

Analysis

Kuwait Times
Established 1961THE LEADING INDEPENDENT
DAILY IN THE ARABIAN GULF
ESTABLISHED 1961Founder and Publisher
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Washington Watch

Early warnings

By Dr James J Zogby

As we await President Trump's "deal of the century", there are hints aplenty as to what it may or may not contain. The New York Times has written an account of what it believed was an outline of the "deal". It is reported Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has been briefed by the White House as to the general direction of the deal and he, in turn briefed Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and Jordan's King Abdullah on its contents. The Palestinian and Jordanian leaders, we have been told are deeply troubled by what they have heard. To date, all we have to go on are hints, speculation, and suggestions of disappointment and/or rejection.

While it may be premature to judge the Kushner-Greenblatt handiwork, it's not too soon to offer some early warnings or cautionary notes to define the terms of what may be acceptable, what will unacceptable and to prepare for the long, and short-term reactions that will shape regional reactions.

Because the United States will officially open its Jerusalem embassy on May 14, the status of the Holy City must be considered. Whatever Trump meant when he said that "taking Jerusalem off the table" he was creating a "bill due" that would allow him to exact future concessions from the Israelis, that's not how the matter played out in Israel.

While Palestinians continue to insist that they will establish East Jerusalem as their capital, Israel is hell-bent on making that outcome impossible. Emboldened by the Trump announcement, the Netanyahu government has moved aggressively to consolidate their position in what they call "Greater Jerusalem". New Jewish-only housing has been approved, some of it in the heart of the Arab neighborhoods of East Jerusalem and Knesset legislation is moving forward designed to reduce the number of Palestinians who live in the city.

Then there's the issue of Palestinian refugees. It would be a delightful surprise to find Kushner and Greenblatt offering a thoughtful and generous solution to resolve this seven-decade-old issue, but I'm not holding my breath. To date, refugees have not been mentioned. The issue is almost exclusively defined as a "demographic problem" for Israel (after all that's why Palestinians were expelled, in the first place - to give the new state "more land and less Arabs"). In reality the refugee issue is much more than that. It's a matter of property rights, justice, and the universally recognized right of refugees to return to their homes.

Right to return

For two generations, Palestinians have sustained themselves with this "right to return". The "deal" would be dead on arrival if it attempts, with the stroke of a pen, to ignore this deeply held Palestinian aspiration. And while Israel claims that it cannot (or better, that it will not) absorb the refugees, one cannot dismiss the impact that closing off the "right to return" will have on the Palestinian refugees in exile and the challenges this will pose to the future stability of Jordan and Lebanon - not to mention, on the hundreds of thousands of Palestinian refugees who live in the West Bank and Gaza who also retain the dream of returning to their properties behind the Green Line. Israel might not give a damn about the consequences this will pose to the region, but the US will need to consider this factor.

