

Trump and Israel: Big-League Issues and Huge Repercussions

Written by Jonathan Sciarcon

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JONATHAN SCIARCON, JAN 2 2017

Even until a few months ago, many academics wrongly believed that Donald Trump had little chance to win the US general election. Many commentators in Israel, too, believed likewise. The outcome, today, stands to the contrary. Now that Trump has been elected, this essay aims to speculate certain key trends in US-Israeli relations. It will focus on five main aspects: Trump's relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, Israeli settlement construction, the Iran Deal (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action), liberal American Jewish support for Israel, and the bi-partisan support for Israel in the United States. Trump's presidency will likely embolden the Israeli right-wing and continue the distancing toward Israel that has been seen among liberal American Jews, which could have long term ramifications for Democratic support of Israel and potentially spell the end of all the talk on the two-state solution.

During his two terms in office, President Obama has clashed repeatedly with Benjamin Netanyahu on issues related, but not limited, to Israeli settlement construction, the Iran Deal, and US military aid to Israel. While in some ways, US-Israeli relations have been closer than ever during this period, many analysts view the Obama-Netanyahu relationship as marking a generational low-point in the relationship between a US president and an Israeli prime minister. One would have to look back to the relationship between George H.W. Bush and Yitzhak Shamir in the early 1990s to find a suitable comparison. Thus, on the face of it, Benjamin Netanyahu came out of the US presidential election as a big winner, having outlasted Obama and now getting to look forward to, after having served as prime minister with two Democratic presidents (Bill Clinton and Obama), working with a Republican president.

While it is likely that Trump and Netanyahu will get along well with one another, the possibility of the Trump administration's positive views of Israeli settlement construction may work to complicate Netanyahu's position as the head of Israel's government. Israeli journalist Barak Ravid recently argued that if the Trump administration follows through on its pledge to look the other way regarding Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank, it could place Netanyahu in a difficult situation as he has long argued that he would green-light further and faster expansion if only the White House would allow it. Now that the White House might allow this, it could expose Netanyahu to criticism, and perhaps even political challenges, both from politicians inside and outside his own party from within his governing coalition. By 2015, the Obama administration had come to view Netanyahu as a spineless politician only concerned with his own political survival. Under a Trump presidency, the world may find out whether Netanyahu is willing to stand up to his coalition's far right-wing policies and an expansion of settlement construction – that many in Israel's center view as counterproductive and even suicidal – or whether he cares primarily about his own political survival.

Another challenge for Netanyahu, and Israel in general, is the possible abrogation or at least modification of the Iran Deal. Although the deal is largely unpopular in Israel, it does have the firm support of many former, and presumably many current, Israeli defense and intelligence officials. If the deal is formally abrogated or if new sanctions on Iran lead to a *de facto* abrogation of the deal, this could lead Iran to restart its nuclear program, which would, in turn, put further pressure on Israel's government to consider military action. As new sanctions are not likely to enjoy support from Russia, China, or most of the European Union, they would also likely lead to a diminishing of US diplomatic influence. This would also harm the security and standing of an Israel that counts on both the US' diplomatic support and its ability to pressure its allies into supporting, or at least to avoid publicly criticizing, Israel. It is worth reiterating

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that any diminishment of American diplomatic power will harm Israel's long-term interests, especially if Israel continues to expand settlements and maintain its military occupation in the West Bank, Gaza, Golan, and East Jerusalem.

It is also worth considering what the new Trump administration would mean for the future of liberal American Jewish support for Israel. Trump appears to have won about a quarter of the general American Jewish vote and under twenty percent of the non-Orthodox American Jewish vote. While this is similar to the performance of past Republican candidates, the liberal American Jewish community's posture toward Israel is arguably different than it was even eight years ago.

During George W. Bush's presidency, American Jews may have largely opposed their president's general foreign and domestic policies, but they largely supported his steadfast support of Israel's right-wing governments despite policy disagreements. Since then, much has changed. *J Street*, a liberal pro-Israel advocacy group has emerged as a challenger to AIPAC and established itself as a key player in the American Jewish community. Its growth has helped liberal American Jews become more confident in publicly criticizing Israel as such individuals now have to worry less about being accused of being self-hating Jews.

A study of American Jewish attachment to Israel has shown that there has been a significant decline in overall support for Israel among the younger generation, even though younger Jews have long been more critical of Israel than their older counterparts. In the past, many American Jews believed they shared political, social, and cultural values with Israeli Jews in addition to sharing religious or ethnic identity. As Israeli society has become more conservative over the years, non-orthodox American Jews have become increasingly liberal and secular meanwhile. This is notable as in the past, American Jews were often willing to give Israel the benefit of doubt, at least partly because they believed that while their Israeli counterparts shared their cultural values, Israel faced pressures that American Jews did not.

Therefore, while in the past, American governmental acquiescence to Israeli settlement construction was often met with silence from much of the liberal American Jewish community, it is no longer the case. If the Trump administration enhances the power of the Israeli right-wing, then more American Jews are likely to conclude, as many academics, international journalists, and Palestinians already have, that the peace process is a charade and that the divide between Israel and liberal American Jewry is too wide to bridge. If the Trump administration were to acquiesce to an Israeli annexation of a part or all of the West Bank, then such a conclusion would almost be certain.

One direct outcome of a shift in liberal American Jewish support away from Israel would be the erosion of bi-partisan support for Israel. Now, this would not happen overnight largely because older American Jewish pro-Israeli donors are unlikely to abandon Israel and will continue to have the ear of the Democrats' elderly congressional leadership. However, American Jewish support for Israel has been one of the, if not the only, major foundation of overall Democratic support for Israel. Thus, any shift in this support from the former group will significantly impact the latter's positions.

Linked to the issue of weakening Democratic support for Israel is the potential impact of an end to the 'two-state solution' on Democratic policy. Since the mid-1990s, the Democratic Party has been committed to at least the rhetoric of the 'two-state solution' of the Israel-Palestine conflict. Trump has already showed contradiction in this regard. A consequent Israeli annexation of a part or all of the West Bank, or even an announcement by an Israeli government to abandon the peace process, would send shockwaves through the Democratic Party. It would embolden Palestinians to pressurize Democrats to distance themselves from the state held responsible for the end of the peace process. Thereon, a party that depends on support from younger, progressive, urban voters – including Jews – who are staunchly opposed to the occupation would be tempted to abandon Israel.

An Israel that loses bi-partisan support in the US is an Israel that ceases to enjoy its 'special relationship' with the world's largest military and economic power. At that point, although the most recent deal will last a decade, Israel would likely see its aid reduced in future. More importantly, Israel may lose unconditional US diplomatic support at the UN.

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One should have a better idea about what Trump's actual policies toward Israel and the Palestinians will be by the summer of 2017, at which point, it may be useful to reassess post-election predictions.

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