

US-Israel relations: tiff or tipping point

Introduction

General David Petraeus is the head of US Central Command (CENTCOM), whose area of responsibility (AOR) stretches from Egypt to the borders of China, covering a large swathe of the Muslim world. As CENTCOM commander, General Petraeus is in overall command of US military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq.

On 16 March 2010, he presented a report on CENTCOM activity to the US Senate Armed Services Committee [1]. In it, he listed a series of factors that “can serve as root causes of instability or as obstacles to security” in the CENTCOM area. First on the list is “insufficient progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace”, of which he wrote:

“The enduring hostilities between Israel and some of its neighbors present distinct challenges to our ability to advance our interests in the AOR. Israeli-Palestinian tensions often flare into violence and large-scale armed confrontations. The conflict foments anti-American sentiment, due to a perception of U.S. favoritism for Israel. Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples in the AOR and weakens the legitimacy of moderate regimes in the Arab world. Meanwhile, al-Qaeda and other militant groups exploit that anger to mobilize support. The conflict also gives Iran influence in the Arab world through its clients, Lebanese Hizballah and Hamas.”

General Petraeus made similar remarks in the equivalent report in April 2009, saying:

“The [Arab-Israeli] conflict has created a deep reservoir of anti-American sentiment, based on the perception of US favoritism for Israel.” [2]

The clear message here is that the ongoing conflict between Israel and Palestinians – and the US alliance with Israel – is detrimental to US relations with the Muslim world and generates support for al-Qaeda and similar groups, which threaten Americans, and American interests, at home and abroad. In other words, the US is acting contrary to its own interests by allying itself closely with Israel, while Israel has not made peace with the Palestinians and other Arab states.

A recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda

This conclusion by General Petraeus is rather obvious: an Israeli state in conflict with Palestinians is a recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda. But it is rarely acknowledged publicly in the US. Instead, across the political spectrum, Israel is portrayed as the US's sole reliable ally in the Middle East in

its “war on terror” against al-Qaeda and much else besides, a portrayal that Israel itself is at pains to accentuate.

Speaking to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in Washington on 22 March 2010, Israeli Prime Minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, said that today Israel “is helping America stem the tide of militant Islam” [3]. In reality, Israel is enhancing “the tide of militant Islam” by adding to the anger in the Muslim world on which al-Qaeda thrives.

What benefit does the US from its close relations with Israel, which costs it \$2.5 billion tax dollars a year? Unlike the Muslim world, Israel has no resources such as oil to which the US would like access on favourable terms. As regards population, Israel is tiny compared with the Muslim world – 7 million or so compared with upwards of 1.5 billion – so the scope for US trade and investment is much less. It makes no sense for the US to ally itself so closely with this tiny state and thereby alienate 1.5 billion people to such an extent that al-Qaeda profits and Americans are killed, the more so when Israel continues to add to the alienation by its ceaseless confiscation and colonisation of Palestinian land.

Clearly, in its own interests, the US should apply whatever pressure is necessary to force Israel to make peace with the Palestinians by agreeing to the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders. Or, failing that, it should terminate its alliance with Israel – and save \$2.5 billion a year in tax dollars.

Obama's initiative

When President Obama embarked on his Middle East initiative, shortly after his inauguration in January 2009, it looked as if he might be prepared to apply the necessary pressure to Israel.

First, he stated repeatedly that such a settlement was in the US “national security interest” [4], and so did George Mitchell [5], his Special Envoy to the Middle East. In other words, the US was taking this initiative, not out of a passing concern for the plight of Palestinians, but in pursuit of concrete national interest. While he did not spell out the message as Petraeus has done that the ongoing conflict was making the world less safe for the US, that was the implication in the phrase “national security interest”.

Second, the initiative was accompanied by declarations by President Obama that he wished to improve US relations with the Muslim world, for example, in his speech in Cairo on 4 June 2009. A key element in that process had to be the US using its muscle to bring about a comprehensive settlement in the Middle East, along the lines proposed by the Arab League in Beirut in March 2002 [6], and later endorsed by Muslim states in the Organisation of the Islamic Conference. This Arab initiative envisages the creation of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders and, in the event of a comprehensive settlement being reached, the normalisation of relations between Israel and the Arab state members of the League.

A settlement on the lines of this Arab initiative brought about by the US would do wonders for US relations with the Muslim world.

