



ISRAEL AND THE OBAMA PRESIDENCY: A ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSION
Panel Discussion*

On November 6, 2008, in light of Barack Obama's election as forty-fourth president of the United States, the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and the U.S. Chamber of Commerce held a panel discussion on the prospects for U.S-Israeli relations under the Obama administration. Those participating were Prof. Barry Rubin, Ambassador Daniel Ayalon, Ambassador Dan Halpern, and Zvi Rafiah. Brief biographies can be found at the end of the article.

Prof. Barry Rubin: Do you think that President Obama is going to be bound to a very large extent to the historic Israel-United States relationship and by the special aspects of that relationship?

Amb. Danny Ayalon: The short answer to this is, "yes, absolutely." I think that he would be very much bound by it for two reasons.

First of all, this is so because of his own personality and convictions. Looking into his past conduct is not necessarily the best background for understanding this. I know that in Israel and other places there was some concern about his background, and I think Obama is a real true American story. But forget the nitty-gritty pieces about background. Whether he was educated in Indonesia, whether his father was a Muslim or not, it is really immaterial. I think what he has proven throughout his career is that he is his own man. He looks at things and decides and judges on the merit of things.

I think the most salient example would be the fact that when he was president of the *Harvard Law Review*, he was basically elected--and there was also some politics there--by the more left-of-center and not the right of center. So he was supposedly beholden to this left group in Harvard, and this is what they expected when he became president. But based on the decisions he took, he really ruled it from the very center, and he really reached out to everybody.

So his personality points toward a great character and on that basis he will look at the map, the bigger picture, and he will judge U.S. interests and tradition. He knows the shared values and he talks about America not just as a country but also as an idea. And he looks at Israel, as he was here not too long ago, describing it not just as a country but as an ideal as well. So that gives me great confidence that he will continue this great relationship based on his character, his conviction, and also ensuring the continuation of interests of the United States in the region.

Amb. Dan Halpern: I agree with my predecessor that the answer is "yes" but I would qualify it in the following way. I think that strategically there won't be any difference between Obama or McCain, if he had been elected. If you go back to the history of previous presidents, all of them believed the United States is a friend of Israel and Israel is a friend of the United States. And all of them, I think, sought what is good for Israel, not only what is good to the United States.

But, as among us, so among them, there are differences in defining what is good for Israel. The first George Bush wanted to save Israel from itself because he thought this would be good for Israel. And one president, for example, may believe that evacuating all the illegal settlements is good for Israel and another one may believe that it is not good to press upon Israel to do so. And both of them

will define themselves and believe that they are friends of Israel.

So I think that, yes, the answer is the United States is very much a friend of Israel and this is, I would say, based on more than personal feelings of one president or another. But at least tactically, there will be differences.

Zvi Rafiah: Well, my answer too is yes. I would like to share with you the reasons why I believe that he is going to be bound by the traditions of friendship and support of Israel.

First, look at what he said repeatedly during the campaign for almost two years. Not only at the AIPAC conference--where you may say, "Well, what else would he say when he talks to AIPAC?"--but on many other occasions, not just talking to Jewish audiences, in interviews with CNN, "Sixty Minutes," or others. Look at what he said. Why would you think that he said all of that, just to renege on it once he becomes the president? Of course, you can say, "Everyone says everything when he wants to get elected, but when he is in place, he changes his view." Maybe, I don't think so. He also he wants to be re-elected.

Second, he has a lot of Jewish connections in Chicago, good friends, some of them actively participating in his campaign. One of them was the strategist of his campaign whom he mentioned in his victory speech.

Then let's look at his advisors on foreign policy that relates to Israel. Is Dennis Ross not a friend? Is Dan Kurtzer not a friend? Is Dan Shapiro not a friend? And I can go on and on. He could have selected somebody else to advise him on the Middle East or at least on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Now what about tradition? Think of what can happen or how it will look if the next president of the United States is breaking the American tradition and declares himself and acts as a "non-friend." I don't want to say enemy, but "non-friend." Why would he do that? What political capital will he gain by doing that?

Then look at Congress. The president is not acting alone. Every major decision he makes, not just budgetary, but even going to war, he

has to consult and get the support of Congress. Now is Congress a friend of Israel, supporting Israel? I think the answer is obvious. So for all these reasons, I believe that President Obama will continue in the tradition of supporting or maintaining friendly relations with Israel.

