

PERSPECTIVE

## Trump's Reckless Middle East Gambles

SHIBLEY TELHAMI

In recent decades, the inevitable changes brought by every new administration to American foreign policy—particularly regarding the Middle East—have quickly given way to elements of continuity. After campaigning in 1992 mostly on the mantra, “It’s the economy, stupid,” Bill Clinton initially downplayed the Middle East, only to be drawn back into the region within months of his election by Israelis and Palestinians who made their own deal in Oslo. George W. Bush, whose foreign policy in the first few months of 2001 was characterized by his father’s former national security adviser Brent Scowcroft as essentially “not Clinton,” soon found himself going down a path similar to Clinton’s, even before the 9/11 tragedy. Nothing in recent American history prepared the world for the storm that Donald Trump brought—and yet, even his foreign policy has revealed some elements of continuity.

Surprisingly, on the Middle East issue that Trump highlighted most during the 2016 election campaign—fighting the Islamic State (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq—his approach as president has turned out to be mostly in keeping with his predecessor’s. Despite inconsequential strikes against Assad’s military to punish alleged use of chemical weapons—the kind of reprisals Barack Obama had not been prepared to carry out—Trump’s Syria policy is focused on going after ISIS and limiting the US role rather than bringing down the Assad regime, which has gradually regained control of most of the country from rebel groups and ISIS.

But that minor difference—limited attacks against the Syrian military—signaled something bigger. Trump’s impulse to flout United Nations resolutions, international norms, and world public opinion has manifested itself elsewhere in his Middle East policy, especially regarding the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and Iran.

This is a thread that has made Trump’s approach to the Middle East unique: unilateralism,

both at home and abroad. Typically, the term refers to America going it alone in the world—but in Trump’s case, it applies also at home. His policy has been run out of the White House by a small group of advisers, often disregarding the assessments of normally influential government bureaucracies and experts, especially the State Department and the Central Intelligence Agency. And certainly, disregarding international norms and UN resolutions, or, in key cases, even traditional American allies, has been a defining characteristic of Trump’s entire foreign policy.

To be sure, every president has sought to run policy from the White House and to limit the influence of government bureaucracies. In Trump’s case, however, his Middle East policy has been nearly monopolized by a small team led by the president’s son-in-law Jared Kushner, formerly a real-estate developer, and special envoy Jason Greenblatt, a real-estate lawyer who served as in-house counsel for Trump’s business organization. They are probably the most inexperienced and isolated group of advisers to ever hold so much power over this sensitive policy portfolio. The outcomes on the two issues at the center of their efforts, Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, have been startling.

Of course, some of the policy changes are reflections of promises the president made in his election campaign, including withdrawing from the Iran nuclear deal and moving the US embassy in Israel from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. But all presidents promise things they ultimately don’t deliver when faced with national security realities; most pay only a small price for breaking their promises. And there is other evidence that makes this “fulfilling promises” explanation for Trump’s major policy shifts unsatisfying.

Trump’s key advisers—particularly his son-in-law, whose family had been friends with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu long before Trump became president—were sympathetic to Netanyahu’s agenda on the Palestinians and Iran. Netanyahu adamantly opposed the Iran deal that the Obama administration helped negotiate. Evan-

SHIBLEY TELHAMI is a professor of government and politics and director of the Critical Issues Poll at the University of Maryland, and a nonresident senior fellow at the Brookings Institution.

gelical Christians, a core constituency for Trump, provided political support for the same agenda, as did key Republican Party funders—especially Netanyahu’s friend and supporter, the casino magnate Sheldon Adelson, who has emerged as the largest Republican contributor in the Trump era.

