THE WASHINGTON INSTITUTE for Near East Policy

PolicyWatch #1642

Biden's Israel Visit and Its Aftermath: The Importance of Maintaining Strategic Direction in U.S. Middle East Policy

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March 15, 2010

In less than forty-eight hours, U.S.-Israel relations went from "unbreakable," according to Vice President Joe Biden, to "perilous," as ascribed to an "unnamed senior U.S. official." This drastic mood swing risks overshadowing the great achievement of the vice president's Middle East trip -- the affirmation for Israelis (as well as those Arabs and Iranians following his words) that the Obama administration is "determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons."

Context

The central purpose of the Biden visit was to cap a months-long "reset" of U.S.-Israel relations within a larger reorientation of U.S. Middle East policy.

When the new administration came to office, its Middle East policy was motivated by three principles:

- that Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking was an urgent priority and that a breakthrough depended in large part on Israel proving its bona fides through full cessation of settlement activity, including in Jerusalem;
- that convincing Iran to change course on its nuclear program was also a high priority and that the best way to accomplish this would be to end Iran's isolation through high-level engagement with Iranian leaders; and
- that the two issues were inherently linked in the sense that breakthrough on the peace process would increase the prospects of success for engagement with Iran.

Over the first several months of the Obama administration, each of these principles was found faulty: In regard to the peace process, Washington overreached in its demand for a halt to Israeli settlements and inadvertently created its own impasse in Israeli-Palestinian diplomacy. In terms of Iran, repeated rebuffs by the Tehran leadership underscored that the real source of the problem was Iran's ambitions, not Iran's isolation. And in reference to linkage, Arab leaders, such as the king of Saudi Arabia, rebuffed U.S. efforts to build a more conducive environment for Arab-Israeli peacemaking while exhorting Washington to be more assertive against Iran, sending a clear message about their own priorities.

In recent months, the administration has toiled hard to repair its earlier errors, adopting a de facto strategy that positions the Iran nuclear issue as the fulcrum of Middle East policy. Part of this effort has been to roll back its maximalist "not one brick in Jerusalem" position on settlements and to shift the focus from a U.S.-Israel clash on peace issues to a U.S.-Israel partnership on strategic issues.

Nevertheless, within that framework it is still important that the administration create a functioning diplomacy between Israelis and Palestinians -- not because serious observers believe a near-term breakthrough is in sight but because an active and ongoing diplomacy denies both critics and naysayers an opportunity to make

mischief. Furthermore, it frees the Administrationadministration to inject international urgency into the Iran issue. Indeed, some argue that the linkage argument is now turned on its head in the sense that real success in the peace process may only be possible once there is success on the Iran issue. Only when the Obama administration has proven its mettle in preventing Iran's march for regional preeminence, it is argued, will Israelis and Palestinians be willing to bet on Washington and take the risks necessary for a real breakthrough in peace negotiations.

In this regard, the U.S. diplomatic team, headed by George Mitchell, the State Department's special envoy for Middle East peace, has shown remarkable persistence in its attempts to convince the Palestinian Authority (PA) to resume peace talks with Israel -- an endeavor that should have required a less-than-herculean effort. After all, one would imagine that Palestinians, eager for statehood, would want talks under almost any conditions. But in the Alice-in-Wonderland world of the Middle East, the reverse has been true. Whereas Washington figured out how to climb down from its insistence on a full settlement freeze as a condition of peace talks, PA president Mahmoud Abbas found the process uncomfortable, particularly given his volte-face, under pressure, on the Palestinian response to the Goldstone report on alleged Gaza "war crimes." In the end, of course, Abbas needs negotiations even more than Israel does; diplomacy is his calling card, without which the Palestinians might as well turn to another leader or, even worse, to the military option of Hamas. Still, Abbas managed to get Washington to work hard to achieve what is manifestly in his interests to do -- that is, talk with Israel, even if through the halfway house of indirect negotiations.

