

How Israel should tackle 'transactional Trump'

written by David M. Weinberg | 20.01.2025

With Donald J. Trump moving in three days' time back into the White House, Israel must carefully calibrate its relationship with the new-old president and his team. Jerusalem has to evaluate what expectations and demands of Trump are realistic, and what price Israel will likely have to pay to meet his priorities.

This is especially true in light of the hostage-for-terrorist release deal that Trump forced down the throat of Israel (and Hamas) this week. What does this tell us about the incoming president's proclivities and modus operandi?

The hostage deal and imposed ceasefire cannot come as a surprise.

For months now, Trump has made it clear that by his inauguration on January 20, he expects quiet on the Gaza front and other Mideast battle lines so that he can focus without interference on his priorities – which are immigration, the economy, and China. And reaching a grand Mideast strategic accord involving Saudi Arabia.

Everything else, Trump has intimated, can wait. This includes finishing-off Hamas and real military confrontation with Iran.

This is what Trump's aides call "sequencing," an ordered set of priorities where not everything can be tackled all at once and early on. In Hebrew, the relevant idiom is parah parah, meaning that you milk (or slaughter) one cow at a time.

It is not only a question of sequencing. It is also "transactional," meaning that Trump runs his foreign policy with a business mindset: give and take.

Transactional Trump

Thus, "Transactional Trump" expects Israel to play along with his priorities, and this is especially true regarding a Saudi deal. The returning president intends to cut a tripartite American-Saudi-Israeli accord this year. For a range of reasons, this is one of Trump's top priorities. It is well within reach, and it mostly jibes with Israel's preferences.

However, Israel will have to swallow some bitter pills to facilitate this, like acquiescence to the US sale of F-35 fighter jets to Riyadh and acceptance of a US-backed Saudi civilian nuclear program.

Netanyahu also may have to mutter something about a “pathway” to Palestinian independence in the distant future – even though neither he nor the Saudis nor most members of Trump’s team believe this is feasible or sensible.

Again, in the context of Trump’s transactional approach to politics and foreign policy, Israel will have to play its part in facilitating the Saudi deal.

IF ISRAEL does so, it will be well placed to expect a return from Trump down the line on issues closer to home – ranging from Israeli assertion of sovereignty in parts of Judea and Samaria, to pushback against nasty international organizations that are at Israel’s throat, to US supply to Israel of heavy ordnance weaponry necessary for striking Iran, and more.

And remember, even if Trump is not going to green light in the near term renewed and decisive warfare against Hamas, he and his team are not going to delegitimize Israel’s continuing wars against Palestinian terrorism in Gaza or Judea and Samaria (and against Hezbollah and jihadist terror from Lebanon and Syria) – the way that the Biden-Blinken-Harris team did.

We also are not going to hear Secretary of State Marco Rubio, National Security Advisor Mike Walz, and US Ambassador to Israel Mike Huckabee contribute to “Palestinianization” of regional politics by fetishizing Palestinians an “immediate” need for Palestinian statehood – especially after the Simchat Torah (October 7, 2023) invasion and massacres.

They are not going to qualify Israel’s “right” to defend itself by using the insidious Kamala Harris qualifiers “but” and “only.” “But too many innocent Palestinians have been killed, children, mothers...” said Kamala, and Israel can fight “only if this leads rapidly towards a two-state solution where the Palestinians have security, self-determination, and the dignity they so rightly deserve.”

Similarly, the Trump team is not going to justify and excuse the radical anti-American, anti-Israeli, and antisemitic rioters on American campuses by allowing that “they have a point” (another shoddy Harris quip).

And the Trump team, along with the Republican-dominated Congress, is not going to hide behind extreme liberal loyalties to the farce known as “international law,” whose holy institutions like the ICC, ICJ and the UNCHR refugee agency have taken to assaulting Israel with false apartheid allegations and war crime arrest warrants.

The Trump team is not going to fuel the nasty campaign to delegitimize Israel’s very presence in Judea and Samaria by conjuring-up and sanctioning so-called “violent settlers” and other “malign” Israeli civil society actors on the right-wing of the political map.

Pushback against all this by the Trump team is crucially important in rebuilding Israel’s legitimacy and standing on the global stage.

FORCING IRAN off its nuclear weapon and regional hegemonic drives through concrete military action is Israel’s top policy priority, and for this it needs Trump administration support and cooperation.

(Perhaps Israeli acquiescence in the Gaza ceasefire that Trump insisted upon will help in this regard. Perhaps. That would make the ceasefire deal with all its problematic aspects worthwhile – especially IDF withdrawals and the release of Palestinian terrorists from Israeli jails.)

But Trump is not there yet. Until President Trump is convinced – in my assessment, this will take some time – that no degree of “maximum” economic sanctions and no amount of his personal swagger and business acumen will do the trick in defanging Iran, he will not be ready to militarily confront the belligerent Islamic Republic.

But this doesn’t mean that time must be wasted. There is a broad range of important immediate initiatives on the table, below the level of a direct military assault on Iran, for revitalizing the US-Israel partnership and for hemming Tehran in.

MY COLLEAGUE Asher Fredman of the Misgav Institute for National Security & Zionist Strategy has laid out a road map for taking the US-Israel alliance to new heights, in a 14-page focused policy paper. (Fredman also serves as director for Israel at the Abraham Accords Peace Institute.)

The paper details four areas for enhanced US-Israel strategic cooperation in the immediate term: defense, intelligence, and technological cooperation; countering the shared threats from Iran and its proxies; expanding regional cooperation and the Abraham Accords; and countering and defunding anti-American, anti-Israeli and pro-terror activity in international organizations.

The brilliance of the paper is its detail. For example, Fredman has specific proposals for expanding joint R&D on cutting-edge military technologies like high-energy laser systems, space and satellite technologies, unmanned air, ground, surface and undersea vehicles, hypersonic weapons, military AI, and offensive and defensive cyber capabilities; and cooperation in advancing precision medicine, digital health, drug development and bio-convergence.

He also suggests adding Israel to NATO's Partnership Interoperability Initiative (PII) and granting Israel "Enhanced Opportunity Partner" status.

Regarding Iran, there are concrete proposals for enacting and aggressively enforcing sanctions on the "ghost fleet" transporting Iranian oil to Asia, and on any entity involved in the manufacture, sale, or transfer of Iranian military equipment or technology to other countries.

Also, imposition of sanctions on any financial institution that uses Iran's System for Electronic Payment Messaging (SEPM) to verify or conduct a transaction. And of course, the Houthis should be listed back onto the US list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations.

As for regional accords, even before any deal is reached with Saudi Arabia, there is much to do - like advancing the India-Middle East-Europe (IMEC) Corridor to counter China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI); and expanding the I2U2 framework encompassing India, Israel, the UAE, and USA, to involve projects in space, energy, water, agriculture, transportation, and health business, academic, and civil society platforms.

Pushing back against terrorism in international institutions should lead to defunding of the UNHRC, OCHA, UNESCO, the UN Special Rapporteur on the Palestinian Territories, CEIRPP, UNISPAL, the UN Division of Palestinian Rights and the anti-Israel departments of the UN Departments of Political and Peace-Building Affairs, Global Communications, and Public Information.

American victims of terror should be allowed to sue international organizations that provide resources to US-designated terrorist groups and that would otherwise be immune pursuant to the International Organization Immunity Act.

In short, “Transactional Trump” is a challenge but also an opportunity. Israel has much to offer the US, and over time can realistically expect concrete returns.

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