

PICKING UP THE MIDDLE EAST PIECES

Despite Campaign Bluster on the Region, the Trump Administration
May Bring More Continuity than Change

By Perry Cammack

With the unexpected and even shocking election of Donald Trump, President Barack Obama's prioritization of transatlantic relations, norms of responsible global governance, and international institutions feels suddenly like a rearguard effort on behalf of a collapsing post-Cold War order. His centerpiece trade initiatives—the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership and the Trans-Pacific Partnership—seem to have reached the end of the road.

In contrast, Trump's focus on tearing up trade agreements, pursuing protectionist policies, and idealizing the art of the deal is undergirded by an implicit assumption of zero-sum global economic competition. Trump and many of his supporters apparently view the slow collapse of the current international order, which Washington so assiduously worked to construct at the end of World War II, not as calamitous to Western values, norms, and interests, but as the end of an age of unfettered globalization which hollowed out America's manufacturing base and led to the creation of an effete, unelected bureaucratic and intellectual elite out of touch with mainstream American values. Such a mindset portends significant changes in Washington's role in the world and in its relations with its North American neighbors, Europe, and East Asia, as international commitments and partnerships are reassessed and more aggressive unilateral approaches are considered.

Within this new context, many assume that big changes are also afoot in America's Middle East policies. During the presidential campaign, Trump was especially critical of Obama's approach, arguing that Obama should be credited with the creation of the Islamic State (or ISIS); as a result of his failings in the region, Trump said, Obama would "probably go down as the worst president in the history of our country." Michael Flynn, Trump's pick to be national security advisor, has written that the United States is involved in

▷ *Aftermath of Syrian airstrikes, Aleppo, Dec. 4, 2016. Ibrahim Ebu Leys/Anadolu Images*



a global, probably multigenerational, conflict against radical Islam against which “we have to organize all our national power.”

But taking a closer look, I think there is reason to believe that there may actually be more continuity than change in Trump’s approach to the Middle East than anticipated. This is a region with little geopolitical order left to preserve and less scope for the frictions of economic nationalism—no Middle Eastern country currently ranks among the top fifteen trading partners of the United States.

After the overreach of the George W. Bush administration—most notably the disastrous invasion of Iraq—the most frequent critique of the Obama administration cites it with the opposite failing: that Obama led an American retrenchment from the Middle East that empowered Iran and Russia, undermined the security of American partners, and left chaos in its wake. But as Trump consistently stated during the campaign, he is deeply reluctant to involve the U.S. military in Arab civil wars and determined to end American experiments in nation-building and regime change, sentiments he shares with Obama—and with the broader American public.

Although it is difficult to imagine two American politicians more different in rhetoric, temperament, and style, Trump and Obama define American interests in the Middle East rather more narrowly than, say, George W. Bush or Hillary Clinton. Trump and Obama operate through the realist lens of core security concerns—energy security (which has faded in importance with growing indigenous energy production), the wellbeing of Israel and other allies, nuclear nonproliferation, and, above all else, counterterrorism.

Of course, one could imagine a Trump approach to the Middle East that blended militarism with economic nationalism. But Trump’s apparent disinterest in the region, his political mission statement to expand working-class economic opportunities, and his background as a real estate developer and reality TV celebrity suggest that he sees trade policy as the overriding focus of his administration’s foreign policy. That is certainly the takeaway from Trump’s choice of ExxonMobil Chief Executive Officer Rex Tillerson, an engineer with considerable negotiation experience but none in traditional national security policy, to become his secretary of state.

Trump’s Twitter feed is an unfiltered and unprecedented direct look into his worldview and governing priorities. In the month after his November 8 victory, Trump devoted dozens of tweets to his personal business interests, Japanese investments in the United States, allegations of Chinese currency manipulation, wasteful government contracts, and, most prominently, his efforts to prevent American factories from relocating abroad. But he issued only a single tweet referring even indirectly to Islam, Muslims, terrorism, or the Middle East, in response to a November 28 domestic mass stabbing attack at Ohio State University, claimed by the Islamic State.

What happens when Trump's transactional approach to world affairs meets the cold realities of the Middle East? Let's take a look at how Trump's policy may play out in relations with America's core regional partners, the nuclear agreement with Iran, and the military campaign against the Islamic State and the Syrian civil war.

Language of Hard Power

After several years of unusually strained relations with Washington, leaders in Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia have been looking forward to a new American administration regardless of the outcome. The election of Trump represents, in their eyes, a stark repudiation of Obama—who was viewed by many of his Middle East counterparts as an uncertain leader who misunderstood both the nature of the region and America's proper role in it. By contrast, in Trump, they see an alpha male who speaks a familiar but unnuanced language of hard power and transactional politics. A friend in Beirut jokes that while Arabs have long awaited the arrival of American-style leadership, Arab-style leadership has instead come to America, as evidenced by the advisory role Trump's children play, his general suspicions of liberal norms, the blurring of his official and private interests, and even his affinity for gilded interior decoration. But an American president more to the liking of Middle East leaders may not be what Arab publics see as being in their best interests.

