



Tread Carefully with the New US Administration

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: The new US administration is far more sympathetic to Israel than was its predecessor, but we must avoid taking steps from which there is no return. The Middle East is not Washington's sole focus and Israel must preserve the bipartisan support it enjoys.

In the run-up to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's February 15 meeting with President Donald Trump, the difference in worldview between the Israeli political Right and Left, especially with regard to the Palestinian issue, became more pointed.

The Left fears that under the new administration, which is more sympathetic to Israel and less wary of the Arab world's reactions than its predecessor, the Right will all but eliminate any chance of resuming the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process – something that is bound to happen if Israel accelerates construction across Judea and Samaria or pursues the odd annexation here and there.

The Right, for its part, hopes that now that it is free of the constraints imposed by the previous American administration, it will be able to realize its dream of integrating Judea and Samaria, or at least the main settlement blocs, into Israel.

In between is the majority of the Israeli public, the wide and mostly silent center, which for the most part just wants peace and quiet with no physical involvement with the Palestinians.

If Israel does decide to change direction and effectively close the door on future negotiations, it will be unable to avoid the question of the civilian-political future of the Palestinians.

This issue has to be dealt with, even if we accept the (probably correct) assumption that over the next few years, the Palestinian leadership will not seriously negotiate a reasonable solution to the conflict.

It is precisely now – when Israel is free of the Obama-era limitations – that it must shoulder even greater responsibility and explore what would be the best policies to pursue. The leeway the Trump administration might give Israel will let it operate more freely, but this freedom is not without risk. Marching solely to the beat of the Right's drum could lead to the point of no return of a binational state. Israel must search for an answer not only to avoid being summoned to The Hague, but because the issue is important to Israel itself.

With all due respect to the settlement enterprise, one must remember that Trump has a few other things to consider when it comes to the Middle East, and all of them matter to Israel as well.

Trump and Netanyahu are likely to discuss myriad regional issues, including how the US plans to deal with radical Sunni Islam, which has grown exponentially over the past few years.

Sunni Islam has both purely terrorist aspects, as seen in the rise of the Islamic State group (IS), and political aspects, as seen in the Muslim Brotherhood's fight against the regimes of Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi and Jordan's King Abdullah.

The US administration's controversial temporary ban on the entry of individuals from seven majority-Muslim countries – Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen – aims to prevent infiltration by terrorist elements into the homeland. But President Trump has yet to shape an overall policy on dealing with terrorism or to address the political questions plaguing the Arab world.

Another major challenge is curtailing Iran's aspirations to regional domination. The Islamic Republic is trying to build a Shiite axis running through Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. This dynamic axis challenges the US's friends in the region. Those parties could, within a few years, acquire military nuclear capability in response to the bad agreement reached by the previous administration and Iran.

These moves already constitute a threat to the US, and the danger will only increase. The new administration has clearly stated that it plans to take a more active approach against Iran, and indeed reacted firmly to the ballistic missile test Iran conducted last week – but it is still unclear how far the new president wants to, or can, go. After all, this situation could lead to a complex military conflict.

These are two very important issues for Israel, and the Iranian issue is critical. We must ask ourselves how we can contribute to shaping US policy and how we may be of assistance in the region. That is what being a strategic ally means.

This is where the issues discussed here converge. It may turn out that Israel's moves in Judea and Samaria hinder the effort to build an anti-Iranian alliance in the region, led by the US and with Israel as a partner.

In other words, an ideological approach to the settlements might contradict a strategic need arising from the new situation in the Middle East at a time when dramatic regional changes are possible. It could transpire that the US will pursue new alliances in the region only if Israel is perceived as refraining from making the situation worse for the Palestinians, or even as promoting negotiations. Such a scenario would confront Israel with a significant intellectual and political challenge.

The US also seems to wish to pursue a rapprochement with Russia, but here too, things are not simple.

President Barack Obama also pursued dialogue with Moscow, but found out the hard way that President Vladimir Putin sees the world, and Russia's position in it, differently.

Moreover, by understanding the limitations of the US when it comes to exercising force, Putin succeeded in carving out positions of influence in areas far from home, such as Syria, and ruffling the feathers of the EU and NATO to the point of military friction, as in Ukraine.

It is hard to tell whether the Trump administration plans on acquiescing to Russia's moves or will side with the EU. Trump's positions during the campaign, implying openness towards Russia, will have to stand the test of reality.

Naturally, any developments with Russia will contribute to the complexity of Middle East affairs. Russia is an important ally of Iran in Syria, and therefore indirectly contributes to the Islamic Republic's growing influence in the region.

These are all international, external challenges. The Trump administration will also have to deal with serious domestic challenges. Israel must not be perceived as taking sides on internal American issues.

American society, divided as it was by the rough election, is uneasy. Israel will work closely with the new administration to promote its own interests, but must do so in a way that elicits bipartisan support as much as possible.

This is an edited version of an article that appeared in Israel Hayom on February 10, 2017.

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