

# Trial and Triage in Washington



“NO,” WAS THE SHORT ANSWER that I received from several statesmen, all of whom had held the same position. All were responding to my question: “Is it winnable?”

“It” referred to the job of Israel’s ambassador to the United States, a post I was about to assume. The month was May 2009, shortly after the election of Benjamin Netanyahu as Israel’s prime minister and the inauguration of President Barack Obama. Enormous challenges lay ahead, I sensed, and I prepared myself as thoroughly and swiftly as possible. The lessons I would learn—most of them the hard way—would serve me well in Washington.

The first of these lessons was the importance of consulting my predecessors. They described the difficulties traditionally encountered by Israel’s emissary in Washington. In contrast to the legates in other capitals, the ambassador to the United States is almost always a prime-ministerial appointee. While this fact enhances the ambassador’s influence, it can also earn the ire of

the professional diplomats who resent working for a political appointee. The resultant press leaks and harmful rumors can impair the effectiveness of the mission’s chief. The embassy, one ex-ambassador warned, was a hornet’s nest.

I also heard about the impossibility of controlling the entire information flow. The alliance between Israel and the United States is probably the deepest and most multifaceted in the world. Representatives of the two countries interact many times daily on a vast spectrum of subjects—strategic, diplomatic, commercial, social, scientific, and even spiritual. In theory, the ambassador is supposed to supervise all these contacts, or at least be privy to them. In reality, the volume is far too massive. Many officials, especially from the military and intelligence community, distrust the civilian foreign ministry and prefer to operate without its knowledge. And since the Israeli government is less a “team of rivals” than a coalition whose members are often in competition with one another, it is not unusual for a minister to show up at the White House without communicating, much less coordinating, with the embassy.

As another former emissary advised me, “you can devote 100 percent of your time to staying on top of 60 percent of the back-and-forth traffic, or you can devote 30 percent of your time to monitoring and then maybe get something done.”

I had learned two essential lessons—the need to build a trustworthy team, and to know what you can and cannot manage—before even arriving in Washington. Nothing, though, could prepare me for the adversity awaiting me there. The former envoys I interviewed had served during the comparatively halcyon Reagan, Bush, and Clinton years. But the Obama administration would prove to be fundamentally different in its relationship with the Jewish state.

From the outset, the Obama White House worked to downgrade the uniqueness of the U.S.-Israel relationship and to normalize it. One of the ways to achieve this was to weaken the influence of AIPAC and other pro-Israel organizations. Accordingly,

the administration fostered the creation of J Street, a lobby that defined itself as pro-Israel, although it rarely supported Israel diplomatically and often worked to delegitimize it. The White House took pains to invite J Street to its first meeting with American Jewish leaders, and it publicly excoriated me—in the first communiqué issued by its Office to Combat Anti-Semitism—for refusing to attend J Street’s annual conference. More jarringly, throughout most of her term, Secretary of State Hillary Clinton boycotted the Israeli Embassy and refused to accept my phone calls. My main point of contact with the administration—fortunately—was Vice President Joe Biden, who always took my calls.

Beyond these largely symbolic measures, the administration departed from long-standing American policies toward Israel. It abandoned the twin principles, honored since the 1980s, of “no daylight” and “no surprises.” The first held that, to the greatest degree possible, tensions between the two countries should be worked out discreetly and out of the public eye.

The second was an American commitment to inform Israel in advance of any statements that might affect its security and to give Israeli leaders the opportunity to comment on them. But President Obama maintained that “no daylight” had hardened Israel’s positions (in fact, just the opposite was true), and he vigorously publicized our differences. Beginning with his June 2009 speech in Cairo, and continuing through several major addresses that impacted Israel profoundly, the president never once gave Israel forewarning.

More damaging, though, were the clashes over Israeli settlement building in Judea and Samaria—the West Bank—and East Jerusalem. The new administration quickly adopted a platform of “not a brick on a brick,” with which no Israeli government, even one from the Left, could comply if it wanted to survive politically. This led to an almost unbroken spate of crises and successive American condemnations of Israel.

Yet even this friction ultimately paled beside that generated by the administration’s efforts to achieve a rapprochement with

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Iran and secure an agreement on its nuclear program. In his very first week in office, President Obama reached out to the Iranian regime and took numerous steps—many inimical to Israel and conducted without its knowledge—to reorient America away from its traditional Middle Eastern allies and toward Tehran. The 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, which the White House touted as a historic achievement, was widely regarded in Israel as a strategic, if not existential, threat.

Israel also contributed to the friction by announcing large-scale construction projects—once, insultingly, during Vice President Biden’s visit to the country—and by appearing to side with the president’s Republican detractors. Israel launched military and intelligence operations against Iran and its proxies that often aroused the Obama administration’s ire.

And then there was the personal animus between Barack Obama and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. The president treated the head of America’s most important democratic ally, as *Washington Post* columnist Jackson Diehl described it, “like a third-world dictator.” The prime minister lectured Obama in the Oval Office and assailed his Iran policy before Congress. No two leaders—the one averse to the use of military force and deeply committed to the United Nations and other international bodies, and the other determined to uphold his country’s security at

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almost any cost, while regarding the UN as a curse—could have been more temperamentally and philosophically mismatched.

What, then, was an ambassador to do?