With one caveat. Is he the president of Israel? He is not. He is the president of the United States of America. And let me just quote one sentence from an interview he had with CNN some time ago. When asked: What would you ask the Israelis or what would you tell the Israelis to do concerning this peace process. He said repeatedly, Israel has to abide by its commitments. So if we make a commitment to a president of the United States that we will, for instance, dismantle illegal settlements, he, contrary to the outgoing president, he will insist on doing it.

Prof. Barry Rubin: Let me talk about the peace process issue. It's pretty clear that this administration is going to say it is putting a big emphasis on pushing the peace process, Israeli-Palestinian and Syrian. What do you think they can do at this point? And if you think they are going to try but fail, do you think they will learn the lesson fairly quickly or will they keep trying to put in more concessions in order to succeed?

Amb. Danny Ayalon: Well, Barry, I think that they will certainly be much more engaged than before, but I am not sure that they will do it right away. I think it was obvious throughout what we heard from our colleagues in Washington that the reality facing the president-elect and the new administration is such that the priorities will be pretty much dictated by developments. I think the most important emphasis in terms of foreign policy for him will be Iraq, simply because he made it his main foreign policy issue on the campaign. And then of course the economy took over, and he will have a lot of energy and time dedicated to this.

But on foreign affairs he has to get out of Iraq in 16 months. This is a very ambitious plan. If the United States wants to leave Iraq when it is walking out tall, I would say

keeping its image, its superpower stature, and its credibility and deterrence. So they have to start working on that right away. You don't just tell your military in Iraq, "Okay, turn west and you march." It will take a lot of exhaustive efforts in terms of dealing with the different factions in Iraq, with the military of Iraq, with the political power and of course monitoring all the others, and not less importantly with the international community, whether it's the neighbors in the Gulf, Jordan, Syria, and Iran. So this, I think, will be the focus certainly for the first two years of his administration.

And then they have Russia. I believe that this administration is maybe capable of reversing this decision of the outgoing administration to position anti-ballistic missiles in the Czech Republic and Poland. And they will have to invest a lot of time and efforts vis-à-vis Russia, the EU, and Pakistan.

Afghanistan is also, in a way, an extension of Iraq, because Obama said, "We are engaged in the wrong war. We have to fight in Afghanistan and put troops in Afghanistan and take them out of Iraq." And of course Pakistan is very, very precarious right now.

So that pushes the other issue down the list. This is not to say that they will not be engaged, because there will be people reminding the administration to do that: the Europeans, the Saudis, the Egyptians, and those whom I call "the professional peace-process industrialists," from the administration and from outside.

Also Obama has the benefit now of the experience of two administrations, which lasted a total of 16 years, with a totally different approach, Clinton and the Bush administration. They both failed, and why? Because the realities on the ground are very difficult. I'm not going to say what the problem is over there with the Palestinians and whether they're split-- Hamas, the PLO. I will not talk about the Israeli problem as well. But simply the gap at this point, I believe, is unbridgeable unfortunately on the core issues between Palestinians and the Israelis.

So based on this experience and understanding, I think they will move very cautiously. Certainly, they will not want to

squander his capital. They will move very, very slowly. So, to sum it up, the fact that attention will be focused on other areas, and the fact that the experience of the last 16 years was not very good means that the engagement will be very careful, very methodical.

Amb. Dan Halpern: I think that the order of things relating to our region is first Iraq. I think the second is Iran. I think that Obama is much better placed to form a coalition with the Europeans, and maybe the Russians, by keeping up the move that President Bush initiated and achieving more effective pressure on Iran.

When do they come to the peace process? I think it's not high on their agenda, not only because there are other issues but also because no American policymaker ignores internal politics of Israel. And while we are on the eve of elections and before we form a new government here, I don't think that they are going to pay too much attention to this because they want to know who they are dealing with.

But all this is said barring two developments. One, if something flares up. This has happened too often in the past. If, for example, we are forced or decide to go into Gaza, this is a new situation and obviously the administration will have to react to it.

Second, I suspect that one difference between the present administration and the Obama administration regards Syria. If for any reason Israel decides to move on this front, I think the new administration will be more supportive and less hesitant in supporting it than the previous administration.

Zvi Rafiah: I think that the millions of Americans who voted so enthusiastically for Barack Obama as president did not do so because they wanted him to engage in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and get it to a conclusion immediately. They voted for him because of the high expectations they had that he will bring unemployment down, that he will provide health care insurance to everybody, that he will take care of the banks and Wall Street, and the economy that is going

down. These are the issues that were on their minds when they voted for him. He doesn't feel obliged by the pressure of the people of the United States of America to start his term with dealing with the unsolvable problem of the Israeli-Palestinian issue.