At the same time, it is also true that a quiet revolution has been going on inside Israel on the peace issue. What has been lost amid the histrionics about construction permits in Jerusalem and Israel's habit of delivering concessions to Washington weeks after the Obama administration wanted them is that Binyamin Netanyahu has led the Likud-led government into totally uncharted waters. With his Bar-Ilan speech, he became the third "revisionist" prime minister in a row to adopt the "two states for two peoples" paradigm, effectively consigning Greater Israel advocates to the margins of Israeli politics, where they have no national champion. Moreover, with his decision on a West Bank settlement moratorium, Netanyahu made a commitment that no Israeli prime minister since Oslo -- Rabin, Sharon, Peres, or Barak -- ever made, and in the process tacitly rolled back forty years of Israeli policy that rejected the idea of settlements as an obstacle to peacemaking. The result is that mainstream Israeli debate on the peace process now centers on the fitness of the PA as a negotiating partner and the extent of Israeli territorial demands -- 2 percent of the West Bank? 4 percent? 6 percent? -- and not on the more basic question of a repartition of Palestine that would leave the other side with the vast majority of West Bank territory in an independent and more-or-less sovereign state. Over time, these developments will be recognized as seismic.

The Biden Visit

The vice president's visit to Israel was intended to confirm this "reset" of U.S. Middle East strategy: to affirm publicly the strength of the U.S.-Israel strategic partnership; to inject warmth and "the human touch" in a relationship that, at high levels, seemed cold and distant; to declare, on Middle East soil, the Obama administration's commitment to preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear bomb (thereby silencing the wags who believe there is a slide toward "containment" in the halls of government); and to bless the awkward and hopefully temporary setup of indirect "proximity" talks engineered by Mitchell. Biden was ideal for the task: he has a decades-old friendship with Israel that has not precluded, at times, some very blunt advice to the Israelis.

From the moment of his arrival in Israel, Biden performed like the master politician he is, hitting all the right notes, making all the right statements, saying all the right things. Then came the Shas-controlled Interior Ministry's statement on Jerusalem construction planning. Though the announcement did not violate the moratorium on West Bank construction nor presage any new construction in the near future, Washington was justifiably outraged by the timing, which seemed to have no other aim than to embarrass the vice president. Although the U.S. reaction -- to "condemn" Israeli actions as contrary to the spirit of peacemaking -- used language more appropriate to a massacre than to a bureaucratic statement, it clearly reflected the U.S. team's

deeply felt anger. (By contrast, it is useful to note that this statement was far more forceful than President Obama's "what we can do is bear witness" response to Iran's violent repression of unarmed anti-government street protestors last June.)

Then, two days later, Biden delivered a major speech at Tel Aviv University that was designed to speak directly to the Israeli people. In that speech, Biden's intent was to repair the perception many Israelis have -- justifiably or not -- that Obama's decision to visit Cairo, Riyadh, and Ankara in his first year as president, but not Jerusalem, was based on a calculation that he couldn't both warm ties with Muslims and strengthen them with Israelis. And Biden performed superbly. He delivered an address reminiscent of Bill Clinton that voiced his empathy with Israeli pain and joy; he reminded his audience that his father had taught him that gentiles could be Zionists (a word even many pro-Israel activists have begun to shun these days) and repeatedly cited the Jewish people's historic connection to the land of Israel, thus correcting the regrettable impression left from Obama's Cairo speech that Zionism only began with the Holocaust.

On the substance of policy, he boasted that the Obama administration had "expanded -- not maintained, expanded" cooperation on joint exercises and missile defense and reiterated America's commitment to Israel's qualitative military edge. And he took a jibe at the Walt-Mearsheimer thesis when he said that "American support for Israel is not just an act of friendship; it's an act of fundamental national self-interest on the part of the United States."

That sense of shared interest was affirmed by the critical portion of the speech on Iran. Not only did Biden underscore Washington's realization that Israel has "no greater existential strategic threat" than Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapon, but he stressed that the "acquisition of nuclear weapons by Iran is also a threat to the security -- short-term, mid-term and long-term -- of the United States of America," effectively correcting a statement to the contrary made by Secretary of State Hilary Clinton last month in Qatar. And he said America's strategy for addressing this threat was prevention -- "The United States is determined to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, period" -- thereby rejecting the advice of some "realist" voices advocating a more "sensible" policy of containment.

