



# How Obama's America Might Threaten Israel

Will Washington force Jerusalem to choose between friendly relations and the actions necessary to assure Israel's survival?

By Norman Podhoretz

**I**S THERE A THREAT to Israel from the United States under Barack Obama? The question itself seems perverse. For in spite of the hostility to Israel in certain American quarters, this country has more often than not been the beleaguered Jewish state's only friend in the face of threats coming from others. Nor has the young Obama administration been any less fervent than its last two predecessors in declaring an undying commitment to the security and survival of Israel.

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Nevertheless, during the 2008 presidential campaign, friends of Israel (a category that, speculations to the contrary notwithstanding, still includes a large majority of the American Jewish community) had ample reason for anxiety over Obama. The main reason was his attitude toward Iran. After all, Iran under its current president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, was vowing almost on a daily basis to "wipe Israel off the map" and was drawing closer and closer to acquiring the nuclear weapons and the ballistic missiles that would give the ruling mullocracy the means to do so. And yet Obama seemed to think that the best way to head off the very real possibility this posed of another holocaust was by entering into talks with Iran "without preconditions." Otherwise, except for campaign

promises, his record was bereft of any definitive indication of his views on the war the Arab/Muslim world has been waging against the Jewish state from the day of its founding more than sixty years ago.

Still—lest we forget—Obama did have a history of involvement with associates whose enmity toward Israel was unmistakable. There was, most notoriously, his longtime pastor, the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. In addition to honoring the blatantly anti-Semitic Louis Farrakhan, Wright was on record as believing that Israel had joined with South Africa in developing an “ethnic bomb” designed to kill blacks and Arabs but not whites; he had accused Israel of committing “genocide” against the Palestinians; and he had participated in a campaign to get American companies to “divest” from Israel. None of this, however, nor all of it together, had elicited so much as a peep of protest from Obama, never mind provoking him into leaving Wright’s congregation. He remained a member for twenty years, during which time Wright officiated at his marriage and baptized his children.

Then there was Rashid Khalidi, holder of a professorship at Columbia named after his idol, the late Edward Said. As befitted a reverential disciple of the leading propagandist for Palestinian terrorism, and himself a defender of suicide bombing, Khalidi regularly denounced Israel as a “racist” state in the process of creating an “apartheid system.” Nevertheless, Obama had befriended him, had publicly acknowledged being influenced by him, and, as a member of the board of a charitable foundation, had also helped to support him financially. And there was also one of Obama’s chief advisers on national security and the co-chairman of his campaign, General Merrill McPeak, who subscribed to the canard that American policy in the Middle East was dictated by Jews in the interests not of the United States but of Israel. Others said to be advising Obama included a number who were no more notable than McPeak for their friendliness toward Israel: Zbigniew Brzezinski, Robert Malley, Susan Rice, and Samantha Power.

True, as the campaign proceeded, Obama either distanced himself from or repudiated the ideas of such associates. Yet he only got around to doing so when the political exigencies of his candidacy left him no prudential alternative.

Not surprisingly, a fair number of Jews who had never voted for a Republican in their lives were disturbed enough to tell pollsters that they had serious doubts about supporting Obama. Faced with this horrific prospect, Obama’s Jewish backers mounted a vigorous effort of reassurance. No fewer than three hundred rabbis issued a statement declaring that his “deep and abiding spiritual faith” derived from “the

teachings of the Hebrew Prophets.” Several well-known champions of Israel also wrote articles explaining on rather convoluted grounds why they were backing Obama. There was, for example, Alan Dershowitz of the Harvard Law School: “The election of Barack Obama—a liberal supporter of Israel—will enhance Israel’s position among wavering liberals.” And Martin Peretz of *The New Republic*: “Israel’s conflict with the Arabs . . . is mostly about history, and Obama is a student of history.” And Martin Indyk of the Brookings Institution: “I believe Obama passes the *kishke* [gut] test.”

