

The Real Problem in U.S.–Israeli Relations

Of all the foreign relationships of the United States, perhaps none is as closely watched and incessantly scrutinized as its relationship with Israel. Like a couple in counseling, U.S.–Israeli relations are the subject of endless analysis. Both supporters and critics are forever on the lookout for the slightest signs of tension or unease, with the former anguishing over them, and the latter celebrating. While there was little to pay attention to during the years of the Bush administration, given its tight and largely uncritical embrace of Israel, the tenure of the Obama administration has provided ample opportunities for U.S.–Israel watchers to speculate on the troubles between Washington and Benjamin Netanyahu’s government. By now, the nature of this debate is entirely predictable—on one side are those who decry President Obama’s alleged failure to resolutely support Israel,¹ and on the other are those who defend the president’s pro-Israeli record.²

Both sides, however, are focusing on the wrong issue. The real debate is not over whether Obama is pro-Israel enough. The real debate we should be having is: how much do U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East really overlap today? Put simply, the fundamental problem in U.S.–Israeli relations is not a matter of *individuals*, however important they may be, but increasingly divergent *interests*.

The “Blame Obama First” Crowd

To many Israelis, and Israeli supporters in the United States, the reason for the tensions between the United States and Israel in recent years is simple:

Dov Waxman is an associate professor of political science at Baruch College and the Graduate Center of the City University of New York (CUNY). He is the author of *The Pursuit of Peace and the Crisis of Israeli Identity: Defending / Defining the Nation* (Palgrave Macmillan, 2006), and co-author of *Israel’s Palestinians: The Conflict Within* (Cambridge University Press, 2011).

Copyright © 2012 Center for Strategic and International Studies
The Washington Quarterly • 35:2 pp. 71–87
<http://dx.doi.org/10.1080/0163660X.2012.666172>

How much do U.S. and Israeli interests in the Middle East really overlap today?

President Obama is not really pro-Israel—or at least not in the way that right-wing, hawkish Israeli and American Jews, and most Republicans, understand the term. For them, being “pro-Israel” means providing uncritical support for Israeli governments. It certainly doesn’t mean lecturing Israel on what’s best for it, or applying any kind of pressure on it—both of which President Obama has done. By this narrow definition, Obama is certainly not “pro-Israel,” but then neither are many American Jews, nor even Israelis for that matter, who also don’t blindly support the Netanyahu government.

But it is not only right-wing Israeli and American Jews who question Obama’s pro-Israel credentials. There is a widespread sentiment within Israel and the American Jewish community that President Obama is not emotionally or instinctively pro-Israel in the way that his recent predecessors have been (notably, presidents George W. Bush and Bill Clinton). While Obama is credited with helping Israel on occasion (at the United Nations for instance,³ or when the Israeli embassy in Cairo was under siege), he is not regarded as a “true friend” of the country. However baseless this belief may be, it has endured despite the best efforts of President Obama and his supporters to dispel it. Indeed, within parts of the American Jewish community, it has become something of a cliché to say that Obama does not have a feeling in his “kishkes” (meaning “guts” in Yiddish) for Israel.⁴

The persistence of the belief that Obama is not sincerely pro-Israel is also, it must be noted, a result of the constant efforts of Republicans to woo Jewish voters and donors. There is nothing new about this attempt by Republicans, but with Obama in office it has gained new momentum and hope. Republicans appear to be convinced that this time, unlike all previous instances when the great Jewish defection from the Democratic Party was supposed to occur, large numbers of Jewish voters will really abandon their traditional Democratic affiliation and vote for a Republican presidential candidate. Although this scenario remains highly unlikely (notwithstanding last year’s upset Republican win in New York’s heavily Jewish 9th congressional district—Anthony Weiner’s former seat),⁵ it entices Republicans who hope to make Obama’s stance on Israel a partisan “wedge issue” in 2012. Thus, the incessant criticisms of Obama’s attitude toward Israel by Republican politicians and commentators should really be seen as electioneering, not objective analysis.

Not only is much of the criticism of Obama’s approach to the U.S. relationship with Israel tendentious (and quite possible disingenuous), it is also highly selective. The assertion that Obama has “thrown Israel under the bus” (in Mitt Romney’s words) is belied by the fact that U.S.–Israeli defense ties have actually increased during the Obama administration.⁶ This is not to say that Obama’s handling of relations with Israel has been flawless by any means. The president and others in his administration have undoubtedly made numerous tactical mistakes, some of which have been very costly. Most egregiously, Obama has not visited Israel or directly spoken to the Israeli public, although he has addressed the Muslim and Arab publics in Ankara in April 2009, Cairo in June 2009, and at the State Department in May 2010. But while the administration has been guilty of mishandling the relationship at times, it cannot fairly be accused of reducing U.S. support for Israel, as many of its critics charge.

