

Trump and the Middle East: 'Barking Dogs Seldom Bite'

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ABSTRACT *In drafting its Middle East policy, the Trump administration appears to depart from the soft power rhetoric of the Obama years, seemingly favoring a more hawkish, hard power approach to dealing with America's most important interests in the region: the defeat of ISIS and the containment of Iran. While many regional partners hope for a radical U.S. foreign policy shift after years of perceived American disengagement, Trump seems to be constrained by path dependency. He inherits a region in turmoil, a public adverse to regional military engagements for peripheral interests, and a major strategic discrepancy between ambition and capability. Consequently, the new White House will be forced to continue Obama's policy of delegation and multilateralism.*

Introduction

When the 45th President of the United States was sworn in after a lengthy, heated, and highly emotional campaign, few commentators and analysts in the West believed that Donald Trump had the personality, expertise, or experience to lead the most powerful country in the world. In the Middle East, however, policy makers and commentators were ironically less critical of the business tycoon from New York who had repeatedly lashed out verbally at Arabs and Muslims alike. Despite this rhetorical abuse, Middle Easterners from Egypt over the Levant to the Gulf hoped that a more hawkish and militaristic U.S. President would bring an end to Obama's policy of multilateral retrenchment, soft power diplomacy, and indecisive overseas commitments.

After a hundred days in office, however, it remains to be seen to what extent Trump can actually meet these expectations. Without a clearly formulated foreign policy strategy, and hampered by an overreliance on the Pentagon and a disintegrating State Department, the Trump administration has so far been

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unable to show any sign of radically rewriting U.S. policy in the Middle East. Quite the contrary, Trump seems to return to old American orthodoxies in the region: embracing the myth of authoritarian stability, as well as an almost unconditional support of Israel and the Arab Gulf amid a containment policy against Iran. This policy unfolds against the backdrop of the Obama legacy, which had “rightsized” America’s role in the Middle East, leaving local partners and allies widely to their own devices to solve their own problems.

Obama had realized that in an apolar, globalized world, no one state could shape the conflicts that have widely become privatized with state and non-state actors operating in a transnational sphere. In a post-Realist anarchy of warlords, war profiteers, terrorists and rebel groups, even the United States

with its overwhelming firepower is unable to dominate international affairs, which have become more and more unpredictable and uncontrollable. Obama entered office realizing that in this new era, the lack of a tangible antagonist exposed the formulation of a national security strategy to subjective securitization, whereby threats were no longer constructed on the basis of palpable evidence of intent and capability, but instead based on risks. U.S. foreign and security policy had become an exercise in risk management, whereby in conflicts of choice across the globe the president had to trade off the political risks of inaction against those of overreaction. The consequences of trying to mitigate the unknown within a global sphere of uncertainty confronted the president with a paradoxical reality in which the lines between rationality and hysteria became blurred. The American public developed an ever higher demand for security, while at the same time displaying an ever growing aversion to overseas commitments and casualties. Consequently, Obama, aware of the intellectual challenge of establishing a link between military engagement overseas and national security at home, limited the United States’ military footprint in the Middle East.¹

In this paper, I argue that the Trump administration’s posture in the Middle East will largely be defined by path dependency² rather than radical policy shifts. The reason is that first, Trump inherits a weakened region largely left to its own devices by the Obama administration. In Libya, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, the United States has few options left to actively shape the outcome of these conflicts, in part because the surrogates and proxies Obama had employed were unable to hold their ground against their Russian and Iranian counterparts. Second, the new administration has so far responded to

growing regional uncertainties with unpredictability and lack of a coherent strategy. An 'America First' policy, though not necessarily isolationist, when applied to the Middle East means that only vital U.S. interests will be secured, most notably against global jihadism and Iran. Third, the United States has forfeited its hegemony as the last superpower amid an increasingly anarchic transnational context where conventional military power is unable to contain the various risks and threats emanating from an ever longer list of contenders. The Trump administration faces huge gaps between ambition, intention, and capability in the new global reality of the 21st century. The overreliance on hard power proposed by the new White House will be unable to secure America's interests in the region in what appears to be a lack of credible soft power engagement.

