

Imagine that the elected leader of a foreign country did this to a democratically elected ally:

1. Implied that its president was a racist
2. Implied its government's policies were effectively racist
3. Demanded a mea culpa from its president to both his own electorate and the international community for his or her comments
4. Then refused that president's apology when it was offered
5. Publicly criticized its president for talking to the ally's opposition party
6. Tried to intervene in the other country's elections
7. Advocated redrawing the country's borders
8. Spied on the other country
9. Denied its ally access to some negotiations that threatened the ally's existence – and didn't provide it with sufficient information about what was going on
10. Tried to divide the members of a historically unified ethnic, religious or political group within the ally's country – on the basis that it knew what was best for the ally.

So which leaders am I talking about here?

If you guessed that these points refer to Prime Minister Netanyahu's efforts to intervene over Iran, then you would have a pretty strong case. Some of them are disputed but many are not. He has certainly become embroiled in American domestic politics in a way few other foreign leaders have in the last century.

But, conversely, if you turned it around, and guessed that I am talking about President Obama's [effort](#) to intervene in Israeli domestic politics and foreign policy, you might have just as strong a case.

Double standards?

Let's look at these points dispassionately for a moment.

The truth is that America has done lots of these things to other countries: abrogated their sovereignty; interfered in their domestic politics; coalesced with opponents of the governing

The President, the Prime Minister and the disappearance of statesmanship

Written by The Conversation USA

party; spied on them; publicly criticized them; attempted to redraw their borders - sometimes successfully (as in the [Mexican-American War](#) of 1846-48.)

So President Obama is upset because somebody else is trying to do to the US what America perennially does to others.

In the face of this fact, I have been increasingly dumbstruck by the double standards being applied by President Obama, some of his administration's senior officials and much of the American media as they wallow in this [very public spat](#) .

There can be little defense for Netanyahu's behavior. Yet I think both he and the president have pretty effectively defied any definition of "statesmanship" of late. And the situation is getting worse.

As his Huffington Post [interview](#) last week made clear, the President has no problem in publicly accusing Netanyahu of betraying Israeli values. Yet he avoids making the same kind of accusations against Muslim leaders across Middle East who have fomented violence or failed to adequately protect minorities.

Netanyahu's comments about Arabs going to vote "in droves" was divisive and unacceptable. But this has been characterized as an effort at voter suppression rather than an exhortation to his own supporters to get out themselves and vote.

Meanwhile in the US, voter suppression is happening through new voter registration requirements. And the Department of Justice is finding it difficult to reform local police authorities for lethal and discriminatory behavior against African Americans across the country.

I have no doubt that the president is frustrated by the impotence of the federal government on these issues. But I would be tempted to tone down my rhetoric and avoid throwing stones in glass houses, given America's current, well publicized racial problems.

The President was happy to send his Chief of Staff, Denis McDonough, to [talk](#) to the anguished members of America's liberal Jewish community about the need for a two-state solution this week.

Presumably, he either doesn't understand the crushing ambivalence American Jews currently feel as their allegiance to the Democratic Party and [Israel](#) becomes increasingly strained or he knows but doesn't care.

But the outcome is the same: he is effectively using American Jews as a "political football" in an attempt to alienate Netanyahu. Any criticism of the Congressional Republicans for [doing the same](#) was fully justified. But in copying them the President just surrendered the moral high ground.

Spying under pressure

The [latest story](#) to hit the press, of Israel spying on the Iran negotiations, has a similar element of unfairness.

Whether the Israelis spied on the negotiations or not is one issue. Israeli officials [have denied](#) that this took place.

I confess, however, that I would probably do so if I felt that my existential existence was threatened. America's National Security Agency (NSA,) after all, spied on all our allies when our country's very existence was not threatened.

The Obama administration's complaint is that the Israelis shared what they discovered with other parties – with the Republicans, countries involved in the negotiations and, presumably, anyone else who might be concerned about a deal with Iran. They have presented no evidence that the Israelis have done this.

But you have to ask yourself these questions: what would you do if you were deeply impacted by the outcome of a negotiation, yet excluded from participating in the discussion? What would

you do if you had in front of you an American president who was not talking to you, yet seemed to be ready to impose an outcome that might give your greatest enemies the means to destroy you? What would you do if you had a president who was ready to agree to a settlement but did not have to live with its consequences because he won't be president in ten years? What would you do then if you discovered something that might sabotage that settlement? I suspect you might publicize whatever you thought might help you.

Netanyahu is obviously deeply frustrated by the fact that the negotiations are taking place and Israel is not a participant. He has to put his country's security in the hands of governments (think France, Germany and the United Kingdom) whose countries are experiencing a growth in anti-Semitism, have historically criticized Israel and are often sympathetic to the Palestinian cause. Netanyahu would prefer a rock-solid advocate on his side and has been busy sending Israeli government representatives to these capitals in an effort to harden their position.

Whether he is right or wrong, Netanyahu sees the fate of his country's future in the balance. But while Obama makes reassuring noises to everyone else, he now very publicly snubs the leadership of the very country most at risk. He would rather do this than diplomatically – and effectively – reassure Israelis and America's Jews, among his staunchest supporters, that his diplomatic support for Israel at the UN is not wavering.

Indeed, the [gurgling noises](#) from the White House about not necessarily supporting Israel at the UN is assuredly as cavalier as this White House has been with any group since President Obama took office.

Getting past the personal

We in the United States always have to distinguish between administrations we don't like and a love for America itself.

It happens to us all every eight years or so as our leadership swings back and forth. I may not love a particular president, but I love the country and share a concern with other citizens that transcends the policies of a particular administration.

President Obama doesn't seem to respect that distinction when it comes to Israel. He proclaims

he does. But his seemingly paternalistic willingness to decide what is best for Israel, to threaten a withdrawal of diplomatic support, and vilify their newly re-elected leader is not smart politics when both American Jews and Israelis need his reassurance and signs of greater engagement – not retribution.

Instead his focus is on [talking](#)) to the Iranian people directly; negotiating with Iran's political leadership while the New York Times [commends](#) Iran's religious leadership for saying nothing at all; speaking "candidly" to the Huffington Post about Netanyahu and [refusing](#) to accept Netanyahu's effort to recant his dreadful comments.

Over the last six years our president has worked with controversial figures such as Cuba's Raul Castro, Russia's Vladimir Putin and Afghanistan's Hamid Karzai.

Only this week the president described [Lee Kuan Yew](#) , who ruled Singapore with an iron fist, as a "giant of history."

Apparently, the only person Obama doesn't want to talk to or work with is the democratically elected Benjamin Netanyahu in a transparent attempt to isolate or alienate him.

When personal animosity overrides the office, then something is seriously wrong.

If Jimmy Carter could get past his animosity and work with Menachem Begin and Anwar Sadat, and if Bill Clinton could work with Yitzhak Rabin and Yasser Arafat, then President Obama can try and work with Benjamin Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas.

Challenging though it may be, this is the very definition of diplomacy. If the president can't do this then he should just leave the issue to his successor rather than threatening to try and forge a path without his closest ally in the region.

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I'm confident, by the way, that presumptive candidate Hilary Clinton is not thanking the president for playing into the hands of the cynical Republican [efforts](#) to peel away Jewish support from the Democratic Party. And if President Obama keeps up the grandstanding then I predict that despite their dislike of Netanyahu, many American Jews will be drawn towards supporting a socially moderate Republican whom they can trust to defend Israel.

As President Obama would be the first to say, you don't play politics when it comes to national security. And, I might add, you don't accuse your friends when you are guilty of sins yourself.

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