

Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East

Donald J. Trump's election as the next President of the United States has thrown enormous doubt upon the continuity of American policy around the world. For the Middle East, Trump did not articulate a coherent policy during the campaign, but he has generally been highly critical of the Obama administration's management of the region. Trump's campaign sharply criticized the nuclear agreement with Iran, opposed intervention on behalf of rebels in Syria, criticized allies such as Saudi Arabia, and called for a ban on Muslim immigration to the United States. A Trump administration will undoubtedly adopt a very different stance on a wide range of issues from those familiar with eight years of the Obama administration. But while Trump presents an unusually high level of uncertainty, and his administration could do a remarkable amount of damage initially, he may find major changes more difficult to implement than he expects.

Trump articulated few coherent policy ideas about the Middle East during the campaign, but taken together his combination of orientations might be termed "belligerent minimalism." He has criticized U.S. military interventions in the region and in particular has opposed U.S. intervention in Syria. He has labeled radical Islam the greatest threat to the United States, implying support both for greatly expanded counterterrorism operations and significant changes in the terms of engagement with Islamist movements. He is keen to work more closely with Israel and autocratic Arab regimes, while also belittling them in public and demanding they pay a greater share of the burden. He shows no interest in using presidential rhetoric to encourage democratic change, and likely cares nothing at all about (or at

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least sees no consequences of) popular anti-Americanism. Most critically, he shows no particular attachment to leadership of the Middle Eastern regional order, which has defined American policy for decades.

Trump can do a great deal of damage in the early days of his administration, particularly on issues related to Islam, before reality kicks in. But that reality is that Trump is likely to experience the same difficulties in transforming America's role in the region as his predecessors, whose transformational ambitions have also been defeated by the structural realities of the United States' position in the Middle East. Trump will find the Middle East intractable to his preferences, with the initial welcome by allies quickly fading and the complex problems with which Obama grappled continuing to resist resolution. Whatever Trump's personal inclinations, an inexperienced president will face constant pressure from U.S. allies, the Republican foreign policy establishment, and the national security bureaucracy to adopt more conventional positions.

That does not, however, mean that the Middle East will not change. The internal contradictions of today's Middle East, including intense domestic instability in almost every Arab country and the destabilizing effects of multiple unresolved wars, may weaken those structural constraints on the new administration and open the possibility for more fundamental changes to regional order. But it will not be because of Trump's policies—or any initiatives from outside the region—it will fundamentally be because of structure—or changes from within the region—as has been true for decades.

Patterns from Obama and Bush

Trump is the third consecutive new president to come to office vowing fundamental change in America's Middle East policy. Both George W. Bush and Barack

There are limits of any president's ability to change U.S. posture in the Middle East.

Obama came to office determined to scale back U.S. presence in the Middle East. Each president ended up with much different results than anticipated. Each left office with a region marked by destabilizing wars, failed democratic change, intense anti-Americanism, strained alliances, and dangerously evolving jihadist networks. Each succeeded at their top objectives—Bush by overthrowing Saddam Hussein, Obama by signing the nuclear agreement with Iran—but neither immediately saw

the expected benefits of these policies to materialize. The similarities in their otherwise divergent trajectories offer a critical case study in the limits of any

president's ability to change U.S. posture in the Middle East, and of the likely fate of Trump's ambitions.¹

George W. Bush came to office pledging to scale back the Clinton administration's interventionism, promising a modest foreign policy and a rejection of nation-building.² Bush reversed course almost completely after the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York and Washington, DC. He then undertook extraordinary efforts to transform the Middle East—invading Iraq, declaring a Freedom Agenda of democratic change, and downgrading the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. Each of these efforts, in turn, had major repercussions on the Middle East and on broader U.S. foreign policy, but failed almost entirely to accomplish their avowed goals.

The U.S. occupation of Iraq profoundly changed the regional balance of power, in ways largely opposite of Bush's intention. Overthrowing Saddam Hussein removed the primary strategic rival to Iran and its ally in Syria, opening up the Levant for Iranian influence. The massive deployment of U.S. troops to occupy Iraq prevented Washington from contemplating any further military adventures. The resistance to U.S. occupation revitalized al-Qaeda, giving it the mass appeal that it had never before enjoyed.

