

Evolution of US-Israel Relations During Trump Presidency

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Preferential treatment for Israel has long been a prerequisite for success in the corridors of power in Washington, where ambitious politicians long ago learned to fear the wrath of 'the Israel lobby', and at the same time yearn for the deluge of 'Benjamins' and other fringe benefits that 'the lobby' in all its forms and manifestations can muster. Nonetheless, relations between the leadership of the two countries have reached new heights - and plunged new depths - during the Trump administration.

The United States under the Trump administration has undergone a shift in its foreign policy, with the new president regularly insulting and expressing contempt for the US' strategic allies and threatening to dismantle the bilateral and multilateral arrangements that they have developed over the course of many years to organize and institutionalize their relations. The one exception from the outset was the US 'special relationship' with Israel.

The Foreign Policy Institute summarized the differences between the approaches of the Obama and Trump presidencies to foreign policy in the following manner:

"Trump is a kind of illiberal alter ego of Obama. Whereas Obama looked to use force alongside allies ("leading from behind" in the 2011 Libya War), Trump has long been disdainful toward America's coalition partners. In 1987, Trump paid for an advertisement in the New York Times that railed against allies, "taking advantage of the United States." As president, Trump has been deeply critical of trade agreements and has withdrawn from more treaties and organizations than all the other post-Cold War U.S. administrations combined.

Whereas Obama spoke eloquently about the importance of the American creed, or the founding ideals of human rights and democracy, Trump may be the first president to openly admire foreign despots.

Whereas Obama traveled to Cairo in 2009 in pursuit of a 'new beginning' between the United States and Muslims around the world, Trump wanted to ban all Muslims from entering the United States..."

However, the differences between the Obama and Trump administrations in terms of their dealings with Israel and in the Middle East more generally go beyond their personal idiosyncrasies, ideological preferences, strategic objectives and management styles. They have also been operating in a quantitatively distinct geopolitical environment, with events in many countries throughout the region undergoing major and in some cases abrupt and tectonic shifts, such as the popular uprising in Egypt that ousted Hosni Mubarak, followed by the military coup that ousted and ultimately murdered his successor Mohamed Morsi, and

the deepening cooperation – that appears more and more to be some kind of strategic alliance based on profound common interests and objectives – between Israel and the Saudis and the United Arab Emirates.

Nonetheless, despite the differences there has also been considerable continuity in certain aspects of US foreign policy. The same report by the Foreign Policy Institute quoted above explained this apparent contradiction as being primarily due to objective conditions in global politics:

“Surprisingly, however, there’s significant continuity between the Obama and Trump foreign policy doctrines because of something that is much more difficult for Trump to ignore—geopolitics. Obama and Trump are like two siblings who deeply dislike each other, and seem opposites in every possible way, and yet nevertheless share many of the same genes...”

However, this is also a very convenient explanation for the extremely powerful groups that have a stranglehold over US foreign policy. As noted above, there have been some fundamental transformations taking place in the Middle East over the last two decades, and yet despite some turbulence certain aspects of US foreign policy remain constant.

The most constant of all policies is that any suggestion that the US military footprint and associated astronomical military budget might be reduced, in any place or at any time and for any reason, has been promptly buried by an avalanche of criticism from most members of Congress and almost all segments of the corporate media.

Hence, a major showdown appeared imminent at the onset of the Trump administration. Trump campaigned on the promise of closing overseas military bases and ending the permanent wars the US is involved in, in particular in Afghanistan but also the military occupation of Iraq as well as open or, more often, covert involvement in disputes and conflicts throughout the region and beyond. Needless to say, ultimately this great showdown never happened.

When Trump announced that he would withdraw all US military from Syria, where they are deployed in complete contravention of all relevant international and US law, the groups controlling US foreign policy (as it affects their core interests) had within a short period of time corrected this anomaly. Very shortly after the revelation that Trump had decided to withdraw all US troops from Syria, a decision that appears to have been made unilaterally by the president, National Security Advisor John Bolton clarified that such a withdrawal might actually take months or years.

Needless to say, there are still an unknown number of US military and contractors in Syria and there is no departure date: Trump managed to save face personally, as he could later claim that they are paying their way by looting Syria’s oil.

Soon after the announcement that US troops would be withdrawn from Syria, Trump also directed the Pentagon to halve the number of US troops in Afghanistan, another decision that appeared to have been made unilaterally by the president. The corporate media and prominent Establishment politicians and pundits immediately responded:

“On this issue...there is more continuity between Trump and Obama than would make either administration comfortable,” Richard N. Haas, president of

The Council on Foreign Relations, told The New York Times in an article headlined “A Strategy of Retreat in Syria, with Echoes of Obama.”

