

President Trump and the Middle East: Views from Israel

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Brief Analysis

Two Israeli statesmen discuss their country's strategic situation and relations with the United States in the Trump era.

On January 30, Tzachi Hanegbi and Itamar Rabinovich addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Hanegbi is Israel's cabinet minister for regional cooperation and a Knesset member from the Likud Party. Rabinovich is a former Israeli ambassador to Washington and founding president of the Israel Institute. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.

TZACHI HANEGBI

Notwithstanding the occasional serious dispute, the U.S.-Israel relationship was relatively stable for decades, regardless of which party was in power in either country. That changed with the Obama administration. Several concrete aspects of the relationship remained strong, such as intelligence sharing, military cooperation, support for Israel in international forums, and the memorandum of understanding on security assistance, which will bring Israel \$38 billion over the next ten years. Nonetheless, the animosity between Obama and Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu exceeded Israeli expectations, particularly on the settlements issue and the Iran nuclear deal.

This degree of friction is not expected to continue during the Trump administration. Whereas Obama condemned all settlement construction, even in less contentious areas, Donald Trump has stayed quiet on the issue so far. Obama's efforts also forced Palestinian officials into a more hardline stance, since they did not want their people to see them

as more compromising than the United States. Trump, by contrast, appears to understand where Israel stands, and officials are hopeful about working with him.

When Trump and Netanyahu hold their upcoming meeting, settlements and Palestinian issues are unlikely to be high on the agenda. Instead, they will probably focus on Israel's relationships with Sunni states and future enforcement of the Iran deal.

Indeed, Israel's primary interest is to strengthen its ties with the Sunni Arab world by making their ongoing private cooperation more public. These relationships are partly based on the fact that they share common enemies: Iran and the Islamic State. By increasing their public cooperation, they can establish a stronger base from which to combat these threats, while also providing cover for the Palestinians to retreat from their maximalist negotiating positions and come to a rapprochement with Israel.

Regarding the Iran nuclear deal, Israel and President Trump both understand the agreement's faults. In their view, the United States squandered its formidable leverage and produced a substandard deal; as a result, Iran will be just weeks away from nuclear breakout if it adheres completely to the deal for the next eight years, since some key provisions expire then. Iran is Israel's biggest strategic threat, and officials are hopeful that the new administration understands these concerns so that they can work together constructively to protect their mutual security.

Regarding the Syria war, Iran would be weakened if Bashar al-Assad were ousted from power, since Tehran has invested heavily in propping him up. Yet this is a purely theoretical matter for Israel, since it will not intervene extensively in Syria. Instead, the United States should consider acknowledging Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights. There is no longer a state of Syria to Israel's north, only the Assad regime and other terrorist groups, so the longstanding dispute over the Golan is currently moot.

Finally, Trump's promise to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem echoes that of several previous administrations, though Trump may actually follow through. This measure would not be out of left field -- in 1995, the U.S. Congress passed a law declaring that the embassy should be moved, though it included a waiver provision that has been signed every six months since then. The measure would also correct a historical abnormality. When the United States put its embassy in Tel Aviv in 1948, Israelis did not outwardly protest because the bilateral relationship was not as strong then as it is now, but times have changed. Moreover, the move could be carried out without necessarily validating Israel's claim to sovereignty over all of Jerusalem.

ITAMAR RABINOVICH

The U.S.-Israel relationship has never existed in a vacuum; it has always been part of a broader regional strategy. Israeli leaders have long sought to prove that in addition to sharing fundamental American values, their country is an important strategic asset to the United States. That perception was enhanced after the September 11 attacks, when Israel was seen as an ally in the war on terror. It was also facilitated by strong personal relationships between leaders, particularly Bill Clinton-Yitzhak Rabin and George W. Bush-Ariel Sharon.

Yet Obama and Netanyahu had a poor relationship, one exacerbated by fundamental differences in how they viewed the Middle East. Obama encouraged Israel to support the Arab Spring and spoke out harshly against settlements, two moves that were anathema to Netanyahu's worldview.

Meanwhile, the United States seemed to pursue a strategy of gradual retrenchment from the Middle East over the past eight years -- a policy that has been most evidently detrimental in Syria. The war there has enabled Russia to become more engaged in the Middle East, while powerful local actors such as Turkey and Iran have become more involved in regional politics.

Amid all these changes, it is not yet clear how the Trump administration envisions its role in the broader Middle East.

Is a grand bargain with Russia possible, and would it entail appeasing Assad in Syria? How would Sunni Arabs react to such an agreement? One thing seems clear: the Sunni states would likely welcome greater U.S. involvement in the region.

As for the Palestinian issue, resolving it remains important to Israelis, in part because it affects their relationship with the rest of the world. To be sure, negotiating and implementing a final two-state solution is not possible right now, and failed talks would probably trigger backlash as in 2001. Yet an interim solution is possible if the Palestinians realize that the status quo is not actually a status quo, but rather a drift toward annexation. Agreeing to an interim solution would stop this drift, though it would not yet give them a state. If Netanyahu and the Palestinians are willing, the United States could play a role in mediating such a solution.

Another option is a regional solution, which Defense Minister Avigdor Liberman and other Israeli officials support. Agreement with the Palestinians is often viewed as a zero-sum game; if Palestinians gain, then Israelis lose. An accord with multiple Arab states would change that calculus, and it is more likely to succeed because broader diplomatic incentives could be offered and balanced among the countries.

Yet campaigning for U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over the Golan Heights would scuttle any regional efforts to resolve the Palestinian issue. The Arab public is wary of anything that smacks of annexation and wants to maintain the territorial integrity of all Arab states, even failed ones. Bringing up the Golan issue unilaterally would be detrimental to a regional peace effort.

Moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem would probably create similar complications. Israel's ties with Arab states exist only at the highest levels; they do not yet extend to the populations of these countries. Without the proper precautions, an embassy move could generate furor throughout the Arab world. To his credit, Trump has indicated a willingness to delay the move until it is studied further.

Israel's greatest threat remains Iran, so hopefully the United States will focus on strictly enforcing the nuclear deal rather than disavowing it, to ensure that Tehran does not build the capacity for a bomb. Deterring Iranian sponsorship of terrorism is also crucial.

Regarding the Syria war, Israel has acted responsibly by staying out of the conflict for the most part. Nevertheless, the prospect of Assad remaining in power is worse for Israel than the alternative -- not only for moral reasons, but also because it would constitute a victory for the coalition of Iran, Russia, and Hezbollah. Assad's continued presence also pushes the conflict zone closer to Israel, potentially embroiling both it and Jordan in the war.

This summary was prepared by Aryeh Mellman. ❖

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