



PERSPECTIVES

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Donald Trump: The View from Jerusalem

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Trump's first 100 days have yet to provide a clear indication of US policy and how he believes he can achieve an Israel-Palestinian deal. The major changes during this period have occurred in areas mostly relevant to Israel: foreign policy and national security. It will take at least 100 more days to figure out how and where Trump wants to lead the US in the near future.

"I truly believe that the first 100 days of my administration has been just about the most successful in our country's history," US President Donald Trump said in his weekly address on April 28, 2017. Trump has never been a modest person, but this self-evaluation of his achievements is highly exaggerated.

His presidential record of domestic and foreign affairs is mixed with both significant achievements and momentous failures. The 100-day mark is an arbitrary juncture based on the unproven assumption that it is easier to score major achievements in the first few months of a new presidency than later on.

Evaluations of presidential performance are based on a comparison between what the president said during the election campaign and his actual policies. In the Trump case, this comparison has been especially difficult because he had never served in a public post, didn't have any political record, and has changed his mind so many times on so many issues that it has become very difficult to understand what he really wants.

It seems, however, that in many recent evaluations, his critics have looked mostly at his failures and his supporters at his achievements.

Undoubtedly, Trump has started off as a unique president. He has changed the presidency, but the office has also changed him.

In several interviews, he has admitted that he didn't expect the job to be so demanding and difficult. As in the election campaigns, he has dominated the public discourse with frequent tweets and provocative statements.

Critics have accused him of creating a "reality show presidency," but he is slowly adjusting. He has declared all-out war against the Washington establishment, the media, the courts, and even the intelligence services. According to a Gallup Poll, he entered the White House with the lowest job-approval rating in history, and closed out his first 100 days in the same place.

Shortly after assuming power, Trump attempted to place restrictions on immigration from seven Muslim countries but was rebuffed by the courts. He revised that executive order, but the courts again rejected it. In response, he aggressively criticized the federal judges who opposed him and blamed them for undermining national security. He also learned the hard way that congressional Republicans, who vehemently oppose Obamacare, won't automatically accept haphazard legislation reforms. They rejected Trump's attempt to erase or substantially reform the healthcare program without serious consultation with them.

Trump has continued to severely attack the mainstream media, accusing prestigious outlets of "faking news." His press secretary, Sean Spicer, has often confronted the media and changed the long-standing rules of press conferences at the White House by allowing supportive reporters from esoteric media to ask questions. He has also made several very embarrassing statements, such as when he made three mistakes in one commentary on Bashar Assad's chemical attack. He said that even Adolf Hitler didn't use chemical weapons and didn't use gas on his own people, and, when corrected, added that the gas Hitler used was in "Holocaust centers."

Trump's achievements in domestic affairs include the nomination and approval of Neil Gorsuch to the Supreme Court.

Following the death of conservative justice Antonin Scalia, then-president Barack Obama attempted to replace him with a liberal judge, Merrick Garland, and in this way tip the balance of power in the Supreme Court in favor of the liberal approach. At the time, appointment to the Supreme Court required a majority of 60 senators. The Republicans, who controlled the Senate, refused to even consider Garland, claiming that it wasn't appropriate to select a judge for life less than a year before Obama's departure from the White House. The Democrats planned to reciprocate by foiling Trump's nomination, but the Republicans implemented a rule change activated in 2013 by Democrat and then-Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid. This change allows Senate approval by a simple majority. Trump, thus, very quickly maintained the court's 5-4 conservative majority.

Close to the 100-day mark, Trump and his chief aides on financial and economic policy, Treasury Secretary Steven Mnuchin and Gary Cohn, head of the White House's National Economic Council, revealed a sweeping income-tax reform designed to simplify the US code, one of the most complicated in the world. Economists largely

praised the plan, but politicians voiced considerable criticism. Several key elements are not yet clear, and the reform may have to be altered to gain congressional approval.

Israelis and world Jewry have been very concerned about the rise in antisemitic events in the US after Trump's victory. Jewish Community Centers (JCCs) were flooded by telephone warnings of planted bombs, Jewish cemeteries were vandalized, and the social networks were filled with large volumes of hate and threats to Jews.

