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From Obama to Trump:

Continuity versus Change in Middle East Policy

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President Trump's recent visit to the Middle East was marked by much rhetoric and several prominent achievements. While some of the President's official statements are reminiscent of statements by President Obama, many are materially different and therefore merit close analysis to understand their potential significance. At the same time, it remains to be seen whether, and to what extent, they will be translated into action.

An Israeli-Palestinian Settlement

During his visit to the Middle East, President Trump, like his predecessor, expressed (a) his personal commitment to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian settlement; (b) adherence to the idea of a comprehensive settlement, rather than a partial settlement of the conflict; (c) awareness of the importance of a supporting regional framework that will facilitate progress toward a settlement; (d) confidence in the feasibility of such a settlement, despite the obstacles in achieving it; (e) emphasis on the need for the two parties to make difficult decisions in order to reach a settlement; (f) the belief that both sides are committed to achieve a settlement; (g) the conviction that an Israeli-Palestinian settlement will have far reaching consequences for the entire region.

At this stage, it is difficult to assess whether President Trump is determined to implement these principles in pursuit of a settlement, as was the Obama administration. Among the considerations that would presumably contribute to the shaping of the President's policy are his internal personal status and the possibility of diverting public opinion in the United States from the high level of criticism launched against him and his administration.

At the same time, unlike President Obama, President Trump has refrained from (a) predetermining the final result of negotiations for a settlement; (b) committing to the

idea of two states; (c) addressing the territorial outline underlying the settlement; (d) addressing the issue of the settlements in Judea and Samaria. In effect, in clear contrast to the Obama legacy, his message to both sides is that they should enter negotiations for a settlement without knowing its final form.

In addition, while in his Cairo speech President Obama emphasized the Holocaust as a basis and justification for the existence of the State of Israel, during his visit President Trump emphasized the historical and religious (“ancient and eternal”) connection of the Jewish people to the land of Israel. Furthermore, in contrast to President Obama’s concept, which stressed security as the dominant, if not the sole factor regarding a settlement and Israeli withdrawal from the territories, President Trump has sent a clear message that the religious-historical affinity of the Jewish people to the land of Israel must be taken into account in any settlement that is achieved.

President Trump also explicitly mentioned the incitement and monetary and moral support by the Palestinian Authority for terrorist groups. At a press conference conducted in the presence of Palestinian President Abu Mazen, Trump stated in no uncertain terms, “Peace can never take root in an environment where violence is tolerated, funded and even rewarded.” On another occasion, he insisted that his administration would not condone any arguments for tolerating, justifying, or ignoring terrorism. The PA’s announcement of the discontinuation of payment of salaries to over 200 released Hamas prisoners in the Gaza Strip may have been designed in part to express the PA’s positive response, however limited, to the President’s demands.

President Trump’s emphasis on the US commitment to Israel’s security is almost certainly a reflection of his understanding that without this commitment it will be difficult for Israel to incur the risks required in the framework of a settlement with the Palestinians. In this context, the President stressed the difference of his administration from the preceding administration. He described the relations between Israel and the United States as relations between great allies. President Trump also emphasized that a settlement with Israel requires recognition of Israel’s important role in the Middle East by the states in the region, and that international organizations would be obligated to recognize Israel’s contribution to the region and to the world.

The Iranian Threat

President Trump’s statements on the Iranian issue reflect a different attitude than that of President Obama. President Trump has consistently emphasized his strong opposition to the nuclear agreement signed with Iran, although it is clear to him that it will be difficult for him to withdraw from it. In his joint announcement with the King of Saudi Arabia, President Trump declared, “The nuclear agreement with Iran needs to be re-examined in

some of its clauses”. This following an earlier announcement by the two countries that they had agreed on “the importance of rigorously enforcing” the agreement with Iran.

In contrast to his predecessor, President Trump has emphasized that the Iranian threat is not confined to the nuclear question; it also concerns Iran’s subversive involvement in the region, which constitutes a threat to the security of the region and the world. He cited the threat of Iran’s ballistic missile program, and connected Iran directly to global terrorism. In his speech in Riyadh, he stated emphatically, “From Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds arms and trains terrorists, militias and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region.” President Trump called on “all nations of conscience” to make a commitment to work together to isolate the existing regime in Iran, deprive it of money that enables it to fund terrorism, and pray for the day when Iranian citizens will have the good government they deserve. President Trump’s message is that the struggle against Iran cannot be confined to strong statements. In contrast to his predecessor, his administration places a solid emphasis on the need to assemble a coalition of countries committed to act against extremist Islam, headed by Iran. That was also the focus of his visit to the region.

Trump’s statements indicate that forming a regional alliance as a basis for the war against jihadist terrorism and halting Iranian subversion is a supreme interest at this time. Against this background, the President made it clear that his administration would refrain from preaching to other countries how to manage their internal affairs and their way of life. From his perspective, changes in the region must come from within, not be dictated from without. The message is clear: the issues of human rights and democratic governance are not an obstacle to a regional alliance.

Conclusion

President Trump’s statements during his visit to the region reflect a profound commitment to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. To this end, President Trump is demonstrating his desire to avoid the mistakes of the preceding administration, which was not successful in advancing an Israeli-Palestinian settlement. First and foremost, he seeks to give Israel the sense that it need have no fear about taking risks, because the United States under his administration is committed unequivocally to provide for its security. Moreover, he has sought to balance the approach of the preceding administration, which gave many the feeling that most of the harsh demands on the road to a settlement were directed at Israel, while the pressure on the Palestinian side was more moderate. Finally, President Trump presented a position that did not predetermine the results of negotiations, and left the decision in the hands of the two parties. These statements, if indeed fully implemented,

would certainly mark a significant change in the relations between Israel and the United States.

Nevertheless, despite the different "spirit" that President Trump brings with him regarding the peace process, it is difficult to understand the basis of his firm belief in his ability to "close a deal" between Israel and the Palestinians. In the end, the fundamental positions of the two sides are well known, and for the foreseeable future the gaps defy bridging. As President Trump presumably understands this, his main goal seems therefore to be to jumpstart a political process in a regional context in order to create an infrastructure for a regional coalition in the struggle against jihad terrorism, which he has declared he will wipe off the face of the earth, and against Iranian subversion.

In these circumstances, it is important for Israel to not only to respond positively to the outline presented by President Trump, but also to present creative ideas that would facilitate its implementation. For example, it could reflect a willingness to agree to a change in the status of parts of Area C and their transfer to Palestinian control, albeit without any surrender of responsibility for security there. Such a gesture would most likely enhance Palestinian economic and civilian development, facilitate Palestinian freedom of movement within the West Bank, enable the PA to project more effective governance, and enhance its political status. This will also reflect Israel's acknowledgment of the strategic importance of President Trump's endeavors to establish a strategic partnership between Israel and the pragmatic Arab countries, and the willingness to undertake risks necessary for its implementation. Such a partnership, if indeed realized, will dramatically improve Israel's regional and international standing, and contribute to its ability to safeguard its essential interests in the area.