

Netanyahu Unrestrained: The Trump Effect on Israeli Politics

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Background

Since 2009, there have been two constants in the American-Israeli relationship: Barack Obama was President of the United States and Benjamin Netanyahu was Prime Minister of Israel. Now, while Netanyahu remains, his new counterpart is President Donald J. Trump, a reality that marks the end of one phase of US-Israeli relations and the beginning of another.

Trump represents a Republican Party whose politics has gradually shifted to the right on Israel-related issues in recent years. In its most recent presidential platform draft, the party even eliminated all mention of the two-state solution. Additionally, Trump's personal relationships indicate a major shift. The two individuals he has thus far tasked with handling relations with Israel and Middle East peace are David Friedman and Jared Kushner. The former is his pick to be ambassador to Israel who rejects a Palestinian state and literally funnels money to Israeli settlements. The latter is his son-in-law who sat on the board of a charity that helped fund Friedman's settlement projects.

The biggest indication of a shift were the events that unfolded in late December 2016 as the United States abstained on a UN Security Council resolution against Israeli settlements, in an attempt to achieve global consensus around the urgency of stopping Israel's undercutting of peace efforts in the region. The Donald Trump transition team, in coordination with Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, slammed the resolution and the Obama Administration's behavior, promising things would be different once they were in office.

The first test of just how different things would be came immediately after Trump's inauguration, when Israel announced it would be building nearly 3,000 new settlement units, including in occupied Jerusalem. The announcement came within 48 hours of a Trump-Netanyahu phone call. Such an announcement would usually have been met with a very harsh response from the White House, particularly given the fact that the timing immediately after a phone call would create the appearance of American collusion or suggest Washington's being blindsided. No statement, however, came from the White House; and during the daily press briefing, the spokesperson for the president said that the administration will be meeting with Netanyahu and will continue to discuss the settlements issue. However, he re-stated that Israel continues to be a great ally of the United States and will receive the support and respect it needs.

Whatever that statement represented, it was not a condemnation of any sort. If anything it was an approval, and no longer only from the transition team but from the White House itself. This reaction was the final clarifying moment confirming what had long been suspected: a significant shift in policy was upon us.

Understanding the Right-Wing's Modern Lock on Israeli Politics

While the state of Israel is often referred to as a democracy and it holds elections to determine the makeup of its government, millions of Palestinians under the state's control do not have a right to vote. These Palestinians living in the West Bank, Gaza, and occupied Jerusalem number nearly 4.7 million but are not citizens of Israel. Another nearly 2 million Palestinians, however, are citizens of Israel and can vote in the elections along with Israeli Jewish citizens. The Knesset is a 120-seat body for which parties compete to control a majority outright or through coalition governments.

However, because of the extremely fractured nature of the Israeli polity along ethnic, religious, and political lines, there are often anywhere between 10 to 15 parties that can win seats in the Israeli Knesset. The largest traditional parties in Israel have been the Labor Party and the Likud Party, with the former being to the left of the latter. Various smaller parties rely on and cater to smaller and often more narrowly focused constituencies. There are parties that represent Palestinian Arab citizens, Russians, settler, and ultra-Orthodox constituencies for Jews of both western and eastern backgrounds. Since many of these smaller parties are tied to demographic subgroups, their share of the seats is small but also static and reliable. The Arab parties, separately or more recently as a Joint List, acquire 10-14 seats. Since the Arab parties will not join Zionist governing coalitions—the Zionist parties wouldn't want them to, anyway—this effectively means that instead of being a contest for 60 seats out of 120, it is a contest for 60 out of about 106 to 110 seats, narrowing the options for constituting a governing coalition.

In recent years, there have been instances where the Likud Party did not win the largest number of seats during an election but still was able to cobble together a governing coalition. This is because as a large right-wing party, it can ally with secular far-right parties, religious parties, and religious-nationalist parties. A large non-right-wing party, however, even if it gets the largest share of the votes, is unable to ally with enough of the smaller parties to build a coalition. Only Likud could do that in the elections of the last decade. One effect this has had on the entire polity in general is a shift to the right since right-wing parties have been in a position to shape the agenda for a significant period without interruption. Religious nationalist settler parties, which a decade or so ago were not players in coalition-making, have grown large enough to be kingmakers. The Jewish Home Party, for example, garnered up to 12 seats, becoming the fourth largest in the 2013 elections. In the 2015 election, when it appeared there may have been a chance that Netanyahu's Likud Party might lose, it ate into the votes of the Jewish Home Party and secured a large enough

percentage of the vote to create a narrow coalition. What this meant was that while Likud would be able to govern, it would owe a lot to a tiny sliver of voters who fell somewhere on the political spectrum between Likud and Jewish Home.

Netanyahu the Salesman

Benjamin Netanyahu is on his way to becoming the longest serving prime minister in Israeli history. He has become prime minister after four different elections in 1996, 2009, 2013, and 2015. In recent years, he succeeded for two reasons: the failure of any opposing parties to effectively produce serious and politically popular candidates, and his ability to sell himself as the best national security leader to a public he constantly reminds of existential threats. One main selling point for Netanyahu is that he is the only candidate who can effectively sell Israel's message to the outside world and most importantly to the United States.

