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President Trump's Middle East Trip: An Opportunity to Reset Relations

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President Donald Trump's first trip abroad will be a nine-day journey to Saudi Arabia, Israel, the Vatican, NATO Headquarters in Brussels, and Sicily for the summit of the Group of Seven world economic powers. The Middle East portion of the trip will focus on three key issues: the war against ISIS, Iran's growing regional threats, and the Arab–Israeli conflict.

Trump Administration officials say the goal of the trip is to marshal a coalition of political and religious leaders against intolerance. “Tolerance is the cornerstone of peace,” President Trump said when he announced his plans for the trip.¹ To put a finer point on it, the goal is to mobilize states and religious establishments against the common threat posed by intolerant Islamist extremist movements of both the Sunni (al-Qaeda and ISIS) and Shia (Iran and Hezbollah) varieties.

President Trump should use this trip to mobilize international support to defeat ISIS and other terrorist groups, rally Arab support to contain and roll back Iran, and set the stage for renewed Arab–Israeli peace negotiations.

Building Security Cooperation and Rebooting Arab–Israeli Peace Negotiations

President Trump's first stop will be in Saudi Arabia on May 20. Trump explained that “it is there that we will begin to construct a new foundation of cooperation and support with our Muslim allies, to combat extremism, terrorism and violence and to embrace a more just and hopeful future for young Muslims in their countries.”²

In Saudi Arabia, the President is expected to announce a major arms sale to the kingdom and open a dialogue on forging a new collective security alliance that would include many Arab states threatened by Iran, ISIS, or other Islamist extremists. The proposed coalition, which has been described as an “Arab NATO,” could reassure Arab leaders who felt abandoned by the Obama Administration in its rush to engage Iran.

President Trump will participate in three separate summit meetings with Saudi King Salman; leaders of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates; and a broader meeting of Arab and Muslim leaders concerned about threats from Iran and Islamist extremist groups.

In contrast to President Barack Obama's first trip abroad, which also included Saudi Arabia but skipped Israel, President Trump should not apologize for U.S. foreign policy but should instead offer enhanced cooperation against common enemies. Trump should not talk to people over the heads of leaders, as Obama did in Cairo on his first foreign trip, when he distanced himself from Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak and embraced the Muslim

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Brotherhood, which later led Egypt to disaster after Mubarak was overthrown.

Agenda in Israel. President Trump will arrive in Israel on May 22, meet with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and President Reuven Rivlin, and visit the Western Wall in Jerusalem. Trump's visit coincides with Israel's annual celebration of the reunification of Jerusalem, which begins on the evening of May 23. This has fueled speculation that the President will follow through on his campaign promise to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem from Tel Aviv, but the Administration has held its cards close to its vest, perhaps to build suspense.

Prime Minister Netanyahu will want to hear about the Administration's plans for the embassy, the U.S. strategy for rolling back Iranian influence, and Trump's evolving vision for peace negotiations. Trump will also meet with Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas in Bethlehem. The two leaders are expected to discuss what would be required of the Palestinians in the event that the Administration launches a peace initiative, as expected, and how to bolster the Palestinian economy, an important building block for peace.

Finding Common Ground Against Common Enemies

During his diplomatic tour, President Trump must build effective international coalitions to advance American interests on three fronts: the struggle against Islamist terrorism, Iran, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. To gain foreign support, Trump must convince other leaders that his "America First" policies will also advance their interests on these fronts:

Counterterrorism. The White House has played up its symbolic effort to unite three faiths—Judaism, Christianity, and Islam—against terrorism, but the nations' political leaders will play the key roles in providing muscle for this effort. President Trump should make it clear that the U.S. is fighting a hostile ideology—Islamist totalitarianism—and not the religion of Islam, as many terrorist groups contend. His Administration, which has ramped up U.S. military efforts to defeat ISIS in Iraq and Syria, should request greater military, economic, intelligence, and

diplomatic support from Arab and Muslim countries that are also threatened by ISIS and al-Qaeda. Such increased burden-sharing could reduce the need for a large U.S. military presence and accelerate the defeat of ISIS. Saudi Arabia and other GCC allies should be asked to contribute military forces and logistical support for the coming campaign to liberate Raqqa, the de facto capital of ISIS in Syria. They could also play a helpful role in stabilizing Syria and Iraq after ISIS is defeated; preventing an ISIS resurgence by choking off private funding; providing humanitarian and economic aid; and helping refugees return to their homes.

Containing Iran. President Trump has an opportunity to forge a more effective alliance against Iran by reaching out to Sunni Arab leaders disillusioned by what they regarded as the Obama Administration's appeasement of Iran, indecisiveness in Syria, and weak leadership. The President reportedly will propose a new regional security alliance, described as an "Arab NATO." While such a coalition is unlikely to upgrade multilateral security cooperation to the degree maintained by NATO allies, it can enhance deterrence against Iran, advance burden-sharing, and encourage the development of an integrated missile defense architecture to blunt the growing Iranian ballistic missile threat. Such an alliance could also become a focus for ratcheting up diplomatic, economic, and military pressure against Iran for its aggressive intervention in Syria and arms transfers to Hamas, Hezbollah, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. But any new alliance should not become a substitute for the important bilateral security relations that Washington currently maintains with key countries in the region.

Defusing the Arab-Israeli Conflict. The Trump Administration is developing an outside-in negotiating strategy for reviving Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations, which collapsed in 2014. This means involving Saudi Arabia and other gulf states, along with Egypt and Jordan, which already have peace treaties with Israel, to encourage Palestinian flexibility and undertake confidence-building measures with Israel. President Abbas should be induced to drop his preconditions for negotiations with Israel

1. CNN, "Trump's Executive Order on Religious Liberty," May 4, 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/05/04/politics/text-executive-order-promoting-free-speech-and-religious-liberty/> (accessed May 18, 2017).

2. Ken Thomas, "Trump's First Foreign Trip to Include Stops in Israel, the Vatican, Saudi Arabia," *Chicago Tribune*, May 4, 2017, <http://www.chicagotribune.com/news/nationworld/ct-trump-first-foreign-trip-20170504-story.html> (accessed May 17, 2017).

(the release of Palestinian prisoners and the halting of settlement activity). A comprehensive final settlement is impossible until Hamas, which seized Gaza in a coup, has been defeated and discredited, but incremental progress can be made if the Palestinian Authority is reformed, with Arab support and encouragement, to root out corruption, end incitement against Israel, and halt the roughly \$300 million in annual subsidies it pays to jailed terrorists and the families of “martyrs” killed in confrontations with Israelis. Trump has stopped short of endorsing a two-state solution, which previous Administrations have supported, but it is difficult to see how he can gain Arab support for peace negotiations without the promise of a future state for the Palestinians.

Time to Reassert American Leadership

President Trump has an opportunity to reset relations with key Middle Eastern allies and restore confidence in American leadership. He can capitalize on one of the Obama Administration’s legacies: Israel and the Sunni Arab gulf states, alarmed by what they regarded as a feeble and disastrous U.S. policy toward Iran, found themselves cooperating under the table to protect their own security. The President must use his Middle East trip to repair bilateral relationships undermined by his predecessor and build multinational coalitions to unite Arab leaders against ISIS, al-Qaeda, Iran, and other Islamist totalitarian threats.

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