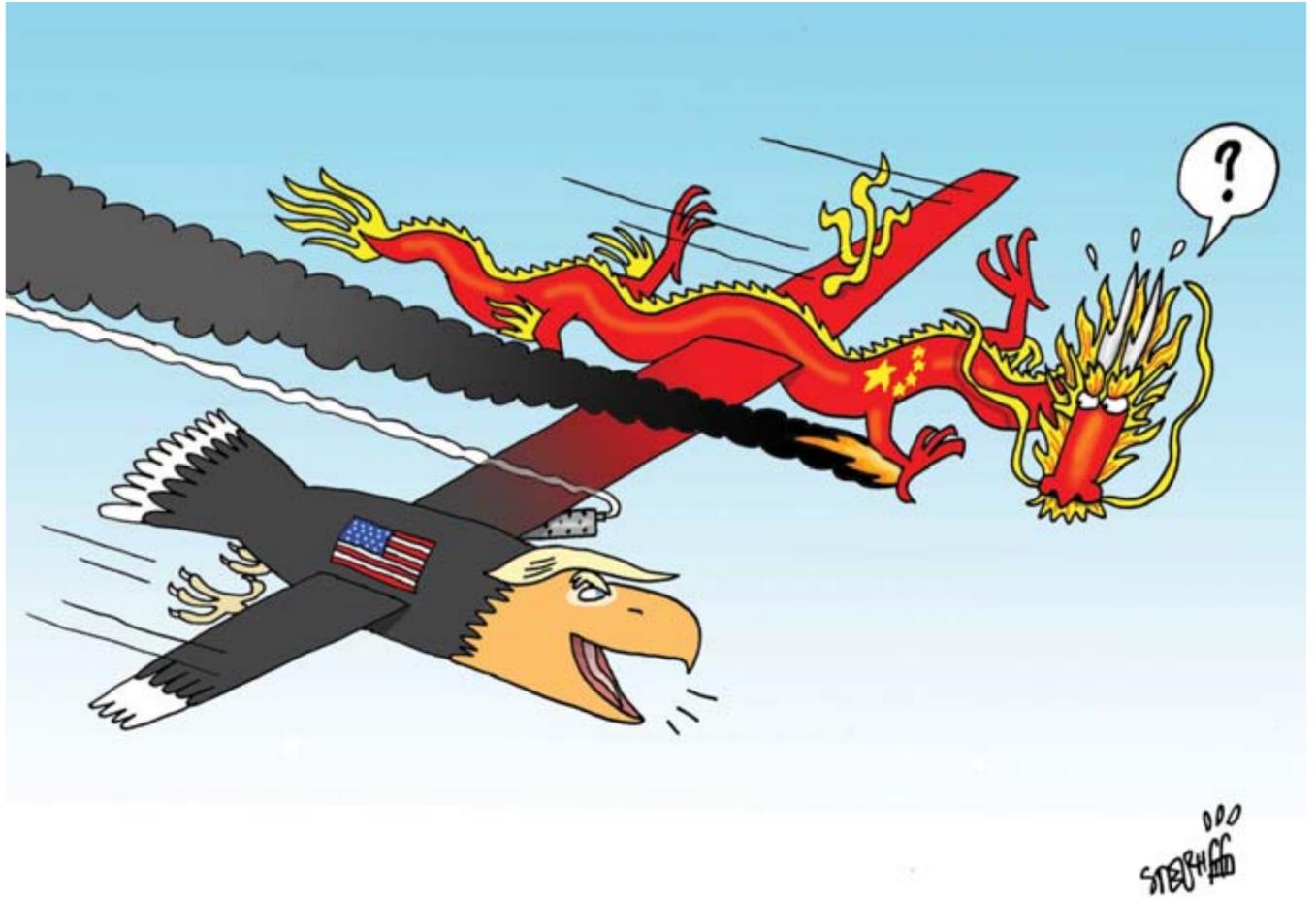
The Trump Administration has been cagey with regards to its attitude toward a Palestinian state. For his part, the president has said he is open to one or two states - whatever outcome the parties accept. With 700,000 Israeli settlers strategically placed throughout the West Bank, connected by Jewish-only roads, it has become difficult to imagine how separation could occur to create a viable and contiguous Palestinian state.

While Palestinians insist on their right to an independent state, the Israelis, with the help of the US Congress, have been pursuing policies that make such a state impossible. The Netanyahu government is pushing for annexation of the territories and Congressional legislation now regularly treats "Israel and areas under Israeli control" as a single entity.

If Kushner-Greenblatt fail to tackle the problems posed by: the Wall (much of which is built in Palestinian territory); the settlements and roads; and Israel's non-negotiable demands that they retain control of the Jordan Valley, all access and egress on the borders, and overall security in the territories - the only outcome possible would be a one-state solution - and an apartheid state, at that. An outcome of this sort will amount to an unacceptable continuation of the occupation. It will be flatly rejected.

Much is made of the fact that "the deal of the century" will involve broader buy-in by major Arab states, with Israel's hope that it can realize the end goal of the Arab Peace Initiative (API) i.e. normalization, without paying the price outlined by the API. This is at best, a dangerous fantasy and pursuing it is "a fool's errand".

