

Jeffrey Goldberg writes: On Tuesday afternoon, as President Obama was bringing an occasionally contentious but often illuminating hour-long conversation about the Middle East to an end, I brought up a persistent worry. “A majority of American Jews want to support the Iran deal,” I said, “but a lot of people are anxiety-ridden about this, as am I.” Like many Jews—and also, by the way, many non-Jews—I believe that it is prudent to keep nuclear weapons out of the hands of anti-Semitic regimes. Obama, who earlier in the discussion had explicitly labeled the supreme leader of Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, an anti-Semite, responded with an argument I had not heard him make before.

“Look, 20 years from now, I’m still going to be around, God willing. If Iran has a nuclear weapon, it’s my name on this,” he said, referring to the apparently almost-finished nuclear agreement between Iran and a group of world powers led by the United States. “I think it’s fair to say that in addition to our profound national-security interests, I have a personal interest in locking this down.”

The president—the self-confident, self-contained, coolly rational president—appears to have his own anxieties about the nuclear talks. Which isn’t a bad thing.

Jimmy Carter’s name did not come up in our Oval Office conversation, but it didn’t have to. Carter’s tragic encounter with Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, the leader of the Islamic Revolution, is an object lesson in the mysterious power of Iran to undermine, even unravel, American presidencies. Ronald Reagan, of course, also knew something of the Iranian curse. As Obama moves to conclude this historic agreement, one that will—if he is correct in his assessment—keep Iran south of the nuclear threshold not only for the 10- or 15-year period of the deal, but well beyond it, he and his administration have deployed a raft of national security-related arguments to buttress their cause. But Obama’s parting comment to me suggests he knows

perfectly well that his personal legacy, and not just the future of global nuclear non-proliferation efforts (among other things), is riding on the proposition that he is not being played by America's Iranian adversaries, and that his reputation will be forever tarnished if Iran goes sideways, even after he leaves office. Obama's critics have argued that he is "kicking the can down the road" by striking this agreement with Iran. Obama, though, seems to understand that the can will be his for a very long time.

When we spoke on Tuesday, he mentioned, as he often has, his feelings of personal responsibility to Israel. In the period leading up to the June 30 Iran-negotiation deadline, Obama has been focused on convincing Arab and Jewish leaders—people he has helped to unite over their shared fear of Iran's hegemonic ambitions—that the nuclear deal will enhance their security. Last week, he gathered leaders of the Gulf Arab states at Camp David in an attempt to provide such reassurance. On Friday, he will be visiting Washington's Adas Israel Congregation, a flagship synagogue of Conservative Judaism (also, coincidentally, the synagogue I attend) ostensibly in order to give a speech in honor of Jewish American Heritage Month (whatever that is), but actually to reassure American Jews, particularly in the wake of his titanic battles with Israel's prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, that he still "has Israel's back." (There are no plans, as best as I can tell, for Obama to meet with Netanyahu in the coming weeks; this appears to be a bridge too far for the White House, at least at the moment.)

A good part of our conversation on Tuesday concerned possible flaws in the assumptions undergirding the nuclear deal, at least as the deal's provisional parameters and potential consequences are currently understood. Obama also spoke about ISIS's latest surge in Iraq, and we discussed the worries of Arab states, which remain concerned not only about Iran's nuclear ambitions, but about its regional meddling and its patronage of,

among other reprehensible players, Lebanon's Hezbollah and Syria's Assad regime. Tensions between the U.S. and the Gulf states, I came to see, have not entirely dissipated. Obama was adamant on Tuesday that America's Arab allies must do more to defend their own interests, but he has also spent much of the past month trying to reassure Saudi Arabia, the linchpin state of the Arab Gulf and one of America's closest Arab allies, that the U.S. will protect it from Iran. One thing he does not want Saudi Arabia to do is to build a nuclear infrastructure to match the infrastructure Iran will be allowed to keep in place as part of its agreement with the great powers. "Their covert—presumably—pursuit of a nuclear program would greatly strain the relationship they've got with the United States," Obama said of the Saudis.