If President Obama, therefore, is not to blame for the recurrent U.S.–Israeli tensions that have arisen during his term, who or what is? Some analysts have suggested that the trouble lies in a clash between two very different leaders—Obama and Netanyahu.⁷ Politically, they come from different camps—Obama is a liberal, Netanyahu a conservative—and personally they don’t seem to like or trust each other very much.⁸ The lack of personal warmth between them has been on full display in their White House meetings, most notoriously in May 2011 when Netanyahu publicly lectured a stern-faced Obama in front of the press, after the president stated in a speech at the State Department the day before that the borders of a future Palestinian state should be based upon the 1967 “Green Line” with mutually agreed land swaps.

Although the personal chemistry of leaders can certainly make a difference in interstate relationships—think of the close relationship between President George W. Bush and British Prime Minister Tony Blair, for example—it does not fully account for the tensions in U.S.–Israeli relations during the Obama administration. After all, these tensions are not just limited to Obama and Netanyahu. They are more widespread and deeply rooted. They stem from more than merely a personality clash between the two leaders. At the root of the tensions are differing strategic perspectives. Only by recognizing this can we really understand the problem in U.S.–Israeli relations today.

At the root of today’s tensions are increasingly differing strategic perspectives.

Common Interests, Divergent Strategic Perspectives

Over a century ago, British Prime Minister Lord Palmerton famously stated that, “Nations have no permanent friends or allies, they only have permanent interests,” and ever since the expression has become one of the guiding dictums of a Realist approach to foreign affairs. When it comes to discussing U.S.–Israeli relations, however, there is a tendency to ignore this hard truth. Instead, both American and Israeli officials tirelessly insist that, as President Obama put it in his address to the American Israeli Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) conference on May 22, 2011: “The bonds between the United States and Israel are unbreakable.”⁹ While these words may be comforting to supporters of the informal alliance between the two, they evade the fundamental reality that both states are guided by their perceived national interests, and it is these interests, not their mutual affection, that will ultimately determine the nature of their relationship. The more these interests are perceived to align, the better this relationship will be.

The two countries also don't see eye-to-eye on how to achieve the things they both want.

To be sure, the United States and Israel continue to share many common interests in the Middle East. They both oppose Iran's nuclear program and want to weaken Tehran's regional influence; they both want to counter the proliferation of ballistic missiles and weapons of mass destruction in the region; they both want to stop Islamist-inspired terrorism (whether by al-Qaeda, Hamas, Hezbollah, or other Islamist and jihadist groups); and they both want to

support pro-Western regimes, such as Jordan's, and maintain some kind of stability in the region. In principle, both also want a peaceful resolution of the Arab–Israeli conflict, involving “two states for two peoples” (i.e., a Jewish state and a Palestinian state) and “normalization” between the Arab world and Israel.

On paper, or in speeches then, everything looks good. The challenge, however, comes when translating these broad goals into actual policies and deciding which to prioritize. All too often, the United States and Israel have different priorities and favor different strategies. In other words, it is not so much that the two countries really want different things; it is that they don't see eye-to-eye on how to achieve the things they both want. As CSIS analyst Haim Malka succinctly put it in a recent report on the future of the U.S.–Israeli alliance: “Increasingly U.S. and Israeli responses to their common challenges and threats differ significantly.”¹⁰

To make matters even more difficult, these different American and Israeli responses to the challenges they face are increasingly perceived on both sides as

harmful to their own interests. While U.S. officials complain that Israel is not sufficiently attentive to U.S. interests and that its actions are sometimes detrimental to them, Israelis criticize what they regard as American naiveté in Middle Eastern diplomacy and its damaging consequences for Israel. In short, both sides believe that the policies of the other are undermining their national interests.¹¹ Given this, it is hardly surprising that there is tension in the current U.S.–Israeli relationship.

Both sides believe that the policies of the other are undermining their national interests.

Broadly speaking, the Netanyahu government in Israel perceives the current U.S. strategy in the Middle East as timid and shortsighted. They see it as signaling weakness to regional adversaries (notably Iran), lacking commitment to regional allies (such as Israel and Saudi Arabia), and opening up a potential power vacuum that could be exploited by outside powers (particularly Russia and China). All of this is bad for Israel. Conversely, in the eyes of the Obama administration, Israel currently has no coherent strategy at all. They see the strategy as appearing to be stuck somewhere between denial and defiance—denial about the long-term trends that will eventually turn the country into an undemocratic state, and defiance of any pressure exerted upon it, even when well-intentioned. As Israel's closest if not only ally, this is also bad for the United States as it has to pay a diplomatic price for Israeli stubbornness.

Along with these general perceptions on both sides, there are three main issues about which the United States and Israel have divergent strategic perspectives, and which have been the main source of U.S.–Israeli tensions in recent years: 1) the Israeli–Palestinian conflict; 2) the Iranian nuclear program; and 3) the Arab Spring. At the heart of these disputes have been basic disagreements between the two countries concerning how they should pursue their goals, how important these goals are, and what goals they should even be pursuing.

