

## **The Future of the Current World Order: Implications for Israel and the Jewish People**

The terrible human cost of World War II drove the United States to promote the establishment of institutions, rules, conventions, and agreements that would regulate, in the international sphere, such basic issues as arms control, trade, health, environmental protection, and more. This "world order," which was forged during a period of American dominance and rooted in a multilateral approach to global problems, was meant to foster stability, to ensure the resolution or containment of conflicts (with an emphasis on great-power conflicts), and to prevent situations of violent anarchy in which "might makes right."

The contours of this world order were not static. Its most prominent feature, until the Soviet Union was dismantled, was the Cold War (and concomitant efforts to prevent a nuclear war). The USSR's collapse was succeeded by the "American Moment," a defining period for the international arena, when the United States enjoyed near-complete global hegemony. This "moment" has also passed; Russia has reemerged as a superpower, and China has exhibited remarkably rapid economic growth.

The post-WWII world order reflected, in its form, prevailing tensions and rivalries between the forces of liberal democracy and those of autocracy. The behavior of the international system's "players" was primarily driven by interests and was rules-based (as opposed to values-based). However, the Western nations, especially the United States, strove, with debatable degrees of success, to promote global values and behavioral norms consistent with democratic and liberal ideals.

The past decade has witnessed trend reversals that have cast doubt on the current world order's stability. First, the major powers (including the U.S.) have started undermining some of the foundations of the prevailing order. Second, the liberal-democratic ethos is in crisis, with challenges from both within (the Western countries) and without. Indeed, Freedom House rankings indicate that over the past 13 years there has been a consistent deterioration of civil liberties and political rights around the world.<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <https://freedomhouse.org/report/freedom-world/freedom-world-2019>

Scholars are divided as to whether this is a long-term trend or a passing phenomenon, but uncertainty on this issue does not absolve Israeli and Jewish policymakers of the need to remain aware and take action. It is, of course, not in the power of these policymakers to change global trends. However, it is their duty to consider the phenomenon's potential consequences for Israel and the Diaspora and, where possible, to prepare for risks and take advantage of opportunities.

### **1. The impact of the liberal-democratic ethos on the current world order**

After World War II, the U.S. undertook to shape a world order with the declared purpose (if not always its actual effect) of promoting security, stability, freedom, free trade, open markets, human rights, the rule of law, equality before the law, fair elections, freedom of expression, humane treatment of minorities and immigrants, gender equality, eradication of racism, and more. The world view on which this heritage is based regards democratic and liberal values as stabilizing forces in international relations, and as the means for advancing the "public good" (a vision emphasized in the American approach) – a sort of a Westernized version of *tikkun olam*.

The liberal-democratic outlook regards cooperation between nations, security agreements, international trade, and addressing challenges of a regional and global character, as win-win propositions. According to this approach, peace is attainable and sustainable when nations embrace democracy and uphold freedom and human rights as core values. Where this occurs, it becomes possible for economies to flourish, which in turn increases the incentive to maintain peace and stability. Indeed, this vision, which, after WWII, drove the establishment of such international institutions as the UN, the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, the World Trade Organization (superseding GATT), and NATO, emphasizes the values of freedom, democracy, and the rule of law. The globalization era owes its birth in large measure to these values and institutions, as well as to the technological developments that facilitated its emergence.

One should, of course, refrain from sweeping assertions. It would be an inappropriate generalization to claim that, over the many years since World War II, liberal-democratic values and altruistic considerations have been the sole or primary factors behind free-world foreign policy. Many other interests and considerations exerted a powerful influence, igniting major intra-Western disputes between idealists and realists. The U.S., the main proponent of the post-WWII world order, has supported quite a few dictators over the years, when those dictators have served American interests. Still, the liberal-democratic approach has had a major impact on the spirit of the age throughout the West and practical manifestations in the international arena.

