

TRUMP AND THE ARAB WORLD

A First Year Assessment

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Arab Center Washington DC
المركز العربي واشنطن دي سي

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INTRODUCTION BY KHALIL E. JAHSHAN



Arab Center Washington DC

INTRODUCTION

Khalil E. Jahshan

On behalf of Arab Center Washington DC (ACW), I am delighted to offer you this publication titled, *Trump and the Arab World: A First Year Assessment*. It includes eleven policy papers written by ACW analysts dealing with various aspects of current US policy toward the Arab world and the broader Middle East. The first four papers focus on general themes in US policymaking including human rights, military interests, countering violent extremism (CVE), and the interplay between the executive and legislative branches of the US government in formulating foreign policies in the region. The remaining seven papers deal with challenging issues in subregional relations with Arab countries in the Gulf Cooperation Council, the Maghreb, in addition to Egypt, Syria, Israel-Palestine, Iraq, and Turkey.

Donald J. Trump was inaugurated as the 45th president of the United States on January 20, 2017. As one who hailed from the business – and not political – world, audiences at home and abroad, including Democrats and Republicans, perceived him as lacking the basic literacy in global affairs necessary for conducting a robust American foreign policy, like many presidents before him. His nativist tendencies, political inexperience, and belligerent pronouncements have contributed to a chaotic American diplomatic scene, if not a radical departure from the conventional processes of policymaking followed by successive American presidents – assisted by diplomats and other national security professionals. No wonder, according to a CNN survey conducted in September 2017, only 36 percent of Americans approved and 59 percent disapproved of the way President Trump is handling foreign affairs.

Since his inauguration nine months ago, President Trump's novice approach to foreign policy has veered wildly from familiar positions to which the international community had grown accustomed, at least after the Second World War. He began his international forays with an overarching theme of "America First" by expressing doubt about the American commitment to essential alliances and norms that developed over many decades. A prime example has been his initial and, until today, tepid adherence to the principles of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) charter and the doctrine of nuclear non-proliferation. His constant resort to Twitter to announce unorthodox and poorly thought-out policy positions has sent unwanted messages about American preferences, such as his dangerous missives on the North Korean nuclear program, his recurrent threat to decertify the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran, his attempt to redefine the concept of national sovereignty, and his restrictions on the entry of Muslims from certain countries to the United States, to name a few.

On Middle East issues specifically, the president's positions have been as uninformed as they have been unorthodox. He waded into a dangerous crisis between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council by siding with one of the conflicting camps, in the process weakening subsequent mediation efforts by his own administration. He appointed an inept and biased team to broker a Palestinian-Israeli peace and broke with longstanding American policy that backed a two-state solution, thus upending half a century of American involvement in effecting an end to the conflict. He eschewed a central principle in US foreign policy – that of advocating for human and civil rights and democracy around the world – and instead emphasized cold interests, linking them with his "America First" mantra in domestic politics. That emphasis on

raw interests has helped support the revival and strong return of authoritarian rule in the Arab world and, indeed, in the Middle East at large. His policies on Syria, Iraq, Yemen, Libya, and other places are more haphazard and transactional than studied, thought out, or purposeful.

This volume is an attempt to pose a candid and reasoned assessment of President Trump's interactions with the difficult issues at the heart of American relationships with the Arab world. The writers have tried to take a bird's eye view of the Trump Administration's dealings with the region since last January, analyzing what they saw as seminal elements of each issue and relating what they perceived as possible future developments in American-Arab relations. Each analysis paper contains a set of policy recommendations that can benefit policymakers in the United States as well as those in the Arab region.

It is our hope at Arab Center Washington DC that this volume serves as another tool to better understand the Trump Administration's relations with the Arab world. We also hope that it may be used to warn against unsuccessful policy choices, encourage informed policy input, and assist American and Arab policymakers in improving American-Arab relations in the long term. For that, we are grateful to all contributors to this volume, particularly to Imad K. Harb, Director of Research and Analysis, for coordinating the project; to Zeina Azzam, Publications Editor, for her thorough editing; and to Nabil Sharaf, Public Relations Specialist, for facilitating the production. A personal word of gratitude goes to all members of the staff and interns for their individual contributions and assistance.

As a nonprofit, independent, and nonpartisan research center focused on the Arab world and on US-Arab relations, ACW remains dedicated to furthering the political, economic, and social understanding of the Arab world and providing insight on US policies and interests in the Middle East.

I. THEMES IN US POLICYMAKING

Trump's Missing Human Rights Record in the Arab World

Charles W. Dunne

US Military Interests in the Arab Region: Sales, Stability, and Security

David B. Des Roches

Countering Violent Extremism Programs Under the Current Administration

Tamara Kharroub

The White House, Congress, and the Arab World

Marcus Montgomery



TRUMP'S MISSING HUMAN RIGHTS RECORD IN THE ARAB WORLD*

Charles W. Dunne

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region remains the least free in the world, according to Freedom in the World report from Freedom House, the international human rights watchdog organization.¹ Out of a total population of 424.8 million people, fully 83 percent, or 352.5 million, reside in countries that are rated “not free,” and the situation has deteriorated significantly in the years after the Arab Spring. The report notes that “in 2016, [the MENA region] demonstrated the depths to which human freedom can fall after decades of authoritarian misrule, corruption, and erratic foreign interventions.” Factors in this decline include lack of political inclusiveness, economic cronyism and corruption, political violence by state and non-state actors alike, and sharp curbs on freedoms of expression, belief, assembly, religion, and the rule of law.

This appalling situation is not a matter of mere academic importance. Significant US interests are implicated in the success—or failure—of civic and political liberties around the world, and certainly in the Middle East. They are of utmost concern to the peoples of the region as well. Lack of essential freedoms, including just governance and human rights,² promote the rise of violent extremism and instability.³ As a result, prospects for social, political, and economic development—the underpinnings of strong and peaceful societies—are all put at risk.

The conclusions of the Arab Human Development Reports sponsored by the United Nations Development Programme (UNDP) are illuminating in this regard.⁴ As the 2004 report states, “No Arab thinker today doubts that freedom is a vital and necessary condition, though not the only one, for a new Arab renaissance, or that the Arab world’s capacity to face up to its internal and external challenges, depends on ending tyranny and securing fundamental rights and freedoms.”⁵

The implications for US policy could not be clearer. As President George W. Bush acknowledged in his address at the 20th anniversary of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) in 2003, “Sixty years of Western nations excusing and accommodating the lack of freedom in the Middle East did nothing to make us safe,” he said, “because in the long run, stability cannot be purchased at the expense of liberty.”⁶

The Trump Administration, however, has departed from the bipartisan Washington consensus on the promotion of democracy, liberty, and human rights, often to the delight of America’s authoritarian allies and the consternation of oppressed societies who had hoped for better.

THE US AND THE INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS AGENDA

America’s interest in expanding freedom has a long history. For Thomas Jefferson, as former Secretary of State Henry A. Kissinger writes in his book, *World Order*, “America was not only a great power in the making but an ‘empire for liberty’—an ever-expanding force acting on behalf of all humanity to vindicate principles of good governance.” President Woodrow Wilson supported self-determination and political freedom in his Fourteen Points speech of January 1918, declaring that the United States stands for the “principle of justice to all peoples and

nationalities, and their right to live on equal terms of liberty.”⁷

These general principles were reinforced by President Franklin D. Roosevelt’s “Four Freedoms” in 1941,⁸ which were incorporated in the Atlantic Charter later that year and became part of the US-UK alliance’s official war aims.⁹ The charter specifically endorsed the right of self-determination as well as “freedom from fear and want.”

After the war, Roosevelt’s widow Eleanor drew upon the Four Freedoms as chair of the UN commission that drafted the United Nations’ Universal Declaration of Human Rights, which was adopted in December 1948 by majority vote of the General Assembly.¹⁰ The Universal Declaration recognized that respect for and advancement of human rights were essential to creating a stable and peaceful world. It remains the gold standard for international human rights; it has been built into the constitutions of numerous countries and has inspired several additional agreements, which now have the force of international law. In short, therefore, American leadership has been instrumental in forging a broad global consensus on the importance of respect for human rights in the international system.

Advancement of the human rights agenda—notwithstanding frequent backsliding, lack of concern, and insincere lip service—has thus been a cornerstone of US foreign policy, as a matter of both principle and national interest. As Bush observed in his NED speech, advancing freedom is “the calling of our country.”¹¹

HUMAN RIGHTS RECEDING IN US FOREIGN POLICY

From its first days in office, the Trump Administration has signaled its intention to de-emphasize human rights as it reshapes US foreign policy to conform to an emerging “Trump Doctrine” in which, *inter alia*, principles and values may be set aside if they appear to conflict with narrow conceptions of US national interests.¹² The approach is the very definition of the president’s vow to put “America first.”

The impact has been felt globally. As Thomas Carothers of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace writes, the president “has moved with unprecedented alacrity, even enthusiasm, to embrace autocrats, many of whom were previously given at least a partial cold shoulder by the United States. Through such actions, Trump has reassured and emboldened autocrats across the former Soviet Union, Central and Eastern Europe, the Middle East, sub-Saharan Africa, and Asia.”¹³

The president worked hard from the beginning to make sure there is no confusion about the new policy direction. During the campaign, Trump disparaged the idea of promoting democracy among authoritarian allies, announcing that the United States would, in the case of the Middle East, “promote regional stability, not radical change.”¹⁴ In his inaugural address he proclaimed that the United States would not seek “to impose our way of life on anyone,” an assurance he repeated to Muslim leaders in his speech to the American-Arab-Islamic Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May.¹⁵ Instead, the United States would pursue a “principled realism” based not on advocating human rights or democratization, but “security through stability” and, at best, “gradual reforms.”

TILLERSON DOWNGRADES DEMOCRACY AND HUMAN RIGHTS AT STATE

Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is proving instrumental in advancing the president's policy, and has taken a systematic approach to dismantling the human rights agenda of his own agency.

Symbolically, Tillerson skipped the rollout of the State Department's annual global human rights report in March, which secretaries of state traditionally attend unless they are traveling.¹⁶ Less symbolically, the most senior human rights position in the department, that of Assistant Secretary of State for Democracy, Human Rights, and Labor, remains unfilled (as do most of the Assistant Secretary slots). Proposed funding for the foreign affairs budgetary line item in support of "governing justly and democratically" was cut from \$2.27 billion in FY 2016 to \$1.59 billion in FY 2018, a cut proposed by the White House without apparent objection from the secretary.¹⁷ (Congress has since moved to restore much of this funding.)

Tillerson has taken other steps toward downgrading State's role in the promotion of human rights and democratization. Like the president, he has drawn a distinction between advancing human rights and protecting the United States' core security interests. In remarks to State Department employees on May 3 he stated this plainly, drawing a distinction between American "policy and values."¹⁸ He asserted that if policy is routinely conditioned on values, it "creates obstacles to our ability to advance our national security interests, our economic interests," thereby boiling down US policy in the Middle East to a "counterterrorism effort."

In addition, Tillerson reportedly ordered a fundamental change to the department's mission statement, which currently notes that the department will "shape and sustain a peaceful, prosperous, just, and democratic world."¹⁹ The replacement draft would eliminate the words "just and democratic," an omission that appears entirely deliberate—and ready to be put into practice. According to a well-placed State Department source, Tillerson's office has instructed State and the US Mission to the United Nations that human rights will not be a priority issue for the United States at this year's UN General Assembly, even though resolutions critical of human rights abuses in North Korea, Syria, Iran, and Crimea—where the regimes in power are hostile to the United States—will be supported vigorously. Needless to say, broadly ignoring the human rights agenda, except when using it as a weapon against regimes that Washington does not like, does a serious disservice to those fighting for freedom globally. It also debases US moral authority on the issue more generally.

FREE PASSES FOR RIGHTS ABUSERS

To date, the administration's approach has typically afforded free passes to human rights abusers in the region, who understand the very clear message from Washington that human rights are a secondary concern, if they are a concern at all.²⁰ The president has underscored the message not only through his general policy statements but also through his pronouncements on individual countries and leaders. For example, Trump has praised Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, despite his severely authoritarian rule and the mounting human rights abuses on his watch. President Trump has evidently given up on helping to bring political stability and representative government to Libya, in which, he said, the United States has "no role."²¹ During the visit to Riyadh in May, Trump told the king of Bahrain, Sheikh Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa, that "there has been a little strain, but there won't be strain with this administration,"²² thus emphatically abandoning concerns about human rights stemming from the repression of

Bahraini Shia and domestic political opposition.²³ (In March, the State Department dropped all human rights conditions on the sale of F-16s and other arms to Bahrain.)²⁴

While assuring Arab leaders that his broader intentions do not include an assertive human rights component, Trump and Tillerson have made clear that US policy in the region is, first and foremost, focused on counterterrorism and the fight against a loosely defined “Radical Ideology.”²⁵ The president reinforced this approach in his address on Afghanistan at Fort Myer, Virginia, on August 21.²⁶ There, he emphasized that “we will no longer use American military might to construct democracies in faraway lands or try to rebuild other countries in our own image. Those days are now over.” By omitting any mention of nonmilitary means to promote democratic governance, the president implicitly rejected those, too.

THE FALSE STABILITY OF REPRESSION

The administration makes a mistake in assuming that repression is the price of success in the war on terror and that it is necessary to maintain political stability. The reality is quite the opposite. As many analysts have cautioned, maintenance of stability in the region will fail if it is based largely on the persistence of authoritarianism.²⁷ Pent-up demand for economic and political change and a widely shared conviction that government is rigged for the benefit of ruling elites are the factors that brought about the Arab Spring. The demands that fueled the uprisings,²⁸ by and large, have not been met, and “the social, political, and economic grievances—above all, the demand for human dignity and justice—that gave rise to the Arab uprisings six years ago are not going away,” as one report notes.²⁹ Even more important, the main failures in the Arab region of “political stagnation, authoritarianism, and corruption are integrally tied to conflict and terrorism in the Arab region.” As such, these basic grievances must be corrected in order to address extremist violence and instability, which are symptoms rather than causes of the region’s problems.

Of course, this has not prevented regional authoritarians from largely ignoring such grievances and focusing instead on thwarting perceived challenges to their rule. Clever regimes have long managed to game the system, relying on the tried and true techniques of election rigging and imprisoning political opposition. Since the Arab uprisings began in 2011, these regimes have emphasized modern twists such as criminalizing online speech and broadening the definition of “terrorism” to encompass almost any words or actions that run afoul of the authorities or compromise “national unity, national security, public order or public morals,” as Egypt’s harsh new NGO law states.³⁰ In several countries, whether monarchies or republics, this includes laws against *lèse-majesté*, reinforced by vigorous self-censorship on well-understood topics considered off limits, such as discussion of official corruption.³¹

These tactics, by and large, have succeeded in the short run but are more than likely destined for failure in the longer term. To the extent that the United States chooses to ignore ongoing repression rather than acting to shape a more favorable regional environment for basic liberties, it risks bungling its response to the next wave of political unrest, unwittingly increasing risks to vital US interests. This would also deepen already substantial levels of international disapproval toward the United States, especially among critical constituencies such as Arab youth, opposition politicians, and civil society, which are crucial to the region’s political future.³²

AN EGYPTIAN EXCEPTION?

Interestingly, Trump may be starting to change course somewhat with regard to Egypt. The president intervened personally on behalf of Aya Hijazi, the American NGO worker jailed in Egypt, whose release he successfully demanded in his bilateral meeting with Sisi in April.³³ In August, the State Department notified the Egyptian government that it was cancelling \$95.7 million in economic and military assistance and placing an additional \$195 million of military aid on hold pending improvements in Egypt's human rights situation.³⁴ Possible reasons for the apparent reversal include Trump's anger with Sisi,³⁵ who, after providing assurances during his visit to Washington in April that the tough new law restricting the operations of foreign and domestic civil society organizations would not be signed, did just that in May.³⁶ US displeasure at Egypt's harassment of American groups and aid workers such as Hijazi and Human Rights Watch, which had to close its office in 2014 and whose website was blocked in September by Egyptian authorities, probably also played a role. Not least, Egypt's military ties to North Korea are a concern as well and might have helped prompt the aid cutback.³⁷

It remains to be seen whether these moves mark a new activism on behalf of human rights in Egypt, and perhaps elsewhere in the region, or are merely an aberration from a more systematic downgrading of human rights in the Trump Administration's Middle East policy. Whatever the reality, the Egypt case bears watching as the administration's attitudes evolve.

RECOMMENDATIONS

If the administration were persuaded to consider course corrections intended to bring policy more into line with traditional American support for human rights and democracy overseas, a range of options is available. The following possibilities just might appeal to a president who values unpredictability, scorns business as usual, seeks leverage against US opponents, and wants to advance international opportunities for US corporations, all in the service of placing America first.

- *The administration should stand up more vocally to the world's violators of human rights.* This includes North Korea, China, Russia, and numerous countries in the Middle East, including Egypt—in fact, quite a few of the violators are allies. It is true that the United States has important interests to protect that occasionally require tradeoffs, but these interests should not come at the expense of America's reputation for basic fair-mindedness and commitment to freedom, which has enhanced US leadership and influence. Despite its flaws, the US has an effective global voice that should be used. Washington should also pressure key regional allies on high-profile human rights cases more often, as Trump evidently did in the case of Aya Hijazi. Some of these involve Americans, such as the 17 US citizens convicted *in absentia* of felonies in Egypt for pro-democracy work, largely funded by the US government, in 2013.[†] Many other specific cases merit attention as well, including the hundreds of political dissidents imprisoned throughout the Arab Gulf region.
- *Pressure – and make use of – the United Nations.* The United States should make reform and empowerment of the UN's human rights instruments a centerpiece of its plans to change the US relationship with the organization, which would

demonstrate the administration's commitment to reordering the way it does business internationally and afford Washington new opportunities to push back against serial human rights abusers. In addition, the United States should resist the temptation to pull out of the Human Rights Council and instead work to make it more representative of the world's democracies and less reflexively anti-Israel, one of Washington's key concerns.³⁸ Washington should also make greater use of the UN's Universal Periodic Review process, which provides member states the ability to review and express opinions on human rights conditions among world countries, and for the states under scrutiny to declare what they have done to fulfill their international legal obligations. All countries are evaluated every several years, so no one is left unexamined. The United States has typically been quiet in these proceedings, but it can and should speak up, not only to pressure foes but to put ostensible allies on notice that the United States is not indifferent to the suffering of their citizens – not to mention their future political stability.

- *International civil society organizations, which include many prominent groups based in the United States, must be supported politically, rhetorically, and financially.* These groups and their local partners have been victimized in recent years as part of the effort by authoritarian regimes to shut down any form of political opposition, including nonviolent criticism of objectionable policies. Many local NGOs are essentially friendly toward the United States and its support for human rights, and many have received funding from the US government for a broad range of projects focused on expanding civil liberties, political participation, and economic development.
- *Enlist business in the struggle for human rights.* International corporations have a mixed record in many of the countries where they operate and, in quite a few cases, are complicit in serious human rights violations.³⁹ Legal interpretations of the UN Universal Declaration have held that its provisions apply to corporations as well as governments, and many international covenants and initiatives, such as the UN Global Compact, have sought to bring corporate policies into alignment with universal principles of human rights.⁴⁰ Active cooperation between the Trump Administration and the corporate community to advance liberty – both in the Middle East and globally – can help support a credible US human rights agenda and burnish the international reputations⁴¹ (and even improve the bottom line⁴²) of US firms.
- *Enhance bilateral cooperation with like-minded countries to press regionally and in international fora for greater accountability on human rights issues.* Many potential partners are in Europe, and they may welcome a change in US direction at a particularly difficult time in trans-Atlantic relations. But there may be some surprising allies in places such as sub-Saharan Africa and Tunisia, which, according to Freedom House, is the sole Arab Spring country to transition from an autocracy to an electoral democracy.⁴³
- *Define a proactive agenda in the Middle East that appeals to a broad range of stakeholders as well as Arab publics in general.* Entrenched Arab governments,

of course, do not want US advice on how to order their affairs, but there is a surprising market for US assistance outside the halls of power. According to a survey of a broad spectrum of Arab political experts in 2016, US assistance would be most welcome “in the realm of supporting institutional reform, technical assistance, and education,” endeavors that would help address deficits identified by the Arab Human Development Reports as contributing to authoritarian dysfunction.⁴⁴ And, given the fact that 72 percent of Arabs express favorable opinions toward democracy, a clear and principled stance on this issue by the United States would bolster its credibility – its “brand” – in the long run.⁴⁵

HUMAN RIGHTS: A WAY FORWARD

Despite occasional failings and neglect, the United States has been an advocate for broader freedom, even if at times it was alone in doing so. Such advocacy, while it does involve tough choices, has helped defend US security in the long term, stabilize its allies and the international system, and build the moral capital the United States needs to advance its broader goals. The president would do well to keep this in mind as he pursues his policies in the Middle East – especially the fight against terrorism – and take the opportunity to work with many potential allies in Congress, the NGO sector, and the international community to forge a smart strategic approach to human rights and democracy in line with America’s values and supportive of its interests.

* This is an expanded and updated version of an essay that appeared originally on the Arab Center Washington DC website on July 5, 2017, under the title, “A Case for Human Rights and Democracy in US Middle East Policy.”

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US MILITARY INTERESTS IN THE ARAB REGION: SALES, STABILITY, AND SECURITY

David B. Des Roches

How does the Trump Administration view military cooperation with the Arab states of the Middle East? The answer to this question is complicated by the president's seeming disregard for process, convention, and normal bureaucratic procedures — all traditionally part of the official business that the president vowed to dismantle when he called for “draining the swamp.” The slow-to-form Trump Administration and its seemingly unpredictable leader provide an easy excuse to substitute political opinion for analysis, punch lines for policy statements.¹

However, when looking beyond the tweets and on-the-fly press statements, one finds structure, logic, goals, and programs.² In some instances, continuity of US government actions reflects the persistent bureaucratic imperative of the various agencies, which are seldom affected by such transient phenomena as changes of administration. In other instances, continuity of action reflects the permanence of US government interests, which have remained relatively constant since the demise of the Soviet Union; indeed, the United States' “enemies” have been fairly constant since 1947. For example, all US governments are committed to preserving Israel's qualitative military edge and have generally looked positively on relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).³

No US government bureaucracy is more immune to changes in political leadership than the military. The interests of the armed services seldom vary as presidents and parties shift power; what is portrayed as a significant shift in strategy or mission is generally just a marginal change in emphasis among competing policy goals, or a fiscal decision made to acquire or not acquire various weapons systems.

For this reason, US military interests in the Arab Middle East seldom shift, regardless of whether the National Security Council Middle East director is Robert Malley,⁴ Derek Harvey,⁵ or Mike Bell.⁶ The Trump Administration's military policies (as distinct from the tweets and utterances of the president) have not varied much from three general themes that have been pursued for decades: sales, stability, and security.

It is important to note that the following discussion will deal only with deliberative policy making — that is, peacetime policy making. For countries in a state of war (such as Iraq, Yemen, and Syria), policy tends to be made at a higher level and with less input from professional staff; often, its motives are outside traditional security concerns since military decisions hold special political ramifications for administrations.

SALES

It is easy for an outside observer to conclude that sales dominate American military policy in the age of Trump. However, the canard that arms sales are a deterministic factor in American military policy is as superficial and incorrect as it is widespread.⁷ In contrast with other countries such as France and the United Kingdom, the United States has a big enough domestic market that it does not need to export weapons to justify domestic production. The diffusion of power

between the legislative and executive branches in American government ensures that arms sales are generally dealt with in isolation from other issues. An American action equivalent to the British quashing of the corruption investigation into the al-Yamamah deal,⁸ for example, may not be possible considering that many institutions would be involved in the process.

