

The End of a Beautiful Friendship: Obama and Netanyahu

Michael Oren has had an honorable career, growing up in New Jersey, a baseball fan who got his doctorate at Princeton, a distinguished historian, and Israeli ambassador to Washington from 2009 to 2013. His new book *Ally* is a valuable and sober dissection of the real existing relationship, one that used to be called a “special relationship,” between Israel and the United States, under President Barack Obama. One concludes from the book that the two countries are just friends, but not like before.

The book, clearly if not eloquently written, is part autobiography, part history, part commentary on the attitudes of American Jewry, and part an account of Oren’s own political views. But above all, it is a work full of anguish at the tension that has developed between the U.S. while Obama has been president, and Israel.

It is not, as some opinionated critics have written, an “imaginary account” of the relationship written for mercenary reasons, as U.S. Ambassador Dan Shapiro shamefully said, or full of factual errors, or one that, as suggested by Abe Foxman, outgoing head of ADL, veers into conspiracy theories, or one that attempts an amateur psychoanalysis of Obama, though Oren does discuss Obama’s self-identity.

Rather, it reveals conversations at the highest level about the real views of American officials towards the State of Israel. To one’s surprise and deep concern, they show that, contrary to the public display of friendship and advertised comity, they reflect a broad breach and gap between the two sides caused by Obama’s policies and intentions, and his lack

of sympathy for Israel.

Oren clearly has a love of two countries, his homeland and Israel to which he made *aliyah*. His book deals with a number of acute problems besides the relationship between the two countries, and his reflections on the different views and behavior of President Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Oren provides a candid appraisal of various persons involved in the game of politics in Washington; Hillary Clinton, who impolitely rebuffed him; the hostility of the UN Human Rights Council; the differences within the American Jewish community and J Street about Israel and its diverse attitude to it; and the vital disagreement over Iran's nuclear program. One of the tidbits is the reference to Placido Domingo who spoke some Hebrew and began his career with the Tel Aviv opera company.

Oren is fully justified in his criticism of the mainstream U.S. media and the grossly disproportionate number of journalists assigned to cover Israel. All too often the media – *Time*, the *New York Times*, and CBS' "60 Minutes" – among others, make use of gruesome photos, staged images, and feature alleged Israel intransigence while ignoring Palestinian and Arab corruption and crimes.

At the core of Oren's analysis is his view that Obama has upset two long-term principles of the relationship between the U.S. and Israel. One principle is that there be "no daylight," that disagreements between the two sides would remain private. The other is that there be no "surprises," namely that no important proposal or speech would be made without the other party being informed.

The essential problem with this analysis is that, while Oren has created a concept that is useful for purposes of discussion, it is an exaggeration of the real nature of the bilateral relationship. It is doubtful that any such explicit

agreement joined the two sides at the hip. If a special relationship existed it was in the awareness and comment on the empirical conduct of the parties rather than an official formula.

Certainly, one can agree that what Oren calls the first principle was breached right at the start of the Obama administration. President Obama on many occasions made his view public that there must be a total freeze on settlement building by Israel, in east Jerusalem as well as in the West Bank, and that there be a two-state solution. This was a rejection of the policy of President George W. Bush, and disavowal of his April 14, 2004 letter with Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, that Israeli settlement construction was appropriate in those areas that would obviously remain within Israel's borders in any reasonable peace settlement. For Obama the letter was not part of the official policy of the U.S.

On this issue, Oren is eminently fair. He reveals that he himself does not favor building of settlements, and also avows that it was a blunder for an Israeli official to announce actions on settlements while Vice-President Joe Biden was in Jerusalem.

Other issues have divided the two sides. Israel was aware of the bewildering inconsistency in the Obama administration on issues in the Arab world, and also of U.S. arms sales to the Arabs. Obama always opposed the blockade of the Gaza Strip. He called, as did Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, for an investigation of Israeli behavior concerning the Mavi Marmara incident of May 31, 2010. Both Obama and Clinton called for Netanyahu to apologize to their "friend" Recep Tayyip Erdogan, then prime minister of Turkey. Under American pressure, Netanyahu on March 22, 2013 extended his apologies, not directly to Erdogan, who had referred to Israel as a racist country and wh



ose action had been a crime against humanity, but to the Turkish people.

