**Master of None: Trump, Jerusalem and the Prospects of Israeli-Palestinian Peace**

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For an administration sorely lacking foreign-policy experience, President Donald Trump has set ambitious goals in the Middle East. Foremost among them is to contain the influence of Iran, which Trump has identified as the greatest threat to U.S. interests and those of its regional allies, like Israel and Saudi Arabia. Second is to defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) in Syria and Iraq, where the administration has intensified Obama-era strategies. Fostering a peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians is at best a tertiary goal, and the Trump administration’s pursuit of it needs to be understood in the context of U.S. politics as well as Middle Eastern politics and security. Effective mediation is subordinate to pro-Israeli domestic political interests. The value of a peace agreement is primarily to remove the major obstacle to overt cooperation between Israel and the Arab world against their shared Iranian enemy, rather than a principled pursuit of sustainable peace. Consequently, the administration has not shown the commitment or diplomatic skill necessary to achieve this goal and is failing to employ a sound mediation strategy.

Although these goals are not dissimilar to those of the Obama administration, they are being pursued very differently. Obama was wary of extensive military engagements and pursued diplomatic missions with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal) being perhaps the signal foreign-policy achievement of his presidency. Obama also unsuccessfully tried to mediate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He was considered hostile by successive right-wing Israeli governments due to his acknowledgment of Palestinian grievances and rights, despite agreeing to the largest-ever U.S. military aid package to Israel.[[1]](#endnote-1)

In stark contrast, Trump has withdrawn from the JCPOA, pledged to confront Iran, and prioritized improved relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Militarism is a key tool in Trump’s policy repertoire, serving to simultaneously create jobs at home and "make America great again" abroad. Trump has maintained or intensified the existing international military engagements he inherited, increasing the frequency of air and drone strikes (and the rate of civilian casualties).[[2]](#endnote-2) In Syria, Trump approved the bombing of Shayrat airbase, used by the Assad regime to launch chemical-weapons strikes against civilians, and more recently targeted Syrian chemical weapons infrastructure after the Douma chemical attack; Obama did not militarily enforce his own stated “red line.” The Trump administration also committed U.S. troops indefinitely to the northeastern region controlled by their allies, the Kurdish-dominated Syrian Democratic Forces, in order to prevent a resurgence of ISIS and limit Iranian control of the area.[[3]](#endnote-3) Although Trump has since called for their withdrawal, sowing confusion about US policy, this has yet to happen.[[4]](#endnote-4)

Diplomacy, mediation and conflict resolution are at the bottom of the administration’s foreign-policy to-do list, and are viewed solely through the lens of power. Trump’s approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the wider region is clearly articulated by Michael Wolff, who argues that Trump has sought to simplify a notoriously complex region into three elements: “powers we can work with, powers we cannot work with, and those without enough power whom we can functionally disregard or sacrifice.”[[5]](#endnote-5) On the basis of the evidence to date, Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt belong in the first category, Iran in the second, and the Palestinians in the third. Those Trump can work with will pressure the weak in order to more effectively counter those he cannot work with. Further evidence of this regional view is contained in the U.S. National Security Strategy unveiled on December 18, 2017, which altered decades of policy:

For generations the conflict between Israel and the Palestinians has been understood as the prime irritant preventing peace and prosperity in the region. Today, the threats from radical jihadist terrorist organizations and the threat from Iran are creating the realization that Israel is not the cause of the region’s problems.[[6]](#endnote-6)

While this argument against “linkage” has clear merits, the issue continues to resonate in the Arab world and should not be dismissed lightly. Trump’s over-simplification of how to address the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on this logic has severely damaged the prospects of reaching a peace agreement.

