

STRATEGIKA

Conflicts Of The Past As Lessons For The Present

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CURRENT US-ISRAEL RELATIONS

IN THIS ISSUE

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Trump and Israel

By Barry Strauss

The Trump administration has changed course in various ways from its predecessor when it comes to relations with Israel. Among other things, the current American government has moved the US embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, recognized Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and reduced aid to the Palestinians. In addition, the administration is on the verge of unveiling the so-called Deal of the Century, a new proposal for an Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

What are the strategic consequences of these initiatives? And how do they advance American national interests? To answer these questions, we need to start with the broader context of American foreign policy.

As a global power, and the sole state capable of defending the liberal world order, the United States has interests around the world. Understandably, it has focused of late on East Asia, given the challenges of China and North Korea. Then, too, there is the importance of other states in the region, especially Japan. Yet other issues in other parts of the world call for attention as well, for example: the revolt against dictatorship in Venezuela, the future of NATO, trade relations in North America, dealings between India and Pakistan, economic development in Africa, and power politics in the Middle East. I turn to the latter here.

In the Middle East, American influence declined during the Obama administration. The fiascos in Egypt and Libya cost American interests dearly. The withdrawal from Iraq enabled Iran to move in. The refusal to get involved in the Syrian Civil War with a coherent and consistent policy opened the door to Russian reentry into the region for the first time in decades. Despite predictions of Russia getting bogged down in a quagmire, Putin has played his hand deftly in Syria and expanded Russian prestige and power at relatively little price, with benefits to be cashed in also in Eastern Europe.

The nuclear deal, meanwhile, enriched Iran and gave it the resources to expand. It did not prevent Iran's emergence as a nuclear power but merely postponed it. A revolutionary regime, Teheran is committed to magnify its power and it has done so. As US secretary of state Mike Pompeo recently said, the deal "put the regime's campaigns of terrorism and proxy wars on steroids." Iran now has a dominant influence in four regional states: Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Syria. Like China, Russia, and Cuba, Iran is also a supporter of Maduro's dictatorship in Venezuela. Finally, Iran is dedicated to the destruction of Israel, to which end it is a key supporter of Hamas and Hezbollah.

In recent years, Turkey has moved further along the road of neo-Ottomanist policies under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who has also expanded his power at home. Turkey's government has become both more authoritarian and more Islamist. Erdogan has threatened the territorial integrity of Greece and Cyprus. Ankara has angered Washington by its insistence on buying advanced missile defenses from the Russians, which hardly seems to suit the spirit of NATO, an alliance of which Turkey is a member. Meanwhile, Iran, Russia, and Turkey have entered into an alignment, thereby multiplying the power of all three in the region.

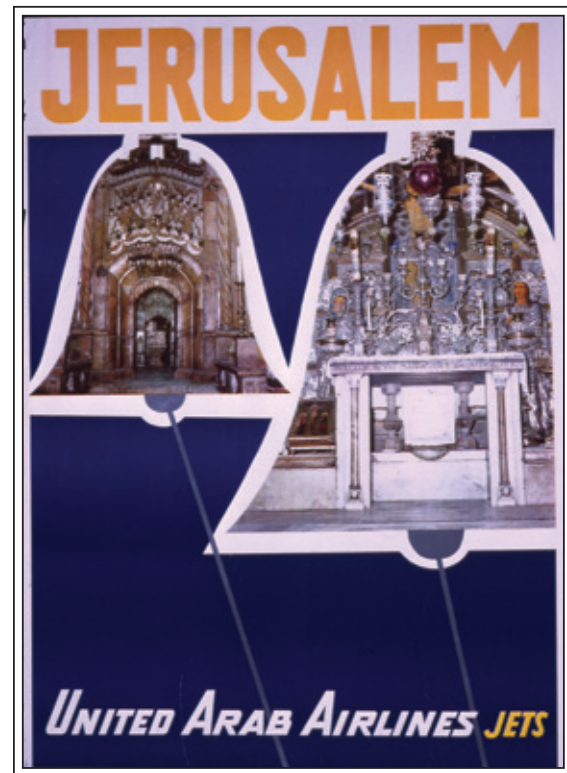


Image credit: Poster Collection, UA 0007, Hoover Institution Archives.

