



September 16, 2009

OP-ED CONTRIBUTOR

How to Put Pressure on Netanyahu

By PIERRE RAZOUX

Barack Obama's historic address in Cairo on June 4 on reconciliation between the United States and the Arab Muslim world opens up a new political era in the Middle East. It is a groundbreaking change and is perceived as such by Arab political leaders. However, it is not clear whether the Israeli authorities, on their side, have fully assessed its magnitude.

Mr. Obama's strategy is a simple one: to reaffirm America's contested leadership, not by coercion but by means of a revamped soft power that will enable the United States to mend fences with the Third World and emerging powers without alienating its traditional allies.

To this end the president has to achieve two objectives. He must deal with the world financial crisis without undermining the precarious equilibrium in international relations. He must also restore America's image, particularly in the Arab Muslim world, in order to increase his prospects of dealing effectively with the main challenges facing the new administration: phased military withdrawal from Iraq; stabilization of the Afghanistan-Pakistan theater (with a view to withdrawal of the U.S. contingent during his second term); a solution to the Iran nuclear crisis; and an equitable settlement of the Palestinian question.

To maximize his chances of success, Mr. Obama knows he must re-engage in dialogue with Iran and Syria by proposing to put all issues on the table. He also knows he must exert pressure on the Israeli authorities in order to make significant headway toward resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

On his side, Benjamin Netanyahu will do whatever it takes to avoid a clash with Washington that would have drastic consequences for himself and for his coalition. He seems determined to come to partial or interim agreements that will not cost him much, will be acceptable to ultra-nationalist, ultra-religious factions, will allow him to lay the blame for any failure to respect them on his Arab and Palestinian interlocutors, and will be sufficient, he hopes, to hold off the Obama administration until the emergence of some other crisis galvanizes the president's attention.

Faced with the Israeli prime minister's delaying tactics, President Obama, who has

displayed both determination and extreme caution on this issue, is well aware that he may not be able to reduce the financial aid or lay so much as a finger on the military assistance provided by the United States to Israel every year. A decision of this kind, were it to be made, would immediately be perceived as a serious attack on Israel's security and would inevitably result in an American Israel Public Affairs Committee intervention in Congress. While the pro-Israel lobbyists may feel uncomfortable about the Jewish settlements and can hardly contest the principle of a Palestinian state, at the same time they seem prepared to stand up to the White House in order to secure continued U.S. material and financial aid to Israel.

The Obama administration, nevertheless, has a number of effective levers that it can use to make the Israeli government give way. First, it can refrain from the systematic use of its Security Council veto in favor of Israel, and thus intensify the Jewish state's diplomatic isolation. It can then gradually reduce the level of military cooperation in crucial areas where Israel is very dependent on the United States, such as intelligence, space, communications, detection and nuclear power.

It can also insist publicly that Israel join the Non-Proliferation Treaty review conference next year, as suggested by the State Department in May. This could force Israel to acknowledge openly its nuclear arsenal and to formalize a deterrence doctrine that could be applied against its potential adversaries — steps that so far the Israelis have refused to take.

Lastly, it can reduce its loan guarantees to Israel along the lines of the measures taken by James Baker in 1991-1992 to make Yitzhak Shamir agree to the Oslo peace process.

There is of course another simple, effective and relatively painless way to put pressure on the Israeli government without going to such extremes: The Obama administration merely needs to make the Israeli government understand that the strategic interests of the two countries no longer necessarily converge. It should then leave the Israelis out of the negotiations with Iran, informing them neither of the status of discussions nor of their content.

In so doing, U.S. negotiators would convey directly to the Israeli authorities the message that not all the issues of concern to Israel necessarily dominate Washington's agenda and should not jeopardize the outcome of negotiations as a whole. This is guaranteed to make Jerusalem edgy.

Mr. Netanyahu's anger at Mr. Obama's refusal to give him advance notification of his Cairo address is sufficient illustration of the potential impact of this strategy of indirect leverage, which appears to be all the more effective since no act of aggression is committed and since it does not affect Israel's security. Thus it cannot be exploited to orchestrate lobby pressure on Congress. Whether Mr. Obama is prepared to go that far to force Israel to compromise remains to be seen.

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