

Trumped Up Diplomacy in the Middle East

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In his first overseas trip since moving into the White House, Donald Trump is leaving behind the frustrations, allegations, rumors, and an increasing sense of implosion that seems to be dooming his presidency during its second hundred days. At the same time, a mixture of curiosity and apprehension awaits this new leader wherever he goes making his visit to the Middle East and Europe momentous occasions for the host governments, wide eyed public, and rapacious media. We need to remember that in this era of popular autocrats and surging right-wing populists, Trump is a 'hero of our time.'

Even if all had gone smoothly for the new president in his home country, there should be expressions of deep concern about his travel itinerary. He visits first the two countries with which the United States has 'special relationships' in the Middle East, Saudi Arabia and Israel. What has long made them 'special' are a series of pre-Trump departures from realist and normative foreign policy orientations by successive American presidencies. These departures were motivated by oil geopolitics, arms sales and strategic alliances, hostility to Iran, and a disguised American sweet spot for foreign royalty. It is has long been obvious that uncritical deference to Israeli priorities has seriously undermined U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, which would have benefited much more from policies designed to encourage peace and stability by refraining from regime-changing interventions, massive arms sales, and a diplomacy of respect for the politics of national self-determination.

Most remarkably, the U.S. Government has for decades winked at the billions of support given by Saudi members of the royal family to Wahhabism, that is, to promote fundamentalist Islam, throughout the Muslim world. The first words uttered by Trump on his arrival in Riyadh were that it is 'an honor' to be visiting.



Trump delivering his speech in the Arab Islamic American Summit in Riyadh (Source: Jornal O Globo)

Then came signed deals adding up to US\$110 billion in arms sales and the declaration of a common strategic vision, that is, a super-alliance, called an 'Arab NATO' in some circles, a dagger aimed at Iran's heart. Why turn a blind eye toward the Saudi role in fanning the flames of *jihadism* while ramping up a military threat to relatively passive Iran that reelected Hassan Rouhani as its president, who has consistently championed moderation at home and normalization abroad.

How can we explain this? Trump has been critical of most aspects of the foreign policy agenda of his predecessors, but on the promotion of the special relationships he seems intent on doubling down on the most misguided aspects of earlier approaches to the region. The shape of his travel itinerary during his days confirms this impression. In this regard, Trump repudiates Obama's hesitant, but in the end successful, efforts to bring Iran in from the cold, while trying to please Saudi Arabia by ignoring its extreme denial of human rights to its own people as well as its contributions to anti-Western terrorism.

If Trump was truly intent on putting America first, as he insistently asserts, then he could do so very directly and effectively by taking three major steps toward the protection of national interests: first, demand a firm commitment from the Saudi government to cease using private funds and public diplomacy to spread Wahhabism beyond its borders. Any credible public statement along these lines would weaken ISIS and other terrorist movements throughout the world far more than cascades of Tomahawk missiles dumped on a Syrian airfield. Such a challenge to Saudi policies also raises the possibility, however remote, of an endgame in the 'war on terror.' If such a reset of Saudi relations could be coupled with an indefinite freeze on arms sales to the Gulf countries that would have been even better, sending a signal throughout the region that America will no longer engage with the bloody conflicts that have brought so much suffering and devastation to the Middle East. This might give some belated meaning to 'America first.'



US president Donald Trump and Israeli prime minister Benjamin Netanyahu

The second step would have been even harder for an American president to take. It would require Trump to tell Mr. Netanyahu that no further military assistance for Israel would be authorized until an unconditional freeze on settlement expansion was in place and enforced, and the blockade of Gaza lifted once and for all.

It does not require a PhD in Middle Eastern Studies to appreciate that the establishment of a nuclear free zone in the region and the adoption of effective steps to minimize the sectarian divide between Sunni and Shia Islam would improve future prospects for these horrendously disrupted political realities, at last reducing tensions and risks of wars. Nor does it require special knowledge to identify the obstacles such actions—the one government that already possesses nuclear weapons and the government that feels threatened by a challenge to its regional preeminence. Saudi Arabia and Israel both regard Iran as enemy number one, although it poses no existential threat to either one, and Israel will not even discuss giving up its nuclear arsenal despite being assured by Washington that its qualitative edge in conventional weaponry relative to its neighbors will be upheld.

