

AUTUMN 2017 / ISSUE NO.9

\$ 12.00 | € 8.50 | 1000 RSD

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JOURNAL OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS
AND SUSTAINABLE DEVELOPMENT

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THE WORLD**

**POPULISM
IN EUROPE**

**MIDDLE EASTERN
TUMULTS**

**ASIAN
DILEMMAS**



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TRUMP'S EARLY STEPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Itamar Rabinovich

THE WORLD is obsessed with Donald Trump: his persona, his style, the policies he has promised to adopt, and those he has actually begun to implement—but also, increasingly, the prospects of his impeachment. Naturally, Americans are primarily interested in the domestic significance and implications of Trump's presidency, whereas people around the globe are more interested in his foreign policy. Both remain puzzled by contradictory trends and developments, by mixed signals, by his proclivity to change his mind and make decisions on the spur of the moment, and by the dysfunctions of his administration.

During the campaign, and then during the transition and in his first months in power, the following elements have all been amply demonstrated: Trump has sent incongruous

signals and taken incongruous steps with regard to both China and Russia; criticized Washington's NATO allies, subsequently tried to placate them, but then refrained from fully reaffirming his commitment to the important Article 5 during his meeting with them; undertook to dismantle the nuclear agreement with Iran, then realized that this is much too complex and shifted to a hostile attitude towards Iran's regional policies in the Middle East; and his meetings with world leaders—such as Prime Minister Theresa May, Chancellor Angela Merkel, and President Emmanuel Macron—were at times awkward. Trump has also correctly identified the development of nuclear weapons and missile capabilities in North Korea as a dangerous threat, but it remains to be seen whether or not this will be followed up by effective policies pursued discreetly with China.

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Photo: Guiliver Image/Getty Images

Netanyahu and Trump conferring during the American president's trip to Israel

This mixed performance in foreign policy is compounded by a malfunctioning of the Trump Administration's foreign policy apparatus. To begin with, a large number of senior positions have yet to be filled and the U.S. State Department, to cite one example, is functioning with a skeleton team. Other than the failed appointment of General Michael Flynn to the position of National Security Advisor, Trump has selected qualified individuals for the senior national security and foreign policy posts: Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, National Security Advisor

Herbert Raymond McMaster, and Homeland Security Chief, General John Kelly. However, the division of labor between the White House and these key figures is not clear.

On several occasions, one of these policymakers has made a significant statement only to be soon embarrassed by a presidential tweet or statement. Most significantly, it is still not clear whether the Trump Administration has a comprehensive strategy in its foreign policy or whether what the world has thus far seen is a series of isolated statements and actions that do not fit into a coherent scheme.

In this context, the Middle East occupies an important place—both as an area of priority and as an illustration of the Trump Administration's *modus operandi* in the areas of foreign policy and national security. It was difficult to fit into a larger context the signals sent by candidate Trump and President-elect Trump with regard to Middle Eastern issues: it initially seemed that he was interested in a grand bargain with Vladimir Putin's Russia and that the Syrian crisis would be an important component of such a bargain; it also appeared that Trump, on the one hand, had a strong desire to achieve an Israeli-Palestinian peace, the "ultimate deal" as he called it, and, on the other, was surrounded by supporters of the Israeli right wing and settlement project. Trump also used harsh rhetoric against Islamic terror and Muslim immigrants, and tried unsuccessfully to block immigration from predominantly Muslim countries.

Later, more coherent policies emerged: his anti-Muslim statements were counterbalanced by his visit to Riyadh, the partnership he formed with the major Sunni Arab states, and his meeting with more than fifty Muslim heads of state. He clearly distanced the United States from some of former U.S. President Barack Obama's major policies in the Middle East. Most importantly, he reversed the policy of

"pivoting away" from the Middle East. More specifically, while realizing that he could not undo the Iranian nuclear deal, he adopted a harsh anti-Iranian line with regard to regional politics in the Middle East and allied himself with the Saudi-led Sunni axis.

