
New and Old Alliances in the Middle East

A CONVERSATION WITH DAN SHAPIRO,
FORMER AMBASSADOR OF THE UNITED STATES TO ISRAEL

FLETCHER FORUM: *Thank you again for being here and for your time. So just to dive right into things, what would you say are the biggest or the most significant differences between the current and previous U.S. administrations in terms of policy towards Israel?*

DAN SHAPIRO: When President Trump was elected, there was an expectation in Israel that they were going to see change in U.S. policy, meaning that the United States would no longer be trying to achieve a two-state solution or trying to stake limitations on Israeli settlements in the West Bank. What became clear after he actually became President in January was that the policy was much more one of continuity of previous administrations on those issues. I consider myself someone who is not particularly fond of the Trump administration, but I have to say on matters relating to Israel, I have many fewer differences, and there are many things I can support. It looks like a policy that I recognize. It certainly includes strong support for Israel's security, it includes strong support for helping achieve a negotiated peace between Israelis and Palestinians, and they don't use the phrase "two-state solution." I wish they would, and I think they should, but I think that's what they're talking about, because there is no other outcome that could achieve the goals of peace and self-determination for Palestinians and security for Israel, and openings between Israel and the Arab world—which they do talk about—other than a two-state solution. And I think they're focused on trying to achieve, as I mentioned, that opening between Israelis and Arab states, and those are all consistent with

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previous administrations at different times. So, I think that the policy, even if the rhetoric is a bit different, is one that's quite consistent with previous administrations.

TUFTS DAILY: *To build on that discussion, I think of rhetoric and specific wording, and how it would affect policy. What are your thoughts on Prime Minister Netanyahu's recent words in August about expansion of settlements in the West Bank and East Jerusalem areas? How do you think that will affect the peace process going forward? Will it change what has been set out as a two-state solution?*

SHAPIRO: Consistently during the Obama administration, like every other administration before us, we made clear that we view the expansion of West Bank settlements as unhelpful to the achievement of a two-state solution. It's unhelpful because it changes the map over time. It's not

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that you still couldn't divide the land and have some territorial swaps, but the more land is affected by the settlements, the harder it gets. But also because of the political impact, and the way it suggests to Palestinians that the decisions are being made before they are at the negotiating table and there will be less to negotiate over eventually. So, it has a political impact as well. I consistently was part of administration efforts to try and restrain that. I think statements like the ones you referenced are unhelpful. What happens on the ground is of course more significant—I

do think Prime Minister Netanyahu at the moment, because of the legal challenges he faces, [is] adopting a political strategy to reinforce his support from his right-wing base, and I think the statement should be understood in that context. And that obviously makes things harder.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Given all of this information, what do you think will be the biggest challenges going forward with the U.S.-Israel bilateral relationship?*

SHAPIRO: I think this is always going to be one of the central features, because it's clearly a U.S. interest to have Israel, which is a strong ally and

security partner, continue to be that. But what enables it to be that is that it is strong and secure, and also that it's a Jewish and democratic state. It is hard to imagine any circumstance where it can continue to be all of those things—strong and secure, Jewish and democratic—without a two-state solution. So, I think that this is going to be very central. But of course, that's not the only issue we deal with Israel on. Israel is an outstanding security partner and intelligence partner because we face many of the same common threats—Iran and its aggressive pursuit of hegemony in the Middle East, its arming of terrorist organizations, and its pursuit of weapons of mass destruction and ballistic missile capabilities; terrorist organizations like Hezbollah and ISIS; and the instability that has been such a feature of the Middle East landscape for the last five years. We need security partners that we can work with, that can help us counter those threats, manage them, and collect intelligence against them. We don't have a better partner than Israel, and we want very much to see that continue. So, I think that the Israeli-Palestinian issue remains a significant focus and will be in all circumstances, but our security partnership is much broader than that, and there are many other things we work on.

