

Remarks by Samuel R. Berger

“U.S. Policy in the Middle East on the Eve of President Obama’s Trip”

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Tomorrow, when Air Force One lands in Tel Aviv, the newly reelected President and the Prime Minister with a new government will turn the page on a new chapter in their relationship. And they will confront how to manage the strategic issues we both face in ways that protects our respective interests. Over the next 2 ½ days in Israel, there will be two conversations going on—one between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu in private primarily on Iran, Syria and Israeli-Palestinian peace—and the other between the President and the Israeli people.

In fact, there will be three—because Prime Minister Netanyahu, coming off a harder than expected election and the challenge of forming a new government, has his own imperatives for this visit with the Israeli public. The public stage will be almost as important for both leaders as the private discussions.

President Obama’s support for Israel has been unprecedented. Yet, many Israelis, forever uncertain of their security for good historical and geopolitical reasons—have questions. Why didn’t he come to Israel sooner? What did he mean in Cairo? Does he understand that we live in a treacherous neighborhood?

This is the first opportunity for President Obama to convey to the Israeli people, in personal terms, that, as David Makovsky has written, he “recognizes [their] historic attachment to the land, [their] aspirations for peace, [their] security and economic needs and the fact that for now, the Mideast is not Switzerland and that therefore Israel requires strong ties with the United States.” This is important, not just for Obama’s satisfaction or his popularity at home, but to advance his strategic objectives. Conveying to Israelis his deep personal commitment to their security can strengthen their trust that, when he addresses issues like Iran and the peace process, he has Israel’s interests at heart.

Netanyahu has his own needs with the Israeli public during this visit. Despite their fierce independence and ethic of self-reliance, Israelis worry when their most essential relationship—with the United States—is strained. Indeed, there is some evidence from the recent Israeli election that the fear of Israel’s isolation played some role in the outcome. The Prime Minister wants to convey solidarity with the U.S.—and convergence—if not warmth—with President Obama. Then, when the door closes for their private discussions, there are serious things to talk about.

Much has been made and said about the personal relationship between Obama and Netanyahu; some of it is true: it has been far from tension-free, and it is in need of a reboot. But I also think it has been exaggerated and that *too* much has been said about it, as if the bilateral relationship could be reduced to their personal rapport, as if the strategic dimension of the two countries’ ties were either anecdotal or purely a function of personal chemistry. We should leave aside some of that background noise and focus more on where the strategic relationship stands today, what challenges it faces, and how this visit can help overcome them.

As to the state of the strategic relationship: First, it has been said before but bears repeating—for it is neither propaganda nor spin: military and security cooperation between the two countries has never been stronger. That is a fact confirmed by both sides, and witnessed in countless ways: intelligence sharing, joint military exercises, extraordinarily close consultation on questions like Iran and, of course, joint efforts on Iron Dome. That is far more important than whether the two leaders can be best friends

Second, it is true that in some respects our two nations experience events in the Middle East somewhat differently. When Prime Minister Netanyahu, his colleagues or the Israeli public look out their window, what they see is greater uncertainty, volatility and even peril than ever before: Iran getting closer to acquiring a nuclear bomb; Islamism making remarkable inroads; Egypt ruled by the Muslim Brotherhood, an organization whose history and ideology are hardly promising from Israel's perspective; Sinai increasingly given to lawlessness; escalating arms trafficking throughout the region; increasingly porous borders; Syria potentially becoming a battleground between Hizbollah and Iran on the one hand, and Sunni jihadists on the other; and Jordan experiencing greater challenges to the monarchy than in the past

And so, it is only natural that, when the U.S. invests in negotiations between the P5 + 1 and Iran, engages with the Muslim Brotherhood, supports democratic transitions, and urges progress in the peace process, some Israelis suspect us of misunderstanding the region or, worse, of naiveté. Yet my sense is that the president is anything but naïve.