The Bush administration's "Freedom Agenda" also brought the United States ever more directly into the domestic politics of the region. A "war of ideas" against radical Islam entailed a breathtakingly wide array of local interventions into the political, economic, social, and cultural institutions of targeted states. Beyond simply calling for democratic elections or less abusive human rights practices, the Freedom Agenda pushed for the reform of educational curricula, monitoring local media content, supporting certain types of civil society organizations, and more. Arab regimes often publicized such initiatives as violations of their national sovereignty in order to inflame local sentiment against the United States and deflect external pressure. Popular and official anti-Americanism, not coincidentally, spiked in this period. The more central the United States became to the region's political structure, the more it became an obvious target for criticism and resentment. Its actions, especially the invasion of Iraq and the practices of the Global War on Terror, were widely seen as hostile to Arab interests.

Obama came to office even more determined to scale back American military commitments in the region. He viewed avoiding another Iraq-like quagmire as a core U.S. national security interest, and was deeply skeptical of the U.S. ability to resolve Middle Eastern conflicts through military force.³ Obama viewed the occupation of Iraq and the "Global War on Terror" as a catastrophic overextension of U.S. resources, and put a high strategic priority on pulling back both ambitions and resources.⁴ The ultimate objective would be a self-sustaining local balance of power that could continue to protect core U.S. interests, but would

not require the level of military or political commitments that he inherited from the Bush administration.

Obama succeeded in his most urgent priority, the withdrawal of U.S. forces from Iraq. This drawdown was carefully designed to minimize the risk of Iraqi state failure, ultimately taking nearly two years rather than the initially promised 16 months. Obama was determined to avoid institutionalizing a permanent U.S. military presence in a hostile, nationalistic, and unstable Iraq. The Iraqi government's refusal to sign an acceptable Status of Forces Agreement, primarily due to domestic political opposition to such a deal, gave Obama a pathway for withdrawal. The seizure of Mosul by the Islamic State and the collapse of the Iraqi army forced Obama to reintroduce a limited number of troops in 2014 in support of the Iraqi government. Still, Obama largely succeeded in removing the vast majority of U.S. troops from Iraq. He also prevented the insertion of significant numbers of U.S. troops into Syria, and avoiding a new war with Iran.

Second, Obama viewed the achievement of a nuclear agreement with Iran as a top strategic priority. He therefore prioritized diplomacy as the most effective way to protect U.S. interests. These efforts produced little initially, leading Obama to go along with Congressional initiatives to intensify sanctions. The groundwork was laid, however, for his 2013 return to diplomacy with Iran—which in turn followed his evident calculation that the Arab democratic transitions had failed and that resolving Syria was hopeless. Those negotiations would bear fruit in 2015, with an agreement that successfully resolved one of the most enduring and high profile of the world's political conflicts, albeit doing little to unwind the bipolar regional structure revolving around the expansion or containment of Iranian power.

Third, Obama hoped to reset the U.S. relationship with the Muslims of the world by ending the worst excesses of the "Global War on Terror" and standing up new forms of public engagement with Muslim leaders and populations. He succeeded in some of these efforts, but failed at the most symbolically important issue when he could not close the Guantanamo Bay prison camp. His initial outreach to the Muslims of the world went well, with a well-received speech in Cairo becoming a global spectacle.⁵ Little followed from that public diplomacy gambit, however, and the momentum faded. This would bear new fruits with his genuinely remarkable willingness to accept Islamist electoral victories in Tunisia, Egypt, and Libya in 2011–12. This forthcoming attitude toward mainstream Islamist movements, rooted in the idea that their inclusion in democratic politics was both necessary and desirable, caused considerable tensions with anti-Islamist sectors of Arab opinion—including most regimes, which viewed Islamists as a primary threat to their rule.

Finally, even as he pulled away from direct military intervention, Obama proved keenly interested in expanding the use of offshore forms of military power, narrowly targeted against al-Qaeda and other violent extremists. Drone

strikes increased in Yemen, Pakistan, and other theaters. The daring Special Forces raid killing Osama bin Laden in May 2011 stood as one of his most spectacular foreign policy successes. By the end of his term, however, the United States had military forces in action in no fewer than four different Arab countries and faced a jihadist threat arguably worse than in the previous decade.

