

Take President Trump Seriously

In a seminal piece for *The Atlantic* last September, journalist Salena Zito explained a simple truth that most people hadn't grasped about the man who was about to be elected the 45th president of the United States. Simply put, his numerous critics took everything he said literally but not seriously, while his supporters took him seriously but not literally. When it comes to trying to figure out what the president is up to in the Middle East, it is vital to keep this insight in mind.

For both ends of the Jewish political spectrum, Trump has been something of a puzzle. At times, he has said or done things to encourage both the right and the left. Where do the president's true priorities lie?

Trump's trip to the Middle East failed to provide the answer. He laid out an agenda against terrorism and in favor of regional peace, in which ties between Israel and Arab states like Saudi Arabia would form the basis for a resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Trump spoke in the warmest terms of Israel, but also made it clear he expects his good friend Benjamin to make no trouble about restarting peace talks with his new acquaintance, Mahmoud. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson said afterward that Trump put "a lot of pressure" on both men to accept the compromises needed to create the "ultimate deal" Trump craves.

Will Trump, despite his very different strategy for negotiations, head down the same path that President Barack Obama trod to get the foreign policy triumph he wants? Both the left and the right are taking deep dives into his words and gestures, looking for clues.

Trump's Western Wall visit was a puzzle to both sides, since he made history by being the first sitting president to visit the Kotel, but also fended off Prime Minister Netanyahu's efforts to join him there, signaling he might not recognize Israeli sovereignty over the holy site.

The official White House communiqué about Trump's activities in Israel's capital happened in "Jerusalem, Israel." This could be a potentially monumental policy shift, since the State Department and previous administrations have refused to concede that any piece of Jerusalem, including the western portion inside the 1967 lines, is part of Israel.

Yet in the same speech at the Israel Museum that right-wingers praised, Trump referred to the conflict with the Arab world as having "dragged on for a half-century or more." This could easily be interpreted as indicating he accepts the notion that the issue only dates back to the 1967 Six-Day War and Israel's presence in the disputed territories. This could mean Trump believes, as Obama did, that Israel must be pressured into withdrawing from the West Bank and dividing Jerusalem.

But those parsing every detail are making the same mistake Trump's critics have done. Taking what he says literally is always going to be a mistake. Trump is not a details person. Nor is he particularly scrupulous about the truth of his comments.

Yet all concerned in the Middle East should take him seriously. For good or for ill, Trump has taken it into his head that peace is possible and that he is the man with the negotiating skills to forge a deal. Unlike Obama, he doesn't think he has a mission to save Israel from itself, or to care about uprooting settlements and prospects for Palestinian statehood. The details are meaningless to Trump, but he wants some sort of deal or set of arrangements that will enable more cooperation between Israel and the Arab world to fight terror as well as something he can label a triumph.

That means that the game of chicken going on between Netanyahu and the Palestinian Authority's (PA) President Abbas, in which both are convinced the other will jump first and blow up future peace talks, is a dangerous strategy. Netanyahu may have good reason to believe the Palestinians—divided as they are between a “moderate” PA faction that finances terrorists and foments hate, and the Islamist terrorists of Hamas—will ultimately reject peace as they have many times before. But Abbas knows if he is able to stay in the talks long enough, Netanyahu's coalition might force the prime minister to act in a manner that will cause Trump to blame him for the inevitable failure of negotiations.

So while the chances for peace are still dim, as most experts from both the left and right agree, the stakes involved in this struggle for the president's goodwill are enormous. And that's something both friends and foes of Israel should take very seriously indeed. {eo}

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