Allies at Odds: Obama, Netanyahu, and The State of U.S.-Israeli Relations

Jane Harman:
Good afternoon. Good afternoon to a packed house. I'm Jane Harman, President and CEO of the Wilson Center. I want to welcome those in this audience, those watching on CSPAN, as well as those tuning in via live webcast, a terrific tool for bringing even more people into the discussion. Also want to recognize our Board Chair, Ambassador Joe Gildenhorn, as well as members of our Wilson Council who are here in the audience, and Haleh Esfandiari, the peerless Director of our Middle East program.

Unlike the Washington Monument or the Lincoln Memorial, the Wilson Center is a living memorial to our first internationalist president. Chartered by Congress in 1968, it is the United States' key non-partisan policy forum for tackling global issues through independent research and open dialogue leading to actionable ideas for Congress, the U.S. Administration, and the broader international policymaking community.

Today's public event is part of a series we sponsor with NPR called The National Conversation. Our hope is that these events will provide the public with new opportunities to engage in much-needed civil discourse, free from spin, in the safe political space that the Wilson Center provides. The qualities of the discussions during our last few NatCons -- that's the abbreviation -- has been truly spectacular. Our audience engaged with leaders like General Keith Alexander on cyber security, Graham Alison on the relevant lessons of the Cuban Missile Crisis on its 50th Anniversary, and Henry Kissinger on China's once-in-a-decade leadership transition and its implications for America.

We at the Wilson Center are also watching developments in the Middle East very closely and looking at the Arab awakening from every angle. Top experts in the field join the Center as long-term scholars or short-term fellows. One of them is right in front of me, David Ottaway. We cover every pertinent issue in the MENA region, and I only wish I had been smart enough to seek their counsel during my nine terms in Congress, where I served on all of the major security committees.

Today's program follows several recent high-level Wilson Center events on Israel's role in the region. In the past year, we've hosted Ami Ayalon, former director of Shin Bet, who spoke of coordinated unilateralism, a new paradigm for a two-state solution. PS: for me, we desperately need a two-state solution. We heard from Efraim Halevy, former director of Mossad, who discussed the effort of the Arab spring, or Islamist Winter as it is known in Israel, and Tehran's nuclear ambitions. And we heard from former U.S. Ambassador to Egypt and Israel, Dan Kurtzer, who stressed last month that the Obama Administration needs to take a more active approach in resuscitating the peace process. As I said, I agree.

Today's event considers the state of U.S.-Israeli relations against two backdrops: the recent American and Israeli presidential elections, of course, but also the at-least-10 other pivotal elections that have or will take place across the Middle East in 2013. There was an election in Jordan just last week. In our Middle East program's latest Viewpoint publication, Wilson Center rock star Robyn Wright writes about how the rise of the Right across the Middle East -- that's a lot of rights -- will influence these elections, as well as policies both at home and in the broader region. Make sure to pick up a copy on your way out. And also check my CNN op-ed on how the Israeli election can be a reset moment for the U.S.-Israel -- for U.S.-Israel relations and for the peace process.

Our moderator today is Guy Raz, the now former weekend host of NPR's "All Things Considered." I know I won't be the only one missing his voice on the weekends, but it's great news that Guy will be the future host of NPR's "TED Radio Hour." So we can all look forward to that.

Guy started with NPR as an intern for "All Things Considered," and then worked as an assistant to my dear, late friend, the legendary Dan Schorr. At the old age of 25, Guy was named NPR's Berlin Bureau Chief, then London Bureau Chief, and finally NPR's defense correspondent at the Pentagon. He has reported for more than 40 countries, including Israel, where he worked for CNN as the Jerusalem correspondent for two years. As long -- and he must be a very old person to have done all this. His long list of interviewees includes President Obama, Israeli President Shimon Peres, and former Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert. He was also awarded the -- both the Edward R.

Murrow Award and the Daniel Schorr Journalism Prize for his reporting in Iraq.

We're lucky it's a Wednesday and not a Monday or a Tuesday, when Guy looks after his two-year-old as a stay-at-home dad. Let's applaud for that. Okay.

[applause]

Right on. Compared to navigating the tight inner circle of mommies and nannies, something he's written about, moderating today's event will be much easier. Please join me now in welcoming Guy, who will introduce the rest of our terrific panelists.

[applause]

Guy Raz:
Thank you, thank you. Thanks so much. Let's get right to our panelists. To my left is David Horowitz. As many of you know, he's one of the most distinguished journalists working in Israel. He's the founding editor of the Times of Israel website. If you haven't had a chance to check it out, you should. It is well worth it. David is a familiar face here in the U.S. as a commentator and as the former editor of the Jerusalem Post.

To David's left, we have with us Ambassador Sam Lewis. He served as the U.S. Ambassador to Israel for eight years, under presidents Carter and Regan. How you survived that long, God only knows, but you managed to. He spent more than three decades at the State Department, including a stint as the Director of the Department's Policy Planning Staff.

To Ambassador Lewis' left, of course, is Aaron David Miller. He is Vice President for New Initiatives here at the Wilson Center, a distinguished scholar, as well, and advisor to six secretaries of state on Arab-Israeli peace. And Aaron's also the author of the acclaimed book, "The Much Too Promised Land: America's elusive search for Arab-Israeli peace."

And, finally, we have with us Natan Sachs. He is a fellow at the Saban Center at Brookings. A rising star in the policy world, he is currently working on a book about the domestic politics of Israeli foreign policy.

So, welcome to all of you. I'm delighted to be moderating this discussion with such an august panel. Let me begin with a question that I'd like each of you to answer, and we'll start with Aaron Miller. And the question is: how would you characterize the state of U.S.-Israel relations right now?

Aaron Miller:
Guy, I think it's anomalous. I think on the institutional level, it's actually quite good. There's a certain automaticity to this relationship. It's gotten better since it reached its sort of threshold point in the wake of the October 1973 War; intelligence-sharing, security cooperation, R&D, prepositioning of equipment, joint exercises, I think the DOD relationship with the Israeli Ministry of Defense. I think the institutional relationship is fine.

The anomaly occurs in -- at the top, where I've written and spoken publicly about this. You have the most -- in my judgment, the most dysfunctional relationship between an Israeli Prime Minister and an American President since -- in the history of the U.S.-Israeli relationship. And that's actually -- as Sam Lewis knows, that's saying quite a bit. You had two other pairs who, frankly, didn't get along with each other, either: Begin and Carter. And of course Bush 41, for whom I worked, and Yitzhak Shamir had a very turbulent relationship. But in both of those cases, there was amelioration in the tensions. In the former case, it was Sudat, who essentially saved the Carter-Begin relationship, and in Bush 41 and Shamir's it was Saddam, who anomalously, by invading Kuwait, created an opportunity for tremendous cooperation between the two.

What is so extraordinary about this relationship is that four years in, the notion of this common enterprise has not yet appeared. And what is being fixed, I'm afraid, are images in the minds of both leaders, which are becoming increasingly ingrained. And that makes this, I think, slightly novel in the history of the U.S. relationship, and it's occurring of course -- last point -- against the backdrop of galactic changes in the region, and two issues in particular: the prospects of Iran crossing the nuclear threshold on the watch of Barack Obama and, arguably, the demise, perhaps, of the two-state solution on Obama's

watch, as well. So, this year and the next several will be quite interesting.

Guy Raz:
Ambassador Lewis, the state of U.S.-Israel relations right now?

Samuel Lewis:
The first time I think in my long and dreary life I almost agree with everything that Aaron said.

[laughter]

Aaron worked for me in the Policy Planning Staff and I usually listened to him but often disagreed with him.

I think there are only one or two things I would like to add to that analysis, though I do agree with the general drift of it. First place, actually, every -- almost every U.S. administration has had some big fights with Israel over something, and often they have been quite personal. What's really different, I think, about this pair of leaders isn't so much that they are -- they have four years of not having a common enterprise. They have, in fact, a common enterprise. It's called Iran, and that's probably what binds them together at this time. My assessment is that you have two people who really don't like each other, you have two people who both have good reason not to like each other because of each other's behaviors, and you have a situation in which the interests of our nation and of Israel have rarely been closer than they are right now, and that fortunately is reinforced by the institutional arrangements which are really quite dense and interwoven compared with the days that I was in Israel.

