Israel Welcomes the Return of the U.S. Superpower Under Donald Trump

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<http://www.newsweek.com/israel-welcomes-donald-trump-netanyahu-superpower-era-557653?rx=us>

When Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu met President Donald Trump at the White House they looked to melt the ice that had formed under the previous administration. They set out to put the trust and intimacy back into the relationship between Israel and the U.S., without surprises or betrayals.

Netanyahu was the [fourth foreign leader to visit the new president](http://www.newsweek.com/trump-netanyahu-palestinians-two-state-solution-israel-west-bank-settlements-557230), after only the U.K.’s Theresa May, Japanese Prime Minister Shinzo Abe and Canadian neighbour Justin Trudeau. The president had warm words for Netanyahu personally and for the “unbreakable bond with our cherished ally, Israel.” Obama’s overtures to the Middle East started with his [Cairo Speech](http://www.reuters.com/article/us-obama-muslims-idUSTRE54754920090508?feedType=RSS&feedName=ObamaEconomy&virtualBrandChannel=10441), reaching out to the Muslim world, and [ended with a U.N. Security Council Resolution](http://www.newsweek.com/resolution-un-israeli-palestinian-peace-hopes-michael-oren-536578) opposed to settlement building, with a bad deal with Iran in the middle. In contrast, Trump seems to be hugging America’s traditional allies close.

On three key issues Trump and Netanyahu see eye to eye: the fight against radical Islamist terror, the threat of Iran, and Israel’s importance as a strategic asset for the U.S. in the Middle East. These provide building blocks to recalibrate and reaffirm the U.S.-Israel alliance and, with renewed warmth, they present historic opportunities.

In the fight against the Islamic State militant group (ISIS) and radical Islamist terror, the U.S. has no more committed an ally than Israel. In intelligence sharing, counter-terrorism and cybersecurity the relationship is strong, and Netanyahu expressed the hope to “upgrade it” and reach “even greater heights.”

They also [found common ground on Iran](http://www.newsweek.com/donald-trump-benjamin-netanyahu-israel-iran-sanctions-iran-550313). The leader of Iran-supported Hezbollah, Hassan Nasrallah, recently called Trump “an idiot” who makes him “optimistic.” But Nasrallah and his Iranian bosses had been making hay for years. Iran’s regional aggression was given steroids by the nuclear deal in 2015, which Trump described during his presidential campaign as “one of the worst deals I have ever seen.”

Netanyahu said that Iran greeted the new president by testing ballistic missiles inscribed with the words “Israel must be destroyed.” Even if the Iran deal can’t be undone, the U.S. can address the loopholes within it. Iran cannot be allowed to test ballistic missiles and must be made to understand that if it reneges on any of its deal commitments, the reinstatement of sanctions will be swift and biting. Netanyahu welcomed the new president’s approach in challenging the missile testing and imposing sanctions. “It’s long overdue”, he said.

The Sunni Arab states, who share Israel’s concerns about both Iran and ISIS, would agree. Obama’s rebalancing of the Middle East, exemplified by the Iran deal, alarmed Arab leaders. “Speak softly and carry a big stick,” said Theodore Roosevelt. Under Obama, the U.S. spoke softly while carrying no stick at all. The resulting vacuum, filled by ISIS on the one hand and Iran on the other, has left Saudi Arabia, the Gulf States, Egypt and Jordan feeling threatened.

Yet this presents opportunities. Netanyahu stated, to agreement from Trump, that “for the first time, Arab countries don’t see Israel as an enemy, but as an ally.” This points a way to what the president has called “the ultimate deal”—peace with the Palestinians. The Palestinians have tried to internationalize the conflict; we need to regionalize its resolution.

The Palestinians have spent years using international forums like the United Nations to wage diplomatic war. But the road to the “ultimate deal” does not run through the U.N. The U.N. is systematically, institutionally hostile to Israel and in his speech the president condemned its “unfair and one-sided actions.” But it is systematically hostile to America too, its institutions all too often hijacked by dictators to push extremist, pro-terror and anti-peace agendas. Paradoxically, the U.N.’s biggest funder is the American taxpayer, who last year contributed $9.2 billion to U.N. linked groups. That gives the new president a golden opportunity to hold the U.N. to account. It can no longer remain anti-Western, anti-democratic and unaccountable and expect to get a star-spangled paycheque.

But both leaders were buoyant about the regional approach. One idea to be discussed is for a regional conference: Israel and the Palestinian Authority would be joined by Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, with U.S. and Russian participation. Even the most accomplished dealmaker can’t broker a deal if one side won’t come to the table. The international approach rewarded the Palestinians for staying away. A regional approach might get them there.

There will be compromises—Trump urged Israel to show “flexibility” and “hold back on settlements”. Netanyahu expressed willingness to reach an understanding to avoid “bumping into each other all the time on this issue,” while emphasizing that the settlements are “not the core of the conflict.” He also later revealed that he [asked the president](http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-1.772025) to recognize Israel’s sovereignty over the Golan Heights.

Ultimately, however, this week’s meeting was about restoring the friendship between the U.S. and Israel, a strategic alliance in the interests of both countries and the wider Middle East. It would be, said Trump, the “first of many productive meetings.” The last eight years exposed the limits of U.S. soft power. Israel, and the region, would welcome the return of U.S. superpower.