

Hillary Clinton, Israel and the Middle East

Written by Andrea Dessì

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ANDREA DESSÌ, JAN 24 2016

When it comes to the Middle East, there has been much speculation as to how a prospective Clinton presidency may differ from that of Obama's in pursuing US foreign policy goals in the region. Since resigning from her post as Secretary of State and announcing her candidacy, Clinton has dropped some hints as to where she stands on certain important issues. But, much uncertainty remains. While there is little doubt that a Clinton presidency would begin its mandate with a considerably different set of priorities and perceptions about the region, it is likely that on many key challenges Clinton's approach will gradually prove to be similar to that pursued by Obama during his second term. Certain differences will quickly emerge in line with the traditional necessity of new president's to distance themselves from their predecessors, but these are likely to be limited to style and tactics while the key policy objectives and overall strategy will remain unchanged.

The Middle East Cauldron

Out of the many foreign policy challenges that will confront the next president, none are likely to impact the agenda with such urgency as the overlapping mixture of crises gripping the Middle East and North Africa (MENA). From the battle against ISIS in Iraq and Syria, to the wars and troubled transitions in Yemen and Libya, jittery relations with Israel and the Arab Gulf States', implementation of the Iranian Nuclear Deal, festering tensions in Egypt and a worsening refugee crisis in the Mediterranean, the MENA region will quickly intrude – and perhaps even dominate – the next Administration's foreign policy agenda.

In these circumstances, a Clinton administration will have to strike a difficult balance between long-term US goals of promoting human rights and political representation in the region with the more immediate security challenges emanating from state failure and terrorist threats. Of the two, a security-first approach is likely to dominate the new administration's policy, with the US increasingly leaning towards the realist school of thought and away from the idealism that defined Obama's early outreach to the Muslim world. In this respect, it is worth remembering how Secretary of State Clinton had advised against a hasty departure of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, later recalling how Obama and his younger advisors had been "swept up in the drama and idealism of the moment" in their decision to withdraw support from the Egyptian ruler in February 2011.

Much has changed since the Arab Spring in 2011. Described in some quarters as a hawkish interventionist, it is unlikely that a Clinton Administration would commit large numbers of troops to either Iraq or Syria in an effort to confront ISIS or overthrow Assad. Past experiences in Libya, where Clinton was among the primary voices that pushed a reluctant Obama to support the ill-fated French-British military intervention in 2011, combined with a growing consensus in Washington that the real long-term US interests lay in East Asia, are likely to dampen any lingering enthusiasm for renewed long-term entanglements in the Middle East.

Differences in Clinton's approach to the region will therefore largely revolve around tone, emphasis and tactics. In this respect, a major priority will be that of seeking to dispel the perception – real or imagined – of a weakened and less resolute America, increasingly shying away from taking the lead in resolving international crises while not employing the whole breadth of US military and diplomatic capabilities in support of those goals. In the MENA region, Clinton is likely to strengthen Obama's recent efforts to reassure long-time allies while working to contain the fallout from the nuclear agreement with Iran that has sent ripples of apprehension across the region, particularly among the Arab

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monarchies of the Gulf and within Israel. In this respect, a Clinton administration will face the complicated task of having to distance itself from Obama's policies while acknowledging that Clinton herself was directly involved in their implementation between 2009 and 2013, including in setting up the secret dialogue with Iran that laid the groundwork for the agreement reached in July 2015.

Israel: Mending Fences and Donor Outreach

Nowhere is Hillary Clinton's balancing act more evident than in the difficult US relationship with Israel. Barack Obama's presidency has been marred by tensions with the right-wing Israeli government led by Benjamin Netanyahu. Distancing himself from the legacy of George W. Bush's wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and what was perceived as too much of a sympathetic and accommodating stance towards Israel were two priorities of Obama's early presidency.[1] This translated into a policy aimed at creating some distance between the United States and Israel while simultaneously launching a 'new beginning' with the Muslim world. Obama then went on to demand a settlement freeze from the Israelis as a goodwill gesture to facilitate the commencement of negotiations with the Palestinians, a request that was met with much concern and opposition in Israel. Tensions increased in the wake of America's decision to withdraw its support for Egypt's Mubarak, deepened as a result of Netanyahu's public rebuttal of Obama's call to base Israeli-Palestinian negotiations on the 1967 borders (with agreed land-swaps), and skyrocketed following the electoral victory of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt's first free elections in June 2012.[2]

While Hillary Clinton has since distanced herself from Obama's request for a settlement freeze, describing it as a "tactical mistake", there is no denying that Clinton – like many others in the US foreign policy establishment – share the same frustration felt by Obama and his advisors vis-à-vis Netanyahu. In the early 1990s, former Secretary of State James Baker actually went as far as "barring" Netanyahu from the State Department and in 1996 it was none other than Hillary's husband, President Bill Clinton, who exclaimed after first meeting with Netanyahu; "who the fuck does he think he is? Who's the fucking superpower here?"