The next day, The Hill repeated the sentiment in an article whose headline holds nothing back: “Trump’s Middle East Policy Looks a lot Like Obama’s - That’s not a Good Thing.”

Even Sen. Lindsey Graham (R-SC), whose support for Trump is matched only by his disdain for Obama’s Middle East policy, called Trump’s plan ‘an Obama-like mistake.’” [LINK](#)

Consequently, while there has been an effort to reduce the number of troops in Afghanistan in the lead-up to the US elections scheduled to be held later this year, there they remain, no vital strategic goals and objectives defined and no departure date set, to be reduced to ‘only’ 5,000 soldiers apparently (plus the usual unspecified number of ‘contractors’) to guard over US Establishment interests and objectives. They certainly aren’t there to safeguard the interests of the American people, much less those of the people of Afghanistan.

One analyst explained the paradoxical comments condemning the supposed similarity between the foreign policies of Obama and Trump in the Middle East as follows:

“While both presidents have advocated decreasing America’s footprint in the region, their policies are comparable only on the most superficial level. Obama and Trump have taken contrasting approaches to the Afghanistan war, America’s longest. Both favoured troop withdrawal - but with different intentions.

In June 2011, Obama announced a multi-year timetable for a withdrawal, after an initial surge. His goal was to let the Afghan government know that the U.S. commitment to Afghanistan was not open-ended. The Afghans had to get their house in order, then take over the fight before the U.S. left for good.

It was, in effect, an announcement of the ‘Afghanization’ of the war, similar in intent to Richard Nixon’s policy of ‘Vietnamization.’ In 1969, Nixon proposed replacing U.S. combat troops with South Vietnamese troops in order to extricate the United States from a seemingly endless war. This was Obama’s goal in Afghanistan as well. By the end of his second term, however, circumstances there persuaded him to slow the withdrawal.

When Trump announced his policy toward Afghanistan during the first year of his presidency, he mocked Obama’s plan. According to Trump, “Conditions on the ground, not arbitrary timetables, will guide our strategy from now on.”

And instead of ‘Afghanization’, Trump originally supported increasing the use of force to compel the Taliban, whom the U.S. and its allies are fighting in Afghanistan, to come to the bargaining table.

The Taliban had other ideas.

Rather than being backed into a corner, the Taliban recently made battlefield gains and is defying U.S. efforts to negotiate a settlement. It was in this context that Trump decided that ‘conditions on the ground’ were ripe for a partial U.S. withdrawal...

Obama’s Afghanistan policy was part of a broader approach his administration took toward the Middle East... Unlike Obama, Trump does not have a Middle

East strategy, grand or otherwise. He has impulses..." [LINK](#)

In the broader regional context, Obama believed that the United States had expended far too much blood and treasure in the Middle East under his predecessor, George W. Bush. For Obama, the region's many intractable conflicts and problems made it more trouble than it was worth. Reinforced by the rapidly growing geopolitical and economic might of China across the Pacific, one of his primary goals was to get the United States out of the Middle East and into Asia.

Therefore Obama sought to reduce tensions in the Middle East, and shift the burden of 'policing' the region to Israel, the Saudis and others, as the United States had done during the Cold War. In line with the aim of withdrawing US forces from the Middle East and initiating the 'pivot to Asia', the Obama administration forged an international Iran nuclear deal and tried to restart negotiations between Israel and the Palestinians.

However, the chaos created by the Arab uprisings and colour revolutions of 2010-11, and the resistance of US allies in the region to what they believed was US disengagement and neglect, prevented Obama from achieving many of these goals.

Unlike Obama, Trump does not appear to have a cohesive Middle East strategy, and most of his decisions are not based on a deep analysis of events in the region and the needs and interests of the countries and people there. In the Trump administration, there are only two sets of interests that count, and they count above everything else: the interests of the US (as perceived and interpreted by the Trump administration), and Israel.

