

# **Donald Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle Eastern region:**

A study on the believer of its own truth



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## **Abstract**

After an examination of primary and secondary American, Israeli, and international sources such as White House speeches, Aljazeera interviews, American and Israeli newspapers, and documentaries, this thesis shows that former president of the United States Donald Trump was the opposite of a mediator for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Instead of being the broker of peace, Trump's foreign policy created more agitation in the Middle Eastern region, and on the international level. Trump played a strategic game, in which realist and constructivist elements were visible in particular. Thus, this study argues that Trump certainly did not improve the tense situation in the Middle East, although he truly saw himself as the true peace maker. In addition to that, this thesis makes a contribution to the field of International Relations in two ways. Firstly, this thesis created clarity by connecting several aspects of Trump's decision-making on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict to specific IR theories. Secondly, it is an addition to the yet incomplete amount of academic literature on the Trump Administration's approach for this particular conflict.

## **List of abbreviations**

International Relations – IR

Israeli Defence Forces – IDF

Palestinian Liberation Organization – PLO

Palestinian National Authority – PNA

United Nations – UN

United Nations Office for the Coordination of Humanitarian Affairs – OCHA

United Nations Security Council – UNSC

## Introduction

“From this day forward, it’s going to be only America First, America First!”<sup>1</sup> This announcement by former president Donald Trump would alter the American foreign policy into an ‘American First Foreign Policy’ from the moment of his inauguration. The America First slogan was used earlier by American Nazi-groups in the 1930s, and it is interestingly argued that Trump had more in common with these people’s viewpoints than just his word choice.<sup>2</sup> Aside from the America First paradigm, ‘Make America Great Again’ played a major role in Trump’s discourse.<sup>3</sup> Trump’s vision led to the United States being isolated, because of the establishment of among other things trade barriers, and limitations for immigrants. However, this isolation on the national level did not stop the Trump Administration from occupying itself with international conflicts, for example in the Middle Eastern region.<sup>4</sup>

An important tradition is that every time a president is elected in the United States, scholars try to predict that person’s grand strategy, which is the collective name for all the new leader’s strategies, policies, and tools that will improve the nation’s interests. Defining the grand strategy was different this time, since Trump’s discourse did not suit with the United States’ previous understanding of the world order: Liberal internationalism was being substituted for ‘illiberal hegemony’.<sup>5</sup> Trump’s republican’s presidential campaign had a populist character, directed towards the American people instead of the rest of the world. More specifically, Trump was seen as the symbol for a new age of global populism.<sup>6</sup>

The popularity of a government in the era of global populism depends on the ability of the populist leader to convince the voters. They will believe in the populist leader if the country’s foreign policy is aimed at securing the national interests. Therefore, it is argued that the leader

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<sup>1</sup> Donald Trump, “Trump spells out his vision for the US in his inaugural address,” *The Straits Times*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.straitstimes.com/world/united-states/from-this-day-forward-its-going-to-be-only-america-first>.

<sup>2</sup> Eric Rauchway, “Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan,” *The Washington Post*, January 20, 2017, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/posteverything/wp/2017/01/20/president-trumps-america-first-slogan-was-popularized-by-nazi-sympathizers/>.

<sup>3</sup> Rubrick Biegon, “A populist grand strategy? Trump and the framing of American decline,” *International Relations* 33, no.4, (2019): 533.

<sup>4</sup> Rauchway, “Trump’s ‘America First’ slogan.”

<sup>5</sup> Peter Feaver. “What is grand strategy and why do we need it?” *Foreign Policy*, April 8, 2009, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2009/04/08/what-is-grand-strategy-and-why-do-we-need-it/>.

<sup>6</sup> Biegon, “A populist grand strategy?” 530.

has to dive into realist foreign policy strategies to become popular.<sup>7</sup> In December 2017, Trump himself defined the ‘new’ American foreign policy strategy as a form of realism: ‘Principled realism’. In the official National Security Strategy document of the United States, the strategy was called ‘realist’ because power had a central role, the American interests were explicitly outlined, and sovereign states were the most promising states that would be able to achieve global peace. Moreover, ‘principled’ meant that the promotion of American principles would lead to the expansion of peace throughout the world. Thus, the spread of American norms and values would make the world a safer, and more prosperous place.<sup>8</sup>

So far, it looks like the Trump Administration pursued a clear foreign policy strategy, based on a mixture of certain values with national interests. However, within the field of International Relations, scholars generally disagree on how to explain the Trump Administration’s foreign policy in the Middle Eastern region. On the one hand scholars (e.g. Steff and Macdonald) argue that Trump has pushed the American foreign policy in new directions when it comes to the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> On the other hand, scholars (e.g. Bentley and Dombrowski & Reich) claim that there existed a trend of continuity in the first year of Trump’s presidency if a comparison is made with his predecessor Obama.<sup>10</sup>

But what makes Trump’s foreign policy towards the Middle East so interesting? It is fascinating to zoom in on Trump’s approach for the Middle East, since he always has delivered a lot of critique on his predecessor’s Middle Eastern policy. For example, Obama’s ‘red line’ concept was a so-called ‘national humiliation’.<sup>11</sup> According to Trump, Bashar al-Assad’s chemical weapon attack on the Syrian city of Khan Shaykhun could have been prevented if Obama had

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<sup>7</sup> Michael Magcamit, “Explaining the three-way linkage between populism, securitization, and realist foreign policies: President Donald Trump and the Pursuit of “America First” Doctrine,” *World Affairs* 180, no.3, (2018): 8.

<sup>8</sup> Donald Trump, “National Security Strategy of the United States of America,” *White House Archives*, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Reuben Steff, “US Foreign Policy in the Age of Trump: Drivers, strategy and tactics” (New York: Routledge, 2021), 1.

<sup>10</sup> Michelle Bentley, “Instability and incoherence: Trump, Syria, and chemical weapons,” *Critical Studies on Security* 5, no. 2. (2017): 169; Paul Macdonald, “America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump’s Foreign Policy,” *Political Science Quarterly* 133, no. 3. (2018): 403; Peter Dombrowski and Simon Reich, “Beyond the Tweets: President Trump’s Continuity in Military Operations,” *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 2. (2018): 60.

<sup>11</sup> Michael Crowley, “Obama’s ‘red line’ haunts Clinton, Trump,” *Politico*, November 10, 2016, <https://www.politico.com/story/2016/09/obama-clinton-syria-red-line-228585>.

taken action sooner. He did not draw the red line for nothing right?<sup>12</sup> Because of this critique, one would expect that the Trump Administration would have a more offensive approach for conflicts in the Middle East. But, as mentioned above, IR scholars have different opinions about that.

The fact that there exists disagreement in the field of IR is interesting, but at the same time it is quite normal. It is important to emphasize that this does not necessarily indicate a research problem.

However, when looking back at Trump's statement on spreading global peace with principled realism, a shortcoming in the literature arises. The existing academic literature does not fully address the Trump Administration's foreign policy strategy when it comes to Trump's biggest attempt of creating peace in the Middle East, which is his presentation of the Deal of the Century: The solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

*"Peace in this world is possible, including peace between Israelis and Palestinians"*<sup>13</sup>

By now, the world knows that a normalization of ties between Israel and Palestine was not realized, so what happened with Trump's vision for peace? Although Trump's decision-making on peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians is discussed the most often of all his actions in the Middle Eastern region,<sup>14</sup> examining it now is relevant for sure. Nowadays, this thesis uses one of the first opportunities to examine the Trump Administration's strategy as a whole, since its research started when Trump's presidency came to an end. Thus, in contrary to the already existing literature, this thesis will be able to present a complete overview of the Trump Administration's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

## **Research question**

Since Trump himself defined his foreign policy as principled realism, it is expected that both realism and constructivism will explain huge parts of Trump's decision-making. Important is

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<sup>12</sup> Bentley, "Instability and incoherence: Trump, Syria, and chemical weapons."

<sup>13</sup> Donald Trump, "Transcript of Trump's speech in Saudi Arabia," *CNN Politics*, May 21, 2017, <https://edition.cnn.com/2017/05/21/politics/trump-saudi-speech-transcript/index.html>.

<sup>14</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Recognizes Jerusalem as Israel's Capital and Orders U.S. Embassy to Move," *The New York Times*, December 6, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/12/06/world/middleeast/trump-jerusalem-israel-capital.html>.

that this thesis does not want to limit its theoretical scope to realism and constructivism only, because it aims to objectively analyse the Trump Administration. Besides, Trump's announcement of the new strategy immediately led to critical responses. The principled realism concept would be a contradiction, because how could one add principles or values to realism, an IR theory that always puts national interests above everything else?<sup>15</sup> Thus, although a bit unlikely, maybe realism and constructivism together could not explain the Trump Administration at all.

The beforementioned disagreement among IR scholars on how to explain the Trump Administration's foreign policy in the Middle East, combined with the incomplete literature on Trump's approach for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, raise curiosity about how Trump's foreign policy on the Middle East was shaped exactly. Moreover, it is interesting to find out how this policy was related to a combination of realism and constructivism, or if other IR theories also played a role. That is why this thesis examines the following research question: *'To what extent could the Trump Administration's foreign policy on the Middle East be explained with principled realism?'*

In this thesis, two case studies will be analysed elaborately. The first case study is the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. The second case study is the progression of the 'Trump Peace Plan'. By analysing these two major events in detail, this thesis creates a better understanding of Trump's argumentation to take certain actions in the Middle East, since his vision on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is discussed the most often. Consequently, it could be scrutinized whether those actions correspond with certain IR Theories.

## **Methodology**

This thesis has used an inductive approach, "which moves from particular or specific situations to infer to broad ideas/theories".<sup>16</sup> Besides, a qualitative thematic analysis was executed to

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<sup>15</sup> Max de Haldevang, "Trump's doctrine of "principled realism" baffles the foreign policy world," *Quartz*, September 25, 2018, <https://qz.com/1401599/unga-trumps-principled-realism-doctrine-is-an-oxymoron/>.

<sup>16</sup> Engwa Aزه Godwill, "Fundamentals of research methodology : a holistic guide for research completion, management, validation and ethics," (New York: Nova Publishers, 2015), 12.



answer the research question. This research method searches for common themes, ideas or patterns in texts.<sup>17</sup> In practice, it means that this thesis aimed to discover if the Trump Administration's decision-making on the two case studies could be linked to IR theory. If specific theories were deduced repeatedly from the sources, this was perceived as a pattern.

## Sources

The analyses were mainly focused on official White House documents to discover the Trump Administration's reasons for its decisions on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Important speeches, statements, and policy reports by both Trump himself, and other actors of the Trump Administration were looked into. Staff members of the Trump Administration who often played a role in US-Israeli interactions, such as the American Vice President Mike Pence, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo, and Senior Advisor and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, were also incorporated in the analyses of the two case studies.

Aside from White House documents, policy reports of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Aljazeera interviews were used to get a more in-depth understanding of a particular event or actor. Additional sources were collected from newspapers and international organizations, such as Aljazeera, the Times of Israel, the New York Times, and the United Nations website. Worth to mention is that social media did not deliver a large contribution to the analysis. Trump's twitter account is removed because his tweets would encourage violence,<sup>18</sup> and screenshots from the internet are not as reliable as official tweets. Only a few twitter accounts of Trump Administration staff members who had a prominent role in one of the case studies were briefly inspected, such as the account of the US Secretary of State Pompeo.

## Limitations

First of all, this thesis used a narrow scope to analyse the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by focusing on the perspective of the Trump Administration specifically. As a result, the conflict itself could

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<sup>17</sup> Jack Caulfield, "How to do thematic analysis," *Scribbr*, September 6, 2019, <https://www.scribbr.com/methodology/thematic-analysis/>.

<sup>18</sup> Kate Conger, Mike Isaac, "Twitter Permanently Bans Trump, Capping Online Revolt," *The New York Times*, January 8, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/01/08/technology/twitter-trump-suspended.html>.

not be analysed as elaborate as I wanted, due to time and space demands that were stipulated for this thesis. Further research might dive even deeper into some aspects, such as the detailed reasons for Arab states to join the Abraham Accords. This would shed more light on Trump's interactions with other actors in the Middle East. Secondly, this study relied on primary and secondary sources that were all written or translated in English. Sources on actors such as the Palestinian President Abbas would be more reliable if I could have studied them in their original, Arabic form.

Despite these limitations, this thesis made a contribution to the field of IR by presenting a clear conclusion that was based on more than a hundred primary and secondary sources, varying from academic work to official reports by international organizations. After all, this thesis aimed to explain the Trump Administration's foreign policy towards the Middle East.

## **Chapter division**

The first chapter embodies the theoretical framework that is being used for this thesis. The chapter presents five IR theories that might interpret the Trump Administration in different ways, since this helps analysing it from a broader perspective.