He will delegate it to somebody else to take care of it but not to get personally involved in it. I believe and I share the views of my colleagues here that the Israeli-Palestinian peace-process is very low on the agenda. Numbers one, two, three, four and five are the economy. And then comes Iraq, Iran, Afghanistan, Pakistan--these are burning issues.

Prof. Barry Rubin: I would like to turn the discussion now to Iran.

Amb. Danny Ayalon: I would say that the new administration will have to have a main theme for the Middle East. I think here we will see the focus on stabilization. What does that mean for Iran? Obama, I believe, is committed not to let Iran become nuclear. Iran is the real challenge to the United States presence in the Middle East at large.

Iran's main goal is to replace the United States as the dominant factor in the Middle East, which means to push it out of Saudi Arabia, out of the Gulf, Qatar, to interrupt as much as possible in the relationship between the United States and Egypt or with Jordan. The United States and people in Washington know it. They know that they must not just contain Iran, but they have to be much more effective in not letting Iran completely destabilize the entire Middle East and beyond.

So what does he do with Iran? He will pursue some kind of engagement, not engagement for the sake of non-stop talking but engagement with a purpose. He said, we're going to meet with the Iranians not just to have tea but to reach results.

So I believe that negotiations with Iran will start under Obama. By the way, it is quite impressive to see the coordination and succession process between the Bush and the Obama administrations. I can say it is the most honorable and most effective way to do it.

I think that under Obama they will try to engage Iran and stop the nuclear process. Of course they will have to offer them some kind of carrots, and they have a lot to offer--the end of economic sanctions, the end of political isolation. This is something that is a very important currency for Iran.

Now there is one caveat here. You don't talk today about Iran without talking about Iraq. Because the Iranians still have a lot of disruptive power. If they want to really embarrass Obama or humiliate him, they can turn Iraq into hell. Which means either the Americans can just leave with a tail between their legs--which I think will ruin Obama's plans for whatever he wants to do in the world--or he will have to engage in a more intensified way that Bush did.

So there is a kind of balance of power here between Washington and Tehran. And the danger I see is that in order for Iran to play a moderating role in Iraq, then they will ask the United States to turn a blind eye on their nuclear project. This is where leadership, experience, determination, skill, and good planning play out because Iran-Iraq is not a zero sum game but Iran and the international community is a zero-sum game. That means you stop, we will embrace you. And if Iran dares threatening the administration then the response will have to be very tough, very quick because there won't be a second chance.

Prof. Barry Rubin: I don't think the theme is so much one of stabilization, I think it's one of conciliation. That theme of conciliation is going to be so strong over the next two years it's going to crowd out the concept of stabilization if necessary. In other words, how can you push conciliation if it seems to embolden your enemies-- making them believe they can succeed with a more aggressive policy or trick you into making unilateral concessions to get nothing in return--and frighten your friends into inaction or appeasement.

Zvi Rafiah: The world is waiting to see, how President Obama will conduct his policy. He qualified this approach by saying in effect,

“I’m not going to talk to President Ahmadinejad right away, I will wait and decide the right place the right time, the right person to talk with.” He will try this new approach of contact, of diplomacy, of some kind of negotiation but he will have to do it very carefully.

And the question is, as far as we’re concerned, when he talks to the Iranians, will he take into consideration, will he raise, the issue of Iranian support for terrorism that disrupts the peace process that he would like to see take place, continue, and bring some positive results? Will he raise the issue of Hizballah and Hamas and about Iranian backing for Islamist terrorism when he talks to the Iranians?

Amb. Dan Halpern: I won’t be surprised if further discussions with Iran take place indirectly through the Europeans. Obama is extremely well received in Europe. If the Iranians are getting the impression that the Europeans are going to play ball with the Americans--that if progress is not attained then sanctions are going to be harsher--and still any movement toward negotiating with Iran fails, this will serve the purpose of Obama, Europe, and Israel.

On the question of Iraq, had I known the answer to this, I surely would have got some prize. But all I can say is, once again, it literally has to do with tradability. I think that he will have no choice but to create an impression that he is very serious about leaving Iraq and imposing upon the Iraqis the need to play a much more active role in their home and not leaving it to the Americans.

