



## President-elect Donald Trump Nominates David Friedman as US Ambassador to Israel

By Roxanne Perugino

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On December 15, 2016, President-elect Donald Trump nominated David Friedman to the post of US ambassador to Israel. Friedman, a bankruptcy lawyer, has no diplomatic or foreign policy experience other than being a zealous supporter of Israel. If there was any question that the peace process would go nowhere in a Trump administration, the appointment of Friedman removes all doubt.

Friedman is indeed a controversial appointment. By all reports, he is a hawk on Israeli policy and opposes the two-state solution. He has supported and contributed to West Bank settlements. He serves as president, albeit on a volunteer basis, for the American Friends of Bet El Institutions, a major funding group of Israeli settlements. He has been vocal in his support of moving the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a move the president-elect also supports. Relocating the embassy would be in direct conflict with long-standing US policy, which does not officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel. Friedman also has accused President Obama of anti-Semitism and excoriated American Jewish leaders who supported the Iran nuclear deal, thereby, in his opinion, failing Israel.

### In His Own Words: Friedman's Views

The following are a few quotes\* by Friedman that elucidate his views on various issues regarding Israel and Palestine:

***Opposing the two-state solution:*** “There has never been a ‘two-state solution’—only a two-state narrative.” (February 2016)

***Expanding settlements on Palestinian territory:*** “As a general rule, we should expand a community in Judea and Samaria where the land is legally available and a residential or commercial need is present—just like in any other neighborhood anywhere in the world . . . Peace will come if and when Palestinians learn to stop hating us and to embrace life rather than worship death. We should try to help them in that effort, but in all cases let’s continue to build!” (October 2015)

***Opposing the removal of settlers:*** “It is inconceivable there could be a mass evacuation on that magnitude [speaking of the removal of settlers], in the unlikely event that there was an otherwise comprehensive peace agreement . . . It makes no sense for Judea and Samaria to be ‘Judenrein [void of Jews],’ any more than it makes sense for Israel to be ‘Arabrein [void of Arabs].’ It’s not fair.” (November 2016)

***Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem:*** Friedman reportedly said that the US-Israel relationship will be “better than ever” and that Trump will keep his promise of moving the US embassy to Jerusalem. (November 2016)

***Supporting Netanyahu’s position on Palestinian statehood:*** “The critical thing is to recognize that there is not going to be any progress on a Palestinian state until the Palestinians renounce violence and accept Israel as a Jewish state. Until that happens there is really nothing to talk about in terms of a political process. (November 2016)

***Accusing President Obama (and Secretary of State John Kerry) of anti-Semitism:*** “Obama and Kerry do little more than condemn the proverbial ‘cycle of violence’ . . . I’m sorry, but this is pure and outright murder and any public figure who finds it difficult to condemn it as such without diluting the message with geo-political drivel is engaging in ‘blatant anti-Semitism.’” (June 2016)

***Attacking liberal American Jews:*** “Unfortunately, hearkening back to the days of the Kapos [Nazi concentration camp prisoners who worked with the SS guard] during the Nazi regime and well before that, there is a history of a minority of Jews betraying their own. I don’t think all liberal Jews are ‘self-hating,’ as some of my colleagues like to describe them. But I do think that, like most liberals, they suffer a cognitive disconnect in identifying good and evil.” And: “People like Jeremy Ben-ami of ‘J Street’ who cut his teeth on the virulently anti-Israel (notwithstanding its name) New Israel Fund, and who today leads an organization—a proverbial wolf in sheep’s clothing—that purports to be pro-Israel but advocates just the opposite.” (July 2015)

***Attacking Senator Chuck Schumer for his support of the Iran nuclear deal:*** “No matter how he ultimately votes, by making his decision such a close call—which it plainly should not be—Schumer is validating the worst appeasement of terrorism since Munich.” (August 2015)

*The New York Times* reported that the ambassadorship had been negotiated between Trump and Friedman over the past several months and that Friedman, a large contributor to Trump’s campaign, has been saying that the job of US ambassador to Israel would be given to him. Friedman would not be the first campaign contributor to be given an ambassadorship; many supporters of various presidents over the years have been rewarded in this way. However, Friedman’s political appointment to such a sensitive post is surprising and of concern to many in the Washington foreign policy establishment.

## **Reactions to Friedman’s Nomination**

Friedman’s nomination has been met with mixed reviews. In Israel, Friedman’s nomination was welcomed by right wing leaders including Education Minister Natfali Bennett, Yesh Atid party leader Yair Lapid, and Deputy Foreign Minister Tzipi Hotovely. Prime Minister Netanyahu, despite his problems with Israel’s right wing, understands the close relationship between Trump and Friedman and has welcomed the nomination. Right-wing pro-Israel supporters in the United States applauded the selection, as has the Zionist Organization of America, which backs

settlements and opposes a two-state solution. To date, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) has not weighed in on Friedman's nomination. The well-respected Israeli newspaper *Ha'aretz* has questioned the choice of Friedman.

Liberal Jewish groups like J Street and Americans for Peace Now have publicly announced their opposition to Friedman's appointment. Although the House of Representatives has no role in the confirmation process, three Jewish members of the House, Representatives Jerrold Nadler (D-New York), Jan Schakowsky (D-Illinois), and John Yarmuth (D-Kentucky) oppose the nomination. Senate Democratic Leader Senator Charles "Chuck" Schumer (D-New York), who also is Jewish, is not taking sides on the nomination. Former Ambassador Dan Kurtzer, who served as US ambassador to Israel from 2001 to 2005, said he was "alarmed" at the appointment. The venerable *New York Times* has been extremely critical of the choice of Friedman and has called on the US Senate not to confirm him.

### **A New Policy for Israel and Palestine**

In the early days of his campaign, President-elect Trump said he would be a neutral negotiator on the Israeli-Palestinian peace process and claimed to support a two-state solution. However, his position seemed gradually to morph into a decidedly hawkish pro-Israel stance, culminating in his choice of David Friedman. Friedman and Jason Greenblatt, both supporters of Israel's illegal settlements, were Trump's principal advisors and clearly had enormous influence on the president-elect's pro-Israel views. Last week, the *Middle East Monitor* reported that Trump donated \$10,000 to a US nonprofit group -headed by Friedman- that raises funds for Beit El settlement. This prompted questions about Trump's earlier statement avowing neutrality in the peace process.

Who will determine US policy toward Israel and the Palestinians? The US Constitution gives the president the authority to make foreign policy. However, President-elect Trump has, at best, a minimal interest in foreign policy and clearly does not comprehend the complexities of the Middle East and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. For decades, US ambassadors have been tasked with implementing and carrying out the president's policies, but Trump recently said that Friedman's ". . . strong relationships in Israel will form the foundation of his diplomatic mission and be a tremendous asset to our country as we strengthen the ties with our allies and strive for peace in the Middle East." Trump's comments, and his apparent reliance on Friedman (and Greenblatt) for policy guidance, beg the question of who will determine US policy toward Israel and Palestine—Trump or Friedman?

*\*The author is grateful to the organization Americans for Peace Now, which collected these quotes.*