NOTE: Dr James J Zogby is the President of the Arab American Institute



TV president, pundit staff, Fox echo chamber

Donald Trump is burnishing his status as America's ultimate TV president by peppering his administration with cable news pundits who play to his base and condense complex issues into soundbites. Last week, the former reality TV star stunned Washington by hiring John Bolton, the hawkish former UN ambassador and current Fox contributor who opposes the Iran nuclear deal and has advocated military action against North Korea, as national security advisor.

A week earlier, he made CNBC commentator Larry Kudlow and former investment bank economist, chief economic advisor, in place of former Goldman Sachs president Gary Cohn. "In the past, presidents have reached for the Harvard University faculty or academically-oriented think tanks. Trump uses cable television news," says Rich Hanley, associate professor journalism at Quinnipiac University.

"This is how he sees the world, this is his filter, so this is what he goes back to. He doesn't go to the Washington establishment, which rejected him before he got the nomination," agreed Mark Lowenthal, an intelligence expert who used to work at the CIA. Looking and sounding good on television has been vital to US political success since John F Kennedy in 1960. But Trump takes love of the medium to the next level. "The qualifications that Trump seeks are the capacity to translate his impulses into sentences," said Hanley.

"The president likes me as a media communicator," Kudlow explained to CNBC. "He said, 'You're on the air,' and he said 'I'm looking at a picture of you,' and he said 'very handsome.' It's so Trump-ian." This is a president who not only found fame on reality show "The Apprentice", but reportedly carves out "executive

time" to watch TV and fires off tweets strikingly similar to commentary on Fox News, long considered the power behind his throne.

Strategist TV

Only on Friday, he threatened to veto the budget and shut down the government after a Fox News host pilloried the deal as a "swamp budget". That host, Pete Hegseth, is reportedly on the shortlist to become the next secretary of veterans affairs. "We enter the uncharted waters of having a president whose chief strategist is the television," writes Edward Burmila, assistant political science professor at Bradley

get the shortest-serving White House communications director in US history, Anthony Scaramucci, a former Fox Business host and CNBC contributor. Last week, the White House promoted former Fox News anchor Heather Nauert from State Department spokeswoman to acting undersecretary following the sacking-by-Twitter of her boss, Rex Tillerson. Reality TV star Omarosa Manigault was an inaugural member of the Trump team, until she was fired and turned up on "Celebrity Big Brother". Cabinet members Linda McMahon, head of the small business administration, was thrown around by wrestlers on television as CEO of World Wrestling Entertainment, and Energy Secretary Rick Perry was a contestant on "Dancing with the Stars" in 2016.

Good for ratings

Then there are the Fox News personalities whose advice Trump solicits behind the scenes, such as Sean Hannity, who hosts the most watched show in cable news, and Jeanine Pirro, who once interviewed for the job of deputy attorney general. "For the president, Fox News is agenda setting," said Dan Cassino, associate professor of political science at Fairleigh Dickinson University. "When Fox News talks about something, that makes the president talk about it. And the president talking about it means that everyone has to want to talk about it."

But it's not just content. The hiring and firing of staff - a chaotic revolving door of staff - delivers constant soap opera style cliffhangers. "To keep the drama going, and by sowing such discord and chaos, he keeps the beast fed and he keeps himself in the news and he keeps himself at the forefront of the narrative... while maintaining contact with his base," said Hanley. — AFP



Trump's love of TV talent is legendary

University, in The Nation. "The new power behind the throne is Fox & Friends." "This trend is likely to continue," he told AFP. "Other than his immediate family, it's entirely possible that people on Fox News as regular guests or as network personalities really are the only people he trusts."

Trump's love of TV talent is legendary. Who can for-

Quick victory unlikely in Egypt assault on IS

Egypt's military is conducting a sweeping assault to crush a resilient Islamic State branch in Sinai, but the group is unlikely to be vanquished quickly, analysts say. The operation was launched on Feb 9 after President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi, who is expected to sweep to a second term in polls next week, gave the armed forces and police a three-month deadline in November to wipe out the militants. The deadline has since been extended, and the armed forces launched their most comprehensive campaign yet to end the five-year-old jihadist insurgency.

