

# Israel-United States Relations

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As the Trump administration approaches the start of its second year in office, relations between Israel and the United States are complex. They reflect close ties between the leaders and the security and intelligence systems; relative weakness in some key national institutions; a decline in US influence in the Middle East; the reluctant involvement of the US in the crisis in East Asia; a rise in the influence of other superpowers in the global system at US expense; growing polarization in the political systems in both Israel and the United States, while the Israeli government inclines toward the American right wing; a widening rift between Israel and most American Jews; and ongoing challenges for Israel and American Jewry on the issues of delegitimization and anti-Semitism.

This comes as the Middle East has reached a new stage in the regional upheaval of the past seven years – the war in Syria is subsiding, Iranian influence is growing and moving closer to the Israeli borders, the Islamic State has reverted to a non-territorial configuration while continuing to threaten regional regimes and populations, and there is an increasing convergence of interests between Israel and pragmatic Sunni regimes, although the potential of this convergence is still limited by the dead end and the negative trends in the Palestinian arena.

Against this background, Israel must work to develop and deepen a network of ties with the United States, both by sector – governments, companies, organizations, and peoples – and by types of activity – political, security, economic, cultural, social, and artistic. It should direct its dialogue with the United States to tackle the new set of threats and emerging opportunities;

make a significant, systematic, and sincere effort to strengthen the ties between the people of Israel and the Jews of the United States; and build new, updated foundations for the relations between the two communities, with the emphasis on the younger generation on both sides of the Atlantic.

In recent decades Israel and the United States have enjoyed a very close bilateral relationship, based on shared values and interests, and encompassing leaderships, government systems, foreign and defense establishments, and business, technological, and cultural sectors. There have also been close links between communities and civil society elements, with a special role for the United States Jewish community. For Israel, there is no substitute for American support, which is a primary strategic national security asset.

This article assesses the relations between Israel and the United States against a background of deep and rapid changes in the international system, the Middle East, the domestic politics of the two countries, their government systems, and the situation of their leaders. The article proposes central principles to promote Israeli objectives by strengthening the bilateral relationship.

### **The Trump Era: Running the World in 140 Characters**

Above all, 2017 was marked by the arrival of a new administration in the United States, led by President Donald Trump, who brought to the White House an outlook, group of associates, and style completely different from anything Washington, let alone the world at large, has known until now. The President's world view challenges some of the United States' core values and anchors in the international system – institutions, agreements, and alliances – with behavior characterized by impulsiveness and uncertainty.

The current American administration suffers in part from a deliberate weakening by the President of government institutions and agencies, due to significant lapses in staffing and unprecedented turnover, in terms of scope and speed, of important positions in his immediate circle. Joining the problems of governance in the administration's first year are problems of internal legitimacy, mainly due to ongoing investigations around the question of Russian involvement in the presidential elections, and Russia's contacts with the President and his team. Moreover, although President Trump has defined policy objectives for his administration regarding some

issues, including in foreign affairs, in most cases, although a year has passed, no detailed policy or overall strategy has been formulated to achieve the defined goals.

The President's world view is founded on the principle of "America first," which involves mainly looking at the world through the prism of narrow national interest, with the emphasis on economic goals. It is fed by the desire to be free of the burden of running the world, and certainly avoiding taking any responsibility for the innumerable problems around the globe. Trump seeks to strengthen America from within, particularly with economic growth engines, in a way that projects power to the outside world without being drawn into complex and expensive foreign missions. At least at this stage, it looks as if America is trying to withdraw gradually from global missions requiring leadership and extensive resources, excluding issues that it identifies as having supreme national or security interest – such as North Korea, and until recently, the Islamic State. Presumably these will be the defining features of this presidency and administration in the coming years.

Against this background, it is possible to identify gradual movement in the balance between the powers, where Russia and China, each in its own way, strive to tilt the international order in their favor, while weakening the United States. China, which is strong and growing stronger, has a complicated relationship with the United States marked by partnership, competition, and rivalry around their global influence, mainly at the economic domain. At the same time, their military establishments see each other as a possible and perhaps even probable enemy of reference. For its part, Russia, in spite of its relative weakness and gradual decline, is exploiting the American convergence to promote its own objectives and influence in Eastern Europe and the Middle East, largely through military means and cognitive measures.

