

International Relations: The Obama Administration's Relationship with Israel

Matthew Jacobs

The politics of international relations have always been complex. Yet despite this, such relations are essential to the way the modern world operates. International trade, military action, and political electability are all dependent on a nation's international status. The area is so significant, that no U.S. presidential candidate could possibly get elected without taking various stances on the matter. Israel is one of America's greatest and most reliable allies. It is one of the only allies we have in the Middle East. One of the most important issues concerning presidential campaigns in the United States is a candidate's stance on Israel. Furthermore, throughout one's presidential term, it is important that U.S.-Israel relations be handled extremely well.

U.S. Presidents have all handled relations with Israel differently and with various approaches. As the current President, Barack Obama has had his own dealings with U.S.-Israeli relations and has received many remarks about the way he handles such an important aspect of International relations. As mentioned previously, The U.S.'s relationship with Israel is crucial to politics in the Middle East. Yet, its relationship is also essential for domestic U.S. politics as well. International relations is a major concern for the citizens of the United States. People want to be sure that the international relation tactics their government is using actually work. Understanding the success or failure of the strategies implemented in our connections with states like Israel is crucial to the understanding of what works in International Relations and what doesn't.

It can obviously be said that success is very difficult to determine. Political success is based on perception, and is therefore subject to interpretation. However, what can be determined is the reasoning behind certain political actions as well as their effects. Through research, questions regarding success or failure, concerning the Obama administration, can be answered. Additionally, it could definitely be argued that something is successful if it works. If there is no evidence to suggest that U.S.-Israeli relations have come to a complete impasse, then it should not be seen as a failure. If U.S.-Israel relations have not been heavily damaged or fallen to the point beyond reasonable cooperation, then said relations should be labeled as successful.

Also, the effect such methods may have on the Arab community and the way they see the United States will be examined. Such research must also look into the effect such methods might have on U.S. citizens concerning future foreign policy. Thus, we must look at the President's use of media, diplomacy, and foreign policy methods that effect the relationship between Israel and the United States.

In order to determine such things, qualitative research methods shall be employed. By analyzing information and data that has already been gathered, the impacts that President Obama's methods have had can be determined. By looking at the words he has expressed, the actions he's taken, and the way such things have been viewed, a conclusion can be established. Such conclusions can help future administrations determine which methods to employ in order to bring a desired result.

Literature Review

Many scholars have conducted several studies on the Obama administration in relation to Israel. One of the first things to look at are Obama's positions on Israel before he was elected. In 2009 an article was printed in the *Journal of Palestine Studies*, "Barack Obama and the Arab-

Israeli Conflict”, that contained a collection of various positions held by Obama concerning Israel. During his 2008 election campaign, Obama’s position on Israel reflected a strong pro-Israel approach. It is argued that these strong and specific comments on his plans for Israel gave Obama a strong advantage, since his opponent, John McCain, didn’t provide such details. In his early speeches, Obama would reference the importance of maintaining a good relationship with Israel. This gives us an idea of the initial approach the Obama administration had before taking office. This, in turn, establishes a base line to work with.

Using this information has made it easier to examine how and if the vocal positions of the Obama administration have changed over time. In comparison, however, it doesn’t seem that has been much change concerning what is being said. In 2013 President Obama held a press conference in Israel expressing positions similar to those expressed in 2009. In 2009 Obama supported Israel’s right to defend itself and expressed a desire to limit terrorist organizations like Hezbollah.

In addition to mere vocal positions, the Obama administration has taken several actions concerning the state of Israel and its neighbors. One the most famous actions of the Obama administration was the passing of the “United States–Israel Strategic Partnership Act of 2013”. The Act makes Israel a major strategic partner of the United States and authorizes the President to carry out US-Israel cooperative activities. It also urges the President to provide assistance for the enhancement of Israeli rocket defense systems as well as enhance the U.S.’ ability to add to foreign-based defense stockpiles and other Department of Defense supplies to Israel.

Though the United States–Israel Strategic Partnership Act officially authorized the U.S. to support Israel on a military basis, it is most certainly not the first time the Obama administration had done this. A New York Times article verifies the 2008 and 2009 approval by

Congress from the Obama administration, to provide Israel with “bunker-busting bombs”. Such weapons were intended to be used against terrorists. However, the author (Thom Shanker 2011) also notes the caution taken by Congress in approving such weapons due to reports from the Pentagon as well as the effects such efforts would have on Jewish voters.

In addition, the Obama administration has been responsible for a multitude of foreign aid given to Israel. According to a government factsheet provided by the Office of the Press Secretary, President Obama has provided Israel with over three billion in foreign aid.

Other famous actions include those taken by the U.S. during the 2011 Arab Spring. The article by Efraim Inbar entitled *Israel's National Security amidst Unrest in the Arab World* provides us with details concerning the U.S. involvement in the Arab Spring and how such actions affected the Middle East. Inbar argues that the Obama administration's actions made the U.S. look “weak and confused”.(62). By taking different responses to different situations, as well as the decline of involvement in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Obama administration left many Middle Easterners “puzzled” (Inbar 62).

