

Obama vs. The Lobby

No matter how much he grovels, it's never enough

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Poor Obama. No matter how much he tries to placate the Israel lobby, they just won't take yes for an answer. The Lobby has been after him [for months](#), trying to dig up "evidence" that someone with the middle name of "Hussein" is necessarily an enemy of Israel. The best they could come up with so far were the Rev. Jeremiah Wright's [jeremiads](#), which didn't have much of an effect at the polls, as the North Carolina and Indiana primary [results](#) - and subsequent national polls - attest.

Yet Obama still keeps trying to appease the Lobby. He's purged staff members who so much as looked cross-eyed at the Israelis, such as [one](#) poor adviser who meekly suggested that talking to Hamas might not be such a bad idea. He was out faster than you can say [Mearsheimer and Walt](#).

Speaking of which: the Obama-oids have gone out of their way to [distance](#) themselves - i.e., "reject and denounce" - those two hate-criminals, even though, as Philip Weiss trenchantly [avers](#), a book by Obama's point man on the Middle East says pretty much the same thing. In response to all this, [Scott McConnell](#), editor of *The American Conservative*, dryly remarked: "At this point one wonders whether the people who deny the dramatic influence of the Israel lobby on American politics feel a little bit silly."

Obama's latest ritualized act of kowtowing takes place in the pages of the online edition of *The Atlantic*. In an [interview](#) with Jeffrey Goldberg - a [male Judy Miller](#) who retailed Ahmed Chalabi's tall tales of Iraqi "weapons of mass destruction" and other [fables](#) while still managing to keep his job and his reputation - Obama jumps through all kinds of hoops with admirable dexterity, while ultimately avoiding abject humiliation and even showing signs of resistance.

Goldberg is relentless from the get-go, demanding to know: Does Zionism "have justice on its side?" Obama goes into a soliloquy about his "Jewish-American camp counselor" whose tales of life in Israel he found "powerful and compelling." Obama, the wanderer, has instinctive sympathy for a people who want only to "return home." All very affecting and authentic, but it's not enough for [David Frum](#), who [kvetches](#):

"Now, how long do you think it takes Obama to deliver a 'yes' or 'no' to that question? I count five long paragraphs - interrupted by two follow-up questions - before we get to 'yes.' That's a long time. And when the answer is delivered, it is immediately followed by a disclaimer."

No explanations, no dilly-dallying, no loitering in the middle ground - Commissar Frum wants answers, "straight" answers, and he wants them *now*! So what is this supposed

“disclaimer”? It’s when Obama says:

“That does not mean that I would agree with every action of the state of Israel, because it’s a government and it has politicians, and as a politician myself I am deeply mindful that we are imperfect creatures and don’t always act with justice uppermost on our minds.”

How dare he refuse to give a moral blank check to whomever is elected prime minister of Israel?! Frum takes the [Ann Lewis](#) line, which is, as she put it at a forum on Israel: “The role of the president of the United States is to support the decisions that are made by the people of Israel.”

According to the strictures set down by the Frum-Lewis Doctrine, we are obligated to carry out whatever edicts the Israeli government issues – and if Obama doesn’t buy that, well, then, he’s obviously a Farrakhan-loving [secret Muslim](#).

Goldberg isn’t satisfied, either. He presses the issue:

“Go to the kishke question, the gut question: the idea that if Jews know that you love them, then you can say whatever you want about Israel, but if we don’t know you – Jim Baker, Zbigniew Brzezinski – then everything is suspect. There seems to be in some quarters, in Florida and other places, a sense that you don’t feel Jewish worry the way a senator from New York would feel it.”

Unconditional support isn’t enough: the Lobby demands love. At the end of his interrogation, Obama is expected, [like Winston Smith](#), to love [Big Brother](#).

Obama’s smooth “I find that really interesting” is devastating, in its way: what [equanimity!](#) He segues into a personal account, talks about his trip to Israel, lists all the admirable qualities of the pioneers who have built a modern democracy in a “hardscrabble land,” among them a strong sense of morality and a long tradition of open discussion and disputation: “What I also love about Israel is the fact that people argue about these issues, and that they’re asking themselves moral questions.”

Here Obama hits back, if ever so subtly. The poor guy was no doubt annoyed at being hectorred by this tiresome fanatic, so who can blame him for making reference to the [well-known fact](#) that discussion in the U.S., when it comes to Israel, is far less open than it is in Israel itself? (Although that is [changing](#).)

He pulls back, though, and resorts to the some-of-my-best-friends argument, another way of groveling. Yet Goldberg is clearly pissed off, because he pops him with the [Ahmed Yousef question](#). Poor Obama: another Rev. Wright-like tar baby, albeit this time an Arabic version, one that the Lobby hopes will stick. Obama, however, isn’t having it:

“My position on Hamas is indistinguishable from the position of Hillary Clinton or John McCain. I said they are a terrorist organization and I’ve repeatedly condemned them. I’ve repeatedly said, and I mean what I say: since they are a terrorist organization, we should not be dealing with them until they recognize Israel, renounce terrorism, and abide by

previous agreements.”

