

## 'We need to take advantage of Trump's time in office'

"The Trump administration is the most friendly toward Israel since the state was founded. In this administration, there isn't a single official who is problematic for Israel," says former Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren. "We haven't lost bipartisan support, but it is being challenged when it comes to the question of what issue is being discussed," he says.

by Ariel Kahana Published on 2019-07-01 09:15 Last modified: 2019-07-01 14:05

'We need to take advantage of Trump's time in office'

Former Israeli Ambassador to the US Michael Oren | Photo: Dudi Vaaknin

There were plenty of difficult discussions between Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and former US President Barack Obama. In one of the last they held, Netanyahu asked for the US to recognize the Golan Heights as part of Israel. This was when the 2015 JCPOA nuclear deal with Iran was being signed. Obama threw all his weight behind that deal, and Netanyahu was waging a war against it, the like of which had never been seen in the history of relations between the two countries. The battle ended with the deal being implemented but not ratified by the Senate, and a meeting was set for the two leaders in November 2015. Historian and former Israeli Ambassador to Washington Michael Oren prepared a "compensatory" list of demands for Netanyahu to present to Obama.

"At the time, I was no longer the ambassador," Oren tells Israel Hayom.

"I was serving as an MK, but I suggested, among other things, that the US and Israel prepare a document in which they would jointly define what would be considered a violation of the nuclear deal and agree ahead of time on how the US would respond to any violations. At the end of the list, I included a request for American recognition of the Golan Heights as sovereign Israeli territory. Netanyahu brought the matter up, but Obama laughed in his face," Oren says.

Oren served as ambassador to the US for over four years, but his intimate knowledge of bilateral relations started long before that. He grew up in New Jersey in the 1960s, the son of a Conservative Jewish family who lived in a mostly Catholic neighborhood, where he racked up a few experiences with anti-Semitism.

"So I'm not upset about or wonder at what's happening today," he says.

He joined the Habonim Dror Zionist youth movement, which wound up changing the course of his life.

In 2012, when Oren finished his ambassadorial role, he told Israel Hayom: "When I was 15, we went to Washington with the movement, and the height of the visit was a meeting with Yitzhak Rabin, who had been IDF chief of staff in the Six-Day War and was at the time Israel's ambassador to the US. Rabin talked to us some, and I felt that it was the best moment of my life. I told myself that I wanted to represent Israel in Washington. That was my life's dream."

After Ron Dermer replaced him as ambassador in 2013, Oren continued to focus on US-Israel relations. He went on a speaking tour of the US to promote his new book, "Power, Faith, and Fantasy: America in the Middle East: 1776 to the Present." The book came after a long series of studies and other published books, some of which were bestsellers in the US and Israel, and mainly focused on American history and as it relates to Israel.

Take advantage of the window of opportunity

So Oren, both as a historian and as one who has sometimes had a hand in history, has his own perspective.

"The Trump administration is the most friendly toward Israel since the state was founded. In this administration, there isn't a single official who is problematic for Israel. Even in good administrations such as the ones of [Bill] Clinton or [George W.] Bush, there were senior officials who made trouble. But with Trump, there's no Condoleezza Rice, there's no Caspar Weinberger, and there's no James Baker," he says.

Q: From a historian's point of view, how does the current period of US-Israel relations look?

"Bilateral relations have undergone a process of evolution over the years. President [Harry] Truman is remembered as a friendly president because he recognized Israel, but he actually boycotted us during the War of Independence when we had our backs to the sea. [Dwight D.] Eisenhower was very tough on us and his secretary of state, John Foster Douglas, was a real anti-Semite. President John F. Kennedy was very critical. He was the first who met with Israeli Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion, but it wasn't at the White House, it was at a hotel in New York and the meeting was a difficult one.

"The big change came in the 1980s under [Ronald] Reagan, but at the beginning, he boycotted us too, because we blew up the [Osirak] reactor in Iraq. He stopped the shipments of F-16 jets and voted with Iraq against us in the UN Security Council. Today, who could imagine a scenario like that? Under Reagan, two principles that characterize [US-Israel] relations were formed: no surprises and no outward discrepancies. If we were shouting at each other, it had to be behind closed doors and not in the open. For example, when Bush Jr. published the road map [peace plan] in 2003, Arik Sharon had received it two weeks earlier. Obama was the one who violated these principles, but the current administration has reinstated them."

Q: Is this administration is the best Israel has ever had, what will a historian who looks at this period 50 or 100 years from now see?

"A lot depends on the question of how we take advantage of the opportunity and the time we have left. We don't know if the current president has another year and a half or five and a half years in office, but in any case, it's not long. We need to take advantage of this window of opportunity to address all the important issues, like Hamas, Hezbollah, Iran, the Palestinians, and so forth."

Q: Practically speaking, do you suggest taking action against Hezbollah while Trump is still in office?