Lastly, it is important to look at the interpretation the media has had on the political dealings of the Obama administration. The articles by Peter Beinart, *FRENEMIES*, *Why Obama Will Ignore Israel*, and *Obama in Zion*, all give excellent insight into the interpretation of U.S. Israeli relations by the media. In addition, the article *FRENEMIES* gives us a greater understanding of the relationship between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu. The relationship between the leadership of two countries often alludes to the relationship between the two countries as a whole.

Reactions from Israeli news stations also bring great insight in regards to how the media reacts to different actions. An article in the *Jerusalem Post* by Arutz Sheva shows the Israeli

reaction concerning President Obama's recommendation to Prime Minister Netanyahu to sign a cease fire agreement with Hamas. Having been the most recent conflict of Israel's, reactions to this are the most relevant. Details on the Israeli reaction to the Obama administrations tactics during a time of crisis can help us come to a better understanding of political relations concerning Israel.

Methodology

For the most part, the above mentioned information is what we have before us. As mentioned previously, the method used for conducting this study will be qualitative. By using the information available, this study will attempt to establish a particular conclusion concerning the topic before us. In using this method, analysis shall be conducted on the various documents concerning U.S.-Israel relations. Content and Document analysis allow us to take the conclusions and data at hand and create either a new or pre-existing conclusion based upon the combined information. By understanding the information that others have found, we can determine what such data is really telling us.

Qualitative methods allow us to go beyond the purely numerical data of quantitative research. Quantitative data gives us numbers and percentages. Though such data tells us some exact information, it doesn't allow us to think outside of the box when it comes to determining a conclusion. A particular data set can tell us what happened, but not necessarily why it happened or what such numbers really mean. Using qualitative methods allow us to view data in a more complex and elaborate way. At times, it can be quite difficult to obtain the pure and accurate data required of quantitative methods. Ensuring such accuracy, even with the highest of resources, can prove to be most difficult. Additionally, quantitative methods often require the adherence of

strict ethical standards. Such standards often limit the amount and type of quantitative studies that can be conducted. Qualitative methods allow for a much freer and less convoluted approach.

Politics particularly is not mere numbers. Politics is action and reaction; cause and effect. In this particular case, the cause and effect relationship between the U.S. and Israel provides us with an example of how an aspect of politics works. International relations is one of the key aspects of American politics. In regards to this political area, it can be quite difficult to determine whether or not certain actions can be deemed as a success or a failure. For the most part success or failure is dependent upon the desired consequences of said initiators. In regards to the particular party the study is focused on, the Obama administration, such objectives are clear.

Analysis

First we must remember that U.S.-Israeli relations don't just involve Israel and the United States. Any dealings with the Israelis have the potential to affect everyone in the Middle East. When the Obama administration came into power, it had to deal with all the previous problems left by the Bush administration. One of most compelling issues to deal with was the continued war in Iraq and Afghanistan. One of Obama's biggest campaign promises was an end to the war in Iraq and the removal of troops from the region. Such a promise may seem as though it has nothing to do with Israeli relations, but such promises and actions made by President Obama have had a serious effect on the way he deals with issues in the Middle East. Having just ended a war, the American people had no desire to get involved with any new wars. It is a known fact that Israel, being the only Jewish state in the region, constantly faces opposition from its neighbors. The greatest of these oppositions consist of the terrorist group Hamas and the state of Iran. Both Hamas and Iran have been very vociferous concerning their dislike toward the state of Israel. As we can see by the events of the 2014 confrontation between Hamas and Israel, things

can escalate between the two sides rather quickly. Being a close and adamant ally of Israel, the U.S. does what it can to support Israel. This has been the relationship held by the United States and Israel through many administrations, and the Obama administration is no different.

Though many people would try to make it look like the Obama administration has been less supportive of Israel the multiple political actions say otherwise. It is true that the Obama administration has had some tensions with the Israeli government, involving certain comments and positions. However, such things are connected to the Obama administrations political agenda and don't majorly threaten the U.S.-Israeli allegiance.

The Obama administration is mainly trying to keep the United States from being forced to get involved in any long term confrontations or wars. When we analyze even the language Obama uses in his speeches, we can see such intentions. As I previously stated, there is little if any difference between Obama's speeches on Israel in 2008 and in 2013. He still agrees that Israel has the right to defend itself against aggressors. However, in his 2013 speech he also advocated for a peaceful two-state solution. Whenever, Israel gets into a confrontation, The U.S. becomes automatically involved. President Obama does not want such confrontations to escalate into the need of long term military involvement.

The desire to stay away from long term military campaigns can be seen in his reaction to the 2011 Arab Spring. Author of *Israel's National Security amidst Unrest in the Arab World*, Efraim Inbar, has provided excellent insight into this matter. The writer argues that such tactics by the U.S. made the country look "weak and confused" (Inbar 62). However, in spite of such things the United States has been able to stay out of any long term affairs. For the Obama administration, such tactics could be labeled as successful.