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TUFTS DAILY: *How do you think the relationship between Israel and the United States will evolve with this administration in terms of concerns with Iran and the nuclear threat?*

SHAPIRO: The president of course during the campaign said that the Iran nuclear deal was a bad deal and that he wanted to cancel it. Every three months he has to make a decision about whether to certify that Iran is in compliance with it—he's done so twice and he's got another decision coming up next month. In my judgement, the Iran deal continues to do what it needs to and what it was advertised as: prevent[ing] Iran from achieving a nuclear weapon, keep[ing] it more than a year from the ability to achieve that capability, and sustain[ing] that for over a decade, [as well as] monitoring in a very intrusive way so we have full visibility of what is happening inside the nuclear program and would know if they were cheating. And that buys us important time. I believe Iran is in compliance with its obligations, and I think most of the president's advisors have told him that they're

in compliance with it. The danger of cancelling the deal, or accusing Iran of noncompliance and using that as a means to cancel it, when we are the initiators of that, is that we would end up with the worst of all worlds. We'd end with Iran released from all of its obligations under the agreement, able to resume the technological pursuit of a nuclear weapon in ways

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..... that they can't now, lose the visibility of the monitoring program, and have no international support for the resumption of sanctions or other economic pressures against Iran, because we would be seen as the party that pulled the plug. The Prime Minister is coming to meet with President Trump next week in New York and he talks about cancelling the deal or "fixing it." I think the reason he says we're "fixing it" is because even he understands (and he's heard from his own security professionals) that cancelling the deal would have all the negative outcomes that I just mentioned. So, I think that the question is how the deal can be buttressed as it always needed to be revisited in the later years to ensure that even as certain provisions of it expire, Iran doesn't try to resume that pursuit, because we agree at the strategic level. It's too dangerous to let Iran acquire that capability and that was what the deal was intended to prevent. It was probably never an achievable objective to end the Iranian nuclear program for all time, and in many ways, this is an exercise in buying time, but doing it in progressive periods of time that lead one into the other.

FLETCHER FORUM: *Expanding on what you said previously about the region overall—you've seen and heard about the crisis that's going on with the Gulf Cooperation Council countries and the new alignments with Saudi Arabia and the wider Gulf against Qatar. Given their respective alliances and Qatar's engagement with the Palestinian Authority and Saudi's new alliances with Israel, how do you see that impacting the future of the Israel-Palestine negotiations?*

SHAPIRO: It's not a new idea, but there might be new opportunities to try and open up Israeli relations with the Arab states as a means of showing Israelis there are opportunities for normalization and some rewards to them for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front that they can't get from a very weak Palestinian partner. And so, it may have that ability to lubricate

the diplomatic process. It's worth pursuing—there are some new elements. One is that there's young leadership in Saudi Arabia, the new crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, who seems to very much have a modern outlook on many things and is willing to challenge previous taboos. That may include an opening to Israel, and of course Saudi Arabia has influence with many of the other Gulf States. The other thing that's new is the emergence of a clear alignment of interests between Israel and those Sunni Arab states against the common enemies of Iran and Sunni radicals like ISIS. They do work together; it's quiet and it's under the table, but it's openly acknowledged that they see each other as security partners. The real question is how can that be surfaced, how can it be brought to the public sphere in a way Israelis will see it and feel it—Arab publics will see it and learn to adjust to it—if there's zero progress on the Palestinian issue. I think it's much more likely that these things will move together in parallel rather than in sequence. So, the idea that Israel can sit back and see that major change in Arab policy, which will be challenging in their own domestic political context and in the context of the regional rivalry with Iran, before they can also point to progress on the Palestinian issue, is probably unrealistic. But as a piece of the overall formula to make progress, I think it definitely should be part of the formula.

TUFTS DAILY: *So, this is a slightly different direction, but what is your opinion on the usage of social media as a means of foreign policy in this administration and how it compares to attempts in the past and as it sometimes relates to policy towards Israel?*

SHAPIRO: Well, I became ambassador when social media was still sort of in its infancy, and it was a tool that we understood already had to be used to connect with wider publics, although it was early in learning how to do that. But I tried, and I know other embassies and other ambassadors have tried, to make it a key means of communication with parts of populations that we previously, as diplomats, didn't have as easy access to. It's definitely true, we all understand this now, that diplomats can no longer restrict themselves to the official exchanges with the foreign governments they work with. Those are still important, but publics who are informed and have means of receiving information and means of projecting their views, their voices, out to the world, obviously need to be engaged. So, social media is a critically important tool. But in the context of diplomacy and government, it needs to be done with a certain amount of discipline. It's so common in our daily lives and our personal lives to use social media with

a degree of informality, and of course we can always go back and re-post, or un-post, or change things. When governments or government officials do things and say things that are not fully thought or fully consistent with policy, it creates confusion with friends, with adversaries, and it can often even create very dangerous situations. President Trump's use of his Twitter account, I think, as a means to communicate with foreign governments is probably—at least the way he's done it—not the best means of using that tool or other channels to communicate with governments, or even to communicate with publics. Done with some discipline, and done with some thinking through how it's being received, not just what the intent of the tweeter is, it can be worthwhile. *f*