In the wake of what seemed to have been a near meltdown in the relationship between the United States and Israel, Obama talked about what he called his love for the Jewish state; his frustrations with it when it fails to live up to both Jewish and universal values; and his hope that, one day soon, its leaders, including and especially its prime minister, will come to understand Israel's stark choices as he understands Israel's stark choices. And, just as he did with Saudi Arabia, Obama issued a warning to Israel: If it proves unwilling to live up to its values—in this case, he made specific mention of Netanyahu's seemingly flawed understanding of the role Israel's Arab citizens play in its democratic order—the consequences could be profound.

Obama told me that when Netanyahu asserted, late in his recent reelection campaign, that "a Palestinian state would not happen under his watch, or [when] there [was] discussion in which it appeared that Arab-Israeli citizens were somehow portrayed as an invading force that might vote, and that this should be guarded against—this is contrary to the very language of the Israeli Declaration of Independence, which explicitly states that all people regardless of race or religion are full participants in the democracy. When something like that happens, that has foreign-

policy consequences, and precisely because we're so close to Israel, for us to simply stand there and say nothing would have meant that this office, the Oval Office, lost credibility when it came to speaking out on these issues."

Though Obama's goal in giving speeches like the one he is scheduled to give at Adas Israel is to reassure Jews of his love for Israel, he was adamant that he would not allow the Jewish right, and the Republican Party, to automatically define criticism of the Netanyahu government's policies as anti-Israel or anti-Semitic. Referring to the most powerful Jewish figure in conservative America, Obama said that an "argument that I very much have been concerned about, and it has gotten stronger over the last 10 years ... it's less overt than the arguments that a Sheldon Adelson makes, but in some ways can be just as pernicious, is this argument that there should not be disagreements in public" between the U.S. and Israel. (Obama raised Adelson's name in part because "No, I don't think we're losing," he said. He went on to explain, "There's no doubt there was a tactical setback, although Ramadi had been vulnerable for a very long time, primarily because these are not Iraqi security forces that we have trained or reinforced. ... [T]he training of Iraqi security forces, the fortifications, the command-and-control systems are not happening fast enough in Anbar, in the Sunni parts of the country."

"I know that there are some in Republican quarters who have suggested that I've overlearned the mistake of Iraq, and that, in fact, just because the 2003 invasion did not go well doesn't argue that we shouldn't go back in," he said. "And one lesson that I think is important to draw from what happened is that if the Iraqis themselves are not willing or capable to arrive at the political accommodations necessary to govern, if they are not willing to fight for the security of their country, we cannot do that for them."

Obama told me three years ago: “It is almost certain that other players in the region would feel it necessary to get their own nuclear weapons” if Iran got them. I then noted various reports suggesting that, in reaction to a final deal that allows Iran to keep much of its nuclear infrastructure in place, Saudi Arabia, and possibly Turkey and Egypt as well, would consider starting their own nuclear programs. This, of course, would run I asked Obama if the Saudis had promised him not to go down the nuclear path: “What are the consequences if other countries in the region say, ‘Well you know what, they have 5,000 centrifuges? We’re going to have 5,000 centrifuges.’”

Obama responded by downplaying these media reports, and then said, “There has been no indication from the Saudis or any other [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries that they have an intention to pursue their own nuclear program. Part of the reason why they would not pursue their own nuclear program—assuming that we have been successful in preventing Iran from continuing down the path of obtaining a nuclear weapon—is that the protection that we provide as their partner is a far greater deterrent than they could ever hope to achieve by developing their own nuclear stockpile or trying to achieve breakout capacity when it comes to nuclear weapons.”

He went on to say that the Gulf countries, including Saudi Arabia, appear satisfied that if the agreement works as advertised, it will serve to keep Iran from becoming a nuclear threat. “They understand that ultimately their own security and defense is much better served by working with us,” Obama said.

