

A Diplomatic Double Standard

✖ Earlier this month, Afghan President Hamid Karzai, lashed out at the United States. Although it is widely reported that Karzai won his re-election by fraud, he made the absurd claim that the international community was to blame for any voting irregularities. Though Karzai owes his power entirely to the U.S. and allied troops fighting the Taliban for him, he dared to criticize his defenders.

Invoking the Taliban's claim that U.S. forces are invaders and not liberators, Karzai said, "In this situation, there is a thin curtain between invasion and cooperation-assistance." A few days later, Karzai reportedly threatened to quit the political process and join the Taliban if the U.S. continued to pressure him to reform.

Let us remember that, to date, more than 1,000 U.S. soldiers have given their lives to support Karzai's government from Taliban advances.

How did the Obama administration respond to this disturbing display of ingratitude? By all accounts, they have decided to back away from pressuring Karzai.

Several weeks ago, the New York Times ran a front-page story under the headline "U.S. Takes Softer Approach Toward Afghanistan's Karzai." And the Obama administration demonstrated this new, softer approach with comments to the media. Rather than criticize Karzai, administration officials expressed sympathy for the pressure he is under, both politically and militarily.

Defense Secretary Gates said it's only natural for a political leader to "react strongly" when he feels his nation is being pressured or disrespected. General Piraeus stressed that "President Karzai is the commander in chief – he is the president of a sovereign country."

I mention all of this not to criticize this response. We may well have backed ourselves into a situation where we cannot afford to alienate Karzai, no matter how offensive he is. I will leave this to the Afghanistan experts. What angered me about this turn of events was the way in which our treatment of Afghanistan and President Karzai casts into sharp relief our shabby treatment of Israel and Prime Minister Netanyahu.

Let's remember the following: Prime Minister Netanyahu won in an open and honest campaign. No one can accuse Israel of holding rigged elections. Although he has been pressured and disrespected by the US, he has never "reacted strongly" against our country or the administration.

And even though Netanyahu faces domestic political pressure and foreign threats, he has largely complied with demands placed on him by the Obama administration. He has agreed to embrace a two-state solution to the conflict with the Palestinians. And he has issued an unprecedented 10-month freeze on construction in Israeli settlements.

Far more than Afghanistan, Israel is a sovereign country not dependent upon outsiders for its existence. Indeed, let us never forget that Israel fights its own battles. The Israelis are proud of the fact—as they should be—that they have never asked American boys to shed their blood in defense of Israel. Instead, Israeli soldiers are the ones who fight and die to preserve Israel's freedom. All Israelis asks is that they be free to defend themselves by themselves.

Despite all the above, what was once merely a whisper campaign has become increasingly difficult to deny. President Obama does not much like Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu. After Netanyahu announced that Israel would proceed with a plan to build housing in an established Jewish neighborhood in East Jerusalem, Vice President Biden and Secretary of State Clinton issued rare public statements of condemnation – something that does not happen without a green light from the White House.

More recently, President Obama agreed to meet with Netanyahu while the Prime Minister was in Washington. But there were no joint appearances, and no photo opportunities. In the midst of their discussions, President Obama departed to eat dinner with his family. Our president left Prime Minister Netanyahu behind with instructions to continue working as if he were a member of the president's staff rather than the elected leader of one of our closest allies.

Israel isn't always right. Differences between the White House and the Israelis are neither new nor shocking. But recent events only highlight a troubling diplomatic double standard. Our treatment of Israel is a marked departure from the deferential treatment accorded the most ungrateful of our allies, not to mention some of our enemies. As Americans we have every right to criticize this approach and demand better from our president. We will continue to do exactly that.