For example, when -- despite pleadings by the Israelis to have just one vessel from the U.S. Sixth Fleet visit Haifa so that the sailors could get home leave -- get shore leave for those eager Israeli women who were waiting for them. And that was turned down repeatedly by the Chief of Naval Operations. Sort of contrast that with the degree our military, naval, air collaboration with Israeli joint exercises, deployments, all the rest, which are pretty well known now. It's a light world difference in institutional relationships, but I think I give a little more credit, or blame, to the fact that Israel, as the -- I won't say satellite; just say less powerful, smaller of the two

allies. The Israeli Prime Ministers have had to lean over backwards at times to mesh their own proclivities with the American presidents, and it was high on all their agendas, the importance of that personal relationship. This Prime Minister has thought he understood, and thinks he understands, the United States better, I think, than our Prime Minister -- our President -- but certainly better than a lot of the commentators. But he's never had that approach. Instead, he's had a different strategy, vis-a-vis Congress and the U.S. Jewish community and the rest, which, when it came up against someone without much of a personal connection with Israel, who had yet to establish himself as a friend of Israel in the minds of the public, created a lot of sparks and a natural reaction and an overreaction and a bad set of tactics.

So I think that these two leaders really have something to deal with which is quite unprecedented, and because the business at hand for both our nations is so crucial, everywhere from Iran all the way across North Africa, in some sense, and certainly Egypt, right in the center of everything. They've got to find a new connection. We ought to come back to this question. I'm not going to elaborate now, because I have a few thoughts about what they should and shouldn't be doing.

Guy Raz:
And we will. We'll have lots of time to elaborate on lots of questions. Let's get the Israeli perspective for a moment on this question. To you, David Horowitz. From your perch in Israel, what does the relationship look like right now?

David Horowitz:
Yeah, I also share much of the assessment that we've heard so far. But from Israeli perspective, I would stress a few things: first of all, I think the relationship is fundamentally very sound. I think, although there are problematic -- and I'll talk about that a little bit. The administration, from Israel's point of view, has enabled Israel to maintain its positive military advantage, it has stood by Israel in crucial diplomatic moments: vetoing a resolution on settlements that it actually agreed with, ensuring that there was -- there actually wasn't a need for a veto at the Security Council on the issue of Palestinian statehood, but there would have been a veto if that was necessary. Voting with Israel and, you know, four tiny

islands that I defy you to find on a map: Panama, the Czech Republic, and Canada -- against the Palestinian successful effort essentially to get the U.N.'s okay to statehood without the need to negotiate with Israel. So, on those big issues, the administration's been fine. But I think that the perception in Israel is, as we've heard, of a very problematic relationship.

Now, some of the problems on Iran are a function of context. You know, we're closer to Iran, we're more immediately threatened by Iran, and we have less of a military capability than the United States has to stop Iran. And, therefore, there's incredibly good communication, there's very good sharing of information, there are very similar assessments of what's going on in Iran, and so I'm -- but we're in different places, physically and in the other areas that I discussed, and, therefore, there are going to be strains. But I do think they're exacerbated by the relationship by the two. I think you have two people here, they've both been re-elected, they both feel completely vindicated, you know, that the public has chosen them again. So, well, they must be right. Each of them thinks they understand the best interests of both countries better than the other. In other words, Netanyahu doesn't just think he knows what's best for Israel, I think he thinks he knows what's best for the United States more than Obama does, and vice versa. That's very problematic.

And just to look at it from the Israeli point of view. You know, one of the issues, and I think this is quite widely felt in Israel: we live in a really ruthless region where people don't all want to live and let live. Lots of them want to kill and be killed. They actually believe that it is their path to paradise. We reject that, because it is so counterintuitive to believe that. Well, there really are people that think that God will reward them, will give them entry to paradise if they kill themselves, non-believing Muslims, Jews, and Christians. And I think the sense in Israel has never dissipated, that this President doesn't get it. That -- in the way that John McCain, for example, terribly had long since internalized the evil that men can do, while President Obama has never, mercifully, had to go through that same kind of process. And there's been this sense in Israel that this President doesn't quite understand our region.

And one last point: the emotional issue. The Israelis are a very emotional people, and we don't feel, you know, the emotional connection. Bill Clinton, if he converted to Judaism and moved to Israel, we would elect him to every and any office in the land.

[laughter]

George Bush, Jr., you could say there were two terms of the Bush Administration. He didn't stop Iran, and yet Israelis feel that Bush understood Israel and felt an emotional connection. And there isn't that feeling where Obama is concerned.

Guy Raz:
Natan Sachs.

Natan Sachs:
I agree very much with what was said. I think there's also been some evolution on this. Obama started out on Israeli public opinion very much as David described. There's a lot of suspicion. He came on the backdrop of Bush 43, and this perception of him trying to restart his relation with the Muslim world, with the Arab world with the Cairo speech and otherwise. And so for Israelis there was a very strong perception that he doesn't get it, he is not with Israelis, he basically doesn't have the same kind of intuitions, even if on policy he's not terribly different, and even if it doesn't matter much because there's not much chance of a peace process.

But that has changed somewhat, I'll qualify, but there has been evolution, especially the last conflict in Gaza. Iron Dome was a big success, the anti-missile system, largely funded by the United States and with help from the Administration, so not just from the Hill, but actually from the Administration. And the Israelis did take note of this, and so there's been -- if you take a look at the polls, as well, there's been a lessening of animosity towards Obama himself and a feeling that -- not quite as bad as they felt in the beginning. But early on there was a lot of suspicion, there was a feeling this is not Bush, this is definitely not Clinton. And it was not -- I agree with David completely, it was not about policy. If you consider Clinton and Bush and how different they were in many respects, that was not the issue. The issue was a perception in Israel that this biggest ally, on which

Israelis know that they depend tremendously, doesn't have them deep in heart, whether that's true or not.

That partly is due, of course, to different styles. President Obama is very different from President Clinton in simply style of interaction with anyone. But it was also a matter of choice. The Cairo speech, there were choices made to try and change the relation with the Muslim world, with the Arab world, that for Israelis felt like they were on the wrong side of that reset. They were on the wrong side of this dramatic change in U.S. policy. And Israel was very appreciative of the votes in the U.N. and et cetera, but they are also very conscious of this tension at the high level. Right -- just recently, there was again Obama coming out, by Jeffrey Goldberg in The Atlantic, speaking about Netanyahu not having Israel's best interests or not understanding Israel's best interests. Israelis listen to this and they have a mixed reaction. On the one hand, there is some indignation, but there's also a signal sometimes received that, well, the U.S. is the one Ally.

So I think there's more ambivalence than there used to be, but fundamentally it starts from a bad place.

Guy Raz:
Is there some truth to what President Obama said, that Israel doesn't always know what its best interests are?

Natan Sachs:
Well, this is the million-dollar question. When you talk to Israeli policy makers -- I often do, and I ask them, "Where do you think Israel should be in 2050? Where do you think Netanyahu or some of the other leaders?" There are different answers I get to this. The most common one is a chuckle, and saying, "You really think they have time to think about 2050 with Syria, Hezbollah, Jordan, Egypt, and not even mentioning Iran?" And I, you know, forgot to mention the Palestinians. So there's no time to get there. It's survival, it's whack-a-mole, and it's an attempt to defer all kind of pressure, especially U.S. pressure, on some of the issues that the Administration feels is core to it.

But that's not the consensus -- I mean, it's not the universal view. Many view it differently and I think that a lot of criticism of Netanyahu was in order, but I don't think we should underestimate the amount of thought that is

-- that does go on, nonetheless, on the strategic issues. Netanyahu has a very different conception of what Israelis' interests -- what Israel's interests are. He may be wrong, and the United States certainly has very different views than Netanyahu, more than sometimes appears, but it is not simply a senseless, lacking-in-strategy approach. It is something that is, I think, more thoughtful than people think.

Guy Raz:
Let's talk about the next four years and a peace process or a non-peace process. From the American perspective, we often view this process through a decidedly American political prism, right? So we say Barack Obama now has four years unencumbered by the need to seek reelection or the pressures of voters, the pro-Israel lobby. What incentive, aside from a moral imperative, does he have to pursue peace for Israelis and justice for Palestinians? Aaron Miller?

Aaron Miller:
Well, there is this notion of the second-term illusion. I call it the second-term illusion. It lacks precedent in the history of the Arab-Israeli peace process, this notion that an American president -- particularly this one, who, in fact, does care about this issue, who is, in a sense, a very nuanced, sophisticated thinker. He deals in gray, Barack Obama, the color of diplomacy. In essence, he is existentially a marriage of black and of white, and I don't think he thinks about the Palestinian issue quite the same way that Clinton thinks about it and George W. Bush thinks about it. I don't think he situates it primarily along the values continuum. He situates it along the continuum of American national interest. He knows it's important, he knows in this broken, angry, dysfunctional Arab world that it is the one issue that continues to resonate ideologically and emotionally, and I think he cares about it. I believe, counterintuitively -- because, frankly, if he tried today he would fail -- that Barack Obama will, in fact, attend in some way, during the course -- during the arc of his next four years, to this issue in some way, because I do not believe he wants to be the president who will allow these two rather extraordinary things that we do care about to essentially be undermined on his watch. One, that Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, developing a capacity or the weapon itself. And, second, that it's clear to normal human beings that the two-state solution is

simply no longer available. I don't think Obama wants to be that American President. So, at some point, he'll try. The question is whether he'll be smart about it this time and dumb about it the way he pursued it during the last four years.

