

Obama and Netanyahu: Reboot  
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In their second act, will Benjamin Netanyahu and Barack Obama find happiness, and cooperate on policies that will best serve both Israeli and American interests?

The answer does not depend on psychology or individual personalities. Serious leaders leave their private likes and dislikes behind when it comes to serious issues – Churchill, Roosevelt and Stalin did what they had to, despite the deep animosities. And Sadat and Begin did not need to play golf in order to negotiate peace.

Instead, the friction between Netanyahu and Obama over the past four years was rooted in their very different perceptions of international politics in general, and the Middle East in particular. The Israeli leader is a hard core Realist, (or pessimist), who sees the dangers of what Thomas Hobbes (1588 -1679) described as “war of all against all” in the anarchy of international politics. In this framework, Israel stands out as a solitary and vulnerable Jewish state in a dangerous and highly unstable Middle Eastern environment. For Netanyahu, leaders and frameworks that involve corrupt international bodies such as the United Nations Human Rights Council or that use the façade of judicial standards are without the substance.

Obama, in contrast, is a liberal Democrat with an Idealist (or optimistic) inclination to conflict, and like Immanuel Kant (1724 – 1804), believes in the power of international law and dialogue to bring peace. For Obama, military force is an undesirable last resort, reserved for use against a few sociopaths like Bin Laden and Taliban terrorist leaders. He invested major and largely unrequited efforts towards the goal of eliminating nuclear weapons and ending America’s military role in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Obama’s idealism is also reflected in many of his key appointments and in the renewed US participation in the Human Rights Council, justified by lofty principles, as opposed to the immoral and destructive reality.

This basic contrast is central to understanding the differences between the two leaders on how best to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. Obama stresses negotiations, dialogue and engagement. In his recent State of the Union address, Obama again declared that “the leaders of Iran must recognize that now is the time for a diplomatic solution...”

In contrast, Netanyahu, as a Hobbesian realist, dismisses hopes for change in Iranian policy without a clear and effective threat of force, declaring “Words alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions alone will not stop Iran. Sanctions must be coupled with a clear and credible military threat if diplomacy and sanctions fail.” Netanyahu’s realism also reflects the history of antisemitism and Jewish vulnerability. In his 2011 address to a joint session of the US Congress, Netanyahu declared:

Less than seven decades after six million Jews were murdered, Iran’s leaders deny the Holocaust of the Jewish people, while calling for the annihilation of the Jewish state.

On these and other issues, Netanyahu’s natural allies in the US are security-based Republicans (and a

dwindling group of like-minded Democrats) who identify with Israel as a democratic society under extraordinary and unique threat, and have a detailed understanding of the security environment.

Political Realism also explains Netanyahu's caution regarding the Palestinians. Tangible security assets – territory and strategic depth to reduce vulnerability to attack – are to be carefully protected, and expectations of breakthroughs towards stable peace are minimal. Most Arab leaders are viewed as ideologically committed to a zero-sum framework, unchanged since 1947 and the violent rejection of the UN framework that included a Jewish state, regardless of boundaries. In addressing the Knesset in May 2011, Netanyahu declared:

What were they yelling in Gaza yesterday? They were shouting that they want to return to Jaffa. ....What did the leader of Hamas say yesterday? 'We want to see the end of the Zionist agenda.'

Any accommodation would require a realization on the part of the Arab leaders and societies that the goal of destroying Israel is out of reach, and that their own vital interests are best served by an end to conflict, as in cases of Egypt and Jordan.

On this basis, Netanyahu's negotiation strategy is based on reciprocity, in contrast to unilateral concessions that are counterproductive and do not bring peace. Four years ago, in response to intense pressure from Obama, Netanyahu declared support for a "two-state solution," marking the first time that a Likud prime minister had accepted the principle of a Palestinian sovereignty. Netanyahu also agreed to a ten month freeze on settlement construction activity. In return, he demanded Palestinian recognition of Israel as the nation-state of the Jewish people, in order to create a stable foundation for negotiations. But when Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas repeatedly rejected this and other expressions of reciprocity, the freeze ended and four years passed without change. And Obama obtained nothing from the efforts to force Netanyahu to move according to the American perceptions of international negotiations.

As Obama prepares to visit Israel for the first time as President, there are indications that he and Netanyahu have found common ground. Netanyahu's new government will include voices that see the dangers in the status quo on the West Bank, and will push for change (in the framework of reciprocity). And the American optimists have been confronted with the evidence of Hobbesian realism, from North Korean to Iran, and from the riots in Egypt to the killing fields of Syria. As serious leaders dealing with serious issues, Obama and Netanyahu should be able to now work together to protect the vital interests of both nations.