The second chapter's goal is to create a general understanding of the Trump Administration's foreign policy actions by using pre-existing academic literature in which Trump's strategies are linked with IR theory. The chapter aims to answer three sub-questions: *'How did the American foreign policy change from the 1990s'?* *'Which position did the Trump Administration take during major events at the global level?'* And *'What are the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict'?* Generating a broad overview of the Trump Administration's foreign policy will make it easier to interpret its decision-making on Israel and Palestine.

Chapter 3 and 4 cover the qualitative analyses of the case studies: The US embassy relocation to Jerusalem, and the progression of the Trump Peace Plan. Chapter 3 aims to discover what the recognition of Jerusalem, and the embassy relocation mean for the Trump Administration's foreign policy. Therefore, the following sub-questions are central: *'What were the Trump*

*Administration's reasons for the relocation of the US embassy'? 'How did the Palestinian side react to this event? And 'what were the results for Trump's position in the Middle Eastern region'?*

Chapter 4 is an examination of Trump's 'Deal of the Century'. The chapter answers the questions: *'What does the Trump Peace Plan look like'?* And *'What were its results'?* Both chapter 3 and 4 will finish with a discussion of the concerning case study's analysis, and an answer on the following last question: *'Which IR theories are suitable to Trump's decisions on this particular case study'?*

Finally, the conclusion of this thesis will give an answer to the main research question.

## **Chapter 1: Theoretical framework**

Scholars generally disagree on how to explain the Trump Administration's foreign policy, based on a specific IR theory. This is deduced from the fact that there exist many different interpretations and opinions on Trump's decision-making, which will become clear in the next chapter, the literature review. This chapter presents the theories that will help analysing the Trump Administration's foreign policy. Both realism and constructivism will probably explain a lot of Trump's decision-making, since Trump called his foreign policy strategy principled realism. However, this thesis uses five main IR theories in order to put the Trump Administration in a broader perspective. The following different angles are used: Realism, constructivism, liberalism, Marxism, and feminism.

I am aware that there exist several sub-types within each theory. However, to keep the analysis as clear as possible, this thesis starts with introducing these five IR theories in their broadest forms. Based on the following chapters, the relevant theories for Trump's approach in the Middle East will be discussed more elaborately in the discussion sections, as well as in the conclusion.

### **1.1 Realism**

Realism understands international politics as a continuous struggle for power. When participating in the international system, state leaders have to make rational calculations to maintain the survival of their state. Outside the state there exists anarchy, which stands for an international political system in which there is no overarching authority above the sovereign states. States are unitary actors who pursue their national interests, by using strategies that maximize the benefits and minimize the costs. They act in a world characterized by self-help.<sup>19</sup>

As mentioned earlier, the term realism popped up when the United States' National Security Strategy (NSS) was presented, in which Trump publicly announced principled realism as the hallmark of his new strategy. That is why realism and constructivism had to be discussed in this

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<sup>19</sup> Michael Barnett, "What is International Relations theory good for?" In: *Chaos in the liberal order. The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 9.

theoretical framework without a doubt. With regard to this thesis' research, realism in particular offers a way to comprehend the Trump Administration's approach for international conflicts.

Realist elements could be derived from the extent in which Trump pursues national interests, and from his interaction with international actors. Jervis for example claims that Trump's relationships, even with allies, could be seen as a zero-sum game.<sup>20</sup> Thus, each negotiation results in winners and losers, and there can only be one winner. When it comes to the Middle East, Walt argues that that Trump uses the 'offshore balancing' realist strategy.<sup>21</sup> This entails that the United States is supporting its favourite regional powers in the Middle East, so that it could have more influence on the rise of the United States' hostile powers in the area. The analyses of the two case studies will point out if such realist aspects were visible in the Trump Administration's foreign policy on the Israeli-Palestine conflict.

What has to be kept in mind is that there is a difference between what is best for the American nation versus what is best for Trump himself. This takes us to the next theory, in which individual values play a central role.

## 1.2 Constructivism

In constructivism the international system is shaped by changes of ideas and behaviour, because different norms and beliefs will lead to variation in the regulation of world politics. For realists, power provides the structure of the international system, while liberalists hold on to institutions and rules. Constructivism is called a social theory, since it takes norms and values into account.<sup>22</sup> Furthermore, constructivism is mainly focused on how normative structures create an actor's identity and behaviour. Structures are not just material, and actors do not adhere to norms with the highest benefits and the lowest costs per se. Instead, interests are shaped by identities, that could change because they are created through social interactions. This means

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<sup>20</sup> Robert Jervis, "President Trump and International Relations Theory," In: *Chaos in the liberal order. The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, 5.

<sup>21</sup> Stephen Walt, "Has Trump become a realist?," *Foreign Policy*, April 17, 2018, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2018/04/17/has-trump-become-a-realist/>.

<sup>22</sup> John Baylis, Steve Smith, and Patricia Owens, "The globalization of world politics. An introduction to International Relations," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2017), 7, 146-148.

that the national interests of the United States are formed by the American identity, which could be influenced the most by the president.

In other words, Trump is influenced by certain norms and values, and the question is whether those factors shape his foreign policy actions. Constructivism is a great tool to interpret Trump's individual norms and values. This helps with understanding his personality, and eventually with the question how the Trump Administration's foreign policy was shaped.

In practice, constructivism could be detracted from the link between power and religion. Trump emphasizes Christian nationalism constantly. Trump for example appointed two conservative judges in the Higher Court, pleaded for praying at school, and he was against transgenders joining the military. When it comes to Christianity, it is important to know that the white evangelicals were very important for Trump's support.<sup>23</sup> After an election scandal with Ukraine, which will be discussed in the literature review, Trump's goal was to gain as much support of this particular group as he could. He had to survive the impeachment procedure that was started against him, and in order to do that he needed to be supported by the Republic senators, who were dependent of their voters. 25 percent of the American voters were evangelicals, so Trump formed a sort of alliance with them. He for example publicly prayed with them in his Oval Office. Eventually, Trump survived the impeachment procedure.

An evident, constructivist aspect of Trump's character is his skill to only perceive the truths that correspond to his worldview and self-image.<sup>24</sup> Trump was obsessed with the book 'The power of positive thinking', written by Peale. Simply said, this book's main message is that if you believe that nothing bad will happen to you, then nothing bad will happen to you. This way of thought is essential for understanding Trump through constructivism.

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<sup>23</sup> Joseph Baker, Samuel Perry, and Andrew Whitehead, "Keep America Christian (and White): Christian nationalism, fear of ethnoracial outsiders, and intention to vote for Donald Trump in the 2020 presidential election," *Sociology of Religion* 81, no. 3, (2020): 274.

<sup>24</sup> Daniel Cook, "The wages of constructivism," *Childhood* 27, no.2, (2020): 139.

A very recent situation related to this way of thought is Trump's approach for the coronavirus. When the virus broke out, Trump claimed that the United States was totally prepared for it. According to him, the virus would disappear like a miracle. Trump threw out the pandemic crisis playbook made by homeland security, and he told Americans not to wear a face mask, although his own government had ordered that. All that mattered were the upcoming elections, and the American economy had to be improved before the elections would begin. If the United States' economy would be influenced by a possible lockdown, Trump could never proclaim how he had improved it during his presidency. Thus, it was not about stopping the spread of the coronavirus, but it was all about Trump.

The last thing that might be attached to constructivism, is that every time Trump has to deal with a major disappointment, he sees it as a complot against him. During the 2016 elections against Hilary Clinton, Trump was convinced that he would lose, and therefore the elections were a fraud. He repeated this accusation after the 2020 elections, which he really lost eventually.<sup>25</sup>

One way to prevent internal complots and betrayals is to only surround yourself with people who agree with you. If Trump suspected that several staff members disagreed with his ideas, he fired them. In the case of the National Security Advisor John Bolton for example, Trump tweeted that he fired Bolton, although Bolton had already resigned officially on the day before.<sup>26</sup> The firing indicates that Trump always wanted to push through his own vision, even if important staff members – such as senior advisors with a lot of experience - were against him. Thus, despite the fact that the Trump Administration involves more individuals than Trump alone, it was Trump who wanted to make sure he stood above everything.

### **1.3 Liberalism**

Important principles within liberalism are free trade, a limited role of the state, individual rights, and cooperation among states. All of this has to be regulated by international institutions.<sup>27</sup> Since the Cold War, the United States is generally portrayed as the protector of the (neo)liberal

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<sup>25</sup> BBC, "Episode 3," The Trump Show.

<sup>26</sup> BBC News, "The White House revolving door: Who's gone?" December 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-39826934>.

<sup>27</sup> Baylis et al., "The globalization of world politics. An introduction to International Relations," 117-118.

world order. In this traditional world order, institutions and rules help promoting American interests, but they mainly aim to guarantee peace, prosperity, and stability for the international system as a whole.<sup>28</sup>

Busby and Monten argue that Trump's populist thoughts are in contrary to this traditional order, because economic and security deals for the long term are often substituted for the short-term best deals. Furthermore, he doubts international institutions sometimes, such as the North Atlantic Treaty Organization, although such institutions are the foundation of the liberal system. Also, Trump is opposed to free trade, which could be detracted from his imposed trade barriers for example.<sup>29</sup>

It seems like the United States has shifted away from the traditional world order since Trump's presidency. Still, liberalism could be a useful theory for this thesis, because the analyses are focused on Trump's cooperation with international actors.

#### **1.4 Marxism**

Marxism perceives the current world as a global, capitalist system, in which all components are related and interdependent. Economic developments have a big influence on the transformation of society, which is prone to class conflicts.<sup>30</sup>

Economically speaking, Trump started several trade wars with the intention to protect American workers. He is opposed to free trade deals, and he has established trade barriers. As a result of this, the United States lost many manufacturing jobs during the Trump Administration, so one could say that Trump has lost his trade wars.<sup>31</sup> Trump's opposition to free trade, as well as his urge to de-globalize the United States, are two aspects that are in contrary to Marxism.

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<sup>28</sup> Ionut Popescu, "American grand strategy and the rise of offensive realism," *Political Science Quarterly* 134, no.3, (2019): 375.

<sup>29</sup> Joshua Busby, and Jonathan Monten, "Has liberal internationalism been trumped?," In: *Chaos in the liberal order: The Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century*, 50.

<sup>30</sup> Baylis et al., "The globalization of world politics. An introduction to International Relations," 132.

<sup>31</sup> Rebecca Ray, "Trump's trade war – What was it good for? Not much," *The Conversation*, October 26, 2020, [Trump's trade war – what was it good for? Not much \(theconversation.com\)](https://theconversation.com/trump-s-trade-war-what-was-it-good-for-not-much).



However, sometimes Trump's policy was strongly determined by his economic interests. Again, a recent example of this is his approach for the coronavirus. Protecting the American people against the spread of pandemic was less important than the upcoming elections, in which Trump had to brag about his economic achievements. Besides, there may be Marxist aspects that will correspond to the Trump Administration's policy on the international level. According to Marxism, a country's foreign policy is determined by capitalist interests.<sup>32</sup> For the United States this was visible during the Bush Administration, when Bush stated that the United States was addicted to oil.<sup>33</sup> Although Trump claimed that he did not need Middle Eastern oil, there were still American troops in Syria to protect the oil there during his presidency.<sup>34</sup> This will be further discussed in the literature review.

Marxism might be a theory that unexpectedly relates to many aspects of the Trump Administration's foreign policy. It serves as a manner to highlight Trump's economical reasons for making certain decisions. Besides, Marxism could possibly be linked with other theories, for example to a realist cost and benefit analysis.

### **1.5 Feminism**

Feminism promotes that women should be allowed the same rights and opportunities as men. Globally, women suffer from subordination and there is no state that currently disposes a complete equality between men and women. Feminism stands for the idea that women leaders are capable of running the world better than men, a vision that was embraced by Trump's predecessor Obama.

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<sup>32</sup> Baylis et al., "The globalization of world politics. An introduction to International Relations," 142.

<sup>33</sup> Jason Bordoff, "No, President Trump, the U.S. isn't energy-independent. Middle East oil still matters," *The Washington Post*, January 10, 2020, [No, President Trump, the U.S. isn't energy independent. Middle East oil still matters. - The Washington Post](#).

<sup>34</sup> Jack Detch, "U.S. Troops really are in Syria to protect the oil – for the Kurds," *Foreign Policy*, August 5, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/05/kurds-oil-syria-us-troops-trump/>.

