



## November 8: What's at stake for the Arab world?

*By Joe Macaron*  
November 7, 2016

What motivates the Arab world's interest in the 2016 US presidential election is primarily the concern about Washington's role in the Middle East as well as the unpredictability of Donald Trump. A majority among the Arab public hopes for a US approach that tips the scales of Middle East conflicts, mostly vis-à-vis Iran. Yet, there is no consensus on the extent and nature of such US intervention.

The Middle East regional order in the last few decades was largely an American invention culminated by the 2003 invasion of Iraq. Since then, we had seen a gradual US fatigue that became starker when that same regional order began to fall apart in 2011. The Arab public that was largely against George W. Bush's intervention in Iraq became critical of Barack Obama's retreat from Syria. Now, we are on the eve of a crossroad once again where American voters will have a choice to make between an isolationist and an interventionist candidate.

Regardless of the winner on November 8, the next US administration is constrained by two policy realities in the Middle East carried over from the incumbent President: the war against the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) and Iran's nuclear deal. On the medium term, the next President will only be able to leave her or his stamp on the US approach to managing regional conflicts and in the kind of alliances Washington will forge.

While the Arab public preference for Clinton is significantly and expectedly higher than Trump, as a recent poll by [Arab Center Washington DC](#) shows, there are high expectations that the outcome of the US election will have a direct impact on the Middle East. The preference for Clinton comes from the assumption that she will likely revert to a traditional US foreign policy compared to what Arabs perceive as an unusual US approach under the Obama Administration.

Hillary Clinton's interventionist record in Libya and her inclination to be more assertive on Syria led 43% of respondents in the ACW poll to believe that her potential presidency would increase US support for democratic transition. The issue of credibility and the FBI investigation in her email server did not factor in the Arab view of her candidacy. On the other hand, 48% believe that Trump would contribute to regional stability, where the Arab public is sympathetic to his conservative stances on some issues like ISIL and abortion.

Most probably, neither Clinton nor Trump will live up to the Arab expectations of their policies. Consistent polls in recent years have shown that Americans are against deploying US soldiers in the Middle East. However, the American public is open to the Obama approach of launching airstrikes on ISIL, arming identified local groups, and providing humanitarian aid.

The reality of governing and the constraints of US politics tell us that Clinton will likely not be as interventionist as people expect and Trump will not be as isolationist.

One of the most consequential questions facing the next US administration's Middle East policy is whether it will opt to contain or deter Iran's regional activities. The precarious influence of Washington in Iraq will likely pre-determine a containment policy. With Clinton's stated policy to continue arming Kurdish groups in Syria and the fact that Washington is not expected to deliver Fethullah Gulen to Ankara, US-Turkish coordination in Syria will remain limited. Clinton and her backers are also inclined to work in tandem with Israel, hence a significant progress in the negotiation with Palestinians is dim. On the other hand, it is hard to predict US foreign policy under a Trump presidency. He publicly stated his hopes to coordinate with Russia and Egypt, although his sole focus is on ISIL and has no interest in pushing Assad out of power by force.

The most crucial takeaway here is that Arabs are divided on the nature of the US role in the Middle East. In the public opinion poll conducted by ACW, 28% of respondents strongly opposed any US intervention in Arab affairs. For many Arabs, the definition of US intervention is the mere deterrence of Iran, but there are no indications that the next administration will follow such a policy. Whoever the next President might be, his or her top priority will be to deal with a divided nation that will take a while to heal from a gruesome election campaign.

As there is no Arab consensus on most regional challenges, the recent poll tell us that we also cannot talk about a unified Arab public opinion. However, both candidates will begin their presidency from a pre-defined attitude among Arabs who are closely watching the US election. While Obama came to power in 2008 along with high hopes in the Arab world, Clinton or Trump will come to power next January with little or no definitive Arab expectations.