Trump's decision to extend support to such allies as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, while disregarding the nature of their domestic politics, was a reversal of Obama's line, which took exception to the politics and policies of the conservative Sunni states and seemed to view Iran as a potential partner. In the Syrian arena, in stark contrast to Obama's failure to respond to the crossing of his "red line," Trump ordered a raid on one of Assad's air force bases after yet another chemical weapons attack on civilians. In the Israeli-Palestinian context, Trump displays friendship and warmth towards Israel, but, contrary to his pre-election rhetoric, has refrained from moving the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; has clarified to Netanyahu in no uncertain terms that he is opposed to settlement construction; and his emissaries have developed good working relationships with the Palestinian Authority's leadership, as well as with other Arab interlocutors.

These were all significant steps and measures, yet they clearly do not amount to a coherent, comprehensive

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states and seemed to view Iran as a potential partner. In the Syrian arena, in stark contrast to Obama's failure to respond

policy. It is quite possible that, early on, Trump and his team planned to predicate their policy in the Middle East on a grand bargain with Russia, and that a settlement of the Syrian crisis was meant to be an important dimension of this bargain. That being said, it is still not clear how such a bargain would have looked like, what Trump could have offered to Russia in return for a change of policy in Syria, and whether Putin was willing and able to distance himself from his Iranian partners in the Syrian civil war.

In any event, notions of a grand bargain with Russia had to be abandoned, or at least frozen, once the issue of Russian meddling in America's presidential election and suspicions of collusion between Moscow and Trump's elections team rose to the surface. In July during the G20 meeting in Hamburg Trump had his first substantial, and apparently quite successful, meeting with Putin. It did result in a partial, at least temporary, cease fire in Southern Syria. But soon thereafter yet another revelation concerning Russian meddling in the U.S. election and possible collusion between Russia and Trump's campaign rose to the surface. An alternative comprehensive approach has yet to be formulated, and the Trump Administration's conduct in the Middle East consists of several discrete policies. This essay will examine these specific policies in some detail.

THE SUNNI AXIS

The importance attached by the Trump Administration to the Middle East was indicated by his choice of Riyadh and Jerusalem as the first two stops in his first foreign trip.

On the whole, the Riyadh visit was a foreign policy success. One of the significant aspects of this success was the absence of apparent tension between the Saudi and Israeli components of Trump's Middle Eastern visit and diplomacy. For decades, American policymakers and others were constrained by a "zero sum" approach to the Israeli and Arab dimensions of their Middle Eastern policy, as Arab interlocutors tended to complain about U.S. support for Israel and demand a more "even handed" policy. Currently, with Saudi Arabia and other Arab states having softened their approach to Israel, it is much easier for an American president to pursue parallel policies towards Saudi Arabia and other Arab countries as well as towards Israel. The tension has not disappeared entirely, but has become manageable, particularly when an American president like Trump is manifestly seeking to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Furthermore, the Trump Administration seems to have endorsed a notion of a "regional approach" to the peace process. In other words, it is seeking to engage its Arab allies in the peace process. The Arab partners to such a regional

approach should facilitate the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in two ways: first, in helping to persuade the Palestinians to accept the concessions expected from them; and, second, in offering Israel “peace dividends” that should make the peace package more attractive to the Israeli public.

Before Obama went to Egypt to deliver his Cairo address in 2009, he stopped over in Saudi Arabia and asked King Abdullah to offer to

Israel such gestures as overflights on the way to Asia, in order to facilitate the Israeli-Palestinian negotiations he was trying to promote. At the time, his initiative was rebuffed by the Saudi monarch. The Saudis are still not ready to extend such gestures prior to an Israeli-Palestinian breakthrough, but the attitude is far more positive than it was a few years ago. Saudi Arabia and other Sunni Arab states are primarily concerned with the threat coming from Iran and ISIS, and view Israel as a partner in confronting them. Sunni Arab cooperation with Israel is presently being conducted under the table, but the change in their attitude provides new opportunities for American diplomacy.

Against the background of Trump's earlier anti-Muslim rhetoric, the display of a close relationship with the

Saudi royal house, Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, and Jordan's King Abdullah, as well as the Riyadh speech delivered to more than fifty Muslim leaders, constitute a distinct achievement.

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The announcement of a major arms deal with Saudi Arabia to the tune of hundreds of billions of dollars (at least nominally) carries with it a promise of revenues to American defense industries and thousands of new jobs—a high priority for the

Trump Administration. Questions remain as to how the announcement of this new anti-Iranian Sunni axis will be translated into actual policies—let alone successful ones—but these questions do not mar the initial success.