U.S. allies in the region will not lament the likelihood that under a Trump administration human rights and democracy promotion in the Middle East, which were already downgraded by the Obama administration, will be jettisoned altogether in all but name. For Benjamin Netanyahu's rightwing government in Israel, Trump's pro-Israel sentiment seems to represent an opportunity to greatly expand the pace of settlements in the West Bank, which some of his ministers openly hope will end any remaining hope in a "two-state solution" agreement to end the long conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. David Friedman, Trump's nominee to be ambassador to Israel, is an outspoken financial supporter of the Israeli settler movement who has endorsed the Israeli annexation of parts of the West Bank. While Trump has expressed his desire to broker an Israeli-Palestinian peace agreement and designated his company's top lawyer Jason Greenblatt as his senior international negotiator, the prospects of such an agreement seem exceedingly remote.

Trump's campaign rhetoric calling for a ban on Muslims entering the country and the surveillance of mosques, and warning that radical Muslims are "trying to take our children," have raised serious concerns about discrimination against American Muslim communities and stoking religious tensions in the United States. For U.S. allies in the Middle East, Trump's rhetoric might offer potential openings to leverage American popular anxieties about terrorism in order to potentially eradicate their

own domestic rivals, such as the Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist groups, even if the evidence linking some of these groups to violence and terrorism can be tenuous.

While Trump thus has an early opportunity to rejuvenate relations with these traditional, but sometimes testy, American partners in a region where foreign policy gains are difficult to come by, it is hard to predict how long this honeymoon might last. Trump's election seems unlikely to reverse the longer-term trajectory of American military disengagement from the Middle East, and may well accelerate it. Over time, Arab leaders who were so vexed by the Obama administration's hesitant approach to the Syrian civil war are likely to find Trump's instincts—to increase security cooperation with Russia and to pull back remaining American support for Syrian opposition fighters—even less to their liking. Meanwhile, although Trump has no qualms about developing close relations with Arab strongmen, it remains to be seen whether the Arab street shares such enthusiasms.

Showdown with Iran?

No Middle East issue brought a starker public disagreement between Trump and Obama as the Iranian nuclear agreement, formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Obama sees the agreement, announced in July 2015, as perhaps his signature regional achievement, a deal with the potential to avert a nuclear arms race in the Middle East for a generation. Trump has called the JCPOA “the worst deal ever negotiated.”

While there were fears (and hopes) that Trump might seek to abrogate the agreement in his first days in office, it has become clear his administration will take a more cautious approach. Since Iran has already secured significant benefits from the agreement through sanctions relief, Iranian hardliners in fact would welcome an outright American abrogation of the JCPOA. That would enable Tehran to blame Washington for the agreement's collapse, while removing the considerable nuclear constraints it has imposed.

James Mattis, the retired Marine general Trump chose to become secretary of defense, is widely known as an Iran hawk. Yet he has cautioned against a unilateral American withdrawal from the JCPOA, arguing that the difficulty in reestablishing multilateral sanctions on Iran could dangerously heighten tensions and put the region “on a road to perdition.” Trump himself, although his campaign rhetoric fluctuated, tended to compare the agreement to a bad real estate contract to be vigorously enforced or renegotiated rather than thrown out. It seems that no president, even one as brash as Trump, would seek to deliberately precipitate a nuclear crisis in his first days in office.

If an outright abrogation is unlikely, a more likely scenario is that the JCPOA will collapse under its own weight amidst reinvigorated antagonism between Washington

and Tehran and tit-for-tat moves and countermoves. Trump's national security team seems uniform in assessing that the Obama administration was insufficiently aggressive in challenging the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), Hezbollah, and other Shiite militias in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and beyond. (Several years ago, I heard Mattis, who was CENTCOM commander at the time, tell a senior senator that his top three concerns in the Middle East were "Iran, Iran, and Iran.") Trump's ultimate success in currying favor with Jerusalem and Riyadh will depend in significant measure on the extent to which his administration reverts to form and again treats Iran as the most significant regional state threat.

Washington and Tehran have diametrically opposed understandings of one unwritten aspect of the JCPOA—namely, whether new American financial sanctions against non-nuclear activity, such as terrorism or ballistic missile testing, would constitute a violation. Sanctions, if carefully designed and implemented, can be effective tools in constructing a tougher American posture against Iranian regional interference, but it is not difficult to see how their application might unravel the agreement.