"We should consider it. Hezbollah has 130,000 missiles [stored] underneath homes in 200 villages. The IDF projects a rate of fire of 2,000-4,000 missiles per day, compared to 200 to 300 per day in the Second Lebanon War. So the IDF won't have a choice but to launch an operation, and in a war, we'll need ammunition. Would a Bernie Sanders or an Elizabeth Warren administration give us ammunition? A move like that would entail heavy civilian casualties and not only on the Lebanese side of the border. Who will give us diplomatic and legal protection? Who will give us a diplomatic Iron Dome in the UN Security Council and at the International Criminal Court in The Hague? The current administration certainly will."

The challenge of bipartisan support

When he was appointed as an ambassador to the US in 2009, Oren gave up his American citizenship. Until then, like most US Jews, his family had tended to support the Democratic Party, which in the 20th century supported Jews and their state more than the conservative Republican Party did. But in recent years, Oren has personally felt, as an individual and as an emissary, that the Democrats are distancing themselves from Israel, while the Republicans are embracing it.

"In May 2010, after the Mavi Marmara flotilla, I was summoned to a meeting with all of Obama's staff at the White House. They were exerting heavy pressure to establish an international investigative committee that would probe the incident. We opposed [this], suspecting that a committee would reach foregone conclusions. During the discussion, I asked Obama's advisers if they would be willing to defend us against possible sanctions at the ICC in The Hague. I showed them a law Congress had passed in 2003, which says that if anyone tried to put American soldiers on trial, or soldiers of an American ally, the US would take steps against the nations trying to do so. I showed them the law and they answered, 'Do you really want us to boycott Norway?' I said, 'Yes,' but they laughed at me. That's how it was with Obama. The current administration doesn't laugh, it boycotts."

Q: Can relations only deteriorate after this administration?

"I don't know. There are a lot of demographic processes that indicate that the Democrats will return to power, if not in 2020 then the next time. There are Democratic candidates who are very good for Israel, but there are also others [who are not]. I don't know if a Democratic president would maintain the same policy toward Iran, or if they would return to the nuclear deal Trump pulled out of. I also don't know if American recognition of the Golan would remain in place, or the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and the relocation of the US embassy in Israel. Bernie Sanders, for example, would certainly return to the nuclear deal and undo the embassy move. He is one of the leading Democrats and there are other progressive leaders like him."

Q: Is Israel losing the important asset of bipartisan support?

"We haven't lost bipartisan support, but it is being challenged when it comes to the question of what issue is being discussed. If it's loss of life (among Arabs), you see the cracks. In the time of Obama, there were instances like that ... after Operation Cast Lead in 2009 and Operation Pillar of Defense in 2012 or after the Marmara flotilla. When it comes to Iran, for example, we've lost bipartisan support because the Democrats aren't with us. On the other hand, on the two-state solution, there is bipartisan support, and even AIPAC is in favor of it – but the Israeli government is not. So bipartisan support is being challenged from all directions."

Q: Are these processes that Israel can influence?

"We can't solve all the problems, but we do need to set a strategic goal of maintaining support among the progressives. That is a top priority, even if our success is partial. We need to bring as many delegations as possible [to Israel] and send as many representatives as possible there. We need to show ourselves that we're doing everything possible to preserve bipartisan support and all sectors of the Jewish people. Thus far, we haven't."

Q: How should Israel prepare for an era in which the US has lost its standing in the world?

"I would always tell Bibi that we need to thank Obama. Because before Obama, we had 40 years in the 'nest.' Mommy America protected us. He came and threw us out of the nest. He forced us to stand on our own two feet. We always knew that the crisis would come, and as a result of it, the prime minister went to China, to India, and to Africa, and our diplomatic situation has never been better. Israel isn't a kid anymore, it's older than half the states in the UN. The US will remain an important ally, but we are strong and can stand on our own two feet."

Despite the bleak prospects about the attitude of the Democratic Party toward Israel, Oren wants to mention one moment during the Obama administration in which they did rush to Israel's aid.

"It was 6 p.m. in Washington, 1 a.m. in Israel. I was on my way to the White House for the annual Hanukkah party," he recalls.

In Israel, it was a time of mourning. Half a day earlier, 44 firefighters, prison guards, and police had been burned alive in the worst wildfire in Israel's history. Oren and the Jewish leadership were invited to the annual White House Hanukkah party.

"I went in and my phone rang. The prime minister was on the line and said, 'Michael, we have a problem. I need you to see what the US can do. We don't have the tools to get the fire under control and we need as much flame retardant and firefighting aircraft as possible, as quickly as possible.' I told him I would speak to the president."

When Obama was available, Oren explained the situation briefly and asked for America to do everything it could.

"Obama replied, 'Give Israel everything it asks for.' We opened an emergency room in the White House and we were there most of the night to handle the crisis. Representatives of the National Security Council and Homeland Security were there with us. A few hours later, eight American firefighting aircraft that had been scrambled from US bases in Europe landed in Israel, carrying cargoes of flame retardant."

"By the way, Obama himself took off that same night for a flash visit to Afghanistan. The first call he made when he landed was to see if Israel had gotten everything it asked for. That's how it is. Even with Obama, the picture is always complicated."