

Between Now and January 2017: Three Fateful Tests for the U.S.-Israel Alliance

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The next president will have a rough start if the next fifteen months are marked by more U.S.-Israeli fighting over the root causes of violence with the Palestinians, unfettered Russian and Iranian military operations just north of the Israel-Syria border, and deepening holes in the Iran nuclear agreement.

The following are Dr. Satloff's remarks as prepared for delivery at the closing plenary of the Israeli-American Conference in Washington, DC.

Congratulations to the organizers and everyone at this important event. I especially want to congratulate your incoming chairman, a friend of long standing, the indefatigable Adam Milstein.

In just a few minutes, I have the privilege of introducing two outstanding congressmen -- and two great friends of Israel. But before then, the organizers gave me a few minutes just to myself, because I want to tell you how vital the next year is, how unusual the current situation is, and how dangerous the possibilities are for the U.S.-Israel alliance.

First, a note of context: It is difficult to understand how different this alliance is from virtually every other bilateral relationship America has in the world, and just about every other relationship between two friendly countries in the world. For all their friendship, the United States and Israel disagree on the most profound and fundamental issues. Let me remind you: they disagree on what should be the size of Israel; what should be the borders of Israel; and what should be the capital of Israel. It doesn't get more fundamental than that. But -- and here's the remarkable part -- over a tortuous half-century, they figured out how to agree to disagree. The result was a level of intimacy almost unprecedented in our history. Think Clinton-Rabin; think Bush-Sharon. It was bipartisan. And it was remarkable.

The past seven years have posed a new challenge. There is a lot of water under this bridge. A lot of responsibility to be shared for what has happened. Responsibility lies not solely in Washington; responsibility lies not solely in Jerusalem. It is important to recognize this. These seven years have seen new priorities for America in the Middle East. Part of that included rolling back the intimacy between America and Israel, making this relationship "more

normal" and "less special." A key part of this was based on what I call a new theory of the relationship.

What do I mean by a new theory? This is a theory that suggests that America could, on the one hand, have strong military, intelligence, and security relations with Israel and, on the other hand, have a political and strategic relationship that was strained and even torn. That is what I believe we have today.

Yes, it is true -- the military/security relationship between the United States and Israel is deeper and more far-reaching today than ever before. And yes, it is also true that the breach between the two leaderships on politics and strategy is deeper and more far-reaching than at any point in the last quarter-century. Just think back to the Iran nuclear debate, during which President Obama not only said the Iran deal was "good for America" -- an assessment I may disagree with but which is certainly legitimate for him to argue -- but also that it was "good for Israel." In fact, he persisted in this view over the objections of virtually the entire Israeli political system -- government and opposition alike. That was, in my view, unprecedented.

Friends, Israel's deterrence is not the sum of its guns, tanks, planes and missiles. Rather, Israel's deterrence is as much a reflection of how its adversaries view the strength of its alliances, especially how its adversaries see the power of its most important partnership. On that level, this distinction -- military/security relations on the one hand; political and strategic ties on the other hand -- is a false divide. The result, in my view, is a profound weakening of the strength not just of the partnership but of Israel's security.

Against this backdrop, it is important to look at three tests over the next year:

First, on Israel's home front: Will America stand side by side with Israel as it battles a resurgence of terror? This does not necessarily mean endorsing every political move Israel makes. It does mean, however, ensuring there is no daylight between Washington and Jerusalem on fighting terrorism and, just as important, on providing no rationale for terrorism, avoiding false moral equivalencies and back-handed justifications that have the effect of legitimizing willful violence.

Second, on the regional front: Will America sit idly by as the Russians and Iranians deploy to Syria -- that is, to the border of Israel? Since 1972, preventing such deployments has been a fundamental principle of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Has that now changed? Is American acceptance of a Russian and Iranian military role on the border of Israel the "new normal"?

Third, on the strategic front: Today is Adoption Day, the day the Iran nuclear agreement begins to be implemented. Here the question is whether America will take the steps necessary to fix some of the worst flaws in the deal, flaws that even many Democratic senators and congressmen noted in the statements they issued when they voted, often grudgingly, to bow to the will of the president in accepting the deal. Or alternatively, will the president willingly bequeath to his successor a deal that he and every thinking person who has read the 158-page text knows has profound flaws?

I know there are many in this room who are already looking to January 2017 and the inauguration of a new president to address every one of these issues. My friends, that is a mistake. I repeat -- that is a mistake. Fifteen months is a very long time, especially in the Middle East. Fifteen months of U.S.-Israeli fighting over the root causes of violence with the Palestinians; fifteen months of unfettered Russian and Iranian military operations just north of the Israel-Syria border; fifteen months in which the holes in the Iran nuclear agreement become deeper and deeper -- all this would make it much more difficult for any new president to fix. So, we cannot wait -- we have to do all we can to effect change now -- press for it, work for it, organize for it. Speak up, speak out, do not wait. Act now.

Two of the people who will play a major role in any effort to bring about positive change in America's Middle East policy are here with me this morning. We will ask each of them about each of these topics. Please join me in welcoming Congressman Ed Royce of California, the chairman of the House Foreign Affairs Committee, and

Congressman Eliot Engel of New York, the ranking member on the House Foreign Affairs Committee.

Robert Satloff is executive director of The Washington Institute. ❖

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