Arms sales do, however, form a major theme in the Trump approach to Arab militaries. Three countries are worthy of special examination: Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Bahrain.

*Saudi Arabia.*⁹ The mammoth arms sale package announced by King Salman and President Trump in Riyadh in May 2017 has quite rightly been the most covered event in the Trump Administration's military engagement in the region.¹⁰ While the total amount of the offer is much less than some press accounts reported and some elements of the package may not be purchased, the offer is still huge – about \$110 billion.¹¹

Not as well noticed, but perhaps more significant, is the formal US military mission to train the forces of Saudi Arabia's Ministry of the Interior.¹² This capability is the only such peacetime mission in the world at present and has US Army and Coast Guard members working on a daily basis with the largest and least understood security organization on the Arabian Peninsula.

These measures are significant but are not deterministic. Saudi Arabia continues to be criticized in official US government reports for a lack of human rights and political participation, trafficking in persons, and other malfeasance.¹³ Saudi Arabia hosts large numbers of American military personnel working as military trainers, but it does not host a deployable American military force or a pre-positioned storage facility for American equipment to be used (such as those in place in Kuwait and Qatar).¹⁴ Indeed, if the aim of American weapons sales is to advance other security interests besides building Saudi partner capacity, it has failed.

However, building Saudi capacity is a useful and helpful measure in itself. The war in Yemen is instructive: Saudi military forces have deployed and are achieving relative operational military successes – though not outright military victories – in Yemen primarily using American military equipment. They have maintained an air campaign since March 2015, managing to keep equipment flying within a coalition command structure and conducting a rather effective missile defense campaign. The lack of Saudi strategic success in Yemen should not detract from the significant increase in Saudi operational capacity.

With one exception, it is difficult to determine a policy difference between the Trump and Obama Administrations' approach to Saudi Arabia. That one difference is the precision-guided munitions (PGM) freeze Obama placed after Trump's election but before Trump assumed office.¹⁵ This aberration should be viewed in the context of American politics, not Middle East security: it represents the political equivalent of a referee's "make up call" in football – that is, an effort to make a point for the historical record once the environment has become consequence-free. While unprovable, it is plausible that Obama would not have taken such an action were Hillary Clinton about to take office; the hold allowed the president to make a point about his commitment to ending the war in Yemen and enhancing human rights without having to manage the complex relationship with Saudi Arabia. It is a policy action made only to be raised in memoirs and future debates.

Under Trump, the relationship will remain constant unless Congress revolts over Yemen.¹⁶ The Saudi crown prince is reported to have excellent relations with the Trump family, and the next American ambassador to the kingdom is both competent and a Trump confidant.¹⁷ On the other

hand, the chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, Bob Corker (R-Tennessee), has put all new orders for weapons from the GCC on hold until the current GCC crisis is resolved.

Bahrain.¹⁸ The Trump approach to weapons sales in Bahrain differs profoundly from that of the Obama Administration. In large part, this reflects the depth of Bahrain's and the Trump Administration's commitment to realpolitik. It also illustrates a reversal from a human rights-driven policy under Obama.

Bahrain is among the smallest countries—by both population and GDP—to fly the F-16 fighter jet.¹⁹ Its territorial integrity is ensured by the two strongest powers in the region, the United States and Saudi Arabia, and its most profound security concerns stem from the political and economic marginalization of its Shia population,²⁰ egged on and encouraged by Iran.²¹

The amount of military equipment sold to Bahrain is small by American standards, but it is crucial to Bahrain. In 2011, the Obama Administration—concerned about the violent suppression of Arab Spring protests in Manama and the intervention of mostly Saudi GCC military forces—placed a hold on transfers of some US weapons to Bahrain.²² At the time, some within the government felt that this reflected a desire to grant a “win” to those in the administration who felt human rights should be given a more prominent role in US policy. Bahrain, the thinking goes, was small enough that a stance on principle could be made without damaging American security interests.

The announcement by the Trump Administration of new F-16,²³ TOW missile,²⁴ and patrol boat²⁵ sales is thus a major departure from the human rights-driven policy of the last Obama term. The pragmatic underpinning of these policies should, however, be noted. Bahrain has defied the State Department for five years; some noted that the focus of Bahraini engagement just shifted from the scolding of the US Embassy in Manama toward the Fifth Fleet headquarters. If this is in fact the case, the Trump Administration will actually reinforce the normal, embassy-driven model of engagement by recognizing reality and restoring the security relationship to the embassy in Manama.

Qatar.²⁶ Qatar is perhaps the strongest example of the relative impotence of arms sales to shape American security or political policy in the region. Qatar's military is relatively small and fields a variety of weapons.²⁷ Most of its current aircraft are French.

Of course, Qatar is currently embroiled in a kerfuffle with Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the United Arab Emirates, which have severed diplomatic relations with Doha and put Qatar under siege. At the outset, President Trump issued a series of tweets²⁸ agreeing with the blockading powers; however, one week after the announcement of the blockade, the Qataris came to Washington to sign a contract for F-15 fighters.²⁹ The American offer to sell these fighters had been made before the crisis began and it could have been rescinded in a matter of minutes.³⁰ That the sale was allowed to go through speaks volumes about the continuity of military interests in the region from the Obama (indeed, from the Bill Clinton) Administration and to the Trump Administration. From the Pentagon's perspective, the big prize here is not the money spent on Boeing aircraft; it is the fact that the next generation of the best and brightest Qatari pilots will have to learn American English rather than French.

STABILITY

Bureaucracies value stability above all else. Even a bad but stable position is a preferable bureaucratic outcome to taking a risk that may lead to a better but unstable outcome. Bureaucracies — even security bureaucracies — are alike in that they generally prefer to continue doing what they have always done. Change has to be imposed from above and is often resisted.

States that Americans view as having stability concerns are those in danger of collapsing or becoming compromised in a manner that could harm American security interests. In this analysis, stability refers to the maintenance of order in states that could become unstable, and not to the use of these states to stabilize others.

This is especially true for some Arab countries in the Middle East. Stability, or at least the promise of stability, has been the driving force behind American security policy toward Jordan, Egypt, and Lebanon. There is no reason to believe this will not continue. For these three countries, under Trump as under Obama, the argument for US military support will be conducted in the language of stability.

*Jordan.*³¹ Jordan's stability has always been a western concern.³² From its establishment as a compromise home for the Hashemites, through the upheavals of the Arab Cold War, past the disagreements about Amman's position during Operation Desert Storm, and up to the present day, Jordan has prospered and built a world-class military establishment by continually playing up the threat of instability should the Hashemite regime collapse.³³ It is safe to say that if Jordan were to somehow become immune from state collapse, it would play a much-diminished role in American security plans. For decades, Jordan has been among the top three recipients of American security assistance regardless of changing threats or any action Jordan takes or fails to take.

A family monarchy with a tribally oriented security structure, Jordan has been notably missing from American calls for reform. Indeed, Jordan's status as a frontline state with Syria, its hosting of hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees, and its military collaboration with the United States on Syria have enhanced its position with Washington, where Amman has portrayed itself as the key player for advancing any American policy in Syria. Jordan's place in Trump's military plans will be determined by its geographic location in relations to Syria, Iraq, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, all important considerations for the United States. Absent any major deterioration in Syria, Trump's policy toward Jordan will be virtually indistinguishable from Obama's.

*Egypt.*³⁴ There is a fundamental misunderstanding at the heart of the American-Egyptian security relationship. The United States regards its assistance to Egypt as a gift that could be revoked, whereas Egypt seems to regard it as a rent payment for compliance with the Camp David peace agreement with Israel.³⁵ Egypt feels it has earned American security assistance, while the United States views it as political leverage.

This is frustrating for successive American administrations for a couple of reasons. First, there seems to be no plan to convert American security assistance into any real capacity that addresses Egypt's national security challenges. Egypt has chosen to focus on procuring tanks and fighter jets at a time when its primary security concerns are insurgents and domestic terrorists.³⁶ Aside from another essentially far-fetched attack against Israel, and maybe defending against the unlikely chance of an incursion from Libya, there is little practical use for this arsenal.

Second, Egypt's human rights record is abysmal and seems to be worsening rather than improving.³⁷ However, it appears that successive American policymakers have concluded that—for all its flaws—Egypt is simply too big to fail. While the administration is currently reprogramming \$300 million that had been earmarked for Egypt and withheld by Obama, this is probably a one-off message.³⁸ The Obama Administration tied itself into logical knots to avoid calling Egypt's post-Arab Spring military takeover a “coup” in order to keep the military hardware flowing.³⁹ It is more probable that Trump and his administration will examine the situation in Egypt, consider Cairo's role in any Arab rapprochement, and resume the flow of money and hardware.

*Lebanon.*⁴⁰ Lebanon is an interesting case study in American engagement over the past few decades. It is host to one of the most effective Arab armies.⁴¹ Unfortunately, that army—Hezbollah's—is outside the realm of the Lebanese state and has aims that counter western security concerns. American military engagement with Lebanon has been cyclical. At times, when it appears that the Lebanese Armed Forces are on the verge of supplanting or confronting Hezbollah, American support increases. At other times, usually after some political compromise that emboldens Hezbollah, American support declines.

American military aid to Lebanon has almost universally been couched in terms of building the state's capacity to supplant Hezbollah and its Iranian supporters, the Syrians, the PLO, and other outside forces.⁴² As successive Lebanese administrations fail to achieve these aims, and successive American administrations either lose interest or seek collaboration with Hezbollah, the Lebanese aid program rises and falls.⁴³

At the heart of this policy vacillation is an American intellectual inconsistency: America wants the armed forces of the Lebanese state to be effective and capable of defeating any armed force in Lebanon—except for Israel. The idea that a Lebanese army would use American equipment to, say, shoot down an Israeli helicopter in Lebanon is not one that Americans have honestly confronted.

SECURITY

Arab states that provide security—that is, security beyond their own borders—are rare indeed. It can be argued that this is an issue of perception; indeed, many states claim to provide security to the broader area or have participated in coalition military action (such as the involvement of Qatar in Libya operations in 2011, or the Egyptian deployment of a field hospital to Afghanistan). Being a security provider appears to be an aspiration of at least some countries, and nations such as Kuwait⁴⁴ and Oman⁴⁵ (which both host sizeable US military capabilities) can claim to contribute in this way.

However, to date, the only country that can claim to provide security in a consistent and militarily significant way is the United Arab Emirates,⁴⁶ although mostly for simultaneously serving its own interests. This small country has put in patient years of spadework, deploying for over a decade to Afghanistan with the United States, investing in an education and training infrastructure, building the equipment base for a deployable force, and then deploying overseas. The driver of the national government, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed, is reported to be close to the Trump Administration in general, and to Jared Kushner in particular, and there is no reason to suppose that the UAE's status as a favored Arab state will decline—if anything,

it probably will rise. It is important to note that this scenario is not likely to be different for other members of the GCC, who provide similar types and levels of assistance for America's leadership role in the Gulf.

The UAE is a dynamic member of the coalition fighting in Yemen.⁴⁷ It has not only conducted amphibious landings in Yemen but also established overseas bases in Somalia,⁴⁸ Eritrea,⁴⁹ and Libya.⁵⁰ In addition, it is deeply involved in fighting extremists in Yemen. The UAE has invested in strategic lift, missile defense, and a world-class national defense university—all programs missing in most of the Arab world. It has hired military specialists for key jobs while seeking to improve its own national base.⁵¹

With such a record, however, come equally important problems that will negatively impact the UAE's role in the region as a strategic partner for the United States. It faces severe criticism in American official political circles and learned public opinion for its poor record in human rights and human trafficking. UAE authorities have arrested liberal and Islamist activists and accused them of sedition. It has reportedly used mercenaries to conduct operations in Yemen⁵² and was blamed for the existence of some 18 prisons in the country where hundreds of Yemenis were tortured by UAE and allied forces and disappeared.⁵³ Importantly for Saudi Arabia, the acknowledged pillar of the American strategic posture in the Gulf, the UAE's ambitions and activities in Yemen, such as supporting the southern secessionists, have potential to seriously damage Saudi interests in the country and along the Red Sea coast.

US STRATEGY IN THE AGE OF TRUMP

Foreign policy has not been the animating principle of the Trump Administration, and Trump's views toward the Middle East—most notably his animus toward the Iran deal—are greeted with relief by most Arab partner states.⁵⁴ Trump's employment of family members, viewed as nepotism in America,⁵⁵ is welcomed by the monarchies of the region, who often involve family in conducting business and politics. Clearly, American policy in difficult or marginal areas is determined by American interests, and the Arab Middle East swings between each of these poles. Thus, despite the bluster and rhetoric, the Trump Administration's military policies toward the Arab world will be more notable for continuity than for change.

Views in this article do not reflect those of any US Government agency.

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COUNTERING VIOLENT EXTREMISM PROGRAMS UNDER THE CURRENT ADMINISTRATION

Tamara Kharroub

Countering Violent Extremism (CVE) encompasses a set of measures designed to identify and counter threats of violent extremism. Some form of it has been a central component of US policy since the monumental attacks of September 11, 2001, which have largely shaped America's CVE strategy. The threat has since evolved, the research evidence expanded, and the risks for the United States have become better understood. However, these developments have not been reflected in CVE strategies. Especially under the Trump Administration, the efforts to counter the threat of violent extremism have taken a dangerous turn, wrapped in Islamophobic rhetoric, unconstitutional and discriminatory policies, ignoring and yet embracing right-wing extremism, and aggressive military operations at the expense of long-term reform.

THE EVOLUTION OF CVE

CVE refers to a broad framework or set of programs and initiatives aimed at complementing "counterterrorism" operations both domestically and internationally. While hard power means the employment of military campaigns, policing, and surveillance to disrupt an imminent violent act, CVE efforts are intended to prevent violent extremism by identifying and deterring threats throughout the so-called "radicalization process."

The "soft power" CVE program in the United States was a trademark of the Obama Administration, signaling a shift in US policy from that of the former Bush Administration. After the September 11 attacks, President George W. Bush set up an initiative to counter threats to US security that largely involved military and hard power measures. From secret prisons ("black sites"), to the USA PATRIOT Act, interrogation techniques, and the wars on Iraq and Afghanistan, the policies of the Bush Administration were heavily criticized for violating human rights and producing the counter-effect of violent extremism. With gross violations of rights and privacies and the proliferation of even more extremist groups such as the Islamic State (IS), this reliance on hard power techniques was deemed unsuccessful.

Following the Bush Administration's largely unpopular, costly, and ineffective "War on Terror," President Barak Obama sought to design a more comprehensive approach that incorporates soft power preventive measures.¹ Most prominently, then-President Obama refused to use the term "radical Islamic terrorism" and adopted the more neutral "violent extremism," thus stressing the notion that violent extremists come in all forms while purposefully avoiding alienating Muslims—a step that was welcomed worldwide, especially in the Muslim world. In fact, empirical evidence shows that the majority of attacks in the United States and Europe are committed by non-Muslims, such as attacks motivated by anti-abortion or separatist and nationalist ideologies, or committed by environmental groups and right-wing neo-Nazi extremists.²

The domestic CVE program started in 2011 with the White House Strategy Document and the ensuing pilot program in different US cities. The international component of President Obama's CVE initiative was launched in 2015 with the White House CVE Summit, in which

over 70 nations participated.³ The US counterterrorism policy under Obama echoed that of the United Nations, which took a new approach that focused on preventive measures rather than repressive counterterrorism means, which the UN calls Preventing Violent Extremism or PVE.⁴ The formal adoption of CVE by the United States helped launch this approach internationally, which has now evolved into a rapidly developing and growing field of research and practice around the world.

Although it was a step forward from Bush-era policies, Obama's CVE program had many shortcomings and critics. The Trump Administration, nonetheless, chose to keep and reinforce the problematic components of CVE while ignoring the research and pulling funding from those components that have positive potential. The current administration has made proposals and statements that risk focusing the CVE program on Islam, cancelled soft power programs, and eliminated some funding altogether. Overall, CVE or PVE approaches continue to suffer from a variety of issues that have not been addressed by policymakers in the United States.

DOMESTIC CVE PROGRAMS: FROM BAD TO WORSE

The domestic CVE program initiated by the Obama Administration was designed to build relations and trust with at-risk communities, and primarily run through the Department of Homeland Security (DHS).⁵ The program includes the Office of Community Partnerships, the CVE Grants Program, and the CVE Joint Task Force, which is run in partnership with the Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI), Department of Justice, and National Counterterrorism Center.

While these initiatives had good intentions and were paraded as efforts to engage with the community and prevent violent extremism, one can easily see the implications of such an excessive law enforcement agenda that focuses disproportionately on Muslims. Numerous analysts have since shown that these programs are misguided, ineffective (even counter-effective), and prejudiced in nature.⁶ These policies have been heavily criticized by civil rights and civil liberties groups⁷ and by Arab and Muslim American organizations.⁸

First, the program overall represents a discriminatory policy that disproportionately targets Muslim communities in the United States. It was not surprising that targeting innocent Muslims as potential criminals based solely on their religious affiliation did not lead to desirable outcomes. While research has shown that marginalization and perceived discrimination are major factors contributing to violent extremism, the US government continues to pursue such policies.⁹ Moreover, community outreach programs, which were piloted in Boston, Los Angeles, and Minneapolis in 2014 and then spread throughout the country, were established in Muslim areas and have been used primarily as a front for intelligence gathering and surveillance.¹⁰ This led not only to diminished trust between the community and law enforcement, but it also generated greater isolation and division among community members.

The repercussions of this are profound. At a time when integration and belonging are vital for immigrant communities, an environment of mistrust and fear will surely hinder the process of assimilation. In addition, while recent research points to issues of individual-level alienation and lack of belonging as motivators for extremism, the CVE approach deepens rather than solves the feelings of isolation and alienation.¹¹ In creating such a culture of fear and paranoia, the CVE program might even push vulnerable youth to online spaces in search of belonging,

acceptance, and identity, where they might come across messages by the so-called Islamic State (IS). While marginalization is found to be one of primary drivers of violent extremism, stigmatizing Muslim communities undermines the very purpose and efforts of CVE.

Second, the CVE program relies on misguided implicit assumptions about the process of radicalization.¹² The commonly discussed “conveyor belt” approach to radicalization has been proven as flawed: there is no one pathway, profile, or pattern that leads to violent extremism nor are there clear signs or observable behavioral markers.¹³ While several studies have disproven the radicalization theory, this flawed approach is still used as the foundation of the CVE program, where friends and family members are asked to report on a set of assumed observable signs of radicalization – although they are often as shocked to hear the news of an attack as everyone else.¹⁴

Additionally, this theory assumes that there is a direct link between holding extremist views and committing violent acts. Treating extremist opinions as a crime is a violation of constitutionally protected rights and freedoms and risks stigmatizing innocent individuals and groups of people. A prominent example of this is the FBI’s “Don’t Be a Puppet” website and game aimed at middle and high school students.¹⁵ The game is designed to help teenagers assess if their fellow students are “puppets” (i.e. violent extremists) based on their beliefs, thus encouraging bullying and profiling. Moreover, according to the American Federation of Teachers, the game creates “suspicion of people based on their heritage or ethnicity.”¹⁶ After almost two decades of CVE policies in the United States and around the world, what the analysts agree on is that there is no one singular observable path to violent extremism.

Third, the focus of CVE on economic support is ill-advised. While some of the economic and social services implemented by CVE are positive and can help youth obtain skills and employment opportunities, there is no evidence that increasing economic opportunities is linked to preventing violent attacks. In order to better understand the correlation between socioeconomic conditions and acts of violence, one can only look at anecdotal evidence. If poverty and disenfranchisement were correlated with the tendency for violent extremism, then we would see far more violent attacks committed by people from disadvantaged economic backgrounds.

Overall, this policing strategy against Muslim communities would reinforce stereotypes and fear of Muslims, legitimize recruitment by extremist groups through alienating Muslim communities, and continue to disregard the research and Muslim voices. With such an overwhelming body of empirical evidence and no indication that the millions of dollars spent on domestic CVE efforts have had any impact in terms of countering violent extremism – in fact, they are more likely to create the opposite effect – the CVE program persisted under Obama and continues under Trump. Even worse, the changes proposed and implemented by the Trump Administration augmented those very flaws of the CVE program.

President Trump’s fixation on Islam and his proposals to change the CVE program from countering violent extremism to countering “radical Islamic extremism” provide a significant regression to an already problematic program.¹⁷ The Trump Administration’s proposal, coupled with the controversial Muslim ban, demonstrated Islamophobic footings to the point that several grant recipients (amounting to 20 percent of the \$10 million total) announced their rejection of the DHS grant under the Trump Administration.¹⁸ To be sure, singling out an entire religion as the focus of violent extremism further alienates American Muslims. It can

be unconstitutional and represents a violation of the First Amendment's establishment clause.

In addition to renaming the program, President Trump has proposed cutting funding to the CVE program, and this especially impacts grants to organizations that address neo-Nazi and right-wing violence. While CVE grants to 31 organizations were approved in January 2017 at the end of the Obama Administration,¹⁹ President Trump froze all CVE grants when he took office.²⁰ In July 2017, it was revealed that the Trump Administration excluded 11 organizations from the list of grant recipients.²¹ Among those excluded were Life After Hate, an organization focusing on right-wing and white supremacist extremism, and a project at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill to counter both militant Islamist and far right propaganda.²²

While several reports point to the prevalence of the threat of right-wing extremism, the Trump Administration continues to ignore these groups.²³ A recent report by the FBI and DHS emphasized that white supremacist organizations were responsible for more homicides between 2000 and 2016 than "any other domestic extremist group."²⁴ Nonetheless, President Trump disregards these threats, and even seems to embrace and nurture such groups. Reports of increased hate crimes since Trump became president represent a case in point.²⁵ More recently, President Trump's troubling reaction to the events in Charlottesville and his refusal to condemn right-wing hate groups and violence only added to the situation. Misrepresenting the threat of violent extremism in the United States constitutes a dangerous practice, where federal resources are not expended to address the real threats facing the country.

The Trump Administration was also reported to have proposed cutting the \$50 million allocated for the CVE program by fiscal year 2018.²⁶ Although this proposal did not materialize (yet), George Selim, the first director of the Office for Community Partnerships at DHS, resigned from his position in July 2017, citing disagreement with the current administration over CVE approaches.²⁷

Additionally, the scaling down on CVE by the Trump Administration is a response to criticism by Republican members of Congress that the program does not go far enough in terms of law enforcement. While the Obama CVE program provided 30 percent of funding to law enforcement and policing organizations, the grants under the Trump Administration awarded to police and law agencies have increased to 50 percent.²⁸ Notably, the Muslim Public Affairs Council was also denied the CVE grant by the Trump Administration because the organization would not agree to working "with law enforcement." Moreover, under the Trump Administration the disregard for civil liberties as a result of the heavy focus on "law and order" might exacerbate abuses against members of the Muslim faith.

This shift represents a further magnification of the shortcomings of Obama's CVE program, with a disproportionate focus on Muslim communities, exclusion of right-wing extremists, and heavy reliance on surveillance and policing. Overall, it is based on viewing CVE through a law enforcement paradigm. Although it was reported that only a few of the 31 CVE grants awarded in January 2017 under President Obama went to organizations fighting right-wing violence, such as Life After Hate,²⁹ DHS spokesperson Lucia Martinez insisted that among the 26 grants awarded under the Trump Administration, 16 address all forms of violent extremism.³⁰

While it is not yet clear whether the Trump Administration's Islamophobic rhetoric and policy proposals will actually be approved or implemented, two things are clear. First, the Trump Administration is amplifying the worst aspects of CVE, and second, the damage has already been done as a result of the administration's hostility toward Islam and vilification of Muslim

communities. These positions will create further fear of Muslims, stigmatize and alienate the American Muslims, and damage any real possibility of engaging with the Muslim community.