But whereas Obama argued that the world could be a better place if it would be led by more women,<sup>35</sup> Trump definitely was not known for his women-friendly behaviour. For example Zalewski and Runyan call Trump sexist, and describe him as being mainly focused on white, heterosexual men.<sup>36</sup> Also, Prasad states that Trump often made some derogatory comments about women. By for example marking someone as ‘a female politician’, he only emphasized the fact that this person was a woman, while her professional qualities were completely ignored. Furthermore, Trump publicly condemned women if he thought they were ugly.<sup>37</sup>

Probably, this thesis will not deal with feminism as much as with other theories, because it is mainly focused on the content of the Trump Administration’s foreign policy towards the Middle East. Still, feminism is included in this theoretical framework, since it offers knowledge about Trump’s personality. In addition to that, for example Layton remarks that women possess hundreds of important roles in the Trump Administration.<sup>38</sup> Thus, it could be the case that women did have lot of influence on Trump’s approach for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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<sup>35</sup> Barack Obama, “Obama says women are better at leading,” December 16, 2019, *Daily Blast Live*, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vuEkoLRPEqQ>.

<sup>36</sup> Marysia Zalewski, Anne Sisson Runyan, “Security unbound: Spectres of feminism in Trump-time,” *Critical Studies on Security* 8, no.1, (2019): 10.

<sup>37</sup> Ritu Prasad, “How Trump talks about women - and does it matter?” November 29, 2019, *BBC News*, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-50563106>.

<sup>38</sup> Roslyn Layton, “Hundreds of women have lead roles in the Trump administration. 45 more await Senate confirmation,” *Forbes*, June 29, 2019, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/roslynlayton/2019/06/29/hundreds-of-women-have-lead-roles-in-the-trump-administration-45-more-await-senate-confirmation/?sh=28b9708e250e>.

## **Chapter 2: Literature review on the Trump Administration**

Before the case studies could be analysed, this thesis aims to establish a general image of the Trump Administration while using pre-existing literature that already has discussed the link between Trump and IR theory. Firstly, this chapter outlines the historical context of the American foreign policy. Subsequently, several extraordinary events in which the Trump Administration was involved are analysed. Lastly, an overview of the Israeli Palestinian conflict is presented. The chapter will show that although Trump seemed to make important decisions on big issues, the outcomes were sometimes quite disappointing. Moreover, world politics had to get used to a totally different style of American foreign policy.

### **2.1 American foreign policy shifts**

The end of the Cold War, paired with the fall of the Soviet Union, meant that the United States was the only global superpower left. The republican George Herbert Walker Bush, father of George Walker Bush who would become president in 2001, was the United States' president from 1989 till 1993. As a reaction to Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait (Gulf War 1990-91), Bush mobilized an international coalition to invade Iraq. There was no international mandate to bring down Hussein's regime, so sanctions were imposed on Iraq instead. This had bad consequences for the Iraqi people, which, in combination with the United States' support for Israel's occupation of Palestine, increased hostile feelings towards the Americans in the region.<sup>39</sup>

Important is that the neoliberal model became the dominant economic approach on a global level since 1990.<sup>40</sup> Neoliberalists plead for a self-regulating market, and a reduced economic role for governments. The US tried to spread this ideology globally. The idea of spreading certain values all over the world, makes me think of Trump's speech on principled realism, in which he claimed that extending American principles would lead to global peace and prosperity.

Aside from the end of the Cold War, the second important change in US foreign policy took place after 9/11. Republican George Bush followed up Clinton, and his presidency started with

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<sup>39</sup> Michael Hudson, "The United States in the Middle East," In: Louise Fawcett, *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 5, 378.

<sup>40</sup> Manfred Seger, "Neoliberalism: A very short introduction," (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 37.

what would become the deadliest terrorist attack in human history: The September 11 attacks. After 9/11, the Bush Administration's foreign policy was shaped by 'the war on terror'.<sup>41</sup>

The beforementioned neoliberalist ideology was an important driver of war during several wars after the end of the Cold War, for example during the United States' invasion of Iraq in 2003. The Americans tried to transform Iraq's state-led economy into an open market system. The 'new Iraq' never worked: Among other things the de-Baathification process and the disarmament of the Iraqi army led to a state that was characterized by chaos, violence, and exclusiveness.<sup>42</sup> The American neoliberal doctrine was a bit of a contradiction, because in order to implement neoliberal economic reforms, the government had to impose such reforms on local and regional authorities.<sup>43</sup>

With the start of Obama's presidency, the 'age of neoliberalism' came to an end.<sup>44</sup> He putted the idea of a 'multipartner world' at the center of his foreign policy approach.<sup>45</sup> With regard to military actions, Obama used another approach than his predecessor Bush. Obama's interaction with hostile states relied more on diplomacy and cooperation, compared to Bush's strategies.

For example, Obama led the 2011 NATO-intervention in Libya, but he wanted to fulfil an assisting role as the 'leader from behind', instead of going to war on his own.<sup>46</sup> Also, the US did not interfere when Assad executed a chemical weapon attack, although Obama came up with the red line concept. As we know, Trump was really against this.

Important is that tensions in the Middle East were shaped by a second Cold War. Having some knowledge about the long history of rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, often referred to as 'the Middle East's Cold War', is necessary to understand the current conflicts in the region. Iran and Saudi Arabia have never fought each other directly, but instead they are supporting

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<sup>41</sup> Hal Brands, "From Berlin to Baghdad: America's Search for Purpose in the Post-Cold War World," 264. <http://web.a.ebscohost.com.ezproxy.leidenuniv.nl:2048/ehost/ebookviewer/ebook/ZTAwMHh3d19fMjA5NzUxX19BTg2?sid=c5c824be-9ca4-4ab3-abf9-f5ff956c21bb@sessionmgr4006&vid=0&format=EB&rid=1>.

<sup>42</sup> Marina Calculli, "External actors," *Leiden University*, February 24, 2020, <https://brightspace.universiteitleiden.nl/d2l/le/lessons/31204/topics/1098629>.

<sup>43</sup> Seger, "Neoliberalism: A very short introduction," 74.

<sup>44</sup> Seger, "Neoliberalism: A very short introduction," 28-29.

<sup>45</sup> John Ikenberry, "Liberal Leviathan. The Origins, Crisis, and Transformation of the American World Order" (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 2012), 12.

<sup>46</sup> Sanford Lakoff, "Leading from behind: The Obama doctrine and US policy in the Middle East," *Strategic Assessment* 16, no.1, (2013): 8.

other countries to fight a ‘proxy war’. The tensions between the two countries go way back, since they both aimed to increase their power over the Middle East from approximately 1979, the time of Ayatollah Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution. To stop Khomeini’s rising influence in the region, Saudi Arabia formed alliances with the US and several Gulf countries. After the American failure in Iraq, several extremist militias arose in that country, which were used as proxies for Saudi Arabia (Sunni) and Iran (Shia). The two countries continued using these strategies during the Arab Spring, a period that further complicated Middle Eastern relationships.<sup>47</sup>

Calculi claims that Trump’s presidency shows a continuity with the United States’ previous neoliberal policies, particularly because of new attempts – in cooperation with e.g. Israel and Saudi Arabia - to reduce the influence of both the Syrian and Iranian regime in the Middle East.<sup>48</sup>

## **2.2 Big actions, small results**

On the global level, there were several striking events in which the Trump Administration played an important, or even the main role. This paragraph analyses these events in order to discover what Trump has achieved during his presidency, and to be aware of his less successful actions or scandals in which he got involved.

To start with maybe the most spectacular happening: Trump was the first American president who entered North Korea. In June 2018 he had a meeting with the North-Korean leader Kim Jong-un to start their nuclear talks, and a year later they resumed that conversation.<sup>49</sup> This meetings were definitely remarkable, but in June 2020 North Korea made clear that it was

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<sup>47</sup> Vox, “The Middle East Cold War, explained,” July 17, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=veMFCFyOwFI>.

<sup>48</sup> Calculi, “Middle East security: The politics of violence after the 2003 Iraq War,” in: *International Relations of the Middle East* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 239.

<sup>49</sup> Peter Baker and Michael Crowley, “Trump steps into North Korea and agrees with Kim Jong-un to resume talks,” *The New York Times*, June 30, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/30/world/asia/trump-north-korea-dmz.html>.

strengthening its nuclear weapon programs.<sup>50</sup> So even though Trump shook hands with Kim Jong-un, he failed to “pursue a future of peace and security for the world”, as he promised beforehand.<sup>51</sup> Beyond any doubt, the meeting was extraordinary, but it did not lead to anything. One year before his first meeting with Kim Jong-un, Trump announced that “if the United States is forced to defend itself (...) we will have no choice to totally destroy North Korea”.<sup>52</sup> It is at least remarkable that a year after this statement he decided to just meet with ‘the rocket man’. Importantly, this course of events might reveal how impulsive Trump’s foreign policy was.

Another country that has occupied the Trump Administration a lot is Syria. Just two months after his inauguration, Trump made clear what his position was towards the Syrian Civil War. On April 7<sup>th</sup> 2017, the US attacked the Syrian government for the first time since this war had begun. A unilateral attack took place in which 59 American missiles were launched. Trump responded to Assad’s chemical weapon attack on the city Khan Shaykhun in Northern Syria, although in the previous years he was known for his anti-interventionist attitude.<sup>53</sup>

Three interesting findings could be deduced from Trump’s attack. Firstly, Obama drew the red line for chemical weapon attacks, but he did not interfere when Assad executed such an attack. That is why Trump’s act was a big contrast with Obama’s approach for Syria. Indeed, Macdonald mentions several foreign policy cases (e.g. the attacks on Syria, but also the enlargement of US troop presence in Afghanistan) with which the Trump Administration has altered the US foreign policy towards a new direction in an unpredictable way.<sup>54</sup> Secondly, Trump completely turned against his former anti-interventionist viewpoint by attacking Syria, since he urged Obama to not attack Assad in 2013.<sup>55</sup> Thirdly, Trump did not discuss his plan beforehand: European leaders knew about the attack on the day itself. This shows that Trump did not feel like he had to cooperate with Europe. The three points already indicate that Trump

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<sup>50</sup> Swon-Gwon Ri, “Our Message to U.S. is Clear,” *KCNA Watch*, June 12, 2006, <https://kcnawatch.org/newstream/1591940601-72980278/our-message-to-u-s-is-clear-ri-son-gwon-minister-of-foreign-affairs-of-dprk/>.

<sup>51</sup> Donald Trump, “Trump talks about meeting with Kim Jong Un,” *ABC News*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.facebook.com/ABCNews/videos/pres-trump-talks-about-meeting-with-kim-jong-un/10157227408043812/>.

<sup>52</sup> Donald Trump, “Trump threatens to ‘totally destroy’ North Korea in UN speech,” *Al Jazeera English*, September 20, 2017, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=kQAjScY4nMM>.

<sup>53</sup> Bentley, “Instability and incoherence: Trump, Syria, and chemical weapons,” 168-169.

<sup>54</sup> Macdonald, “America First? Explaining Continuity and Change in Trump's Foreign Policy,” 403.

<sup>55</sup> Crowley, “Obama's 'red line' haunts Clinton, Trump.”

did not have one specific strategy. He adjusted his tactics if he felt that something was the best thing to do at one specific moment.

In October 2019, Trump called for the withdrawal of all American troops from Syria, mainly because there needed to be a ceasefire between fighting Turkish and Kurdish troops.<sup>56</sup> In December 2018, Trump already mentioned that he was planning to do so, which raised concerns about the United States' allies, who would get a weaker position in the conflict. Moreover, analysts, and even the Syrian Democratic forces had warned Trump against the consequences of such a withdrawal, for example the creation of more space for the Islamic State, although according to Trump the US had already won the war against them. Trump chose to order his troops to withdraw and this led, according to him, to many saved lives in the region. But eventually, a small number of American troops remained in Northern Syria to secure the oil in the area. Apparently for Trump securing oil was part of the American mission in Syria.

In September 2020, more American troops were heading to Syria in order to avoid more Russian aggression.<sup>57</sup> This was in contrary to Trump's withdrawal statement from the year before. Thus, at first it seemed like Trump did not care about Russia or other forces that could fill up the power vacuum after a troop withdrawal. However, when it actually happened, Trump came back to protect the oil, and to reduce the influence of other groups in the area. Trump's decisions on Syria did not really indicate a specific foreign policy strategy, because he constantly changed his mind.

The observation that the Trump Administration's actions were flexible and impulsive, which was also the case with North Korea, comes across with realism. The American foreign policy was adjusted based on what was the best thing to do at a specific moment. On top of that, Marxism is related to Trump's will to maintain in control of the oil, since this manifests that he was driven by economic interests.

