

## **President Trump's Foreign Policy Towards the Middle East (2016-20): A Critical Analysis**

*Mansoor Ahmed, Mohammad Ozair & Irfan Khan*

### **Abstract**

*Since the oil discovery and Balfour Declaration in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the Middle East, particularly the Arab-Israel conflict has remained the most contested subject of the international politics. The United States (US) policy towards the region has always been debatable because of its one-sided and unconditional support to Israel. The unprecedented policy tilt undertaken by the Trump administration towards Israel from 2016 to 2020 has far-reaching implications not only for the tumultuous region, but also for global politics, particularly relating to the Muslim world. This article analyzes the Trump administration's foreign policy in the world's most volatile and unstable region. The article focuses on the US recognition of Jerusalem as Israeli capital, Israeli sovereignty over illegal Jewish settlements in the West Bank and the strategic Golan Heights, the Deal of the Century and the Abraham Accords, and, more importantly, the policy options for Pakistan. This research is qualitative, explanatory, and descriptive, with an analytical approach that critically studies the key policy initiatives undertaken by President Trump in the Middle East and Levant.*

**Keywords:** Trump administration, Middle East, Israel-Palestine Conflict, Deal of the Century, and the Abraham Accords.

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## **Introduction**

Soon after the assumption of the Presidential charge in early 2016, Donald J. Trump reiterated the often-repeated statement that his administration would revise the foreign policy initiatives of the previous regimes that have resulted in a noticeable decline in the American dominance in the Middle East region. The May 2017 visit of President Trump to the very crucial but highly problematic and chaotic region of the Middle East (ME) focused on the establishment of peace and security including meetings with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries. The Trump administration's policy toward the Middle East is one of the clearest examples of one-sidedness and unilateralism. The policy is based on an extremely rigid divide between arch-foe Iran (and those, such as the Syrian regime, that have a positive relationship with Iran), on the one hand, and regional rivals of Iran, including Israel and some major Gulf Arab States on the other. Indeed, the US needs to replace its long exhausted military practice (Iraq and Afghanistan) with soft power by looking for political and diplomatic solutions to addressing the long-lasting issues.<sup>1</sup> The Trump administration seemed reluctant to resort to military interventionism and counter terrorism initiatives and favored the establishment of peace through economic development and reconciliation in the region.

Historically, the United States wished to stop Communism from spreading, however, over the past decade, there have been two commonly cited threats from the Middle East; one is the radical Islamist groups (the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria or ISIS) and the other is the nuclear-armed Iran. The academic and policy experts believe that the new American approach toward the ME gives rise to questions regarding its traditional policy roadmaps; does the US leadership have worn-out options regarding its policy initiatives be it military expedition,

intervention in the regional affairs of the Middle Eastern countries, threat of political Islam, the nuclear proliferation of Iran, or economic and financial burden? In this context, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) embody the regional expression of American global hegemony—the notion that ‘the United States has the right, responsibility, and wisdom to manage local politics almost everywhere’.<sup>2</sup> Trump’s detractors hold that the US foreign policy since 2016 is spelling doomsday for global peace and human security while his supporters see it as restoring US pride and nationalist defiance against an oppressive global establishment.

The article deals with some of the major themes of US policy in the Middle East such as the Abraham Accords, the bilateral agreements dubbed as the deal of the century, the future of Palestine, and more importantly, the policy options for Pakistan. The Israel-Palestine conflict in the region is termed as the most critical territorial and ideological issue in the region that has engaged various global and regional powers in terms of financial, military, and diplomatic support on both sides which often led to offensive clashes resulting in financial and collateral damage. In this context, President Trump’s policies with regard to Israel-Palestine issue seem productive and goal-oriented as he interested in peaceful settlement of the issue.

### **Deal of the Century**

The Oslo Accords of the 1990s left numerous key issues unresolved pending the completion of the permanent status negotiations, including, among other things, borders, security, refugees, and Jerusalem issue. Thus, President Trump came up with a proposed deal considering the regional security dynamics including the Israel and Palestine issue. Historically, the American leadership had always been on the side of the Israelis be it political, economic, diplomatic, or military issues.<sup>3</sup> A case in point is the so-called deal of the century on January 8,

