



## **2010 – The Triangular Relationship between Washington, Jerusalem, and the Jewish Community**

Following Obama and Netanyahu's second year in office, the developments in the triangular relationship between Jerusalem, Washington, and the American Jewish community remain shrouded in a fog of uncertainty and an atmosphere of mutual distrust hangs between the two administrations. Both leaders continue to deal with complex political situations internally, and with unprecedented external challenges.

### **Washington**

Obama's party suffered a significant loss of power in the midterm congressional elections, losing the House majority while also sustaining a significant decrease in the Senate. These losses are perceived as resting on the shoulders of the President. Obama's approval rating is relatively low, mainly the result of increasing difficulties in the domestic arena and his inability to signal a significant change in dealing with the economic crisis that broke out towards the end of the Republican Bush administration. Obama's administration is finding it difficult to make up for the lack of jobs, and the high rate of unemployment. Having said that, some recent improvement in the economy and unemployment numbers is perceptible and is received with satisfaction by the administration. His foreign policy also has not been able, to date, to show positive movement in the United State's position in the world in general, and in Muslim countries in particular.

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With the beginning of the revolt in Egypt, the American position, which expressed reservations nearly to the point of abandoning Hosni Mubarak's regime, raised alarms among its allies and among Middle Eastern rulers identified with the moderate Sunni axis. For thirty years the deposed Egyptian president was one of the pillars of Egypt's closer relationship with the West, and he led the moderate axis in the Middle East. In return for his moderate policies he received military aid and economic and political support. The peace between Cairo and Jerusalem was the cornerstone of American influence in the Middle East.



**A deterioration leading to regime change in Arab states belonging to the pro-West axis may transfer US military and technological capabilities and know-how into the hands of fundamentalist, hostile regimes, which could then turn them against the United States and its allies. The first signs of the American policy, which was interpreted as supporting the opposition to the regimes in moderate Arab countries, was received in Israel and the region with frustration and incomprehension, and may further erode America's image in the world, already damaged due to the administration's restraint vis-à-vis the provocations of North Korea and Iran. The subsequent unrest in Bahrain was a warning signal and raised the need for a reevaluation of regional policy. On the other hand, the fact that the uprisings in the region were led by many secular activists may lead to a positive and progressive shift in the future.**

Under Obama's leadership, the erosion of the West's strength and influence in favor of Asia continues, although the process is slow and does not herald an immediate reversal in the world order. Even his successes -- passing the Health Care Bill and the new START agreement with Russia -- have been met with harsh opposition and criticism. Among Jews, even though the rate of support for the Democratic Party has not reflected the downward trend in the general public, there is obvious disappointment with Obama over what is perceived to be an intransigent attitude towards Israel and Netanyahu's government and a reserved attitude towards the Jewish community and its leadership.

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## **Jerusalem**

During his second year in office, Netanyahu continued to deal with a problematic coalition, which raised obstacles in setting an agenda with regards to domestic affairs and the political process. The Iranian threat continued to be an existential challenge to Israel in the year 2010. Despite success in the economic realm, joining the OECD, and as of now, the impressive response to the economic crisis, the social gap is increasing, and there is considerable erosion in the position of the middle class. In this context, there is an increase in social tensions between the productive, participatory sector of the economy, which bears the brunt of the burden in addition to contributing



to the country's security, and other sectors of the population: the Ultra-Orthodox, which is perceived as utilizing its considerable political power to gain benefits for its constituency bearing no relation to its contribution to society, and some of the Arab minority, which does not feel part of Israeli society.

The stagnation in the political process between Israel and the Palestinians – widely treated in the geopolitical section of the document – has been met with mixed emotions in Israel. The calm based on the success of routine security measures along with disappointment and mistrust of the Palestinian partner, fed by the lessons of the Second Intifada and the rocket attacks on the Western Negev that followed the Gaza disengagement, give Netanyahu's government political breathing room.

