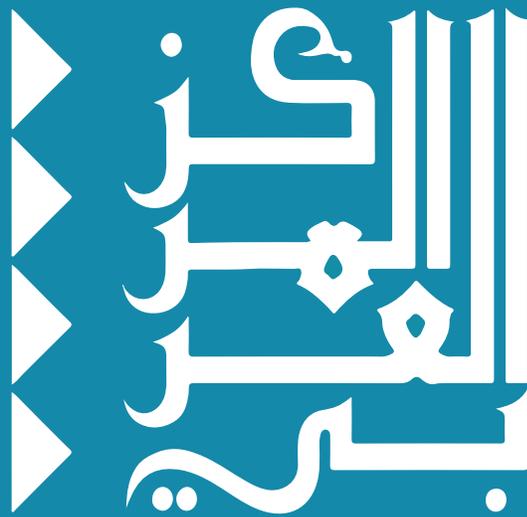


The Middle East in Trump's First 100 Days in Office

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When President Franklin D. Roosevelt coined the term “first hundred days” in a radio address, little did he know that this term would haunt every US president in the weeks after taking the oath of office. President Donald Trump called the 100-day benchmark a “ridiculous standard”—after having made unrealistic promises for the period during his campaign and following his election. Nevertheless the White House issued a list of his national security accomplishments, most of which related to the Middle East. This analysis focuses on Trump’s scorecard on the Middle East and examines the trends that shaped his first 100 days as president of the United States.

Washington and the world braced for the ascension of Trump to power. His tweets and political statements have bewildered foreign leaders, who have started to perceive a distinction between Trump and the “deep state” he strives to govern. That burden apparently took a toll on the president himself when he said, “This is more work than in my previous life. I thought it would be easier.” Trump’s candid assessment reflected not only the learning curve of a novice president but also the turbulent times in US politics.

The Perception of Force

From a Middle Eastern perspective, the highlight of Trump’s first 100 days was the April 7 US strike on al-Shayrat airfield in the Homs province, in reaction to the Syrian regime’s April 4 chemical attack in Khan Sheikhoun. It was the first instance of Trump drawing a contrast with his predecessor, Barack

Obama, who in 2013 did not enforce the same chemical weapon “red line.”

It is worth noting that the Tomahawk cruise missile attack in Syria was not unprecedented. Just last October, the US military used the same coercive measure in Yemen to send a message to the Houthis, who were threatening US navy ships. Nevertheless, the al-Shayrat strike was an exception rather than a transformative moment in Washington’s approach to Syria. A week later, on April 13, the US military also dropped the Massive Ordnance Air Blast (MOAB) bomb on an underground tunnel complex in Afghanistan run by the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL); yet it is clear the real threat that should be countered there is the Taliban. Both strikes were low risk measures and did not alter the balance of power on the ground.

While the display of force was meant to send a message that the new US Administration does not shy away from confrontation, Russia, Iran, and North Korea are yet to take Washington’s threats seriously. In Tehran and in Moscow, these strikes were not interpreted as part of a strategy to deter and confront terrorism but rather as attempts by Trump to deflect attention and escape from a crisis at home. That perception of force is crucial to how the Trump Administration will manage to push its own agenda, whether in the Middle East or beyond. However, conveying the impression that Trump is unpredictable and willing to go to war is, ultimately, not a feasible strategy. With the ongoing fight against ISIL on multiple fronts, there are legitimate doubts surrounding the Trump Administration’s readiness to entangle

the United States in additional Middle East wars.

Hallmarks of Trump's Foreign Policy

In the first 100 days, Trump hosted 17 world leaders (five from the Middle East) and made no visits abroad. He did not rip up Iran's nuclear deal nor did he designate the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. ISIL was not decimated and the US embassy did not move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Indeed, the past 100-day benchmark was a realization that governance is a daunting challenge and "America First" is, at base, merely a slogan.

Indeed, there was a wide schism between campaigning and policy-making in the first 100 days, as the new administration was exploring governance and sorting out its internal divisions. The political instability of February and March led to a disturbing and chaotic environment that left many wondering when normalcy would return to the White House. The month of April will go down as the reboot moment when the Trump Administration began to sound like a conventional presidency. The late-night tweets were no longer endangering diplomatic relations and the president's remarks became scripted in joint appearances with world leaders—probably an attempt to avoid awkward situations like the debacle with German Chancellor Angela Merkel.

