



HOW BAD ARE US-ISRAELI RELATIONS?

By Adam Garfinkle



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All mature human relationships consist of several levels or layers operating simultaneously. Memory, emotion, interests, expectations, and interactions with third parties are forever weaving around one another in fascinating and largely unpredictable array. What is true for individuals is also true for mature relationships between larger social entities, including entities variously called (and lazily conflated) countries, governments, states, nations, and peoples. The relationship between the United States and Israel is not an exception; it constitutes rather a fulsome case in point.

When we consider any bilateral relationship within the general ambit of international affairs, we typically approach it within the specialized framing conventions we all learned at one point or another. We anthropomorphize the actions of the parties, so that it is common to read and write that “the United States believes” or “Israel decided” and so on. But we understand upon reflection that such language, while serviceable, obscures the distinct layers and their interactions. National leaders—Presidents and Prime Ministers in this case—represent both political parties and governments; governments are an expression of the state within some given constitutional order, that order also called a regime; the state as the executive function of government is just one institution of government, however, for legislatures and independent judiciaries exist within most democracies as well; and all governmental institutions in democracies, parties and bureaucracies alike, arise from deeper currents in society itself, which in turn are shaped by a dialectic of social structure and culture unique to each.

In most bilateral international relationships, leaders and governments—or administrations in the U.S. case—matter most. That is where exchanges are thickest, most consequential, and most overtly political. Highly institutionalized relationships, such as those of longstanding allies, also usually feature fairly dense interactions at the level of state bureaucracies, such as those concerned with intelligence and defense matters, which engage with one another over successive administrations often without senior elected officials needing or wishing to intervene. Less often do relationships between societies and between non-governmental associations within societies play major roles “from below”, as it were, in bilateral relations. But the existence of significant diasporic communities, immigrant experiences, strong overlapping historio-ideological beliefs, and other factors operating separately and together create occasional exceptions. The U.S.-Israeli relationship is one of those exceptions. How could it be otherwise when two self-avowed forms of exceptionalism merge?

With this in mind, it is now at least possible to ask two pertinent questions, or at least two questions that seem to be on a lot of people's minds these days: How bad are U.S.-Israeli relations now?; and, How important is the U.S.-Israeli relationship anyway in the larger geopolitical scheme of things? Let us take these questions in turn.

US-ISRAELI RELATIONS IN HISTORICAL PERSPECTIVE

The relationship between the U.S. and Israeli leaderships today is bad, perhaps as bad as this upper level of the relationship has ever been. President Obama and Benjamin Netanyahu dislike each other as well as disagree with each other over significant strategic portfolios (peace process issues, Syria, Gaza and Hamas, and above all Iran), and the combination of dislike and disagreement is not automatic. The White House's use of gutter language to describe Prime Minister Netanyahu, barely

concealed and for which no contrition has been expressed, is even worse than some of the colorful but privately held language earlier senior U.S. officials—James Baker being a notable case in point—used to use to describe Israeli leaders.

And to say that their relationship is perhaps maximally bad is really saying something, if one is prepared to remember the relationship's history without eye scales. The Eisenhower-Dulles relationship with Ben-Gurion and Moshe Sharett around 1955, 1956, and 1957 was combustible, to put it mildly. The first two years of the Reagan Administration, as its senior officials encountered Menachem Begin and Yitzhak Shamir, were arguably as troubled.¹ The Begin-Carter years before and Shamir-Bush 41 years after were dreadful, too. In all these cases, and some others too, emanations from Israelis and American Jews of what Harvey Sicherman used to call “the gevult syndrome” were in prolific evidence. The syndrome, he used to say, is characterized by the belief that the sky has fallen, is falling, or is about to fall, and if you don't realize it then there is something wrong with you. But the sky never did fall; it just vibrated a little too much for some people's nerves.

In all these cases, also note, there erupted charges, frequently true, that one side or both was playing politics in the other's back yard. Israeli politicians have tried to inveigle the U.S. government and the bilateral relationship in their political favor, such as, to pick just one example of many, when Menachem Begin tried to get himself invited to Washington in advance of the June 1981 Israeli election, and Secretary of State Alexander Haig, Jr., travelled to the Middle East instead to head off this particular electioneering tactic. (Begin won anyway.) Some have let their preferences in U.S. presidential election be known to American voters, some more subtly than others. Most have tried to leverage Congress, the repository of the “soft” factors in the relationship, against the White House, which has to first consider the “hard” strategic factors at hand. American Presidents have also occasionally tried to torque Israeli elections, too, such as when the Bush 41 Administration, amid the flak over the loan guarantees/settlement freeze squabble, threw its weight in favor of the Israeli Labor Party. It worked; Yitzhak Rabin led Labor to victory in the June 1992 elections.

