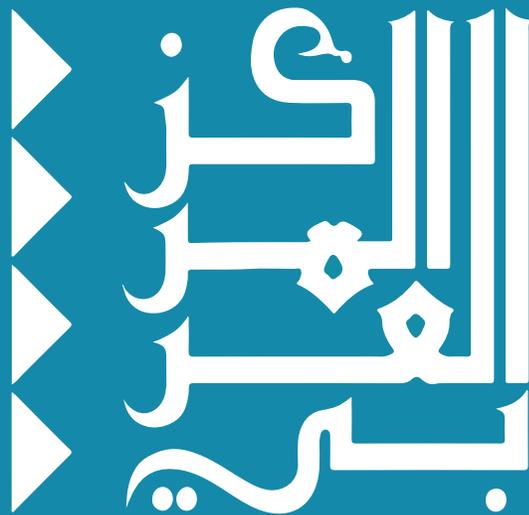


# The Trump Administration's Complicated Middle East Map

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As the 2016 US presidential campaign wound its way through a long string of primaries, fundraisers, and an almost unimaginable marathon of candidate debates, domestic issues largely framed the discussion. Foreign policy issues, however, were drawn mainly in the bright primary colors of blame-casting, dubious accusations, and over-bold promises.

Candidate Donald J. Trump proved a past master at each of these. From assertions that President Barack Obama and Secretary of State Hillary Clinton "created" the Islamic State (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant, or ISIL), to accusations that Obama's policies had led to the current chaos in the Middle East, to his claim to have a "secret plan" to eradicate ISIL, Trump was nothing if not brazenly self-confident in a performance that appealed strongly to his base, if not to foreign policy elites.

Nearly three months after his inauguration, Trump must now reconcile his vision of a dystopian world in which American leadership failure has led to disaster—a vision replete with hints of neo-isolationism—to the complex reality of defending American interests in a turbulent world. Nowhere is this more complicated and difficult than in the Middle East, where the United States is engaged in wars in Syria and Iraq, threatened by terrorism, faced with massive humanitarian crises, and confronted with resurgent authoritarianism that is inflicting ever-worsening human rights violations on already-restive populations.

Just how does the Trump Administration view the region, and what are its choices and likely paths?

Five main issues are demanding Trump's attention and framing the administration's approach to the Middle East's crises and politics. These are the defeat of ISIS, the future of Syria and Iraq, tension with Iran, Palestinian-Israeli peace, and human rights and democracy. How the administration responds to these challenges will have a huge impact on regional security and determine whether the United States retains its leadership role of regional arbiter, or cedes that role to others.

### **The War against ISIL**

Trump raised the defeat of ISIL to his highest regional priority during the campaign and after the election, touting a "secret plan" to accomplish this. Following his arrival in the Oval Office, it became clear that no such plan existed; the Joint Chiefs of Staff were tasked with developing one. So far, this has resulted in an increased US troop presence on the ground in Iraq and Syria, approximately 5,200 in Iraq and about 900 in Syria. (Exact numbers are probably higher, since they do not count troops temporarily assigned. In fact, the administration stopped reporting on troop deployments last month, allegedly to maintain the element of tactical surprise.) In addition, the United States has enhanced military support for the Iraqi security forces and the Kurdish Peshmerga; American airstrikes, intelligence, artillery support, and advisors are playing important roles in the fight. The administration has prioritized the re-conquest of Mosul, the Islamic State's last remaining major stronghold in Iraq, as well as the retaking of the ISIL "capital," Raqqa, in Syria. Both of these goals now appear within reach.

What comes next is another question. If, as expected, the remnants of ISIL mount an insurgent campaign of terrorist violence against government, security, and civilian targets in both Iraq and Syria, the administration will be under pressure to increase its military involvement further, including commitments of additional troops. Given Trump's demonstrated willingness to permit mission creep in both these conflicts so far, this appears the most likely way forward.

### **The Future of Syria and Iraq**

The administration has not yet articulated a game plan for either country that extends beyond the defeat of ISIL. This issue is becoming increasingly urgent for Iraq, as the fight to reclaim Mosul, the Islamic State's last major stronghold in the country, is entering its final phases, and the brutal civil war in Syria has taken a dangerous new turn.

Productive talks took place with Iraq's Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi during his visit to Washington in March 2017, which focused not only on ISIL and the struggle for Mosul, but the possibility of expanding bilateral ties by fully implementing the sweeping agreements on civil and security cooperation negotiated by the Bush Administration toward the end of 2008. Doing so would help cement a deep partnership between the United States and Iraq, but it is unclear how far Washington is willing to go in pursuing such a relationship, especially given the costs and troop commitments likely needed in this context. The Trump Administration has also thrown a wild card into the mix by apparently considering a stronger relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government

(KRG), possibly including US troop bases in Kurdish areas and a diplomatic relationship independent from Baghdad to a significant degree. This would seriously complicate any future plans for closer relations with Iraq's central government.