With most Muslim community organizations pulling out, even those who took CVE funds under the Obama Administration, it is difficult to see how this program could continue with its intended purpose of building bridges and engaging with Muslims and “at risk” communities.

In terms of policy recommendations for the Trump Administration, there is a solid body of literature and growing consensus showing what not to do, such as not targeting Muslim communities, not using a primarily law enforcement lens, and not employing the radicalization theory approach. However, there is little agreement regarding what should be done to address the threat of domestic violent extremism.

When considering the empirical information available, two main approaches emerge. The first is an individual-level response based on data that show some common characteristics in specific settings. In Europe, for example, lone attackers inspired by the Islamic State share a second-generation immigration status, a history of petty crimes, identification as born-again Muslims, and troubled social and family backgrounds.³¹ Collecting empirical evidence in specific contexts might be a useful starting point. Additionally, once such individuals have been identified, a social and psychological support paradigm should be used instead of the current law enforcement response, as new approaches to violent extremism consider it a mental health issue and not a religious one.³²

While it might be extremely difficult to identify individual-level risk factors, the second approach involves a structural, community-wide effort that aims to build resilient communities; these are based on strong social connections and identity, bridging the individual with the larger community, empowerment, and social and economic services. What is clear is that the research evidence points to ineffective existing CVE programs that should be discontinued and replaced with more empirically based strategies.

INTERNATIONAL CVE: SHORTSIGHTED AND COUNTERPRODUCTIVE

President Trump’s approach to the global fight against the Islamic State has mostly mirrored that of Obama, with some tactical changes such as delegating more authority to field commanders and a more aggressive military battle.³³ The principal substantial difference is that the Trump Administration has focused almost exclusively on military means to fight IS, while former President Obama complemented it with soft power CVE through building awareness, countering extremist narratives, and emphasizing community-led intervention.³⁴ Despite good intentions, the Obama Administration’s programs also missed the mark as it relied on flawed assumptions such as the existence of a path to radicalization and a relationship between extremist ideologies and violence.

President Trump’s military campaign with coalition forces against IS, on the other hand, has been celebrated as a success. Whereas the Islamic State’s territorial control over geographic areas in Iraq and Syria has been diminishing, the battle against violent extremism is far from over.

First, the Trump Administration’s loose guidelines for authorizing military strikes and its hawkish approach have led to civilian casualties and displacement, thus further exacerbating the humanitarian crisis. As Secretary of Defense James Mattis put it, US policy against the

Islamic State is “annihilation” and “civilian casualties are a fact of life.”³⁵ According to Amnesty International, coalition forces used unnecessary force in densely populated areas in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.³⁶ Accusations of US attacks against civilians would likely feed into the Islamic State’s narrative and contribute to recruitment by extremist groups.³⁷

Second, after the fall of the Islamic State, if segments of the Iraqi population continue to be marginalized without access to services and political participation, or when Bashar al-Assad continues his repressive dictatorship in Syria, such unaddressed underlying structural factors will likely lead to further violence and the rise of new extremist groups.

Third, military operations without subsequent programs for humanitarian services, reconstruction, transition, and nation building are futile. A vacuum in governance contributes profoundly to violent extremism. In fact, the Islamic State has conducted several significant attacks in liberated cities across Iraq and Syria.³⁸

However, the Trump Administration does not seem to be interested in learning from history. It does not have a plan in place to help stabilize and rebuild areas in Iraq and Syria and support reconciliation efforts. On the contrary, Trump stated in a speech that he is not interested in nation building but in “killing terrorists.”³⁹ Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is also considering a draft revision to the State Department’s statement of purpose by omitting the promotion of democracy and a just world from its mission. Secretary Tillerson also dropped the human rights agenda from the State Department’s priorities and stated that American values are “an obstacle to pursuing America’s national security.”⁴⁰

Additionally, budget cuts to UN agencies and State Department programs, including USAID, have been proposed. US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley boasted about cutting the budget to UN peacekeeping missions⁴¹ and described the UN Human Rights Council as “so corrupt.”⁴² In March, the White House announced the 2018 fiscal year budget, which increases defense and national security spending by \$54 billion and introduces vast cuts in foreign aid.

The Trump Administration’s heavy-handed military operation to counter violent extremism is detached from the very environments that contribute to CVE’s growth and expansion. Scrapping reconstruction and democracy promotion programs, while embracing dictators and abusers of human rights from Egypt to Syria to Saudi Arabia, undermines the very efforts of the anti-IS military campaign. Without resolutions and just transitions for the conflicts in Syria and Iraq, the narrative of extremist groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and others will continue to appeal to marginalized and oppressed populations. Military efforts will not solve the problems of sectarianism, power vacuums, dictatorships, and marginalization. On the contrary, military means lead to further conflict, grievances, and weak states, thus contributing to an increase in violent extremism. Even at home, an FBI study has shown that US military operations are the biggest motivations for domestic violent extremism.⁴³

The military campaign against IS has led to a humanitarian crisis that the international community and US leadership must address in order to establish viable governing structures and reconciliation efforts that prevent the further eruption of extremist and militant groups. The Trump Administration continues to ignore the research evidence when it comes to countering violent extremism globally, and it fails to understand that democratic governance and human rights directly impact US national security.

The Trump Administration would better serve US interests and security by focusing on

fostering democratic governance, investing in diplomatic solutions, and supporting nation building and the rule of law while addressing each context's local and unique group-based grievances and marginalization.⁴⁴

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THE WHITE HOUSE, CONGRESS, AND THE ARAB WORLD

Marcus Montgomery

Donald J. Trump is just three months away from completing his first year as president of the United States. While significant policy accomplishments have generally eluded him to this point, he has maneuvered to overhaul the functions and responsibilities of the federal government – for better or for worse. Nowhere is this more apparent than in the realm of foreign policy; he has drastically changed – or attempted to change – the institutions that have traditionally set the tone for engagement with those beyond US borders, such as the US Department of State.

What also has been apparent is that President Trump’s dealings with the Arab world have been congruent with traditional US policy efforts at times, but in most aspects, they have been contradictory. Similarly, the administration’s policies have not necessarily been opposed by Congress outright, but seldom have they garnered unconditional support. Instead, President Trump’s first term has been spent mostly reckoning with the fact that he does not have sole purview of US foreign policy. Congress retains immense power to dictate policy priorities and, as such, it has served as a major check on the administration’s policy initiatives in the Arab world in the early months of the Trump White House.

THE ADMINISTRATION’S BRIEF FORAY INTO THE ARAB WORLD

Over the first several months of this administration, Trump and his team have been involved, to varying degrees, in a few of the conflicts roiling the Arab region. In some cases, the United States has been very active, maintaining US troops in hostile areas like Syria and Iraq to advise and support proxy groups fighting radical extremists. Here, Trump is largely continuing a strategy initiated by his predecessor – although spikes in the numbers of civilian casualties suggest that the US military has loosened its rules of engagement in these countries.¹ However, in places like Yemen, President Trump has surpassed President Barack Obama in terms of increasing the US military involvement in conducting airstrikes and ground raids on extremist groups.

To say that Trump has actively engaged with the Arab world is not to say his efforts have been the most prudent. As a crisis broke out between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), President Trump initially waded into the rift by singling out Qatar and siding with Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt;² this was despite the fact that Qatar is home to the United States’ largest and most accessible military base in the Middle East.³ Four months into the Gulf conflict, Trump has signaled his willingness to mediate and seek a political settlement between the states, but thus far, he has lacked the personal commitment to do so and his diplomatic corps is too understaffed to effectively engage all sides of the crisis.

Mr. Trump and his administration have also declared their desire to engage Israelis and Palestinians in an effort to resolve their decades-long conflict and reach a peace agreement, one that has eluded his predecessors. While admirable, the administration’s early efforts have been ineffective, if not counterproductive; indeed, Trump has staffed arguably the most blatantly pro-Israel team ever to conduct negotiations with both parties – let alone secure a peace agreement – and has tapped his inexperienced son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to lead the

effort.⁴ The results have been predictable: Israel's right-wing government sees in Trump the best friend they have ever had,⁵ while the Palestinian Authority (PA) has been frustrated to the point of issuing declarations the United States does not consider helpful to the process.⁶

The Trump Administration's early record in the Arab world is indicative of the lack of experienced and knowledgeable personnel needed to maintain the positive aspects of US foreign policy in the region and to further US interests at this tumultuous time. Additionally, this White House's efforts in the Middle East so far demonstrate a single-track mind toward counterterrorism and national security with little interest in addressing issues that underlie many of the conflicts in the region.

BEHOLDEN TO THE MILITARY

When one looks at Donald Trump's early policy proclamations dealing with the Arab world, it is easy to see the influence of his predecessors' foreign policy blunders. With his administration's "principled realism"⁷ and "persistent presence"⁸ approaches, Donald Trump and his team have attempted to position this administration somewhere between Barack Obama's more distant engagement and George W. Bush's overextension in the region. While it is important to understand Donald Trump's foreign policy priorities in the Middle East, it can be a frustrating task because this unorthodox, disorganized presidency has left little in terms of consistent, discernible policy specifics for addressing many of the problems facing the Arab world.

Where there are some identifiable details, the administration favors "principled realism" — a position that officials describe as policy based solely on facts on the ground, not ideological considerations — and "persistent presence" — which outlines maintaining a visible US presence abroad. Both are very much a product of President Trump's affinity for the US military and its leaders. The upper echelons of Trump's leadership are staffed with former military officials like National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and Chief of Staff John Kelly, all of whom have decades of military experience on the ground. These men wield considerable strength in Trump's foreign policy circle and their perceptions of and postures toward US foreign policy are colored by the ethos of military service. In general, military policy is more pragmatic and less ideological, and Trump's early forays in the region demonstrate that to some extent. In contrast, Trump's top diplomat, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, is inexperienced and seemingly uninterested in crafting or maintaining a policy of broad engagement with the world.

With a number of military officials occupying key government policy positions and a hyper focus on building up the United States' military capacities, Trump's foreign policy strategy is geared almost solely toward military engagement and national security coordination in the Arab world. Trump and his allies view Arab countries through a national security lens; thus, the administration focuses on eradicating the so-called Islamic State (IS) and forming a pan-Sunni shield to protect against Iranian hegemony in the region. When it comes to "soft power," however, including diplomacy and aid for development, the Trump Administration has thus far neglected those efforts; or worse, it has actively contributed to handicapping the institutions responsible for fostering trust in the United States throughout the region. A White House-proposed budget, had it been implemented in full, would have significantly rolled back the capabilities of the State Department and the US Agency for International Development

(USAID).⁹ In addition, Secretary Tillerson, on Trump's command, has already decapitated the State Department, leaving a void of leadership by failing to staff key posts, including a number of ambassador positions to states in the Middle East.

Donald Trump's "principled realism" strategy prioritizes pragmatism over the ideological considerations that served as the basis for Bush 43's Freedom Agenda¹⁰ and Obama's Wilsonian embrace of the uprisings that took place throughout the Arab world in the early part of this decade. Trump's realism also incorporates taking honest assessments of facts on the ground and allows for policies to be tailored for specific situations. But, as it stands, the pragmatist and realist aspects of the Trump strategy are divorced from any non-security-related policies, which risks leaving the United States singularly engaged with Arab states in a military context.

President Trump has empowered his military brass to execute multiple US wars with more discretion. While allowing military officers to have more operational command seems like a pragmatic approach, it will likely prove to be problematic because military leaders are indoctrinated in such a way that they are more disposed to seeing problems as having military solutions—when, in reality, that is not the case. Though Obama may have micromanaged the military to some extent,¹¹ Trump's deference to the Department of Defense on tactical decision-making has led to the loosening of the rules of engagement and broadening a bombing campaign that was already robust under the previous administration. It is apparent that Trump is obsessed with a complete and total defeat of IS and other terrorist groups, but he has demonstrated little appetite for taking steps to ensure that these groups do not return once the battles end and the smoke clears.

AN ASSERTIVE CONGRESS

Congress is arguably more involved now in foreign policy decision-making than has been the case previously. Most observers of the US government maintain that foreign policy decisions are the responsibility of the president and the executive branch, but Congress is exerting power that it has slowly consolidated over the last couple of decades. Authors like Kirk Beattie¹² have chronicled how, for years, a GOP-held Congress contested President Obama's executive foreign policy initiatives. One could be forgiven for assuming that those years were spent solely antagonizing the Republicans' chief political rival. However, Congress's posture now is every bit as assertive as then, perhaps signaling that congressional involvement in US foreign policy has evolved irreversibly, with more and more members of Congress willing to obstruct presidential foreign policymaking regardless of partisan politics.

It is impossible to consider US foreign policy in general—and toward the Arab states, in particular—without acknowledging Congress's role in forging priorities. Congress members have been more than willing to influence the foreign policy agenda of the Trump Administration thus far.¹³ Through legislation and appropriations, Congress has scaled back some of the damage done to the State Department in the president's original budget proposal and has levied sanctions on adversarial states, even over the president's objections. At times, even when Congress has refrained from inserting itself into foreign policy decisions, the White House has forced it to act. President Trump's recent decision to forego certifying the Iranian nuclear deal is a perfect example. Congress must now decide whether the United States remains in the deal, and if not, what sanctions will be levied against Iran.

In the current political environment, Congress has, with some success, pulled the Trump Administration toward a more traditional foreign policy stance. After ostracizing key allies, abandoning long-held US values, and exercising hyper vigilance toward national security, President Trump and his team repositioned US foreign policy priorities, particularly in the Arab world, well outside of what the United States has historically pursued. However, whether it is the legislative branch as a whole or powerful lawmakers individually,¹⁴ Congress has inserted itself into Trump's foreign policy agenda when it seemed to be weakening the country's standing on the world stage.

A UNIFIED FRONT?

The extent to which the executive and legislative branches disagree on policy specifics—especially on a topic as divisive as the Middle East—cannot be understated. While Trump fully embraces tactical partnerships with ruthless autocrats, many in Congress appear more wary of such alliances. Trump would like to arm Arab states indiscriminately with high-grade US weaponry, but key members of Congress are halting the delivery of such weapons.¹⁵ They believe a fully funded, fully staffed State Department is crucial to US foreign policy, while the Trump Administration's proposals would render the department nearly obsolete. All of this begs the question, is there a united US policy on which both branches agree? If so, what does it look like?

Several months into the president's first year, it seems like the only areas of Middle East policy where the White House and Congress are in complete lockstep is in supporting Israel and disdaining IS and Iran. Otherwise, Congress will continue to serve as a bulwark¹⁶ against Trump's reckless dismantling of the United States' diplomatic institutions—and not as an ally that simply rubberstamps the president's policy initiatives.

WHAT SHOULD THE ARAB WORLD EXPECT?

With a lack of a coherent US foreign policy in the Arab world, what should Arab citizens and governments expect from the US government over the remaining years of the president's term? For one thing, Trump's foreign policy will likely remain focused on security. This is great news for countries like Egypt, the Gulf monarchies, and Israel, which have learned that they can flatter Trump and agree to security coordination and, in exchange, he will disregard their more problematic behavior. However, there is much to be desired for those facing persecution and oppression in places like Egypt, Bahrain, and Palestine or those who look to the United States to help provide a modicum of support for development and stability (for example, Tunisia, Jordan, and Iraq).

Luckily for those in the latter two categories, Congress may be of some support. Early on, Congress was the more vocal branch for maintaining American values on human rights, democratization, and engagement, and that is unlikely to cease. Members of Congress have done more than just talk, however, when it comes to providing aid for development. Under Fiscal Year 2018, for the foreign operations budget¹⁷ that funds the State Department and USAID, lawmakers moved to increase funding and support for fledgling democracies like Tunisia and for allies like Jordan that are only just holding on to domestic stability. The legislative branch has also differed from the executive regarding specific conflicts, including

the GCC crisis. While the White House took sides early, members of Congress have generally taken the middle ground and, for the most part, the reputations of all the countries involved in the rift have suffered. Senator Bob Corker (R-Tennessee) has effectively punished all GCC countries for this crisis, vowing to block any arms transfers to these states until the issue is resolved.

What also may be pivotal for the Arab world in the immediate future is whether Secretary Tillerson resigns.¹⁸ His potential departure will have two opposite effects. On the one hand, the State Department might then have a chance to again become the active organization it always was and return to its mission of diplomatic fare, a positive development not only for the Arab world but for the international community. On the other, his middle-of-the-road approach to the GCC crisis and his advocacy of American neutrality toward the council's members will be missed. With President Trump having alienated the traditional (Republican and Democratic) foreign policy establishment, one is hard pressed to think of an alternative who could re-emphasize the conventional American approach to the world. Moreover, it is hard to imagine any replacement for Tillerson who will have the required freedom from the president to return to previous foreign policy positions Trump has eschewed since he was a presidential candidate.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Moving forward, what can the Trump Administration do to maximize its engagement with the Arab world and help bring about peace and stability to the region? Below are some early steps the president and his team would do well to pursue.

1. Seek stability. President Trump has not committed to this task wholeheartedly. Whether it is taking sides¹⁹ in an intra-Arab rift or antagonizing Iran at every turn, Trump has contributed to further polarization and instability in the Middle East. What he could do is work to communicate more clearly with actors in the region, friend and foe alike, and task his team with finding ways to manage threat perceptions of the states in the Middle East, especially the Gulf.

Effective communication in such a volatile region is crucial for any US president who seeks to realize and maintain stability. Much can be criticized about President Obama's record in the region, but he at least tried to cultivate lines of communication with even the most adversarial countries, like Iran. Trump – who bills himself as the negotiator extraordinaire – would do well to keep open lines of communication with everyone in the region, and this would limit the possibility for a miscommunication to turn into a conflict. Such an approach could also allow for quicker mobilization of support should the president need to form a coalition like the one battling the Islamic State. A good starting point for better communication is to staff the State Department appropriately and provide US diplomats the tools and resources they need to pursue US policy objectives.

Establishing clear, more efficient lines of communication would also allow the Trump Administration to address threat perceptions of the countries in the region. Iran – which has found significant inroads into the Arab world – is a frequent target of the hawks in the US government, but even the most conservative observers have admitted that much of Iran's problematic behavior stems from its perceptions of being threatened by its neighbors.²⁰ The same can be said for the GCC states in the Arabian Gulf, Egypt, Israel, and others. Ensuring that US allies know that they are supported, as well as de-escalating tensions with adversaries,

can go a long way toward reducing the risk of open conflict. Indeed, the Trump Administration should consider less saber rattling and more good faith outreach to all the major actors in the Middle East.

2. *Seek bold reforms to the foreign policy apparatus.* Trying to reform the State Department is not necessarily a bad idea; however, the execution thus far leaves much to be desired. What Donald Trump, the political outsider, could do is attempt to usher in bold reforms that could increase the clout of the diplomats in the administration. While it is important to have the military's perspective present in major policy considerations, the policy of delegating US policy to the military may lead to one-sided thinking.

If Trump were to staff his foreign policy apparatus with fresh faces and bold ideas, this anti-establishment president could truly usher in new reforms. To do that, however, he must change his tone drastically and refrain from both criticizing well-intentioned foreign policy planners and cutting the State Department's budget. In addition, he and his staff should let the past pass and extend invitations to collaborate on critical issues in the region even to those who may have criticized him when he was a candidate. Allowing loyal officials to staff key positions may soothe the president's ego, but it can also cultivate group-think and fail to prevent an erratic president from undertaking risky action.

3. *Carefully measure and apply US pressure.* Whether as a candidate or as the president, Trump has demonstrated that he understands only strength and power. His limited cultural understanding of the Arab world has also led him to believe that the actors in the region also only understand strength and power, which has resulted in overly aggressive statements and policy positions from the president. However, Trump's willingness to flex his muscles can quickly spiral out of control and could find him overextending the United States in conflicts in the region. Perhaps his retaliatory strike on Syria last April sent a message to the Assad regime and Russia, but there is little evidence he had much of a plan after that first strike.²¹ What if Syria – or Russia – acted even more aggressively; would he have upped the ante even further? Clearly this president would do well to display more self-control; otherwise, and in a region as tumultuous as the Middle East, he could quickly lead the United States to potential conflict.

The US military, with Donald Trump's blessing, has broadened its list of "area[s] of active hostilities,"²² stretching US resources even further. If the president intends to dispatch the military to every arena to exert pressure, he risks engaging it in multiple fronts in the Middle East alone, to say nothing about the rest of the world. Instead, the Trump Administration should take a realistic look at the region and accurately assess which threats – from state or non-state actors – are the most pressing and could most realistically be resolved through US pressure and military involvement. For the problems that cannot be solved through US pressure, Trump should be willing and eager to dispatch diplomats and work with partners on the ground to address the issues without risking the lives of American service members.

CONCLUSION

It is clear that in the first year of the Trump Administration, US foreign policy in the Arab world has been delegated almost entirely to the military minds of the administration. While the White House has set forth a policy of "principled realism," it has overwhelmingly neglected the non-military aspects like diplomacy and development aid, which have long supplemented

the United States' "hard power." Fortunately, members of Congress have intervened to bring some form of balance and stability to President Trump's reckless neglect of US diplomatic institutions.

Moving forward, the White House and Congress should work together to fund and staff foreign policy institutions efficiently. Additionally, the president would be wise to relent on his aggressive stances toward the Middle East and seek to foster security – through communication and threat management – and boldly reform the United States' overall foreign policy toward the Arab world. Finally, the president should be more calculating when applying US pressure in the Middle East. Open conflict with Iran is already a threat, but broadening US bombing campaigns in the region risks entangling the United States in one of numerous ongoing conflicts and overextending, perhaps needlessly, American military resources.

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II. ISSUES IN SUBREGIONAL RELATIONS

The United States and the GCC: A Steep Learning Curve for President Trump

Imad K. Harb

The Trump Administration and the Perils of Ignoring North Africa

William Lawrence

US Policy in Syria: Assessment, Challenges, and Recommendations

Joe Macaron

Deciphering Trump's Policy Toward Israel-Palestine

Yousef Munayyer

The Trump Administration and Developments in Iraq

Gregory Aftandilian

US-Turkey Relations and Their Impact on the Arab World

Mustafa Gurbuz

Trump's Miscalculation about American-Egyptian Relations

Imad K. Harb



THE UNITED STATES AND THE GCC: A STEEP LEARNING CURVE FOR PRESIDENT TRUMP

Imad K. Harb

The Donald Trump Administration faces many challenges today in its relationship with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). The administration's lack of experience in Gulf issues and readiness to deal with Gulf complexities and Middle Eastern dynamics is arguably only matched by the danger of the ongoing rift between the GCC states. Nonetheless, the Trump team cannot simply neglect its shortcomings or the uncertainties of intra-GCC relations as it approaches the end of its first year in power. Specifically, it has the dual responsibility of helping to safeguard the GCC's unity as a strategic bloc vital to American national interests and to coax GCC states toward a more open domestic social and political environment without which they may not be able to tackle the vicissitudes of the twenty-first century.

A BRIEF LOOK AT THE STATE OF PLAY

Long considered one of the strongest pillars of American security around the world, the GCC is currently going through an existential crisis pitting three of its members (Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) against a fourth (Qatar). Two others (Kuwait and Oman) remain neutral, the former shouldering the responsibility of devising an acceptable compromise with which all could be comfortable, and the latter declining any involvement. For all the actors, the United States continues to be the pivotal ally, arms supplier, and strategic partner as the bloc faces numerous social, economic, political, and security challenges emanating from within and without the Arabian Peninsula.