Obama's attempted "right-sizing" of the U.S. presence triggered significant uncertainty across the region with allies and adversaries alike. His refusal to intervene in Syria, along with his determination to sign a nuclear accord with Iran, angered regional actors who expected the United States to support a regional order centered on confrontation with Iran. Regional allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates were even enraged by Obama's support for democratic change in longstanding allies such as Egypt. Obama did succeed in reaching agreement with Iran over the nuclear issues, but struggled to leverage this into broader change in regional attitudes, structures, or dynamics. The Gulf states and Israel pushed back against efforts to reinvent the U.S. relationship with Iran, ultimately largely succeeding in limiting the immediate transformative impact of the landmark nuclear agreement by maintaining a confrontational posture toward Iran. Adversaries too pushed back, looking to see what advantages they could gain. Meanwhile, newly empowered Arab publics scorned Obama's policies, even when his support for Egyptian democracy and rejection of military intervention in Syria aligned with the views that most Arabs had forcefully expressed for decades.

Unintended consequences and structural resistance to change are a critical commonality across the two administrations. Bush and Obama each attempted to transform the U.S. role in the Middle East, but with outcomes quite different from the intentions. This is not to say that their policies had no effect. Bush's destruction of Iraq profoundly shaped the geopolitics and human geography of the region, changing structural constraints by forcefully removing one of the central players in the regional balance of power. Other Bush policies successfully took root within the region's structure, such as the collective focus on containing Iran, prioritizing the War on Terror, and ignoring the Palestinian conflict. Obama had similar successes, such as avoiding the large-scale commitment of U.S. troops in Syria and elsewhere, as well as reaching a nuclear accord with Iran. He failed, however, to fully change the expectations of U.S. involvement, to effectively support democratic transitions, or to redefine U.S. interests in the region. The next president, like the previous ones, will likely declare an intention to dramatically change the U.S. role in the Middle East, only to face the same structural obstacles and confront the same limitations on U.S. power.

This pattern of failed transformation and unintended consequences has less to do with any specific decisions or policies than with the overarching stickiness of structure. Changing the Middle East from the outside in any direction is inherently

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difficult. Long-standing patterns of power, rivalry, and identity tend to reassert themselves even after major upheavals. The mechanism by which structure trumped agency in the Bush administration was the inexorable costs of the Iraqi quagmire, while for the Obama administration it was primarily the resistance by U.S. allies to his aspirations. Their resistance to

change incorporated the full arsenal of alliance politics, from foot-dragging to leash-slipping to open opposition.

Structural Constraints

Both Bush and Obama found their strategic visions disrupted primarily by developments within the Middle East itself. Bush's vision of achieving Iraqi democracy through invasion collapsed in the face of insurgency, sectarianism, and regional ambitions. Obama's hope to reset relations with the Muslims of the world ran aground amidst the intense politics of Arab uprisings and failed transitions. Trump likely aspires to working closely with autocratic Arab regimes, without the usual American posturing about democratic change. He has signaled admiration for Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, despite his leading of a violent military coup, and has praised Bashar al-Assad as an important partner against jihadist rebels. Trump's expectations of the Middle East are likely to be frustrated by the region's domestic instability and proxy wars. Not only that, there is a strong constituency in Washington, the region, and the international system pushing back against any major change—*increase or decrease*—in the level of U.S. military involvement in the region.⁶

The structure that Trump faces may be less immediately constraining of U.S. policy initiatives than in earlier periods. The Middle East is in the throes of major changes at all levels of analysis. At the global level, U.S. unipolarity is no longer an unchallenged reality. At the regional level, there is no clear balance of power, with major powers still consumed by internal upheaval and no clear resolution to the question of Iran's place in the region. Syria's interminable war is reshaping the political geography of the Levant, and the rise of the Islamic State (IS) organization has increased the threat of terrorism and insurgency. At the level of Arab domestic politics, the crushing of most of the Arab uprisings has left regimes profoundly fearful for their survival and exceptionally fierce in their domestic efforts at control. Over the longer term, however, the recurring structural realities of the region will inevitably reassert themselves against U.S. ambitions.

At the global level, the structural balance of power has become more uncertain. The opportunistic entry of Russia into the Syrian war and other theaters has not made it a peer competitor, but has introduced options for alliance politics that had previously been absent. The United States still faces no real peer competitors, but it is no longer able or willing to exercise effective hegemony over the Middle East. Russia should be viewed not as a competing pole, but as an opportunistic regional power able to advance specific interests through the aggressive use of regular and unconventional military forces. Its intervention in Syria is not a particular sign of newfound strength. Even if it completely defeated the opposition and ensured that Bashar al-Assad remained in power, this would only restore the pre-2011 *status quo ante*. And even such a limited goal is likely far beyond Russian capabilities to deliver—more likely, Russia will remain ever more desperately bogged down in a perpetual military campaign, with growing material and political costs and no possibility of escape. For all its opportunism, Moscow remains very badly placed to serve as a strategic asset to Arab states, either militarily or economically, since its dependence on oil exports makes its economy cyclical with Gulf states. Russia will likely remain trapped in its Syrian quagmire for years, alienating rather than attracting potential allies, while steadily bleeding assets in a lost cause.

