

Trump and the Holy Land

First, Do No Harm

*Dana H. Allin and
Steven N. Simon*

Every U.S. president since Harry Truman has sought peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Every president since Lyndon Johnson has opposed the building of Jewish settlements on land that Israel occupied in June 1967 and has supported a diplomatic solution by which the Jewish state would trade much of that land for a secure and lasting peace. And every president since Bill Clinton has worked for a two-state solution under which Israel would enjoy security and genuine acceptance in the Middle East and the Palestinians would run their own affairs and prosper in a viable, independent state.

Achieving these goals has never been easy, and Washington's attempts to put the Israelis and the Palestinians on the path to peace have regularly been stymied by rejectionism on both sides. Palestinian leaders have proved unable or unwilling to grasp past diplomatic opportunities,

and the current Israeli government of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the most right-wing in Israel's history, represents segments of society that are fixated on a vision of an Israel that excludes Palestinian aspirations and rights. The Obama administration made a serious effort to break the impasse but failed, and the status quo is probably unsustainable. Although any new administration would find the landscape daunting, the United States' strategic interests and moral values call for continued opposition to Israeli settlements in occupied territory, a continued insistence that the Palestinians pursue their cause through peaceful means, a continued commitment to a two-state solution, and continued attentiveness to Israel's strategic vulnerabilities. In other words, the most basic requirement is to do no harm, thus following in the tradition of past presidents.

Donald Trump, it must be said, looks like a different kind of president. In his coldness toward the vision of a Palestinian state and his indifference to the problem of settlements, he has aligned himself with Israel's right wing, and his surprise victory gave that camp hope that their dreams of absorbing the Palestinian territories into Israel might be fulfilled, unencumbered by American scolding or restraint. Israeli conservatives may well envision an alliance between the most illiberal elements of both societies, in which the United States and Israel fight their shared enemies of Iran and radical Islam, without having to worry about the niceties that concerned the Obama administration so much. President Barack Obama took the view that the construction and expansion of Jewish settlements in the West Bank was killing any remaining

DANA H. ALLIN is Editor of *Survival* and Senior Fellow for U.S. Foreign Policy and Transatlantic Affairs at the International Institute for Strategic Studies in London.

STEVEN N. SIMON is John J. McCloy '16 Visiting Professor of History at Amherst College. From 2011 to 2012, he served as Senior Director for the Middle East and North Africa at the U.S. National Security Council.

They are the authors of *Our Separate Ways: The Struggle for the Future of the U.S.-Israel Alliance*.

prospects for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For Israel's hard right, killing the two-state solution is a feature, not a bug, of the new dispensation.

But other Israelis rightly fear the death of that long-standing proposal. The direct financial costs of occupation may be relatively low, and the diplomatic costs manageable. But the overall price will rise over time—not just in terms of military incursions into the territories or other expensive deployments to restore order should it break down but also in terms of the damage to the Israeli polity itself and Israel's place in the world. The imperatives of continued occupation entail depriving Palestinians of civil rights, which will ultimately damage the democratic constitutional order in Israel. That will, in turn, complicate Israel's foreign relations, particularly in the West. Many Israelis believe that withdrawal from the West Bank in the context of a peace accord would involve unreasonable risks, but those risks must be weighed against the risks of continued occupation.

OBAMA'S LEGACY

Like NATO, the U.S.-Israeli alliance was founded not only on mutual strategic interests but also on cultural connections and shared democratic values. But the similarities end there: the partnership between the United States and Israel does not include a defense treaty, and the bond of shared values has been steadily weakened by cultural and demographic changes in both countries, as well as by the manifest failures of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Obama, whose liberal Zionism was nurtured in a circle of progressive

Chicago Jews supporting his political rise, entered the White House with a strong conviction that some form of tough love was necessary to restore the moral basis of the alliance. Under his tenure, the United States finally, and decisively, confronted Jerusalem on the growth of Jewish settlements in the occupied territories when, in 2009, he demanded a complete freeze on new construction in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (although he later accepted a partial freeze that excluded Jerusalem). To preserve confidence between the two allies, however, Obama also re-committed the United States to the security relationship, by substantially increasing the amount of U.S. security assistance to Israel, notably for missile defense.