Different Strategies: The Israeli–Palestinian Conflict

While the United States and Israel agree on many things about the Israeli–Palestinian conflict—the desired outcome; the need for direct, bilateral negotiations between the two parties in order to resolve the dispute; and the unacceptability of Hamas as a negotiating partner—there are still some major points of disagreement between them. The most obvious concerns Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem—a subject of longstanding disagreement between Israeli and U.S. governments. Every previous U.S. administration has opposed Israeli settlement construction (some more vociferously than others, particularly the administration of

The two countries differ on how to prioritize the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and Iran.

George H.W. Bush), and every Israeli government has balked at stopping this construction (although some have slowed it down, while others have speeded it up).

There is, therefore, nothing new about the Obama administration's repeated condemnations of settlement building by the Netanyahu government, except that it has been more vocal and unambiguous about it (recall the outrage expressed by administration officials when Israel

announced plans to build new housing units for Jews in East Jerusalem while Vice President Joe Biden was visiting the country in March 2010). In the words of Rahm Emanuel, Obama's former chief of staff: "We were enunciating twenty-plus years of U.S. policy. The difference was we weren't just lip-synching it."¹²

Where the Obama administration has differed from its predecessors in its approach is in the importance it has placed on the issue. This is not because of any lack of pro-Israel sentiment on the part of President Obama or his deputies, but because the Obama administration, along with many experts inside and outside the U.S. government, recognizes that settlement building is a critical issue and has a major impact on the Israeli–Palestinian peace process. Instead of regarding the continued expansion of Israeli settlements as merely a nuisance, the United States has come to understand the importance of the issue for Palestinians and accept that it is a major impediment to progress in the peace process.¹³ Although in the past, the Palestinians were willing to negotiate with Israel while Israeli settlement building continued, they have become less willing to do so as they see the expansion of Israeli settlements as gradually eating away the land available for a future Palestinian state. Thus, as the Palestinians have become more steadfast in their opposition to Israeli settlement construction, the Obama administration has, in turn, sought to apply greater pressure on Israel to stop its settlement activities. This is why soon after coming into office the Obama administration demanded that Israel freeze settlement construction. As Professor Shai Feldman explained:

Observing, accurately, that the Palestinian side had no trust in Israel's new Likud-led Israeli government, the Obama administration assessed that a dramatic step needed to be taken to build such trust and thereby improve the environment for the proposed talks. Since the epicenter of the Palestinians' distrust of Israel was the latter's ongoing expansion of the settlement project—one that the Palestinians saw as inconsistent with negotiating the end of Israel's occupation of Palestinian lands—it was not unreasonable for the U.S. to push for a freeze on settlement activity.¹⁴

Whereas the Obama administration believes that a cessation of Israeli settlement building would increase the chances for peace process success, the Netanyahu government believes that settlement construction basically makes no difference to Israeli–Palestinian negotiations. It contends that, in the past, peace negotiations took place and made progress while Israeli settlements continued to expand. As far as it is concerned, the Palestinian insistence on a complete Israeli settlement freeze is just a smokescreen designed to enable it to avoid entering into substantive negotiations with Israel. What is at issue, then, is how much settlement building really matters, practically and symbolically, to the prospects for Israeli–Palestinian peace.

While the bilateral disagreement over continued Israeli settlement building has received a lot of media attention, far less has been given to a much more important and fundamental disagreement: the role that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict plays in the wider political dynamics of the Middle East. Does the conflict radicalize Arab and Muslim public opinion? Does it make it harder for moderate regimes in the region to support pro-Western policies? Does it allow Iran to exploit the issue for its own regional ambitions? To many within the U.S. foreign policy and national security establishment, the answer to all these questions is an unequivocal “yes.”¹⁵ The belief in what is termed “linkage” between the Arab–Israeli conflict and other issues of U.S. concern in the Middle East is now widely held by current and former U.S. officials (both Democrat and Republican), as well as most Middle East experts.

“Linkage” does not, as it is sometimes caricatured, mean that Arab–Israeli peace is the antidote to all regional ills. It simply means that it would help the United States deal with the region’s other problems—for instance, facilitating containment of Iran since it would weaken Iran’s proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas, while making it easier to mobilize the Sunni Arab world against Iran—and contribute to a better, less toxic atmosphere in the region. There is a growing consensus in the United States, especially inside the Beltway, that the Israeli–Palestinian conflict harms U.S. interests in the Middle East, even if uttering it aloud is still considered politically risky for elected officials. This consensus view was clearly voiced by General David Petraeus, then head of U.S. Central Command (now director of the CIA), in his March 2010 testimony to the Senate Armed Services Committee when he stated that:

the [Israeli–Palestinian] conflict foment anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the [area of responsibility] and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas.¹⁶