It did not take long, though, for the complexity of Middle Eastern realities to present itself. The sense of empowerment felt by the Saudi leadership was an important element in the June 2017 decision by Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and several other Arab countries to launch a political offensive against Qatar. Doha has been, and is, playing games in its regional policies. It is, on the one hand, a conservative oil-and gas-rich country, but, on the other hand, it is also a supporter of radical Islamist movements—the Muslim Brotherhood in particular; it conducts a dialogue with Iran;

its Al-Jazeera television network has played an important role in galvanizing the Arab street; and it is the main supporter of Hamas in Gaza. But Qatar is also the host of a large and important American air force base that is essential for conducting its activities in Middle Eastern military arenas. And so the Trump Administration finds itself now required to mediate in an effort to prevent the eruption of a major crisis involving several of its Gulf allies on both sides of the divide.

The complexity of these Middle Eastern realities is, among other things, illustrated by the fact that Turkey, a NATO member, has declared its willingness to send thousands of soldiers to Qatar to protect it against a potential military threat by other American allies. In the context of a policy of alliance and cooperation with Sunni Islam, it is imperative for Washington to fix its current relationship with Turkey, a major Sunni Muslim state.

IRAN & SYRIA

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But it will be tested in several arenas. Iran is active in Yemen, where it supports the anti-Saudi rebels; in Iraq, where it enjoys considerable influence over the Shi'ite central government; and primarily in Syria, where it is the mainstay of Bashar al-Assad's regime. Moreover, in Lebanon it enjoys paramount influence through its proxy, Hezbollah. It thus confronts Israel through

Lebanon, but also through two other channels: Hamas in Gaza and, currently, through its efforts to establish Hezbollah and other Shiite militias in southern Syria.

It is difficult to overstate the extent of Iran's ambitions. These ambitions are powered both by religious ideology and the legacy of the Persian empires of past centuries. Iran already projects power both to the east and to the south of its borders, and it is clearly seeking a land corridor to the Mediterranean.

Clearly the main arena for containing Iran is Syria. The Syrian civil war has now lasted for more than six years. It has cost the lives of more

than half a million Syrians and others, and has turned ten of Syria's 22 million inhabitants into displaced persons—six million inside Syria and four million in Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan. It is a multilayered crisis: domestic, regional, and international. It has become the main arena of Saudi-Sunni-Iranian-Shiite competition. And it has provided Vladimir Putin with a golden opportunity to build his presence and prestige in the Middle East.

It is difficult to foresee either a military or politico-diplomatic solution to the crisis any time soon. Bashar al-Assad and the Alawite community are clinging to power with Iranian and Russian help. The bulk of the population refuses to accept them as a legitimate regime, but has failed to translate its opposition into a simple and effective political and military organization. Several other regional players have been meddling in the Syrian crisis. More recently, with Russian and Iranian help, the regime has scored significant successes in northern Syria and, if allowed, will continue its campaign to re-conquer much, if not all, of the country's territory.

The reality of the Syrian crisis is compounded by the presence and activities of ISIS. ISIS is an essentially Iraqi or-

ganization that used the Syrian war to make its spectacular appearance on the global scene. It acquired control of a large swath of land on both sides of the Iraqi-Syrian border and established a capital in the Syrian city of al-Raqa. At the time

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of writing, Al-Raqa is besieged by an international coalition in which America plays a major role. Defeating ISIS on the ground and destroying its "caliphate" is a high priority for the United States. Once achieved, a vacuum will be created in eastern Syria, and intense conflict has already begun as the parties to the Syrian civil

war aspire to capture this area.

The Obama Administration's regional policy was predicated on a determination not to become involved in the Syrian crisis in a major military way. Obama vetoed the recommendation made by senior aides as early as 2012 to establish safe zones and no-fly zones, and famously declined to act when his "red line" was crossed. But he did authorize the dispatching of special forces to Syria, to help in the campaign against ISIS. The Trump Administration has clearly decided to expand and upgrade Washington's military involvement in Syria. American direct participation in the fighting against ISIS has increased, and American forces have

recently clashed not only with those of the regime but also with pro-Iranian Shiite militias—an indication that the scramble for territories taken from ISIS in eastern Syria has begun. It should be noted that Washington's Syrian policy is now primarily formulated by the Pentagon.

