

# Associate Paper

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## US Middle East Policy in Tatters before the Bahrain Workshop

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### Key Points

- A Palestinian state may no longer be achievable, but unless the Palestinians are actively involved in charting their future, the so-called “Deal of the Century” to be unveiled at the “Bahrain Workshop” is doomed to failure.
- The Trump Administration’s Middle East policy has been significantly weakened by the inability of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to form a government, and the Arab, Muslim and Gulf Co-operation Council insistence on a “two-state” solution.
- Any plan for future Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement that is drawn up under the guise of fighting Iran will not work.
- If the US is to recapture its leadership role in the Middle East, it must conceptualise ground-breaking negotiations with Iran and a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the right of the two peoples to live together in peace, dignity and security.
- That can only be accomplished through international and regional collaboration.

### Summary

The confluence of the Israeli snap elections, the Arab, Muslim and Gulf Co-operation Council summits in Mecca and the upcoming “Bahrain Workshop”, underscores the amateur nature of President Trump’s Middle East policy. The conundrum in which Washington finds itself illustrates the absence of any comprehensive thinking on the part of the administration towards Iran, the Arab world, and the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. In light of the recent Arab,

Muslim and GCC statements on the future of Palestinian-Israeli rapprochement and the need to have such a settlement grounded in the “two-state” and “land for peace” paradigm, whatever “Deal of the Century”, or parts of it, that Jared Kushner plans to reveal at the so-called Bahrain Workshop at the end of June will be dead on arrival. Arab, Muslim, and Palestinian leaders have already signalled their disapproval of the American approach, stating that economic support is welcome but statehood rights cannot be overlooked.

Even on Iran, although the Saudis were able to engineer a strong Arab, Gulf and Muslim statement at the three summits against Iran, regional leaders are no longer sure or clear of the Trump Administration’s real stand. The Saudi and Emirati leaders, together with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, have been clamouring for a war, presumably lead by the Americans. According to recent statements, however, the administration is backtracking on the rush to war. “Regime change,” according to Trump, is off the table, and the draconian and untenable conditions that Secretary of State Mike Pompeo had established earlier as a requirement for talks with Iran have been jettisoned. ‘We are prepared to engage in a conversation with no pre-conditions,’ Pompeo said in a recent press interview. ‘We are ready to sit down.’

Netanyahu’s political future is the other wobbly pillar of Trump’s Middle East political edifice. Jared Kushner and Jason Greenblatt, the president’s special envoys dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, had banked on the Israeli prime minister’s solid standing in Israel and the Gulf region to help sell the plan through economic largesse. Netanyahu’s failure to form a government, resulting in snap elections to be held in the (northern) autumn, and his legal troubles, with a looming indictment on corruption, have weakened his position, throwing the whole process in doubt.

## **Analysis**

### ***Miscalculating on Iran***

President Trump’s visceral animus towards Iran and his determination to bring the clerical regime to heel are based on three pillars: pulling out of the nuclear deal; imposing severe economic sanctions on Iran, especially the oil sector; and forming an Arab-Islamic-Israeli alliance with an eye towards containing Iran’s regional posture and activities. Trump’s hostility proved ephemeral.

The Iranian regime has not caved in. Other signatories of the deal – the four UN Security Council permanent members plus Germany – have opposed undermining the nuclear agreement and urged the Trump Administration to settle America’s differences with Iran peacefully. To its credit, Iran (for the most part), continues to abide by the key requirements of the nuclear deal.

Although the harsh economic sanctions have dealt a blow to the Iranian economy, other nations have continued to trade with Iran, including buying its oil. The Iranian people’s perceived threat of regime change by the United States, the two Gulf Sunni Arab autocracies of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the right-wing Israeli government has unified the Iranian people in defence of their national, sovereign Persian state.

Iranians who abhor the clerical regime are never sanguine about a foreign power declaring war on their country in order to remove their regime by force. Iran and the region still retain a vivid memory of the 2003 American invasion of Iraq. As the Bush Administration discovered then, the dislike of Iraqis for their brutal regime did not translate into their liking a foreign invader. Iran is not any different.

By selling unprecedented amounts of sophisticated arms to Saudi Arabia and the UAE despite some congressional opposition, the Trump Administration has hoped that these heavily armed regimes would force Iran to end its support for the Houthis in Yemen and capitulate. The war continues unabated, and the US-supplied weapons to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi have been killing more civilians in Yemen. Without overtly admitting the failure of its gunboat diplomacy against Iran, the Trump Administration seems to be searching for another course of action that does not threaten regime change but which involves negotiations without preconditions.

