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Fire the Mideast Policy Team!

by Leslie H. Gelb

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 **President Barack Obama meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in the Oval Office of the White House, July 6, 2010. (Gary Fabiano / Sipa Press) Obama's bow to Netanyahu was just the latest in a series of disastrous missteps in U.S. policy toward Israel. Leslie H. Gelb on who's to blame—and how the White House can get back on course.**

Whoever advised President Obama to flay Israel publicly until this week should be fired. Only advisers with no experience in dealing with Israel could have believed that Israeli leaders like Prime Minister Netanyahu would bow to public attacks. And whoever advised Mr. Obama to kneel rhetorically to Mr. Netanyahu in public on Tuesday should also be fired. The only thing accomplished by this embarrassing tactic was to put Israel in a position to call the shots on Mideast policy for the rest of Obama's first term.

The real enemy of a negotiated settlement in the Mideast is not time; it's failure.

Were the culprits the non-foreign policy White House intimates – chief of staff Rahm Emanuel and political honcho David Axelrod? Axelrod knows nothing about this, and worse, Emanuel thinks he does because he lived in Israel. Was George Mitchell, the president's Mideast negotiator, the brains behind the foolishness? Surely, he's had enough experience working with Israelis to know better. Did General James Jones, the National Security Adviser, remain silent, again? And of course, where was Secretary of State Hillary Clinton? Strangely for someone so adept at pleasing Israel's constituents in America, she spent a lot of time this past year publicly beating up on Israeli leaders. Has she been led astray by the pro-Arab contingent of the State Department?

• [Martin Indyk: New Hope for Mideast Peace](#)

• [Peter Beinart: Netanyahu's Latest Insult](#) Or is the guilty party none other than President Obama himself? The more we find out about who makes decisions in the White House on every subject from nuclear weapons to coloring of Easter eggs, it turns out to be the man in the Oval Office himself. He's the expert. He's the decider. He invites everyone to state his or her piece or peace, then he tells them what to do – and seemingly without question, they do his bidding.

Mr. Obama started his White House tenure from a near-zero base of foreign policy knowledge and no experience in the Middle East. It was easy enough to guess this blissful state from his earliest decisions. He came out of the box demanding that Israel agree to suspend construction on the West Bank as a precondition for direct negotiations with the Palestinians. Anyone who knew anything about this situation surely would have told the president that the chances of Mr. Netanyahu agreeing to this "proposal" were zero, or minus zero. No Israeli leader, even a dovish one, would ever dream of beginning negotiations by conceding his major bargaining card. As the teenagers say, what were Obama and his advisers thinking? And yes, after the Israelis publicly humiliated Vice President Biden during his trip to the Holy Land by announcing they would start new construction in East Jerusalem, Washington had to respond vehemently. The Israelis had been arrogant and stupid on this one. They had weakened American power in the region. No U.S. president could let them get away with it. Clinton and others made strong public statements of criticism, and those were fine. But Mr. Obama then allowed Mr. Netanyahu to come ahead with his planned visit to D.C. – and publicly humiliated him. The U.S. president let the Israeli prime minister cool his heels for hours before meeting with him, then wouldn't shake his hand when he departed. There's no surer way to unite a nation behind its leader, even a controversial one like Netanyahu, than to have a foreign leader humiliate him.

This brilliant tactic – thought of by Obama's advisers or the president himself – accomplished two things. It stiffened Israeli backs even further against being conciliatory about starting talks with the Palestinians. The Israeli government was not about to cave to American pressures. It also galvanized Israeli supporters in the United States – in particular within conservative parts of the Jewish community and the Republican Party. There went Mr. Obama's support for pressing Israel even in private.

To top this all off with Tuesday's meeting, full of smiles and the adoption of Israeli-desired language on almost every topic, only made matters worse. It made the situation look as if the American president had been cowed by Jewish control of

American politics. That certainly pleased American and Israeli hawks, but it did not please others who want to see genuine progress in Mideast talks.

There is a time and place for Washington to put pressure on Israel. Mr. Obama and his team picked every wrong time and place. The right occasion to squeeze is when the negotiations have reached the point where both sides have given and where both must give more to close the deal. Only at that point does pressure make sense. All parties would get a real shot at peace in return for their concessions.


To be sure, many ask at this point – How do you get to that point? The answer is not to browbeat the parties to scurry to the negotiating table. That tactic simply never pays off. The answer is to build conditions beyond the negotiating table, conditions in the political community in both Israel and Palestine, that would support compromises at the table. The British pushed the Catholics and Protestants to make concessions year after year, only to fail time and again, only to further inflame feelings all around and spur greater violence. Finally, London focused on getting Protestant and Catholic women to form common groups to support compromise. London did as much with various business communities that evolved into backers of mutual concessions as well. Only then did parties know that they had support for compromises, their negotiations got somewhere, and they reached agreement. That's what needs to be done between Israel and the Palestinians.

We hear time and again that the enemy of peace in the Middle East is time, and that time is running out. Perhaps that is what has caused Mr. Obama and his team to misstep so badly; they think it's a race against the clock. Do something now or fail. But the real enemy of a negotiated settlement in the Mideast is not time; it's failure. Neither Israel nor the Palestinians nor the United States can afford to fail again. After yet another failure, it could well result in perpetual violence.

To set his Arab-Israeli policy on a sensible course, Mr. Obama needs to search for new advisors who know how to get things done in the Middle East, hire them, and listen to them.

Leslie H. Gelb, a former New York Times columnist and senior government official, is author of Power Rules: How Common Sense Can Rescue American Foreign Policy (HarperCollins 2009), a book that shows how to think about and use power in the 21st century. He is president emeritus of the Council on Foreign Relations.

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