EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Barack Obama has eroded the US’s superpower status and is leaving behind a far more dangerous world than the one he inherited. A Trump administration gives Israel reason to be optimistic, although it must bear in mind that he is a very shrewd businessman.

One cannot help but admire the American public, which eight years ago elected Barack Obama as the country’s first African-American president. The genuine elation and joy in the streets of New York City, where I was when he was sworn in, reflected the change American society had undergone.

Obama assumed office with a very solid worldview. He believed many of the challenges the US was facing globally stemmed from its forceful conduct and ability to impose its will on other nations. In his view, many of Washington’s international failures stemmed from the fact that it had not tried to improve ties with its adversaries.

This drove Obama to visit the Middle East – not including Israel – in 2009 and deliver his famous Cairo speech. He believed that addressing the people from the heart would be reciprocated. This was also the logic that drove his attempt to promote a new rapport with Russia.

Eight years later, it is hard to say the world has repaid Obama in kind. The world is not a better, more democratic place; nor does it favor the US in any way. This is especially true in the Middle East, but the sentiment is shared elsewhere as well.

Moreover, the US rollback on its role in different regions has made its allies wary of their aggressive neighbors. This is so much the case that in some countries, there has been talk of replacing the dwindling American nuclear
umbrella – by which the US, as a nuclear power, guarantees the protection of its non-nuclear allies – with independent atomic abilities. Should this become reality, it would spell a horrific nuclear race.

Obama is leaving behind a world far more dangerous than the one with which he was entrusted as leader of the most powerful country on earth – a title he managed to seriously compromise.

As far as Israel-US relations go, the eight-year Obama administration has been complex. On the one hand, Israel had a sympathetic ear in Washington with regard to its security needs. The landmark $38 billion defense aid package signed with the US, and the fact that Israel, of all nations, was the first to receive the state-of-the-art F-35 fighter jet, speaks to the American commitment to the Jewish state’s security for decades to come.

The relationship between the Israeli and American intelligence agencies continues to be excellent, a state of affairs that would not be possible without direction from the White House. Israel has also received vital US backing in the international arena more than once.

Still, Washington and Jerusalem were at odds under Obama on four important issues.

The first was nuclear nonproliferation. In 2010, the administration failed to keep its promise to Israel and gave in to Arab demands for supervision of Israel’s alleged nuclear capabilities. This was done as part of the American effort to maintain consensus at that year’s nuclear nonproliferation conference in Vienna.

The Americans may not have explicitly admitted that they broke a promise to Israel in this regard, but they understood that it was perceived that way by Israel and the world. Judging from the limited foreign reports on the issue, Israel’s complaints were justified. The US ultimately took action to help Israel overcome the difficulties incurred as a result of that mistake, but that blatant breach of promise made a dent on the collective Israeli consciousness, even if its overall effect has dimmed.

The second issue is the settlement enterprise. The outgoing administration turned settlement construction in Judea and Samaria into the key issue with regard to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It was nothing short of an obsession, and the issue by which any progress would rise or fall.

Washington refrained from pressuring Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in any way, even when he failed to agree to the 2014 US framework to reignite the talks. The US deemed Abbas too politically weak to be pressured, while any Israeli construction, in either Judea and Samaria or Jerusalem, was denounced as an obstacle to peace. The administration thereby lost an opportunity of possibly historic proportions to advance the
peace talks, while the Israeli government – and a Likud government at that – was more willing than ever to promote it.

The dissonance in the administration's responses was so jarring that it eroded the effectiveness of US condemnation, as the majority of the Israeli public, and some around the world, began to perceive it as one-sided, unjust and unwise. Moreover, the way in which the Obama administration handled the issue of settlements made Abbas climb up a very tall tree. It will be hard for him to climb down from such a height toward future negotiations.

UN Security Council Resolution 2334 denouncing the settlement enterprise, passed in the last month of Obama's presidency, has only made things worse, and is likely to stall negotiations even further. The outgoing president appears to have decided to hinder his successor as much as possible, even at the expense of an interest he allegedly wants to promote. For anyone seeking to advance the peace talks, UNSCR 2334 is counterproductive. If anything, it will be remembered as a low point, the "revenge" of an administration purporting to be analytical and calculated.

Outgoing Secretary of State John Kerry's Middle East vision speech, warning that Israel's settlement policies placed the two-state solution in "serious jeopardy," only exacerbated the feeling that the US administration's obsession with the issue has lost all proportion and clouded common sense.

The third issue of discord between Jerusalem and Washington was the Iranian nuclear program. Some would say this disagreement culminated in Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to Congress in March 2015, perceived as an affront to Obama on his own turf. Truth be told, the crisis was of the administration's making.

Contrary to how things are generally handled between allies, the White House made a conscious choice to deceive Israel and conceal the fact that it was holding intensive nuclear negotiations with Iran – an issue that has direct bearing on Israel's very existence.

