

Twenty-Seven Hours: Donald Trump in Israel

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It was time to do the Zionist boogie within a mere period of 27 hours, and anyone wishing to see two muggers of history enjoying each other's company found themselves peering at Donald Trump of the United States, and Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, nearly arm in arm on the recent tilt in US policy. "We understand each other," effused the Israeli leader, "and so much of the things that we wish to accomplish for both our countries."

Not that Washington had been that savage in reneging on its general policy on Israel during the Obama years. Israel was still deemed firm bosom pal and supposed beacon of democracy in a sea of Arab savagery. One could hardly count the various gestures on the part of the Obama administration, notably those taken in the second term, as firm, sharp turns.

True, the Obama administration had veered at points, paying lip service to international law and the questioned status of the Israeli settlements. There had been a registered abstention in the UN Security Council. But effectualness was nowhere to be seen.

Notwithstanding that, the actions of the administration even as Trump was readying to move into the White House provoked Netanyahu, who was also in a habit of turning on the issue of whether the two-state solution ever had legs.

Any Trump promise comes with hazards, the most notable of which is flipping rapid change. It soon became clear, even within the short time the president was going to spend in Israel, that dangerous, even scandalous excitement was looming.

The issue about whether Trump had disclosed classified material to Russian delegates on Israeli intelligence capabilities reared its curious head, and was beaten down.

"Just so you understand, I have never mentioned the word or the name Israel."^[1]



On his arrival in Israel on May 22, US President Donald Trump shook hands and posed for a selfie with controversial Israeli lawmaker Oren Hazan (Source: News.com.au)

Nothing about Trump is ever lofty. The philosophy of the gut and instinct prevail, a situation that is bound to provoke controversy. The supremely vulgar Israeli MP Oren Hazan, being a bird of such a feather, ploughed through in a successful effort to take a “selfie” with Trump. Not even Netanyahu could stop him.

Nor should he have. Hazan had been accused in a televised report in 2015 of pimping and drug taking, a situation which led to his suspension as deputy speaker of the Knesset. In December that same year, he was suspended for one month from any parliamentary activity after unwarranted behaviour towards a colleague with a disability. Such a fine resume would sail well in Trumpland.

The gut philosophy is certainly baffling seasoned operatives on the ground. Having expressed, in warm terms, his desire that the Israeli capital move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, doubts have crept in. An unnamed senior White House official told Bloomberg that,

“We don’t think it would be wise to do it at this time.”[2] There would be no provocations at a time “when everyone’s playing real nice.”

Nathan Thrall, senior analyst at the International Crisis Group, suggests that

“both Israeli and Palestinian leaders – including Netanyahu – are made very nervous by Trump.”[3]

The baby risks being thrown with the bath water, and the diplomats and various politicians find themselves at odds with the status quo which emphasised paralysis over effort. The

only thing to do is utter niceties and sweet words – for the moment.

Worried that the ground might be shifting before the spectre of the “ultimate deal” on peace, former Likud member Moshe Feiglin fears that the Trump-Netanyahu association would spell doom for Israel, fuming at his prime minister for pushing

“Israel’s strategic situation into the depths of an abyss that we have never known.”[4]

Such dabbling with Trump would thrill the progressives.

“Only Likud can fulfil the dreams of the most radical left.”



US President Donald Trump delivers a speech
at the Israel Museum in Jerusalem on May 23
(Source: The Times of Israel)

On this reality show in the Holy Land, the Trump display reduces history to show and spectacle, usually within the shortest of bursts. This all came to a delightful head in the visit to Yad Vashem, where heads of state are scrutinised for their obeisance to the Holocaust credo. What words of grave import would Trump come up with? In all likelihood, it would have to be in less than 140 characters.

As a Presidential candidate, Barack Obama visited the memorial in 2008, and got on the horse of history to survey the world. The words in the guest book were lengthy, contemplating this

“powerful reminder of man’s potential for great evil, but also our capacity to rise up from tragedy and remake our world.”

In his 2013 speech at the memorial, now as president, Obama spoke of how

“our sons and daughters are not born to hate, they are taught to hate. So let us fill their young hearts with the same understanding and compassion that we hope others have for them.”

Trump, in contrast, delivered a more trimmed version, still sneaking in the necessary punch of horror:

“Millions of wonderful and beautiful lives, men, women and children were extinguished as part of a systematic attempt to eliminate the Jewish people.”

Netanyahu’s response almost broke the solemnity with unintended satire, thanking the US president for a speech “that in so few words said so much.”

In the guest book of Israel's national Holocaust memorial were penned words seemingly screaming in their self-referential, adolescent awe:

"IT IS A GREAT HONOR TO BE HERE WITH ALL OF MY FRIENDS - SO AMAZING & WILL NEVER FORGET!"

As Amir Tibon would conclude at the end, the first visit to Israel as the president of the United States saw Trump offer a diet to the Israeli people irresistible though unhealthy.

"It consisted almost entirely of sugar and sweets, with very little 'protein' in the form of actual substance."[5]

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Notes

[1] <http://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/22/politics/trump-israel-russia-intelligence/>

[2]

<https://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2017-05-17/trump-said-to-rule-out-moving-israel-embassy-to-jerusalem>

[3] https://www.vice.com/en_au/article/trumps-constant-embarrassing-gaffes-in-israel-wont-hurt-him

[4] <https://www.facebook.com/JewishLeadership/posts/10154967988673058>

[5] <http://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/1.791207>

Featured image: Jerusalem Post

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