If there is one country on Earth that equals Trump's contempt for international law and the US Establishment's addiction to permanent war it is Israel, which has enjoyed the protection of the US veto as its own since the day it was created (the main exception being during the Suez Crisis). Another common factor in the specific case of Donald Trump and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is their billionaire benefactor Sheldon Adelson, who has particularly close ties with both and has provided vast sums to smooth their way to power and keep them there. [LINK1](#), [LINK2](#)

Yet the ties between the two go further:

"Trump's affinity for Netanyahu is also probably enhanced by the PM's relationship with Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, which goes way back. Kushner's father appeared alongside Sheldon Adelson and Ron Lauder on a list of potential donors Netanyahu compiled in 2007. On a trip Netanyahu took to the US before he became PM, he stayed as a guest at the Kushner home, sleeping in Jared's bed while Jared, a teenager at the time, bunked in the basement. Netanyahu visited Jared's father Charles at his office and played soccer at one of the Jewish day schools bearing the Kushner family name with Joshua Kushner, Jared's younger brother." [LINK](#)

Thus bilateral US-Israel relations and cooperation on the international scene to achieve common objectives were set to reach unprecedented levels. Nonetheless, the overwhelming majority of economic and military benefits Israel has received over the last four years was merely part of the built-in financial, military, technological and diplomatic largesse that the US bestows on Israel year after year, jealously protected by a bipartisan chorus that very

few members of the US Congress can resist. The twenty-six standing ovations Netanyahu received for his mediocre address before the US Congress in 2015 should be sufficient testimony on this point.

The power of the Israel lobby in US politics and corporate media was also put on display on another rare occasion that a US president infringed upon one of the lobby's sacred cows when George Bush (Snr) threatened to withhold US aid to Israel should Israeli President Chaim Herzog not cease the construction of new settlements in the West Bank. After determined lobbying of the US Congress by the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in particular, accompanied by a withering corporate media backlash, Bush stated that he was: "one lonely little guy, up against some powerful political forces made up of a thousand lobbyists on the Hill." His remarks identifying AIPAC as one of the main protagonists behind the lobbying campaign sparked another barrage of criticism for which Bush later apologized, agreeing to send Israel its grants in foreign aid irrespective of the policies and conduct of the Israeli government and whether they are compatible with the interests of the people of the US.

In 2007, George Bush (Jnr) signed an agreement with Israel promising to provide \$30 billion in US military aid to Israel for a 10 year period. Barack Obama also duly signed a deal guaranteeing 38 billion dollars in aid to Israel. While the Obama administration generally maintained the US' favourable posture towards Israel, it declined to back some of the Israeli leadership's more insistent and reckless demands, foremost among which was that the US isolate, demonize and ultimately attack Iran. Indeed, Obama went one step further and ended the staged confrontation over Iran's nuclear energy program by signing the JCPOA along with the other permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany, successfully quashing a dangerous flashpoint - for a while, at least.

One of Obama's final major decisions as president, to not veto a Security Council resolution condemning Israel's annexation of Palestinian territory and the construction of Israeli settlements on territory occupied in the aftermath of the 1967 war, earned him the wrath of 'the lobby' and a public flaying in the corporate media, typical of the political excommunication of those that waver even the slightest in placing the interests of Israel above all others, including those of the US. A prominent hit piece in the Washington Examiner, "Obama's disgraceful and harmful legacy on Israel", gives just a small taste of the barrage of wailing and gnashing of teeth that followed:

"For all eight years of the Obama administration, Democrats have made believe that Barack Obama is a firm and enthusiastic supporter and defender of the Jewish state. Arguments to the contrary were not only dismissed but angrily denounced as the products of nothing more than vicious partisanship. Obama's defenders repeatedly used the trope that "Israel should not be a partisan issue"...

All of those arguments have been ground into dust by Obama's action Friday allowing a nasty and harmful anti-Israel resolution to pass the United Nations Security Council. Just weeks before leaving office, he could not resist the opportunity to take one more swipe at Israel—and to do real harm. So he will leave with his record on Israel in ruins, and he will leave Democrats even worse off...

Today's anti-Israel action will further damage the Democratic party, by driving some Jews if not toward the Republicans then at least away from the

Democrats and toward neutrality. Donald Trump's clear statement on Thursday that he favored a veto, Netanyahu's fervent pleas for one, and the Egyptian action in postponing the vote show where Obama stood: not with Israel, not even with Egypt, but with the Palestinians. Pleas for a veto from Democrats in Congress were ignored by the White House.

Does the resolution matter? It does. The text declares that "the establishment by Israel of settlements in the Palestinian territory occupied since 1967, including East Jerusalem, has no legal validity and constitutes a flagrant violation under international law"... The text demands "that Israel immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in the occupied Palestinian territory, including East Jerusalem"... The resolution also "calls upon all States, to distinguish, in their relevant dealings, between the territory of the State of Israel and the territories occupied since 1967." This is a call to boycott products of the Golan, the West Bank, and parts of Jerusalem, and support for the Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions movement.