2020. The document comprising 181 pages divided into 22 sections covers each part of the Israel-Palestine issue. President Trump categorically stated maintenance of peace is now fundamentally different from that of the past. The region has suffered greatly in general and the two rival states, in particular. If the conflict is resolved, the region will become safer and more prosperous because there is always the possibility of a win-win situation for both sides only if they develop a consensus regarding the prevailing issues. The vision for peace and prosperity in the region, the deal, according to him, would create room for the Palestinians to get a state which would enable them to live with peace, dignity, and honor.<sup>4</sup> Currently, the West Bank and Gaza are politically divided. The former is governed by a government that is labelled incapable and corrupt while the latter is dominated by Hamas that launched various attacks on Israel, creating security concerns not only for regional countries, but also for international powers. The deal is viewed as aiming to promote peace and security, especially for Palestine.<sup>5</sup> It proposes that Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided capital and Eastern Jerusalem will become Palestine's capital once the conditions of statehood are met. Once peace is maintained, there will be economic progress in the shape of investment and employment opportunities which will ultimately lead to a healthy political environment.

In this regard, President Trump's proposal was not exceptional. While he believed that he was offering a "deal of the century", the deal actually was meant to greatly benefit Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu, his government, and people. Undoubtedly, the world in general and the US in particular were interested in a peaceful and durable solution of the long lasting and problematic issue of Palestine and Israel. However, in this long process of mediation, reconciliation, and peaceful negotiations between the archrivals, the United States always cared about

the wishes, constrains, and security of Israel.<sup>6</sup> The Oslo peace process of 1990 was another case in which the United States explicitly favored Israel. Various multi-level negotiations that were directed at conflict resolution were taken up by President Trump e.g., recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel; closing the Palestinian Liberation Organization's (PLO) embassy in Washington, and the proposal for an independent Palestinian state.<sup>7</sup> The U.S. has always favored Israeli settlement and often employed veto at the United Nations; exclusively assisted the Israeli leadership with technological leverage to uphold military superiority in the region; and mediated for peace between Egypt and Israel by pulling the Arab army out of the equation.<sup>8</sup>

However, in the Senate of the United States, the Democrats along with three presidential candidates wrote a letter to the President, criticizing and terming this move as "one-sided" as it clearly violated Palestinians' right to self-determination. The leadership of Muslim countries including Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC) and Arab League (AL) also extensively discussed the projected US plan about the Israel-Palestine conflict and blatantly rejected it.<sup>9</sup> The plan to a great extent permits the Israeli leadership to capture more areas of the West Bank. Netanyahu also stated that the Palestinian government must recognize Israel as a Jewish state, cede Jordan valley, and abandon the desire for the return of refugees and the capital in Jerusalem's old city.<sup>10</sup>

### **The Abraham Accords**

On September 15, 2020, Israel signed separate peace agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. They also signed a trilateral accord known as the "Abraham Accords". The accords were brokered by President Trump and his son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Through this agreement, UAE and Israel agreed to establish formal diplomatic relations with each other under

the established international legal regime.<sup>11</sup> Although UAE formally recognized Israel and established diplomatic relations; however, even before this agreement Israel had a diplomatic office in Abu Dhabi which was established in 2015.<sup>12</sup> Security and intelligence cooperation between the two states had already been sustained for a significant period of time.<sup>13</sup>

The agreement reaffirmed the joint statement of the US, UAE, and Israel dated August 13, 2020. In this joint statement, the UAE and Israel agreed to normalize diplomatic relations and scheduled for the delegations of both states to meet in the coming weeks to sign bilateral agreements in different sectors including “investment, tourism, direct flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, the environment, the establishment of reciprocal embassies, and other areas of mutual benefit.” In the joint statement the parties agreed that they “will continue their efforts in this regard to achieve a just, comprehensive and enduring resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.”<sup>14</sup>

Following are the major points of the UAE-Israel Abraham Accord:

- Establish diplomatic relations, peace, and full normalization of bilateral relations.
- Relations between the parties will be guided by the charter of the United Nations and the principles of international law governing relations among states.
- The Parties shall exchange resident embassies as soon as possible and shall conduct diplomatic and councilor relations in accordance with the international law.
- Both states shall work for peace and stability of the region and shall thwart any hostile or terrorist activity endangering the security and interest of the parties. Further, they shall discuss such matters regularly.

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- Besides commitment to peace, stability, diplomatic and friendly relations, cooperation, and full normalization, both parties shall unlock their great potential in different sectors by signing agreements at the earliest dates in order to further the interests of the region.
- Both nations being the descendants of Abraham will usher in a new era of friendly relations including “people-to-people programs, inter-faith dialogue, cultural, academic, youth, scientific and other exchanges between their people.”
- Establish a “High Level Joint Forum for Peace and Co-Existence” which shall work to counter terrorism and extremism.
- Work with each other and with the US to launch a “Strategic Agenda for the Middle East” to advance multi-faceted development in the region.
- An annex has been provided to the treaty which charts out how to progress their relations in different areas including finance and investment; civil aviation; tourism; innovation; trade and economic relations; science, technology, and peaceful usage of outer-space; environment; telecommunications and post; health care; agriculture and food; water; energy; maritime arrangements and local cooperation.