The Trump administration has wisely built up a regional counter-alignment of Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the Gulf States, and Israel. Saudi Arabia and the Gulf States feel directly threatened by Iran and its ambitions in the Persian Gulf. The Gulf States also have soured on the Palestinians and their close ties with Iran. The current Egyptian government under President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi fears Iran's radicalism and resents Turkey's support for the regime of the Muslim Brotherhood that followed the fall of Hosni Mubarak. Israel is also the lynchpin of another alignment that checks Turkey, this one with Greece and with the possible participation of the Kurds.

Among these states, Israel necessarily plays the leading role. No other country offers the combination of military force, economic resources, domestic stability, and competent leadership. Israel is, moreover, a democracy. To quote Secretary Pompeo again, the administration has "reaffirmed America's historic alliance with the only free nation in the Middle East: Israel."

When it comes to freedom of speech, vigor of debate, and political engagement, Israel compares favorably to any western democracy. Israeli political participation is, actually, higher than in the United States of America—with an average voter turnout of 69% in parliamentary elections over the last twenty years, compared to ca.55% in US presidential elections. Netanyahu is not without domestic political problems, but in spite of those problems he is a first-class leader on the international stage.

As for the Palestinians, it appears unfortunately that they will continue to suffer under a leadership that is itself radicalized or that is afraid of its radical opponents. Such a stance leaves the Palestinian leadership unable to accept any deal that is less than the maximum. Based on the supposed details that have leaked out, Trump's deal of the century is likely to fail as well. Although it reportedly offers very generous financial terms for developing the Palestinian economy, apparently it does not offer an independent state.

By moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, Trump strengthened Israel's legitimacy. It also demonstrated Israel's growing normalization among Islamic countries because of what followed or, rather, because of what didn't follow. In spite of predictions by some, there was little or no violent response.

The US recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Golan is no small thing. It tends to strengthen Israel's claim over disputed territory in international tribunals. It weakens the prestige of the Assad regime while highlighting the inability of Assad's allies to prevent a major foreign policy loss. It underlines the principle that territorial change in Israel's benefit is possible without major consequences. Both recent US moves, regarding Jerusalem and the Golan, remind us that among other things, Trump is a businessman: they cost the Americans nothing.

By cutting aid to the Palestinian Authority by over \$200 million as well as by \$300 million to UNRWA, the Trump administration makes the point that it considers the number of Palestinian refugees to be inflated (while also saving taxpayer money—the businessman, again). It shows that it is serious about trying to influence Palestinian policy in the direction of a settlement with Israel. It also underlines the inability of the Palestinians' Iranian patron to protect them.

To be sure, Israel has its own interests that don't always suit America. Yet increasingly it seems that Israel is a more reliable ally to the United States than some of America's old friends in Europe.

Historically, it is very useful for hegemonies to have friendly "beachheads" in strategically challenging territory. Examples range from classical Greece (Sparta's alliance with Athens' neighbor, Megara), to the Roman Republic (Rome's friendship with Numidia against Carthage) to the twentieth century. That latter era offers such examples as France's alliance with Czechoslovakia in interwar Europe, the Soviets' alliance with Cuba in the Cold War, and the American alliance with Japan, Taiwan, and South Korea. For the United States, Israel is such a beachhead.

Beachheads offer resources to distant powers including such things as bases, local intelligence, and military support. Beachheads are capable of throwing roadblocks in the way of other powers in the region who pose threats to a distant hegemon. Yet beachheads are not passive. They have interests and minds of their

own. While willing to help the hegemon, they naturally put their own interests first. Hence the relationship between hegemon and beachhead is rarely simple. Sometimes it's a tug of war. Charges of "the tail wagging the dog" are legion. Sometimes the hegemon ditches the beachhead state when the price of support grows too high, as France and Britain surrendered Czechoslovakia to Nazi Germany in 1938. Sometimes, as that case reminds us, hegemons later regret that decision.

