

ISSUES IN PERSPECTIVE

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President Obama's Failure with Israel

As President Obama makes the case that he should be re-elected as president, one of his significant failures may haunt him come November—his failure as a friend of Israel. Historically, since 1948, the United States has been the most important friend of Israel. Indeed, one could argue that since 1948 had America not supported Israel, it would have been destroyed. Israel's right to exist as a homeland for the Jewish people has been the centerpiece of America's Middle Eastern foreign policy. For the most part, the US has not wavered in this deep-seated commitment. However, as Obama took office in January 2009, there were significant concerns about him: Among others was his Muslim middle name, "Hussein," the friendship and mentoring role his former Chicago pastor—a vitriolic, anti-Zionist leader—and his past friendships with prominent Palestinians. Would he be a friend of Israel? Or would he begin placing public demands on Israel and attempt to force Israel into concessions with the Palestinians? His administration began with a bid for historic change, but due to political and tactical errors and the breakdown of a trusted friendship with Israel, it has failed. Few would argue that Obama's first term has been a success when it comes to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. In fact, almost everyone agrees that his first term has been a dismal failure. I believe that his first term undermined a key friendship—with Israel—and gained absolutely no new credibility or trust with the Arab and Palestinian peoples of the Middle East. In chronological order, in this *Perspective*, I want to chart the failure of President Obama's first term as a friend of Israel.

1. In June 2009, President Obama made his now famous speech in Cairo, calling for a "new beginning" between the United States and the Islamic world—furious about America's role in two wars (Iraq and Afghanistan) and its allegiance with Israel. In the speech, at the historical al-Azhar University in Cairo, Egypt, he insisted that the Palestinians must end their hateful anti-Israel language, manifested in their publications and rhetoric and then categorically stated that the "Palestinians must abandon violence." Of the Palestinians, Obama said that they "endure daily humiliations, large and small, that come with *occupation* (my emphasis)." This was the first time a US President, in a major address, used the term "occupation" to refer to Israeli land gained after the 1967 war. The speech electrified the Arab world but frightened the Israelis. In addition, as Obama left Egypt, he did not stop in Jerusalem, as the Israeli government thought he would. Instead, he flew to Germany and visited the Nazi camp at Buchenwald, where he made a significant political blunder. At this horrific site, Obama said, of the occupants and liberators of the camp, "They could not have known how the nation of Israel could rise out of the destruction of the Holocaust and the strong, enduring bonds between that great nation and my own." As reporter, Scott Wilson, has observed, this speech was a "miscalculation, a sign that the president knew less about the historic shape of the Israeli-Palestinian story than he thought . . . [M]ost Israelis believe the state's legitimacy is rooted in the Bible and Hebrew texts of its people, a central tenet of Zionist thought."

2. In the summer of 2009, President Obama began publically setting a new condition upon Israel as a basis for restarting negotiations with the Palestinians—Israel’s government must stop building Jewish settlements in the West Bank and in East Jerusalem. In fact, in Cairo, Obama even had characterized continuing West Bank settlement construction as “illegitimate.” In addition, during that same summer, Obama met with American Jewish leaders and shocked them with these statements: “Look at the past eight years [meaning the Bush presidency]. During those eight years, there was no space between us and Israel, and what did we get from that? When there is no daylight, Israel just sits on the sidelines, and that erodes our credibility with the Arab states.”
3. President Obama, during the early part of his term, appointed former Senator George Mitchell as his special envoy for the Middle East. Mitchell continued to emphasize the new condition for resuming talks with the Palestinians—Israel must freeze all settlement construction activity. During Obama’s first major 2009 meeting with Israel’s Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, he said very publically before reporters, with Netanyahu by his side, “Settlements have to be stopped in order for us to move forward.” Netanyahu was stunned! Secretary of State Hillary Clinton communicated the same message to Mahmoud Abbas, the leader of the Palestinians. Categorically of President Obama, she declared, “He wants to see a stop to settlements—not some settlements, not outposts, not ‘natural growth’ exceptions.” No administration had so publically altered its public position toward Israel.
4. That summer, Netanyahu, during a national address, endorsed for the first time the Palestinian right to an independent state. Obama affirmed the speech as “an important first step,” but the Palestinians dismissed it! Some of Obama’s advisors believed that the president was wasting a tremendous amount of political capital for nothing, but Obama persisted nonetheless. Then in November 2009, Netanyahu announced a 10-month freeze on settlement construction in the West Bank, but would not agree on a moratorium in East Jerusalem. Abbas regarded Netanyahu’s action as meaningless. As Wilson reports, “The result: an angry Netanyahu, who had made a political sacrifice without reciprocation from the Palestinians. Israeli officials wondered why Obama was not applying the same pressure they had been feeling for months to the Palestinian leadership—and so did Israel’s supporters in the United States.” Indeed, it would take nine months for the Palestinians to respond, one month before the moratorium was scheduled for expiration.
5. In March 2010, President Obama then sent Vice President Biden to Israel, and, at the beginning of the visit, Israel’s Interior Ministry announced the construction of 1,600 new housing units in East Jerusalem, which the US regarded as a diplomatic slap in the face. In fact, Secretary Clinton used the term “condemn” as a part of the US response, a diplomatic term normally used by the US in reference to terrorism. Heated discussions followed between Israel and the US. Later that month in 2010, Netanyahu made a speech before the American Israel Public Affairs Committee, and declared that “Jerusalem is not a settlement; it is our capital.”
6. When negotiations finally resumed between the Palestinians and Israel, nine months after Israel’s moratorium on settlements in the West Bank, Netanyahu made it clear that when the

moratorium ended at the end of September 2010, it would not be renewed. The effect was that direct talks ended just as they had begun—with no progress—and no further scheduled negotiations!

7. In September 2011, Abbas took the Palestinian statehood issue directly to the UN and announced that the PLO would soon unilaterally declare a Palestinian state. Obama then delivered a major address in which he argued that negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians must resume based on pre-June 1967 lines, with the acknowledgment that land swaps between Israel and the Palestinians would be necessary. The Israeli government was not informed about this. No American president had so publically declared pre-1967 lines as the beginning point of negotiations!! As one Israeli official put it—“Friends do not treat friends that way.” Perhaps by now, President Obama has learned what every other president has learned: The bottom line issue for the Middle East is that the Palestinians (and most every other nation) refuse to recognize Israel as a homeland for the Jewish people. The issue is not settlements, or borders, or Jerusalem. It is the right of Israel to exist. Until and unless the Palestinians and every other Middle Eastern nation accept this, it is suicide for Israel to surrender more land or give in to additional demands.

President Obama spent his first term fundamentally altering the precious relationship between the United States and Israel. He has achieved nothing! In fact, there is only one term that could honestly characterize his diplomacy on this front—failure! Furthermore, with the enormous changes unfolding with the so called “Arab Spring,” Israel is now more vulnerable than ever. As its close friend and supporter since 1948, the US, it would seem, can no longer be trusted. In many ways, Obama’s policy with Israel is indicative of so much of his presidency—at first he speaks moderately and reasonably and then begins to act radically! That procedure has failed miserably in his dealings with Israel. May the next four years be different!

See Scott Wilson, “Where Obama Failed on Forging Peace in the Middle East,” in the *Washington Post* (14 July 2012).