

OBAMA RECONSIDERED: AN ISRAELI VIEW

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Presidential election campaigns in the United States are always closely watched in Israel, and this is particularly the case in 2008. The conventional wisdom is that Obama, like Jimmy Carter, is inexperienced and naive, and that he has been influenced by radical Palestinian friends like Rashid Khalidi (the Edward Said Professor of Arab Studies at Columbia University), anti-Israel advisors like Samantha Power and Zbigniew Brzezinski, and by his ex-pastor, Jeremiah Wright, a supporter of Louis Farrakhan. In contrast, McCain is viewed as a realist who understands the complexities of the Middle East, including Iran's efforts to dominate the region through nuclear weapons, and is prepared to respond effectively.

But Obama has provided some reasons to reexamine this image, while also introducing a new and important factor that works in his favor. Like others around the world, Israelis have observed and been impacted by the decline of American power in recent years. Intense internal divisions (red vs. blue states) and President Bush's stumbling appearances severely undermined Washington's credibility and influence, from Venezuela to Pakistan. Major mistakes in Iraq allowed the Iranian regime to become a leading force in the Middle East, and the faith-based promotion of instant democracy legitimized Hamas, and weakened the military elite that provides stability in Egypt. Power projection resulting from economic success has disintegrated as the dollar and Wall Street plummeted, and America-led alliances have failed to defeat Al Qaida or the Taliban. The perception of the US as a weak and fading world power has also reduced Israel's own deterrence, and emboldened its enemies.

To restore American power and, in its wake, Israeli security and Middle East stability, the next president must first unify the American public, and inspire them to take the steps necessary to repair their economy, including reducing the huge gap between rich and poor, and improving education. A president who projects confidence, intelligence, and empathy can lead a long-overdue transformation, and here, Obama has the advantage.

History has shown that these steps will also have a major impact in improving America's ability to act effectively around the world. In 1961, John F. Kennedy's stirring speeches projected a confident superpower, sure of its moral mandate and ready to "bear any burden" to defend the cause of freedom. In practice, the inexperience of Kennedy and his advisors led to serious policy challenges, including the 1962 nuclear confrontation with the Soviet Union, but America emerged as the undisputed leader and inspiration for citizens in many other countries.

The Vietnam War, the darkness of the Nixon years, and Jimmy Carter's "malaise" undermined this power, but in the 1980s, Ronald Reagan's clear message and actions restored America's position as the world leader, and sped the demise of the Soviet empire. The economy boomed, and further increased Washington's power. As the close ally of the US, Israel's deterrence capabilities also benefited from this recovery.

On this score, Obama's energy and racial background can unite and inspire Americans, and his election will revive the glow of American democracy around the world. His speeches and Q&A responses display a quick intelligence and a sharp wit, and his body language is consistent with the words. In this context, Obama has written about his admiration for Reagan – the quintessential Republican and Neo-conservative. However, to convince Israelis, the Democratic candidate must also demonstrate that he invoke a credible deterrent, and make the difficult calls, including the use of force, when required. Obama's comments on Iraq, including a pledge to end the war, come across as simplistic, as did the confused statements on the very complex issue of Jerusalem. In his upcoming visit to the region, Israelis will be looking for signs that beyond inspirational speeches and self-confidence, Obama can also deal with the threats on the ground.

In contrast, McCain's policies, including threats to use of America's military power to defend freedom, are more credible than Obama's, and his record is consistent and substantive. On Iraq, as on many other difficult issues, McCain does not present thin hopes of a quick solution which will allow America to disengage and leave a stable government. But McCain's personality and rhetoric do not inspire, and he will be seen by many both inside the U.S. and from overseas as a continuation of the Bush era.

These dimensions, taken together, make for a difficult choice for Americans, while Israelis watch with more than usual interest. If the result produces a stronger America, this should also benefit other democracies around the world, including Israel.

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