



Trump Has Fans in Israel

by Prof. Efraim Inbar

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Israel is a very pro-American country, possibly more so than any other country in the world. As in the past, Israelis followed the US presidential election with great interest, amazed that the American political system had not produced more palatable presidential candidates. After eight years of a frosty relationship with the US Commander in Chief, many Israelis cautiously welcome the advent of Donald Trump.

In a poll taken following Donald Trump's victory, 83% of Israelis said they consider Trump a pro-Israel leader; by contrast, another poll showed that 63% view Barack Obama as the "worst" US president with regard to Israel in the last 30 years. Indeed, after eight years of tense relations with the Obama administration, most Israelis are relieved to see a friend in the White House. Moreover, on issues that are important to Israel – Iran and the Palestinians – there seems to be a greater convergence of views than before.

Trump's stance on Iran is particularly important now, as Iran recently held a military exercise to test its missile and radar systems after the Trump administration imposed sanctions on Tehran for a ballistic missile test. When Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu visits Trump in Washington DC this week, it will be worth noting what the leaders say about the Iran nuclear deal and what kind of role the US will play in Israel.

Netanyahu fought tooth and nail against the nuclear agreement negotiated by the Obama administration with Iran. Trump slammed it as "one of the dumbest deals ever." Senior members of his administration share this view and are apprehensive about Iranian intentions.

Obama gave a high priority to negotiating the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and was obsessed with Jewish settlements in the West Bank. He estranged Israelis by not distinguishing between Israeli building in Jerusalem and in the West Bank. He often dished out “tough love” to Israel, as he called it when addressing a synagogue in Washington, DC.

Trump and his advisors, by contrast, seem more relaxed about the Israeli-Palestinian issue, correctly understanding that it is by no means the most important problem in the chaotic Middle East. Even the White House criticism of new settlement building plans – it called them unhelpful to the peace process, but added that they are not impediments to peace – represents a positive change to many Israelis.

Furthermore, Trump’s promise to move the American embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem seems more sincere than similar promises made by previous presidential candidates. Throughout his campaign and into the early days of his presidency, Trump has shown that he follows through, and is more concerned with fulfilling his promises than flattering the electorate. Israelis cannot understand why other countries refuse to accept Jerusalem as their capital and to place their embassies in western Jerusalem, which is not, after all, disputed territory. Picking David Friedman – an Orthodox, pro-settlement, Jewish American who owns an apartment in Jerusalem – as ambassador to Israel lends credence to Trump’s promise.

Several of Trump’s positions that draw tremendous criticism at home and abroad are less problematic for Israelis. For example, the idea of building a wall along the US-Mexico border to stop illegal immigration is viewed in Israel as the expression of the sovereign right of any nation to prevent undesirable elements from entering its territory. Israel has built walls and fences to stop the infiltration of terrorists and illegal immigrants from Palestinian territory.

Trump’s diatribes against Muslims are unseemly, but Israelis can understand where he is coming from, since they have been subjected to Muslim terrorism and Arab state aggression for 100 years. The political correctness of the Obama years – when the president refused to acknowledge radical Islam as the source of most of the terrorism in the world – frustrated Israelis.

Thus, Trump’s willingness to speak his mind is appreciated in Israel, even if some of his statements border on the vulgar. It is refreshing to the Israeli ear to hear an American president decline to beat around the bush, but rather to address issues directly, without the constraints of liberal political correctness. This quality has earned Trump some popularity in Israel.

Israelis well know that a portion of the Washington bureaucracy, especially at the Department of State, and some of the media and academic elites are unfriendly to Israel. They welcome a president who dislikes that bureaucracy and is critical of those elites.

We should not forget that since the late 1960s, Israelis have largely preferred Republican presidents. Yitzhak Rabin, who served as Israel's ambassador to Washington from 1968 to 1973, openly supported the Republican presidential candidate, Richard Nixon. Similarly, Prime Minister Netanyahu made his preference for Mitt Romney over Obama abundantly clear. Unlike many European politicians and American Democrats, Israelis are substantially nationalist and conservative. The conservative Israeli Likud party has won more elections than any other party since 1977.

Israelis followed the decline of American international fortunes during the Obama years with alarm. It frightens them to see America so weakened. Thus, a Trump who wants to make his country great again by increasing defense spending and standing tall against America's enemies abroad (especially Iran) strikes a responsive chord among Israelis.

Finally, Trump's family biography endears him to Israelis. His daughter converted to Judaism and belongs to an Orthodox community. Trump has Jewish grandchildren of whom he is proud. His Jewish son-in-law, Jared Kushner, is an important advisor. Living in New York may have sensitized him to the sensibilities of the Jewish community. Moreover, he has always expressed strong support for the Jewish state.

After eight years of the distant President Obama in the White House – a president who used his last days in office to lash out at Israel at the UN – it should not be surprising that Israelis are looking forward, with some trepidation but even more hope, to working with the new American president. While the euphoria displayed by some right-wing circles in Israel is not warranted, an improvement in bilateral relations is a realistic expectation.

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