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Israel Should Be a U.S. Campaign Issue

Major Jewish groups are trying to shield Obama from legitimate criticism.

By DOUGLAS J. FEITH

Pro-Israel organizations have long been active in American politics, promoting friendly relations between the U.S. and Israel. Jewish groups, in particular, have helped ensure that candidates' attitudes toward Israel would be an important element in congressional and presidential elections. Yet now, two venerable Jewish organizations, the American Jewish Committee (AJC) and the Anti-Defamation League (ADL), are saying that it is improper to do this in the case of President Obama. They have taken the initiative to shield Mr. Obama from the political consequences of his cold treatment of Israel.

The AJC and ADL are jointly promoting a "national pledge for unity on Israel." Its essence is that "America's friendship with Israel . . . has always transcended politics" and that "U.S.-Israel friendship should never be used as a political wedge issue."

Explaining this effort, ADL chief Abraham Foxman lamented that presidential candidates have recently "challenged their opponents' pro-Israel bona fides" and "questioned the current administration's foreign policy approach vis-à-vis Israel."

True, every political movement wants unity in support of the common cause. But since when have American supporters of Israel believed that a candidate's attitudes toward Israel should be kept out of electoral politics? Since never.

In 1984, pro-Israel groups exerted themselves to block the re-election of Illinois Republican Sen. Charles Percy, the prominent chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee who was an outspoken critic of Israel and champion of U.S. engagement with the Palestine Liberation Organization. Percy lost and, in an election night interview, attributed his defeat to the Israel lobby. Other politicians who met a similar fate include Reps. Paul Findley (R., Ill.) and Cynthia McKinney (D., Ga.).



Associated Press

President Barack Obama, left, with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.

When running against President George H.W. Bush in 1992, Bill Clinton took full advantage of Mr. Bush's testy relationship with Israel. As the New York Times reported in March 1992: "Some leaders of American Jewish groups predicted today that President Bush would pay in the November election for his demand that Israel freeze settlements."

One such leader spoke of the "anger and dismay in Jewish communities over Bush Administration policy that is increasingly perceived as one-sided and unfair against Israel," adding "I imagine it will be translated into an unwillingness to vote for this Administration or contribute funds." By the way,

the speaker was Jess Hordes, Washington director of the ADL.

President Obama came into office determined to distance the U.S. from Israel and to portray Israel as the impediment to Middle East peace. He insisted on an unprecedented Israeli settlement freeze, exceeding the demands at that time of the Palestinian Authority itself. And he went along with the PA's refusal to renew direct negotiations with Israel, agreeing that the Palestinians could use U.S. officials to conduct indirect talks. Meanwhile he offered "engagement" to Israel's Iranian and Syrian enemies, a vain policy that failed as the courted regimes rebuffed the offer and brutalized their own pro-freedom demonstrators.

Mr. Obama also orchestrated a public imbroglio with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, walking out of a White House meeting with him in 2010 and refusing to be photographed with him. Quarrels between the men this year have been openly bitter.

This vexed Mr. Netanyahu and the Israeli public in general, which overwhelmingly views Mr. Obama as anti-Israel, and it antagonized not only the president's domestic political opponents but also many Democrats in Congress. When Mr. Netanyahu addressed Congress in May, most Democrats, including the leadership, joined in the numerous standing ovations that were obviously intended to contrast the affection for Israel on Capitol Hill with the bad feeling emanating from the White House.

So anyone truly intent on preserving unity among Israel's friends could do so by building on the substantial bipartisan opposition to Mr. Obama's policies on Israel. Instead, the AJC and the ADL are working to protect Mr. Obama.

These organizations exist in large part to defend the Jewish state from unfair criticism, pressure and attacks. But they are defending President Obama from well-grounded charges that he has subjected Israel precisely to that.

If the AJC and ADL want to defend Mr. Obama straightforwardly, they could do so. They might argue that his record on Israel is not unremittingly hostile. They could try to balance some of the healthy features of the U.S.-Israeli relationship—for example, the continuation of defense cooperation—against the bad parts. But it's not a strong argument, which explains why they are claiming to uphold a venerable (though previously unheard of) principle of unity that precludes criticism of a president's position on Israel.

Whatever the AJC and ADL say, Mr. Obama can expect to pay a substantial political price in 2012 for his antagonism toward Israel and feckless courting of its enemies.

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