## **2. What factors have undermined the current world order?**

### **An accumulation of failures**

The current world order has not realized, in full, its promised vision of security, stability, freedom, and prosperity. Moreover, the attractiveness of liberal-democratic values has weakened. The list of failures and challenges is long, and includes, not necessarily in order of importance: the 2008 financial crisis; the growing social inequality that has accompanied globalization; the withering of the hopes raised by the Arab Spring; a deteriorating sense of personal security; and an erosion, in the West, of the open-borders ideal and the cosmopolitan mentality, in the face of Islamic extremism, terrorism, and waves of immigration from the Middle East and Africa. To these one may add: the waning ability of governments to contend with domestic and global challenges (due to a transfer of power and resources from the state to international corporations); the European identity and economic crises; Brexit; the U.S. military failures in Iraq and Afghanistan; Iranian subversion and the problematic nuclear agreement (JCPOA) from which the U.S. has withdrawn; the North Korean nuclear threat; a sense of helplessness in the face of the Syrian tragedy; and more.

The economic problems and deteriorating sense of personal security have given rise to trends that undermine the liberal-democratic ethos: populism; hostility toward elites (frequently identified with the liberal-democratic ethos); protectionism; trade wars; political extremism on both the left and the right; the political invigoration of far-right movements; an intensified "tribal" impulse to fortify the nation-state as a unit with a strong, cohesive identity and borders; a growing tendency toward national and cultural separatism, the exclusion of minorities and foreigners, closing borders to immigrants, and fighting globalization and multiculturalism. Additionally, the fast pace of technological innovation (social media, information exchange, etc.) threatens groups that abhor rapid lifestyle changes, and increases their support for political movements that emphasize conservatism and national identity.

As the face of the liberal-democratic world order has become marked by traces of erosion and crisis, a new option has appeared whose attractiveness is growing. China offers an alternative regime model to that of the West: rapid and consistent economic development without democracy or a commitment to safeguarding human rights. Under this system, the ruler's legitimacy is based not on the ballot box but rather on demonstrable effectiveness and achievement (the Chinese model's attractiveness may itself diminish should the country's present economic crisis deepen).

**Drastic change in the relative weights of the actors in the international system**

– The United States, which bore most of the burden of maintaining the world order, has wearied of its global-policeman role and is now focusing more on itself – avoiding demonstrations of military force and preferring to exert economic and political power only, sometimes even when direct and significant American interests are at stake. In the great-power equation, the relative weight of authoritarian regimes that stand in opposition to the U.S. – China and Russia – is growing. These nations see themselves in historical perspective as superpowers, and do not accept the logic of a world order dictated by the West that ignores their strength. They are displaying increased strategic assertiveness in the military, economic, and cyber realms, arguing that their status and interests are no less legitimate than those of the U.S. and Europe, (the demand that the world order proportionately reflect their growing power is also being voiced by India and Brazil). Another reason for Russia and China's opposition to a world order defined by liberal-democratic values is the fear that Western ideas might undermine their domestic stability. From their point of view, the liberal-democratic order is simply an underhanded strategy for interfering in their domestic affairs, diminishing their power, and perpetuating Western hegemony.

**The Trump effect** – In contrast to the argument frequently voiced by President Trump's adversaries, Trump did not cause the erosion of the liberal-democratic ethos. Rather, his election stemmed from the undercurrents and trends that themselves caused the ethos to erode. As president, he reflects and may be intensifying these trends, but they will not necessarily be reversed when he leaves office. Faithful to his “America First” philosophy, he shows no interest in preserving the status of the United States as the world leader promoting democracy and human rights. “Soft power” is clearly not a major asset in his eyes. He lacks the traditional sentiment for the United States' Western allies, which in his view, have taken advantage of American generosity; he is demanding that they shoulder the financial burden of their own defense. Trump has no interest in alliances or in cultivating international institutions. He has exited the Paris Agreement on climate change, withdrawn from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), and is suspending compliance with the [Soviet-era] Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty (INF). He has left European leaders with major

