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## The Region: Obama: Bad president, good for Israel?

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I have just returned from briefing a high-ranking official of country X on the Middle East. We kept coming back to a vital theme: the incredibly shrinking power of the United States. Try to explain American behavior to neutral, open-minded third parties for whom US policy activities have become just plain bizarre!

I have just published an article about how terrorists, including the murderers of four American officials in Benghazi, are literally laughing at the United States and its inability (or unwillingness) to do anything effective to defend its interests.

This item in a CBS News report particularly caught my eye: "US officials [in December 2012] lamented the lack of cooperation with the governments of Tunisia, Libya and Egypt in their ongoing investigation into the [Benghazi] attack, saying most of the suspects remain free."

Let's review:

- Tunisia, where the US government supported not only the overthrow of a regime allied to itself but also elections that led to a Muslim Brotherhood-dominated government. Helpful hint: You should have intervened behind the scenes to get the four non-Islamist (secular, if you wish) parties to work together, run their campaigns successfully, and win. They got 60 percent of the vote but lost the election.
- Libya, where the US government installed the current regime, which is basically an American client regime, by military (NATO, technically) force and pumped in support yet feared to send in a rescue mission to Benghazi.

Obama should have called the Libyan leader on the evening of September 11, 2012, and said, "We're on our way and expect your cooperation." And the only reason for not doing that would have been knowing the Libyan government could rescue the Americans, which it was unable to do or even to try doing.

- Egypt, where the US government was cheerleading for the Muslim Brotherhood as early as Obama's Cairo speech and backed it all through the revolution. There was the alternative of backing the military to get rid of Hosni Mubarak and then make reforms. Or there was the alternative of backing the disorganized, under-financed moderates (and helping them to unite, get money, and be effective).

But Obama did neither and his administration for all practical purposes endorsed the Muslim Brotherhood.

And now we see that these three governments won't even cooperate in getting terrorists responsible for murdering Americans.

Remember that Tunisia and Egypt, even if they are Islamist-ruled, have no direct interest in helping these terrorists – the Muslim Brotherhood doesn't like al-Qaida – but won't help due to anti-Americanism, a generalized Islamic solidarity, and knowledge that they can stick their finger in America's eye and taunt, "What are you going to do about it?" How the mighty have fallen! But what's most amazing is that this isn't murder but suicide. It is voluntary. Is it reversible? Nobody knows, but it isn't going to be reversed in the next four years.

You have to understand, I tell the diplomat, that there's been for all practical purposes a revolution in the United States, at least in terms of its governance. Regarding foreign policy, all the old rules don't apply – credibility; punishing enemies and rewarding friends; deterrence; don't leave your men behind to die; don't appoint a muddleheaded fool to be secretary of defense. In each case there is a nicely crafted rationalization for going against centuries of diplomatic and security practices. But so what? It's still wrong.

Obama is too busy in apologizing for real or imagined past US bullying, proving he only believes in multilateral action, has so much respect for local customs, and trying to demonstrate to those that hate it that America is their buddy in order to win them over.

The language above is harsh, but it is also true.

Once upon a time there were two superpowers, the United States and USSR, in the Cold War. Then there was one superpower, the United States. Now there are none.

And yet what this means from Israel's standpoint may be very different from what you'd expect.

Israel can cope with this situation, especially since it continues to receive US military aid, some diplomatic backing, and nice rhetoric about the ironclad special relationship between the two countries.

And those assets rest on a foundation of public and congressional support for Israel in the United States.

Indeed, it is clear that Israel is the only – the only – factor that Obama doesn't like that has

been able to preserve its interests while other seemingly far more powerful forces – the health industry, the energy industry, the National Rifle Association, for example – have been battered into defeat or are hard-pressed.

Moreover, Israel can defend itself. It is willing to take unilateral action and can succeed in doing so.

That's why, as I know from first-hand observation, that it is a myth that Israel's government has done anything to undermine Obama. People who make such charges provide no proof or even references to specific events.

On the contrary, the Israeli government consciously developed the policy of seeking to avoid any friction with Obama and his government. One key reason was that it knew coexistence with Obama was possible. The other was that it knew avoiding making the situation worse was imperative.

The seemingly most obvious exception – building in east Jerusalem – was based on a prior secret agreement with the US government. The other apparent exception – Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu's speech to a joint session of Congress – came after Obama ambushed Netanyahu by changing US policy toward Israel while the prime minister was on a plane to Washington.

And here's a powerful item of proof on the other side: not a single pro-Israel Democrat in political life has turned against Obama. If Israel is so influential, why did a supposed anti-Obama campaign not change anyone's position? In fact, pro-Obama American Jews, who comprise a large majority of the community, and pro-Israel political figures have either reconciled the discordant information (Obama is Israel's best friend); kept their mouths shut; had other priorities; or tried to keep relations as good as possible.

And in practice – a point on which Obama's supporters are correct – there have been no real, material, huge problems in direct US-Israel relations. What they leave out is that this was also largely due to Arab, Iranian and particularly Palestinian intransigence. These forces lost the opportunities Obama offered them to undercut Israel and the US-Israel relationship because they didn't rush to seek deals on much better terms.

If they had done so, Obama would have pressured Israel to make big concessions and would have been far more antagonistic if Israel refused. Israel's enemies threw away that chance and it will not come again in his second term.

By the same token, it is equally foolish for some to criticize, for example, President Shimon Peres for giving Obama a medal or Israeli leaders for lauding Obama on every possible opportunity. And the same applies to AIPAC not objecting to Chuck Hagel as secretary of defense, never criticizing Obama, and inviting him to speak at its annual meetings. Whoever is president or secretary of defense, AIPAC and Israel will have to work with him.

All of these people, then, are doing their jobs properly by avoiding entanglements in such internal American issues.

Israel needs good relations with the United States.

Obama is the president of the United States twice elected by the American people and he will be president for the next four years. It is not the task of Israel's government to interfere with

America's internally made choices. It is the job of Israel's government to live as best as possible with those rulers, minimize the disadvantage, and wait out this period by agreeing, smiling, giving in on small things, and doing everything possible to protect the nation's security.

And thus Israeli leaders should applaud Obama, say what a good friend he is, and do everything possible to maximize cooperation on the critical issues that both countries face. These include continued military and intelligence cooperation as well as the maximum possible support on Iran and other issues. In this context, Israel – like every other country friendly with the United States able to do so – retains its independence of action while minimizing friction.

People like me are free to express our views about the damage he is doing. That damage is first and foremost to US national interests; second to the lives of people in Arabic- speaking countries, Turks, and Iranians; and only in third place to Israel.

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