But the demise of the JCPOA is by no means preordained. Many regional leaders believe that deliberately or unintentionally Washington has given Iran a freer hand to support terrorism and sectarianism. But they now privately acknowledge—Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu seems the exception—that the JCPOA itself has been effective in the narrower objective of severely constraining the Iranian nuclear program.

Indeed, the very logic that led to the JCPOA in the first place—economic relief for Iran in exchange for significant and verifiable curtailments in its nuclear program—may still prevail, even in an environment of escalating tensions as each side attempts to avoid both being blamed for the JCPOA's collapse and a renewal of the nuclear crisis which could evolve into a military conflict that the American public is hardly clamoring for. If the Trump administration takes a hawkish but pragmatic rather than ideological approach to Iran that carefully weighs the potential benefits of increased pressure on Iran against the risk of JCPOA's collapse, it is conceivable that a new bilateral equilibrium can be created, fragile though it might be.

As if this calculus were not complicated enough, two more variables are worth considering. First, in the fight against ISIS, Washington and Tehran are at least indirectly on the same side. As President Trump explores options to increase military pressure against ISIS, he may discover that finding capable regional partners is more complicated than candidate Trump had suggested, given the role that Iranian-allied Shiite militias play, especially in Iraq.

It is also worth watching how Trump's economic nationalist instincts intersect with the Iran agreement. With the recent announcement that Boeing will sell eighty passenger jets to Iran for nearly \$17 billion, the U.S. economy now has at least some

financial stake in the survival of the JCPOA. On the other hand, in the event of a sharp deterioration in U.S.-Chinese relations, it is conceivable that extraterritorial Iran sanctions—which target third-country parties dealing with Iran—might be a useful stick to wield against Chinese economic interests.

The first six months of the Trump administration may be the most fraught period for the JCPOA, as both sides simultaneously recalibrate to each other. If the deal survives this period of first contact, the odds of it lasting the four years of Trump's presidential term will become more likely.

Tale of Two Cities

Two urban battles about five hundred kilometers apart could have important implications for the future of the Levant and the ongoing role of the United States there. The fall of Mosul, in Iraq, to a motley assortment of the Iraqi army, Shiite militias, Kurdish peshmerga, and American-led airpower would not mark the end of ISIS but it could mark the beginning of the end of its physical caliphate and expedite its evolution toward a virtual one. In Aleppo, the joint Syrian-Russian assault on the remaining rebel redoubts utilized indiscriminate destruction on a scale not seen since the end of World War II. The fall of Aleppo in December will not end the Syrian civil war, but it shifts the conflict to a new phase in which the Bashar Al-Assad regime enjoys a decisive advantage, as it seeks to consolidate its control of Syria's principal population centers.

Taken together, these two events—the first representing the relative success of the Obama administration's approach to fighting ISIS in Iraq, the latter a symbol of American and international helplessness in Syria—could mark a conceptual sea change in how the overlapping conflicts are seen in Washington. The lightning pace of the assault on Aleppo was an obvious effort to create facts on the ground in advance of Trump's inauguration as president. In contrast, the fight in Mosul seems likely to proceed more slowly both to minimize the scope of the humanitarian displacement and to delay the internal Iraqi political reckoning which will surely follow.

This sequencing presumably reinforces the political instincts of a new president committed to destroying the Islamic State but disinclined to get involved in Middle East civil wars, since he can inherit a significant military victory in Mosul set in motion by his predecessor, while blaming that same predecessor's failures for leaving him with no meaningful options after the fall of Aleppo for supporting the Syrian opposition.

Iraq and especially Syria are likely to be unstable incubators of metastasizing radicalization and terrorism for years to come. As the recent history of the Levant makes amply clear, neither Iraq nor Syria will enjoy long-term stability absent new political arrangements and social contracts to address the catastrophic failures in governance which led to the emergence of the Islamic State in the first place. But achieving such

arrangements will require a level of international, and by extension American, commitment and engagement which Trump has shown little inclination to pursue.

Instead, Trump has promised to escalate the military campaign against ISIS. Increasing numbers of special forces or changing rules of engagement might have some marginal benefit in killing ISIS fighters, but carry potentially significant risks as well, including ethical ones. He could tack more sharply toward the Kurds, but this could provoke a rupture with the Turkish government of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. He could seek closer cooperation with Moscow, but he'd likely find this easier said than done and possibly trigger a backlash from Congress, the military, and the intelligence community. Notwithstanding Al-Assad's criminal violence against the Syrian people, some have speculated that Trump might even contemplate some sort of coordination with the Syrian regime. But Trump would quickly find the Syrian army nearly depleted and such an approach incompatible with a tougher stance against Hezbollah, Iran, and the IRGC.

