



Netanyahu and Trump Chart New US-Israel Relationship

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Background

On February 15, 2017, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Donald Trump met in the White House for the first time since America's 45th president was inaugurated, officially kicking off a new chapter in the US-Israel relationship. Even prior to the election of Trump in November 2016, it was clear that the new president, whether it turned out to be Clinton or Trump, would welcome the Israeli prime minister to Washington and that the moment would be billed as a reset of the relationship that was widely perceived as tense between the outgoing Obama Administration and Israel. What that reset would look like, however, would depend a great deal on which candidate would win. Had Clinton won, the change in relations would likely have served to close some of the partisan divide on Israel in the United States, even though there would have been the continued appearance of tension between a Clinton Administration and a right-wing Netanyahu government committed to expanding illegal settlements. Trump's victory, however, would yield a different type of reset, one that not only would exacerbate the partisan divide on Israel in the United States, but would do so while shaking up the entire US approach to Middle East peace.

Two-state Agnosticism

During the day of meetings, both leaders appeared together for a [press conference](#), oddly before any one-on-one meetings were actually held. In the press conference, two positions of note deserve attention because of the role they will likely play in characterizing the US-Israel relationship under President Trump.

The first of these two was the statement made by Trump at the press conference regarding the "two-state solution": "I'm looking at two-state and one-state, and I like the one that both parties like. I'm very happy with the one that both parties like. I can live with either one." On its face, the statement represents a clear break from what had been the stated policy of both the Barack Obama and George W. Bush Administrations—that the goal of the Middle East peace process was two states, one Israeli and one Palestinian, living side by side in peace.

While Trump's statement was clearly a shift, it was not an entirely unexpected one. The Obama Administration had been warning about the end of the two-state solution for some time so, in many

ways, looking at alternatives to a failed solution is not unreasonable. But what sort of one-state alternative was the president “looking at”? He didn’t say. He also stood silently by Netanyahu as the prime minister made clear his position on never relinquishing security control over territory west of the Jordan River, effectively ruling out the possibility of an independent, viable Palestinian state. Left to the Israelis to dictate and given the imbalance of power between the parties, this is precisely what would happen: Israel’s preferred one-state vision is a form of the status quo where millions of Palestinians do not have a right to vote in the state that controls the land they live on.

When one looks at the comments on this issue of Trump and Netanyahu together, the biggest break from the previous administration's position becomes clearer. The Obama Administration had routinely affirmed that a one-state scenario—a situation where Palestinians were still being denied equal rights to ensure Jewish majoritarian control—would be fundamentally contrary to American values. Most notably, Secretary of State John Kerry outlined this in his speech on Middle East peace in December 2016, calling such an outcome “[separate and unequal](#),” thus harkening back to the Jim Crow era in the United States. President Trump, who ran on the campaign slogan of “Make America Great Again,” offered no such reminder.

The “Outside In” Approach

Along with the agnosticism toward a two-state solution, the second important position of note that came out of the joint press conference was the seeming support for an “outside in” approach to Israeli-Palestinian peace. In this model, instead of trying to achieve a bilateral peace between Israelis and Palestinians, a process to develop, improve, and make public Israeli relations with other Arab states would be used to guide Israeli-Palestinian peace forward. Netanyahu has increasingly favored this approach in recent years. He has sought to use Iran as a wedge with which he could split Arab states from the Palestinians, putting the Palestinians in a weaker position where they would be compelled to agree to even fewer demands.

Netanyahu introduced the idea at the press conference, saying: “We have to look for new ways, new ideas on how to reinstate them and how to move peace forward. And I believe that the great opportunity for peace comes from a regional approach from involving our newfound Arab partners in the pursuit of a broader peace and peace with the Palestinians.” Netanyahu’s openness about this seemed to catch Trump by surprise, who responded, “And we have been discussing that, and it is something that is very different, hasn't been discussed before. And it's actually a much bigger deal, a much more important deal, in a sense. It would take in many, many countries and it would cover a very large territory. So I didn't know you were going to be mentioning that, but that's—now that you did, I think it's a terrific thing and I think we have some pretty good cooperation from people that in the past would never, ever have even thought about doing this. So we'll see how that works out.”

The press conference, where this “outside in” approach was featured, followed [media reporting](#) just days prior about the Trump Administration's consideration of this shift, relying heavily on sources from an AIPAC-spawned, Washington-based think tank with scholars, known to be close to Netanyahu himself, who have been pushing this “outside in” agenda for years.