The Obama administration shares this view and believes that resolving the Israeli–Palestinian conflict would make a major contribution to regional stability. Other U.S. administrations have also believed this, but none has been as open and explicit in expressing it. Members of the Obama administration have just said publicly what previous administrations have only discussed privately. Even as a candidate for president, Obama openly talked about the linkage between the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and other U.S. interests in the Middle East, stating in an interview: “this constant sore [the Israeli–Palestinian conflict] does infect all of our foreign policy. The lack of a resolution to this problem provides an excuse for anti-American militant jihadists to engage in inexcusable actions, and so we have a national-security interest in solving this. . . .”¹⁷ He has not changed his tune since becoming president, declaring on one occasion, for example, that: “the absence of peace between Palestinians and Israelis is an impediment to a whole host of other areas of increased cooperation and more stable security for people in the region, as well as the United States.”¹⁸ Although Obama may well see a Palestinian state as a moral right, it also, perhaps first and foremost, is a strategic necessity for the United States as far as he is concerned.

Although Israel also supports the establishment of a Palestinian state,¹⁹ at least in theory, it is much less eager to see one emerge any time soon. Prime Minister Netanyahu may have officially endorsed the two-state solution (in his much-publicized speech at Bar-Ilan University on June 14, 2009),²⁰ but his support for it is half-hearted at best.²¹ He has done little or nothing to promote it; he is certainly in no rush to bring it about. Netanyahu seems to believe that the establishment of a Palestinian state, while maybe in Israel’s long-term interest, is not in Israel’s short-term interest given the risk that such a state could come under Hamas’, and by extension Iran’s, control.²² For him, and many others in Israel’s military and security establishment, allowing for the establishment of a Palestinian state is a dangerous gamble, and Netanyahu’s instinct is to play it safe and play for time. This Israeli policy of procrastination is clearly causing mounting frustration within the Obama administration.²³

Even if Israel were willing to move more quickly and boldly toward the two-state solution, as the Obama administration urges, it does not accept the American view that a resolution of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict would have a major positive impact upon the wider Middle East. Indeed, many Israelis think that their conflict with the Palestinians is really a consequence of the region’s problems, not a cause of them. Israelis also resent the notion of linkage in so far as they suspect that it implies that Israel is somehow at least partly responsible for the problems of the Middle East, and thus indirectly for America’s problems in the region too.

The more U.S. officials become convinced that there is indeed a linkage between ending the Arab–Israeli conflict and securing other U.S. national interests in the Middle East (and even beyond the region), the harder they will push for a resolution of the conflict, even if this means pressuring Israel, and the more Israeli officials will push back and resist. Inevitably, this is a recipe for serious tension in U.S.–Israeli relations no matter who is in office.

Different Priorities: The Iranian Nuclear Program

On two key issues in the Middle East, the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the Iranian nuclear program, both the United States and Israel want the same things—a two-state solution and a termination of Iran’s nuclear activities. Where they crucially differ, however, is on how they prioritize these issues. Israel’s primary concern is the threat from Iran, not its conflict with the Palestinians (which is manageable as far as many Israelis are concerned). For the United States, by contrast, Iran’s nuclear program, although a major challenge, is not as great a threat as it is to Israel. Hence, stopping it is not quite as urgent or all-important.

For Israelis, Iran has become their bogeyman. It is almost universally seen as the country’s greatest enemy and biggest threat. Needless to say, such a perception is not unfounded given Iran’s support for Hamas and Hezbollah, its ballistic missile capability, and its ongoing nuclear program—the purpose of which, it is assumed, is attaining nuclear weapons. As public anxiety over the threat has mounted in Israel in recent years—stoked in part by apocalyptic warnings by leading Israeli politicians (often invoking the Holocaust and equating Iran with Nazi Germany and President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad with Adolf Hitler²⁴)—the perceived threat of Iran has come to eclipse all other Israeli national security concerns including the Arab–Israeli conflict. The popular consensus is that the advent of a nuclear Iran would pose an unprecedented, even existential threat to the Jewish state.²⁵ Given this, most Israelis support a unilateral Israeli military strike against Iran’s nuclear installations if sanctions and diplomacy fail to persuade the Iranians to stop their nuclear enrichment program, while they are almost evenly divided over whether Israel should launch an immediate attack against Iran.²⁶

No matter how frequently and emphatically Obama administration officials vow to prevent Iran from attaining nuclear weapons, and imply they might be willing to use military force if necessary, the fact remains that the United States is not as threatened or worried about the Iranian nuclear program as Israel is. This fact is simply the result of geography—the United States is much farther away from Iran than Israel and much bigger than Israel. Iranian missiles cannot reach the United States, and even if they eventually could, they cannot destroy it. The United States and Israel, therefore, have fundamentally different threat

Israel and the United States have had fundamentally different responses to the Arab Spring.

perceptions of Iran. For the United States, it is undoubtedly a strategic nightmare—possibly spurring regional nuclear proliferation and undermining global efforts to promote nonproliferation—but it is not even a remote threat to America’s existence, as it is to Israel’s. The United States could live with a nuclear Iran and simply seek to contain it (as it did with the Soviet Union during the Cold War); Israel can’t, or

at least it doesn’t seem to think it can. As Israel’s Deputy Prime Minister Silvan Shalom recently put it: “Israel cannot live with the idea that lunatics like the Iranian regime will be the one that can take a decision if they would like to destroy the state of Israel or not.”²⁷