In the time ahead, the Trump Administration will have to make some major decisions regarding the direction of its Syrian policy and its willingness to make further investments in the Syrian arena. As noted above, the policy of Assad and his patrons is to build on the successes in northern Syria and to pursue a policy of "reconquista" that would bring most, if not all, of the nation's territory back under the regime's authority.

This policy is met by effective resistance from the opposition in several regions; but without effective external assistance, the opposition may not be able to resist increased Russian and Iranian pressure. Iranian pressure may well be exercised indirectly. The Iranians are sensitive to losses in Syria and have been importing Afghan and Iraqi Shiite militias to do the heavy lifting, alongside Hezbollah and the Damascus regime's emasculated armed forces. In late June 2017, Iran escalated its involvement by firing medium-range

missiles from its territories into the city of Deir a-Zor. It was described as retaliation for an ISIS terror attack in Tehran, but looked more like a display of Iranian intentions and capabilities. It bears repeating: the scramble for the

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large territory held by ISIS in eastern Syria has already begun.

It is also possible to see the adumbration of the next phase of the Syrian crisis, as Iran is dispatching its proxies

into southern Syria. This area is perilously close to both the Jordanian and Israeli borders, and fighting there could easily lead to the eruption of a major regional crisis. The Trump Administration will have to decide whether it wants to play a role in eastern and southern Syria with the triple purpose of checking Iran, preventing deterioration into regional crisis, and perhaps acquiring assets for a future negotiation over a Syrian settlement. Currently, when meetings are held in Astana to discuss a resolution of the Syrian crisis, the United States is conspicuously absent. Clearly, Washington is at present focused primarily on the fight against ISIS, but this focus will have to shift in the near future.

During the spring of 2017, several analysts began to point to Iran's quest for a corridor, or even two

corridors, from its own territory to the Mediterranean via Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, as an important dimension of its policy in the Levant. Subsequently, it has also been suggested that this quest is matched by a counter effort by Western and conservative Middle Eastern states to erect a counter axis from south to north, leading from Saudi Arabia to the Turkish border, in order to check the Iranian east-to-west drive.

It remains to be seen how serious and successful such a counter effort will be, but clashes along the Iraqi-Syrian border between American forces and pro-Western military, on the one hand, and pro-Iranian militias, on the other hand, are an early indication of the serious potential of this conflict.

Washington's policy in Syria cannot be divorced from its larger relationship with Moscow. Russia refrained from a real response to the American raid on a Syrian air force base after the use of chemical weapons against civilians. When U.S. airplanes shot down a Syrian air force jet in late June, Moscow responded with a threat—vague enough, but nonetheless a threat. Should Washington decide to stiffen its attitude towards the Assad regime, it will have to take into account the prospect of a clash, diplomatically if not militarily, with Russia. As

Trump's relationship with Russia is being investigated in Washington, walking a tightrope in the context of Syria would be particularly difficult.

Another important dimension of Washington's policy in Syria has to do with its relationship with Turkey. Erdogan's Islamist policies at home and abroad, and his resentment of Fetullah Gulen's continued presence and activity in the United States, are irritants in a relationship with a problematic

NATO member. But the relationship is primarily poisoned by Washington partnership with the Kurdish Syrian militias. This partnership is predicated on the militia's participation in the fight against ISIS, as the most effective local force on the ground. This is an important consideration for the Trump Administration, which has been reluctant to increase America's direct participation in the fighting. But this is anathema for Ankara. Erdogan and other Turks view the Syrian Kurds as allies of the PKK, the radical Turkish-Kurdish Party, and therefore as a threat to the very foundations of the Turkish state. Once ISIS is defeated in Syria, this issue will have to be sorted out as part of a larger effort to settle the American-Turkish relationship, in order to ensure the enlistment of Turkey as an important ally against Iran.

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THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN ISSUE

As we have seen, the contradictory elements of the Trump Administration's policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue—as manifested during the election and the transition—were packaged within a more coherent policy in the spring of 2017. It gradually transpired that, alongside the appointment of supporters of the Israeli right wing to important positions, the Trump Administration had developed an effective working relationship with the Palestinian Authority and had discussed the Palestinian issue with its Arab partners.

