

# THE MIDDLE EAST AFTER TRUMP: A RESHUFFLING OF THE CARDS?

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*The Middle East's preparation for the Joe Biden presidency is in full gear. Saudi Arabia is patching up relations with Qatar to de-escalate tension in the Gulf. Israel, in seeking to shut the window of opportunity for diplomacy on Iran's nuclear program and progress on Iran's relations with the West, appears to have assassinated Iran's top nuclear scientist Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.<sup>1</sup> This assassination puts Iran in a bind and leaves it with no palatable options. If Iran does not respond, it will suffer a reputational loss, and if Iran responds, it will then make it difficult for the Biden administration to activate diplomacy on the nuclear issue. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is sending mixed messages. His recent promises of reforms is being contrasted by his policies.<sup>2</sup> But in any case, Erdoğan is likely to adjust his policies to the new reality in the US. Irrespective of whether one can establish causal relationships, we have seen different versions of Erdoğan's politics during different US presidencies over the years.*

## Adjusting to the Biden presidency

Therefore, the Middle East is adjusting itself to the Biden presidency. Obviously, some of the countries feel less of an urgency or pressure to undertake such recalibration and adjustment in their foreign policies. Israel is one of them. Next to Israel is the United Arab Emirates (UAE). Biden is unlikely to reverse either the decision of moving the US embassy in Israel to Jerusalem or the Abraham Accord, which formalizes the Israeli relationships with two Gulf Arab states without reference to Palestinians.<sup>3</sup> Arguably, the UAE's normalisation or formalisation of its relations with Israel will shield it from some of the challenges that Saudi Arabia is likely to experience in its relations with the US moving forward.

The administration change in the US is therefore a big deal for the world and arguably an even bigger one for the Middle East. In the end, despite the fact that in recent years the region's relations with international powers are attaining a multipolar character with the increasing prominence of Russia in regional security and China in regional economics, the US still remains the indispensable actor for regional (in)security and (dis)order. Of all great powers involved in the region, the US represents more than *primus inter pares*. As European colonial powers played the crucial role in the making of the modern Middle East and its state systems, the US put its thick imprint, if not hegemony, on the region's politics since the Suez Crisis of 1956, which repre-

sented the decline of European imperial power and the primacy of the US in regional affairs.

It is not only US actions in the region, but also its inactions that matters a great deal, arguably sometimes even more so, as the evolution of the Syrian crisis can attest. The places the US occupies as well as the void that it leaves in the region can have formative impacts on the regional politics. In this respect, as Middle Eastern actors adjusted their foreign policies to the Trumpian world, they will also adjust them to the Biden presidency. But are these two figures so different from each other when it comes to their foreign policy visions, particularly in approaches to the Middle East?

### **Trump: Everyone for himself/herself world**

Withdrawal, unpredictability, personalisation of relations, and a diplomatic deficit represented the US policy towards the region under Trump. But the following question begets an answer: Was it Trump that first introduced these features into US foreign policy in the Middle East?

Despite the fact Trump likes to present himself as anti-Obama in international affairs, his propensity to downsize the US commitment in the region has followed in Obama's footsteps. The only difference is that Trump has done this more clumsily and disorderly. To state it differently, the US withdrawal from the region did not begin with Trump, rather it started with the Obama administration. This downsizing of the US presence in the region takes the form of the US downsizing its commitments more than its capabilities. The US still maintains

formidable military capabilities and diplomatic networks in the region. On these features, it maintains primacy over other actors. However, under Trump, the US has not only downsized its commitments to the region, it also reduced its diplomatic engagements and initiatives in the region.

Further compounding the US retreat from the region, Trump effectively sent a message that this is an everyone for himself/herself—accelerating the decline of the international institutions, norms, and principles in the conduct of international affairs. Many regional powers have adjusted themselves to this Trumpian world. To cite one example, Arab Gulf states' blockade<sup>4</sup> on Qatar would not have happened, if it was not green-lighted by Trump. The US downsizing of its role in the region coupled with Trump's view of international affairs has set off scrambles amongst different regional players for more influence and power in the MENA region. In other words, not only has Trump had little regard for rule of law or human rights in Middle Eastern state's domestic politics, he has also had little respect and concern for the rules, norms and institutions in the conduct of the intra-regional politics.

Likewise, in a region where power is widely personalized, Trump's propensity to personalize US relations with the region was well received by many. From Egyptian President Abdel Fattah Al-Sisi to the UAE's Mohammed bin Zayed (MBZ), from Saudi Arabia's Mohammed Bin Salman to Turkey's Erdoğan, many of the regional leaders have cultivated close personal ties with Trump and utilised

these channels to override institutional mechanisms and, at times, institutional friction in the US.