**DOMESTIC POLITICS**

Ironically, Henry Kissinger’s famous quip that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic policy, might also be an apt description of Trump’s engagement in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. As a candidate for the Republican presidential nomination, Trump tried to hold the middle ground by suggesting that he would approach the conflict in an even-handed way, reluctant to single out any one party for blame and questioning both sides’ readiness to make concessions for peace.[[7]](#endnote-7) However, this message of neutrality increasingly evaporated, and Trump aligned his message with pro-Israeli Republicans to appeal to key constituencies, including evangelical Christians. Having told Jewish Republicans, “You’re not gonna support me because I don’t want your money,” he then came to realize that he did need their money, their support and their votes. This was particularly true of Sheldon Adelson, the prominent Republican billionare donor, pro-Israel advocate, and backer of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu.[[8]](#endnote-8)

A main turning point was his speech to the annual conference of the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on March 21, 2016, where Trump focused on issues close to the heart of the right-wing pro-Israeli community. He devoted most of his attention to the threat posed by Iran and pledged to dismantle the “horrible” and “disastrous” nuclear deal, that only served to strengthen the Iranian ability to sponsor terror against Israel. He deemed the United Nations unfriendly to democracy, freedom and Israel, and vowed to protect the Jewish state from any international attempt to impose a peace deal with the Palestinians. Finally, he identified Palestinian terrorism, incitement and rejection of “generous” Israeli peace offers as the main reasons for the persisting conflict, and vowed to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, “the eternal capital of the Jewish people.”[[9]](#endnote-9)

During the transition period, Trump continued to be more attuned to Israeli interests. His transition team took the unusual step of lobbying against UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (which condemned illegal Israeli settlement construction in the West Bank) at Netanyahu’s behest, thereby undermining the Obama administration (which abstained, allowing the resolution to pass) and violating the Logan Act. The FBI investigation into Russian interference in the U.S. elections, led by Robert Mueller, revealed that indicted national-security adviser Michael Flynn and U.S. ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley contacted members of the Security Council, urging them to vote against the resolution.[[10]](#endnote-10) These efforts appear to have been part of a coordinated campaign by a “very senior member” of the Trump transition team believed to be the president’s son-in-law and senior adviser, Jared Kushner.[[11]](#endnote-11)

The senior leadership of the Trump administration is heavily populated with ardent pro-Israeli advocates; this will have reassured voters who were unsettled by Trump’s initial stance. Vice President Mike Pence self-describes as an evangelical Catholic whose “Christian faith compels [him] to cherish the state of Israel.”[[12]](#endnote-12) The Kushner family has long had a personal relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, and their foundation has donated tens of thousands of dollars to organizations that support illegal and ideologically right-wing Israeli settlements in the West Bank, such as Yitzhar and Beit El.[[13]](#endnote-13) Among them is American Friends of Beit El Yeshiva, whose former president, David Friedman, Trump appointed as U.S. ambassador to Israel.[[14]](#endnote-14) The cumulative volume of these voices has undoubtedly shaped Trump’s approach to not only the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but also Iran.

Recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, arguably his most significant action to date, was consistent with this pro-Israeli trajectory and highlighted the importance of Trump’s domestic political agenda. In his statement, he explained that he was quite simply fulfilling a campaign promise to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem. Unlike many other presidents who had made the same pledge and then reneged on it, he was delivering — much to the delight of evangelicals, pro-Israeli groups and major donors.[[15]](#endnote-15) At a time when his approval ratings were hovering around the lowest level of any elected U.S. president in his first year, this was particularly important to shore up his base. Other key election promises, like the Mexican border wall, had not yet gained momentum, and the repeal of both the Iran deal and Obamacare had been only partially addressed, at best.[[16]](#endnote-16)

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and the Middle East as a whole, also serve as a welcome distraction from unwelcome news coverage. Trump’s visit to Saudi Arabia in May followed his dismissal of FBI Director James Comey and the appointment of Mueller to head the special investigation. Before leaving, Trump spoke of “the biggest breakthrough in Israel-Palestine negotiations ever,” which would be “*the* game changer, major like has never been seen.” Coverage of the trip and the announcement of lucrative arms sales to the Saudis and other deals made headlines, giving him a modest “win.”[[17]](#endnote-17) The Jerusalem announcement then came at a time when the ongoing Mueller investigation continued to dominate the headlines, despite efforts by Trump’s lawyers to minimize its importance by speculating that it would end early.[[18]](#endnote-18)

Cumulatively, all of these aspects portray an administration that is more closely aligned to Israel than any other, mainly for domestic political reasons.