The most likely future peer competitor to the United States in the Middle East is not Russia but China. Enormous and growing interests in Gulf oil and natural gas should make Asian powers determined to develop the military capacity to protect those vital flows. Beijing continues to remain mostly silent on the region's politics, content to free ride on U.S. military commitments; it has made no moves in the Middle East comparable to its investments in sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, China's massive and growing dependence on Gulf energy gives powerful material incentives toward its eventual development and assertion of military capabilities to protect those vital interests. In the coming years, as the United States continues to retrench and reconfigure its alliances, it would not be surprising to see China move in greater force into the region.

At the regional level, the shifting balance of power has created new patterns of alliances and interventionism. Turkey has been consumed by domestic politics since July's failed coup, and has been intensely focused on the renewed war with its Kurdish population even when this interferes with the campaign against the Islamic State. With other traditional powers such as Iraq, Syria, and Egypt also in chaos, the small powers of the Gulf such as Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have filled the gap. This is not likely to be sustainable over the longer

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term, however, given the very real limitations on the power of such tiny states. The Saudi bid to take the lead in regional military action has faltered as its Yemen war descended into quagmire, while Qatar faced a sharp backlash against its post-2011 interventionism. With the real balance of power uncertain and regional powers consumed by insecurity, they will continue to pursue their own strategies even where they diverge from Washington's preferences.⁷ Turbulent alliance politics will most likely continue to dominate regional international relations in the coming years.

Finally, at the domestic level, very few states in the region are likely to remain stable over the coming years. The reassertion of authoritarianism has beaten back

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popular challengers for the time being, but failed to respond to any of the underlying governance, economic, and social problems. Political turbulence and war has devastated tourism and foreign investment, while the collapse of oil prices has cut into the finances of even the wealthiest of the Gulf states. Egypt and Turkey continue to reel under the effects of their respective coup plots. Indeed, on most indicators of political instability, the states of

the region look more at risk today than they did in 2010, in advance of the uprisings.

The typical domestic constraints imposed by the Washington consensus on foreign policy could be eroded in the short term by the unusually high post-election concentration of institutional power in the Republican Party. This may grant the new administration less freedom than in other policy areas, however, given the hostility to Trump's policy ideas among traditional policy elites, including a significant portion of the Republican foreign policy elite. Deeply entrenched policy communities, lobbies, and political expectations sustain U.S. policy in the Middle East. Bureaucracies across all agencies, from the Defense Department to the State Department, are built around a large Middle East presence. Washington DC think tanks for the most part lobbied hard during the Obama years for higher levels of U.S. involvement in the region and are unlikely to step back now.⁸ These domestic structures have tended to mobilize against presidential efforts to change American posture. No matter how radical Trump may hope to be, his administration will be staffed by creatures of the system and buffered by powerful entrenched interests.

The United States is trapped in the Middle East by an unforgiving structure, one largely of its own making, from which it now cannot escape. Trump will likely attempt to redirect Obama's policies by focusing on combatting radical Islam and the containment of Iran, rebuilding relations with traditional U.S.

allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia, and dropping calls for democracy in favor of transactional relations with autocratic regimes. This approach assumes the ability of friendly autocrats to enforce unpopular foreign policies and effectively control their own societies. And during the Clinton and Bush administrations, this required the forward deployment of U.S. military forces at levels unlikely to be sustainable today, especially since it would require a significant and politically contentious increase following Obama's years of restraint and the American public's domestic focus.