It didn't work. Israeli officials, including Netanyahu, have acknowledged that the Obama administration offered unstinting military and security cooperation. But that support was overshadowed—not only by the confrontation over settlements but also by tectonic regional shifts that opened multiple chasms between the two countries. Israelis across the political spectrum were shocked by the United States' decision to urge Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak out of office in 2011, by its cooperation with the Muslim Brotherhood government of Mohamed Morsi after he won the Egyptian presidency the following year, and by its distinct lack of enthusiasm for the military coup that drove Morsi from office the year after that. Along with Sunni Arab regimes, Israel was likewise alarmed by Obama's failure to launch air strikes to enforce his "redline" on Syria's use of chemical weapons.

Then there was Iran. There, Obama's two overriding priorities were to prevent



The writing's on the wall: in Tel Aviv, November 2016

the development of nuclear weapons and to avoid getting entangled in another Middle Eastern war. He correctly decided that the only way to reconcile those objectives was to negotiate an agreement that would block Iran's pathways to a weapon. The result was the Iran nuclear deal—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Agreed to in July 2015, the JCPOA marked one of the Obama administration's greatest diplomatic achievements. Yet because the deal left Iran with a latent nuclear program, the Israeli government found it intolerable, as Netanyahu had made dramatically clear to a joint session of the U.S. Congress as it was being negotiated. From the Obama administration's perspective, Israel also moved the goalposts: unable to deny that the agreement would prevent Iran from posing a nuclear threat for the next decade, it began complaining

about the United States' alleged acquiescence to Iran's regional aggression. These gaps in perceptions and priorities were so deep as to constitute a conflict of strategic interests between the United States and Israel.

Netanyahu's failed campaign to derail the JCPOA had the side effect of darkening the mood surrounding renegotiation of the ten-year memorandum of understanding that governs U.S. military aid to Israel. Netanyahu might have won a better deal had he finalized it in 2015, but he delayed it for a year. The memorandum of understanding that Israel signed in 2016 looks generous on its face—\$38 billion over the next decade—but some of the fine print is, from an Israeli perspective, disappointing. Among other new restrictions, the agreement precludes the possibility that Israel could approach Congress for additional funding during the lifetime

of the agreement in an effort to make an end run around the executive branch.

Looming over all these tensions was the Obama administration's failure to make progress on the peace process. Secretary of State John Kerry's peace mission during Obama's second term was dogged, courageous—and futile. Obama's early insistence on a settlements freeze, along with his outreach to the world's Muslims, fueled deep Israeli distrust. Yet the White House had its own grounds for suspicion: despite his pronouncements otherwise, Netanyahu has never behaved as though he is genuinely committed to a two-state solution, and some members of his current government are openly hostile to the idea. By the end of Kerry's mission, in 2014, Washington and Jerusalem were trading *ad hominem* attacks, much of them on the record, that were truly astonishing for supposed allies.

Last December, when the UN Security Council considered a resolution condemning Israeli settlements, the Obama administration decided not to exercise the United States' customary protective veto, and the measure passed. Furious, Netanyahu called the abstention a "shameful ambush" and support for the resolution itself "a declaration of war." Trump, meanwhile, announced on Twitter that Israel should "stay strong" until he came to its rescue. The resolution did not promise any foreseeable breakthrough, but nor did it derail the Israeli-Palestinian peace process: there was no functioning peace process to be derailed. For the Obama administration, it represented the last chance before Trump took office to define the elements of a deal and reinforce them through a clear international consensus.

A PATH TO PEACE

A wise set of policies for any new administration would start with the recognition that the Obama-Netanyahu years of trouble were not simply the result of clashing personalities. Rather, they reflected a deep process of alienation between two states and societies. The goal now should be to reinforce the moral bond and minimize the strategic divergence.