**At the same time, there is a growing fear that the lack of an Israeli political initiative along with its refusal to freeze construction in the settlements are contributing to the strained relations with the Obama administration and may prevent a future two-state solution. The alternative, a bi-national state, endangers the Zionist movement's aspiration to establish a Jewish and democratic state that would constitute a national home for the Jewish people, in the Middle East.**

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2010 ended with the former president, Moshe Katsav, convicted of rape, sexual harassment, and obstruction of justice. This terrible affair constitutes a peak in a series of investigations and legal actions aimed at Israeli leaders, some of which have yet to be concluded. The year 2011 began with the initiation of a criminal investigation into the Boaz Harpaz “forged document” affair, which was meant to influence the Chief of Staff appointment. This scandal reveals misconduct among the IDF's top echelon. In addition, the appointment of Yoav Galant to Chief of Staff was revoked as he was accused of appropriating land that did not belong to him, and of submitting to the court two affidavits containing inaccurate statements. The revocation of Galant's appointment, an outstanding officer and exemplary warrior, closes a circle that began during the premiership of Ariel Sharon. The main damage during this period was the



silent acceptance and even legitimization -- granted by the media and a significant part of the Israeli public -- of problematic conduct and improper use of governmental power.

Misconduct of public figures has occurred in the past as well, but for the most part such missteps were investigated and resolved. During Sharon's time, senior journalists in Israel preferred to treat him like a "Sukkot etrog, (citron)" -- with infinite care and delicacy, turning a blind eye to some improper conduct in his immediate environment. These elements justified their approach with their appreciation of his leadership and political about-face – the disengagement from Gaza – that characterized his term of office. The indictments of Katsav, former finance minister, Avraham Hirschson, former prime minister, Ehud Olmert, and others marked the beginning of the end of this period. It must be emphasized that no criminal allegations have been raised against Galant, and the background of his actions is completely different from those under indictment. However, the revocation of his appointment to Chief of Staff may signal the end of the "etrog" phenomenon, and with it the willingness of the public to suffer breaches of proper conduct.

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### **The Jewish Community**

In the United States too, the Jewish community was in uproar over several episodes of corruption and misconduct by prominent Jews. Past annual assessments of the Jewish People Policy Institute have pointed out the possibility of damage to the self-image of Jews as a consequence of these incidents and warned of the risk to the desire of the world's young generation of Jews to identify with their Jewish roots. Although the State of Israel has shown its ability to deal with these negative disclosures with greater courage and determination than other Western countries, the trend of distancing among the young generation has grown stronger this year, due also to the growing processes of delegitimization.



This campaign, aimed at undermining the Jewish people's right to sovereignty, is fostered not only by elements outside Israel or the Jewish people, such as anti-Semitism or the Arab-Islamic BDS campaign, it is also fed by harsh criticism in the world media of the degrading treatment of radical Israeli elements towards Palestinians and the Arab minority in Israel, as well as the aggressive conduct of the security forces. In the view of many, these phenomena, alongside the political standstill, are seen as harming liberal values dear to many young Jewish Americans.

**The special chapter in this annual assessment on North American campuses shows that the delegitimization phenomenon primarily causes internal damage, harming Jews and friends of the Jewish people, even though it is widely agreed that a double standard is applied to Israel compared to other countries in the East and West. Although, in the past year, the standing of the new Jewish organizations attempting to build a lobby in opposition to the Jewish and Israeli establishment has deteriorated, there is a continuing trend among young adults in the Jewish community to organize independently, without any establishment or Israeli connections, for the purpose of promoting a Jewish agenda.**

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### **The Challenge to Israel: American Bi-Partisan Support**

The twisted obstacle course that has characterized the relations between Israel and the United States ever since the change of administrations in Washington and Jerusalem is not a new phenomenon. The two countries have proven in the past, ever since Jewish sovereignty was established in the Middle East, that their shared cultural and democratic values and mutual interests can overcome harsher disagreements and crises than the current one: the 1956 Sinai War, the "reevaluation" after the second Sinai disengagement agreement in 1975, the Pollard Affair in 1986, and the suspension of loan guarantees in 1991.