Iran is another subject that is often discussed when it comes to Trump's Middle Eastern policy. Since the 1980s – The US supported Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War<sup>58</sup> - there are no real

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<sup>56</sup> Megan Specia, "Winners and losers in Trump's troop withdrawal from Syria," *The New York Times*, October 15, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/15/world/middleeast/trump-syria-troop-withdrawal.html>.

<sup>57</sup> Alex Ward, "Trump says the US is "out of Syria." But more US troops are heading there," *VOX*, September 21, 2020, <https://www.vox.com/2020/9/21/21448845/syria-russia-usa-troops-trump>.

<sup>58</sup> Council on Foreign Relations, "U.S. Relations with Iran," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-iran-1953-2020>.

diplomatic relations between the US and Iran. During Trump's presidency, the US imposed severe sanctions on Iran with regard to its nuclear weapon program. The two most striking happenings were the US withdrawal from the Iran nuclear deal in May 2018, and the killing of Iranian commander Qassim Suleimani in January 2020.<sup>59</sup>

In a further stadium of this thesis it will be more elaborately illustrated how Trump perceives Iran as a sponsor of terror, and how the US and Israel cooperate to reduce radical Islamic terrorism.

Another threat for Trump's interests, economically speaking, was China. Trump's decision-making on China shows how much Trump was focused on improving the United States' economy. In March 2018, Trump announced tariffs on Chinese imports. Four months after that, more tariffs were added, which resulted in an escalated trade-war between the United States and China. This trade-war further intensified in 2019, until progress was finally made in January 2020, when a trade deal was signed. However, with the breakout of the coronavirus, the bilateral relations became worse again.<sup>60</sup> In July 2020, Secretary of State Pompeo stated that the United States' engagement with China had failed.<sup>61</sup>

These practices are obviously in contrary to liberalism. Liberal internationalism is about international engagement, not about the president isolating the country.<sup>62</sup> In this case, Trump was only focused on the economy of the United States. What's more, the realist thought of perceiving the world as a struggle for power could be related to the trade-wars. It seemed a sort of competition for Trump to come up with obstacles in order to decrease China's power as much as possible.

The last two outstanding events demonstrate how Trump's foreign policy interactions were related to staying in power on the national level. In June 2018, Trump had a meeting with the Russian President Vladimir Putin, to get an answer on whether the Russians had interfered in

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<sup>59</sup> Michael Crowley, Falih Hassan, and Eric Schmitt, "US strike in Iraq kills Qassim Suleimani, commander of Iranian Forces," *The New York Times*, January 2, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/02/world/middleeast/qassem-soleimani-iraq-iran-attack.html>.

<sup>60</sup> CFR, "U.S. Relations with China. 1949-2021," <https://www.cfr.org/timeline/us-relations-china>.

<sup>61</sup> Mike Pompeo, "Communist China and the Free World's Future," *U.S. Department of State*, July 23, 2020, <https://2017-2021.state.gov/communist-china-and-the-free-worlds-future-2/index.html>.

<sup>62</sup> Chaudoin et al., "Chaos in the liberal order: The Trump presidency and international politics in the twenty-first century", 61.



the American elections of 2016. All American intelligence agencies were convinced that Russia played a role in harming Hillary Clinton's campaign, while strengthening Trump's one. However, after Putin denied that he had something to do with it, Trump agreed with him. It is striking that Trump believed one man over the United States' intelligence services. Also, Trump seemed a bit submitted to Putin during the meeting, by agreeing with him so quickly. In 2019, a report came out that said there was no collaboration with the Russians, so Trump officially was right.<sup>63</sup>

Another election scandal had to do with Ukraine. After Trump's defeat during the 2018 mid-term elections, his advocate Rudy Giuliani asked Ukraine to start an investigation on Joe Biden. According to Giuliani, it was all about Biden who was possibly involved in a corruption scandal. The United States threatened to stop giving Ukraine its promised military aid, unless it would start an investigation on Joe Biden and the democrats. Eventually, this event led to Trump's impeachment inquiry.<sup>64</sup> As we know, Trump survived this impeachment procedure because he was supported by the evangelicals, who formed his largest support group. It is not surprisingly that for example Ülgül claims that religious values played an important role in the American foreign policy under the Trump Administration.<sup>65</sup>

The election scandals are a reflection of two constructivist aspects. Trump was clearly influenced by religious values, and he strongly believed in his own truth.

With regard to the Trump Administration's position during the outlined major events, I think Trump himself completely agreed with his own decision-making. He wanted to have the main role, and make a strong impression. However, outsiders of the Trump Administration might interpret his self-image, and his decisions in different ways. The impeachment procedure after the scandal with Ukraine was a very important happening that harmed Trump's credibility. A second thought is that although some actions seemed amazing at first (e.g. Trump's meeting with Kim Jong-un), they did not lead to actual improvements. This observation is also an infringement on the Trump Administration's reputation.

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<sup>63</sup> BBC, "Episode 3," The Trump Show, <https://www.bbc.co.uk/iplayer/episode/p08svfw6/the-trump-show-series-1-episode-3>.

<sup>64</sup> BBC, "Episode 3."

<sup>65</sup> Murat Ülgül, "Faith abroad: how religion shapes Trump Administration's foreign policy," *International Relations* 1, no. 1, (2021): 15.

### **2.3 The Israeli-Palestinian conflict**

This paragraph on the origins of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is important to understand the United States' role when the case studies are analysed. Several important names, and abbreviations are worth to mention, because they will return in chapters 3 and 4. During the Trump Administration period, the Israeli president is Reuven Rivlin, and Benjamin Netanyahu is Israel's Prime Minister. The president of the State of Palestine is Mahmoud Abbas, also head of the Palestinian National Authority (PNA). Abbas chairs the Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO), in which his Fatah party is the largest fraction.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict started in the middle of the previous century, around 1947, and is part of the more extensive Arab-Israeli conflict. From 1920 till 1948, there already was an armed conflict in Mandatory Palestine (ruled by the British at that time) between the Palestinian Arab people, and the Yishuv, the Jewish residents. The United Nations' attempt to solve this conflict with a partition plan failed, as the 1947-1949 Palestine War or 'War of Independence' or 'Nakba' broke out. The British people withdrew from Palestine during this war, and the State of Israel was established in 1948. Many Palestinian people were expelled from their homes. In 1948, the US was the first country that recognized the state of Israel, and the two countries overall maintained close ties since.<sup>66</sup>

The Arab-Israeli relations became more complicated from 1967, when Israel started its occupation of the West Bank (including East-Jerusalem), Gaza Strip, and the Sinai Peninsula during the Six Day War. The Israelis have always perceived Jerusalem as the capital city of the Jewish state, while the Palestinians also see 'al-Quds' (how they call Jerusalem) as their future capital city. During the Six Day War, the Israelis established several settlements for Jewish people in and around this area. From 1967, more Jewish 'settlers' moved to these areas, that were officially occupied by Palestinians. Furthermore, Israel was engaged in multiple armed conflicts with several of its neighbours, since both Gaza and Sinai were parts of Egypt before, and the Westbank (with its Jordan Valley) initially belonged to Jordan.

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<sup>66</sup> Rafael Aronstam, "Israel background, issues and U.S. relations," (New York: Nova Publishers, 2013), 15.

Also, from approximately the late 1960s, Israel encountered the threat of Palestinian nationalism, and Islamist terrorism. The country especially felt threatened by Iran and its allies.<sup>67</sup> This comes across with the United States' bad relationship with Iran.

Throughout the years, there were several international attempts to improve the situation. In 1978, the Camp David Accords stipulated Israel's return of Sinai to Egypt. At the same time, the number of Jewish settlements in the Palestinian occupied Westbank region was growing, which divided the Palestinian land even more. This situation was making it increasingly difficult for the Palestinians to have their own state. Eventually, Palestinian frustration led to the First Intifada (1987-1993), or uprising. In the meantime, a Palestinian group in Gaza separated themselves from the Westbank PLO: Hamas was created.

In 1993, a Palestinian Authority with limited governance control over the West Bank and Gaza Strip was developed during the Oslo Accords, signed in Washington. The PLO and Israel recognized each other, while Hamas did not agree on this. Despite this important start of a possible peace process, a Palestinian state was not established, and many violent protests took place. It is argued that the Oslo Accords failed, among other things because the US position as a mediator was biased.<sup>68</sup>

In 2000, there was a second Camp David summit, but this did not work out either. The Second Intifada (2000-2005) took place, which was way more violent than the first one. After this uprising, the nature of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict changed. Israel started to build walls and checkpoints to control the Palestinians. Achieving peace started to become more unlikely, since both negotiations and violent ways did not lead to anything so far.

After the Second Intifada, the Israeli Defence Forces (IDF) withdrew from Gaza. Hamas really gained power and divided Gaza from the Westbank. As a response, a Gaza blockade was established in 2007. Gaza has remained a troubled area. In 2009, there was a bloody conflict between Israel and Hamas. As a result of reconciliation agreements in 2014, the Palestinian Unity Government was formed, which meant that Hamas and Fatah became one government. Israel did not support this unity government, since it would not negotiate with the terrorist

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<sup>67</sup> Aronstam, "Israel background, issues and U.S. relations," 4.

<sup>68</sup> Ghassan Khatib, "Palestinian politics and Middle East peace process consensus and competition in the Palestinian negotiation team" (New York: Routledge, 2010), 168.

organization Hamas. When Hamas murdered three Israeli teenagers, the 2014 Gaza War between Hamas and Israel broke out, which was one of the deadliest fights between the Israelis and the Palestinians. Because of Gaza's isolated position, rearmament has been challenging for Hamas.<sup>69</sup> The Gaza blockade has still not been lifted after the 2014 Gaza War.

Notwithstanding the fact that this is a short outline of the situation, it shows the complexity of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Therefore it helps understanding different perspectives. The analyses of the two case studies, the US embassy relocation to Jerusalem, and the progression of the Trump Peace Plan, will examine if the Trump Administration's policy towards the conflict has improved the situation.

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<sup>69</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Gaza, Hamas and the New Middle East," <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=od0KzQN4TpQ>.

## Chapter 3: Trump's curious role as mediator for the Middle East

On December 6, 2017, Trump recognized Jerusalem as the capital city of Israel, and he called for the relocation of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem.<sup>70</sup> This chapter will show how Trump ascribed himself a mediator role for the Middle East, even though he was definitely not solving conflicts in the meantime.

### 3.1 American-Israeli friendship

Because Trump announced the relocation of the US embassy, the Jerusalem Embassy Act could finally be realized. This is a public law that was adopted in 1995, and had the ambition to establish the American embassy in Jerusalem before the end of May in 1999.<sup>71</sup> Important is that the US administrations after 1995 had always postponed the Jerusalem Embassy Act, because Israel and Palestine could not come to an agreement on Jerusalem.<sup>72</sup> Thus, it is extraordinary that the Trump Administration decided to realize it after more than twenty years. Eventually, the embassy already opened on May 14, 2018, on the 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary of Israel's independence.<sup>73</sup> Apparently, Trump felt that he had to support his decision to relocate the embassy with an official law. I think he already foresaw that this decision would evoke a lot of commotion, and that he probably had to explain himself. Therefore he used an official, existing law to support his plans.

*Which motives are used?*

In Trump's presidential proclamation on December 6, 2017, a couple statements are outstanding, since they indicate what Trump's interests were. First of all, he argued that the American recognition of Jerusalem was in the best interests of the United States. Trump added that it also would be beneficial for the chance of peace between Israel and Palestine, which suited with the Trump Administration's wish for a peaceful and safe Middle East. I do not directly see how recognizing Jerusalem would improve the chance of peace between two states

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<sup>70</sup> Donald Trump, "Statement by former President Trump on Jerusalem," *U.S. Embassy in Israel*, December 6, 2017, <https://il.usembassy.gov/statement-by-president-trump-on-jerusalem/>.

<sup>71</sup> 104th United States Congress, "Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995," *United States Government Publishing Office*, November 8, 1995, <https://www.congress.gov/104/plaws/publ45/PLAW-104publ45.pdf>.

<sup>72</sup> Ahmed Abu Artema, "A post-Trump Palestine," *Aljazeera*, January 17, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2021/1/17/a-post-trump-palestine>.

<sup>73</sup> White House Staff, "President Donald J. Trump keeps his promise to open U.S. embassy in Jerusalem, Israel," *White House Archives*, May 14, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trump-keeps-promise-open-u-s-embassy-jerusalem-israel/>.

who perceive the same city as their capital, so I think Trump's second argument did not fit well in this peculiar situation.

With regard to a solution for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Trump made clear that the US would not choose a side during final peace negotiations between the two countries, for example when they would discuss their border issues. However, by recognizing Jerusalem as Israel's capital city, the US did choose Israel over Palestine, since the Palestinians perceive East-Jerusalem, Al-Quds, as the capital city of their future state.