Look, one last comment: fighting with Israel, with a close ally, is an occupational realty. Every serious Republican, Democratic, secretary of state, or president that succeeded in this issue has fought with every Israeli government and the pro-Israeli community in the United States. The question is: will the fight be productive? Otherwise, why fight with a close ally? Barack Obama chose to have an unproductive fight during his first year over settlements, over his settlements freeze. It proved unproductive and it damaged our credibility with Israel and with the Arabs.

So that's really the question: does this man, sentimentalist or not, on the question of Israel -- Jim Baker wasn't a sentimentalist, neither was Bush 41, but they had a strategy. The worse thing is to be unsentimental and not have a strategy, and that is, in fact, Obama's fate during the first four years.

Guy Raz:
David Horowitz, is there any public groundswell in favor of a fast-tracked, negotiated settlement to the conflict? Do Israelis want America to get involved?

David Horowitz:
We'd love America to be involved if we thought that there was anything constructive that could be done. We want to find an accommodation with the Palestinians. Most Israelis -- I think Israel, in the last generation, basically moved to the left in that the consensus in Israel became that if we want to maintain a Jewish and a democratic Israel, we need to separate from the Palestinians. In the last two or three years, unsurprisingly, we swung a little back to the right because the region is descending into total chaos. And, you know, take Syria as a great example. You know, if Israel had made progress with Syria we might not hold the high ground of the Golan Heights right now, and that's a pretty terrifying proposition. And if you then put that onto the Palestinian context, you understand Israeli wariness.

And I would just -- I'd just make a few key points. The first is we're sitting here as though we're in the luxury of things staying calm on the Palestinian front and the President will be free to decide if he wants to get engaged or not. I don't think we should make that assumption. I don't think there is any guarantee that things will stay as relatively calm as they have been. I think the signs are, in fact, that they are becoming slightly less calm and there may be some need for, at the very least, more energetic conflict management. I think, to take you into the Israeli mindset, we are -- and I'm trying to give a sense of the middle ground here. We're very conflicted about Abbas. Now, here is somebody who goes on Israel television and give English language interviews in which he says, "Under my late leadership there will be no third violent intifada. I have no claims on pre-'67 Israel. Although I was born and suffered in Northern Israel and I like to visit, I don't feel I have the right to go back and live there." You know, that's fantastic for the middle ground in Israel. But then he goes to the U.N. and in Arabic for the whole world says that our country was born in fundamental sin through ethnic cleansing. That produces a rather conflicted Israeli response, understandably, and then the situation is complicated by the fact that if we did what Abbas ostensibly wants us to do and pull the army out of the West Bank -- which is the last thing he actually wants us to do -- he would fall, because Hamas would take over. That's what happened in Gaza. That's probably what would happen in the West Bank if the Israeli army withdrew.

So it's not a function of whether we want to be able to disengage and reach an accommodation with the Palestinians. I think in Israel, in the middle ground -- and it was so not an issue in the elections, not because we don't care, but because we don't see the conditions in which we could have some kind of accommodation.

And one last point. In the last Israeli government, the Olmert government, for a lot of Israelis, offered the Palestinians what they purport to want. You know, he was prepared to relinquish the West Bank with one-for-one land swaps, to divide Jerusalem into Israeli and Palestinian neighborhoods, to relinquish Israeli sovereignty in the old city in favor of an international trusteeship. And, depending on your interpretation, Abbas understandably didn't do the deal because Olmert was nearly finished as a Prime Minister and he would have been left with a worthless

piece of paper, or terribly didn't do the deal because if he really wanted the deal he would have prevented Olmert from leaving the room before he signed off on the document. Those are some of the thoughts.

Guy Raz:
Sam Lewis, given that there doesn't appear to be any clear willingness or interest in coming back to the negotiating table, from elements on both sides of the conflict, is there an incentive for President Obama to get involved?

Samuel Lewis:
Well, I think the incentive is the one actually that you just referred to. No expert, and I'm sure the advice that he gets, believes this kind of calm on the Palestinian front can last very long, and there's going to be an explosion of some kind if something isn't done to draw some of the venom out of it. That's really his only incentive, I think. And, you may have noticed, he has a rather full agenda in other parts of the world, to say nothing about this part of the world. And everything would argue he would do just as well to step back, worry about amnesties and sequesters and Afghanistan and so forth and wait for things to settle down on the political side. It's very hard to argue, I think, that it would be wise to launch any kind of initiative when you don't know what kind of Israeli government formula is actually going to be there. So the short-term is you wait to see if you've got a government that shows the slightest interest in being a little different than the previous one. And that might happen. I'm not terribly optimistic, but it's a possibility. Israeli politics is not always as predictable as we'd like to think.

But I think it's also crucial -- and here I have -- my friend and former colleague to the left has recently written a book, and he said something quite, I think, correct, in very guarded language, about the relationship between these two men. He said, "On the most sensitive issues, you will need a different kind of relationship than the one we currently have, a working bond where confidences are respected and there's a clear sense that we aren't -- you aren't out to undermine him, and vice versa." And there's also a matter of creating that bond with Israel the public, which you referred to, Dan [sic].

Now, therefore -- and I think that's correct. I don't think you can start from here and put together an initiative anyway that would have the slightest chance, even if prospects were better on both sides, until you handle the top-layer relationship differently. Well, you're not going to change the people, but you do have another formula. Let's not forget, there was a very sharp set of differences between Menachem Begin and Jimmy Carter. Cyrus Vance, a great Secretary of State -- much underestimated by historians, I think -- spent nine months almost entirely on the airplane going back and forth among all the parties, all the Arab parties, Israel, and gradually trying to coax a new process. Go back to Geneva, et cetera. It foundered. Sadat stepped in, saved the day by his extraordinary decision to go to Jerusalem, and the rest is history. But the point is, in that period there was no Carter-Begin relationship. Begin came once, Carter was astounded, I managed to persuade Carter to treat him a little differently than his advisors, especially as Zbig Brzezinski wanted. He went away thinking quite well of Carter and that Carter gritted his teeth and had taken Begin's measure correctly, I would say. But they weren't certainly able to engage with each other, really, for a long time, almost until they got to Camp David, actually, a year later.

Vance played a crucial role in finding out where the possibilities were and building a relationship of trust with the Israeli leadership and particularly the Egyptian leadership, which Carter then could play off of. And that's where we are right now, I think.

John Kerry is almost ideal, I think, to play this role. I hope it's not true what I read in the paper, that he was planning to go even before the government's formed. I think that would be a great mistake. He needs to talk to the people after the government is formed and the Arabs at the same time, otherwise they won't be ready to talk to him. But he does need to play a preparatory role so that then the two leaders don't have to deal so much with each other directly. And the foreign minister on the Israeli side, who could play the role that Moshe Dayan played, would be very nice because Dayan and Vance together got us over all sorts of huge obstacles that Carter and Begin could not have done directly at the times these events occurred.

And something like that's happened in other administrations. Baker -- it was a different game with Bush because they were different people, but it had some of the same qualities. Baker did the leg work and Bush got the credit, or a lot of the credit. And, later on, Clinton did not have that kind of Secretary of State. I worked for Warren Christopher, a wonderful man, but not that kind of Secretary of State. And I think Clinton's over-involvement personally in dealing directly with Barack on the phone or directly almost every day was a big mistake and proved to be later on. It got too easy to be the President as the negotiator, and that's not a good idea.

So, more distance right in the next few weeks and months. Polite, a different tone, I would hope -- let's not pick fights with each other publicly through leaks -- by the way, is a bad idea on both sides. Both governments do a little leaking, I believe, but I don't think there's a really good argument for an initiative until a lot of groundwork has been played out, and I think you probably have months or a year or two before this grand explosion has to take place. I wouldn't assume that you can't head that off for a certain time.

Guy Raz:
Natan Sachs, give us a sense of the medium-term vision in Israel of how this conflict or this situation will unfold, if nothing happens, if nothing changes.