Israel's closer security ties with China, for example, have elicited a strong American response. Meanwhile, Israel lost trust in the United States after the Obama administration backed away from assurances given to Israeli prime minister Ariel Sharon by American President George W. Bush in 2004 and endorsed by Congress. Bush recognized the risks being taken by Israel in withdrawing from Gaza and promised that Israel would not have to withdraw as well from settlements on the West Bank. The Obama administration, by contrast, said it wanted Israel to withdraw more or less to the pre-1967-war boundaries. These are real disputes, but when powerful interests connect allies, they can usually find a way to resolve them, as the United States and Israel surely will.

Despite recent saber rattling against Iran, the United States has managed to stay out of war with Iran. The Trump administration recognizes that it is better to have Israel on the front lines, while also acting to deter armed conflict between the two states. Iran has heated up its response, but it seems more likely that it is trying to squeeze financial aid out of Europe, in the face of American sanctions, than that Iran would risk all-out war.

If we put the Trump administration's recent policies toward Israel in the larger context of American strategy, the strategic implications become abundantly clear. Trump is reversing Obama's strategy in the Middle East. He is weakening Iran considerably while also checking Russia and Turkey. He is strengthening Israel, which is the cornerstone of a set of understandings among states that stretches from Greece to the Persian Gulf and includes the key players of Egypt and Saudi Arabia. After a period of passivity and withdrawal, Trump is reasserting American influence in the region while avoiding involvement in another war. The result makes the United States—and the world—safer.



BARRY STRAUSS is a military historian with a focus on ancient Greece and Rome. His latest book, *The Death of Caesar: The Story of History's Most Famous Assassination* (Simon & Schuster, March 2015), has been hailed as "clear and compelling" by *TIME* and received three starred reviews from book journals (*Kirkus*, *Library Journal*, *Shelf Awareness*). His *Masters of Command: Alexander, Hannibal, Caesar and the Genius of Leadership* (Simon & Schuster, May 2012) was named one of the best books of 2012 by Bloomberg.



Image credit: Poster Collection, US 3576, Hoover Institution Archives.

Israel's Narrow Path to Peace

By Angelo M. Codevilla

Pitilessly, the past quarter century's events have dismissed the hopes for peace with the Arabs that Israeli diplomats, often accompanied by US counterparts, detailed to the world in 1993 as they explained the concessions they had finalized in Oslo. Previously, they had treated Yasser Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization as a terrorist organization to be marginalized if not destroyed. The list of its outrages, from bombing school buses and airports to murdering Olympic athletes, spoke for itself. In 1982, the United States saved the PLO from imminent destruction by an Israeli and Lebanese alliance, and sustained it in supervised exile in Tunisia. US policy had always nourished hopes that, were the PLO to be given responsibility and treated as a partner, it would moderate itself. This would result in a Palestinian state living peacefully alongside Israel.

In Israel, substantial high-level opinion had come to share these hopes. And why not? The Soviet collapse, having removed the PLO's main source of funding and hope of support, radically weakened Syria. The Israelis judged that the PLO had little choice but to take the generous option of peace and partnership offered to it. Besides, Israel had been suffering from a wave of PLO-organized violence in the West Bank, and longed for a broad path to peace. Hence, the Oslo Accords.

The accords delivered the opposite. Subsequent waves of violence, escalating demands, and outright wars, have convinced the Israeli public's vast majority that its only path to peace is very narrow—a long-term commitment to very hard, defensible borders, coupled with encouraging Egypt and Jordan, who are almost as equally threatened as Israel by what the Palestinian people have become, to take control of Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank. Only the Arab parties and the left wing of left-wing Meretz regret abandoning attempts at a “two state solution.”