True, Israel lives in the region and we do not; where you sit determines where you stand, and differences in outlook and threat perceptions are inevitable byproducts of our respective locations. But that doesn't necessarily translate into divergent strategic pursuits, nor should it. And a principal goal of this trip, in my view, is to clarify that point.

Take the issues one by one: The first is Iran. Both President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have made clear that a nuclear Iran is unacceptable and that they will act—militarily if necessary—to prevent it. I believe both of them mean what they say. Beyond that, there are nuances in their approach. Managing them in a way that protects our respective interests; that is the task at hand. The U.S. is convinced that the door for diplomacy has not yet closed. That is partly because, as Obama said, it believes Iran is at least a year away from being able to acquire a bomb, and partly because the sanctions are taking a tremendous toll which—we hope—might affect the Iranian leadership's strategic calculus and persuade it to accept at least a "stop the clock" interim agreement with Iran that will verifiably halt the program. Chances are uncertain at best, but at the very least the administration believes we should allow the Islamic Republic to reflect on their economic predicament before closing the door on a negotiated settlement.

The administration also believes that by going the extra mile diplomatically, it will be in a far better position to forge an international coalition for whatever is required should diplomacy fail. This is not naiveté. It is prudent statecraft. And so, while Israel might be skeptical about the prospects for diplomacy, Prime Minister Netanyahu needs to give the president the time and space necessary to play this out.

Israel's worry is that this will take too long and that, in the process, Iran will have crossed the point of no-return—and entered the so-called zone of immunity in which its nuclear facilities will have become invulnerable. This brings us to the second nuance, which has to do with our respective trigger points—or red lines. For Prime Minister Netanyahu, it is when Iran accumulates enough enriched uranium to make one bomb if it decides to do so. Since Israel, acting alone, has more limited ability to damage the Iranian program, he believes it must act, in effect, when Iran has the ingredients it needs. President Obama has not spelled out an explicit American red line, but because of our greater military capabilities, we can still act effectively after we see Iran move toward developing a nuclear weapon.

In other words, if Netanyahu's challenge is to give president Obama the time he requires, Obama's task is to persuade the PM that we will act in a timely manner to ensure that Iran will not acquire a bomb. Granted, this is no easy thing for any leader in Israel—a country that has learned not to rely on others for their survival. But it is essential given the considerable stakes.

Second, the issue of the Arab transitions, and notably Egypt and Syria. That things look gloomy and ominous from Israel's perspective is only natural, and who can blame them? Likewise, there are many

reasons to distrust the Islamists and their intentions. That is not the question. The question is what to do about it. And the question is whether U.S. and Israeli interests are better served by keeping the Islamists at a distance or by engaging them.

As far as I can see, there are no real substantive differences between Israel's and our own interests in this regard. Take the case of Egypt: We both want the Camp David accords to survive; Sinai to be stabilized, its jihadist elements curbed and arms trafficking halted; we want Cairo to take steps to shut down the tunnels leading into Gaza; we also want Egypt's political leadership to engage more openly with its Israeli counterpart; and we want to avoid a collapse of the Egyptian economy that could have dangerous spillover effects while radicalizing its politics.

All of these interests are more easily pursued by engaging the elected Egyptian leadership—critically ... frankly—than by snubbing it. Regardless of what some Israelis might say publicly, they too recognize this: when war erupted between Israel and Hamas in Gaza, U.S. mediation with Cairo was instrumental in restoring calm; when security frays in Sinai, Israel urges the U.S. to press Egypt to crack down on terrorist cells; and Israel wants us to keep pressing Morsi's government to engage directly with its Israeli counterparts. Of course the U.S. does not see eye to eye with Cairo on a whole range of issues. We should be clear about the principles we believe are essential in its domestic struggles—pluralism, inclusiveness, tolerance, rule of law—perhaps clearer and more vocally than we have been. But our policy of dealing with the Muslim Brotherhood is one on which I am convinced the U.S. and Israel can agree.

