



**From the Editor • John Podhoretz**

# The Turn Against Israel

**B**ARACK OBAMA began the first week of June with a series of interviews on the eve of his journey to Cairo to deliver his address to the “Muslim world.” In all of them, he spoke of the Israeli-Palestinian situation and the central importance of resolving it as part of his aim of beginning anew with the Arab and Muslim nations that have grown so disenchanted with the United States. To National Public Radio, the President made a point of invoking the ties that bind America to Israel and the “special relationship” between the two nations before asserting that

part of being a good friend is being honest. And I think there have been times where we are not as honest as we should be about the fact that the current direction, the current trajectory, in the region is profoundly negative, not only for Israeli interests but also U.S. interests. And that’s part of a new dialogue that I’d like to see encouraged in the region.

The President is, of course, entirely right about how “profoundly negative” the “current direction, the current trajectory, in the region” is for American and Israeli interests. A theocratic regime committed in word and spirit to Israel’s destruction is relentlessly marching ahead with the development of nuclear weaponry. The conclusion of its march poses not only a threat to Israel’s existence but portends a Persian Gulf arms race with implications that ought to terrify everyone. This is precisely the kind of “new dialogue” Israel and the United States should be pursuing in the Middle East—honesty about the trajectory of Iran.

But, of course, honest discourse about Iran was not the fearless truth Barack Obama wished to bestow upon Israel or the Muslim world.

Rather, his honesty solely concerned the trajectory of the “settlements”—which is to say, those acres between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea on which Jewish people now live that have not been declared part

of the state of Israel by the international community.

The President’s honesty compelled him to inform his friend that these acres of earth have been improperly and illegally built upon, and that their existence imperils the creation of the Palestinian state he believes is a political and moral necessity.

Obama’s notion that presidents before him have not been “as honest as we should be” about the settlements is a peculiar one. Every occupant of the Oval Office since Richard Nixon has spoken unfavorably about them. Indeed, when it comes to policy specifics, it is hard to see exactly how Obama has ushered in a new era of “honesty” in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

And yet there is no question that we *have* entered a new era, one that I expect will be characterized by tensions and unpleasantnesses of a kind unseen since the days when George H. W. Bush was president, James A. Baker III was secretary of state, and the hostility toward Israel oozed from both men like sweat from an intrepid colonial traveler’s brow as he journeyed across the Rub-al-Khali.

One tiny detail gives the game away: Obama’s very use of the word “honest.” It was carefully chosen, and is pregnant with meaning.

**I**N THE MATTER of relations between nations, the adjective “honest” is often deployed to denote animosity. When, for example, a State Department official describes a discussion between diplomats as “open and honest,” that description is presumed to mean that the proceedings were heated and confrontational.

And in the relations between the United States and Israel, “honest” has a provenance that cannot be ignored. It is most often used as part of a two-word phrase whose euphemistic purpose has long been to criticize American closeness to Israel and assert that any such intimacy needs to be abandoned in favor of a more distant, distinctly cooler posture.

The phrase is “honest broker,” as in, “the United States should serve as an honest broker in the Middle

East.” It goes back at least 30 years, and seems first to have entered the realm of American cliché in tribute to President Jimmy Carter’s role in the Camp David peace process between Israel and Egypt. The success of that negotiation led to calls for the United States to continue to serve as an “honest broker” when it came to the relations between Israel and the 21 other Arab countries that, unlike Egypt, still continued to refuse to recognize its existence.

Therein lay the flaw in the “honest broker” idea whereby it was exposed for the disingenuous notion it was. For Israel’s only offense to those nations was its very

existence. There can be no honest deal-brokering if one party refuses to accept the reality of another. The term suggested each party had equal weight and equal standing, but that was precisely not the case with Israel and the Arab states. The Arab nations had the geopolitical weight; Israel had the moral standing.

What the honest-brokerers actually meant when they said that the United States should play an uncommitted role was that we ought to keep our distance from Israel in order to maintain good relations with Arab states—many of whom, after all, not only sat atop mammoth oil reserves but whose potentates were also genial and lovely hosts, in contrast to the informal and stiff-necked sabras who simply didn’t know how to act in a courtly fashion toward the starched foreign-service officers who served as the nation’s emissaries.

It was only in the 1990s, when Yasir Arafat was parachuted into the West Bank from his exile in Tunis and reinvented as a negotiating partner for Israel, that the phrase began once again to find purchase. For now, at last, there was a deal to be brokered; the Palestinians were now at the table, eager to claim the land Israel had taken in war.

Those who advocated for the Palestinian cause argued that the only way such a thing was going to happen would be if the United States were to serve as an “honest broker”—which is to say, implicitly, as the representative of the Palestinians in the negotiation. And indeed, effectively, that is what the Clinton administration did do, so well that it all but designed a Palestinian state, induced then-Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Barak to accept it, and then went into slack-jawed shock when Yasir Arafat rejected it and started a terror war instead.

Nonetheless, those in the “honest broker” camp believed the Clinton administration was compromised by its acceptance of the phrase “special relationship”

and Clinton’s own expressions of closeness to the assassinated Israeli Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin. Such is the nature of those who hunger for the “honest broker” role—nothing less than a breach with Israel will do. The honest-brokerers presume that the United States has tilted in Israel’s direction for all sorts of reasons, all of them corrupt, corrupted, and corrupting.

The government is always being manipulated, the honest-brokerers say, by the all-powerful Israel lobby, the all-powerful neoconservatives, or the all-powerful born-again Christians. Presidents hunger for the Jewish vote in Florida and Pennsyl-

vania, and therefore betray America’s true interests. For the honest-brokerers, then, American support for Israel is always viewed as dishonest.

PEOPLE will argue about the text of Obama’s Cairo address as long as he is president, because he is to plain-spoken clarity what blue-hued cotton candy is to nutrient. But the message he was delivering to his own State Department, to his own diplomats who will be carrying out his policies, was plain: The goal of American foreign policy in the Middle East is now the creation of a Palestinian state. Very little will be expected of the Palestinians in the creation of that state; Hamas should renounce terror and recognize Israel, but a failure to do so will not kill the deal. Violence should be foresworn, but even that is of secondary importance to the state itself.

A great deal is, however, expected of Israel. Settlements are to be frozen, including their “natural growth.” Israel must bolster the Palestinian economy, provide Palestinians with jobs, and make things better in Gaza. Israel is to give; the Palestinians are to receive. Israel’s giving is to be accompanied by a promise of reduced violence. Palestinian receiving will be accompanied by Israel’s surrender of more territory beyond the entirety of Gaza and the near-entirety of the West Bank already in Palestinian hands. Israel, the president asserts, will be better off if all this happens. Trust him. He’s Israel’s friend. A better friend than anyone else, remember, because he’s willing to be honest about Israel’s need to sacrifice itself on the altar of nothing more than a promise, and maybe not even that.

And so the turn against Israel that so many predicted during the 2008 campaign is coming to pass—with a smile, and a nod, and an invocation of a word that actually means something very different from friendship. It might even mean its opposite. 🍷

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