

Trump Builds Rapport in Israel; Policies to Come?

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Brief Analysis

Publicly at least, the president's first trip to Israel focused on symbolic rapprochement rather than policy pressure, but at some point the administration will need to clarify its next steps on the peace process and Iran.

President Trump's visit to Israel was in keeping with the theme of his first Middle East tour, namely, identifying with traditional U.S. allies in the region. The Gulf states and Israel are now hearing a more assertive American tone against Iran, the Islamic State, and similar actors, in sharp contrast with the Obama administration's perceived policy of resolving tension via diplomacy with Tehran.

Israeli leaders did not hide their satisfaction with the contrast. President Reuven Rivlin captured this sentiment best when he stood alongside a grinning Trump and declared, "We are happy to see that America is back in the area." Similarly, Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu told Trump, "I wanted you to know how much we appreciate the American change in policy on Iran."

So far, however, it remains unclear what has changed besides Washington's tone. Just last week, for example, the administration **waived certain sanctions (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-to-expect-after-irans-election>)** on Iran, and it has affirmed that the United States will abide by the 2015 nuclear deal. Yet Israeli officials have not challenged this approach, so they may be satisfied with public hints (and, perhaps, private assurances) of greater U.S. assertiveness in the future.

On the Israeli-Palestinian issue, Trump probably did not want to mar his first visit by focusing on matters that might magnify U.S.-Israeli differences. Rather, he seemed intent on building personal rapport with Israeli leaders, using an assertive tone during his public remarks and taking symbolic steps that resonated with the public. For example, he embarked on highly visible tours of the Western Wall and the Church of the Holy Sepulchre (the first time a sitting U.S. president has done so), among other important sites. Many Israelis were also touched by his Tuesday speech at

the Israel Museum, where he said he would never forget visiting the Western Wall and declared that the United States will not bow to Iran or terrorism.

Meanwhile, his public remarks omitted virtually all Israeli-Palestinian policy issues. He did not mention recommitting to the two-state solution, resuming peace negotiations, or relocating the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Nor did he utter the word "settlements" or make anything beyond a very general comment against Palestinian incitement and rewards for terrorism. Similarly, his Bethlehem discussion with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas -- their second meeting this month -- did not produce any announcements about potential talks with Israel, despite Abbas's previously stated willingness to drop preconditions and meet with Netanyahu under Trump's aegis.

Although Netanyahu and Abbas likely heaved a sigh of relief at this pressure-free approach, other observers will no doubt wonder what this absence of policy talk means. Was it a deliberate effort to set the table for more substantive pronouncements down the road? Or is Trump essentially telling the parties that the United States is not going to do any heavy lifting on this issue, and that the onus is on them to move the process forward? If the latter, this marks a major shift that Washington needs to clarify.

One dimension of the visit that received relatively little public attention in Israel was how Arab states can contribute to advancing peace with the Palestinians -- a surprising omission given Trump's presence at Saudi Arabia's full weekend of pan-Islamic summits. At one point Trump did suggest that Israel-Palestinian peace could contribute to regional peace, but Netanyahu seemed to suggest the reverse: that progress between Israel and Arab states would lead to movement with the Palestinians. The prime minister also expressed rare enthusiasm about the Arab shift in attitudes toward Israel, saying it was the first he could detect in his lifetime. While the idea of Arab involvement in the peace process is decades old, many observers now hope that the growing Israeli-Sunni convergence of thinking on Iran and jihadist movements will create a new parallelism: namely, Sunni Arab governments taking steps toward Israel as Israel takes steps toward the Palestinians, creating more political space for all. No such steps were mentioned publicly, but it is possible that U.S. officials relayed private messages to this effect given the proximity of their Saudi and Israeli visits.

In short, whether the issue is Iran, Palestinian peace talks, or potential Arab-Israeli ties with Israel, Trump may be planning to follow up his trip with a new set of policies that provide a sense of direction for the road ahead. For now, though, the next steps on these key issues remain unclear.

David Makovsky is the Ziegler Distinguished Fellow and director of the Project on the Middle East Peace Process at The Washington Institute. His publications include the Transition 2017 paper "[Toward a New Paradigm for Addressing the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict](http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict)" (<http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/toward-a-new-paradigm-for-addressing-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict>) (coauthored with Dennis Ross). ❖

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