

Trump's Visit to the Middle East

Commentaries by Mitvim Institute Experts

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Donald Trump made his first foreign trip since taking office to the Middle East. In May 2017 he visited Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the Palestinian Authority. Throughout his regional tour, the US president highlighted common security threats that can help unite nations and religions in the Middle East. He called for joint action against terror and extremism, and expressed hope and belief that Israeli-Palestinian peace is possible. However, the visit did not include major policy announcements, and many open questions remained about future American policies in the Middle East.

This document includes commentaries by Mitvim Institute experts regarding Trump's visit to the Middle East and its outcomes: (1) Regional security, not the peace process, tops Trump's Middle Eastern agenda, by Dr. Nimrod Goren; (2) Trump chose Saudi Arabia; Israel did not object, by Prof. Elie Podeh; (3) The Arab media was happy about Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, by Khader Sawaed; (4) The US adopts a multi-lateral approach to peacemaking, and the Palestinians are on board, by Dr. Ido Zelkovitz; (5) Trump was in Israel and Saudi Arabia but attention is focused on America and Iran, by Rebecca Bornstein; (6) Trump passes a low bar, by Gabriel Mitchell

Regional Security, Not the Peace Process, Tops Trump's Middle Eastern Agenda

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For several months, Israelis were speculating about Trump's next steps regarding the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia, the Palestinian Authority, and Israel was an opportunity to bring some certainty into this debate. However, if there is one key takeaway from the visit it is that for the new president, regional security is the top priority in the Middle East, not the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

Whether it was in his speech in Riyadh, his remarks in Bethlehem, or his statements in Jerusalem, Trump spoke a similar language – it is time to fight terror, defeat extremism, and contain Iran. At least publicly, the American president did not refer to the two-state solution. He did not mention the Palestinians' right to self-determination. He did not criticize Israel over settlement expansion. He did not call on Israel to show maps and define its borders. Trump chose to speak about peace in general and ambiguous terms, in a more religious than national context. While spelling out regional enemies and threats, he kept vague on

regional opportunities for peace, and ignored perhaps the most significant peace initiative out there – the Arab Peace Initiative, which was just reaffirmed by the Arab League two months ago.

Despite their disappointment from lack of progress towards peace during the visit, pro-peace actors – in Israel and beyond – can leverage three messages introduced by Trump during his visit, which contradict popular right-wing rhetoric: (1) While Netanyahu claims that a breakthrough in ties with the Arab world does not require progress on the Palestinian track, Trump emphasized that steps towards the Palestinians are needed for Israel to upgrade its regional ties; (2) While the Israeli government is de-legitimizing Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas, Trump stressed that Abbas is a genuine partner for peace, and; (3) While right-wing Israelis present a dichotomous approach, asking international actors to choose whether they are for Israel or against it, Trump made the case that there is no contradiction between being pro-Israeli and pro-Arab.

Trump Chose Saudi Arabia; Israel Did Not Object

Prof. Elie Podeh

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Donald Trump chose Saudi Arabia as the destination for his first foreign visit. This symbolic decision emphasizes the regional and international importance that the US president attributes to Saudi Arabia. The Saudis reciprocated with a warm and festive welcome, and the visit launched a new chapter in ties between the US, Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and the Sunni world. The Arab allies of the US viewed the Iran nuclear deal, led by former President Obama, as a betrayal. They felt abandoned by a US administration that left them to deal on their own with their biggest regional threat. The renewal of their alliance with the US includes a series of far-reaching military and economic deals, which total value ranges – according to various estimations – between 110 and 400 billion USD. It is still unclear to which extent these deals will actually be implemented, but it is obvious that the Saudis can now work with an American president who – unlike Obama – chose them. The fact that Trump's speech to the Muslim world was delivered from Riyadh, and not from Cairo (as Obama's 2009 speech), made clear just how important Saudi Arabia is to the new president.

Symbolically, from Riyadh, Trump flew directly to Israel. So far, Israel refrains from criticizing the gigantic US-Saudi arms deal. This is in contrast to the fierce uphill battle fought in 1981 by Israel and the Jewish lobby against a more-modest US-Saudi arms deal. The Israeli reaction may indicate that Israel does not view Saudi Arabia anymore as its enemy. Moreover, Israel, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and other Sunni states now share an interest in combating Iran, the Shi'a, Jihadist Sunni organizations, and Hezbollah. It is as if they are all part of a secret alliance. A few days prior to Trump's visit, the Gulf states have reportedly offered Israel partial normalization in return for Israeli steps towards the Palestinians. By doing so, they created an opportunity to advance the peace process, which the Israeli government should now decide whether to seize. Trump may seem determined to reach an Israeli-Palestinian agreement, but he is bound to find out that getting there involved a long and difficult road, which may also include political obstacles that originate in Washington.

The Arab media is happy about Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia

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Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia received enormous media attention across the Arab world, especially among important Saudi Arabian allies such as the UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and Jordan. The second day of the visit, during which Trump met with Arab leaders and attended a summit with leaders of various Muslim countries, received the most media coverage. Overall, the visit was very much appreciated by the Arab world. Arab leaders and media outlets emphasized time and again that the visit launches a new chapter in US-Arab relations, and that it symbolizes an American return to the Middle East.

In Saudi Arabia, the media stressed the long-lasting partnership with the US and the shared interests – in diverse fields – that bind the two countries together. An emphasis was put on the renewed cooperation with the US vis-à-vis the Iranian threat. Saudi and American leaders now view Iran as the major threat in the Middle East. A threat to security, regime stability, and peace, in a region that is the major global oil provider, and in which large American corporations conduct energy-related business. Other Gulf and Arab states also covered Trump's visit positively, focusing on the anticipated US-Arab cooperation in fighting terror. The gigantic deals signed between Saudi Arabia and the US – the enormous amounts of money they involve and the many new jobs – they are set to create also drew much attention from the Arab media. Nevertheless, the Arab coverage of these deals left out the fact that most of the money will flow westwards towards the US, and that most of the new jobs will be created in the US – for the benefit of Trump's supporters and potential voters – and not in the Gulf.