**CONSTRUCTIVE AMBIGUITY**

Both on the campaign trail and in office, Trump has repeatedly touted his superlative negotiating skills, making the prospect of securing "the ultimate deal" between Israelis and Palestinians impossible for his ego to ignore. In December 2015, he appeared to aspire to the role of impartial mediator when speaking to the Republican Jewish Coalition, calling for even treatment of the parties in deal making: “I’d like to go in with a clean slate and just say, ‘Let’s go, everybody’s even, we love everybody and let’s see if we can do something.’”[[19]](#endnote-19) In a town-hall meeting in Charleston, South Carolina, a few months later, he avoided making pronouncements for one side or the other or placing blame for the conflict, saying to the moderator, “Let me sort of be a neutral guy.”[[20]](#endnote-20) In office, Trump has simultaneously tried to maintain his pro-Israeli and pro-peace credentials through highly ambiguous statements about what a possible peace would look like, presumably in order to retain room for political maneuver.

After his first meeting with Prime Minister Netanyahu in Washington on February 15, 2017, a common refrain was that Trump had reversed 15 years of explicit (and decades of implicit) U.S. policy towards the conflict by abandoning support for a Palestinian state and a two-state solution. However, Trump was much more ambiguous and did not disavow any solution to the conflict: “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.”[[21]](#endnote-21) His policy was, effectively, that he did not have a policy. He reiterated this position on December 6, 2017, as part of his announcement to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.

On the face of it, Trump’s recognition was straightforward: “… I have determined that it is time to officially recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel.”[[22]](#endnote-22) This declaration clearly broke with decades of U.S. policy on the subject by explicitly acknowledging Israel’s claim to the city prior to any negotiated outcome and was therefore highly significant. However, it was just as notable for what he did not say. For example, he made no effort to define what he meant by “Jerusalem.” Following its occupation of East Jerusalem and the West Bank in the 1967 war, Israel significantly expanded the municipal boundaries of Jerusalem to include Jordanian East Jerusalem and surrounding territories, where Israel built settlements like Pisgat Zeev, Neve Yaakov, Ramat Alon and others. This change and the official Israeli annexation of the territory in 1980 have never been recognized by the international community, as they are illegal under international law.

Trump refrained from specifically endorsing this Israeli vision of a greater Jerusalem and did not use Israel’s preferred terminology of an “undivided” or “indivisible” city or capital. However, he made no distinction between the different parts of the city either, in that he did not recognize West Jerusalem specifically as Israel’s capital or mention East Jerusalem as the capital of a Palestinian state. In reference to the Palestinian claim to East Jerusalem, he specified that his decision did not seek to prejudge any final-status issues to be negotiated: “We are not taking a position [on] any final-status issues, including the specific boundaries of the Israeli sovereignty in Jerusalem, or the resolution of contested borders. Those questions are up to the parties involved.”[[23]](#endnote-23) In a question-and-answer session with Acting Assistant Secretary of the Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs David M. Satterfield the following day, reporters tried unsuccessfully to procure further details about what exactly the president meant by “Jerusalem” and what the practical implications of the decision were.[[24]](#endnote-24)

Trump and Satterfield both claimed this decision would advance the peace process, without elaborating how. There can be merits to this type of ambiguity, in that it can be constructive in the short term by allowing the parties to interpret what they want from a statement and retain flexibility. However, such ambiguity can be harmful when contradictory understandings are internalized and there is no follow-up clarification to ensure effective implementation. The problem is that this announcement was not rooted in any discernible diplomatic peace strategy that could provide such clarity. As probably the most difficult and emotionally charged final-status issue, any policy on Jerusalem is extremely sensitive; any compromise on it would constitute a major concession for either side. President Trump has effectively assured Israelis that all of West Jerusalem within the 1967 lines will be theirs, without asking or receiving anything in return. Trump argued in his statement that this was merely an acknowledgement of reality. While this is true, it is nonetheless poor mediation strategy.

