

America and Israel's Show Must Go On

By [James Gundun](#)

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Credit them this skill – they're good performers. Not great. Great is convincing. But a good performer abides by the cardinal rule of show business. The show must go on whether someone flubs their lines, trips, or passes out, and Israel and America have kept going through it all.

Now will anyone believe their act?

It quickly became clear after Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's disastrous trip to the White House in May that a repeat performance wouldn't occur. Netanyahu canceled his next visit after Israeli commandos raided the Freedom flotilla, justifiably allowing him to address the crisis at home – and conveniently avoid putting America in the position to advocate for Gazans. The script was postponed until Tuesday's meeting with President Barack Obama. Nothing could stop such well-planned choreography.

But with so much time to prepare and many disagreements left unresolved, the full-scale production turned out predictably bland, overindulgent, and fuzzy on details.

"We had a extensive discussion about the prospects for Middle East peace," [said Obama during a joint press conference](#) after their meeting. "I believe that Prime Minister Netanyahu wants peace. I think he's willing to take risks for peace... now more than ever I think is the time for us to seize on that vision. And I think that Prime Minister Netanyahu is prepared to do so."

"We're committed to peace," Netanyahu echoed. "I'm committed to peace. Peace is the best option."

As they plowed through the negative perceptions surrounding their frayed relationship and Israel's strategic liability, Obama and Netanyahu began to step outside the bounds of their countries' alliance. Rather than demonstrate their personal relationship and political policies have improved, they acted as though the last year and a half needed correcting in an hour and a half. So they laid the propaganda on extra thick.

"If you look at every public statement that I've made over the last year and a half," argued Obama, "it has been a constant reaffirmation of the special relationship between the United States and Israel."

The perception that he's anything except pro-Israel stands as one of the Israeli lobby and US Congress' finest achievements, allowing him to dance for the Palestinians while winking at Israel.

Obama added of his very real rocky relationship with Netanyahu, "I've trusted him since the

first time I met him, before I was elected president. The press in Israel and the US like to make a story." Netanyahu promptly declared, "Thank you for reaffirming to me the long-standing US support of Israel."

They smiled, waved, shook hands. No one used the back door.

On one hand this strategy is sound. America is Israel's last dependable friend on Earth after Europe was compromised by the Gaza war and flotilla raid. Obama ironically praised the Quartet for being "very helpful." True, without its opposition America never would have brought the pressure it did bear on Israel to ease Gaza's blockade. Europe is no longer trustworthy and Obama would get nowhere by twisting Netanyahu's arm.

The critical questions remain whether Obama and Netanyahu are merely resetting their relationship or vainly papering over major cracks – and whether this formula gets anywhere with the Palestinians. If not, Obama's good cop routine is no sounder than favoring the Palestinians at Israel's expense. Then the conflict begins to dictate itself on US and Israeli interests, not those of Israel and the Palestinians.

And Palestinians are already beginning to pay the price.

Obama's softness towards Netanyahu will likely produce even greater doubts in the Arab world of their sincerity for "peace." Recent events in Gaza provide the best evidence, just not in Israel's favor. Obama cheered, "We've seen real progress on the ground. I think it's been acknowledged that Israel has moved more quickly and more effectively than many people anticipated." But does he realize that he carelessly swiped at Israel?

A large part of the world does expect less, or outright wrong. Not to disappoint Israel did its utmost to deny and then neuter an investigation into the flotilla raid, and required painstaking pressure to ease the Gaza blockade. The revised list of goods hasn't exactly drawn Obama's high praise either. Having lost Turkey and losing Europe, Israel simply cannot afford to lose America too. There's nothing willing about its "confidence-building measures."

Now, instead of confronting how these issues threaten the peace process, Obama and Netanyahu are playing them down as long as possible out of their own gain. The ultimate goal of their show – coercing the Palestinians into direct negotiations.

"We've seen already proximity talks taking place," Obama touted. "My envoy, George Mitchell, has helped to organize five of them so far. We expect those proximity talks to lead to direct talks, and I believe that the government of Israel is prepared to engage in such direct talks, and I commend the Prime Minister for that."