This move was especially jarring as it involved a dramatic shift in US policy, which resulted in a very bad deal. Even those who believe the deal is solid have a hard time justifying the winding road walked by the US administration to reach it – even more so when some top officials within the administration itself thought it was wrong to hide the talks from Israel.

Choosing this path cost the US Israel's trust, good will, and, to an extent, professional assistance, which could have reduced the scope of error inherent in the agreement. The American claim that things were kept secret for fear of a leak on the Israeli side does not hold water, as nothing had been leaked from intimate Israel-US talks on the issue prior to the US's deviation off course.
The new reality presented by the administration required Netanyahu to outline Israel's position in the clearest possible way, especially before the American public, which is Israel's most important friend. Issues pertaining directly to the fate of the Jewish people must be addressed out loud, and it is right to do so in the highest seats of power. As Kerry himself said, friends must tell each other the truth.

Netanyahu had to consider that the bad deal inked between world powers and Iran might one day require Israel to use force to stop the Islamic Republic's nuclear program from developing military dimensions. He had to lay the moral groundwork that would justify such extreme measures.

This need stemmed from the change in US policy, which went from demanding that Tehran relinquish any nuclear ability to deferring the development of such abilities by 15 years at most, and allowing Iran to continue to develop the next generation of centrifuges and missiles without interruption.

Top US officials stress that the quality of defense ties is proof of the Obama administration's strong support of Israel, but to the president's opponents, it sounds more like an effort to justify undercutting Israel on the Palestinian issue and on Iran's nuclear program.

The fourth issue at odds is the chaos in the Middle East. This was particularly evident after the 2011 ousting of Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, when the Obama administration favored the Muslim Brotherhood's Muhammad Morsi as the representative of authentic sentiments among the Egyptian people over the military's countercoup.

Israel preferred Egypt not be ruled by the radical ideology propagated by the Muslim Brotherhood, even if the alternative was Gen. Abdel Fattah Sisi, who maintains an iron grip on Egypt as president. In this case, the lack of consensus between Washington and Jerusalem over the dangers of political Islam was at the heart of their dispute.

The American approach is ideological, in that it refuses to recognize that radical Islam is an authentic side of Islam. The very phrase "Islamic terrorism" was stricken from the politically correct vocabulary employed by Washington during the Obama years.

As to the incoming administration: as far as one can understand its positions on these issues, it appears that with regard to settlement construction and Iran's nuclear program, Israel is likely to find a far more sympathetic ear. Many of Trump's advisers understand that it is not the settlement enterprise that has prevented Abbas from resuming negotiations with Israel, so there is no point in locking horns over that issue. Instead, efforts should focus on measures that could reignite the peace talks – if that is even possible. Abbas
will have to walk the walk, not just talk the talk. He will have to take concrete steps, from halting the Palestinian Authority’s financial support of terrorists’ families to eliminating the incitement encouraged by Ramallah.

In this context, it is very important that Trump fulfill his campaign promise to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. This would be a clear signal of US commitment to Israel and recognition of Jerusalem (or the west side of it at least) as its capital. After the outgoing administration’s stunt at the Security Council and Kerry’s settlement speech, the decision to move the embassy to the Israeli capital will carry even greater significance.

With regard to Iran, many in the incoming administration seem to believe the nuclear deal is as bad for the US as it is for Israel. The US is expected to pursue three paths of action: exhausting measures outside the framework of the agreement, such as imposing sanctions on the Iranian missile program and over the fact that it supports terrorism; holding Tehran to the letter of the agreement far more adamantly than did the outgoing administration; and collaborating with Israel on options by which Iran would be unable to pursue nuclear weapons after the deal lapses, even if that means reopening the deal.

It is not up to Israel to push for the annulment of the dangerous Iran deal, to which the outgoing administration committed itself. The US must do so to serve its own interests. Moreover, Iran is a dynamic force in the Middle East, one in the midst of tightening its control over an axis stretching from Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus and Beirut. Unless Tehran is stopped, most of the Arab nations east of the Mediterranean will fall under its influence one way or the other.

This would be a historic change that would seriously undermine America’s traditional allies, pushing many Sunnis into IS-style radicalism. This is another issue where collaboration between the US and Israel would be key, and it could involve the Sunni Arab states seeking regional stability. It might even be possible to pursue a more far-reaching move that would see the Palestinians enter negotiations as well.

As a guiding principle, ties between Israel and the Trump administration will have to be based on Israel-US relations going back decades. The two will have to determine what new areas of collaboration would prove most beneficial to both.

Understandings will have to be reached to bring about a breakthrough in ties between the two countries. The cyber sphere is one area in which such understandings are likely to reached. This will not be the only area, of course, but Israel should focus its efforts on improving the issues most important to it and refrain from scattering its interests.
It is generally believed that once in office, Trump will break rules, abandon politically correct practices, and act from his gut, in stark contrast to his predecessor. Although it is too soon to judge, the incoming president’s instincts seem to be more Israel-friendly than those of his predecessor – although we would be wise to remember that he is also a shrewd businessman.

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