Obama backs down

Initially, President Obama demanded that Israel freeze all settlement activity in the West Bank, including East Jerusalem, prior to the start of negotiations, as required by the Road Map. This fuelled expectations that this time a US president intended to stand up to Israel and force it to

cease its confiscation and colonisation of the land which is supposed to belong to a Palestinian state at the end of the negotiations.

Both the President and his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, made unusually blunt demands of Israel that settlement building should cease. For example, on 27 May 2009, Hillary Clinton laid down the law in the following terms:

“With respect to settlements, the President was very clear when Prime Minister Netanyahu was here. He wants to see a stop to settlements – not some settlements, not outposts, not natural growth exceptions. ... That is our position.” [7]

But, when Israel said no, the President capitulated and last September settled for an Israeli promise of “restraint” in settlement activity outside East Jerusalem lasting 10 months. That the US had backed down was bad enough; that, standing beside Prime Minister Netanyahu in Jerusalem on 31 October 2009, Hillary Clinton described this ill-defined “restraint” as “unprecedented” made matters worse [8]. In practice, the Israeli “restraint” has made no identifiable difference.

Hopes that had been raised had now been dashed and, understandably, the PLO refused to accede to US pressure to enter into negotiations with Israel. If the US was unwilling to force Israel to cease its confiscation and colonisation of Palestinian land even for a limited period, what hope was there that the US was going to force Israel to abandon its colonies on Palestinian land and withdraw to the 1967 borders so that a Palestinian state could be established?

US condemns Israel

In March 2010, with the blessing of the Arab League, the PLO yielded to pressure and agreed to indirect talks with Israel, in which George Mitchell was to act as an intermediary. However, just as these talks were about to begin, it was announced on 9 March 2010 that 1,600 housing units were to be built at Ramat Shlomo in East Jerusalem.

The US vice-president, Joe Biden, who is proud to call himself a Zionist, was in Israel at the time to launch the talks and reassure Israelis publicly of Washington’s “absolute, total, unvarnished commitment to Israel’s security”, to quote from his remarks as he stood beside Netanyahu on 8 March 2010 [9]. The announcement took Biden by surprise and a rare event occurred in US-Israel relations – the US uttered the word “condemn” in respect of an Israeli action. In a statement, Biden said:

“I condemn the decision by the government of Israel to advance planning for new housing units in East Jerusalem. The substance and timing of the announcement, particularly with the launching of proximity talks, is precisely the kind of step that undermines the trust we need right now and runs counter to the constructive discussions that I’ve had here in Israel.” [10]

Why this action merited such unusually harsh words is not clear, since Israel had never agreed to exercise any “restraint” whatsoever in respect of settlement building in East Jerusalem.

Apparently, Biden spoke extremely harshly to Netanyahu in private. An account of their conversation appeared in the Israeli newspaper *Yedioth Ahronoth* on 11 March 2010, in an article headed *Biden: You’re Jeopardizing Regional Peace* [11]. Here’s an extract:

“While standing in front of the cameras, the US vice president made an effort to smile at Binyamin Netanyahu even after having learned on Tuesday [9 March] that the Interior Ministry had approved plans to build 1,600 housing units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Ramat Shlomo. But in closed conversations, Joe Biden took an entirely different tone. ...

“People who heard what Biden said were stunned. ‘This is starting to get dangerous for us’, Biden castigated his interlocutors. ‘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.’

“The vice president told his Israeli hosts that since many people in the Muslim world perceived a connection between Israel’s actions and US policy, any decision about construction that undermines Palestinian rights in East Jerusalem could have an impact on the personal safety of American troops fighting against Islamic terrorism.”

At the time of writing (6 April 2010), the dispute between the US and Israel is ongoing and there are no plans for negotiations to begin. The PLO has reverted to its original position that it will not enter into negotiations of any kind with Israel until it freezes all settlement activity, as required by the Road Map.

East Jerusalem is “occupied” territory

In the interim, speaking to AIPAC in Washington on 22 March 2010, Netanyahu reasserted Israel’s absolute right to build Jewish settlements in East Jerusalem – on the grounds that Jews were building there 3,000 years ago [3].

Israel regards East Jerusalem as an integral part of its territory, having annexed it in 1967 shortly after occupying it by force. This annexation is in breach of Security Council resolutions 252, 267, 271, 298, 476 and 478 that demand its reversal.

East Jerusalem is therefore “occupied” territory, within the meaning of the 4th Geneva Convention, like the rest of the West Bank, and Israel is the Occupying Power.

