

DISPATCH

TRUMP'S LEGACY IN ISRAEL

By Ruth Margalit

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Trump Heights, an Israeli township in the Golan Heights. Ahead of the U.S. Presidential election, sixty-three per cent of Israelis supported Trump, according to a November poll. Photograph by Ammar Awad / Reuters

In a barren corner of the Golan Heights, some forty miles southwest of Damascus, stands a massive, gold-lettered sign. This is Trump Heights, an Israeli township named to commemorate Donald Trump's recognition of Israeli sovereignty of the area, which was seized from Syria in 1967. In the summer of 2019, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu unveiled the new locality in a camera-ready event that also included David Friedman, the pro-settler U.S. Ambassador to Israel, waxing on about Trump belonging to a “small cadre of Israeli heroes.” A year and a half later, the town stands vacant; by the end of January, twenty families are slated to move into temporary housing there.

An outsized Trump sign in a disputed, far-flung hamlet may not be a bad metaphor for the outgoing President's legacy in Israel, which is heavy on ceremony. “The American policy in Israel is totally symbolic,” Alon Pinkas, a former consul-general for Israel in New York, told me, likening much of it to “foam on the water.” Then again, in Israel, symbolism matters. When Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, he in effect quashed the possibility that East Jerusalem would ever belong to a Palestinian state. When he moved the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, in 2018, he signalled the abandonment of even the pretense of good-faith negotiations with the Palestinians.

Rather than use the prospect of these gestures as an incentive for Netanyahu to adopt a comprehensive peace plan in the region, Trump

simply made them. Similarly, in recent months, when the U.S. brokered normalization accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and, most recently, Morocco, Trump allowed Israel to reap the rewards of diplomatic relations with these Arab countries in exchange for shelving Netanyahu's extremist plan for annexing part of the occupied West Bank. For years, Israel had carried on back-channel diplomacy with these countries, but their relations had not been formalized because of the countries' insistence on advancing Palestinian statehood. Now, officially, Israel has vowed to shelve its annexation plan. Unofficially, the Trump Administration agreed to once-unthinkable measures that made the normalization accords lucrative for these Arab countries. For the U.A.E., most notably, there was a proposed arms deal worth twenty-three billion dollars, which includes the sale of fifty stealth F-35 fighter jets. "Netanyahu got everything he wanted from Trump," Amit Segal, the chief political analyst for Israel's Channel 12, told me. Trump's alignment with Netanyahu has been so total that, ahead of the U.S. election, sixty-three per cent of Israelis supported Trump, and only seventeen per cent supported Joe Biden, according to a November poll by the Israel Democracy Institute. If Israel were a U.S. state, it would be the "reddest state in the Union," a column in the left-leaning newspaper *Haaretz* noted.

Scroll through the Twitter feeds of some of Netanyahu's most ardent proponents and you could be forgiven for thinking that you've landed on the Hebrew accounts of Sean Hannity or Tucker Carlson.

"Honorable President Trump. Thank you for all you've done to make

America great and powerful,” Shimon Riklin, an analyst for Channel 20, which has been described as “Israel’s Fox News,” said. Three weeks after the U.S. election, Yinon Magal, a well-known pundit and former right-wing lawmaker, told Israeli radio, “We still pray for a miracle that Donald, son of Fred, will win the election.” On Sunday, after a mob of Trump supporters stormed the U.S. Capitol, Gadi Taub, a right-wing commentator, began his weekly podcast by saying, “It’s really scary!” before clarifying that he was referring to the President being banned from Twitter. “It’s Stalinist in atmosphere,” he decried. “They didn’t ban anyone from Antifa!”

Perhaps nowhere is Israeli Trumpism more flagrant than in the pages of *Israel Hayom* (“Israel Today”), a free daily newspaper that fawningly promotes Netanyahu’s interests. *Israel Hayom* was founded in 2007 by Sheldon Adelson, a U.S. casino mogul and munificent Republican donor, and his Israeli wife, Miriam. (Shortly after the publication of this piece, it was reported that Adelson had died, on Monday night, at the age of eighty-seven.) On the eve of the U.S. election, Miriam Adelson published a front-page column titled “Don’t Be Afraid.” In it, she wrote, “I hope and believe with all my heart that the vote tally will show that most Americans want a second term for Trump.” On Sunday, in the wake of the attack on the Capitol, the newspaper claimed, “Ahead of the inauguration, the Democrats and the media want Trump’s head.”

