

## Center Field: Which side are they on?

2009-06-10 21:21:05 by Southern

JONATHAN TOBIN

US President Barack Obama's call for an end to any growth in the Jewish settlements in the West Bank has backed Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu into a corner. With Israel rightly insisting that a ban on "natural growth" inside existing settlements - especially those that past understandings with the US were seen as likely to be retained even in a peace settlement - is unreasonable, a showdown may be inevitable.



Former US President George W. Bush.

Photo: Courtesy

Obama's remarks were hardly the first time this issue has been used as a cudgel by the White House. But that can't be much consolation for Netanyahu. While he can say "no" to the US, there would be a price to be paid for doing so.

The precedent for this was established in 1991 when Israel asked the US for a loan guarantee to help pay for housing a massive wave of immigration from the former Soviet Union. The elder president George Bush demanded that none of the funds be used for housing in the settlements. The answer of then-prime minister Yitzhak Shamir of the Likud to this diktat about where the new immigrants could live was a blunt no. He asked the American Israel Public Affairs Committee to lobby Congress to make sure the guarantees were passed, triggering a memorable confrontation.

Yet the lessons of this incident tend to be remembered differently in Israel and the US. To the extent that Israelis remember this moment, they tend to recall that Bush's statement intimidated AIPAC and that Shamir alienated Israel's only ally. This played a not insignificant role in his defeat in the 1992 election which brought

Yitzhak Rabin to power.

But American Jews primarily remember Bush's news conference, in which he referred to himself as "one lonely little guy" standing up against "1,000 lobbyists on the Hill," as an attempt to delegitimize pro-Israel advocacy and thereby silence American Jewry. Whether he intended it or not, his stand turned out to be a forerunner of the Walt-Mearsheimer "Israel lobby" thesis that seeks to portray bipartisan support for the Jewish state as the result of a plot by a cabal of Zionists. Bush's stand is also recalled alongside his secretary of state James Baker's widely quoted retort when asked whether hostility to Israel was a political liability. "F\_\_\_ 'em," Baker is believed to have said, "they don't vote for us anyway."

Unfortunately for both Baker and his master, American Jews took their quips to heart. Though the majority of Jewish voters had, as Baker said, not voted for Bush in 1988, 35% did support him. However in 1992 when Bush ran for reelection that number fell to approximately 11% in what turned out to be a losing effort in a close race. Even more troubling for Republicans was the fact that this event set back the party's efforts to grow its share of the Jewish vote, that reached a record high with Ronald Reagan's candidacy in 1980. Indeed, no subsequent Republican candidate, not even his far more pro-Israel son George W. Bush or a moderate on social issues like John McCain, has equaled the tally of Jewish votes that George H. W. Bush received in 1988.

Flash forward to 2009 and it looks like another president is heading for a similar confrontation with a Likud prime minister. However, Obama and his advisers seem to think there will be no political price to pay for following in the elder Bush's footsteps.

OBAMA'S DECISION to personally confront Netanyahu on settlements, his decision to avoid Israel during his tour of the Middle East, and a National Public Radio interview in which he described his policy as merely being "honest" which invoked the specter of an "even-handed" approach to the conflict (which under the circumstances means Israel will be left without an ally), all ought to worry friends of Israel.

This apparent decision of the White House to emphasize outreach to the Muslim world while de-emphasizing the alliance with Israel might be a political risk for Obama. But Netanyahu, the Likud and the settlements are all unpopular among American Jews. Even more to the point, Obama's camp believes the loyalty of Jews to the Democratic Party and its very popular leader may now outweigh the vestigial ethno-religious pull of affection for the Jewish state. In a confrontation with Netanyahu, they seem to agree with left-wing groups like J Street that claim most Jews will back Obama.

Indeed, 18 years after the confrontation with the elder Bush, factors such as assimilation and the passing of a generation that remembered the Holocaust and

the struggle to create the state means that many Jews see Israel in a very different light than their equally liberal predecessors.

However, it should also be recalled that American Jews were no more supportive of settlements in 1991 than they are today. That didn't endear them to Bush because the imperative to resettle Jews from the former Soviet Union outweighed concerns about settlements. Today there is another factor that could focus this community on opposing Obama's stand: Iran's drive for nuclear weapons and the existential threat such weapons would pose to Israel.

Obama's insistence on picking a fight with Israel over settlements rather than prioritizing the menace from Iran is puzzling, since more concessions on settlements are unlikely to advance the peace process with a toothless Palestinian Authority or its Hamas rivals, neither of which have much interest in accepting a two-state solution that most Israelis already support. It is as if Obama has decided that pressure aimed at ousting Netanyahu, who was elected in February, is more important than confronting the ayatollahs in Teheran, even if it means the latter will almost certainly be granted the time to advance their nuclear ambitions.

Can such a policy be what the majority of American Jews who voted for Obama were expecting? Will they reward an administration that pursues such a reckless policy with continued high levels of support? The White House seems to think so.

Yet whether or not he is successful in causing Israel's government to fall, it is clear that Obama's moves will not fulfill his promise to halt Iran's nuclear plans or bring peace with the Palestinians closer. While the president may believe he can maneuver around this diplomatic obstacle course unscathed, the lethal combination of nuclear capability and terrorism from Teheran's allies Hamas and Hizbullah may well sabotage his strategy. It is hard to believe that most Americans, let alone Jews, would greet such an outcome with general applause, no matter how distant from Israel Obama may think they have become.

The writer is executive editor of Commentary magazine, where he contributes to its blog Contentions at [www.commentarymagazine.com](http://www.commentarymagazine.com)

[Jerusalem Post](#)

<http://www.southernwolf.net/modules.php?name=News&file=article&sid=1398>