To make things worse, Trump later contradicted his own statement about not prejudging the outcome of final-status negotiations when he tweeted, “… We have taken Jerusalem, the toughest part of the negotiations, off the table …,” sowing further confusion about what recognition actually means in practice.[[25]](#endnote-25) In a meeting with Netanyahu at Davos on January 25, 2018, Trump repeated, “We took Jerusalem off the table, so we don’t have to talk about it any more.”[[26]](#endnote-26) It remains unclear if Trump is dismissing any Palestinian claim to Jerusalem whatsoever, which would be unacceptable to Palestinians, or if he is only referring to Israeli sovereignty in West Jerusalem. At best, this is a confusing ambiguity; at worst, it is a definitive move that renders impossible a two-state solution as traditionally imagined. The incoherence of Trump’s messaging reveals a lack of sound mediation strategy.

The significance of this for any peace process can be viewed in different ways. From one perspective, it is major: Trump has managed to alienate the Palestinians and lose whatever trust or credibility he and his envoys may have accrued. The Palestinian leadership were encouraged by President Mahmoud Abbas’s trip to the White House in May 2017 and by the fact that Trump put the conflict back on the international agenda after other issues like Syria, Iraq and ISIS had long dominated the headlines.[[27]](#endnote-27) In the aftermath of Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem, however, Abbas announced that the Palestinians would no longer accept the United States as a mediator and would not accept any U.S.-sponsored peace initiative.[[28]](#endnote-28) The Palestinians have been canvassing other potential mediators like Russia, China and France to take a greater role in the negotiations, akin to the P5+1 structure used to negotiate with Iran, and are calling for systemic changes to the mediation of the conflict.[[29]](#endnote-29)

On the other hand, if the Palestinians want an independent state, they do not have any option but to acquiesce to U.S. involvement and initiatives.[[30]](#endnote-30) Israel is extremely unlikely to engage in any negotiating configuration not sponsored by the United States, rendering any such prospect dead in the water. Moreover, the Trump administration is unlikely to relinquish any control of the process beyond their existing Saudi and Egyptian partners. Trump’s disdain for multilateralism is reflected in his frustrations with the European partners to the JCPOA, who insist on its continued implementation as agreed. While he has been happy to enlist the services of French President Emmanuel Macron to try and keep the Palestinians open to any future peace plan, that appears to be the limit of European involvement thus far.[[31]](#endnote-31) The argument that Trump’s actions prove the United States is not an “honest broker” is true but laced with disingenuous novelty. Washington ceased to be an “honest broker,” if indeed it ever truly was, a long time ago; U.S. negotiator Aaron David Miller made this point over a decade ago about the Clinton era.[[32]](#endnote-32) Continued Palestinian acceptance of U.S. involvement is not based primarily on trust, but on the hope that the United States will exert leverage over Israel.

Consequently, the Palestinians could focus on the positive ambiguity of Trump’s words on Jerusalem and reason that little has been lost. West Jerusalem is and always was going to be Israeli territory in any agreement, so the door is still open, but it needs to be pushed proactively. However, this is where trust still matters. It is difficult for the Palestinians to countenance the political risks involved in doing so when there is no trust whatsoever in the U.S. mediators, their intentions or their ability to influence their Israeli counterparts. A mediator concerned about maintaining good relations with the parties would normally look to offer some confidence-building measures to the aggrieved party at this stage. Trump has instead decided to cut funding to the UN Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which provides essential services to Palestinian refugees in both the occupied territories and the wider region.[[33]](#endnote-33) His approach to mediation appears consistent with his approach to the U.S. real-estate business: bully the weaker party until they break.[[34]](#endnote-34) Trump is likely to have few qualms about this; the Palestinians and their concerns are not his main priority.

