

Miscalculations in Israel Could Pave Way to Wider War

Following a number of foreign-policy miscalculations, Israel and its allies in the Trump administration could be setting us up for more trouble in the Middle East, warns Alastair Crooke in this analysis.

By Alastair Crooke

Last week, Israeli political leaders were rolling with guffaws and ribbing each other in delight as Vice-President Mike Pence proved that, as a Christian Zionist, he was more Zionist than the Zionists in the Knesset (minus, of course, its evicted Arab members – see [here](#)). But one might wonder what the more sober Israeli security echelon figures were thinking as they listened to Pence's Knesset speech, which was rife with Biblical references and declarations of his "admiration for the People of the Book."

Perhaps they were speculating how far they might be able to go in influencing Pence and his boss, Donald Trump, to wield U.S. military power to advance Israeli interests.

Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, via the Trump family go-betweens – Jared Kushner, and the Trump family lawyers – has certainly had an impact in Washington. The Middle East landscape has changed considerably over the last year as a consequence, but the nature of that change is what is at issue. How many of these changes have actually benefited Israel's – or the U.S.'s – security interests?

When Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman (MbS) began his coup last June, ultimately resulting in this 31-year-old assuming absolute power, President Trump characteristically took full credit. "We've put *our* man on top!" he bragged to his friends, according to Michael Wolff in his book, *Fire and Fury*. Yes, Trump was right – partly.

"Our man" came out on top, but it was Netanyahu, working the levers behind the scenes, and Mohammad bin Zayed (MbZ)'s "man" in Washington, United Arab Emirates Ambassador Yousef al-Otaiba, who did the heavy lifting in order to change the U.S.'s settled preference for Prince bin Naif, as Successor to the Throne. And it was MbZ, in the first place, who had advised MbS that it was *Israeli* support that was both the necessary, and the sufficient condition, for him to become Crown Prince. Netanyahu (and Israel) cannot escape some responsibility for the condition in which the kingdom now finds itself.

Are the more sober-minded Israelis now still congratulating themselves with

enthusiasm for their “new man at the top”? One has some doubts, as Saudi Arabia transforms into a ticking bomb of internal, family, and tribal hatreds – and as the peripheral Emirates wonder what is to become of them in this new era of Saudi hyper foreign policy activity; or what might be their futures, were this Saudi “bomb” somehow to self-detonate. (“Not pretty” is likely to be their conclusion.)

And, for the second major aspect to Israel’s influence on the Trump administration, one has to look no further than the Kurds: Israeli Justice Minister Ayelet Shaked said, just before Masoud Barzani’s independence referendum, that “Israel and countries of the West, have a major interest in the establishment of the State of Kurdistan.” She added, “I think that the time has come for the U.S. to support the process.”

(Netanyahu supported the Kurdish bid too, and reportedly, urged Barzani to press on, despite the opposition amongst the Kurds themselves, and from all the surrounding neighbouring states). That ploy did not work out too well.

First came the Barzani fiasco, with his initiative squashed within 24 hours, and now we have Plan B: a Kurdish “statelet” in northern Syria. And that too is now unravelling.

Israel, having failed to get the buffer zones it sought along the Golan armistice line, or on the Syrian-Iraqi frontier; and having failed to keep the Iraqi-Syrian border closed, prevailed upon a receptive U.S. administration to implant a Kurdish wedge in north-eastern Syria. This was an outcome intended to keep Syria weak (the oil and gas assets being denied to the Central Government, and the Syrian state divided, and at odds with itself), and to keep open the connectivity of the Syrian mini “state project” to the Kurdish population of northern Iraq.

The Israeli “project” with the Kurds is a longstanding one, and very much “hands on.” It was most clearly formalized in the so-called *Oded Yinon* plan which was published in 1982, and which advocated the fragmentation of the Middle East, in terms of a logic of sectarian division. So, when Minister Shaked advocated for a Kurdish state, saying that it would be integral to Israeli efforts to “reshape” the Middle East, it is highly likely that she had the Yinon plan in mind, which advocated an Iraq fragmented into separate states.

But again (in spite of the Barzani fiasco), there was overreach: Moscow and Damascus offered the Kurds a compromise that would allow for a measure of autonomy, but insisted on the preservation of state sovereignty over all of Syria. The Kurds forcefully declined (apparently believing that Washington had their backs). And U.S. Centcom overreached: they gave the Kurds advanced anti-

tank weapons, and man-portable surface to air missiles, too.

