

Towards a US/Israel Confrontation?



by force if need be, and back-peddalling on this issue would involve a monumental loss of face (plus, if their suspicions are correct, the loss of Israel's current position of comfortable strategic primacy as the one and only nuclear state in the region).

In pure theory, Israel might conceivably decide to defy the US ban and attack the Iranian nuclear installations on its own, counting

One of the most stable elements of the global political scenario over the past decades used to be the very close strategic partnership between the United States and Israel. Although no formal alliance between the two countries exists and indeed none was ever contemplated, ever since the Six-Day War back in 1967 and due to a variety of reasons an uninterrupted series of US administrations have been progressively moving towards a situation, whereby the US ultimately came to identify its own strategic interests in the Middle East region as being virtually identical with Israel's, and could thus be predictably expected to approve and support – either pre-emptively or more frequently post-facto – virtually every political and/or military move by Jerusalem. On the other side of the coin, a succession of Israeli governments knew they could always count on not only sort of an undeclared but pretty evident US strategic umbrella and guaranteed supply of advanced weaponry, but also on unflinching diplomatic and political backing for their actions. The whole applied both to what could be regarded as Israel's thorny internal problem, i.e. the Palestinian issue, as well as the ups and downs of Israel's relations with its Arab neighbours and the overall regional power balance.

There might admittedly be different opinions as to whether this nearly symbiotic relationship was really in line with the ultimate interests of the United States (or of Israel for that matters), and even more so as to whether it actually contributed towards the search for peace in the region or rather worked in the opposite direction. But be this as it may, some threatening cracks are now running across the walls of what used to look like an impregnable fortress. The United States and Israel are increasingly pushing forward very different when not diametrically diverging policies as regards the best ways and means to solve a number of key strategic problems in the broader Middle East region, and the perception is palpably mounting in both capitals to the effect that their undeclared but exceedingly close bilateral alliance is becoming sort of a hindrance in the pursuit of their respective interests when not a liability in itself. While it would certainly be preposterous to state that the United States and Israel are on a collision course, it is pretty evident that they are no longer in synch with each other on a number of issues – and the more momentous the issue, the wider the gap.

The process of drifting apart started, or at least became evident to external observers, during the last years of the Bush administration, but it has dramatically emerged to the surface with the negative international reactions to Operation "Cast Lead" in Gaza and the arrival of new governments in both countries. On the one

hand, President Obama clearly does not share the neocons' vision of a "New Middle East" to be achieved at all costs, and in which a key role was to be reserved for Israel. On the other hand, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Foreign Minister Avigdor Lieberman apparently intend to implement policies, both at home and abroad, that even an uncompromisingly pro-Israeli US administration would find it pretty difficult to understand, not to mention accept and support.

It basically boils down to two major issues: the intractable Palestinians problem; and, the alleged Iranian nuclear weapons programme.

As regards the Palestinians, the Obama administration has reiterated its belief that the Annapolis Agreement and an eventual two-state solution are the only viable way forward, while in sharp contrast Mr Lieberman as his very first act in office declared Annapolis to be null and void, and Mr Netanyahu has so far studiously avoided to even pay lip service to the notion of a future Palestinian state – not even one, whose borders and political structures would effectively be dictated by Israel. The only remaining point of agreement between Washington's and Jerusalem's respective policies in this regard is the refusal to negotiate with Hamas (incidentally, the legally elected Palestinian government), but even this hangs in a very precarious balance. Unless the Israeli government moves pretty quickly to formulate at least a generic commitment in principle towards the establishment of a Palestinian state, or failing this comes out with some coherent proposal for an alternative future Palestinian arrangement, that the Obama administration could rush to share – and which shall thus have nothing to do with Yisrael Beiteinu Party's dangerous dreams of ethnic cleansing and racial/religious purity – the United States would find itself in clear and officially declared opposition to Israel on what arguably is the central issue of Middle East politics. Such a divorce was totally unconceivable until a very recent past, and its potential implications are mind-boggling.

As regards Iran, it nowadays appears reasonably certain that under the present conditions the US will not attack it on behalf of, or in conjunction with Israel, and in all likelihood it will also not give Jerusalem the "green light" for an independent attack. One might perhaps speculate as to whether this attitude is due to the belief in Washington that no Iranian WMD programme actually exists, or rather to the appreciation that the limited threats to the global US interests such a programme might pose are not worth the risks of a war, but such fine distinctions are largely irrelevant. However, Israeli political and military authorities have repeatedly expressed their firm intention to see what they describe as Iran's nuclear ambitions thwarted,

on the highly predictable violent Iranian reaction to drag the US into the conflict. I would certainly hope, however, that not even the most right-wing government in Israel's history could seriously consider such a Dr Strangelove-style move. Bottom line is, Washington's and Jerusalem's respective ideas and goals are diverging on this issue, too.

Beyond these two key and most prominent issues, it is perhaps also conceivable that at least some political circles in the US are coming to the conclusion that creating a well visible separation between American and Israeli policies on a couple of highly sensitive issues could be a useful tool to mend fences with the Arab/Muslim world, and would make it much easier for the US to guarantee the continued survival of a number of rather disputable but more or less friendly regimes in the region.

For the time being, the divergences and disagreements between Washington and Jerusalem, while very real have not yet led to the open declaration of conflicting policies, and by the same token none of the other regional actors has yet been able to try and plant a firm wedge in the gnawing gap. What today appears as a threatening confrontation in the making may thus very well be all but reabsorbed in the weeks and months ahead leaving no permanent scars, and the two capitals return to their usual close relationship. Or, things may take a different course.

The key consideration in this regard is that the US would most certainly not wish to openly challenge Israel, and even less so give it the cold shoulder, unless it is effectively forced into such a posture by Israel's very actions. At the same time, however, it is quite evident that not even the legendary clout of the pro-Israeli lobby could persuade the Obama administration to approve for Israel degenerating into an apartheid nation, or to plunge head-on into another insane "war of choice" based on flimsy pretexts. Thus, the ball is firmly in Jerusalem's camp.

What are Mr Netanyahu's proposals for a permanent and hopefully mutually acceptable solution to the Palestinian problem? And, is his government prepared to acknowledge the US leadership and thus accept and share the US' decisions as regards Iran? Washington, and indeed all the rest of the world, is waiting for some answers.

 A handwritten signature in blue ink that reads "Ezio Bonsignore". The signature is stylized and fluid, with a long horizontal line extending to the right.

Ezio Bonsignore