

Myths vs. Reality:
The Current State of U.S.-Israel Relations
March 17, 2010



NJDC strongly believes that now is the time for American Jews and partisans to move away from the inflammatory, inaccurate and unconstructive rhetoric of recent days. [Click here to learn more.](#)

Are U.S.-Israel relations at risk? Are we in crisis – the worst in 35 years? Is the U.S. asking Israel to take impossible steps? Read on to learn the facts, and click on the links for further information and documentation.

Myth 1:

The foundation of close, strong U.S.-Israel relations is at risk.

Reality:

The fact is that the bedrock of the U.S.-Israel relationship remains as solid as ever. As Middle East expert [David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy wrote in Foreign Policy](#) on March 15, “the U.S.-Israel relationship still has a solid core. There have been almost a dozen separate high-level visits to each country in just the last two months, as the two countries are cooperating extremely closely in their efforts to prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon. The United States also stood with Israel in resisting the unbalanced Goldstone report on Gaza. The two countries also engaged in a massive military exercise together recently.” We know that [what Vice President Joe Biden said so eloquently in Israel](#) recently remains true today: “America stands with you shoulder-to-shoulder in facing these threats. President Obama and I represent an unbroken chain of American leaders who have understood this critical, strategic relationship.” As the [Vice President said](#) while standing next to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, “[T]he cornerstone of the relationship is our absolute, total, unvarnished commitment to Israel’s security.”

We know that this commitment remains rock-solid because of the numerous statements made by top Obama Administration officials just this week. [Secretary of State Hillary Clinton said](#) on March 16, “We have a close, unshakable bond between the United States and Israel and between the American and Israeli people.” [White House Press Secretary Robert Gibbs echoed](#) these sentiments from the podium of the White House briefing room: “...[L]ast week, the Vice President was in Israel to reaffirm our unwavering commitment to the security of Israel and its people. As I said earlier mature, bilateral relationships can have disagreements. And this is one of those disagreements. It does not break the unbreakable bond that we have with the Israeli government and with the Israeli people on their security. ...[D]espite a disagreement that you might have, our commitment to Israel’s security is unchanged. Our commitment to its people is unchanged.”

The Administration of President Barack Obama has marked a period of unprecedented strategic cooperation between Israel and the United States on many fronts, including Iran. Click to learn more about what [Israel's leaders have said about Obama](#), how the [Obama Administration has stood with Israel](#), and more from [White House Chief of Staff Rahm Emanuel and Prime Minister Netanyahu](#) on the State of the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Myth 2:

The state of U.S.-Israel relations is in complete crisis, and is in fact at its worst point in 35 years.

Reality:

While the press had reported Israeli Ambassador Michael Oren as saying that U.S.-Israel relations were at their worst point in 35 years, he has clearly and strenuously denied ever making such a statement. [As JTA reported](#), "On Tuesday evening, Oren issued a statement flatly denying that account of a conference call he had Saturday night with Israeli diplomats. 'I was flagrantly misquoted about remarks I made in a confidential briefing this past Saturday,' Oren said in a statement. 'Recent events do not -- I repeat -- do not represent the lowest point in the relations between Israel and the United States. Though we differ on certain issues, our discussions are being conducted in an atmosphere of cooperation as befitting long-standing relations between allies. I am confident that we will overcome these differences shortly.'" [Secretary Clinton clearly disagreed](#) with the premise that U.S.-Israel relations are in crisis in a press conference on March 16 (saying at one point in shorthand, "I don't buy that"), as did State Department Spokesman Crowley in a [briefing on March 16](#).

As [Martin Indyk](#), [Aaron David Miller](#) and other experts have pointed out, the U.S.-Israel relationship – like the relationship between many close allies – has had a number of difficult patches that are far worse than anything in recent weeks. The list of flare-ups with real – not rhetorical – ramifications include the Suez Crisis in 1956; the major reassessment of the fundamentals of the bilateral U.S.-Israel relationship in the Ford Administration in 1975; the sale of AWACS aircraft to Saudi Arabia under the Reagan Administration in 1981, and the resulting delay in delivering military aircraft to Israel; and President George H.W. Bush's withholding of loan guarantees from Israel in the 1990's over the issue of settlements. Each of these difficult chapters help place the current isolated disagreement over one issue into perspective.

