

The Relationship between Israel and the Obama Administration

May 22, 2009

By Rabbi Stuart Gershon

Copyright © 2009 Temple Sinai, Summit, New Jersey

That Vice President Biden and Senator Kerry, both long-time supporters of Israel, should publicly call upon Israel – and at the AIPAC convention no less -- to implement its responsibilities under the roadmap, and among them to accept a two-state solution and to freeze Israel's settlement activity on the West Bank is a telling sign that the President, the congress, and the American people want Israel to do more to help the United States achieve its strategic foreign policy goals in the Middle East.

As you may know, President Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu just concluded their first face-to-face meeting together. What happened? What is the Obama administration's relationship with Israel?

Both Israel and the United States came to this meeting with different agendas, agendas very different from those of their respective predecessors. While the Bush administration allowed Israel to waver on its commitment to the peace plan known as the roadmap, the Obama administration wants explicit Israeli agreement that the only solution to the Israel-Palestinian conflict is the two-state solution. This position was strongly voiced by Rahm Emanuel, the President's Chief of Staff, at the AIPAC convention last week. In addition, Vice President Biden and Senator John Kerry, both long-time supporters of Israel, also strongly endorsed the view that progress cannot be achieved until Israel stops the construction of new settlements in the West Bank and dismantles unnecessary roadblocks.

On the Israeli side, former Prime Minister Ehud Olmert and the Kadimah party were committed to the vision of a Jewish state and a Palestinian state living side by side in peace. Prime Minister Netanyahu's administration openly derides the two-state solution, proposing as an alternative some form of Palestinian self-rule that is well short of national sovereignty.

Netanyahu's foreign policy agenda is to downgrade the Palestinian issue altogether, arguing that the greatest threat to Israel's security is not the Palestinians but Iran. Netanyahu wants to switch focus from the Palestinian issue to forging a regional pact with moderate Arab countries who also feel threatened by Iran. To this approach, the Obama administration counters that no moderate Arab nation will join such a coalition until they see progress on the Palestinian-Israeli issue.

While no major dispute between Israel and the United States was allowed to surface publicly at the meeting, it is rather clear that there is a clash between the two countries' agendas. It remains to be seen whether this clash will turn into a rift.

Now, as American Jews, what should our perspective be at this time? Do we support the approach of the Obama administration? Do we support Netanyahu and the policies of Israel's Likud party? As usual, the American Jewish community is divided on what approach to take.

Some in the American Jewish community argue, along with the Netanyahu administration, that the two-state solution is naïve, that there is no responsible Palestinian leader with whom Israel can make peace, and that it is now more crucial for Israel to deal with Iran. They argue that the best strategy for Israel is to maintain the status quo and to be patient for changes in the political winds that will favor Israel's interests.

Others in the American Jewish community argue, along with the Obama administration, that neither time nor the status quo are on Israel's side. They argue that Israel will be in a better position to deal with Iran if the Palestinian conflict is removed from the equation. They argue that the repercussions of Israel's ongoing rule of one million Palestinians are huge and just as threatening to Israel's security as Iran.

That is to say, if Israel retains control of the West Bank more Arabs will live in Israel than Jews. Losing its Jewish majority, Israel will no longer be a Jewish state. And since these one million Palestinians will have few rights and not be allowed to vote, Israel will lose its character as a democratic state. The status quo means that Israel might become unrecognizable to us; Israel might become an international pariah, like South Africa once was.

Both positions have their merits. Both strategies come with great risks. But even as the American Jewish community may be divided on how best to support Israel, there is one thing we can agree on. The political winds are changing. While they are never completely aligned, America's foreign policy interests and Israel's are diverging. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to undermine America's relationships with the Muslim and Arab world. It gives the Arab and Muslim street a rallying cry for anti-Americanism. The resolution of this conflict is a national security interest of the United States.

That Vice President Biden and Senator Kerry, both long-time supporters of Israel, should publicly call upon Israel – and at the AIPAC convention no less -- to implement its responsibilities under the roadmap, and among them to freeze Israel's settlement activity on the West Bank is a telling sign that the President, the congress, and the American people want Israel to do more to help the United States achieve its strategic foreign policy goals in the Middle East.

Even Israel's friends are now saying that Israel's security cannot be achieved by choosing international isolation and forever going it alone. They argue that Israel's security

requires choices that can win it international support, especially from the moderate Arab states.

President Obama will make a major Middle Eastern policy address in Egypt on June 4. It will be important to hear what he has to say. However, I want to reassure you on two points. Even if the interests of Israel and the United States are not always the same, I do believe that the strong commitment between Israel and the United States will continue. Our two countries are deeply intertwined. Both countries identify with each other and share common values. Both the United States and Israel have a strategic need for each other.

Another reason why I am not worried about differences of opinion between Israel and the United States is that I am fundamentally convinced that whatever is good for the United States and strengthens the United States – which remains Israel's best friend and most loyal ally in the world -- is ultimately good for Israel.