Building Jewish settlements there, and in the West Bank, is contrary to Article 49(6) of the Convention, which forbids an Occupying Power from transferring its citizens into the territory it occupies. Nevertheless, Israel continues to build settlements despite Security Council demands in resolutions 446, 452 and 465 that it cease and remove the existing settlements.

At this time when Israel is refusing to freeze settlement activity as a prelude to negotiations, it is important to note that, if Israel complied with Security Council resolutions, as it is supposed to do as a UN member state, there would be no Jewish settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, and the latter would not be annexed to Israel.

Gates on US national security interests

General Petraeus’ political master, Secretary of Defense, Robert Gates, was asked to comment on his remarks at a press conference on 25 March 2010. He responded:

“... the lack of progress toward a ... Middle East peace is clearly an issue that is exploited by our adversaries in the region and is a source of certainly political challenge. ... there is no

question that the absence of Middle East peace does affect US national security interests in the region, in my view." [\[12\]](#)

Other US foreign policy specialists have been blunter in their assertion that a settlement in the Middle East is essential for US national security. Listen to this:

"Osama Bin Laden did not commission attacks in New York and Washington, DC to 'free Palestine'. Yet tens of millions of young men and women in the Arab world and the Muslim world beyond – the products of demographic 'youth bulges' in challenged economies – are targeted for recruitment by al-Qaeda and its affiliates partly on the basis of ongoing defeat, injustice and humiliation in the Arab-Israeli context. Some of these recruits have found their way to Iraq. Others no doubt await opportunities to strike at American interests and persons ...

" ... it is essential that the incoming administration make Arab-Israeli peace a high national security priority from the beginning. A comprehensive Arab-Israel peace will not erase al-Qaeda. Yet it would help drain the swamp in which the disease thrives and mutates."

This is from a document entitled *A last chance for a two-state Israel-Palestine agreement* [\[13\]](#), addressed to the incoming Obama administration from a bipartisan group of ten former senior government officials, both Republican and Democrat.

These included Brent Scowcroft and Zbigniew Brzezinski, National Security Advisers to, respectively, President George HW Bush and President Jimmy Carter; Lee Hamilton, vice-chairman of the 9/11 Commission; and James Wolfensohn, former head of the World Bank and Tony Blair's predecessor as Special Envoy for the Middle East Quartet.

General Petraeus isn't a lone voice in saying that an Israeli state in conflict with Palestinians is a recruiting sergeant for al-Qaeda.

Since 9/11, protecting the US homeland, and US interests abroad, from al-Qaeda has been the major priority for the US. If bringing about a settlement in the Middle East comes to be seen as a means of reducing this threat, then it would be difficult for Israel and its supporters in the US to hold back a determined effort by the US to force Israel into allowing a Palestinian state to be set up.

We haven't reached this tipping point yet, but it is difficult to believe that the current dispute between the US and Israel is merely a tiff which will blow over and allow relations to resume on the same basis as before. And the awful truth is out: the US is acting contrary to its own interests by allying itself closely with Israel, while Israel has not made peace with Palestinians and other Arab states.

The status quo is not sustainable, says US

Another straw in the wind indicating a shift in US policy is the recent emphasis by the US administration that "the status quo is not sustainable" for demographic reasons. This has been a consistent line from the administration of late.

In a speech at Tel Aviv University on 11 March 2010, a couple of days after his "humiliation", vice-president Biden said:

“Ladies and gentlemen, the status quo is not sustainable.

“It’s no secret the demographic realities make it increasingly difficult for Israel to remain both a Jewish homeland and a democratic country in the absence of the Palestinian state. ... For Israel, then, this is about both preserving your identity and achieving the security you deserve, lasting security.” [14]

To the best of my knowledge, this is the first time that the US has spelled out publicly to Israel the uncomfortable message that it is impossible to have a Jewish state encompassing the whole of mandate Palestine – because Jews are in a minority in that area.

Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, reiterated this uncomfortable message in a speech to AIPAC on 22 March 2010:

“... there is, I think, a belief among many that the status quo can be sustained. But the dynamics of demography, ideology, and technology make this impossible.

“First, we cannot ignore the long-term population trends that result from the Israeli occupation. As Defense Minister Barak and others have observed, the inexorable mathematics ... of demography are hastening the hour at which Israelis may have to choose between preserving their democracy and staying true to the dream of a Jewish homeland. Given this reality, a two-state solution is the only viable path for Israel to remain both a democracy and a Jewish state.” [15]

That comes close to saying that Israel's claim to be a democracy is bogus, while it rules over millions of Palestinians in the occupied territories and these Palestinians are unrepresented in the Israeli institutions that govern them.

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