One of the reasons I worry about the Iran deal is that the Obama administration seems, on occasion, to be overly optimistic about the ways in which Iran will deploy the money it will receive when sanctions are relieved. This is a very common fear among Arabs and, of course, among Israelis. I quoted Jack Lew, the treasury secretary, who has said that “most of the money Iran

receives from sanctions relief will not be used to support” its terrorist-aiding activities. I argued to Obama that this seemed like wishful thinking.

Obama responded at length, but he began this way: “I don’t think Jack or anybody in this administration said that no money will go to the military as a consequence of sanctions relief. The question is, if Iran has \$150 billion parked outside the country, does the IRGC automatically get \$150 billion? Does that \$150 billion then translate by orders of magnitude into their capacity to project power throughout the region? And that is what we contest, because when you look at the math, first of all they’re going to have to deliver on their obligations under any agreement, which would take a certain period of time. Then there are the mechanics of unwinding the existing restraints they have on getting that money, which takes a certain amount of time. Then [Iranian President] Rouhani and, by extension, the supreme leader have made a series of commitments to improve the Iranian economy, and the expectations are outsized. You saw the reaction of people in the streets of Tehran after the signing of the agreement. Their expectations are that [the economy is] going to improve significantly.” Obama also argued that most of Iran’s nefarious activities—in Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon—are comparatively low-cost, and that they’ve been pursuing these policies regardless of sanctions.

I also raised another concern—one that the president didn’t seem to fully share. It’s been my belief that it is difficult to negotiate with parties that are captive to a conspiratorial anti-Semitic worldview not because they hold offensive views, but because they hold ridiculous views. As Walter Russell Mead and others have explained, anti-Semites have difficulty understanding the world as it actually works, and don’t comprehend cause-and-effect in politics and economics. Though I would like to see a solid nuclear deal (it is preferable to the alternatives) I don’t believe that the regime with which Obama is negotiating can be

counted on to be entirely rational.

Obama responded to this theory by saying the following: “Well the fact that you are anti-Semitic, or racist, doesn’t preclude you from being interested in survival. It doesn’t preclude you from being rational about the need to keep your economy afloat; it doesn’t preclude you from making strategic decisions about how you stay in power; and so the fact that the supreme leader is anti-Semitic doesn’t mean that this overrides all of his other considerations. You know, if you look at the history of anti-Semitism, Jeff, there were a whole lot of European leaders—and there were deep strains of anti-Semitism in this country—”

I interjected by suggesting that anti-Semitic European leaders made irrational decisions, to which Obama responded, “They may make irrational decisions with respect to discrimination, with respect to trying to use anti-Semitic rhetoric as an organizing tool. At the margins, where the costs are low, they may pursue policies based on hatred as opposed to self-interest. But the costs here are not low, and what we’ve been very clear [about] to the Iranian regime over the past six years is that we will continue to ratchet up the costs, not simply for their anti-Semitism, but also for whatever expansionist ambitions they may have. That’s what the sanctions represent. That’s what the military option I’ve made clear I preserve represents. And so I think it is not at all contradictory to say that there are deep strains of anti-Semitism in the core regime, but that they also are interested in maintaining power, having some semblance of legitimacy inside their own country, which requires that they get themselves out of what is a deep economic rut that we’ve put them in, and on that basis they are then willing and prepared potentially to strike an agreement on their nuclear program.”

On Israel, Obama endorsed, in moving terms, the underlying rationale for the existence of a Jewish state, making a direct

connection between the battle for African American equality and the fight for Jewish national equality. “There’s a direct line between supporting the right of the Jewish people to have a homeland and to feel safe and free of discrimination and persecution, and the right of African Americans to vote and have equal protection under the law,” he said. “These things are indivisible in my mind.”

In discussing the resurgence of anti-Semitism in Europe, he was quite clear in his condemnation of what has become a common trope—that anti-Zionism, the belief that the Jews should not have a state of their own in at least part of their ancestral homeland, is unrelated to anti-Jewish hostility. He gave me his own parameters for judging whether a person is simply critical of certain Israeli policies or harboring more prejudicial feelings.