So firmly is Israel on this path, so lacking are credible alternatives, that the highly touted “plan of the century” that Jared Kushner is to unveil in June 2019 may trouble it, but is unlikely to alter it.

Beginning in 1993, by implementing what they believed to be the terms of the Oslo Accords, Israelis and Americans gave the PLO effective sovereignty over the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, thus transmuting it into the Palestinian Authority (PA). They provided it with local taxing authority and police power, basic infrastructure services (electricity, water, etc.), and power over schools and lots of money. Negotiations began to transfer virtually full sovereign power over these territories to the PA: power, in exchange for moderation. But by 1998, when the deal was to have been sealed at Wye Plantation, Maryland with President Clinton presiding, the PA had already become a Kakotopia.

The lavish funds at its disposal—now from America and Europe as well as from Israel—had enriched a class of officials and created a society that lived on the corrupt trickling down of unearned money. Its legitimacy—reaffirmed daily by its school system—rested more than ever on the demand for the “right of return”

of anyone who claimed descent from those who had left Israel a half century before, to come and dispossess Israelis. In its absence, it rested on incitement to violence against Jews. Whereas during Oslo's early years the PA's authorities had not interfered with commercial relationships between Arabs and Israelis, they now increasingly penalized Arabs who sold land to Jews. The PA's leadership chose to firm up this basis for their claim to legitimacy. They punctuated their rejection of the Wye bargain with an intifada that lasted from 2000 to 2005. The PA was not to have an army, only police, which would coordinate its activities with Israel. Nonsense. Its main part became an army that fights Israel with every available weapon.

The Palestinian campaign in Israel has taken ever newer forms—knife attacks, vehicles running down civilians, etc. The Israelis responded primarily by reducing contact with Palestinians not under their control. This meant the construction of over 400 miles of barrier along what had been its armistice line. This produced unprecedented security and, in a way, became the basis of Israel's long-term plan for its future: tight security control of all areas where Israelis live. That now includes some 400,000 persons who live in settlements on the West Bank. These settlements are policed by Israel.

Similarly, Israeli concessions over external borders led to more war and more demands. In 2000, Israel withdrew a force from southern Lebanon that had prevented rocket launches against Galilee. No sooner had they departed than the launches resumed. In 2004, Israel uprooted 10,000 Jews from Gaza as it withdrew. The result has been rocket-barrages from Gaza, and three major wars, in 2008, 2012, and 2014. There will be no more border concessions to enemy states.

Two conclusions about Israel's path to peace are now firm: isolation from Arabs over whom it has no security jurisdiction, as well as no more border concessions.

The remaining question is how Israel should shield itself from Palestinian misrule in the West Bank and Gaza. The US government has hoped that "moderate Arabs," meaning chiefly the Saudis and the Emiratis, might exercise a moderating influence on the Palestinians, especially recently because of the de facto alliance between the former and Israel versus Iran. This has not worked because these faraway countries wield little influence, and financing the PLA enables its misrule.

Israel, however, now counts on the fact that both Jordan and Egypt do suffer from the nearby radicalized Palestinian population, whose only real occupation is making trouble for their neighbors. Israel does not want to police them. Egypt and Jordan, in their own interests, could be persuaded to treat Palestinians in Gaza and the West Bank, respectively, as citizens, to impose order upon and dispense justice among them.

For the past quarter century, the PLA has used the power that Israel and America gave it over the Palestinian people, and the money, to make war. Peace will require taking that power and that money away.

POLL: What is the importance of Trump's pro-Israel initiatives?

- ☐ Not much: Trump simply recognized long-accepted realities on the ground.
- ☐ Trump is solidifying a new Israeli, moderate Arab, and American anti-Iran axis.
- ☐ Trump is restoring America's traditional pro-Israel policy mostly negated by the Obama administration
- ☐ Trump has abandoned the disinterested role of the United States that made us an honest broker in the region.
- ☐ Overt favoritism toward Israel will lead to violence, maybe war, and anti-Americanism among Muslim nations.

