

Palestine and the Middle East: “Trump Will Leave this Region with Toxic Legacy When Departing White House”

By [Michael Jansen](#)

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When he departs the White House on January 20, Donald Trump will leave this region with a toxic legacy. First and foremost, his ongoing campaign to delegitimise the Palestinian people and encourage Israel to continue colonising their homeland has had disastrous consequences for both Palestine and countries further afield.

Trump defied decades old international policy by recognising occupied East Jerusalem as part of Israel's capital although its status is meant to be determined in negotiations between Palestine and Israel. Trump cancelled the US contribution to UNRWA, the UN agency providing for five million Palestinian refugees. This has deprived UNRWA of \$665 million over two years and forced the agency to cut expenditures, services and staff jobs. For decades, the US donation had been one-third of UNRWA's budget. Trump has also cut off all funding for USAID projects in the Israeli-occupied Gaza Strip, West Bank, East Jerusalem, where the St John's Ophthalmic and Makassad hospitals in East Jerusalem were defunded.

Trump closed the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington, launched his “Deal of the Century” peace plan which promised the Palestinians economic incentives to agree to accept autonomy in isolated islets of territory in Gaza, the West Bank, a capital on the edge of East Jerusalem and Israel's annexation of 30 per cent of the West Bank, including the Jordan Valley. Israel would remain in control of Palestinian air, land and sea. This plan — rejected by the Palestinians, the Arabs, and the international community — would have put paid to Palestinian hopes for an end to the occupation and statehood. Trump has consigned the Palestinian people to either endless occupation or perpetual exile.

Trump followed up these “gifts” to Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu and his right-wing government with others. In March 2019, he recognised as part of Israel, the occupied Syrian Golan Heights. In November of that year, his Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, a radical evangelical Christian, declared that Israeli “settlements” in occupied territory are not “inconsistent with international law”, although occupiers are prohibited by international law from colonising and annexing conquered territories, a dikta accepted by the majority of countries. Pompeo's statement amounted to a reversal of the Obama's administration policy on “settlements” and of earlier administrations which regarded them, at least, as “obstacles” to a peace deal. Last week, Pompeo took a further provocative step by not only visiting an Israeli colony near Ramallah in the West Bank but also going to a colony in the Syrian Golan. Pompeo subsequently declared products from colonies could be labelled “Made in Israel”, rather than in the West Bank or Golan colonies.

Pompeo piled on the administration's anti-Palestinian policies by declaring that Washington would regard as "anti-Semitic", the Palestinian-led Boycott, Divest, and Sanction (BDS) movement, designed to put pressure on Israel to end its occupation and reach a just deal with the Palestinians. He labelled BDS a "cancer". He said he would identify and sanction organisations that adopt "politically motivated actions intended to penalise or limit commercial relations with Israel". This policy would put an end to peaceful Palestinian, Arab and international resistance to Israel's occupation regime even though resistance — both violent and peaceful — is legal under international law.

As it nears the end of its term in office, the Trump administration has also ruled that US citizens born in Jerusalem can put "born in Israel" on their passports and that Jonathan Pollard, convicted of spying on the US navy for Israel, could leave the US to live in Israel although he had been banned from doing just this.

Trump also gifted Netanyahu with the withdrawal of the US from the 2015 six-nation agreement lifting sanctions on Iran in exchange for reducing its nuclear programme by 90 per cent. This involved violating the terms of a deal which has the force of an international treaty. Trump also reimposed sanctions which had been lifted and imposed fresh primary and secondary sanctions in order to prevent governments, businesses and individuals from dealing with Iran. This punitive policy, adopted during the global COVID pandemic, has impoverished millions of Iranians and Syrians, whose government is allied to Iran, and Lebanese, whose Hizbollah movement is tied to Iran. Why did Trump oblige Netanyahu? Because of the opposition to Israel of Iran, Syria, and Hizbollah.

Nevertheless, pulling out of the nuclear deal has not been enough for Netanyahu who has pressed the Trump administration to take military action against Iran. Trump did this by assassinating Iranian Quds Force commander Qassem Suleimani in Baghdad in January and by threatening further strikes if Iran retaliated. Tehran did not oblige and patiently awaits the end of Trump's reign.

The murder of Suleimani and Iraqi Abu Mahdi Al Muhandis, deputy head of Iraq's Popular Mobilisation Forces, which consists largely of pro-Iranian militias, prompted a vote in the Iraqi parliament demanding the total withdrawal of US and other foreign forces from that country. The Trump administration refused at first but is now planning to pull out 500 of the remaining 3,000 US troops deployed in Iraq. This is a half measure which will please neither the Pentagon nor the Iraqi people. They seek an end to the current Iran-friendly Shia sectarian regime and want both the US and Iran to stop intervening in their affairs.

The strike on Suleimani combined with anti-government protests led to the fall of Prime Minister Adel Abdul Mahdi and the formation of a new cabinet by Mustafa Al Kadhimi who has struggled to contain demonstrations and restrain pro-Iranian militias from mounting rocket attacks on military bases housing US forces. Determined to deny Trump a pretext to attack Iran itself, Tehran displayed its influence in Iraq by ordering the militias to suspend their attacks.

Trump's exit from the White House on January 20 will be welcomed by a majority of people in this region, but his destructive policies will be hard to reverse and will continue to inflict damage and suffering.

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Featured image: President Donald J. Trump and Vice President Mike Pence participate in an expanded bilateral meeting with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu Monday, Jan. 27, 2020, in the Oval Office of the White House. (Official White House Photo by D. Myles Cullen)

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