During the Obama Administration, this was a particular asset. Obama was cast as a figure whom Israelis could not and should not trust because he never fully embraced the Israeli narrative. Israel's greatest ally was now being led by a dubious man, as far as the right-wing narrative in Israel went, who may hastily throw Israel under the bus. Only one man could possibly navigate this challenge for Israel. He'd have to know America intimately, including all its power brokers. He'd have to have experience and the willingness to go toe-to-toe with the president of the United States. He'd have to speak perfect, polished English and have a desk drawer full of sound bites and the occasional prop for UN general debate speeches. Netanyahu was the only man for this job. Knowing full well the importance of his image as "the Washington whisperer," Netanyahu used a speech to Congress just weeks ahead of the 2015 election to help drive this point home with Israeli voters. The speech came so close to the election that the Israeli elections commission demanded it not be aired live in Israel but on a five-minute delay in the event any electioneering might take place during the delivery. Likewise, the White House was incensed by it in part because it could well impact the vote outcome. Sure enough, after the speech, in which Netanyahu received nearly 30 standing ovations from Congress which played on TV screens across Israel, he used footage from the applause in his campaign ads.

But now that Obama is gone and Trump is in the White House, how does this dynamic change? How can Netanyahu, who has sold himself as the guide Israel needs to manage a dangerous America, keep making that argument to voters who see a Trump Administration appearing to let Israel do as it pleases? The answer is that it won't be easy, if possible at all.

The Trump Effect

With Obama out of the way and both Trump and Netanyahu reinforcing the message that a new era would begin on January 20, the most right-wing Israeli coalition government in history sought to act on its biggest dreams. This moment, they believed, would be an opportunity they could not

waste but exploit. There was much they could ask for, and take and get away with, if Washington would let them. The “era of the Palestinian state” was declared dead, and calls to move the American embassy to Jerusalem started to sound more credible. Demands to annex Area C, 60 percent of the occupied West Bank, began to be seriously made, as were demands to annex individual large settlements like Maaleh Adumim—the largest in the occupied West Bank whose annexation would effectively bisect the territory.

This presents a real domestic political threat to Netanyahu. He is being pulled from his right to push for bigger and bolder steps at this moment. The far religious right, which threw support behind Netanyahu, wants him to do much more. Netanyahu, however, is wary. While he harbors no desire to relinquish occupied territory or stop settlement expansion, he knows there is a strategic value for Israel in maintaining the illusion of peace and a peace process. That process, or the pretense of one, has been a tremendously effective cover for settlement expansion and a shield from international opprobrium. Big, bold steps—particularly in this moment after world unison on the illegality of settlements and their threat to peace—would do significant damage to Israel’s strategic objective of trying to maintain relations with various other global players. This doesn’t mean Netanyahu doesn’t share the same goal as the far right; he certainly does, but he wants to have his cake and eat it too, and he knows that is in jeopardy if Israel moves too fast. The Trump Administration certainly represents a moment of opportunity for the Israeli right, but Netanyahu knows seizing that opportunity requires management and not haste.

The far-right parties see a political opportunity here as well. Who really supports the settlements, they want right-wing voters to ask, Jewish Home or Likud? They hope to make clear to Israeli voters that it is their party, not Netanyahu’s, that supports the religious nationalist agenda, and if Netanyahu says otherwise they are daring him to prove it. Netanyahu hopes to make the counter-argument that their agenda can only be served if there is a right-wing coalition, which only he could hold together. Recently quoted in the Israeli press, Netanyahu declared that he thinks that the country’s interests would be well served if everyone just let him lead the process.

White House Statement

This is why the [White House statement on settlements](#) released on February 2nd, which came as a surprise to some, is so important. Despite being erroneously characterized [in the media](#) as an embrace of a “pillar of Obama’s foreign policy,” the statement was anything but. If anything, the statement is a significant break not just from Obama but from previous administrations’ policies on settlements. Settlements themselves, the statement says, are not “an impediment to peace”; however, new construction and expansion “may not be helpful in achieving that goal.” It goes on to say that the Trump Administration “has not taken an official position on settlement activity.” Every American administration has understood and pronounced that the settlements are a problem

and that further expansion is not just something that “may” be a problem but something that *is* a problem.

At the same time, the statement sends the message that Israel should not feel totally free to put the pedal to the metal in the West Bank because coordinating these matters with Washington is still important. This buttresses Netanyahu’s domestic argument while still giving him plenty of room to build settlements in many areas.

Moving forward, we are likely to see continued settlement expansion with little or no push back from Washington. But the pace and scale of that expansion may well be tempered to balance the demands of Israel’s religious nationalists with the appearance of a process. How long this will continue to be the case remains unclear, but some clarification may come as the Israeli domestic political picture becomes more stable. Currently, Netanyahu is facing unprecedented investigations and possibly indictment on a variety of corruption-related charges. It is unclear if an indictment, should one be handed, would result in Netanyahu’s resignation. However, what is clear is that to survive politically, indictment or not, Netanyahu will need his narrow coalition to remain disciplined and follow his lead.