

The Trump Administration and Israel

By Dov Waxman

Donald Trump's Presidency is likely to bring about a significant change in U.S.-Israel relations, and possibly also in the United States' approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Although President Obama was much more supportive of Israel than his critics charged, his personal relationship with Prime Minister Netanyahu was marked by mutual distrust, bitter disagreements, and lingering frustrations. However unpredictable and irascible President Trump can be, he is much more likely to see eye-to-eye with Netanyahu. After all, both men are right-wing populist nationalists, who are scornful of liberal elites and dismissive of the international community and the United Nations in particular.

The Trump Administration's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is likely to minimize conflict with Israel. According to one of his advisers on Israel, Trump is not committed to statehood for the Palestinians, and he would not object to Israel annexing parts of the West Bank. At a White House press conference with Prime Minister Netanyahu, Trump himself said: "I'm looking at two-state and one-state and I like the one that both parties like. . . . I can live with either one . . . if Israel and the Palestinians are happy, I'm happy." This does not mean, however, that the Trump Administration has abandoned the U.S.' support for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Ultimately, if President Trump is serious about trying to reach a long-elusive peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, a solution involving the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside the State of Israel remains the only feasible scenario to achieve this.

Israeli settlement building in the West Bank and East Jerusalem has long been one of the most contentious issues in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and was a constant source of friction between the Obama Administration and the Israeli government. On this issue, President Trump's attitude will not be as tolerant as those on the Israeli right and some on the American right initially expected it would be. Trump has already stated in an interview with an Israeli newspaper that settlements are not "a good thing for peace," and "every time you [Israel] take land for a settlement, there is less land left [for Palestinians]." Nevertheless, the fact that Trump is surrounded by advisers who support Israel's settlement enterprise in the West Bank and East Jerusalem (particularly his ambassador to Israel) suggests that the Trump administration will adopt a more permissive attitude toward Israeli settlement construction than the Obama Administration's. Trump may at least be willing to allow Israel to build within its major settlement blocs, if not beyond them. Giving Netanyahu a freer hand, however, might actually make life more difficult for him, as Netanyahu will face more pressure from his right-wing coalition members to expand settlements, and even for Israel to annex major settlement blocs. Netanyahu is, of course, a supporter of the settlement enterprise, but he benefited politically by positioning himself between the pro-peace talks, anti-settlement stance of the Obama administration and the opposite stance of his rightwing at home. Now, ironically, Netanyahu may end up missing Obama!