**And indeed, in crucial subjects concerning vital areas of Israel's security, the American administration has continued and even intensified cooperation between the two countries. In the case of Iran for instance, where Obama himself promised to do his utmost to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, the administration has not only joined the efforts to apply sanctions, but also initiated covert American activities intended to delay the program's development. In the UN and in other political forums, the United States continues to grant Israel political support, as seen in the wake of the Goldstone Report, Turkish flotilla affair, and its February 2011 security council veto of a resolution condemning settlement construction. However, this support cannot be considered automatic and may be used to leverage pressure in the future.**

The main point of contention with the Obama administration resulted from the stagnation of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which is perceived as an American strategic interest, and the ongoing construction in East Jerusalem. But the Israeli refusal to extend the construction freeze east of the green line after the conclusion of the ten month freeze agreed upon at the end of 2009 also had a part in damaging the trust between the two administrations. The Palestinians demanded extending the freeze as a pre-condition for resuming direct talks. In the context of political standstill and other developments, an internal American debate re-surfaced around the question of whether Israel is an asset or a liability. In this context, several extremely harsh remarks were attributed to Vice President Joe Biden and to International Security Assistance Force in Afghanistan Commander, General David Petraeus, both of whom were quoted as warning that Israel's activities in the territories may bring about further American casualties in Iraq and Afghanistan.

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In June 2010 the American magazine Commentary conducted a written symposium headlined: "Obama, Israel, and American Jewry: the Challenge." The editorial board gathered 31 critical essays by prominent Jewish writers and activists representing a broad range of opinions from Right, Left, and Center. Among the participants were: the Head of the Middle East Forum, Daniel Pipes; CEO of the Anti-Defamation League, Abe Foxman; Harvard Law Professor Alan Dershowitz; former deputy to the Head of the National Security Council and current senior fellow of the Council on Foreign Relations, Elliott Abrams; Brandeis University historian, Prof. Jonathan Sarna, who is also a senior fellow of the Jewish People Policy Institute; Director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, Robert Satloff; Aaron Miller from the Woodrow Wilson Center in Washington; the President of the Union for Reform Judaism, Rabbi Eric Yoffie, and others.

Upon reading these essays and after discussions held with some of the authors and with additional prominent figures in the Jewish community in preparation for this chapter in the annual assessment, it seems that the attitude towards Obama is loaded and suspicious. Although some still express support for the President out of traditional loyalty to the Democratic Party and its values, most believe that his actions and policies in the Middle East must be watched closely in order to prevent him from trying to pay with Israeli currency for closer relations with the Islamic countries.

As to the question of how the Jewish community will or should deal with the tensions between Jerusalem and Washington, opinions are divided. It is assumed that as long as there is no existential threat to the State of Israel from Iran's nuclear project or from an overall military attack on Jewish sovereignty in the Middle East, the community will not rise to take extensive action. Prof. Alan Dershowitz describes it thus: "the line in the sand for me has always been Israel's security...I'm worried about the direction that the Obama administration seems to be taking with regard to Israel's security. I will not join the chorus of condemnations by right-wingers directed against the Obama policy with regard to the settlements, or even with regard to a divided Jerusalem. The Obama administration has not yet crossed my line in the sand. I hope



it never does so, but if it does, I will be extremely critical. In the meantime, those of us who supported Obama must continue to pressure him against compromising Israel's security and against suggesting a false and dangerous linkage between Israel's actions and the safety of American troops."

Traditionally, most American Jews support the Democratic Party, out of many considerations, especially internal American ones. Israeli issues do not usually top the agenda, as long as the subject of security is not involved. In the 2008 presidential election, four out of five Jews supported Obama, despite apprehension about his attitude towards Israel. This level of overwhelming support is not guaranteed in 2012. Indeed, although the Jewish vote does not carry a decisive weight in the elections, the financial support and the organizational ability of the Jews during the election campaign is very significant. One leader defined it as follows: "if there is one thing I will not forgive Obama regarding his behavior towards Israel and the Jewish community, it is if I am driven to vote for the Republicans."