With regard to Syria, the April 4 chemical weapons attack on the town of Khan Sheikhoun in the northwestern part of the country prompted harsh public responses by the State Department and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, followed 48 hours later by cruise missile strikes on the military airfield from which the chemical attack was launched. This amounted to a sudden reversal of Trump's strongly held position that the United States should not intervene in the Syrian civil war and a break with the Obama Administration's standoffish stance toward the conflict. It is unclear whether the US strike itself represents a one-off response to a particularly egregious incident or a more fundamental shift in strategy. At this point, Trump's team seems to have no real game plan for grappling with Assad's regime and its Russian and Iranian sponsors; indeed, administration officials have insisted that Assad's removal remains a second-tier priority, after the defeat of ISIL.

What is clear is that Washington needs detailed plans for post-ISIL Syria and Iraq, including a diplomatic strategy to end the Syrian civil war and ramp up reconstruction programs and resettlement assistance to internally displaced persons, all vital to restoring some semblance of stability. The administration will doubtless pressure European and Arab allies, especially the Gulf states, to contribute more to these efforts.

## Confrontation with Iran

President Trump has made no secret of his dissatisfaction with the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama Administration with Tehran, but he has offered few alternatives. Former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn put Iran “on notice” in February after Iran flight-tested a ballistic missile in apparent violation of UN Security Council Resolution 2231, which codified the multiparty nuclear deal (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA). But neither Flynn nor any other administration official specified consequences for such tests. The administration appears willing to allow the nuclear deal to go forward for the moment, but with extra scrutiny and a special focus on Iran’s ballistic missile program.

The challenge posed by Iran has other major facets as well. Its deep involvement in the Syrian civil war in support of President Bashar al-Asad, its considerable political and military influence in Iraq, its sponsorship of terrorism, and its ongoing support for Hezbollah in Lebanon and Houthi rebels in Yemen all pose direct threats to US interests and those of Israel and America’s Gulf allies. As they have in recent months, the Iranians are likely to try to test the new president along all these lines. Increasing its support for the Asad regime, particularly in light of the US strike against Syria, is one likely option for Tehran, as is intensifying assistance to the Houthis, who are opposed by the Saudis with US military support. Continued development of Iran’s ballistic missile capabilities and maritime provocations in the Persian Gulf could also be expected.

For now, the Trump Administration seems content to pursue additional unilateral sanctions in response to perceived violations of the JCPOA and other provocations. But the combination of a seemingly unpredictable president and a confrontational Iran has raised the threat of military clashes, accidental or otherwise, to a level higher than it has been in many years.

## The Middle East Peace Process

The Trump Administration has shown little proclivity to take practical steps to reinvigorate Palestinian-Israeli negotiations, despite the president’s assurance in his February 16, 2017 joint appearance with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu that he would encourage “a great deal” between Israel and Palestine. While offering mild criticism of Israeli settlement activity—urging Israel to “pull back on settlements for a little bit”—Trump also seemingly abandoned the longstanding US commitment to a two-state solution, opining that “I’m looking at two-state and one-state and I like the one that both parties like.”

Trump’s choice of advisors on this issue suggests a less flexible approach, one more in keeping with the staunchly hard-line, pro-Israel rhetoric on the campaign trail. Jared Kushner, his son-in-law who has been tasked with a major role in brokering Middle East peace, has only superficial experience of the region. He is known to be in close contact with key Arab ambassadors in Washington, but he has also cultivated strong ties to Prime Minister Netanyahu and the Israeli right. His general lack of expertise in Middle East negotiations,

combined with the vast and increasing portfolio settled on him by his father-in-law, will probably make for a scattered and sporadic approach to this intractable issue on his part, at best.

Jason Dov Greenblatt, a conservative pro-Israel activist and former Trump Organization executive, has been named “special representative for international negotiations,” with a major responsibility for Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. He believes in a strictly transactional, businesslike approach to the long-standing conflict, stripped of historic, religious, and emotive issues that are woven into the fabric of its negotiating history. Further, Trump’s new ambassador to Israel, David Friedman, has contributed millions of dollars to settlement expansion in the West Bank.

While Trump’s evolving views on the Middle East peace process are not necessarily the sum of those of his chief advisors (he has, after all, backtracked from a campaign pledge to move the US embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem), it is likely that his approach will be anchored in strong support for Israel, both militarily and economically. He may de-emphasize direct Israeli-Palestinian negotiations in favor of first encouraging closer ties between Israel and key Arab states, and then urging those governments to pressure the Palestinians into a permanent status agreement with Israel (the so-called “outside-in” approach). Indeed, Greenblatt attended the Arab Summit in Jordan in March, meeting with several Arab leaders to discuss peace prospects. Suggestions have circulated that a US-sponsored summit on Middle East peace might be in the offing. If Trump senses an actual deal is available, he might very well

persuade himself to swoop in to clinch it and take credit for the success. Otherwise, Palestinian-Israeli peace does not seem to be a top regional priority of the new administration, and any early setbacks may further cool the administration’s ardor.

