



PERSPECTIVES

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Handling the “Tectonic Shift” in US Foreign Policy under Obama: A Strategy for Israel

by Dr. Max Singer

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: *Israeli ambassador to the US Michael Oren and American President Barack Obama agree that Obama’s view of the Middle East is sharply different from previous presidents. While this dramatic difference spells trouble for Israel it also means that Obama’s view has not yet become US policy. No president has the power to make such a “tectonic shift” in US policy by himself. Israel must balance its acceptance of Obama’s policies with the reinforcement of parts of the American policy-making system that have not been converted to the President’s view.*

Recent Hebrew-language press reports had Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren telling Foreign Ministry officials in Jerusalem that a great “rift” had developed between the US and Israel. Meanwhile he publicly gave *The Jerusalem Post* a very optimistic report on US-Israel relations. As the dust settles, it is becoming clear that Oren sought to deliver a single, clear message: that the Israel-US relationship has changed dramatically because US President Barack Obama has a fundamentally different view of the world than previous US presidents and is determined to change US foreign policy.

Oren’s denial that there is a “crisis,” in the relationship becomes less reassuring, as well as more justifiable, when he explains that there is no crisis because it is

not a short-term issue and not caused by any sudden event. However, his metaphor of a “tectonic shift” (not “rift”) in US-Israel relations was poorly chosen, because the phrase implies long-term movement of fundamental forces —and this is *not* the case.

A US president can create major problems for Israel, but no single president – not even a two-term president – can by himself create a “tectonic shift” in the relationship between the two countries. Obama’s different view of the world is not shared by the US Congress or by the American people. Nor is his view the result of recent shifts in the underlying forces of world affairs. All indications are that Obama’s different way of viewing the world goes back many years.

There is every reason to believe that Oren is correctly reporting President Obama’s radically different understanding of world affairs, and that Obama is personally making a large share of the decisions, including all key decisions about the Administration’s policy concerning Israel. Thus, as long as he is president, Obama’s new view will determine much of American policy toward Israel.

However there are two important limitations on how far Obama’s perspective can determine US policy. First, even in foreign policy, there are some issues where Congress has a role in determining what the US does. Second, when deciding policy, the president must take into account the possible political costs to himself and to his program if his actions are too blatantly inconsistent with the views of Congress and the American people.

It is clear that Congress is intent on maintaining its role in US foreign policy-making and acting as a buffer in US-Israel relations, as recent letters to Obama, urging him to be more considerate of Israel, were signed by large majorities of both parties in the House and the Senate.

Even where the president has the power to take actions that reflect his view of the world, he may have to refrain from doing so if the price will be more conflict with traditional and mainstream thinking than he can afford. This is particularly true in the period before elections or when the president’s poll ratings are not very high.

The US administration’s recent efforts to display friendliness toward Israel, as the president’s ratings have fallen and elections approach, is not only or primarily a response to support for Israel among Jewish groups and political

donors; it also reflects the feelings of the large evangelical Christian community and a significant element of traditional mainstream American political thinking.

There is much disagreement about the content of Obama's different view of the world, but Oren's description of it as being "tectonically" different is consistent with Obama's presentation of himself as a man of change. Obama's strategy, if he is to bring the US around to implementing his view of the world, must be initially to conceal those of his premises which most conflict with the way other Americans see the world, while both using his powers to change policy and gradually trying to lead the rest of the country to accept his view of the world. While he is doing this the question of what Obama's real thinking is will be the subject of bitter debate between supporters and opponents.

For example, Obama supporters argue that he follows the widespread but controversial view that the way to help Israel and protect its security is to pressure it to accept the Arab terms for a two-state solution – apart from a Palestinian right of return to Israel. This, of course, is a view that has strident support from the Israeli Left and a great number of Israeli academics.

Opponents argue that Obama accepts the Arab narrative that Israel is a colonial invader of Palestinian land and that the US should stop standing in the way of justice for the Palestinians. They believe that Obama is not concerned that an Israeli removal from East Jerusalem and the West Bank could lead to the destruction of Israel, since such an Israeli retreat is required both by the US need to move to a more just role in the world and by a growing international consensus.

Israel certainly has to recognize the thinking of the American president, and should design Israeli policy based on a realistic understanding of how Obama wants to move American policy. But it is equally important for Israel to understand the limits on the American President's power and authority to take US policy in a radically new direction based on thinking not shared by the other components of the American democratic system.

Oren's "tectonic" metaphor may correctly describe the degree of difference between Obama's thinking and that of all previous presidents. However, that great gulf between Obama's understanding of the world and that of other parts of America, as well as of previous administrations, is exactly the reason why at this time there has been no "tectonic" shift in the US-Israel relationship, or indeed in US policy.

Obama may want to make a “tectonic shift” in US policy, but he does not have the power to do so by himself, certainly not within the span of just a few years. Concerning Israel, his power to do so depends partly on how Israel responds to his efforts.

To prevent Obama from bringing America behind his different view of the world, Israel needs to help Americans appreciate the way that Obama sees things differently than they do. The views of most Americans, and of most of the American political world, are much closer to Israel’s understanding of Middle Eastern realities than to Obama’s perceptions. Israeli actions can help Americans to recognize the conflicts between what they believe and the premises of Obama’s proposed policies.

The critical element in Israel’s policy concerning the US is the degree to which Israel is able to recognize, stimulate, and get the benefit of the parts of the American policy-making system that do not share President Obama’s radically different ideas about the world. Israel does not have to act as if Obama’s views will necessarily determine the policy of the US, and it certainly does not have to assume that Obama’s current views will dominate US policy-making for many years. Israel has the power, if it has the fortitude, to influence the degree to which Obama is able to make the tectonic change in American policy that he would like to make.

Israel’s courage and wisdom in standing up for its own understanding of Middle East politics can greatly influence Obama’s ability to get America to change the way it sees the world and its traditional thinking about how the United States should act.

Dr. Max Singer, a founder of the Hudson Institute, is a senior research associate at the BESA Center and the author of The REAL World Order: Zones of Peace, Zones of Turmoil.

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