The Abraham Accords were followed by a series of agreements aimed at normalization of relations mainly with the Arab states<sup>15</sup>. President Trump spearheaded these peace initiatives in the Middle East. In January 2020, President Trump issued his long-awaited vision for the Middle East, entitled “Peace to Prosperity” which is also called “Deal of the Century” because it aimed to resolve one of the world’s major and longest issue by proposing a two-state solution to the Palestine-Israeli issue. Israel welcomed President Trump’s plan while Palestine strongly rejected it. President Trump standing next to the Israeli

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu issued a statement saying it might be the last chance for Palestine.<sup>16</sup> Palestine had already ended ties with US in 2017 when US recognized Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and shifted the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.<sup>17</sup>

After signing the peace and normalization of relations agreement between the state of Israel and Bahrain, Israeli Prime Minister observed: “It took us a full 26 years from Israel’s second peace agreement with an Arab state to the third peace agreement, and now it’s taken us only 29 days from the third peace agreement to the fourth.<sup>18</sup> What a change! I want to express my appreciation for His Majesty the King of Bahrain for joining the Circle of Peace, and my appreciation for Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Zayed for working with Israel and the United States to expand the circle of peace”. Palestine declared the agreement as “another knife in the back.”<sup>19</sup>

Major points of the Israel-Bahrain peace agreement are as follows:

- Like the UAE and Israel agreement, the agreement between Bahrain and Israel promised the normalization of relations between the two states and highlighted its importance for regional peace and inter-faith co-existence.
- “The parties discussed their shared commitment to advancing peace and security in the Middle East, stressing the importance of embracing the vision of the Abraham Accords, widening the circle of peace.”
- Both parties agreed to establish full diplomatic relations, tackle threats to their security and to promote a culture of peace.
- Like the UAE and Israel agreement, this one also sought agreements “regarding investment, tourism, direct



flights, security, telecommunications, technology, energy, healthcare, culture, the environment, and other areas of mutual benefit, as well as reaching agreement on the reciprocal opening of embassies.”

- They termed the event as a “historic opportunity” with reference to their shared future. Both parties thanked and showed their appreciation to President Trump for his untiring efforts in this respect.

There are two speculations regarding this. First, President Trump being religiously motivated wants to leave a legacy; and second, the US, its strategic partner Israel, and the likeminded friends want to establish a common front against their common enemy, Iran<sup>20</sup>. Saudi Arabia delayed its response to the peace agreements but then lately denounced the move however after granting permission to Israel to use its air space. President Trump's close aide and son-in-law Jared Kushner made these developments possible through his confidential back-channel diplomacy.<sup>21</sup> Further, news about the visit of Israeli Prime minister Netanyahu to KSA and meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman and Mike Pompeo, the secretary of state at Neom city appeared in the media but were rejected by the Kingdom.<sup>22</sup> These developments show signs of covert negotiations and contacts between Israel and KSA. Both KSA and Israel are uncertain about the new administration's policy towards the Middle East and how the new administration will treat Iran. They are afraid of Iran becoming a nuclear power and consider it a threat to their security and interests in the region. Some analysts see these agreements as providing protection from the Iranian threat.<sup>23</sup> The Voice of America reported remarks of the senior Palestinian official Saeb Erekat:

The Bahrain-Israeli agreement to normalize relations is now part of a bigger package in the region. It's not about peace, it's not about relations between countries.

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We are witnessing an alliance, a military alliance being created in the region, maybe they want to call it an Arab-Israel NATO. As far as the Palestinians are concerned, big Israel can bring 193 ambassadors to Tel Aviv, but then what? I am what needs to be solved, I am the problem. They are my problem. I am what needs to be solved and the only way to have peace in this region is to solve the Palestinian question.<sup>24</sup>

In the post-Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action commonly known as the Iran Nuclear Deal during the Obama administration, relations between the US and Israel faced a minor decline.<sup>25</sup> The Obama administration accepted the limited nuclear capability of Iran which also had to submit for the IAEA inspections. Iran Nuclear Deal was a threat for Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other likeminded states in the region who consider Iran an enemy.<sup>26</sup> Iran's promotion of the pan-Shiite Islamic ideology and its military interference in the region are the source of contention in the Middle East. Iran's support to the Hezbollah and Hamas further heightens this tension. These organizations are declared as terrorist organizations by many western countries including the US and Israel.

