

Reagan, Obama, and Israel: Historical Context, Uncomfortable Comparisons

Written by Jonathan Sciarcon

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JONATHAN SCIARCON, JAN 19 2017

On December 23, 2016, the United States abstained from, instead of vetoing, UN Resolution 2334. This resolution criticized Israeli settlement construction outside its 1949 borders, stating that Israel has no legal claim to such land. On December 28, US Secretary of State, John Kerry, delivered a televised speech in which he discussed the Obama administration's strong support for Israel and its frustration with Israel's settlement enterprise. The American abstention and Kerry's speech sparked a fierce debate, with many seeing these developments as evidence that President Obama either never truly supported Israel or has now abandoned it.

Instead of engaging in the 'Obama loves Israel/loves Israel not' debate, this brief essay aims to provide some historical context for the latest dust-up in US-Israeli relations. It would be useful to compare the recent events to three key periods of tension from 1981-1982 during the presidency of Ronald Reagan. Why Reagan? Not only is Reagan considered the most important Republican president over the past two generations, but he was – during his time in office and even now – often mentioned as one of the most pro-Israeli presidents in US history.

The Reagan administration inherited a Middle East in transition as a result of the Iranian Revolution and the Israel-Egypt Camp David accords, both of which took place during Jimmy Carter's presidency. While the former cast Israel as an ever more important and secure ally in a difficult region, and the latter ensured near-permanent high level of aid to Israel, these events also negatively impacted US-Israeli relations in the early 1980s. Iran's new regional posture convinced Saudi Arabia to seek advanced defensive aircrafts from the US and Israel's peace treaty with Egypt effectively removed the latter from the Arab-Israeli and Israeli-Palestinian conflicts, allowing Israel more leverage to undertake military operations against its adversaries.

On June 7, 1981, the Israeli Air Force launched a surprise raid on an Iraqi nuclear reactor near Baghdad. For it, the IAF had to violate the airspace of Saudi Arabia and Jordan, which enjoyed close ties with the US. Reagan responded forcefully to Israel's actions by publicly criticizing the raid, supporting UN resolution 487 (which condemned Israel's attack on a sovereign country) and suspending the delivery to Israel of a shipment of advanced fighter jets.

During and after this raid, the Reagan administration was also involved in a public battle against Israel and pro-Israel lobbying groups in the US over a proposed plan to sell advanced reconnaissance aircrafts (AWACS) to Saudi Arabia. The sale, a hold over from the Carter administration, was meant to help Saudi Arabia patrol its airspace, specifically against Iran in the Persian Gulf. Israel, however, feared for the qualitative military edge it held over Arab states and the IAF's freedom to maneuver in the region. After all, IAF jets had flown, undetected, through Saudi airspace. From Israel's perspective, Saudi Arabia was, legitimately, viewed as a hostile state whose leaders had been, on record, calling for Israel's destruction.

The pending AWACS deal debate played out in the US public sphere and its Congress. The battle was painted as one between the organized pro-Israel American Jewish community and the Reagan administration. Reagan had actually won close to 40% of the American Jewish vote in the 1980 election, still a post-World War II record for a Republican presidential candidate. Thus, many pro-Israel American Jews hoped his administration would yield to pressure to retain Jewish voters. Instead, Reagan courted Republican Senators and was able to ensure that a bill

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aimed at stopping the sale, which had sailed through the House of Representatives, was narrowly defeated by October 1981. The sale was a key blow to the pro-Israel lobby groups and their supporters, as it showed that a determined administration could convince enough members of the Senate, and the public, that American and Israeli interests did not always converge.

Nearly a year later, the US and Israel suffered another crisis in their relations. In June 1982, the Israeli military invaded southern Lebanon to, as claimed, clear Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) guerilla fighters and heavy weaponry from the area. Privately, however, the invasion was aimed at strengthening the power of the Right-wing Christian Phalangist Party and its paramilitary units, with the goal of bringing the Lebanese civil war to an end and a pro-Israeli government to power.

