

Trump's Scheme to Carve Up Palestine

President Trump's big idea for Israeli-Palestinian peace was the "outside-in" plan in which Israel's new Saudi allies would squeeze the Palestinians until they accepted a bogus "state," as ex-CIA analyst Paul R. Pillar explains.

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Global Research, December 08, 2017

[Consortiumnews](#) 7 December 2017

Region: [Middle East & North Africa, USA](#)

Theme: [Intelligence](#), [Media Disinformation](#),
[US NATO War Agenda](#)

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Featured image: President Trump meets with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in New York on Sept. 18, 2017. (Screenshot from Whitehouse.gov)

Donald Trump never has given evidence that he has new, fresh, and promising ideas to achieve his declared objective of an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement. His statements on the subject can more plausibly be interpreted as another piece of braggadocio about his self-declared deal-making ability.

The obstacles to an Israeli-Palestinian peace have long been painfully apparent, even if much discussion of the subject does not candidly acknowledge them. The contours of any fair and stable resolution of the conflict also have long been well known and have found expression in, for example, the "[parameters](#)" that Bill Clinton outlined.

Rather than offering anything that would be either fair or stable, the Trump White House has seized on the idea of outsiders imposing a formula on the Palestinians, with selected Arab governments to play a major role. This has become known as the "outside-in" approach. The approach fits well with some of the administration's other inclinations that constitute what passes for a strategy toward the Middle East.

One of those inclinations is to go all in with the right-wing government of Israel. For Trump, this deference to the Netanyahu government has roots in his [coming to terms during the presidential campaign with major donors](#) who are allies of Netanyahu.

During the transition period, the deference was demonstrated by Michael Flynn's appeal to Russia to flout the will of the rest of the international community (and an abstention by the incumbent U.S. administration) by vetoing a United Nations Security Council resolution critical of Israel's continued construction of settlements in the occupied West Bank. Although Flynn's pre-inauguration machinations have been viewed mainly as part of the story of the influence in U.S. politics of Russia, the foreign country exerting influence in this case was not Russia (which voted for the resolution) [but instead Israel](#).

Once in office, Trump appointed as ambassador to Israel his bankruptcy lawyer, who has been an advocate less for U.S. interests than for the Israeli right wing and has [personally assisted construction of more settlements](#). Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, to whom the President has given the Israeli-Palestinian peace portfolio, also has aided settlement

construction, although we are only belatedly learning of the extent of his involvement because Kushner [conveniently failed to disclose a major part of that involvement](#) in his government ethics filing.

Only Lip Service

Given the all-too-obvious posture of Netanyahu's government toward the Palestinians and the issue of making peace with them, the posture of a deferential Trump administration on the same subject also is obvious. Despite periodic lip service by Netanyahu toward a peace process, his government opposes the yielding of occupied territory or the creation of a Palestinian state. Netanyahu says so when speaking to his domestic base, and other senior members of his ruling coalition are even more direct than he is in saying so.

Ergo, for the deferential deal-maker in the White House, a deal for genuine peace is not on the agenda. His newest statements about Jerusalem's status and a move of the U.S. embassy are just another facet of his deference to the government of Israel and its American backers.

The other inclination of the Trump administration that meshes well with the idea of outside-in is the going — well, if not all in, then mostly in — with the young de facto ruler of Saudi Arabia, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS). Kushner is a key figure in this relationship as well. The two unelected thirty-somethings, with power handed to them through paternal favoritism, reportedly have become best buddies.

Here the U.S. deference has included Trump's support for the Saudi-led effort to isolate Qatar, despite his own Secretary of State's efforts to reconcile the disputatious Gulf Arabs. It also has included continued U.S. support for the Saudi military assault on Yemen, despite the resulting humanitarian catastrophe there.

The strengthening of the remaining link of this love triangle, with Israeli-Saudi cooperation becoming a more open and frequently discussed topic, also fits the outside-in notion. The Netanyahu government always has sought more salient ties with Arab governments as a demonstration that Israel need not resolve the Palestinian problem to avoid international isolation.

For MbS, developing a relationship with Israel is one form of getting help wherever he can get it amid the challenges of consolidating power internally after his coup and coping with a series of foreign policy setbacks involving Yemen, Qatar, and Lebanon, while staying in good graces with a U.S. administration that is in bed with the ruling Israeli right-wing.

All three points of the triangle are making their maneuvers to the drumbeat of Iran, Iran, Iran as a constant preoccupation and rationalization. For Netanyahu, the drumbeat continues to serve as an all-purpose distraction and blame-shifter. MbS has made opposition to Iran his rallying cry in trying to justify operations such as the calamity in Yemen and the attempts to strong-arm smaller states such as Qatar and Lebanon.

Iran-Bashing

And of course, anti-Iranism has been the one loud and consistent theme in a Trump Middle East policy in which many observers have a hard time discerning a clear strategy.

