



PERSPECTIVES

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The US Must Bolster its Global Credibility

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Frustration over government dysfunction was at the root of recent Arab upheavals, and it is now driving some of the changes taking place in Western democracies, including the US. The Trump administration will have to work hard to gain public trust, and to restore America's credibility as a superpower too – which was badly eroded during Obama's presidency. The new administration is likely to be friendlier to Israel than the outgoing one. Israel should be ready to tell all the president's men, as early as possible, which private and public understandings Israel prefers, which issues need more robust American involvement, and where Israel would prefer the US to take a step back.

If anyone had any doubt that the world is in the midst of a prolonged shockwave with no end in sight, the results of last Tuesday's US presidential race should provide all the necessary proof. The impossible has become fact, and democracy has again shown itself to be a volatile system which can lead to surprises.

We learned once again that tracking polls are suspect, and that public opinion is difficult to predict – not only in the Middle East, but also in California and New York. Perhaps it is time to suspend such polls, which almost invariably mislead the public.

A wise man told me recently that Western democracies are experiencing a crisis that is leading to the rise of extremist movements in Europe and non-mainstream candidates in the US. He explains this phenomenon as follows.

The public in these countries expects the state to provide more than it possibly can. There is no chance the state will be able to satisfy the public's demands without radically changing the system. When it becomes apparent that elected officials cannot change harsh realities – in other words, that campaign promises do not translate to the real world – public disappointment grows even further.

It is not only democracies that are experiencing massive backlash as their citizens respond to governmental failure to meet expectations. Dictatorships are experiencing this phenomenon as well. In democracies, this popular discontent is reflected on election day. In dictatorships, there are coups and bloodshed.

Frustration over government dysfunction was at the root of the unrest in the Arab world and the subsequent Arab upheavals, and it is now driving some of the changes taking place in Western democracies.

Brexit, the British referendum to leave the EU, saw Britons vote *en masse* against the London-based elite and in favor of divorcing the 28-member bloc. In the US, the Republican Party did not hide its aversion to Donald Trump, and the media and numerous cultural icons rallied to prevent his election and ensure the victory of Democratic presidential candidate Hillary Clinton. The vote in Trump's favor roundly contradicted the predictions made by the self-appointed leaders of public opinion.

The media played a key role in the run-up to the Brexit shock, as well as in Israel's general election in 2015 and Tuesday's elections in the US. In all three cases, the media proved to be quite detached from both public sentiment and reality.

Israel, Britain and the US have three different systems of democracy, and all three experienced this phenomenon. The disconnect between the media and the public is not healthy for democracy, as the public's faith in media fairness and objectivity is vital.

It is unclear what, if anything, can be done to tackle this problem. It is unlikely that government action would be the right approach.

The media, especially the classical media (print, radio and television), would be wise to do some soul-searching over the loss of its credibility, and with it, the loss of its ability to influence the public. This is true for Israel and the US alike.

For many Americans, President Barack Obama's term in office is coming to an end on a disappointing note. Much will be written about the man who shattered the racial glass ceiling, but he will also go down in history as a polarizing president whose tenure left American society the worse for wear.

The smear campaigns waged by both the Democrats and the Republicans during the 2016 presidential race reflected a deep rift and mutual loathing between two political cultures in the US. Obama's behavior did little to mitigate tensions. If anything, he probably made things worse.

One example was the nuclear deal with Iran. Obama completely ignored Congress – and, apparently, American public opinion – and signed an agreement he called the most important achievement of his administration. This is not how you foster consensus or build confidence in the country's political culture and institutions.

This should serve as an important lesson to democracies struggling with serious disagreements. Disputes should be resolved through compromise. Those in a

position to impose their opinions should give a little, so those holding the minority opinion do not feel completely ignored. It is also important not to make critical decisions without a solid majority.

In Israel, those who make tough decisions that defy public opinion are often lauded as "courageous leaders," especially if said decisions coincide with the positions expressed by the media and ignore the damage inflicted on society.

American society today is plagued by hatred that stems, at least in part, from ignoring the most important rule of all: the majority should not flaunt its decisions, and must not ignore the minority's protest. Israel would be wise to remember this lesson as well.

With a firm Republican hold on the House and Senate, things should be easier for President-Elect Trump. Nevertheless, the general hope in the US is that even though he has a majority, Trump will still see himself as "everyone's president," as he said in his acceptance speech, and that he will not shun the Democrats. By taking this approach, he can help to heal the rift.