As if there were any doubts that Israel wants direct talks. It's pushing Obama, not the other way around. Said Netanyahu, "[Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud] Abbas and I need to move to direct talks."

US officials have been leaking stories for weeks that proximity talks are "progressing." [Daniel Shapiro](#), senior director for the Middle East and North Africa on Obama's National Security Council and long-time Israeli lobbyist, claims, "These talks have been really quite substantive." But Abbas, understandably, isn't ready for direct negotiations. Palestinian officials have denied reports of progress since proximity talks began two months ago and

America's most trusted player recently contradicted everything Obama and Netanyahu claimed.

"We have yet to see the kind of progress that would be able to justify the consideration of direct talks," [Palestinian Prime Minister Salam Fayyad warned](#) several days ago. "The issue really is not so much about whether the talks are direct or indirect. The issue is about political progress."

It would be one thing if Obama and Netanyahu meant well, but their calls for direct negotiations have little to do with the Palestinians' well-being. Trapped by their own untenable political positions, US and Israeli officials have incessantly demanded direct negotiations from before the first failed proximity round until Tuesday's meeting. Their drive to push direct negotiations into an unprepared environment is the brightest indication of insincerity. Obama and Netanyahu hope to artificially jump-start negotiations before September into an environment that favors Israel.

They preach words of peace, but these aren't the actions of peace.

As Washington seeks to correct Israel's current international imbalance, the Palestinian's bargaining position is chipping away. Israel already stands firmly opposed to a right of return for refugees. Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas is [reportedly considering a generous compromise](#) in Jerusalem by ceding control of the Old City to Israel – many Arabs might consider this compromise as weakness.

And now settlements are being reduced to the same stub. Israel's 10-month settlement freeze in the West Bank expires in September, driving its insatiable urgency, but settlements weren't mentioned once save for the last reporter's question. Both Obama and Netanyahu dodged the issue let alone the word. All their optimism was made possible because they silenced the elephant.

That's the show.

Netanyahu is under intense pressure from his right-wing coalition at home not to extend the freeze; now the tables have flipped and he needs Abbas to bail him out with direct negotiations. But Palestinians remain adamant that a total settlement freeze is necessary. They would be left out in the cold were Netanyahu to stall, as they expect. Maen Rashid Areikat, the Palestinian envoy to Washington, remarked, "We cannot just engage again in a process that will lead us nowhere."

One is tempted to think negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians would be far ahead of the current pace, if only America exhausted as much energy on the peace process as it does on making that process appear successful. Perhaps Obama's story will lead to a happy ending, but it seems unlikely, based on all participants' behavior, that diplomacy will resolve this paradox before September.

Obama and Netanyahu are betting all their chips on persuading Abbas to agree to direct talks, thus allowing Netanyahu to extend the West Bank freeze without freezing Jerusalem. Yet Abbas has no reason to trust Netanyahu based on their own history. He would rather work with whatever government replaces Likud and Yisrael Beiteinu.

America and Israel also fail to concern themselves with how weak they intend to leave Abbas. They're too worried about his strong alternative. Obama may still get his wish – a

Palestinian state before November 2012 – if he stays soft on Israel. Following through on the Arab League’s pledge, Egyptian Foreign Minister Ahmed Aboul Gheit recently affirmed that Arab leaders will push the UN to unilaterally establish a Palestinian state in the event that indirect negotiations lead nowhere.

“If the proximity talks don’t bring progress by September,” said Gheit, “then the Arab League foreign ministers would agree on the need to act in the Security Council. The state should not be delayed beyond this year. Who should decide? The Quartet is not enough. The Security Council is the venue.”

Having been invited by Netanyahu to tour Israel, Obama will touch down sometime before September for a whirlwind tour to swing support. This will be his last chance, either to pull off a heist or wreck his hopes along Israeli settlement blocs. Meanwhile the show will go on until curtains fall.

But based on its first and second act, Palestinians won’t be applauding at the end.

James Gundun is a political scientist and counterinsurgency analyst based in Washington D.C. Contact him in The Trench, a realist foreign policy blog, at www.hadalzone.blogspot.com.

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