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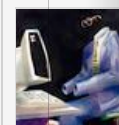
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REVIEW & OUTLOOK | APRIL 19, 2010

The View From Jerusalem

Why Israel is anxious about the Obama Administration.

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Imagine that you're an Israeli perusing the past week's headlines. Senior U.S. military officials have told Congress that Iran may be a year away from producing a bomb's worth of fissile material. Efforts to sanction Iran are again bogged down at the U.N., even as the sanctions are watered down to insignificance. And senior Israeli officials now say that Syria has supplied Hezbollah with Scud-D missiles that can hit every city in Israel with a one-ton warhead to an accuracy of 50 meters.

Oh, and now the Obama Administration seems increasingly of the view that *Israel* is the primary cause of instability in the Middle East. In a press conference last week, President Obama said the U.S. had a "vital national security interest" in resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, on the theory that "when conflict breaks out . . . that ends up costing us significantly in terms of both blood and treasure."

The remark, which echoes previous comments by senior Administration and Pentagon officials, is being widely interpreted as presaging a concerted Administration effort to press even harder for an Israeli-Palestinian agreement over territory. After the recent flap over Jewish settlements north of Jerusalem, concern is growing that the U.S. wants Israel to return to its pre-1967 borders. At their narrowest, those borders give Israel a nine-mile margin between the West Bank and the Mediterranean Sea.

Israel could conceivably withdraw to something close to that border if it had credible assurances that a future Palestinian state would be peaceful, stable and well-governed. But the Palestinian reality today is that it is riven politically and geographically between two camps, one of which (Hamas) is armed by Iran and sworn to Israel's destruction.

As for Israel's other neighbors, Syria has further entrenched its alliance with Iran, despite repeated entreaties by the Administration and its allies in Congress; Egypt is entering a period of political transition; and Turkey has gone from being an Israeli ally to an adversary under its Islamist government. None of this can inspire much confidence among Israelis that the time is ripe to withdraw from the West Bank.

Nor will Israel's fears be assuaged by paper guarantees of its security in some future settlement. In 2006, a senior Bush State Department official gave us similar assurances that the Security Council's resolution that brought the 2006 war between Israel and Hezbollah to a close would seal the Lebanese border at least to "heavy weapons" from Syria and Iran. The resolution even provided for a beefed-up international security force to enforce the resolution's terms. So much for that, and so much for the results of the solicitous visits to Syria in recent years by Speaker Nancy Pelosi and Senate Foreign Relations Chairman John Kerry.

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As for Iran, yesterday brought reports of a secret memo from Defense Secretary Robert Gates to the White House arguing that the Administration lacks a strategy for coping with Iran's drive to gain a nuclear weapon. We're not sure why this memo is secret, since it merely says what has been obvious to the world for months. Everyone in the Middle East has begun to assess how its interests and strategic calculations will change once Iran gets the bomb.

For all the current talk about Israel costing America lives and treasure, the striking fact is that the U.S. has *never* had to go to war to defend the Jewish state. This is more than can be said for Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Lebanon, Bosnia, Kosovo and the people of Afghanistan and Iraq. That's because for 62 years Israelis have provided for their own defense, in an alliance with the U.S. that has reflected American values and—in both the Cold War and the war on terror—advanced American interests.

The Obama Administration seems not to grasp this point, which is why these are anxious days for Israel and its American friends.

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