What really separates Israel from the United States when it comes to Iran’s nuclear program, therefore, is not their different intelligence estimates of how close Iran actually is to developing nuclear weapons or what their timetables and “red lines” are for deciding when to militarily attack Iran’s nuclear facilities, as media reports often suggest,²⁸ but their assessments of whether a military strike is in fact really necessary and worthwhile. The costs and benefits of overt military action against Iran are quite different for the United States and Israel. Faced with a perceived existential threat, a preemptive military strike, no matter how risky and costly, might ultimately be worth taking for Israel. For the United States, it is almost certainly not (a covert military campaign is a different matter).²⁹ This explains the concern in Washington that Israel might decide to launch an attack against Iran without seeking American permission first, and the Obama administration’s constant effort to reassure Israel of the U.S. commitment to its security (it would also explain why President George W. Bush, despite his much-touted support for Israel, refused to give Israel the green light to carry out an attack against Iran’s nuclear facilities when then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert allegedly asked for permission back in 2008³⁰).

American assurances, however, do little to assuage Israeli fears about Iran and anxiety that the United States may eventually, albeit reluctantly, accept a nuclear Iran rather than risk another Middle Eastern war. This all adds up to a lingering Israeli suspicion that the United States will not want to attack Iran’s nuclear facilities and won’t allow Israel to either, and a lingering American worry that Israel will one day attack Iran itself without forewarning the United States—another recipe for U.S.–Israeli tension.

Different Goals: The Arab Spring

Throughout President Obama’s term, the underlying and long-running disagreements over the centrality of the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and the

urgency of the Iranian nuclear threat have been behind much of the tension in U.S.–Israeli relations. Then, in 2011, the “Arab Spring” happened. The revolutions and uprisings that rocked the Arab world, overthrew regimes, and redefined Middle East politics have left the United States and Israel cheering for different sides, at least some of the time. After always supporting the same team in the Arab world—pro-Western autocracies (most notably, Hosni Mubarak’s regime in Egypt and the Hashemite monarchy in Jordan)—for the first time, the United States and Israel don’t seem to be rooting for the same people.

Simply put, Israel appears to be rooting for the survival of the ruling Arab autocrats (obviously, because of fear rather than affection), while the United States has tilted in favor of the Arab masses in the streets demanding dignity and change (albeit belatedly, hesitantly, and very selectively). These different Israeli and American responses to the Arab Spring have been most apparent in the case of Egypt, where the Obama administration supported President Mubarak’s exit from power and the democratic transition in the country, while the Netanyahu government openly backed Mubarak and the military council that took his place. But the two countries’ differences have also surfaced in their attitudes to the Syrian uprising, which the United States supports but Israel is deeply ambivalent about (though no fan of Bashar Assad’s regime, Israel fears instability and chaos in Syria).³¹

The Arab Spring, then, has increased the divergence in U.S. and Israeli strategy toward the Middle East. Although the United States and Israel have traditionally both favored and sought to uphold the status quo in the region, this is less the case today, as the Obama administration has supported to varying degrees rebellions across the region from Tunisia in the West to Yemen in the East. Again, similar to the Iranian threat, geographic proximity is a critical factor. For Israelis, the Arab Spring is not a distant event as it is for Americans, but something all around them on, and even spilling over, their borders. The danger of virulently anti-Israeli (and even anti-Semitic) Islamist governments coming to power through democratic elections is real, immediate, and could have catastrophic consequences for Israeli national security, most seriously if a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government in Egypt annuls the Egyptian–Israeli peace treaty.

If the Arab Spring does in fact usher in a more democratic Arab world, Israel stands to lose, at least in the short-term. Since Arab public opinion is staunchly pro-Palestinian and anti-Israeli, empowering it is bound to affect the tenor and conduct of Arab foreign policies toward Israel and the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. The public belligerence and private cooperation which characterized several moderate Arab states’ interactions with Israel over many years will certainly be jeopardized. This does not necessarily mean that Israel will become embroiled in new conflicts with Arab states, but it does make life more difficult

for Israel in the region, at least so long as it maintains its occupation of Palestinian and Arab lands.

Whereas Israel is likely to suffer as a result of more democracy in the Arab world, the United States hopes that it will eventually benefit. Whether or not this hope is unduly optimistic, it has guided the Obama administration's reaction. It apparently believes that if the United States publicly supports freedom and democracy in the Arab world, instead of trying to maintain regional stability and the existing order, it can win popular support among Arabs. While it may not become pro-American, the "Arab street" could at least become less anti-American if the United States is perceived to be "on the right side of history."

