

## **The Netanyahu-Trump Meeting**

***Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts***

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**The Israeli Prime Minister and his government reacted favorably to the election of Donald Trump as the new US President. However, since Trump assumed office, questions have mounted regarding his policies towards Israel, the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, and the Middle East. The first official meeting between Trump and Netanyahu, on February 15<sup>th</sup> in Washington D.C., was an opportunity to assess the policy directions of the new administration.**

**This document includes commentaries by Mitvim Institute experts regarding the Netanyahu-Trump meeting and its outcomes: (1) The atmosphere was good but the policy was vague, Gabriel Mitchell; (2) The settlements and the Palestinian issue take a back seat in Israel-US relations, Nitzan Horowitz; (3) A regional breakthrough requires progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track, Dr. Nimrod Goren; (4) The Iran nuclear deal is likely to remain intact, Rebecca Bornstein; (5) The Palestinians do not have a friend in the White House, Dr. Ido Zerkovitz; (6) The Palestinian citizens of Israel were ignored once again, Kamal Ali Hassan; (7) Things went well for Netanyahu and Trump, but what comes next?, Dan Rothem.**

### **The Atmosphere Was Good but the Policy Was Vague**

**Gabriel Mitchell**

**US Representative of the Mitvim Institute**

Like any good melodrama, the first meeting between President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu left observers with more questions than answers. Both leaders went the extra mile in order to demonstrate that relations would be markedly improved from the Obama era: they joked on stage, paid compliments to each other's wives, and reiterated their mutual interest in containing Iran and countering the threat of "radical Islamic terror."

What will undoubtedly remain subject to debate is the administration's position on the two-state solution. Part of this ambiguity can be blamed on the timing of Netanyahu's visit; the new US administration is engaged in a tumultuous transition period and has yet to fill many of its senior positions, let alone lay out a detailed regional policy. On the other hand, Trump's waffling on Israeli-Palestinian issues fits within a broader pattern that began on the campaign trail and has continued into the opening weeks of his presidency. Yes, Trump punted when it came to committing to the two-state solution. But in the same breath he expressed interest in pursuing a "great peace deal" that included other regional actors, and

asked that Israel exert self-control when it came to settlement expansion (which happened to be a reiteration of multiple statements he has made in the past).

Trump's vagueness helps Netanyahu in the short run. He can now return to Israel claiming that the new US administration will support Israel in ways that Obama never did, and in doing so deflect pressure from within his coalition. It also offers a window during which Israeli and American officials can focus on other points of interest rather than the peace process.

At the same time, Netanyahu knows that his new friend in the White House may make unpredictable and difficult demands in the future. He also knows that Trump's lack of clarity will be used by radical elements in both Israeli and Palestinian societies to advance their own interests, which could produce potentially harmful consequences, and will likely seek to iron out some of these questions in the coming months.

## **The Settlements and the Palestinian Issue Take a Back Seat in Israel-US Relations**

**Nitzan Horowitz**

**Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute, International Affairs  
Commentator, and Former Member of Knesset**

President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu did not meet in Washington to discuss the settlements and Israel's Regularization Bill. While these issues stir a heated debate in Israel, they now play a much more marginal role in Israel-US relations.

The Trump Administration has yet to shape its Middle East policy, as is evident by the occasionally contradictory messages coming out of the White House. Nevertheless, it is clear that the new administration has a different approach than its predecessor to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump does not intend to impose a solution to the conflict, nor is he planning to support international steps to do so at the UN. He will most likely limit his engagement on the issue.

Recent reports from Washington, as well as statements by top officials there, indicate that there are new understandings between the Israeli and American leaderships. Both sides share a lack of urgency towards an Israeli-Palestinian deal, let alone towards implementing the two-state vision. Apparently, they are both satisfied with the continuation of the status quo, in one form or another. There are no more harsh American condemnations of Israeli settlements, and no US pressure is put on Israel to change its policies. On the other hand, the US also refrains from supportive statements regarding settlement expansion or other steps taken by Israel.

This situation is convenient for Trump, as he takes his first steps in the international arena. It is also convenient for Netanyahu, who enjoys sympathy in Washington without fanfare that would increase pressure from the Israeli right to annex territories and establish new settlements. As far as Trump and Netanyahu are concerned, Israel will avoid provocations and the White House will avoid condemnations.

The Israeli-American dialogue will now shift to other crucial strategic issues, on which Israel seeks clarifications and support from the US. First and foremost, policies vis-à-vis Russia. Israel is closely monitoring the Trump-Putin relationship, and wants to ensure that any

agreement between the two leaders on issues like Syria and Islamic terror will take Israel's interests into account. Israel is eager to know which policies Trump will implement on Iran, and on the fate of the nuclear deal. Moreover, both Israel and the US are seeking to advance relations with the major Sunni states – Egypt and Saudi Arabia – as a counterweight to Iran.