The small community of politically conservative Jews did what it could to counter this campaign, but to no avail. In the event, Obama received 78 percent of the Jewish vote. This was a staggering 35 points higher than the pro-Obama white vote in general (43 percent), and it was even 11 points higher than the Hispanic vote (67 percent). Only with blacks, who gave him 95 percent of their vote, did Obama do better than with Jews. The results were just as dramatic when broken down by religion as by race and ethnicity: Protestants gave 45 percent of their vote to Obama (33 points less than Jews), and Catholics gave him 54 percent (24 points less than Jews).

**B**UT IF the forecasts of a Jewish defection from Obama were all wrong, the prediction of his Jewish opponents that he would be less friendly toward Israel than George W. Bush has turned out to be more accurate than any “*kishke* test.” Bush’s friendliness manifested itself in various ways. One of the most important was his backing for the measures Israel had been taking to defend itself against suicide bombing—the building of a wall and the institution of checkpoints that would make it harder for suicide bombers to get through from the West Bank and into Israel proper. These measures were denounced almost everywhere as oppressive in themselves and as a species of apartheid, while the accompanying assassinations of the leaders who recruited, trained, and supplied the suicide bombers were routinely condemned as acts of murder. But Bush—that is, the Bush who emerged after 9/11—would have none of this. So far as he was concerned, suicide bombing was a form of terrorism and therefore evil by definition. Israel had an absolute right to defend itself against this great evil, and in fighting it, the Israelis were struggling against the same enemy that had declared war on us on 9/11.

A similar logic guided Bush’s view of the Israeli incursion into Lebanon in 2006 and of its attack on Gaza in 2008. Since, contrary to the confident assur-

ances of their opponents, the wall, the checkpoints, and the targeted assassinations had all but eliminated suicide bombing, the terrorists were now resorting to a different tactic. From its redoubt in Lebanon, Hizballah rained rockets into the north of Israel, and from its base in Gaza, Hamas fired them into the south. In each of these cases, when the Israelis finally responded, they were furiously accused by most of the world of using “disproportionate” force that allegedly resulted in the wholesale “slaughter” of innocent civilians. But Bush would have none of these egregious defamations either. Both in 2006 and 2008, he again affirmed Israel’s right to defend itself against terrorist assault, and he worked to fend off efforts by the UN to stop the Israelis before they could finish the job they had set out to do.

To be sure, Barack Obama (while still President-elect) said about the then impending Israeli incursion into Gaza, that

If somebody was sending rockets into my house where my two daughters sleep at night, I would do everything in my power to stop that and I would expect Israelis to do the same thing.

This sounded very much like Bush. But whereas an altogether new conception of how to make peace between Israel and the Palestinians undergirded Bush’s support for the tactics Israel had been using to defend itself against terrorist attack, there was nothing in Obama’s record or in his past statements or in his history to suggest that he shared, or even was aware of, this conception.

George W. Bush was the first American President to come out openly in favor of a Palestinian state. But he also decided to attach a codicil that was even more novel. “Today,” he declared on June 24, 2002,

Palestinian authorities are encouraging, not opposing, terrorism. This is unacceptable. And the United States will not support the establishment of a Palestinian state until its leaders engage in a sustained fight against the terrorists and dismantle their infrastructure.

To this he added the requirement that they elect “new leaders, not compromised by terror,” which amounted

to an implicit demand that Yasser Arafat be replaced.

Of course, Bush also challenged Israel “to take concrete steps to support the emergence of a viable, credible Palestinian state.” Yet he most emphatically did not follow the usual practice of blaming Israel for the persistence of the war against it. Instead, in an entirely unprecedented move, he placed the onus

on the Palestinian leaders and the Arab states backing them up. By saying up front that “there is simply no way to achieve . . . peace until all parties fight terror,” he was blaming the absence of peace on the Arab states and the “Palestinian authorities” (who were “encouraging, not opposing, terrorism”), and he was exonerating the

Israelis (who were being “victimized by terrorists,” not supporting them).

Nor was this all. Two years later, in an addendum to his codicil, Bush said that “as part of a final peace settlement, Israel must have secure and recognized borders,” and that these must include “already existing major Israeli population centers.” To put it plainly, the United States rejected the almost universally accepted idea that a precondition for the establishment of a Palestinian state was the forcible removal of every last Jew from the West Bank. In all other contexts, this is known as ethnic cleansing and regarded as a great crime. But in this context alone, and by a process of reasoning that has always escaped me, it has been magically transmuted into the exercise of a sacred human right. Not, however, to Bush.

