

US and Israel: An unsettled alliance

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The world clustered around Barack Obama on Monday – with one very notable exception. Leaders of some 40 countries, from Argentina and Armenia to China and India, gathered in Washington to attend the nuclear security summit convoked by the US president. Benjamin Netanyahu, Israel's prime minister, stayed away.

Israeli diplomats attribute Mr Netanyahu's last-minute cancellation to Turkish and Egyptian plans to discuss Israel's nuclear arsenal. But his absence from an event intended to show US allies and partners rallying around the American president's agenda was, at the very least, deeply symbolic.

The US-Israeli alliance, for decades the cornerstone of Middle East power politics, is in rocky shape. The Obama administration is angry about Israeli settlements in occupied East Jerusalem. Mr Netanyahu's government is recoiling at what it depicts as Mr Obama's unreasonable demands.

The tension between the two sides has become a story of personal snubs and policy differences even as the US and Israel profess their devotion to each other. As George Mitchell, Washington's Middle East envoy, prepares to return to the region, US officials are considering eventually issuing outlines of their own for an Israeli-Palestinian deal – a turn of events Israel is desperate to avoid.

But at root, the differences stem from the two countries' contrasting reactions to an issue seen by both as crucial to their national interest, and, in Israel's case, to its national survival: Iran.

"The principal difference between now and previous administrations is the Iran problem," says a senior US official as he discusses the current US-Israeli stand-off. "From our perspective, it increases the urgency of Israel keeping the international community focused on that problem and not on other problems. And the Israelis need all of us to be working together on the common goal of keeping the pressure on the Iranians to back off."

Still, as diplomats and analysts study the underlying causes of the US-Israeli rift, there can be little doubt that the poor personal and political chemistry between Mr Obama and Mr Netanyahu plays a part. Their relationship is clearly much more confrontational than that between President George W. Bush and Ariel Sharon and Ehud Olmert, the former Israeli prime ministers.

Washington officials say Mr Obama was infuriated by Israel's announcement of the expansion of a settlement in occupied East Jerusalem during a fence-mending visit last month by Joe Biden, the vice-president. Little more than a week later, Mr Netanyahu paid one of the most ignominious visits to the White House of any major ally in recent years – out of sight of the media, left to confer with his team in the Roosevelt room while Mr Obama dined without him, and exiting the building without any agreement despite two meetings with the president in a matter of hours.

Mr Netanyahu also presides over perhaps the most rightwing coalition in Israeli history, while Mr Obama is widely perceived as among the most liberal presidents in decades. The Israeli leader is seen in Washington as obstructionist, while many Israelis regard Mr Obama as naive, inexperienced and – worst of all – the architect of a US policy of appeasement.

Mr Obama and Mr Netanyahu share the view that Tehran must be stopped from acquiring nuclear weapons capability, a scenario both maintain would destabilise the wider Middle East and embolden Israel's most committed foes. But there is a fundamental, and increasingly

visible, rift on how best to respond. Crudely put, the Americans view Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts as the key ingredient in building an Arab coalition to curb Iran. Israel, by contrast, argues that a lasting Middle East peace is only attainable once the world has dealt with the threat from Tehran.

Speaking to more than 7,000 people at last month's annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (Aipac), the powerful pro-Israel lobby group, Hillary Clinton, US Secretary of State, highlighted the propaganda value of images of the occupied Palestinian territories, calling for Israel to help change "the facts on the ground" to "refute the claims of the rejectionists and extremists and in so doing create the circumstances for a safe, secure future for Israel".

She added: "Behind these terrorist organisations and their rockets, we see the destabilising influence of Iran. Now, reaching a two-state solution will not end all these threats . . . but failure to do so gives the extremist foes a pretext to spread violence, instability and hatred."

The US is also stepping up work with Arab states to contain Tehran. But as General David Petraeus, head of US central command, said last month: "If you go to moderate leaders in the Arab world they will tell you that the lack of progress in the Middle East peace process causes them problems."

Mr Netanyahu's government treats the rise of Iran – and its nuclear ambitions – as an issue so urgent it leaves the peace talks in the shade. On his last trip to Washington he told members of Congress that the Palestinians were not presently a willing partner for peace. He also encouraged the passage of unilateral US sanctions legislation against companies investing in Iran – despite the Obama administration's objections.

The White House was not happy. "The more you resort to throwing your weight around in someone else's backyard the less compunction they will have about doing the same," says Daniel Levy, a former Israeli peace negotiator now at the New America Foundation think-tank in the US.

In his own speech to Aipac, the Israeli prime minister brushed aside any suggestion that the broader conflict between the Muslim world and the west was linked to Israel: "Militant Islam does not hate the west because of Israel. It hates Israel because of the west – because it sees Israel as an outpost of freedom and democracy that prevents them from overrunning the Middle East."

This is not a view widely shared outside Israel. "We are all saying to Israel that if the main threat in the area is indeed Iran then they are not on the right road for a solution," says a senior western diplomat, stressing European and Russian support for Mr Obama's position.

The logic sketched out by the US and its allies goes as follows: containing Iran requires an Arab coalition; an Arab coalition requires an Israeli-Palestinian peace process; an Israeli-Palestinian peace process requires Israeli concessions; and the Israeli concession required right now is a halt to new settlement building in occupied East Jerusalem. In her Aipac speech, Mrs Clinton also argued that, in the absence of a peace deal, demographic trends and other factors put Israel's long-term survival as a democratic Jewish state at risk.

"They can stick to their position of principle on East Jerusalem but just because they can doesn't mean they have to," the senior US official says of the Israeli government. "And that's what we are suggesting, just out of their own self interest – some forbearance there to make it possible for the Palestinians to be more forthcoming."