Three recurring trends in the past 100 days defined the Trump Administration's approach to the Middle East:

1. Trump is more conventional than expected.

Trump's Middle East policy remains the byproduct of the ongoing struggle among competing powers in his administration. The February 14 resignation of Mike Flynn as national security advisor was a game changer for the US decision-making process. The appointment of H.R. McMaster and the subsequent April 4 ouster of chief strategist Steve Bannon from the National Security Council reflected a policy shift where populism, to a large extent, became disengaged from national security. Considering all these changes, the Trump Administration can no longer claim the anti-establishment mantle on foreign policy.

Translating that bureaucratic shift into policy began to materialize in recent weeks. The White House is strengthening ties with traditional US allies in the Middle East—mainly Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia—and is seeking to restore the US role in addressing the Palestinian-Israeli conflict.

While drone attacks on ISIL and al-Qaeda have intensified, the Trump Administration is facing the Obama Administration's same policy constraints. In Iraq, the Pentagon continues to navigate a difficult environment where Tehran can turn the tables on Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi or endanger the lives of US troops on the ground. In Syria, the Trump Administration also continues to attempt to balance supporting Kurdish forces while appeasing the Turkish ally. Though there are significant tactical changes, the overall US strategy to fight ISIL largely remains the same under Trump.

However, the impulsive nature of this presidency is what drives the conduct of its foreign policy. As the National Security Council, under McMaster's leadership, continues to institutionalize the decision-making process, room for a mishap will gradually narrow moving forward.

2. No clear doctrine, and a mismatch between rhetoric and policy.

Any attempt to define Trump's doctrine at this point of his presidency is futile; deciphering the puzzles of his administration's rhetoric and policies is not enough to construct a clear picture. Trump's lack of interest in policy debates and the continuous infighting among his team might lead to a new norm of an incoherent foreign policy. Numerous instances in the past 100 days have illustrated such dysfunction and inconsistency.

For example, after repeatedly invoking "safe zones" in the early days of his administration, the idea has gradually disappeared from Trump's rhetoric on Syria. Instead of enforcing safe zones, the White House is currently working on "de-escalation zones" in coordination with Russia. Furthermore, the Trump Administration flip-flopped on the fate of Syrian President Bashar al-Asad, with Secretary of State Rex Tillerson suggesting that it is up to the Syrian people to decide their future—before affirming that the Asad family's reign is "coming to an end."

On Iran, the Trump Administration is also sending mixed signals about its strategy,

confusing even members of the US Congress. Last February, the White House put Iran "on notice" and the Treasury Department imposed sanctions on supporters of Iran's ballistic missile program. On April 18, one day after the State Department formally certified that Iran is in compliance with its commitment to the nuclear deal, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson launched a full diplomatic attack on the Iranian regime during a press conference. He described the Obama Administration's "strategic patience" with Iran as a "failed approach." However, a week later, on April 25, a US official spoke directly with the Iranian delegation in Vienna to raise concerns about a detained and missing US citizen in Iran. Prior to that, Boeing secured a \$3 billion jetliner deal with Iran Aseman Airlines, the first export of US aircraft to Iran since the shah's era; this development was an important test for the administration's rhetoric on the Islamic Republic.

On Yemen, Saudi Arabia is betting on US support to take control of al-Hodeida seaport on Yemen's western coast, which is likely to become a bloody battle considering that it is the last water gateway for the Houthis. There are indications that the Trump Administration might be on the verge of giving the green light to capture al-Hodeida by providing military and intelligence support to the Saudi-led coalition.

Last month, through Tillerson and US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley, the Trump Administration ratcheted up its diplomatic attacks on President Vladimir Putin's policies in Syria and Ukraine. While it is

not clear whether Trump did so for domestic reasons—to gain much needed anti-Putin credentials—the White House still lacks a clear strategy on how to deal with an assertive Russia. On May 2, in a call between the two leaders, Trump and Putin agreed to renew their talks on Syria, hence reviving the Obama approach.

