

U.S., Israeli leaders: Stop meddling in each other's internal politics

The troubling relations between Netanyahu and Obama, and their political parties, threaten to undermine the Israeli-U.S. alliance and each country's national interests.

By [Mark A. Shiffrin](#) and [Avi Silberschatz](#) | Jan. 26, 2015 | 7:04 PM



Obama and Netanyahu during the U.S. president's visit in Israel, March 20, 2013. Photo by Bloomberg

Like extended family members who have to learn to avoid meddling in the lives of their kin, allies have to learn to avoid playing in the internal politics of their allies.

The increasing overlap between internal electoral politics in Israel and the United States has led to troubling alliances between politicians and factions in each country that threaten to undermine the allies' relations and national interests.

U.S. Speaker of the House John Boehner is well within his authority to invite Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to address Congress, given the intimate nature of the bilateral alliance. (Whether the speaker consulted the White House on the matter is a question of their own relationship.) But because the speaker invited the prime minister in the lead-up to an election in which the latter is an active candidate, the invitation became something more than a gesture between leaders of allied nations; it became meddling in the family of the other.

The speaker's invitation to a caretaker prime minister in the midst of a campaign was ill-advised – as was the latter's acceptance – because this was not so much an invitation to Israel's prime minister as chief-of-government, but as the chief of the faction under which he now controls the government and seeks to continue controlling it in an ongoing political campaign. And because of the internal divisions in Washington, the speaker did not extend the invitation simply as a constitutional officer of the United States inviting a representative of an allied state, but as a Republican rival to a Democratic president. The speaker's move sought to bolster the prime minister's political prospects, as well as his own.

The same is true of U.S. President Barack Obama's decision not to welcome Netanyahu during his visit. Scheduling meetings between premiers of allied states should not be a matter for negotiations and posturing, but a matter of course. However, here, too, Obama has a message for Israeli voters. It is no secret that if Obama could vote in Israel he would not cast his ballot for the Likud party.

The Obama Administration – having entered its lame duck phase – started playing "protocol," suggesting Netanyahu's conduct could "blunt" U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's "enthusiasm for being Israel's primary defender." This was an odd threat given that Kerry serves a president who clearly has no appetite for defending Israel. Perhaps Obama is suggesting that Israel should behave like a good client state and defer to his leadership on the Iranian issue.

But as Obama criticizes Netanyahu's inconvenient disagreement over Iranian sanctions, we may recall the emissaries of former U.S. President Jimmy Carter, who importuned the Iranian military to defer to the authority of the ayatollahs replacing the shah, putting aside their own inconvenient disagreement with an earlier American policy of Iranian appeasement that failed miserably, and for which we are still paying.

The foolishness of American and Israeli politicians meddling in the other country's elections is not new. During their terms in office, U.S. Presidents Carter and George H.W. Bush made clear their problems with Likud leadership during Israeli elections in the hope of influencing Israeli voters, and Netanyahu made clear his preference for Mitt Romney in the last American presidential campaign in the not-so-subtle hope to influence American voters.

America and Israel have an alliance that transcends the leaders of any moment. Every leader of every nation holds a temp job, a temporary trust leading a community far larger than himself. A nation-state presumably exists before and after any leader's personal existence. When leaders of allies start playing the game of who will triumph in an ally's internal democratic process, kindred spirits start moving from the realm of external allies into that of internal political adversaries.

When allies spy on each other – and neither Israel nor America has clean hands on this – the trust between them diminishes. Yet it is even worse when allies meddle in each other's internal democratic processes of leadership selection; doing so subtly undermines their alliance. Individual Americans and Israelis certainly have preferences concerning the elections in the other country, but personal preferences should be no more than rooting interests as spectators in a game. The United States does not get the luxury of choosing who leads Israel. Israel does not get the luxury of choosing who leads America. Each nation – any nation – is bigger than its leaders, and neither has the right to try to influence the democratic process

of leadership selection in the other's state. Leaders in both the United States and Israel should start realizing that, in playing politics beyond their own shores, they undermine national interests in pursuit of their personal priorities.

If the U.S. speaker of the House wants to invite the Israeli prime minister, and the prime minister wishes to accept, this should only occur after Israel's election concludes and a new government is formed. It should only occur when the prime minister – whoever it may be – stands with full power, and not as a caretaker. And when this happens, the president of the United States should make it clear that any prime minister of Israel – whoever is chosen by the Israeli population in a democratic process – is always welcome in America.

America and Israel have vital national interests that transcend the leadership of any given moment in either nation. When the leaders of these states forget that and meddle in the elections of the other, they confuse statecraft with the politics of an American ward heeler or Israeli party functionary. The more the leaders of either ally do this, the less they serve their nations' interests, and the common interests of the alliance.

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