The notion of regionalizing Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts is not new. In 2002, the [Arab Peace Initiative](#) (API) offered Israel a path to normalized relations with 57 Arab and Muslim states if it agreed with the Palestinians on a solution based on international law. The API garnered support from the Arab League and the Organization of the Islamic Conference. The Israelis, however, never supported this framework. In recent years, during a time when Benjamin Netanyahu routinely claimed unprecedented cooperation between Sunni Arab states and Israel due to common views on Iran, he declined the API as a framework for peace even after Secretary of State John Kerry secured assurances from Arab states that it could be modified to include a reference to land swaps.

Days after the Netanyahu-Trump meeting, Haaretz [reported](#) that Netanyahu again turned down an offer by Secretary Kerry for a regional approach that included Jordan and Egypt. Netanyahu believed his coalition would not support it and reportedly sought out the inclusion of Isaac Herzog’s Labor Party to keep his government afloat, in case he decided to move forward with the regional approach. Netanyahu’s talks with both Herzog and Kerry ultimately produced nothing.

The fundamental hurdle in this regional approach is that Netanyahu and the Arab states are looking at it very differently. The API was an attempt to bring unified Arab and Muslim consensus toward supporting an Israeli-Palestinian peace, but Israel seems to be looking for something separate. Unwilling to support a Palestinian state, Israeli politics is divided among those who support a non-state Palestinian entity, perpetual occupation, and dumping occupied Palestinians off on Jordan and Egypt. In each of these perverse scenarios, there are roles for some Arab states in the Israeli imagination, but not ones they would want to play in reality. For several reasons, the [idea that Israel’s relations with Sunni Arab states](#) would increase the likelihood of Palestinians accepting a deal imposed by the Israeli right is far-fetched.

An Alliance Built on Shared Mattresses

Perhaps more important than either of these two positions that came out of the press conference was the fact that other parts of the Trump Administration did not seem to have any idea about them. The following day the US Ambassador to the United Nations, Nikki Haley, made clear that Washington still supports a two-state solution even though the president suggested otherwise. The US State Department is largely without leadership at present. Though the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, has been confirmed, he lacks the vast majority of his politically appointed leadership. The State Department, which traditionally holds daily briefings to reiterate and clarify US foreign

policy on a daily basis, under the scrutiny of questions from the press, has not yet held a briefing since the presidential inauguration. Foreign policy is now almost entirely run out of the White House and while many presidents and their cabinets have had great control over foreign policy, in specific issues or in general, it is hard to recall any instance where the State Department has been so marginalized. Further, it seems the president is tasking specific people close to him in the White House with leading diplomacy on specific issues. When it comes to Middle East peace and the US relationship with Israel, that person is Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner.

Ahead of the Trump-Netanyahu meeting, the *New York Times* ran a [profile](#) of Jared Kushner focusing on how for him, Washington's "Israel policy may be shaped by the personal." The article detailed how Kushner had known Netanyahu since his youth, saying he "knew the prime minister, who was friendly with his father, a real estate developer and donor to Israeli causes. Mr. Netanyahu had even stayed at the Kushners' home in New Jersey, sleeping in Jared's bedroom."

Netanyahu also listed Jared's father on the top tier of a list of potential American donors to his political campaign in Israel. At the press conference with Trump, Netanyahu noted his long relationship with the president's son-in-law saying he's "known [Jared] for many years, too. Can I reveal, Jared, how long we've known you? Well, he was never small. He was always big. He was always tall."

The Goal of the Status Quo

Netanyahu has always been risk averse, particularly when it comes to political decisions. With a coalition that is both narrow-minded and simply narrow at 60 of 120 seats, Netanyahu is looking for as much stability as possible and desires continuing the status quo on the ground. Doing this will not be easy given that perpetual occupation comes with the costs of international isolation, which are only growing with time. At the same time, Netanyahu's coalition partners would like to exploit the opportunity of a blank check from Washington to make paradigm-shifting moves in the West Bank. One way to balance this is to find a new framework that keeps the illusion of a peace process alive even if the Palestinian leadership is refusing to play along. An "outside in" approach may well be that opportunity, and Jared Kushner, Netanyahu's dear old friend who has been spending time in Washington developing relationships with Arab ambassadors, may be the American counterpart willing to walk down this path with Netanyahu. At the end, this approach will inevitably fail but those involved will say "at least we tried," while Israel alone will have succeeded in further entrenching the occupation through thousands of new settlement units over the next four or perhaps eight years.