With Trump’s blessing, Kushner’s approach was based on personal diplomacy. He backed the rise of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) to the position of Saudi crown prince, unseating the CIA’s favorite, Mohammed bin Nayef. MBS’s perceived assets included his willingness to coordinate with Israel to confront Iran and pressure Palestinian leaders to accept a “realistic” deal with Israel. This made MBS a key partner for Kushner and a cornerstone of Trump’s Middle East policy. The initiation of this partnership took place when Trump made Saudi Arabia his first foreign destination as president in May 2017. This was a prestigious, high-profile gesture to the Saudi monarchy, in exchange for which Trump was able to tout trade deals—later shown to be exaggerated—totaling tens of billions of dollars.

The Trump administration in fact started by moving cautiously on both Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict before breaking with long-standing US policies. On the latter issue, Trump reached out to both parties for consultations. He invited Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to the White House early in his administration, and projected an air of optimism; Abbas also seemed upbeat. In his first news conference with the Israeli prime minister, Trump hinted that Netanyahu would have to compromise, too. When his first opportunity to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal arose, Trump passed, though he still emphasized his disdain for the agreement. But a policy revolution was brewing on both issues, despite almost universal international opposition.

## RUSHING TO JERUSALEM

The first rupture came in December 2017, when Trump announced that his administration would recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and move the US embassy there from Tel Aviv. This broke with long-standing US policy that recognized Jerusalem as having a special status since the creation of the state of Israel in 1948, and had accepted post-1967 UN resolutions identifying East Jerusalem as occupied territory whose ultimate status would be settled through negotiations. The decision was announced before Trump unveiled his plan for Palestinian-Israeli peace, the so-called “deal of the century,” thus sealing its

doom even as it remained unborn. The exclusion of Jerusalem made the deal a nonstarter for the Palestinians.

A public opinion poll I conducted in the United States just before the Jerusalem announcement showed no indication that there was any public pressure on Trump to declare the embassy move at that time, not even from Republicans. The University of Maryland Critical Issues Poll (among a national sample of 2,000 American adults, surveyed by Nielsen Scarborough November 1–6) found that 59 percent of respondents said they preferred that Trump lean toward neither side of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while 63 percent opposed moving the embassy to Jerusalem, including 44 percent of Republicans. Although evangelical leaders had urged Trump to move the embassy, their constituency was not pressing the issue. Two-thirds of evangelicals said Trump’s policy was already leaning toward Israel, and their support for moving the embassy was hardly overwhelming: while 53 percent supported the move, 40 percent opposed it.

Given that Trump was preparing to unveil a Middle East peace proposal, he easily could have said he would wait to see the regional reaction to his plan before acting on Jerusalem. He had already given the evangelical right more than any other president in history, from key appointments such as Supreme Court Justice Neil Gorsuch and Secretary of Education Betsy DeVos to policies highly favorable toward religious schools. Evangelicals would not have walked away from him had he postponed the Jerusalem move. Why then did he rush into it?

Three related factors shed some light on Trump’s policy—keeping in mind that his key advisers on this issue (Kushner, Greenblatt, and Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, formerly a lawyer who had represented Trump in bankruptcy cases) were ideologically predisposed to support the embassy move. First, their unprecedented inexperience led them to underestimate how important the Jerusalem issue is to Palestinians. They wrongly believed that “taking this issue off the table” would make it easier for Arab partners, especially the Saudi crown prince, to back the deal they were preparing to propose and in turn pressure the Palestinians to accept it.

Second, the ideas they were exploring for the deal were not finding any traction with the Palestinians or other Arabs. This set the Trump administration on a unilateral track, and provided an

excuse to blame others for its inevitable failure. Third, Trump's team—which, unlike any previous US administration, avoided using international law, UN resolutions, or prior Israeli-Palestinian agreements as frames of reference for negotiations—was planning to implement a deal based on what it called the “realities” that Israel and the Palestinians were vastly unequal, and that any deal would have to reflect this disparity.

