American Jews and Israel: A Relationship in Transition

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Session Four: The View from Washington and Jerusalem

Discussants:

Moderator: JJ Goldberg, The Forward

Itamar Rabinovich, Former Israeli Ambassador to US, Israel Institute of Washington and Tel Aviv

Dan Kurtzer, Former American Ambassador to Israel, Princeton University Woodrow Wilson School

Takeaways:

- Both agreed that the diplomatic relationship between the governments of Israel and the US has reached a nadir.

- Both criticized Netanyahu for engaging in activities that Obama perceived as attempting to undermine him, like the most recent Netanyahu speech before Congress. Both also felt that Netanyahu has failed to project a vision regarding the conflict. Kurtzer emphasized the importance of America developing a policy on Israel which may differ from what Israel wishes and which would force Israel to do things it would normally oppose. Both also agreed that Obama has contributed to the strain in ties.

- Rabinovich and Kurtzer had different ideas for what Obama could have done to advance the peace process at the beginning of his presidency. Rabinovich would have liked Obama to tie US attempts to halt Iran’s nuclear program to Israel’s commitment to move forward on peace, whereas Kurtzer felt that Obama should have pressured Netanyahu into continuing Olmert’s negotiations with Abbas.

- Both observed the unprecedented intrusion of Israeli politics into American Jewish life, and the concomitant fracturing of an American Jewish consensus on Israel.

- Both agreed that the Senate bill on Iran’s nuclear program is a defeat for Israel (it includes none of Israel’s demands), and that the military option is no longer credible.
- Rabinovich maintained that the Israeli public and politicians take seriously the relationship between America and Israel, whereas Kurtzer argued that the most current Netanyahu administrations have evinced a total lack of interest in preventing it from souring.

Summary:

- Both agreed that the relationship between Washington and Israel is the worst it has ever been (perhaps with the exception of the Eisenhower years). What worries Kurtzer is the divergence in strategic concerns between the two countries, most recently on issues like Iran, Ukraine, Cuba, and the Chinese Asian bank. Rabinovich added that lately in Israel a group of leaders have advocated for replacing the US with a new Great Power. Rabinovich also added the element that, as of late, bipartisan support for Israel has eroded.

- Both felt that blame for the tensions can be apportioned to Obama and Netanyahu. Kurtzer mentioned how Obama did not visit Israel after visiting Cairo and Istanbul in 2009, and his demand on a complete settlement freeze prior to negotiations, which had never been levied by the US government, was a mistake that only pushed Netanyahu away. Rabinovich argued that upon entering the presidency Obama should have linked the Iranian and Palestinian issues: if Israel moves forward on a two state solution, then the US would clamp down on Iran’s path to weaponization. Regarding Bibi, Kurtzer identified a long history of strained relations between Netanyahu and Washington that preceded Obama, and Rabinovich maintained that Netanyahu never attempted to portray himself as someone who the president could trust, which was only made worse by his repeated attempts at currying favor with Republicans.

- Kurtzer was skeptical that a linkage between the Iranian and Palestinian issues could have worked with Netanyahu because Netanyahu would have balked and because at the beginning of the Obama presidency there was no possible diplomatic opening between the US and the Iranians (this could only occur after P5+1 sanctions were imposed). Kurtzer had an alternative idea: that upon entering the presidency, Obama should have pushed Netanyahu to pick up where Olmert left off with Abbas, instead of starting again from scratch.

- Both agreed that the resolution to the conflict is known by all, a two state solution with land swaps, but that it cannot be achieved at the present time. Rabinovich argued that the three components for a securing a deal – a compliant Israeli government, a strong and conciliatory Palestinian leadership, and an influential US broker -- are all currently lacking. Kurtzer added that the US should have used the last two years of Obama’s
presidency to iron out its position on the details of a final status agreement, on specifics like: the contours of a future Palestinian state, its positions on Jerusalem as capital of Israel and future Palestine, on refugees. To go forward, America will need to impose a clear and robust negotiating infrastructure that goes beyond the notion that a two state solution is the bedrock of the deal.

- Rabinovich observed the growing trend of Israeli political parties attempting to mobilize the American Jewish community to lobby Washington, and the greater penetration of Israeli politics into American Jewish life. He thinks this has had detrimental effects for American Jews. Kurtzer added that the divide over Israel is widening by the day in American Jewish life (examples: JStreet excluded from Conference of Presidents; NIF almost being barred from marching in Israel parade), and thinks that Republicans are now seeking to project themselves as the pro-Israel party as a way to win Jewish votes away from Democrats.

- Both agreed that in the present turmoil in Middle East, Israel has the strategic advantage of being an island of stability, but that its intransigence on the Israel-Palestinian conflict and the souring of the Netanyahu-Obama relationship has made it difficult for Israel to capitalize on this as far as relations with the US are concerned.

- Rabinovich argued that Israeli public discourse and politicians take the US-Israel relationship very seriously, and have always worried about maintaining it (example: Shamir lost in his reelection bid for this very reason). However, Rabinovich did admit that Netanyahu’s most recent reelection may indicate that the Israeli public cares less about this than ever before. Kurtzer disagreed, surmising that the current Israeli government has failed to pay attention to anything but a few wealthy American Jewish donors.