



Reassessing American Interests in the Middle East

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BESA Center Perspectives Paper No. 382, December 1, 2016

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY: President-Elect Trump has serious decisions to make about the Middle East, including what to do about Syria, how to tackle Islamic State, how to take on Iran, and, of course, how to handle the perennial Israel-Palestinian problem. Trump's margin of error is narrow, especially since Russia and Iran are likely to test his leadership and determination.

Because foreign policy issues received so little attention during the recent presidential election, it is difficult to know what vision and policies president-elect Donald Trump will adopt for US policy in the Middle East.

Trump made a few statements about challenges in the Middle East region and about American-Israeli relations, but they were very broad and lacked focus. It will take some time before he completes the appointment of key officials in defense and foreign affairs and formulates his strategies and specific policies.

The challenges and expectations that he will face are clear, however.

American foreign policy is always marked by both continuity and change. Incoming presidents, especially those from a party different from that of the outgoing president, often wish to adopt dissimilar, and sometimes opposite, policies to those of their predecessors.

As a strong anti-establishment candidate, Trump is likely to follow this practice even more so than have other incoming presidents.

Trump has severely criticized President Obama's foreign and national security policies, especially the Iran nuclear deal, the battle against Islamic terrorism, and the handling of American-Israeli relations. During the campaign, Trump exhibited a tendency to adopt a semi-isolationist, anti-globalization posture toward American foreign policy. But to "Make America Great Again," he will have to be heavily involved in foreign affairs and, perhaps, define a new vision for American global leadership.

Trump faces several serious challenges in the Middle East. How to restore American credibility and leadership in the region? How to stop the horrible civil war in Syria? How to deal with the Russian intervention in Syria? How to destroy Islamic State (IS)? What to do about the Iran nuclear deal? How to repair relations with Egypt's President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi? How to improve relations with Israel, and what to do about Palestinian-Israeli negotiations? How to strengthen America's Arab allies?

All of those allies, as well as Israel, would like to see a major change in the American strategic approach to the Middle East. Obama left a serious leadership vacuum in the region that was quickly filled by President Vladimir Putin. US allies expect Trump to restore American power and influence in the region. Obama's policies have blurred the lines between allies and enemies, and US allies want Trump to clarify who is a friend and who is a foe.

The No. 1 challenge will be Putin's Russia. Putin has pursued aggressive direct military interventions in both the Ukraine and Syria. This behavior led in turn to direct confrontation with the Obama administration and the European Union.

Putin was reported to have been pleased with Trump's presidential victory because he expected Hillary Clinton to continue to confront him. With Trump, there is a chance that agreements can be reached to resolve Russia's disagreements with the US in Europe and the Middle East.

In Syria, Russia's primary goal is to save the regime of Bashar Assad and restore his rule over the entire country. The secondary goal is to diminish US standing and restore Russian power and influence in the region.

Putin has acquired a reputation as a determined leader and a reliable ally. He has built air and naval bases, bombed Sunni-rebel groups supported by the US far more than he has IS strongholds, and formed a strategic alliance with Iran. Moscow and Tehran share common goals in Syria, and are negotiating a huge arms deal that will completely modernize Iran's conventional armed forces.

Trump was described as Putin's "friend," and it remains to be seen how his relationship with the Kremlin will change Russian behavior in Europe and the Middle East.

During the campaign, Trump said he would use his business experience to solve international conflicts via "deals." While it is true that there are several common elements in all types of negotiation, business bargaining is very different from diplomatic negotiation. Trump might offer Russia a deal based on US concessions in Syria in return for Russian concessions in the Ukraine and Europe. Any such deal will necessarily include Iran, and may lead to disagreement and tension between the US and its allies in the Middle East.

America's allies are concerned about Iran's military and political interventions in Syria, Iraq and Yemen; sponsorship of terrorism; destabilization of pro-Western governments; nuclear deal; development of intercontinental ballistic missiles; and relationship with Russia.

Iran is establishing a Shi'ite strategic axis that includes itself, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon. Its purpose is to promote Iran's hegemonic aspirations in the region, and it is much more dangerous to the region and the world than IS. Russian support for this alliance increases its strength and threat.

Trump has defined the Iran nuclear deal as a "disaster" and "the worst deal ever negotiated," and promised to cancel it. Since Congress did not approve the deal, Trump has the authority to reverse it. Yet it was approved by the UN Security Council and includes several useful restrictions.

Rather than cancel the deal outright, Trump is likely to ensure that Tehran fulfills all its nuclear obligations. He will also be more inclined than Obama was to deal forcefully with Iran's aggressive behavior in the region.

During the Obama era, US-Israeli relations suffered many disagreements on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and the nuclear deal with Iran. On a personal level, the Obama-Netanyahu relationship exuded a particularly toxic element that hobbled ties between the two countries. The personal relationship between Trump and Netanyahu is likely to be much warmer, and the general environment at the White House much friendlier.

Since the establishment of Israel, every US president has expressed a desire to help resolve the Palestinian-Israeli conflict; and in every recent presidential election, at least one of the candidates has promised to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Israel's capital, Jerusalem. Trump is no exception on either point.

Obama applied heavy pressure on Israel to promote negotiations with the Palestinians and was obsessively focused on any type of housing construction in the West Bank settlements. This strategy failed. The Palestinians refused to negotiate directly with Israel, expecting Obama to “deliver” the Jewish State so that they would not have to make serious concessions in return for peace.

Trump is unlikely to prioritize the Israeli-Palestinian issue. He has said he wouldn't force negotiations or a “solution.” And in stark contrast to the current, steadfast US position, he has declared that he does not oppose settlements in the West Bank. He is also likely to oppose attempts by the Palestinians to obtain one-sided anti-Israel resolutions in international organizations, such as the UN Security Council.

In light of this possible approach, the Palestinians may conclude that their best option is to alter their strategy and seek an agreement via direct negotiations with Israel.

It is difficult to know whether Trump's campaign promise to move the US Embassy to Jerusalem will be implemented. Like his predecessors, he might be persuaded that this action would cause too much damage to American relations with the Muslim and Arab world.

Trump will have to reassess US interests in the Middle East to produce new and more effective ways of dealing with the numerous challenges in ways that will best balance resources and goals.

The expectations for change are very high, perhaps too high, and the margin for error is narrower than it was a decade ago. Global and regional actors, such as Russia and Iran, are likely to test Trump's leadership and determination to achieve the goals he sets for US policy in the Middle East. He will have to demonstrate considerable patience, stamina, and endurance to cope with them successfully.

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This is an edited version of an article that appears in the December 12, 2016 issue of *The Jerusalem Report*.

BESA Center Perspectives Papers are published through the generosity of the Greg Rosshandler Family