I think at this point in time there is a belief that the Americans will not leave if a void is created and therefore chaos is taking place. If they believe that he is very serious about withdrawing--in stages--and supporting them in other ways along the process, I think there is a somewhat greater chance of the Iraqis playing a more major role in putting order in their home.

And of course, there are the issues that were mentioned here, Iran or any other outside force, and this is also the issue with Syria, of

terror activities and disruption and so on that he will have to take care of.

Prof. Barry Rubin: It’s good to hear so many good ideas and so much goodwill, but let me present a bit of a tougher picture. I think we should remember that President Obama is a man with absolutely no experience in foreign policy whatsoever. That he is a man with no experience in administration, except for a \$160 million educational fund, which didn’t go so well. So while we want him to succeed, we cannot assume that decisions will be well made, the best advisors most listened to, and the policies best implemented. We will see.

Amb. Dan Halpern: I think the most important thing we know about Obama is that he is very intelligent, and comparatively he has been out of the United States more than many other presidents. I would assume that a bright person is able to gather bright people around him, and this will be the real test.

Prof. Barry Rubin: We shouldn’t *assume*. He may do a very good job, but we should be aware of this factor. The U.S. policy system is different from that of every other country because it is a pluralist system in which large numbers of individuals, agencies, and interests compete. The president must choose among them. There are many examples of presidents who chose wrongly, and some have happened in recent years. As for being smart, it is true that the wise are required to solve the problems created by the smart, and that one can be smart but not understand how others think differently. We may assume that very experienced people, centrist people, knowledgeable people will be appointed, but we don’t know that yet. In the end, what an administration intends to do and what actually happens are not necessarily the same thing.

Amb. Dan Halpern: I would say also that he has Biden on his side and Biden is extremely experienced in foreign affairs. And I assume that he is going to play a major role in those issues. It makes more sense to have Biden as

Vice-President because of his expertise in this area.

Zvi Rafiah: When he was elected a senator, Israel was the only country where Obama visited and spent a whole week. Normally senators who come to Israel spend a day and a half. But he stayed an entire week here and met with a lot of people. The fact that he came to Israel has some meaning. Maybe the meaning is that he is a great politician, and when you want to run for president, you better start visiting the Holy Land.

Prof. Barry Rubin: One thing that surprises me is that more people haven't mentioned the first appointment made was Rahm Emanuel.

Zvi Rafiah: Rahm Emanuel is going to be the chief of staff of the White House, the closest man to the president. Rahm Emanuel grew up with Obama politically in Chicago. But if President Obama would select as his secretary of state, former senator Chuck Hagel, I would be very concerned. So tell me who your advisers are and I will tell you how friendly and experienced your administration is.

Prof. Barry Rubin: One point that could be made is that an Obama administration would have very good relations with Europe and that Europe would be very supportive as long as the United States didn't press Europe to do more. We have very specific issues like Austria, Switzerland, and Germany having big contracts with Iran. Are they going to respond to the pressure and stop those deals? Or will the much improved European alliance be a restraint on the United States, a matter of the United States joining Europe rather than Europe joining the United States.

Second, there is an issue regarding the differences in the worldview and methods of Obama and adversaries of the United States. As the United States withdraws, Iran will try to increase its influence in Iraq, and Syria will try to increase its leverage over Lebanon. These regimes will pass money under the table to people, strengthen violent client forces, assassinate and threaten people, and carry out

a massive propaganda campaign. Is an Obama administration going to be able to compete in that tough game or to even comprehend what that type of uneven competition means?

Third, there tend to be two visions of Obama: one as someone who has always been a pragmatist, the other as an extremist. In my opinion, Obama does have a very extreme, left-wing background with close contacts to people who were not only haters of Israel but also haters of America. I don't disagree with what you have said about the situation now. But how did we get from that old situation to the current situation?

Pressure and criticism have played an important role. I think the Obama campaign and Senator Obama learned that you can--and I'm sorry to say this--bad-mouth small town Americans, saying they are addicted to racism, religion, and guns. You can call for the coal industry to be closed down. You can be involved with criminal slumlords, racist preachers, and a corrupt political machine. You can make lots of mistakes and be protected by an extremely sympathetic media.

But it is clear that the Obama campaign perceived that anything that made them look hostile to Israel would have a tremendous cost. I think they have learned that lesson, and that is of absolutely critical importance to an Obama administration. And the fact that the Jewish vote went overwhelmingly for Obama in the end also sent a message that those people are supporters to be treated properly. This is in contrast to the first Bush administration whose secretary of state said, privately and vulgarly, that Israel could be mistreated because its supporters did not vote for them.