The Palestinian issue and the Israeli-Palestinian peace process were largely ignored and marginalized during Trump's visit to Riyadh. The Arab Peace Initiative, which originated in Saudi Arabia, was not mentioned publically. This went unnoticed in the Arab media and did not draw any criticism. Moreover, Arab and Muslim world, including Saudi Arabia, have put aside the aggressive and offensive statements against Islam, which Trump has made in the past, and are embracing the new opportunities for cooperation.

The US adopts a multi-lateral approach to peacemaking, and the Palestinians are on board

Dr. Ido Zelkovitz
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President Trump arrived for his first visit in Israel and the Palestinian Authority after signing a major arms deal with Saudi Arabia. This deal is of diplomatic significance. It shows that the Trump administration views Iran as a major threat to peace, stability and American interests in the Middle East, and envisions a major role for the Saudis in regional politics. In

return for this security alliance with the US, the Saudis may be asked to help promote the Arab Peace Initiative, through a multi-lateral process towards a regional peace deal. Israel and the Palestinians are facing an American administration that is moving from a bi-lateral to a multi-lateral approach to address regional challenges. They will both have to find a way to promote their own interests vis-à-vis this new and unexpected American administration, which views regional diplomacy through a business lens. The administration aims at creating a joint regional front against Iran in parallel to promoting an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough. It seeks gains and benefits for the US in the Middle East, in a manner that will create regional stability while maintaining diplomatic and economic US hegemony.

Trump's visit brings new energy to efforts to renew Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. In his meeting with Mahmoud Abbas, the American president acquired a Palestinian commitment to return to the negotiations table. For his part, Abbas, reiterated his previous positions, without new demands or preconditions for the resumption of peace talks. He continues to define the conflict with Israel in national – not religious – terms. He also calls for the establishment of a Palestinian state along 1967 borders, with recognition of Israel in line with the previous official recognition made during the Oslo process. Despite the Palestinian preference for direct bi-lateral talks with Israel, Abbas has not ruled out a multi-lateral negotiations process held under an American umbrella.

Trump was in Israel and Saudi Arabia but attention is focused on America and Iran

Rebecca Bornstein

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Trump's Middle East trip included several themes: he approached global affairs using the language of religion, prioritized personal relationship-building over concrete policy proposals, and underscored a shared opposition to Iran.

Trump was warmly received in Riyadh and in Jerusalem, where he focused on Iranian threats. This reflects a shared national security interest in containing Iran. His anti-Iranian rhetoric earned him applause, as did the conclusion of a multi-billion dollar arms deal that will upgrade Saudi military capabilities. In the short term, this approach increased Trump's standing in the region. But goodwill in the Middle East will not eclipse the scrutiny he faces at home over the investigation into his campaign's ties with Russia.

Now that Trump's Middle East trip has ended, his administration must quickly formulate a more complex policy towards Iran. Excessive statements against Iran and increased international isolation of Iran threaten the stability of the nuclear deal and may not serve US interests. A tough line on destabilizing Iranian actions should not undermine the progress already achieved, and a new policy must address opportunities, not only threats. Trump was *en route* to Saudi Arabia when Iranians re-elected Hassan Rouhani, a legitimization of the platform of engagement with the West. Rouhani swept the polls even though voters have yet to feel the economic benefits of the Iran deal. And not all news from Tehran is bad: last month, the administration certified to Congress that Iran is complying with the nuclear deal that brought the international community back from the brink of crisis.

In addition to formulating a nuanced policy towards Iran, the administration must clarify its vision towards Israeli-Palestinian peace. During his visit, Trump did not present a plan towards peace, or even mention the two state solution. His visit left several major questions unanswered: What exactly will his administration do to advance Israeli-Palestinian peace? What unilateral steps is it prepared to take in the absence of peace talks? And, most importantly - what policy goal is it working towards?

Trump passes a low bar

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International travel is a welcome escape for leaders facing domestic turbulence, and President Trump seemed to have found his stride while visiting the Middle East. Not only was the change of scenery – far from the ongoing drama in Washington – a visible boost to the president's spirit, but his hosts also expressed an enthusiasm that was never extended towards his predecessor Barack Obama.

Obama's difficult relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu is well documented. The two leaders suffered from both a clash of personalities and a difference of worldviews. But the Obama administration's policies, in particular its pursuit of the Iran Deal, also strained ties with other Middle Eastern actors, including Saudi Arabia. In fact, the degree of distrust between the US and its regional allies became so severe that it pushed Israel and the Gulf States to engage in a not-so-secret security arrangement in order to contain Iran.

It is therefore no surprise that Trump, who from Day One marketed himself as the anti-Obama candidate, was greeted warmly in Riyadh and Jerusalem. He stayed on point for most of his trip, and by all accounts was a gracious guest.

But now that this exceedingly low bar has been overcome, the onus now falls on the Trump administration to move beyond its opposition to Obama, and to devise new policies that will take into consideration the interests of American allies. Trump tends to focus less on the details, so responsibility will fall on Special Representative for International Negotiations Jason Greenblatt, Ambassador to Israel David Friedman, and his advisor/son-in-law Jared Kushner to keep the ball rolling. Better that they set the agenda early, so as to avoid confusion about how this administration seeks to accomplish its regional goals, rather than allow third parties the room to create false narratives about Trump's intentions.