

# Is Obama Really Going to Get Tough with Israel?

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It is late in Obama's term for him to be considering minimal actions against Israel and to expect them to have any real impact on its rogue behavior. ([Pete Souza](#) / [The White House](#))

Since [Benjamin Netanyahu's](#) convincing [re-election victory last week](#), the talk of a [deepening breach](#) between the US and Israel has escalated.

But we should be highly skeptical that the administration of US President [Barack Obama](#) will take any serious steps that benefit Palestinian rights.

The perception of a growing rift has been fed first and foremost by the White House itself. In the wake of Netanyahu's win, Obama's spokesperson slammed the Israeli prime minister's "[divisive rhetoric](#)" for railing that Palestinian citizens of Israel were going out to vote "[in droves](#)."

Obama himself reiterated this criticism in an [interview with The Huffington Post](#).

"We indicated that that kind of rhetoric was contrary to what is the best of Israel's traditions," the president said. "That although Israel was founded based on the historic Jewish homeland and the need to have a Jewish homeland, Israeli democracy has been premised on everybody in the country being treated equally and fairly."

Even in ostensibly criticizing Israel, Obama manages to heap undue praise on it. Of course Israeli "democracy" has nothing to do with equality: it is an ethnocracy founded on [ethnic cleansing and the relentless subjugation of the remaining non-Jewish population](#).

## No Palestinian state

But what has most disturbed the US administration is Netanyahu's avowal during the last days of the election campaign that he would never allow the creation of a Palestinian state on his watch.

"We take him at his word when he said that it wouldn't happen during his prime ministership, and so that's why we've got to evaluate what other options are available to make sure that we don't see a chaotic situation in the region," Obama said.

"We continue to believe that a two-state solution is the only way for the long-term security of Israel if it wants to stay both a Jewish state and democratic," he added.

Asked more specifically what he might do, Obama detailed what he wouldn't do – exact any price in terms of the US military aid without which Israel could not continue to occupy,

colonize and massacre Palestinians with impunity:

“We’re gonna make sure, regardless of disagreements we have on policy that our military and intelligence cooperation to keep the Israeli people safe continues, and that cooperation also helps the American people stay safe,” the president said.

## Trial balloons

While Obama has remained circumspect, his administration has sent up trial balloons through David Ignatius, a *Washington Post* columnist closely allied with the US administration.

Ignatius [reports](#) that the White House is “privately weighing” the following “pressure tactics”:

- Drafting a new UN Security Council resolution outlining the framework for a Palestinian state. Such a resolution might summarize the parameters that emerged during Secretary of State John Kerry’s negotiations with Israelis and Palestinians that collapsed last year.
- Deterring Netanyahu’s plans to expand settlements in the West Bank, perhaps through warnings in a planned report to Congress on loan guarantees to Israel. President George H.W. Bush briefly cut off loan guarantees in 1991 to protest settlements, creating a political uproar but no lasting success in halting settlements.
- Altering current US policy that opposes Palestinian efforts to take complaints against Israel to the International Criminal Court. Similarly, the United States might relax its pressure against European allies that are advocating sanctions against Israel.
- Weighing future vetoes of UN Security Council resolutions condemning Israeli settlements or other activity. In the past, the United States’ use of the veto to support Israeli positions has been all but automatic.

## A UN resolution?

The first of these – a UN resolution – would cause excitement among those who may be impressed by the rare spectacle of a US president allowing the passage of a resolution even mildly critical of Israel.

But any resolution likely to be approved by Obama would have as its first and foremost goal rescuing and legislating the so-called “two-state solution” and Israel’s status as a “Jewish and democratic state.”

I do not oppose a UN resolution in principle, but I oppose one that would – [like the one put forward by the Palestinian Authority last December](#) – undermine fundamental Palestinian rights.

As I wrote at the time of the failed December resolution:

I evaluate any steps related to Palestine through a simple and consistent lens: does this measure take us closer to the fulfillment of Palestinian rights, all Palestinian rights?

These rights are set out most succinctly in the Palestinian call for boycott,

divestment and sanctions (BDS): an end to Israeli occupation of Palestinian land during and since 1967; an end to Israel's institutionalized racism against Palestinians in present-day Israel (the areas on which Israel was established in 1948); and the return of Palestinian refugees to their land and homes.

Obama's commitment to securing a "Jewish and democratic" Israel is wholly incompatible with Palestinian refugee rights and full equality for Palestinian citizens of Israel.

(Also read Joseph Massad's important article from December: "[Recognizing Palestine, BDS and the survival of Israel](#)").

## Too little, too late

With respect to the possible administration steps he outlines, Ignatius claims: "Adoption of any of these measures would open a wide and potentially destabilizing breach between the two allies, and the administration's consideration of them now is probably partly tactical."

In other words, these are mostly empty threats. But more than that all of them are minimal and mild. As noted, there's nothing here about using the billions that the US gives to Israel every year as leverage – the no-strings-attached aid would presumably continue.

In the year 2015, who could possibly be impressed by the possibility of mere "warnings in a planned report to Congress on loan guarantees to Israel?"

The more promising possibility is that Obama could lessen his staunch opposition to Palestinians bringing Israeli war criminals to justice at the [International Criminal Court](#). But again, if Obama were serious, the first step he would take is to halt the supplies of weapons that are used to occupy and murder Palestinians.

We must not forget that at the height of Israel's massacre in Gaza last summer, the Obama administration [opened its weapons stores to the Israeli military](#), resupplying it with bombs and grenades of the kind that were causing [indiscriminate casualties](#) among Palestinian civilians.

No UN resolutions are needed for that. Obama has executive authority to act. Moreover, a real sign of seriousness would be if the Obama administration were to open an investigation into Israel's use of US weapons to commit human rights crimes.

The State Department [has a mandate to do this under the 1976 Arms Export Control Act](#) but has refused to fulfill it.

It is late in Obama's term for him to be considering minimal actions against Israel and to expect them to have any real impact on its rogue behavior.

Obama must know that even if he took all the measures being floated they would generate much political heat and backlash, while doing little to bring about a "two-state solution" on his watch. But that backlash could further jeopardize his chances of getting a potential deal with Iran through Congress. So expect him to do little or nothing.

To be sure, as I and others have argued, Netanyahu's re-election presents an important opportunity for Palestinians as it widens the cracks between Israel and the rest of the world.

But we must keep pushing for all rights for all Palestinians – through [boycott, divestment and sanctions](#) – and not allow this moment to be coopted by efforts to rescue – even if only on paper – the segregationist “two-state solution.”

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