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President-elect Trump and the Middle East?

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In the immediate aftermath of Donald J. Trump's victory in the U.S. presidential election, Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, the Emirati chairman of the Arab Council for Social Sciences, wrote that the last thing the world needed was a "huge dose of uncertainty" that would only add confusion to the already muddled state of global politics.¹ Joyce Karam, the Washington Bureau chief for *al-Hayat*, pointed out that "unpredictability" and "lack of coherent foreign policy" define Trump's approach to the Middle East.² Nevertheless, it is still too early to be definitive about how Trump will leave his mark on U.S. policy in the Middle East. Politics are reactive, and Trump will undoubtedly be confronted with new circumstances that will present unforeseen constraints and opportunities. Indeed, one of the principal critiques of President Obama's Middle East policy has been its apparent lack of coherence, with many arguing that Obama intentionally eschewed a grand unifying principle. Ironically, then, Trump's approach may ultimately demonstrate as much continuity as change in the Middle East, illustrating, that "far from being captain of the team, a president is often captive of his team and the world as he finds it."³ In other words, Trump will inherit the playing field left to him by President Obama.

And yet Trump's victory suggests that populism may be remaking politics in the West.⁴ The European Union is not a likely alternative to U.S. leadership, not only because it does not possess the capabilities to project power in the region, but also because it is experiencing its own populist backlash — in response to the shock of the Syrian refugee crisis — that may preclude it from deeper

¹ Abdulkhaleq Abdullah, "[An open letter to the 45th president of the US](#)," *Gulf News*, November 9, 2016.

² Joyce Karam, "[Trump and the Middle East: 'Ignore the Campaign Rhetoric'](#)," *al Arabiya*, November 10, 2016.

³ James J. Zogby, "[What will Trump do?](#)" *Jordan Times*, November 21, 2016.

⁴ Pippa Norris, "[It's not just Trump. Authoritarian populism is rising across the West. Here's why.](#)," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2016.

engagement in the Middle East. Beyond the Middle East, Trump's brand of populism rejects the post-Cold War expansion of free-trade and globalization as well as the burden of leading a liberal international order.⁵ In the wake of Brexit during the summer of 2016, Trump's election portends "the globalization of anti-globalization."⁶

The United States' Middle East policy, therefore, is likely to be a byproduct of President-elect Trump's attempt to put "America first" and reduce American commitments abroad in the name of strengthening the U.S. at home. President Obama also tried to reduce the amount of U.S. blood and treasure it committed to the Middle East, but with mixed results. For example, since August 8, 2014, the U.S. has spent more than \$9 billion on operations against the Islamic State (IS), which tallies to more than \$12 million per day.⁷ The war against the Islamic State is likely to be a source of continuity between the Obama and Trump administrations. However, while President Obama was often critical of Middle East allies that he felt did not reflect core U.S. liberal values, President-elect Trump has expressed admiration for illiberal, authoritarian rulers in the Middle East, who insist that they reflect the "will of the people," just as Trump does. Indeed, President-elect Trump may attempt to reduce U.S. burdens by uncritically outsourcing the war against terror to such partners. In fact, no less than Bashar al-Asad, declared President-elect Trump a "natural ally" in the fight against terrorism.⁸

Syria may be a case where the President-elect tries to showcase the "art of the deal," and reduce U.S. burdens in the Middle East. Russia appears eager to find a favorable *quid pro quo* that trades U.S./NATO concessions on Ukraine and Crimea for an end to the bloodletting in Syria.⁹ This would allow Putin to secure a Eurasian return on its military intervention in Syria, provided the Asad regime can be stabilized, the rebels co-opted, and the Islamic State defeated. In such a scenario, Trump would concede what is left of Syria to Russia, Asad, and Iran, while, at the same time, emphasize the U.S. role in defeating the Islamic State in Iraq and forging a diplomatic solution to the civil war in Syria. While Russia would pocket U.S. concessions on Ukraine and Syria, Trump would be able to tell his U.S. constituency that he ended an open-ended U.S. military commitment in

⁵ "[Trump Announces Policy Plans](#)," *The New York Times*, November 21, 2016.