Despite this history, sober souls on both sides of the relationship understand that interfering in each other's domestic politics is not a good idea. But it keeps happening anyway. What is different about the current fracas is how simultaneously mutual the interference has become, and how polarized politics in both countries has encouraged it.

Just who started the current mess is not in dispute, though it might nevertheless turn out to be too simple a story. In January, House Speaker John Boehner and Senate Majority Leader Mitch McConnell decided to invite Prime Minister Netanyahu to address a joint session of Congress on March 3, this knowingly only two weeks in advance of the March 17 Israeli election. Netanyahu accepted only after the White House was informed of the invitation, but there is speculation that Netanyahu had privately asked to be invited. Either way, in essence Boehner and McConnell invited Netanyahu to use the relationship for partisan political purposes in Israel, even as they deployed Netanyahu's visit as partisan ammunition against the Obama Administration in the United States—a brilliant and unique two-for as these things have gone, and one likely to be uniquely damaging when all is said and done.

What was their fuller tablet of motives? To retaliate against the Obama Administration for suggesting that it might implement a nuclear deal with Iran by Executive Order, bypassing the Republican-dominated Congress? To raise the heat nationally against what they consider to be shaping up as a bad agreement? Perhaps, closely related, to get the Administration to toughen its eleventh-hour negotiating stance in hopes of provoking the Iranians to refuse the deal? To help Netanyahu politically, both because they like him and perhaps in the expectation, too, that some of his well-healed American supporters—Sheldon Adelson being the main case in point—will pour even more money than usual into Republican campaign coffers as 2016 approaches? To split the Democrats between those who support any Israeli government and those who are critical of at least this Likud-led one, thus confronting the party with some annoying choices? If you checked “all of the above,” you're probably on the right track.

The Democrats are certainly deep in the soup. Some Democratic Congressmen soon announced they would boycott Netanyahu's appearance. Other Democrats, sensing the damage that would do all around, tried to dissuade them, and failing that to dissuade Netanyahu from coming, lest he befoul the Jewish political constituency in the United States that remains on balance the most pro-Israel of all. For a while, speculation arose that Netanyahu might call off the speech, or agree to meet with boycotting Democrats in some other venue while in Washington. But then Vice-President Biden, president *pro tem* of the Senate, announced that he would not be present for Netanyahu's address either, and that appears to have persuaded the Prime Minister to stay the course.

¹ A contemporary analysis is my “U.S.-Israeli Relations: The Wolf This Time?” *Orbis* (Spring 1982). The number of contentious issues was astounding.

In Israel, the current election campaign has also become unusually bitter. Netanyahu's opposition has accused him of accepting (or soliciting) the Boehner-McConnell invitation out of pure partisan motives; Netanyahu has emphasized instead the responsibilities of leadership to foil a bad agreement in prospect that could put Israel in existential danger, and the tough talk seems to have helped him in the polls. This is despite the fact that Netanyahu's determination to go to Washington has led several key Democratic Senators to withdraw their support for new or prospective sanctions against Iran, which objectively harms Israel's interests. The campaign slogans reflect the polarization. The Likud slogan, translated fairly, reads: "It's us or them." J. F. Dulles, he of the "you're either with us or against us" mindset, would be proud.

On February 9 the vitriol splattered the Israeli scene in a novel manner, when the Prime Minister took sides in a newspaper war pitting Israel's most widely read daily newspaper, *Yediot Aharonot*, against a free upstart funded by the aforementioned Mr. Adelson called *Israel Hayom*. *Yediot Aharonot's* editorial page is not for Netanyahu while *Israel Hayom's* is; indeed, from all appearances, that's its only reason for being. For a sitting Prime Minister to get personally involved in this kind of media spat is unprecedented, leading Nahum Barnea, one of Israel's most respected columnists, to describe Netanyahu as a paranoid in need of psychiatric care. Even by Israeli standards, all this is way "out there."

It is therefore fair to say that at the level of leaderships and governments, the U.S.-Israeli relationship is going through a very bad patch, with mutual poaching into each other's domestic politics at a new low. But what about the other levels of the relationship?