Supporting Arab democracy and winning Arab hearts and minds in the process appeals to the deeply held optimism and democratic faith of Americans. Israeli Jews, by contrast, are accustomed to seeing Arabs as implacably hostile to Israel, and political change in Arab and Muslim lands as potentially dangerous to their security—the example of the 1979 Iranian revolution is always in the back of their minds. Thus Americans, and the U.S. government, hope for the victory of democratic forces in the Middle East as the Arab Spring unfolds, while Israelis fear the worst.³²

Even if democratization in the region brings Islamist-backed governments to power—as has already happened in Tunisia, Libya, and, most significantly, Egypt—the United States appears to have to come to terms with this apparently inevitable outcome, while Israel has not. U.S. officials have finally come to recognize that not all Islamist movements are alike and not all are necessarily beyond the pale. Those that are democratically-inclined and willing to respect the rights of women and non-Muslim minorities are worth engaging. In any case, the United States has little choice but to engage with them given their strong domestic support (hence the Obama administration's tentative outreach to the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt, which now dominates the country's newly elected parliament). For Israel, on the other hand, no matter how democratic they may purport to be, Islamists are not to be trusted. They should certainly not be allowed to take power.

Not only do the United States and Israel view the popular Arab revolts that have upended regional order through different lenses, they also regard each other's reaction to these dramatic changes as problematic at best. The Obama administration's support for Arab uprisings, especially in Egypt, is widely seen in Israel as naïve and even a bit reckless.³³ Conversely, inside the Obama administration and among some U.S. commentators, Israel's ostrich-like response elicits frustration and annoyance.³⁴ Here too, these mutual attitudes, and the occasional tensions they arouse, are more a product of divergent U.S. and Israeli national interests than of different personalities at the helm of their governments.

Changing the Conversation to What Matters

The relationship between the United States and Israel has always had its ups and downs, its moments of crisis, and periodic tensions. The last four years, during the tenure of the Obama administration and Netanyahu government, are no exception. Although it may be politically convenient or psychologically comforting for some to lay the blame on President Obama himself or his administration more generally for all the tensions that have emerged, it does not help to understand what has really troubled U.S.–Israeli relations in recent years.

Instead of discussing Obama’s “kishkes,” we should be focusing on U.S. and Israeli interests and asking how much they really overlap in practice. This is *not* the same as asking if Israel is a strategic asset or burden to the United States, as many now do. That is a sterile debate that all too often pits Israel’s advocates against its opponents and ultimately gets us nowhere. Rather than framing the question in terms of whether aligning with Israel helps or hurts the United States, we should examine the policy areas in which they disagree and try to see if these disagreements can be bridged or narrowed. In other words, we should be engaging in a substantive discussion about the perceived interests of the United States and Israel and how to align them more closely, not merely reciting these interests or arguing about whose interests are being undermined by whom.

As two states of very different size in very different areas, and with very different capabilities (one a superpower, the other a regional power), it should be expected that the United States and Israel will not agree on everything and will sometimes have different concerns. The sooner we are able to recognize this fact, the sooner we will be able to have a more productive discussion about U.S.–Israeli relations. Given the tensions that will continue to surface in this relationship, regardless of who gets elected president in November, it is essential that we are able to have this discussion. Without it, misunderstandings and resentments on both sides will steadily accumulate and gradually sour the U.S.–Israeli relationship. For the sake of that relationship, therefore, more honesty and openness are badly needed, and less partisan polemics.

Notes

1. See, for example, Dan Senor, “Why Obama Is Losing the Jewish Vote,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 14, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424053111904353504576568710341742174.html>.
2. For example, Natasha Mozgovaya, “Obama campaign does not shy from his record on Israel,” *Ha’aretz*, September 5, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/blogs/focus-u-s-a/obama-campaign-does-not-shy-from-his-record-on-israel-1.382720>.