Goldberg has got him. The man who would talk to [Mahmoud Ahmadinejad](#), [Hugo Chavez](#), and [Raúl Castro](#) won't deal with the [elected](#) government of Palestine. Why single them out for special disfavor? After all, the Cuban commies, for one example, have imprisoned and killed their internal critics, as have the Iranians. Chavez is no angel, either. Why a different standard for the Palestinians? He's acknowledged their [suffering](#); why won't he recognize their legitimacy?

Much of Obama's appeal is personal, rather than ideological. He's just the kind of president one can imagine pulling off a series of diplomatic triumphs based on the sheer power of his personality alone. The Obama campaign knows this, of course, and that's partly why the candidate continually [emphasizes](#) the value of diplomacy, of talking to our alleged adversaries, and giving America options other than war. It's pretty humiliating for him to have to drop this tack because it so rankles the Lobby.

What's more, you can bet [John McCain](#) will point to this contradiction during the coming debates. If I were McCain, I'd ask: *Well, Barack, if you're going to talk to Ahmadinejad, then why not have a cup of coffee with [Ahmed Yousef](#)?*

Goldberg, clearly enjoying himself, digs the knife in deeper and inquires if Obama was “flummoxed” upon receiving the Ahmed Yousef seal of approval.

Obama - flummoxed? Surely he jests.

It's time for Obama to play his trump card, and he does so by citing his support for Israel's 2006 invasion of Lebanon, in which factories, hospitals, and Christian churches were bombed and thousands of Lebanese civilians were killed, in retaliation for the [kidnapping](#) of two Israeli soldiers and the killing of three more. That, at least, was the ostensible rationale for a sustained assault on Lebanon's physical and socio-economic infrastructure, although military action to take out Hezbollah was [planned](#) long before that incident.

In any case, Goldberg keeps throwing him some pretty hard fastballs: what about [the settlements](#)? And you'll note how Goldberg phrases the question, asking whether President Obama “will denounce the settlements publicly.” “Denounce” is a pretty strong word: I doubt that's what Obama would do. The point is that what the Lobby fears most is *public* criticism by an American chief executive, or, really, by any American official. The settlements, answers Obama, are not helpful, and he doesn't deny that he'll say this in public. He won't take a vow of silence.

Goldberg comes back with an echo of a persistent suspicion, oft voiced in Likudnik circles: “Do you think that Israel is a drag on America's reputation overseas?”

Clearly exasperated at this point, Obama cuts to the core of the issue by inserting a heretical concept - that an American president ought to be upholding American interests:

“No, no, no. But what I think is that this constant wound, that this constant sore, does infect all of our foreign policy. The lack of a resolution to this problem provides an excuse for anti-American militant jihadists to engage in inexcusable actions, and so we have a national-security interest in solving this, and I also believe that Israel has a security interest in

solving this because I believe that the status quo is unsustainable. I am absolutely convinced of that, and some of the tensions that might arise between me and some of the more hawkish elements in the Jewish community in the United States might stem from the fact that I'm not going to blindly adhere to whatever the most hawkish position is just because that's the safest ground politically."

Obama is here engaging the Lobby, challenging its claim to set the terms of the debate – and refusing to grovel. Good for him. The [very idea](#) that American and Israeli interests are in any way separable – and even, at times, in opposition to each other – is the Lobby's worst nightmare. For that would mean the end of our policy of unconditional public support – although, in private, recriminations abound.

Obama really goes on the offensive toward the end of the Goldberg interview, especially when he avers:

"My job in being a friend to Israel is partly to hold up a mirror and tell the truth and say if Israel is building settlements without any regard to the effects that this has on the peace process, then we're going to be stuck in the same status quo that we've been stuck in for decades now, and that won't lift that existential dread that David Grossman described in [your article](#)."

Of course Obama has read Goldberg's article, and the mirror metaphor is really devastating, yet more evidence of the candidate's underrated ability to lash out – but with a rapier, not a broadsword.

Existential dread – that's what Obama evokes in the Lobby. They've had it easy during the Bush II era, with [the American Netanyahu](#) ensconced in the White House. [Settlements](#)? Go right ahead. The [Wall of Separation](#)? Higher, please. [Assassinations](#) timed to derail the "peace process"? Fire away! Those days will be over if Obama makes it to the Oval Office, and the Lobby knows it.

The great problem for Obama is that no matter what he does or says, the Lobby will fight him every inch of the way, and the smears will get more outrageous. The "he's-a-secret-Muslim" meme is just the beginning. The guilt-by-association strategy is by no means exhausted. How many penny-ante anti-Semites who spent two minutes with him shaking his hand, and would enjoy the publicity of being the focus of media attention, can be dug up between now and November?

We'll soon find out.

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