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# How the Iran nuclear talks affect Israel's confidence in the U.S. as mediator

*November 13, 2013 at 12:00 AM EDT*

To assess how the Iran nuclear negotiations are affecting the relationship between Israel and the U.S. in mediating Israeli-Palestinian peace talks, Jeffrey Brown talks to Robert Satloff of the Washington Policy and Hussein Ibish of the American Task Force on Palestine.

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## TRANSCRIPT

**JEFFREY BROWN:** So, where does the peace process stand and what is the state of U.S.-Israeli relations?

I'm joined by Robert Satloff, executive director of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Hussein Ibish, senior fellow at the American Task Force on Palestine.

Welcome to both of you.

**HUSSEIN IBISH**, American Task Force on Palestine: Thank you.

**JEFFREY BROWN**: Robert Satloff, let's pick up on that last part, the Iranian element. How large a shadow does that cast over any potential peace talks between Israel and the Palestinians?

**ROBERT SATLOFF**, Washington Institute for Near East Policy: It casts a very, very broad shadow. We are in uncharted waters in the U.S.-Israel relationship today.

**ROBERT SATLOFF**: Uncharted waters.**JEFFREY BROWN**: Uncharted waters?

**JEFFREY BROWN**: After all these years?

**ROBERT SATLOFF**: After all these years, after all the different ups and downs, this is a new scenario in which the United States and Israel are at loggerheads over an immediate national security initiative of the United States, namely, the negotiation of a first-step agreement with Iran.

The prime minister of Israel says it's dangerous, not just for American interests, but for his interests. The United States president and the spokesman for the White House has said that if you are opposed to what is being put on the table, you are a warmonger. And so this is a clash unlike any I have seen in 30 years in Washington.

**JEFFREY BROWN**: And your sense is, is that holds hostage, in a sense, any particular — any peace talks with the Palestinians?

**ROBERT SATLOFF**: To be precise, Israel's confidence in America as a mediator in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations is totally derivative of its confidence in the Iran talks.

**JEFFREY BROWN**: All right, let me get Hussein Ibish's assessment of that.

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** Well, I think that that's a very good summation of what the prime minister of Israel's office thinks and says.

They have, I think, framed everything to do with the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, including the cancellation of this extraordinary 24,000-unit plan, including this very sensitive E1 construction area, which would be a strategic game-changer on the ground, in terms of their confidence in the United States deriving from Iran.

So, in other words, everything gets refracted through Iran. But that is not the American perspective. That is the Israeli perspective, and it might be an understandable one, but the American perspective, which has been articulated by President Obama many times and by Secretary of State Kerry, is that if the two issues are linked, they're actually linked the other way around, in other words, that making progress between Israel and the Palestinians helps the international community deal more robustly with Iran.

I actually think that everything is linked together. But such a straightforward binary linkage, as was described by Mr. Satloff and as is being provided by Prime Minister Netanyahu, is the kind of crude linkage that we have been trying to get away from for the past 20 years.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Go ahead.

**ROBERT SATLOFF:** It's not that the Israeli-Palestinian issue is in any way linked to the Iran issue.

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** No.

**ROBERT SATLOFF:** That's not it.

What is — the connection is that any confidence that Israel will have in an American mediation, any ideas that the United States will put on the table to solve, say, the security challenges, which America's being looked to, to provide answers, will be totally dependent on the confidence Israel has that America is looking out for the collective best interests, security interests, in the biggest issue facing world today, which is the Iran negotiations.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** And where does this leave the Palestinians? Bring the Palestinian side into this. Where does that leave them and what role are they playing at this point?

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** Well, there's not much they can do vis-a-vis Iran. They really — really are not part of the equation, and that sort of underscores the extent to which, while you're absolutely right, there's a question of confidence in not only that Israel has, Saudi Arabia has, and other regional allies have in the United States that has been somewhat disrupted by various different policy scenarios over recent months.

It's still the case that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is a pressing need that exists in a regional context, needs to be resolved in a regional context, but that also cannot be shelved. It can't be said by anyone seriously that Palestinians just have to wait until the nuclear issue with Iran is resolved, or that somehow that's a key.

And even if it were a question of, say, bringing the Saudis into the mix through the Arab peace initiative or bringing Egypt into the mix because of their relative importance in the Arab world and their control over the Gaza crossing, it would still be an issue that has to be dealt with. And there are really important things that need doing here on their own.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** Well, let's bring — bring the U.S. back into the mix, because we saw Secretary of State Kerry with some pretty hard, hard language, harsh language, referring to a potential third intifada. How much leverage does he have in this case?

**ROBERT SATLOFF:** Well, I think it's quite regrettable that what happened over the last 10 days is, we saw a U.S.-Israel breach on both Israeli-Palestinian issues and on the Iran negotiations. It really didn't have to be this way.

I think, in retrospect, the secretary probably regrets suggesting that the bona fides of Israel, that Israel's intention is to scuttle these negotiations.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** You think that's how it came out sounding? That's how it was taken in Israel?

(CROSSTALK)

**ROBERT SATLOFF:** It's certainly the way it was taken when he said, do you really want a third intifada? You're not serious.

When he took even the settlement issue — I'm not going to defend Israeli settlement policy, but what the secretary did is, he took the announcement of 1,900 apartments, only 200 of which are east of the security fence, east of the barrier, and turned this into the greatest attack on the potential for peace ever.

It's a — it was — it wasn't wise at a moment when he needed Israel's understanding for what was about to happen with Iran. And now Israel thinks, my gosh, on Iran, they're going in a different direction. On the peace process, they're in a different direction. Maybe they're really not the strategic partnership that we thought we had.

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** Well, that's got to cut both ways. Obviously, if Israel's disappointed in the United States, it's very likely the United States is disappointed with Israel.

Look, our regional allies, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, et cetera, these are regional powers with regional interests. We are a global power with global interests. It's understandable if Israel is obsessed with Iran, and thinks only in terms of Iranian issues.

The United States can't do that. We have to deal with multiple issues. We have to deal with Syria. We have to deal with the Israeli-Palestinian crisis. We have to deal with repairing our relations with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, and many other things all over the world.

So you have got to come back to the Israeli-Palestinian file as one that the United States takes seriously on its own. It cannot be held hostage to...

(CROSSTALK)

**JEFFREY BROWN:** And just very briefly, do you think that will happen?

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** I do, actually, yes.

I think that this — there is an ability that the United States have — has to make this issue — to bring this issue to the fore. If the United States wants to focus on it, the parties will focus on it. And I think, clearly, the intervention to stop this settlement expansion is inspired by Washington in one way or another.

**JEFFREY BROWN:** OK. We are going to have to leave it there, but we will keep watching.

Robert Satloff, Hussein Ibish, thank you both very much.

**HUSSEIN IBISH:** Thank you.

**ROBERT SATLOFF:** Thank you.

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