

# Obama, Israel & American Jews: The Challenge

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We asked 31 prominent American Jews to respond to this statement:

The open conflict between the Obama administration and the government of Benjamin Netanyahu has created tensions between the United States and Israel of a kind not seen since the days of the administration of the first President Bush. And those tensions are placing unique pressure on American Jews, who voted for Barack Obama by a margin of nearly 4-to-1 in 2008 after being assured by Obama himself and by his supporters in the Jewish community that he was a friend and an ally of the State of Israel despite his long association with, among others, the unabashedly anti-Israel and anti-Semitic Reverend Jeremiah Wright. ¶ We argue that American Jews are facing an unprecedented political challenge, and at a crucial moment, with the need to address the existential threat to Israel—and by extension to the future of the Jewish people as a whole—from a potentially nuclear Iran. How will American Jews handle this challenge? Can Obama's Jewish supporters act in a way that will change the unmistakable direction of current American policy emanating from the White House? Will American Jews accept Barack Obama's view that the state of Israel bears some responsibility for the loss of American "blood and treasure" in the Middle East? Will they continue to extend their support to the Obama administration and to Barack Obama's political party?

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American Jews are predominantly progressive, and like President Obama, they largely subscribe to a progressive interpretation of world affairs. Unfortunately, the progressive assessment of Israel and of Middle East politics is based on a reckless illusion that thwarts worthy progressive goals and undermines vital American interests.

The illusion is that Israel's occupation of Palestinian land is the root cause of instability, violence, and war in the region. If only Israel were to withdraw from the West Bank and ease restrictions on the Gaza Strip, then, progressives contend, a democratic and peaceful Palestinian state would emerge. This would placate restive Muslim populations throughout the Arab world and enable the international community to concentrate on other matters, including Iran.

The illusion prevents progressives from grasping what our allies in the region see clearly. Not only Israelis but also Sunni Arab states across the Middle East—from Kuwait, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia in the Gulf to Lebanon and Egypt along the Mediterranean—view the Islamic Republic of Iran's sponsorship of Islamic extremism and pursuit of nuclear weapons as the chief threat to their interests and the great menace to the maintenance of international order.

The progressive illusion antedates Obama's presidency. The learned and the political classes throughout the United States and Europe subscribe to it, the Arab press promulgates it, and the United Nations holds it as an article of faith. By affirming it through deliberate, public, and one-sided imposition of pressure on Israel to make concessions in advance of negotiations, the Obama administration has baffled and demoralized Israelis, pulled the rug out from under Palestinian moderates, lent legitimacy to the demonizers of Israel around the world, and given Iran a windfall of precious time to promote terror and develop nuclear weapons.

On June 14, 2009, 10 days after President Obama's Cairo address, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu delivered a landmark speech at Bar Ilan University. While insisting on Israel's determination to establish secure borders, he declared his willingness to go anywhere to discuss peace, invited Arab leaders to come to Israel, and became Israel's first conservative prime minister to affirm the Palestinians' right to govern themselves in their own state.

Prime Minister Netanyahu's bold gestures have not been reciprocated.

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