

Trump and the Israel - Palestine Conflict

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June 6, 2017



Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

We are now five months into the chaos of the Trump era. Is it possible to begin to answer the question of how this unusual president might choose to deal with the Israel-Palestine conflict? Has he begun to shape something recognizable as a policy, or is it more a matter of a “work in progress,” a collage of sound bites more than a considered strategy? We do not actually have much to go on.

During his campaign for the presidency, Trump adopted a very strong pro-Israel position—not exactly unusual for ambitious American politicians. He, of course, promised to move the US embassy to Jerusalem. Toward the region more generally, he seemed to be disinclined to pursue with much enthusiasm the multiple wars that he had inherited, indicating that he thought the United States was too involved in the Middle East, too concerned with how countries governed themselves, and too preoccupied with nation building and human rights. In contrast to his predecessor, he seemed to have a high tolerance for the autocrats of the region. Stability seemed more important than peace making.

But candidate Trump also said that he might try to tackle the “ultimate deal”—the Israel-Palestine conflict—that someone had told him was “really hard.” His motivation seemed to be that he would thereby prove his ability as a great deal maker. Rather unusually, he seemed to have no particular preference for how the conflict should be resolved—one state, two states; whatever the parties could agree upon was fine with him. That, of course, was the

problem: if they could agree on a solution, they would not need an American mediator—not Trump, not anyone. But by now we know pretty well that there is very little common ground between the existing positions of the Israeli government and the PLO. Both may talk about peace, both may make a nod to a two-state outcome, but the details and priorities do not align. If they even came close, any number of mediators or “facilitators” could help them wrap up a deal in short order, tossing in a few side payments and reassurances to ease whatever painful concessions had to be made.

What is missing in all of this is anything resembling a clearly stated rationale for a new US policy—or any policy at all—on Israel-Palestine. Here is an example of what we might hope to hear:

“Lack of progress toward a comprehensive Middle East peace affects U.S. and CENTCOM security interests in the region. I believe the only reliable path to lasting peace in this region is a viable two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. This issue is one of many that is exploited by our adversaries in the region, and it is used as a recruiting tool for extremist groups. The lack of progress also creates friction with regional partners and creates political challenges for advancing our interests by marginalizing moderate voices in the region. By contrast, substantive progress on the peace process would improve CENTCOM’s opportunity to work with our regional partners and to support multilateral security efforts.”

Guess who made this statement? None other than current Defense Secretary, General James Mattis, in his former incarnation as CENTCOM head testifying before the Senate Armed Services Committee in 2011. Whether or not one agrees with what General Mattis said on that occasion, he at least was thinking strategically. He had in mind US national interests and was making a logical connection between policy choices on Israel-Palestine and broader regional goals.

So far in the Trump era, this kind of thinking has been in short supply on most foreign policy issues. Instead, the president wants to play peacemaker to prove his deal-making ability, or perhaps he will just leave that task to his overburdened, rather preoccupied son-in-law. Of course, if the effort fails, as it almost certainly will, it will be easy to place the blame on other parties, almost certainly the Palestinians themselves, first and foremost.

Unless US policy on an issue as complex as Israel-Palestine is anchored in a very clear sense of national interest, it is most likely that a politician with little real understanding of the conflict and little tolerance for hard, sustained diplomacy will give up after a short while, reverting to the old, and meaningless, trope that “we can’t want peace more than they do.” Meanwhile, Trump and his team, with their short attention spans and multiple distractions, will be off tweeting about some other world problems.

There is, I suppose, a slight chance that President Trump’s fascination with Saudi Arabia and his antipathy for Iran—the two most obvious parts of his Middle East policy—might lead him to think that pursuing an Israeli-Palestinian “deal” with the support of Sunni Arab countries (Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan and Egypt) really does make some sense. But that presumes that Saudi Arabia, in particular, would be prepared to press the United States hard for movement on this issue—something I doubt. And even if Saudi Arabia were prepared to play a major role, is Israel really ready to make big concessions on Palestinian issues in order to enjoy the benefits of better relations with the Saudis and Emiratis? Again, I doubt it. They already seem to be getting much of what they want without any such concessions.

So, I conclude that the Trump Administration has little real incentive to develop a serious strategy for promoting Israeli-Palestinian peace, of the one, two, or three state variety—to say nothing of more subtle and novel variations such as two peoples in one state with agreed levels of political responsibility, rights, and obligations. Certainly there is little sign of new and serious thinking taking place on this matter in official Washington today. And if there were a temptation to get involved in a major diplomatic effort at Israeli-Palestinian peace, would our current domestic climate be conducive to the kind of effort that would be required? Let’s be frank about it: no US president will find it easy to press Israel to make the kinds of concessions that would be needed,

and which Israel has been unwilling to make for the past 50, or even 70, years. In the face of a major effort to move Israel from its most intransigent positions, we would all of a sudden find an otherwise dysfunctional Congress showing remarkable unity in refusing to support the president. If one has any doubts about this, it would be useful to remember Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu

addressing a joint session of Congress in March 2015 and receiving 26 standing ovations!

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