Natan Sachs:
I think that's exactly the point that -- that's really the elephant in the room, is the status quo, how stable that is. A solution really is not on the table right now, so it would seem, certainly in Israel, and the question is how the status quo plays out.

For many on the right, and especially the center-right, the status quo -- or perhaps not center-right. The -- Dani Dayan, the former leader of the settler movement, for example, has spoken very explicitly about the status quo -- prolonged status quo as the goal. And, of course, critics of that would say that it's not a status quo. There's nothing static about it. There's a lot of erosion on the ground and there's building, for example, in some of the settlements. But, from the Israeli perspective, as long as life inside Israel is quite good, as long as there's quiet

in the territories, the status quo is excellent. And right now the situation in the West Bank is very good.

The alternative to the status quo, though, is always the question. Some on the right now, in this campaign, for example, the Jewish Home, the party on the far-right, has opposed not the status quo but actually pushing forward, annexing eventually all of Area C, which is most of the West Bank and all the Jewish settlements in the West Bank. And many others propose different things, some going to back to a final status negotiation with Abbas again. Others: interim agreements, constructive unilateralism, as we heard before, and other ideas.

But the status quo, at least in the meantime, seems to be the only default approach that everyone can agree on. If you think of the right wing in Israel, the dominant group right now, it's an amalgam of very different groups. Their end goals are quite different and their motivations are quite different, but they agree on means and they agree on opposition to most of the changes that the United States would want. And so the status quo, more or less what we see today, which is predominantly building within the settlement blocks, at least officially, very little movement, agreement to speak to the Palestinians at any time, and no preconditions, but the largest set of conditions on what final status would look like, and a deep skepticism about final status in the near term.

That is sort of what everyone agrees on and where everyone comes to, not necessarily from ideology but simply from design by committee, in a sense.

Guy Raz:
Aaron Miller, we hear -- we often hear about -- from supporters of Israel and critics of President Obama that this President does not feel Israel in his heart. And I'm wondering, given the changing demographics in this country, in the United States, at some point in the near term, can you imagine Israel not being a particularly important political issue in the United States?

Aaron Miller:
It's a fascinating question. I've watched this relationship for a long time and I guess my own sense is that when the image of Israel changes in the mind of America, when in fact that change really takes place, that,

correctly or incorrectly, the Israelis are no longer perceived as a small state, with nuclear weapons notwithstanding, with a dark past, living in a dangerous neighborhood on the knife's edge. When that image changes, Israel's pluralism, its respect for its own peculiar democracy, it may be a preferential democracy with 8 million people -- a million Israeli Arabs suffer social -- systemic, social, and economic discrimination. But when that image of the tiny democracy -- remember, 22 countries in the world since 1950, and only 22, have maintained their democratic character continuously. The Indians and the Turks are not on the list. Democracy is a very small club and it's -- the arbiter is can you be democratic over time? That's the key. Good marriages, good business propositions, good friendships. It's time that's the ultimate arbiter of quality.

So, yes, when the image of Israel changes in the mind of America, and this is where I really do take issue with the notion that somehow five-and-a-half million American Jews, half of whom are not even affiliated with an organization or a synagogue, somehow have a veto power over the course of American foreign policy. They hold it hostage. I've heard Arabs and Europeans refer to the U.S. Congress, you know, as the little Knesset, that it's somehow Israeli-occupied territory. Frankly, that's an affront to the -- to my government, and it's a fundamental misunderstanding of the nature of politics in this country. Fundamental misunderstanding.

It is not the so-called Jewish lobby that has gotten Chuck Hagel into so much trouble. That is the adhesive that drives this relationship over time. It is the non-Jewish elites in public and their acquiescence and/or act of support for the image of Israel that maintains the durability and quality of this relationship. When that changes, if in fact it changes, it's when the non-Jews abandon the image of Israel, only then will the relationship change. And that is -- frankly, the Arabs become Israel's best and most compelling talking point in this city, because no matter how badly the Israelis behave toward the Palestinians, you take a regional tour and look around. You find an asymmetry of cruelty and a willfulness, which, frankly, mitigates any capacity on the part of an American President to gain any leverage.

If you had a Sadat, if you had a Palestinian leader who was both willing and able, a Jordanian king -- you do have a Jordanian king who is quite pro-American, but he's constrained. It is that, also, that is missing and helps the durability of this relationship to survive. But, no, the image of Israel changes among non-Jewish elites and the public, and the nature of the U.S.-Israeli relationship will change, and it is a cautionary tale, frankly, to Israelis.

Guy Raz:
David Horowitz, is there an appreciation in Israel for the scenario that Aaron Miller lays out? I mean, Israel looks out at the western world and sees its position in Europe among its allies in Europe increasingly isolated, it sees its position in the U.N. as an isolated -- increasingly isolated position. Is there an appreciation that that is a possibility down the road?

David Horowitz:
I think Israel looks at the world and feels astoundingly misunderstood and mistreated, pretty much everywhere apart from the United States, Canada, and the four islands that you can't find in the Pacific. We think that Europe looks at Israel as some kind of modern colonial implant and doesn't appreciate our history. We think people lose track of the fact that we're nine miles wide at our narrowest point and, you know, on the western edge of a pretty hostile land mass. And we think America feels differently. We know the U.N. has changed. The U.N. -- the family of nations is a different family from the one that re-legitimized Israel in 1947. Israel would not be revived in the U.N. today. So that fact that the U.N. is incredibly, overwhelmingly, automatically hostile to Israel doesn't resonate profoundly with us because we know who's in that family, and therefore the relationship with the United States is to us absolutely critical. And some of us in the middle ground in Israel worry that some of the things that Israel does sometimes make it too easy for people to blame Israel for problems that are largely not of our making.

But we're very aware of all of these complexities. I think we feel that the events of the last two, three years have re-cemented the notion that Israel is, you know, uniquely dependable as an ally for the United States in a completely unpredictable part of the world. We just had elections in Israel and it is completely taken for granted, as it should

be, that these elections were held in an incredibly comfortable and safe atmosphere. Nothing bad happened at all, no nefarious behavior. There was one Druze village where the far-right Power for Israel party got 109 votes, which seemed somewhat implausible, so the judge who ran the elections committee actually went to the police. It turned out a typing error had given 107 too many votes.

[laughter]

So the far-right Power for Israel party, they actually got two, which in itself actually was quite interesting. But, again, no violence. One in four or five Israelis are Arabs. Most people don't know that. They voted. They voted in lower numbers than we would have liked them to vote, but they got 11 seats out of 120 seats in the parliament for really, essentially Arab parties. And I think some of that we feel resonates to our advantage and helps understand why this -- explain why this American-Israeli relationship is so strong and looks to be robust.

I just want to add two minor nuances to a couple of things that were said. I'm not sure that you can say as blatantly as you did, Natan, that the right is the dominant group in Israel. The elections that we just had in Israel are really interesting and people are asking for predictions about what's going to happen. I'm still trying to understand what did happen last week. Israel did not move to the right in these elections. The right in Israel became more hard-lined, but it lost ground. If you look at the right-wing parties, they held 49 seats in the last parliament and they're going to have 43 in this one, by my arithmetic. Could be wrong, but that's my understanding of the arithmetic. The center rose in Israel. The center is a little more hard-lined, I suppose, than the center used to be, but it's much more nuanced and complicated than it would be helpful to be able to describe it as. You know, it's complicated, as so much is in Israel.

And the last sort of nuanced clarification: I don't think Israelis are happy with the status quo on the Palestinian issue. We're kind of sorry, dismayed, bleak about the status quo. We don't think it's a good thing, we don't think that time is on our side, we don't think demographics are on our side, but we have Hamas and we have Abbas who wants to reconcile with Hamas. And we're, as I said, a bit conflicted about Abbas. I don't think Israelis feel that

the medium term is comfortable. I don't think they feel that they can ignore the Palestinian issue. It wasn't a big issue in these elections simply because we're so bleak about the current situation, but I don't think we're happy about that.

Guy Raz:
Natan Sachs, presumably you want to respond to that, but I'd like you to sort of address this idea that David raised about the idea of being misunderstood, which has long been a curse or a part of the Israeli character, however you want to describe it. Is there -- do you find that there is a considerable amount of self-reflection on this idea in Israel that maybe they aren't entirely misunderstood? Maybe there are critics who have it right.