Though some would argue such tactics a failure because they made the U.S. look weak, it could further be argued that the Obama administration's main focus is that of domestic approval. Domestically, U.S. citizens would react a lot worse to having been dragged into another war, then temporary international reputation issues. Also, I find Beinart's assertion to be incorrect. The U.S. reaction to the Arab Spring may have made the U.S. look weak to some, but it is extremely doubtful that the majority of the Arab population felt that way. It is clear that the United States is still heavily revered throughout the US. Though they may have given the appearance, to some, of inconsistency, they never appeared weak. In addition to the knowledge of constant drone attacks, the assassination of Osama bin Laden would have nulled any thoughts of the U.S. being weak.

In addition to success in the eyes of the U.S., the U.S.-Israeli relations as a whole must also be analyzed. As I mentioned earlier, International relations should be considered successful if they work. As long as Israel and the United States are able to have a cooperative relationship, such relational tactics should not be labeled as failures. In light of such definitions, U.S.-Israeli relations should be found to have been successful. Despite the two nations' difference in opinions, such opinions are irrelevant. Because the U.S. and Israel are both committed to the protection and firm defense of the state of Israel.

In Peter Beinart's article *Why Obama Will Ignore Israel*, Beinart points to several observations that could be interpreted as concerning. He mentions the Obama administration's silent reaction to Prime Minister Netanyahu's decision to build in East Jerusalem as a testament to that of an eroding relationship. However, as I mentioned earlier, the main desire of the Obama administration was to stay out of confrontation. If the Obama administration had taken a more formal position on the matter, there would have been tensions on all sides. In addition, such

small issues are not the basis for the entirety of said relations. Though responses such as this may have raised a few eyebrows, that doesn't mean that they caused major blows to the relationship.

Furthermore, it must be remembered that actions speak louder than words. Despite public responses, it is the actions of the administration that are most effective. It is important that we don't forget the Obama administrations supplying of weapons, foreign aid or its support of the United States–Israel Strategic Partnership Act. Actions, such as these, hold far greater significance than words.

In light of the previously mentioned issues concerning the Obama administration, the fact that such responses are currently irrelevant doesn't mean that the continuance of such responses, throughout future administration, will have no effect. The documents at hand that emphasize the issues regarding U.S. reactions, suggest a minor fluctuation in U.S.-Israeli relations at times. However, such political responses are not strong enough to destroy the bond that the U.S. and Israel have. On the other hand, if such fluctuations remain constant, the relationship between the two countries could change. A lot of small tensions over time can have the same effect as a large political disagreement.

In Beinart's article *FRENEMIES*, we can clearly see that President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu have not always seen eye to eye. Though such tensions were emphasized by Israeli news stations such as Arutz Sheva, such disagreements were not extremely damaging. As Beinart points out, the Obama administration was able to resolve this issues through political means. With groups like AIPAC (The American Israel Public Affairs Committee) aiding them, the Obama administration has been able to smooth things over with Prime Minister Netanyahu. Also, Beinart refers to information obtained by the Obama administration that indicated that a majority of Jewish voters approved of the administrations methods. This shows that in spite of

minor hiccups, U.S.-Israel relations remain strong. However, if such disagreements and tensions were to persist, it would become a lot harder for relations to be repaired.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the Obama administration was successful in its relational tactics toward Israel. Despite the desire from Israel to take a more active stance against Iran, President Obama was able to strategically remove such options and keep the United States from long term military obligation. Furthermore, the relationship between the United States and Israel is still strong and successful. Despite minor discrepancies, the relationship still works. The U.S. has kept its essential ally in the Middle East and Israel continues to receive financial and defensive aid.

As mentioned above, the only problem that may come to U.S.-Israel relations would be through a major political disagreement or a continuation of minor incidents. Both of these are preventable. As the world shifts in times and administrations Israel must also be willing to give on some political stances. Simultaneously, the United States must continue to take a strong pro-Israel stand even during times of controversy. Such political strategies will ensure the United States and Israel stay on good terms.

References

- Beinart, Peter. 2012. "FRENEMIES." *Newsweek Global* (March): 46-52.
- Beinart, Peter. 2012. "Why Obama Will Ignore Israel." *Newsweek Global* (February): 22-23.
- Beinart, Peter. 2013. "Obama in Zion." *Newsweek Global* (March): 1.
- Inbar, Efraim. 2012. "Israel's National Security amidst Unrest in the Arab World." *Washington Quarterly*: 59-73.
- Kahn, Gabe. 2012. "Obama: US Support for Israel 'Sacrosanct'". *Arutz Sheva: Israel National News*.
- Obama, Barack. 2013. "The President's News Conference with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel in Jerusalem, Israel." *Daily Compilation of Presidential Documents* (March):1-11.
- Shanker, Thom. 2011. "U.S. Quietly Supplies Israel With Bunker-Busting Bombs". *The New York Times*.
2009. "Barack Obama and the Arab-Israeli Conflict". *Journal of Palestine Studies*. 64-75.
2012. "Fact Sheet: Advancing Israel's Security and Supporting Peace". *Office of the Press Secretary*.