As for the former, it is worth remembering that even the George W. Bush administration, which embraced Israel as a partner in the war on terrorism, considered democratic values an indispensable bond between the two countries. After the death of the Palestinian leader Yasir Arafat, in 2004, Bush leaned on Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon to return to the negotiating table. In Bush's view, Israel's security cooperation with the United States didn't obviate the need for a peace process aimed at expanding the democratic rights of those Palestinians living under Israeli occupation. For Bush, that connection was intuitive and vital. After the Cold War, a mutually reinforcing and supportive network of liberalizing societies and democratizing governments had emerged. The U.S.-Israeli alliance formed part of that network, which meant that Israel's rule over the Palestinians could not stand.

It is an illusion that shared strategic interests will be enough to sustain the kind of alliance that both the United States and Israel have cherished. During the later Cold War years, the Reagan administration looked to Israel for important air bases where carrier-based aircraft could land if denied access to a carrier deck. Soon enough, however, the Cold War ended and, with it, the Soviet

threat to the U.S. Navy's Sixth Fleet and to Saudi Arabia. It soon became clear that although the United States was Israel's ultimate security guarantor, Israel couldn't be the United States', or do much to help the United States defend its interests in the Arab world. As the George H. W. Bush administration assembled a coalition to drive Saddam Hussein's forces from Kuwait in 1990, its main request to Israel was that it make itself scarce. After 9/11, the United States and Israel would discover a shared interest in combating Islamic radicalism. Even on that, however, the United States and Israel have not really perceived the same threat: the United States has been concerned with fighting al Qaeda and the Islamic State, or ISIS, both of which rank low on Israel's priority list; Israel has cared more about Hamas, Hezbollah, and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, none of which has targeted Americans in recent years.

Indeed, after the United States sent troops to Afghanistan and Iraq, some in the highest echelons of the U.S. military took the view that close relations with Israel posed a distinct liability in the fight against terrorism. During his time as the head of U.S. Central Command, for example, General David Petraeus argued that the United States' association with Israel, because of the anger its policies toward the Palestinians caused in the Arab world, impeded U.S. cooperation with Middle Eastern governments.

So grave are the U.S.-Israeli alliance's prospects that it is time for an audacious grand bargain aimed at reconnecting its moral and strategic dimensions. This should take the form of a treaty formally committing the United States to Israel's defense, including through nuclear

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are leaders,
but all leaders
are readers.**

- Harry S. Truman

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deterrence, in exchange for Israel's acceptance of the well-established U.S. parameters for a two-state solution. Admittedly, there is reason to doubt that a Republican administration would insist on both sides of this bargain, or that Israel would accept it. So nothing this big is likely to happen anytime soon.

Yet at a minimum, Washington should maintain its commitment to its long-standing moral and strategic objectives. These include opposing the expansion of Israeli settlements and insisting that the Palestinian leadership recognize Israel—and its de facto Jewish character—and clamp down on terrorism and anti-Israel incitement. Washington must couple its expectation that Jerusalem will one day be home to two U.S. embassies, one for Israel and one for Palestine, with the realization that moving the U.S. embassy there from Tel Aviv today would provoke angry, possibly violent protests in the West Bank and beyond. Even though Israelis and Palestinians alike have lost faith that a two-state solution will come to pass in their lifetime, the United States has no other vision that can reconcile its moral duty to Israel with its commitment to democracy. Therefore, it must not acquiesce to any creeping or precipitous annexation by Israel of the West Bank.

When it comes to countering the threat from Iran, the United States and Israel should predicate their efforts on making the JCPOA work, rather than causing it to fail. The U.S. government should resume the close consultations with Israel on Iran that took place during Obama's presidency, including sharing intelligence regarding Iranian compliance with the deal and undertaking contingency planning for military

options in the case of truly threatening noncompliance.

Finally, U.S. policymakers should resist Israeli bids to renegotiate the 2016 memorandum of understanding. This might seem like a modest technical matter, and it may be tempting to make concessions in the service of improving the atmospherics of the relationship. Yet for the United States to go down the slippery slope of having negotiated a ten-year agreement only to renegotiate it six months later would simply encourage Israel's tendency to game the American system of divided government, to the detriment of a consistent U.S. foreign policy.