doubts about his commitment to the NATO alliance, is taking a protectionist approach on the economic plane, has entered into a trade war with Beijing, and deplores the multilateral trade agreements reached under President Obama. He is unwilling to cooperate internationally on immigration issues, is slashing foreign aid and funding for international institutions, and has brawled openly with traditional U.S. allies (with the exception, to date, of Israel). He does not conceal his sympathy for dictators and has even demanded that Russia be restored to the ranks of the G7 (four years after its ejection due to the Ukraine incursion and Crimea annexation). In a programmatic speech before the UN General Assembly (September 2018), Trump elaborated an approach whose main features are the antithesis of liberal democracy: "We reject the ideology of globalism and accept the doctrine of patriotism." He promised not to intervene in the internal affairs of non-democratic countries. Trump's advisers explain his understanding of the world order as follows: "The President embarked on his first foreign trip with a clear-eyed outlook that the world is not a 'global community' but an arena where nations, nongovernmental actors and businesses engage and compete for advantage. [...] Rather than deny this elemental nature of international affairs, we embrace it."<sup>2</sup>

The Trump presidency reflects and brings into sharper relief the ideological polarization that prevails today in the United States. It is indeed possible that, after Trump leaves the White House, the ideological pendulum will swing back toward liberal democracy, and that current American demographic trends will work to the Democratic Party's advantage. It should, however, be emphasized that even a swinging pendulum doesn't necessarily mean increased U.S. global involvement, as evidenced by the Obama presidency, and as statements by 2020 Democratic presidential hopefuls have indicated.

### **3. What might the future world order look like?**

Leading thinkers studying the international arena are divided as to whether the erosion of the current world order and the weakening of the liberal-democratic ethos constitute a historical turning point, or a limited and short-term reaction. Many prefer to characterize the prevailing global system as a "world disorder," or an interim period on the way to a new, more stable order. In any case, the world order/disorder is dynamic in nature, as it reflects changes in the balance of power between players in the international system, including technological developments that undermine the old order, etc. For the foreseeable future, two world-order options are on the horizon, one functional, and one not.

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<sup>2</sup> *WSJ*, "America First Doesn't Mean America Alone," H.R. McMaster and Gary D. Cohn, May 30, 2017.



**Functional multi-polar world order founded on great-power competition** – this type of system gives more weight to the growing power of Russia and China, helped along by diminished American interest in dominating the international arena. Such an order would reflect the declining influence of the liberal-democratic ethos. Although great-power relations would function better under a system of this nature, and great-power cooperation on global challenges (nuclear arms proliferation, space regulation, global warming, etc.) might be incentivized, there would be greater latitude than in the past for Russia and China to expand their influence, and the constraints that deter them from threatening to use, or actually using, their military might in regional contexts would erode.

**Continuing global disorder** ("the jungle grows back") – a dysfunctional system characterized by anarchy, uncontrollable security and economic crises, the danger of great-power confrontations, and a persistent lack of cooperation on global challenges, from unconventional arms proliferation to global warming. (Of relevance here is a recent book by the historian Robert Kagan, who warns that, unless the achievements of the liberal-democratic ethos are resolutely safeguarded, the "jungle" will grow back, and brutality will rule the day.<sup>3</sup>)

### Implications for Israel and the Jewish people

The world order that has prevailed since the Second World War has had ramifications for Israel, some positive, some less so. On the one hand, Israel has been covered by an American strategic umbrella that bolstered its strength and deterrence, provided economic benefits, and fostered an image of belonging to the liberal-democracy club as the outlier in an undemocratic and non-liberal region. On the other hand, Israel has suffered systemic discrimination at the UN – the prevailing world order's representative institution. The UN majority, which includes many nations whose regimes are far from democratic or liberal, has acted to undermine Israel's legitimacy.

Moreover, since 1967 Israel has been subject to a major de-legitimization campaign, precisely because of those values which place human-rights discourse above Israeli security needs. In many cases, Israel has found itself under pressure from a "liberal" value system that abhors occupation and the use of force and prides itself on safeguarding weak minority groups. In some respects, Israel would cope more easily in a world order founded on forceful conduct. Under such circumstances, Israel would enjoy greater understanding and encounter fewer restrictions on its use of power in Gaza, Lebanon, and other arenas; there would be less criticism of its settlement policy in Judea and

<sup>3</sup> *The Jungle Grows Back: America and Our Imperiled World*, Robert Kagan, 2018.

