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Policies and Politics Will Test U.S.-Israel Ties

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As the Iran deadline approaches, violence flares up in Jerusalem, and respective election cycles ebb and flow, U.S. and Israeli officials will need to work harder than ever to manage bilateral tensions.

In the coming weeks, a number of foreign and domestic developments will affect U.S. and Israeli policy, with each potentially testing the already tense bilateral relationship. One key date is November 24, the deadline for negotiations over Iran's nuclear program. President Obama has publicly said there is a "big gap" between the parties, making the prospects of a breakthrough unclear, but high-level U.S., EU, and Iranian envoys have completed two days of talks in Oman in a bid to reach such a breakthrough. If a deal is in fact made and the terms are not to Israel's liking, then the war of words with Washington may resume on this very sensitive issue.

Exacerbating the situation was a statement this weekend by Iranian Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei detailing a plan for eliminating the state of Israel. Furthermore, Senator Lindsey Graham (R-SC), who has been skeptical of the negotiations, has just announced that Congress will seek to review the terms of any agreement with Tehran. This comes on the heels of a midterm election in which the Republicans won control of the Senate, and shortly after the Obama administration reiterated its authority to suspend certain sanctions against Iran in the event of a breakthrough.

Meanwhile, violent incidents have surged in east Jerusalem and elsewhere. This weekend, Israeli police killed an Arab man in the Galilee town of Kafr Kana under disputed circumstances. And earlier today, an Israeli soldier was stabbed to death in southern Tel Aviv. Unlike past spasms of violence and terrorism, such as the second intifada of 2000-2004, the latest incidents are not attributed to an organization; in the case of Jerusalem, they were carried out by Palestinian Jerusalemites. Yet there are widespread media allegations that the Israel-based northern branch of the "Islamic Movement" is paying Israeli Arabs anywhere from 1,500 to 4,000 shekels per month to throw stones at Israeli authorities and tourists on the Temple Mount/Haram al-Sharif, with some Israelis accusing Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas of inflaming tensions at the holy site. Palestinians have made the same charge against rightist Israeli parliamentarians such as

Moshe Feiglin, accusing them of visiting the site for narrow political purposes. The Palestinians oppose the idea of Jewish prayer there; a few even claim that it is aimed at sabotaging the Dome of the Rock, but Israelis see such talk as baseless incitement.

Amid these volatile developments, the Likud Party's Central Committee has just scheduled its next primary for January 6. While Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu is widely expected to maintain his hold on the party, he tends to tack more to the right during primary season -- at least in public, if not in action. At yesterday's committee meeting, he gave a pointed defense of his ability to resist international pressures of all kinds, singling out Iran and the Palestinian issue. A tough tone by Netanyahu -- combined with recent reports of insulting personal comments by unnamed U.S. officials -- could ratchet up bilateral tensions in the lead-up to the primary.

American domestic political calculations may prove problematic as well. While the Israeli-Palestinian issue is unlikely to be among the president's top priorities given numerous other policy challenges, the Republican electoral victories may lead him to believe that his ability to influence domestic legislation is now limited. As such, he may be tempted to focus more on foreign policy, where the executive branch has had more leeway. And since he has just faced the last of three congressional elections during his presidency, Israelis fear he may be more likely to press them now that he is less encumbered by domestic political concerns.

PERSISTENT RIFT OVER IRAN

Washington and Israel's differences over Iran are well known. On the nuclear front, Israel has traditionally opposed allowing Tehran to retain any capacity for enriching nuclear fuel, while the Obama administration is willing to concede limited enrichment rights. Israel was also irked that it was not informed of a secret U.S.-Iranian channel that opened in 2012, and there are conflicting reports about whether President Obama told Israel of his secret letter to Ayatollah Khamenei in mid October, news of which first surfaced publicly last week. According to the *Wall Street Journal*, the letter spoke of facilitating U.S.-Iranian cooperation on another pressing regional issue -- the jihad being waged by the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) -- in the event of a nuclear breakthrough before November 24. The president has denied any linkage between the two issues.

At a cabinet meeting yesterday, Netanyahu did not mince words, telling ministers in a written statement distributed by his office that "the international community now faces a simple choice, of either yielding to Iran's demands in a capitulation that endangers not only Israel but the entire world, or of standing firm in the demand that Iran disarm its capabilities for producing nuclear weapons." He added, "Israel will not accept a capitulation. It's dangerous for all of us." His remarks came shortly after Khamenei issued a defiant statement that, while stopping short of calling for all-out war against Israel, openly exhorted Palestinians to use force in the West Bank. The Supreme Leader also called for a referendum on the issue of Israel's existence, one in which most Israelis would not be allowed to vote.

In Washington, it is unclear if the midterm election results give the Obama administration more leverage in dealing with Iran. If Tehran seeks the suspension of some sanctions in return for a breakthrough, time may not be on its side once the Republican-controlled Congress is installed in January. And in the absence of a deal, the new Congress could add more sanctions. Given ongoing tension over these issues, the administration likely believes that Israel would attempt to sway Congress into complicating the suspension of sanctions in the event of a breakthrough with Tehran.

LIKUD TACKING MORE TO THE RIGHT?

Netanyahu has been consistently skeptical of an Iran deal, but the upcoming Likud leadership race will provide another backdrop to Israeli policy on the nuclear issue. The prevailing view in Israel is that a new election will be called in 2015. And since twenty-six of the country's past thirty-two governments have not survived three years, the Netanyahu government -- which came to power in early 2013 -- will likely follow suit.

This tumultuous political rhythm is exacerbated by other factors as well. Significant fault lines are apparent within the Netanyahu coalition; ironically, they have become more evident in the absence of negotiations with the Palestinians than they were during the most recent talks. Netanyahu's junior coalition partners -- led by Finance Minister Yair Lapid (Yesh Atid Party) and Justice Minister Tzipi Livni (Hatnua) -- have become more vocal on the issue of West Bank settlements, and former defense minister Amir Peretz (Hatnua) quit the coalition this week to protest the lack of progress.

The expectation of elections has accelerated the Likud political calendar, spurring Netanyahu to use the latest Central Committee meeting as a platform for spiritedly defending his views. As he kicked off the political season, he also urged Israeli Arabs to adhere to law, even saying for the first time that he favors revoking the citizenship of people involved in terrorism. In addition, he charged Abbas with fomenting terrorism, despite admitting in the past that the PA leader favors nonviolence.

One may question why the Likud leader would have to tack right if his only apparent challenger is Feiglin, the party's right-edge. Yet Netanyahu's risk-averse nature means that he takes no chances, which is precisely why he sought an early primary. His calculations seem to be shaped by three considerations. First, he is aware that hardly any member of the Likud's thirty-seat parliamentary faction has endorsed his call for a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Second, some right-wingers are dissatisfied that he did not order the Israel Defense Forces to take over Gaza and rout Hamas in the latest war. And third, despite Netanyahu's popularity at the height of the fighting, the one party that emerged stronger in the polls after the late August ceasefire was the party to his right, the Jewish Home, headed by Economics Minister Naftali Bennett.

CONCLUSION

Given these imminent developments, it seems imperative that the Obama administration and Israel work out a smoother *modus vivendi*, even if the two leaders will never be close. An Israeli delegation reportedly visited the White House earlier this month to discuss the Iran negotiations. Both governments should follow up on these discussions by defining their conceptual and textual differences over the Iran talks and seeing which of the gaps can be bridged before November 24. This may require a U.S. letter of assurance to Israel on key issues that cannot be addressed in the text of nuclear deal with Iran itself. Whatever the case, waiting until after November 24 may be too late.

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