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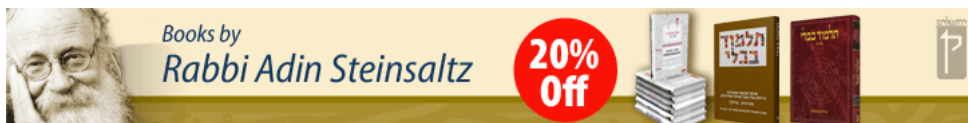
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[Responses to US Administration Comments on Israel](#)

By: **JointMedia News Service**

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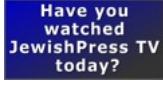
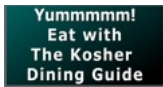
After sharp criticisms from three U.S. officials, Jews wondering whether Obama can be trusted on Israel.



Photo Credit: White House

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Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, Defense Secretary Leon Panetta, and U.S. Ambassador to Belgium Howard Gutman each sparked controversy—independently of the others—with recent comments related to Israel and the Jewish people.

The trifecta of statements, all appearing within the space of a few days last week, has spurred a large-scale debate among American Jews and Jewish organizations, many of whom are doubting the Obama administration's support for Israel.

Clinton called Israeli democracy to task, raising concerns about two bills that could restrict foreign funding of non-profit organizations. Panetta urged Israel to get back to the “damn negotiating table” and pull itself out of its growing isolation in the region. Gutman said that Muslim hatred for Jews stemming from the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should not be construed as anti-Semitism.

Jonathan Schanzer of the Foundation for Defense for Democracies told the *Washington Post* that the U.S. is pressuring Israel because it knows it can't get results from the Palestinians, particularly from Palestinian Authority (expired-term) President Mahmoud Abbas. At the Dec. 7 Republican Jewish Coalition (RJC) Presidential Candidates Forum, Newt Gingrich called to reprimand Panetta and expressed shock that Clinton would “talk about discrimination against women in Israel, and then meet with Saudis.”

“This one-sided continuing pressure that says it's always Israel's fault, no matter how bad the other side is, has to stop,” Gingrich said.

“Panetta is a fine domestic politician, but his speech was outrageous,” he said. “How about saying to Hamas, give up violence and come to the table?”

Responding to Gingrich's comments, Pentagon Press Secretary George Little told *ABC News* that the U.S. has an unquestionable commitment to Israel and that Panetta “was simply noting in part of his speech that we should foster greater dialogue with the countries in the region and that Israel needs to do its part. It's as simple as that.”

Clinton also weighed in on the ongoing controversies regarding gender segregation on several Jerusalem buses, and the demands by some Israeli rabbis that religious army troops not be forced to watch performing women. Clinton said these developments are “reminiscent of Rosa Parks.”

Israeli officials had mixed reactions to the Secretary of State's remarks. Opposition leader Tzipi Livni said Clinton's comments should serve as a wake-up call about what's happening in the country, according to the *Jerusalem Post*. However, Israeli Finance Minister Yuval Steinitz said Clinton seriously exaggerated.

“The exclusion and segregation of women is something totally unacceptable, and it needs to be stopped, but to cite this as a threat to Israel's democracy is a big leap,” Steinitz said, according to *Haaretz*.

The National Conference on Jewish Affairs (NCJA) released a press statement calling to remove Gutman from his post as U.S. Ambassador to Belgium. In the wake of the controversy surrounding his comments, Gutman said that his words were taken out of context.

“Those who use the existence of the Jewish State of Israel or the ongoing deadlock in Israeli-Palestinians peace negotiations as an excuse to hate Jews are nothing more than anti-Semitic bigots... and I am pleased that (Gutman) has expressed regret for his remarks,” U.S. Rep. Steve Rothman (D-NJ) said in a statement.

The White House also distanced itself from the comments by stating it condemns “anti-Semitism in all its forms.”

Scholar and rabbi Dr. Michael Berenbaum, however, wrote in a column for the *Los Angeles Jewish Journal* that while “Israel is not to blame for anti-Semitism—anti-Semites are to blame for anti-Semitism... there is a direct correlation between actions in the Middle East and an increase in manifestations of anti-Semitism.”

Berenbaum cited France as an example, where “increased anti-Semitism came in waves,” occurring in much greater intensity during the various Intifada periods in Israel. “There can be no doubt about the correlation,” he wrote, adding that the absence of negotiations in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict also fuels the extremists.

At the Republican Jewish Forum, Mitt Romney criticized the Obama administration's general Israel policy, saying the president chastises the country but has little to say about the thousands of rockets launched at southern Israel by Hamas. Romney said the president has also been weak with regard to Iran.

“These actions have emboldened Palestinian hard-liners, and they're now poised to form a unity government with terrorist Hamas,” Romney said. “And they feel they can bypass Israel at the bargaining table.”

Jonathan Tobin of *Commentary Magazine* did see one silver lining to the “ominous signals” created by U.S. officials' controversial comments on Israel, as well as the “failure of the administration's promises to stop Iran's nuclear program.”

“No matter what Obama, Panetta, Clinton and their underlings may think about Israel, they are keenly aware a full break with Israel is not something they can get away with,” Tobin wrote.

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