Samaria, and fewer threats of prosecution in the International Court of Justice in the Hague; a weakened UN's adverse resolutions would be less effective; there would be fewer attacks on Israeli legislation (such as the Nation-State Bill), less criticism of Israeli domestic policy (toward the Arab minority, migrants), etc.

Thus, the weakening of the current world order confronts Israel with an array of challenges, dangers, dilemmas, and opportunities. All of these things are interpreted in different ways that parallel internal Israeli political and ideological cleavages. For example, some would argue that it is not in Israel's best interest to take advantage of more favorable conditions for expanding the settlements, while others would see such expansion as beneficial. However, the existence of such disputes does not justify ignoring the implications of change in the prevailing world order.

**Erosion of Israel's deterrence and the military might attributed to it –** Israel's strategic resilience is significantly affected, not only by the quality of its relations with Washington, but also by the global status of the U.S., the role the U.S. plays in the international and Middle Eastern arenas, and the might and aspirations of the powers competing with the United States. A decline in the international status of the U.S. – the power whose friendship and aid to Israel are critical, and which is home to a flourishing Diaspora community that constitutes half of world Jewry – could potentially lead to a gradual erosion of Israel's deterrence and image of military strength. A weakened NATO and Transatlantic Alliance also have strategic implications for Israel – both in terms of the ascendancy of Russia in the Mideast, and in terms of Israel's overall deterrence image.

**U.S. abandonment of the Middle East –** This abandonment (in relative terms, of course) is deepening the region's strategic vacuum, drawing into it forces that are problematic for Israel, and could further destabilize an already-volatile region that needs a world power such as Washington as a stabilizing force. The U.S., which has tired of involvement in costly wars in the region (Afghanistan, Iraq), and which believes that the cost-benefit balance of its regional investment is negative, is losing interest in the global-policeman role and in ensuring stability in the Mideast. The economic incentives that motivated U.S. involvement in the region have deteriorated as the U.S. has gained in energy independence, while the ideological/moral incentives have deteriorated as the America First approach has gained sway. This situation leaves Israel to manage in the region alone, vis-à-vis Russia, just as it is more or less alone in its struggle with Iran.

**Less importance attached to democratic-liberal values –** A world order that assigns less weight to human and democratic rights, etc., will exert less pressure on Israel to end the current state of affairs – a situation in which it must constantly use power to advance its interests and ensure its security, and in which (in the language of its critics) Israel persists in "controlling another people

with no national or political rights." Under such a world order, it might also be easier for Israel to take unilateral measures in the territories. However, one should take into account that this scenario of an "unsentimental" international system, indifferent to values-based discourse, could prove detrimental to Israel in cases where the interests of the major powers run counter to those of Israel.

**Between free trade and protectionism** – The comparative advantages of the Israeli economy are manifest in a free-trade world with no restrictions on Israeli exports. A more strongly protectionist world order could potentially harm the Israeli economy, which is oriented toward exports and currently benefits from free trade agreements with the U.S., European Union, and more.

**Great-power competition** – Now that the U.S. is diminishing its involvement and presence in the Middle East, Israel has an interest in developing its relations with the other powers – which, in turn, is forcing it to maneuver between the powers in an unprecedented manner. This is especially true given Russia's dominant presence in Syria, and China's growing interest in the region (as part of its One Belt, One Road initiative). Israel could potentially find itself squeezed between the two powers. For instance, within the mounting contradiction of developing economic relations with China (a clear and important Israeli interest) in a context where rivalry with China becoming an organizing principle of American foreign policy (this rivalry is manifesting in a trade war and in other geopolitical issues).

**The fate of the Jerusalem-Washington alliance** – Unlike most other traditional U.S. allies, Israel has, up to now, enjoyed close relations with the Trump administration, benefiting from the American protective umbrella in the UN and from unusual pro-Israeli measures on the part of the administration, such as the American Embassy's move to Jerusalem. However, the more weight that is assigned to hardheaded considerations in the U.S., and the more importance that is attached to America-First model, the greater the possibility for fissures in the American commitment to Israeli security. In major crisis situations (having to do, for instance, with Iran's nuclear ambitions), Israel could find itself with U.S. economic/political support but left to bear the military burden on its own.

