accord with direct and active American involvement which is absolutely necessary.

Notwithstanding President Obama's struggles in fashioning a new and sustainable fiscal policy and his desire to augment the U.S. presence in Asia, he cannot ignore the Middle East, in particular the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as the recent crisis has demonstrated. In his final term the President can, and in fact should, invest greater political capital to resolve the conflict where failure will not be to his detriment, but success will arguably be his greatest legacy.

Note: This article is published in collaboration with Prof. Ben-Meir's web portal.

Web Link: <http://www.alonben-meir.com/article/netanyahu-is-the-loser-at-the-end-game/>

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