⁶ Timothy Garton Ash, "[Pushing back against populism](#)," *The Globe and Mail*, November 12, 2016; Pippa Norris, "[It's not just Trump. Authoritarian populism is rising across the West. Here's why.](#)," *The Washington Post*, March 11, 2016.

⁷ U.S. Department of Defense, "[Operation Inherent Resolve](#)," August 14, 2016.

⁸ Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "[Syrian President Calls Donald Trump a 'Natural Ally' in Fight Against Terrorism](#)," *The New York Times*, November 16, 2016.

⁹ Gideon Rachman, "[Donald Trump, Vladimir Putin and the art of a deal with Russia](#)," *The Financial Times*, November 14, 2016; for an alternative perspective, see: Alec Luhn, "[Trump's victory may not be the big win for Putin that everyone thinks it is](#)," *Vox*, November 17, 2016.

the Middle East that was costing the country \$12 million per day. Moreover, the President-elect could emphasize that a portion of that savings could be used to make America safer from terrorism at home, shifting the burden of defeating the Islamic State in the Middle East to others.

In other words, President-elect Trump will try to reduce U.S. costs in the Middle East. It seems clear that he sees governance as transactional, meaning he will be less focused on principles than the Obama Administration in negotiating deals with regional strongmen. In fact, he seems ready to mentally wall off the majority of the region. President-elect Trump, in two important respects, then, represents a potential break with history. First, he does not seem particularly invested in the post-World War II global security order rooted in “clear U.S. commitments to its allies.”¹⁰ Second, if he defines U.S. interests in the Middle East even more narrowly than President Obama then this region may be facing a period without a great power “overseer,” to borrow Kenneth Pollack’s term, for the first time in its the modern history.¹¹

To be sure, some will see continuity in these changes. President Obama was perceived by some in the region as abandoning traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East; and, the Obama administration’s preference for focusing on core U.S. interests also created the impression in the region that the U.S. was no longer interested in playing the role of a superpower.¹² Nevertheless, it would be a stretch to argue that President Obama was not engaged in promoting and strengthening globalization and buttressing norms of the liberal international order. In any case, if President-elect Trump continues to further reduce traditional alliance commitments and scale back American engagement in the Middle East, then the region will face a power vacuum.

China and Russia do not appear interested in investing the political or financial capital required to replicate the U.S.’s post-Cold War leadership role. Instead of global superpowers, the countries in the Middle East are likely to be navigating between competing regional powers: Asian, Eurasian, and North American.

In addition, in the absence of active U.S. engagement in the region, strong regional actors will attempt to fill the void. Iran, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey are likely to feel compelled to more forcefully defend their interests and advance

¹⁰ “[Donald Trump’s victory challenges the global liberal order](#),” *The Financial Times*, November 9, 2016; Peter Baker, “[Donald Trump’s Victory Promises to Upend the International Order](#),” *The New York Times*, November 9, 2016.

¹¹ Kenneth Pollack, “Fight or Flight: America’s Choice in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs* March/April 2016, pp. 62-75.

¹² Daniel L. Byman, “[Shifting U.S. Interests in the Middle East](#),” Brookings Institution, March 2, 2016; Jeffrey Goldberg, “[The Obama Doctrine](#),” *The Atlantic*, April 2016; Yaroslav Trofimov, “[America’s Fading Footprint in the Middle East](#),” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 9, 2015.

their view of order and stability in the region. In Iraq, Lebanon, and Asad's Syria, Iran has already established its regional predominance. In its quest for the nuclear deal, the Obama Administration appeared ready to allow Iran to walk away from more than thirty years of U.S. containment. And while President-elect Trump campaigned on rolling back the Iran deal, he seems indifferent or unaware of the broader issue of how Iranian ascendance is fueling competition and conflict across the region. Indeed, it is the prospect of Trump's ambivalence towards the nuances of regional and international politics that presents the greatest risk to Israel and traditional U.S. allies in the region.

