

Trump's Ambassador to Israel is Truly Terrifying

By [Josh Alvarez](#)

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In keeping with the logic of the Trump era, Senate Republicans (along with two Democrats) have hired an arsonist to prevent a fire. [David Friedman](#), whom the Senate confirmed today as U.S. ambassador to Israel, spent most of his confirmation hearing either apologizing for or attempting to walk back everything he has ever said about Israel, Judaism, and the conflict with Palestinians.

Friedman was **Donald Trump's** bankruptcy lawyer during the president's Atlantic City debacles. Apparently, in Trump's mind, that qualified him to serve as campaign advisor on Israel and the Middle East. During the campaign, Friedman contributed commentary to [Arutz Sheva](#), an extreme right-wing publication based in Israel. In an August 2016 [post](#), he called for an "end to the two-state narrative," which he described as the product of a U.S. State Department "with a hundred-year history of anti-Semitism." Friedman will now be collecting a paycheck from that evil institution. He continued,

"At this juncture, a Palestinian state is the last thing the [Palestinian] middle class wants—they know better than anyone how corrupt and inept their people are at self-government."

According to him, no Palestinians in the West Bank (he [prefers](#) to call them "Arabs of Judea and Samaria") are "under any physical threat by the Israeli government." This was news to me. I've traveled repeatedly to Hebron, where I've seen the barbed wire surrounding the Palestinian part of town and the watchtowers with heavily armed Israeli soldiers facing *toward* the Arabs inside.

Friedman has also [contributed](#) money to illegal settlements in the West Bank as well as to the [Jerusalem Reclamation Project](#), which works to purchase property and settle Jews in the Muslim Quarter of Jerusalem's Old City and Arab neighborhoods in East Jerusalem. The goal is obvious: push all non-Jews out of Jerusalem and "reclaim" the city.

A month before the election, Friedman matter-of-factly [denied](#) the existence of the explicitly anti-Semitic alt-right. Anti-Semitism, in Friedman's view, is primarily a feature of the left.

"There is anti-Semitic sentiment among Clinton's supporters," he said. "The danger in the U.S. is on the left, not on the right," Friedman said. "I'm not saying that there aren't neo-Nazis floating around in the United States, because I'm sure there are. But the movement we ought to be concerned about is on the left."

But Friedman saved the bulk of his vitriol for liberal Jews. In one [post](#), he equated being a

Jewish liberal to a young **Theodor Herzl** (the forefather of Zionism) joining the German fraternity Burschenschaft, which became a breeding ground for pre-Hitler anti-Semites. Friedman appears to believe that liberal Jews are not simply misguided, but are actively seeking to destroy Israel while falsely proclaiming themselves to be pro-Israel.

There can be no other explanation, in his mind, for the liberal Israel lobby J Street's public support of President Obama's negotiations with Iran than intentionally undercutting the Jewish state and betraying true Jews. Liberal Jews, he [wrote](#), are "worse than kapos," the Jews who collaborated with the Nazis in the death camps. They are "just smug advocates of Israel's destruction delivered from the comfort of their secure American sofas—it's hard to imagine anyone worse." Later confronted with his own words at a conference, Friedman doubled down, [saying](#), "They're not Jewish and they're not pro-Israel."



The difference between a mere religious bigot and a true fundamentalist is that a bigot mostly concerns himself with the Other—people outside his faith—while a fundamentalist concerns himself foremost with rival groups within his faith. Muslim fundamentalists, like the ones in ISIS, are more immediately concerned with cleansing their society of Muslims they deem insufficiently devout than with destroying Christendom or Judaism. Likewise, for people like Friedman, discussion of the inferiority of Arabs and Muslims and their coming subjugation is superfluous. The important thing is to marginalize the (so-called) Jews who don't believe that the establishment of a Jewish theocracy over Greater Israel will bring redemption and God's grace.

This is the man the Senate saw fit to entrust with America's diplomatic mission in a place already suffering from a surplus of religious zealots. Despite his apologies, there is no reason to believe Friedman has suddenly abandoned his extremism, nor that he would be under the strict control of the president, who clearly has no real interest in or moral conviction on the conflict.

The potential impact of Ambassador Friedman would be tempered if not for the current makeup of the Israeli government. **Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu** is leader of the Likud Party, which in recent decades has moved ever further to the right on the traditional Israeli spectrum. But even Likud has been outflanked by the rise of the [Home Party](#), which could be considered Israel's version of the alt-right. The Home Party is now in a coalition government with Likud and has enough seats in parliament to unseat Netanyahu. The defining features of its platform is the dismantling of secular democratic laws and institutions, the full annexation of the West Bank (a one-state solution), and the imposition of Israeli law on Palestinians, who would be denied full citizenship and civil rights and forcibly segregated from Israelis. In a word, apartheid.

It's with this party that Mr. Friedman most closely identifies, and his nomination has already further emboldened its members and sympathizers. A Likud Party minister [publicly broke ranks](#) with Netanyahu, declaring the two-state solution dead and proposing his own Home Party-esque idea for a one-state solution. Practically speaking, Netanyahu was never in favor of a two-state solution and has done everything in his power to nip any negotiations in the bud. But now we have an ambassador who will not hold Netanyahu to even a vague rhetorical commitment to a two-state possibility.

Friedman's appointment further discredits the Trump administration's supposed toughness

on Israel regarding the annexation of the West Bank. At his joint press conference with Netanyahu last month, Trump faced Netanyahu and said, “I would like to see you hold off” on further settlements. (It was at this same conference that Trump ended America’s commitment to a two-state solution.) **Israel Defense Minister Avigdor Lieberman** said he received a [direct message](#) from the Trump administration warning that “imposing Israeli sovereignty [on the West Bank] would mean an immediate crisis with the new administration.”

It appears Lieberman himself did not consider this to be a credible threat. He met with **Secretary of State Rex Tillerson** [last week](#) and told him that West Bank settlements—which are, by definition, imposing Israeli sovereignty—are not an impediment to peace, and that the U.S. should leave the United Nations Human Rights Council and reconsider its support of the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees. Friedman’s appointment further undermines Trump’s public stance. This incoherence on the part of the administration, combined with [a weak State Department](#) and a growing morass of self-inflicted crises, is an open [invitation](#) for the Israeli right wing to keep pushing ahead with the settlements, further narrowing the possibility of ever getting rid of them.

Perhaps the only positive outcome is that Friedman’s Senate confirmation vote almost entirely fell on party lines: only two Democrats, **Robert Menendez** of New Jersey and **Joe Manchin** of West Virginia, voted in favor. Israel is no longer an axiomatic bipartisan issue. This process was helped along by Netanyahu and the Republican Party during the Obama administration, especially when Netanyahu, at the invitation of GOP congressional leadership, addressed Congress and directly undermined the sitting president’s foreign policy—an unprecedented and disgraceful spectacle that Democrats are unlikely to forget. Perhaps the United States will become host to the debate about what kind of country Israel should be, a debate the Israeli government and its enablers are currently uninterested in having.

On a broader level, Friedman’s appointment further establishes the conditions for Israel to go down a potentially irreversible moral path. The current occupation and creeping land theft is already a crime in slow motion. But the combination of a [radicalized](#) militant government with a monopoly on the means for mass violence, a strident messianic movement in the West Bank, and the presence of enablers in the West Wing and the American embassy opens the possibility for even greater sins from which Israel and the Israeli soul may never recover.

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