For the United States, the GCC has been an essential collective of friendly and wealthy states that coalesced to form the bloc in 1981 after three menacing developments: the Iranian Revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979 and the start of the destructive Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988). Since then, Washington has striven in both its Democratic and Republican stripes to safeguard the entente by providing the military means for defense and the political and strategic cover for peace and prosperity. American relations with the Gulf Arabs have defined a prototypical relationship the likes of which may not be easy to emulate or repeat, despite some instances when long-term goals collided briefly with short-term objectives on either side of the equation.

During the past two administrations, differences surfaced as to how the United States presents itself to the GCC, what form its commitment to the bloc takes, or how far it can go in trying to change the status quo of the relationship. During the George W. Bush Administration (2001-2009), Washington provided strategic assistance and coordinated on important issues, but it ran afoul of the GCC's consensus on the inadvisability of the 2003 invasion of Iraq. The Barack Obama Administration (2009-2017) looked to develop relations with East Asia, which were feared as coming at the expense of the Gulf states, and sought to accommodate Iran in a Gulf-wide environment without doing the preliminary work of subduing the Islamic Republic's stridency in areas that threatened the GCC's collective security. Both administrations—despite their declared commitment to the GCC's wellbeing—did harm to the relationship and

awoke fears of distrust among the Gulf allies, whose social-tribal ethos is built on the basis of trustworthy relations with allies and whose elites have grown to value the benefits of having close ties with the United States.

As an endowed collection of states that serves long-term US interests in the Middle East and around the world, the GCC is a strategic reality that presents many advantages to policymakers in the Trump Administration.¹ And as heir to America's leading role internationally, the administration would do well to harness whatever capabilities the bloc possesses to enhance bilateral relations and provide for mutual benefit from an old alliance. Most important are the GCC's strategic advantages to the United States.

THE GCC AS A STRATEGIC ASSET

Abutting an area of many active military conflicts and a number of political and sectarian hot spots, a healthy GCC can be the anchor for a long-term, sustained, and easy-to-maintain American presence and role in the Middle East.² In that sense, the United States has Defense Cooperation Agreements with Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE, a Status of Forces Agreement with Kuwait, and a Facilities Access Agreement with Oman; it also uses Saudi Arabian bases for drone operations against areas in Yemen controlled by Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). The GCC hosts tens of thousands of American troops in different bases, the forward headquarters of CENTCOM, and the American Fifth Fleet. Between 2009 and 2016, GCC countries collectively imported about \$200 billion worth of American weaponry.³ So far in 2017, the State Department has approved agreements for weapons with Bahrain worth almost \$4 billion,⁴ Kuwait over \$800 million,⁵ Qatar \$12 billion⁶, and the UAE \$2 billion.⁷ Last May, President Trump signed an agreement with King Salman bin Abdulaziz to sell Saudi Arabia \$110 billion worth of weapons and upgrades.⁸

Like others before it, the Trump Administration sees the GCC as a pillar in its increasingly belligerent stance toward the Islamic Republic of Iran—despite the fact that the ongoing intra-GCC crisis impedes cooperation on facing Iranian adventurism in the Gulf and along the Tehran-Beirut axis. In fact, the current crisis may help fracture whatever unity of purpose and action that the bloc had been able to offer American policy in the Gulf vis-à-vis Iran. It is likely that a decisive and forceful American intervention in the GCC crisis will lead to strengthening the GCC's front, although not necessarily in a direction the Trump Administration might desire.⁹ Indeed, what the GCC could do is help tamp down the administration's rhetoric and stridency on all things Iranian: from rolling back the nuclear agreement to threatening military action against Iran. Both issues are anathema to GCC interests because they will result in actual physical harm to the bloc's members and to their economic wellbeing.

The GCC will furthermore always be a good asset for the American position on Yemen, both as a strategic location along the Mediterranean-Indian Ocean stretch and as home to AQAP and the so-called Islamic State (IS). While Saudi Arabia and the UAE appear to control some developments in the Yemen war, their involvement cannot be separated from other GCC members who, while not as engaged, have a high stake in how things turn out. Eventually, and given the stalemate there after two and a half years of outside intervention, it should not be hard to fathom a change away from a military confrontation and toward a political solution based on an equitable compromise. Whatever the Trump Administration's stance regarding Iran as fomenting the Houthi-Saleh challenge in Yemen, a GCC concord with Washington on

such a solution is good for peace and security in the Arabian Peninsula and along the strategic corridor from the Suez Canal to the Bab al-Mandab waterway.

By the same token, the GCC can be the effective tool for fighting extremists and terrorists sheltering in eastern Yemen and threatening Saudi Arabia, Oman, and the Arabian Sea coast. As it stands, UAE forces, American special operations personnel, US drones, and UAE-supported armed elements of the southern Yemeni secessionists are spearheading a drive to rid Yemen of AQAP and IS.¹⁰ What, however, would make this effort more fruitful in safeguarding Yemen's unity and territorial integrity is for the UAE and the Trump Administration to work toward involving units of Yemen's national army under the leadership of the legitimate president of the country, Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi. Only a unified Yemen, run by a legitimate, internationally recognized government can assure security in the Arabian Peninsula and provide for the overall stability sought by the United States and all members of the GCC.

Another possible role for the GCC in the Trump Administration's potential plans for the Middle East would be influencing the now-dormant process of reviving a Palestinian-Israeli peace deal, remote as this appears at present. The GCC is currently the only entity that could surmount the Israeli government's rejection of any reasonable plan to implement the hoped-for two-state solution – considered by multiple American administrations as the only alternative to the current stalemate or the breakout of violence. The GCC's role is pivotal in pushing forward the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, which represents the only equitable course of action between Israel, the Palestinians, and the Arab world at large.

Finally, a unified GCC is essential for the Trump Administration's realization of America's national interests in the Levant and Egypt and along the shores of the Red Sea. As a strategic partner with military and financial resources, the GCC can be a fulcrum of stability operations. After it ends its battles against the Islamic State, Iraq will need a new social contract that preserves its peace and assures true reconciliation, and the GCC could play a vital role. Syria will likely continue to be a bleeding ulcer for decades and the GCC may be the only bloc capable of helping its reconstruction. Yemen will likewise require a massive infusion of funds for its rehabilitation, and Egypt will always depend on GCC benefaction and economic investment.

THE TRUMP-GCC RELATIONSHIP THUS FAR

During his election campaign, President Trump made pronouncements on Gulf issues and countries which betrayed his lack of adequate knowledge of GCC affairs, needs, and importance. In 2015, for example, he demanded that Saudi Arabia pay the United States for protection and warned the kingdom that it was in trouble and needed American help – he was probably unaware of the hundreds of billions of dollars Riyadh and other GCC members have spent on American military hardware for decades.¹¹ Yet, in a presidential debate in April 2016, he did not object to Saudi Arabia (and Japan and South Korea) having a nuclear program, thus increasing anxieties at that time about nuclear proliferation during a possible Trump presidency.¹² He also accused Saudi Arabia of responsibility for the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the United States.¹³ Throughout his campaign Trump called for lifting all restrictions on developing American sources of energy so that imports from Saudi Arabia could be halted, prompting warnings from Saudi officials after his election.¹⁴

In December 2015, Trump called for halting the entry of Muslims to the United States, raising

fears—should he win—about long-term relations with the Muslim world and the GCC.¹⁵ His “Muslim ban” is still a political issue in the United States, although many court decisions have delayed its full implementation. When he first advocated for it, relations between the Obama Administration and GCC states had run into disagreements regarding Iran, Syria, and human and civil rights issues. Later, President Obama’s accusations that GCC states (and Europeans) are free riders—relying on the United States to resolve international and regional conflicts without doing their part—did not help in settling fears of an American withdrawal from the Middle East to East Asia.¹⁶ The GCC was thus looking for an opportunity to right what they considered an American wrong, although they were not quite sure that Donald Trump was the one to rectify the situation—or if indeed he was likely to win the presidency.

When Trump won the election, all GCC leaders sent their congratulations and best wishes to the president-elect.¹⁷ After his inauguration in January 2017, two consequential visits by now-Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (in March 2017) and Abu Dhabi’s crown prince and UAE putative president, Mohammed bin Zayed (the following May), proved that the GCC was ready for open relations with the new president. Trump’s previous declarations about Saudi Arabia and banning Muslims from the United States no longer appeared to be impediments to cordial relations. In fact, Mohammed bin Salman’s visit with the president was declared a “historic turning point” in the restoration of trust and confidence between Saudi Arabia and the United States.¹⁸

It was not an insignificant development that after assuming office, President Trump made his first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia to convene an American-Arab-Muslim conference in May 2017.¹⁹ The meaning of that visit was not lost on GCC leaders, especially Saudi Arabia’s, who had been waiting to restore the GCC’s centrality to American foreign policy. At the conference, Trump spoke of driving out the extremists from Muslim places of worship and helped inaugurate the new Riyadh-based Global Center for Combatting Extremist Ideology.²⁰ Even calls during his campaign and in his conference speech to fight “Islamic radical extremism”—a moniker eschewed by the Obama Administration—did not affect the cordiality with which he was received in Riyadh.

TRUMP’S UNFORTUNATE MAGNUM OPUS: THE GCC CRISIS

If President Trump saw that a close relationship with the GCC was a net gain for the United States (considering continued military sales or fighting extremism, for instance), his early advocacy for Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt in the ongoing GCC crisis was ill-advised, shortsighted, and ultimately dangerous. By taking sides against another GCC member, Qatar, the president threatened both to undo decades of American foreign policy in the Gulf, the Arab world, and the Middle East and to collapse the very front he hoped to strengthen against Iran—a double calamity that remains possible. Lacking basic knowledge of the region and the intricacies of intra-GCC relations, Trump fell victim to his own bravado and the machinations of errant GCC leaders eager to weaken Qatar and strip it of its independent foreign policy.

Starting as a UAE-sponsored hacking of Qatari official websites²¹ to disseminate false reports attributed to Qatar’s emir, Sheikh Tamim bin Hamad Al Thani, the GCC spat quickly developed into an intra-GCC split when Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Bahrain (along with Egypt) severed diplomatic relations with the peninsular nation on June 5, 2017.²² President Trump quickly took

credit for the development, tweeting that when he was at the summit in Saudi Arabia, those in attendance pointed to Qatar as financing terrorism.²³ He also wished that the severance of relations with Qatar would signal the beginning of the end of the despicable scourge of terrorism; he repeated this accusation over a period of a few weeks. Meanwhile, America's diplomatic and military officialdom went into hyperdrive to prove Qatar's cooperation in fighting terrorism and to prevent the deterioration of relations with the country that hosts 10,000 troops at the Al Udeid American air base, which houses CENTCOM and associated military installations.²⁴

Besides his initial, dangerous, and divisive intervention in the GCC crisis, Trump further boasted that the United States could move Al Udeid easily to other countries that would be happy to build a replacement facility "and pay for it."²⁵ This and other assertions were always contradicted by counter-pronouncements by Secretary of State Rex Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis, and by officials in both departments who know the importance of the base to US military operations against the Islamic State and understand the significance of the GCC's unity of mission and purpose. This situation did not only highlight the divisions within the administration and point to misdirection and confusion, but it also threatened three interconnected issues.

The first was a concerted Kuwaiti effort to mediate in the intra-GCC crisis, one that was buttressed by a similar, supportive American effort at reconciliation led by Secretary Tillerson. Second, the president's seeming nonchalance toward the severity of the crisis encouraged aberrant behavior by Saudi Arabia and its cohorts that increased the pressure on Qatar, which had exhibited great flexibility in accepting Kuwaiti and American mediation. Third, the slowness in effecting a reconciliation allowed for others to intervene, such as Iran, which offered badly needed goods and materials for besieged Qatar, and Turkey, which saw an opportunity to side with an aggrieved party and appear as a protector of Qatar's independence and integrity.²⁶ All these factors have both weakened the much-needed and vaunted GCC unity necessary for US national interests in the Gulf and emboldened Iran after its successes in Syria and Iraq over the last two years.

In the end, however, it appears that President Trump has finally realized that his unstudied and biased early position on the GCC crisis showed his administration as divided and threatened traditional American foreign policy in the Arabian Gulf. In early September, he welcomed the emir of Kuwait, Sheikh Sabah Al-Ahmad Al-Jaber Al-Sabah, to the White House, applauded the latter's mediation initiative, and offered his own services to the effort.²⁷ The administration had decided in August to send its own emissaries to help in Kuwait's mediation: Deputy Assistant Secretary for Arabian Peninsula Affairs Timothy Lenderking and retired Marine Corps General Anthony Zinni.²⁸ Immediately after the US president's meetings with the Kuwaiti emir, Qatar's ruler telephoned Saudi Arabia's crown prince, following Trump's encouragement, and the two agreed to start a dialogue to resolve the crisis. But this breakthrough soon collapsed as Saudi Arabia's foreign ministry issued a statement decrying Qatar's purported "distortion...of facts."²⁹ Indeed, President Trump and his lieutenants are likely to continue to be busy trying to address the GCC's difficulties for the foreseeable future.

IMPORTANT STEPS ON THE ROAD FORWARD

Whatever the failings of the Trump presidency and administration, and however discordant

intra-GCC relations presently are, it is almost an article of faith that the US-GCC relationship will continue to be a defining aspect of international affairs. But as the current custodian of this old association, President Trump would do well to emphasize what American policymakers have long considered essential issues for the national security of the United States in the Arabian Gulf and the wider region.

First, the Trump Administration must redress the dangerous institutional shortage in pivotal personnel positions responsible for Gulf affairs at the Department of State. The recent appointment of veteran diplomat David Satterfield as Acting Assistant Secretary for Near Eastern Affairs may provide some direction in the administration's relations with the MENA region, but it falls short of addressing the dangerous limitations in able and experienced hands.³⁰ Importantly for the GCC crisis, the administration must fill the position of US ambassador to Qatar, which was vacated last June when Dana Shell Smith resigned amid confusion about Washington's position on the crisis.³¹

Second, the administration, through the auspices of the White House and the Departments of State and Defense, is called upon to spare no effort in helping to mediate a resolution to the ongoing GCC crisis. Such a resolution is vital for GCC unity, stability, and prosperity and essential for safeguarding the collective and individual interests of GCC members vis-à-vis a strident and ascendant Iran. This, however, should not imply that the GCC or its members must have a confrontational policy toward the Islamic Republic. Rather, it should mean that in dealing with the Iranian challenge, positively or negatively, the GCC would do better if it is unified in purpose and action.

Third, the administration must end its declared policy of eschewing advocacy for democracy, human rights, and freedom of speech, thought, and association. The president told his hosts and audience at the American-Arab-Muslim conference in May that the United States is not interested in telling others how to live; however, continuing to ignore violations of basic rights in the GCC only encourages further abuse.³² The latest news about Saudi Arabia's arrest of prominent religious figures and crackdown on dissent does not augur well for stability in the kingdom.³³ Just as bad are Bahraini and Emirati prohibitions on dissent or on displays of sympathy for Qatar in the current GCC crisis.³⁴

Fourth, working on asserting GCC unity and stability should help in assuring American national interests in the Gulf and around the region. Thus, intervening in the GCC crisis to resolve it will buttress the American position on such issues as Iran's behavior in the Middle East, the war against extremists in Yemen, reconciliation efforts in Iraq, redressing grievances against Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria, the Palestinian-Israeli stalemate, and general stability in this vital region of the world.

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THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND THE PERILS OF IGNORING NORTH AFRICA

William Lawrence

Except for intervening militarily in Libya against the so-called Islamic State (IS) and paying some lip service to Tunisia's experiment in democratic transition, the Trump Administration has paid scant attention to North Africa, a region that is as important to the American strategic posture around the world as it is essential for Europe's security and stability. From divided Libya's uncertain future to Tunisia's impending economic crisis, and from Algeria's hamstrung reform process to Morocco's rowdy protests and social dislocations, the region has a vital strategic position and growing geopolitical importance. It is also ripe for new, reoriented US inputs and assistance to reflect changing priorities. So far, the Trump Administration's paucity of expertise and experienced hands in that part of the world should not blind American policymakers to its centrality to international peace and security.

AN UNDECIDED ADMINISTRATION

On a visit to Washington last April, Italian Prime Minister Paolo Gentiloni spoke candidly during a press conference with President Donald Trump about the problem that Libya presents to Italy and its European partners. His primary objective was to convince the new American president to step up US engagement in Libya. Gentiloni declared that increased US assistance for Libya would be "critical" and that leaving Libya divided and in conflict would be devastating for the entire Mediterranean region. From his part, President Trump – who had failed to wear his earpiece for simultaneous interpretation – did not hear his guest's imploring message for increased assistance to Libya. He promptly contradicted the prime minister by declaring that he did not see a role in Libya for the United States and added that the United States had enough roles in the world already, saying "We're in a role everywhere." But sensing that his dismissive comment had over-shot its mark, Trump then partially self-corrected, stating that he did in fact see a continuing counterterrorism role for the United States in "getting rid of ISIS."¹

In the following days the White House and the State Department continued to fix the problem created by the president's response, each issuing corrective, low key statements that reaffirmed US commitments to Libya and the North African region, just as international think tanks and the press began to publish a flurry of negative reactions to Trump's snub of a visiting minister and the prospect of a shift in US policy away from engagement in North Africa.² Within days, the administration appeared to be back to the status quo ante – with Pentagon, State Department, intelligence, and other US government agencies endeavoring to reassure allies that Washington would continue to cooperate to contain problems in the North African region. But the underlying message was clear: there would not be increased attention by the Trump Administration, and North Africa would retain its status as Europe's back yard.

The situation could not be more dire for southern Italy, hit hard by tens of thousands of desperate migrants arriving in Italian coastal communities and sometimes dying by the hundreds as their overloaded boats collapsed and sank. Libya was not a problem that former colonial power Italy could solve on its own, and leaving Libya's troubles to Italy to solve or to let slide into

failed state status would continue to have destabilizing effects not only on the six adjacent countries—Tunisia, Algeria, Niger, Chad, Sudan, and Egypt, all of which are affected by conflict spillover—but on many countries in Europe as well. Facing over a million new refugee arrivals across the continent, Europe has for years been rocked by a rise in right-wing political parties exploiting somewhat unrestrained migrant flows, proposing restrictive immigration policies, and threatening the European Union itself. US political and commercial interests in the Mediterranean have always been important and the reason for military interventions, but deeper commitments have not been sustained and rarely scaled to the issues at hand. In 2017, with Europeans reaching out to Washington for more commitment than it could muster itself, there is no indication that US engagement will deepen.

A similar North Africa gaffe occurred in late May 2017 with the Trump Administration's rollout of its 2018 budget, in which it proposed a 70 percent aid cut to Tunisia. The announcement, which was largely ignored until early July, proposed to cut US assistance from \$177 million to \$54 million.³ Abandoning the Arab world's newest democracy, often characterized as a bulwark against IS while the United States was engaging militarily in neighboring Libya, seemed foolish. The proposed cuts sent democracy advocates scrambling. Tunisia was continuing to face a severe post-revolutionary economic crisis, including serious fiscal and budgetary woes. In addition, one of Tunisia's main economic strengths, tourist revenues, had suffered serious reductions following triple terrorist attacks by the Islamic State emanating from Libya in 2015. British tourism had decreased by over 90 percent and was hardly made up by increased Libyan "tourism" by its citizens escaping conflict, and Algerian "solidarity" tourism which endeavored to help keep the Tunisian economy afloat.

As pro-Tunisia assistance advocacy ramped up in Washington, absent the much better funded lobbying that supports US assistance to countries like Jordan, it quickly became clear that the US Congress may be the only hope. Led by foreign policy-focused Senators John McCain (R-Arizona) and Lindsey Graham (R-South Carolina), together with Senate Appropriations Committee Vice Chair Senator Patrick Leahy (D-Vermont), Congress would likely restore all or most of the assistance as a part of an omnibus spending package likely to be approved in or after December 2017. Restoring the aid would highlight the importance the United States usually places on democratic transitions anywhere in the world. In this case, the emphasis would be on the Arab and Muslim worlds, with hoped-for regional demonstration effects in the context of the multi-front war with the Islamic State and other extremist groups. This would be combined with a concomitant reduction in Egypt's assistance of about 15 percent on the grounds of human rights violations.

The longer-than-usual learning curve of the anti-establishment, neophyte President Trump, combined with frequent "rookie" mistakes, have continued to hamper US-North Africa relations throughout the first year of the Trump Administration. Nonetheless, it has been increasingly clear that the administration has been stumbling into a "Goldilocks principle" of North African engagement that could loosely be summarized as "lukewarm relations with an indifferent attitude." As noted in Steven Sestanovich's article on Trump's foreign policy in *The Atlantic*, "Trump sensed that the US public wanted relief from the burdens of global leadership without losing the thrill of nationalist self-assertion."⁴ In a way, the Trump Administration is simultaneously pursuing a continuation of Bush and Obama Administration policies in North Africa that had looked to cut spending and the American footprint wherever possible but, simultaneously, maintained or increased targeted engagements in a few places where it was

deemed geopolitically critical in the moment.

Militarily, this means hitting Islamic State targets in Libya harder and more lethally, often with disregard to the Obama Administration's policies on protecting civilians from drone attacks.⁵ On the political and economic sides, however, this means the unloading of previous US commitments to "nation building," including cuts of vital assistance, wherever possible. The primary goals appear to be to contain jihadist threats to Libya and the region without addressing their underlying causes, including containing jihadist and other economic threats to Tunisia without offering its economy the shot in the arm it needs to weather its post-revolutionary economic challenges.

This piecemeal, haphazard approach to North African security, politics, and economics is mistaken. The increasing costs of neglect of the region, and, conversely, the strong benefits of increased positive inputs make North Africa a superb opportunity to invest additional political bandwidth and economic stimulus with possibly greater and more immediate upside benefits than can be found in addressing more intractable conflicts further east. It was events in North Africa (Tunisia specifically) that led to the destabilization of the eastern parts of the Arab world in 2011; thus, successful stabilization of the region and empowerment of North African actors may very well have stabilizing effects on the east, if at a minimum only from the demonstration effects and to decrease flows of foreign fighters. Meanwhile, with the gradual defeat of IS in Iraq and Syria sending hundreds of North Africans home, how the region deals with foreign fighters returning from conflicts in the east will have direct impact on whether or not the region succeeds. So far, the record has been mixed, with a few fighters cooperating with authorities and reintegrating and much larger numbers, often from economically marginal areas, risking falling through the cracks. Never before, it seems, has the fate of the countries of the Middle East and North Africa region seemed more intertwined, even while the differences among the countries seem more pronounced.

THE MIXED LEGACY OF THE ARAB SPRING

The Trump Administration may not get its head around North Africa (indeed the entire Arab world) without understanding the origins and repercussions of the Arab Spring. It was the most important turning point in the relationship between the Middle East and North Africa in recent memory, linking the two more closely than ever despite huge regional, national, and subnational level differences. The 2010-2011 disturbances that began in central rural Tunisia and quickly spread to 18 Arab nations (only Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, deeply implicated in the Arab Spring's regional outcomes, were spared significant internal protest). The Arab Spring created stronger cross-regional bonds between youth activists, polities, and regimes than ever. But it is important to point out that the Arab Spring had far more devastating effects on the eastern Arab world than it did North Africa, thoroughly destabilizing Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and causing dozens of serious secondary effects on nearly every country – from sectarian conflict in Bahrain to the ongoing blockade of Qatar.

