

Nine Questions Obama Wasn't Asked on Israel

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TEL AVIV—Last week journalist Ilana Dayan interviewed President Obama on her popular Israeli prime-time investigative television program. This was the latest in the president's campaign to take his case for a nuclear agreement with Iran -- and against Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu -- directly to the people, particularly the Jewish people. The president launched the campaign in late May in an interview with the Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, and followed it with a speech a few days later at Congregation Adas Israel in Washington.

Goldberg and Dayan elicited clarifying answers from the president. What was most clarifying, however, was Obama's questionable judgments and policies.

Goldberg and Dayan are accomplished reporters—but extracting edifying answers from a sitting president is not easy. To carry forward the task they began, here are nine follow-up questions that would provide necessary information for a full assessment of U.S. Middle East policy under the current administration.

1. In his interview with Goldberg, Obama said, “There has been no indication from the Saudis or any other [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries that they have an intention to pursue their own nuclear program.” Yet in the Wall Street Journal in 2013, Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal, a prominent member of the Saudi royal family and the Arab world's richest businessman, expressed dismay at the Obama administration's proposed deal with Tehran because it did not require Iran to dismantle its nuclear program. The prince also suggested the possibility, if a bad deal were signed, of the Arabian Peninsula going nuclear.

Moreover, only last month the Journal quoted a former Saudi official, a retired Saudi colonel, and a Saudi prince and think-tank scholar, all of whom agreed that Iran's acquisition of a nuclear weapon would compel Saudi Arabia to obtain one. In a country where an extended ruling family and a small elite group keep a tight grip on the reins of power, do these emphatic assertions by three eminent Saudis -- published in a premier American newspaper - - not count as significant indications of Saudi and GCC intent?

2. Obama told Goldberg, “Part of the reason why [the GCC countries] would not pursue their own nuclear program—assuming that we have been successful in preventing Iran from continuing down the path of obtaining a nuclear weapon—is that the protection that we

provide as their partner is a far greater deterrent than they could ever hope to achieve by developing their own nuclear stockpile or trying to achieve breakout capacity when it comes to nuclear weapons.”

In light of Obama’s February 2011 turning on Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a longtime American ally, his decision to remove all American combat troops from Iraq, and his 2013 refusal to enforce his own red line against Syria’s use of chemical weapons—what makes Obama think GCC countries will trust American assurances now?

3. Goldberg asked whether, given what the president has called their “venomous anti-Semitism,” the Iranians “can be counted on to be entirely rational.” Obama responded that to maintain power and overcome their economic troubles, the Iranians will “strike an agreement on their nuclear program” because anti-Semitism “doesn’t preclude you from being rational.” In fact, even as the Third Reich was collapsing, Hitler deprived his army of resources by continuing to round up Jews and transport them by train to extermination camps. What is the evidence for Obama’s optimism about anti-Semitic dictators?

4. Obama told Goldberg that Netanyahu’s statement in the days before Israel’s March 17 parliamentary elections that “a Palestinian state would not happen under his watch,” and that the prime minister’s election day portrayal of Arab citizens as “an invading force that might vote,” along with his insinuation “that this should be guarded against,” not only violated Israel’s commitment to equality but should have “foreign-policy consequences.”

Does Obama not understand that (a) many Israelis who favor a two-state solution nonetheless agree with their prime minister that regional turmoil makes its realization unfeasible in the near term; (b) Netanyahu did *not* portray Arab citizens as an invading force that might vote but rather as a constituency whose votes would strengthen his opponents and therefore he urged not the suppression of the Arab vote but a final push to the polls by his supporters; (c) and that Netanyahu’s portrayal, though crude, differs little from the overtly ethnic appeals made in U.S. politics all the time, including on Obama’s behalf?

5. In the Dayan interview, the president acknowledged that after the election, Netanyahu reaffirmed his commitment to the long-term goal of a Palestinian state and apologized for his remark about Arab voters. But Obama nevertheless questioned Netanyahu’s sincerity: “I think that it is difficult to simply accept at face value the statement made after an election that would appear to look as if this is simply an effort to return to the previous status quo in which we talk about peace in the abstract, but it’s always tomorrow, it’s always later.” Why does Obama assert that post-election statements, made after the battle has been decided and the dust has settled, should be dismissed while statements made in the frantic final days of a fiercely contested race unambiguously reflect a political leader’s deepest and most credible views?

6. The president stressed to Dayan “the necessity to resolve” the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians. Why does President Obama think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is more destabilizing than the manifold conflicts shaking the Middle East—the Syrian civil war, which has killed more than 220,000 and produced a flood of more than a million Syrian refugees into Lebanon and similar numbers into Jordan; the conquests of ISIS in Iraq; the Iranian-backed Houthi rebellion in Yemen; Egypt’s war against Muslim extremists in the Sinai Peninsula; and Libya’s descent into chaos. And why does Obama think that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alone is subject to near-term resolution?

7. Like Goldberg, Dayan did not mention Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, nor did Obama refer to him. By largely ignoring the PA, both interviews gave the impression that Obama believes that the major impediment to peace is Netanyahu. Wouldn’t showing an appreciation of the substantial obstacles to peace presented by Abbas and the Palestinians help Obama persuade Israelis that he understands the complexity of their acute security challenges?

8. Obama implied to Dayan that one “practical consequence” of what he deems Netanyahu’s failure to pursue a Palestinian state is that the U.S. may refrain from vetoing Security Council resolutions aimed at imposing a settlement to the conflict with the Palestinians. The president also said that he sought to “create some building blocks of trust and progress.” What are Obama’s grounds for supposing that breaking with almost 50 years of American policy—by repudiating U.N. Security Council resolutions 242 and 338, which call for the parties to negotiate a settlement—would do anything but impair trust and progress?

9. Obama reiterated to Dayan his displeasure at Netanyahu’s decision to address Congress earlier this year. “I think it’s fair to say,” Obama opined, “that if I showed up at the Knesset without checking with the prime minister first, if I had negotiated with Mr. Herzog, that there would be a sense of some protocols that had been breached.” Did Obama consult with Netanyahu before he went over his head to address the Israeli people directly on prime-time television and did Obama give tacit approval for his former political consultants to work to defeat Netanyahu’s party in the March elections?

We should be grateful to Jeffrey Goldberg and Ilana Dayan for obtaining answers from President Obama about Israel and the Middle East that illuminate what must be asked in the next round of questions to properly evaluate the president’s policies in the region.

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