**PERILS OF "OUTSIDE-IN"**

Trump’s priority in the region is rolling back the rising tide of Iranian influence, which has expanded significantly in Iraq, Syria and the Persian Gulf, much to the alarm of Saudi Arabia, the wider Sunni Arab world and Israel. However, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict inhibits overt Arab-Israeli cooperation against this common threat. U.S. mediation strategy seeks to remove this obstacle by taking advantage of the shared strategic anti-Iranian interest to foster a deal. Since February 2017, rumors have circulated about a U.S. peace plan that follows the “outside-in” logic, heavily involving Egypt, Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states to support, incentivize and exert pressure on the Palestinians.[[35]](#endnote-35) Theoretically, this is a sound idea; the failure to involve the Arab world has been identified as one of the many failures of the negotiations sponsored by President Bill Clinton.[[36]](#endnote-36) The current approach, however, seems more intent on coercing the Palestinians than addressing their interests.

U.S.-Saudi relations suffered under the Obama administration due to Saudi opposition to the JCPOA, but the Trump administration and the Saudis have both sought to recalibrate relations. Saudi leaders visited Washington in March, and when Trump made an official visit to the kingdom in May, he and his entourage were greeted in a manner clearly designed to appeal to his opulent tastes: a party reportedly costing $75 million. Other Arab leaders such as President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt were also present to lavish Trump with praise.[[37]](#endnote-37) Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MBS) and Jared Kushner, both young and new to the international stage, apparently established a good personal relationship and emerged as the driving forces behind an improved bilateral relationship and a new strategy for Arab-Israeli peace.

While leaders in the Arab world have always paid lip service to the Palestinian cause, actively representing Palestinian interests has long ceased to be a priority for them. It does, however, continue to resonate with the average citizen and key religious institutions; this forces leaders to tread carefully.[[38]](#endnote-38) Wary of renewed protests now that the dust of the Arab Spring has largely settled, political elites are reluctant to provoke the masses over the issue but have to reconcile it with the changing geopolitical winds. In Egypt, President Sisi reacted cautiously to Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem, publicly condemning the move and tabling a Security Council resolution against the decision, but only allowing limited public protests, lest they spiral out of control and take aim at his regime. Continued economic hardship has made this his primary concern. Although the grand sheikh of al-Azhar took an uncompromising stance, most clerics toed the government line and devoted Friday sermons to “family values” rather than Jerusalem, in the interest of keeping their jobs.[[39]](#endnote-39) *The New York Times* also reported that an Egyptian intelligence officer told influential television hosts to accept the decision rather than denounce it, although the regime has vociferously denied this.[[40]](#endnote-40)

Saudi Arabia publicly condemned Trump’s recognition as an “unjustified and irresponsible” move that constituted “a big step back in efforts to advance the peace process,” but, as in Egypt, privately the reaction was muted.[[41]](#endnote-41) The day after Trump’s announcement, Prince Mohammed bin Salman met with members of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy. Rather than directly addressing the decision, he offered “a mild rebuke of the President’s Jerusalem shift and a hopeful vision of Saudi-Israeli partnership” only when asked.[[42]](#endnote-42) As Shibley Telhami has observed, such a reaction would have been unimaginable a decade ago and points to a significant transformation in thinking.[[43]](#endnote-43) The prince has effectively consolidated power in the kingdom through a widespread purge, called an anti-corruption effort, and has been the architect of an aggressive Saudi foreign policy in Syria and, above all, in Yemen aimed at countering Iran. Despite denials to the contrary, this policy has also involved a willingness to intervene in the internal politics of other countries, as shown by the bizarre resignation of Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri — broadcast to the world while in detention in Riyadh — which was later revoked.[[44]](#endnote-44)

Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s approach to the Palestinians appears to run along similar lines. Reports suggest that in early November in Riyadh he presented the broad outline of a draft Israeli-Palestinian peace plan to Abbas, who was infuriated, as it contained multiple significant concessions no Palestinian leader would be able to accept. A Palestinian “entity” would be established in Gaza and parts of the West Bank, specifically Areas A and B, and 10 percent of Area C; this would mean controlling noncontiguous bits of territory with only limited sovereignty. The vast majority of Israeli settlements in the West Bank would remain. The Palestinian capital would not be in East Jerusalem, but in Abu Dis or Ramallah, and there would be no right of return for Palestinian refugees.[[45]](#endnote-45) Abbas was supposedly offered an ultimatum: accept the plan or resign.[[46]](#endnote-46) Although such a plan has yet to be officially presented, at a meeting of the PLO Central Council on January 14, 2018, Abbas declared, “Now we say ‘No’ to Trump. We won't accept his plan — we say the ‘deal of the century’ is the slap of the century.”[[47]](#endnote-47) PA officials have said that it was primarily details of the upcoming peace plan, communicated by the Egyptians and Saudis, rather than the Jerusalem announcement that led to this stance.[[48]](#endnote-48)

This approach thus suffers from two major weaknesses. First, the Egyptian and Saudi leaders will prioritize regime stability above all else, and from a Saudi perspective, much depends on the success of the prince's reforms. If his anti-corruption drive and wider program of economic diversification (Vision 2030) manage to address the economic, political and social grievances among Saudi citizens, he might be able to change the kingdom’s official stance on Jerusalem and challenge the public’s mood on the issue. By appealing in particular to Saudi youth — a key demographic given its size — MBS is looking to the future and trying to change the direction of the kingdom.[[49]](#endnote-49) However, if it is unsuccessful, his ability to confront the conservative religious authorities over the issue will be reduced. Similarly, President Sisi needs to address Egypt's ailing economy and poor security situation, particularly in the Sinai, in order to challenge prevailing opinion.

Second, a failure to take Palestinian aspirations and demands seriously will not result in lasting peace; it will squander what might be a final opportunity to rescue the two-state solution.[[50]](#endnote-50) The Trump administration’s actions to date might already have helped put the final nail in the coffin of the two-state solution, as both Israelis and Palestinians are drawn to alternative options. Within the PLO, calls have been made to abandon the two-state solution and focus on one-state with equal rights for Israelis and Palestinians. Even senior PA leader and negotiator Saeb Erekat has shifted to support this option, and it is being seriously considered.[[51]](#endnote-51)

The PLO Central Council has recommended that the Executive Committee “suspend recognition of Israel until it recognizes the State of Palestine on the 1967 borders and revokes the decision to annex East Jerusalem and expand and build settlements.” A further statement also said that the Oslo Agreements “no longer stand,” and that security cooperation with Israel would cease.[[52]](#endnote-52) It is not clear what this suggests about a Palestinian vision for the future. While announcing the end of Oslo and a suspension of the recognition of Israel can be seen as a call for a one-state solution, the conditional nature of the suspension and the simultaneous call for recognition of a Palestinian state suggests the two-state solution remains the preferred option. The withdrawal of security cooperation has been called for before but not implemented, as in 2015; such a decision ultimately depends on the leadership of President Abbas.

The collapse of the Oslo structure, long discredited and criticized by Palestinians, would present an opportunity for change. Whether this alternative would be nonviolent depends on who is calling for it; Hamas and other Islamist groups have called for a return to armed resistance. Reconciliation between Hamas and Fatah remains a distant prospect. Deadlines for the implementation of agreements continue to pass without action, and divisions remain as fundamental and stark as ever.[[53]](#endnote-53) Abbas has repeatedly stated that he will not allow Hamas to follow the example of Hezbollah in Lebanon and maintain a powerful militia in parallel to the PA's Palestinian Security Forces.[[54]](#endnote-54) However, if the PLO were to officially revoke its recognition of Israel, this would remove one obstacle to Hamas's joining the organization and potentially helping foster reconciliation.

