

## The Current Crisis in the Israel-United States Relationship

A number of people have asked me about my thoughts concerning the recent tensions between Israel and the United States. I am happy to share my own personal opinions, but I am fully aware that not everyone will agree with my analysis of the situation. When I am in Israel, people often ask me to explain President Obama's perceived antipathy towards Israel. I respond that there is no such antipathy. I believe that President Obama wants what is best for Israel and the Middle East. He is fully in favor of the "Two State Solution" for the Israelis and the Palestinians, two states for two people. The Two State Solution should not be seen as a gift to the Palestinians or some kind of surrender by Israel. It is rather the best solution for Israel itself. Israel cannot remain *both* democratic *and* Jewish unless the Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza have a state of their own. The Zionist dream of a democratic Jewish state is impossible to achieve as long as Israel controls another people within its borders who are denied the basic political rights of self determination, while Israelis, living in that same area, are granted full citizenship.

I am fully aware of the obstacles to peace that the Palestinians have created. They have rejected the generous peace offers made at Camp David and Taba. Some have resorted to terror and continue to incite hatred of Israel. Indeed, many have yet to truly accept the permanence of a Jewish state in Israel. But having said that, I believe that it is in Israel's own self-interest to have a Palestinian State separate from Israel on land that Israel has occupied since 1967. This is hardly an anti-Israel position given the fact that the vast majority of Israelis say that they are in favor of a Palestinians state.

Past Israeli governments were committed to that Two State Solution. Benjamin Netanyahu has always opposed it and only reluctantly agreed to the idea under enormous pressure from the American administration. Netanyahu had recently refused to accept the idea of two states when offered a coalition with Tzipi Livni of Kadima, who was the actual winner of last year's Israeli election.

When building permits for 1,600 houses were approved for a section of East Jerusalem, I believe it was an intentional insult to Vice President Biden and the United States government. Prime Minister Netanyahu apologized for the timing of the announcement but not the substance. Then other apologists claimed that this was, in fact, a Jewish neighborhood of Jerusalem that would never be returned under any peace agreement. The arguments are disingenuous at best. Just this week a settlement was approved in the Shepherd's Hotel complex in Arab East Jerusalem in the Sheikh Jarrah neighborhood. This has always been considered an Arab neighborhood, but the Jewish settlers are supported by the right wing American bingo czar, Irving Moskowitz. The group, Ateret Cohanim, is committed to taking over land and housing in specifically Arab areas. The Netanyahu government has approved this move, knowing full well that both the United States and Britain strongly oppose that action. For those of you who have been in Jerusalem, this area is near the American Colony Hotel and near Salahadin Street, the very heart of Arab East Jerusalem.

Netanyahu has chosen to build a coalition with Avigdor Lieberman as his Foreign Minister and various other right wing parties that have absolutely no desire to create a viable democratic Israel living side by side with a democratic Palestine. They demand that there be only a Jewish state between the Mediterranean and the Jordan River, and democracy is of little or no concern to them. Prime Minister Netanyahu has chosen to ally himself with that ideological position, consistent with his position throughout his life. I believe he also thinks that Israel can “manage” the Palestinian problem, and that the status quo can continue forever. I believe he is profoundly wrong.

The United States government has never accepted the right of Israel to occupy all of the West Bank and Gaza, while at the same time denying some of that land’s residents the basic rights of self-determination. President Obama is acting in full consistency with past American policy. I believe this policy is in Israel’s own best interest. President Obama is attempting to move Israel towards a peaceful and secure state living in peace with her neighbors. It is what the majority of Israelis desire as well. *Ad hominem* attacks on the President and his aides will not change the fact that Israel is pursuing a policy that is, at its heart, inimical to the basic values of the Zionist dream.

I do not expect everyone to agree with my analysis, and I would welcome comments and responses. I do believe that this moment of tension between the United States and Israel requires us to be informed and engaged. We will discuss this issue further at our downtown Lunch and Learn on Wednesday, May 5<sup>th</sup>.

My very best wishes for a sweet and joyous Passover.