**The fate of the strategic Jerusalem-Washington-U.S. Jewry triangle** – Domestic ideological polarizations (on issues related to the liberal-democratic ethos), which are intensifying in both the U.S. and Israel, could potentially compromise both American bipartisan sympathies for Israel (this bipartisan support is already eroding), and intra-Jewish solidarity -- the ability for Jews to join forces at critical junctures.



**International legitimacy** – Israel, as a small country surrounded by enemies, has benefited from being a member of the free-world camp, and from the fact that this camp, headed by the U.S., has worked to imprint its values on the world order. The support of free-world nations for Israel's legitimacy and for its right to be an equal member of the family of nations and its international institutions is an asset for Israel.

**Reinforced legitimacy of autocratic leaders and the ascendency of extreme-right movements** – This phenomenon, which is intensifying as the liberal-democratic ethos becomes less attractive, poses a dilemma for Israeli foreign policy decision-makers: how to deal with countries that demonstrate great friendship for Israel, but whose rulers depart from democratic norms, and where anti-Semitic elements flourish. To this dilemma one may add a built-in tension in this context, between Israeli interests and those of Diaspora Jewry.

**The status of Western Jewry** – American-Jewish prosperity stems in part from the values that inform the liberal-democratic system. A society that is not committed to these values will tend to generate more hostility and anti-Semitism toward its Jewish minority, and will feel less duty-bound to protect it. Accordingly, many Diaspora Jews would prefer to maintain a liberal world order that safeguards minority rights, while many Israeli Jews, who are the majority in their country, tend to be more preoccupied with majority rights. From their perspective, the liberal propensity to honor minority rights limits majority rule.

**Israel as an asset** – This is a multifaceted issue. On the one hand, one can argue that, so long as Israel is an integral member of a camp characterized by a set of differentiated values (liberal-democratic) in opposition to a camp that is hostile to those values, Israel is not facing its enemies alone. The fact that the U.S., Israel's friend, is the leader of the free world, gives Israel a great deal of power (a "big brother" who looks out for it). This asset is eroding as the U.S. loses interest in leading the free world, and as the American commitment to the values that drive free-world cohesion deteriorates. From the free world's point of view, Israel plays a vital role vis-à-vis a common enemy. But if the free world's loyalty – and especially U.S. loyalty – to their own values is dwindling, Israel's image as an asset will lose its value.

On the other hand, one can argue that a world "disorder" actually offers Israel new opportunities to strengthen and realize its equity – economically, technologically, and otherwise – in many places around the globe, despite the lack of a shared ideology. Even today, one can see this in the way quite a few nations are courting Israel. Moreover, the prevailing worldview in our region, according to which the U.S. is in withdrawal mode, is pushing major regional Arab players toward unprecedented cooperation with Israel. These players view

Israel as an anchor of strength and stability in the face of Iranian subversion and the danger posed by radical Islam. This trend seems poised to intensify.

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**Policy recommendations:**

- Israel should strategically prepare for the ongoing erosion of American willingness to invest in the Middle East, to be present and to lead stabilization and deterrence efforts in the region. This situation is contrary to Israeli interests and could potentially damage Israel's deterrence. Israel cannot, of course, dictate American foreign policy, but on specific issues of importance to it, it should not automatically rule out measures capable of persuading the U.S. to be present and involved and, certainly, supportive of Israeli deterrence as a whole. Such measures should be taken with the necessary caution and sensitivity, and without seeming to act against the sentiments and interests of the American public.
- Promoting a contractual strategic alliance with the U.S. should again be considered, given the approaching changes in the world order, and especially if the America First sensibility continues to guide U.S. foreign policy.
- In any case, in an era of instability, and given the need to act alone in the face of weighty challenges (such as Iran), Israel should cultivate its hard-power capabilities – military and economic – to an even greater degree.
- In a situation where the U.S. is reducing its Middle East profile, Israel has a heightened ability to strengthen its relations with region neighbors that share concern over the Iranian threat and Islamic terrorism. An opportunity is arising for Israel to develop a regional security architecture that would also serve American interests and increase Israeli equity. Israel should strive to make the most of this opportunity, which is actually growing in a world where the liberal values that helped put the Palestinian issue at the top of global and regional agendas are eroding. This situation enlarges the potential for establishing a Middle East alignment (security, economics, use of energy resources, etc.), and for building relationships in Asia, Africa, and the former Soviet republics.
- Israel has an interest in cultivating its ties with both China and Russia, the players whose relative weight in the world order and in the Middle Eastern arena is increasing. However, it should continue to tread carefully, in light of the current great-power rivalry; the main interest to consider is that of avoiding damage to strategic relations with the United States. At the same time, Israel should refrain from descending entirely into "Sinophobia." Diaspora-Jewish cultural, artistic, and academic activity