Yet Barack Obama thought this was all fine and refused to veto. Settlements have been an obsession for Obama since the second day of his term in office, January 22, 2009. That day he appointed George Mitchell to be his special peace envoy, and adopted the view that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was the key to peace in the entire region and that freezing construction in settlements was the key to Israeli-Palestinian peace..." [LINK](#)

Another corporate media outlet complained:

"When speaking with Obama, French President Nicolas Sarkozy bewailed Israel's PM saying, "I can't stand Netanyahu; he is a coward and a liar." Rather than defend Netanyahu, Obama replied, "You can't stand him? I have to deal with him more than you." [LINK](#)

A report by *The Guardian* provides another perspective on the Obama administration's relations with Israel and policies on the Israel-Palestine question:

"That Obama detests Netanyahu is common knowledge. What is less well known is that Obama's personal antipathy towards the prime minister co-exists with a genuine commitment to the welfare and security of the Jewish state.

Obama's actual record over his eight years in office makes him one of the most pro-Israeli American presidents since Harry S Truman. Obama has given Israel considerably more money and arms than any of his predecessors. He has fully lived up to America's formal commitment to preserve Israel's 'qualitative military edge' by supplying his ally with ever more sophisticated weapons systems. His parting gift to Israel was a staggering military aid package of \$38bn for the next 10 years. This represents an increase from the current \$3.1 to \$3.8bn per annum. It is also the largest military aid package from one country to another in the annals of human history." [LINK](#)

One of the major shifts that has occurred in the bedrock of geopolitics in the Middle East is the relations between the Gulf States, particularly the Saudis and the UAE, and Israel. While the respective parties are still reticent to openly acknowledge the extent to which their interests and objectives are aligned and the nature of their collaboration, the fact that such alignment can now be openly discussed is in itself a paradigm shift. This has already become a part of the 'new normal' under the Trump administration.

“Muhammad bin Zayed, Crown Prince of Abu Dhabi, and Muhammad bin Salman (MBS), Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, believed the Gulf states and Israel shared a common enemy: Iran. In May 2017, Trump and his team met with Arab leaders in Riyadh, and Kushner and MBS agreed on the outlines of a Middle East strategic alliance. Israel would remain a ‘silent partner’, at least for now. The US committed to taking a harder line on Iran, and the Gulf Arabs promised to help get the Palestinians to go along with the new program.

In May 2009, Netanyahu had tried to get Obama and his team to assist in easing Israel’s isolation in the region. He asked Secretary of State Hillary Clinton to convince Gulf leaders to meet with him publicly to demonstrate a normalization of relations to the peoples of the Middle East. Saudi King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz refused to meet an Israeli leader, and American officials were skeptical for years of Israel’s claims that it was possible for it to expand ties with the Gulf States.” [LINK](#)

The differences between the Obama and Trump administrations on their policies towards Israel and the Middle East more generally, despite the above-mentioned continuities, is also clearly demonstrated with respect to the latter point mentioned in the report by the *Washington Examiner* quoted above, the cornerstone issue of Israeli settlements in Palestinian territory and a broader Israel-Palestine peace agreement. The article in the *Guardian* argued in this respect:

“Netanyahu has always believed what the Likud’s electoral platform continues to state explicitly: there can be no independent Palestinian state west of the Jordan River. He is a reactionary politician whose overriding aim is to preserve the status quo with Israel as a regional superpower, ruling over millions of disenfranchised Palestinians in what he and his colleagues insist on calling Judea and Samaria.

Netanyahu presides over the most rightwing, jingoistic, pro-settler, and overtly racist coalition government in Israel’s history. He and his government are addicted to occupation – the root of all evil. In the teeth of almost universal condemnation, they continue to expand the Jewish settlements on the West Bank, thereby deliberately destroying the basis for a viable and territorially contiguous Palestinian state.

Area C, where most of these settlements are located, comprises 60% of the West Bank. Several ministers, led by the ultra-nationalist Jewish Home party, advocate outright annexation of this area. A cabinet majority is pushing for a new law that would ‘legalize’ the illegal Jewish outposts on the West Bank – illegal even by Israeli standards because they were built on private Palestinian land. This law, if passed by the Knesset, as seems very likely, will translate the ongoing practice of the ethnic cleansing of Palestine into official state policy...