Trump's avowed reticence to intervene in the Middle East outside of counterterrorism may prove popular at home, but it's unlikely to significantly change regional public opinion of the United States. Whatever the calculations of Arab leaders, an intense, persistent anti-Americanism has characterized Arab public opinion for decades, regardless of changing American policies or public diplomacy initiatives. The 2016 wave of the respected Arab Barometer survey asked respondents to name the most positive thing the United States could do for the region: 62 percent of Egyptians and 50 percent of Tunisians said "the [United States] should not get involved."⁹ A more assertive America, whether in Syria or elsewhere, would likely produce yet another surge of anti-Americanism in response. This is not to say that a less assertive America will improve its image in the region, given the historical legacies of unpopular U.S. policies and Trump's penchant for inflammatory rhetoric.¹⁰ Arab public hostility will likely remain a constant feature of regional politics, even if Trump proves indifferent to its significance.

Redefining U.S. Interests?

The definition of U.S. interests in the Middle East has been relatively stable over the last 60 years, despite significant global and regional structural changes.¹¹ Trump thus far seems likely to continue to accept most of this conception of interests—with two potentially huge exceptions.

First, the United States has viewed it as a vital national interest to ensure the predictable flow of oil from the Gulf at reasonable prices. This does not require the United States to directly control the oil, or even that the United States directly consumes a significant portion of it; instead, the United States denies any other actor from either threatening or protecting that flow of oil. This has been an integral part of U.S. global hegemony. It underlay U.S. domination over Europe and Japan during the Cold War, despite their rapidly growing economies. Even today, it explains why China has not expanded its naval power to protect the energy supplies upon which it increasingly depends. Oil, quite simply, is why the United States cares about the Middle East in ways it did not care about

sub-Saharan Africa or other parts of Eurasia. Trump, who mused during the campaign that the United States should have taken Iraq's oil after the invasion and who sharply opposes any restrictions on energy production, is unlikely to rethink this U.S. interest, even if he tries to coerce China or U.S. allies to pay a larger share of the security costs.¹²

Second, there has long been a bipartisan consensus on ensuring the survival and prosperity of the state of Israel. Whether this in fact constitutes a U.S. interest has been a contentious debate. Indeed, the degree of the U.S. commitment to Israel, despite its many costs and complications, prompted leading realists such as Steven Walt and John Mearsheimer to highlight the role of domestic lobbies as the only explanation for such suboptimal behavior.¹³ The argument that supporting Israel is not a U.S. interest only makes sense from a narrowly realist perspective, however: if an enduring bipartisan and broadly supported domestic consensus thinks something is a national interest, then that seems to *prima facie* make it so. The sunk costs of that alliance also factor into the enduring interest, from the deep integration of U.S. and Israeli security agencies to the consolidation of regional order around the expectation of such an alliance. Trump has aggressively aligned himself with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and while he seems poised to break with the longstanding U.S. commitment to a negotiated two-state solution, he shows no sign of rethinking the U.S. commitment to Israel.

Third, the attacks of 9/11 raised terrorism to the top of U.S. national interests. The defense of the homeland from existential threats would always top any realist definition of the national interest. Prior to 9/11, this was rarely in play with the Middle East, outside of rare superpower showdowns such as the 1973 Arab–Israeli war. If al-Qaeda never actually posed such an existential threat, the Bush administration highlighted the potential—real or fantastic—for jihadist groups to acquire nuclear weapons. The Iranian nuclear program, while not directly related to jihadist terrorism, similarly rose to the highest levels of national interest because of the prospect, however remote, that Iranian nuclear weapons could threaten the U.S. homeland, find their way into the hands of terrorist groups, or undermine America's ability to play the role of regional hegemon. Trump has placed an extremely high priority on terrorism.

Fourth, while most U.S. administrations have talked about the importance of bringing democracy to the Middle East, and the Obama administration went so far in May 2011 as to define democratization as a fundamental national security interest, few have ever actually acted as if it were an important national interest.¹⁴ The reality is that sustaining a favorable status quo by supporting allied regimes against internal and external threats to maintain order has always taken precedence. At times, political reforms promoting inclusion or accountability might be seen as the best method of promoting the long-term security of those allied regimes. But such reforms were designed to stabilize rather than undermine

those regimes, and regimes typically understood quite well how to adopt reforms selectively or to deflect them entirely. Trump's enthusiastic embrace of Arab autocrats and dismissal of democratic aspirants removes the ideological scaffolding of American liberal values, but does not really change enduring U.S. policy.

