

Relationship Reset: Israel and the United States

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Like many new office holders, the new United States President will likely utilize a fresh set of personal, ideological, and practical tools as he confronts domestic and international developments. A shift in US policy is bound to occur, however, not only because of the changing of the guard, but also because of a new response warranted by unstable circumstances and by changing patterns among actors in the region and beyond.

The Regional and International Backdrop

The bilateral relations between Israel and the United States cannot be separated from the greater regional and international contexts.

US conduct during President Obama's second term illustrates the administration's difficulty in charting a policy that reflects the political, economic, and societal changes in the Middle East. While navigating between allies that have not necessarily followed the liberal values and norms embraced by the US has always been a difficult task, this is particularly true in the current regional turmoil, which has already cost hundreds of thousands of lives and resulted in millions of refugees.

President Obama reduced the US presence in Afghanistan and Iraq, two fronts inherited from his predecessors, and the policy was extended to new battlegrounds in the Middle East, particularly Syria. In general, the reason to limit American engagement in the Middle East can be attributed to two factors. The first is that the US relies increasingly on domestic energy resources and is becoming a net energy exporter, which potentially increases

tension with OPEC in general and Saudi Arabia in particular, in light of Riyadh's attempt to control markets. As such, the incoming President is likely to promote domestic production of energy sources. A second factor is the desire to avoid heavy investments in conflicts that do not stand to yield clear military, strategic, political, and economic gains.

Whether or not the President-elect's rhetoric during the campaign about rechanneling American resources inward is translated into policy, the government of Israel would do well to analyze the strategic implications for Israel regarding a gradual and partial US withdrawal from the region. One implication of such a development, for example, is reduced American involvement in the peace process. Even in the face of an American withdrawal mode, however, the US will continue to be involved in shaping Middle East processes (the President-elect has expressed his wish to negotiate an agreement between Israel and the Palestinians), and Israel has no better alternative to be a part of such developments than through close dialogue with the US. An Israeli-American engagement of this sort requires trust at the highest level – a factor that was clearly missing in the relationship between the US President and the Israeli Prime Minister over the past eight years.

Israel's ability to distance itself from the regional wars and disputes of the past six years served to strengthen the argument that there is no rational linkage between the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and other regional conflicts, and that solving the former will have no impact on settling the others. While this basic rationale appears to have been accepted by the United States, it has not resulted in an easing of pressure on Israel regarding its policies toward the Palestinians, either by the US under the Obama administration or by other international actors. While Trump the candidate spoke very little about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict (beyond commitments to Israel's security and transferring the US embassy to Jerusalem), it is a mistake to assume that this issue will disappear from the new administration's agenda. In fact, it is likely that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will not only surface in the Israeli leadership's first meeting with the new President, but also in related discussions regarding Israel's relations with regional and international actors.

In the coming period – and here too, irrespective of campaign rhetoric – there will presumably be no demands made of Israel to chart precise borders or detail future plans for Jerusalem. The current regional instability, the

weakening of state power, the particularly grim state of affairs in the West Bank, and the policy line adopted in the July 2016 Quartet Report whereby international efforts will be channeled to keep the two-state solution viable, lessen the likelihood of such demands.

The Twilight of One Administration and the Dawn of the Next

Two major issues affected the bilateral relations during the Obama administration: the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), i.e., the deal reached between the P5+1 and Iran over Iran's nuclear program; and the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the summer of 2015, Iran emerged from years of international political and economic pressure with an agreement that fails to prevent it from pursuing certain nuclear, political, and military activities that can adversely affect the interests of Israel and the United States alike. Yet while the JCPOA with Iran is a fact, the entire Iranian file, including future possible violations of the nuclear agreement, still loom. Prime Minister Netanyahu may face a tempting situation in which President Trump will seek to reopen the JCPOA. Such an attempt, however, would rekindle political battles in the Congress, replete with familiar repercussions for Israel, and would most likely be opposed not only by Iran, but by America's partners to the negotiations as well. The Israeli Prime Minister's preferred alternative on this issue should thus be to focus on initiating an Israel-US dialogue concentrating on a response to any Iranian violation of the JCPOA.

