

Interview - Nadav Tamir

Written by E-International Relations

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Nadav Tamir is currently the Director of International Policy and Government Affairs at Peres & Associates Global Advisory, and formerly served as the Senior Policy Adviser to the President of Israel during the last 3 years of the presidency of Shimon Peres.

In 1993, Mr. Tamir joined the Ministry of Foreign Affairs and the following year began to serve as the Policy Assistant to the Foreign Minister. He has had the privilege of serving as a policy assistant under 3 Foreign Ministers – Shimon Peres, Ehud Barak, and David Levy. He was then promoted to the position of Political Officer at the Israeli Embassy in Washington, D.C. in 1997. Four years later, he was granted the position of Advisor to the Director General at the Ministry of Foreign Affairs in Jerusalem. He returned to Israel in 2010 both after earning his MPA from Harvard University's Kennedy School of Government, and after serving as the Consul General of Israel to New England at the Consulate General of Israel in Boston for four years. He subsequently served at the Policy Planning unit of the Israeli Ministry of Foreign Affairs until July 2011 when he joined the President's Office.

How has the way you understand the world changed over time, and what (or who) prompted the most significant shifts in your thinking?

I worked most of my career as a diplomat when I was in Israel with former president Shimon Peres, so he is definitely an inspiration. Working with him, I was exposed to many world leaders and learned a lot from his creativity and the way he sees diplomacy in general.

Do you believe a two-state solution between Israel and an independent Palestine is possible?

Absolutely! It is possible and imminent. It is the only way to keep Israel both as a home for the Jewish people and as a democracy, so at some point we will have to make that decision. It's the only way to end the predicament where we have to make the Palestinian life miserable in order to secure our life which is not a very sustainable situation. I want to remind all of us that before we had peace with Egypt, nobody believed that could happen and the same is true of Jordan. I am very certain that we can achieve a two-state solution, and we have to.

In February, former President Peres stated in an interview with TIME that the primary obstacle for peace in the region is mistrust. What do you see as the greatest obstacle to peace in the region?

I agree with that assessment. In the past, most Israelis thought a Palestinian state to be an existential threat. However, today we see in all polls that most Israelis understand that it is in the interest of Israel to have a Palestinian state. I think it's the same with most Palestinians that in the past wanted to destroy Israel rather than build their own state, and today, Abbas, the Palestinian leader and the Palestinian Authority supports a two-state solution and all of the Arab countries around us that in the past did not accept Israel as part of the Middle East today support the Saudi Initiative which calls for a two-state solution. I think what we lack right now is trust and a feeling that there is a partner on the other side; both sides don't feel that. We need also the leadership that will take us there and unfortunately right now we're stuck, but as I said, we will get there.

There appears to be explicit division between the governing Likud party of Benjamin Netanyahu and the

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Obama administration. This conflict especially derives from disagreements over the recently agreed upon Iran nuclear deal. What do you make of the Iran deal?

I think compared to the alternative, the Iran Deal is good for Israel. The jury is still out on some of those issues, but I think it was the right decision to prefer diplomacy to create a coalition of world powers that started with sanctions and led eventually to Iran coming to the negotiation table. I think that the trajectory where Iran was advancing towards a nuclear weapon will stop and the monitoring is better right now, so I also think it is also in Israel's interest. Right now, it is a fact that we have to work much better with the United States administration to make sure that it is implemented in a sufficient way and that Iran is not breaking out, or cheating out to a bomb.

More broadly, how would you define the Obama Doctrine, particularly as it pertains to Israel?

I think that Obama is definitely a friend of Israel. He might have a different view than our government, including how to secure Israel and what is the best way forward, but he is a friend of Israel. It is also in Israel's interest that he will keep on being involved in the Middle East but I have to say I can't blame him for seeing that the investment in the Middle East is not rewarding for the U.S., so I can understand why he is skeptical about being too involved. Though I think in terms of the relations with Israel and the special relationship, the security and intelligence cooperation, that will continue and Obama has been very supportive of that.

How about the criticism that Obama's approach too heavily favours withdrawal?

I wouldn't agree with that. I think a lot of this criticism is based on a world that doesn't exist anymore. I think that Obama sees a new world; a world where it's not the Cold War anymore and it's not also the unipolar moment, where the U.S. was the only superpower. It's a different world where you have to work with many players; it's also not all between governments and conventional armies. You have a lot of new asymmetric threats and in this kind of world, powerful military intervention doesn't serve your purposes many times, and it's better to invest in diplomacy and I think that's what Obama has been trying to do.

Looking at 2016, it appears either Hillary Clinton or Donald Trump will become the next president. Who would be a better president for U.S.-Israeli relations and a better friend of Israel's?

We never try to get into internal American politics and keep the U.S.-Israeli relations bipartisan and we work with anyone the American people will choose. Having said that, it's true that we have many years of working with Hillary Clinton; we know her and her record. We know much less about Trump, so one is more of an open question and with Hillary we have longstanding relations but again, it's a decision that the American people will make. We need the U.S. to have the best president it can because it's in Israel's interest that America will be successful.

What is the most important advice you could give to young scholars of International Relations?

My advice would be to learn the same lessons from my mentor, President Shimon Peres, which is first of all, to be optimistic. I'm not talking about being naive, but to be open to opportunities, and not just to focus on threats and obstacles. I think that is what's made him a player that can do things and seize many of those opportunities. I would also say, look for win-win situations and not zero-sum. The third piece of advice is to always be curious and look ahead.

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This interview was conducted by James Resnick. James is Deputy Features Editor at E-IR.