

## SHADOW GOVERNMENT

# Why Israel Should Be Worried About Getting Into Bed with Trump

There's long been a bipartisan consensus on support for Israel. That may soon be history.

BY DEREK CHOLLET | DECEMBER 13, 2017, 5:26 PM

It's hard to see how President Donald Trump's move to declare Jerusalem the capital of Israel advances the peace process, but it achieved one thing: it fueled the love affair for Trump among Israel's government and strategic community, especially in contrast to his predecessor — a view expressed to me repeatedly, and enthusiastically, during a recent visit there. This may seem like a good thing, but I worry it reveals a deep challenge with the U.S.-Israel relationship.

Could Trump be the wrecking-ball that destroys bipartisan support for Israel?

As with everything in the Middle East, this is partly about the past. To hear Israeli officials and elites describe things, the Obama era was a time of unmitigated disaster, in which the United States withdrew from the region, cozied up to Iran, threw its friends in the Arab world under the bus, and exuded weakness and fecklessness. To be sure, from the Arab Spring to the Iran nuclear deal, the Obama years were marked by deep disagreements between the United States and Israel, and these differences were exacerbated by two leaders who neither trusted nor liked the other.

But below the drama at the highest levels, it was also a moment of unprecedented cooperation, especially in military and intelligence affairs. The list of accomplishments was impressive: Cooperating on Iron Dome. Providing Israel with the best weapons, including the F-35 fighter aircraft. Forging the 2016 agreement for Washington to provide \$38 billion in security assistance over the next decade, which was the largest single pledge of American military assistance ever. Even the infamous “red line” outcome, which most decry as Obama's most glaring failure, left Israel safer — the security of Syria's chemical weapons stockpile was an existential threat to Israel for which it had no military answer. (Recall that in the months before Syria's chemical weapons were removed, every Israeli citizen was given gas masks and antidotes in case of attack — thank goodness they were never needed.)

While Trump likes to say on every issue he inherited a mess, with Israel he got a relationship whose fundamentals were actually in pretty good shape. So why are so many Israeli leaders swooning over him? They like the saber rattling about Iran and the threat to withdraw from the nuclear deal, although don't seem very clear on what comes next (and in this way, Trump has talked a big game but under-delivered). They like the U.S. withdrawal from UNESCO and the tough stance on the U.N.'s Human Rights Council, whose anti-Israel bias is indeed outrageous. And of course, they really like last week's announcement on Jerusalem.

I agree that the Jerusalem move recognizes reality and is the right thing to do. During many visits to Israel in and out of government, I never considered Jerusalem as anything other than the capital. My problem is that it risks a lot while not accomplishing much. Even by Trump's own

standards — as the self-styled negotiating genius — it's not clear how this gets him any closer to the ultimate deal he professes to want.

But there is a larger price that could be paid, one that should concern anyone who believes deeply in the importance of a strong U.S.-Israel relationship. The current Israeli leadership is all-in with Trump, and they have heaped praise on him from day one. Their giddy mood over Trump is a stark contrast with the sense of wariness and despair expressed among almost every other democratic ally.

The strength of the U.S.-Israel relationship comes from its solid bipartisan foundation, and there are signs that, like so much else, it is cracking. This began in the Obama years — the seismic event being Netanyahu's speech in Congress against the Iran deal — but has become worse.

The danger is that being “pro-Israel” becomes a status confined only to Trump's Republicans. Israel will not benefit from a relationship defined by partisanship, and it is foolish for Israeli leaders to fuel this, even if they are doing so unwittingly. Think of the next generation of Democratic political leaders, who will mainly remember the bitterness of the Obama era and stand against pretty much anything Trump is for. How will the Israeli government's big bet on Trump look to them?

I get why many Israelis like Trump's policies on Iran, the United Nations, and Jerusalem, even if I disagree with some of them. But can they really be happy about the apparent tolerance for (if not blatant stoking of) white nationalism, especially its anti-Semitism? Or his assault on a free press and the rule of law? Moreover, if one of Israel's greatest strategic assets is its relationship with the United States — and therefore, a strong United States is vital for a strong Israel — then it will not be better off with an American ally that is pessimistic, isolated, and weaker in the world.

It's often said that Trump tarnishes everything he touches — and in less than a year in office, he's already left behind quite a debris trail of personnel, policies, and principles. One has to hope that, years from now, we won't be saying the same about what he's done to the U.S.-Israel relationship.

**Derek Chollet** served in the Barack Obama administration for six years in senior positions at the White House, State Department, and Pentagon, most recently as the U.S. assistant secretary of defense for international security affairs. Currently the executive vice president at the German Marshall Fund of the United States, his books include *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, *America Between the Wars: From 11/9 to 9/11* (co-written with James Goldgeier), and *The Unquiet American: Richard Holbrooke in the World* (co-edited with Samantha Power). A native Nebraskan, he lives in Washington, D.C., with his family. Chollet is a co-editor of *Shadow Government*.

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