In the same declaration, Trump referred to the importance of principled realism in the US foreign policy. He claimed that principled realism starts with the acceptance of 'plain facts', and when it came to Israel this required both the recognition of Jerusalem and the relocation of the American embassy. Trump did not further elaborate on his principled realism argument.<sup>74</sup> It was never such a plain fact that Jerusalem belonged to Israel though, otherwise the current situation between the Israelis and the Palestinians would be a little less complicated.

Lastly, Trump briefly mentioned that the United States would keep supporting Jerusalem's holy sites. These places had to preserve their status quo, because they were still of great value to Judaism, Christianity, and Islam.<sup>75</sup>

From the moment of the US recognition of Jerusalem, more members of the Trump Administration publicly tightened their bonds with Israel. On January 22, there was a meeting between the Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and the American Vice President Mike Pence, who was on a trip to Egypt, Jordan, and Israel. Pence gave a speech at the Knesset, the Israeli parliament. He reaffirmed Trump's announcement from the month before, and he stated that the American embassy would open before the end of 2019.<sup>76</sup> Pence's arrival at the Knesset was not very friendly, as members of the parliament started criticizing him at the beginning of his speech. Eventually, the situation escalated, because some Knesset members had to be removed

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<sup>74</sup> White House Staff, "Presidential Proclamation Recognizing Jerusalem as the Capital of the State of Israel and Relocating the United States Embassy to Israel to Jerusalem," *White House Archives*, December 6, 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-proclamation-recognizing-jerusalem-capital-state-israel-relocating-united-states-embassy-israel-jerusalem/>.

<sup>75</sup> White House Staff, "Presidential Proclamation Recognizing Jerusalem as the Capital of the State of Israel and Relocating the United States Embassy to Israel to Jerusalem."

<sup>76</sup> Mike Pence, "Full transcript of Pence's Knesset speech," *The Jerusalem Post*, January 22, 2018. [Full transcript of Pence's Knesset speech - The Jerusalem Post \(jpost.com\)](https://www.jpost.com/News-Analysis/Full-transcript-of-Pence-s-Knesset-speech-577777).

from the room after their protests became violent.<sup>77</sup> Based on this unfriendly welcome, it can be derived that the Israeli parliament did not unanimously agree with the US embassy relocation.

After Pence did his speech at the Knesset on January 22, he met again with Netanyahu later that day. Netanyahu expressed his gratefulness for the US recognition of Jerusalem, and he called the decision historic. Moreover, both Netanyahu and Pence emphasized the strong American-Israeli relationship repeatedly.<sup>78</sup> I presume that the Americans saw this second meeting as necessary to restore Pence's rough morning at the Knesset. Pence and Netanyahu shook hands before a lot of press, and it looked like they were friends. This pretty impression was intensified by the emphasis on Trump's wonderful decision on the relocation, and the US-Israel friendship.

Notable is that the issues with Iran were brought up twice that day, although both meetings between Pence and Netanyahu seemed to be about Jerusalem's recognition at first. Netanyahu made clear that he supported the Trump Administration when it came to its policy towards the nuclear deal, and he agreed with the belief that the Iranian regime was fuelling radical terrorist thoughts all over the world.

The next day, on January 23, Pence had a meeting with the Israeli President Reuven Rivlin, in which Pence addressed the strong bond between the US and Israel one more time. The threat of Iran was brought up by Pence, as well as the necessary American-Israeli cooperation for reducing radical Islamic terrorism in the region. The observation that Iran often was a hot topic during the beforementioned American-Israeli meetings, manifests that reducing this threat forms an important stimulus for cooperation between the two countries. It makes sense that the American foreign policy was aimed at containing Iranian power in the Middle East, because of the historical, tense division between US backed Arab countries (e.g. Israel and Saudi Arabia) and Iran. On top of that, there has not been any form of a diplomatic relationship between the United States and Iran recently.

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<sup>77</sup> Associated Press, "Scuffles as Arab Knesset members protest Pence," *YouTube*, January 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=czYJQi8VUjE>.

<sup>78</sup> U.S. Embassy Jerusalem, "Vice President Pence meets Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu," January 22, 2018, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=vIX8LbDRMF4>.

The good relationship between the US and Israel was highlighted many more times. In the same meeting between Pence and Rivlin, Rivlin stated that the people of Jerusalem were very proud on Trump's decision to recognize their city, and that it was a gift for Israel's 70<sup>th</sup> anniversary. About Israel's relationship with Palestine, Rivlin said that Israel had to continue with searching for a way to create confidence, which did not yet exist between the two countries.<sup>79</sup> The one thing that seems clear to me, is that any form of confidence was not established by ascribing Jerusalem to the Israelis.

When Trump himself met with Netanyahu again four months after the opening of the American embassy in Jerusalem, he stated that the relocation of the embassy seemed to be controversial at first, but that it turned out to be a good decision. Also, the US and Israel had made a lot of progress together. Netanyahu expressed his thankfulness for among other things Trump's historic decision on Jerusalem, and the United States' support for Israel against the threatening Iranian regime. The meetings between the US and Israel seemed a little monotonous at this point, since the same messages were repeated over and over again. At the end of this meeting, Trump revealed that he was busy with working on a peace plan, and that he really wanted to see peace between Israel and Palestine.<sup>80</sup> He did not officially reveal this plan until January 28, 2020, which will be elaborately discussed in the next chapter.

At first sight, it seems obvious that Trump, Rivlin and Netanyahu were quite on the same page when it came to Trump's recognition of Jerusalem. But were they really? I notice that Trump's appearance, especially how he comes across publicly, is very important to him. His foreign policy meetings are about showing a good relationship with another strong leader. The repeated emphasis on the solid bond between the US and Israel during the process of the embassy relocation shows that. I think American-Israeli meetings concerning this particular case look like Trump's entrance to North Korea for example. Trump wanted to get the world's attention by showing how tough he was to meet the authoritarian leader Kim Jong-Un. The same way of thought was demonstrated when Pence restored his rough morning at the Knesset by shaking Netanyahu's hand with a smile before the press. Another way in which Trump shows his

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<sup>79</sup> White House Staff, "Remarks by Vice President Mike Pence and President Reuven Rivlin of Israel Before Bilateral Meeting," *White House Archives*, January 23, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-vice-president-mike-pence-president-reuven-rivlin-israel-bilateral-meeting/>.

<sup>80</sup> White House Staff, "Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel Before Bilateral Meeting," *White House Archives*, September 26, 2018, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-prime-minister-netanyahu-israel-bilateral-meeting-3/>.



decision-making to the world is via social media. After the relocation, the American embassy's twitter account changed its name from 'USEmbassyTelAviv' to 'USEmbassyJerusalem'.<sup>81</sup> It is all about presenting a beautiful image to the rest of the world.

Behind the scenes, however, it becomes clear that the Trump Administration's foreign policy decisions were not always that successful. For example, on the White House website there is nothing to find about the commotion caused by Knesset members at the moment of Pence's arrival, but on YouTube there is a video. This shows one more time that it is all about the presentation of the Trump Administration's perfect side, which apparently is not that perfect in reality.

### 3.2 Mixed reactions

Since the American-Israeli perspective of the US embassy relocation is outlined, this paragraph presents the reactions by the rest of the world. Obviously, the most attention is given to the reactions of the Palestinian side, since this directly relates to Trump's self-ascribed role as a mediator between the Israelis and the Palestinians.

First and foremost, Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, and the embassy relocation were extremely supported by the American evangelicals.<sup>82</sup> In Augustus 2020, Trump even said that he had taken both decisions for this group in particular.<sup>83</sup> It is understandable that Trump used the evangelicals as such a big motivation for his actions. The evangelicals were seen as Trump's most loyal support, so Trump had to serve their interests with the 2018 mid-term elections in prospect. When he claimed that both decisions were made for his largest support group in particular, Trump probably was worried about the 2020 national elections, and therefore he tried to please the evangelicals again with this statement. He knew that he needed them, because they helped him survive the election scandal with Ukraine.

An interesting fact is that vice-president Pence was also known for his Christian evangelical preferences.

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<sup>81</sup> Times of Israel Staff, "US embassy moves to Jerusalem – on Twitter," *The Times of Israel*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/us-embassy-moves-to-jerusalem-on-twitter/>.

<sup>82</sup> Daniel Burke, "Why evangelicals are 'ecstatic' about Trump's Jerusalem move," *CNN Politics*, December 6, 2017, [Why evangelicals are 'ecstatic' about Trump's Jerusalem move - CNNPolitics](https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/06/politics/trump-jerusalem-move-evangelicals/).

<sup>83</sup> Times of Israel Staff, "Trump says he moved US embassy to Jerusalem 'for the evangelicals,'" *The Times of Israel*, August 18, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/trump-says-he-moved-us-embassy-to-jerusalem-for-the-evangelicals/>.

The rest of the American public was less enthusiastic on Trump's decision. A public survey showed that 63 percent of the American public opposed the relocation. 31 percent supported Trump's move, while the majority of those people would call themselves a republican.<sup>84</sup> Since Trump continued to push through his negotiations with Israel, and eventually even announced the Trump Peace Plan, he undoubtedly was not bothered much by the negative reactions of his own people. As long as he had the support of his most important voters, he held on to his vision.

Outside the United States, Trump's decisions also led to contradiction. Although the American evangelicals were very delighted about Trump's recognition of Jerusalem, some of the Christians in Israel, and Pope Francis claimed to be worried that it would raise more agitation in the region. Swift changes in the city of Jerusalem would probably lead to division and violence.<sup>85</sup>

Logically, the most commotion was perspicuously visible on the Palestinian side. In December 2017, after Trump's announcement on the recognition of Jerusalem, President Abbas of Palestine called off his meeting with Pence, and claimed that he could no longer see the US as a broker of peace.<sup>86</sup>

At the United Nations General Assembly in September 2018, Abbas shared his opinion on the American recognition of Jerusalem again. He stated that Trump's decisions undermined a two-state solution, and that peace was only possible if Palestine would be an independent state. The Palestinian capital city should be East Jerusalem. Furthermore, Abbas said that the rights of Palestinians should not be made available for bargain.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>84</sup> Shibley Telhami, "Russia: American attitudes on Trump's foreign policy," *The Brookings Institution*, December 1, 2017, [The Middle East and Russia: American attitudes on Trump's foreign policy \(brookings.edu\)](https://www.brookings.edu/articles/russia-american-attitudes-on-trump-s-foreign-policy/).

<sup>85</sup> Daniel Burke, "Ecstatic evangelicals."

<sup>86</sup> Reuters, "Palestinian President Abbas won't meet Pence in region: foreign minister," December 9, 2017, [Palestinian President Abbas won't meet Pence in region: foreign minister | Reuters](https://www.reuters.com/article/us-palestine-abbas-pence-idUSKBN15L001).

<sup>87</sup> United Nations, "Jerusalem is not for sale' Palestinian President Abbas tells world leaders at UN Assembly," *UN News*, September 22, 2018, ['Jerusalem is not for sale' Palestinian President Abbas tells world leaders at UN Assembly | UN News](https://www.un.org/press/en/2018/20180922.unnews01.shtml).

Haniya, the leader of Hamas, went further and labelled Trump's announcement as a war declaration, which motivated heavy demonstrations in Gaza. He also encouraged the fighting against Israeli soldiers in the West Bank, and said that the attacks would not stop unless Trump's policy would change.<sup>88</sup>

Senior fellow from the Washington Institute for Near East Policy al-Omari asserted that the violence in Gaza could possibly led to another war between Israel and Hamas, referring to the earlier war in 2014 between the two parties. Even if this would not happen, future perspectives for the region would be characterized by instability. The worsened situation in Gaza, as well as the smaller chance for a diplomatic solution to the Israel-Palestine conflict, were described as a result of the embassy relocation. Hence, the success of the Trump administration's peace plan for the Middle East started to be questionable.<sup>89</sup>

In contrary, the scholars Ross and Makovsky from Washington Institute argued that the embassy relocation did not violate Palestinian rights, and that Trump did not make a bad decision. In fact, the US recognition of Jerusalem was called 'a reality'. There was no violation of rights yet, because Trump did make clear that he would not make any final decisions on boundary or sovereignty issues. This was the task of Israelis and Palestinians themselves.<sup>90</sup> Thus, the Palestinian position with regard to the embassy relocation is contested.

When looking at the reactions of other political leaders, President Al-Sisi from Egypt, Prince Salman from Saudi Arabia, and King Abdullah from Jordan claimed that the relocation of the American embassy would not be auspicious for peace in the Middle Eastern region. Despite their doubtful minds, the next chapter of this thesis explains how Saudi Arabia almost became part of the Trump Peace Plan. It will become clear that each Middle Eastern country has its own interests, and that Trump was always busy with inventing ways to involve the most important actors of the region in his plan.