President Trump reversed the Obama administration policy towards the Middle East. He not only walked away from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), but he also spearheaded efforts for the recognition of Israel. From the recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel, efforts for the recognition of Israel in the Arab world, walking away from the Nuclear Deal to the \$38 billion in military aid to Israel shows a different kind of relation between President Trump and Netanyahu.<sup>27</sup>

The Abraham Accords could have a domino effect in the Arab World in particular and in the Muslim world in general. Jared

Kushner is also of the view that the Abraham agreement will be followed by other states' normalization of relations with Israel. The possibility of domino effect of the agreement could not be discarded as Oman's government already released a statement expressing hopes that "this new strategic path taken by some Arab countries will contribute to bringing about a peace based on an end to the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands and on establishing an independent Palestinian state with East Jerusalem as capital."<sup>28</sup>

President Trump has lost the presidential elections, but he has left a legacy for the new President Joe Biden and Vice President Kamala Harris. Joe Biden is considered to have an opposite approach to that of Trump.<sup>29</sup> Therefore, changes in the US Middle Eastern policy could be expected. However, Biden would like to build on President Trump's efforts of normalization of relations in the region.

### **Future of Palestine**

The Abraham Accords do not provide a solution to the Israeli and Palestinian issue. Prime Minister Netanyahu needed assistance not to promulgate his West Bank annexation plan due to the internal opposition and international implications to the plan and further to raise his stature to blanket his legal vulnerability on corruption charges. UAE provided that window by taking the credit of the suspension of the plan with the help and assistance of President Trump and Jared Kushner.<sup>30</sup> On the other hand, UAE needed something to show to the Palestinians and to the Muslim world about the future prospects of the agreement regarding the Palestinian state as Israel promised not to carry out their annexation plan. President Trump needed something unique, conclusive to show to his electorates indicating a clear victory on the diplomatic front in the upcoming elections. As a whole the agreement is a combination of short-term personnel political gains, medium term security

and geo-political challenges, and long term geo-strategic challenges, flight from ideology to realpolitik, and political, economic and security prospects. These prospects of the agreements and their implications are not yet clear as time will tell how effective they are. As has been pointed out, the agreement could have possible secret clauses.

The agreement is also seen as an effort to alter the power equilibrium in the Middle East with the help of the Arab Gulf States against Iran. Undoubtedly, the agreement is more than just the normalization of relations and the establishment of diplomatic relations between Israeli and UAE and Bahrain as it is also a matter of a power play of realpolitik by the parties to the agreement as well as the US against Iran.<sup>31</sup> Time will reveal Iran's reaction to the agreement as it also limits yet liberates Iran's choices against Israel, USA and the Sunni, Wahhabi sects in the region.

President Trump has done considerable damage to the prospects of the two-state solution. During his presidency, he tried to "to create not only irreversible facts on the ground, but a 'new normal.'"<sup>32</sup> As discussed in the previous section, Palestine had strongly rejected the Abraham Accords and termed them a "knife in the back"; however, this development was also welcomed by many including the newly elected President, Joe Biden. Hours after President Trump's announcement of the peace agreement, Biden's statement was released saying: "Today, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have taken a historic step to bridge the deep divide of the Middle East. The UAE's offer of publicly recognizing the State of Israel is a welcome, brave, and badly-needed act of statesmanship. And it is a critical recognition that Israel is a vibrant and central part of the region. Israel can and will be a valued strategic and economic partner to all who welcome it."<sup>33</sup> He also said that Israeli annexation would be a "body blow to

the cause of peace, which is why I oppose it now and would oppose it as president.”<sup>34</sup>

The new US administration can renew peace efforts by putting some positive energy by resuming the US assistance to the Palestinian refugees through United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA). According to the Middle East Institute, Israel had “effectively pushed the administration to defund the UNRWA, which provides health, education, and other services to Palestinian refugees.”<sup>35</sup> Further, recalling of the Palestinian mission to resume its work in the US would further encourage those who support a two-state solution to the Israeli and Palestinian issue.

