



**The Center for the Study of  
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## PERSPECTIVES

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The Center for the Study of Contemporary European Jewry publishes commentary and analysis on Jewish identity and culture. You are welcome to share your thoughts on our Perspectives with us: [cst@taux.tau.ac.il](mailto:cst@taux.tau.ac.il). We are glad to share with you the forty-sixth issue of Perspectives.

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### Obama Vs. Trump Revisited

*The nemeses reflect the same historical trend.  
It puts Israel in existential danger*

*Uriya Shavit*

A month after the Israel-Iran war, four alarm bells ring for all those who care about the future of the State of the Jews.

The first is how the war ended. Intelligence agencies debate whether it delayed Iran's nuclear program by a year or by two years. Yet the bottom line is that despite all the Trump and Netanyahu bravado and the genius Israeli planning and execution, the best the strikes might have achieved is a delay. The war did not eliminate the program and, at least at this point in time, did not undermine the Iranian terror regime.

It is foolish to argue for a political resolution as the logical implication. Why would Iran accept one if a war that demonstrated the tremendous weakness of its military did not force its surrender? On the other hand, it is a stretch to dismissively, nonchalantly argue that wars with a defiant Iran can now become an annual event.

The war thus ended with tactical triumph – and strategic deadlock. There is a reason the Israeli public did not celebrate it as Six Day War II or a reenactment of the Entebbe Raid or the bombing of Iraq's and Syria's nuclear facilities. Its instincts are often healthier than those of the parroting, saluting mainstream media.

Why has a decisive victory not been achieved? Here comes alarm bell number two. The main strategic concern of the Trump administration was not to see Iran stripped of its nuclear capabilities, but to ensure that the crisis did not deteriorate into an all-out, protracted war involving the US military. Trump talked about Iranian capitulation, but did not force Iran to capitulate.

This is the same Trump who was willing to sell Ukraine to end the Russian aggression; gave the Houthis carte blanche to bomb Israel as long as they stop targeting American interests; legitimized al-Jolani so that the few remaining American troops could finally leave Syria; and threatened Hamas with an apocalypse but never delivered it.

The theatrical articulations of Madman Theory mixed with peace rhetoric masque a simple truth: the United States cannot afford, at present, commitment to foreign wars; and because it cannot, its ability to exert influence on the world stage has greatly diminished.

Donald Trump is usually portrayed as the counter-Obama leader, the Christ saving America from the downfall ushered in by his predecessors (or the anti-Christ spreading darkness in a vicious crusade against the forces of light).

In reality, Obama and Trump have much in common.

Both were elected in their first terms as the ultimate outsiders, with no experience in government, manifesting the disgust of Americans with Washington and party politics.

Both shined as great storytellers, ushering in a new political age where performance skills are not just an important quality – they are the most important one.

Both were speedily iconized and idolized, demonstrating how desperate the public is for a messiah.

Both were the products of reality-television culture (Trump, literally), where being the improbable or the outrageous is an asset rather than a liability.

And – and this often overlooked point cannot be emphasized enough – both were among the few public figures in America who were against the 2003 war in Iraq outright. They are associated with what was at the time a lone opposition to what turned out to be a failed experiment in which over 4,500 American troops died, dozens of billions of dollars were lost, the over-extended US armed forces were exhausted, and the American public lost its appetite for military adventures.

At no moment in the recent war in Iran was there a majority in America supporting intervention. Even the brief and rather riskless American participation threatened to break the Trumpian electoral coalition.

The simple truth is that in the post-Iraq War era, America cannot afford to enter into new wars.

Obama tried to conceal the reality of decline through bombastic and quasi-deep speeches, such as in Cairo, confident that his charisma and charm would make a difference. They did not. The chaos in the broader Middle East and the beginning of the Russian aggression in Ukraine took place under his watch. Trump has been trying to conceal the reality of decline through vulgarity, erraticism, and empty expansionist wishful thinking. He is equally failing, while killing whatever is left of American soft power.

Words cannot fundamentally change the rules of math. The United States is still the strongest power in the world, yet one that is extremely limited in its ability to apply force.

The decline of American power is particularly concerning for Israelis, and particularly today, after the country exhibited first-of-their-kind military dependences and diplomatic weakness.

Throughout its existence, Israel, a David that triumphed against many difficult odds, relied on stronger allies for military equipment, yet – the Suez War of 1956 no exception, in essence – managed to fight and win its wars on its own.

In the immediate aftermath of October 7, Biden sent warships to the region and issued his famous don't. At the end of the war with Iran, after four decades of planning by the best and brightest and the investment of dozens of billions of dollars, Israel admitted that it needs America's participation to get the job done. It lobbied for it openly and unapologetically.