As the son of a veteran of the Normandy landings, I had long been an advocate of triage: When under fire, address the problems that can most benefit from intervention, ignore what cannot be helped or what will otherwise take care of itself, and press on. In diplomatic terms, this meant rectifying only the most serious staff issues while aggressively addressing crises. Unfortunately, my predecessors’ warnings proved accurate: Virtually every word I spoke to foreign-ministry officials, even in the most classified settings, appeared in the morning papers. So my first task was to identify those individuals I could trust. The team did not have to be large. Mine was composed of my deputy chief of mission, my spokesman, my chief of staff, and a congressional liaison.

A greater difficulty arose from the fact that, though I was personally appointed by the prime minister, I was never especially close to Netanyahu and had never been a member of the Likud. This did not elevate my profile in Washington.

Raising it required the diplomatic equivalent of an end run. The Obama administration was especially sensitive to the media. This presented an opportunity to harness my experience as a newspaper columnist and television commentator. Penning some 60 op-eds and performing hundreds of TV and radio interviews, spending many hours on background briefings, and appearing on popular talk shows significantly enhanced my stature. Entering the White

House, I was more than once greeted jokingly with, “What, you’re not on CNN?”

A similar tactic was to greatly expand my social calendar, attending innumerable balls and galas and hosting prominent guests at the residence. These events were hard work and essential for establishing personal relationships. But beyond the usual meet and greets, I sponsored a series of intercultural dinners and performances, including Israel’s first-ever official Iftar—the nightly break-fast of Muslims during Ramadan—which made headlines in the United States and which has remained an annual event on the embassy’s calendar.

While some Israeli ambassadors may see themselves as the prime minister’s envoy to the president, I chose to act as Israel’s emissary to America. Whenever possible, I traveled to cities and towns far from the usual diplomatic route. Sundays often found me in churches, not all of them warm to Israel, and weekdays on campuses that were openly hostile. I attended popular gatherings, such as the 150th reenactment of the Gettysburg battle, and innumerable sports events. Irrespective of the venue, the goal was always the same: to introduce Israel to the wider American public.

Israel’s ambassador to Washington is also Israel’s representative to the American Jewish community—or, more accurately, communities. The once-vaunted bipartisan support for Israel in the United States had begun to break down, with profound ramifications for American Jews, the overwhelming majority of whom vote Democratic. Most of them supported the Iran nuclear deal, deeply disappointing Israeli leaders. Israel, for its part, withheld recognition from the liberal Jewish movements and denied them equal status at the Holy Places.

Bridging these divisions could easily have been a full-time job. While trying to explain American Jewish perspectives to policymakers at home, I reached out to Reform and Conservative rabbis and organized a series of “tisches”—roundtable discussions—between them and their Orthodox counterparts. I devoted more than two

years to mediating an agreement that guaranteed egalitarian prayer at the Western Wall. The objective, throughout, remained unchanged: to preserve the unity of Jewish people and the status of Israel as our nation-state.

By the end of my first year in office, I had internalized the lessons that would guide me over the next four, most of all when it came to reaching out beyond my political comfort zone. No amount of lessons, unfortunately, could ease the strains with the Obama administration.

The response was what might be called a “whole of government” approach—taking advantage of the fact that there is more to the U.S. government than the executive branch. It meant identifying those areas of American decision-making most sympathetic, or at least open to, Israel’s positions. Consequently, I more than doubled the time I spent on Capitol Hill, forging personal relationships with members from both parties as well as their senior advisers. I similarly reached out to the military, spending days at the academies and officer-training schools. Wherever I went, I adhered to the self-imposed rule of never working behind the administration’s back. Even when lobbying against President Obama’s policies, I always apprised his advisers of my activities and so retained their confidence.

But the crises kept recurring and even escalating. I often imagined myself bound to two chariots racing in opposite directions. The best I could do was to maintain, at least unilaterally, the “no daylight” principle by downplaying the depth and scope of our disagreements while spotlighting the areas of consensus. If the administration was making concessions to Iran that Israelis saw as dangerous, I praised America’s commitment to our security and to Israel’s right to self-defense. If Israel was constructing apartment complexes in East Jerusalem and being condemned for it, I explained that even the best of friends can disagree. The effort helped dispel the image of a weakening alliance and deny our enemies the temptation to exploit it.

Simultaneously, in my conversations with Israeli leaders, I explained what the situation looked like to Americans and how they might react to our decisions. This was perhaps my hardest role, as it often meant going against the advice of most of the prime minister’s senior staff, some of whom faulted me for being too conciliatory to the administration. My strategy was to be as creative and proactive as possible, to regard every crisis as an opportunity, to present Israel’s case directly to the American public, and to elevate the embassy’s status in Washington’s social calendar. And yet, no matter how imaginative and robust, an ambassador is only one person whose ability to affect the course of events is ultimately limited.

In the United States, as in Israel, historical processes continue to alter society and reorient politics in ways that may further strain our bilateral ties and fray our alliance. The U.S. is not only withdrawing from the Middle East but also retreating from many aspects of world affairs in general. America is unlikely to project the large-scale military power upon which its allies, Israel among them, have long depended. An ambassador can interpret these developments and recommend the policies necessary to adapt to them. He or she can work to mitigate the negative impact of some of these developments and even delay them. But, in the end, an ambassador merely represents, rather than leads, a country and can pursue only those diplomatic, social, and media measures that best advance its interests.

Those tasks can be weighty enough, and the lessons I learned in Washington proved essential to fulfilling them. Listen to your predecessors, build a trustworthy team, play to your strengths, think and act out of the box, earn the trust of key players, reach out of your political comfort zones, direct your energies solely at those situations that you can affect, and understand the limits of your power—all are necessary if an ambassador is to succeed at the job and demonstrate that it is, in fact, winnable. \*