Before the JCPOA was concluded, the strained personal and political bilateral relations between the Israeli and American leaderships likely damaged the potential for the two states to cooperate effectively on related issues. A long term consequence of the tense relations is Israel's 2015 decision to delay the talks over the renewal of the Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) on the next decade of US security assistance to Israel, in order to avoid the impression of accepting or conceding to the deal negotiated with Iran. Thus, Israel's policy line was to suspend the talks until after the negotiations with Iran were concluded.

The new MOU, signed in September 2016 following an extended period of negotiations, will govern US security assistance to Israel for the decade

that begins in 2018. Changes from previous agreements reflect the Obama administration's dissonance vis-à-vis Israel: fierce criticism of the Israeli government's conduct regarding the Iran deal (including Prime Minister Netanyahu's speech to Congress in March 2015) and the Israeli-Palestinian arena, versus the major foreign policy tenet of deep US commitment to Israel's security. In this state of affairs, the terms of the MOU include two prominent changes from previous agreements. The first is an Israeli commitment to refrain from approaching Congress directly with a request to increase the level of assistance following the conclusion of the MOU. This is significant since the revisiting of Israel's security needs on a frequent periodical basis (in addition to the ten-year deal) has not been an uncommon occurrence. This stipulation, if unchanged, will make it difficult to persuade US administration officials and lawmakers of a deteriorating security balance calling for adjustment in the US security assistance. The second change from the existing framework is a gradual annulment of the provision enabling Israel to spend a quarter of the amount on the purchase of goods manufactured by Israeli defense industries (which is a potentially detrimental condition for some of them).

It is of course possible that President Trump will review the MOU in light of political or security-related developments, or that Congress will decide to increase the level of America's security support beyond the administration's request, even absent Israel's request. In such a scenario, however, a certain amount of Israel-bashing can be expected, and therefore the Israeli government should avoid being perceived as initiating a move to change the MOU. Moreover, a move by the new US administration and especially the Department of Defense to improve the terms of the MOU is preferable to a similar initiative by Congress. For its part, Israel should engage the new US administration in dialogue regarding the Qualitative Military Edge (QME) that could be negatively affected, in the event that the United States or other powers forge new military deals with Israel's regional neighbors.

The second issue that contributed to the erosion of the bilateral relations during the Obama term, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, has in fact been a major stumbling block in US-Israel relations since 1967, notwithstanding the expansion of cooperation between the two states in defense, science, trade, and other fields. In this respect, the Obama administration has not

deviated significantly from a longstanding pattern of heavy US criticism regarding two issues: Israel's settlement enterprise and what is perceived as excessive Israeli military force in dealing with Palestinian acts of terror. The tense relations between Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Obama, however, seem to have set a precedent in their long duration. It is no secret that the Obama administration, and especially Secretary of State John Kerry, invested extensive efforts in the Israeli-Palestinian channel during the second half of the President's term, and American officials involved in the process did not hide their sense of Israel's intransigence and their ascribing Israel at least partial responsibility for the failure of the efforts. Simultaneously, however, it would be wrong to accuse the Obama administration of being substantially more critical of Israel in comparison to previous administrations.

Notwithstanding official US criticism regarding Israel's policies toward the Palestinians, throughout President Obama's term the United States vetoed – or when necessary, threatened to veto – draft resolutions in the UN Security Council aiming to create a new legal basis for resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict other than Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338. Extensive discourse whether this policy could be subject to change in the immediate period before the new administration is inaugurated in January 2017 is yet another poignant indication of the deterioration of mutual trust between the Israeli and incumbent US leaderships. Yet regardless of America's UN policy line in the final months of President Obama's term, the Israeli government would do well to propose pragmatic ideas toward ending the Israeli-Palestinian deadlock, including seeking to reaffirm the United States positions put forth in President Bush's letter of April 24, 2004 to Israeli Prime Minister Sharon concerning future borders and the resolution of the Palestinian refugee issue. This is based on the assumption that the incoming Republican administration will be more comfortable adopting ideas cultivated by a former Republican administration, rather than those advocated by President Clinton or President Obama.