Settlement construction has skyrocketed under Netanyahu, and Clinton herself has written in her memoirs *Hard Choices* that she was the "designated yeller" during the Obama Administration's confrontations with Netanyahu. And yelling matches there were. One of which reportedly lasted for 45 minutes after the Israeli government announced 1,600 new housing units for Israeli Jews in East Jerusalem during Vice President Joe Biden's visit to Israel in March 2010. In a 2014 CNN interview, Clinton noted how settlements were her "biggest complaint with the Israeli government":

I am a strong supporter of Israel, strong supporter of their right to defend themselves. But the continuing settlements [...] are clearly a terrible signal to send if at the same you claim you're looking for a two-state solution. [...] Some of the settlements would be within any reasonable drawing of borders for Israel. But a number of them would not. And those that would not would have to be either dismantled or live under Palestinian rule.

While there is much that the US could do in terms of holding the Israeli government accountable for its settlement enterprise – beginning with a real investigation into the considerable flow of private, tax-exempt, donations from the US that have supported such building efforts – to date no US administration has applied serious and sustained pressure on this issue. Obama's ill-fated attempt to convince the Israeli government to extend a partial moratorium on settlement construction in November 2010 – which included the somewhat humiliating refusal by Israel of 20 F-35 fighter jets at a cost of \$3 billion in exchange for a 90-day extension of the partial freeze – means that it is unlikely that Clinton would risk important political capital early in her first term by prioritizing this issue in her dealings with Israel. More likely would be a continuation of what has been termed Obama's policy of 'benign neglect' towards Israel, an approach that would see the United States tone down its efforts to pressure international actors into not overtly criticizing or sanctioning Israel's settlement enterprise, as has been the case with the European Union's recent decision to begin labelling Israeli produce from illegal settlements for example.

It seems likely that Clinton would begin her term worrying not about a 'new beginning' with the Muslim world, but rather the need for a fresh start with both Israel and Saudi Arabia, two countries that were among the least enthusiastic followers of the 2011 Arab protests and consequently of Obama's (and Clinton's) policies adopted in

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their wake. Between the two, there is no debating which country a presidential hopeful is more likely to court in the realm of public opinion in the United States. It should come as no surprise therefore that Clinton has already begun to reach out to Israel and the American-Jewish community with promises of support and a change of tone from the Obama Administration.

In March 2015, the Conference of Presidents of Major American Jewish Organizations released a supportive statement in which Clinton is quoted as saying that

we need to all work together to return the special US-Israel relationship to constructive footing, to get back to basic shared concerns and interests, including a two-state solution pursued through direct negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. We must ensure that Israel never becomes a partisan issue.

In July 2015, Haim Saban, an Israeli-American billionaire known for his staunchly pro-Israel views, donated \$2 million to a pro-Clinton super-PAC after the Hillary Campaign released a letter to Mr. Saban in which Clinton pledges her opposition to the Boycott, Divestment and Sanctions (BDS) movement and Palestinian attempts to internationalize the conflict by petitioning for recognition from the UN or other world bodies. Then, in November, Clinton authored an opinion piece in *Forward Magazine* entitled; "How I would reaffirm unbreakable bond with Israel – and Benjamin Netanyahu". In it Clinton promises to invite Netanyahu to the White House during her first month in office while working to "enhance our strategic partnership and strengthen America's security commitment to Israel."

Such outreach, particularly for a Democratic Party candidate, is commonplace during an election year but cannot in itself serve as an insurance against the kind of disagreements that have emerged during Obama's time in the White House.

The Looming Crisis

There are those within Israel and the conservative media in the US who have been warning that Clinton cannot be trusted on as a 'true friend of Israel'. Among these voices, many have pointed to the role of Sidney Blumenthal, a long-time advisor and confidant to both Bill and Hillary Clinton and whose son, Max Blumenthal, is a harsh critic of Israel. While it is true that Clinton has received advice from many in the American political spectrum, including some who are critical of Israel, such voices cannot compete with the whole breadth of the US-Israel relationship which largely transcends personal animosities. Instead, such criticism reflects the mounting frustration with Netanyahu and a very true concern that Israeli policies vis-à-vis the Palestinians are dooming Israel's Jewish-Democratic character. Indeed, these critical voices are not limited to the far left but also include such figures as Thomas Pickering, Daniel Kurtzer and Martin Indyk, all of whom have been US Ambassadors to Israel, and even Secretary of State John Kerry himself.

