

Trump's 'Historic' Visit to the Middle East: Much Ado About Nothing

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Sadly, President Trump's visit to the Middle East only confirmed my skepticism about what might come out of it. Trump went to the region with nothing to offer to mitigate the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and received no commitment from either Israeli or Palestinian leaders to resume the peace negotiations in earnest, but he received lots of platitudes and empty good-will gestures.

In his meeting with the Saudi King Salman and the rest of the heads of Arab states, he heard the chanting against the Iranian threat and joined the chorus without offering any specific idea as to how he might address Iran's support of violent extremists and its hegemonic ambitions.

To be sure, however, there were many photo ops. Israeli and Arab officials alike clamored to take a photo with a besieged President who is reveling in the accolades of the moment and doing his best not to think about the dark clouds awaiting him back home.

That said, there is no doubt that the US remains the indispensable power in the Middle East, and just about every state in the region relies heavily on the US' political support and protection. This, however, does not suggest that the US has a magic wand and can simply wave it and change overnight the dynamics of the multiple conflicts sweeping and consuming the region. None of Trump's predecessors has had that kind of power and Trump has even less.

During his meetings with Saudi officials, he said nothing about their gross violation of human rights and the kingdom's promotion of Islamic Wahhabi extremism. On the contrary, he was delighted to conclude an arms deal worth over \$110 billion, becoming more like a merchant of death rather than a messenger of peace.



President Donald Trump and King Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud of Saudi Arabia talk together during ceremonies, Saturday, May 20, 2017, at the Royal Court Palace in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia. (Official White House Photo Shealah Craighead)

On the relationship between the Arab states and Israel, Trump offered no recipe as to how they can reach a comprehensive peace agreement. He stated that

“King Salman feels very strongly and, I can tell you, would love to see peace with Israel and the Palestinians.”

The fact is that the Arab states want peace between Israel and the Palestinians based on a two-state solution, and conditioned normalization of relations with Israel based on that premise, which was articulated in the Arab Peace Initiative introduced by the Arab League in 2002.

On the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump seems to have realized that the conflict is far more intractable than when he stated before his trip that

“There is no reason there’s not peace between Israel and the Palestinians—none whatsoever.”

But once he listened to the Israelis and Palestinians, he stated that

“I’ve heard it’s one of the toughest deals of all.”

Whereas he took no initiative to advance the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, to the chagrin of Netanyahu and his cohorts, Trump backtracked on his promise to relocate the US embassy to Jerusalem and asked Netanyahu to slow down the building and expansion of settlements. To the disappointment of many in Israel, he refused to allow any Israeli officials to accompany him during his historic visit to the Western Wall.

The statements made by Prime Minister Netanyahu and President Abbas that they are ready and willing to resume negotiations are old, tired, and inconsequential. Both sides have been expressing such a sentiment for years, and nothing that Trump has said or done will change the positions of either Abbas or Netanyahu.

Netanyahu is not committed to a two-state solution, and Abbas is unable to make any concession and politically (if not physically) survive. Trump could have challenged both leaders to take some measures to demonstrate their commitment to peace and create a conducive atmosphere that would pave the way for serious negotiations, but he did not even attempt to do just that.



President Donald Trump participates in arrival ceremonies with President Mahmoud Abbas of the Palestinian Authority at the Presidential Palace, Tuesday, May 23, 2017, in Bethlehem. (Official White House Photo by Shealah Craighead)

Among other measures, Trump could have asked Netanyahu to release some Palestinians prisoners, allow for freer movement of Palestinians, and open the door for mutual tourism. Trump could have also leaned on Abbas to stop public incitements and acrimonious public narratives, and end financial aid to the families of terrorists.

Although Trump does want a deal, he assigned his son-in-law Jared Kushner and former Trump Organization attorney Jason Greenblatt, two novice individuals who know even less about the complexity of the conflict than he does, to find a solution that has eluded several

presidents before him.

Notwithstanding their desire to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the Iranian threat assumes greater urgency for both Israel and the Arab states. Both sides have long since concluded that Iran is a common enemy and poses a real danger to their national security. As they see it, although the Iran deal has delayed its pursuit of nuclear weapons, Tehran is still committed to becoming a nuclear power.

Regarding the concern over the Iranian threat, Trump said nothing that was not known before:

“There is a growing realization among your [Israel] Arab neighbors that they have common cause with you in the threat posed by Iran, and it is indeed a threat, there’s no question about that.”

It is true that Tehran is deliberately destabilizing the region by its support of terrorist organizations and by meddling in the Arabs’ domestic affairs (Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen) to serve its hegemonic ambition. Israel and the Arab states have for several years been collaborating strategically by sharing intelligence and developing clandestine security cooperation to stop Iran from realizing its regional objectives.

Other than boasting by stating that

“We are telling you right now that Iran will not have nuclear weapons”, Trump offered no concrete steps as to how to deal with the Iranian menace.

Instead, he encouraged the Sunni Arab states to ally against Shiite Iran, which can only further heighten tensions between the two sides and further destabilize the region, which is already in turmoil.

Trump ignores the basic fact that regardless of Iran’s mischiefs and transgressions, it is here to stay. Tehran has been complying to all the provisions of the nuclear deal and it has just reelected President Rouhani, who is a moderate and expressed on many occasions that he wants improve relations with the US and the Arab states.

However, Trump’s statement to the Sunni leaders was:

“Until the Iranian regime is willing to be a partner for peace, all nations of conscience must work together to isolate Iran, deny it funding for terrorism, and pray for the day when the Iranian people have the just and righteous government they so richly deserve.”

Indeed, regardless of the intense objection of the Israelis and the Arab states to the Iran deal, Trump did not tear it up as he promised during his campaign for President, and his administration continues to fully comply with the deal’s requirements by lifting the sanctions as stipulated in the accord.

Wisdom dictates that the US should build on the Iran deal, and work with Iran to help bring an end to the horrifying civil war in Syria and stop the senseless proxy war between Iran and

Saudi Arabia in Yemen and Iraq, from which neither side can emerge victorious.

Trump's visit to the region was full of opulence and symbolism, with little or no substance. There was no progress in the search for a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The Arab states continue to refuse to normalize relations with Israel before resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and they have received no assurance that the US will deal with Iran with an iron fist.

The only thing that came out of Trump's visit is that he could get a respite from the political turmoil in which he is marred back home. Otherwise, the trip was much ado about nothing.

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