None of this has anything to do with the issues underlying the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which has involved a contest between two peoples, Israelis and Palestinians, over the same land. Once again, Palestinians have become collateral damage of the pursuit of unrelated objectives by others.

Earlier in the history of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, this included the objective of atoning for the genocidal sins of Europeans. Now the objectives include a young Saudi prince trying to shore up his position and an unpopular U.S. president trying to score points with his political base.

With such dynamics driving the latest chapter in what is still called the “peace process,” it is no surprise to read [reports](#) that MbS has presented Palestinian leaders with a proposal that no Palestinian leader could ever accept. The proposal supposedly would create a Palestinian state, but one with only noncontiguous pieces of the West Bank, only limited sovereignty over even that territory, no East Jerusalem, and no right of return for Palestinian refugees.

The Saudi suggestion included naming Abu Dis, an Arab-inhabited suburb of Jerusalem, as the capital of the Palestinian entity — an idea that has been advanced before. Such a proposal being advanced now undermines the contention that Trump’s new declaration regarding Jerusalem as Israel’s capital has no implication for how Jerusalem will be handled in final status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians.

The history of Palestinian activism does not support the central concept of outside-in, which is that powerful Arab regimes will be able to impose their will on the Palestinians. The Arab League, with Gamal Abdel Nasser’s Egypt playing a leading role, did create the Palestine Liberation Organization in the 1960s. But only a few years later, the PLO came under the control of Yasser Arafat’s Fatah movement, which had originated before the PLO. Subsequent actions and postures repeatedly demonstrated that the PLO, despite its origin, was no tool of Arab regimes but more a reflection of popular Palestinian sentiment. Later history featured the rise of Hamas, which owed its existence to no regime and became such an expression of the frustration of Palestinians over Israeli occupation that Hamas even defeated Fatah in a free election.

There are strong reasons that the unresolved Israeli-Palestinian conflict evokes strong sentiments, and will continue to do so until and unless a genuine resolution of the conflict — not an imposed substitute for such a resolution — is achieved. One thing Kushner got right was his [recent public comment](#) that “if we’re going to try and create more stability in the region as a whole, you have to solve this issue.”

Anger Over Injustice

Sheer anger over occupation and all of the injustices in daily life that are part of the occupation is an underlying driver of instability. Another is the strength of nationalism and the desire of any people for self-determination. Such sentiment, among Israeli Jews as well as Palestinian Arabs, is why a two-state solution, despite how much more difficult the half century of Israeli colonization of occupied territory has made it, still is an essential part of any resolution of the conflict.

Arab empathy with Palestinian brethren continues to be strong, despite much talk in recent years about all the other problems in the Middle East that are on Arab minds, and notwithstanding how much the Bibi-MbS-Trump triangle would like to think that the only

thing anyone cares about is Iran.

The Jerusalem issue — the focus of Trump's latest appeal to his base — is especially a hot button. As Shibley Telhami, who regularly uses polling to test Arab sentiment, [observes](#), Jerusalem "remains a mobilizing issue even in a polarized environment: Even if Arabs don't go out into the streets in consequential numbers, a declaration will play into the hands of those plotting in the basement."

And Arabs do still go out in the streets. Telhami notes that they did so a few months ago in response to Israel's installation of new security measures at the al-Aqsa Mosque, generating enough of an uproar to lead governments to intervene.

What the Trump administration is doing, in concert with the rightist Israeli government, can be interpreted as just another episode in stringing along a "peace process" while Israel unilaterally establishes still more facts on the ground that are difficult to reverse. It is that, but there probably also is some self-delusion involved, especially when coupled with the inexperience of Kushner and MbS.

Sometimes when a rhetorical theme is repeated as often and for as many purposes as the drumbeat of Iran, Iran, Iran has been repeated, the drummers start to believe their own rhetoric.

In his public remarks the other day, Kushner asserted,

"Israel is a much more natural ally today than they were 20 years ago because of Iran and ISIS extremism."

No, it isn't. The growing intolerance in a state defined by religious and ethnic discrimination, with the cementing of a system of apartheid with a large subjugated population lacking political and civil rights, has made Israel even less of a natural ally of the United States over the past 20 years.

As for Iran, Netanyahu's political exploitation of that issue in a way that goes, with respect to the biggest Iran development in recent years — the agreement that restricts Iran's nuclear program — against even [Israel's own security interests](#) reflects how big the gap has become between Netanyahu's policies and U.S. interests.

Saudi Arabia always has had interests significantly different from those of the United States, notwithstanding mutually beneficial cooperative arrangements involving oil and security. The differences have become even greater with the rise of a young prince preoccupied with his internal power and his troubled campaign to claim regional dominance.

By hitching his Middle East policy to these two wagons in the vain hope that Palestinians can be browbeaten into permanent subjugation, Donald Trump is doing no favors either to U.S. interests or to the cause of Middle Eastern peace.

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