There is one critical area where Trump may challenge a longstanding U.S. conception of its interest, however. This lies in his understanding of the inherent value of U.S. regional leadership for its own sake. Until 1989, the United States believed denying the Soviet Union influence in the Middle East was a national interest; indeed, the Cold War structured the regional alliance system with the struggle between communism and the West defining all events, even where this framing was an awkward fit. When the Soviet Union collapsed, the United States quickly moved to consolidate a unipolar regional order, in which all regional powers had to choose between alliance with Washington or banishment from international society. At this point, the United States became a quintessential status quo power, in which defense of the existing regional order came to be seen as an interest in its own right. U.S. policy has since 1991 been based upon the assertion of American leadership as the cornerstone of regional order. Even the Obama administration cast its minimalist posture as a form of regional leadership.¹⁵ It remains strikingly unclear whether Trump buys into this longstanding consensus on the inherent value of a U.S.-led Middle Eastern order—an uncertainty that alarms foreign policy elites on both sides of the aisle.

TTrump may challenge a longstanding U.S. conception of its interest in one critical area.

Trump's Belligerent Minimalism

Trump's broad strategy remains ill-defined at this point. He offered few coherent policy proposals during the campaign, concentrating instead on criticism of the Obama administration and asserting an "America First" ethos. The most striking contrast with Obama is his belligerent tone, his outspoken animosity toward Iran and all variants of Islamism, and his frequently caustic remarks about traditional U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia. He has signaled a desire to return to counterterrorism and the containment of Iran familiar from the Bush administration, but without the rhetorical commitment to democratic change. At the same time, he has at various times seemed to share Obama's skepticism of military action, most notably breaking with Republican orthodoxy to criticize the invasion of Iraq and savaging Obama and Clinton for their decision to intervene in Libya's civil war. His stated opposition to intervention in Syria, including aid to rebels

who he views as primarily jihadist, is closer to Obama's minimalism and skepticism. Trump may, in fact, redirect but escalate Obama's right-sizing approach, moving the United States even further off-shore while continuing drone strikes and military support operations against Islamist targets.

As the experience of both Obama and Bush attest, structural realities tend to overwhelm the efforts by new presidents to change them. Any president faces limits in pushing the United States into a different direction. Had she won, Clinton's Syria escalation would not have resolved that war, while her closer consultation with Arab allies and Israel would not have changed the fundamental divergence in interest or accumulated grievances. Trump's belligerent minimalism will likely meet a similar fate. Trump has articulated a transactional conception of alliances, in which local partners are expected to pay their way. At the same time, he has no expectations of American allies in terms of domestic politics or human rights. This indifference will be highly pleasing to the region's leaders, and will likely lead them to forgive many rhetorical slights. But initially enthusiastic regional leaders will soon return to grumbling, unresolved conflicts will continue to mutate, and the United States will face constant pressures to escalate its involvement in the service of the preferences of its local allies. The new administration will offer a temporary re-set in America's alliances, but intra-alliance conflict and tension will soon return.

The Iran nuclear agreement will be one of the most critical early tests of Trump's approach to the region. During the campaign, Trump repeatedly described the Iran nuclear agreement as the worst deal ever negotiated. This does not mean that he will necessarily tear it up, however. Instead, he seems likely to seek to renegotiate parts of the deal and ramp up enforcement provisions. Unlike Obama, who viewed Iran as a potentially reconcilable rival that could be incorporated into the regional order, Trump has tended to view Iran as an unmitigated enemy to be contained. This view will be pleasing to Gulf regimes and Israel, who prefer such a confrontational stance toward Iran across the region.

Trump also seems likely to break with U.S. diplomatic tradition on Israel, with unpredictable consequences. He may well decide to move the U.S. Embassy to Jerusalem, despite Arab and Muslim warnings that this would provoke severe responses.¹⁶ More consequentially, he could support moves by the Israeli government to impose a final status arrangement involving the annexation of most settlements in the West Bank. Such moves would likely lead to the collapse of the Palestinian Authority. The near-certain Arab and Muslim public backlash would put enormous pressure on Arab regimes, posing an extreme test to the emergent alignment between those regimes and Israel against Iran. It is equally possible that he will step back from such moves once in office, however, once the costs become clear.

Trump also seems unlikely to change U.S. policies toward the disastrous Saudi war in Yemen. A minimalist approach would seem to be fine with allowing Riyadh to fight its own local wars, no matter how pointless and destructive, and profiting from selling vast quantities of arms to support their war effort. Nor does he seem likely to become more deeply involved in Libya, particularly given his frequent criticism of Clinton and Obama over the military intervention and his campaign advertisements prominently featuring the 2012 killing of Ambassador Christopher Stephens in Benghazi.

