

The Painful Decline of American Democracy- An Israeli Perspective



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Jerusalem: Watching the American election nightmare unfold has been a very painful experience. And however the vote goes on Tuesday, there is no guarantee that the decline will end there, and that the U.S. will quickly return to what passes for “normal”.

The United States, which has been held up as the model of stability, strength and democratic values, is in a deep downward spiral. Israelis have always looked to America’s culture, system of checks and balances, and bipartisan foreign policy, including support of Israel, as role models. But now, the standards of reality television and anti-social media have taken over, with vicious personal attacks and “lowest common denominator” morality. The growing gap between the super-rich and poor (including the sinking middle class), and the fights over identity, economic globalization, and immigration, give Trump, like Corbyn in Britain, a following of angry supporters.

Every crude outburst of Trump’s evokes a cringe, as do the accusations of tawdry and immoral behavior. Trump’s refusal to promise to accept results of the elections further undermined the legitimacy of the democratic process.

And notwithstanding Trump’s Jewish son-in-law and daughter, the campaign has unleashed a torrent of crude antisemitism beyond any in the American public discourse for decades.

Trump’s supporters are frightening, but they do not have a monopoly on extremism. The hysterical attacks from the left of the Democratic party – particularly from Bernie Sanders supporters — display the same irrationality and antisemitism and further erode

the image that Israelis (and much of the world) had of the American political system's capacity for self-correction.

On the other side, if Hillary Clinton is elected, her presidency will begin with a very dark shadow which will add further damage to America's ability to address its internal crisis and resume a leadership role in the world. Clinton's carefully sculpted public image as a responsible and thoughtful leader was never entirely convincing, and collapsed with continued revelations of reckless behavior. The email scandal and flouting of basic security requirements as Secretary of State would have eliminated her as a serious candidate in any normal democratic process.

For Israel, the consequences of the crisis in America are particularly significant and worrying. The US has been Israel's primary ally and partner beginning with President Truman's formal recognition of the Jewish state in May 1948 (a principled position taken against the position of his advisors). Building on the common values and the shared democratic foundation, a special relationship evolved with no parallel in modern history. America provided Israel with the advanced weapons necessary to defend against Arab attacks, and in the 1973 war, the US airlift was essential to Israel's successful counterattack (after the Soviets resupplied the armies of Egypt and Syria) that led eventually to the peace treaty in 1979.

Diplomatically, the US has cast many vetoes in the United Nations against one-sided anti-Israel resolutions, and spoken out forcefully against the international bullying led by the Arab and Islamic blocs. This behavior stood in sharp contrast to Europe's cynical and self-interested policies.

However, the trust Israelis placed in America has already begun to erode. For eight years, President Obama's isolationism (some say naiveté, particularly on Iran and Russia), paternalism towards the Jewish state mixed with sympathy for Palestinian victimization, and personal wars with Prime Minister Netanyahu led many Israelis to question America's commitment.

There has been some speculation that a Hillary Clinton presidency would move to correct these failures, but this is uncertain. And Israelis have not forgotten Clinton's embrace of Suha Arafat in 1999, after Ms. Arafat falsely accused Israel of using poison gas to kill Palestinian children. Later, as Senator from NY, Clinton was a consistent supporter of Israel, but this can be explained as a cynical political calculation rather than core personal commitment.

Regardless of the policies that are pursued, a weak and distracted America is bad for the world, and for Israel, in particular. Regardless of the outcome of the elections, America's political crisis, including the polarization, is far from over.

For Israelis, the one consolation is the realization that our political system, with all of its warts, is not as bad as we thought. We also suffer from the politics of polarization and irrationality, and a dearth of qualified candidates prepared to withstand the torture of modern political campaigns.

But a divided, weakened and confused America will not help Israel. We need to see an America that is great again, not in the Trumpist meaning, but in a return to democratic stability and strong moral leadership. Based on what we have seen in the past year, we should be prepared for a long wait.