Natan Sachs:
I think it's a bit of both. Israelis definitely feel misunderstood, and there's a perception that if people only understood where Israelis live they would view the situation very differently. And even in this campaign, there were criticisms of Netanyahu for the increasing isolation of Israel in the last few years. Tzipi Livni, the former foreign minister, made quite a bit of ads about that, about being quite so isolated. This was not the case even just four years ago, when Israeli policy was still controversial in many respects. Kasselid and Gaza was extremely controversial, of course, abroad, but nonetheless Israel enjoyed much more international support in many fora. So there's a lot of criticism on Netanyahu on that.

I agree with David completely that the right did not overwhelm these elections by any means. In fact, there's very little change. It's true about the right, and if you look at the right plus religious, they moved down from 63 to 61 or 64 to -- actually an enormous amount of stability in the Israeli system. That's one of the most surprising elements in several election rounds.

But my comment is actually not about these elections. For -- since basically 2000, we've had a shift in Israeli paradigm. As David said, the Israeli mindset has moved quite to the left in the sense of the need for partition. The understanding of the basic demographic realities mean that if Israel wants to be democratic and Jewish, it cannot control the whole land of Israel [unintelligible] -- but at the same time, the skepticism of the right and the very

hawkish approach of the center-right has become prevalent. So today in this election, it is true the right-wing barely won, but the main benefactor was the center, Yair Lapid, and Yair Lapid's party includes people from both right and left, very real people who are securely on the right and people who are securely on the left. And their basic approach is also very consistent with mainstream Israeli hawkishness today, which is not right-wing in the classic sense of whole land of Israel, but is very right-wing in the sense of a very skeptical -- reasonably skeptical approach to the region and a belief that any alternative to the status quo, as dismaying as it is, will be far worse.

So, in fact, if you hear Israelis speak today, they don't quaver so much about the solution, they argue against the notion of solutionism, as some people call it. Moshe Allon, the Vice Prime Minister and perhaps next Defense Minister, we don't know, he has spoken publicly, for example, about solutionism is the problem. You think you can solve this. You pragmatic Americans, you think you can solve every problem in the world. That's why there is no solution to this problem. It is much, much too deep to solve, and therefore we need to manage it. For that we need to be extremely strong, we need to be tough, we need to be very, very skeptical, have no illusions. These are the kinds of words that people use, and they were using it on the center, as well.

In some sense that's right-wing. Not in the "whole land of Israel, we need settle Hebron, et cetera," but in the "don't believe the PLO, don't believe the Arabs, don't believe the amorphous enemy," which is not unreasonable.

Guy Raz:
Ambassador Sam Lewis, I want to get your perspective on this question: do you believe that we are either entering or we're inside a new paradigm where Israeli-Palestinian-Arab peace may, for the near and medium term, no longer be a central factor in U.S. foreign policy objectives?

Samuel Lewis:
I think it's time we got to that question, actually, because if you look around the world and you look around the Middle East writ large, if you go as far as India, it's really hard to make a strong argument that this administration should put Arab-Palestinian-Israeli potential negotiating strategy very high on its agenda.

It’s a problem which doesn’t -- it pales at the moment in the perspective when we look at a region where Syria is dying on our doorstep -- on their doorstep -- where Lebanon is as vulnerable to what’s going on in Syria as it’s ever been to anybody, where the Jordanian king is shaky, came through an election which was mildly for him and still is shaky, where Egypt every day looks worse, and Saudi Arabia and the Gulf not much better.

So it’s really hard to argue if you’re sitting in the Oval Office and going, “Mr. President, we really ought to put a lot of chips on launching a big, new Palestinian initiative,” just as soon as Kerry is going out there and taking their temperature and figuring out how -- you know, exactly how to launch it. I couldn’t give him that advice, and I have devoted the last 30 years of my life to worrying about this problem and working on it and thinking about it and apologizing for it and explaining it.

But I think the paradigm shift is not very well understood by a lot of us who do spend most of our time worrying about this problem. We’re really preoccupied with a problem that’s still unsettled that’s huge for Israel, and I guess it’s huge for us if it’s huge for Israel, because Israel is a genuine, unique national interest of the United States in all sorts of ways that Aaron has made some reference to. But I think that managing the problem of Palestinian-Israeli negotiating future is the way to describe what we’re going to have to be doing, rather than launching in the near future an effort to solve it.

Guy Raz:
Aaron Miller, what -- I mean, if you were advising Secretary of State, would you come to the same conclusion as Sam Lewis and say, “Well, maybe we shouldn’t get so involved in this”?

Aaron Miller:
I’m not in the -- for many years I lived, and Sam knows this, in the -- I wouldn’t call it the world of illusions, but they were the world of -- perhaps the world of well-intentioned illusions. When much was possible, when the fix-it mentality that drives -- that makes us such an extraordinary people, and I would never want to abandon it, but I can’t have those same illusions today. On the other hand, abandoning hope is simply not --

Samuel Lewis:
That’s right.

Aaron Miller:
-- conscionable. I have -- you know, I have a 32- and a 30-year-old. What am I going to tell them? Never? On a problem that I devoted the better part of my professional life to and what remains my credibility to? I’m going to tell them that it cannot happen? But, you know, trying and failing, the notion -- as Bill Clinton said to us in the second briefing in Camp David, trying and failing is better than not trying at all. I understand that logic. I really do. It’s uniquely American. I hope we never abandon it. But it is not and cannot be a substitute for the foreign policy of the most consequential nation on Earth. Failure costs. So, in my judgment, the one line is the two-state solution right now is simply too complicated to implement, but it is simply too important to abandon. And it is in that space where this administration over the next -- well, in the next four years, as legacy competes with lame-duckery, which will be the two central, driving forces, which are already underway, this President will have to find a way to craft some strategy. And I would very much agree, and I’d love to hear Natan and David on this subject. What will, in fact, the traffic bear? Can you adopt a strategy that will preserve in a credible way the prospects of the least-bad outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is two states for two people living in peace and security?

Samuel Lewis:
Let me add one codicil. For years, many of us, at periods when the process was lagging or was failing, would make the argument that it's important to keep a peace negotiating process in being, because if you drop it, if you say, “It can’t go, so let’s do something else,” that then leaves nobody with an excuse not to turn to violence. Having even a thin hope of progress on the front makes it easier for the Palestinians in particular not to go back to intifadas, and we have to keep that general idea in mind because it's really the argument for holding on hope even when you don’t have much hope.

Guy Raz:
David Horowitz?

David Horowitz:

Well, I just want to energetically embrace the thrust of what you're saying. I'm raising my family in Israel. I don't think I could do that as a parent if I thought the future was unremittingly bleak and that that's all we have to look forward to. They all hate us, they all want to kill us. There's nothing we can do about it. We have to protect ourselves as best as we can until a climate is there in which we can reach longstanding agreements, but we also have to work to create that climate.

Where I disagree, and where I think Israel, broadly speaking, disagrees with so much of the world is they seem to think we can fix this because we're really strong. Well, we can't. We have to have a Palestinian partner who is credible, who's going to be around for a long time. If it's not him, then it's his successor, not somebody who's going to be swept away, and who is willing to meet us on terms that allow us to continue to flourish as a Jewish, democratic state. But we also have to -- we have to work to create that climate, and that means -- I mean, you know, you guys know this much more intimately than I do. When Arafat was at Camp David and he said to Clinton, you know, "If I sign the deal now, the next time you see me will be at my funeral." I mean, that was a very valid assessment, but he created that situation. He did not tell his people, "Guys, the Jews have historical legitimacy, too, and we're going to have to compromise with them." The terrible failure of Abbas is I don't think he thinks that, but he has not energetically countered that fourth narrative that Arafat bequeathed to this people, and therefore there needs to be top-down effort on the Palestinian leadership, with whatever leverage the United States and others can muster, to tell them to explain to their people the imperative for compromise. There needs to be bottom-up interaction, grassroots interaction. There's very little banal interaction between Israelis and Palestinians anymore because there's a great big security barrier that we had to build because they were killing us, because we were the subject of a strategic onslaught of suicide bombings. But that means people don't interact. My second son is a black belt in karate. He does karate with Muslims and Christians and he used to do it with Palestinian kids. Those kids have a slightly different perspective. You have to expand any effort like that, that can build up from the bottom up a different kind of climate. You have to work top-down. You must not abandon the process. Yes, it's a really bad situation at the moment, but not even as cynical as saying,

“We have to keep the process alive somehow.” You have to do more than that. We have to begin to create a climate in which we will be able to make progress.

Guy Raz:
But why do you have to do that first? I mean, it seems like it’s an impossible goal. I mean, here you have Mahmoud Abbas and Salam Fayyad. I mean, it's harder to find a more moderate team of leaders in the Arab world. I mean, how high can you put your expectations?