Israel's ongoing understandings and coordination with Russia have become more important with the increase of Russian influence in the Middle East in general and Syria and Lebanon in particular. Israel has growing commercial relations with China in non-security fields. Neither power grants nor is expected to grant consistent political support to Israel in the international arena. Nevertheless, Israel has a clear interest in strengthening relations with both powers, even though it must also be careful not to harm

American interests and must certainly be removed from any developing hostility between the powers.

On foreign issues, most American attention in 2017 was directed at the Korean peninsula, which is emerging as the most serious and urgent national security problem that the administration will face in the near future, and perhaps longer. The focus on North Korea is expected to reduce the attention and investment directed toward other areas, including the Middle East; affect the image of United States power; and serve as a reference point for key issues related to Israel, such as the Iranian nuclear threat.

At this stage in the Middle East, the level of expectations is commensurate with the level of disappointment. It is clear that notwithstanding the goals defined by the President – defeating the Islamic State, handling Iran’s negative influence and growing regional power, and striving for the “ultimate deal” in the Israel-Palestinian conflict – and notwithstanding the time and attention devoted to the region, the administration has still not formulated a clear, overall, and coordinated strategy on the main issues. Actions on the ground also fail to match the actors’ expectations, especially among United States allies, of more significant US involvement in the region.

In the background, the US political system and the American public still bear the trauma of prolonged, failed military campaigns in Iraq and Afghanistan. There is a broad internal consensus against the United States being drawn into similar military campaigns, and in the foreseeable future it is reasonable to expect that the US administration, irrespective of who is at the helm, will seek to avoid such situations. At the end of the current campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria, the United States is likely to withdraw some of its ground and other forces and reduce its physical presence in the Middle East. Once the dust settles, it will be clear that the United States is leaving the Syrian arena to the Russian superpower and the Turkish and Iranian regional powers.

However, the situation in Iraq and Syria, as in other parts of the Middle East, is far from quiet and stable, in terms of security and politics, and additional moves and resources will certainly be needed for reconstruction and the restoration of normal life. The potential for crises in the Middle East with consequences for the whole world, particularly the export of terror, refugees, and migrants, will make it very hard for the United States to leave

the stage completely, however much it might want to. The United States was and remains the main superpower that has the ability to lead important processes that will shape the Middle East, whether in times of war or in times of stability and order. On the other hand, the interest and ability of the Trump administration to do so over the coming year is in doubt.

Israel has a clear interest in the continued American presence and influence in the region. It looks to the United States to provide backup and support for its moves; to preserve its political and military freedom to take action to promote its strategic objectives while removing the threats it faces, above all the threat from Iran and its allies; and to promote cooperation and dialogue between Israel and other countries in the region.

### **Israel-United States Relations: Protected or Challenged?**

The absence of clear US policy in the Middle East, together with the weakness of the supporting institutions in Washington and Jerusalem, makes it difficult to promote a coordinated strategy. An ever-growing list of dilemmas challenges the ability of both governments to learn and act jointly in response to the burning issues in the immediate term, as well as the important issues in the medium and long terms.

Relations between the leaders themselves – Netanyahu and Trump – are perceived to be very good, although it is difficult to assess their real quality or to predict their future developments. So far, President Trump has seemed very sympathetic to Israel, as shown by his visit to Israel, his meetings with Prime Minister Netanyahu, and his public pronouncements, including the historic announcement recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. On the other hand, it is doubtful whether he will pay much attention in the long run to issues affecting Israel, and it is particularly hard to believe that he will demonstrate patience and tolerance if and when the processes drag on, and conflicts of interest come to the surface. Therefore, it is important to strengthen the relations by building on a rich fabric of government systems, and not only on the personal relations between the leaders.

Particularly important is American support for Israel in the international arena, and notably in the UN institutions, where US Ambassador Nikki Haley is working to balance attitudes to Israel in the Security Council, in the Human Rights Council, and in other institutions, by means of severe criticism and

concrete steps against the anti-Israel bias that has characterized these bodies for so many years. However, at this stage it is too early to assess whether it will be possible to achieve a fundamental change in Israel's status in these international forums.