in Asia should be encouraged, as a "soft-power" endeavor on a continent whose power and importance are growing.

- As part of the American trend toward reduced international involvement in general, and a diminished Middle East presence in particular, Israel should be aware that the U.S. may despair of advancing an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, and abandon leadership of the peace process (for example, if the peace plan on which it has been working should fail to "take off"). Such a situation could allow international entities unsympathetic to Israel to try and fill the vacuum, with the aim of promoting problematic initiatives. Israel may have a dual interest in giving the U.S. a "reason" not to withdraw from the peace process: the very fact that this process is led by a friend, and the possibility of reinforcing an anchor that leaves the U.S. present in the region (the agreements' implementation process could be designed to confer on the U.S. an ongoing role thereby ensuring long-term American involvement in Middle East). However, some argue that an unstable world order, combined with the region's volatility and violence, dictate political resolve and a strict avoidance of change to the status-quo. This approach may become feasible in a world order where liberal values have declined in influence.
- Israel should consider leveraging the American peace initiative to deepen its relationships with Arab countries in the region. The existence of a diplomatic process may soften some of the restrictions that these countries have imposed on themselves in their relations with Israel, especially in the public domain.
- Should there turn out to be no Palestinian partner for President Trump's peace plan, consideration should be given to leveraging the president's friendship for a unilateral diplomatic initiative (which would likely encounter less opposition due to changes in the world order). The aim would be to avert the danger of sliding into a binational-state reality that would threaten Israel's Jewish-democratic identity.
- Trump's businesslike and unsentimental approach, and his commitment to the America First ideal, require that Israel prepare for the possibility of non-routine measures on the part of the American president (such as the initiative he presented for talks with the Iranian leadership), including measures that would be coordinated by him with other players in the global and regional arenas, without Israel's participation.
- The Middle East has remained a realm of unconventional arms proliferation, a nexus of global terrorism and refugee issues, and a potential source of shock to the global economy, should the supply of energy originating from the region be compromised. This being the case,

Israel should accentuate its value as an anchor of stability in a dangerous and tempestuous part of the world.

- Israel should exercise caution in her relations with countries and political parties that display great friendship for Israel but whose leaders depart from democratic norms, especially leaders under whom anti-Semitic elements thrive. Beyond Israel's own ideological considerations, one must recognize the cost of alignment with nations perceived as hostile to the liberal-democratic ethos. Israel's image would be sullied in the eyes of broad swathes of the American populace, including groups that may one day take the political reins and institute assertive international policies unfriendly to Israel. Being identified with these anti-liberal countries also contributes to young America Jews' sense of alienation from Israel, thereby weakening Israel's future ability to rely on U.S. Jewry in an hour of need.
- Israel should maintain a close relationship with the Trump administration, without seeming, in the eyes of U.S. Democrats, and the majority of U.S. Jews, to blindly embrace the president's entire value system. At the same time, the American Jewish community would do well distinguish between situations where Trump acts in a manner contrary to the Jewish community's values, and situations where he supports Israel and works to strengthen it. Given the deepening ideological rifts that currently prevail in the United States (on issues pertaining to the liberal-democratic ethos), Israel should take care not to undermine American bipartisan sympathy for it. At the same time, Israel should work to ensure the resilience of the Jerusalem-Washington-U.S. Jewry triangle. Impairing intra-Jewish solidarity could make it hard to unify forces when the situation calls for it. Israel should, therefore, cultivate ongoing dialogue even with those American Jewish groups that express criticism of Israeli government policy.

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