**N**OW, on a number of issues—most notably Iraq—Obama as President has surprised many people by in effect signing on to Bush’s policies (while claiming to be reversing them). Yet even though he will certainly follow Bush in pushing for the establishment of a Palestinian state, it would be nothing less than astounding if he were also to accept the conditions prescribed by the Bush codicil and its addendum. For neither Obama himself nor those of his appointees who will be involved in the “peace process”—his Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton; his special envoy to the Middle East, George Mitchell; his national security adviser, Gen. James Jones; and his Ambassador to the UN, Susan

## **It would be astounding if Obama were to echo Bush’s policies on ending terrorism and preserving Israeli security before endorsing a Palestinian state.**



Rice, although she made the right noises at her confirmation hearing—have ever so much as suggested that it is the Palestinians and not the Israelis who are blocking the way to the holy grail of a two-state solution. On the contrary, Obama and his team are all great worshipers at the shrine of “even-handedness,” which has long served as a deceptive euphemism for pressuring Israel to make unilateral concessions to Palestinian demands.

No wonder, then, that the Obama administration is already reverting to the old pre-Bush assumptions that have repeatedly been discredited in practice: that Israeli “intransigence” is the main obstacle to ending the conflict with the Palestinians; that “restarting” the “peace process” therefore requires putting the onus back on Israel; and that this in turn necessitates forcing Israel back to the 1967 borders. In other words, Jerusalem must be redivided and the major centers of Jewish population in the West Bank that Bush had promised would remain part of Israel must also be evacuated and the West Bank as a whole be made *Judenrein*.

Indeed, during Hillary Clinton’s first trip as Secretary of State to Israel, she went evenhandedly out of her way to castigate the Israelis over the issue of Arab housing in Jerusalem while making a great show of the \$900 million the U.S. has pledged to Gaza.

**I**T IS too early to tell whether the return to this approach will go so far as to substantiate the fear expressed by the former UN ambassador John R. Bolton, who foresees “pressure on Israel to acknowledge the legitimacy of [Hamas and Hezbollah], and to negotiate with them as equals (albeit perhaps under some artful camouflage).”<sup>\*</sup> But it is not too early to tell that nothing will come of a reversion to the pre-Bush assumptions. Nothing will come of it with the Israelis because they—even most of the doves among them—have learned that withdrawing from previously occupied territories means the creation of bases from which terrorists will rain rockets on Israeli towns. Thus, when in 2000 they withdrew from the security zone they had established in southern Lebanon, Hizballah moved in, and then their withdrawal from Gaza in 2005 resulted in a takeover by Hamas—even tuating in both cases not in peace or even improved prospects for peace but in war and more war. Furthermore, the withdrawal from Gaza, entailing as it did the dragging of some 8,000 Jews out of their homes, was so

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<sup>\*</sup> John R. Bolton’s article in this Special Report begins on page 27—Ed.

painful a national trauma that doing the same to more than thirty times that many Jews living in the West Bank has become unthinkable.

Nor will anything come of the old approach with the Palestinians. The writ, such as it is, of Mahmoud Abbas as president of the Palestinian Authority extends only to the West Bank, not to Gaza, so that even if he were to reach an agreement with Israel, he lacks the power to deliver on it.

But a deeper reason may be at work here as well. When people quote Abba Eban’s famous quip that the Palestinians never miss an opportunity to miss an opportunity, the opportunity they have in mind is the achievement of statehood. And it is true that on at least three occasions when they could have had peace and a state of their own for the asking—in 1947, under the UN partition plan; in 2000, under the extremely generous terms proposed jointly by Israel under Ehud Barak and the United States under Bill Clinton; and in 2005, after the Israeli withdrawal from Gaza—the Palestinians rejected statehood and chose war instead.

May it not be, then, that they failed to seize these “opportunities” because they have never really wanted a state of their own?

