



Strategic Consensus: DOA in 1981; Resurrected in 2017?

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President Trump's efforts to bring Israel and the Palestinians back to the negotiating table are taking place against the background of a broader effort to recast US policy in the region. The memory of Secretary of State Alexander Haig's failed effort, back in 1981, to put together a regional "strategic consensus" against the Soviets may have faded, but the idea behind it is making a comeback. Facing the Iranian revolutionary regime and its proxies on the one hand and radical Sunni versions of Islamist totalitarianism on the other, key regional players are now more open than ever to an informal US-led alliance against their common enemies. The semblance, perhaps even the substance, of progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front can facilitate this; but even more important would be a firm policy on Iran.

The time may be ripe for a resurrection of the idea of "strategic consensus". Saudi Arabia and Egypt have patched up their differences after a long period of tension. The United Arab Emirates showed no discomfort at having their air force openly participate alongside their Israeli counterparts in an exercise in Greece. Jordan is more explicit than ever about the need to confront a possible Iranian threat from Southern Syria. A coherent US policy would – and should – also bring in like-minded Eastern Mediterranean countries like Italy, Greece, and Cyprus to help generate a new strategic reality. If such a consensus materializes, it would help both the Israelis and the Palestinians take risks and strike workable compromises in pursuit of peace.

As President Trump prepares for his first foreign trip, much has been made of the possible motives of several individuals regarding US policy towards Israel and the Palestinians. This refers specifically to the efforts of Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress and a long-time friend of Trump's, to bring about a resumption of negotiations (echoing equally unauthorized forays into "peace processing" by one of his predecessors, Nahum Goldmann, who led the WJC from its inception in 1948 until 1977). Such interventions by individuals have their place in the policies of any government, perhaps especially that of a president with a highly personal style and little to no experience in foreign affairs, and an administration whose senior ranks have yet to be filled by seasoned operators.

Such input is supplied, however, against the background of a broader context: in this case, the administration's strategy of consolidating a base of support in the region. Led primarily by Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense Mattis (both closely associated in the past with economic and military relations with Saudi Arabia), as well as National Security Adviser McMaster, this new orientation aims at reversing the sense of abandonment that marred the US's relationships with key regional players during the Obama years. It defines the purpose of the Trump visit as a whole, including its Israeli-Palestinian segment – and particularly the Saudi leg of the trip, which will include a broadly attended meeting with leaders of Muslim countries.

As such, the visit is eerily reminiscent of the 1981 failed effort by Reagan's first secretary of state, Alexander Haig, to bring about a "strategic consensus" between the key pro-American players in the region, mainly Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Israel. Extraordinary times call for extraordinary measures. Reagan had inherited from Carter a world in which the Soviets were on the march, having invaded Afghanistan in December 1979. Pro-Soviet elements (including, at the time, Arafat and the Palestinian leadership) were gaining ground in the Middle East and beyond, from Nicaragua to Laos. The fear was real; and so, presumably, was to be the response. This was not to be a formal alliance – the days of MEDO (attempted under Truman) and the Baghdad Pact (in the Eisenhower era) were long gone – but a loose framework for coordination, emphasizing a common stand against a common enemy.

This turned out to be much too ambitious. In ideological and identity terms, the regional players were too far apart. The Arab world was still committed to a boycott not only of Israel but of Egypt as well, ever since Sadat broke ranks in 1977 and went to Jerusalem to seek peace. The PLO, led by Arafat, was still

a major pro-Soviet presence casting a long political shadow. Even Egypt was reluctant to cooperate openly with Israel, given the fragile relationship between Sadat (who was assassinated a few months later) and Prime Minister Begin.

In practical terms, each nation was willing to do its part to support the US in the renewed Cold War. Egypt helped in Africa, and Saudi Arabia financed much of the Reagan Doctrine's clandestine anti-Soviet operations. Israel, with a nod from the White House, moved in 1982 to destroy the PLO base in Lebanon and with it, the support infrastructure for KGB-sponsored terror groups from around the world. All this was done, however, directly with Washington and with little or no need for help from the other parties. The term "strategic consensus" vanished, having become synonymous with the illusions fostered by Haig during his short tenure on the seventh floor in Foggy Bottom.

Such a failure to read the region could happen again. The Trump administration is already being accused by critics, from both right and left, of playing with hopes that are bound to collapse sooner rather than later. But conditions have radically changed since 1981, and some form of revived strategic consensus might be an idea whose time has come.