American-Jewish leaders criticized Trump for failing to forcefully condemn the attacks early on. Former Democratic National Committee chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz even said that Trump has given "license and permission to antisemites" and, thus, "opened the floodgates" for antisemitic attacks.

The FBI found in 2015 a rise of 9% in antisemitic incidents, and the New York Police reported a sharp jump of 189% in antisemitic hate crimes – from 19 during the first two months of 2016 to 55 in 2017. Indeed, Trump was slow to condemn the JCC bomb threats and vandalism, but on February 28, in his first address to Congress, he finally said, "Recent threats targeting Jewish Community Centers and vandalism of Jewish cemeteries, as well as last week's shooting in Kansas City, remind us that, while we may be a nation divided on policies, we are a country that stands united in condemning hate and evil in all its forms."

To put the issue in proper context, it is necessary to mention that, surprisingly, the two perpetrators who so far have been arrested and charged with making the bomb threats are Juan Thompson, an African-American former journalist who wanted to implicate his former girlfriend; and an 18-year-old Israeli-American who suffers from autism and a brain tumor. It also turns out that tombstones in a historic Jewish cemetery in Brooklyn were damaged by environmental causes and not by vandalism.

The major changes in Trump's first 100 days have occurred in areas mostly relevant to Israel: foreign policy and national security.

Enemies tested and challenged Trump, and he had no choice but to respond. Iran was the first to test Trump's mettle: it conducted a ballistic-missile test a few days after he entered the White House, violating Security Council Resolution 2231 of July 2015, which endorsed the nuclear agreement with Tehran. Unlike Obama, Trump defined Iran as an enemy, placed it on notice, and imposed new sanctions on Iranian senior officials involved in developing missiles and in terrorism.

Assad, meanwhile, tested Trump with a chemical weapons attack in the Idlib area. Unlike Obama, he ordered a missile retaliation against the air base from which Assad's warplanes took off to make the chemical attack.

North Korea challenged Trump by testing ballistic missiles and preparing to test more destructive nuclear bombs. Trump responded with warnings, deployment of a large naval force to the region, and military exercises. He also dropped the largest non-nuclear bomb in the American arsenal on ISIS's strongholds in Afghanistan.

Trump sent a clear message to both enemies and allies: the US is ready to use force to protect its vital interests.

After eight years of tension and disagreements on critical issues between Obama and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, there is a new, friendlier approach to Israel at the White House, and a fundamental agreement on strategic issues.

Trump and Netanyahu agree on Iran, the situation in Syria and Iraq, the importance of Egypt and Jordan, negotiations with the Palestinians, and the status of Israel as a strategic asset. The friendlier approach was clearly visible at the first meeting between the two leaders with Trump as president, which took place at the White House on February 15.

Trump truly wants to revive Israeli-Palestinian negotiations and achieve a peace “deal,” and has appointed longtime confidant and adviser Jason Greenblatt as his chief envoy.

He has met with Netanyahu, King Abdullah of Jordan, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, and Palestinian Authority head Mahmoud Abbas. Trump did not convey a preference for any particular solution, but said the US would not impose a solution on the sides.

He criticized Palestinian terrorism and incitement to hatred. He also promised to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, but it isn't clear yet how and when this move will be implemented.

Since 2000, the Palestinians have rejected four serious Israeli or American peace proposals, thus proving they are either not able to make or have no interest in peace.

Abbas is an aging, weak leader with no mandate to make the concessions needed to make peace. It isn't clear, therefore, why Trump decided to enter this tough arena in which the last four US presidents failed, other than the desire to prove that he can achieve what the others couldn't.

Trump is still unpredictable and much of his domestic and foreign policies are still being developed. He realizes the enormous burden of the presidency, and feels the constraints and limits of his power. It will take at least 100 more days to figure out how and where he wants to lead the US in the near future.

This is an edited version of an article that was published in The Jerusalem Report on May 15, 2017.

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