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Prof. Jonathan Sarna's analysis matches the spirit of those words: "Much can change between now and 2012, but signs abound that support for the Democratic administration is waning. The real question, looking ahead, is whether the Republicans will be able to use this to their advantage. To do so, history suggests, they will need to nominate a candidate whose views on American policy, foreign and domestic, comport with those most Jews hold dear. If Jews decide that the Republican candidate in 2012 more closely aligns with their views than Barack Obama, it is a safe bet that the Republican candidate will win many more votes than McCain and Palin did in 2008."

In this context, one must also refer to the rise, prior to the elections, of the "Tea Party" movement, which was meant to garner support for fiscally conservative Republican candidates on a local basis. Although it is still too early to estimate the future significance of this phenomenon on the national level, it must be noted that alongside support of Israel, some of the "Tea Party" supporters hold contrary tendencies:





an isolationist approach with cross-the-board cuts in foreign aid. That said, the Jewish community has duly noted that Republican support of Israel has been stable and has even risen, compared to the erosion of Democrat support of Israel.

An October 2010 survey conducted for The Israel Project by the prestigious strategic consulting firm, Greenberg Quinlan Rosner, shows that for the first time since June 2009, support for Israel in American public opinion dropped below 50 percent. The gap in favor of Israel as opposed to the Palestinians is still large – 44 percent in favor of Israel as opposed to 8 percent in favor of the Palestinians, but the problem is more notable using a party cross section. Among Republicans, support for Israel is 62% as opposed to 2 percent for the Palestinians. Among Democrats, support for Israel drops to 32 percent while support for Palestinians rises to 14 percent. The results are affected by media criticism of Israel's conduct towards the Palestinians, and the delegitimization campaign against the right of Israel to maintain its Jewish character in the context of liberal positions held by the Democrats.

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The attitude taken by the American administration with the onset of the Egyptian riots, and the cold shoulder shown to Hosni Mubarak by President Obama have left a bitter taste and bolstered doubts of the current administration as a source of support, not only among leaders in the moderate Arab camp, but also in Israel and among some of the Jewish leadership in the United States.

**Israel's standing in the United States, since its establishment, and the influence of the American Jewish community derive, to a large extent, from a bi-partisan approach concerning the Middle East. The picture currently being formed must set off alarm bells in Israel and among Jewish organizations in the United States, due to the threat of the Arab-Israeli conflict being turned into a point of contention between the two parties, thus endangering the desire to preserve Democratic as well as Republican support for Israel.**



## Politics and Statesmanship

On January 17, 2011, Defense Minister Ehud Barak surprisingly announced his resignation from "Labor" along with four other Members of Knesset, and the establishment of the "Independence Party." In so doing he acted preemptively, avoiding a blow he would likely have suffered due to the creation of a majority bloc against him in the Labor Party, which could have led to his ouster. The same day Labor Ministers Binyamin Ben-Eliezer, Avishay Braverman, and Isaac (Buji) Herzog, announced their decision to immediately resign. Despite the numerous inner controversies, the eight remaining Labor MKs decided to refrain from an additional split.

Seemingly, the coalition's base has narrowed, but in practical terms, the Labor Party's exit from the government may prolong its existence, even though at the same time it increases the negotiating power of Yisrael Beiteinu, headed by Avigdor Lieberman.

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Barak's move took the entire political system by surprise, even though he had coordinated it beforehand not only with the MKs who joined him, but also with the Prime Minister, who wished to avoid a future, abrupt exit of the entire Labor party from his coalition. Such a development could have set off a dynamic leading to new elections.