David Horowitz:
Well, you know, Fayyad doesn’t have any public following, however moderate he may be. And Abbas -- you know, I’ve given you my picture of Abbas. It’s -- you know, he’s -- if he’s the ideal Palestinian leader, well, then you begin to understand why things are not as plain-sailing as you would wish them to be. It’s more complicated.

I just want to say one other little thing about -- and we’re speaking here as the -- as Israel is forming its government, and one of the big -- you know, the great success of the last elections was Yair Lapid’s Yesh Atid party, which came from nowhere and won 19 seats somewhere in the center. His key, security-credible guy is Yaakov Perry. Yaakov Perry is another former head of the Shin Bet. Israel has two movies nominated for the best documentary Oscar. One of them is called “The Gatekeepers.”

Guy Raz:
Yeah.

David Horowitz:
Yaakov Perry is one of the six heads of the Shin Bet who was interviewed in that movie. That’s why I encourage you all to go and see it. You should listen to what Perry has to say, this man who ran the service that protects Israelis, and he says the most compelling, extraordinary line, when he says, you know, “After years of doing this and dealing with people who you know want to kill you,” he says, “even though you know how terrible some of these people are, after years of dealing with this,” he says, “you become a bit of a leftist.” That’s what he says. It’s the most extraordinary moment in the movie. And therefore I’m not sure what Yair Lapid’s going to stand for in this government, and I’m not sure if he’s going to be

the foreign minister. But I think, you know, there are some interesting processes that are still playing out --

Samuel Lewis:
-- Yeah.

David Horowitz:
-- post-election.

Guy Raz:
Before we open it up to questions, I want to go down the row here. I'll start with you, Natan Sachs. For at least the past two decades we have been warned at least every two weeks that time is running out, that the window of opportunity is closing, that this is the last opportunity. I don't know how many times I reported that when I was covering the conflict for CNN, that this is now the last opportunity, we're being told. How much time is left, in your view?

Natan Sachs:
I think the bad news is that, on what we conceived of before as the solution, it may be over already. The Oslo Process, in some sense, is dead, but it left -- it bequeathed us with two things. One is a fundamental understanding of what the contours might be with a final status agreement. And I think this is more or less known, something along Olmert or Barack or Clinton, and it also left us with this deep skepticism, and that also entails something about the security aspects of just that kind of deal, and it also makes it very unlikely right now to think of Israel after the Gaza experience or the Golan -- the idea of the Golan with Syria right now. If we think of Israel, for example, withdrawing from the Jordan Valley with Jordan teetering, it seems very unlikely at the moment. But it also means -- but I also tend to think in general that stating the end of some solution in international relations is -- has some hubris to it. We don't know what things will happen, and even in the next four years a lot can change. The region can change dramatically. Something with Iran may come to a head in the next year diplomatically or otherwise. Syria we all hope will calm down, Egypt could change quite a bit in many different directions and more than once, and Israeli politics, too. We just had elections, but Israeli elections are often called before four years are through, and this government, too, will -- whichever coalition is

formed -- will have internal contradictions that may come to bear. They may not. But certainly on the Palestinian issue, one of the likely coalitions will have internal contradictions on the Palestinian question, and if Secretary Kerry is forceful in his moves, that may also come to bear. So, in -- the short answer is in the near future -- I think it's already close, to a certain degree. Abbas is too weak already, the Palestinians are divided, and Israel is not in the right position for it, anyway. But in the longer term, the end of the anything in these circumstances seems just unwise to me.

Guy Raz:
Aaron Miller, how much time left?

Aaron Miller:
I can't answer that question. My mother, who is an extraordinary human being, once described to me her view of life. It wasn't a glass half empty and it wasn't a glass half full, it was a glass that fills up every single day either with setbacks and tragedies or opportunities and hope. The only thing that mattered in life, according to my mom, was how you responded to the issue of the filling glass. So I -- my own analysis has been annoyingly negative, but I will not abandon the one critically important ingredient that is the necessary prerequisite of life, and that is hope. Facts on the ground are bleak. The real issue is facts up here, and can those facts and perceptions be changed. If they can, then I think there's still a fair amount of running room left for a two-state solution.

Guy Raz:
Ambassador Lewis? Sam Lewis?

Samuel Lewis:
I don't think that time is running out. I think the Oslo Process, as originally conceived, is past its sell-by date, but left behind the kind of legacy that you suggested earlier. What I do think is the missing factor in the readiness is in the nature of leadership. I think -- I don't think we see the pair of leaders or the trio of leaders that are going to make a deal in the very near future for a whole variety of reasons. I don't think anybody can make a deal about Palestinian-Israeli relations, even if you had perfect leadership, so long as the region itself is in such turmoil, because Israel isn't

-- is a small country in a big place, and all the Israeli fears cannot be overlooked. They're real fears. Until Iran, for example, as an issue for the region, for us, and for Israel, is clarified for better or for worse, it's hard for me to see very much headway on the Palestinian problem. I think that Iran right now is a huge cloud over all of this discussion that we're really not talking about, and maybe it's a cloud that by the end of this year, this calendar year, will be dissipated either in a storm or in a passing of the front. I don't think we have to assume this year is the last year forever to make peace between Palestinians and Israelis, and it probably will not necessarily look exactly like Clinton's parameters. But there are formulas that both sides can live with, but the elements of the decision-making process aren't there.

Guy Raz:
Now we want to get to questions in a moment, but, before that, Dave Horowitz, briefly. Time running out.

David Horowitz:
Yeah. Well, just -- I would just add -- I mean, picking up from what Sam said, you know, don't leave out of the equation the rise of Islamic extremism. You know, things are not as they were the last time that America managed to get the parties to the table. Hamas has taken over Gaza, Iran is closing in on the bomb, Hezbollah is very dominant, and Lebanon and Syria is -- you know, I don't know what's going to come after Assad, but you can fairly safely bet that it will be worse. You know, worse for Israel and probably worse for the region as a whole. So, you know, the parameters -- it's been hard in the past, and I think the additional rise of Islamic extremism makes things much more difficult, it makes the imperative to try and make progress, you know, that much urgent, but our situation becomes progressively more complicated. You know, I think time is working against us, and -- but, you know, as I said before, the situation at the moment is very, very unpromising. We cannot give up on it.

Guy Raz:
Great. Panelists, stand by. At this time I'd like to turn the questions over to the audience. We've got microphones, so please wait until you are in front of a microphone.

Samuel Lewis:

If Dan Preacher [spelled phonetically] were here he'd be very upset by this conversation.

Guy Raz:
And we will go ahead and begin. Where are the microphones? Okay, I see. Let's go ahead and begin with the gentleman in the back, all the way in the back. Yes, you sir. Yes, please, and can we just -- if you wouldn't mind, just wait for the microphone to get to you.

Male Speaker:
Yes, Ted Kitoo [spelled phonetically], former U.S. diplomat. This is an extraordinary panel, tremendous amount of knowledge and wisdom. Very much appreciated. But the one thing -- there's always a "but" after you compliment. The one thing that surprised me a bit, other than for Ambassador Lewis in the beginning talking about sort of the obligation of the junior partner to accommodate him or herself a bit more to the senior partner in the alliance, I perceive a certain equivalence when talking about Netanyahu and Barack Obama in terms of fault and blame and all of that, and yet here's a Israeli prime minister heading the most right-wing government in Israel's history who announces a major settlement project during the so-called settlement freeze when Biden's just about to land in Israel for Jerusalem. I know Jerusalem wasn't included. He lectures the President of the United States in the Oval Office as I've never seen even an adversary, let alone an ally, lecture the President in front of the cameras. He all but campaigns for the Republican opponent of the President and then he blindsides the Administration with the announcement on E1 after the U.N. vote and after we gave Israel our full support, both then and on the settlements. So I don't quite see -- if the perception is there's an equivalence, I don't see it, and if you think there is I'd like to know why.

Guy Raz:
Great question. Let's start with you, Sam Lewis.

Samuel Lewis:
Well, I was being graceful, I hope, in my comments because I rather agree with you, Ted. I don't think it's equivalent at all, but I do understand Obama made some mistakes and didn't handle Bibi as smoothly as he might have. And it was a mistake going at an issue that he couldn't solve, and people should have told him, "You can't

win on settlements unless you've got a deal in hand." The only way you can ever get a settlements freeze, and I've had some experience with this, is if you have a deal that is overwhelmingly favorable and only settlements remains as the piece to put into the deal -- can you solve it. He didn't get that advice, or if he did, he didn't listen, so he made some tactical mistakes. But, you know, Bibi's approach toward the United States I did describe a bit. I think he thinks he knows a lot more about it than Obama does and he used all of his chips at the AIPAC conference, at the Congress. Jane's [spelled phonetically] friends up at the Congress just fell all in line and cheered, and, you know, it was insulting. I felt quite offended as a former American official and an American who happened to have supported Obama, also. But I think he's handled it fairly gracefully ever since his initial missteps. The trouble is, with Israelis you're always viewed as either a friend or an enemy. My experience is if they think you're really a friend, you can criticize the hell out of them. You can talk pretty rough to them and they won't -- you know, they'll give it back to you. But unless you start having made the friend effective, psychological connection, you are put over in the other camp and anything you do is likely to backfire, and that's what happened with Obama.