At the regional level, Trump pursued a decidedly anti-Iranian and pro-Arab Gulf states plus Israel policy. Short of war, he put in place a hard containment or “maximum pressure” policy on Iran.<sup>5</sup> Instead of a mere behaviour or policy change, his steps amounted to a regime change policy on Iran. In line with this policy, he envisioned some form of regional order centred on the Arab Gulf states, Egypt and Israel. This regional realignment is driven by anti-Iran, anti-Turkey and anti-political Islam sentiments. Plus, this block is unequivocally against the Arab Spring and the regional change it represented. Whereas the Arab states’ fear of the Arab Spring stems from regime insecurity and illegitimacy, Israel is opposed to the same phenomenon, believing that if successful, this regional transformation will give birth to a new regional system, in which its regional role would have been reduced or constrained.

### **Biden: Synthesising Obama's vision with a Trumpian world?**

As Trump likes to project himself as anti-Obama, Biden is already being fashioned as anti-Trump in his domestic and foreign policies. On international affairs, he projects the message he will strengthen ties with allies and multilateral institutions, institutionalise relations, promote democracy and a human rights agenda, revitalise diplomacy, and bring predictability to the US foreign policy. If these are the pledges, will we see a dramatically different US policy in the Middle East?

Biden will certainly bring more predictability, institutions, and diplomacy into his Middle Eastern policy. Even if not the policy and politics of regional transformation, Biden can adopt the language of human rights, good governance and democratisation. These changes in themselves will prove to be consequential. However, Biden is unlikely to scale up the US commitments in the region—in the end, the policy of the US retreat from the region started under the Obama administration, in which Biden served as vice president. Arguably, the strategic value of the Middle East is decreasing for the US and a Biden presidency will not change this basic fact. Unlike Trump, the Biden administration is set to bring three things into its Middle East policy that will bear consequences. These are predictability, diplomacy and transatlantic convergence with European actors on the Middle East, at least on major issues in the Middle East and the Mediterranean. Without an additional increase in the US military commitments, these factors will make a difference.

Another dividing line between Biden and Trump is present in their approaches to Iran and Russia. Trump was fixated on Iran and has not pursued in earnest any anti-Russian policy in the Middle East. In contrast, Biden will be more inclined to seek a diplomatic solution to the nuclear file. Probably, the difference between Obama and Biden’s diplomatic overtures to Iran will anchor on whether the concerns and fears of Arab Gulf states are included in this process. Obama did not pay much attention to these concerns and fears. Biden, in contrast, is likely to try to accommodate part of their concerns during diplomatic

engagement with Iran. Putting this aside, Biden is likely to pursue a more anti-Russian policy in the region. Having said that, this does not mean the US will not seek some form of an understanding with Russia in Syria.

Finally, the approach to Turkey is set to become another difference between the Biden and Trump administrations. During the Trump era, Erdoğan established close personal relations with the US president, who shielded Turkey from the wrath of US institutions on many accounts. To be more precise, during the Trump administration, a divergence between Europe and the US, as well as between Trump and US institutions on Turkey, increased Turkey's room to manoeuvre. During Biden's presidency, it is highly likely there will be a double convergence between Biden and US institutions, as well as between the US and Europe, on Turkey. This in itself is set to generate more friction in relations. On top of this, four issues will test the relations from early on. Turkey's purchase of the Russian-

made S-400 missile systems, the Syrian Kurds, the eastern Mediterranean crisis, and Biden's propensity to speak on the domestic developments in Turkey. Unless there is a major policy recalibration in Ankara that open the way for more engagement between the sides in places such as the Black Sea region and Libya, Turkish-US/Western relations will go from bad to worse in the coming period.

A Biden administration will not increase the U.S. footprint in the Middle East. However, a different politics, set of strategies and style will prove to be consequential without necessarily any increase in US military commitment to the region. The new administration will have to grasp that the Middle East is undergoing a major restructuring, in which the region's relations with international powers have become more multipolar and regional powers' more important. The Biden administration will have to factor these changes into its MENA policies.

## NOTES

1. <https://www.bbc.co.uk/news/world-middle-east-55128970>
2. <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-11-13/erdogan-promises-period-of-economic-and-legal-reform-in-turkey>
3. <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>
4. <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/6/5/understanding-the-blockade-against-qatar>
5. <https://www.iiss.org/blogs/survival-blog/2020/03/iran-united-states-maximum-pressure>



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