The prior evening former Minister of Interior, Arie Deri, announced his intention to return to political life. Deri, one of the founders of Shas, was convicted of bribery, fraud, and breach of trust, served a three-year sentence in prison, and finished a seven-year period of disgrace that until recently had prevented him from returning to the political sphere. On the eve of Barak's resignation, Deri said that he had not yet decided in which framework he will be running for office, and that he may join a non-religious party. Although it seems that his natural place would be in Kadima given his public political statements and his close relationship with Kadima's Council Chairman, Haim Ramon, it is possible that he wishes to join a new, secular party. The establishment of the new Independence party provides him with an opportunity to



begin from an enhanced negotiating position. This, due to the support he enjoys from the religious Sephardic public and among secular voters who appreciate his skills, are convinced that he has "paid his debt to society," and has learnt the obligatory lessons.

Another possibility is that Barak and company's resignation from the Labor Party and their continued support of the coalition are part of a broader political move that may secure the government an additional safety net. Lately, several new figures have joined the Kadima Party, including former Chief of Staff, Dan Halutz; Chairman of Mizrahi-Tefahot Bank and former Head of the Israeli Internal Security Service, Yakov Perry; and Gilad Sharon, son of former Prime Minister and Kadima founder, Ariel Sharon. Such reinforcements may spur several Kadima veterans to leave the party and join the coalition headed by Netanyahu, since they may fear that their chances of reelection have been diminished. The Prime Minister still holds two unmanned, ministerial portfolios: the Ministry of Welfare and the Ministry for Minority Affairs, as well as having overwhelming influence over several other senior political appointments. If several opposition members cross party lines, Lieberman's position and his ability to dismantle the coalition will be weakened.

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**The main question begging for an answer in light of these possible changes to the political map is: "For what purpose?"** The assumption is that Prime Minister Netanyahu and Defense Minister Barak have their sights on the political horizon, beyond the completion of the current government's tenure. Their partnership seems stable at this stage, and one cannot discount their standing for the next elections in a joint bloc.

**In order to increase their chances of reelection, Netanyahu and Barak require impressive achievements in the political arena: an agreement with the Palestinians (and perhaps Syria) as a part of the Arab world's process of acceptance, or an achievement in the defense arena vis-à-vis Iran. In short, making peace or winning war. As of now, it is unclear if they have decided where they are headed.**



**The American administration has the data and the ability to read the situation in Israel. It is possible that this is the reason Netanyahu was offered a "security package" at the end of 2010 in order to enable the resumption of direct talks between Netanyahu and Abu Mazen.**

However, the political considerations have additional components. It is possible that Netanyahu had the political power required to make a far-reaching political move even without changes to the political map. The various components of the coalition have no interest in breaking up the partnership. Even before his departure from Labor, Barak and his party did not enjoy widespread approval among the public. If Barak felt that he would be able to increase his power in elections, it is likely that he would have led a move to dismantle the government, regardless of the peace process. Shas leader, Eli Yishai, is not in a position to ignore Arie Deri and the in-fighting of his own party. One may assume that Yisrael Beiteinu leader, Avigdor Lieberman, who may be facing indictment - depending on the Attorney General's impending decision - will be faced with a dilemma: whether to leave the coalition and go forth into the unknown or to preserve his political power. It must be noted that if the Attorney General decides to indict him, that is not the end of the matter, as Lieberman will obviously be given the right of a fair hearing and will be able to argue against his indictment, a process that could take many months.

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It is possible that Netanyahu's difficulties are based, among other things, on the fear of the wider Israeli public that Abu Mazen intends to promote a two-state solution: one Palestinian and the other bi-national, which will eventually unite, thus putting an end to Jewish sovereignty in the region. The lack of trust among a significant part of the public, which was evident in the results of the last election, was also influenced by the memories of the Second Intifada, which erupted after Barak's far-reaching offer to Arafat at the end of Bill Clinton's presidency, as well as by the memory of the rockets hurled at Sderot and other towns in the south after Sharon's Gaza disengagement.