Giora Eiland, a retired general and the former head of Israel’s National Security Council, argues that this is indeed the case. He writes:

The Palestinian ethos is based on values such as justice, victimization, revenge, and above all, the “right of return.” . . . It’s true that the Palestinians want to do away with the occupation, but it’s wrong to assume that this translates into a desire for an independent state. They would prefer the solution of “no state at all”—that is, the State of Israel will cease to exist and the area between the Mediterranean Sea and the Jordan River will be divided among Jordan, Syria, and Egypt.

Adding to the plausibility of this theory is the most recent polling data showing that a large majority of Palestinians would reject the two-state solution *even* after “the settlement of all issues in dispute,” and would be unwilling to accept a state of their own *even* with its capital in East Jerusalem and an unlimited “right of return.”

But whether or not Eiland is right—and I for one think that he is, at least about the “no-state” solution—the futility under current conditions of negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians is so obvious that even devout American “peace processers” like Aaron

David Miller and Martin Indyk acknowledge it. Hence (along with certain high-placed Israelis) they now advocate shifting to the “Syrian track.” But nothing will come of this either. Even under the delusion that, in exchange for the Golan Heights, Syria would be ready to give up the dream of wiping Israel off the map that it shares with its closest ally Iran, it is hard to see how the Israelis would be willing to do unto the 20,000 Jews living there what they did to the 8,000 who lived in Gaza.\*

When I say that nothing will come of renewed American pressure on Israel to accept the demands that are the precondition of a deal with the Palestinians and/or the Syrians, I mean that nothing will come of it on the ground. It is, however, likely

to result in the same souring of relations that developed in the 1990s when George H.W. Bush was in the White House and Yitzhak Shamir was Prime Minister of Israel, and that then carried over to their successors, Bill Clinton and Benjamin Netanyahu. Unpleasant as this would be, it does not rise to the level of a threat.

But what surely does rise to the level of a threat is American policy toward Iran. In making the ridiculous boast during his presidential campaign that he could talk Iran into giving up its quest for nuclear weapons (and the missiles to deliver them), Obama was careful to add that the military option remained available in case all else failed. But everyone, and especially the Iranians and the Israelis, had to know that this was *pro forma*, and that if elected Obama would pursue the same carrot-and-stick approach of the Europeans who had been negotiating with Iran for the past five years. He would do this in spite of the fact that the only accomplishment of the European diplomatic dance had been to buy the Iranians more time; in spite of the fact that they had spurned the carrots they were offered and defied the sanctions put in place by the Security Council; and in spite of the fact that the Russians and the Chinese—who had prevented stronger sanctions from being adopted—were still determined to veto measures like a blockade or a cutoff of gasoline imports that could conceivably do the trick.

How much time do we have? Secretary of Defense Robert Gates at first said that Iran was still five years or more away from the bomb. This estimate re-

lied on the CIA, in which Gates worked for more than 25 years, including a stint (1991-93) as its director. But the CIA does not exactly have a brilliant record of tracking nuclear proliferation. It was wrong in 2007 about Iran’s suspension of its nuclear program; wrong in 2003 about Syria’s nuclear program; wrong in 2002 about Saddam Hussein’s possession of weapons of mass destruction; and wrong in exactly the opposite direction before the First Gulf War in 1991, at whose end UN inspectors discovered that the Iraqi nuclear program was far more advanced than the American intelligence community had thought. By contrast, an increasing number of experts (possibly—to judge

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by hints he has thrown out—the current Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Admiral Michael Mullen, among them) agree with the head of Israeli military intelligence, who warns that the Iranians have already “crossed the nuclear threshold.” Perhaps this is why, in an interview with the *Financial Times*, Gates has now backed away from his complacent five-year estimate (“How much more time [we have] I don’t know. It is a year, two years, three years”). Admit it or not, then, the awesome choice of bombing Iran or letting Iran get the bomb is hard upon us.

Although it is certain that Obama has removed American military action from the table, it is difficult to tell whether he still thinks that he can talk Iran into giving up its nuclear program. On the one hand, his Secretary of State reportedly admits that this is “very doubtful,” but on the other hand she invites the Iranians to a conference on Afghanistan, then Obama himself sends a videotaped message proclaiming his “respect” for the brutal and tyrannical regime in Tehran, and finally it is announced that the U.S. will now join the Europeans, the Russians, and the Chinese in the farcical negotiations with Iran we had previously shunned. Naturally the mullahs, seizing this gift of an opportunity to buy yet more time for reaching their nuclear goal, welcome the renewal of “constructive dialogue.”

