

London Review Blog

Taking Sides

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In the wake of Vice President Joe Biden's ill-fated trip to Israel last week, many people would agree with the Israeli ambassador Michael Oren's remark that 'Israel's ties with the United States are in their worst crisis since 1975... a crisis of historic proportions.' Like all crises, this one will eventually go away. However, this bitter fight has disturbing implications for Israelis and their American supporters.

First, the events of the past week make it clear in ways that we have not seen in the past that Israel is a strategic liability for the United States, not the strategic asset that the [Israel lobby](#) has long claimed it was. Specifically, the Obama administration has unambiguously declared that Israel's expansionist policies in the Occupied Territories, including East Jerusalem, are doing serious damage to US interests in the region. Indeed, Biden [reportedly told](#) the Israeli prime minister, Binyamin Netanyahu, in private:

This is starting to get dangerous for us. What you're doing here undermines the security of our troops who are fighting in Iraq, Afghanistan and Pakistan. That endangers us, and it endangers regional peace.

If that message begins to resonate with the American public, unconditional support for the Jewish state is likely to evaporate.

Right after Biden's remarks were reported by the Israeli newspaper [Yedioth Ahronoth](#), Mark Perry, a Middle East expert with excellent contacts in the US military, [described](#) a briefing that senior officers working directly for General David Petraeus, the head of Central Command, gave on 16 January to Admiral Michael Mullen, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff. The central message Petraeus sent to Mullen, according to Perry, was that 'Israeli intransigence on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was jeopardizing US standing in the region... and could cost American lives.' Apparently, Mullen took this message to the White House, where it had a significant impact on the president and his chief advisers. Biden's comments to Netanyahu appear to reflect that view.

Israel's supporters in the United States have long defended the special relationship between the two countries on the grounds that their interests are virtually the same and therefore it makes sense to back Israel no matter what policies it adopts. Recent events show that claim to be false, however, which will make it hard to defend the special relationship, especially if it is putting American soldiers at risk.

Second, the Obama administration has gone beyond simply expressing anger over the 1600 housing units that Israel announced it would build in East Jerusalem just after Biden landed at Ben-Gurion Airport. According to press reports that have not been challenged, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton has demanded that Netanyahu reverse his government's decision approving that construction. This demand is unprecedented; the United States has often complained about settlement building, and Obama asked Israel to freeze temporarily the construction of new settlements in 2009, but it has never asked Israel to reverse a building plan that the government has already approved.

Israel will surely fight tooth and nail against Clinton's demand, and so will the main groups in the lobby. The Netanyahu government is filled with hard-line opponents of a two-state solution, many of whom also believe that East Jerusalem is an integral part of Israel, and it is hard to see how Netanyahu's coalition could survive if he agreed not to build those 1600 housing units. Yet Obama has powerful incentives to stand his ground as well. After all, he backed down last year when Netanyahu refused his request that Israel completely freeze settlement building in all of the Occupied Territories – including East Jerusalem – and that act of spinelessness has cost him dearly in the Arab and Islamic world. More important, we now know that the president and his lieutenants believe that new construction in East Jerusalem threatens American lives, which makes it even harder to see how he could back down without suffering political damage.

Still, it is hard to imagine the Obama administration engaging in a serious fight with Israel over the fate of those 1600 housing units, given that the lobby wields extraordinary influence inside the Beltway. The president is also not inclined by temperament to engage in public brawls and he has so many other problems on his plate that he surely does not want to get bogged down in a costly fight with Israel and its American supporters. In the end, there is likely to be a rather muted, protracted dispute between the two sides over those housing units and the many others that the Netanyahu government plans to build in East Jerusalem. This ongoing conflict will be a constant reminder to Americans that Israel and the United States have conflicting interests on a very important issue.

The third reason that this crisis is so troublesome for Israel and the lobby is that it forces the latter to choose sides in a public way. There is little doubt that almost all of the mainstream organisations of the lobby will back Israel to the hilt and blame the Obama administration for the crisis. This tendency to defend Israel no matter what it does is reflected in the recent comments of Abraham Foxman, the head of the Anti-Defamation League. He [issued a press release](#) about the Biden visit in which he said he was 'shocked and stunned at the administration's tone and public dressing down of Israel on the issue of future building in Jerusalem'. It was, he said, 'a gross overreaction to a point of policy difference among friends'. He will have plenty of company in the weeks ahead from his fellow hard-liners in the lobby, who will not miss an opportunity to defend Israel and lambast Obama and his advisers.

Siding with Israel against the United States was not a great problem a few years ago: one could pretend that the interests of the two countries were the same and there was little knowledge in the broader public about how the Israel lobby operated and how much it influenced the making of US Middle East policy. But those days are gone, probably for ever. It is now commonplace to talk about the lobby in the mainstream media and almost everyone who pays serious attention to

American foreign policy understands – thanks mainly to the internet – that the lobby is an especially powerful interest group.

Therefore, it will be difficult to disguise the fact that most pro-Israel groups are siding with Israel against the US president, and defending policies that respected military leaders now openly question. This is an awful situation for the lobby to find itself in, because it raises legitimate questions about whether it has the best interests of the United States at heart or whether it cares more about Israel's interests. Again, this matters more than ever, because key figures in the administration have let it be known that Israel is acting in ways that at best complicate US diplomacy, and at worst could get Americans killed.

The crisis will undoubtedly simmer down over the next few weeks. We are already hearing lots of reassuring rhetoric from the administration and Capitol Hill about 'shared values', 'unbreakable bonds' and the other supposed virtues of the special relationship. And the lobby is hard at work downplaying the importance of the crisis. For example, Congressman Gary Ackerman, a fervent supporter of Israel, described recent events as a 'mini-crisis, if even that'. Michael Oren is now denying – rather late in the game I might add – that he ever said that relations between Israel and the United States are at a 35-year low. He claims to have been 'flagrantly misquoted'. And to show how Orwellian the lobby can be, Israel's supporters are also trying to make the case that Biden too was flagrantly misquoted and indeed, he never told Netanyahu that Israel's policies were putting American troops at risk.

This concerted effort to rewrite history and generate lots of happy talk about the special relationship will surely help ameliorate the present crisis, but that will only be a temporary fix. There will be more crises ahead, because a two-state solution is probably impossible at this point and 'greater Israel' is going to end up an apartheid state. The United States cannot support that outcome, however, partly for the strategic reasons that have been exposed by the present crisis, but also because apartheid is a morally reprehensible system that no decent American could openly embrace. Given its core values, how could the United States sustain a special relationship with an apartheid state? In short, America's remarkably close relationship with Israel is now in trouble and this situation will only get worse.