



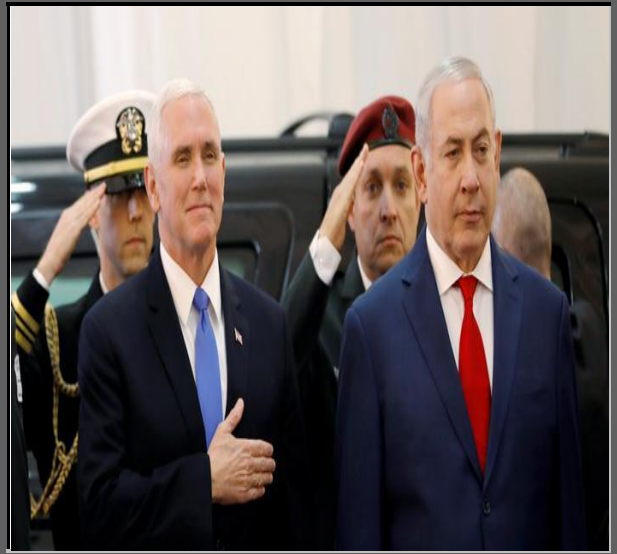
### MIKE PENCE'S TRIP TO THE MIDDLE EAST: CEMENTING ALLIANCES

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*(Views expressed in the brief are those of the author, and do not represent those of ISSI)*



**On 20 January, US Vice President Mike Pence arrived in Egypt to start a four-day Middle East tour. The trip had initially been scheduled for early December 2017, but was postponed. The trip primarily aimed to support the Trump administration's efforts in its quest of an "ultimate deal"<sup>1</sup> to bring about Middle East peace.**

Mr. Pence's next stops were Jordan, a US military base near the Syrian border, and finally Israel. This was the highest-level visit from a US official to the region since December 2017, when Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

In his talks with the Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi in Cairo, Pence assured Sisi that United States was committed to protect the status quo of holy sites in Jerusalem and had as yet, not come to a final resolution. He went on to guarantee firm US support in the nation's fight against Islamist militants and said the connection between the two countries had never been stronger after a period of "drifting apart."<sup>2</sup>

Similar sentiments were conveyed to King Abdullah over his next stopover in Jordan. However, King Abdullah was quick to point out to Pence that the only solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was

<sup>1</sup> Emma Green, "This Is Not the Israel Trip Mike Pence Had Planned," *The Atlantic*, January 22, 2018.

<sup>2</sup> Additional Matt Spetalnick, "Pence tells Egypt's Sisi that U.S. would back two-state solution," *Reuters*, January 20, 2018.

a two-state one, also adding that under all circumstances, East Jerusalem was the capital of a future Palestinian state.<sup>3</sup>

In both Egypt and Jordan, Pence was admonished for Trump administration's overturning of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. While President Sisi did so privately (at length), King Abdullah publicly tongue-lashed Pence: "Today we have a major challenge to overcome, especially with some of the rising frustrations,"<sup>4</sup> he stated. The latter told the media afterwards that they had "agreed to disagree"<sup>5</sup> on the American acknowledgment of Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

The King's reproof is understandable given that Jordan has somewhat higher stakes since it is the official custodian of Jerusalem's Muslim holy sites. Jordan also hosts more than two million Palestinian refugees who are directly affected by Trump administration's decision to cut back funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees.

Pence was warmly welcomed by the Israelis - a stark contrast to his previous meetings. He met with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and spoke before lawmakers at the Knesset.

On the other hand, Palestinian officials snubbed Mr. Pence's visit.

While President Mahmoud Abbas met with European foreign ministers in Brussels to press for a so-called "two-state solution"<sup>6</sup> between Israel and Palestinians, in Gaza, the head of the militant Palestinian faction Hamas said Pence was "not welcome"<sup>7</sup> and went on to call on all Palestinian factions to prepare for "resistance in all forms."<sup>8</sup>

Pence reaffirmed the US administration's pledge of moving the American embassy, stating that it would be done in 2019. In an address to the Israeli parliament, he unfalteringly defended the controversial decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital.

During his speech, Pence described the US-Israel relationship as a "remarkable alliance" which had "never been stronger".<sup>9</sup> The Vice President went on to bash Iran calling the Iranian nuclear deal a

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<sup>3</sup> Al Jazeera, "King Abdullah reiterates support for two-state solution," *News | Al Jazeera*, January 21, 2018.

<sup>4</sup> "Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence and His Majesty King Abdullah II of Jordan Before Working Lunch," *The White House*.

<sup>5</sup> Rana F. Sweis, "Pence and Jordan's King 'Agree to Disagree' on Jerusalem," *The New York Times*, January 21, 2018.

<sup>6</sup> Additional Alastair Macdonald and Marja Novak, "Abbas wins renewed EU backing for Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem," *Reuters*, January 22, 2018.

<sup>7</sup> Ruth Eglash and Jenna Johnson, "Prospects of peace elusive as Pence wraps up visit to Middle East," *The Washington Post*, January 23, 2018.

<sup>8</sup> Ibid.

<sup>9</sup> "Full transcript of Pence's Knesset speech," *The Jerusalem Post | JPost.com*, January 23, 2018.

“disaster”<sup>10</sup> and saying that the Trump administration would no longer certify it. He said that “the brutal regime in Iran is merely a brutal dictatorship that seeks to dominate its citizens and deny them of their most fundamental rights.”<sup>11</sup> Israel’s Prime Minister praised US Vice President Mike Pence’s speech in the Israeli Parliament, calling it a “powerful expression of the enduring bond between our two countries.”<sup>12</sup> In contrast, Israeli Arab lawmakers began shouting and holding up protest signs at the beginning of Mr. Pence’s speech, before they were pushed out.

On the last leg of his stopovers through the Middle East, and the final part of his visit to Israel, Pence took a private tour of the Western Wall. No doubt, Pence’s visit serves as a powerful statement and another verification (not that any more were needed) of the Trump administration’s close association with the Jewish state.

However, it seems that US administration may have damaged its own objectives in the region. Originally, Pence’s trip was supposed to focus on Christian persecution. But influential religious leaders in both Egypt and Palestine refused to meet with him. When the marketing of Pence’s trip as a mission for persecuted Christians did not work out, the *raison d’être* shifted to general efforts to promote peace process breakthroughs. His itinerary conspicuously neglected Christians and other persecuted religious minorities.

Pence’s short trip is merely a reminder that America’s role as a negotiator in the Middle East has become more complex under Trump. In fact, the alignment with Israel’s right wing is more strong than ever as Pence told officials there, “I am here to convey one simple message ... America stands with Israel.”<sup>13</sup>

At this point, the Americans and the Israelis hold all the cards. Whatever solution the latter have in mind would be on their own terms. Unless the Muslim Ummah unite and take action, nothing concrete can come out of what are merely statements admonishing Trump’s inflammatory decisions regarding the Middle East.

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid.

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

<sup>12</sup> “Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence and Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel in Joint Press Statements,” *The White House*.

<sup>13</sup> Sam Bahour, “Mike Pence just confirmed America’s exit from the Mideast peace process,” *Haaretz.com*, January 23, 2018.