The Palestinian issue does not top the Israeli-American diplomatic agenda, and is unlikely to be prioritized above other strategic issues of higher importance to both countries. In light of this reality, and of the major questions surrounding Trump's administration and personality, Israel should adopt a cautious approach when engaging with the new US President.

## **A Regional Breakthrough Requires Progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track**

**Dr. Nimrod Goren**  
**Head of the Mitvim Institute and**  
**Lecturer for Middle Eastern Studies at the Hebrew University of Jerusalem**

Prime Minister Netanyahu succeeded in injecting his regional approach into the policy vacuum that characterizes President Trump's first weeks in office. Since 2014, Netanyahu has declared at home and abroad that a breakthrough in ties between Israel and neighboring Arab states is possible, even without progress in the peace process with the Palestinians. Reality, however, paints a different picture.

Progress on the Palestinian issue was a prerequisite for any major breakthrough that ever took place between Israel and the Arab world. The signing of the peace treaty with Egypt was dependent on Israeli-Egyptian agreement over the autonomy plan for the Palestinians. The peace treaty with Jordan was reached only after Israel and the PLO signed the Oslo Accords. The Arab Peace Initiative, first published 15 years ago, emphasizes this fact in clear terms. It offers Israel normal relations with the entire Arab world, but only after an Israeli-Palestinian peace treaty is reached.

The regional approach that Prime Minister Netanyahu is advancing challenges this reality, and attempts at flipping the sequence – calling for improved Israeli-Arab ties first, and progress with the Palestinians later. It is true that Israel currently enjoys better ties than in the past with some Arab countries. There is increased security coordination, the relations that do exist are becoming more visible to the public, and new channels for dialogue and cooperation have been put in place. These are positive developments, which derive from the changes occurring in the Middle East in recent years and from the emergence of joint strategic interests. They emphasize the existence of a historic regional opportunity for Israel to reshape its relations in the Middle East.

Some Arab countries are motivated to increase even further their cooperation with Israel, and to expand them to civilian – and not only security – issues. However, the transition from Israeli-Arab relations, which mostly take place behind the scenes and focus on security coordination, to actual normal and visible relations has not yet happened, and is unlikely to happen without progress on the Israeli-Palestinian track.

Arab leaders emphasize this in private meetings as well as in public statements. They see the Netanyahu approach as one that contradicts the Arab Peace Initiative, which they are

committed to, and which cannot be accepted by their own publics. John Kerry tried to convince Arab leaders to take some steps towards normalization with Israel even before an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough, and this was rejected. Kerry highlighted this in his final speech before leaving office.

The steps that Trump is likely to take in order to strengthen US relations with Egypt and Saudi Arabia may lead to increased security coordinations between these states and Israel. But in order to fulfill the opportunity for a new era in Israeli-Arab relations, progress towards a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is required. This is what the Arab world requests in return. It is also an Israeli interest, even if it is not on Trump's priority list.

If the Israeli government maintains its rejectionist policy towards the peace process, the regional opportunity will be missed. The upcoming annual summit of the Arab League, to be held in Jordan in March, will be an opportunity for Arab leaders to remind both the Israeli Prime Minister and the US President of this reality.

## **The Iran Nuclear Deal Is Likely to Remain Intact**

**Rebecca Bornstein**

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on US policies towards Israel and the Middle East**

The first meeting between Trump and Netanyahu must be analyzed in the broader context of the new administration's national security team. The meeting took place the day after former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn, who was heavily involved in preparations, resigned over undisclosed discussions with Russian officials during the campaign. The administration faces heightened concern over its ties to Russian intelligence, and Flynn's departure leaves the administration's foreign policy and national security team unusually shallow. This is increasingly salient in light of Trump's break with the longstanding US policy commitment to the two-state solution, and ambiguity over his intended policies in the region.

Unlike previous administrations, Trump articulated no clear vision towards Israeli-Palestinian peace, and confirmed that he has no specific commitment to the two-state solution, so long as Israelis and Palestinians agree on an alternative. His emphasis on direct, bilateral negotiations over international action was overshadowed by his enthusiasm towards a broader, regional approach towards peace. Regional interest in the two-state solution, however, remains strong.

Netanyahu's comments on Israeli security control over the entire West Bank also appear incompatible with a regionally accepted vision of peace. In any case, aspirations towards a larger, regional configuration will buy time for both the US and Israel, and will legitimize Trump's walkback of his campaign promise to relocate the US Embassy to Jerusalem, as such a move would undermine goodwill between Israel and the Sunni states.

On Iran, the Trump-Netanyahu press conference provides the clearest benchmark yet on the durability of the nuclear deal and the likelihood that the US will remain committed to its enforcement, even though broader US-Iranian relations remain volatile. Despite being two of the biggest critics of the deal (Netanyahu strongly opposed negotiations at every phase, and Trump campaigned on a commitment to dismantle it) neither raised the possibility of the

US abandoning or renegotiating it. This indicates that Trump will heed the advice of Defense Secretary James Mattis, as well as the assessments of American and Israeli security officials, and continue to enforce the deal.