Myth 3:

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton challenged Prime Minister Netanyahu to take steps that are politically impossible for the Prime Minister.

Reality:

Despite widespread reporting of “impossible demands” that Secretary of State Clinton made of the Prime Minister Netanyahu, in fact the substance of those media reports have varied widely – and the substance of the ongoing U.S.-Israel discussions is clearly highly confidential. This is clearly a manifestation of the old adage: those who know aren’t talking, and those who are talking don’t know.

All we know on the record is from a [State Department briefing](#) on March 15 by State Department Spokesman Philip J. Crowley, in which he noted the Secretary’s urging in her call to Prime Minister Netanyahu that the Israeli Government undertake “specific actions.” He said of the actions under discussion, “I’m not going to go into specific detail. I think that they involve not only specifics about the project in question that was announced last week, but really more so about the willingness of the parties to engage seriously in this process and jointly create conditions for its success and be willing to address the core issues at the heart of the peace process.” Crowley went on to say the State Department is “deeply disturbed by statements made by several Palestinian officials” surrounding the rededication of a synagogue in the Jewish Quarter of the Old City.

Everything else – everything – is rank speculation.

Myth 4:

The U.S. is not taking steps to diffuse tension in the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Reality:

In fact, the U.S. is in ongoing contact with the Israeli government. As [Secretary Clinton said](#) on March 16, U.S. officials are “engaged in a very active consultation with the Israelis.” Moreover, Secretary Clinton is [tentatively scheduled to call](#) Prime Minister Netanyahu on March 17 or 18 to continue the ongoing conversation.

Myth 5:

In talking to Prime Minister Netanyahu in Israel, Vice President Biden linked progress in the peace process to America’s military efforts in Iraq and Afghanistan – suggesting that a lack of progress in the peace process would put America’s troops at stake.

Reality:

Once again, the old adage applies – those who know aren’t talking, and those who are talking don’t know. Despite press reports that the Vice President made such a linkage in private conversations, this has been widely and strenuously denied by those who would know. [As JTA noted](#), “He never said that, and there's no basis to assert that he did,” The Atlantic quoted one official as saying. ‘What he did say in a meeting with the prime minister and his senior advisers and his own team was that the U.S. is doing a number of things in our national security interest, and in Israel’s

national security interest, and they include a strong effort to build a coalition against Iran's nuclear program; deploying 200,000 troops in conflict areas in the region; standing against efforts to delegitimize Israel in various international bodies, sometimes virtually alone; acting decisively against terrorists in very significant ways; and building probably the strongest defense cooperation relationship with Israel that we've seen, including on missile defense.”

Myth 6:

Israel’s announcement of building these 1600 housing units was just a local, low-level “urban planning issue” that is of no consequence. There’s no reasonable reason why the Obama Administration would be concerned by this development.

Reality:

Clearly Prime Minister Netanyahu viewed the incident as a very significant one, given his [repeated and profound apologies](#) for the occurrence of this event. But analysis and background from an independent expert can help explain the deep significance of this event. As David Makovsky of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy [explained in Foreign Policy](#), “President Barack Obama has reason to be upset by this episode, which must seem like déjà vu. After what Netanyahu described as his best meeting yet with Obama last November, the prime minister was blindsided by an announcement from his own bureaucracy regarding the construction of 900 new units in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Gilo. After this embarrassment, senior U.S. officials say Netanyahu pledged that there would not be any more surprises for the prime minister's office, or for the Obama administration. Netanyahu promised to create a mechanism to avoid such mishaps. During the previous Ehud Olmert government, the prime minister had a parliamentary representative keeping track of settlement decisions in order to prevent such a miscommunication. Apparently for the current government, this mechanism was either not established or it did not work. It is hard to know which is worse. If there was no mechanism, the Israelis are guilty of duplicity. If there was a mechanism that failed to function, it is ineptitude.” Of all time for this surprise to occur, it occurred during a mission by America’s Vice President dedicated towards reaffirming the U.S.-Israel relationship.