3. The Obama administration has repeatedly supported Israel at the United Nations—most notably when it sided with Israel over the Goldstone Report, which accused Israel of committing war crimes in its 2008-2009 Gaza War, when it vetoed a UN Security Council resolution condemning Israel's settlement building in the Occupied Territories, and when it condemned and threatened to veto the Palestinian Authority's application for UN membership.
4. See for example, James D. Besser, "Strategic Ties And Obama's Kishkes," *The Jewish Week*, November 30, 2010, http://www.thejewishweek.com/news/international/strategic_ties_and_obamas_kishkes.
5. On Obama's "Jewish problem" in the 2012 election, see John Heilemann, "The Tsuris," *New York Magazine*, September 18, 2011, <http://nymag.com/news/politics/israel-2011-9/>; and Laura Meckler, "Jewish Donors Warn Obama on Israel," *The Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2011, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703509104576331661918527154.html>.
6. Charles Levinson, "U.S., Israel Build Military Cooperation," *The Wall Street Journal*, August 14, 2010, <http://online.wsj.com/article/SB10001424052748703321004575427272550050504.html>.
7. Aaron David Miller, "Bibi and Barack," *Los Angeles Times*, January 2, 2012, <http://articles.latimes.com/2012/jan/02/opinion/la-oe-miller-bibi-barack-20120102>.
8. President Obama inadvertently indicated his personal dislike of Prime Minister Netanyahu when a private conversation between him and French President Nicolas Sarkozy at a G-20 summit in November 2011 was picked up on a microphone and overheard by reporters. See "Sarkozy calls Netanyahu 'liar' in remarks to Obama," *The Financial Times*, November 8, 2011, <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/3af99210-0a2d-11e1-85ca-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1hIcXZaCs>.
9. "Remarks by the President at the AIPAC Policy Conference 2011," The White House, May 22, 2011, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/22/remarks-president-aipac-policy-conference-2011>.
10. Haim Malka, *Crossroads: The Future of the U.S.-Israel Strategic Partnership* (Washington, D.C.: Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2011), p. 56, http://csis.org/files/publication/110908_Malka_CrossroadsUSIsrael_Web.pdf.
11. *Ibid.*, p. XVIII.
12. Quoted in Heilemann, "The Tsuris."
13. President Obama clearly expressed this view in an interview with Fox News: "Additional settlement building does not contribute to Israel's security. I think it makes it harder for them to make peace with their neighbours...it embitters the Palestinians in a way that could end up being very dangerous." Quoted in "Israel defies US on settlements," *The Financial Times*, November 18, 2009, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/46b47ff0-d39f-11de-8caf-00144feabdc0.html#axzz1hIcXZaCs>.
14. Shai Feldman, "Beyond September: Lessons from Failed Mideast Diplomacy," *Middle East Brief* no. 54, Crown Center for Middle East Studies, August 2011, <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/MEB54.pdf>.
15. Malka, *Crossroads*, p. 66.
16. "Statement of General David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army Commander, U.S. Central Command, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on the posture of U.S. Central Command," March 16, 2010, <http://armed-services.senate.gov/statemnt/2010/03%20March/Petraeus%2003-16-10.pdf>.
17. Quoted in Jeffrey Goldberg, "Obama on Zionism and Hamas," *The Atlantic*, May 12, 2008, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2008/05/obama-on-zionism-and-hamas/8318/>.

18. “Remarks by President Obama and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Press Availability,” The White House, May 28, 2009, <http://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/remarks-president-obama-and-president-abbas-palestinian-authority-press-availabilit>.
19. The official platform of the Likud Party (the dominant party in Israel’s current coalition government), however, still opposes the establishment of a Palestinian state. See http://www.knesset.gov.il/elections/knesset15/elikud_m.htm.
20. See “Full text of Netanyahu’s foreign policy speech at Bar Ilan,” *Ha’aretz*, June 14, 2009, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/full-text-of-netanyahu-s-foreign-policy-speech-at-bar-ilan-1.277922>.
21. Moreover, the kind of truncated Palestinian state that Netanyahu envisages is one with limited sovereignty and probably covering only the Gaza Strip and about 50–60 percent of the West Bank—a far cry from what Palestinians are seeking.
22. Most Israeli Jews share this view. In a survey taken in September 2011, 54 percent of Israeli Jews believed that it was not in Israel’s interest for a Palestinian state to be immediately established. “The Peace Index: September 2011,” The Israel Democracy Institute, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num = 232&monthname = September>.
23. For an expression of this, see Thom Shanker, “Defense Chief Says Israel Must Mend Arab Ties,” *The New York Times*, December 2, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/12/03/world/middleeast/panetta-says-israel-must-mend-ties-with-arab-neighbors.html>.
24. In a 2006 speech, before he became prime minister for the second time, Netanyahu drew a direct analogy between Iran and Nazi Germany, repeatedly declaring: “It’s 1938 and Iran is Germany. And Iran is racing to arm itself with atomic bombs.” He also claimed that Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad “is preparing another Holocaust for the Jewish state.” See Peter Hirschberg, “Netanyahu: It’s 1938 and Iran is Germany; Ahmadinejad is preparing another Holocaust,” *Ha’aretz*, November 14, 2006, <http://www.haaretz.com/news/netanyahu-it-s-1938-and-iran-is-germany-ahmadinejad-is-preparing-another-holocaust-1.205137>. More recently, speaking at a ceremony held at Yad Vashem, Israel’s Holocaust museum and memorial, in January 2011, Netanyahu stated: “we, the Jewish people, cannot ignore the lessons learned from the Holocaust as they apply to the present day. New oppressors deny the Holocaust as they call for our destruction. Iran and its pawns, Hezbollah and Hamas, call for the annihilation of the Jewish State and openly act to that end. . .Iran is even arming itself with nuclear weapons to realize that goal, and until now the world has not stopped it. The threat to our existence, to our future, is not theoretical.” See “PM Netanyahu’s Address at the National Ceremony Opening the Holocaust and Heroism Remembrance Day at Yad Vashem,” January 5, 2011, <http://www.pmo.gov.il/PMOEng/Communication/PMSpeaks/speechshoa010511.htm>.
25. In a survey taken in February 2007, 82 percent of Israeli Jews said that a nuclear-armed Iran would constitute an existential danger to Israel. See “The Peace Index: February 2007,” The Israel Democracy Institute, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num = 5&monthname = February>. There is, however, some disagreement within the Israeli political and security establishment over whether a nuclear-armed Iran would actually pose an existential threat to Israel. For instance, Tamir Pardo, the head of Israel’s Mossad intelligence agency, has recently suggested otherwise. See Barak Ravid, “Mossad chief: Nuclear Iran not necessarily existential threat to Israel,” *Ha’aretz*, December 29, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/mossad-chief-nuclear-iran-not-necessarily-existential-threat-to-israel-1.404227>; see also Dalia Dassa Kay, “Do