“When I look at Trump, I see, first of all, a powerful man,” Boaz Bismuth, the editor-in-chief of *Israel Hayom*, told me recently. “I liked him from the very beginning.” Parallels between Trumpism and what’s

known in Israel as Bibism are unmistakable: an outward contempt for—and inward obsession with—the media; a disdain for cultural élites and elements of a so-called deep state; racist incitement (Netanyahu: “Arab voters are coming out in droves”; Trump: “These aren’t people. These are animals”); and a brand of nationalist populism that has similarly taken root in countries as far flung as India, Hungary, and Brazil.

A large part of the Israeli right’s affinity for Trump stems from his willingness to countenance new settlements in the West Bank while ignoring the Palestinians who live there. “Every building plan that had been placed in front of me was approved; under Obama, we didn’t even dare to dream about it,” one settler leader said, during a joint prayer for Trump in Hebron, a few days before the U.S. election. The right also appreciates the Trump Administration’s broader disregard for the Palestinians. When Trump announced a peace plan for Israel and Palestine—his so-called “deal of the century” in the region—without even briefing the Palestinians, he seemingly wished them out of existence. In response, Mahmoud Abbas, the President of the Palestinian Authority, called Trump’s plan the “slap of the century.” The irony is that, despite getting all it could wish for under Trump, the Israeli hard right still rejected his “deal.” It opposed the mention of a Palestinian state—even a shrunken one that would have no security autonomy and would be pockmarked by Jewish settlements.

Bismuth believes that, if Trump had won a second term, he would have allowed Israel to annex West Bank settlements—or, in Bismuth’s words, to “recognize our sovereignty over Judea and Samaria.” He also

credits Trump with making the Gulf states effectively choose Israel over Palestine. “Israel shouldn’t be the mistress in the Arab world—Israel should be the wife. And Trump helped us become the wife,” he said. The way Bismuth sees it, “We suddenly have an American President who says, ‘Wait a minute, you’re actually O.K. Your success, your existence, your ability to thrive doesn’t have to depend on the Palestinians.’ ”

Other Israelis, including former senior officials in Israel’s security establishment, warn that excluding the Palestinians from those regional diplomatic settlements will have dire consequences—for the Palestinians and also for the future of Israel. “You can’t remove the Palestinian issue. It’s a huge mistake,” Amos Gilead, a retired major general in military intelligence who heads the Institute for Policy and Strategy at the Interdisciplinary Center Herzliya, told me. “If our relationship with them collapses—if we take over, or if they become part of our state—we won’t have a Jewish and democratic state.” Pinkas, the former diplomat, added, “Once the P.R. display is over, the ones who are left with the Palestinian issue are us. Not the Emiratis, not the Bahrainis, not the Omanis, and not the Americans. We’re left with three and a half million Palestinians. Whoever thinks that not solving the issue is an accomplishment, good luck to them.”

News of the planned U.S. sale of advanced weapons to the U.A.E. was revealed only after the normalization agreement was announced; Netanyahu claimed not to have known about it, although reports indicate that he did. Gilead, the retired general, welcomed the accord but called the sale of F-35s “a violation of a sacred principle,” which

states that the U.S. will uphold Israel's qualitative edge in the region. "If the U.S. sold it to them, it can sell it to others," Gilead said, of the Emiratis. "Can anyone guarantee that won't happen?"

Uzi Arad, a former national-security adviser to Netanyahu who has since become a critic, said that Trump's efforts in the region had been "wasted" on the wrong gestures. Instead of recognizing Jerusalem as the country's capital, Arad said, Trump could have fulfilled a much more urgent need by countering the entrenchment of Iranian forces in Syria. Most crucially, Trump chose to walk away from the nuclear agreement with Iran negotiated under Barack Obama. We now know that Iran has since enriched uranium to twelve times the level permitted in the agreement. Arad said, "The so-called great achievement of going hand in hand with America in leaving the agreement looked like a honeymoon, but a honeymoon that leads where?"

Trump's reversal on the Iran deal seemed intended to undo Obama's legacy; Israelis often speak about Obama with similar hostility. As Bismuth put it, "With Trump it was 'America First,' and under Obama it was 'Iran First,' so how can I not prefer Trump?" I've heard several theories floated as to why Obama—who secured the largest military-aid package to Israel in the history of both countries—remains a target of such antagonism in Israel. One theory involves a deep suspicion spurred by his middle name, Hussein, which is often highlighted by the Israeli conservative press, and by his decision, early in his Presidency, to make Egypt among his first foreign destinations. Another theory rests on matters of temperament, on Obama's

projection of cool aloofness in a country where emotions run high. Certainly, his decision in his first year to pressure Israel to end settlement construction inflamed Netanyahu and his ministers. They, in turn, signalled to the public that they believed the Obama Administration was hostile not toward their hard-line policy but toward Israel writ large.

