

Israel and the Next U.S. Administration

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According to an oft-repeated Israeli story from the 1960s, when an aide mentioned a drought, Prime Minister Levi Eshkol worriedly asked, “Where?” “In the Negev,” explained the aide. “Thank God it’s not in the US, then I’d be really concerned,” said Eshkol.

Surrounded by an Iranian “ring of fire” and battling simultaneously on multiple fronts, Israelis can be excused for giving less attention these days to their country’s dependence on America’s welfare. Israeli ground forces are operating within Rafah and other densely populated urban areas in Gaza against Iran-backed Hamas. Hamas’ diabolical strategy of using Palestinian civilians as human shields ensures that Israel’s legitimate efforts to defend itself against the jihadists’ expressed genocidal aims will cause extensive injury and death to Palestinian civilians and leave Gazan civilian infrastructure in ruins. The photos of civilian suffering have, as Hamas intended, inflicted a terrible blow on Israel’s reputation, which has sunk to new lows in the court of international public opinion.

Meanwhile, Iran-backed Hezbollah’s daily aerial assaults – beginning shortly after Hamas’ Oct. 7 massacre of some 1,200, mostly civilian Israelis and including Americans, and kidnapping of approximately 240 others, mostly civilian Israelis and including Americans –

compelled Israel to evacuate a five-kilometer-wide swath of sovereign territory along its northern border and prepare for a high-intensity war. And Iran has equipped proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen with long-range drones and missiles.

Notwithstanding Israel's focus on its soldiers, its kidnapped citizens, and its homeland, the nation's fight against Hamas, Hezbollah, other Iranian proxies – and Iran itself – remains bound up with American power and prosperity. Lacking a comprehensive domestic weapons industry, Israel acquires fighter aircraft, a wide range of munitions, and other essential military equipment from the United States. Israel's fortunes at the United Nations, in the International Court of Justice and the International Criminal Court, and among nations turn in no small measure on the tone set, judgments issued, and actions taken by the United States. And should war with heavily armed Hezbollah broaden into a regional conflict – which may well include waves of Iranian-launched attack drones, cruise missiles, and ballistic missiles – Washington's decision about whether and how to intervene would have major ramifications for Israel.

Hence, American politics and opinions about Israel in the United States continue to possess vital significance for the Jewish state. In the short term, the most important set of opinions issue from the White House and, to a lesser extent, Congress; Israel can glean these from first-hand observation and shape them through diplomatic exchange. In the long term, the American people's perceptions and judgments will prove decisive. The Jewish state's best bet for influencing these consists in serving as a strong and reliable American partner and providing an inspiring example of freedom and democracy. In the intermediate term, Israel has a keen interest in anticipating and planning for the next president's foreign policy. But whom will U.S. voters choose in November and what understanding of America and the world will prevail?

The July/August issue of *Foreign Affairs* provides overviews of two main possibilities. Ben Rhodes, former deputy national security adviser for strategic communications during all eight years of Barack Obama's presidency, represents the Democrats. Rhodes urges the United States "to minimize enormous risks and pursue new opportunities" by adopting "an updated conception of U.S. leadership – one tailored to a world that has moved on from American primacy and the eccentricities of American politics." Making the case for Republicans is Robert O'Brien, who served from 2019-2021 as national security adviser to President Donald Trump. Invoking presidents Washington, Roosevelt, Reagan, as well as Trump, O'Brien argues for "peace through strength." Rhodes' and O'Brien's conflicting views on Israel and the Middle East give a good sense of their slogans' practical meanings and how their parties are disposed to conduct U.S. diplomacy.

In "A Foreign Policy for the World as It Is," Rhodes sides with many progressive critics of U.S. foreign policy who favor "abandoning a mindset of American primacy." He joins the hard left at home and abroad in condemning not only Israel's exercise of its right to self-defense

but also America's support of it. "Indeed, after Hamas's October 7 attack on Israel and the Israeli military campaign in Gaza, American rhetoric about the rules-based international order has been seen around the world on a split screen of hypocrisy, as Washington has supplied the Israeli government with weapons used to bombard Palestinian civilians with impunity," writes Rhodes. "The war has created a policy challenge for an administration that criticizes Russia for the same indiscriminate tactics that Israel has used in Gaza, a political challenge for a Democratic Party with core constituencies who don't understand why the president has supported a far-right government that ignores the United States' advice, and a moral crisis for a country whose foreign policy purports to be driven by universal values."