Trump will be less able to avoid or minimize the campaign against the Islamic State, even if he had an interest in doing so. He will inherit a large-scale military campaign against the Islamic State in both Syria and Iraq, which has been making steady progress. Over the last several years, the United States has carried out an enormous number of air strikes against IS. Thousands of American military personnel have returned to Iraq in support of the campaign, while the United States has worked closely to train and support local non-state proxies and the rebuilding Iraqi military. IS has steadily lost territory, especially in Iraq, and Trump will take office in the midst of the critical battle to liberate Mosul and the initial stages of the campaign to retake IS's Syrian capital of Raqqa. Trump will likely be quite happy to take credit for the success of this campaign, should the final victories take place after his inauguration. The fall of IS's caliphate would not end the complex challenges posed by rapidly evolving jihadist networks—challenges for which Trump may be uniquely ill-equipped.

In Iraq, Trump will quickly face the inherent contradictions of America's position. His hawkishness toward Iran will have to be reconciled with U.S. dependence in the campaign against the Islamic State on the Iraqi military and on Iran-backed Shi'ite militias. Trump has repeatedly emphasized that he views the Islamic State and radical Islam as the greatest threat to the United States—a view shared by the Obama administration. He will need to decide quickly

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whether confronting that threat justifies the current level of cooperation with Iran and the Shi'ite-dominated government of Prime Minister Hayder al-Abadi. If he decides that it does not, and that Iran should be prioritized as the greatest regional threat, then the campaign against the Islamic State will face an existential crisis.¹⁷

A victory against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria would be a significant accomplishment, but would also set in motion new challenges. Jihadist networks have proven to be highly resilient and adaptable in the face of setbacks, such as killing Osama bin Laden. Jihadists will likely continue to take root in the failed states and in repressive regimes that populate the region. Their ideology and

messaging is exceptionally well adapted to a socially mediated world, and will continue to inspire local movements and individual attacks.

Trump can do a great deal of damage to global security through his extremist approach to Islam. Trump's anti-Islamic rhetoric and policies, including his proposed ban on Muslim immigration, are tailor-made to inflame conflict with the Islamic world and to empower jihadist extremists. Trump's advisers have signaled an intention to designate the Muslim Brotherhood, a mainstream Islamist movement which regularly competes in Arab elections, as a terrorist organization.¹⁸ This would please Egypt and the Gulf regimes, which have been pushing for such a move, but would antagonize many Muslim-American organizations, encourage even greater regional repression and further weaken Islamist opponents of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State.

Trump's extreme views on Islam go well beyond the already hawkish views of the Bush administration after the September 11 terrorist attacks that reshaped his presidency. Bush ultimately recognized the failures of his administration's campaign against al-Qaeda's ideas, and adapted effectively. Following the replacement of Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld with Robert Gates in early 2007, the administration shifted toward a far more differentiated view of Islamism, which sought to isolate and marginalize al-Qaeda rather than exaggerate its appeal to Muslims. Obama largely continued that policy of disaggregation, focusing on engaging with all forms of non-jihadist Muslims including Muslim Brotherhood-style Islamists. Trump's choice for National Security Adviser, retired General Michael Flynn, has advocated a comprehensive global war against "radical Islam" which would redefine American alliances and radically expand U.S. military and political activities around the world.¹⁹ Whether Trump sustains the anti-Islamic rhetoric and policy of his campaign into the presidency, and—if he does—how quickly he recognizes the dangers of those policies and adapts, will be a question of urgent importance.

Intervention in Syria was one of the only Middle East issues discussed during the presidential campaign, and one of the sharpest points of disagreement. The Clinton campaign was prepared to immediately ramp up military assistance to the Syrian rebels, and would likely have moved to the declaration of a no-fly zone. The expectation of this coming intervention had shaped at least the last half-year of the war's conduct, with rebels preparing for their new role, and Assad, backed by Russia, seeking to consolidate control in as many areas as possible. Trump, however, has dismissed Syria's rebels as dominated by jihadists and has vocally opposed military intervention on their behalf.²⁰ He has at times made conflicting statements in support of safe areas defended and funded by Gulf states, but he has generally aligned himself with Russia's view of the conflict as one between Assad's secular state and a jihadist insurgency. Trump will likely receive little intelligence to contradict his dim view of the current rebels or to

persuade him to increase support to the moderate opposition. He may continue Obama's efforts to negotiate with Russia over a cessation of hostilities, perhaps after tacitly welcoming Russia's efforts to recapture Aleppo from the insurgents. Whatever the case, the long-expected Syria intervention is likely off the table, at least initially.

