Robust resilience for Israel

written by David M. Weinberg | 26.07.2024

Prime Minister Netanyahu's meetings in the US this week with President Joe Biden, Vice President (and Democratic presidential candidate) Kamala Harris, and former President (and Republican presidential candidate) Donald Trump are certainly important. Certainly, as they relate to Israel's immediate needs in confronting Iran's Hamas, Hezbollah, and Houthi proxies.

But the shifting political winds on both sides of the political aisle in America make it clear that long-term reliance on Washington for all of Israel's needs is an uncertain thing. It is time for Israel to diversify its strategic alliances, sources of raw materials and weaponry, technological partnerships, and more.

No, this is not a (ridiculous) call to ditch the US and seek alliances with China or Russia! The United States of America is and hopefully will remain a bedrock of democratic/moral, diplomatic, and defense backing for Israel for many decades hence. One surely asks G-d, as Netanyahu did Wednesday in Congress, to "bless the great alliance between Israel and America forever."

But again, given progressive impulses on the Democratic left and isolationist trends on the Republican right, the passionate and generous backing for Israel in America of recent decades cannot be assumed to hold in all circumstances.

Simply put, resilience for the Israeli long-term requires broader circles and deeper reservoirs of support.

On the Democratic side, Kamala Harris could preside over a closer embrace than ever with the anti-Israel narrative that has swept "liberal" academic, political and media circles and become a potent political force in America. Harris' demand way back in March for an "immediate ceasefire" in Gaza, when Israel was making substantial progress on dismantling Hamas, was outrageous from Israel's perspective.

Her mollycoddling of the campus protests against Israel's counter-offensive in Gaza is worrying too. Harris: "(The protestors) are showing exactly what the human emotion should be, as a response to Gaza. There are things some of the protesters are saying that I absolutely reject, so I don't mean to wholesale

endorse their points. But we have to navigate it. I understand the emotion behind it."

Nor is it certain that a next Democratic administration will have the inclination or gumption to deflect the escalating international legal assaults on Israel, because Democrats seem to so assiduously believe in the "integrity" of international legal institutions, as well as "humanitarian" organizations (like UNRWA) – no matter how corrupt and disfigured they are.

Even before we get to a next administration, there is a danger that the current Democratic administration could move to unilateral recognition of Palestinian statehood – a move that would plunge a knife into Israeli security and diplomacy, and lavish undeserved gains on the Palestinian national campaign to crush Israel.

On the Republican side, President Trump and his new ticket-mate Senator J.D. Vance are both instinctively pro-Israel for strategic (and religious) reasons, and will defend Israel against assaults at the UN, ICC and other institutions that are hostile to Washington too. If it were up to them, they would supply Israel at present with every weapons system it requested, and they would not be too perturbed about humanitarian aid for Palestinians loyal to Hamas.

But isolationist (and ultimately anti-Israel) impulses are on the rise in Republican camp. At the very least, Trump and Vance do not want to fight Middle East wars on their watch. They are quietly saying to Israel: Clobber your enemies now, before we take office next year, and we'll run interference for you afterwards.

President Trump will have other priorities (immigration, economy, China), and he will not be rushing to confront Iran and its proxies. His "sequencing" or prioritization of issues certainly won't begin with Iran or the Palestinians.

And if/when Trump gets around to dealing with Iran or the Palestinians, I sense that his instinct will be to seek a grand deal with them – no less than Presidents Obama and Biden did, over Israel's objections. After all, Trump sees himself as the grandmaster businessman, the great dealmaker, who by force of his personality and blunt diplomacy can bend people and countries to his will.

In the short term, this could work to Israel's benefit, because the tools of pressure Trump might again apply – maximum crushing sanctions along with targeted assassinations against Iranian terrorist leaders, and diplomatic diffidence to

Palestinian tantrums – move the markers in the right direction.

But in the longer term I fear that Trump will overreach for a "huge" win, for tantalizing shiny trophies of grand "peace" deals that do not truly end the threats to Israel (and the West), at Israel's (and the West's) expense.

And whatever side of the American political aisle one might think more problematic, there is the simple reality that political vicissitudes make even the best long-term assessments uncertain and strongest long-term alliances unpredictable.

CONSEQUENTLY, Israel must build for itself resilience across many platforms – in defense, diplomacy, energy, technology, and society. Resilience, so that Israel can act independently in the national security sphere; resilience, reflected in multilateral alliances in the Middle East and beyond that do not depend exclusively on Washington; and resilience, so that Israeli citizens have confidence in their future despite many threats and challenges that surely are going to persist.

Israeli resilience needs to be developed in four areas: defense systems (development and manufacturing, including munitions); critical resources (the supply chain for minerals and other scarce materials like steel); national security technologies (including AI, homeland and cyber security, quantum computing, and space technologies); and perhaps most complex of all – social cohesion (which mainly means better integrating Arabs, Druze, and Bedouin citizens, and Haredi Jews, into Israeli economy and national defense frameworks).

For example, in the armaments sector, Israel needs to be much more independent; an estimated eight times over the current manufacturing capacity of Israeli defense industries. Israel needs to indigenously produce 10,000 surveillance and attack drones, 200 Thundermaker self-propelled artillery guns, 100 Namer armored personnel carriers, and 50 Merkava main battle tanks – per year.

Israel also needs to self-manufacture 155mm artillery shells, and precision-guided missiles for the air force, in insane numbers. (This is especially true since Israel faces increasing restrictions on the use of US-supplied weaponry, and because there is a global shortage of such ammunition.)

Israeli resilience also means ramping-up and reinforcing services such as hospitals, electricity grids, water and sewage networks, and food manufacturing and stockpiling. (Israel's electrical grid has almost no excess capacity. Yet it needs many layers of redundancy in case of enemy attack.) Israel must have at hand massive supplies of medicines, food products, and core industrial ingredients to last-out a one-year-long interruption in air and sea imports.

The IDF needs to grow by at least three divisions. That is 50,000 soldiers more, with tons of military equipment. A gargantuan increase in the training of front-line troops is necessary, especially armored formations. The Israeli navy needs more than $5 billion in new ships, submarines, weapons systems, and personnel over the next decade.

The Misgav Institute for National Security & Zionist Strategy, a leading think tank with which I am associated, has begun two massive projects to help Israel navigate its way forward in this regard. The first project called "Israel 2.0," led by professors Gabi Siboni and Kobi Michael, is meant to lay down a vision for the State of Israel over the coming decades, following the collapse of last October.

The project is well underway. It revisits and reconsiders the conceptual foundations of Israeli diplomacy, security doctrine, internal security, civil-military relations, agricultural and settlement policies, constitutional and legal structures, majority-minority relations, immigration policies and institutions, and more. The project will offer a "reset" for Israel in these spheres and more.

A second project, involving thought leaders and professional advisors from different sectors, will commence soon, focused on building "robust resilience" across numerous platforms for the long-term; concrete plans for strategic endurance in defense, diplomacy, energy, technology, and society, as described above.

Published in The Jerusalem Post, July 26, 2024.