The display of friendship toward Israel has been balanced by the decision not to move the embassy to Jerusalem and by discrete pressure on Netanyahu and the Israeli government to restrain its settlement policy. In addition to serving as one of Trump's private lawyers, Jason Greenblatt has been appointed as the key person for restarting the Israeli-Palestinian peace process; he has proven to be very effective in his dealings with Palestinians and other Arabs. Trump also assigned his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to play a role in this endeavor. Kushner came to Israel in late June 2017 to continue the effort begun during Trump's Middle Eastern visit.

It is quite clear that the Trump Administration is determined to advance this

effort, and that it pursues its policy in the area discreetly. This is done in contrast to the policy pursued by Obama, who made an Israeli-Palestinian settlement an early and important priority, while conducting his effort to freeze Israeli settlement activity publicly. This policy contributed to the early antagonism between Obama and Netanyahu. Much is not known about the conversations held by Trump and his team with Netanyahu and Mahmoud Abbas during the American president's visit to the region, but it seems that some difficult exchanges took place under the patina of warmth and friendship in Jerusalem.

It is curious and important to examine the response of Israel's right wing to Trump's election and the evolution of his policies. The initial response of the Israeli right, and even more so of the radical right, was enthusiastic. Some of his statements, the appointments he made, and the promise to move the embassy to Jerusalem, led the Israeli extreme right, the West Bank settlers, and their political arm to believe that they were given license to expand settlements and annex parts of the West Bank.

Netanyahu's response was much more cautious. His own reading of Trump and the American political scene, probably reinforced by messages given to

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him privately, led him to treat the new American chief executive cautiously. Netanyahu understood that Trump's desire to solve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was not an idle statement, but rather reflected a serious intention. Netanyahu understood the disastrous potential of a possible conflict with Trump and his ambitions, which led him to impose restraint on his extreme right wing partners.

A second wave of enthusiasm gripped the Israeli right wing in the aftermath of Trump's visit to Jerusalem. Trump radiated warmth and support for Israel and refrained from making any public demands from Israel. But this was a mistaken reading of the American president's conduct. His attitude seems in fact to have been an effort to soften the Israeli public for future demands. Indeed, in the aftermath of the visit, his son-in-law was dispatched to Israel in an effort to restart Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.

It is interesting to speculate on what motivated Trump to choose the Israeli-Palestinian issue as an important foreign policy aim. There is

no need to elaborate on the complexity of this issue; nor on the difficulties it creates for those who seek to resolve it. But Trump may well be motivated by the sense that an achievement in this area could yield important dividends. His administration is currently seeking a final status agreement between Israelis and Palestinians. This may not be feasible in the current circumstances, but even a more limited achievement would resonate both at home and abroad. It is difficult to achieve a breakthrough in the Israeli-Palestinian arena, but is it more difficult than cracking the North Korean challenge?

Should the Trump Administration persist in efforts to bring about an Israeli-Palestinian settlement, it is likely that the current cordial atmosphere in its relationship with Netanyahu's government will be replaced by awkwardness and tension. Netanyahu's current coalition and the pressure of the extreme right wing on his own party deter him from making even the slightest concession to the Palestinian Authority. He clearly has an option to replace his current coalition partners with the Labor Party, and to subdue

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THREE UNANSWERED QUESTIONS

Some six months after Donald Trump's inauguration, it can be clearly stated that the Middle East is an important arena for his foreign policy, that he has distanced himself from Obama's legacy in the region, and that he has launched several significant initiatives. It remains to be seen whether these ventures will be packaged in a comprehensive scheme, whether Trump will have the stamina and patience required for success in Middle Eastern diplomacy, and whether he will be able to overcome his domestic problems. ●

his own radical right wing. But this will require Sharon-like conduct that Netanyahu has so far refused, or been unable, to adopt.

At the same time, Netanyahu is clearly reluctant to find himself at odds or in conflict with Trump. He is afraid of Trump's temper and understands full well that Trump is not Obama, and that the political environment in Washington in 2017 is very different from that of 2009. The option of mobilizing his Republican friends against a Democrat President is simply not available.