The same principle holds in Syria. Both Obama and are being pulled into the vortex of the Syrian crisis more than they would like. After extracting the United States from Iraq and Afghanistan, the President is hardly eager to become entangled in another Middle East conflict—one with uncertain players on the ground, swirling sectarian cross-currents and no clear-cut exit strategy. As it watches jihadi groups gain a foothold not just in Syria, but in the Golan itself, Israel too is hardly sanguine about the post-Assad future.

But neither country can escape the consequences of Syria's unraveling. Over a million refugees now pose a threat to the stability of Syria's neighbors, including Jordan and Lebanon—a prospect that would spell more trouble for the region, the United States and Israel. Sectarian clashes in Syria are deepening those battle lines in Iraq, and elsewhere in the region. Islamic jihadists—some of the best equipped and most capable fighters in Syria—are establishing a strong position. The disintegration of Syria could unleash its stockpile of chemical and other weapons. Hezbollah, with the support of Iran, might shift rockets and other sophisticated weapons from Syria to Lebanon. And after years of a relatively stable border with Syria along the Golan Heights, Israel now faces growing jihadist threats there and a UN Monitoring mission under pressure.

The U.S. and Israel thus share the common goal of expediting Assad's departure in a way that minimizes risks to regional stability and of an imploding Syrian state. In this respect, I am glad that, in his recent trip to the region, Secretary Kerry, building on the work done by Secretary Clinton, opened channels of direct aid—still non-lethal—to the opposition, and lent full public support to the assistance by others.

I believe we should do more to help shift the balance of forces on the ground—to increase the pressure on Assad before a bloody battle over Damascus. We are gaining greater knowledge about the groups on the ground. The battle today over the ouster of Assad is the prelude to the battle over the future of Syria after Assad goes. We can't expect to have much influence on that future, nor much leverage on those who will decide it, if we are not working to strengthen more moderate groups now.

When he does fall from power—as he will—a fractured Syria will require massive assistance. Unlike the other “Arab Spring” countries, the destruction and displacement in Syria—another million people inside the country—have been staggering. Further disintegration would be a human and political disaster. There

will need to be a significant international effort to provide support for and help shape a successor regime, to provide the necessary humanitarian relief, to assist in the orderly return of millions of refugees and displaced persons, and to try to prevent a humanitarian slaughter.

Finally, the third topic for Obama and Netanyahu is Israeli-Palestinian peace. This arguably is the one that is most fraught with disagreement: whereas the U.S. sees this as an important issue that must be tackled with some urgency, many in Israel see things differently. They believe progress is highly unlikely, that concessions at a time of regional volatility are unwise and that the world must first take care of Iran.

I think it is important from the outset to clarify a few points: The argument made by those in the U.S. on behalf of movement on the peace process is not—nor has it ever been—that resolving the conflict is the most urgent priority or that it is the key to resolving all other regional issues. The most immediate crisis we face in the region almost certainly is Syria; the most high stakes one almost certainly is the Iranian nuclear program. And Egypt's economic collapse would have extraordinarily far-reaching consequences.

No, the argument made by those of us who advocate efforts on behalf of a two state solution is different. It is that the status quo is not stable, does not serve our interests, Israel's or those of moderate Palestinians. In the West Bank, the combination of rising economic distress, anger at the Palestinian Authority which has problems paying salaries and loss of faith in negotiations is combustible. Clashes between Palestinians and Israelis are increasing. Palestinian security cooperation with Israel is fraying, leading to an increase in IDF incursions. The danger of a misstep quickly escalating out of control is real. President Abbas probably is the last Palestinian leader for some time with the authority and inclination to sign a peace agreement with Israel. What comes after him is uncertain at best; in particular, if Hamas's narrative of resistance dominates, there will be no prospect for a peaceful resolution of the conflict. More broadly, unresolved, the Palestinian issue will continue to be catalyst for radicalism across the Arab world at a time when its direction is very much up for grabs.

