

## AIPAC Confronts A New Reality as Obama's Agenda Becomes Clear

*A Tougher Message Replaces the Uncritical Support of Bush Years*

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**WASHINGTON** — “You’re not going to like my saying this,” Vice President Joe Biden told 6,000 delegates from the podium of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee’s annual policy conference — a spot that politicians usually vie over vigorously for the privilege of telling the crowd what they want to hear.

But Biden, after sending up his rhetorical warning, used his May 5 keynote speech to the pro-Israel lobby to convey the Obama administration’s insistence on a number of policies directly conflicting with those of the new government in Israel — and some policies held by previous Israeli governments, too.

Other speakers, such as Democratic Senator John Kerry of Massachusetts, chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, underlined Biden’s points on the need for Israel to stop expanding settlements in the West Bank and accept the necessity of a two-state solution to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

And when they went to lobby on Capitol Hill, AIPAC delegates even found some stalwart supporters in Congress holding back on one of their key legislative initiatives — a full-court press to impose new sanctions on Iran to accompany the Obama administration’s drive to engage Tehran diplomatically.

It was the lobby’s first mass encounter with a Washington now dominated by President Obama and his party. The broad and uncritical embrace of the Bush administration’s eight years seemed a distant memory. Bush’s GOP, now out of power in the White House and both houses of Congress, seemed in full retreat. And pro-settler evangelical Christians — a prominent feature of AIPAC conferences during the Bush era — were not on the schedule at this year’s conference.

Some AIPAC delegates were not shy about expressing their disapproval of the new order.

“I really think Obama needs to take a tougher line on Iran; he cannot afford a learning curve,” said Susan Canter, a delegate at the AIPAC policy conference, as she prepared to leave for Capitol Hill to lobby her elected representatives in favor of Israel.

Another delegate, Seymour Cohen from New York, showed little hope for talks with Iran. “I don’t believe in engagement,” he said, “but if you do it for only a limited time, it can be okay.”

But AIPAC’s politically savvy leadership, along with Israel itself, took a more nuanced approach, seeking to smooth over rough edges and bridge significant gaps that seem to exist with the United States over the administration’s new policies in the region.

With Iran taking center stage in the relationship between the United States and Israel, Israeli officials and supporters in America struggled to strike a tone that would express their concerns while not directly countering the Obama administration’s push for diplomatic engagement.

“Engagement should be backed with tougher sanctions to enhance the probability of success,” AIPAC’s Web site states. “Engagement should be combined with tougher sanctions in order to demonstrate the ramifications for Iran if it abuses America’s genuine desire for better relations.”

But the Obama administration has rejected calls by Israel and its American supporters for a sharp and clear time limit on diplomatic engagement with Iran and for increased sanctions on Tehran to accompany any talks.

The new reality became apparent during the AIPAC conference itself, when AIPAC’s top lobbying issue — new legislation that would tighten sanctions on Iran now — was put on hold in Congress immediately after it had been introduced.

California Democrat Howard Berman, chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, announced that his committee would not take up the Iran Refined Petroleum Sanctions Act, which he himself had introduced. The legislation is intended to block exports of refined petroleum to Iran, and thereby increase the pressure on Iran’s faltering economy.

“I have no intentions of moving this bill through the legislative process in the near future,” said Berman, normally a strong supporter of AIPAC initiatives. He made it clear that the bill would go forward only if efforts to diplomatically engage Iran fail.

AIPAC officials, who sent more than 6,000 activists to lobby for the legislation, insisted that Berman’s position was not a blow for the lobby and that it did not reflect any difference of opinion. But a congressional source who closely follows Middle East affairs pointed out that putting legislation on hold at the time it’s introduced is highly unusual, especially when the bill is a top priority for the pro-Israel lobby.

In a May 3 interview with the Forward, Berman, a leading pro-Israel voice in Congress, said that his action was meant to send a double message: one in support of the president’s drive to engage with Iran, and another making clear that this engagement could not be open-ended.

“I went to the AIPAC dinner, and I met many people, and none of them said to me I was wrong in not moving this forward now,” Berman said, adding, “Whoever is as concerned as I am about a nuclear Iran should know that we are not foolish enough to think this is a never-ending process.”

While on Iran the differences of approach are nuanced, when it comes to Palestinian issues, significant gaps seemed evident between Washington and Jerusalem.

Israeli leaders, headed by President Shimon Peres and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, used the AIPAC conference venue to reach out to the administration, as well as to American public opinion and the Jewish community.

Netanyahu's plan, as presented in his speech at the AIPAC conference via satellite and reiterated by his senior adviser Ron Dermer in meetings with Jewish activists, calls for parallel progress on three tracks: political, economic and a security track.

Both Netanyahu and Peres stressed that the new government in Israel is committed to renewing the peace process within this framework. Nevertheless, the change in policy was clear. The two leaders consistently avoided using the term "two-state solution" and chose wording that suggested no more than Palestinian sovereignty.

A senior Israeli diplomat said that this was not coincidental. "We used to talk with our counterparts every day about the need for a two-state solution. Now, we can't mention it anymore," said the diplomat, who asked not to be named because he was not authorized to speak with the press.

The change of tone did not go unnoticed by the Obama administration.

In his speech, Biden told AIPAC supporters that Israel should work for a two-state solution and "not build more settlements, dismantle existing outposts and allow Palestinians freedom of movement."

Kerry, a former presidential candidate, was even more specific. "Nothing will do more to show Israel's commitment to making peace than freezing new settlement activity," he told the crowd. He added that new settlements only make it more difficult for Israel to protect its citizens.

"They undercut [Palestinian] President [Mamoud] Abbas and strengthen Hamas by convincing everyday Palestinians that there is no reward for moderation," Kerry said. He specifically warned Israel to avoid building in the sensitive E1 corridor outside Jerusalem, an area that has long been a point of dispute between the United States and Israel.

In a private meeting with Peres later that day, Biden raised the settlement issue again and stressed the need to stop expansion of existing Jewish towns in the West Bank, Peres told reporters after the meeting. The Israeli president replied that East Jerusalem should not be considered a settlement and that there was no way to stop natural growth of settlements.

Trying to iron out these differences will be the main task for Netanyahu in his first meeting with Obama, scheduled for May 18. Peres, who tested the water in his May 5 visit to the White House, came out optimistic. "I don't see any room for conflict between our government and the U.S.," Peres said after the meeting. "I see here nothing but a great friendship."

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