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<sup>88</sup> Aljazeera, "Hamas leader Haniya says movement wants 'national unity,'" December 16, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/12/16/hamas-leader-haniya-says-movement-wants-national-unity>.

<sup>89</sup> Ghaith Al-Omari, "Jerusalem Embassy Move, Gaza Fatalities Dim Hopes for U.S. Peace Plan," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, May 14, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/jerusalem-embassy-move-gaza-fatalities-dim-hopes-us-peace-plan>.

<sup>90</sup> Dennis Ross and David Makovsky, "Moving the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem Is Not a Disaster," *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moving-us-embassy-jerusalem-not-disaster>.

The British Prime-Minister May, the German chancellor Merkel, and the President of France Macron also disapproved Trump's action. They claimed to be proponents of a two-state solution as well, but Trump should not make such a drastic move until there would be a final agreement between Israel and Palestine. Prime-Minister May announced that the British embassy would stay located in Tel Aviv.<sup>91</sup> She announced that, because after the relocation of the American embassy more countries stated that they would move their embassies from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Until now, only Guatemala has opened its embassy in the city.<sup>92</sup>

However, at this point European countries already knew that Trump did not care much about maintaining good diplomatic relationships with them. This already came forward in the very beginning of Trump's presidency, when Trump did not inform Europe about his attack on Syria. And indeed, despite the international counter-reactions, the relocation of the US embassy was realized.

## **Discussion**

When looking at the Trump Administration's reasons for relocating the US embassy, the mentioned arguments for the relocation were: Increasing the chance of peace between Israel and Palestine, serving the United States' interests, and fulfilling the Jerusalem Embassy Act. Moreover, in 2020 Trump used the evangelicals as the main reason for both the recognition of Jerusalem and the relocation of the embassy. During the relocation process, Trump started revealing that he was busy working on a real peace plan for the region, so the recognition of Jerusalem could also be seen as the start of his bigger project. Also, principled realism was used as a justification for the relocation, although Trump mentioned it only one time in his statements on Jerusalem without further explanation. At last, radicalism in the region, with Iran as the main concern, seemed to be a very important topic of conversation during the meetings between American and Israeli politicians.

With regard to what is the best for the United States' interests, I believe Trump was especially busy with two things. First and foremost, he wanted to please the American evangelicals, from

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<sup>91</sup> Natasha Turak, "International leaders react to Trump's Jerusalem move," *CNBC*, December 7, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/12/07/international-leaders-react-to-trumps-jerusalem-move.html>.

<sup>92</sup> Aljazeera, "Netanyahu says Serbia will move its embassy to Jerusalem," September 4, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/4/netanyahu-says-serbia-will-move-its-embassy-to-jerusalem>.

which he needed support to stay in power. Secondly, containing Iranian threat has always been a motive for American-Israeli cooperation. By pleasing Israel with the recognition of Jerusalem and the embassy relocation, the US relationship with Israel was strengthened, or at least a beautiful image was created in which two strong leaders seemed to have a solid diplomatic relationship. This could work for deterring the threat of Iran in the future. The next chapter elaborates on power divisions in the Middle East, as well as the establishment of new ties between Israel and Arab countries.

Moreover, the questions how the world reacted on the US embassy relocation, and what the results were for Trump's position in the Middle Eastern region, are now answerable. Despite the support of several members of the Trump administration, the evangelicals, and Israeli leaders, the relocation of the American embassy did evoke mixed opinions throughout the world. Even Knesset members were divided on the issue. Also, Trump's mediator role for the Middle East, or at least his idea of a peace plan for the region, became questionable before its content was officially presented. Although the relocation of the embassy was eventually realized, the divided attitudes towards this event might be a prelude for the reactions to Trump's future decision-making on the Middle East.

Lastly, I start to have an idea about which IR theories are relatable to Trump, none the least on which theories are relatable to the developments around the US embassy relocation. Firstly, constructivism plays a role, because Trump emphasizes religious values, and the Christian evangelicals form a big motive for the relocation. Besides, it becomes clear that Trump really believes in his own vision. He was not bothered by the many counterreactions, and pushed through the relocation. Secondly, I see realist characteristics in Trump, among other things because he is focused on decreasing Iranian power in the region. Also, Trump is constantly busy with his own interests regarding the American elections, and hence his policy is based on what he could personally win.

The examination of the second case study, the progression of the Trump Peace Plan, will elaborate on how the Trump administration developed his vision for peace after the American embassy was opened in Jerusalem.

## Chapter 4: Trump's 'game' of the century

“All prior administrations, from President Lyndon Johnson, have tried and bitterly failed. But I was not elected to do small things or shy away from big problems”.<sup>93</sup> Trump was talking about the ‘Trump Peace Plan’, officially named ‘Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People’, which he revealed with Netanyahu on January 28, 2020. According to Trump, the plan would be the best, and most detailed solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict so far.<sup>94</sup> This chapter shows that Trump’s ‘Deal of the Century’ was never a real solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The US foreign policy was mainly favouring Israel over Palestine, and again, it turns out that Trump was a believer of its own truth.

### 4.1 A changing tradition: The Gulf against Palestine

The content of the Trump Peace Plan was largely designed by White House senior advisor, and Trump’s son-in-law, Jared Kushner. Three general observations are worth mentioning before diving into the plan’s details.

A first interesting observation is that the plan was revealed by President Trump and Prime-Minister Netanyahu. Thus, there were no Palestinian actors invited to the White House while the most important peace deal for Israel and Palestine was presented. This slightly contradicts Trump’s way of thought earlier, when he claimed that the US would not choose any sides in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, since only Netanyahu was invited to unveil the plan’s content with him.

Secondly, the fact that the US and Israel announced the peace deal together, might already indicate that the content was based on their specific interests. All details were discussed and written down already, so the Palestinians only got the choice to accept the deal as a whole. They did not have the chance to help designing the points within the plan.

Thirdly, the revelation of the Trump Peace Plan was delayed. The first economic part of the plan was already presented in June 2019, and in January 2020 it was time for the second political part. At that time, the plan was delayed for two years already.<sup>95</sup> The delay meant that from the

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<sup>93</sup> Donald Trump, “full official text president’s speech “Peace to prosperity” vision,” *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/full-text-of-trump-speech-this-could-be-the-palestinians-last-opportunity/>.

<sup>94</sup> Trump, “full official text president’s speech “Peace to prosperity” vision.”

<sup>95</sup> Deutsche Welle, “Trump announces overdue release of Middle East peace plan,” January 24, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/trump-announces-overdue-release-of-middle-east-peace-plan/a-52132698>.

moment the plan was announced, Trump and Netanyahu had less than a year to put everything into practice.

### *Who is involved?*

The concept of the Trump Peace Plan seemed quite unusual at first, because of the actors who gradually became involved. On the 13<sup>th</sup> of August, the Abraham Accords were signed, which meant a ‘normalization of relations’ between the United Arab Emirates, Israel, and the United States.<sup>96</sup> It appeared that the normalization processes was already happening quietly for years, until the US announced it publicly. ‘Normalization’ stands for the creation of a formal relationship between two countries, for example via trade deals.

After the UAE, also Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco joined the peace deal. The Gulf states in general have always wanted a return to the Israeli-Palestinian borders as they were before 1967. They saw this as a condition for any form of official recognition of Palestine. Sudan for example has always supported Palestinian resistance in the past, and this country has maintained close ties with Iran. When Netanyahu met Sudan’s collective conditional head of state in February 2020, this was a stab in Palestine’s back. Morocco also knew a tradition of defining Israel as the enemy, since the two countries used to be at war. Because of these four states’ traditional attitudes towards Israel, it seemed striking that they gave up on their old opinions, and closed a deal with ‘the enemy’.<sup>97</sup> So why did they do this?

The Gulf states’ support for Palestine starts with the role of Saudi Arabia. In December 2020, Foreign Minister Al-Saud argued that Saudi Arabia was actually the first Arab state who putted the idea of normalization with Israel on the table, and that there should be a peace deal between Israel and Palestine.<sup>98</sup> This was extraordinary, since the Saudi King Salman always had supported the Palestinian side. He claimed that a normalization of ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel would not be possible until the Palestinians would have their sovereign state, based

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<sup>96</sup> White House Archives, ‘Abraham Accords Peace Agreement’, August 13, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/ABRAHAM-ACCORDS-PEACE-AGREEMENT.pdf>.

<sup>97</sup> Al Jazeera English, “Gaza, Hamas and the New Middle East.”

<sup>98</sup> Al Jazeera English, “Why are Israel and Arab states getting friendly?,” December 7, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/program/start-here/2020/12/7/why-are-israel-and-arab-states-getting-friendly-start-here>.

on the pre-1967 borders. Moreover, he argued that the Israeli occupation of Palestine should come to an end. However, King Salman belonged to the older Saudi generation, and the new guard - under the leadership of the Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohamad Bin Salman – was less anti-Israel.

A normalization of ties with Israel could bring economic prosperity to Saudi Arabia. Besides, and maybe more importantly, Bin Salman tried to restore his own image at the same time. Due to the war in Yemen, and several internal problems (e.g. The killing of journalist Khashoggi) he was aware that Saudi Arabia needed a new friendly relationship, which he found in Donald Trump.<sup>99</sup> Trump and Bin Salman shook hands on television several times, which showed they loved negotiating with each other.<sup>100</sup> Thus, it seems like both men had something in common: Having a good reputation, and showing that to the rest of the world.

Not surprisingly, it initially was a part of Trump's vision to involve Saudi Arabia in his peace plan for Israel and Palestine. When the American Secretary of State Mike Pompeo met with Bin Salman, the Israeli Netanyahu was suspected of secretly joining their meeting.<sup>101</sup> This was a striking event, since Netanyahu flew to Saudi Arabia, a country that normally did not have a good relationship with Israel. Eventually, Saudi Arabia did not sign the Abraham Accords within Trump's presidential term.

### *Which interests played a role?*

As mentioned, the UAE was the first Gulf country to be officially involved in the Trump Peace Plan. The Abraham Accords entailed possibilities for economic prosperity. For the UAE in particular, the normalization deal with Israel could be seen as a business transaction.<sup>102</sup> Prior to the enclosure of the Abraham Accords, the relationship between Israel and the UAE became better, especially because the current Emirati society was more open and friendly towards Israel

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<sup>99</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Why are Israel and Arab states getting friendly?"

<sup>100</sup> Gulf Insider, "U.S. President Donald Trump shakes hands with Saudi Arabia's Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in the Oval Office at the White House in Washington," March 20, 2018, <https://www.gulf-insider.com/saudi-arabia-loves-dealing-trump/u-s-president-donald-trump-shakes-hands-with-saudi-arabias-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-in-the-oval-office-at-the-white-house-in-washington/>; Daily Sabah, "Trump shakes hands with Saudi Crown Prince in G20 family photo while others wave," June 30, 2019, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/2019/06/30/trump-shakes-hands-with-saudi-crown-prince-in-g20-family-photo-while-others-wave>.

<sup>101</sup> Noa Landau, "Netanyahu Secretly Flew to Saudi Arabia, Met MBS and Pompeo, Israeli Sources Say," *Haaretz*, November 23, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium-netanyahu-secretly-flew-to-saudi-arabia-met-mbs-and-pompeo-israeli-sources-say-1.9323608>.

<sup>102</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Why are Israel and Arab states getting friendly?"



than the older generation, which saw Israel as its traditional enemy.<sup>103</sup> But aside from enjoying economic benefits, Trump's vision for peace in the Middle East entailed more opportunities for the Gulf. Decreasing Iranian threat in the Middle Eastern region always has been one of the main reasons for American-Israeli cooperation. This also came forward in the analysis of the US embassy relocation. So not unexpectedly, for example Behraves and Azizi claimed that the UAE and Israel both were using the Abraham Accords to respond to the threat of Iran, in alliance with the US.<sup>104</sup>

Bahrain also shared the Emirati wariness towards Iran. Bahrain signed the Abraham Accords in September 2020, and was the second Gulf country that established full diplomatic relations with Israel. Because of the new Saudi generation of Bin Salman, Saudi Arabia did not hold back Bahrain from cooperating with Israel. As mentioned, the Saudis would normally have disapproved it if Middle Eastern countries would normalize their bonds with Israel. At least not before Israeli occupation over Palestine would be ended, and Palestine would get its right to be an independent state.<sup>105</sup>

Sudan signed the Abraham Accords in January 2021, after agreeing with normalizing ties with Israel in October 2020, in order to make an end to the belligerence between the two countries. With Sudan's recognition of Israel, the US removed Sudan from the state sponsors of terror list, which created economic possibilities for the country. Joining the American-Israeli side was Sudan's chance to solve its big internal problems, such as the hunger crisis.