Finally, it is during President Obama's term that an important base for the bilateral relations, i.e., the notion that the two nations have "shared values," appears to have eroded with the perceived weakening of Israel's democratic ethos. Surveys show continued American support for Israel among conservatives, with liberals displaying more ambivalence and a

greater inclination to view the Palestinian plight as analogous to apartheid. The Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions (BDS) civil society campaign, which is by now widespread on American campuses, feeds on this rhetoric and thus, despite its lack of significant impact on the two states' bilateral relations to date, should not be dismissed lightly.

Relations between Israel and the American Jewish Community

The 1967 Six Day War played a pivotal role in the relations between Israel and the American Jewish community. The war ushered in an era of close bilateral political activity centered on increasing the United States role in the Middle East in general and vis-à-vis Israel in particular. At the same time, 1967 sowed the seeds of American discontent with Israel, and these seeds have blossomed in recent years.

All US presidents and administrations have adopted the spirit and content of UN Security Council Resolution 242, which the US co-authored and which passed in November 1967, and stipulates Israel's withdrawal from territories occupied in 1967 in return for peace. In the domestic aftermath of the 1967 war, Israel's religious parties adopted a nationalist-based agenda advocating retention of the Biblical areas of Judea and Samaria (the West Bank) as integral parts of Israel. Following the political shift that resulted from the 1977 general Israeli elections, these national religious parties became vital parts of consecutive right wing coalitions, enabling them to push their dual agenda, which fuels tension between significant parts of the American Jewish community and Israel.

For decades after the Six Day War, the American Jewish community refrained from engaging in a discussion regarding the 1967 borders, essentially adopting the Israeli approach. In recent years, however, pro-Israel Jewish groups advocating for an end to the conflict with the Palestinians at the cost of withdrawal from most of the land occupied in 1967 and halting settlement building have become active in the US. The erosion of the conviction that the Jewish communities in Israel and the US share human, religious, and political values may have harmful implications, in that the linkage between the two communities underlies support for Israel among the broader American public as well as among members of Congress. Another factor influencing

American support for Israel has to do with the almost instinctive understanding that the unwritten alliance between Israel and the US serves the interests of both parties. The active involvement of the American Jewish community in US political arenas has contributed to this support far beyond the Jewish community's actual demographic size. A change in the perception that the American Jewish community identifies itself with the Jewish nation at large and with Israel in particular is therefore bound to have harmful repercussions for Israel.

In acknowledging the importance of the bond between the world's two largest Jewish communities, the Israeli government, political parties, and NGOs should consider the wider implications that the bilateral relations have for Israel, beyond the Israeli domestic arena. As such, Israel's political echelon should pursue specific moves, e.g., a symbolic move such as a trip to Washington by Israel's President in order to meet with major Jewish communities in the US. On the practical level, there could be a periodical forum in the US in which the entire Israeli government will convene with heads of American Jewish organizations.

Looking Ahead

The Middle East that President Trump will encounter is dramatically different from the region that President Obama sought to engage in his Cairo speech during his first year in office. The new realities in the region, many of which do not involve Israel directly, will affect Israel's strategic standing in the future. Whether the United States slowly withdraws or remains cautiously engaged in the region, it will continue to be a key international and regional actor. Israel ought to embark on a fresh start in its relations with the new US administration and present it with a comprehensive analysis of major regional developments (including in Iran), and proposals for regional economic, political, and security cooperation (soft and hard). Since it is unclear how the US policies vis-à-vis the Israeli-Palestinian conflict will evolve, Israel should carefully monitor potential provocative and escalatory actions, taking all possible scenarios into account and weighing the long term implications of its short term policies.