Departing observations

Israel’s former ambassador to the US Michael Oren describes a relationship that ‘turned out to be deeper and more multifaceted than anything I imagined’

BY HERB KEINON

S eptember 30 was Michael Oren’s last day in office as Israel’s ambassador to Washington. Unlike most people on their last day on the job, however, Oren didn’t have the luxury of leisurely packing up his belongings, bidding a bittersweet farewell to his co-workers, and walking out the door and into the sunset. Rather, his last day was spent in the Oval Office, taking part in the 11th meeting between US President Barack Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

Oren’s last day epitomized his entire 50-month tenure in Washington: hectic, high stakes, and in the shadow of the Obama-Netanyahu relationship.

Now he is back in Israel and will be joining the staff at the Interdisciplinary Center in Herzliya as a lecturer at its Lauder School of Government, Diplomacy and Strategy.

Before departing the States, he spoke to The Jerusalem Post and shared some final observations. What follows are excerpts from that interview.

You are leaving Washington during a pretty dramatic and significant period. Do you have regrets about missing all the action?

I think the only people who know where the action is going. Because of the nature of the geopolitical situation in the Middle East today, I think the action is going to be happening for a few years.

I think that we are going to see the confluence of three sources of instability: the Sunni-Shi’ite split, the Islamist-modernist split and the challenge to the Arab state system. Those three will converge and assure continued instability in the region. And that will be a joint challenge to the US and Israel.

During the Syrian crisis, were you concerned about voices in the US saying Israel and the Jews were again dragging the US into a war? Were those serious voices?

There were some voices like that, but they were few and rather meager. We experienced this during Iraq, and it wasn’t true back then either. There was a concern that this narrative would return. It was groundless about Iraq, and it would have been groundless now. It didn’t happen.

Independent of Syria, however, how concerned are you about the rising isolationist mood in the US?

It is something I have been aware of for a long time. I have been talking about it for at least a year – particularly the connection between the progressives and the libertarians. It is not only on our stances on issues relating to American use of drone strikes, the IRS, Egypt aid. It is on a whole spectrum of issues.

Some in Israel were shocked when US Secretary of State John Kerry began his hard press to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, even as the rest of the region was imploding. Why did the Americans do this? What were they thinking? Do they believe that this would stabilize the region?

No, no one believes that. It could perhaps put us in a better position to grapple with some of the other challenges in the region. But if you make peace with the Palestinians, does that mean the Iranians are going to stop spinning out enriched uranium? It is not going to bring stability to internal affairs in Egypt, and it is not going to end the Syrian civil war. No one thinks that. But it puts us in a position that maybe we will have one less front to worry about. It gives us a little more credibility with part of the Middle Eastern street.

You are American and a historian; you know America well. What surprised you the most about Washington?

I had a “Rip Van Winkle effect.” I had taught here at various universities – at Harvard and Yale – so I was here for several sabbaticals, but I never really lived in America since I made aliyah [migrated to Israel] in the ’70s. The “Rip Van Winkle effect” was to come back and see how America had changed in 30 years, and some of those changes were very profound: social, political, economic.

Recognizing and acknowledging these changes had a big impact on the way I interpreted events here for policy-makers back home.

What surprised you the most about the US-Israel relationship?

I spent about 30 years studying the relationship. I thought I knew it very well. I knew it as a very deep and multifaceted relationship, but it turned out to be deeper and more multifaceted than anything I imagined.

What does that involve?

The commercial relationship and how Israel has become a commercial interest for the US. Today, Israel is America’s 29th-largest customer in the world, and the 12th-largest export destination. Tens of thousands of Americans are employed in Israeli businesses. At a time when American enterprises are outsourcing jobs to Asia, Israeli corporations are outsourcing jobs to the US. The technological aspects, the R&D, are big, much bigger than I knew. That has been a real eye-opener for me.

Do Israelis understand what makes America tick?

I think there are some, but I think it is not easy. America is a unique place. The value part of American foreign policy is something I think is very laudable, but it is uniquely American. And it is part of what makes America special.

You hear a lot of criticism here that America is naive when it comes to the Middle East. Is it?

I don’t think anyone has a monopoly on mistakes. It is not like Israel has not misread situations in the Middle East, or that America has not misread situations in the Middle East. America has a certain luxury, in that it is further away from the Middle East, is a much bigger country and has much bigger capabilities.

I wrote a book called Power, Faith and Fantasy [about America’s role in the Middle East from 1776 to the present], and I strongly hold to the theory that if you are going to understand American policy in the Middle East, you have to understand those three components. The three elements – power, faith and fantasy – always form policy.

It is important to understand that, but we have also been the beneficiaries. We have been the beneficiaries of the power and the faith components. We are an American strategic asset – actually we are an unrivaled American strategic asset in the Middle East – and we embody the same spiritual ties and the same democratic ties.

We often see stories here that Israeli policies are driving away young American Jews. How serious is this?

I think it is overblown. I’m not saying it doesn’t exist, but we have seen surveys that show it is overblown. Our main problem is not Israeli policies; our main problem is Jewish apathy.

This is true on campuses. Go to campuses with a high percentage of Jews, and a certain percentage will be involved in Hillel, and you will have a pro-Israel group that is 10 people. To me, that is a greater challenge than the people who protested against me at the University of California at Irvine.

Is that apathy because they don’t like or know Israeli policies, or because Israel is simply not their story?

It is apathy about being Jewish. It’s a lack of knowledge or appreciation about being Jewish. It’s apathy because people are focusing on the economy.

Has the Taglit-Birthright program not put a dent in that apathy?

Yes, it has. I think it has had a substantive impact. Still, it is one thing to get people to feel connected to Israel, and it is another thing to mobilize them for pro-Israel activities.