The American administration too has doubts, mistrusting the current Israeli government's sincerity with respect to the peace process. These doubts grew as a result of what was seen as, on one hand foot-dragging in the political process, and a series of decisions to resume construction in the settlements and in East Jerusalem on the other. On the Israeli side and among parts of the American Jewish community, there is concern stemming from doubts about Obama's approach to the Middle East conflict, his appreciation of Israel's existential concerns, and what is seen as an alienated attitude toward the Jewish community. President Obama and Secretary of State Clinton's reaction to the riots in Egypt, which have spread to other countries belonging to the moderate axis, has not strengthened trust in the current administration as a source of support and alliance that can be trusted.

In this context, we must refer to the Israeli demand that the Palestinians recognize Israel as a Jewish state and as the national home of the Jewish people. If the agreement that is taking shape is based on the 1967 borders, with several amendments accompanied by land swaps, then the only concessions the Israeli public may have gained are the end of the conflict, legitimization of the Zionist project and improvement of the security situation.

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As the contours of a viable agreement have been set, and with the stalled peace process in mind, the possibility once again arises that the United States will place its own mediation proposal on the table, and work to implement it. The success of such a move primarily depends on forestalling a unilateral Palestinian attempt to garner international recognition of their independence, rebuilding mutual trust and in early coordination between both sides. Significant steps should be taken by Obama, with the support of the Quartet, to reestablish Israeli confidence in his administration.



## Concluding Remarks

Despite efforts by both Washington and Jerusalem to reach an understanding in light of the mid-term congressional elections and the problems of the coalition in Israel, the challenges facing the triangular relationship remain. The American response to the upheaval in Egypt, symbolized by the "cold shoulder" shown Mubarak, has been a matter of concern to other allies in the Middle East. Yet the new situation may also empower new reformists and progressive regimes and reinforce mutual interests between Israel and the United States which may draw them closer. As such, it is a primary interest of Israel and the Jewish people globally that the status of the US as the leading superpower doesn't erode.

Past experience shows that cultural values, democracy, and common interests of Israel and the United States eventually overcome controversies and even severe crises. The most recent events require intensifying efforts to achieve strategic cooperation and coordination between the United States, Israel, and the Jewish community.

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- The challenges facing Israel in light of regional changes require its leadership to make a decision as to its direction, to reevaluate the challenge of preserving its Jewish character, take the initiative in areas that require urgent intervention, and be alert to other arenas in order to adapt policy accordingly.
- Every possible effort should be made to prevent the Middle East conflict from becoming a point of contention between the Republican and Democratic parties in the United States, and to remove Israel and the Jewish community from the American, internal political debate.
- The concern of a possible erosion in US international status on one hand, and the general support that Israel and the Jewish people enjoy in North American public opinion on the other hand require a continuous effort to reinforce the strength and economic power of the US. Israel and the North American Jewish community should make every effort to strengthen their ally.





- With former President Katsav's conviction, indictments of other leaders and measures taken against other senior figures, Israel may be parting ways with the attempt to grant legitimacy to the improper conduct of public figures. This is the beginning of a welcome process that may eventually improve trust of the young Jewish generation in Israel and contribute to strengthening the ties between Israel and the Diaspora.
- The delegitimization phenomenon aiming to subvert the right of the Jewish people to sovereignty in the Middle East harms not only Israel but also Jewish affiliation, support of friends of the Jewish people, and Israel-Diaspora relations. The phenomenon requires a comprehensive evaluation and treatment in various arenas to minimize damage.

**Despite the erosion of the standing of new Jewish organizations that attempted to establish a lobby in opposition to the Jewish American establishment and Israel, there is a continuing trend among the young, American generation to organize independently to promote agendas, unrelated to the establishment or Israel. Against this background, Jewish organizations must make a special effort to open their ranks to the young and encourage them to assume key roles in the community. Israel, for its part, must use its resources to increase its investment in the future of the young generation, in education and in expanding the frameworks shared by Israel and the Diaspora.**

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