Heretofore, the US government's commitment to the "two state solution," and its concomitant financial support of the PA, had been a principal obstacle to the Palestinians' capacity to absorb the reality that they are never going to destroy Israel, and hence to realize that they must get on with lives aimed at something else—like earning a living.

The Trump administration has reduced the level of funding, and seems disposed to end it. It remains to be seen how, after the Kushner report, US diplomacy deals with the budding trilateral arrangement among Israel, Egypt, and Jordan.



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Trump and the Israeli-Palestinian Standoff

By Paul A. Rahe

In his inimitable way, Donald Trump has gored yet another sacred cow—this one in the Levant.

First, consider this. For nearly seventy years, the United States was the principal source of funds for the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestinian Refugees in the Near East (UNRWA)—an outfit which not only provided (and still provides) support for Palestinians who fled from their homes in 1948 and found, after the first Arab-Israeli War, that they could not return, but which also provides for those of their patrilineal descendants who still reside in the refugee camps situated in Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, the Gaza Strip, the West Bank, and East Jerusalem. For a similar period, the United States refused to recognize Jerusalem as the Israeli capital and located its embassy in Tel Aviv. Moreover, for more than half a century after the Six-Day War of 1967, the American government chose to treat the Golan Heights, captured from Syria, as occupied territory.

Then, ponder the fact that the Trump administration abruptly changed all of this. It cut off funds for UNRWA. It acknowledged that Jerusalem is Israel's capital and moved the US embassy there. And recently it recognized the Golan Heights as Israeli territory.

Initially, these changes in US policy stirred controversy. Fourteen of the fifteen members of the UN Security Council—including Britain, France, Italy, Sweden, and Japan—voted for a resolution condemning the decision regarding Jerusalem, as did nine of the eleven former American ambassadors to Israel still alive. The decision to recognize the Golan Heights as Israeli territory was similarly excoriated by the European Union; by Britain, Ireland, Germany, France, Belgium, Spain, Poland, Russia, Canada, Japan, China, and Vietnam; and by South Africa, Turkey, the Arab League, Egypt, Sudan, Saudi Arabia, Oman, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Kuwait, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq, Mauritania, Morocco, and Tunisia as well as Iran, Somalia, Indonesia, Pakistan, Malaysia, Cuba, and Venezuela.

Then, the uproar died down—for next to no one really cares about any of this, and the denunciations amounted to little more than virtue-signaling on the part of those who regard themselves as the great and the good. The truth, as everyone knows, is that Jerusalem has been Israel's capital for more than seventy years and that the Golan Heights, which looms over the Galilee and the Syrian plain to the north, is essential for Israel's defense. It is, moreover, obvious that UNRWA has long outlived whatever usefulness it once had. The number of genuine refugees still alive seven decades after these Palestinians fled from their homes in what is now Israeli territory is minuscule. And the chief contribution of the UNRWA in the last six decades has been to enable the countries hosting the refugees and their offspring to resist their integration within the surrounding populations. If, within the Levant, there is still a refugee problem today, it is because the United States and its allies subsidized it.

Of course, during the Cold War, there may have been a point to the policy that the United States adopted. It enabled us to pose—and sometimes actually serve—as a mediator between the Arabs and the Israelis, and it made it easier for us to maintain cordial ties with the Turks, the Saudis, the Jordanians, the Tunisians,



Image credit: Poster Collection, US 8131, Hoover Institution Archives.

the Moroccans, the Pakistanis, and, at times, the Egyptians, the Indonesians, and the Iranians. There were always some who supposed that it would enable us to broker a genuine peace (as opposed to a cease-fire), but that was always a dream. There were then and still are now individuals on the Palestinian side who are willing, even eager, to reach a lasting settlement. But they have never been in positions of power, and, within the Palestinian community, they did not and do not command much in the way of support.