The special relationships block even the consideration of enlightened initiatives; take them entirely off the table. This contrasts with the American proclivity for coercive diplomacy, which always assertively leaves the military option on the table. Without tension-reducing measures, a few false moves could easily give rise to a major war with Iran, which might bring smiles to leaders in Riyadh and Tel Aviv, but would be disastrous for the societies involved and for the United States, as well as for the region.

Given the leverage and militancy of pro-Israeli lobbies in the United States, more realistically pursuing American national interests toward Israel and the Middle East, seems tantamount to issuing invitations to Trump's beheading, and despite his wildly gyrations of policy and mood, he has shown no disposition whatsoever to take on AIPAC, inc. Quite the

contrary.

Of course, I am not so naïve to think that the advocacy of rationality in foreign policy will have the slightest echo in Washington in the course of Trump's current diplomatic foray into uncharted territories. What I wish to point out is that this kind of foreign policy fantasy, however desirable if it were to be enacted, has become a species of political suicide. Any political leader who moved in more rational directions would be risking his own life, at least politically. The proposals mentioned above tells us what an American president should do if a rational and humane political system was in place and organized in such ways as to allow the pursuit of national interests, the realization of values associated with peace and human rights, and to attain the benefits of just and sustainable Israeli/Palestinian peace arrangements.

As long as these dysfunctional special relationships are relied upon to define American national interests in the Middle East, violent extremism and turmoil will persist, the authority of the United Nations and international law will suffer, and the credibility of American regional and global leadership will further erode. And maybe worst of all, the mounting ecological and nuclear challenges of global scope and apocalyptic risk will be remain unattended in what has become the greatest display of species indifference to its own survival throughout human history.

Mainstream advice on the Middle East being proffered to the Trump presidency by Beltway sharpshooters takes for granted the geopolitical status quo questioned above. The problems presented by the two special relationships are not even mentioned. Given these perspectives there are three broad kinds of approaches recommended for the region:

(1) don't aim too high, lower expectations, and don't touch raw nerves in Israel or the Arab world (e.g. moving the American embassy to Jerusalem or telling Israel to dismantle the separation wall, stop expanding settlements, or handle the ongoing hunger strike humanely)[See Aaron David Miller, "From My Twenty Years of Failing at Middle East Peace," *Foreign Policy* online, May 19, 2017];

(2) gang up on Iran, which will please both Israel and Saudi Arabia, and will have some positive resonance back in the United States [e.g. Michael Doran, "A Trump Plan for the Middle East," *NY Times*, May 19, 2017];

(3) adopt the Israeli hard right view, now pushed within the United States, that the best road to 'peace' is to give Israel a green light to exert even greater pressure on the Palestinians to the point of their surrender. [a position repeatedly advocated by Daniel Pipes on the online listserv Middle East Forum and elsewhere, see Pipes, "The Way to Peace: Israeli Victory and Palestinian Defeat," *Commentary*, Jan. 2017; Pipes boasts of his work with the Congressional Israel Victory Caucus that wants the U.S. Government to stop talking about 'the two state solution,' and support an Israeli shift from managing the status quo to launching a campaign to defeat Palestinians so decisively as to end the conflict.]

The first of these approaches is a cautionary warning to Trump the maker of grand deals not to exceed the boundaries of the feasible. The Israel/Palestine conflict is not ripe for resolution, Israel has no incentive or inclination to reach a fair compromise and even if it were, the Palestinians are currently too fragmented and poorly led to provide a reliable negotiating partner. The second geopolitically oriented approach makes matters worse, pushing the sectarian and secular divides in the direction of a regional confrontation, even

combat. The third is geopolitically triumphalist, assuming that the Palestinians can be induced to give up their century old struggle, and go the way of other indigenous lost causes that have succumbed to predatory settler movements.

As Trump dominates the news by his visits to Saudi Arabia and Israel we should not be tricked into thinking that his 'achievements' are hopeful developments. The only true beacons of hope for the peoples of the Middle East are the contrarian affirmations of the Palestinian hunger strike, the Rouhani electoral victory, and the BDS Campaign. The fact that such developments are ignored or condemned by the dominant political forces in the West should at least alert us to gathering storm clouds in that tormented region and elsewhere.

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