

Not quite as it was

Support remains strong but is no longer unquestioning.

FROM Barack Obama's point of view, the timing could not have been worse. The administration has been pushing hard in the Security Council for new sanctions against Iran and had invested heavily in the Israeli-Palestinian "proximity talks" brokered by Mr Obama's special envoy, George Mitchell. Both of these efforts are now in jeopardy. Moreover, the Israeli raid came soon after Mr Obama had decided to rescue America's relations with Israel from the ditch into which they fell in March, when Israel announced plans for a Jewish suburb in occupied East Jerusalem just as the proximity talks were about to begin.

During that confrontation Mr Obama asked Binyamin Netanyahu to freeze Jewish settlement in Jerusalem, an undertaking the Israeli prime minister refused to give. Mr Netanyahu received a frosty reception at the White House in March. But for one reason or another the Obama administration decided several weeks ago that it was time to make up. Mr Netanyahu was invited back and was supposed to drop by this week. After the raid he flew directly home to Israel from a visit to Canada.

Whatever the private thoughts of Mr Obama, America has refused to join the international outcry against its wayward ally. In New York American diplomats ensured that a special meeting of the UN Security Council did not condemn Israel and called only for an impartial investigation of the facts. In a telephone call with Turkey's enraged prime minister, Mr Obama was cautious. He expressed his condolences and affirmed the need to provide humanitarian assistance to the people of Gaza—but, according to a White House summary of the conversation, "without undermining Israel's security". As ever, domestic politics have played a part in shaping Mr Obama's responses. Israel's friends on Capitol Hill have pushed back hard since the March spat. A letter affirming the value of a close relationship with Israel was signed by 334 of the 435 members of the House, and a similar one by 76 of the 100 senators. Despite the emergence of J Street, a feisty and doveish pro-Israel lobby, AIPAC, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, has far more muscle and is not afraid to flex it.

Even in Congress, however, support for Israel is not rock solid, and is showing signs of change. Dan Senor, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, noted recently that there were "real divisions" among congressional Democrats over Israel, "and those divisions are widening and cementing in ways not seen in decades". For most Republicans, on the other hand, supporting the Jewish state remains, literally, an article of faith.

With mid-term congressional elections due in November and the Democrats braced for a drubbing, this would be a tricky time for Mr Obama to pick a fresh fight with Israel. That may be why, since early May, the White House has been labouring to correct what Rahm Emanuel, Mr Obama's chief of staff, has described as the administration's flawed "messaging". A posse of senior officials have stressed that the ties to Israel are unbreakable.

That said, the influence of domestic politics can be exaggerated. Despite the pre-flotilla thaw, Mr Obama has made it abundantly clear in recent months that Israel can no longer take American support for granted. He seems genuinely to believe that the United States can and should bring about a two-state solution in Palestine. Mr Netanyahu says that is his aim too, but in his case there are strong reasons to doubt whether he is sincere. So long as both leaders remain in office, with their convictions unchanged, that will be a recipe for growing estrangement.

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