In fact, the destabilization of Libya, often held up as somehow "equal" to the destruction and carnage in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, is dwarfed by comparison with those other conflicts. For example, casualty rates in the Libyan conflict since 2011, including two civil wars (2011 and 2014-2017) are less than 3 percent of the casualty rates in Syria, both civilian and military.⁶ Other than aggressive attacks on and by the Islamic State since 2014, the current conflict in

Libya is largely a low-intensity stalemate where, in most cases, Libyan fighters would rather lob warning shots over each other than actually attack each other's positions or attempt to take over each other's strongholds. As for violence waged by the Islamic State, the civilian carnage is significantly lower than what IS has been inflicting in France or Britain or Germany, even though the negative effects of IS control of a city or town can be more devastating on a local population. And by 2017, the Islamic State was forced out of every city and town it had controlled between 2014 and 2016.

The purge of the Islamic State from urban spaces in Libya was the direct result of Libyan international cooperation. General Khalifa Haftar, Libya's eastern-based government's military leader, played only a minor role in this battle, which was largely accomplished by militiamen from Misrata, most notably the "Bunyan Marsus," with significant air power and special forces assistance from Europe and the United States.⁷

Strategists and policymakers considering leaving North Africa to its own devices should never forget that the Arab Spring began in Tunisia and spread from there, and it is where large numbers of the foreign fighters in Syria and Iraq originated. It is worth noting that most of the thousands of Tunisian fighters who ventured to Syria largely between 2011 and 2013 thought they were joining a fight to bring down a Syrian dictator, just as North Africans had brought down the Tunisian, Libyan, and Egyptian dictators.

But the effects of the Arab Spring on North African Arab countries and those on the east are significantly different. Most notably, the Arab Spring in North Africa is still considered a "spring" by experts and populations, and not a series of "uprisings," as Middle East experts have labored to change the moniker for the whole region. The Arab Spring is still considered by many in North Africa, but not all, a largely positive event.

Morocco, which saw its largest anti-government protests over 60 years (since its independence in 1956) exceeding 800,000 people in more than 100 cities simultaneously, emerged largely unscathed with a new and reformed constitution and an acceleration, at least for the first few years, in its political reform process. A large, comparatively democratic, moderate Islamist party, the Justice and Development Party, came to power in 2011 and led successive governments since then, in part due to its relative success in combatting and avoiding corruption. Civil society in Morocco is mobilized and engaged, and citizen action continues to contest the state in powerful ways, most recently in the Rif areas in the north.⁸ Morocco has opted for a progressive political strategy, recently characterized by Moroccan Foreign Minister Nasser Bourita in Washington as "stability through reform."⁹

Algeria saw its largest protests in over 20 years – the largest since the 1991 anti-gerrymandering sit-ins toward the end of the country's "Arab Spring" democratic moment. The fact that officials still frequently refer to Algeria as having had the "first Arab Spring," from 1988 to 1992, attests to the one-to-one connection most North Africans make between Algeria's democratic experiment and the 2011 protest wave. As a result of relatively large protests in the first few months of 2011 and then continuing intermittently through Ramadan 2013, the government made significant moves toward constitutional reform and expanded a range of social services, benefits, and concessions to the population, particularly to government employees. A new slogan—based on protest vocabulary that began in 1988 and has occurred every few years since—appeared after 2011, *Barakat min al-hogra!* – or enough injustice! – is ubiquitous in Algeria, especially after an economically difficult summer.¹⁰

The political class in Algeria has reached near unanimity on the economic reforms needed to jumpstart Algeria's moribund economy, reforms largely hamstrung by political inertia related to the failing health of President Abdelaziz Bouteflika. The recent calls by former officials for his removal because he is "unfit for office" are a continuation of this oppositional activity in Algeria that started in late December 2010 and continue to simmer in the present.¹¹ Moreover, a new generation of Algerians is coming of age who did not live through the Black Decade of the 1990s and increasingly feel less restrained by the forces which political and social contestation risk to unleash.

Nowhere is the Arab Spring considered as more of a net positive than in Tunisia, notwithstanding its serious current political and economic challenges. While security challenges and economic malaise fuel growing nostalgia to the times of former presidents Habib Bourguiba and Zine El-Abidine Ben Ali, the Jasmine Revolution remains the Arab world's first successful democratic transition, earning Tunisia countless well-deserved accolades including a Nobel Prize for peace.¹² More importantly, both the inclusive constitution-writing process and the text of Tunisia's remarkable constitution, which garnered over 90 percent support from Tunisia's first democratically elected parliament, was a monumental political achievement. A generation of Tunisian youth is growing up with a free press and full freedom of expression across the country's institutions—an achievement unlikely to be fully reversed by future secular or Islamist-led governments—all still fully invested in Tunisia's democratic experiment.

Even Libya, the purported "failed state" of North Africa's Arab Spring, has important potential and is one amended political agreement away from significant improvement. Notwithstanding frequent media reporting on "chaos" in Libya, most of the country has been spared from conflict since November 2011. As noted above, Libya is not experiencing an all-out civil war, but consists largely of armed post-revolutionary municipalities that guard local communities and rarely fight each other. When municipal conflicts do occur, they are usually low-casualty and short-lived, with peace deals mediated by local elders within a post-revolutionary consensus against full-on conflict.

There is significant resistance in Libya to creating new martyrs to join those slaughtered *en masse* by Qadhafi both before and during the Arab Spring.¹³ The 2015 United Nations-sponsored Skhirat peace deal that created the Government of National Accord (GNA) has not entirely failed and, with at least three or four key amendments addressing issues left on the table from the onset, remains the basis of the next Libyan political agreement.¹⁴ Throughout this period, Libya's constitution-writing process has continued with fits and starts, and a draft constitution was approved in late July 2017 and is now tied up in the courts, subject to the ongoing overarching political negotiations.¹⁵

In the early days of the Trump Administration, a flurry of analysis and recommendations appeared in the press and by leading think tanks calling for a new recommitment to North Africa and lamenting insufficient engagement to that point. Most analyses correctly predicted a "security-first" approach with some limited support for the Tunisian political transition, with some urging deeper commitment to solving the region's problems—from the Libyan conflict to the Tunisian economic crisis to the economically costly Western Sahara impasse. On every issue, containing threats and maintaining the status quo seem to generate significant consensus among the experts, who seemed as eager to restrain what they perceived as Trump's worst instincts as they were to tackle regional threats head on.¹⁶ However, the lack of a comprehensive plan to

help provide young Tunisians a revolutionary dividend will continue to create the conditions for their radicalization and alienation from the political system.¹⁷ More importantly, the United States needs to listen to European leaders like Prime Minister Gentiloni and not leave Europe to go it alone in North Africa. As recent history in Iraq and Syria indicate and massive flows of refugees across the Mediterranean fleeing both conflicts and economic deprivation attest, the stakes could not be higher.

STEPS ON THE WAY FORWARD

As the United States formulates a new approach to North Africa, the Trump Administration would do well to try to institute some important policy recommendations.

First, the United States is called upon to increase its assistance to all North African and Sahel states in their struggle against the uprooted Islamic State and other extremist threats, including intelligence cooperation, security force training, and air power. Emphasis should be placed on border security, especially the Libyan-Algerian border, police training that has borne fruit in Morocco and elsewhere, expanding the International Military Education and Training program in Algeria, and encouraging and facilitating counterterrorism cooperation between the states of the region.

Second, the United States should make Tunisia's political stabilization and economic success a greater strategic priority with an increase in economic aid and support for democratization and capacity-building. Funding low-cost, high-impact parliamentary assistance in Tunisia would bear fruit since parliamentarians would have funds to increase their effectiveness and accelerate progress toward badly needed reforms and new projects, thus demonstrating commitment to the ideals of the revolution. In addition, Washington would do well to fund a Millennium Challenge Corporation compact for Tunisia and increase funding to the Tunisian Enterprise Fund.

Third, commercial engagement with Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia should be increased. Under the free-trade agreement with Morocco, there are ample opportunities to facilitate deeper investment on both sides. One would be to support the creation of an enterprise fund and other mechanisms to seed entrepreneurial ventures and efforts to scale Moroccan production to meet American and international demand. In Algeria, the United States should respond proactively to Algerian efforts to diversify economically, including trade missions and investment facilitation. The United States should regularly support Algerian efforts to reform, and in particular to modify the 51 percent ownership rule, with a few strategic sector exceptions at first.

Fourth, and finally, Washington must continue to support democracy, human rights, and governance-related programming in all four states, including regionalization efforts and cross-sectoral training.

- ¹ Glenn Thrush, "No U.S. Military Role in Libya, Trump Says, Rejecting Italy's Pleas," *The New York Times*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/20/us/politics/trump-italy-prime-minister-paolo-gentiloni.html>
- ² For example, see Karim Mezran and Alissa Miller, "Trump on Libya, What Now?" Atlantic Council, April 21, 2017, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/trump-on-libya-what-now> and Federica Saini Fasanotti, "President Trump, Don't Ignore Libya," Brookings Institution, May 1, 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2017/05/01/president-trump-dont-ignore-libya/>
- ³ Conor McCormick-Cavanagh, "Trump administration plans to slash US aid to Tunisia," *Al-Monitor*, July 4, 2017, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2017/07/tunisia-united-states-aid-budget-cuts.html>
- ⁴ Stephen Sestanovich, "The Brilliant Incoherence of Trump's foreign policy," *The Atlantic*, May 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2017/05/the-brilliant-incoherence-of-trumps-foreign-policy/521430/>
- ⁵ See, for example, Paul Shinkman, "In Libya Strike, Military Shows New Lethal Powers under Trump," *U.S. News and World Report*, September 29, 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/politics/articles/2017-09-29/in-libya-strike-military-shows-new-lethal-powers-under-trump>
- ⁶ Death rates in Syria are estimated at 400,000-500,000. See the Syrian Observatory for Human Rights, <http://www.syriahr.com/en/?p=70012>. Death rates in Libya both civilian and military are estimated at roughly 8000 for 2011. See "Libya: Number of Deaths," Uppsala Conflict Data Program, <http://ucdp.uu.se/#country/620>. For the 2014-7 conflict, estimates are no higher than 7000. See, for example, Armed Conflict Location and Event Data Project, <https://www.acleddata.com/data/realtime-data/>
- ⁷ Haftar even permitted the Islamic State fighters to traverse territory he controlled after they were purged from Derna, to rejoin their brethren in Sirte, prior to IS's defeat in Sirte (in which Haftar played a little Role). See for example "Inquiry sought into ISIL escape under Khalifa Haftar," *Al Jazeera*, May 26, 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/05/inquiry-sought-isil-escape-khalifa-hafter-170526210718755.html>
- ⁸ See for example Mohammed Cherkaoui, "Morocco's Rif Rises against the Makhzen's Power," Arab Center Washington DC, October 4, 2017, http://arabcenterdc.org/policy_analyses/moroccos-rif-rises-against-the-makhzens-power/
- ⁹ "Morocco's Social Contract: 'Stability Through Reform,'" *The Australian in the North Africa Post*, April 16, 2017, <http://northafricapost.com/17371-moroccos-social-contract-stability-reform-australian.html> Nasser Bourita's comments were off the record, but the same Bourita comment can be found in this article.
- ¹⁰ See for example Abdenmour Toumi, "All You Need to Know about Algerian Political Harvest Season," *Arab Daily News*, n.d., <https://thearabdailynews.com/2017/09/29/need-know-algerian-political-harvest-season/>
- ¹¹ See "Former Algerian FM says Bouteflika unfit for office," *The Citizen*, October 8, 2017, <https://citizen.co.za/news/news-africa/1681679/algeria-politics-opposition-bouteflika/>
- ¹² For example, Tunisia was the first Arab country in first place for political freedom in the Freedom House's Freedom Index for 2015 and 2016, and its National Dialogue Quartet received the Nobel Prize for peace in 2015, among other honors.
- ¹³ See more at William Lawrence, "Against All Odds: The Black Swans of Libya's Arab Spring," *World Politics Review*, July 23, 2013, <https://www.worldpoliticsreview.com/articles/13112/against-the-odds-the-black-swans-of-libya-s-arab-spring>
- ¹⁴ A New UN initiative was announced in September 2017. See John Pearson, "US backs new UN plan to end Libya conflict," *The National*, September 24, 2017, <https://www.thenational.ae/world/mena/us-backs-new-un-plan-to-end-libya-conflict-1.661198>

¹⁵ See “Exclusive: Libyan constitution draft approved by CDA in Al-Bayda,” *Libyan Express*, July 29, 2017, <http://www.libyanexpress.com/exclusive-libyan-constitution-draft-approved-by-cda-in-al-bayda/>

¹⁶ See for example “The Trump Presidency: Implications for the Middle East and North Africa,” Control Risks, <https://www.controlrisks.com/en/our-thinking/analysis/the-trump-presidency-implications-for-the-middle-east-and-north-africa>

¹⁷ In 2014, National Democratic Institute found that youth were more involved as poll watchers than as voters. See “Final Report on the 2014 Legislative and Presidential Elections in Tunisia,” National Democratic Institute, <https://www.ndi.org/Tunisia-election-report-2014>

US POLICY IN SYRIA: ASSESSMENT, CHALLENGES, AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Joe Macaron

On July 25, 2017, President Donald Trump stood in the Rose Garden and argued that if his predecessor, Barack Obama, had retaliated in 2013 against the Syrian regime for crossing the red line after it used chemical weapons, Russia and Iran would not have been involved “anywhere near the extent” of where they are in Syria today.¹

While Obama’s Syrian red line was a defining moment in his Middle East policy, Trump’s recurrent argument is flawed chronologically. After the 2013 chemical weapons episode, the Syrian regime suffered serious setbacks during 2014 and the first half of 2015 despite Iranian ground support. The turning point was rather the Russian aerial intervention in September 2015² that tipped the balance in favor of the Syrian regime. The Obama Administration’s attitude was to avoid two scenarios, a Cold War in Syria and a situation in which the United States would have to face both Russia and Iran simultaneously. Out of that quandary came the US approach, since 2015, of engaging Moscow to contain Tehran.

Meanwhile, two milestones were already in process for the US strategy in the Middle East. In December 2014, the Obama Administration made what can be described as a tacit agreement with Iran to combat the so-called Islamic State (IS),³ and in July 2015, the nuclear deal with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA)⁴ was signed in Geneva. These key developments had two policy implications: 1) the United States and Iran decided to fight IS separately in Syria and Iraq without overlap or confrontation; and 2) the United States disengaged its policy regarding Iran’s nuclear deal from the Islamic Republic’s regional activities.

When Trump came to power last January, there were legitimate questions about the strategy his administration might follow in Syria, given his unpredictable campaign and, now, his tumultuous presidency. The Trump Administration’s Syria policy can be divided into two phases, a preparatory and an executory one.

PHASE 1: COERCION AS LEVERAGE FOR ENGAGEMENT (JANUARY TO JUNE 2017)

In the first six months of the Trump Administration, US policy in Syria was in a formative phase. Both foes and allies were kept on their toes guessing whether Trump would fulfill his campaign promises by making a deal with Russian President Vladimir Putin or if he would, instead, present a more defiant posture. While the White House was in a desultory mode, jumping from a ban on Syrian refugees to the improbable idea of safe zones in the country,⁵ the Pentagon was slowly amassing power and becoming, eventually, the ultimate decision-maker in Washington when it comes to US policy in Syria.

Early signs of bold movements by the Trump Administration ended up being false alarms for those who were betting on US involvement in the Syrian war. The following three unprecedented moves were a direct message to Turkey, Russia, and Iran—the guarantors of the memorandum signed last May in Astana establishing four “de-escalation zones” in Syria.⁶

First, the decision in March to have US Humvees and Stryker combat vehicles patrol the streets of Manbij⁷ to protect the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) was the first move that accentuated the new US intent to coercively defend its interests in Syria. The display of force sent a clear message to Ankara that Washington prioritizes the protection of the SDF campaign against IS. That limited deployment was misinterpreted as a willingness to intervene in the Syrian civil war. The United States gave Kurds in Syria a shield from any potential threats while keeping them away from the Astana process.

The second move came in April and represented the most dramatic US intervention in the Syrian war. US warships in the Mediterranean fired 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles against the Syrian regime's al-Shayrat airfield southeast of Homs,⁸ an area from which western intelligence believed a deadly chemical attack in northern Syria was launched. The unprecedented strike against the Syrian regime was interpreted as a transformative moment in the US strategy. The guided missiles, launched from a US Navy destroyer instead of a drone, were a calculated risk and a clear message to Moscow. The strike was effective in deterring any future use of chemical weapons and in reinvigorating US presence in Syria, which had waned since the end of 2016 due to the diplomatic dispute between the Obama Administration and the Kremlin as well as the transitional period between administrations in Washington.

The third move was a message to Iran and signaled US readiness to be in an aggressive defense posture against Tehran, if needed. On May 18, US forces struck a convoy⁹ that included the Iranian-backed Kataeb Sayyid al-Shuhada (an Iraqi militia with ties to the Badr Organization) as pro-Syrian regime forces were advancing toward the al-Tanf base, where US advisors train and advise Syrian opposition groups. Iran did not strike back and stayed within the US-Russian red lines.

These three policy moves allowed Washington to reassert its influence at a time when Russia, Iran, and Turkey were setting the tone in Syria. Washington and Moscow subsequently began the process of defining the parameters of postwar Syria, which made the Astana process less significant and gave the United States more leeway in shaping the outcome in the country.

PHASE 2: ENGAGEMENT AS A TOOL TO DEFEND INTERESTS (JULY 2017 TO PRESENT)

The most significant US policy shift came with the ceasefire announced after the July 7 meeting between Trump and Putin at the sidelines of the G-20 summit in Hamburg,¹⁰ which placed Syria on the difficult path of conflict resolution by dividing the country effectively into spheres of influence disguised by the term "de-escalation zones." That trend conforms to the idea, in military terms, that the power that controls the air space in Syria likely dictates what happens on the ground.

The US-Russia deal in July laid the groundwork for lasting changes in Syria and altered the regional calculus. Thus, the survival of the Syrian regime was extended, the exiled Syrian opposition became increasingly trivialized, and the Kurds solidified their territorial gains. Saudi Arabia and Turkey became less influential, while Jordanian and Israeli interests were no longer aligned. Indeed, Jordan's faltering economy is motivating Amman to reopen border crossings and trade routes¹¹ with the Syrian regime at a time when Israel continues to have reservations about the overall role Iran will have in the future of Syria.

The US-Russia ceasefire deal was built on the premise of three gradual phases: 1) calming Jordanian and Israeli concerns by dissociating southwestern Syria from the Astana process and keeping Iran away from the Jordanian border and the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights; 2) disengaging the forces of the regime and the rebels by identifying separate geographic deployments; and 3) securing the return of Syrian refugees from Jordan to the governorates of Deraa and Quneitra. So far, the ceasefire has largely held, yet for it to evolve into a permanent status quo, a number of challenges must be overcome.

First, the elephant in the room is what to make of the investigation surrounding Russia's meddling in the US election in 2016. The recent diplomatic spat between the two sides did not have a negative impact on their routine military coordination in Syria,¹² yet the US establishment is successfully resisting any political rapprochement between Trump and Putin. The second challenge is the ongoing covert mini-war between Iran and Israel. Iran's agility in moving weapons and fighters between Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq is making Tel Aviv anxious.¹³ Israeli strikes against the Syrian regime have increased in recent months, attempting to drive a wedge between Damascus and Tehran while sending a message regarding the US-Russia deal that Israel's national security interests must remain central to any arrangement regarding the Syrian-Israeli border.

The third challenge pertains to Syria's domestic dimension, as the armed opposition groups are resisting US attempts to force a new status quo and the Syrian regime is not recognizing the role of opposition armed groups. If the regime and opposition forces opt not to cooperate, a stable environment in Deraa and Quneitra will be difficult to maintain. Fourth, the final pieces of the Syrian puzzle depend on who ultimately controls Deir Ezzor in the northeast and Idlib in the northwest. The race between the United States and Iran toward the border towns in Deir Ezzor will determine whether Iran will establish a supply line into the Levant. Idlib will shape the future role of Turkey in Syria and will be the last round of infighting among Islamist and extremist groups.

WHY HAVING A COHERENT US POLICY IN SYRIA MATTERS

Explaining how his attitude toward Syrian President Bashar al-Assad has changed after the chemical attack in April, Trump said, "I like to think of myself as a very flexible person. I don't have to have one specific way, and if the world changes, I go the same way."¹⁴ Indeed, the Syrian war has changed and the US administration had to cope; however, that flexibility does not necessarily mean continuing to abandon a US policy in Syria. While Trump was occasionally bolder, his administration continued Obama's strategic decision not to become involved in the Syrian war — which has become the general mood in Washington.

So far, US official thinking on Syria has been based on a progressive approach: defeat IS, stabilize Syria, and work with partners on a political process that leaves Assad out of the government. Not only is the US focus restricted to the first two tracks, but there is also a failure to understand that the conditions by which the Syrian civil war will end will shape the future of Syria, including the fate of Assad. Five factors contribute to the lack of clarity in the Trump Administration's approach to Syria.

First, the Pentagon's control of Syrian policy in the Trump Administration has been a stabilizing force, but it also reflects the shortcomings of a US approach that lacks any political vision for

a post-IS Syria. The weakening role of the State Department and the CIA has made holes in Washington's Syria policy. An arsenal of drones and 500 military advisors, with a partnership with the SDF, are not enough to shape a coherent strategy.

Second, there is no consensus on whether US forces should resort to limited deterrence to prevent Iran from establishing its supply line. The Pentagon affirmed that it "does not seek to fight Syrian regime, Russian, or pro-regime forces partnered with them, but will not hesitate to defend Coalition or partner forces from any threat."¹⁵ Despite calls from the White House, the Pentagon declined to take measures to prevent the attempts of pro-regime forces to advance in Deir Ezzor via the Euphrates River valley into Iraq.¹⁶ Syrian partners of the United States are not equipped to seize full control of that governorate nor can the Pentagon effectively defend its assets if US advisors are deployed in the Badiyah (Syrian desert).

Third, the investigation surrounding the Trump campaign's alleged collusion with the Kremlin is preventing a smoother process of stabilizing Syria and is complicating the conclusion of a grand deal in Syria between Washington and Moscow. Trump is not currying favor with Putin and Russia will not give the United States any slack in Syria.

Fourth, the Trump Administration has repeatedly affirmed that it has no intention of staying in Syria for the long term, after the Islamic State is defeated, or playing a nation-building role.¹⁷ Responding to comments by an SDF commander that the United States will remain in Syria long after the defeat of IS, State Department spokeswoman, Heather Nauert, said in a press briefing: "Our overall mission, and we're not taking our eye off the ball in this regard, is to defeat ISIS. Whether it's in Iraq or in Syria, that is our intent, to defeat ISIS and not do anything more than that."¹⁸ However, American strategic support for the Kurds and investment in the deal with Russia mean Washington must provide guarantees for the local and regional powers, at least in the medium term. Furthermore, there are risks of confrontations between Israel and Hezbollah, between Turkish and Kurdish fighters, and between the Syrian regime and the opposition.

Fifth, the most consequential US dilemma is how to handle Iran after the defeat of IS. The Trump Administration should determine whether it will continue the Obama Administration's approach of distinguishing between Iran's nuclear deal and its regional activities. The lack of a regional approach to Iran adds to the lack of US clarity in Syria.