At the level of state-to-state relations, little has changed. It is true that during the most recent Gaza fighting, the Administration reached down into the nearly automatic military prepositioning and supply relationship to make a point. But while unusual, this was not without precedent: President Reagan and Defense Secretary Weinberger did the same thing, even withholding major platforms like fighter jets, back in 1981. By and large, the deeply institutionalized aspects of the U.S.-Israeli relationship, based on a since-elaborated and much practiced memorandum of understanding also from the early 1980s, have not been perturbed.

And down at the societal level? There is ample reason to expect the cultural affinities between Israeli and American societies to weaken in due course. The triangular relationship between the American Jewish community, Israel, and the United States is coming apart from all directions: non-Orthodox American Jews feel ever less affinity with Israel as time passes; the convergence of "hard" U.S.-Israeli strategic interests after the Cold War is diminished (of which more below); and as American demography becomes less Protestant and less "white," American society's traditional "soft" and very deep-seated Judeophilia will ebb, surely affecting the general view of Middle Eastern struggles in a way that does not bode well for Israel.²

That said, there is not yet much of a sign of any parting of the ways. The polls show wide sympathy for Israel, and not much change in that regard in recent years. Ironically, the demographic catastrophe besetting American Jewry via intermarriage and assimilation has the side effect of creating more Jewish relatives in more non-Jewish American families than ever before. Otherwise, the positive images, mutually held and intertwined, concerning democracy, ingenuity, progress, and the Abrahamic heritage still glow, whatever their blurred bases in reality.

America and Israel are also in truth both covenantal *peoples*, not narrow bloodline ethnicity-based *nations* in the strict sense of the term. We are therefore both more comfortable with abstractions and aspirational politics than are most bodies politic; and that, apparently, still helps to bind the two societies together, at least for the time being, despite the superficial dyspepsia lately generated by Messrs. Obama and Netanyahu. In other words, if one likes a metaphor, while the weather is decidedly stormy, the sky is not in fact falling—not yet anyway.

HOW MUCH DOES IT MATTER?

So what does any of this matter? The short answer is that, despite its current confabulation of telegenic crises, the Middle East will come to matter less to the United States strategically over time, and the U.S.-Israeli relationship will come to matter less within the constellation of U.S. Middle Eastern interests than it does today. Alas, a short answer is not always the best answer, even in these excessively peripatetic times. So allow me to peel back the fingers of the fist I have just thrown at you.

² For a fuller argument, see my (unfortunately titled) "The Triangle Connecting the U.S., Israel, and American Jewry May Be Coming Apart," *Tablet*, November 5, 2013.

Of course, a “pivot” speech or two does not a strategic readjustment make. Even if, as the Obama Administration contends, the United States is “overinvested” in the Middle East, it obviously doesn’t mean that the U.S. government can just turn on a dime, sell its shares to the Chinese or to Barnum & Bailey Circus and just “do Asia” like Washington consultants “do lunch.” It doesn’t work that way. Heaven knows the President would like to disinvest in the region far more rapidly than he has been able to do so, but the truth is that thanks to several unanticipated developments he simply has not been able to do so. There are U.S. troops again in Iraq, and just today there is news that the President is considering slowing, again, the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan. He has got to loathe both developments, but running the foreign and national security policy of the country responsibly is not like buying and selling stocks.

That said, longer-term trends point to gradual U.S. disinvestment. First, Asia and Europe, but also Latin America, is where the money, the human capital, and the largest prospective trade relationships are. The Arab world and its Muslim periphery have selected commodity riches, but not real earned wealth. This is reflected in the fact that whether one measures technological innovation, patents, books published, medical advances, education levels, female literacy trends, or a host of other standard development indices, the Muslim MENA region is near the bottom of the global heap. The area is important not for its positive contributions to a globalized world, but because of its negative potential to pull the tent down on everyone.

Second, and not unrelated, the level of sheer dysfunction that is galloping in parallel with the decay of state-level institutions—with a few noteworthy exceptions, as with the Kurds—puts most of the region into the “too hard” box. We cannot fix this place. No outsider can. The peoples who live there have to do it for themselves, and they probably will; but it may take a long time for that to happen, if it happens at all. Americans are not a patient people. As long as we can reasonably insulate ourselves from the local mayhem, we are bound to lose interest in these places.