The Israeli hawks cannot wait for Donald Trump to enter the White House because he is a strong supporter not only of Israel itself but of the illegal settler movement. They believe he would give them a free pass to annex the rural parts of the West Bank and they hope that he will act on his promise to move the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem– a move that would drive a stake through the two-state solution...” [LINK](#)

Indeed, the US Embassy is now located in Jerusalem.

An article posted by the *Besa Foundation* provides a very different interpretation of the topic of illegal Israeli settlements and the ‘peace process’ in its summation of the Trump

administration's proposal to resolve the Israel-Palestine question, the 'Deal of the Century' drafted pursuant to the directives of Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

"To achieve harmony and actually solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump, with Kushner, unveiled a \$50 billion Palestinian investment and infrastructure proposal dubbed the 'Deal of the Century'. The plan is designed to create at least a million new jobs for Palestinians. It proposes projects worth \$27.5 billion in the West Bank and Gaza and \$9.1 billion, \$7.4 billion, and \$6.3 billion for Palestinians in Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon, respectively. The projects envisioned are in the healthcare, education, power, water, high-tech, tourism, and agriculture sectors. (Needless to say, the Palestinian leadership rejected the plan before even seeing it.)

One of the most significant differences between the Obama and Trump administrations is their approach to, and understanding of, the Palestinian question. Obama felt the best approach was to beat up on Israel and give the Palestinians everything. Trump, by contrast, wants the Palestinians to understand that their stock is declining. The goal is to get the Palestinian leadership to accept more realistic proposals." [LINK](#)

The 'more realistic proposals' require them to surrender all aspirations to a Palestinian State and most of their territory, to live in a few scattered enclaves surrounded and guarded by Israeli security forces.

As noted previously, in stark contrast to relations with Israel, Trump's decisions and policies with respect to other countries in the region, including other allies for which the US has traditionally offered unwavering support, have been opportunistic, patronising and condescending if not downright insulting, and always based on the fundamental principle of 'America (and Israel) first'. The relations between the Saudis and the Trump administration are illustrative in this respect, as they have concluded massive weapons deals and the US has continued to support the Saudi's and UAE's genocidal war against Yemen even as Trump has twittered that the Saudi regime is inherently unviable and would immediately collapse without the military and other hardware that the US provides as well as the technical expertise required to operate it.

The relations between the Trump administration and other countries with 'autocratic' regimes in the region have been similar, in effect a necessary business arrangement to be concluded amidst effusive expressions of friendship despite the mutual dislike, if not contempt, that exists between the respective parties. For example, Trump's casting aside of all diplomatic niceties (not to mention pretences and charades) at a function attended by US and Egyptian officials:

"During a reception at the Hotel du Palais in Biarritz, France, at the recent G7 summit, President Donald Trump was looking for Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al Sisi and called out, 'Where's my favorite dictator?' according to the Wall Street Journal, citing several people who were in the room at the time.

According to the witnesses, Trump appeared to be joking, but, the Journal said, "his question was met by a stunned silence." [LINK](#)

Thus although Trump's conduct of foreign policy has been spontaneous, erratic and opportunistic, his support for Israel has been consistent and absolute. This may be due in

part to his benefactor Sheldon Adelson's influence, but on many related matters their positions were probably not that far apart to begin with even if the finer details and specific decisions remained to be defined:

"Adelson gave \$82m toward Trump's and other Republican campaigns during the 2016 election cycle - more than three times the next largest individual donor, according to Open Secrets.

That commitment bought him an attentive hearing from the new administration as he pushed for the appointment of Bolton as national security adviser knowing that he would be an important ally in getting the White House to kill the Iran nuclear deal. The New York Times reported that Adelson is a member of a 'shadow National Security Council' advising Bolton.

The day after Trump announced that the US was pulling out of the Iran agreement, Adelson was reported to have held a private meeting at the White House with the president, Bolton and Vice-President Mike Pence." [LINK](#)

While it has always been unpredictable and subject to abrupt tectonic shifts in the external environment, the future course of relations between the US, Israel and the Middle East once again is located on the threshold of a major juncture with the presidential elections scheduled to be held in a few months and turmoil peaking throughout the Middle East region, most recently with the catastrophic accident or attack that has devastated Lebanon.

Whether Trump or Biden win the elections, or whether they are held at all, is unlikely to significantly affect the Establishment dogma of the primacy bestowed upon Israel in the conduct of US foreign policy.

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