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REVIEW & OUTLOOK | MARCH 15, 2010

Obama's Turn Against Israel

The U.S. makes a diplomatic crisis out of a blunder.

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In recent weeks, the Obama Administration has endorsed "healthy relations" between Iran and Syria, mildly rebuked Syrian President Bashar Assad for accusing the U.S. of "colonialism," and publicly apologized to Moammar Gadhafi for treating him with less than appropriate deference after the Libyan called for "a jihad" against Switzerland.

When it comes to Israel, however, the Administration has no trouble rising to a high pitch of public indignation. On a visit to Israel last week, Vice President Joe Biden condemned an announcement by a mid-level Israeli official that the government had approved a planning stage—the fourth out of seven required—for the construction of 1,600 housing units in north Jerusalem. Assuming final approval, no ground will be broken on the project for at least three years.

But neither that nor repeated apologies from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu prevented Secretary of State Hillary Clinton—at what White House sources ostentatiously said was the personal direction of President Obama—from calling the announcement "an insult to the United States." White House political chief David Axelrod got in his licks on NBC's Meet the Press yesterday, lambasting Israel for what he described as "an affront."



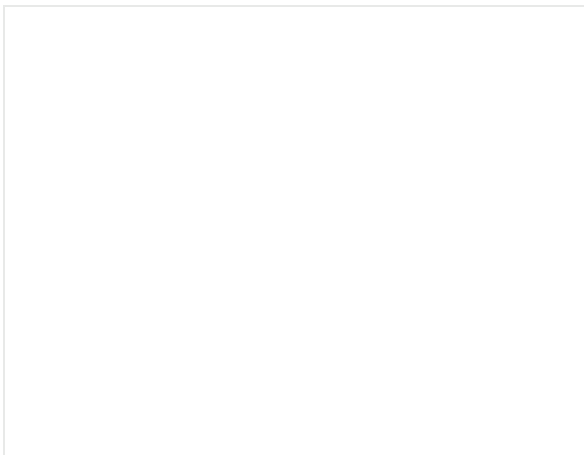
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Associated Press

Since nobody is defending the Israeli announcement, least of all an obviously embarrassed Israeli government, it's difficult to see why the Administration has chosen this occasion to spark a full-blown diplomatic crisis with its most reliable Middle Eastern ally. Mr. Biden's visit was intended to reassure Israelis that the Administration remained fully committed to Israeli security and legitimacy. In a speech at Tel Aviv University two days after the Israeli announcement, Mr. Biden publicly thanked

Mr. Netanyahu for "putting in place a process to prevent the recurrence" of similar incidents.

The subsequent escalation by Mrs. Clinton was clearly intended as a highly public rebuke to the Israelis, but its political and strategic logic is puzzling. The U.S. needs Israel's acquiescence in the Obama Administration's increasingly drawn-out efforts to halt Iran's nuclear bid through diplomacy or sanctions. But Israel's restraint is measured in direct proportion to its sense that U.S. security guarantees are good. If Israel senses that the



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Administration is looking for any pretext to blow up relations, it will care much less how the U.S. might react to a military strike on Iran.

As for the West Bank settlements, it is increasingly difficult to argue that their existence is the key obstacle to a peace deal with the Palestinians. Israel withdrew all of its settlements from Gaza in 2005, only to see the Strip transform itself into a Hamas statelet and a base for continuous rocket fire against Israeli civilians.

Israeli anxieties about America's role as an honest broker in any diplomacy won't be assuaged by the Administration's neuralgia over this particular housing project, which falls within Jerusalem's municipal boundaries and can only be described as a "settlement" in the maximalist terms defined by the Palestinians. Any realistic peace deal will have to include a readjustment of the 1967 borders and an exchange of territory, a point formally recognized by the Bush Administration prior to Israel's withdrawal from Gaza. If the Obama Administration opts to transform itself, as the Europeans have, into another set of lawyers for the Palestinians, it will find Israeli concessions increasingly hard to come by.

That may be the preferred outcome for Israel's enemies, both in the Arab world and the West, since it allows them to paint Israel as the intransigent party standing in the way of "peace." Why an Administration that repeatedly avers its friendship with Israel would want that is another question.

Then again, this episode does fit Mr. Obama's foreign policy pattern to date: Our enemies get courted; our friends get the squeeze. It has happened to Poland, the Czech Republic, Honduras and Colombia. Now it's Israel's turn.

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