Throughout its existence, Israel faced a hostile international arena. There has not been a country in modern times that was attacked by so many agents of hypocrisy on so many fronts. Yet overall, Israel found basic sympathy and stable alliances within the liberal West. Almost two years into the war in Gaza, this heartfelt, solid support base has shrunk to more or less the United States, what is left of Germany's sense of guilt, and Hungary.

Many people enjoy Piers Morgan's interviews with junior Israeli ministers as good entertainment. The pompous Amichai Chikli, shifting between the gestures of a frightened school boy to those of a mafia boss; the painful-to-watch May Golan, shifting between impressions of a Belgravia lady and her usual aggressive hysteria. To paraphrase Kissinger, these interviews demonstrate again and again that Israel doesn't have public diplomacy; its politicians appear on international media with their eyes set to impress certain local publics, and the effect is terrible.

The joke is on us, but the focus should not be on the joke, but on what Morgan's impatience reflects: centrist liberal Europeans with a populist bent that used to be essentially pro-Israel and pro-Zionist are pressing the unfriend button.

Which brings me to the third alarm bell. Not only has the state of the Jews become so expressly dependent on one country, the United States, which is diminishing in

power, it is far from obvious that America's strong alliance with Israel – at least with Israel of today – will survive.

The data are scary.

Netanyahu has often been blamed that he turned Israel into a partisan issue in American politics.

Well, maybe it is becoming a bipartisan issue again, but differently than desired.

According to the latest Pew survey from June this year, 53% of Americans have a non-favorable view of Israel, compared to 45% who have a favorable one. That's an 11 percent increase from March 2022.

The Democratic Party appears all but lost, with almost 70% of Democrats now holding an unfavorable view of Israel, up 16% from 2022. But things are not shiny on the Republican side as well, where 37% view Israel negatively. Worse, whereas the shift against Israel has been more pronounced among older Democrats than younger ones, on the Republican side, the collapse is far greater among younger voters. 50% of Republicans under 50 are today anti-Israel, compared to 35% three years ago.

The war with Iran exposed how deep-seated the antagonism against Israel is among certain Republican constituencies. That's not just because of bad-old-antisemitism, although bad-old-antisemitism is evidently there. Again, the Iraq trauma: a cornerstone of Trumpism has been the anger over the Iraq War, and Israel is suspected as the one ally who can drive America into yet another costly idealist adventure.

The evangelicals have been reduced to the only solid support base left. That support base has been recently severely damaged by criminal acts against Christians in the West Bank and disrespect for Christian tourists. It's as if someone is trying to make sure no stone is left unturned so that a people alone will dwell.

Trump is ironically exceptional in the core Trump world in his overflowing positive approach to Israel. In three years, he will most likely be succeeded by an isolationist who will need to covet the Carlson-Republicans aggressively to have any chance of winning. On the Democratic side, mainstream moderation is unlikely to be a winning card after the Harris disaster. If lucky, Israel will get a candidate whose radicalism is expressed by his identity rather than his politics, such a Pete Buttigieg. If unlucky, it will have to face a Mamdani-style radical anti-Zionist candidate.

Which brings me to the final alarm bell.

Will there be another election in the United States? Can the Union survive?

The most disturbing aspect of analyses regarding the future of American democracy is how far removed they are from reality.

The media show goes on as if these are normal times. They are not.

The United States is governed today almost single-handedly by a man who four years ago inspired a violent insurrection to upend the electoral triumph of his rival, and all but committed to doing so again, should he lose again. The only person who so far proved capable of winning against him turned out to have been physically unfit while serving in office and protected by a bunch of irresponsible operators. That's the definition of a flawed democracy.

What should have everyone worried is not the structural constitutional deficiencies and corruption of the American political system and the practical impossibility of amending them, the bankrupting national debt, the declining life expectancies, the politicized judiciaries and academia, or the culture of hate-mongering. What should have everyone worried is that the accumulated meaning of these crises is ignored, and a sense of greatness and immunity still prevails in America.

In the early 1990s, when the United States was at a historical peak in its power, declinist literature abounded. Today, there is mostly silence and much false patriotic optimism. There is an old rule that never fails: when a company starts having lavish parties, it is in trouble. From an underwhelming military parade to what promises to be a disastrous World Cup, America is partying; partying without joy, without unity, without a good reason to party.

Israel is currently at a crucial juncture where the inherent contradictions of Zionism surface powerfully and painfully. It needs to look inward. Yet a refreshed discussion of its place in the world is equally crucial.

Hoping and praying that the United States will recover – and no one should underestimate the potential of that historically great nation – is not enough. Israelis need to engage in a serious, even if uncomfortable, debate on what alienated so much of the world. At the same time, Israel needs to expand its diplomatic outreach and alliances and drastically reduce its dependency on American military aid.

We cannot afford to ignore alarm bells that ring loud and clear: things will no longer be the same.

After all, they have 50 states. We only have one.

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