Israel rightly argues that the regional situation is bleak, and then often evokes this as a reason to be cautious vis-à-vis the Palestinian question. I would turn that around: yes, the region is volatile. And, yes, there is very little Israel can do to mitigate the risks it faces in Egypt, Syria, and beyond. But there is one place where it *can* act to mitigate risks and take the initiative, and that is the West Bank. It is the place in the region where it possesses the greatest ability to protect itself, to change dynamics, to ensure that forces of moderation prevail. Of course, the future of the peace process is far from being exclusively in Israel's hands. We would need to see far greater risk-taking on Abbas's part as well, a willingness to compromise on core issues, end incitement and move forward on the path to peace. But Israel, with U.S. military, diplomatic and political support, can and should do its part to bend the arc of history where it can—which could then have positive repercussions elsewhere.

As for the sequencing between the Palestinian and Iranian issues: we hear the argument that it would be far easier for Israel to address the Palestinian conflict after the nuclear question has been put to rest. Perhaps. But building a powerful international coalition to deal with Iran would be made far easier in the context of progress on the Palestinian front. Conversely, an impasse in the peace process—or, worse, a sharp deterioration—would play right into Tehran's hands.

All of this brings me back to Obama's trip. The President has made clear that he is not carrying a peace plan, nor does he intend to launch a high-profile peace initiative when he is in Israel. That is the right posture for this trip. There is a new Israeli government and the groundwork has not been laid. The last thing that is needed now is a grand gesture that is an instant flop. Instead, this visit is the beginning of a conversation intended to explain why the U.S. believes progress is important for Israel's sake. No one benefits from negotiations for negotiation sake. But Obama should make the case—publicly and privately, both in Jerusalem and Ramallah—that a two-state solution is the only path to durable peace and

security, that time is running out, that all alternatives (a de facto one state outcome, another Palestinian uprising, triumph of Hamas's narrative) are far worse; and that the regional climate all around—with regard to Iran, Egypt, Turkey, to name but a few—would be improved if progress were made between Israelis and Palestinians .

And Obama needs to signal that, if the parties are ready, so too are he and Secretary Kerry willing and able to invest time and energy to this effort.

We all know the many arguments for why the President should not do so, why he should steer clear from the Israeli-Palestinian issue in his second term. Trust between the parties has seriously eroded. Neither side believes it has a partner for peace. The Palestinian side is divided, with Hamas a potential spoiler. The rise of Islamists in the region means that President Abbas cannot be sure that other Arabs will support concessions that he will have to make to Israel to reach an agreement. And, finally, there are other pressing demands on the President's attention.

Yet I am convinced that, sooner or later, the Israeli-Palestinian issue will wash up on the President's desk, and the later it happens, the harder it will be to deal with its consequences.

There are two other legs to the peacemaking stool. First are steps Israel and the Palestinians can take on their own to halt the deteriorating situation in the West Bank and begin to build some trust between them. This could easing include giving the Palestinians greater access and responsibility over areas where their jurisdiction is limited; shoring up Israeli-Palestinian security cooperation; and enhancing movement of people and goods in and out of the West Bank. Both sides also should stop provocative actions—on settlements by Israel or threatening to go the International Criminal Court by the Palestinians.

And second, efforts on the Israeli-Palestinian issue must include securing Arab support for resumption of negotiations. Such support would make negotiations more attractive to Israel, easier for Abbas, and more difficult for Hamas to disrupt.

Like a pendulum swing, many have gone from exuberant optimism about the region when the so-called Arab spring first began, to extraordinary gloom and doom. The former was as premature as the latter is unjustified. There is absolutely no doubt that the collapse of state structures, rise of Islamist groups and chaos present real challenges to our and Israel's security. But if the Arab uprisings taught us anything, it is that the future is not preordained. We must be mindful of the fact that the region is writing its own history, and there are limits to how much it can be shaped from the outside. Still, our two countries can and should do what they can—on the question of Iran, of Egypt, of Syria and of the peace process—to bend it in a direction that best comports with our strategic interests.

As president Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu sit together over the next few days, that is what they should be dealing with—together.