Egypt – while roundly attacked by Erdoğan's Turkey – is no longer an Arab pariah. The Arab League institutions are back in Cairo, led by an Egyptian Secretary-General, and no Arab regime still upholds the boycott. Strategic relations with Israel are at an all-time high, and it is the Egyptians who now complain that Israeli embassy staff no longer live in Cairo due to security concerns.

The sense of common effort in the war against Islamist terrorism is an important driver in the relationship, even if for the Egyptians, the Muslim Brotherhood comes first on the list of enemies (hence the lame effort by Hamas to distance itself from the mother movement) and Iran comes last. After Trump came to power, President Sisi was finally welcomed at the White House. He has patched up his troubled relationship with Saudi Arabia, making the strategic consensus much more of a practical reality than it has been.

Moreover, since 1994, Jordan – small, but with a robust and well-trained army, and centrally located in both defensive and offensive operations against Islamist challenges, both Sunni and Shia – has joined the circle of peace. Despite ugly tones from time to time (such as the recent angry official reaction to the killing of a knife-wielding Jordanian visitor who had attacked and wounded a policeman in Jerusalem, and the refusal to comply with the extradition request for Ahlam Tamimi, a convicted mass murderer), Jordan maintains a close

working relationship with both Israel and the US government. King Abdallah II has struck an effective personal note with President Trump, with whom he has already met twice.

In recent weeks, against the background of a large Centcom military exercise ("Eager Lion") in northern Jordan, tensions have been rising with Iran. The King is acutely aware that Iranian designs to turn the West Bank into "a new Gaza" will require first the establishment of a Hezbollah presence on his border in the southern Golan, and then the destabilization of his own kingdom. This is a scenario that both Jordan and Israel are determined to prevent.

The fourth pillar, if one counts Israel, of this emerging consensus is composed jointly of Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. (Of the other Gulf states, Qatar has placed itself in a different camp as an ally of Turkey in supporting the Muslim Brotherhood and Hamas; Bahrain is weak and internally divided between a Sunni monarch and a Shia majority; Kuwait is too fragile and apprehensive, with an Iran-dominated Iraq on her border; and Oman is historically close to the Iranians.) With the Saudis and the UAE steadily escalating their military involvement in the war against the Iranian-backed Houthi uprising in Yemen, the "game of camps" in the Arabian Peninsula has become a deadly shooting war, matched by bursts of ideological and religious invective from both sides. In Syria, meanwhile, the Gulf powers are present by proxy, essentially assisting anyone willing to fight the Iranian-backed Assad regime.

With Israel increasingly perceived as an effective ally against Iran's regional ambitions, past barriers to cooperation have been falling. This goes a long way towards explaining the ease with which Greece obtained the consent of the UAE to send an air force contingent to a multinational exercise in which Israeli pilots trained side by side with their Greek (and Egyptian) colleagues. The UAE did not even insist on maintaining secrecy.

This event, in turn, raises an additional idea. The Trump administration would do well to use the Brussels leg of the visit to bolster relations with the key European pillars of an Eastern Mediterranean strategy. It could thus add an important component in building a robust new format for strategic cooperation. Such an array of forces could also help the US handle the fallout from future friction with an increasingly Islamist Turkey, given the Pentagon's decision to support the Kurds in northeastern Syria ("Rojava", as the Kurds call it).

The players here are Italy, possibly Croatia and Albania, certainly Greece, and, because of geopolitics (and gas), Cyprus as well (though it is not a member of

NATO). A revived consensus will require a redefined strategic concept focused on Eastern Mediterranean stability and security. This would provide Israel and her neighbors with a sense of strategic identity that could in turn make it easier for both sides to take further steps towards an Israeli-Palestinian understanding – a permanent status agreement, or, more likely, a workable half-way station.

Progress towards this goal, or at least the reemergence of a viable framework for negotiations, should not be a precondition for cooperation. The key players' vital interests should not be subjected to the whims of a Palestinian leadership that has lost its nerve many times at the point of decision. It is nevertheless worth trying, from the administration's point of view, if only because the effort in itself could make it politically easier for all participants to take strategic consensus to the next level. That would mean beginning to work together in a measured way, not only to fend off but to roll back the gains made by the Islamist totalitarians over the past ten years.

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