

Obama, Israel and R.E.S.P.E.C.T.

Monday, January 28, 2013

As Israelis reached the end of another intense election campaign, covering a wide range of complex issues, the president of the United States suddenly intervened by attacking Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's policies and declaring that "Israel doesn't know what its best interests are." Even given the history of friction between President Barack Obama and Netanyahu, this interjection was surprisingly harsh and violated the basic norms of behaviour in relations between democracies.

The citizens of most countries, including the often prickly Americans, generally don't like to be told that they are incapable of choosing leaders and governing themselves, and that outsiders know better. And Israelis are particularly sensitive to the intervention of powerful foreign governments, for whatever reason, including well-intentioned (and paternalistic) motives.

For 2,000 years, the Jewish People did not have the opportunity to govern themselves and were subject to the whims, and often, the hatreds, of the leaders of powerful empires. Indeed, the fundamental objective of Zionism was, and remains, the restoration of Jewish self-determination in a sovereign state in our historic homeland. Like any other nation, we must determine our own fate, for better or for worse, and while mistakes are inevitable, at least they're our mistakes. That's the essence of freedom and democracy.

Powerful outsiders – including foreign political leaders, journalists, Jewish philanthropists and organizations from the Diaspora – are free to give advice and provide assistance, but when it comes to critical decisions, they are, and must, remain the responsibility of the citizens of Israel and our elected leaders. When distant advice turns into manipulation or the imposition of policies, it becomes an infringement on sovereignty and independence.

In addition, in this case, as in many others, Israelis are far more familiar with the complexities and options than distant observers, including the leaders of powerful countries. How simple it must seem to Obama and his advisers, sitting in Washington, to look at Israel, which he failed to visit once during his first four-year term, and repeat the popular mantra that settlements are the main obstacle to peace. If this were indeed the situation, Israelis would be the first to embrace the hope of an end to 65 years of hatred, warfare and mass terror.

But most Israelis live in a different and more complex reality, and they're still recovering from the false optimism of the 1993 Oslo peace accords, which ended in a mass Palestinian terror campaign.

That experience was reinforced by the 2005 Gaza withdrawal, when settlements weren't frozen, they were dismantled. And in response, Gaza became the launching pad for thousands of rockets aimed at Israeli cities. Nevertheless, during Obama's first term, Netanyahu agreed to an unpopular settlement construction freeze, and once again, the Palestinians took no measures toward peace.

Yes, it's easy to find a few Israelis who agree with Obama and other foreigners who think that they know Israel's "true interests" better than the elected government, but this group had every opportunity to present its opinions to the voters, and they have been repeatedly rejected.

This is not due to some conspiracy of "right-wing settler fanatics" – the anti-settler movement in Israel is very prominent in the media, and receives massive financial assistance from European governments

and ideological groups such as the New Israel Fund. As the vast majority of Israelis showed again on Jan. 22, they simply remain unconvinced by these claims.

Even more than erring on the substance, or trying to manipulate public opinion and impose his views of “Israel’s best interests,” Obama erred by failing to show respect. If he and his advisers knew anything about Israeli democracy and the spark at the core of Zionism, they would understand that respect for national sovereignty – for being a state with equal rights to determine our destiny and interests – is essential and not subject to compromise. Given his own personal background, respect is a value that Obama should readily understand.