

Netanyahu's Nightmare: Trump Visits Palestine

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President Barack Obama, Barack Hussein Obama, that is, never had a chance.

From the day he arrived on the national political scene, Israelis were predisposed to distrust him. His middle name, his African ancestry, and his time spent in Indonesia as a child all led Israelis to suspect that Obama sympathized with the Palestinian narrative more than the Israeli one.

No matter how unprecedented his support for Israel was, including steadfast vetoes in the UN Security Council for nearly eight years as well as unrivaled military aid packages, to many Israelis, Obama was always going to be the guy with the Muslim sounding name who did not pass their “kishke test” – that is, their perceived gut-deep support of Israel. His Israeli counterpart, Benjamin Netanyahu, could easily use this to motivate voters with fear, shoring up his base to resist any advance toward peace.

The right wing of the Zionist establishment in the United States, including both influential Jewish and evangelical groups, pounced on the first black president’s supposed lack of love for Israel. Over the years, he had been accused by political opponents of everything from “throwing Israel under the bus” to doing favors for Iran, an American adversary. These suggestions of treason regarding what the American right holds to be sacrosanct Judeo-Christian culture dovetailed nicely with other false accusations against the president: he was not an American, his birth certificate was forged, and he is a secret Muslim.

But Barack Hussein Obama is gone now. Enter Donald John Trump, perhaps the single most identifiable individual with birtherism, who rode into office on a wave of nativist, xenophobic, and yes, even anti-Semitic fervor – only to be anointed as “good for the Jews” by the very flank of the pro-Israel community that relentlessly slammed Obama.

Trump lacks the diplomatic skills, experience, temperament, and knowledge of the details – or even the desire to get to know the details – necessary to effectively engage on Middle East peace. Given the deluge of unfavorable headlines, he may not even have the time. But he has one thing Obama could never count on: he can’t be attacked from the right on Israel.

The scandal-plagued Trump Administration has drawn many comparisons to the Nixon Administration. Nixon himself fled to the Middle East in a 1974 trip as the Watergate scandal rocked Washington. That, however, was during the second year of Nixon’s second term, and Trump has only been in office for a few months. Still, it was a different Nixon trip – his 1972 trip to China – that might offer the more important lesson here.

Nixon understood the profound American interest in establishing relations with mainland China both because of the importance of the bilateral relationship itself and the options it would afford him at the negotiating table with the Soviets on other matters around the world. But only a politician like Nixon, who came to

national prominence as a staunch anti-communist on the congressional House Un-American Activities Committee, had the political capital to make the trip. Any other politician would have feared the political consequences and been pilloried by his opponents.

Trump does not have to take another trip. But if he is serious about pursuing a negotiated settlement between Israelis and Palestinians, he is in a unique position to actually use some of the much-needed pressure on Israel necessary to increase the prospects of success. In an American political climate, particularly on the right, where “pro-Israel” has become increasingly synonymous with “anti-Muslim” (and vice-versa), who is on safer ground to press Israel than America’s Islamophobe-in-chief?

Given the way Trump behaved as a candidate, one might think that he would have no interest in such a thing. But Trump the candidate and Trump the president are notably different on this issue. As a candidate, he promised to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and slammed Obama for permitting a resolution on Israeli settlements to pass at the United Nations. Since his inauguration, however, he has not only failed to move the embassy but he has made a number of statements that contradict the persona of Trump the candidate, ones that are very likely to irk Netanyahu.

Some were surprised when Trump told Netanyahu to “hold back on settlements.” But more interesting was the White House’s language on Jerusalem. White House officials carefully sidestepped numerous traps on language that would indicate a shift in the longstanding policy of not recognizing Israeli sovereignty over Jerusalem, maintaining instead that it was a final status issue. For a president who constantly gets himself into trouble for blurting out, or tweeting, the first thing that comes to mind, Trump has been disciplined and has followed the script meticulously on these issues.

Trump further stated, standing alongside Palestinian National Authority President Mahmoud Abbas, that he firmly believes “that if Israel and the Palestinians can make peace, it will begin a process of peace all throughout the Middle East.” A similar statement was made by US Secretary of State Tillerson the following day. This line must have made Netanyahu cringe since the Israelis have long worked to push back against the notion of “linkage” in the hopes of dissociating their abusive policies toward the Palestinians—and American support for these policies—from the discontent and anti-American sentiment across the region (even though public opinion polling routinely confirms this relationship). But this statement indicates more than just a belief in such a linkage. It torpedoed the notion of an “outside-in” approach, where Israel and the Arab states would normalize relations before an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and instead

underscores the necessity of an inside-out approach, which is the principle of the Arab Peace Initiative, long endorsed by Arab and Muslim countries as a pathway to normalization with Israel—if it came to terms with the Palestinians within the outlines of international law.