Yet to Obama’s offer of a “new day” in the relations between us, the Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Supreme Leader of that regime, responds in a speech heaping scorn on the United States to the accompaniment of an audience chanting “Death to America.” And far from having leaped at Obama’s old offer of direct talks without preconditions, the Iranians have rebuffed it and insisted on a few preconditions of their

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\* There are also other factors at play here that Bret Stephens brilliantly spells out in “The Syria Temptation—And Why Obama Must Resist It” (COMMENTARY, March 2009).

own, beginning with an apology for all the “atrocities” we have committed against them and a promise of “deep and fundamental” change in our policy.

In order to avoid this humiliation, Obama (we learn from the *New York Times*) has chosen the slightly lesser humiliation of “seeking an understanding with Syria.” The idea here, according to the *Times*, is that through the Syrians, “the United States could increase the pressure on Iran to respond to its offer of direct talks.” And to compound the double foolishness of expecting the Syrians to lend us a helping hand with Iran and the Iranians to join with us against the Taliban in Afghanistan, Obama expects that

such an understanding [with Syria] would also give Arab states and moderate Palestinians the political cover to negotiate with Israel. That, in turn, could increase the burden on Hamas, the Islamic militant group that controls Gaza, to relax its hostile stance toward Israel.

Well, compared to this concatenation of wishful delusions, the prophet Isaiah’s vision of the end of days when the lion will lie down with the lamb is a piece of hardheaded realism.

**T**HE UPSHOT is that, barring military action by Israel (or a miracle), Iran will get the bomb, and sooner rather than later. What then? For some time now, many pundits with the ear of the Obama administration have finally recognized that neither carrots nor sticks nor any combination of the two can work. But instead of going on to support military action, they have fallen back on the position that we can “live with” a nuclear Iran. In line with the doctrine of Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD), they soothingly tell us, the mullahs can be deterred by the fear of retaliation much as the far more heavily armed Soviets and Chinese were deterred during the cold war. They also say that Ahmadinejad—who in his fanaticism admittedly sounds as though he can hardly wait to use nuclear weapons against Israel—neither runs the regime nor speaks for it.

What they forget to mention, however, is that Ah-

madinejad could never have issued his threats without permission from the Ayatollah Khamenei, who does run the regime, and who has himself described Israel as a “cancerous tumor” that must and will be excised. Besides, even Ahmadinejad’s predecessor as president and the current Speaker of the Assembly of Experts, the Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani, known far and wide as a “moderate,” has declared that his country would not be deterred by the fear of retaliation:

If the day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in its possession . . . application of an atomic bomb would not leave anything in Israel, but the same thing would just produce damages in the Muslim world.

If this is the position of even a reputed Iranian moderate, how could Israel depend upon MAD to keep the mullahs from launching a first strike? Much anxiety has been voiced over the nuclear arms race that would be triggered throughout the region if Iran were to get the bomb, but in all truth we would be lucky if there were enough time for such a race to develop. For consider: if the Iranians were to get the bomb, the Israelis would be presented with an almost irresistible incentive to beat them to the punch with a preemptive strike—and so, understanding this, would Tehran. Either way, a nuclear exchange would become, if not inevitable, terrifyingly likely, and God alone knows how far the destruction would then spread.

Measured against this horrendous possibility, even the worst imaginable consequences of taking military action *before* the mullahs get the bomb would amount to chump change. But to say it again, with American military action ruled out, the only hope is that such action—which could at the very least head off the otherwise virtually certain prospect of a nuclear war—will be taken by Israel.

Forget about the Palestinian and Syrian “tracks”: if there is a threat to Israel coming from Obama, it is that, having eschewed the use of force by the United States, he will follow through on his Vice President’s declaration that the Israelis would be “ill-advised” to attack the Iranian nuclear sites and will prevent them from doing the job themselves. 📌