



OPENING SESSION

Israeli and American Worldviews

Moderator: David Ignatius, Columnist, *The Washington Post*

Avigdor Liberman, Deputy Prime Minister; Minister of Foreign Affairs

James Steinberg, Deputy Secretary of State, U.S. Department of State



In the opening session of the Saban Forum on Saturday evening, participants discussed the ongoing challenges the United States and Israel face—specifically, the stalled peace process and Iran’s pursuit of nuclear capabilities—and focused on the state of the United States-Israel relationship.

The session started with an assessment of how Israelis view the Obama administration. An Israeli participant asked why President Barack Obama had not yet visited Israel, saying that a presidential visit would bolster Israeli public opinion of Obama and the strength of the United States-Israel relationship. However, another Israeli argued with the premise that the relationship is in peril, saying that any low popularity of Obama among Israelis is the natural, temporary reaction of the public to an unknown president coming into office with a new vision.

An American participant responded by noting that Obama visited Israel during the presidential campaign, and added that several factors go into deciding when a president travels abroad. When Obama became president, Israel was undergoing an election campaign of its own, so a visit then would not have been appropriate. More importantly, the participant said, the president should only travel overseas when his visit would have an impact on the policies his administration is seeking to advance. Regarding the issue of the United States-Israel relationship, the participant said that there is intense, behind-the-scenes coordination between both countries each day, particularly relating to issues of security.

In terms of the peace process, an American participant said that President Obama does not view the Arab-Israeli conflict as a zero-sum game—in his view, a final agreement can address each side’s aspirations and lead to more security and prosperity for all parties. The American said that in thinking about the peace process, Israelis should consider that making progress is the best of all possibilities since failure to reach an agreement would be the most dangerous outcome for Israel’s long-term security. This is why every Israeli government has tried to move forward on the peace process, and has debated how to move it forward, not whether to move it forward.



An Israeli participant agreed that peace talks are necessary but was skeptical that an agreement could be reached in the next two to three years. The participant said that peace cannot be imposed by outside parties, it must spring from local factors such as economic prosperity, stability, and a lack of violence. These elements are needed as precursors to an agreement, the participant said, otherwise there may be a situation in which there is an agreement on paper, but not true peace. An American participant agreed that a peace agreement would not be a panacea to all that plagues the region, but argued that a political settlement between both governments would lead to true peace between both populations.

An Israeli participant was critical of the Palestinian Authority (PA) for what the participant said were inconsistencies in its positions. The participant said that the PA supported Israel's actions in Gaza against Hamas in 2008, but then publicly called for international condemnation of Israel. In addition, the Israeli criticized the fact that the PA had said it was seeking peace but instead placed preconditions on talks.

Regarding Iran, an American said that the process of addressing Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is fraught with challenges, but has been beneficial in that it has forged a strong relationship among members of the P5+1 and international community. An Israeli described the problem of Iran in terms of three things: it denies Israel's right to exist, it sponsors terrorism, and it seeks nuclear weapons. The Israeli said that if Iran gains nuclear capabilities, there is a likelihood it would share it with terrorist groups. For this reason, the Israeli argued, it is the primary challenge facing both countries.