### **Democracy, Human Rights, and the Future of Political Change**

In a speech at the Center for the National Interest in April 2016, presidential candidate Trump made clear that he has no interest in promoting democracy—and, by extension, human rights—in the Middle East. He decried the “dangerous idea that we could make western democracies out of countries that had no experience or interest in becoming a western democracy,” placing the “mistakes” made by the United States in Egypt, Libya, Iraq, and Syria squarely at the door of this impulse and asserting that the regional chaos and the rise of ISIL were the direct result.

Trump’s actions since becoming president have been consistent with his own analysis. The administration has been largely silent toward ongoing human rights abuses, particularly with regard to major US allies. For example, President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt, once characterized as a “fantastic guy” by Trump, was officially welcomed to the White House on April 3 (the first such state visit of an Egyptian president since 2007), despite his seizure of power in a military coup in 2013 and the rising toll of massive human rights abuses under his regime. As expected, counterterrorism cooperation and el-Sisi’s economic reforms were the chief focus of discussion, and Trump complimented el-Sisi for doing “a fantastic job.”

Public criticism of the Egyptian president's human rights record was ruled out by an unnamed White House official, who said such issues would be raised in private – another way of saying these concerns will be a very low priority, if they are raised at all.

There are other examples. The administration lifted Obama-era human rights restrictions on arms sales to Bahrain, despite accusations of government repression of its Shiite citizens. No public criticism has been leveled against other Gulf states that are characterized by high levels of political repression. And, until it was recently reinstated, Washington dropped a long-standing demand that President Asad of Syria step down from power to pave the way for a new government. This has changed again to a re-affirmation of the old US position stating that Asad has no future in Syria after the latest chemical attack and the American response.

Taken together, the signal is clear: the Trump Administration is unwilling to expend diplomatic capital to encourage establishment of democratic norms and respect for human rights in the region, especially in those countries considered leading allies in the fight against ISIL and terrorism more generally. This is unfortunate, since the advance of democratic politics and respect for human rights is an important foundational element of regional stability. The administration's stance risks alienating youth populations and political activists who fought and suffered for greater political freedom; at the same time, it will be seen as a welcome respite from the more demanding Bush and Obama years by many governments in the region.

## Where to Now?

Trump's strategic vision relies heavily on the elements of surprise and unpredictability, as demonstrated by the Syria strike; in addition, Trump appears unfettered to any strongly held foreign policy beliefs. Personal relationships with advisors, appeals to emotion, and wrenching visuals all appear to hold as much if not more sway with the president than policy papers and expert briefings. All this has led to a pronounced ad hoc quality in the administration's initial foreign policy forays, confusing friends and enemies alike. Thus, the current struggle in the West Wing for influence with the president on foreign affairs is critically important. The outcome – which could elevate National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster and Secretary of Defense James Mattis over political advisors such as Stephen K. Bannon in the national security realm – will either lead to a more pragmatic and coherent policy approach to the Middle East and other regions, or intensify the chaotic policymaking and contradictory style we have seen so far.

One important wild card is the apparent evisceration of the State Department, which will deeply complicate Trump's efforts to mount an organized and effective foreign policy. Proposed cuts of up to 29 percent in State's budget, including deep cuts to foreign aid, will vastly reduce the nation's capacity for preventive diplomacy and crisis management short of military action, curbing American influence, presence, and capabilities in the Middle East and many other parts of the world. Key positions throughout State's ranks, including critical posts such as Deputy Secretary and Assistant Secretary for the Near

East, remain unfilled. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson's reticence and near-absence from the diplomatic stage suggest he is out of his depth and unwilling to craft a leading role for himself and his department on Middle East policy, among other issues.

Along with the additional \$54 billion the president's budget guidelines have marked out for new defense spending, the message is clear: Trump's approach to foreign policy will be heavily militarized and centered on counterterrorism missions, an approach that worries even some senior members of Trump's own cabinet. As then-CENTCOM commander Mattis told the US Global Leadership Council in 2013, "If you don't fund the State Department fully, then I need to buy more ammunition ...The more that we put into the State Department's diplomacy, hopefully the less we have to put into a military budget as we deal with the outcome of an apparent American withdrawal from the international scene."

A military-centric approach to regional policy, combined with a more lenient approach toward repressive regimes, will please governments such those in Egypt and the Gulf. As noted, Trump has clearly signaled his willingness to give such governments a pass on issues of human rights and domestic political reform,

both because he does not believe they are important to US core interests and because counterterrorism cooperation with regional governments vastly outweighs any benefits to be had by irritating them with such "soft power" issues. While previous administrations have wrestled with similar concerns about the need to balance regional security needs with stands on behalf of human rights, the Trump Administration's complete abandonment of this agenda, both practically and rhetorically, marks a major departure from the past.

Trump's malleability and self-touted "unpredictability" may make for sudden and wrenching policy changes such as in Syria. But the international community, and particularly Israel and America's Arab allies, will no doubt realize opportunities to shape the president's foreign policy approach. It remains to be seen whether more centrist voices such as those of McMaster, Mattis, Haley, and potentially, Tillerson will be able to turn the ship of state toward a well-managed and multifaceted approach to the Middle East that utilizes all levers of national power and, critically, is based on long-standing American values, not just narrow security considerations. To judge from the chaotic start to the Trump Administration, this is likely to take a very long time to sort out.

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