

Trump victory strengthens Israel's far-right and settler parties

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The election to the US presidency of Donald Trump has changed political relations within Israel, as elsewhere.

The elevation to the highest office in Israel's paymaster of a fascistic and racist demagogue—whose white supremacist supporters were caught on video giving the Nazi salute—has strengthened Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's ultra-nationalist coalition partners and the settler movement. Both view a Trump presidency as an opportunity to further their Greater Israel project and to possibly sideline Netanyahu and his Likud party.

Netanyahu was one of the first overseas leaders to phone and congratulate Trump, calling him “a true friend of Israel.” Trump responded by inviting him to Washington at the “first opportunity.” Nevertheless, Netanyahu is concerned over Trump's remarks on the Israel/Palestine conflict, which reflect the most extreme demands of Israel's settler movement and prime minister's political rival and leader of the Jewish Home Party, Naftali Bennett.

They could—if implemented—isolate Israel both politically and diplomatically, precipitate a civil war and destabilise the entire region.

Trump has said he will move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. If he does, he would be the first Western leader to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and Israel's sovereignty over the entire city, including the Al-Aqsa mosque compound/Temple Mount. Israel annexed East Jerusalem immediately following its capture during the June 1967 war, and the religious settler movement has sought to open up the Al-Aqsa mosque site to Jewish prayers.

Moving the US embassy to Jerusalem would be a breach of international law that outlaws the annexation of territory captured in war, and make it impossible for a putative Palestinian state to maintain East Jerusalem as its capital. It would antagonise Jordan, which has ultimate guardianship over the Al-Aqsa mosque compound.

More fundamentally, it would be tantamount to a public declaration that the US has abandoned all pretensions of pursuing a two-state solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict. This would sour relations with Washington's increasingly unstable regional allies that publicly support a Palestinian state in order to appease their own domestic and highly restive audiences.

Trump's Israel Advisory Committee published a statement just prior to the election stating that a two-state solution was impossible and that the Palestinians had rewarded terrorism and incited hatred against Israel and Jews.

It implied that Israel would have a green light to expand the settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem, illegal under international law, and that a Trump administration would increase the military support the US gives Israel, over and above the recent agreement to provide \$3.8 billion in military aid a year for 10 years.

The statement also promised to crack down forcefully on the Boycott Divest and Sanction (BDS) campaign against Israel and the European Union's requirement that all Israeli exports from the West Bank be labelled as such so that they do not benefit from duty-free status like other Israeli goods. Trump has now nominated Nikki Haley as the US ambassador to the United Nations. As South Carolina governor, she pioneered anti-BDS legislation and opposed Obama's Iran deal.

Trump's most likely picks for Secretary of State, Rudy Giuliani and John Bolton, have both been vocal opponents of a Palestinian state.

All of this makes nonsense of Trump's egotistical suggestion that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, might broker a mini-Palestinian state.

Bennett, a settler leader who holds the Education portfolio and calls for the annexation of 60 percent of the West Bank designated Area C under the 1993 Oslo Accords, crowed, “The era of the Palestinian state is

over.”

Yossi Dagan, head of a West Bank regional council, called for “an end to the construction freeze and even more.”

On November 10, the cabinet approved 7,000 new settlement homes in East Jerusalem that had been frozen for years because of Washington’s opposition, while a ministerial committee approved the introduction of the so-called “regularisation law”—despite opposition from Netanyahu who fears the Palestinians will use it to inflame international opinion against Israel. The law will retroactively legalise the outposts in the West Bank that contravene Israeli (as well as international) law, paving the way for legalising dozens of outposts in the West Bank.

Any moves to take over all or part of the West Bank would likely trigger the collapse of the Palestinian Authority, to whom Israel has subcontracted the burden of policing the Palestinians. This would raise the spectre of an Israeli state in which the Palestinians would soon form the majority, with few if any political rights. It would strip away the veneer of democracy in which Israel has sought to cover itself, and precipitate a possible civil war that could engulf the entire region.

Concerned that his coalition partners are bypassing him on the right and openly expounding their ultimate goal of effectively wiping out the Palestinians, Netanyahu ordered his ministers not to talk about Trump’s election victory. The incoming administration should be allowed “to formulate—together with us—its policy vis-à-vis Israel and the region through accepted and quiet channels, and not via interviews and statements,” he declared.

His defence minister Avigdor Lieberman of the ultra-national Yisrael Beiteinu party (Israel is our Home) later said that Trump’s team had sent an official message to the Israeli government asking Israel to refrain from making any statements about the day after Trump takes office and “act modestly.”

Later Netanyahu forbade his minister coalition partners from making “any contact with the incoming US administration, other than through the Prime Minister’s Office or the Israeli Embassy in Washington.” This was in response to attempts by Bennett, who had earlier said, “We have to say what we want first,” and other right-wing leaders to meet Trump’s team in New York.

While Netanyahu has long had close links with the Republican Party—to which he is far closer ideologically than to the Democratic Party and the Obama administration—these are with the neo-cons such as

William Kristol, Elliott Abrams, Bolton and former CIA director James Woolsey. In 2012, Netanyahu famously supported the Republican candidate Mitt Romney, incurring Obama’s wrath for interfering in American politics. It was one of a number of conflicts that have soured US-Israeli relations over recent years.

While the largest contributor to the Trump election campaign was US billionaire Sheldon Adelson, who also funds *Israel Today*, a free newspaper that functions as Netanyahu’s personal mouthpiece, the coterie around Trump are far closer to settler leader Bennett than Netanyahu—whose relations with Trump have not always been smooth. Last December, Trump was forced to cancel his plans to visit Israel after Netanyahu felt obliged to speak out against some of Trump’s more embarrassing Islamophobic remarks—including his proposal that should he become president he would ban Muslims from entering the US until its internal security was “sorted out.”

Netanyahu’s fears about the impact of a Trump administration go far beyond the Palestinian issue to the wider Middle East, not least because Trump’s utterances on foreign policy have been so erratic and contradictory.

But crucially, according to the Israeli daily *Ha’aretz*, the Israeli Foreign Ministry’s initial assessment of Trump’s foreign policy in the Middle East asserts that Trump will in fact reduce US involvement in the region. This would adversely affect the regional balance of power and Israel’s position, while strengthening that of Russia, Iran and Turkey.

Bruce Maddy-Weitzman, a specialist on Middle East politics at Tel Aviv University’s Dayan Centre, told the *Jerusalem Post*, “The US has a role to play in maintaining a balance of power in which Israel can thrive and survive. Without that balance, it’s [the Middle East] a more dangerous region.”



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