Opinion

A referendum on Obama and Israel: Bob Turner vs. David Weprin is really about the President

BY Douglas J. Feith and Seth Cropsey

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And for good reason. When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visited the White House in 2010, Obama demanded concessions from him for the Palestinians. According to press reports, when Netanyahu demurred, Obama quit the meeting and left his aides to pursue discussions. Britain’s Telegraph reported that the President told the prime minister, “I’m going to have dinner with Michelle and the girls.” Obama refused to be photographed with him on that visit.

But the current problem in U.S.-Israeli relations goes beyond this deliberate impoliteness. The President does not share the American people’s general respect and sympathy for the Jewish state, the supportiveness reflected in the standing ovations that Netanyahu received when he addressed a joint session of Congress in May.

An immediate source of Obama’s irritation was that Israel is building housing for Jews in East Jerusalem. Obama wants Israel to stop. His logic is peculiar: The Palestinian Authority has just made a national unity coalition with the terrorist organization Hamas, which rejects Israel’s right to exist and continues to launch missiles from Gaza against civilian targets in Israel. Yet the American President argues that halting this construction in Jerusalem will brighten prospects for peace talks.

With whom? With Palestinian leaders who want Israel destroyed? Their argument is not about borders. They object to Israel’s existence as a Jewish state. But Obama does not see this. He stands by his preconception that Israeli settlements are the major impediment to peace.

Israeli construction in East Jerusalem is the consequence of Israel’s victory in the 1967 War. That war began after Israel’s neighbors mobilized military reserves and moved large ground forces near their borders with Israel. Israel was approximately 10 miles wide at the time — as it had been since the armistice that ended the 1948-49 Arab war to destroy Israel — and prospects of cutting it into two pieces fueled aggression among Israel’s neighbors. In a May speech this year, Obama called for Israel to return to its pre-1967 borders, with only minor adjustments.

In that same speech, Obama commented strangely about the national unity agreement between Fatah, which heads the Palestinian Authority in the West Bank, and Hamas. He said: It
"raises profound and legitimate questions for Israel: How can one negotiate with a party that has shown itself unwilling to recognize your right to exist? And in the weeks and months to come, Palestinian leaders will have to provide a credible answer to that question."

But Palestinian leaders have already provided their answer. To extremists who are speaking for the Palestinians, Obama gently poses a question they have continually, consistently and contemptuously answered. At the same time, he insists that Israel make risky territorial concessions that would not resolve the conflict.

Obama’s downgrading of the American relationship with Israel is no aberration; it’s part of a pattern of downgrading relations with America’s democratic allies. He and key members of his national security team have written extensively in favor of transforming the U.S. role in the world so that America can become less assertive, more humble, more constrained. Such ideas are implied by the now-famous boast by a White House aide that in Libya, President Obama aimed to “lead from behind.”

The 2012 presidential election will test whether American Jews - ordinarily an overwhelmingly Democratic constituency - apprehend the danger that Obama’s policies pose to Israel and to America’s interests in promoting a safer Middle East that is more open to democratic reform. In the meantime, voters in New York’s heavily Jewish 9th Congressional District may heed the call of former Mayor Ed Koch and seize the opportunity to demonstrate buyer’s remorse that they helped put Obama into the White House.

Feith and Cropsey are senior fellows at Hudson Institute. Feith served as undersecretary of defense for policy from 2001 to 2005. Cropsey served as a naval officer from 1965 to 2004 and as deputy undersecretary of the Navy in the administrations of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush.