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THE NEXT ADMINISTRATION AND RECALIBRATING U.S.-ISRAELI TIES

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Former Head of Policy Planning at Israel's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, Eran Etzion, explores the state of U.S.-Israel relations and their likely future trajectory under a new U.S. administration. Etzion notes a strategic drift has widened between the two allies in recent years, and that is likely to continue regardless of the outcome of the U.S. presidential elections. The United States and Israel diverge on a number of key points, including strategic priorities and, increasingly of late, values. These differences will sustain the negative trend in relations moving forward, but military and defense ties will remain strong and compartmentalized from the friction at the political level.

KEY FINDINGS

- ◆ Benjamin Netanyahu's "new Israel," which is more conservative and religious, is shifting further away from core American liberal values of democracy and human rights.
- ◆ The Arab Spring and the Iran nuclear deal widened the strategic differences between the United States and Israel.
- ◆ Military cooperation is expected to remain strong, and compartmentalized from troubled political relations.
- ◆ The Israeli-Palestinian conflict will continue to be a major bone of contention between Washington and Tel Aviv.
- ◆ The next U.S. administration is unlikely to see a reversal in the negative trend in U.S.-Israel relations.
- ◆ Israel has taken note of the U.S. pivot away from the region, and is trying to expand its economic interests with Asia.

INTRODUCTION

Relations between the United States and Israel in the Obama-Netanyahu era underwent what is arguably the most severe crisis in their history. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's 'circle of trust' was visibly concerned over President Barack Obama's 'enigma' even before the president's election, and certainly after he was elected. Netanyahu—an extremely savvy politician—was quick to identify a fundamental gap between Israeli and American interests as perceived by himself and Obama. That gap would later unfold in front of the entire world and culminate in the unprecedented battle on Capitol Hill over the Iran nuclear agreement.

The Iran nuclear issue was the most prominent manifestation of an increasingly divergent strategic agenda, which has been driving the growing split between the two countries in recent years. Beyond partisan politics and campaign rhetoric, this divergence will also carry over to the next administration irrespective of the identity of the 45th President. The two countries have a fundamentally different outlook regarding the Middle East, as well as very different threat perceptions and strategic priorities. While the basic asymmetries between a remote global superpower and a small regional power play a part in this widening gap, the dynamics of divergence are rooted in the two administrations' values, ideologies, and political agendas. Thus, Netanyahu and Obama spent the better part of their first joint term twisting each other's arms over



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their main strategic priorities. For Obama, it was the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which he and his close circle judged to be the core of the Middle East problem, the resolution of which would positively impact other regional conflicts and U.S. credibility in the region. For Netanyahu, the clear priority was the elimination of the Iranian nuclear program, which he perceived as the one and only existential threat to his country.

This debate, which began almost immediately after Obama's entry into office, became wider and more bitter, trickling down to the defense and foreign policy professional echelons and dominating the bilateral discussions on all levels. With the two leaders unable to come to an agreement on their common strategic sequencing, the 'Iran-or-Palestine-first' dilemma would continue to fester and become a primary source of discord and ongoing tension. Looking ahead

unto the next American administration, the basic mismatch in terms of strategic priorities will continue regardless of the identity of the next president. Iran will continue to be a bone of contention and the Palestinian issue will be a fountain of disagreements. In the bigger scheme of things, the U.S. pivot away from the region, its newfound energy independence, and the historic collapse of the Sykes-Picot state system will accelerate the U.S.-Israel drift. With one side watching from a safe distance and the other immersed in multi-front and multi-layered crises, there is hardly any reason to foresee a changed bilateral dynamic. Whoever is elected president will necessarily adapt his or her approach to those realities.

DIVERGING VALUES

Even more than diverging perceptions, at the core of this Netanyahu-Obama hostility lay different sets of values. The progressive, liberal Obama stands in direct contrast to the conservative and increasingly illiberal Netanyahu. Unlike U.S. presidents, Israeli prime ministers have no term limits, and Netanyahu is safely on his way to becoming the longest-serving prime minister, surpassing the founding father of the Israeli state, David Ben-Gurion. Netanyahu's place in the history books will not be earned on the basis of a bold foreign policy record or brilliantly planned and executed military campaigns. He will be remembered for his steady and masterful transformation of Israel's unwritten and unlegislated—Israel

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has no constitution—set of values, as well as its political, spiritual, and cultural elites. The ‘new Israel’ Netanyahu will have helped create by the time he leaves office will be less liberal, more conservative, more religious, and generally less ‘westernized’ than the Israel he inherited from the assassinated Yitzhak Rabin or from his former Likud colleague, Ehud Olmert.

It is not clear which America this ‘new Israel’ will be forced to deal with after the 2016 elections. Still, it is safe to say that a permanent gap has opened with regard to shared values, the set of democratic, Western, Judeo-Christian beliefs that are constantly mentioned as an integral feature of the special relationship between the two countries. This gap will persist regardless of the next American president's identity. The width and depth of this gap will be measured in relation to the value set of the next president. A conservative commander in chief will likely reduce the gap, but it will nevertheless remain a visible, palpable political factor in future bilateral relations.

On issues such as the legitimacy of authoritarian Arab regimes—Egypt's current regime being one case in point—and human rights in general, particularly within

the context of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, a Clinton administration will not see eye-to-eye with a Netanyahu government. A Trump administration, to the extent it is possible to grasp its future policies, will probably be much less attentive to these 'liberal agenda' issues and adopt a mini-

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malist strategic posture with respect to the region. Absent a major attack on U.S. soil emanating from the Middle East, a President Donald Trump will have no reason to devote political resources, let alone military or financial resources, to this part of the world. In his case, his politics, to be distinguished from his campaign rhetoric, are expected to be in alignment with the sound strategic rationale of offshore balancing that was developed in the U.S. policy community and implemented by the Obama administration in recent years. One might expect a more aggressive posture with regard to China and Russia, but even there we may very well witness a 'world of difference' between candidate Trump and Commander-in-Chief Trump.

A Cruz administration will probably follow a similar path, with one potential deviation. Given Ted Cruz's strong religious

strand and evangelical political affiliations, which are in correlation with Netanyahu's American power base, one cannot exclude a personal inclination to strengthen Israel's hand in its conflict with the Muslim world in general, and with the Palestinians in particular. However, given the built-in checks and balances within the American system and the overall Middle East aversion in U.S. public opinion, it is hard to see a major American intervention even under a President Cruz. A possible change of stated positions on Israel-Palestine is in the cards, but it will inescapably be perceived as a personal and political maneuver, rather than one rooted in strategic considerations.

STRATEGIC DRIFT

Israel and the United States have been drifting apart for decades with regard to their strategic interests. This has been the case since the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of Israel's Middle East proxy role during the Cold War.

Relations received an unexpected boost as a result of 9/11 and the following global war on terror, in which Israel was able to play a small part, mainly in the intelligence domain. The Bush-Sharon and Bush-Olmert relations were based on a considerable level of trust, as well as on the ability to cleverly identify—albeit in the Sharon case only

after heavy American pressure—areas of strategic convergence, most notably the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the Gaza disengagement project. But as the Iran nuclear challenge gradually loomed larger to the point of dominating the bilateral agenda, tensions grew. Olmert's decision, according to media reports, to implement the 'Begin Doctrine' of preventing the rise of any Middle Eastern nuclear power by striking Syria's plutonium reactor at Deir Ezzor in September 2007 was, in retrospect, an early indication of the Israeli-American clash over a military option in the case of Iran's nuclear program.¹

The majority of Israel's policy community interpret U.S. strategy in the Middle East as offshore balancing, namely minimizing direct interventions, narrowly and clearly defining direct threats to U.S. national security interests and displaying a strong preference for a leading-from-behind approach.² Some have not shied away from labeling Obama's stated preference for engagement with adversaries as appeasement.³ Israel's government is attentive to the negative reception of Obama's approach by other U.S. allies and shares their frustration. Israel is actively trying to divert its trade towards China, India, and Asia at large, while pursuing a 'respect and suspect' strategic relationship with Russia based on limited joint interests in Syria, alongside an effort to limit Russian arms sales to Israel's adversaries.

Despite the harsh criticism, the indispensability of strategic relations with the Unit-

ed States continues to be a core principle of Israel's unwritten national security doctrine. This is the view of the vast majority of policy professionals and analysts. With the signing of the Iran nuclear agreement, they are now preaching for a 'reset' of the relations. However, the leading politicians in Netanyahu's coalition link a potential reset with the post-Obama era. Their assumption seems to be that the next president will change American strategy in the Middle East, including its approach to Israel. They are therefore not in a hurry to initiate such a reset or to conclude the negotiations on the new ten-year military assistance memorandum of understanding.

REGIONAL OUTLOOK

The epic strategic surprise called the Arab Spring served to escalate bilateral tensions even further. With the administration initially bursting with optimism and rosy predictions of an Arab Spring, the dominant narrative in Israel—shaped by the political and military establishment—was of major concern and even alarm at the loss of the familiar authoritarian regimes. Israel's warnings against the rise of the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist movements initially fell on deaf ears. The result was a rapid spread of anti-administration sentiments in Israeli government and society circles. The United States was widely viewed as naïve, clueless and, on the fringes of both internal and public discourse, even dangerous and malicious towards Israel.

The last five years highlighted the fact that for the first time in decades, the United States and Israel do not share a single major common strategic objective. With regard to the main three issues at stake—Iran’s nuclear program, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the crumbling regional order—there are fundamental differences in analyses, strategic prioritization, policy options, and operational goals. In fact, the two countries do not even agree on a common term describing the collapse of the old regional order. Israel initially referred to the phenomenon as an ‘Arab Winter’ and later adopted the alarming ‘regional turmoil.’ Washington moved from the optimistic misnomer ‘Arab Spring’ to the open-ended ‘Arab revolutions.’

Israel’s government and defense community see the Middle East as a failed region that will continue to disintegrate in the foreseeable future. In a post-Iran deal environment, Israel’s attention will be focused on its immediate vicinity. Direct threats include Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Gaza, and global jihad organizations amassing in Sinai, the Golan Heights, and potentially on Israel’s eastern frontier and maritime borders. The I.D.F. and the various intelligence agencies are preoccupied with developing tactical and operational responses to these threats. The political leadership continues to prefer a largely passive, strategically patient approach based on surgical strikes against imminent threats, fortified border regimes,

and smart fences—i.e. technologically sophisticated systems, including multiple cameras, drones, and other means—on all fronts. The Israeli government hopes to leverage what it views as shared strategic interests with key Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan. Such interests include an ongoing rivalry with Iran and proxies, as well as the campaign against ISIS and other Sunni radicals.

MILITARY INDEPENDENCE VERSUS COOPERATION

In essence, the basic question that has complicated U.S.-Israeli relations and will continue to do so in the next political cycle is simple. What, if any, are the limits that the United States can or should impose on Israel’s use of military force? In more colloquial terms: who calls the I.D.F.’s shots?

The relevance of this question stretches across Israel’s military fronts and conflicts. According to some American policymakers, it covers even the domestic domain of Israel’s Arab and Bedouin citizens. Tensions between successive Israeli governments and U.S. administrations can be traced back to this question, in cases like the 2006 Second Lebanon War and the recurring campaigns in Gaza. These tensions have risen again during these very days with the so-called ‘wave of terror’ or ‘the individuals’ intifada’ currently raging in the West Bank and in Israel proper. The pattern is clear; after a short

period of violence, the U.S. administration tends to view Israel as utilizing excessive or disproportional force and initiates various diplomatic and media efforts to restrain it. The Israeli government, in turn, insists on maintaining its operational freedom to maneuver in terms of concrete military operations, but, as importantly, in terms of perception on all public opinion fronts—domestic, regional, and international. The Israeli side sees the United States as ‘tying our hands,’ while Washington feels that ‘the Israelis are reckless and ungrateful.’ These sentiments are left to fester and have accumulated over the years, aided by structural deficiencies in the American-Israeli strategic dialogues. They are now a permanent impediment.

However, their mutual interest in conducting counter-terrorism operations against ISIS and other global jihad outfits has ensured military relations remain robust, especially in terms of intelligence sharing. Thus, curiously, with the overall strategic agenda mismatch notwithstanding, the United States has adopted Israeli operational tools and methods. Targeted killings, massive use of drones, intelligence, and cyber warfare were all Israeli innovations before becoming Obama administration landmarks. Moreover, defense and intelligence officials from both sides have consistently emphasized and continue to praise the ongoing intelligence sharing and

operational collaboration in certain fields. As much as possible, the compartmentalization of these mil-to-mil relations from the troubled political ties should contin-

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ue, as it has throughout the crises of recent years. Beyond its intrinsic mutual value, it provides a certain safety net in the wider bilateral context.

The massive, direct United States military aid to Israel has, of course, been rock-steady, and chances are it will even be increased in the coming years. The two countries are in the final stages of negotiations on a new MoU, which is expected to set an even higher level of assistance for the next ten years. According to media reports, the current annual \$3 billion will be increased to approximately \$4 billion.⁴ The joint defense research and development projects, most notably the extremely successful multilayered missile defense mega-project, will continue to serve as a living testament to the sheer power and proven success of the operational defense cooperation. This type of project-based, mutually beneficial and therefore balanced cooperation should be the model for larger segments of the

defense relations. In the long run, the old Foreign Military Financing model should be revised so as to reflect the maturity of the I.D.F., Israel's military industries and its robust economy.

FEW EXPECTATIONS HEADING FORWARD

Against this backdrop, what can we expect in the coming years with respect to U.S.-Israel relations? To what extent are future developments contingent upon the outcome of the upcoming presidential elections?

When attempting to assess the next U.S. administration's regional strategy, one may discern two dominant schools of thought. The first attributes current U.S. policies to President Obama and believes or rather, hopes, for a major 'correction' beginning in 2017. The degree of this predicted deviation will differ in relation to the partisan affiliation and particular identity of the next president.

The second school expects to see a large measure of continuity across administrations, even if the next president is not a Democrat. They argue that the self-perceived U.S. interest in the Middle East has fundamentally changed due to its newfound energy independence, the continued turmoil in the region, and the need to focus on the home front and on China, within the now-familiar framework of 'the pivot to Asia.'

By and large, there seems to be a relatively low-level of expectation regarding the future of U.S.-Israel relations. The ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, increasingly seen as both irresolvable and unmanageable, is expected to continue to be a major bone of contention between the two countries. Iran will also continue to serve as the subject of major bilateral tension as the U.S. tries to create a new strategic equilibrium and Israel tries to deny Iran any policy or economic achievements and limit its regional clout. Any Iranian abrogation of its nuclear agreement, no matter how small, will immediately become a topic of major friction between Israel and the next U.S. administration, placing the two countries at opposite policy ends. Israel will seek quick and painful retaliation against Iran, and the U.S. will strive to contain the situation and go back to the path of agreed implementation.

Given these structural constraints, a recalibration of the relations between the two leaders and administrations, assuming it is at all attempted, will most probably be limited, rough, and fragile. The offsetting factors, including political support for Israel in Congress and the flourishing ties between the high-tech communities of Silicon Valley and 'Silicon Wadi,' will continue to provide some counterweight to the strategic tensions and disputes. However, the bottom line is clear: the next political cycle will not see a reversal of the negative trend now apparent in U.S.-Israeli relations.

ENDNOTES

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