Trump's non-intervention is unlikely to end the conflict, however, or the relentless pressure to get more involved. All of the structural forces sustaining the war will continue to operate. The rebels will likely continue to receive aid from Turkey and the Gulf states, and U.S. allies will continue to push Washington to support their cause. Assad, Russia, and Iran lack the manpower, resources, or legitimacy to re-establish control over all of Syria's territory and population. Nearly half a million Syrians are believed to have died in the war thus far, with more than 12 million displaced from their homes.²¹ Entire cities have been devastated, the national economy has largely ceased to exist, and large swathes of the country have fallen outside the control of the central state. Turkey has moved troops to northern Syria to confront the Islamic State, Assad, and Kurdish rebel forces. Millions of refugees strain the capacity of Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and beyond to Europe. The Syrian war will continue, just as it would have under Clinton, but at a lower level of direct U.S. involvement.

Trump will find managing alliance politics around Syria challenging. The Obama administration spent an enormous amount of time attempting to restrain and guide the support to Syrian rebels by Turkey and the Gulf states. U.S. officials despaired at the endless competition between Saudis, Qataris, Turks, and others backing different opposition factions. They were particularly concerned by Turkey's loose management of the border, which allowed jihadist groups to gather strength, and by its parochial focus on the Kurdish issue at the expense of rebel unity. Trump could face even greater alliance problems should these states decide to respond to his ending support to the Syrian rebels by dramatically expanding their own flows of military assistance.

Perhaps Trump will stand his ground against the enormous pressure from U.S. allies, the Washington policy community, and senior foreign policy leaders in his own party, such as Senator John McCain, to reconsider his stance on Syria. But even Obama struggled to resist the relentless pressure. His efforts to deflect pressures to intervene often included smaller, incremental escalations to appease the critics. He declared that Assad had lost his legitimacy through his systematic violence against his own people and called for him to step down, despite his deep foreboding about the likely pressure to escalate militarily that would follow. The steady sequence of incremental escalation, despite clear understanding of the risks,

Tump will find managing alliance politics around Syria challenging.

reflected precisely the power of structure over presidential preferences. Obama judged all arguments for limited intervention in terms of whether they would commit Washington to a path that would end up in such a direct military occupation.²² An inexperienced and temperamentally belligerent Trump, however, may be more easily railroaded into the fateful first steps.

Trump and the Future of the Middle East

Trump's campaign statements do not yet add up to a coherent strategy, and they will likely soon run into the weight of their own internal contradictions. The autocratic regimes are less stable than they appear, and unchecked internal repression will only exacerbate their internal challenges. Trump's transactional approach to alliances and inconsistent messaging will soon wear thin in the region, while Trump will likely soon be driven to distraction by the incessant challenges, evasions, and demands of his regional allies. The extreme anti-Islamic positioning will generate a fierce backlash that will undermine efforts to promote a common front against extremism. Syria will remain unresolved, with the horrific consequences of the war continuing to destabilize the region.

The greatest question of all will be whether Trump has rethought U.S. interests as opposed to strategies. If Trump concludes that regional leadership is no longer valuable in its own right, his policies will provoke sharp backlash from multiple directions. If not, then despite a different rhetorical tone the United States will largely retain its alliance system and continue to pursue the same basic set of interests through mostly the same policy tools. It will continue to struggle with the internal contradictions of its regional alliance system, and its attention will predictably be consumed by unexpected crises. The complex conflicts across the region will remain intractable, absorbing Trump's new initiatives and grinding forward. Despite all of the uncertainty and turbulence to come, Trump's unstable, unfriendly, and deeply troubled Middle East will likely soon feel all too familiar.

Notes

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6. Kenneth Pollack and Ray Takeyh, "Why Washington Should Focus on the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 3 (May/June 2014), pp.92-105; Kenneth Pollack, "Fight or Flight: America's Choice in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 3 (March/April 2016), pp.63-75.
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11. Joel Migdal, *Shifting Sands: The United States in the Middle East* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2013).
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14. Office of the Press Secretary, The White House, "Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa," May 19, 2011, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2011/05/19/remarks-president-middle-east-and-north-africa>.
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