Given his desire to avoid American "boots on the ground," he is likely to find himself running into the same conundrums that so frustrated the Obama administration, particularly if he is simultaneously seeking to increase pressure against Iran and Shiite militias.

Though American tactics might well become more aggressive, it seems likely that Trump's basic strategic approach to fighting ISIS will not look dramatically different from the one pursued by Barack Obama, especially if he inherits victory in the siege of Mosul. Military victories against ISIS will not solve the problems of Syria and Iraq, but they may allow a Trump administration to focus its attention elsewhere. As for the increased terrorist threat that may emerge in the aftermath, it is a diffused one, which perhaps the Trump administration will see as manageable, at least in the short term, since it will threaten Europe more than the United States, and Iraq and Syria most of all.

Illusions of Authoritarian Stability

Despite the cascade of global crises during the Obama years, and the widespread perceptions that America has lost its way domestically and abroad, Trump inherits a relatively strong geostrategic position. The American economy has enjoyed seven consecutive years of economic growth, and the unemployment rate is at its lowest rate in a decade. Though Obama's response to the Syrian civil war has been widely criticized, the estimated fifteen thousand troops deployed between Iraq and Afghanistan are a fraction of the 180,000 in place when Obama took office in January 2009.

Trump is the first Republican president since 1928 to enter office with elected Republican majorities in both houses of Congress, and because of the vagaries of state and local election dynamics seems set to enjoy these majorities through his full

four-year term. (Obama in contrast only enjoyed congressional majorities during the first two of his eight years in office.)

But there are two ironies in this situation. While Donald Trump enjoys an uncommon degree of domestic latitude in the Middle East, he seems disinclined to use it. And while Trump spent much of the last year skewering the Obama administration's Middle East policies, he may discover his own policies do not end up looking terribly different.

Add all of Trump's inclinations together—reluctance to become entangled in the Middle East, revitalized relations with security partners, backtracking on demands for Al-Assad's removal, reduced emphasis on human rights and good governance—and you have a policy of promoting authoritarian stability in the Middle East. Such a policy has the benefit of keeping the United States out of the civil wars in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, and thereby greatly reducing the potential for American military casualties and keeping military costs from spiraling.

But this is hardly an edifying policy. The region's inhabitants will be the losers with such an American approach. Without American leadership, though possibly also even with it, the region's four civil wars are likely to continue to burn before eventually simmering out, with all of the continuing humanitarian and geopolitical problems that these conflicts entail. The prospect of an end to the Arab-Israeli conflict recedes even further, and the region's already beleaguered reformers, civil society members, and activists may find themselves under even greater pressure.

Authoritarian stability itself is a mirage, which is likely to produce more of the socioeconomic stagnation, cronyism, and corruption which gave rise to the 2011 Arab uprisings in the first place. With oil prices having collapsed from \$110 a barrel in 2014 to roughly \$50 today, the pillars of the rentier system which supported the authoritarian bargains of the past have crumbled, making further social explosions likely, though no one can say when.

However the Trump administration chooses to confront the many challenges of the Middle East, significant questions await it. In the wake of the battle for Mosul, how will the Trump administration react to Kurdish moves toward independence? How will it approach the Arab-Israeli conflict? How will it square Trump's apparent desire for rapprochement with Moscow with its hostility toward Iran?

Amidst this turmoil, we shouldn't expect a fully coherent approach from a fledgling administration. A contradiction-free American policy for the Middle East would only be possible with an ideological approach devoid of nuance or flexibility. We cannot predict Trump's policies with any degree of certainty. Almost every American president since Dwight D. Eisenhower has entered the White House only to have their designs for the Middle East completely overturned. Events in the region are rarely linear, and sooner or later, Trump too will face his moment of Middle East truth.

Trump's campaign rhetoric tells us relatively little about his specific policies in the Middle East, but it reveals much about his temperament. His apparent disinterest in either the details of governance or the nuances of foreign policy are not necessarily fatal defects. Neither Franklin D. Roosevelt nor Ronald Reagan were voracious readers, but they were effective leaders because they articulated compelling strategic visions of change that their lieutenants were empowered to execute.

But there is no precedent for a "post-truth" presidency, with a commander in chief who won election to office with emotional appeals and repetitive talking points rather than detailed policy formulations. If Trump does not feel the need to more than occasionally review his president's daily brief, it is worth asking which of his closest advisors will. In a moment of crisis, who does Trump turn to for information and how does he process it? Indeed, the most dangerous period could be the early months of the Trump administration, when allies and adversaries alike seek to recalibrate their policies amidst the many unknowns of the American response. The Trump administration has some opportunities in the Middle East, but its biggest challenge may be Trump's impetuosity itself.