ENTER TRUMP

Trump's statements on Israel have contained bluster and contradictions, and so in this area, as in many others, it is hard to know how seriously to take them as policy pronouncements. Still, the general drift has been clear. Trump promised that dismantling the JCPOA would be his "number one priority" and that Iranian ships would be "shot out of the water" if they behaved aggressively. He pledged to "move the American embassy to the eternal capital of the Jewish people, Jerusalem," and although this has long been a standard Republican campaign promise, Trump may lack the wisdom of past presidents to not fulfill it once in office. In the 2016 U.S. presidential campaign, the Republican Party platform, which Trump called "the most pro-Israel of all time," omitted its traditional nod to a two-state solution. During the wrangling over the UN Security Council resolution in December, at Israel's behest, President-elect Trump persuaded Egyptian President Abdel

Fattah el-Sisi to withdraw Egypt's draft resolution (in the end, four other countries took it forward). Most notably, Trump chose his personal bankruptcy lawyer, David Friedman, for the post of U.S. ambassador to Israel. Friedman has close ties to the Israeli settler movement, and he has accused Obama of "blatant anti-Semitism" and called liberal American Jews who are critical of Israel's government "far worse than kapos"—referring to Jewish prisoners who acted as supervisors in Nazi concentration camps.

To be sure, Trump has also appointed key cabinet heads who hold more traditional foreign policy views. Rex Tillerson, for example, Trump's choice for secretary of state, came to his attention with backing from three establishment Republicans, James Baker, Robert Gates, and Condoleezza Rice, all of whom embody the old-school tradition of seeking balance between Israel and the Arabs. Trump's pick for defense secretary, General James Mattis, has warned that giving up on the two-state solution would mean that "either [Israel] ceases to be a Jewish state or you say the Arabs don't get to vote—apartheid." He added, "That didn't work too well the last time I saw that." Like Petraeus, Mattis, when he was the commander of U.S. Central Command, noted the relationship's downsides. "I paid a military-security price every day as the commander of CENTCOM because the Americans were seen as biased in support of Israel," he said.

DANGER AHEAD

The UN Security Council resolution, Obama's parting gift to Trump, offers Mattis and other like-minded officials

something to hold on to if they remain firm in their assessment that permanent Israeli control over the West Bank and its Arab inhabitants is not in the United States' interest. For the most part, however, the path that the new administration seems determined to go down looks dangerous for both countries.

Trump's tough talk against Iran and the nuclear deal may be music to many Israelis' ears. Yet it is difficult to perceive a coherent plan for turning it into a strategic gain for the United States. If Trump reneges on the JCPOA, or provokes Tehran into abandoning it, Iran will most likely restart its nuclear program. At that point, the United States would have lost the necessary international support for renewed sanctions or other pressures; military action could be the only remaining option for quashing Iran's nuclear ambitions. Yet American or Israeli air strikes would only convince Iran to withdraw from the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty and race toward a weapon. Iran's nuclear program could be delayed through military action, but soon enough, the Iranians would get back to work, and the Americans or the Israelis would have to set the program back again. This is a recipe for endless war.

Moreover, the Trumpian version of a counterterrorism alliance makes little strategic sense. Trump has not just called for banning Muslims from entering the United States; he has also picked a national security adviser, General Michael Flynn, who has called Islam "a malignant cancer" and "a political ideology [that] definitely hides behind this notion of it being a religion." As campaign rhetoric, such statements have already caused considerable damage, and if translated into actual policy, they will further

alienate Muslims in the United States and abroad, with dangerous ramifications for U.S. national security. If these consequences unfold, Americans' confidence in an outward-looking foreign policy will be shaken at least as badly as it was by the misadventures of the George W. Bush administration. Such trauma cannot be good for U.S. allies, Israel included. Although the idea of an alliance even partly based on anti-Islamic fervor of the type espoused by Flynn is conceivable, the Trump administration's anxieties about Islam are global, whereas Israel's are both more specific geographically and focused on Hamas and Hezbollah.

