Thoughts on the Future Relations between the US and Israel

It will probably not come as a surprise to anyone that, following the change of administration in the White House, relations between the US and Israel have taken a turn for the worse. Similarly, it is no secret that this factor greatly contributed to the political downfall of Benjamin Netanyahu, who the Israelis felt had been in power for long enough.

Many experts are now of the opinion that Netanyahu himself is to blame for the new US leadership’s change of heart in relation both to him personally and to Israel as a whole. It is clear that Joe Biden was happy to see Benjamin Netanyahu’s departure from Israel’s top post - after all, following his inauguration the new US president waited for several weeks before his first call to Netanyahu, while he called Naftali Bennett to congratulate him on his election victory just hours after the latter was sworn in, on Sunday June 13.

Angry and bitter, by the time Netanyahu left office he had driven a wedge between Israel and the Jewish diaspora in the US, including the country’s long-term supporters in the Democratic Party. No other country, not even Iran, has done as much damage to relations between the US and Israel. In a comment piece, the Jewish Telegraphic Agency, one of the leading Jewish media organizations in the US, accused Benjamin Netanyahu, the leader of a state that exists to protect the interests of Jews around the world, of doing all he could to damage his country’s relations with the US Jewish community - the largest Jewish diaspora in the world.

In a private conversation back in 2001, Netanyahu is quoted as saying: “I know what America is. America is a thing you can move very easily, move it in the right direction.” Those words seem particularly ironic in view of the fact
that, from 2009 onwards, he embarked on a policy of damaging his own reputation in the eyes of US Jews, and, as far as the Democrats were concerned, entirely destroying it.

For the Democrats, Netanyahu tied himself to the Republican cause for good in 2015, when, invited to address Congress by its Speaker, the Republican John Boehner, he criticized Obama for his policy in relation to Iran. The Israeli media outlet Maariv described the incident on March 6 2015 as follows:

“Yesterday the conflict between the Israeli prime minister and the US president reached a new peak. The world has seen nothing like it before, and is unlikely to do so again. A leader of a foreign state came to Congress, having been invited behind the President’s back, and delivered an impassioned speech directly attacking the President’s policies. Netanyahu entered Congress, the US’s Holy of Holies, and that is something that Obama will never forgive him for. The Democrat Nancy Pelosi, a firm supporter of Israel and at the time the House Minority Leader, left the room until Netanyahu finished his speech, and afterwards described her feelings as follows: “...I was near tears throughout the Prime Minister’s speech – saddened by the insult to the intelligence of the United States...” If Pelosi reacted like that, it is hard to imagine how Obama felt.”

In March 2015 an information leak surfaced to the effect that Netahnyahu’s government, clearly distrusting the Democrat presidential administration, had spied on the talks between the US and Iran. The story was published in The Wall Street Journal. The White House’s reaction was angry, to say the least, and the Department of State had the following to say about Tel Aviv’s policies: “An occupation that has lasted for almost 50 years must end.” Obama threatened, in no uncertain terms, to reconsider the US’s policy in relation to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was referring to the proposal to create a Palestinian state.

Back then, with all these angry words flying around, Maariv’s news site NRG asked, on behalf of the majority of Israelis: what have Israeli citizens done to deserve this? Should they bear collective blame for their head of government’s disregard for diplomatic protocol and not being courteous towards the US president? Can they allow Israel’s very existence to be threatened - either by the Palestinian conflict or the Iranian problem? Just because Obama and Netanyahu do not get on with each other?

From then on, Netanyahu’s policies just served to widen the gulf between Israel and the majority of US Jews. For example, in 2017 he scrapped a plan that would have allowed non-Orthodox groups to pray at the Western Wall in Jerusalem. His threat in 2018 to expel African asylum seekers from Israel was condemned even by those Jewish leaders who had previously avoided criticizing him. And his 2019 alliance with an ultra-right wing party was greeted with concern by the main Jewish organizations, including the AIPAC lobby, which had always maintained a pro-Israeli position.

Netanyahu’s refusal to work together with the Democrats was further strengthened after Donald Trump was elected president of the USA, and made all kinds of previously unthinkable concessions to Israel. For example, when Netanyahu talked quite openly about annexing part of the West Bank, even the most pro-Israeli Democrats were shocked.

As Mark Mellman, leader of the Democratic Majority for Israel group, has stated, before Netanyahu the two US parties were more or less equal in terms of their support for close relations with Israel, but now support for Israel is increasingly becoming a partisan issue. Many Jewish Democrats, people who were actively involved in Jewish youth organizations, who for many years played a leading role in determining US policies in the Middle East, and who used to admire Netanyahu, now see him as a persona non grata.

As the Americans say, when you spit at America, it’s just a drop of water, but when America spits on you, you drown. Clearly, that saying expresses the way that Americans, including much of the Jewish community, see Netanyahu.

That is why the US president was so quick to call Naftali Bennett, the new Israeli prime minister and congratulate him after his inauguration on June 13, and why many in the US are hopeful that the Democrats can start to heal relations between the two countries. Of course, this does not just depend on the new US administration, - the new Israeli government also needs to show that it is willing to make a move.

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