Guy Raz:
I'd love to hear your take on this, Natan.

Natan Sachs:
Fundamentally, I agree. I wrote a while ago about how President Obama might be more like Bill Clinton in trying to capture Israeli minds -- or hearts and minds, really, I should say, and using that as leverage on Netanyahu, because, after all, Netanyahu has bosses and those are the citizens. Not that Obama should intervene in the elections, but, rather, he should capture the Israeli hearts first and then move on other things. It may be too late for that, but the interesting -- one of the interesting things for him is I got a lot of criticism, a lot of mail, and the fundamental thing that people, to my mind, misunderstood was that they thought I think Israel deserves it, that there's an equivalence, that Obama owes it to the average Israeli, this small country in the Middle East, to pay attention to them like Clinton did. And I don't think that's the case, not at all. In fact, I don't think Israelis necessarily think it's the case. I do think it may be wise or it would have been wise, especially early

on. Of course, first impressions are always first -- or you cannot have them twice. And, to a certain degree, we are where we are, but the President is not as unfavorably viewed as he was in the beginning, and there is a lot of room to grow.

I think, also, Netanyahu -- some of the perception of what he did may be overblown. I'm not a big fan, but certainly his intervention in the elections -- to his mind he didn't. He's probably wrong, but to his mind he didn't. When the Republican candidate visited Israel, you know, the perception in Israel and Jerusalem was what could they do? Here comes the presidential candidate. They have to host him. They hosted President Obama when he was a Senator, as well. There were many missteps along the way, certainly the lecture in the White House and many other things. But I think one of the interesting things is that there's a different perception even of the facts. Israelis don't view it quite the way that Americans do. The lecture in the White House, for example, I often speak to Israelis about this point and say that this is a point you hear in Washington all the time, especially from Democrats. Israelis don't even remember that. It's like, "Yes, he was being gruff on him," but they don't remember that incident at all.

Guy Raz:
Dave Horowitz?

David Horowitz:
Yeah. Well, since the two previous speakers assented with the thrust of the question, I owe it to you to give you what I suspect Netanyahu would say if he or somebody representing him, which I stress, you know, I'm not, would say. First of all, to pick up on what you said, I think if Israelis think you get it, then we can argue. And, you know, if we think that --

Samuel Lewis:
Yeah.

David Horowitz:
-- fundamentally you understand what's going on, then let's go. You know, fine, let's get into the debate. That would be great. But I think on the specifics of what you said -- so here's this President who goes to Cairo but doesn't come to Jerusalem and who opposes all settlement with no nuance,

which is incredibly counterproductive. You know, take a stronger position on isolated settlements. How much more productive would that be and introduce nuance into your criticism of settlements.

On the Biden issue, some low-level Jerusalem planning committee approves a building that, to the best of my knowledge, still hasn't been built. The Vice President appreciates that that was, you know, really bad timing and Israel was really apologetic. And the President revives the row and has the Secretary of State phone the Prime Minister and say, you know, "Don't you have -- aren't you invested in this relationship?" My goodness, who inflated that dispute?

The lecture in the Oval Office. Wait a minute, you've told us we need to make peace on the basis of the '67 lines with some adjustments, that's our major concession. Have you demanded of the Palestinians publicly and you need to give up on this ridiculous demand for a, quote-unquote, "right of return" that destroys Israel as a Jewish state. Where was the equivalence in that blueprint that you issued, Mr. President?

On Romney, you know, Obama when he came to Israel as a candidate, every politician across the spectrum wanted to be photographed with him. The Shas party, with its 90-something-year-old spiritual leader, adopted Obama's campaign slogan and plastered it on buses. You know, "Yes we can. Vote Shas."

[laughter]

He was a rock star. You know, we couldn't have given him nicer treatment when he came. And Romney did -- you know, the treatment was pretty similar and the -- you know, the blindsiding on E1, well, Netanyahu would argue the Palestinians have just told the world, "Hey, we've got a state." We need to do something that says we're not taking that lying down. Now, I want to stress, I'm not endorsing those counterarguments, but those would be some of the points that I suspect would be made if you came at Netanyahu with those kinds of arguments.

Guy Raz:
Thank you. Question in the back.

Female Speaker:
Hi. You talked about some of the existential issues in the region, including religious fundamentalism versus secularism. And one could argue that a lot of the actions Israel's taken under Netanyahu have actually strengthened elements in a more fundamentalist area, particularly in Gaza, for instance, showing that the violence produced results, had Israelis cowering in their homes. There's also a lot written that the government in Gaza looked much stronger after the two recent incursions in Gaza. And you mentioned Salam Fayyad, who perhaps has no power but is universally respected and has worked to the detriment of his own health, and the current situation of withholding tax revenues. So even if Abbas doesn't have a lot of power, you could argue that we should be strengthening more moderate elements, strengthening and reinforcing the security advances that have been made and cooperations, and yet it seems, in a way -- and there's some criticism that Netanyahu's world view is benefitting from the apparent primacy of the Gaza government as opposed to the more moderate elements.

Guy Raza:
David?

David Horowitz:
You know --

Female Speaker:
[inaudible]

David Horowitz:
-- I think there's some -- I think you make some good points. I would remind us all that the pullout from Gaza in 2005 was conducted by Sharon, was opposed, although too late to stop it by Netanyahu. The timing of his opposition was quite interesting. I think it's relevant in terms of reminding ourselves about settlements as the ostensible core problem. You know, Israel dismantled the entire settlement enterprise in Gaza and has shown a willingness diplomatically, certainly at certain points, to dismantle the majority of the settlements in the West Bank. I'm not sure that this government, the last government, or the incoming government would be prepared to do that.

But I -- you know, I think there's a very good point to be made that pulling out of Gaza without an agreement, and

that's, you know, more dramatic than the instance that you cited, was the step that vindicated terrorism and violence and is, I think, quite widely perceived in Israel as a misstep. I think Israelis are very pleased that we're not in Gaza. We feel that we empowered the extremists, that we weakened relative moderates, that this was seized upon as proof that the Israelis respond, you know, only to terrorism and to violence. That pre-dates the Netanyahu government. That's the Sharon government, and I think interestingly, you know, a fairly left-wing view. It may be emblemized best by Yossi Beilin, that if you're going to leave Gaza, do it by agreement with Mahmoud Abbas, which was really, you know, not -- Sharon was -- had become the kind of centrist Prime Minister, and that Beilin counterargument was pretty marginal. In retrospect, I think a lot of Israelis would say that was the biggest misstep on the Gaza front. "Why pull out without an agreement? You've weakened Abbas, you've strengthened Hamas," and everything that's happened since then would seem to confirm that.

Guy Raza:
Aaron Miller, answer that question. Have Netanyahu's actions empowered extremists?

Aaron Miller:
I think they've certainly helped do that, yeah, and I think it touches on a broader point, which Sam raised, which is the issue of leadership. And every time there's been a breakthrough in this conflict, and there've only been three over the course of 50 years, you had leaders who were masters of their political constituencies, not prisoners of them. The fact is, on the Israeli and Palestinian side, in this region generally there is a leadership vacuum of historic proportion and it's only going to get worse as -- on the Arab side, as centralization of faux-Arab republics -- the bells haven't tolled for the kings yet, maybe they will, maybe they won't, but as the central states in Syria, in Iraq, in Palestine, in Lebanon become even more highly decentralized.

On the Israeli side you have a leadership crisis. You have two surviving founders. One is in a coma and one is quite the opposite. He is the -- an embodiment of vitality at 86, but that's it. Perez and Sharon. Then you have the younger generation. And in Israel, on the peacemaking side it's not a story of the center-left, it's a story of

transformed hawks. Men of the right, including Rabin, the breaker of bones in the First Intifada, who were transformed either by the actions of others or by their own sense of responsibility and strategy.