There is one area where Trump will leave his mark for years to come: the US Supreme Court. The incoming administration will need to appoint judges to the bench, but in the US, that process involves confirmation hearings. Because Republicans control both the House and the Senate, they will be able to appoint conservative judges, which could tip the balance in the Supreme Court. This will affect the delicate sway the Court holds over the character of American society.

Trump's election reflects Americans' deep fear of immigrants, whom many in the US see as a threat to America's national character. The same is true for the UK, where much of the Brexit vote was driven by British concerns over EU immigration policies. For many Americans, this was a chance – perhaps the last chance – to delay this change.

Trump was carried to the White House by the neglect and abandonment felt by blue-collar Americans wary of the globalization they feel is pulling the rug out from under their feet.

There is another America outside New York and Washington, away from the bustling urban centers on the west and east coasts, and away from Ivy League universities – places the average American finds it difficult to reach without being from a wealthy family or an extraordinary genius.

The American dream has stalled, and Trump's victory reflects the public's desire to resuscitate it. It is no wonder this issue was raised in the president-elect's victory speech, and it is a worthy and difficult task.

What the new president's policies will be to address the issue is an open question. It is impossible to magically stop immigration, and there is little that can be done about the millions of illegal immigrants already living in the US. It is equally hard to see the US forfeiting the leading economic position globalization has given it,

especially in the fields of finance and technology. If Trump were to launch a trade war with the world, the US would be heavily affected.

These phenomena are not unique to the US. They are evident in Europe as well, and will affect next year's elections in Germany and France. Do the Brexit result and Trump's election herald a new historic direction in the international system with regard to immigration and economics? It is too early to tell, but the signs are stronger than ever.

I do not know how much the deterioration in the US's international standing affected the presidential election, but Trump clearly faces several tough tests with respect to foreign relations. The main problem is that the US has lost its credibility as a superpower. Obama explained time and again why he did not believe superpower status was important, but in international affairs, this status means a great deal.

Restoring its superpower standing is the only way the US can continue to alleviate global tension and prevent the deterioration of relationships in which it has a vested interest.

The feeling that the US has abandoned the world and cannot be counted on is shared by its allies worldwide, including in the Far East, where those allies must contend with China's aggression. Trump will face tough questions on the South China Sea, but also on Russia's growing power in the Middle East. Dealing with these issues, especially given the cuts in US defense spending, will not be easy.

As for Israel-US relations, it is not yet known whom the president-elect will name to the critical positions of secretary of state, defense secretary and national security adviser. Trump will most likely also replace the heads of various organizations with which Israel maintains important ties. Until it is clear with whom he plans to surround himself, it is difficult to formulate an opinion.

Trump has basic sympathy for Israel's needs. He knows and has worked with many people who are familiar with these needs and can ensure Israel's voice is heard. The next two months, during which Trump will shape policy and formulate his team, will be important for the creation of working relationships that can influence that policy.

Israel has several important advantages. It is, first of all, a stable country. It is not asking the US to send troops to its aid, and it cannot be faulted for not paying a price for its own defense. The financial aid that Israel receives from the US, considerable as it may be, will be reverted back to American defense industries in a few years. Israel was wise to agree to that stipulation in the recent defense aid deal, and it would be difficult for anyone to complain about it.

The new administration is likely to be harder on Iran, even if it does not renege on the 2015 nuclear deal. What remains to be seen is how much Trump will be willing to invest to prevent the Shiite power from becoming stronger, especially given its ties with Russia – which, like Iran, is heavily involved in Syria.

The new administration will likely to be less strict with Israel regarding the Judea and Samaria settlement enterprise. This was a red flag for Obama, who made settlements and any construction in east Jerusalem a key issue in Israel-US relations. That was a big mistake. One can only hope the new administration will compromise with Israel on the issue, especially if the government remains committed to the two-state solution.

There is a long and complex learning curve ahead of us. Everything will slow down until the new administration feels secure enough to decide its strategy. Trump's first steps as president will be crucial. They will need to convey to the world that it is not just the rhetoric that has changed, but also the willingness to invest and make sacrifices to protect the interests of both the US and its allies around the world.

Israel should gear up to tell all the president's men, as early as possible, which private and public understandings Israel prefers, which issues need more robust American involvement, and where Israel would prefer the US to take a step back.

The US will continue to be Israel's most important – some would say only – mainstay, but Israel must strive to improve its relations with the new administration. As solid as Israel-U.S. relations were during the outgoing administration, there is room for improvement. The time to start is now.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in *Israel Hayom* on November 11, 2016.

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