It was probably a combination of all three of these factors that ultimately drove the embassy move. In any case, the outcome should have been predictable. Without the prospect of having East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state, the Palestinians ended the talks, and America's Arab partners were unable or unwilling to press them on this issue; even the Saudi monarchy didn't want to go down in history as the party that sold out Jerusalem. In response, the Trump administration set a punitive course: it proceeded to close the Palestine Liberation Organization office in Washington (although not a diplomatic mission, it had in effect represented the Palestinian Authority in the United States), cut aid to Palestinians, and halt US funding for the UN agency that provides assistance to Palestinian refugees.

Reliance on personal relationships also showed its limits.

The Saudi crown prince, an anchor of the administration's Middle East policy, was weakened when Jamal Khashoggi, a prominent *Washington Post* columnist and moderate critic of Saudi policy, was murdered in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul, Turkey, on October 2, 2018. MBS faced heavy international criticism over his suspected role in ordering the assassination, and his ability to pressure the Palestinians diminished further, even though his willingness to cooperate with Israel grew since he needed to maintain Trump's backing.

## SLIPPING TOWARD CONFLICT

On Iran, the US-Saudi-Israeli coalition remained unified and barreled toward confrontation. After Trump ignored global opposition and announced in May 2018 that the United States was withdrawing from the 2015 deal that set tight restrictions on Iran's nuclear program (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA), the administration moved to restore economic sanctions on Iran that had been in effect before the deal. It found support for the move principally among the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis. The sanctions were reimposed on November 5, 2018.

Despite the intent of all other permanent members of the UN Security Council, as well as the European Union, to stick with the deal, circumventing US sanctions will be a difficult task. The EU's assurances that it will back businesses that trade with Iran have not eliminated their concerns about possible US punishment. Except for Trump's confrontational trade policies, no other issue has highlighted the strategic break between Europe and the United States more than Iran.

Pulling out of the deal has also set the United States on a slippery slope toward further, possibly military, confrontation with Iran. Although it's not clear that the president himself seeks a war, the likelihood of escalation and the presence of White House counselors known to favor military action, such as national security adviser John Bolton, make the prospect of conflict real.

Meanwhile, with all the unprecedented moves the Trump administration has made on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it's worth keeping in mind that there were independent reasons why a resolution would elude the White House. Despite good intentions, Obama was unable to advance peace, and may have unwittingly narrowed the chances

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for the two-state solution he sought. More Israeli settlements were built in the West Bank during his eight years in office, diminishing the viability of a Palestinian state, while his failure to deliver any progress undermined the hopes of others seeking a two-state solution.

The asymmetry between Israel and the Palestinians has only grown in the years since. Israel is led by a right-wing government that is unlikely to compromise, the Palestinians are divided, and other Arab states are preoccupied with more immediate troubles. Trump's moves on Jerusalem and his acquiescence in expanded Israeli settlements in the West Bank are unprecedented (unlike its predecessors, his administration has failed even to issue statements of disapproval, while his ambassador to Israel has offered gestures of support for settlements), but they may have simply accelerated the completion of a course that was headed to a dead end anyway. The lasting impact of Trump's policies is to be found elsewhere.

There is a global perception that the United States now pursues pure unilateralism, ignoring

international norms. And Trump has validated the view that the United States favors Israel (and sometimes the Saudis) over the strongest traditional American allies in Europe, even on issues that matter strategically to the Europeans, as in the case of Iran policy. Among observers in the Middle East, his moves have led to the unavoidable conclusion that the United States and Israel really are joined at the hip. While there was always a perception that Washington favored Israel in the region and showed deference to its preferences, the Trump administration's approach has made it impossible to see any daylight between Israeli and American preferences.

This has had dual consequences: Arab governments seeking close ties with Washington see the shortest path as going through Israel, while those angry with Israel direct their frustration even more toward the United States. Yet the Iran policy shift may be the most consequential, in that no other issue facing Washington now poses a higher risk of military conflict. Taken together, the Trump administration's reckless actions in the Middle East, which have disregarded international norms and have been out of step—and in some cases in direct confrontation—with European allies and other major powers, are taking a dangerous path in a region already in turmoil. ■