

Trump's "America first" approach is great for Israel

written by Dr. Raphael BenLevi | 12.11.2024

Many commentators in Israel claim that the US president-elect, Donald J. Trump, is unpredictable and therefore his policy in the Middle East is uncertain and may yet turn out to be less positive for Israel than many Israelis assume. Some point to his statements that he will bring peace to the region and end the wars currently raging in the world with concern that he will pressure Israel to stop short of its war aims. Although there is always a degree of uncertainty at the outset of every administration, in this case the contours of Trump's approach are easily discernible, and they are all positive for Israel.

Trump's approach to the world, with which we can expect all his appointees to align, is embodied by the phrase "America First." Due to the historical baggage of this phrase many have interpreted it as identifying him with the isolationist trend in US foreign policy that seeks to turn its back on allies around the world. However, in order to understand what Trump means when he says "America First", one must look what is actually being said in the current discourse among those most prominently associated with it.

A leading institute in developing a platform for the second Trump administration called the "America First Policy Institute", emphasizes that their approach is not a call for the US to withdraw from its role as the leader of the free world. Rather, "America First" means building a powerful military while being highly selective regarding the situations that justify its use, in order to keep US troops out of unnecessary and unending wars. As well, it is not a call to cancel the US system of alliances around the world, but rather to work with allies hand in hand, while requiring them to carry their full weight of their own security needs.

A prominent voice on grand strategy in Trump's circle, Elbridge Colby, emphasized this week that in his view, the current defense establishment is interested in allies who are perpetually dependent on the US, similar to the dynamic whereby the welfare state creates dependent civilians. He, in contrast, is interested in strong allies, who stand on their own two feet and do not expect the US to risk its soldiers to protect them. It is not the post-World War II era order

that he seeks to abolish, but the consistent tendency of US administrations in the post-Cold War era to intervene in conflicts around the world in which there is no compelling American interest.

Applying this thinking to the Middle East, Vice President-elect J. D. Vance has made it clear that the America First approach seeks to see a strong Israel acting alongside strong Gulf states as a counterweight to Iran. The best way to avoid American involvement in a regional war, he says, is for America's partners to do more to secure the region, in a way that would free up American resources for the challenges in East Asia. It is also to be expected that Trump will want to return to promoting the Abraham Accords, first and foremost with Saudi Arabia, alongside other countries in the region and in East Asia.

Such an approach aligns well Israel's ambition that the current war will result in a significant change in the regional balance of power as a result of the destruction of the Iranian "ring of fire" built up around Israel over the past two decades, followed by a significant pushback against Iranian influence across the region, together with Gulf Arab partners.

As for Trump's desire to bring an end to the war in Gaza, a Republican party spokeswoman clarified recently that his intention is for Israel to end the war with a decisive victory, and that unlike the Biden administration, which slowed Israel's rate of progress, Trump will encourage Israel to act toward a swift victory. Trump is also not a fan of the Palestinian Authority and has no particular interest in pressuring Israel to include it in a future administration for Gaza, or to promote a Palestinian state. In Trump's view, his first term proved that the road to Riyadh does not pass through Ramallah, and the wave of violent pro-Hamas demonstrations in the US over the past year has only harmed the reputation of the Palestinians in the vast majority of the American public.

Regarding Iran, Trump will cease the incessant and desperate attempts to reach out to Tehran and bring Iran to negotiate while offering concessions in exchange for "de-escalation." It has already been reported that Trump intends to return to his previous policy of maximum pressure, which means tightening the sanctions regime which has not been enforced in the past years to pressure Iran economically and make it difficult to finance its network of terrorist organizations. If Israel is going to take military action against Iran, Trump would probably prefer that it do so before the inauguration. But regardless of when or what action Israel

may take, Trump's nominee for NSC head, Michael Waltz, has made it clear that he wants the American approach toward Iran to change significantly, as he recently criticized Biden's "naive attempts to engage Iran and prematurely ease sanctions," arguing that they have "provided Iran with resources to bankroll terror throughout the region."

We should also expect a significant change in US policy regarding international institutions hostile to Israel such as the International Criminal Court and the UN Human Rights Council. Secretary of State nominee, Rubio, has made clear that he appreciates the perverse hypocrisy of these forum's attacks of Israel and Trump can be expected to push them to the margins of international politics.

Tensions or tactical disagreements may yet still arise between Jerusalem and Washington and Trump may indeed surprise on various issues, but one thing is clear, "America First" will likely be great for Israel.

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