And on the Palestinian side you have -- I've said this many times, you have right now a -- basically a Noah's Ark; you have two of everything. Two polities, two constitutions, two visions of what constitute where Palestine is and what kind of state it should be. You cannot, in this environment, make the kinds of choices and decisions that are required without leaders. It is only leadership that warrants the kinds of risks that need to be taken, and Sadat and Rabin paid with their lives for those risks. So it's a matter of degree. Netanyahu is who he is. He is not going to have a transformative moment. I have argued that Bibi is at war with Netanyahu, that a tough-talking, Likud politician whose father, whose mother, brother, whose wife, whose brother-in-law is much tougher than he is, is at war with Netanyahu, a man who has now served as Prime Minister longer than any other Israeli Prime Minister with the exception of David Ben-Gurion, and wants to be a great Prime Minister. But when Bibi gets together with Netanyahu it's always Bibi who wins out and prevails, and I think that should tell you something. So, you need leaders, and same thing for [unintelligible].

Guy Raz:
We have time for one more question. I'm sorry about that. Right here in the front row.

Female Speaker:
My name is Emma Modalili [spelled phonetically]. I'm with the Wilson Center. My question is about Syria. I would like somebody to talk about how Israel -- how does Israel -- or the new Israeli government would lead -- would deal with the Syrian situation? Do you think it's better for Israel to have a weak Syria, a Syria that's at civil war, as some people in the opposition are saying? Or you prefer a democratic Syria, a new Syria, or a Syria that's a better neighbor? Thank you.

Guy Raz:
Can we start with Natan Sachs?

Natan Sachs:

I think the Israeli position is not necessarily that they want a weak Syria. In fact, they were pleased with a weak Assad, in a sense; a very stable but not militarily-threatening one. The basic Israeli posture on Syria right now is deep concern, and just this morning there were reports of an Israeli strike on a convoy on the Lebanese side of the border of probably anti-aircraft missiles. And this is the kind of concern that the Israelis and the Israeli intelligence is putting a lot of effort into following. Of course, chemical weapons in particular, but also other kind of armaments that might reach Hezbollah if the Assad regime disintegrates and Hezbollah, with some presence in Syria, can pull things out.

So the Israelis are deeply concerned. They're also deeply concerned of what would happen after Assad. I think David spoke about this earlier, on who would rise. If it was similar to the trends, it could be deeply disconcerting for Israel. Civil wars or disintegration might be good in your enemy, but it is very bad in an enemy where there are also chemical weapons, because lack of authority over them is Israel's nightmare, much more than conventional war with a central Damascus government.

Guy Raz:
David Horowitz?

David Horowitz:
Just briefly. I want to stress to you: Israel, it's the only democracy in the Middle East. We don't rejoice in that title. We would love to be joined by lots of other genuine Middle East democracies. We were wary, however. Much more ambivalent than the United States was, I think, about this whole Arab Spring process. We feared that the best organized oppositions in these countries were the Muslim Brotherhood and their variants, and we feared that what would happen was that those powers would rise, and to our -- you know, to our sorrow, that seems to be some of the process that's unfolding.

But we would love Syria to turn into a -- you know, we'd love Egypt to -- you know, to find a path forward that's, you know, not looking likely at the moment. The other thing to say about Syria is, fundamentally, you know, we think it's terrible that this man is killing his own people. You know, we assume that what happens afterwards will probably be bad for us, but this is terrible. In this

day and age, in 2013, where we can all see what's happening, and it's -- you know, we've seen it on Youtube and Twitter. There's no -- it's not 30 years ago when his father bombed, you know, 10, 20,000 people and people only found out about it afterwards. We're seeing this live, and, like all people who value life, I imagine, we in Israel think that this is appalling and that this man has to be stopped and that the situation is untenable. How that plays out for Israel afterwards? Yeah, we assume that we'll all -- it won't get any better, but this is terrible and he ought to go. That's the gut Israeli reaction.

Guy Raz:
We have just a few moments left, and, unfortunately, no time for further questions, but let me ask our panelist for -- to give us your takeaway. Where is the U.S.-Israeli relationship going? First to you, Natan Sachs.

Natan Sachs:
The headline is continuity. Netanyahu won these elections. We seem to ignore this fact. He's the Prime Minister and he won and he's very experienced. But there are changes. There are deep changes in Israel, and I think the main thing that we're forgetting because things seem bleak is just how much is expected to change just in the next two or three years. So many things are volatile; Iran, Syria, Egypt, as I mentioned, and Israeli politics, too. So we're probably going to see a lot of continuation of sort of the frosty relation at the top, the close cooperation everywhere below the very top, but also I would not be surprised if there would be dramatic change within Obama's second term on the Israeli front and on many other fronts, as well. It could get worse, but there's a silver lining: it could also get somewhat better in some respects.

Guy Raz:
Aaron Miller, your takeaway? Where does it go?

Aaron Miller:
My own view is very clear. It's dysfunctional, but I think if -- as an American, we have a special relationship with Israel. We don not have an exclusive relationship. Our interests don't always coincide. There are going to be differences. They ought to be aired openly and honestly. If this administration wants to deal with Iran and preserve the option -- avoid war with Iran and preserve the option of peace with the Palestinians, Netanyahu and Obama will

have to figure out a way to work this through, because if they don't then the interests of both countries are going to be profoundly affected, because neither of these things are going to come out the right way.

Guy Raz:
Would you put money on it?

Aaron Miller:
I believe that the -- annoyingly negative as I am, I believe that the -- and I mentioned this to David earlier. I think that the relationship between the President and the Prime Minister, in the large part because of what Sam has identified as the Kerry factor, he -- Kerry cares about this. He does want to do something serious. He can't because he's got the most withholding, controlling foreign policy President since Richard Nixon in charge. But the relationship with Bibi I think will be extremely important to test whether or not something is possible, and Kerry's going to want to test it.

Guy Raz:
Sam Lewis, as we look ahead to the next four years, where is the relationship going and where is the peace process headed?

Samuel Lewis:
I think I agree with the short-term estimate of Aaron's. I think in the longer term, the U.S. and Israel are going to remain in a Catholic marriage, as I've said many times. There's no divorce, and it's going to be many years before the American Christian supporters of Israel turn against them, largely, I think, because the Arab world is going to be such a mess and the Muslims will continue to be a very unattractive neighbor for Israel. And that is in Israel's interests. As far as the daily workings in the next four years, it's very hard to predict. I don't think we're going to be divided from Israel as much as we're going to be on the same side.

Guy Raz:
David Horowitz?

David Horowitz:
Just briefly. I think we concentrated a lot on the Palestinian issue and I think the Iran issue is going to be huge, and, depending on how the relationship grapples with

that, that's going to be the key issue. As far as we're concerned in Israel, Iran cannot achieve a nuclear weapons capability. It changes everything in our region. It sets off a nuclear arms race in the Middle East. It economically devastates Israel, psychologically devastates Israel. We don't know that they wouldn't use a bomb if they got one, but even if they weren't going to use the bomb it's an untenable reality for us. And the way that that is handled, I think, is crucial.

And I would just stress that, unlike in the United States, there is no two-term limit on our prime ministers. This is actually the third Netanyahu term that's beginning now, and, you know, like Thatcher, I assume he thinks he can go on and on and on. You know, you spoke about a leadership -- deep vacuum. There was no credible alternative Prime Minister running in these elections. That's an amazing thing.

Samuel Lewis:
Yeah.

David Horowitz:
Netanyahu is not particularly popular, and yet the electorate didn't see anybody else remotely credible. The Labor Party gave up on the Palestinian issue, had a leader that nobody took seriously. The Labor Party, the party of Ben-Gurion and Rabin, had a leader that Israeli's didn't consider as a credible Prime Ministerial alternative.

And the last thing that I would say, and it's a nice place for me to end in this room, the less that the Israeli-American relationship is a partisan issue in the United States the better, I think, for both sides, certainly the better for Israel. We don't want to be on that field.

Samuel Lewis:
Correct.

David Horowitz.
We don't want to be tossed around between Democrats and Republicans. We think that the values and the shared interests are much more profound. We were discomforted by the degree to which Israel was a factor in the Presidential election campaign, and we want to encourage and think that both sides benefit from a relationship that is not partisan.

Guy Raz:
My takeaway from this conversation is that if Israel-U.S. relations are at a low point, this is certainly a bad relationship to envy. I want to thank all of our distinguished panelists here today. Natan Sachs from the Brookings Saban Center, Aaron David Miller from the Wilson Center, Ambassador Samuel Lewis, and of course David Horowitz, who came all the way from Israel to be here today, and I think that deserves its own round of applause. Thank you all for joining us here at the Wilson Center for the National Conversation series, in partnership with NPR.

[applause]

[end of transcript]