When it comes to the fraught relationship between Israel and the Palestinians, some will argue that bipartisan U.S. solutions have failed and it is time to move in a radically new direction—to which the only proper response is that things could get much worse. If the United States ended its opposition to unbridled settlement activity in the West Bank and even the territory's annexation—to acquiesce, in effect, to the permanent subjugation of the more than 2.5 million Palestinians living there—the results would be damaging. Such a move would no doubt foment more despair and more violence in the form of another Palestinian uprising, with an inevitably harsh Israeli response that, even if Trump himself approved, many Americans would not understand. What is more fundamental, official U.S. indifference to the plight of the Palestinians would further undermine the shared values that have bound the United States and Israel to each other for the better part of seven decades. This is unknown territory. Both Washington and Jerusalem should be wary of entering it.

Ominously, the snuffing out of a liberal vision for the region, one in which two states live side by side in peace, could represent part of a larger global movement. It's possible to imagine Trump and Netanyahu joining forces with Vladimir Putin's Russia and European right-wing populists in the kind of Judeo-Christian civilizational alliance promoted by Steve Bannon, the ethnonationalist Trump adviser who has spoken of a "global Tea Party movement" comprising Trump voters in the United States, Brexit supporters in the United Kingdom, National Front partisans in France, and Hindu nationalists in India, all rising to defend Western capitalism. Many of Trump's supporters may well be indifferent to liberal concerns about Palestinian rights.

There is a problem, however, with a U.S.-Israeli alliance based on Trumpian values: in the United States, the adherents to those values are aging and, in relative terms, diminishing in number. On both the left and the right, Americans' visceral affinity for Zionism is fading away. An overtly illiberal U.S.-Israeli alliance would further erode the bipartisan basis of U.S.-Israeli ties, a process that Netanyahu advanced when he aligned himself so closely with the Republican Party during the 2012 U.S. presidential election and, later, when he tried to derail the Iran nuclear deal. If Trump governs as he campaigned, his brand will remain toxic to more than half of the U.S. electorate, and that toxicity could mar the image of an Israeli government that embraced him closely.

It would be imprudent, after the Trump upset, to make confident predictions about the political consequences of demographic changes. But the uncertainties extend in every direction, with

unknowable, and potentially damaging, consequences for U.S.-Israeli ties. Trump's campaign energized a fringe anti-Semitism on the so-called alt-right, a development that will not endear the new president to an American Jewish community that voted by a wide margin for Hillary Clinton and already has large pockets of disaffection with Israeli policies. There is also left-wing illiberalism, which has erupted sporadically on American campuses in a strain of anti-Zionism that verges on anti-Semitism. What can be predicted with reasonable confidence is that the Trump years—whether four or eight—will bring even sharper polarization. The Israeli right has chosen a dangerous moment to ally itself so closely with the Republican Party.

Moreover, projections of a honeymoon between Washington and Jerusalem, during which the Trump administration enables every unilateral Israeli impulse, must reckon with Trump's narrow conception of U.S. interests. To begin with, Trump's understanding of alliances should not be particularly reassuring from an Israeli perspective: he sees them as transactional deals always subject to a cost-benefit review. Nor should his view of U.S. leadership: Trump has repeatedly evinced a preference for faraway regions to manage their own problems. As a candidate, he said that he would serve as a neutral broker between the Israelis and the Palestinians, and in their confirmation hearings, both Mattis and Tillerson testified that they would not tear up the JCPOA. It's not hard to imagine Israeli policymakers assuming that a sympathetic Trump will run interference for, or just overlook, unilateral Israeli actions that could prove destabilizing, such as the expropriation of large tracts

of West Bank land or actions that jeopardized the JCPOA and drew the United States into an armed conflict.

That said, Trump's campaign and presidential transition have defied the traditional norms of U.S. politics, so it is probably a mistake to predict or analyze his administration's policies on the basis of precedent. In fact, it's possible that Trump may defy expectations in a positive direction, for example, by making good on a statement he made in a meeting with journalists at *The New York Times* after the election: "I would love to be able to be the one that made peace with Israel and the Palestinians." Perhaps, in his fascination with "the art of the deal," Trump will be inspired to go for it. But given some worrying trends in Israel—the political imbalance created by an ineffectual, shrinking center-left; the broad popularity of the right, especially among younger Israeli Jews; and demographic trends that do not appear to favor territorial compromise—and the dire state of the rest of the Middle East, there is also the potential for considerable harm to be inflicted by ill-advised policies, or even tweets. 🌐

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