Morocco was the last country to sign the Abraham Accords during Trump's presidency. Along with the Moroccan-Israeli normalization of ties, Trump recognized Morocco as the sovereign ruler over the disputed Western Sahara territory, which shook up the tensions in the still ongoing Western Sahara conflict. I observe that Trump strategically came up with manners to persuade

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<sup>103</sup> Ebtessam Al-Ketbi, "The UAE-Israel Breakthrough: Bilateral and Regional Implications and U.S. Policy", *The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/uae-israel-breakthrough-bilateral-and-regional-implications-and-us-policy>.

<sup>104</sup> Maysam Behraves, and Hamidreza Azizi, "Israel's Peace Deals Are a Strategic Nightmare for Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/14/israels-peace-deals-are-a-strategic-nightmare-for-iran/>.

<sup>105</sup> Jeremy Bowen, "Five reasons why Israel's peace deals with the UAE and Bahrain matter", *BBC News*, September 15, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-54151712>.

the Arab countries when it came to normalizing ties with Israel. He was aware of the historical tensions between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Therefore Trump played a smart role himself to create support for his own vision, and for Israel.

Another important motive for the establishment of a new alliance around Israel, is that Israel needed more allies to overcome Hamas in Gaza.<sup>106</sup> Hamas is perceived as an extension of Iran, since Iran is its most valuable deliverer of weapons. In Trump's Peace Plan, Hamas is defined as a terrorist organization.<sup>107</sup> Thus, it was beneficial that the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan automatically took over this point of view when they officially signed their deals with Israel, and with the US indirectly.

*What is in the plan?*

After discussing the main involved actors of the Trump Peace Plan, its content needs to be studied. The Trump Peace Plan is 181 pages long, out of which several major developments are striking for the future of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

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<sup>106</sup> Al Jazeera English, "Why are Israel and Arab states getting friendly?"

<sup>107</sup> White House Staff, "Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people," January 2020, 9. [https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a6/Peace\\_to\\_Prosperty.pdf](https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/a/a6/Peace_to_Prosperty.pdf).



Image 1: Vision for Peace Conceptual Map. The state of Israel.<sup>108</sup>

What might be the most clear development to start with, is the map that was drawn. “What is more important than what happened in 1967 is what the land looks like today in 2020 (...) The map that we have drawn is in the spirit of UN Resolution 242, so it is a swaps for peace deal that Israel has now put on the table”.<sup>109</sup> This means that compromises would be necessary to make the deal work.<sup>110</sup> Important is that it was the first time that Israel agreed to a map, and to a Palestinian state.<sup>111</sup>

An example of a compromise that was devised has to do with the Israeli settlements in the Westbank. According to the plan, Israel would claim sovereignty over approximately 30 percent of the West Bank, including a large part of the Jordan Valley, and Israeli settlements.<sup>112</sup> In return, Israel would be disallowed to enlarge these settlements in the upcoming four years. A crucial part of Netanyahu’s political campaign, has always been the annexation of several Westbank parts, among which the Jordan Valley. Netanyahu did never mention that he aimed to ‘annex’ these parts, but he called it ‘applying sovereignty’ instead. This is exactly what would be realized with this first point in the Trump Peace Plan. Although Israel would officially not be able to expand its Westbank settlements according to the plan, Kushner stated that this was a flexible issue.<sup>113</sup>

The part on flexibility sounds somewhat ambiguous to me. On top of the fact that Israel would become the sovereign ruler over large parts of the Westbank, there would be a small possibility to expand these parts, since freezing construction for four years apparently was not a fixed part of the deal. Furthermore, with UN Resolution 242, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) called for the withdrawal of Israeli troops from occupied territories.<sup>114</sup> I do not see how the drawn map would be based on this specific resolution. Even though Israel would

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<sup>108</sup> White House Staff. “Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people,” 40.

<sup>109</sup> Jared Kushner, “Trump’s plan last chance for a Palestinian state, says Kushner,” *Al Jazeera English*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=PhvLnUPxpwo&t=145s>.

<sup>110</sup> Kushner, “Trump’s plan last chance for a Palestinian state, says Kushner.”

<sup>111</sup> White House Staff, “President Donald J. Trump’s Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and a Brighter Future for Israel and the Palestinian People,” *White House Archives*, January 28, 2020, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-vision-peace-prosperity-brighter-future-israel-palestinian-people/>.

<sup>112</sup> White House Staff. “Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people,” 40.

<sup>113</sup> Kushner, “Trump’s plan last chance for a Palestinian state, says Kushner.”

<sup>114</sup> United Nations Security Council, “Resolution 242,” *United Nations Peacemaker*, November 22, 1967, <https://peacemaker.un.org/sites/peacemaker.un.org/files/SCRes242%281967%29.pdf>.

recognize the Palestinian state for the first time, the annexation of the area would not lead to a return to the pre-1967 borders.

In the previous case study it was presented how Trump recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital. On January 28, 2020, he stated that "Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided, very important, undivided, capital. But that is no big deal, because I have already done that for you right?"<sup>115</sup> I think the way in which Trump made his statements remains very striking. In the statement mentioned above, one could deduce that he loved playing with his public. Besides, it again comes forward how Trump saw himself as the one true dealmaker, for whom it was 'no big deal' to execute one of the most disputed decisions: The US embassy relocation.

In the Trump Peace Plan it was stated that: "A division of Jerusalem would be inconsistent with the policy statements of the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995 of the United States",<sup>116</sup> which comes across with Trump's earlier statement. However, the plan's drawn map shows that when looking closely at Jerusalem, Palestine would get parts of East Jerusalem now. The reality is that Jerusalem would remain the sovereign capital city of Israel, while the Palestinian capital would be within the East Jerusalem area. A 'security barrier' would keep both parties divided.<sup>117</sup> I think this regulation is contradictory. It is impossible that a city is undivided, and divided at the same time.

In his speech on the US embassy relocation, Trump already mentioned that Jerusalem's holy sites had to preserve their status quo. The Trump Peace Plan confirmed this ambition by letting Israel be the safeguard of those sites.<sup>118</sup> Moreover, sacred Muslim places would be kept under Jordanian custody. Muslims would be always welcome to pray at the Al-Aqsa Mosque, but this place should be open to the believers of all religions.<sup>119</sup> I think this part of the plan was too risky, in the sense that one could predict that the Palestinians would disagree with it. First of

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<sup>115</sup> Trump, Donald. "Trump: 'Jerusalem will remain Israel's undivided capital'." *France 24 English*, January 28, 2020, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG1dCdm\\_5Wg](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FG1dCdm_5Wg).

<sup>116</sup> White House Staff. "Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people," 16.

<sup>117</sup> White House Staff, "Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people," 16-17.

<sup>118</sup> White House Staff, "Peace to Prosperity. A vision to improve the lives of the Palestinian and Israeli people," 16.

<sup>119</sup> White House Staff, "President Donald J. Trump's Vision for Peace, Prosperity, and a Brighter Future for Israel and the Palestinian People."

all, Trump claimed that he wanted to preserve the status-quo, but in the meantime he did change it. The 1967 status quo regulated that only Muslims could pray at Haram al-Sharif (Temple Mount), the hill in East Jerusalem with the Al-Aqsa Mosque.<sup>120</sup> By opening the site for all worshippers, Muslims could lose this privilege. Secondly, the Palestinian people were claiming sovereignty over Haram al-Sharif for a long time.<sup>121</sup> Trump probably saw it as a sort of compromise, by not giving the right on sovereign rule to Israel, but to Jordan custodianship. However, Palestinians would see it as an unequal stipulation instead.

With regard to Palestinian statehood, Palestine would be an independent state, but demilitarized.<sup>122</sup> I think this point is unrealistic, because it could be summarized like the following: Palestine was now officially allowed to be a state, but a powerless state, since they should not have military forces. There could be no existence of a sovereign state without a monopoly on violence. The demilitarization point again was in favour of Israel, who would enjoy even more power compared to their weaker, unarmed neighbour Palestine. In addition to that, it is unimaginable that Hamas would put down its weapons.

“Israel’s primary gain from this, from making this offer which they have never made before, is that they will have a more secure environment”.<sup>123</sup> According to Kushner, Trump putted much effort in reducing radical terrorism in the Middle East. Israel’s gesture to make peace with Palestine and the other Arab countries would create more safety and stability in the region.<sup>124</sup>

On the one hand, this idea that the normalization of relations between Israel and Arab countries would improve the Middle Eastern region’s stability makes sense. In particular because a new block, consisting of Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, was established against Iranian threat. Additionally, former hostile relationships were now replaced by new diplomatic ties.

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<sup>120</sup> Mersiha Gadzo, “Israel normalisation may partition Al-Aqsa: Analysts,” *Aljazeera*, September 14, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/9/14/israel-normalisation-may-partition-al-aqsa-analysts>.

<sup>121</sup> Ian Bremmer, “How the Trump Administration’s Israel-Palestine peace plan will change the Middle East,” *Time*, January 28, 2020, <https://time.com/5773138/trump-israel-palestine-peace-plan/>.

<sup>122</sup> Jim Zanotti, “Israel and the Palestinians: U.S. Peace Plan and possible Israeli annexation,” *Congressional Research Service*, January 30, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/IN11214.pdf>.

<sup>123</sup> Kushner, “Trump’s plan last chance for a Palestinian state, says Kushner.”

<sup>124</sup> Kushner, “Trump’s plan last chance for a Palestinian state, says Kushner.”

On the other hand, this ‘safer environment for Israel’ could be related to the demilitarized Palestinian state. I perceive the Trump Peace Plan as a biased – in Israel’s favour obviously – strategic plan, which Trump tried to implement by manipulating powerful countries to support Israel. Despite the Gulf countries’ traditional narrative of seeing Israel as the enemy, it turned out that each country had their own interests that transcended this way of thought. For example in the case of Sudan, Trump played a smart game by offering the country financial opportunities in return for the Sudanese recognition of Israel.

The next paragraph will elaborate on how Trump did not care much about the worried international reactions to his peace plan, just as was the case with the US embassy relocation. The difference now is that Trump accomplished to realize the former, but due to the outcome of the 2020 elections he failed to pursue with his Middle Eastern peace plan.

#### **4.2 An unreachable implementation**

In his speech on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January, 2020, Trump mentioned several aspects which made it look like he really thought true the Palestinian position. He stated that he had done many things for Israel. Therefore, he argued that “it is only reasonable that I have to do a lot for the Palestinians, or it just wouldn’t be fair”.<sup>125</sup> On top of this, the Palestinians deserved a better life, and Trump claimed to be saddened by their living conditions. “Palestinians have been trapped in a cycle of terrorism, poverty, and violence, exploited by those seeking to use them as pawns to advance terrorism and extremism”.<sup>126</sup> It is true that the Trump Peace Plan included many aspects for the foundation of a prosperous Palestinian state, but the Palestinians would never agree to the most comprehensive parts of the plan.

The Palestinian President Abbas rejected the peace plan immediately, by claiming that ‘the conspiracy deal’ would not pass.<sup>127</sup> In 2019, he had already rejected the economical part of the plan, so it was not a surprise that he did it again. Also, the Palestinians condemned the Abraham

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<sup>125</sup> Trump, “Full official text president’s speech “Peace to prosperity” vision.”

<sup>126</sup> Trump, “Full official text president’s speech “Peace to prosperity” vision.”

<sup>127</sup> Mahmoud Abbas, “Abbas on Trump peace plan: ‘Conspiracy deal won’t pass,’” *BBC News*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/av/world-middle-east-51288022>.

Accords between Israel and the UAE. I think Palestinian concerns grew more and more after they noticed that more Middle Eastern countries started joining the peace plan.

On the 11<sup>th</sup> of February, Abbas reiterated that Palestine rejected the Trump Peace Plan during his address to the United Nations Security Council, because according to the plan East Jerusalem would no longer be under the sovereignty of Palestine. This point was enough for Palestine to disapprove the plan as a whole. Moreover, even though Palestine wanted to be an independent state, the plan offered the Palestinians a fragmented state, “like a swiss cheese”.<sup>128</sup> The Trump Peace Plan would not bring peace and stability for the region, and therefore the Palestinians would be ready for confrontations on the ground if the plan’s content would be implemented.<sup>129</sup>

The Yesha Council, the leading organization for the Jewish settlers in the Westbank, also rejected the plan. This group of people was against the idea of the official establishment of a Palestinian state, since this would be a threat to Israel. Yesha called upon Prime Minister Netanyahu and Knesset members to not accept the plan.<sup>130</sup> This means that although Netanyahu was very eager to annex the Israeli parts of the Westbank, the settlers themselves foresaw complications. After the relocation of the US embassy was announced, it already turned out that some Knesset members saw jeopardy in Trump’s vision. This was for example showed during Pence’s unfriendly entrance at the Knesset. Again, it appears that Netanyahu had to do with internal counterreactions.

