

Which way will Obama jump on Israel?

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Most American presidents take office intending to focus on domestic issues.

Franklin Roosevelt planned to go down in history as the destroyer of the Great Depression and the man who kept America out of foreign wars, and instead became one of the leaders of the war against Hitler's genocidal Nazi regime. Lyndon Johnson intended to wage war on poverty, and ended up waging war in Vietnam. George W Bush won election promising to make tax cuts his primary goal: 9/11 changed his priorities.

So with Barack Obama. The President-elect has been trying to keep Congress and the American public solidly behind his domestic economic stimulus package. With difficulty, as Congressional opposition to some features of that programme mounts. "I don't work for Barack Obama," says Harry Reid, leader of the Democrats in the Senate.

Inevitably, foreign affairs are diverting attention from Obama's domestic plans. Looming in the background is Afghanistan, to which he has promised to commit more troops. And Iran, with nuclear ambitions that candidate Obama said he finds unacceptable and a threat to the region and the world. And leaping

to the foreground is the Israeli effort to end Hamas's rocket attacks on its civilian population.

In five days Obama will no longer be able to avoid the issue by claiming, quite rightly, that America has only one president at a time. Polls suggest that a majority of rank-and-file Democrats want the Israelis to declare a ceasefire, leaving in place Hamas's ability to rearm using its network of tunnels from Egypt, and with no credible way of preventing the terrorist group from launching hundreds of missiles at increasingly distant targets within Israel.

Never mind that the civilian casualties caused by the Israeli Defence Force are collateral damage, while the casualties caused by Hamas are the purpose of its rocket attacks. Or that Hamas is violating the Geneva Convention by hiding behind its women, endangering children by storing arms in schools, and risking the lives of the sick by placing its headquarters under Gaza City's Shifa hospital - built by the Israelis when they occupied Gaza. Most Democratic voters, understandably appalled by the horrible pictures that Hamas makes available to the Western press, want Israel to stop its attacks. Now.

Whether the Israelis will bow to



The new president will be pulled in different ways on foreign policy, says Irwin Stelzer

mounting international pressure remains to be seen. One faction in its government knows that the world has stood silent while thousands of rockets have rained on its people during the years of the so-called truce with Hamas, and that history suggests that "the international community" cares little about the survival of the world's only Jewish state.

Another sees the goodwill of other nations as key to Israel's long-run survival, and worries that Britain is taking an increasingly anti-Israel line: foreign minister David Miliband

is insisting that Israel labels products of the West Bank in a way that would make their importation into the EU difficult or impossible, and Gordon Brown has lined up with the peace-at-any-price, ceasefire-with-no-conditions crowd. Throw in Nicolas Sarkozy's attempt to strut across the world stage as the arbiter of the current dispute, and you have a powerful coalition forming to deny Israel this chance to enhance its security.

The key, of course, remains the United States, Israel's so-far staunch ally. Which puts Barack Obama front and centre on January 20. The outgoing Bush administration, itself divided between the Condi Rice doves and the Dick Cheney hawks, won't be around to hide behind.

Obama shares his party's belief in diplomacy, in the importance and efficacy of working with allies and international organisations, and will be reluctant to exercise the UN Security Council veto that has stood between Israel and the wrath of Arab nations and others opposed to the existence of the Jewish state or indifferent to its survival. He will feel the tug of his party's Left-wing base - the people who gave him the nomination over the more moderate Hillary Clinton. The new president will also be hearing

from those among his advisers who see Israel not as a strategic asset in the Middle East and the global war on terror, but as a liability that dilutes American influence in the Muslim world.

Israel is counting on the realists in the Obama foreign-policy team to make its case. These advisers know that diplomacy cannot bridge the difference between parties when one contestant is so committed to the destruction of the other that it uses its resources to construct tunnels through

which to smuggle arms rather than to build a viable economy. International monitors who can't shoot straight, or not at all, will not prevent the rearming of Hamas or the continuation of rocket attacks, as experience in Lebanon proves. Incoming Secretary of State Hillary Clinton knows that, even if the department professionals don't. She knows, too, that despite their posturing most Arab governments have little use for Hamas.

Obama will have to choose between the lady at his State Department and the left-wing talk-at-any price wing of his party. No one can guess which this most opaque of all new presidents will choose.

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