The military gives regular updates on the operation, saying it has killed more than 100 militants so far while losing at least 20 troops. "Egypt is doing a really good job controlling the narrative," said Zack Gold, an analyst with the US-based CNA research group. "Even ISIS has been challenged to put out statements. This suggests Egypt is in control," he said, using an alternative name for IS. "But (it) makes it hard to assess what's really going on and whether long term impact will be different."

Egypt had already launched several operations against jihadists in the Sinai Peninsula, who have killed hundreds of soldiers and policemen. The Egyptian Ansar Beit al-Maqdis group pledged

allegiance to IS in 2014, gaining expertise and logistical support from the international group, which controlled a self-declared "caliphate" in Iraq and Syria. The Sinai militants soon ramped up their attacks on civilians, planting a bomb on a Russian airliner carrying holidaymakers from a south Sinai resort in 2015, killing all 224 people on board.

Starting in late 2016, they also began targeting Christians, killing more than a hundred in church bombings and shootings across the country. Sisi's ultimatum came after suspected IS gunmen massacred more than 300 worshippers in a Sinai mosque associated with Sufi Muslims, seen by IS as heretics. "There appears to be greater emphasis on actively targeting individual militants alongside degrading their logistical supply," wrote EgyGreenfly, an anonymous blogger for Egypt Defence Review. "Whereas previous Egyptian offensives focused on a particular area independent of the others at any one time, 'Sinai 18' appears to have finally coordinated efforts across the country."

Election threat

The military has said about 60,000 soldiers are taking part in the campaign, launched after a period of intelligence-gathering in the peninsula, which borders Israel and the Palestinian Gaza Strip. Omar Ashour, an associate professor at the Doha Institute for Graduate Studies, said the latest operation was different from previous assaults in several ways. He cited "intensive media propaganda/coverage, the size of the forces mobilized... the sustained cooperation with 'militias' or armed tribal formations fighting alongside regular army, and the increased tactical and operational coordination with Israel." — AFP

Facebook faces 'Oppenheimer moment' over Trump scandal

Facebook and psychologists who have worked with it are grappling with their "Oppenheimer moment", experts say, over revelations that its data may have been used to help elect US President Donald Trump. The scandal over the way Cambridge Analytica obtained personal information to try to manipulate US voters "is the most important moment that Facebook has faced since it went public (in 2012)," according to Professor Andrew Przybylski of Oxford University, one of the world's leading authorities on social media psychology.

He compared their reluctance to admit the destructive potential of social media to the epiphany of the father of the atomic bomb, Robert Oppenheimer, who declared, "Now I am become Death, the destroyer of worlds." "With Facebook we have to acknowledge we are giving Frodo the Ring," Przybylski told AFP, referring to the object in the Lord of the Rings which confers absolute power. "If you gave me the Ring I would be corrupted. It is not that what is happening at Facebook is by its nature bad," he added. "It is that they are using our data for products and services, but that we have no idea what they are

up to." He called for regulation and a new "ethical framework (to ensure) that users' rights are protected and that research is being done transparently and in the public interest." Przybylski said similar crises had led to the establishment of ethical standards in other areas.

'Facebook sense threat'

"Chemistry had this moment after they invented dynamite and chemical weapons, physics had this with nuclear weapons," he argued. Facebook and "others have been built on the shoulders of academic research... The key issue is trust. Facebook works one-on-one with psychologists and researchers and there is a fundamental asymmetry there."

Przybylski, who has spent the last two days at Facebook's San Francisco headquarters, said he told founder Mark Zuckerberg's chief of staff "Chris Cox all this to his face", and set out proposals on how Facebook might change the way it works. "I am optimistic. They are receptive, they have a sense of the threat and they have a proactive mindset," said Przybylski, who no longer uses Facebook himself.

But Google researcher Francois Chollet has his doubts. In a series of scathing tweets this week the inventor of the Keras open source library said "the problem with Facebook is not 'just' the loss of your privacy and the fact that it can be used as a totalitarian panopticon," a prison in which all the cells can be observed from one point. "The more worrying issue is its use of digital information consumption as a psychological control vector." — AFP