



PERSPECTIVES

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Curb Your Enthusiasm About the Trump Administration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: One cannot blame Israelis for their sense of euphoria following the change of government in the US, but a less simplistic view of events in the US reveals a more complex picture. It is in Israel's interest to approach the new administration with a degree of restraint.

It is not difficult to understand why many Israelis, inside and outside government, are experiencing slight euphoria over the change of government in the US. The advent of President Trump represents a new era, a sharp turn from the policies of President Obama. Judging from the line-up of executive orders already signed by Trump, his new approach is taking shape quickly.

Obama began his eight-year administration by disregarding the written commitment made by his predecessor to Israel (the Bush letter to Sharon of April 14, 2004) and ended it with the parting shot of the US abstention on UN Security Council Resolution 2334. Along the way, he struck a nuclear deal with Iran's Khamenei. It is therefore little wonder that the change in Washington is being welcomed by Israel, even before President Trump has had his say on the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem.

Moreover, for those Israelis who have found themselves in recent years pondering the complex issue of governance and decision-making, the string of executive orders signed in the days and weeks immediately following the inauguration makes a refreshing change. It is an approach to governance some would like to see implemented in Israel.

Yet it would be preferable for Israel to curb its enthusiasm about the developments in Washington. This is for five reasons, both tactical and strategic.

First, most expectations of the new president (including an erroneous attribution to this administration of open sympathy for the policy of applying Israeli law to Judea and Samaria and the abandonment of the two-state solution) have not yet been tested by reality. All we have seen so far is a warmer atmosphere regarding the issue of settlement building. On the most important issue for Israel, Iran's nuclear program, it is hard to identify any clear plan as yet.

It should be remembered that two key members of the new administration, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Defense Secretary James Mattis, have a history of close contact with Saudi Arabia and its Arab neighbors – Tillerson on oil deals, and Mattis as Commander of US Central Command responsible for protection of the Gulf. Where will this lead? It is hard to tell, and better not to build up expectations. A tighter partnership with regard to facing Iran? Probably. Sweeping support for dramatic Israeli moves? Probably not, and certainly not if they would result in serious rifts with the moderate states.

Secondly, it would be a great mistake to assume that Israel's national interest requires us to side with the nationalistic and religious right in the US (and with "Western civilization," i.e., the Judeo-Christian world) against Islam as a religion and as a culture. That is how President Trump's selective executive order has been interpreted, though it was not his intention. Israel's population is one-sixth Muslim, and its two main partners for peace, Egypt and Jordan, have distinct (albeit moderate) Muslim identities. It would be dangerous, from the standpoints of security, politics, and morality, for Israel to allow itself to be swept away by "clash of civilizations" logic.

Thirdly, President Trump's mode of operation is itself an issue. In some cases, he appears to have acted not only according to a broad interpretation of his constitutional powers as head of the executive branch, but also according to his personal opinion (and that of his inner circle of advisers). He has circumvented any orderly process of consultation with either administration officials or Congressional leadership. He has also made the unprecedented move of altering the composition of the Principals Committee, which examines issues of national security prior to their discussion by the president and the National Security Council (corresponding to the Israeli "inner cabinet"). Remarkably, Trump replaced representatives of the military as regular attendees of Principals Committee meetings with his adviser Steve Bannon, from the alt-right.

It should be recalled that the bastions of support for Israel within the US government have always been Congress and the military and defense system. That system was once suspicious and hostile, but has learned to appreciate Israel's contribution over the past few decades. Conduct that weakens those power centers and disproportionately empowers the president is inconsistent with the long-term interests of Israel and its allies.

Number four is a core issue. A polarized America, with a leadership that is raising reservations and even anger among large segments of the American and Western public, will have difficulty defending its traditional principles – one of which is bipartisan commitment to the wellbeing and security of Israel. Those who claim that the Democrats in the US, and the moderate center-left parties in Europe, are "lost causes" (paving the way towards wholehearted identification with Trump and the right) exempt themselves too easily from a difficult but vital political and diplomatic mission: to keep the balance that must be preserved if we are to avoid finding ourselves labeled a political enemy by many in the West.

Fifth and most important, we have a duty to do our utmost to prevent a deepening rupture between Israel and American Jewry. The dealings of the ultra-Orthodox factions against a compromise with non-Orthodox streams on the issue of the Western Wall are already fomenting tension. Antagonizing American Jews threatens not only the cohesion of the Jewish people, but also the national security of the State of Israel, which may be harmed without the constant endeavors of Israel's friends, particularly in Congress. If American Jews are confirmed in their growing sense that Israel is turning a deaf ear to their concerns about Israeli government positions, the consequences for Israel could be serious.

At his meeting with President Trump this week, Prime Minister Netanyahu must do all he can to maximize the potential for enhancing relations, delineating a joint strategy, and realizing symbolic expressions of support and commitment, such as the transfer of the US embassy to Jerusalem. However, a modicum of restraint and caution – and a sympathetic ear towards mainstream American Jewry, whose commitment to Israel is indisputable – would not hurt.

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