- Israelis Really Want to Bomb Iran?" *Foreign Policy.com*, January 11, 2012, http://mideast.foreignpolicy.com/posts/2012/01/12/do_israelis_really_want_to_bomb_iran.
26. In a survey taken in March 2009, 54 percent of the Israeli public wanted Israel to bomb Iranian nuclear sites if the international community failed to stop Iran from developing nuclear weapons. See <http://truman.huji.ac.il/poll-view.asp?id=257>. More recently, in a November 2011 poll, 41 percent of Israelis supported an immediate strike against Iran's nuclear facilities, and 39 percent opposed it. See "Haaretz poll: Israelis evenly split over attacking Iran," *Ha'aretz*, November 3, 2011, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/haaretz-poll-israelis-evenly-split-over-attacking-iran-1.393378>.
 27. James Reynolds, "Israel's fears of a nuclear Iran," January 20, 2012, *BBC News*, <http://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-16655995>.
 28. See, for example, Avi Issacharoff and Amos Harel, "Israel and U.S. at odds over timetables and red lines for Iran," *Ha'aretz*, January 15, 2012, <http://www.haaretz.com/print-edition/news/israel-and-u-s-at-odds-over-timetables-and-red-lines-for-iran-1.407346>.
 29. The United States and Israel are widely suspected to be engaged already, individually or jointly, in a covert military and intelligence campaign to sabotage and disrupt Iran's nuclear program. On America's "secret war" against Iran, see David E. Sanger, "America's Deadly Dynamics With Iran," *The New York Times*, November 5, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/06/sunday-review/the-secret-war-with-iran.html?page-wanted=all>; Eli Lake, "Operation Sabotage," *The New Republic*, July 14, 2010, <http://www.tnr.com/article/world/75952/operation-sabotage>; and Seymour Hersh, "Preparing the Battlefield," *The New Yorker*, July 7, 2008, http://www.newyorker.com/reporting/2008/07/07/080707fa_fact_hersh. On Israel's see, Ronen Bergman, *The Secret War with Iran* (Free Press, 2011).
 30. Jonathan Steele, "Israel asked US for green light to bomb nuclear sites in Iran," *The Guardian*, September 25, 2008, <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2008/sep/25/iran.israel-and-the-palestinians1>. The fact that the Bush administration did not supply Israel with "bunker-busting" bombs, which Israel could have used to attack Iran's nuclear facilities, also suggests that it opposed an Israeli military strike. See Thom Shanker, "U.S. Quietly Supplies Israel With Bunker-Busting Bombs," *The New York Times*, September 23, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/24/world/us-quietly-supplies-israel-with-bunker-busting-bombs.html>.
 31. For a detailed analysis of Israel's view of the Arab Spring, see Daniel Byman, "Israel's Pessimistic View of the Arab Spring," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 3 (Summer 2011), http://twq.com/11summer/docs/11summer_Byman.pdf.
 32. When asked in a November 2011 survey how the changes in the Arab world will affect Israel, 68.5 percent of Israeli Jews said that Israel's strategic situation was worse as a result of events in the Arab world. See "The Peace Index: November 2011," The Israel Democracy Institute, <http://www.peaceindex.org/indexMonthEng.aspx?num=237&monthname=November>.
 33. Some in Israel have even blamed President Obama for Mubarak's downfall, hyperbolically claiming that Obama "lost Egypt." See Amy Teibel, "Barack Obama's Egypt Response Slammed in Israel," *Associated Press*, February 3, 2011, http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2011/02/03/egypt-protests-barack-oba_n_817992.html. More recently, Israel's National Security Council criticized the Obama administration's attitude toward the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt as "naïve," and expressed the hope that Obama would take a "harder stance." See Shlomo Cesana, "National Security

- Council: Obama naive on Muslim Brotherhood,” *Israel Hayom*, January 3, 2012, http://www.israelhayom.com/site/newsletter_article.php?id=2481.
34. See Shanker, “Defense Chief Says Israel Must Mend Arab Ties”; and Thomas L. Friedman, “The Arab Awakening and Israel,” *The New York Times*, November 29, 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/11/30/opinion/israel-and-the-arab-awakening.html>.