### ***Miscalculating on Israel-Palestine***

The Israeli Prime Minister boasted recently that Trump has been the most supportive US president towards the state of Israel. What Netanyahu really meant to say was that Trump has been the biggest supporter of the ultraconservative, pro-occupation, and anti-Palestinian, policies pushed by the current prime minister. President Trump, despite the opposition of most regional experts and former diplomats – for example, the two former US ambassadors to Israel, Daniel Kurtzer and Martin Indyk – and contrary to UN Security Council resolutions, declared Jerusalem the capital of Israel, moved the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and accepted the “legality” of Israel’s control of the Golan Heights. The Trump-Pompeo State Department no longer uses the term “Occupied Territories” to describe the Israeli-occupied Palestinian lands in the West Bank.

Furthermore, the Trump Administration has closed the Palestine Liberation Organisation office in Washington and severely reduced its contributions to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency, which provides for Palestinian refugees’ relief and human development. President Trump has acquiesced in Israel’s continued economic tight grip on Gaza and the withholding of most taxes it collects on behalf of the Palestinian Authority in Ramallah.

The president has appointed his trusted adviser and son-in-law Jared Kushner to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The envisioned plan – the so-called “Deal of the Century” – is reportedly grounded in economic aid to the Palestinians while dismissing their right to self-determination as a political community. Unfortunately, Jared Kushner is the least qualified “honest broker” interlocutor with the Palestinians. He has supported Israeli settlements in the West Bank and does not believe in the Palestinians’ right or ability to govern themselves in their own state alongside Israel. Kushner erroneously perceives the road to peace with the Palestinians going through Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) of Saudi Arabia and Mohammed bin Zayed (MbZ) of Abu Dhabi. He is also convinced that the expected billions of dollars from the Gulf States would buy off the Palestinians’ aspirations for statehood through some sort of a quisling leadership that would remain subservient to Israel for decades to come.

As Kushner discovered following the recent Arab-Muslim summits in Mecca, most participants reiterated their support for a two-state solution based on UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 338, which were adopted following the 1967 and 1973 wars. Participants, including Gulf leaders, also support East Jerusalem as the capital of a future Palestinian state. Neither he nor his two key partners in the Gulf – MbS and MbZ – will be able to kill the *idea* of Palestinian statehood in the Arab psyche.

That is not to say that the two-state paradigm is at all achievable. In fact, more and more experts believe that the paradigm has faded and is being replaced by one area between the Jordan River and the Mediterranean Sea comprising two peoples: Israelis and Palestinians, roughly six million each. Kushner will soon find out, whether at the Bahrain Workshop or in other forums, that unless he recognises the political peoplehood of the Palestinians, no deal will succeed. Perhaps a Palestinian state is unachievable, but unless the Palestinians are involved in charting their future, together with other “honest brokers,” Kushner’s deal will fail. No plan for Israel and the Palestinians cooked up in Washington, Riyadh and Abu Dhabi under the guise of fighting Iran will work.

Recapturing America’s indispensable role in the Middle East must conceptualise ground-breaking negotiations with Iran and a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on the right of the two peoples to live together in peace, dignity and security. That can best be accomplished through international and regional collaboration. Its military and economic might notwithstanding, America cannot accomplish such a monumental task alone. Will Washington rise to the challenge or leave the region to others to fill the ensuing vacuum?

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**About the Author:** Dr Emile Nakhleh was a Senior Intelligence Service officer and Director of the Political Islam Strategic Analysis Programme at the Central Intelligence Agency. He is a member of the Council on Foreign Relations, a Research Professor and Director of the Global and National Security Policy Institute at the University of New Mexico, and the author of *A Necessary Engagement: Reinventing America’s Relations with the Muslim World*, *Bahrain: Political Development in a Modernizing State*, and *The Persian Gulf and American Policy*. He has written extensively on Middle East politics, political Islam, radical Sunni ideologies and terrorism. He is also a Board Member of the World Affairs Council of Albuquerque. His recent writings on terrorism and contemporary regional politics are posted on LobeLog.com and on The Cipher Brief. Emile received his BA in Political Science from St. John’s University (Minnesota), his MA in Political Science from Georgetown University, and PhD in International Relations from the American University. He and his wife live in Albuquerque, New Mexico. This article originally appeared in the [Lobe Log](#) foreign policy blog.

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