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How Israel threw Barack Obama 'under the bus'

Contrary to Romney's claim, it was Obama who was thrown under the bus by Israel, not vice versa.

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Remember Barack Obama's "pivot to Asia"? Announced during his first term, then reinforced by Hillary Clinton's detailed monograph on the subject one full year before his re-election, the "Pivot to Asia" was seen as Obama's signature second term foreign policy initiative.

The pivot was not simply an acknowledgement of Asia's growing economic power (it accounts for 25 percent of US exports and 35 percent of its imports - and supports 2.4 million jobs). It marked a break with the United States' decade-long engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan - a hapless budget sapping adventure that yielded few benefits. So while Obama would never publicly say so, the message to the Arab world - and Israel - was clear: We have other priorities.

Or maybe not.

Just days before Obama embarked on a high profile trip to Thailand, Myanmar and Cambodia, which was intended to symbolise this "pivot", Israel assassinated Ahmed Jabari, the head of Hamas' military wing. The eight-day conflict that followed not only pushed Obama's three-day

Asia tour off the US' front pages, it sent ripples of exasperation through the administration's foreign policy establishment.

"Here we go again," a senior State Department official told me just 24 hours after Israel's attack. "The Middle East is like quicksand: The more you struggle to get loose, the more you get pulled back in."

The statement is hardly an exaggeration. While Obama toured Thailand's Wat Pho monastery, renowned for its giant reclining Buddha statue, his foreign policy staff was providing him hourly updates of the Gaza fighting - which continued even as the president met with Myanmar's democracy icon, Aung San Suu Kyi.

By the time the president visited Cambodia to attend a summit organised by the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, the strain of focusing on the day-to-day requirements of his tour while handling a worsening Middle East crisis was beginning to take its toll. Obama's irritability was undergirded by the barrage of questions he faced on the Gaza crisis, even as he attempted to refocus the press corps' attention to the importance of his Asia tour.

But that proved nearly impossible. On the day before his arrival in Phnom Penh, Obama spent hours dealing with the crisis, making numerous calls to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and Egyptian President Muhammad Morsi.

Too much of diversion?

Correspondents accompanying the President learned of the phone calls and pressed Obama's staff: Was the Gaza crisis becoming too much of a diversion? Was Asia now "on the back burner"? Ben Rhodes, Obama's deputy national security adviser, issued a testy response: "At the risk of having a double metaphor with a pivot," he said, "We believe that the United States can walk and chew gum at the same time."

Perhaps. But on November 20, and even in the midst of his meetings in Phnom Penh, Obama dispatched Hillary Clinton to the region to help Israel and Egypt bridge the remaining gaps to a ceasefire that would end the conflict. The decision was something of a gamble: If the Secretary of State didn't succeed, Washington might be held accountable for an inevitable uptick in the fighting.

Then too, Obama did not want to signal to either Israel or Egypt that he or Clinton were at their beck and call. The resulting departure of Clinton from Phnom Penh would also have serious and distasteful ramifications for the "Asia pivot" - which soon became obvious.

"Having Clinton fly directly from Asia to the fires in the Middle East reminds Asia that the conflict in Gaza and the Middle East strife in general is like a jealous lover," Ernest Bower, an Asia expert at Washington's Center for Strategic and International Studies noted at the time, "Always calling the US high-level focus away from Asia."

A draft of the ceasefire proposal written by the Egyptians awaited Clinton when she arrived in Jerusalem at 11pm on November 20, where she appeared with Netanyahu at a late night press conference. Clinton ticked all the boxes: "America's support for Israel is rock solid and unwavering," she said, and then condemned the "rocket attacks from terrorist organisations inside Gaza on Israeli cities and towns".

Much of this could have been predicted, but what could not have been predicted was the shift in Clinton's tone, which acknowledged that "our hearts break for the loss of every civilian, Israeli and Palestinian". The words, while buried in her statement, were significant - an acknowledgement of Palestinian suffering.

