Trump and Netanyahu's New Partnership

written by Dr. David Wurmser | 04.02.2025

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu meets President Trump this week at a time of upheaval in the U.S.-Israel relationship. The two leaders have a chance to set the contours of a new strategic framework.

Since launching its response to the Oct. 7, 2023, attacks by Hamas, Israel has redefined the dynamics of the Middle East. It has contained the plague of Iranian power, which spread throughout the region for nearly five decades, and established itself as a regional power—perhaps one without a clear rival. The Trump administration plans to support these developments via a novel foreign-policy framework: The U.S. will reduce its global footprint, empower its allies and enhance its own strength.

For most of the past 16 years, the Obama and Biden administrations complicated and undermined Israel's position in the Middle East. Their fear of escalation and entanglement—and belief that the region's most radical ideologies could be domesticated—led them to seek a series of cease-fires that spared Israel's mortal enemies, left conflicts to fester, and continually shackled the Jewish state. This, in turn, reinforced America's regional reputation as a perfidious ally.

The Obama-Biden strategy also deepened American military involvement in the Middle East. The more Washington zip-tied Israel and other allies, the more the U.S. had to fill the security gap. In 2016, President Obama urged a Saudi-led coalition against seizing the Houthi-controlled Hodeidah port in the Red Sea, claiming humanitarian concerns. This helped delay plans by the United Arab Emirates to take the port in 2017. In 2022, under pressure from the Biden administration, the factions agreed to a cease-fire that left the Houthis in control of the port. Two years later, they are terrorizing the Red Sea, forcing the U.S. to increase its operations in the region.

The Obama-Biden approach followed a consensus held by American elites dating back to the end of the war between Israel and Egypt in 1970, when the U.S. pressured Israel to exercise restraint after Egypt violated the cease-fire. The idea was that the U.S. would foster peace by demanding Israel's strategic passivity in

exchange for greater U.S. support, protection and funds. Israel's shift to a more reactive defense was disastrous. Egypt and Syria launched a surprise attack in the 1973 Yom Kippur War. But rather than abandon its reactive approach, Jerusalem continued it, growing more reliant on the U.S. for weapons and funds. The concept again failed catastrophically on Oct. 7. Now Israel has returned to its pre-1970 assertiveness, initiative and self-reliance.

Mr. Trump's return to the White House will reinforce Israel's new strategy. His America-first policy rests on two pillars. First, he promises "no new wars." Second, he seeks to rebuild global respect for the U.S. Such power and resolve, combined with the promise of a withering response when challenged or harassed, can deter war.

Yet Mr. Trump's first priority could contradict the second. If the world believes the U.S. is fundamentally averse to war, its enemies may not feel the fear and respect that underpins deterrence. This is particularly true for radical terrorist groups such as Hamas and al Qaeda, which value life so little that they are impervious to Western threats.

Mr. Trump can bring the two objectives into alignment by making powerful allies the leading edge of Western defense. Washington has for years allowed many of its allies to be strategically passive in exchange for greater military and financial investment. Mr. Trump's desire to change this dynamic is the reason he's demanding that European countries increase their defense spending so they can independently counter threats to the Continent.

Israel's strategic shift toward strength aligns with Mr. Trump's global vision. But establishing this new relationship requires that Israel emerge from the current war not only as a U.S. ally but as a powerful proponent of Western values. In the short term, the greatest support the U.S. can lend Israel is weapons and diplomatic cover. In the long term, the U.S. must provide steadfast moral support for the survival and self-defense of the Jewish people in their homeland.

The alternative is a U.S. retreat from the region, which would invite attack and engender a global perception of American decline. Or the U.S. could revert to the policies of the past nearly six decades, when it increased its engagement while demanding Israeli weakness. Neither path has led to regional stability, reduced U.S. engagement in the Middle East, secured American interests, or enhanced

global respect for the U.S.

American efforts to tether Israel, spare its enemies and compensate for Israeli weakness with its own forces have led to further entanglement and restricted Israel's ability to vanquish its enemies. In the Middle East, no ally is identified as a symbol of the West more than Israel, nor is any country as capable of fighting and defending itself even without American boots on the ground. Messrs. Trump and Netanyahu will surely discuss specific policies. More important, they will forge a new, innovative U.S.-Israel relationship that secures Israel's strength and makes use of it to advance America's interests.

Published in The Wall Street Journal, February 03, 2025.

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