Finally, North Korea is perhaps the ultimate case study for the White House's inconsistency. A few days after leaving the door open for a military intervention against Pyongyang, on May 2 Trump said on he would be "honored" to meet North Korean leader Kim Jong Un "under the right circumstances."

We may never know if Trump really has a doctrine. Asked by reporters last month about his approach to Syria, 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." That "flexibility" reflects the Trump Administration's ambiguous approach that will most likely continue to define US policy moving forward.

3. Heavy-handed military approach.

One of the clear trends in the Trump Administration's dynamics is the leverage US generals exercise on national security. The White House has loosened the rules of engagement for military commanders while giving them a blank check to operate on the ground. These commanders are being encouraged to make their own decisions without waiting for White House authorization,

in stark contrast to the micromanagement style of the Obama Administration.

Indeed, a senior administration official has confirmed that Trump did not know about dropping the MOAB over Afghanistan until the operation took place. The same official described perfectly the Pentagon's attitude across the two administrations. Under Obama, the attitude was, "I am going to drop a MOAB, better let the White House know." Under Trump, Defense Secretary James Mattis is telling his commanders, "it's not the same as it was, you don't have to ask us before you drop a MOAB."

The Trump Administration has also intensified the military campaign against ISIL and al-Qaeda. For instance, between February 28 and April 2, the Pentagon carried out 70 strikes in Yemen, which is more than twice the number of strikes in 2016.

Last March, in yet another unprecedented US move in Syria, US Humvees and Stryker combat vehicles patrolled the streets in Manbij, in northern Syria, sending a clear message to Ankara not to launch an assault on the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Now that the Turkish referendum has concluded, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan has shifted his focus back to challenging US influence in northern Syria by attacking the SDF with no prior notice, prompting US forces to patrol the Turkish-Syrian border to prevent further attacks. Flexing muscles in Syria with no political context or clear US strategy might serve to further limit US influence, instead of strengthening it.

The Trump Administration's inclination to use hard instead of soft power is disconcerting. While it continues to rely on US sanctions, there is an increasing focus on militarization and economic opportunism instead of reforms and human rights. The defense budget proposal issued by the White House last March showed the Trump Administration's eagerness to militarize US foreign policy at the expense of diplomatic tools.

On the other hand, the Trump Administration has shown that it is disinclined to emphasize human rights issues. For instance, after weeks of mending fences with Riyadh, Trump noted on April 27 that, "frankly, Saudi Arabia has not treated us fairly, because we are losing a tremendous amount of money in defending Saudi Arabia." Last month, Washington dropped the human rights precondition for selling F-16 jets to Bahrain. On April 3, Trump hosted Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, without considering his human rights record and before securing the release of Egyptian American activist Aya Hegazi.

Allowing military commanders to operate without checks and balances has led, in recent weeks, to civilian deaths and a backlash in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Completely neglecting issues of reform in the Middle East will only lead to instability in the long term. Even-handedness between hard and soft power is needed for a more balanced and effective US approach.

The Next 100 Days

The most crucial challenge in the next 100 days will remain the unpredictability of an administration plagued by infighting and political instability. The inconsistent policy of the Trump Administration is confusing allies, even more than foes. After the Tomahawk cruise missiles on al-Shayrat base, many in the Arab world thought that Trump is keen to deter Russian and/or Iranian influence. Expectations are building up that the US might enforce a balance of power in Syria, help deal a blow to the Houthis in Yemen, and stand up to Iran's regional activities.

While many in the Arab world are indeed heartened by the Trump Administration's first 100 days, one should not expect heavy US involvement in the Middle East. The US diplomatic threat to Iran and Russia is yet to trickle down into policy at a time when US forces remain vulnerable both in Iraq and Syria. The fact is that the White House did not roll out a coherent US strategy for the Middle East. The Trump Administration would do well to level with its Arab allies on its intentions and the extent of its readiness to invest resources in the Middle East. Most importantly, projecting the image of political stability and steadiness in Washington is paramount; the Middle East and the world cannot afford to be second-guessing US foreign policy for long.

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