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Jewish Chessboard: Israel Becomes A Pawn In The Arcane World Of Geopolitics

By AMY NEUSTEIN, Ph.D.

The US-brokered “dizzying deal” – secured by fiat over consensus – struck an incontrovertible blow at the Jewish community last week. Many were left flummoxed, if not demonstrably shaken. On nearly everyone’s mind was how President-elect Donald Trump, a proven diehard supporter of Israel, could send an envoy to pressure Netanyahu into agreeing to suspend his campaign to extinguish Hamas and to release convicted terrorists who evidently pose an imminent danger to Israel’s security.

The *Jerusalem Post* had reported that on the heels of Netanyahu having been pressured to agree to an ominous hostage-ceasefire deal, sources close to Trump issued a stern warning to Israeli officials against a possible collapse of the ceasefire agreement in Lebanon. The admonitions from Trump came without an iota of support for Israel’s need to maintain its military presence in Lebanon beyond the 60-day deadline due to the “slow deployment of the Lebanese army” in tamping down Hezbollah’s militant forces.

So, it has now become apparent that before Trump had officially taken office, he was already bullying the Jewish state into accepting compromises that were contraindicative to its survival. I’m afraid, all of this points to an elephant in the room that must no longer be ignored. The problem, however, is that we tend to look for easy explanations (we rationalize Trump’s impetuous hostage-ceasefire deal as motivated by his need for flashy inauguration optics) while haphazardly overlooking the major forces – often hidden beneath the glossy wrapper of “peace talks” – that adumbrate geopolitical decision-making and transactional agreements that have profound effects on our lives.

To correct that, we must take a step back to accurately comprehend the power dynamics found in the theater of world politics so that we are not so easily caught off-guard. To do so, we must first recognize that it is no secret that Trump’s main objective is to have the US achieve economic superiority over China. In fact, Trump has averred to establish the “External Revenue Service” on his first day in office so as to collect tariffs from Chinese imports that flood the US consumer markets. Not surprisingly much of Trump’s policies, politics, and passions are principally geared toward fortifying America’s presence in trade relations and in closing the US borders to prevent, among other things, the onslaught of illegal drugs coming over from China. To Trump, China presents the greatest existential threat to America.

In understanding this, it would be hard to ignore how Trump, in his mission to defeat his Chinese rival, has been at pains to leverage the support of Russia, by displaying unusual comity and collegiality toward Putin and his oligarchy. By showing fealty to Russia, Trump ostensibly weakens the dyad between China and Russia, making it easier for America to compete with China in global consumer markets. In truth, Russia obviously would want Israel to cease their combat operations in Gaza because continued fighting in the Middle East would portend an eventual assault on all of Iran’s nuclear facilities. Given that Iran is a long-standing ally of Russia, it wouldn’t take much for Putin to try to encourage Trump to bring an end to Israel’s counteroffensive in Gaza. Not surprisingly, less than 48 hours after Israel announced its support of the hostage-ceasefire deal, Putin put on an amazing spectacle. Holding a joint

press conference with his Iranian counterpart, President Masoud Pezeshkian, Putin applauded the deal and urged its implementation.

Since it is no secret that Russia has vocally supported Palestinian statehood, it does not bode well to continue to ignore Putin’s preoccupation with the Middle East – and, even more importantly, how easily he can exact compromises and concessions from Trump who has openly courted Russia in his grand scheme of fortifying the US against its formidable rival, China. Certainly, the strong-arming of Israel to consent to the hostage-ceasefire deal, followed by stern warnings regarding the Lebanon-Hezbollah ceasefire, has sacrificed Israel on the altar of a geopolitical chess game. By doing so, the Jewish state has been slid across the chessboard as a pawn of politics, while superpowers gloat in their mastery of this game.

So, why is it important to understand the larger picture? First, it’s spilled milk to agonize over whether the coordinated efforts to mobilize Jewish communities across the US to vote for Trump has proven justified. Second, it’s an extravagant waste of time to impute solely small-minded motives to Trump – such as glory and pomposity in bringing about a hostage release and ceasefire deal – while overlooking the meta-politics of superpower rivalry that presumably informed the president-elect’s controversial eleventh-hour arm-twisting diplomacy. Seeing the larger picture, as best expressed by the Latin Proverb, *praemonitus praemunitus* (forewarned is forearmed), is essential to protecting national interests.

Similarly, while carefully factoring in the geopolitical landscape so that one is better able to understand what may have motivated Trump’s imperious behavior toward his staunch ally, one should not minimize or discount what may have amounted to extortionist manipulations by Fitch – the first major credit rating agency to take a sledgehammer to Israel’s creditworthiness when it began its justified counteroffensive against Hamas last year. Early last week, bond market analysts close to Fitch subtly let out the message that if Netanyahu would order a ceasefire in Gaza, Israel would enjoy a boost to its credit rating, thereby making the Jewish state more appealing to foreign investors. For a country already stressed by a 15-month multi-front war, dangling these promises of a credit upgrade is dastardly and deceitful.

All in all, the Ferris wheel of fate has played out, I’m afraid, and not to Israel’s benefit. The landslide victory of Trump has emboldened the Jewish state and Jews throughout the world. It’s time to get off the Ferris wheel and stand firmly on the ground. We must use our intellect to analyze, understand, and comprehend, which is by far more prudent than to swing with exultation over election victories. A steady demeanor based on a meticulous calculation of complex geopolitical variables will make Israel less likely to be moved around as a pawn on a chessboard. And this will no doubt augur well for Israel’s long-term survival.

Amy Neustein, Ph.D., is the author/editor of 16 academic books. Her two most recent books are “From Madness to Mutiny” (Oxford University Press, June 2025) and “Moral Schisms” (Oxford University Press, forthcoming) follow the publication of her anthology, “Forensic Speaker Recognition: Law Enforcement the Counter-Terrorism” (Springer 2011). She resides in Fort Lee, NJ

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