### **The New Administration in the US**

The Trump administration has been replaced by Joe Biden and Kamala Harris as the new president and vice president respectively. The new administration is the polar opposite of the Trump administration. However, major changes could not be expected in the Middle East region. In his first phone call to Netanyahu, Biden promised stronger US-Israel relations.<sup>36</sup> In case of KSA, the new administration opined that it will deal “counterpart to counterpart”, which means King Salman bin Abdul Aziz and the US counterpart as opposed to the powerful Crown Prince, Muhammad bin Salman. However, on February 19, 2021, the US defense secretary Lloyd Austin spoke to MBS on the phone and emphasized 70 years of partnership and cooperation for the region's peace and security.<sup>37</sup> On the question of Iran, Joe Biden has previously stated that he will join the Nuclear Deal again<sup>1</sup>, but in the current circumstances i.e. US foreign policy being in the process of reevaluation, no

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<sup>1</sup> Israel has objected to the Nuclear Deal and considers the deal as a threat to its security, therefore, if US joins the agreement again, Israel will be offended.

major changes could be seen in the region. Similarly, as far as Israel and Palestinian issue is concerned, it is unlikely that Joe Biden will reverse the Trump administration's facilitation of Israeli recognition by Arab states and the resulting establishment of diplomatic relations since the US interests in the region are more important than those of different parties. However, he would likely support the two-state solution for the Israel-Palestine issue.

### **Implications for Pakistan**

The history between Pakistan and Israel has been thoroughly discussed by several scholars. However, the question is where does Pakistan stand on the question of Israel and Palestine in the light of the current normalizations? Pakistan has denied and rejected any rapprochement and reconsideration on its Israel policy. In an interview, Prime Minister Imran Khan said: "The Quaid-i-Azam had said in 1948 that Pakistan could not recognize Israel unless it gave freedom to Palestinians. If we recognize Israel and ignore tyranny faced by the Palestinians, we will have to give up (the cause of) Kashmir as well, and this we cannot do."<sup>38</sup> The foreign office of Pakistan issued a statement saying: "Pakistan cannot recognize Israel [until a] just settlement of the Palestinian issue is found." And "[f]or just and lasting peace, it is imperative to have a two-state solution in accordance with the United Nations and Organization of Islamic Cooperation resolutions, with the pre-1967 borders and Al-Quds Al-Sharif as capital of a viable, independent and contiguous Palestinian State."<sup>39</sup>

Pressure has been exerted on Pakistan by the US and KSA for the recognition of Israel as the report of the Middle East Eye (MEE) implied.<sup>40</sup> Pakistan rejected the report and did not compromise on its foreign policy. The two-state solution is Pakistan's ancestral stance over Israel-Palestine issue. From

Muhammad Ali Jinnah to Imran Khan, Pakistan has not changed its stance regarding Palestine, neither can it afford to do so. Public support for the Israel recognition is not only hard to achieve but seems impossible in the highly religious and polarized Pakistani society.

### **Conclusion**

Neither the 'Deal of the Century' nor 'the Abraham Accords' have been able to provide a concrete solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict. Historically, the American support to the Israel remained multifaceted. The Trump administration's policy toward the Middle East is one of the clearest examples of this kind. Currently, the Middle East region is divided between the Sunni states led by KSA and supported by the US and Shiite Iran and its allies. Through the normalization of relations between Israel and UAE and Bahrain, scholars believe that US is trying to establish a united front against Iran in the region. The Trump administration has made changes to the US policy in the region and achieved a conclusive diplomatic success on the Israeli front as evident from the "deal of the century". President Trump categorically stated that at this time maintenance of peace is fundamentally different from that of the past which had not been achieved so far.

The region, in general, and the two rival states, in particular, have suffered greatly. Considered a vision for peace and prosperity in the region, the deal is expected to create room for the Palestinians to get a state which would enable them to live with peace, dignity, and honor. However, the Abraham Accords do not provide any solution to the Israel-Palestine issue. Further, in this long process of mediation, reconciliation, and peaceful negotiations between the arch rivals, the United States has always cared about the wishes, constraints, and security of Israel. President Trump has gone to great extents to consider Israel's interests. In the prevailing "geo-strategic earthquake" in

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the region regarding the present normalizations between Israel and Palestine, Pakistan has denied and rejected such rapprochement and reconsideration on its Israel policy. From Muhammad Ali Jinnah to the present Prime Minister, Pakistan's policies towards Israel have been, that is, the stance that a two-state solution is the only way out of the Israel-Palestine issue.



## End Notes

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid.

<sup>25</sup> Fatima Umar, *op cit*

<sup>26</sup> Md Muddassir Quamar, "Changing regional geopolitics and the foundations of a rapprochement between Arab Gulf and Israel" *Global Affairs*, (2020): 1-16.

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