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US POLICY IN SYRIA

When it comes to Syria, the only question that matters to the Trump Administration is to decide whether that country is worth fighting for—or, to be more precise, if what is at stake for the United States is worth fighting for. The answer is not black and white; there are options between inaction and full-fledged intervention. In the case of Syria, however, these options are gradually narrowing. The five policy recommendations below take into consideration the restrictions on the ground and suggest options for the United States.

1. Talking to Russia is imperative. There is no way around this prerequisite. Fighting both Russia and Iran in Syria is not an option; it would put US troops at risk and reduce US ability to influence the outcome. Russia is now the kingmaker in Syria, so engaging Moscow to contain Tehran remains the most viable US approach. The fact is that both sides need each other in

Syria and no other alternative or diplomatic channel is available for the cessation of violence. Most importantly, when, and if, the US-Russian coordination collapses, US forces must choose between facing Iran, staying idle, or retreating.

2. *Deterring Iran needs a long-term strategy.* When the dust settles, Iran will continue to have significant leverage in Syria. In recent months, Tehran has been increasingly in tune with the Russian strategy in return for establishing its supply line to Beirut. In the short term, limited deterrence by targeting Iranian-backed militias, when needed, remains a viable tactic to establish rules of conduct. Containing Iranian influence is the least bad option available and requires a long-term US strategy for postwar Syria.

3. *Appeasing Israel and Jordan.* Both Jordan and Israel have established a buffer zone on their borders with Syria (in the case of Israel, it is the occupied Golan Heights) to keep extremist groups at a distance. The Syrian issue will most likely create tensions between the United States and Israel, and Washington's interest is to avoid the scenario of fighting a war in Syria on behalf of Israel. In the case of Jordan, there is a gradual process of reconciliation with the Syrian regime and Amman will look to Washington for guarantees in safeguarding its border and securing the return of refugees to Syria. Continuous engagement with both countries is important for US interests because if Jordan fails to deliver in southern Syria or Israel continues to defy the ceasefire, US interests might be at risk.

4. *Clarifying US views on the Kurdish issue.* One of the most controversial elements of the US approach in Syria has been the strong trust built over time between Washington and Kurdish fighters, which ultimately alienated both Turkey and the Syrian armed opposition groups. The SDF agreed with US preconditions to focus on Daesh instead of the Syrian regime; they were also effective in battling IS and reliable when receiving training and weapons. Unlike the previous US administration, the Trump Administration made no apologies about that emerging alliance. Now that the war against IS is gradually coming to an end, the United States must clarify where it stands on the Kurds' quest for autonomy and encourage the SDF to be part of the talks about the future of Syria. Washington also must balance its relations with Ankara as it continues to consider Kurdish ambitions in Syria as an internal threat. The passing of the Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence on September 25 has certainly not made this dynamic any less serious. Ultimately, the United States should have the same consistent policy regarding Kurds in both Iraq and Syria—that is, calling for a dialogue with the central government to reach a consensus on power sharing.

5. *Reestablishing relations with the Syrian opposition.* When the Trump Administration took power in January 2017, relations between Washington and the Syrian opposition in exile were at a low; distrust had grown between both sides. Since the US-Russia deal, Washington has pressured the opposition armed groups in southern Syria to remain in line and respect the ceasefire. Beyond the Kurds in the north, the United States has no reliable Syrian political partner. The tactical differences between US forces and the Syrian armed groups delayed and eventually cancelled plans to launch an operation in Deir Ezzor, which gave the Syrian regime an edge to lead that battle. As Syria enters a transitional phase, Washington must take two steps: 1) to restore high level dialogue with the Syrian opposition factions and encourage them to have a united political and military structure, and 2) to decide how the United States will deal with Assad in postwar Syria. All these questions relating to how Washington deals with the Syrian dilemma require answers as Syria appears to be emerging from the rubble. Phase 3 of the US

approach should look inward to what Washington wants from its policy in Syria and how Syria fits Washington's larger strategy in the Middle East.

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DECIPHERING TRUMP'S POLICY TOWARD ISRAEL-PALESTINE

Yousef Munayyer

Early in his candidacy for the presidency around mid-2016, Donald J. Trump announced, rather cavalierly, his intention to reach what he called the “ultimate deal” for peace between the Israelis and the Palestinians. This claim remained a sure promise in his campaign and in the Republican Party’s platform despite serious aspersions cast on it, given the history of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. President Trump continued to assert that he will assemble the best team for the mission and probably have his deal within the first year in office. As the months have dragged on since his inauguration last January, the folly of the original bravado became more apparent and, today, the United States as a long-time interlocutor appears as unable to achieve the president’s vision as it has even been.

AN EARLY PRO-ISRAEL MOVE

Shortly after Trump’s surprise election victory on November 8, 2016, his transition team began to assemble his new administration, including key figures related to the Israeli-Palestinian issue. One of his earliest appointments was the naming of his personal bankruptcy lawyer, David Friedman, for the post of ambassador to Israel.¹ This appointment began to lay the groundwork for the Trump approach to Israel-Palestine.

Friedman was Trump’s personal friend and lawyer for many years. Aside from his legal practice, Friedman was a vocal advocate for Israeli settlements and ran a charity that raised funds to build Beit El,² a key settlement in the early settler movement. He is easily the most controversial person ever nominated to this diplomatic post, which serves in a region with one of the tensest conflicts in the world. A regular columnist for a religious and nationalist Israeli publication called *Arutz Sheva*, he is on record as someone who has opposed Palestinian sovereignty in any portion of Palestine,³ questioned Israel’s policy of providing citizenship to its Palestinian citizens,⁴ viewed himself as part of the Israeli settler movement,⁵ and claimed that former President Barack Obama and former Secretary of State John Kerry were anti-Semites.⁶ The Senate ultimately barely confirmed the president’s pick for ambassador by a vote of 52-46,⁷ in large part because Friedman’s history of controversial right-wing positions made it hard to envision his success as a diplomat.

The Friedman pick was but the first indication of the direction of Trump’s policy on Israel-Palestine. Shortly after his confirmation, reports began to surface that Trump would announce the move of the American embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a decision every president before him has forestalled because US policy holds that the status of Jerusalem is to be determined through negotiations between the parties.⁸ Then, at the very end of 2016, more indications of the Trump policy surfaced when the president-elect reacted to President Obama’s decision to abstain from the UN Security Council Resolution condemning illegal Israeli settlements.⁹ The Israelis and Trump lobbied the Egyptians to withdraw the resolution, but it was ultimately reintroduced by other Security Council members and passed.¹⁰ Trump reacted with ire, tweeting, “As to the UN, things will be different after Jan. 20th,”¹¹ referring to his inauguration day. In fact, on inauguration day, Trump was set to announce the relocation of the embassy to

Jerusalem as his first act as president, according to Senator Bob Corker, Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee,¹² but he likely held off due to the intervention of Jordanian King Abdullah II, who traveled to Washington to meet him before that supposed announcement.

THE ENVOYS

Along with Friedman, Trump has designated two envoys to represent the administration in frequent meetings with the parties to discuss matters related to Israeli-Palestinian peace. One of those envoys is Jason Greenblatt, another attorney and close confidant of Trump who had been employed by the Trump organization for some time and became an advisor to Trump on Israel. Along with Friedman, Greenblatt is thought to have played a key role in shaping Trump's positions on Israel during the campaign and in the transition period. He and Friedman authored a public memo to Trump as co-chairs of his Israel Advisory Committee during the campaign, outlining their right-wing positions.¹³

Joining Greenblatt as a presidential envoy is Jared Kushner, the president's son-in-law. Kushner's father has had a close relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu over the years and was included on a short list of Americans from whom Netanyahu would seek campaign funds. So close are the Kushners and Netanyahu that the Israeli prime minister once slept in young Jared's bed when visiting his parents. Trump's son-in-law is now charged with communicating the positions of the American president to the Israeli prime minister alongside Friedman and Greenblatt.

All three lack international or diplomatic experience; yet this is the trio tasked with what is perhaps the most complex and daunting American foreign policy portfolio of all. Although they lack diplomatic experience, they do have an intimate familiarity with the Israeli right, the settler movement, and Benjamin Netanyahu, and they seem to have the trust of President Trump. While this might bode well for ensuring a strong US-Israel relationship, it is likely to hinder any prospects of advancing a durable Israeli-Palestinian peace.

OUTSIDE-IN VS. INSIDE-OUT

After setting up his team, President Trump began to take the next steps in formulating his policy toward the Israeli-Palestinian issue and the region at large. One of the first foreign leaders to meet Trump in the White House on an official visit was Benjamin Netanyahu,¹⁴ and Trump's first international visit was to the Middle East.¹⁵ Both of these trips and developments in between played an important role in shaping the Trump Administration's positions.

Netanyahu arrived in Washington for a meeting on February 15, 2017.¹⁶ Even though this was merely three weeks into the administration of President Trump, there were already indications of a policy shift ahead of the meeting. The Israelis had made a series of settlement expansion announcements before Netanyahu arrived,¹⁷ the sort that would routinely draw the condemnation of the White House from the podium of the press secretary or through an official statement. Yet no condemnation came. The Israelis, it seemed, were testing the waters; indeed, they may have been surprised at how conciliatory the White House was in response to their moves. Netanyahu's right-wing coalition members began demanding that the moment was ripe to exploit the opportunity at hand and take massive paradigm shifting steps in the

West Bank, like annexation. In fact, in early October, Netanyahu announced his support for legislation in the Israeli Knesset to annex 19 settlements.¹⁸

The meeting seemingly confirmed the policy shift. While Trump did tell Netanyahu in the post-meeting press conference that he wanted to see him “hold back on settlements a little bit,”¹⁹ he also said that he was open to whatever solution the parties were ready to discuss, the one- or two-state solution. For Netanyahu this was a tremendous victory. In the preceding weeks, the White House had dropped any mention of the two-state solution, language that had been omnipresent in American statements for years. Now with Trump's comments at the press conference, it was clear that this was not just an oversight but an intentional statement. The traditional American insistence on the creation of a Palestinian state at some point in time had evaporated. Netanyahu and the Israeli right had achieved something that was unthinkable only a few years before.

But the disappearance of the two-state objective was not the only news to emerge from the meeting. Trump had revealed, perhaps inadvertently, that he and Netanyahu were discussing, in his words, “a much bigger deal, a much more important deal, in a sense. It would take in many, many countries and it would cover a very large territory. So I didn't know you were going to be mentioning that, but that's – now that you did, I think it's a terrific thing and I think we have some pretty good cooperation from people that in the past would never, ever have even thought about doing this.”²⁰

Trump was referring to a regional grand bargain that would not only purportedly bring Israeli-Palestinian peace but also peace between Israel and states in the region. In recent years, covert alliances between Israel and Gulf Arab states had been building as a tactical response to Iran, but such relations were still taboo in a region where publics opposed Israel's brutal treatment of their Palestinian Arab kin. Trump, who has developed strong ties with key Arab Gulf states that seek normalization with Israel, like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, was flirting with the idea of helping to bring these relations out into the open. Netanyahu, who would welcome the opportunity to use this so-called outside-in approach²¹ to weaken Palestinians by achieving a separate peace, was surely happy to hear Trump's words.

Of course the Palestinians, along with the Arab states, had long since provided their own version of a regional grand bargain, which was not outside-in but rather inside-out. The 2002 Arab Peace Initiative, proposed at the Arab League Summit Meeting in Beirut, Lebanon, had been embraced by the Arab countries; the plan affirmed that should Israel agree to a peace deal with the Palestinians within the framework of international law, then peace and normalized ties with the remaining Arab states would follow. Netanyahu and Trump now seemed set on undoing this longstanding Arab consensus.

Palestinian Authority President Mahmoud Abbas spent significant time traveling to Arab capitals and meeting other Arab leaders in an effort to ensure that the consensus around the Arab Peace Initiative would hold. During the League of Arab States meeting in March 2017, Abbas garnered League-wide support for the initiative, which was back on the agenda after years of falling behind other urgent issues in the region, including uprisings and civil wars.²² When King Abdullah of Jordan and President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi of Egypt both came to visit Trump in the weeks after the Arab League meeting,²³ they too delivered the message about the Arab Peace Initiative in their public comments alongside Trump. The Palestinian Authority president would arrive in Washington in early May to meet with Trump and, despite showering

Trump with praise, Abbas was alone again in espousing the two-state solution as a goal when the leaders spoke at their respective podiums following the meeting.

By the end of the month, Trump would be embarking on his first foreign trip as president. Usually, American presidents make their first foreign trips to one of their neighbors, but Trump chose to go to Riyadh at the invitation of King Salman of Saudi Arabia,²⁴ where he would meet with representatives of 50 Arab and Muslim countries. In Riyadh, President Trump mentioned that Israeli-Palestinian peace could unlock peace throughout the region—pointing to a chronology of inside-out, not outside-in, events, which surely disturbed Netanyahu.²⁵ The bulk of his comments, however, focused on telling Arab Gulf regimes that he did not intend to criticize their human rights abuses, identifying Iran as the greatest problem in the region, and demanding an end to the financing of terror groups like the Islamic State and others. This offered much for Netanyahu to work with and, in an attempt to make a parallel with Trump's focus on Iran, Netanyahu created a new demand to end the Palestinian Authority's welfare payments to Palestinians killed by Israel, including those killed or imprisoned carrying out attacks.

After leaving Riyadh and heading to Israel and Palestine, Trump visited Jerusalem and carefully sidestepped traps that would lead him to refer to Jerusalem as Israeli.²⁶ He stuck meticulously to prepared remarks and even told Netanyahu's cabinet that he believed Abbas wanted peace and that they, too, would have to make difficult choices. After Trump's meeting with Abbas in Bethlehem, it appeared that Netanyahu was the one who disappointed Trump. Readouts from the meetings indicated Abbas was prepared to relaunch negotiations but that no such commitment was reciprocated by Netanyahu. Instead, Trump was forced to leave the Holy Land with little more than pictures at the Western Wall and to delegate the work of trying to restart negotiations to his much-vaunted and dynamic trio of envoys.

A PEACE PLAN?

Nearly five months have passed since Trump's visit to the region. His team of envoys have traveled to meet with the principal parties multiple times, and delegations from these parties have also come to Washington. In August, the American envoys had an opportunity to present to the parties a set of options for a way forward ahead of the United Nations General Assembly (UNGA) meeting in September, at which leaders of all the countries would be making key statements before the international community. But the envoys came with nothing new and the United States could still not even say that it is committed to the creation of a Palestinian state, let alone present a position on settlements, Jerusalem, or refugees. Reports had emerged about the possibility of a Trump peace initiative for full Palestinian self-rule but without a state that would be revealed at the UNGA, but this never materialized, perhaps because it never really existed or because it was not ready in time.²⁷ So Trump, Netanyahu, and Abbas each went to the UNGA to make their remarks, with Trump and Netanyahu both underscoring the threat they believed comes from Iran while saying nothing about how to advance peace between Israelis and Palestinians. Abbas continued to speak of the struggle for statehood and, while his remarks were met with applause from the UN body, it is unclear if they registered at all with the White House. Shortly thereafter, the international police organization, INTERPOL, accepted the State of Palestine as a member. This served as a reminder that the Palestinians may shift to an internationalized strategy again if the White House fails to put forward a

meaningful proposal.

CAN TRUMP MAKE ANY PROGRESS?

President Trump is hampered by many problems when it comes to pursuing Israeli-Palestinian peace. Despite a stated commitment, he is constantly distracted by scandal and controversy, much of it his own doing, which makes it difficult for him to engage in any sustained or serious way. This would not be an insurmountable problem if he were able to rely on his team of envoys, but even that does not seem to be possible. Greenblatt and Kushner are out of their depth on this issue and Friedman's deep biases continue to shine through. For example, in early September, Ambassador Friedman referred to the "alleged occupation" when speaking to Israeli media,²⁸ perhaps forgetting he was ambassador and thinking he was still writing for right-wing, religious-nationalist settler publications. Staff of the US State Department had to distance themselves from his comments. By the end of the month, a similar episode unfolded with Friedman—this time he said that only 2 percent of the West Bank was occupied.²⁹ Once again, the State Department's spokesperson had to clean up the damage done by Friedman, drawing questions about whether or not Friedman, who is the Senate-confirmed US ambassador, actually represents US policy.³⁰

Distracted at home and straddled with a dysfunctional team of envoys whose only real experience is with the hard-core Israeli right, Donald Trump is not primed for success when it comes to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking. That the State Department continues to be understaffed exacerbates the problem, and his Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, is often absent on this issue in particular. To be sure, with the president's envoys having little relevant experience, it would be helpful for the State Department to play a more robust role in supporting the effort. A good start would be to communicate US policy more steadily through the State Department's spokesperson by resuming daily press briefings, which has not happened since the Obama Administration. This would serve to at least provide a consistent line from Washington and clarify misinformation and misperceptions. If Trump is truly serious in this effort, he should also consider replacing his envoys with seasoned diplomats who will not be exploited by the shrewd Netanyahu and who are able to maintain a more genuine public perception of impartiality.

It also seems that all the parties realize that there is a lack of leadership in Washington and that this means there will be no "ultimate deal." Instead, they will angle to get the most they can in the interim. For Abbas and the PA, and Netanyahu and Israel, these will be two very different things. Abbas will likely look for something declarative that sustains the idea of a Palestinian state while Netanyahu will push for something that negates it. Neither will likely transpire. Instead, all will muddle through some variation of the status quo. Washington might broker interim agreements that enable a modicum of economic improvements for Palestinians living under occupation. If this is the best Abbas can get, then he will have to find a way to convince his people that it is acceptable, even as Israeli settlements continue to make the occupation more entrenched. With nearly 67 percent of Palestinians calling for their octogenarian leader to resign,³¹ Abbas will find this difficult to do and will likely rely further on instruments of repression.

Ultimately, if Donald Trump is officially taking the two-state solution off the table, he will need to enunciate an alternative. The two-state solution was a deeply flawed plan but it was, at

minimum, a plan. It is clear the Israelis have moved on from it and it seems that the Americans are doing so as well—and Palestinians will not be long behind. But taking one plan off the table and replacing it with nothing is dangerous because it demonstrates that the United States finds the status quo acceptable. Washington simply cannot continue to frame the discussion as one state or two; rather, it must say, “if not two, then what?” The White House, in the absence of a plan, should lay out clear principles to which the parties must adhere, particularly if the outcome is not the two-state solution that has been at the center of American policy for years. These principles must include freedom, justice, and equality for all inhabitants of the land, Palestinians and Israelis alike. The US approach must also make clear that if the Israelis are not willing to permit the creation of a Palestinian state, they will have to accept and enforce the principle of equal rights for all Palestinians.

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THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION AND DEVELOPMENTS IN IRAQ

Gregory Aftandilian

The Trump Administration sees Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi as the best leader it can hope to support in a country as troubled and divided as Iraq. US forces will likely continue to train and assist the Iraqi national army even after remnants of the so-called Islamic State (IS) are completely removed from the country. Despite Abadi's Shia background and his leading role in the Dawa Party, the Trump Administration hopes that he will work to minimize Iranian influence in Iraq.

With a stated aversion to the idea of "nation building" and having lost billions of dollars in Iraqi reconstruction funds to waste, fraud, and abuse in the 2003-2011 period, US policymakers are reticent about assisting Iraq financially to rebuild its heavily damaged cities. They seem to be counting on Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to foot the bill; however, these countries may not be as forthcoming with largesse as Washington and Baghdad would like. Without a major rebuilding plan in place that is backed by significant international resources, Iraq could face another sectarian crisis in the coming years, as the heavily damaged cities are largely in the Arab Sunni areas of the country whose population has felt disenfranchised since Shia-led governments took power shortly after the US-led invasion in 2003. In addition, coming on the heels of the highly controversial Iraqi Kurdish referendum for independence, Iraq's future remains problematic and will likely occupy the Trump Administration's attention over the next several years.

TRUMP, IRAQ, AND THE PRIMACY OF THE ANTI-IS CAMPAIGN

During the long US presidential campaign in 2015-2016, then candidate Donald Trump frequently called the 2003 Iraq war a "disaster" that should have never been fought because it squandered American lives and treasure and helped Iran extend its influence in the Arab world.¹ This message had a great deal of resonance with a substantial segment of the American people who, by that time, had come to see that war as a mistake. Trump even accused his Democratic opponent, Hillary Clinton, of being "trigger-happy" in part because she voted for the Iraq war resolution when she was a US senator.²

Trump's "America First" ideology also played into this opposition to the 2003 Iraq war, as he used that conflict to argue that the United States should avoid costly engagements overseas. Instead, he called for concentrating all efforts on building the American economy and a kind of isolationist, fortress America.

Nonetheless, Trump also has said that, having gone into Iraq, US forces should have never left.³ Like other Republicans, he blamed the Obama Administration for leaving Iraq without a residual US military force in place and this, in his view, allowed IS to take over large parts of Iraq in the summer of 2014. But Trump also suggested a more cynical motive that evinced ignorance of Iraqi and Middle Eastern history: the western exploitation of oil resources in the region. During a public address at CIA headquarters the day after his inauguration in January 2017, Trump said the United States should have taken the oil and half-jokingly said perhaps the next time it might actually do so—which, of course, would be a violation of international

law.⁴ These comments were widely criticized in Iraq,⁵ including by the Iraqi leadership, and prompted Secretary of Defense James Mattis to say, while on a visit to Baghdad, that the United States had no designs on Iraqi oil—in other words, he had to play clean-up after Trump’s remarks.⁶

At the same time, Trump also criticized the Obama Administration for what he believed was its tepid response to IS and vowed that under his presidency, IS would be totally destroyed because it was a threat to the US homeland.⁷ These statements meant not only continuing the Obama policy of US air strikes against the Islamic State and the provision of training and advisors to rebuild the Iraqi army, which was re-organized in September 2014, but also a policy to allow US military commanders in Iraq more leeway to make decisions on the battlefield without always checking with Washington.⁸

Hence, Trump tried to avoid getting bogged down in Iraq while, at the same time, he ramped up military pressure against the Islamic State.