Trump's victory was greeted as a positive development in Israel.¹³ Despite recent remarks to the *New York Times*¹⁴ that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, could be a Middle East peace broker, Trump seems unlikely to put pressure on Israel to take political risks to alter the status quo. This may make the Israeli government more comfortable and secure, but that also depends on how the Palestinians react to the new American president. The rise of populism in both the U.S. and Europe, which is hostile to Muslims, means the Palestinians may find themselves more internationally isolated than at any time since the fall of the Soviet Union. A combination of international isolation and Israel settling into the status quo could lead to popular despair among Palestinians. Widespread Palestinian frustration could erupt into a cascade of grassroots or organized violence, presenting a threat to Israel's political stability if not its security. On the other hand, international isolation or ambivalence combined with regional pressure from the Arab Quartet (Jordan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE)¹⁵ could lead the Palestinian leadership to actively engage with Israel, which would alter the status quo for both sides. Therefore, the question of how a Trump presidency will affect Israeli-Palestinian dynamics is not entirely straightforward.

More broadly, Israel will also be greatly affected by how President-elect Trump treats the Arab monarchical regimes. For example, there has been little discussion of how Trump's campaign rhetoric about reducing American aid to its allies may affect Jordan, whose economy heavily relies on American aid. Peace with the Hashemite Kingdom in Jordan, and its economic stability, are vital issues for Israel's security. The *Financial Times* headline, "Saudi Arabia warns

¹³ There was, however, a broad range of views expressed in Israel after the election, see: Yosef Hirsch, "[Loving Israel and not apologizing for it](#)," *Mida* [Hebrew], November 11, 2016; Itamar Eichner, "[Trump and Israel: Many promises, a big riddle](#)," *Ynet* [Hebrew], November 9, 2016; Uzi Baram, "[Trump is good for Israel?](#)" *Ha'aretz* [Hebrew], November 14, 2016; Herb Keinon, "[Trump and Israel, now what?](#)" *Jerusalem Post*, November 9, 2016; Gill Hoffman, "With Trump victory, has Netanyahu won the lottery," *Jerusalem Post*, November 11, 2016; David Horovitz, "[President-elect Trump – a tsunami and its consequences](#)," *Times of Israel*, November 9, 2016; Barak Ravid, "[For Netanyahu, Donald Trump's Victory Is a Trip Into the Unknown](#)," *Ha'aretz*, November 9, 2016.

¹⁴ Bob Fredericks, "[Trump thinks Kushner could help broker peace in Middle East](#)," *New York Post*, November 22, 2016.

¹⁵ Daoud Kuttab, "[Jordan, Fatah's Achilles heel](#)," *al-Monitor*, November 29, 2016.

Trump on blocking oil imports," just a week after the election, also indicates a troubling dynamic brewing between the new President-elect, who promised "complete American energy independence" from "our foes and the cartels," and the Saudi Kingdom, which has been one of the U.S.'s most important post-WWII allies in the Middle East.¹⁶ Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey share a converging interest in limiting Iran's regional influence, and therefore a significant change in American policy towards either Saudi Arabia or Turkey during the next four years would affect how Israel responds to Iran's ongoing efforts to project power in the region.

Since the Arab Spring uprisings in 2011, the Middle East has experienced horrific violence, massive destruction and upheaval, and the collapse of states. The Syrian War has led to violent spillover in Iraq and Turkey and contributed to the Saudi war in Yemen. Libya is in the midst of civil war and Egypt faces a jihadi insurgency in the Sinai. Large parts of the region are a battlefield. Now regional instability may be compounded by a potentially significant change in the fundamentals of the global order. Israel may be able to find solace in the fact that the U.S. President-elect appears sympathetic and supportive of Israel. Nevertheless, the grim state of affairs in the region suggests there may be additional challenges on the horizon. In any case, Israel and the U.S.'s traditional allies in the region will still be looking to the U.S. for leadership. The question remains as to whether Trump will erect mental barbed-wire around the region, leaving it to cope with new crises on its own. A lot may depend on his senior cabinet appointments, and it would be premature to judge him on the past alone; we should not rule out the potential for transformation from businessman to statesman, in which case the new Administration may take a longer, broader view of U.S. interests in the region.

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¹⁶ Pilita Clark, "[Saudi Arabia warns Trump on blocking oil imports](#)," *The Financial Times*, November 15, 2016.

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