The polarization of internal politics in both countries, and the warm embrace Trump receives from Israel – particularly striking against the strong opposition he arouses among many within the United States – make it hard for Israel to remain a bipartisan issue in the United States, as it was over most decades. In the long run, this situation could have serious consequences for relations between the two countries and for the vital support Israel receives from the United States.

The bilateral relations rest on several foundations. Apart from the shared interests, which could change over time, there are two more fundamental bases – shared values and the support of United States Jewry. While Israel is building stronger ties with conservative communities and leaders in the United States, such as the Evangelical communities, Israeli policy regarding the Palestinians, religion and state, and civilian society has widened the gap between Israel and large sections of the progressive and liberal camps in the American public and in the Democratic party, including many American Jews. In 2017 these gaps and ensuing tensions between Israel and American Jews came into sharp relief, particularly in view of Israeli government decisions on the issues of conversion and the Western Wall area, and certain statements by senior government officials. This tense relationship affects the ability and willingness of American Jewish communities to continue their broad support for Israel and influence the further development of the special relationship, which is so essential for Israel. More than once Israel has become a source of conflict that divides the support of American Jewish communities.

The United States, as in many other places worldwide, has seen efforts to delegitimize the State of Israel, with the BDS movement at the forefront of a campaign to undermine Israel's international standing and its status as a legitimate expression of the Jewish right to self-determination. It aims to challenge US support of Israel, and drive a wedge between Israel and Jewish communities. Direct BDS attempts in the United States toward a boycott and sanctions on Israel and withdrawal of investments have so far

failed and have even prompted effective counter-legislation (which has been passed by 23 states, with others possibly joining them). However, in the long run the indirect consequences of these efforts to influence hearts and minds against Israel are harmful and spreading, and arouse fears for the future, against a background of increasing anti-Semitic incidents in the US and elsewhere. Another source of concern is the demographic electoral shift in the United States, principally the growing numbers of ethnic minorities and liberals, and the possible impact of this shift on the erosion of support for Israel in the long term.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The long relationship between Israel and the United States is based on shared values and interests, anchored by a broad, stable fabric of contacts, activities, and partnerships. Therefore, in structural terms, it is essential to continue widening and deepening the rich network of contacts between Israel and the United States in all areas and sectors – political, security, economic, business, technological, cultural, academic – and at all levels – leaders, establishments, peoples, and communities – with a bi-partisan base that is as wide as possible.

In this framework, there must be an ongoing dialogue with representatives of both main US parties, with a special emphasis on retaining and rehabilitating the relations with members of the Democratic party. Particularly in this sensitive period, however, it is essential not to be flagrantly involved in the stormy internal American political game, or push the US toward action beyond the boundaries of its own national interests (for example, in the Iranian context). It is important to highlight at every opportunity how Israel stands alongside America and underscore Israel's value as an asset, while avoiding any unnecessary friction or the development of the image of Israel as a liability on US foreign policy (particularly the Palestinian issue and the wider regional context).

In the long term, retaining and broadening American sympathy and basic support for Israel is critically important, first and foremost through an ongoing investment in the basis of this support among the American public, and no less important, by developing support bases among additional groups, mainly among ethnic minorities and liberal audiences. Investment

of this type requires integrating the activity of the State of Israel with that of Jewish community organizations in the United States.

Strengthening ties between the Jews in the United States and Israel, the two largest Jewish communities in the world, is vital for the future of the Jewish people. American Jews stand at the forefront of the struggle against delegitimization of Israel and anti-Semitism, and have a very positive influence on Israel-US relations. In this framework, Israel must improve its channels with United States Jews and show more sensitivity to their needs and the issues that are important to them, particularly in the field of religion and state, and the struggle against anti-Semitism. Maintaining the character of Israel as a Jewish democratic state and its humanist-liberal values is vital first and foremost for Israel's identity, but these are also the basis of values that are shared with the United States in general, and US Jews in particular. Striving to end the conflict and achieve peace with the Palestinians is another issue that concretely affects Israel, but also has significant implications for Israel's relations with US Jews, as the Palestinian issue is a charged political lever. The response to these challenges requires much better cooperation between Israelis and Americans, both Jewish and non-Jewish, and governments and civilian elements, in a coordinated, long term campaign.

