



The Institute for National Security Studies
Strategic, Innovative, Policy-Oriented Research

INSS Insight No. 932, May 22, 2017

President Trump's Visit to the Middle East

Amos Yadlin and Eldad Shavit

President Trump's visit to the Middle East coincides with a bitter political crisis underway in Washington revolving around alleged contacts between close Trump associates and Russia during the election campaign. Accusations are under investigation by the FBI and committees in both houses of Congress; the US Justice Department has appointed a special prosecutor to investigate the matter; and voices are heard, including among Republican lawmakers, regarding the possibility of impeachment proceedings against the President. These developments have forced the President, only four months into his tenure, into a defensive position that has already left its mark on his conduct in the US domestic arena and that has the potential to influence his foreign policy as well.

The meetings scheduled for Trump in Riyadh, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and the Vatican, like his participation in meetings of NATO and the G-7 in Sicily later in the month, will provide the President with something of an opportunity to divert domestic attention from the events underway in the American domestic arena. They also offer an opportunity to generate an alternative and more positive discourse focusing on the rapid and auspicious change that, as he sees it, his administration has succeeding in effecting in the Middle East and, as a result, in the status of the United States in the international arena.

The focus of Trump's trip is his visit to Riyadh. The Saudi leadership went to great lengths to welcome Trump with a grand reception to demonstrate that Saudi Arabia and the rest of the Gulf states seek to honor him; that they have high expectations of both him and American policy – which contrast starkly with their view of the Obama administration; and that here too, unlike in recent years, the two countries have many overlapping priorities and interests. In addition to his bilateral talks with the Saudi leadership, Trump met with Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) state leaders and took part in the Arabic Islamic American Summit, attended by many of Arab and Muslim leaders who travelled to the Kingdom for this purpose. Since Trump entered the White House, he has shown a deliberate interest in rehabilitating the United States' relationship with Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states.

His meetings in Saudi Arabia can be expected to provide him with several accomplishments:

1. On a personal level, President Trump and his associates estimate that the thronging of the leaders of Arab and Muslim countries to Saudi Arabia for political meetings with the US President will position his image as that of an authoritative superpower leader. The meetings are also expected to rehabilitate the image of a President accused of harboring Islamophobic sentiments because of his statements during the campaign and his executive orders banning entry of citizens of a number of Muslim majority countries from entering the United States. In addition, Trump is interested in proving that unlike President Obama, he is willing to “lead from the front” and base his policy on trust and good personal relations with his counterparts in the international arena.
2. Like Saudi Arabia, the US administration has an interest in displaying a united front against Iran, particularly with respect to the Islamic Republic's subversive activities and its aspiration to establish a Shiite axis from Tehran to Beirut. The United States and Saudi Arabia, along with the entire pragmatic Sunni camp, regard the containment of Iran as a priority. On the nuclear issue, it appears that although Saudi Arabia and the Trump administration contend that the JCPOA is highly flawed, the agreement in fact currently serves the interests of both countries, and thus neither seeks to annul it. The United States also recently renewed the presidential waiver allowing the continued suspension of sanctions against Iran.
3. The US administration hopes to strengthen its partnership with many Islamic countries in the fight against the Islamic State, both financially and in terms of action on the ground. They all have an interest in presenting themselves as committed to achieve a decisive victory in the anti-ISIS campaign and, even more so, in shaping the arrangements for the day after based on Sunni Arab ground forces, although such willingness has yet to translate into substantive action.
4. The US administration has placed special emphasis in highlighting the fact that the American partnership with Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states has already made a significant contribution to the US economy and helps fulfill Trump's campaign promise to create new jobs. Immediately following Trump's arrival in Riyadh, an announcement was made regarding US weapons sales to Saudi Arabia that would inject over \$100 billion into the US economy as well as the potential for future arms deals for additional sums in the hundreds of billions of dollars over the next decade. Arms deals of this scope could pose a challenge to Israel's “Qualitative Military Edge” (QME) in the region, which means Israel will need to pursue in-depth strategic discussions with the US on the matter in order to preserve its QME.