Standing next to Netanyahu, Trump said Abbas was ready for peace and Israel would also have to make concessions. During Abbas's meeting with Trump, the White House readout confirmed, Abbas told Trump he was ready to "return to negotiations immediately." In response to all of this an alarmed Netanyahu soured the atmosphere by attempting to connect Abbas and the Palestinians to the ISIS-claimed bombing in Manchester and then created new preconditions. Surely Trump would have loved nothing more than to announce the resumption of Israeli-Palestinian peace talks during this trip; speaking to reporters the following day, Tillerson said he pressed both parties hard for just that. It would have given him a much-needed achievement and a positive headline amidst all the bad news at home, but it is clear that it was Netanyahu who was not ready to help him out.

There is good reason for that, of course. Not only does Netanyahu not want to deliver, he can't deliver. His coalition government, which has the narrowest of majorities in the Knesset, does not support a two-state solution, which had been the stated and shared goal in the past. But now, even the White House has backed

away from the language of a two-state solution. When Netanyahu met him in Washington earlier this year, Trump said that he was open to one state, two states, or whatever the parties favored. This was met with some ridicule in the press but, in reality, the parties no longer share a unified goal, even in rhetoric, when it comes to a negotiated outcome. While the Palestinian side, led by Abbas, has maintained the position of a two-state solution, the Israeli government has clearly moved away from that position.

However, if Trump wants a deal, at some point he is going to have to ask the Israelis to decide where they stand; that is when it is going to get very precarious for Netanyahu, whose public is not prepared for equality with Palestinians under the law in one state, and whose governing coalition is not prepared to discuss Palestinian sovereignty and independence in occupied territory. Something will have to give, and most likely it will ultimately be the floor beneath Netanyahu's coalition.

As a political survivalist, Netanyahu will do what he can to postpone this scenario. Strategic dallying has long been a cornerstone of Israeli policy when it comes to the peace process. Netanyahu could throw up various obstacles, as he has already begun to do, by creating new demands like ending Palestinian welfare payments to the families of prisoners. He could play the incitement card again, one of his favorites. He could take a page from Ariel Sharon's playbook and demand new Palestinian elections. He could also instigate

escalations in violence in Gaza, the West Bank, or elsewhere to delay any conversation about negotiations. But Netanyahu may find that Trump, with his notoriously mercurial attitude and unpredictable temperament, will not have the patience for his dallying, as Obama did.

If Trump persists, fueled by the notion that he could secure some grandiose regional bargain befitting the expectations set by the royal welcome he received in Riyadh, Netanyahu will have to have an uncomfortable conversation with his coalition, and he may well be forced to call for elections.

What Netanyahu will not be able to do is rely on pro-Israel interest groups to check Donald Trump from the right; nor can he hope for help from the left. After President George H.W. Bush conditioned loan guarantees to the right-wing Yitzhak Shamir government over illegal settlement building in 1992, despite having an approval rating close to 90 percent after the Gulf War, the incumbent president lost nearly half the Jewish voters he was able to secure when he won the White House in 1988. But much has changed since then.

With the way Netanyahu worked to politicize US-Israel relations over the last decade, he cannot count on pro-Israel attacks on Trump from the left, certainly not in defense of perpetual occupation, as may have been possible before. Democrats, increasingly attuned to the political interests of minorities, watched uncomfortably as Netanyahu attacked

the first black president for mildly criticizing Israel's endless military rule over other brown folk. Today nearly 50 percent of Democrats support sanctions or greater pressure on Israel to end settlement building.

Netanyahu's limitations are a product of his own doing. This may ultimately cost him with Israeli voters, to whom he has sold himself as the leader who best understands how to handle the relationship with Washington. After Netanyahu spoke to the US Congress weeks before the Israeli election, images of congressional standing ovations for him made it into his campaign ads. A candid video of Netanyahu from years ago shows him boasting to an Israeli family living in an illegal settlement about how he stymied the peace process and how he believes he can easily manipulate America.

Now, after putting all his eggs in the GOP basket for the past eight years, if Trump asks the Israelis to make a deal in good faith, Netanyahu will be exposed, first and foremost before Israeli voters. The message that Barack Obama tried to get Israelis to understand—that they had to address the legitimate grievances of Palestinians for a shot at peace—was one they could not hear over their own prejudices. If Trump, whose politics mirrors the Israeli ethos, delivers a similar message to Israelis, they will likely be pointing fingers at each other and especially at Netanyahu, instead of covering their ears.

Trump will not bring about a two-state solution, a fantasy that was shattered long ago by the rude reality of Israeli settlements. But he may be in a unique position to get Israelis to understand

that even with him at the helm, there is no legitimate defense for their unending oppression of the Palestinian people. That, in itself, would be a Trump-sized achievement.

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