And one final point of great importance. Given the changes in the region, it should be increasingly harder to argue that support for Israel is a zero-sum game in the area. Israeli interests parallel those of most Arab governments today. All, except mainly for Syria, are threatened by radical Iran's regime, and by revolutionary Islamist movements. There are more common interests among them, and for cooperating with the United States, than ever before in history.

Now I invite you to respond to this question: How do you see Israel handling its relations with the new administration once there is an Israeli government in the best way?

Amb. Dan Halpern: I think what you said about the lessons that the Obama campaign learned is very important, I don't disagree with you.

Secondly, the most important thing is communication between the two governments to make sure, for example, that what happened with President Ronald Reagan never happens again. Reagan was a good friend of Israel but nevertheless surprised us with the Regan plan of 1981. The most important agreement between Israel and the United States is: no surprises. This means also that it behooves us not to surprise the United States government. This would include any attack on Iran. I would very much hope that it won't happen as a surprise to the United States. If it happens as a surprise for Iran, that's fine with me.

So I think coordination is the most important thing to begin with. Once we have a prime minister in place he has to go to Washington and come to some kind of agreement, not of what we do but of how we do it. How do we work together? This is extremely important. And of course he will have to go to the leadership of Congress at the same time.

Zvi Rafiah: We do not know what President Obama really intends to do and what decisions he is going to make, and how deeply he is going to get involved in the peace process, though we all believe, as we've said, that it won't be item number one on his agenda. When the prime minister of Israel goes to Washington to have the first meeting with the president, he needs to secure the continuation of the strategic alliance, cooperation, and coordination between Israel and the United States.

And he can earn this understanding and support by coming up with an initiative. Let's not wait until the president of the United States--by proxy or directly--will tell Israel what he thinks we should do. Let's go to him

and tell him, "Mr. President, we share your views on a, b, and c. This is what we are ready to do on the peace process or on any other issue and this is what we would like you, or what we expect you, to do so we can continue our lives, as you said, in peace and security."

Daniel "Danny" Ayalon is a former Israeli Ambassador to the United States, appointed in 2002. He previously served as deputy foreign policy advisor to two prime ministers, and as chief foreign policy advisor to Prime Minister Ariel Sharon, during which time he was a member of the Israeli delegations to the Sharm al-Shaykh (1997), Wye Plantation (1998), and Camp David (2000) summits. He served in New York from 1993-1997 as the Director of the Bureau of Israel's ambassador to the UN and as deputy chief of mission in Panama in 1991-1992. Ayalon played a leading role in the negotiations for the Roadmap to Peace and Israel's disengagement plan. Since 2007, he has served as the co-chairman of [Nefesh B'Nefesh](#). In March 2008 he was elected as Vice-Chairman of the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce. In August 2008, he joined the Yisrael Beiteinu party.

Dan Halperin is founder and CEO of IFTIC, a private business-consulting agency. He served in the Israeli Ministry of Finance for over twenty years in senior positions, including Advisor to the Minister, Deputy Director-General for International Affairs, and Economic Attaché in Washington, D.C. Received a B.A. in Humanities from the Hebrew University of Jerusalem. He is Vice-Chairman of the Israel-America Chamber of Commerce.

Zvi Rafiah is a frequent commentator on Israeli radio and television on American affairs. He holds a Master's degree in American Government from Georgetown University in Washington D.C., and a B.A., with Honors, in Modern History and Languages of the Middle East from the Hebrew University in Jerusalem. Mr. Rafiah served 21 years in the Israeli diplomatic service. His last assignment abroad (1973-

1979) was Minister-Counselor at the Israeli embassy in Washington, serving as the liaison for the Embassy with the U.S. Congress, along with other domestic political organizations. For more than 28 years since retiring from the diplomatic service in 1980, Mr. Rafiah has been active as a Consultant on American affairs to a number of major Israeli industries, assisting in developing their business interests in the U.S., in cooperation with U.S.

industries. He was a Visiting Fellow at Harvard's Institute of Politics, spring 2003.

Professor Barry Rubin is director of the Global Research in International Affairs (GLORIA) Center and editor of the [Middle East Review of International Affairs \(MERIA\) Journal](#). His latest book is [The Truth About Syria](#) (Palgrave-Macmillan).