“Do you think that Israel has a right to exist as a homeland for the Jewish people, and are you aware of the particular circumstances of Jewish history that might prompt that need and desire?” he said, in defining the questions that he believes should be asked. “And if your answer is no, if your notion is somehow that that history doesn’t matter, then that’s a problem, in my mind. If, on the other hand, you acknowledge the justness of the Jewish homeland, you acknowledge the active presence of anti-Semitism—that it’s not just something in the past, but it is current—if you acknowledge that there are people and nations that, if convenient, would do the Jewish people harm because of a warped ideology. If you acknowledge those things, then you should be able to align yourself with Israel where its security is at stake, you should be able to align yourself with Israel when it comes to making sure that it is not held to a double standard in international fora, you should align yourself with Israel when it comes to making sure that it is not isolated.”

Though he tried to frame his conflict with Netanyahu in impersonal terms, he made two things clear. One is that he will



not stop criticizing Israel when he believes it is not living up to its own founding values. And two—and this is my interpretation of his worldview—he holds Israel to a higher standard than he does other countries because of the respect he has for Jewish values and Jewish teachings, and for the role Jewish mentors and teachers have played in his life. After equating the creation of Israel with the American civil-rights movement, he went on to say this: “What is also true, by extension, is that I have to show that same kind of regard to other peoples. And I think it is true to Israel’s traditions and its values—its founding principles—that it has to care about ... Palestinian kids. And when I was in Jerusalem and I spoke, the biggest applause that I got was when I spoke about those kids I had visited in Ramallah, and I said to a Israeli audience that it is profoundly Jewish, it is profoundly consistent with Israel’s traditions to care about them. And they agreed. So if that’s not translated into policy—if we’re not willing to take risks on behalf of those values—then those principles become empty words, and in fact, in my mind, it makes it more difficult for us to continue to promote those values when it comes to protecting Israel internationally.”

Many Reform and Conservative rabbis (and some Orthodox rabbis as well) find themselves anguishing—usually before the High Holidays—about how to present Israel’s complex and sometimes unpalatable reality to their congregants. (I refer to this sermon generically as the “How to Love a Difficult Israel” sermon.) Obama, when he talks about Israel, often sounds to me like one of these rabbis:

“My hope is that over time [the] debate gets back on a path where there’s some semblance of hope and not simply fear, because it feels to me as if ... all we are talking about is based from fear,” he said. “Over the short term that may seem wise—cynicism always seems a little wise—but it may lead Israel down a path in which it’s very hard to protect itself [as] a Jewish-majority democracy. And I care deeply about preserving that

Jewish democracy, because when I think about how I came to know Israel, it was based on images of ... kibbutzim, and Moshe Dayan, and Golda Meir, and the sense that not only are we creating a safe Jewish homeland, but also we are remaking the world. We're repairing it. We are going to do it the right way. We are going to make sure that the lessons we've learned from our hardships and our persecutions are applied to how we govern and how we treat others. And it goes back to the values questions that we talked about earlier—those are the values that helped to nurture me and my political beliefs.”

I sent these comments on Wednesday to Rabbi Steinlauf to see if he disagreed with my belief that Obama, when he talks about Israel, sounds like a rabbi in the progressive Zionist tradition. Steinlauf wrote back: “President Obama shares the same yearning for a secure peace in Israel that I and so many of my rabbinic colleagues have. While he doesn't speak as a Jew, his progressive values flow directly out of the core messages of Torah, and so he is deeply in touch with the heart and spirit of the Jewish people.”

I have to imagine that comments like Steinlauf's may be understood by people such as Sheldon Adelson and Benjamin Netanyahu as hopelessly naive. But this is where much of the Jewish community is today: nervous about Iran, nervous about Obama's response to Iran, nervous about Netanyahu's response to reality, nervous about the toxic marriage between Obama and Netanyahu, and nervous that, once again, there is no margin in the world for Jewish error.