The Reagan administration initially supported Israel's invasion, believing that the government had the right to defend its citizens from the PLO's cross-border attacks and that Israel planned to create a limited security zone in southern Lebanon. However, Israeli forces soon advanced beyond southern Lebanon, and by August, began shelling PLO positions in Beirut. Reagan responded with an angry telephone call to Menachem Begin, in which he demanded a cessation of operations. During the conversation, Reagan had referred to Israeli airstrikes as a 'holocaust', greatly upsetting Israel's Prime Minister. Ultimately, the US brokered a deal allowing PLO affiliates to leave Lebanon.

In its later years, too, the Reagan administration continued to upset Israel and the pro-Israel American Jewish community, with actions such as Reagan's visit to a German military cemetery which housed the bodies of deceased Nazi soldiers in 1985; the jailing of the American-born Israeli spy Jonathan Pollard in 1987; and the beginning of formal dialogue with the PLO in 1988.

How do the crises in US-Israeli relations under Obama compare to those under Reagan? Arguably, no issue in US-Israeli relations under Obama has been as troublesome as the ones touched off by Israel's bombing of Iraq in 1981 and its attack on Beirut in 1982. The Obama administration has never voted to censure Israel at the UN and has only once abstained from a resolution that criticizes Israel. However, the AWACS debate of 1981 had some similarities to the recent debate over the Iran Nuclear Deal in 2015. In both cases, a sitting president had to rally the public behind an unpopular deal that was, at least initially, opposed by majorities of both major parties in the House and the Senate. In both cases, the president won.

Yet, there are two key differences worth highlighting. First, unlike current Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, in 1981, then Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin did not publicly interject into US domestic politics. Second, Reagan was able to convince several Democratic Senators to support the AWACS deal, whereas Obama was only able to assemble a veto-proof minority of Democratic Senators for the Iran Deal.

If Reagan was more critical of Israel at key points – in terms of rhetoric and action – than Obama has been, why have many argued that Obama has been the most anti-Israel president in history, whereas Reagan is often viewed by these same people as one of the most pro-Israel presidents in history? One possible answer: it boils down to partisanship, with Republicans making the former claim while looking back at US-Israeli relations under former Republican presidents through a rosy lens. But this answer is too simplistic. It does not account for key changes in US-Israeli relations and Israel's place in America's domestic politics since the end of the Cold War.

There are three main reasons why Obama has received harsher treatment than Reagan when it comes to Israel. First, Reagan's general pro-Israel rhetoric seems to have resonated with the pro-Israel community on an emotional level, whereas Obama, even when handing out generous aid to Israel or supporting it at the UN, has often been received coldly even by Democratic supporters of Israel. Second, in the early 1980s, it was still possible to find influential Republicans critical of the US-Israeli relationship and Israel's actions in occupied territories. The rise to prominence of the pro-Israel Christian Right in the Republican Party in the 1980s and 1990s ensured that these voices were largely silenced. Third, Reagan followed two presidents, Jimmy Carter and Gerald Ford, who had had serious public battles with their Israeli counterparts. Obama, on the other hand, is following perhaps the two most pro-Israel presidents, Bill Clinton and George W. Bush, to ever sit in the Oval Office, at least if 'pro-Israel' is defined as giving Israel near blanket support for its regional foreign policy and settlement enterprise. The pro-Israel community

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in the US, by Obama's time, had grown accustomed to automatic support for Israel at both the executive and legislative levels.

In conclusion, Obama has not been harder on Israel relative to former presidents. In fact, he has treaded more lightly with Israel than both Reagan and, it is worth noting, his Republican successor, George H.W. Bush. Unfortunately for Obama, he was elected into office in 2008 and not 1980 or 1988. It is unclear at this point whether his presidency will mark the beginning of a return to more of a pre-1993 US-Israeli relationship where Israel still gets significant, though not blanket, support from US presidents or whether it has merely been an anomalous blip in the middle of successive administrations which provide unquestioned support for Israel, regardless of its actions. Much will depend on what happens with American Jewish and general liberal American views of an increasingly religious and conservative Israel in the near future.

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