Countering Iran will be a major theme of future US-Israel discussions, and pushback is likely to focus on strict enforcement of the nuclear deal, and tougher sanctions on Iranian officials over ballistic missile tests and terrorist financing. Still, Trump's unpredictability has the potential to send US-Iran relations into a tailspin, especially in the absence of a strong national security team capable of producing cogent policy proposals towards the region.

## **The Palestinians Do Not Have a Friend in the White House**

**Dr. Ido Zelkowitz**

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Netanyahu's meeting with Trump confirmed Palestinian concerns about the new American administration, and reinforced the perception that the White House will not be seeking their friendship.

Over the years, Abbas remained committed to promoting Palestinian interests through diplomatic activity that focused on building international support for a future state based on 1967 borders. However, the Netanyahu-Trump meeting indicated to the Palestinians that this US government will make it more difficult for them to pursue this route, and that they should not expect US-sponsored negotiations in the near future.

Several Palestinian fears appear to have become reality: that the Trump administration would adopt an isolationist policy, that it would avoid pressuring Israel to advance the peace process and halt settlement construction, and that it would not invest many resources in solving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In light of these developments, the Palestinian Authority can be expected to continue its diplomatic work through channels that it believes can counterbalance the Trump administration's policies. This could take the form of closer engagement with key European states, Russia, Jordan and Egypt, and perhaps with the legal institutions of the United Nations. The challenge posed by the Trump administration may also contribute to rapprochement between Fatah and Hamas, and increase the feasibility of an accord between them.

The broader strategic framework set by the Oslo Accords created a system of economic interdependence and security between Israel and the Palestinians that stabilizes their relationship, even if it has not yet led to the realization of the two-state vision. However, the Palestinian Authority's inability to recruit the US to spearhead a meaningful political process, coupled with the arrival of a new administration that seeks to reduce the prospects of that process, places Palestinian leadership in a serious dilemma. It is now caught between the non-violent approach of Abbas and the desire of the Palestinian street to engage in a popular struggle that – in the absence of a political process – could quickly become violent.



## **The Palestinian Citizens of Israel Were Ignored Once Again**

**Kamal Ali Hassan**

**Policy Fellow at the Mitvim Institute and Lecturer at the Open University**

The positive atmosphere that characterized the Netanyahu-Trump meeting highlighted their choice of a regional track towards peace. The significant transformations in the Middle East are creating, in their eyes, joint interests between Israel and other regional countries. In light of this, Trump and Netanyahu believe it should be possible to make progress towards a comprehensive regional peace deal.

In their remarks, Trump and Netanyahu referred to the values of democracy, freedom, and human rights as the basis for the special relationship between Israel and the US. However, these values should guide Israel and the US not only in their bilateral relations, but also in their conduct with the Palestinians and Middle Eastern countries.

The fact that neither Netanyahu nor Trump made any reference in their remarks to the Palestinian minority in Israel contradicts their statements about the importance of democracy and the regional approach to resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Not only are the words spoken on such occasions important; what is not said is of equal importance. And, once again, the Palestinians citizens of Israel were ignored. Their distress was ignored, the challenges that their ongoing exclusion and discrimination by the establishment pose to Israeli democracy were ignored, and their vast potential to contribute to the advancement and achievement of any regional agreement was also ignored.

### **Things Went Well for Netanyahu and Trump, but What Comes Next?**

**Dan Rothem**

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There was much in common between Trump and Netanyahu as they held their first official meeting. Both leaders lead a tense — at times outright confrontational — relationship with their respective national security apparatus, the judiciary, and the media. And both enjoy a dominant hold on power all while suffering from political weakness vis-a-vis their publics.

The two wisely chose to hold their press briefing before the meeting. It is easier to put on a friendly show before gaps are explored in full. On substance, three things stood out at the press briefing:

First, on Israel-Palestine, both leaders lack a clear grasp on where they want to go; Trump's ignorance and Netanyahu's chronic indecisiveness lead observers to see both a retraction from and a qualified affirmation of a two-state vision.

Second, on the regional Israeli-Arab approach, both leaders seem to view the regional track as a potential breakthrough. But they are likely to run into the same dead end that derailed

previous such attempts: Arabs expect serious Israeli moves toward a two-state solution before they engage, and — not less important — Arabs are unwilling to push the Palestinians to make compromises they are unwilling to make, only to support ones they do.

Finally, on Iran, both Trump and Netanyahu reaffirmed their opposition to the Iran deal, but stopped short of committing to undermine it. Undoubtedly, Iran will test their resolve in the coming months and years. And here, while Netanyahu's hesitance resulted in Israeli military inaction, Trump's strategic illiteracy may prove consequential and costly.

For the time being, both leaders will try to use what seemed to be a positive first meeting to help maneuver their troubled politics at home.