When Netanyahu went before Congress, in 2015, and spoke against Obama's Iran deal, the fault line between Israelis and Jewish Americans became publicly visible for the first time. By now, it's an abyss. An Associated Press poll showed that sixty-eight per cent of Jewish Americans voted for Biden, whereas thirty per cent voted for Trump. A poll taken by the progressive pro-Israel lobby J Street showed a larger gap: seventy-seven per cent for Biden and twenty-one per cent for Trump—almost the exact opposite of the preferences of Israelis. According to Jeremy Ben-Ami, the president of J Street, the divide between American and Israeli Jews is also reflected in a chasm *within* American Jewry. “The local Jewish population, no matter where they live, are dividing into these two camps, one being much more ethno-nationalist and religious and one being much more humanist and liberal,” he told me. In the U.S., the humanist view is rapidly rising, but “in Israel it's becoming the inverse.” Partly as a result, Israel is no longer the priority that it once was for Jewish Americans, and the formerly tight-knit communities are drifting apart. Netanyahu's American support now relies on an unlikely alliance of Orthodox Jews and evangelical Christians. This has produced several surreal moments, such as the ceremony that marked

the opening of the U.S. Embassy in Jerusalem, which featured a televangelist who had once said that the Holocaust was simply God's way to get the Jewish people to return to Israel.

If Obama, with his intellectual probity and soaring rhetoric, fared so miserably in Israeli public opinion, perhaps Biden, who displays little of the above, can avoid a similar fate. The Israeli pundits I spoke to believe that Biden's at-times-excessive warmth and his penchant for speaking off the cuff—the very traits that made his campaign jittery about gaffes—could go a long way with Israelis. (The fact that all three of his children married Jews—“A remarkably Jewish family,” as the *Jewish Chronicle* put it—doesn't hurt, either.) Arad, Netanyahu's former national-security adviser, recalled a visit he made to the White House, as part of the Prime Minister's delegation, in 2010. He was walking down a corridor alongside the former Vice-President, “and he's tall, and he has his arm around me,” Arad recalled. At one point, Biden turned to him and, according to Arad, said, “Uzi, remember that I'm your best fucking friend here.” Arad appreciated the gesture, which he took to mean that “Obama was technical toward Israel,” while Biden would be “more sympathetic.”

In Biden's choice for Secretary of State, too, there is potential for a rapprochement between the Democratic Party and conservative Israelis. Antony Blinken, who served as deputy national-security adviser during the Obama Administration, is said to be responsible for securing the replenishment of Israel's antimissile system during an offensive it launched in Gaza in 2014. As Blinken likes to tell it, he received a late-night call from the Israeli Ambassador to the U.S., Ron

Dermer, who urged him to fund more interceptors. Blinken rushed to the Oval Office, where Obama, with Biden by his side, reportedly told him, “Get it done.” Steve Israel, a member of the Defense Subcommittee of the Appropriations Committee at the time, told me that congressional approval of the funding “went faster than anything I’ve seen.”

Yet Blinken’s and Biden’s close ties with Israel might be a moot point, at least for now. In the midst of a global pandemic, the U.S. has shattered alliances to repair and a tanking economy to turn around; Israel likely won’t be high on the President-elect’s agenda, particularly as it is heading toward yet another election, in March—its fourth in two years. Even if Netanyahu wins reelection (he is currently favored in the polls), Biden may be understandably wary of meaningful gestures. Biden no doubt remembers the sting of a visit he made to Israel in 2010, when he was blindsided by the announcement that Netanyahu’s government would expand settlement construction in East Jerusalem. As Martin Indyk, a veteran U.S. envoy in the region, wrote on Twitter, after Netanyahu mentioned his long acquaintance with Biden, “It’s true that Netanyahu has known Biden for nearly forty years. But it’s also true that Biden has known Netanyahu for nearly forty years.”

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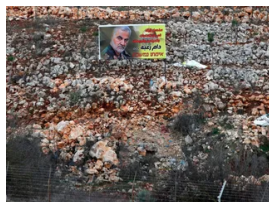
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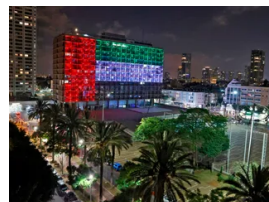
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