Of course the Turks “got it.” Such weapons in the hands of the Kurds change the whole strategic balance. Such weapons have nothing to do with pushing Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to agree a modified constitution for Syria. That narrative is quite implausible. This weaponizing was about empowering the Kurds *à la Oded Yinon*: not just in Syria and Iraq, but as a ploy to weaken and fracture Turkey as well: No wonder the Kurds of Afrin were so full of themselves. Senior Turkish commentators, such as Ibrahim Karagul (a leading commentator who is close to Erdogan) were unsurprisingly plain in identifying Israel’s hand in wanting Turkey’s state fragmentation.

So, what has been achieved? Ankara now is profoundly (and perhaps irrevocably) disenchanted with Washington. Damascus is quietly sorting out Idlib (now depleted by armed opposition groups, commandeered by Turkey to assist in Afrin). Pressure on Assad is relieved; and Turkey has shifted more deeply into the Russian-Iran-Iraq axis. Washington is now ruing the Turkish anger, but what did they expect?

The writing was on the wall at the May 19 press conference held by Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis, Joint Chiefs of Staff Chairman General Joseph Dunford, and Special Envoy to Counter ISIS Brett McGurk, in which they attempted to smooth over frayed relations with Ankara regarding disputes regarding Washington’s support for the Kurds.

But then came Netanyahu’s third major input into U.S. policy: encouraging President Trump to ditch the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal.

Pence stated that Trump will refuse to sign the U.S. nuclear sanctions waiver this May. But as Washington now rues the Turkish reaction to its Kurdish initiative; so Israel may yet come to rue the loss of the JCPOA. Does the Israeli leadership seriously believe that Lilliputian MbS, Saudi Arabia and the UAE are going to Gulliverise Iran and its allies? And does the Israeli armed forces truly trust the U.S. to have its back completely, if it comes to regional war?

And finally, there is the “deal of the century”: sending VP Pence to threaten Jordan, Egypt and the Palestinians with withdrawal of funding completes the picture of an Israel hoeing in an extremely narrow, and highly partisan, Zionist seam of American (and global) support – a seam consisting of Jared Kushner (Trump’s son-in-law), David Friedman (Trump’s specialist in bankruptcy), and Jason Gleenblatt (a real estate lawyer, and the former chief legal officer working for Trump’s various companies).

Even Haim Saban, the strongly pro-Zionist founder of the U.S. Brookings' *Saban Center* described the team to Kushner last month as "a bunch of Orthodox Jews who have no idea about anything."

"The team has an entrepreneur – you – a real-estate lawyer, a bankruptcy lawyer. I don't know how you've lasted eight months in this line-up. There's not a Middle East macher in this group," Saban said, using the Yiddish word for bigwig.

Kushner responded that while the team was "not conventional" it was "perfectly qualified," defending Friedman's reputation as "one of the most brilliant bankruptcy lawyers and a close friend of mine, and the President."

Haim Saban noted that indeed, the situation in the Middle East, never had been so "bankrupt."

Perhaps Netanyahu may come to reflect that, in mining this very narrow seam, he has placed Israel in a precarious place. He may rejoice at the Palestinians' present humiliation by Trump and Pence, but as the Israeli PM catalyzes American foreign policy in ways that are deeply antagonistic to the region as a whole (not just Iran, Syria, Lebanon and Iraq, but to treaty partners, Jordan and Egypt, too), come the next crisis, Israel may find itself friendless and alone. Even Gulf States are re-positioning – hedging, if you prefer – in the face of the deep uncertainty in Saudi Arabia.

America today is deeply polarized, with each side reflexively rejecting the views (on both domestic and foreign policies) of the other. Even within the wider seam of *cultural* nationalism that is apparent in America and Europe today, Trump's rather narrow Middle East team line-up, is not even representative of 'Alt-Right' culture in general, which ultimately forms Trump's base. The evidence – for all the Alt-Right's insistence on a common Judeo-Christian basis – is that those identifying with the Alt-Right view their culture more narrowly. Rather, the unqualified support that Israel believes it now enjoys, may prove to be highly ephemeral.

The errors of judgment are obvious to Washington establishment figures, who see the consequence in mixed messages emanating from the administration and in the erosion of the unitary state into rebellious departmental fiefdoms, which the White House seems unable to control (see here on Turkey).

The Middle East (and the wider world), just skirted serious conflict in 2017, but we may not be so lucky in 2018. Trump is regarded as Israel's "best friend," but is that really so? Israel's future seems much less secure one year after he assumed office. The landscape has darkened. Israel misjudged Syria; it misjudged

its Syrian proxies; and (probably) will find that it has misjudged MbS – and now, a further miscalculation, this time with Turkey.

It may misjudge Iran next.
