



New Mideast Peace Deal Reflects a Broader U.S. Strategy

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Does the Trump administration have a grand strategy for the Middle East? Conventional wisdom has long held that the answer is "no." Detractors have blasted the president's penchant for disengagement from places like Syria and Afghanistan as proof that the White House doesn't have a clear plan for managing the Middle East, and is in fact actively eyeing the regional exits. Over the last week, however, the administration has proved its critics wrong.

On August 13, President Donald Trump announced that he had succeeded in brokering a peace deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates. Under the new agreement, the first of its kind since the 1994 Jordan-Israel peace treaty, the two countries have committed to fully normalizing diplomatic relations in exchange for an Israeli freeze on plans to apply Israeli sovereignty to parts of the West Bank and the Jordan Valley.

The deal is unquestionably historic. It represents an unalloyed triumph for Israel, which has worked assiduously over the past decade to cultivate deeper political and economic contacts with the Arab states of the Persian Gulf. A decade on, this diplomacy—originally launched on the basis of shared worries over a nearly-nuclear Iran—has become a thriving web of bilateral contacts on everything from trade to scientific collaboration. The aggregate result has strengthened security and prosperity on all sides, with the effect of drawing Jerusalem and Arab capitals much closer together. Last week's announcement was simply a public recognition of this reality.

But the agreement is also a resounding victory for the Trump administration, which has now made serious progress in its vision for the region.

The first part of that vision is focused on Iran. Since President Trump's May 2018 decision to withdraw the U.S. from the 2015 nuclear deal with Iran, his administration has embarked upon a broad campaign of "maximum" political and economic pressure against the Islamic Republic. The objective of that approach is by now abundantly clear: not to change Iran's regime, but to curb its international menace and force it back to the international negotiating table. It has also been broadly successful, dramatically reversing the Iranian regime's economic fortunes and generating renewed internal dissent against clerical rule.

The second prong centers on the administration's so-called "deal of the century" for Israeli-Palestinian peace. Unveiled publicly back in January, the plan is a detailed proposal that, among other things, offers the Palestinian leadership tremendous economic opportunities (some \$50 billion in prospective U.S. investment) in exchange for a normalization of ties with Israel. Although the Palestinian leadership has thus far rejected the White House's offer, it has been effectively endorsed by a bevy of Arab nations (including the UAE, Bahrain, Oman, Egypt, Morocco and Qatar), as well as by Israel itself, thereby further setting the stage for the current unfolding detente.

Connecting these two poles is what is arguably the Trump administration's most important (but least well-known) regional initiative: the Middle East Strategic Alliance. Since 2017, administration officials have been working quietly with their counterparts in places like Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE and Jordan to build a regional security grouping aimed at "confront[ing] extremism, terrorism, [and] achieving peace, stability and development" in the region. Popularized as an "Arab NATO" against Iran and the Islamic State, the bloc is actually intended to be much more. As administration officials have intimated, the objective is to eventually incorporate countries like Morocco and Israel into the evolving political, economic and military architecture. Last week's peace deal marks a significant step toward that objective.

If the administration has its way, however, it will be just the beginning. "Now that the ice has been broken, I expect more Arab and Muslim countries will follow the United Arab Emirates' lead," President Trump noted upon announcing the August 13 accord.

Whether they do remains to be seen. But it is apparent that last week's accomplishment represents part of a larger administration plan for the Middle East. And it is equally clear that, if President Trump perseveres at the ballot box in November, a big part of his second term foreign policy will involve building upon it.

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