The useful myth that Obama now likes Israel

By BARRY RUBIN

Reality, especially in 2012, is very hard to face. So many hopes dashed, so many bad things happening. So people can be forgiven for taking refuge in wishful thinking. Sometimes, not telling the truth has its value in public affairs, especially when you are looking at a president with four more years in office and no elections ahead of him.

Such is the story now gaining currency in some quarters; that President Barack Obama has changed his view of Israel, now wants to get along with Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, and the two are closely cooperating. If you want to believe that idea, it probably does no harm, and might make you feel better. Maintaining this fiction may also encourage Obama supporters to think more kindly of Israel.

There is another factor here that should be mentioned. Many people overstated Obama’s active antagonism toward Israel, as if he wanted to wipe it out or hurt it in any way possible. Obama dislikes Israel, disregards its strategic interests, and despises Netanyahu. That doesn’t mean, however, that he’s obligated to do much about it.

If, however, you are interested in the actual situation, I would ask this question: What evidence is there of any change at all of Obama’s policy toward Israel?

Beyond wishful thinking, basically two things have happened:

• The US government issued routine statements of support for Israel’s battle in Gaza while apparently urging it not go on too long and for it not to include a ground attack. It didn’t go out of its way much on the issue, however, for example not rethinking the president’s love affair with the Turkish Islamist regime despite the fact that its prime minister froths at the mouth with hatred of Israel.

• The US government opposed, as it always has, the UN’s upgrading of the Palestinian Authority’s status. The American government realizes that such behavior is a torpedoing of the Oslo accords and peace process of which Israel was a guarantor. But at the same time, it certainly didn’t seem to put any real pressure on European allies who supposedly adore Obama and would be willing to listen to him to vote against the proposal, and there are stories (which are not completely confirmed but seem authentic) that the White House urged European countries and Canada to give Israel a hard time over the new construction.

American officials certainly didn’t assert the absurdity of a situation in which the PA can reject a two-state solution repeatedly and break all of its commitments but Israel is said to be destroying peace because it approves some future apartment construction.

So Obama’s great support of Israel consisted mostly of not attacking Israel verbally and maintaining routine administration positions. I am not suggesting that the Obama administration wanted the General Assembly to give Palestine non-member state status.

It is so hard to get people to step back and apply the same logic they would have used a few years ago, but open your mind for a moment and ask this question:

How is it possible for the US to lose the backing of every single European ally with regard to a policy issue which is important to the president, but doesn’t involve the national interests of the allies? In any other case and with any other president, the mass media would be sounding alarm bells and speaking of a tremendous defeat, of incompetence and a terribly weak American position.

After all, America’s allies just threw out 20 years of a diplomatic process sponsored by the United States.

Of what importance is it that Obama is personally popular with Europeans if he can’t get them to go along with his goals? Ah yes: he is in large part personally popular with Europeans because they know he’ll let them do what they want.

The two biggest examples supposedly to the contrary, i.e. the overthrowing of Muammar Gaddafi in Libya and the increased sanctions on Iran, only prove the point; these were issues regarding which the key European states were demonstrably more hawkish than Obama. He followed them as much or more than they followed him.

At present and concerning Israel, there are additional points that could be mentioned as demonstrating Obama’s lack of support, such as his opposing more sanctions on Iran and taking no action toward the Muslim Brotherhood’s increasing dictatorship in Egypt. There is not the slightest hint that the administration realizes its pro-Islamist strategy was a huge mistake.

So where’s the change? I think the specter of a second-term Obama undeterred by a future election is so scary that the flattery is being stepped up. Well, ok, I won’t make any problems. I’ll go along with this and pretend all will be well – except in private conversations like this one, in order to brief my readers accurately.

Most obviously, Obama is not pressuring Israel to make more concessions to the Palestinians. As I pointed out two years ago – and as the president clearly stated in 2010, he had concluded that he wasn’t going to make Israel-Palestinian peace. It is the only international issue regarding which this administration seems to have learned anything.

But with all of the other pressing issues in the region plus the intransigence of the PA, which is still treated as a favored pet by Obama, plus the unwillingness of Arab governments to help him, why should Obama find time for the Israeli-Palestinian issue? With all the other stuff going on, to argue that advancing toward a comprehensive peace agreement would solve all the other regional problems has become too ludicrous even for the current administration.

What is pro-Israel are events in the region and decisions taken by Israeli leaders. Israel just gave Hamas a beating, intensified (despite the terrorist group’s bragging) by the utter lack of regional (especially Egyptian) material aid.

A lot of Egyptians aren’t quietly accepting Islamist dictatorship; the Egyptian regime is still weak and needs stability to get foreign aid; Syria is still weakened by its civil war; Hezbollah is in trouble because of its backing of the Syrian regime and facing increasing opposition within Lebanon; the Sunni Muslim Arabs don’t want Iranian influence (though Hamas is happy to take its weapons to shoot at Israel); and Hamas and the PA can never make up.

Yet a president who helps to empower Israel’s worst enemies – who also happen to be America’s worst enemies – cannot be said to be a friend except for nice words, especially pro-Israel events, maintaining aid levels, and ongoing intelligence cooperation. Perhaps that’s what American Jewish voters who supported Obama need to hear, and those who pursue that line will be richly rewarded.

Or perhaps if we pretend Obama is friendly to Israel now in his second term he and his colleagues will come to believe that themselves. Or perhaps they will reward us by not getting angry and trying to punish Israel. Okay, let’s go along with this story for a while. But my job is to let you in on what’s really happening. Shl

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