ABADI AS A STRONG ALLY IN THE FIGHT AGAINST IS

Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who visited Washington in March 2017, was one of the first foreign leaders Trump received in the White House. The president seemed to be impressed with Abadi’s determination to defeat IS, saying he had “great respect” for the prime minister and lauded the sacrifices of the Iraqi national army in its fight to take back Mosul.⁹ A White House readout from the meeting stated that Trump and Abadi agreed that the United States and Iraq would “pursue a long-term partnership to decisively root out terrorism from Iraq and strengthen the Iraqi military and other key institutions.”¹⁰ For his part, Abadi, with the help of Mattis and White House National Security Advisor H.R. McMaster, was able to persuade Trump earlier to drop Iraq from his original list of Muslim-majority countries from which citizens were banned from entering the United States.¹¹

In the spring of 2017, reports surfaced that the Trump Administration, under the direction of Defense Secretary Mattis, was holding talks with Abadi and his government over long-term US military presence in Iraq once IS is defeated there in order to continue to train the Iraqi army and provide a kind of insurance policy against the emergence of another extremist group.¹² Some reports mentioned that the number of US troops would be roughly equivalent to the current levels (5,000-7,000) already in the country, but because of nationalist sensitivities in Iraq, Abadi is treading carefully on this issue. He has said that US forces, post-IS, would only be “advisors.”¹³ Given Iraq’s nationalist history of opposition to western forces and suspicions of US motives, Abadi may decide to opt for an executive agreement with the United States on the American troop presence as opposed to submitting a formal Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) to the Iraqi Parliament, where ratification could become a highly charged political issue and may not pass.¹⁴

ABADI AS A POTENTIAL ALLY AGAINST IRAN

President Trump was undoubtedly briefed by US intelligence officials on Abadi’s Shia background and the fact that his Dawa Party is a longstanding Shia Islamist party that, in the past, received assistance from Iran.¹⁵ Nonetheless, among Iraq’s Shia politicians, Abadi is

considered a moderate and not one to pursue a narrow sectarian agenda. Moreover, he seems much more willing to countenance a Sunni role in government, in contrast to the policies of his predecessor, Nouri al-Maliki.¹⁶ And while Abadi maintains cordial relations with Iran, he is reportedly wary that some of the Popular Mobilization Forces in Iraq, a mostly Shia force that was established in part with Iran's help when IS was at Baghdad's gates in 2014, answer more to Iran's Revolutionary Guard Corps than to the central Iraqi government.¹⁷ In the fight against IS, Abadi has tried to limit these Shia militia forces going into Sunni cities, such as during the liberation of Mosul, because of the sectarian violence that occurred in earlier battles. To broaden his support, Abadi has fashioned himself as an Iraqi nationalist, emphasizing that the anti-IS fight is a struggle backed by the entire Iraqi nation.¹⁸

Knowing the demographics of Iraq — where about 60 percent of the population is Shia Muslim — the Trump Administration seems to understand that the Shia are going to remain on top of Iraq's political system and therefore, it makes sense to cultivate and support a moderate leader like Abadi.¹⁹ Indeed, some high ranking officials in the Trump Administration like Mattis (who was a Marine Corps combat commander in Iraq) are familiar with the more radical elements in Iraq, as many of his fellow Marines were killed by Iraqi Shia militiamen who were supplied and trained by Iran.²⁰ Hence, compared to some alternatives within the Shia community, Abadi looks like a good bet.

Perhaps for this reason, Trump and his officials have not given Abadi an ultimatum on ties with Iran, as they seem to know that Iraq is going to have a relationship with Iran regardless of US policy. This is because of religious ties — for example, tens of thousands of Iranian pilgrims visit Shia holy sites in Iraq every year — and the fact that Iran, as a next-door neighbor, will continue to try to exert as much influence as it can on Iraq. What Trump Administration officials probably hope is that Abadi will try to keep Iranian influence to a minimum and steer Iraq back to the Arab world with the help of Saudi Arabia and other major Arab states.

Indeed, this process is already happening. For many years, post-2003, Saudi Arabia was very reluctant to send an ambassador to Baghdad out of concern that Iraq was becoming an Iranian vassal state. This attitude has changed in the last couple of years, with Saudi Arabia restoring full diplomatic relations with Iraq and receiving Abadi in Riyadh, a process that was encouraged by the United States.²¹ More surprisingly, even the Iraqi radical Shia cleric, Muqtada al-Sadr — once viewed by the Saudis as being in Iran's pocket — was received recently in Riyadh by Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman.²² It is apparent that the Saudis are appealing to these Shia leaders' sense of Arabism in the hope that they will continue to wean themselves from Iran.

THE LEGACIES AND RENEWED CONTROVERSIES RELATED TO IRAQI RECONSTRUCTION

Abadi's chief concerns now are not about Iranian influence but how to rebuild the heavily damaged Iraqi cities, like Mosul, most of which are situated in the Arab Sunni parts of Iraq where distrust of the Shia still runs deep.²³ In addition, there are hundreds of thousands of internally displaced refugees from the conflict with IS, many of them living in poor conditions and unable to go home because the liberated cities remain uninhabitable. The key question Abadi faces is how to pay for the rebuilding of these cities, as the costs are enormous. The deputy governor of Anbar province west of Baghdad has estimated the cost of rebuilding the

cities in his jurisdiction alone as at least \$22 billion.²⁴

Abadi likely knows that if he fails in this rebuilding endeavor, not only will his efforts to reach out to the Sunnis come to naught, but the situation might also provide an opportunity for another extremist group like IS to emerge in the future.²⁵ The reason why the Islamic State was so successful in taking large swaths of Iraqi territory in Sunni areas, with only a few thousand fighters in the summer of 2014, was that it capitalized on pervasive Sunni discontent over Nouri al-Maliki and his unfriendly policies.

Iraq's financial resources are not adequate to do the job, however. Over the past several years, because of low oil prices and high military and civil service expenditures, Iraq has actually posted budget deficits of over \$20 billion per year.²⁶ In 2017, as a result of certain austerity measures, the budget deficit might drop to about \$18 billion, but this still means that Iraqi coffers will continue to remain problematic for the foreseeable future as Baghdad has to borrow to cover such major shortfalls.²⁷

During his visit to Washington in March 2017, Abadi stated publicly that he hoped the United States and other allies would continue to offer Iraq economic assistance, knowing how crucial this is to Iraq's stability.²⁸

The Trump Administration recognizes Iraq's needs but appears unwilling to make a major financial commitment to Baghdad. For Fiscal Year (FY) 2018, the Trump budget request for direct economic assistance to Iraq is \$300 million, up from \$112.5 million in FY 2016.²⁹ Iraq might receive additional US economic assistance through another account called the "Further Continuing and Security Assistance Appropriations" that is designed to aid countries countering IS, but the total amount of this fund is \$1 billion and is to be divided among several countries. Hence, total US economic aid to Iraq under the Trump budget is likely to be below \$1 billion for FY 2018—not nearly enough even to make a dent in the reconstruction of the damaged cities in Iraq.

The Trump Administration's reluctance to fund such rebuilding in Iraq is the result of several factors. First, no country wants to be burned twice: of the \$60 billion that was allotted to Iraqi reconstruction in the period 2003-2011, US auditors found that at least \$8 billion was lost to waste, fraud, and abuse.³⁰ Although some of the fraud was the result of unscrupulous American contractors, most of the amount was lost, pilfered, or wasted in Iraq. With President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson vowing to cut not only State Department and USAID operations, but foreign aid itself, the Trump Administration probably believes it cannot justify a large increase in economic aid to a country that has a record of not using the aid properly. Despite Abadi's best efforts to clamp down on corruption, it is still a major problem in Iraq today.³¹

Second, both Trump and Tillerson are ideologically opposed to so-called "nation building," as in the case of Iraq. Trump's philosophy is that it is neither the job nor the responsibility of the United States to build nations, and his "America First" ideology necessitates the channeling of US economic resources to build up the American economy. Meanwhile, in his major address to the leaders of the anti-IS coalition in March 2017 in Washington, Tillerson stated that the goal of the assembled leaders was to defeat IS, but "we are not in the business of nation-building or reconstruction."³² He added: "We must ensure that our respective nations' precious and limited resources are devoted to preventing the resurgence of ISIS and equipping the war-torn communities to take the lead in rebuilding their institutions and returning to stability." By

“equipping” Tillerson meant assisting without large outlays of financial aid.

Third, the Trump Administration seems to be counting on Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to take the lead in helping Iraq financially. This may indeed be part of Trump’s strategy of embracing the Saudi leadership. As mentioned earlier, US officials are probably heartened by the fact that the Saudis are now supporting Abadi.

The problem of relying on the Saudis and the other GCC states, however, is that they may not be in the financial or political position right now to extend substantial resources to Iraq. Low oil prices and high military expenditures, fed in part by the war in Yemen, have caused the Saudis to post large budget deficits of their own over the past several years and to undergo economic belt-tightening.³³ Moreover, even though the Saudis have reached out to Abadi, other issues are occupying their attention at present, such as their dispute (backed by the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt) with Qatar that shows little signs of abating. Therefore, the Washington strategy of hoped-for Saudi financial assistance to help Abadi rebuild the damaged cities may result in big disappointments.

Nonetheless, it is in Abadi’s interest not only to have the Saudis on his government’s side economically, but also to persuade them to weigh in with the Sunni tribes of western Iraq to cooperate with his government.³⁴ In order to bring about this reconciliation, the tribes need to be assured that the cities of Anbar province will be rebuilt. This is all the more imperative given the fact that the Trump Administration does not appear to be forthcoming on a large-scale economic plan for Iraq.

Indeed, in April 2017, Iraqi Foreign Minister Ibrahim al-Jaafari reportedly urged Brett McGurk, the US envoy to the anti-IS coalition, to support a major reconstruction project for Iraq similar to the post-World War II Marshall Plan that helped to rebuild Western Europe.³⁵ There is no indication that McGurk gave a positive reply.

THE KURDISH ISSUE ADDS TO ABADI’S—AND WASHINGTON’S—PROBLEMS

The lack of resources for rebuilding Iraqi cities is challenging enough, but Iraq is now also facing a serious ethnic conflict between the Arabs and Kurds due to the Iraqi Kurds’ desire for independence—at least on paper. For the Kurds, the independence referendum, which passed overwhelmingly on September 25, was an important statement in their long nationalist quest for an independent state; however, it is likely to exacerbate ethnic tensions not only in Iraq but also in the region.³⁶ The Trump Administration’s attempts to have the Kurds, a key ally in the anti-IS fight, put off the referendum, came to naught. The Kurds apparently were not cowed by Washington’s public and private opposition to the referendum.³⁷

After having presided over costly and bloody anti-IS victories like the liberation of Mosul, Abadi does not want another fight on his hands. Much will depend on what happens in areas around the Kurdish Regional Government in northern Iraq, particularly the ethnically mixed and oil-rich city of Kirkuk. This city’s status, which the Kurds believe is rightfully theirs, was supposed to have been determined by a referendum by its inhabitants a decade ago, but the issue was so politically explosive it was deferred many times.³⁸ Then in 2014, as IS marched through northern Iraq and the Iraqi army collapsed, the Kurds seized Kirkuk and unilaterally made it part of the Kurdish Regional Government despite protests by the central government in Baghdad.³⁹

If Kirkuk remains peaceful after the referendum, Abadi might confine his opposition to Kurdish demands for independence to statements and economic pressure. But if clashes ensue, he may feel compelled to send regular Iraqi army units into Kirkuk to protect the ethnic Arab and Turkmen inhabitants of the city.⁴⁰ He has already called the referendum unconstitutional.⁴¹

In addition, if the Kurds actually press for independence after the referendum, Turkey and/or Iran might intervene militarily, as they are both strongly opposed to Iraqi Kurdish independence, believing it would stir up their own Kurdish populations to press for the same.⁴²

RECOMMENDATIONS FOR US POLICY

The Trump Administration would be well advised to counsel the Kurds not to take any provocative actions in Kirkuk against non-Kurds, and not to use the referendum's results to press for actual independence. It should also strongly advise Turkey to desist from military intervention against the Kurds in northern Iraq. Starting a Middle East regional war at a time when IS is on its last legs in Iraq and Syria would not be in the interest of the United States. Because the Trump Administration has very poor relations with Iran, it should rely on a friend in the region, like Qatar, to pass on to Tehran that Iranian intervention would not be welcomed, either, because it could lead to a wider war. The one thing Iran and the United States seem to agree on at this point is opposition to a breakaway Kurdish state, and if enough pressure is applied on the Kurds from different states, the Kurds may desist in pressing the issue further.

On the issue of Iraqi reconstruction, the Trump Administration should rethink its opposition to a long-term reconstruction plan. This does not mean that the United States should provide Iraq with tens of billions of dollars for reconstruction like it did in the 2003-2011 period, but it does mean that Washington should convene an international meeting of donors, made up of European countries, Gulf Arab states, Japan, China, and the international financial institutions, to devise a mechanism to fund the reconstruction of the heavily damaged cities. If enough countries share the financial burden, such a plan could conceivably succeed. Without it, the Abadi government, and by extension Washington, run the risk of witnessing a new Sunni insurgency in the near future that could throw Iraq back into chaos and possibly lead to the formation of another IS-like extremist group, one that could threaten not only the region but Europe and the United States as well.

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US-TURKEY RELATIONS AND THEIR IMPACT ON THE ARAB WORLD

Mustafa Gurbuz

Since becoming a member of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) in 1952, Turkey has been a key ally of the United States regardless of the changing governments and leaders in both countries. The current deterioration of bilateral relations, however, has brought wide skepticism about the future of the long partnership. For most Turkey experts, the setback is unprecedented since the time of the 1974 crisis, when the United States implemented an arms embargo in response to Turkey's invasion of Cyprus.¹ The Cold War atmosphere united Ankara and Washington against the common threat of the Soviet Union. What is often called a strategic partnership between Ankara and Washington in the post-Cold War era, however, has been plagued with the increasingly divergent interests of both parties.

American-Turkish relations have been especially turned upside down in the past few years due to the shifting dynamics in the Syrian civil war. The American military partnership with the People's Protection Units (YPG), an armed militia that has links to Turkey's nemesis, the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK), has frustrated Ankara deeply. In addition, the botched coup attempt in July 2016 marked a new low in bilateral relations; Ankara accused the United States of involvement in the coup conspiracy² and opened an investigation against John Brennan, the former head of the Central Intelligence Agency.³ Donald Trump's inauguration as the 45th president of the United States, therefore, came at a time when both countries were in desperate need of repairing severely damaged relations.

Despite President Trump's recurrent anti-Muslim statements in the election campaign,⁴ Turkish officials and pro-government media supported and expressed optimism about the new incumbent in the White House.⁵ Among the reasons behind Ankara's initial optimism was Trump's business style of conducting politics. Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has long been a fan of the "transactional approach" in his dealings, believing in the value of running the country "like a corporation."⁶ In addition to the similarity of the two leaders, the Trump Administration's dismissive approach to democratic institutions and human rights issues has encouraged Ankara to court Washington.

Turkey's three major demands from the United States have included the following: 1) curbing support to the YPG with alternative plans for the Raqqa, Syria, operation, as well as cooperating in the fight against the PKK in Turkey and Iraq; 2) extraditing Fethullah Gulen, the self-exiled Turkish imam living in Pennsylvania since 1999, whom Ankara accuses of masterminding the 2016 coup attempt; and 3) reaching a negotiated resolution regarding the arrests in New York of a Turkish state bank deputy official, Mehmet Hakan Atilla, and a Turkish-Iranian businessman, Reza Zarrab, both of whom have close ties to the Turkish president and have been accused of evading US sanctions against Iran.

Despite the initial willingness of the new White House to open a fresh chapter with Turkey, Ankara was quick to discover that the very institutional barriers that plagued bilateral relations during the Obama Administration have remained in place in the Trump era. As a response, Turkey has further developed its relations with Russia and Iran.

THE KURDISH QUESTION: A KEY DETERMINANT IN US-TURKEY RELATIONS

Since 2014, diverging interests in the Syrian civil war have put Washington and Ankara at opposing poles: while the United States focused on the fight against the Islamic State (IS), Turkey perceived the YPG as enemy number one in Syria and continued to support the Syrian rebels against the Assad regime. After a series of failed experiments to secure sufficient local Arab forces against IS, the Pentagon decided to cultivate strong relations with the Syrian Kurds, who were dominated by the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its armed militia, the YPG.⁷

The Islamic State's siege of the Kurdish town of Kobane on September 15, 2014, was a critical turning point in US-YPG relations. This was when Erdoğan refused to help the Syrian Kurds while the American media applauded YPG forces and Kurdish women fighters in their "epic defense."⁸ Raising the ire of Ankara, US military officials frequently praised YPG forces as reliable and most effective in defeating IS.⁹ In an effort to change Washington's approach, the Turkish government has diligently tried to expose the ideological and structural links between the YPG and the PKK, which has been designated as a Foreign Terrorist Organization by the United States since 1997.¹⁰ Nevertheless, US officials expressed their reluctance to accept the link between the YPG and the PKK as long as the YPG operated within Syria under the US command against the Islamic State.¹¹

Hoping to halt the US-YPG partnership in the Trump era, Ankara has offered alternative plans to the Pentagon for cooperation in northern Syria.¹² In fact, Turkey had a real chance to break the cycle. President Trump asked the Pentagon to come up with a major strategic plan by the end of February 2017 in order to launch a major operation against IS in its capital, Raqqa. Initially, the Turkish government curtailed the anti-American discourse in the Turkish media, although it continued to blame the Obama Administration for cooperating with the Syrian Kurds.¹³ In fact, Ankara made a special effort to block the reappointment of Brett McGurk, Special Presidential Envoy for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIL, who was perceived as "too friendly" with the YPG.¹⁴

The Trump Administration faced two critical questions that would have long-term consequences for US-Turkey relations. First, should the United States assign the YPG a leading role in liberating Raqqa and its non-Kurdish surroundings—a role that Syrian Kurds perceive as an American promise of Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria? Second, should the Pentagon provide heavy armaments to the YPG, and if so, under what conditions? Although the Obama Administration laid the foundation of the US-YPG partnership, such serious questions were left unaddressed and purposefully postponed to the post-election period. This situation not only delayed the military offensive against Raqqa but was also exploited by Russia, which used the time to court Turkey for the Astana process.

Nevertheless, Obama Administration officials were vocal in defending the continuation of close US-YPG cooperation. For example, former Deputy Secretary of State Antony Blinken called for arming the YPG to move promptly on the Raqqa offensive.¹⁵ Perhaps more important, the Trump Administration has received strong recommendations for cooperation with the YPG from the military officers who have ascended to power to shape Washington's policy, especially after the appointment of General James Mattis as Secretary of Defense. Of particular note, several officers from the US Central Command (CENTCOM)—the most ardent supporter of Syrian Kurds in the US Army—hold key positions in Trump's White House, including National Security Advisor Lieutenant General H.R. McMaster and the National Security

Council's senior director for the Middle East, Derek Harvey.¹⁶ In advising President Trump, the Pentagon also pointed out the difficulties Turkey had faced in its March 2017 siege of al-Bab, which led to an abrupt end to Operation Euphrates Shield.¹⁷

Thus, it did not take long for the Trump Administration to find Turkey's alternative suggestions "risky," deciding to count on the YPG for the Raqqa offensive. In a delicate balancing act, the White House swiftly congratulated Erdoğan's controversial referendum victory¹⁸ and invited him to Washington despite objections by the US Department of State.¹⁹ At the same time, a few days before Erdoğan's arrival in Washington, President Trump approved arming the YPG directly for the Raqqa operation.²⁰ Meanwhile, right after the referendum, Turkey bombed a few YPG strongholds in northern Syria, killing 20 Kurdish fighters with no warning to US forces to vacate the area.²¹ The Pentagon, the Department of State, and CENTCOM were quick to criticize the Turkish airstrikes.²²

A rather surprising dimension to the Kurdish question was the Turkish government's inept public relations in the United States. Erdoğan's first visit to Trump's White House was overshadowed by his security detail's violent assault on peaceful protestors, including Kurdish activists who carried the PYD flag.²³ Senior senators – both Republicans and Democrats led by John McCain and Dianne Feinstein – called for accountability of Turkish security personnel involved in the attack.²⁴ McCain added that the United States should throw Turkey's ambassador "the hell out."²⁵ A federal grand jury indicted 19 individuals, including 15 Turkish security officials, for conspiring to commit violence, a felony punishable up to 15 years in prison.²⁶ The Turkish government summoned John Bass, the US ambassador to Turkey,²⁷ and Erdoğan called the indictment of his guards a "scandal."²⁸ The US Senate later voted to freeze arms sales to Erdoğan's personal security guards due to "their history of excessive force."²⁹

Interestingly, a similar incident – marking the fourth contentious episode between Erdoğan's security detail and American protestors – eclipsed the Turkish president's second meeting with Trump at the UN General Assembly in New York in September 2017. A mixed group of Americans who sympathized with Kurds, wielding YPG flags, were beaten and kicked out of the venue – the Marriott Hotel near Times Square – where Erdoğan addressed his Turkish-American audience. The ranking member of the House Intelligence Committee, Adam Schiff (D-California), called for the immediate detention of Erdoğan's security detail for the assault.³⁰

THE AMERICAN JUDICIARY AND WORSENING ANKARA-WASHINGTON TIES

Beyond the Kurdish issue, several judicial cases have led to a remarkable escalation of tensions between Ankara and Washington. Turkey repeatedly demanded the extradition of Fethullah Gulen, the reclusive cleric who has lived in rural Pennsylvania since 1999, accusing him of masterminding the coup attempt in 2016.³¹ Ankara also sought the release of imprisoned Turkish-Iranian businessman Reza Zarrab who evaded US sanctions against Iran. Although they are two separate cases, the Turkish government has connected them by portraying the US judicial system as "politically motivated."³² In 2013, Gulen-linked police officers were behind the revelation of the corruption scandal that reached circles close to Erdoğan, and a key figure in their investigation was Zarrab. Since then, the Turkish government has not only aborted the investigation and overhauled the police force, but it also shut down all the media outlets of the Gulen movement. Thus, Ankara perceived the US authorities' indictment against Reza Zarrab in March 2016 as taking a side in the Erdoğan-Gulen clash, fearing that the Zarrab investigation

may lead to the subsequent criminalization of Turkish government officials.

For US officials, the extradition of Gulen was a difficult case. The Department of Justice frequently found the Turkish government's evidence to charge Gulen deficient, demanding more files.³³ The Obama Administration was also skeptical about Erdoğan's accusations due to the mass purge following the coup attempt,³⁴ which the Turkish president called "God's gift."³⁵ The fact that Erdoğan used the coup as a pretext to imprison over 50,000 dissidents, including the country's top intellectuals, academicians, journalists, and lawyers, raised far more questions in Washington. Many secularists who offered alternative explanations to the government narrative of the coup also faced terrorism charges for being members of the Fethullah Terrorist Organization, including Ahmet Sik, who had become a well-known journalist in the western media due to his critical views of Gulen.³⁶ Such inconsistencies and the Turkish government's aggressive control of the coup narrative were widely reflected in the western media; at the same time, the Turkish media increased its tone in blaming the United States for aiding the coup. The Turkish government's perspective was that Washington's reluctance to extradite Gulen represented clear evidence of American complicity. Turkey's justice minister even speculated that Bin Laden would have been instantly handed over to American authorities if he were living in Turkey, adding, "Fethullah Gulen is our Osama bin Laden."³⁷

With Donald Trump in the White House, Turkish officials hoped that a "transactional approach" based on common interests may usher a change in overcoming American legal barriers.³⁸ On November 8, 2016, the very day of the US elections, Trump's former campaign advisor Michael Flynn penned an op-ed piece in *The Hill* calling for Gulen's extradition, branding him "a shady Islamic mullah" and "a radical Islamist."³⁹ More importantly, Flynn was soon elevated to the post of National Security Advisor to the president, a key position for influencing policy toward Gulen. Thanks to Flynn, the first phone conversation between Erdoğan and Trump focused on extraditing Gulen, based on a bilateral extradition treaty between the United States and Turkey that enables bypassing lengthy court proceedings when "national security" is at stake.⁴⁰ A week later, however, Flynn was forced to resign over the investigation into Russia's meddling in the 2016 elections. In the ensuing FBI investigation, Flynn disclosed that his lobbying firm was paid \$530,000 by a businessman with close ties to the Turkish government. More embarrassingly, former CIA director James Woolsey accused Flynn of having secret meetings with Turkish Foreign Minister Mevlut Cavusoğlu and Minister of Energy Berat Albayrak to discuss abducting Gulen through extrajudicial measures.⁴¹ Given the fact that the American media was so eager to attack Trump's ties to foreign leaders in his first 100 days in office, Flynn's transgressions received massive attention and thus, the Trump Administration decided to leave the Gulen case in the hands of the American courts.