It is important to maintain frequent and thorough strategic discussions between foreign and defense policy officials from both countries in order to formulate a shared assessment, reach understandings, and identify areas of agreement and disagreement. In view of the relative weakness of the State Department, the Israeli Foreign Ministry, and the National Security Councils of both countries, ties between their security, military, and intelligence establishments acquire more importance, along with the potential importance of other channels of communication, including Track II channels led by think tanks and research institutes in both countries.

In the dialogue between Israel and the United States there must be a clear definition of objectives and needs in the Middle East, with the focus on the following issues:

*Iran:* Notwithstanding the strong rhetoric from the US President and senior members of the administration regarding Iran in general and the nuclear agreement and negative regional Iranian influence in particular, it is important to understand the differences between Israel and the United States



on this issue. The threat that Iran poses to Israel and some other countries in the region is quite different from the threat it poses to the United States. There are also fundamental differences in the options for response, attitudes towards taking action, and preferred timetables.

However, the JCPOA has created an important window of opportunity for Israel and the United States to discuss thoroughly the challenges of the long campaign against Iran, in the nuclear context and also in terms of regional influence. Such discussions would do well to focus on the following issues: improved intelligence capabilities; supervision and enforcement of the nuclear agreement; preparation of conditions and scenarios for the sunset provisions; creation of the requisite future military and diplomatic capabilities; formulation of a parallel campaign against Iran in other fields, with the emphasis on surface to surface missiles and advanced conventional military capabilities, weapons proliferation, and Quds Force activity; and the containment of Iran's nefarious influence, both direct and indirect, waged by its proxies and allies in the regional space.

This is the time to formulate the mechanisms of the joint discussions for continuous development of knowledge and strategy formulation for the long term. Inter alia there should be a joint investigation of how Iran has been handled so far, in order to learn lessons for the future, while also investigating together the development of the nuclear crisis with North Korea, to see if there are any relevant lessons for the Iranian context.

*Syria and Lebanon:* With the end of the current campaign against the Islamic State, it is important that Israel and the United States coordinate their strategy on Syria and Lebanon. This discussion should focus on the possible influence of the United States on the political arrangements in the area, the ability of civilian measures to shape and stabilize Syria in general (the US) and areas near the Golan Heights in particular (Israel with US help and in coordination with Jordan), and the role of military force in defining the rules of the game with other actors in the theater. Positions should also be coordinated regarding Lebanon, with an effort to seek opportunities for possible moves, with the emphasis on political processes, to limit the rise of Hezbollah and intensify political, economic, military, and legal pressures on the organization.

*Palestinians:* The United States is expected to launch a political initiative in early 2018, although at this stage its content is not clear. To the extent possible, Israel would do well to influence the formulation of such an initiative so that it can respond positively, in the hope that it includes better conditions for a future settlement with the Palestinians, and perhaps even renew the political process. Since there is little hope of reaching a final agreement on a permanent settlement to end the conflict in the next few years, Israel can try to guide the United States initiative toward a definition of the essential parameters for such a settlement, and set in motion a gradual, ongoing process of creating the conditions for the successful implementation of an agreement in the more distant future, with the emphasis on economic and governance-related elements and creation of positive momentum and a horizon of hope and security for both Israelis and Palestinians.

*Region:* The United States has a central role to play in shaping the regional architecture, built around a coalition of moderate Sunni states with bridges to encourage coordination and cooperation between them and Israel. On this aspect, the US can work to integrate Israel into multilateral regional frameworks and promote strategic and operational collaborations in view of the regional challenges, with the emphasis on the Iranian threat, the Islamic State, and aspects of stability and governance.

*Superpowers:* The changing relationships between the three large powers and Israel's relations with each of them highlight the importance of an intensive dialogue between Israel and the United States about each of the other powers. On Russia, talks can examine its actions and policy in the Middle East, and the patterns of its political and intelligence interventions in the political systems of the US and other Western democracies. As for China, Israel should maintain continuous strategic coordination with the US, to avoid potential damage to its relations with each of these two powers as a result of negative developments in the competition and rivalry between them.