

Jerusalem Peace & Security Forum Mulls Israeli-U.S. Relations

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November 20, 2014



Jerusalem, Israel - Worsening Israeli-U.S. relations were the topic of the Nov. 20, 2014, meeting of the Jerusalem Peace and Security Forum.

The forum's president, Professor Eliezer Glaubach, an Ambassador for Peace, opened the discussion by describing the deep division currently existing between Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and U.S. President Barack Obama.

Although the current difficulties are not the first to occur, generally there have been few major conflicts between the two democracies and the special and close relationship has endured, despite occasional disagreements, Professor Glaubach said.

Presently opinions in both nations seem to be that dealings between Mr. Netanyahu and Mr. Obama are worse than those that existed between Yitzhak Shamir and George H.W. Bush, Professor Glaubach said. Still, there is some comfort in knowing that the difficult period of the Bush-Shamir years was followed by one of the better periods in Israeli-U.S. affairs, under Yitzhak Rabin and Bill Clinton, he said.

Following the introduction by Professor Glaubach, the forum featured two main speakers: Consul Jacob Dayan, the former Israeli consul general in Los Angeles, and Dr. Arie Geronik from the Department of Political Science at Open University of Israel.

Consul Dayan began by refuting the notion held by some U.S. critics, comparing the United States of today to the Roman Empire in its decline. The U.S., he noted, continues to serve as an intellectual hub for many from around the world and is still spearheading the modern technological revolution. The United States remains the strongest and biggest (often seemingly, the only) ally of Israel, Consul Dayan said. However, he said he believes there are two critical issues that might destabilize the relations between Israel and the United States during the remaining two years of Barack Obama's presidency.

1. The relationship with Iran: As part of his legacy, Mr. Obama wants to achieve an agreement with Iran. For Israel, this remains problematic, since Israel cannot agree with the likely terms of the agreement.
2. Israel-Palestine conflict: U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sees the end of this conflict as a key to the stability of the whole region, but so far he hasn't succeeded in any of his efforts. The big question here is whether the U.S. will veto what Israel would consider a one-sided declaration in support of a Palestinian state.

To the question of how Israel might improve its relationship with the United States, Dayan answered that one of the keys would be to regain some of the lost support of liberal thinkers. If Israel returns to Ben Gurion's International Assistance Policy, which existed when the State of Israel was a major contributor to world aid, liberals may reconsider some current negative trends of thought depicting Israel as a militant nation.



Dr. Geronik of Open University of Israel offered another perspective. Some Israelis, he said, tend to overlook the altered state of American Jewry's influence over the U.S. political landscape, particularly on Washington's decision-making process. At the same time, they overemphasize the alleged contribution of Israel to U.S. national security.

As to the latter, there is little doubt that Israel contributes to U.S. national security, but one should not conclude from this that the United States is in any way dependent on Israel for its security. Israel could just as easily be seen as an occasional burden, Dr. Geronik said, especially during times when Washington is trying to exert influence within the Muslim world.

Clearly interactions with the U.S. offer many advantages for Israel, including continued military and economic support, and in the international diplomatic arena the importance of U.S. assistance cannot be underestimated. An added bonus is that such closeness with the United States makes Israel attractive to other nations that seek to improve their relations with the U.S., believing that "the way to Washington goes via Jerusalem."

However, Dr. Geronik also noted that there are some risks to Israel within the framework of current U.S. relations.

1. The political socialization of future U.S. leaders follows events post-1967. Thus, Israel is seen as a strong, occupying country by such leaders, who do not necessarily understand the Israeli perspective and the historical background for the long-lasting U.S.-Israeli relationship.
2. Current U.S. involvement in the Middle East has been indecisive toward extremists, who continue to pose a challenge to Israel's security.