The shift in tone was not an accident. According to two senior Egyptian officials with knowledge of these events, Morsi had expressed his worries over the one-sided nature of US public statements on the crisis in his telephone exchanges with President Obama, saying that Washington should take "a more balanced approach".

Blaming Hamas for sparking the fighting and labelling them as puppets of Iran were simplistic, inaccurate and only fuelled the conflict. The same message had been communicated to Washington by Turkey's Prime Minister Erdogan who, the day before, had called Israel "a terrorist state".

Appearing with Netanyahu, Clinton reflected these admonitions, going out of her way to praise Morsi for his "personal leadership" - a statement that would have been all but unnecessary had Hosni Mubarak still been in power in Cairo.

The same shift in tone was apparent the next day, when Clinton flew to Cairo to meet with Morsi, after a cosmetic stop in Ramallah to speak with Mahmoud Abbas. Clinton presented the changes Netanyahu wanted in the draft Egyptian ceasefire proposal, adding deliberately ambiguous language on major issues (referring to them as "other matters") that the Secretary of State believed might derail a prospective agreement. After securing the approval of Morsi, who conferred with the Hamas leadership, the ceasefire was in place - and the war was over.

But the recriminations, and the rethinking, aren't. In the days following the agreement, a small but influential host of US national security officials have begun to reflect on the conflict, and have begun to raise tentative political assessments on how it might affect US-Israeli and US-Egyptian relations.

Israel still counts

A senior national security official, for instance, is adamant in defending the Israeli action, but goes on to question the timing of Israel's assassination of Ahmed Jabari. "From Israel's perspective it was absolutely essential that they defend themselves, and we don't deny that," he told me in a wide ranging conversation three days after the signing of the ceasefire, "but the question for us is - why now?"

Other influential voices note the simmering resentment among some White House officials that Obama's signature foreign policy initiative for his second term - the "pivot to Asia" - was given second billing to Israel's war: That, as one said, "the Asia pivot became a Middle East aboutface - a reminder from Israel that all it needs to do to set our overseas agenda is drop a bomb".

Yet another senior official was even more blunt. "Bibi is a manipulative man, and a complete political animal," he noted. "He needed to find out where he stood with Obama, whether we loved Israel as much now as before the President's re-election. And, you know, he can read the numbers as well as anyone."

This theory of Israeli actions is neither far-fetched nor cynical, but rather a reflection of political discussions in Washington. The "numbers" that the official was referring to were available on the morning of November 7 - even as Obama partisans celebrated their candidate's re-election. For Obama not only won the election (and it's no secret that Netanyahu would have preferred a new president - namely, Romney), but that he did so without relying on the Jewish vote.

Romney would have won Florida if he had taken a higher percentage of the Jewish vote, clustered in Broward, Miami-Dade and Palm Beach counties, but even if he had, it wouldn't have mattered. Obama did not need Florida - and its considerable Jewish population - to win the election. The same held true for New York, with its considerable Jewish population.

The fact is - and the numbers show - that if every Jewish voter in New York voted for Romney, Obama would have still carried the state. Finally, exit polling among Jewish voters showed that Obama's support for Israel lagged well behind other bread-and-butter issues: The economy, education, the environment. Concern over Israel came in well behind these issues - a wake-up call for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee that their hold on electoral politics might well be at an end.

Given that reality, an Israeli test of a second Obama term must have been overwhelming. And what better way to test it than to challenge a president's agenda - to show that Israel still counts. Of course, critics of Israel will point out that Obama actually passed the test, issuing the same kinds of statements in support of the Jewish State that he made during his first term. That's all too true.

But even so, a rethinking of the US relationship with Israel, the long slow process that began in Obama's first four years, might well now accelerate. Obama must be seething inside. For the truth is that while he was criticised by Romney for "throwing Israel under the bus", the most recent war - and its timing - proves just the opposite. It was Barack Obama who was thrown under the bus, and it was Binyamin Netanyahu who did it.