Such public scrutiny over the Trump Administration after the Flynn scandal also influenced the case of Reza Zarrab. After Trump won the presidency, the Turkish president paid extra attention to the case by arranging a personal meeting with the former New York City mayor, Rudolph Giuliani – who strongly supported Trump's campaign – and Michael Mukasey, who served as attorney general in the George W. Bush Administration.⁴² Giuliani and Mukasey acted as voluntary defense attorneys for Zarrab and requested "a state-to-state resolution" of the case, implying a transactional deal that would ensure the release of Zarrab in return for Turkey's help to advance American interests in the Middle East. Moreover, Turkish diplomats lobbied for the removal of US Attorney Preet Bharara, whose office first charged Zarrab in the investigation. The Trump Administration fired Bharara in March 2017 and soon after,⁴³ Ankara

launched an investigation against Bharara, charging that he worked with Gulen to facilitate the 2016 coup attempt.⁴⁴

The Trump Administration, however, frustrated Turkish officials when Joon Kim, the new acting US attorney who replaced Bharara, ordered the arrest of Mehmet Hakan Atilla, vice president of international banking in Halkbank—Turkey’s second largest state-owned bank. Atilla was accused of participating “in a years-long scheme to violate American sanctions laws by helping Reza Zarrab, a major gold trader, use US financial institutions to engage in prohibited financial transactions that illegally funneled millions of dollars to Iran.”⁴⁵ It was clear to the Turkish government that, despite the removal of Bharara, the Zarrab investigations had serious potential in reaching the higher echelons of Erdoğan’s family and friends.

In September 2017, federal prosecutors filed a new indictment that significantly expanded the Zarrab case, charging Turkey’s former minister of economy, Zafer Çağlayan, and the ex-head of Halkbank, Suleyman Aslan. For the first time, the indictment stated that high-ranking government officials in Iran and Turkey “participated in and protected this scheme” and some officials like Çağlayan received “tens of millions of dollars’ worth of bribes in cash and jewelry.”⁴⁶ Ankara was swift to call the indictment “a coup attempt” by “the American judiciary.”⁴⁷ Erdoğan declared that Turkey had never agreed to comply with international sanctions on Iran.⁴⁸ Noting that the Trump Administration paid special attention to the case of Andrew Brunson—a pastor being held in a Turkish prison for alleged ties to Gulen—the Turkish president sought to exchange Brunson for Zarrab or for Gulen.⁴⁹ Indeed, judicial independence in the United States has limited the Trump Administration’s influence over courts’ decisions related to this matter. Furthermore, and in the context of serious infighting within the Trump White House, Erdoğan’s demands were never truly viable.

The latest arrest by Turkey of Metin Topuz, a communications officer at the US Consulate in Istanbul, has triggered a serious reaction from Washington and a diplomatic row. The United States swiftly suspended all non-immigrant visa services to Turkey,⁵⁰ which in turn led to Ankara’s order to arrest another US Consular employee.⁵¹ Turkish authorities believe that Topuz played a key role in the Zarrab case, and accused him of “espionage” due to his earlier communications with Zekeriya Oz—the prosecutor who supervised the corruption investigation against the Turkish government in 2013.⁵²

THE FUTURE OF US-TURKEY RELATIONS: TURBULENCE IS THE NEW NORMAL?

Great optimism and a desire to open a new chapter in US-Turkey relations in the Trump era have turned into deep frustration in both Ankara and Washington. Turks were surprised to hear President Trump’s statement in September 2017 that US-Turkey ties are at the best that they have “ever been.”⁵³ While Ankara may interpret these words as Trump’s way of overpraising, this could also reflect an increasing sentiment in Washington that Turkey will remain a tough ally, and therefore, the United States should lower its expectations.

Realizing that none of its demands are being met, the Turkish government has already lowered its own expectations from the Trump Administration. Ankara has conspicuously boosted its ties with Moscow to Washington’s ire. An especially disturbing development for the Pentagon is Turkey’s bid to acquire the Russian S-400 defense system,⁵⁴ which prompted cries among

US military circles for removing Turkey from NATO⁵⁵ and establishing a major airbase in the Kurdistan Regional Government territory as an alternative to Turkey's Incirlik.⁵⁶ Another troubling move was Ankara's recent rapprochement with Tehran at a time when the Trump Administration aims to exert pressure on Iran.⁵⁷ Washington's mismanagement of the Gulf crisis has only fueled the Turkish government's anxiety that Ankara may be the next target of international isolation, after Doha.⁵⁸

Beyond the personalities of Trump and Erdoğan, certain structural shifts appear to be shaping the future of US-Turkey relations. Domestic troubles as a result of Erdoğan's increasingly authoritarian rule and the ensuing derailment of Turkey's peace process with the Kurds have led to the downfall of the neo-Ottomanist vision, which was sympathetic to negotiations with Kurdish groups.⁵⁹ In November 2015, for example, Turkey's foreign minister claimed that the PYD should be treated as "a political party just like HDP [a legal pro-Kurdish party in the Turkish Parliament]."⁶⁰ Erdoğan's removal of Ahmet Davutoğlu and his cadre, and later, the Turkish president's empowerment of Eurasianists and Turkish nationalists to fill the unprecedented vacuum in bureaucratic positions after the 2016 coup have sown the seeds of structural changes that may have long-term consequences.⁶¹

Unless Washington aims to arbitrate renewed peace talks between Turkey and the PKK—and therefore, seek to disturb Erdoğan's domestic alliance with Turkish nationalists—Ankara's priority will likely focus on "the threat of Kurdish separatism," which is recurrently and powerfully depicted as "American support for terrorism" in the Turkish media. Such an attempt will surely be challenging for the United States. One way or another, Washington will find itself between a rock and a hard place in the Turkish-Kurdish fight after the defeat of IS in Raqqa, especially in addressing the demands of Syria's Kurds for autonomy. That the Trump White House does not coordinate with the US Department of State is worrisome for the future of US-Turkey relations. This is clearly irresponsible and detrimental to US foreign policy. To be sure, Washington's lack of vision in crafting a long-term strategy remains the Achilles' heel of US policy in the Middle East.

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TRUMP'S MISCALCULATION ABOUT AMERICAN-EGYPTIAN RELATIONS*

Imad K. Harb

As Egypt lurches toward a more oppressive political environment, the United States realizes that it has to make difficult decisions regarding future relations with an erstwhile ally. Answers to serious and ongoing questions about Egypt require, and deserve, an honest look at the strategic value Egypt still provides in a chaotic Middle Eastern environment. Such an evaluation has to occur while the Egyptian regime clearly violates the rights of wide sectors of Egyptian society, is beset by daunting economic challenges, and suffers from a stubborn extremist insurgency. How the United States responds during and after President Donald Trump's time in the White House will affect not only Egypt but also many other countries in the neighborhood. US policy will also involve several issues pivotal for American leadership in the region and around the world.

But what has been obvious thus far in the life of the Trump Administration – and specifically for Presidents Donald Trump and Abdel Fattah el-Sisi – has been the realization that the American-Egyptian relationship is not merely an extension of the quick friendship and affinity that the two leaders developed since the American presidential campaign of 2016. Despite President Trump's positive pronouncements about his Egyptian counterpart since the two men met on the sidelines of the 71st United Nations General Assembly session in New York in 2016, the White House has not been able to forge ahead with a relationship with Egypt unencumbered by American law and congressional impediments.

Indeed, since Trump's inauguration the Egyptian case has proven – once again – to be an example of the imperatives driving American national interests intermingling with certain basic legal obligations that may sometimes jeopardize them. These obligations were at the heart of the Barack Obama Administration's coolness toward the Sisi regime – which came to power shortly after ousting the duly elected president, Mohamed Morsi, in a military coup in 2013 – and resulted in the temporary suspension of American military aid to Egypt. In fact, it would not be an exaggeration to state that Sisi saw Trump's election as a good omen for him and his government after Trump eschewed all talk of human rights and democracy during his campaign. To Sisi, this signaled an American rejection of what he thought were Obama's follies and a welcome embrace of the virtues of hard geopolitical calculations, at the center of which Egypt stands as a citadel of stability and anti-Islamism.

But, in addition to the two presidents' mutual admiration, there are many factors that influence the role of the US political environment on the bilateral relationship. Since Trump's inauguration until the present, there has been a deterioration of the conditions on which American institutions base their judgment regarding interactions with Egypt, from the country's record on human rights and democracy, to its economic hardships, to its difficult fight against extremists. Thus, for Trump to establish healthy dealings with a successful Egypt, his administration must also understand the severity of these problems and effectively address their repercussions.

MONKEY WRENCHES IN THE WORKS

A Poor Human Rights Record

Egypt boasts numerous forms of democratic practice—a government structure, an elected parliament, print and electronic media, and a court system, to name a few—but its democratic life has experienced a precipitous decline. The Egyptian political system has a “managed democracy” that adheres to the motions of parliamentary legislation, government implementation, and judicial review whenever the government exceeds its limits.¹ And yet, life for Egyptians is organized and controlled by the organs of the deep state and the country’s armed forces and security services.

Not long after then-Minister of Defense Abdel Fattah el-Sisi toppled President Mohamed Morsi in July 2013, a court banned the Muslim Brotherhood and the interim government of President Adly Mansour declared it a terrorist organization the following December.² In August 2014, the government dissolved the Brotherhood’s political wing, the Freedom and Justice Party.³ Today, a government-friendly member of the Egyptian Parliament is writing legislation that aims to dismiss “members of the Muslim Brotherhood from their public posts.”⁴ Such a law, if passed, will most assuredly be used against regime opponents of all stripes who are likely to be accused of belonging to the organization. Criminalizing the group deprives a large segment of Egyptian society of a channel for peaceful political expression and leaves the military regime—which continues to be supported by the armed forces and the security agencies—in charge of the country’s post-coup political roadmap that included amending the constitution and organizing presidential and parliamentary elections.

An anti-terrorism law promulgated in mid-August 2015 gives state institutions broad powers to control public life. The law’s provisions arguably consider any political activity as opposition to the establishment, give the security forces the right to interfere in all matters they deem detrimental to national interests (as they define them), and allow the president to declare an endless state of emergency.⁵ In essence, all political activity in Egypt has been subjected to the executive branch’s broad powers while the legislative branch, for all intents and purposes, has become beholden to security agencies and rubber stamps government policies.

Human rights organizations report that around 60,000 people have been imprisoned in Egypt since 2013. In the past five years, Egypt has built 19 prisons, 16 of them since President Sisi assumed power in June 2014. In 2016, a law went into effect that forced media outlets to carry only what the government reports about security incidents, threatening to revoke media licenses and to fine or suspend non-compliant outlets.⁶ Last February, the government shuttered Al Nadeem Center for Rehabilitation of Victims of Violence and the Nazra Center for Feminist Studies, both of which were involved in work against torture and sexual abuse.⁷ Human Rights Watch has documented torture, abuse, disappearances, wrongful imprisonment without sufficient evidence, and curtailment of the freedoms of assembly, association, and expression. Some 7,400 military trials of civilians have been issued since widening “the scope of military jurisdiction in 2014.”⁸

Egypt today lives under a state of emergency that was declared in April 2017 for three months following attacks on the Coptic Christian minority community around the country.⁹ It was renewed in June 2017 as the government continued its efforts to address security threats.¹⁰ According to Law 162, promulgated in 1958 during Egypt’s revolutionary period, the state

of emergency gives state organs wide powers such as setting up special courts to which the president may appoint military officers who may try civilians; restricting movement and a number of freedoms; and overseeing all forms of media and communication.¹¹

What also ran afoul of the US Congress and forced a partial suspension of American aid to Egypt was President Sisi's approval, in May 2017, of a law regulating nongovernmental organizations (NGOs); it was passed by parliament in November 2016.¹² This NGO law affects some 47,000 Egyptian and 100 foreign groups by limiting their freedom to conduct activities and imposes jail terms of up to five years and heavy fines for noncompliance. Even a worker's right to strike has been banned. A ruling by the Supreme Administrative Court in April 2015 criminalized public workers' strikes and penalized strikers "by forcing them into retirement." According to labor and human rights activists, the law violated both the Egyptian Constitution of 2014 and Egypt's commitment to the United Nations' 1967 International Convention on Economic, Social and Cultural Rights, which it ratified in 1981.¹³

Egypt's Uncertain Economics

With a population of over 95 million,¹⁴ Egypt has progressively become hostage to outside assistance to nurse its weak and dependent economy. According to Trading Economics, the annual growth rate of Egypt's GDP was 3.4 percent in September 2016, down from 4.5 percent two months earlier. It had an unemployment rate of 12 percent in March 2017 and inflation soared to almost 30 percent in June 2017. Egypt's current account deficit hit \$3.5 billion in March, while its external debt topped \$67 billion in December 2016. Its foreign exchange reserve witnessed a dangerous dive in July 2016 when it dipped to a mere \$15.5 billion, though it currently shows improvement at around \$31 billion.¹⁵

The most severely hit of Egypt's economic sectors has been tourism, the major producer of hard currency for the country. The victim of slow economic growth since the failed revolution of 2011, tourism has also suffered from the rise and resilience of extremist activity in the Sinai Peninsula and the Egyptian mainland. While experts point to a possible good year for tourism in 2017, statistics for 2016 showed a serious decline in the number of tourists visiting the country—from 14.7 million to 5.4 million visitors.¹⁶ This impacts tourism revenues and employment directly as the country reels from slow economic activities in other sectors. Even the new Suez Canal addition that was inaugurated with much fanfare two years ago is failing to bring in the benefits that were expected by the planners of the project.¹⁷

To arrest its economic slide, in November 2016 Egypt negotiated a \$12 billion loan from the International Monetary Fund and received the first tranche of \$2.75 billion—but only after it instituted a drastic austerity program to boost investor confidence.¹⁸ (It also secured some \$6 billion in outside financing.¹⁹) The same month, the Egyptian government floated the currency to halt the slide in foreign exchange reserves (the exchange rate now stands at 18 pounds to the dollar) and severely slashed fuel subsidies.²⁰ In June 2017, the government further reduced these subsidies and, in fact, increased fuel and gas prices by an average of 55 percent, affecting the agricultural and industrial sectors. With 71 million Egyptians dependent on ration cards to obtain basic necessities, President Sisi declared an increase in rations—but that was followed two days later by a large increase in the prices of sugar and cooking oil, main staples for average Egyptians.²¹

And to help its structural adjustment moves and address shortages and financial hardship, the Egyptian government has accepted tens of billions of dollars from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Estimates put Saudi grants, loans, and investments in the Egyptian economy at \$25 billion since 2014.²² Over 2 million Egyptians work and live in the kingdom;²³ in 2015, one million expatriate Egyptians there remitted \$7.57 billion to their home country.²⁴ Immediately following the July 2013 coup, the UAE gave Egypt \$3 billion, \$1 billion of which was a grant and the rest was in “the form of an interest-free deposit with Egypt’s central bank.”²⁵ In April 2016, it again provided Egypt with \$4 billion, half in investment and half to support the central bank’s cash reserves.²⁶

An Active Insurgency

The Egyptian government is also beset by an Islamist insurgency and outright war in the Sinai Peninsula against Wilayat Sinai (WS), the Egyptian chapter of the so-called Islamic State. Tens of thousands of soldiers and security personnel, fixed-wing aircraft and helicopters, and tanks and armored vehicles have been deployed against WS across the peninsula.²⁷ The organization has threatened to establish a jihadist state that would constitute a grave danger to the Egyptian state, Israel, and global maritime navigation. In fact, the large number of Egyptian soldiers in the area is testament to this danger since Egypt—according to the 1979 peace treaty with Israel—is disallowed from deploying forces there except by mutual agreement with its neighbor to the east. Seminal events in this insurgency over the last two years were the downing of a Russian airliner over Sinai in November 2015, in which 224 persons died,²⁸ and attacks on Coptic Christians in Cairo, Alexandria, Asyut, and other places.²⁹

In addition to threatening Egypt’s security and stability while it experiences other political and economic troubles, the insurgency has allowed the government to use the war as justification for its crackdown on all independent political activity. In fact, the government has accused the Muslim Brotherhood of having a military wing—known as Hasm—that trains and conducts operations against security forces, which have killed scores of Hasm members in several Egyptian cities.³⁰

A RESTRAINED TRUMP ADMINISTRATION

Only seven months into the Trump presidency, US-Egyptian relations became embroiled in an American law that, when it was enacted, was meant to punish governments receiving American aid for their violations of basic human rights and to stipulate required remedies. Responding to President Sisi’s signing of the NGO law last May, the Trump Administration “reprogrammed” (i.e., will use for other purposes) over \$95 million in military and economic aid formerly allocated for Egypt for 2016 and 2017; it also delayed the delivery of another \$195 million in military assistance to Egypt “because of its failure to make progress on respecting human rights and democratic norms.”³¹ In 2016, Congress had passed Public Law 114-113, the Consolidated Appropriations Act, Section 7041 (a)(3)(A), which requires the administration to withhold 15 percent of the \$1.3 billion in annual American military assistance to Egypt (or \$195 million) if the Department of State cannot certify the Egyptian government’s progress on human rights.³²

The State Department’s certification on the second amount is something that President Trump

may be able to influence, given his previous positive pronouncements about President Sisi,³³ and his admiration of the Egyptian strongman during the Arab-Islamic-American Summit in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia, in May.³⁴ In fact, his call to Sisi on August 24, following the rescinding of the aid, may have included a promise to reevaluate the matter.³⁵ But it is hard to view the State Department's decision except as a reflection of the administration's inability to sidestep established law or as a reinforcement of Congress's role as the holder of the purse when it comes to appropriations for foreign relations—no matter the importance of any specific strategic relationship. As far as the US Congress is concerned, Egypt can remain an essential ally and partner, continue to provide the needed assurance and sustenance of US foreign policy in the Middle East, and fight extremists, all while still respecting democratic norms and human and civil rights.

But prior to that, when Sisi visited Washington in April 2017, President Trump used his personal relationship with the Egyptian president to secure the release of aid worker Aya Hijazi, an American citizen who was arrested by Egyptian authorities in 2014 on false charges of sexual abuse of children in her care.³⁶ It was hard for President Obama to be this effective due to his poor relations with Sisi. On the other hand, personal intercession cannot be assumed to serve as the *modus operandi* in bilateral relations, specifically because of the legal and institutional constraints on American foreign policy. Before President Trump was inaugurated, Senate leaders from both parties impressed upon Egypt's foreign minister, Sameh Shoukry, the importance of reform and improving human rights conditions in Egypt.³⁷ Egyptian unresponsiveness to such congressional sentiments must have been behind the State Department's decision to suspend aid to Egypt.

Simultaneously, and perhaps necessarily, American foreign policy officials find themselves trying to walk between rain drops in their evaluation of relations with Egypt and in applying US laws and congressional directives. Since the late 1970s, the United States has considered Egypt an indispensable ally in the Middle East, although the bilateral geostrategic relationship suffers from the changing environment in the region and from the weakened position of the Egyptian state. Egypt's armed forces are an asset at a very important node in the American global strategic posture. Regionally, Egypt may still be counted on in the never-ending quest for Middle East peace and the worthy mission of protecting the hydrocarbon riches of the Arabian Gulf.

Such considerations are likely not hidden from Egyptian policymakers, although they may not be in the driver's seat on important matters because of Egypt's need for American economic and military assistance. As soon as the United States made known its decision on aid, the Egyptian foreign ministry cancelled a meeting scheduled between Shoukry and President Trump's advisor and son-in-law, Jared Kushner, after the latter's visits to Arab capitals and to Jerusalem and Ramallah to discuss the moribund Palestinian-Israeli peace.³⁸ Kushner still met with President Sisi, however, with Shoukry in attendance, but the discussion concerned the peace mission.³⁹ In a reversal of his earlier decision, Shoukry had a tête-à-tête with Kushner.⁴⁰ In a sense, Egypt let it be known that it can indeed be slighted but it may not remain mad for long; and President Trump's call to Sisi after the episode may have helped that. However, this affair may have returned the bilateral relationship to its Obama tribulations, not only because of philosophical differences about rights and freedoms but also because even Donald Trump may not be able to escape the long arm of American law and congressional diktat.

The institutional impediment from Congress to unconditional relations may also be compounded by the requirements of a successful American foreign policy. In this case, Washington was disappointed that Egypt continued to maintain good relations with North Korea despite the fact that the United States is leading an international crusade to isolate Pyongyang as it develops its nuclear and ballistic missile programs.⁴¹ The recent exposure of a North Korean arms shipment worth \$23 million destined for the Egyptian armed forces⁴² was a clear example of Egyptian double-dealing. Not even President Trump, with his tendency to ignore facts on the ground, can cover for such a grievous mistake, notwithstanding his opinion of Sisi as a great man with whom he wants to maintain cooperation.

But at the edges of the American-Egyptian relationship are issues central to the American and Egyptian military establishments and their strategic cooperation. One is the American Navy's access to the Suez Canal, which will always be an established imperative that supersedes any congressional or executive concerns about Egypt's domestic conditions, including the status of human rights and democracy. Another concerns the "Bright Star" exercises between the American and Egyptian military institutions. These had not been conducted since 2009, in part because of the onset of the Egyptian version of the Arab Spring in 2011 and the coup of 2013. The latest, conducted last September, commenced in a new military installation, the Mohamed Naguib Military Base, and included around 200 American personnel from all services in the military.⁴³ In fact, any deterioration of bilateral military relations quickly reflects on overall relations. In 2014, the coolness between the Obama and Sisi Administrations led Cairo to import Russian weapons such as attack helicopters and French ships. Egypt also received a Russian corvette ship and is set to acquire 50 MIG-29 and 24 MIG-35 fighters from Russia.⁴⁴

CONSEQUENTIAL CAVEATS AND WARNINGS FOR THE FUTURE

While Egypt inarguably remains an essential partner in American strategic planning, congressional opinion about the US-Egypt relationship and the State Department's decision on aid to Egypt have exposed important caveats that the American and Egyptian administrations cannot ignore.

First, the Trump Administration is yet again reminded that the White House must rethink its understanding of control over foreign policy decisions and its ability to implement them. In the Egyptian case, President Trump may want to reward a supposedly "good man" in Sisi, but he will not be able to go far if he completely ignores the legal and institutional impediments to full and unconditional relations.

Second, the reputation of the United States still hinges on its adherence to the promotion of civil and human rights internationally and the encouragement of democratic practices by friendly and unfriendly governments. It thus behooves the Trump Administration to recast its declared foreign policy in those terms and rescind the instrumentalism currently advocated by President Trump and Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, who do not see a place for principle-driven explanations of foreign policy.

Third, President Sisi and his regime would do well to disabuse themselves of the notion that, first, the American president is the one who singlehandedly makes American foreign policy and, second, that he is free of all constraints of the law. Sisi and his government must understand that the American president is unlike his Egyptian counterpart, who presides over

a sprawling foreign policy establishment awaiting orders to do his bidding.

Fourth, the Egyptian government should pay attention to the possibility that Donald Trump may be impeached and removed from office. He and his administration are under the threatening cloud of serious investigations by congressional committees and Special Counsel Robert Mueller because of accusations of collusion with Russia during last year's presidential campaign. Cairo's policymakers also should know that these investigations are at an advanced stage: calling in witnesses and subpoenaing records and documents. It thus behooves Sisi and his government to consider having to deal with a future administration whose head may not think highly of the Egyptian president.

Fifth, and finally, the Egyptian government would do well to rethink the NGO law that triggered the latest State Department decision. Furthermore, if the NGO law caused the rescinding of part of US aid to Egypt, maybe President Sisi would think many times before he signs into law other nefarious pieces of legislation, like the one currently being written in parliament to force the firing of civil servants accused of belonging to the Muslim Brotherhood.

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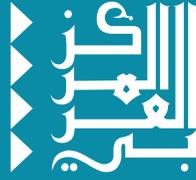
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