In the interim, conditions have changed. The Cold War is over. The Muslim world has fractured along sectarian lines. Iraq and Syria have been wracked by civil wars. A number of Sunni Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt, are in effect allied with Israel against Iran. And the Palestinians are bitterly divided—with some supporting Mahmoud Abbas and the PLO and others, arguably a majority, taking the side of Hamas. It does not now matter whether the Israeli government wants to reach a settlement with the Palestinians. There is on the other side no reliable interlocutor capable of speaking for the Arabs situated in Gaza and on the West Bank, and the United States no longer needs to curry favor in the larger Arab world. The new American policy reflects the fact that there is no longer any compelling reason to keep up what was never much more than a pretense.

Today, some within the Trump administration may wish to argue that publicly acknowledging realities of long standing will make it easier to forge a proper settlement, and they are said to be about to dangle before the Palestinians an economic carrot. Whether anything will come of this, however, we may justly doubt. It would be wiser to acknowledge, at least in private, that, no matter what we do, a lasting settlement is not in the cards. The Israelis will never sacrifice the conditions prerequisite for their security, and the Palestinians are not apt to accept those conditions. We are told that the latter are nearly as fed up with Hamas as they are with the corrupt rule of Abbas and his cronies. We are told that young Palestinians increasingly dream of a one-state solution. And this may well be true. But there is no real prospect that, in the foreseeable future, the Palestinians as a people will ever settle for anything less than everything—and today's Israelis no longer entertain any illusions about this.



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Discussion Questions

1. Why is the Golan Heights considered such a historically strategic landscape?
2. What exactly is the new role of Russia in the Middle East?
3. Is the enmity of many of the Arab states toward Iran really stronger than their historical dislike of Israel?
4. What are the strategic consequences of the Trump administration's new initiatives affecting Israel, such as moving the US embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights, and reducing aid to the Palestinians?
5. Does the Israeli Left approve of Trump's new policies toward Israel?

IN THE NEXT ISSUE

US-China Trade Tensions



Military History in Contemporary Conflict

As the very name of Hoover Institution attests, military history lies at the very core of our dedication to the study of “War, Revolution, and Peace.” Indeed, the precise mission statement of the Hoover Institution includes the following promise: “The overall mission of this Institution is, from its records, to recall the voice of experience against the making of war, and by the study of these records and their publication, to recall man’s endeavors to make and preserve peace, and to sustain for America the safeguards of the American way of life.” From its origins as a library and archive, the Hoover Institution has evolved into one of the foremost research centers in the world for policy formation and pragmatic analysis. It is with this tradition in mind, that the “Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict” has set its agenda—reaffirming the Hoover Institution’s dedication to historical research in light of contemporary challenges, and in particular, reinvigorating the national study of military history as an asset to foster and enhance our national security. By bringing together a diverse group of distinguished military historians, security analysts, and military veterans and practitioners, the working group seeks to examine the conflicts of the past as critical lessons for the present.

Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict

The Working Group on the Role of Military History in Contemporary Conflict examines how knowledge of past military operations can influence contemporary public-policy decisions concerning current conflicts. The careful study of military history offers a way of analyzing modern war and peace that is often underappreciated in this age of technological determinism. Yet the result leads to a more in-depth and dispassionate understanding of contemporary wars, one that explains how particular military successes and failures of the past can be often germane, sometimes misunderstood, or occasionally irrelevant in the context of the present.

Strategika

Strategika is a journal that analyzes ongoing issues of national security in light of conflicts of the past—the efforts of the Military History Working Group of historians, analysts, and military personnel focusing on military history and contemporary conflict. Our board of scholars shares no ideological consensus other than a general acknowledgment that human nature is largely unchanging. Consequently, the study of past wars can offer us tragic guidance about present conflicts—a preferable approach to the more popular therapeutic assumption that contemporary efforts to ensure the perfectibility of mankind eventually will lead to eternal peace. New technologies, methodologies, and protocols come and go; the larger tactical and strategic assumptions that guide them remain mostly the same—a fact discernable only through the study of history.



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