Biden did not avoid the peace process; on the contrary, he devoted much of his speech to this issue. And, for the most part, it was a strong declaration of U.S.-Israel partnership. The key line is Biden's emphatic statement, to strong applause, that "in my experience, one necessary precondition for progress is that the rest of the world knows ... there is absolutely no space between the United States and Israel when it comes to security, none."

Biden and Clinton on Bibi

On the crisis over the Jerusalem construction planning announcement, Biden explained that the U.S. government viewed it as "undermining the trust required for productive negotiations" and explained that President Obama himself had asked him to "condemn it immediately and unequivocally." Importantly, he then went on to express "appreciation" for the "significant" steps taken by Netanyahu in the intervening two days to prevent the recurrence of such a bureaucratic blunder.

Given Biden's comments, it is not unreasonable for his hosts to believe that the crisis had passed. Indeed, Biden did not say that Israel had violated any agreement with the United States by making its ill-advised Jerusalem construction announcement; he did not suggest that relations were severely damaged by making this announcement, nor did he resurrect the demand for complete cessation of settlement activity, including in Jerusalem, that had bedeviled earlier diplomacy. While Biden did promise that the United States "would hold both sides accountable for any statements or any actions that inflame tensions or prejudice the outcome of talks," he noted that Netanyahu himself said that "all sides need to take action in good faith if peace is to have a chance." By the end of the speech -- and by the end of the visit -- the bitterness that provoked the unusual condemnation of Israel two days earlier seemed to have dissipated.

There are some items to quibble with in Biden's speech. For example, though he said there was "no space" between Washington and Jerusalem on security issues, in reality they have different redlines in respect to the Iran nuclear question. As Biden noted, repeating previous comments by Obama, the U.S. redline is to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons; Israel's redline, as repeatedly noted by Netanyahu and others, is to prevent Iran from achieving a "military nuclear capability" -- a much broader requirement. At some point in the not-too-distant future, this divergence may give rise to practical disagreement between the two sides. If that happens, the potential for a nasty dispute is real.

But the dominant message of the Biden speech and his entire visit was U.S.-Israel amity -- which underscored the cognitive dissonance of Secretary of State Clinton's walk-to-the-woodshed conversation with Netanyahu on Friday and subsequent comments by senior officials on weekend talk shows. In Middle East terms, her rebuke of the Israeli prime minister's insult to the U.S. vice president was reminiscent of the French outrage when the Bey of Algiers smacked the French consul with a flyswatter in 1827, triggering the dispatch of the French navy to invade, occupy, and colonize Algeria. In this case, however, Clinton's implied threat was not invasion, but rupture of relations. She not only took Netanyahu to task for insulting Biden and risking damage to the bilateral relationship, but according to reports she also outlined specific demands within the context of peace negotiations with the Palestinians that the government of Israel needs to implement, lest it find itself friendless.

Here, the Obama administration needs to tread carefully and act wisely or it risks the collapse of its entire "new and improved" Middle East strategy. It is appropriate to ask the Israeli government to take steps to prevent freelancing by individual ministers on matters of national significance -- especially one like Shas interior minister, Eli Yishai, who is supposed to carry broad government responsibility as a deputy prime minister -- and to give additional meaning to Israel's oft-stated commitment to negotiate in good faith. On all these issues, there are reasonable steps the Netanyahu government can take to allay any lingering concerns in Washington about a crisis of confidence.

At the same time, the U.S. administration needs to avoid demands that undermine the very purpose of the Biden visit, that resurrect the overreach of the first six months of the administration, and that threaten the reordered strategic priorities that have been a salutary course correction for Obama administration Middle East policy. It would be shortsighted for the administration to use this episode as an opportunity to reward the Palestinians -- who, after all, have been unenthusiastic about American requests for negotiations for months -- or to accept Palestinian arguments that "proximity talks," rather than direct negotiations, are an appropriate forum for substantive give-and-take. And it would be an analytical blunder for the administration to believe that this incident is an opportunity that could precipitate Netanyahu's political demise: after all, this government -- or another with him at the helm -- is an accurate reflection of what Israeli politics these days is all about.

The key for a great power is to know the difference between thinking big and thinking small. The vice president's mission to Israel was an expression of the former. Even accounting for the Israelis' grievous blunder that marred Biden's visit, it is important for the administration not to let itself be diverted from this path.

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