



PERSPECTIVES

THE BEGIN-SADAT CENTER FOR STRATEGIC STUDIES

Prospects for a Near East Treaty Organization

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 493, June 10, 2017

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: Erstwhile Western Sunni allies (Saudi Arabia, UAE, Jordan) and a former Soviet client (Egypt) seem increasingly amenable to uniting in active defense against “Islamist extremists.” They share an adversary in Iran, which has tentacles in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, Oman, Bahrain, and Kuwait, as well as an unsavory history with North Korea and Pakistan. Prospects seem to signal potential for NETO, a Near East Treaty Organization (not a resurrection of CENTO, or an extension of NATO) that would embrace the span between the Eastern Mediterranean (including Israel), the Red Sea, and the edge of the Indian Ocean. Should such an organization materialize, it might well contribute to novel approaches to resolving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

US President Donald Trump’s “pilgrimage” to Riyadh, Jerusalem, Bethlehem, and Rome was carefully choreographed. This first foreign trip by a novice president turned out to be a masterstroke.

The trip achieved several critical objectives. Mr. Trump wished to create a semblance of unity with allies who had come to question the strength of their respective relationships with the US. He designated a common enemy by suggesting that ancient hatreds can no longer be afforded, and by urging that strategic realignments grounded on a region-wide alliance are not only desirable but feasible. This ambitious agenda eschewed detailed specifics, relying on strict adherence to prepared scripts.

By going to Riyadh first, Trump conveyed the impression that he considers the Saudis a top priority. This tacit statement, made before a global audience, so flattered the Saudis that a page replete with historic disappointments was promptly turned.

By insisting on visiting the Western Wall without Israeli escort; by discouraging a performance by a Palestinian Christian youth band eager to display its Palestinian national insignia at the Church of the Holy Sepulchre; by avoiding the Knesset; and by electing to meet the aging president of the Palestinian Authority in Bethlehem rather than Ramallah, the US president made clear that, at this stage, he would not allow politicized symbolism to cast doubt on his stylized impartiality. His speeches in Riyadh, Tel Aviv, Jerusalem, and Bethlehem were consistent in their cordiality.

The flash visits to the Western Wall, Bethlehem, and Yad Vashem took place even as Britain was mourning the Manchester bombing and a “Day of Rage” was in full swing on the West Bank. The US president called for compassion across the region just as yet another knife-wielding Palestinian Arab had to be neutralized in Netanya. His intercessions were hence timely, conveying a sense of urgency.

Trump convincingly remarked that not only those who commit violent crimes, but also those who incite to violence by rewarding criminality in the name of a higher cause ought once and for all to cease and desist. By neither outlining nor so much as alluding to a new road map, and by unequivocally leaving the matter to the parties to debate, he reserved a role for the US as even-handed facilitator. Trump’s administration seems determined not to propose, let alone impose, any ends, means, methods, or style. This fresh approach, with its focus on “the collective need for realistic security-mindedness”, permits all the regional stakeholders to expand their thinking.

That thinking could include one particularly intriguing alternate future. It is possible to imagine a wholesale security redesign for the region – one that would include Israel, as well as an autonomous Palestinian entity thriving in peace and prosperity alongside it. This scenario would be conceivable only after the enemy factions agree as one to live in constructive acquiescence to the existence of the Jewish democratic State of Israel.

Over the past fifty years, new realities have swept the Middle East. Nasser’s pan-Arabism and the Muslim Brotherhood’s pan-Islamism both failed (although their remodeled ideals are currently being approached through other means by the 57-member Organization of Islamic States). Egypt has been won over by the West. Both Jordan and Egypt have sustained a cold peace with Israel. The “Arab Spring” has led to sporadic implosions that in turn spawned several failed states. Syria has been internally destroyed. Yemen is in agony. Iran has developed an appetite for regional hegemony, with recourse to militias abroad. Iraq and Libya have yet to experience a semblance of stability. Afghans, Chechens, and many other dissatisfied Muslims are fighting for their respective brands of fundamentalism, often

engaging in zero-sum games with their own coreligionists. Lebanon remains in its apparently eternal existential dilemma. An increasingly Islamist Turkey has developed its own ambitions across the region by means that have polarized its population. African nations bordering on the Red Sea continue to experience internal unrest. Cyprus has yet to be reunified, and the Kurds' destiny in Turkey, Iraq, Iran, and Syria is still undetermined.

Meanwhile, primary and secondary world powers foreign to the region are active in its affairs through investment, exploitation of resources, and the use of naval and land bases according to their own geopolitical calculus.

A new collective security approach could warrant a Near East Treaty Organization (NETO) – one that would eliminate any Muslim partner's need overtly to rub shoulders with “crusaders” or “former colonizers,” some of which are principal NATO members. If NETO is established before Turkey (hypothetically) quits NATO or joins the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (“The Shanghai Pact”), the new alliance would have to determine whether, and to what extent, Ankara should be deemed a straight-shooting interlocutor on which it could count.

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BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family