Israeli analysts close to the Netanyahu government see things differently. "President Barack Obama capitalised on a minor Israeli glitch [the announcement during Mr Biden's visit] . . . to fabricate a crisis in US-Israeli relations," says Efraim Inbar, the director of the Begin-Sadat Centre for Strategic Affairs. "This appears to fit Obama's overall foreign policy approach of estranging democratic allies while appeasing anti-American dictators."

Yet to other Israelis the fighting talk of the country's political right masks a dangerous complacency. They note that Israel has become even more dependent on US military and diplomatic support than in the past.

"If you look at the threat perception in Israel, the threat is mainly considered to be coming from Iran. But it is also quite evident that Israel cannot deal with the Iranian threat on its own," says Shlomo Brom, a senior analyst at Israel's Institute for National Security Studies and the former director of the army's strategic planning division.

It is a view widely shared among US analysts. Israel, they say, is likely to need US assistance for any effective military strike on Iran's nuclear facilities – and to deal with the backlash certain to follow such an attack.

Meanwhile, there is considerable discomfort in Washington about some of Mr Netanyahu's language on Iran, which he has likened in the past to Nazi Germany. "I don't think it is in America's interest or of anybody else who is a friend of America to encourage America into a collision with Iran," says Zbigniew Brzezinski, the former US national security adviser. "The issue really is how can one achieve an outcome which is going to be good for the American national interest, ensure Israel's indefinite well-being and security, and some measure of genuine justice for the Palestinians?"

Many people maintain that Israel and the US will ultimately be able to patch up their differences and resume their traditional close relations. Powerful forces in Washington feel uncomfortable with the current tensions. Many conservatives view Israel as an ally unlike any other, a fellow democracy in a sea of authoritarian states. The administration's stance has found opposition or only muted support on Capitol Hill, where Aipac remains a formidable force despite increasing divisions among Jewish-Americans themselves. Leading Republicans have voiced sharp criticism of the tougher line on Israel.

That kind of support leads some Israelis to believe Mr Netanyahu can, and should, defy US pressure. As Dore Gold, the president of the Jerusalem Centre for Public Affairs and a former Netanyahu adviser, says: "The relationship between the US and Israel is not restricted to their governments . . . The people of the US are with us and Congress is certainly with us."

One thing is clear: even as the diplomatic tensions mount, no one in Washington is questioning the American commitment to Israel's security, a pledge described by Mrs Clinton as "rock-solid, unwavering, enduring and for ever". She boasted in her Aipac speech that Washington was increasing the \$3bn military assistance the US delivers to Israel each year. Nor does the Obama administration see much scope in reducing other subsidies to Israel. All the same, some officials are looking at one possible source of pressure: eventually issuing US "parameters" or guidelines for a peace deal.

The Obama administration is, in other words, shaping a policy more nuanced than its predecessors': it seeks to blend a cast-iron commitment to Israel's security with a much more critical stance on settlement building and the peace process. As Iran continues its progress towards nuclear capability, it is a distinction that seems unlikely to disappear. For Mr Netanyahu and his government, uncomfortable times lie ahead.

Disputed territories

There are today more than 280,000 settlers living in 121 settlements in the occupied West Bank. There are at least another 180,000 settlers in occupied East Jerusalem. Their presence – in growing numbers – is widely considered one of the main obstacles to a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians because the settlements are located on land the Palestinians want to become part of an independent state. Though some settlers say they are ready to leave their homes should a peace deal ever emerge, others have vowed to fight any attempt to evict them – even by the Israeli government.

East Jerusalem

The quiet suburb at the centre of the dispute over Israeli settlements.

Ramat Shlomo does not look like the centre of a major international dispute, write Tobias Buck and Daniel Dombey. Sitting on a steep hill just a short drive from downtown Jerusalem, the settlement's quiet streets are lined with modern buildings in cream-coloured stone. The residents belong almost entirely to Israel's ultra-orthodox religious minority.

To most Israelis, it is no more than a suburb of Jerusalem. To the rest of the world, however, it is an illegal Jewish settlement built on occupied Palestinian land. That is why a plan, revealed last month, to build an additional 1,600 homes there for settlers sparked a global outcry, as well as a crisis in US-Israeli relations yet to be resolved.

Many Israelis are angry at the sudden focus of US president Barack Obama's administration on settlement-building in East Jerusalem. After all, it follows years in which the US appeared to neglect the issue, and a face-off last year in which Washington was widely perceived to have backed down.

Along with the wider international community, every US administration for more than 40 years has held that Israel is an occupying power in East Jerusalem and the West Bank – the lands conquered, along with the Gaza Strip, during the 1967 war between Israel and its neighbours.

As a result, Washington regards all Israeli settlements on these territories as illegal. East Jerusalem, however, is particularly sensitive: the Palestinians want it as the capital of a future independent state; the Israeli government, in contrast, is committed to maintaining all of the city as the "undivided capital" of the Jewish state.

The Obama administration started with a very different stance from that of George W. Bush, which muted its criticism of settlement-building in the area. Last May, Hillary Clinton, secretary of state, called for building in all occupied territories, including East Jerusalem, to be halted. Eventually, however, she praised as "unprecedented" a 10-month Israeli freeze that covered the West Bank alone.

Today, US officials acknowledge two errors in that confrontation, which they say they will learn from: making explicit demands for a formal freeze, so reducing room for manoeuvre; and failing to plan their response to Israeli resistance to those demands. This time, Mr Obama and Mrs Clinton are pushing for a halt in announcements about East Jerusalem as opposed to a formal freeze. The Israeli leader, however, under intense pressure from rightwing allies to stand up to Washington, has yet to respond formally to the US on how he will handle future construction plans in the contested city.

Fonte: Financial Times, London, Apr. 12th 2010, Comment, online.