If Oren is critical of other actions by Netanyahu, such as making his speech in Congress on March 3, 2015, that some found controversial, he is much more critical of Obama on many issues including this issue when the president referred to the speech as “politics... and theater.” On the settlement issue, the Israeli prime minister received no credit from Obama for his decision to impose a 10-month moratorium on construction. Instead, Obama called for the extension of the moratorium.

More important, Obama has refused to recognize that most of the Arab states and many Palestinians have not made a single gesture towards peace with Israel.

Oren never directly suggests that Obama is hostile to Israel. He points out that Obama, at Ben-Gurion airport, in March 2013 publicly commented that it was in the fundamental national security interest of the U.S. to stand with Israel. The Star of David was flying together with the Stars and Stripes. But if Obama admires Israel it is an idealized Israel, not the existing one. Zionism does not resonate with Obama.

The personal contrast is stark between the cerebral Obama, cold, aloof, and somewhat insular, and Netanyahu, former officer in the Sayeret Matkal, the equivalent of the U.S. Delta Force, with MIT degrees in architecture and management, always haunted by Israel’s need for security and the danger of Iran. If not ambivalent about his prime minister, Oren is not uncritical of Netanyahu whom he regards as part commando, part politico, and thoroughly predatory.

More important than the differences of personality between the

two leaders are those of substance and policy. One is center-right; the other is left or center-left politically. At the heart of the problem is Obama's preconceived ideological view, a view that is at variance with that of mainstream Israel. As a presidential candidate, Obama appeared, with a kind of liberal self-deception, to believe naively that the Arab-Israeli conflict was at the root of Middle East disputes, and that Arab-Israeli peace was the key to regional stability. Right at the start of his presidency, his first phone call to a foreign leader was to Mahmoud Abbas, president of the Palestinian Authority. Obama visited the Middle East, skipped going to Israel, and made his historic speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009.

Obama took a startling step in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood that took power in Egypt and its leader President Mohammed Morsi. His ties with the organization, starting in January 2012, became, in Oren's word, an "embrace." Morsi, who had referred to Jews as warmongers, apes, and pigs, was invited to the White House. It was only after an Islamist mob attacked the U.S. Embassy in Cairo that Morsi was disinvited.

Oren argues that Obama's ideological position is one of anti-colonialism, of reconciliation with Islam, a belief in the use of "soft power," and of cooperation with the "international community," rather than American unilateral action. Without necessarily accepting the Palestinian Narrative of Victimhood, Obama believes that Arabs have been abused. On June 4, 2009, in a conversation with students in Cairo, Obama spoke of his personal connections with Muslims, his Muslim family members and his childhood days in Indonesia, and his conviction that Islam is part of America.

Though he described American-Israeli bonds as "unbreakable," Obama thought the Palestinians should not endure "the pain of dislocation... the daily humiliations... that come with occupation." Oren's opinion is that to an unrivalled extent Obama identified American interests with the Palestinians.

Obama continually affirmed the relationship with Israel, and made some friendly gestures such as immediate help to Israel in the disastrous Carmel forest fire in December 2010, yet he refused to confirm the well-known reports that Syria was arming Hizb'allah, the terrorist group hostile to Israel.

It is disappointing that Obama's presidency has strained the relationship, even the alliance between the U.S. and Israel. It is dismaying that real animosity towards Israel, as Oren conveys, exists in the White House and the State Department. It is crucial that this animosity be ended. The president should be more aware of and prepared to deal with the real problems in the Middle East, the turmoil in the Arab world, the civil and external wars, the failed states, the nuclear power of Iran, the use of chemical weapons by Syria, and above all, the threat of Islamist terrorism. Israel needs America, but America also needs Israel.

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