International actors who gave their first reactions to the plan were often not immediately convinced. The United Nations Secretary-General António Guterres claimed that the UN supported a two-state solution for Israel and Palestine, based on the borders before 1967.<sup>131</sup> Many European countries shared the same opinion. The European Union urged Israel and

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<sup>128</sup> Mahmoud Abbas, “PA President Mahmoud Abbas addresses UNSC over Trump’s Middle East peace plan,” *i24NEWS English*, February 11, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=8BmXRug1WIL>.

<sup>129</sup> Abbas, “PA President Mahmoud Abbas addresses UNSC over Trump’s Middle East peace plan.”

<sup>130</sup> Jacob Magid, “Settler leaders call on PM to oppose Trump plan, even at the cost of annexation,” *The Times of Israel*, January 28, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/settler-leaders-call-on-pm-to-oppose-trump-plan-even-at-the-cost-of-annexation/>.

<sup>131</sup> BBC News, “Trump Middle East plan: Palestinians reject 'conspiracy',” January 29, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51292865>.



Palestine to elaborately study the Trump Peace Plan, but European countries were cautious about the plan's possible results at the same time.

Reacting to the relocation of the US embassy, Germany for example had already argued to be in favour of a two-state solution, but only if a peace proposal would be acceptable for both sides. Regarding Trump's peace plan, a spokesman of the German Angela Merkel stated that Trump's plan would maybe cause frustration on both the Israeli and the Palestinian side. This suits with the international concerns that were raised during the US embassy relocation. The British Prime Minister Johnson was less worried, and argued it was a good thing that Jerusalem would be the in the hands of both Israel and Palestine according to the plan.<sup>132</sup>

Looking at what is exactly realized of the Trump Peace Plan, the implementation went quite rough. The normalization of ties between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco worked out, but Trump's presidency came to an end in January 2021. The ties between Saudi Arabia and Israel were never officially normalized. It became clear that in the days and months after the plan was announced, its content raised stronger disturbance within international organizations.

Particularly the counter-reactions to the annexation of Israeli settlements have postponed the implementation of the Trump Peace Plan. During a briefing to the UNSC in April, Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Nickolay Mladenov for example argued that Israel needed to halt its settlement activities, because it would eliminate the possibility of a two-state solution. At that time the annexation plans were planned for July the 1<sup>st</sup>.<sup>133</sup> The Westbank annexation was not realized.

The Arab League, including the UAE and Bahrain who would sign the Abraham Accords a half year later, also rejected the plan. In the previous paragraph I have seen that the UAE and Bahrain let go of their former opinions on Israel, and chose to agree with Trump's vision. Yet now, the countries of the League claimed that according to the plan there would be no real Palestinian state, and they were against the division of the al-Aqsa Mosque. Probably they referred to the

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<sup>132</sup> Deutsche Welle News, "Germany, Europe react to Trump's Middle East peace plan," January 29, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/germany-europe-react-to-trumps-middle-east-peace-plan/a-52182434>.

<sup>133</sup> Nickolay Mladenov, "Nickolay Mladenov Special Coordinator for the Middle East Peace Process Briefing to the Security Council on the Situation in the Middle East, reporting on UNSCR 2334," OCHA, March 30, 2020, <https://reliefweb.int/report/occupied-palestinian-territory/nickolay-mladenov-special-coordinator-middle-east-peace-24>.

opening of Haram al-Sharif for the believers of all religions. Arab or Islamic countries could not agree to such a change. On top of that, the Arab League felt disadvantaged, since they were not informed about the plan's details until the official announcement on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January.<sup>134</sup> The latter reminds me of Trump who often liked to not inform the rest of the world about his plans.

For example Vanaik argued that the Trump Peace Plan was the final step of Trump's unilateral policy, after the US recognition of Jerusalem, the Israeli annexation of the Golan Heights, and the stopped funding for the Palestinian people. It was seen an ultimatum for the Israeli-Palestinian situation, since it was not a negotiable plan anymore.<sup>135</sup> I agree that the course of events is the opposite of a multilateral foreign policy approach. Trump uses a unilateral strategy by dismissing multilateral ties and values, and prioritizing his interests and self-image. This relates to the Arab League who was not elaborately informed about Trump's plans for their Middle Eastern region.

In addition to these international counterreactions, it became visible that while Trump and Netanyahu tried to continue with putting the peace plan into practice, they both got their own problems at home. Before the official announcement of the Trump Peace Plan, Trump was already in trouble because of the impeachment procedure. At the same time, Netanyahu had to do with international opposition.<sup>136</sup> He was for example charged with bribery and fraud. However, the men's problems were not brought up during their speeches at the White House on the day that the plan was announced.<sup>137</sup> I think that both Trump and Netanyahu could use the announcement of the Trump Peace Plan as an opportunity to distract the world from their internal problems. This way of thought definitely suits with Trump's governing style, since sketching a beautiful, strong picture was a recurring aspect within his foreign policy.

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<sup>134</sup> Jack Khoury, "Arab envoys at Trump's Peace Plan unveiling were misled, diplomat says," *Haaretz*, February 1, 2020, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/.premium-arab-envoys-at-trump-s-peace-plan-unveiling-were-misled-diplomat-says-1.8476393>.

<sup>135</sup> Achin Vanaik, "Trump's Middle East 'Peace Plan' Is a Step Towards Institutionalising Apartheid," *The Transnational Institute (TNI)*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.tni.org/en/article/trumps-middle-east-peace-plan-apartheid>.

<sup>136</sup> David Makovsky, "The UAE-Israel Breakthrough: Bilateral and Regional Implications and U.S. Policy."

<sup>137</sup> Deutsche Welle News, "Israel? Palestine? Trump's Mideast peace plan explained," January 29, 2020, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=9gTJgfzhdZw&t=66s>.

## **Discussion**

The previous case study on the US embassy relocation has demonstrated that Trump saw himself as the mediator for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, but that his vision for establishing peace in the Middle Eastern region was perceived as questionable before he officially had presented his ideas. The counterreactions on Trump's announcement of the Trump Peace Plan on the 28<sup>th</sup> of January 2020, increased the already existing concerns on his self-ascribed role as a broker of peace in the Middle East. Trump's proposal was not a real plan to create peace, and it was not a win-win situation for Israel and Palestine either. Israel would be the only winner. Thus, answering the first sub-question on what the Trump Peace Plan looked like, it has turned out that the Trump Peace Plan was not even a real peace plan.

With regard to the results of the Trump Peace Plan, it has appeared that Trump and Netanyahu were both struggling with internal problems, which counteracted their progression. Trump achieved to include the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco in the plan, but his vision died with the end of the Trump presidency. After the US embassy relocation, agitation did already arise in the region. If the Trump Peace Plan would be realized, I am sure that there would be much more violence in the Middle East. With regard to the specific example of annexation, the Westbank would be a much tense area, because of the Israeli-Palestinian hodgepodge.

Finally, and similar to the case study on the US embassy relocation, I discovered that Trump's foreign policy regarding the Trump Peace Plan is especially explainable with constructivism and realism. I think the realist 'offshore balancing' strategy suits Trump perfectly, since he supported his favourite countries in the Middle East in order to decrease the power of his enemy Iran. With regard to constructivism, Trump always believed that his peace plan was the most brilliant plan so far to establish peace in the Middle Eastern region.

When it comes to the other IR theories, it is worth to mention that those are not totally excluded from Trump's foreign policy. For example, Trump's peace vision for the Middle East counterworks the argument that Trump only thought about security deals for the short term, and that his policy could therefore not be linked to the traditional liberal world order. Because of the fact that a peace plan of 181 pages was published for the long-term, one might believe that Trump was not only focused on quick victories. Moreover, it could be claimed that Trump was not against international cooperation per se, since he chose to cooperate with a couple of actors

in particular. However, I do not agree with these way of thoughts, since my analyses clearly show that Trump's real intentions are not focused on long-term deals, and definitely not on cooperation. With regard to Marxism, it has appeared that Trump's decision-making in the Middle East was somehow intertwined with economic interests or aspects, because he implemented his vision for peace like he was trying to make a good business deal. In the case of Sudan for example, Trump made sure that economic possibilities were created, because he knew Sudan would then normalize its ties with Israel.

## Conclusion

This thesis has examined the following research question: *'To what extent could the Trump Administration's foreign policy on the Middle East be explained with principled realism?' Based on the analyses of two case studies, the relocation of the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and the progression of the 'Trump Peace Plan', this study argues that the Trump Administration's foreign policy on the Middle East is explainable with realism and constructivism in particular. Thus, based on that it seems like principled realism was a suitable definition for the Trump Administration's foreign policy. However, this study also reveals that both liberalism and Marxism explained specific parts of the Trump Administration's foreign policy on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, so the notion of principled realism does not cover the Trump Administration as a whole. The additional conclusion of this thesis is that Trump was definitely not a mediator for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, although he always believed that he was.*

Trump's realist strategies came forward in two ways. The first manner starts with the analysis of the US embassy relocation, which demonstrated how Trump occupied himself with reducing Iranian threat. The threat of Iran was a recurrent aspect during many American-Israeli meetings at the time of the relocation. This aspect was elaborated after the case study on the Trump Peace Plan. By establishing a new power block, consisting of Israel, the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco, Iranian threat would be further reduced. This thesis agrees with ascribing the realist strategy of 'offshore balancing' to Trump's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. This means that Trump supported several countries in the Middle East, in order to decrease the power of his largest enemy. Most of the time this was realized because he came up with a win-win situation, such as recognizing Moroccan sovereignty over the Western Sahara territory in return for the establishment of diplomatic relationships between Morocco and Israel. Strategic games often played a role in Trump's attempt to realize his vision.

The second realist part of the Trump Administration's foreign policy could be deduced from Trump being constantly occupied with his own power, even when it came to international decision-making. By relocating the US embassy to Jerusalem, Trump gained a lot of support from the American evangelicals, with which he could secure his power. He knew that he needed this group to overcome his internal scandals. Furthermore, Trump really cared about presenting

a beautiful image of a strong leader to the rest of the world, even though the most occasions were never as beautiful in reality.

The second IR theory constructivism was also visible at two different levels. Trump's decision-making was influenced by Christianity, as was determined because of his devotion to the evangelicals. Aside from Christian values, Trump acted according to beliefs that were only relatable to his own understanding of the world. According to Trump's own persuasion, relocating the US embassy was a very good decision, just like he argued that Kushner had designed the best peace deal for the Middle East so far. The many counterreactions demonstrated that the rest of the world had another opinion. Nevertheless, it seemed like Trump was never really bothered by them as he always kept pursuing his goals, and relying on his own conceptions. Therefore, this thesis perceives Trump as a constructivist president. The observation that Trump's decision-making seemed only based on his own beliefs and values, might be the most important of this study's conclusion, since it really helps with understanding Trump's personality.

When it comes to liberalism, one might believe that Trump was not only focused on short-term wins, since he published a 181 page peace plan for the Middle East that would bring a solution for the long-term. Furthermore, cooperation is an important liberal aspect, and Trump worked together with several international actors. However, based on my analyses I am able to counter these way of thoughts. Although liberalist ideas could be detracted from several aspects of the Trump Administration, I have clearly seen that Trump did not really have a foreign policy strategy. His decision-making was impulsive and flexible, and aimed on the wins at one specific moment instead of on long-term gains.

Marxist aspects were much more related to the Trump Administration's foreign policy than liberalism. Trump's tried to realize his vision for peace in the Middle East like he was closing a business deal. He for example created economic opportunities for Sudan in order to establish a normalization of ties between that country and Israel.

Moreover, the literature review already showed that Trump was focused on protecting the oil in Syria, and that he occupied himself with the construction of trade barriers.

Thus, notwithstanding the fact that Trump defined the American foreign policy as principled realism, it turned out that the Trump Administration did not pursue one clear strategy. The Trump Administration's foreign policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was based on what was the best for Trump himself.

This thesis likes to conclude with an appropriate quote that reflects Trump's personality. This statement was made during his presidential farewell on January 19, 2021. It shows again that Trump always believed he did good things, although the rest of the world looked at him in a different way.

*"We restored American leadership abroad, the world respects us again"*<sup>138</sup>

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<sup>138</sup> Donald Trump, "Donald Trump's Last Speech as President Is 19 Minutes of Self-Congratulation," *Trump White House Archived*, January 19, 2021, [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h5\\_d3DUdR4&t=613s](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=6h5_d3DUdR4&t=613s).

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