Trump's meetings in Saudi Arabia will also focus on ways to advance the political process between Israel and the Palestinians. The goal appears to be to mobilize the Saudi

leadership and other Gulf leaders to help the US administration broker a deal between Israel and the Palestinians. In this context, Riyadh will most likely be required to use its influence over the Palestinians by pressuring them to moderate their positions and adopt a more positive stance toward Israel. The United States will expect of Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states to not wait for the conclusion of a final status agreement between Israel and the Palestinians, as stipulated by the Arab Peace Initiative, but rather to begin normalization with Israel in parallel to positive measures taken by the Israelis and the Palestinians even before the signing of a final status agreement. According to the Wall Street Journal, a Saudi proposal in this spirit already exists but is conditional on a partial settlement freeze. For its part, the Saudi leadership urged Trump to refrain from moving the American embassy to Jerusalem, as this, they believe, would disrupt the effort to restart the political process.

President Trump ascribes great significance to his visit to Israel, which will demonstrate his commitment to Israel and to the Jewish people. Still, in contrast to the positions that he and his associates voiced on the eve of the elections, and in contrast to the impression that the new administration would support the Israeli positions and adopt them as the starting point in the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, in practice the administration has been attentive to the views presented to Trump by the Arab leaders whom he met in recent months. This includes Abu Mazen, who succeeded in giving Trump the impression that he is extremely interested in advancing the political process, even if this means relinquishing his preconditions for the resumption of negotiations.

It is unclear whether the administration has a formulated plan for extricating the sides from their current deadlock. However, the work undertaken in advance of the visit indicates that with regard to many of the elements, there has likely been no significant change in the American positions presented by previous administrations. For now, the Trump administration is not ready to move the embassy to Jerusalem, and appears to regard the issue of Jerusalem as an element for future negotiations between the parties. Some US diplomats continue to relate to the Western Wall as part of the West Bank, and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster's statement that in his meeting with Abu Mazen, the President will express his support for "Palestinian aspirations for dignity and self-determination," indicates that the President has been attentive to the Palestinian position.

At the core of Trump's visit to Israel and the Palestinian Authority is the US administration's intention to restart the political process. The President and senior administration figures have not concealed their interest in reaching the "ultimate deal" and in succeeding where his predecessors have failed, despite their repeated assertions that they have no interest in imposing solutions on the parties. It appears that the dialogue will initially focus primarily on confidence-building measures by both sides. Though aware of the necessary imperative to navigate the formidable political difficulties in Israel

and the Palestinian arena (primarily its internal split), they have nonetheless repeatedly emphasized that the President expects Israeli and Palestinian leaders to be ready for compromise.

The challenge to Israel in its future interactions with the US administration has intensified. Even if it is disappointed with some of the administration's positions, Israel must refrain from clinging to stances that will force it into the position of spoiler. Against this background, and on the assumption that the administration does not intend to place parameters on the table during this initial visit and that it is still possible to influence its positions and help shape the process, Israel needs to transition from a passive policy of retaining the status quo to a proactive policy.

1. Instead of advancing tactical preconditions (such as the cessation of incitement against Israel by the Palestinian Authority and the cessation of making payments to jailed terrorists and their families), Israel should present a policy that clarifies its strategic aims ("what kind of Israel do we want?") and the fundamental issues on which Israel will not compromise: security arrangements, the principle that Palestinian refugees do not return to Israel, and the retention of settlement blocs and the Jewish neighborhoods of Jerusalem.
2. Israel needs to identify possible interim measures that if adopted as part of agreements with the Palestinians will change the reality on the ground, build trust, and facilitate the establishment of political, economic, and security foundations that make a final status agreement more likely in the future.
3. Israel should advance a multiparty regional process, in accordance with the policy that the US administration is trying to promote vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia and the other Gulf states, in which the United States addresses the interests of these countries (an aggressive policy toward Iran and a willingness to supply arms) whereas the Arab countries demonstrate a greater willingness to compromise with Israel, to be manifested in the adoption of measures of normalization. According to this policy, Israel would suspend all measures indicating an intention to impede or prevent the actualization of a two-state solution.

In conclusion, the willingness of the United States and Saudi Arabia to strengthen their strategic partnership, and the US administration's motivation to advance the Israeli-Palestinian political process, offer the first opportunity in many years to set in motion a more substantive political process than in the past. Therefore, Israel must avoid being pushed into the role of spoiler. Even if it is currently not possible to reach a final status agreement with the Palestinians, a greater chance exists now than in the past to advance measures that will help implement interim arrangements that will prove acceptable to

both the US administration and the major Arab states, and with their encouragement, to the Palestinians as well.