Rhodes swallows whole the odious canard that Israel's military operates lawlessly. He fails, however, to provide the slightest evidence that the Jewish state could accomplish its legitimate war aims with substantially less force. At the same time, Rhodes ignores Hamas' grotesque violations of the international laws of war – slaughtering, raping, mutilating, and kidnapping civilians while hiding behind, among, and under its own civilian population – and the centrality of these reprehensible tactics to the jihadists' ambitions to eradicate Israel. Like campus protesters throughout America, Rhodes deplores U.S. failure to thwart Israel's military operations in Gaza. "Put simply," he maintains, "Gaza should shock Washington out of the muscle memory that guides too many of its actions."

Rhodes' rebuke of U.S. Middle East policy goes well beyond Gaza. President Trump's signal Middle East achievements, argues Rhodes, undermined peace. "By moving the U.S. embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, recognizing the annexation of the Golan Heights, and pursuing the Abraham Accords," according to Rhodes, Trump "cut the Palestinians out of Arab-Israeli normalization and emboldened Israel's far right, lighting a fuse that detonated in the current war." Rhodes overlooks the Palestinians' resolute opposition to U.S.-brokered peace initiatives by four presidents: Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump. He also fails to see that whereas Palestinian intransigence has produced an impasse, the Trump administration's bold steps, welcomed by Israel and Gulf Arabs, enhanced regional stability and provided new opportunities to ease the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In sharp contrast to Rhodes, in "The Return of Peace Through Strength," O'Brien recognizes Israel as a close American friend and partner, affirms Jerusalem's legitimate war aims, and identifies the Islamic Republic of Iran as the principal threat to regional stability. Accordingly, "the United States should continue to back Israel as it seeks to eliminate Hamas in Gaza," argues O'Brien. Moreover, "the long-term governance and status of the territory are not for Washington to dictate; the United States should support Israel, Egypt, and U.S. allies in the Gulf as they grapple with that problem," he writes. "But Washington should not pressure Israel to return to negotiations over a long-term solution to the broader conflict with the

Palestinians.” Instead, “the focus of U.S. policy in the Middle East should remain the malevolent actor that is ultimately most responsible for the turmoil and killing: the Iranian regime.”

Iran, O’Brien emphasizes, has grown stronger and more belligerent under the Biden administration. The current White House has enabled Tehran to increase oil revenues by tens of billions of dollars over the last three and a half years. During the Biden administration, Tehran “has managed to reach a point where it can not only produce nuclear weapons on-demand but produce large quantities of WGU [weapons-grade uranium] quickly in a very hard-to-destroy enrichment plant,” reports the Institute for Science and International Security. And the Biden administration encouraged Tehran’s diplomatic rehabilitation. Furthermore, observes O’Brien, “Iran’s proxies, including Hamas, kidnap and kill Americans. And in April, for the first time, Iran attacked Washington’s closest ally in the Middle East, Israel, directly from Iranian territory, firing hundreds of drones and missiles.”

Diminishing Iran’s ability to export jihadist terror “would also lead to a more productive approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is once again roiling the region,” maintains O’Brien. “For decades, the conventional wisdom held that resolving that dispute was the key to improving security in the Middle East. But the conflict has become more of a symptom than a cause of tumult in the region, the true source of which is Iran’s revolutionary, theocratic regime.” Tehran “provides critical funding, arms, intelligence, and strategic guidance to an array of groups that threaten Israel’s security.”

Although preoccupied with the grind of daily battle with barbarous jihadists, Israelis have cause to follow carefully events transpiring in the United States and to prepare for their far-reaching repercussions. Whether the next American president renounces U.S. primacy in world affairs or returns to the pursuit of peace through strength is a choice that will have weighty consequences for the Jewish state and for America’s interests in Middle East stability and global order.

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