Will Obama Make Netanyahu Pay for Historic Aid Deal With Last-gasp Push for Peace?

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During a press briefing shortly before the festive signing of the new aid agreement in Washington, acting National Security Adviser Jacob Nagel was asked whether Israel or the United States had tried during the lengthy negotiations to forge any link between the defense assistance and the Palestinian issue. Nagel hastened to reply that there was no connection between the two, nor had there ever been.

“During the talks a link between the defense aid agreement and the Israeli-Palestinian issue never came up in any form,” he said. “It wasn’t even hinted at during the discussions. Nothing. No connection between political aspects and the continued assistance, and no connection between the agreement and progress on the Palestinian issue. As far as the negotiating teams were concerned there was a wall of fire between the two issues.”

But within less than two hours it became clear that the wall of fire Nagel spoke of was gone. The appetizer came from U.S. National Security Adviser Susan Rice, who, in her speech at the signing ceremony, mentioned the Palestinian issue and the need to advance the two-state solution as a central component of Israel’s security. But the main course was a press statement issued by U.S. President Barack Obama that made an even clearer link between the aid package and the peace process.

“It is because of this same commitment to Israel and its long-term security that we will also continue to press for a two-state solution to the long-standing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, despite the deeply troubling trends on the ground that undermine this goal,” Obama said. “As I have emphasized previously, the only way for Israel to endure and thrive as a Jewish and democratic state is through the realization of an independent and viable Palestine. Ultimately, both this [agreement] and efforts to advance the two-state solution are motivated by the same core U.S. objective that has been shared by all administrations, Democratic and Republican, over the last several decades – ensuring that Israelis can live alongside their neighbors in peace and security.”

This was Obama’s first public statement on the Israeli-Palestinian issue after many months in which he avoided it like the plague. It’s hard to believe that this was coincidental. Nowadays, only a few months before Obama leaves the White House, every decision, meeting or remark is measured and aimed with an eye to the legacy he wants to leave behind. From Obama’s words, one can understand that the aid pact is one side of the coin with regard to his legacy on Israel. The other side may yet turn out to be a move on the Palestinian issue before his term ends on January 20.

One can assume that Obama’s statements were read and internalized by those sitting in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu’s office in Jerusalem.

Obama’s announcement and the connection he made to the Palestinian issue reinforces Netanyahu’s pessimistic scenarios regarding moves the American president may make immediately after the U.S. elections in November.

Will it be a presidential address in which he presents his outline of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement? Will it be a UN Security Council resolution that sets down these principles? Perhaps both? At the prime minister’s bureau, they don’t know the answers to these questions, but Obama’s words are evidence that these question marks are liable to become exclamation points very soon.

The military assistance agreement signed Wednesday is a bitter-sweet one. On one hand, Netanyahu can be satisfied that he obtained an increase, however modest, in U.S. assistance for Israel – the largest assistance package ever – during Obama’s term in office. If anyone had still doubted that Obama has assisted Israel’s security more than any other president in U.S. history, the decisive proof was delivered Wednesday. Netanyahu was correct when he said that the U.S.-Israel alliance was proven Wednesday to be stronger than any disagreement – even as poisonous as the disagreement between himself and Obama was over the past seven years.

Despite the achievements, smiles, hugs and mutual praise uttered at the signing ceremony Wednesday, there is also a “but” – a big “but.” The path leading to the military assistance agreement was strewn with politics, bitterness, suspicion, leaks and exchanges of blows in the media. There is a major disparity between the high rhetoric and slogans expressed by the two sides regarding mutual values and interests or the unshakeable relations between the countries, and what looked like haggling in a marketplace between two rivals rather than negotiations between the two greatest allies in the world.

Netanyahu loves to say that what is important is the test of results and not the process. In this instance, the process was highly problematic, and one can absolutely also quibble over whether the results were good or whether they could have been better. Americans talk about Monday morning quarterbacking, or what Israelis might call “wisdom in hindsight.” With respect to the internal debate in Israel over the military assistance agreement, neither side is innocent of invoking wisdom in hindsight.

It’s hard today to know who is right and what we could have obtained or not obtained – if anything. Netanyahu and Nagel, his national security adviser, claim it was not possible to obtain a better agreement and therefore the fight in Congress against Obama and the Iranian nuclear agreement was justified and didn’t harm Israel’s security. They apparently are in the minority, however. When nearly any prominent person in Israel involved in foreign affairs and defense is asked, whether former Prime Minister Ehud Barak, former cabinet member Dan Meridor, former IDF Intelligence Corps chief Amos Yadlin or even senior members of the current security cabinet, there is a clear tendency in support of the argument that had Netanyahu conducted himself differently with Obama on the Iranian issue, he would have obtained a better military assistance agreement.

For Nagel, three years of negotiations, 12 trips to the U.S. and hundreds of hours of disagreement and convincing culminated on Wednesday in the signing of a two-page document worth $38 billion to Israel. Nagel recounted on Wednesday that at the beginning of the negotiations, Netanyahu had presented him with three results that he could aim for. For the least of them, involving maintaining the current situation, the prime minister said Nagel would be awarded a bronze medal. If he managed to very substantially increase the financial assistance, he would get a gold medal and something in between would qualify for silver. Nagel, the architect on the Israeli side of the agreement, may not have qualified for the gold, but he can certainly be satisfied.