



November 15, 110 Monday 16 Kislev 3871 9:30 IST  Print  Back to original article

THE JERUSALEM POST

Israel's best-selling English daily and most-read English website



Photo by: AP

When Ben-Gurion said no to JFK

By GERALD STEINBERG
28/03/2010

The "don't ask, don't tell" compromise served both Israel and the US well.

It's official – there is a major crisis in relations between Jerusalem and Washington. This is not an emotional response or passing tiff over the timing of Jerusalem building announcements, but a full-blown dispute on issues effecting vital Israeli and American interests. And although the personalities of Barack Obama and Binyamin Netanyahu may influence the conflict at the margins, the real clash is over policies and goals.

In these situations, both the president and the prime minister are aware of the huge asymmetry in the relationship. America is Israel's only reliable ally, and while there is some reciprocity through military technology and anti-terror intelligence, there is no balance. No other country – certainly not any European one – provides the sophisticated and costly weapons platforms needed to protect Israeli lives. As a result, the White House holds most of the cards, particularly with a majority in Congress (as is the case now).

But history shows that some issues are so critical that even the president of the United States cannot force Israel's hand. Important examples include Menachem Begin's rejection of Jimmy Carter's demand for an indefinite settlement freeze in the 1978 Camp David summit, and Ariel Sharon's refusal to accept George W. Bush's demand to end anti-terror operations in March 2002, following the Passover attacks, including the Park Hotel. The sharpest example took place almost 50 years ago, when John F. Kennedy demanded that David Ben-Gurion end Israel's nuclear deterrent program, deemed necessary to ensure Jewish survival in a very hostile world.

THE CLASH began in 1960, when the outgoing Eisenhower administration sought an explanation for the mysterious construction near Dimona. It was told that this top-secret activity in the middle of the desert was a harmless textile plant, and no, it could not come and visit. Classified spy photos were then published on the front page of *The New York Times* (yes, the CIA spied on the Jewish state, with or without forged passports).

When president Kennedy took office in 1961, the disagreement became a full-blown crisis. Like Obama, Kennedy was not inherently hostile (unlike Jimmy Carter), but he did not have a special sympathy for the Jewish people. His advisers urged continuous pressure, assuming that Israel would have no choice but to accept US demands. Every high-level meeting or communication repeated the demand for inspection of Dimona. One form of pressure was to deny Ben-Gurion an invitation to the White House – his May 1961 meeting with Kennedy was a low-key affair at the Waldorf Astoria Hotel in New York, and was dominated by this issue.

In some ways, Israel was far weaker than is the case today. Before 1967, the IDF was not seen as a formidable power, and the economy depended on massive aid from Diaspora Jewry. If the US government were to impose tax restrictions, the costs would have been very high. Ben-Gurion avoided saying no by dancing around them for two years.

Finally, Kennedy had enough, and in a personal letter dated May 18, 1963, the president warned that unless American inspectors were allowed into Dimona (meaning the end of any military activities), Israel would find itself totally isolated. Rather than answering, Ben-Gurion abruptly resigned. Kennedy's repeated emphasis on America's "deep commitment to the security of Israel" was all well and good, but, as seen after Egypt's sudden expulsion of UN peacekeepers in 1967, Israel could not depend on anyone – even the US.

Ben-Gurion's successor, Levi Eshkol received Kennedy's next letter, which upped the pressure, warning that the American commitment and support of Israel "could be seriously jeopardized."

Later, after Lyndon Johnson became president following Kennedy's assassination, the issue resurfaced, with threats of an American conventional arms embargo. But Eshkol followed Ben-Gurion's precedent. Similarly, in 1969, Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger made one more effort to force Israel to relinquish the deterrent option, and when Golda Meir refused, the US and Israel agreed to the "don't ask, don't tell" compromise that has served both countries well for more than 40 years.

IN ATTEMPTING to compare and apply the lessons to the current US-Israel crisis, the differences should not be ignored. Dimona was a bilateral issue, but in the peace process, the Palestinians are a crucial third party. There is no sense in pressuring Israel if Palestinians continue terror and incitement and reject the legitimacy of Jewish sovereignty. And although Jewish rights in Jerusalem are core issues for most Israelis and Jews, strategic deterrence is in a unique category.

The question, therefore, is not whether Netanyahu or any other Israeli leader can say no in the face of determined American pressure – there are enough precedents. Rather, the issue is whether Obama's demands are dangerous enough to justify the costs resulting from an escalating conflict.

Regardless of the future course of this crisis, it has already highlighted the need for carefully considered priorities and policies on Jerusalem and on the wider questions of borders and settlements. These cannot continue to be based on short-term coalition politics or decisions attributed to minor bureaucrats. At least in this respect, Israelis can thank Obama for this crisis.

The writer is president of NGO Monitor and a professor of political science at Bar-Ilan University.

[Print](#)[Back to original article](#)

[About Us](#) | [Advertise with Us](#) | [Subscribe](#) | [RSS](#)

All rights reserved © 1995 - 2009 The Jerusalem Post.

כל הזכויות שמורות © 2009- נט אפיקי תקשורת אינטר מדיה בע"מ