Any Palestinian decision to abandon the two-state solution or return to armed resistance will resonate with those Israelis who argue that there is no partner for peace. Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem was welcomed by most Jewish Israelis, who felt that this acknowledgement of their connection to their spiritual home was not only just, but a long-overdue recognition of reality. It has also emboldened the already ascendant Israeli annexationists and settlement advocates in government who seek to take advantage of the freedom granted by the Trump administration to pursue maximalist goals. Two days after Trump’s Jerusalem announcement, Israeli construction minister Yoav Galant announced plans for 14,000 new units in settlements, adding to other tens of thousands already announced during the Trump administration.[[55]](#endnote-55)

While more extreme right-wing leaders like Habayit Hayehudi’s Naftali Bennet have made no secret of their plans to annex the occupied territories, this sentiment has now firmly taken root in the more mainstream ruling Likud party. On December 31, the central committee of Likud voted unanimously in favor of the “free construction and application of Israeli law and sovereignty in all liberated areas of settlement” in the West Bank. This is tantamount to annexation. The Knesset also passed an amendment to the basic law on Jerusalem requiring a majority of 80 votes (out of 120) to cede any parts of the city (per Israeli definitions) to a foreign entity, making any concessions to the Palestinians even more difficult.[[56]](#endnote-56)

Former U.S. officials like Martin Indyk and Dennis Ross have argued that the United States needs to wrap its arms around Israel to make it feel safe in order to generate any positive traction in negotiations. However, as Nathan Thrall argues, this must be followed by pressure to compromise.[[57]](#endnote-57) An adept mediator would look to use the credibility and trust accrued thus far in Israel to push for concessions; on the basis of its first year in office, it seems doubtful the Trump administration will be willing or able to do this. The Israeli right appear so emboldened as to make this too damaging for Trump. It would not play well with key domestic constituencies he can ill afford to lose as the Mueller investigation continues. While he has built a reputation for being unpredictable, it is difficult to envisage such a radical break with existing policy patterns.

**CONCLUSION**

By linking an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement to a regional front against Iran, Trump embarked on a bold and broad agenda for change, together with his Saudi partners. While there is an undeniable logic to this approach, the Trump administration’s engagement to date shows little evidence of the mediation skills required to strike such a grand bargain. They have shown a poor understanding of the needs of Palestinians and have unnecessarily antagonized them over Jerusalem without getting anything in return, a move that shows the primacy of domestic politics over effective foreign policy. What Trump, Kushner and Mohammed bin Salman lack in experience they make up for in hubris, though this is unlikely to produce positive results. The delicate situation calls for astute and nimble diplomacy, skills the Trump administration and its regional allies lack. Their style has been more akin to a bull in a china shop, upending the stale existing order but leaving little positive in its wake. Although Trump seems to be attempting to retain flexibility through vague policy, it is far from clear he will now be in a position to take advantage of it. Having initially sought to stroke Trump’s ego by praising his negotiating skills, Abbas and the Palestinians are less than convinced.

If, as is likely, the Palestinians continue to refuse to let their cause be sacrificed on the altar of an anti-Iranian alliance, this leaves Trump in danger of coming away from this regional engagement with nothing. Israel and the Arab world may privately agree on the need for cooperation, but it remains problematic without a resolution to the Palestinian predicament. Communication and consultation undoubtedly are taking place in the shadows, but it is doubtful whether this is enough to achieve the desired goals. Much depends on the extent to which the Arab world can be convinced that Iran poses a danger that makes Jerusalem pale in comparison. As a result, Trump is placing a lot of faith in a bold but reckless change.

In any peace plan that finally gets presented, Kushner and MBS need to address minimal Palestinian needs or it will not succeed. While a third party can incentivize, provide political support and apply pressure, there needs to be a balance; force and threats alone are unlikely to lead Palestinians to abandon their national aspirations. There also needs to be a greater balance in the application of pressure. The Trump administration has shown no appetite for forcing Israel to concede anything, but this will have to happen if an agreement is to be reached. Although multilateral cooperation seems anathema to Trump, greater engagement with other international partners, such as the EU, could help to correct the current imbalance. Without a more nuanced strategy, this attempt at Israeli-Palestinian peace is likely to join many others in history's dustbin, taking the two-state solution along with it.

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