These voices symbolize the emergence of a growing constituency within the United States who feel their long history of friendship towards Israel is being betrayed by the actions of Israel's right-wing government and in particular by Netanyahu's open support for the Republican Party. Originating in a clear disagreement about how best to preserve Israeli long-term security while protecting US interests in the Arab-Muslim world, such tensions have not however spilled over to impact America's vast military and economic support for Israel, which has continued to progress independently from the top-level animosity that has developed between the respective governments.

US military aid to Israel has actually increased considerably under Obama's Presidency. Moreover, Washington has repeatedly reaffirmed Israel's right to defend itself, by itself, against possible threats in the region, particularly in the context of Gaza and Israel's confrontations with Hamas. Even on the much discussed issue of Israeli settlement construction, in February 2011, the US vetoed a UN Security Council resolution whose text closely matched key US statements on the issue. Most recently, the US has begun negotiating with Israel for a new 10-year Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) meant to update and augment Israel's military capabilities, particularly in the light of the Iranian Nuclear Deal. Media reports have indicated that Israel is requesting an annual increase from \$3.1 billion to as much as \$5 billion a year for the next decade, while the US Administration is reportedly ready to consider an annual increase to \$4.1-4.5 billion.

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Pending the successful conclusion of the MOU, a Clinton Administration would inherit a stronger US-Israel relationship. This will entail a change of public tone and more visible displays of cooperation with Israel while sidestepping, at least initially, those political and long-term strategic issues on which the two countries fundamentally disagree. Ultimately, according to many in the US, the only way to provide for Israel's long-term security while preserving and strengthening Israel's liberal democracy and rule of law – characteristics that represent the foundations of the US-Israel alliance – is that of reaching a two-state solution with the Palestinians. Only through a peace agreement and territorial withdrawals will the state of war between Israel and its neighbours end, and only following the emergence of a Palestinian state will Israel's democracy be preserved. If, on the other hand, the Israeli government continues to build settlements on Palestinian land, enact laws that restrict NGO activity in the country and proceed to publicly flout repeated US efforts to reignite peace negotiations, the foundations of the US-Israeli relationship will slowly erode and political crises in the relationship will only grow stronger.

Overall therefore, and notwithstanding some noise about a possible last-ditch attempt by Obama and Kerry to re-launch Israeli-Palestinian peace talks before the end of the year, it is unlikely that a Clinton Administration will enter the White House itching for a new confrontation with Netanyahu, whether this be on settlement construction or peace talks with the Palestinians. With the Middle East in turmoil, the US will be confronted with other priorities in the region and will need the support and assistance of Israel, as well as that of its other Arab allies in the Gulf. In these circumstances, Israel will regain its reputation as America's most stable and reliable ally in the region and US assistance and public diplomacy in the region will be updated accordingly.

That said the potential for crisis in US-Israel relations would not disappear under a Clinton presidency. A sudden and sustained explosion of violence in the West Bank or Gaza, increased European pressure to re-energize Israeli-Palestinian peace talks and renewed Palestinian efforts to sanction Israel at the United Nations could all force a reluctant US to refocus on the conflict, again setting the stage for a political confrontation with the Israeli government. In light of the fact that no potent opposition exists to the right-wing government headed by Netanyahu, a Clinton Administration will not have the luxury of waiting for a more accommodating Israeli government to be elected. In these circumstances, while Clinton will likely seek to clear the slate with Israel and not prioritize the issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace early in her first term, no one in Israel or the US is under any illusion that Obama's departure will end the underlining tensions that have rocked the US-Israel 'special relationship' over recent years.

While the two countries may agree on a whole number of threats and challenges, it is the contrasting and largely incompatible long-term visions of Israel's place in the region that fundamentally separate the United States, and particularly the Democratic Party, from the right-wing Netanyahu government. It is here that the seeds of past, present and future crises in the US-Israel relationship originate and it is only a matter of time until circumstances dictate that an American president again engages the explosive issue of Israeli-Palestinian peace, further exacerbating this underlining disagreement while evidencing how the world views and priorities of the two countries are slowly drifting apart.

Notes

[1] See, Michael Oren, *Ally: My Journey Across the American-Israeli Divide*, New York, Random House, 2014; Dennis Ross, *Doomed to Succeed: The US-Israel Relationship from Truman to Obama*, New York, Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2015; Frontline Documentary, *Netanyahu at War*, PBS, 5 January 2016, <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/frontline/film/netanyahu-at-war/>

[2] See, Andrea Dessì, "Israel and the Palestinians After the Arab Spring: No Time for Peace," *IAI Working Papers* 12/16, May 2012, <http://www.iai.it/sites/default/files/iaiw1216.pdf>

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