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## Policy Brief

### Trump, Pence, Netanyahu and the Risks of Zionist Groupthink

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**US. Vice-president Mike Pence and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu at the Knesset in Jerusalem, January 22, 2018 [Reuters]**

While U.S. Vice President Mike Pence made his way to address the Israeli Knesset, 110 posters were put at various strategic locations across Jerusalem declaring him “a true friend of Zion”. This public diplomacy stunt was sponsored by the Friends of Zion Museum (FOZ) to recognize those who support Israel. Earlier in December, President Trump was the recipient of the “Friend of Zion” award for doing something “historic and prophetic”, according to FOZ founder Mike Evans who addressed him in the presence of Pence and Christian leaders who were said to be representing more than 150 million Christians around the globe.

Trump’s recognition of Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and his intent to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem was a political gift with significant resonance to the Evangelical-Zionist historical alliance. Tony Perkins, president of the Family Research Council, highlighted that “This president [Trump] is an anomaly. He is an anomaly because he keeps his promises. Evangelicals, conservatives across this country are grateful for the fact that he has actually done exactly what he campaigned on.” From the onset of Trump’s candidacy for the presidency, various evangelical Christian groups maintained regular meetings with candidate Trump and President-elect Trump to keep the momentum toward his official position on Jerusalem.

Being a devout Evangelical Christian, Pence has played a pivotal role in reaching this uncharted territory in solidifying the US-Israeli strategic alliance. He was the first U.S. official to announce Trump’s intent to recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel in a pro-Israel gathering. While addressing members of the Knesset and Prime Minister Netanyahu in Jerusalem, he proposed a revisionist outlook of the bilateral pact; “America stands with Israel. We stand with Israel because your cause is our cause, your values are our values, and your fight is our fight. We stand with Israel because we believe in right over wrong, in good over evil, and in liberty over tyranny. We stand with Israel

because that's what Americans have always done, and so has it been since my country's earliest days."

The more significant points in Pence's Knesset address and the evolution of America's Pro-Israel politics in general are three trajectories that seem to be incompatible and probably irreconcilable with each other in shaping Trump's foreign policy in the Middle East in the future.

### **The New Definition of "Pro-Israel"**

Pence has proved he is the driving force in reinforcing the definition of "Pro-Israel" both in political, strategic, and biblical terms. His Knesset speech showcases an over-fetched constructivist interpretation of America's history as if the Founding Fathers were looking at a carbon copy of the Jewish history. Many U.S. history scholars would contest his claim, "In the story of the Jews, we've always seen the story of America. It is the story of Exodus, a journey from persecution to freedom, a story that shows the power of faith and the promise of hope."

As the famous idiom goes "if all you have is a hammer, everything looks like a nail", Pence underscored "President Donald Trump made history. He righted a 70-year wrong; he kept his word to the American people when he announced that the United States of America will finally acknowledge Jerusalem is Israel's capital." This pursuit of a manipulated version of 'history' derails from the recorded history and the United Nations' resolutions either in 1948, 1967, or the provisions of the Oslo Accord vis-à-vis the status of Jerusalem and the illegality of Israel's occupation. Pence's overstretch of a 'historical error' and his shallow 'moralistic' underpinnings cannot counter last month's heated debates, either at the Security Council and the General Assembly, and their respective vote outcomes [14/1 against the US] and [128/9], not to mention the world-wide protests of condemnation and anger from Jakarta to Rabat. The divergence between Pence's 'history' and recorded history may extend an already-contested tunnel vision of the US foreign policy toward Jerusalem and the entire Israeli-Palestinian history.

### **The Illogic 'logic' of seeking a two-state peace process**

Pence's claim that Trump's Jerusalem decision is "in the best interests of the United States" remains a baseless claim. It is probably true about serving Netanyahu's agenda and empowering his Likud party. However, many American strategists are skeptical about whose interest comes first: the U.S. or Israel? Mainstream America is reviving the debate of the Israel lobby which "has a negative effect not only on American interests, but its impact has also been unintentionally harmful to Israel as well", as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt illustrated in their "The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy" book.

Pence's allegation that "the United States has chosen fact over fiction, and fact is the only true foundation for a just and lasting peace" remains a self-defeated cry in the wilderness. Palestinian leadership have publically relinquished any hope in a U.S. peace broker. As one Member of the Knesset, Jamal Zahalka, put it, ""We oppose the policies of Mr. Trump. He is not only the enemy of Palestinians; he is the enemy of peace."

### **The Resurrection of the Anti-Iran 'Axis of Evil'**

Another interesting assertion in Pence's speech at the Knesset was a notion of realpolitik and the stigmatization of Iranian leaders, and an overplayed card of ill-informed counterterrorism. As he vowed "the United States will continue to work with Israel, and with nations across the world, to confront the leading state sponsor of terror -- the Islamic Republic of Iran." This could be a timely Christmas gift for the Conservatives around Ayatollah Khamenei as they pursue the defeat of the reformist movement, led by President Hassan Rouhani, less than a year before the legislative elections. Pence has positioned himself as the new prophet of human rights; "the brutal regime in Iran is merely a brutal dictatorship that seeks to dominate its citizens and deny them of their most fundamental rights. History has proven, those who dominate their own people rarely stop there. And increasingly, we see Iran seeking to dominate the wider Arab world." However, Pence's rhetoric seems to be a desperate use of America's dying 'exceptionalism' under Trump's policies, imperial impulses, and attacks on the media, the freedom of expression, and other values of the American democracy.

In short, Pence's political silo and hammer-nail vision may sound like the best ideological maneuvering of the extreme right in the U.S. Ironically, It may also reveal how radicals in the U.S. and Israel end up empowering their rivals inside Iran and beyond.