Third, we will be able to afford that disinterest because global energy production and consumption patterns are changing and, by historical standards, they are changing fast. Oil and gas will remain important for a long time, and Mideastern supplies will remain important, too—but gradually less so. That perception will reinforce the foregoing reasons for the U.S. government to keep a maximally feasible distance from the region.

Fourth, other major powers will gain more efficacy and interest there. That is likely to include China and India (if they do not implode), but also Russia and, if it can ever get its act together, the European Union. Hence, the U.S. government will not have to supply common security goods, in the form of suppressing security competitions, all on its own. Others will be able to help, and if they are not as disinterested as the United States has usually been in that role, that really amounts to someone else’s problem.

As the Middle East becomes less important within the overall balance of U.S. interests, Israel will become less central too. This is because the United States will likely attempt to do less that is positive in the region, and it will not so much be able to use Israeli help in preventing the negative. Not only can the United States not fix this region, but Israel, with massively less political entrée to the Arab world than the United States, certainly will not be able to do so. Boosters of the relationship love to cite intelligence and military-innovation cooperation, and prepositioning and porting facilities among other commonly checked boxes, to maximize the perception of how much Israel contributes to U.S. security. And these points are not false. But the truth is that in all the relevant spark points of recent crises, Israel has not been able to make a significant contribution; most often it has been a bystander or a mild complication to U.S. aims. In recent weeks, for example, Israel has been a far less useful asset in fighting the Islamic State than far less militarily formidable countries like Jordan and the UAE. That is not likely to change.

Another truth is that even during the Cold War, and even at the height of U.S.-Israeli amity, the basic interests of the two states overlapped only partially. The special relationship notwithstanding, the United States and Israel were not and still are not formal allies—and there is a good reason for that: They did not share a principal adversary then, and they do not share one today. The Soviet Union was the principal U.S. Cold War adversary; but the Arab states were Israel’s principal collective adversary. The end of the Cold War and U.S.-brokered and supported peace agreements between Israel and two key Arab neighbors lessened the overlap further. This diminution was of course a consequence of strategic success, not failure; but so it goes.³

If the Cold War was a big deal—and it was—then it follows that the end of the Cold War also had to be a big deal. Strategic interests and alignments would have to change, and only the amnesic, the dull, or the delusional could possibly think

³ I made these basic points going on twenty years ago; see my “U.S.-Israeli Relations after the Cold War,” *Orbis* (Fall 1996).

otherwise. So Israel matters less to the United States since the Cold War because its assets no longer blunt or foil Soviet gambits in the region, and its utility in managing the mess that the region has since become is close to nil. It's not true that the main reason Islamist fanatics want to harm the United States and U.S. interests is U.S. support for Israel, but Israel's mere existence as a successful state and vigorous society, as well as its relationship with the United States, supplies fuel for the reproachful, addled, conspiratorial minds that so abundantly populate the region.

On the other hand, with Israel's conventional security well within its own grasp, it arguably now needs the United States more than before to deal with unconventional threats—terrorist stilettoes that sneak in below the wire and especially missiles from afar that fly over it. These are growing security problems that Israel cannot readily handle without help. In that mounting imbalance of shifting needs we have the makings of a tender, if not difficult, future relationship.

Israel will become still less important to U.S. policy particularly if the Arab-Israeli conflict, including its Palestinian aspect, eventually falls to amelioration; and if other potential existential threats to Israel—namely, Iranian hegemonist pretensions—are managed astutely and resolutely. It is easy to be pessimistic about all this, but pessimism is sometimes only a synonym for either fatalism or a lack of imagination. As to the former, remember that the idea of peace between Israel and Egypt, and Israel and Jordan, once looked equally as far-fetched. A settlement is possible, and indeed is likely—it is simply not possible yet to know when.

As for keeping Iran cut down to size, far more difficult challenges have been met and surmounted, one way or another. President Obama has not taken force off the table if diplomacy fails, and on February 9 he said that should Iran lack “the political will and the desire to get a deal done,” then U.S. “options are narrow and they're not attractive”—a clear allusion to the use of force against a state that, after all, is not ten cubits tall. No one should desire a use of force in this case, and like all wars, unanticipated side effects are inevitable. It is a bad option redeemed only by the reality that all the other options are worse.

So do not despair. If you must say “gevult” anyway, try to keep it to a whisper. It has been known to be contagious.

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