Obama's Legacy in the Middle East

Like Donald Trump, Barack Obama was under the burden of the legacy his predecessor left behind. A financial crisis, an extraordinary budgetary deficit, and a tainted foreign policy reputation weighted heavy on Obama when he assumed office in 2009.³ He had won the campaign *inter alia* with the promise to end the highly unpopular wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, while ensuring that the United States would not get pulled back into the quagmires of the Middle East. Unlike the Bush administration, Obama was adamant that the U.S. needed to "rightsized" its commitments overseas due to lack of funds, public willpower, and a capacity to fight 'everywhere wars.'⁴ Instead, Obama's weapon of choice was supposed to be America's soft power: protecting U.S. values and interests in cooperation with local and regional partners. 'Multilateral retrenchment' meant that he had "to curtail the United States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners."⁵

According to this worldview, the U.S. would always prefer the diplomatic over the military lever of power.⁶ Obama imagined the U.S.' engagement with the Middle East to be founded on mutual understanding and respect. In his famous Cairo speech, he delivered a clear message that the United States were partners and friends of the Muslim world who could rely on each other. America's impact on the region was supposed to be increasingly transformational, i.e. leveraged with the proverbial carrot rather than a stick.⁷ In Obama's idealist remarks in Cairo, references to cultural relativism, the promotion of human rights, liberalization and democratization were on the forefront.⁸

Obama accepted that despite being the most powerful country in the world, the United States could not be more than a *primus inter pares* in an anarchic, globalized world. Any intervention, whether military or diplomatic, would



During his first visit abroad in May 2017, the U.S. President Donald Trump met with Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and Palestinian leader Mahmud Abbas.

(L) AFP PHOTO / GIL COHEN-MAGEN

(R) AFP PHOTO / THOMAS COEX

require the consent and support of regional partners. The 2015 National Security Strategy stated that “the threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases, we will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes.”⁹

Burden sharing, or the externalization of the burden of warfare to partners and local surrogates, became a key feature of an increasingly pragmatist foreign policy approach to the Middle East.¹⁰ Obama's initial aversion to commit to the region was challenged by the reality of the unfolding crises during the Arab Spring and the rise of ISIS. Obama realized that he had to respond, but without vital interests concerned, any response had to be measured and delivered with the smallest U.S. footprint possible. He asserted in a 2015 press conference that, “ultimately, it's not the job of ... the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East. The people in the Middle East are going to have to solve some of these problems themselves.”¹¹

Leading from behind proved to be highly ineffective, however, when hundreds of thousands took to the streets in late 2010 calling for more socio-economic security and political liberalization. Overwhelmed by the events, the Obama administration failed to deliver on its promise to become a driver for socio-political transformation in the region. When Middle Easterners called for U.S. leadership, Obama was unwilling to grant more than moral support. Only in Libya, where intervention appeared cheap and protestors well organized, did the Obama White House allow for a limited, multilateral military intervention.¹² The operation was short, did not involve American ground troops, and widely relied on the support of NATO and Arab partners who were unable to assume the leadership void that Obama had left.

In Egypt and Syria, the administration applied “salami tactics,” waiting to see how events on the ground would evolve.¹³ Obama lacked a decisive strategy providing the administration and its agencies with a clear vision of how to transform a region shaped by authoritarianism into one more responsive to communal and individual interests. Washington’s indecisiveness, both in terms of rhetoric and action, provided others with a momentum they could exploit. Obama’s unwillingness to enforce “redlines” beyond the use of diplomacy had a particularly detrimental impact on events in Syria. Russia and Iran could maneuver with impunity, becoming complicit in the atrocities committed by the Assad regime, while U.S. partners such as Turkey, Qatar, and Saudi Arabia would try to implement their conflicting visions for a new regional order.¹⁴



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By the time ISIS appeared on the battlefields of Syria in 2013, the civil war had escalated into a global conflict the U.S. could no longer manage. The moderate Syrian opposition, which had not received the U.S. support it needed, was being undermined by radical Salafi-jihadist forces who in 2014 would move across the border into Iraq. With thousands of operatives and surrogates on the ground, Iran had become the necessary partner for U.S. counter-terrorism operations against ISIS in Northern Iraq.¹⁵ Iran’s Revolutionary Guard (IRGC) had been quicker to commit funds and troops to its neighbor than a U.S. government haunted by Bush’s Iraq legacy.

Hence, when Obama left the White House in early 2017, the Middle East had socio-politically disintegrated. The old power houses of Syria, Iraq, and Egypt had either collapsed or had given way to new ones whose center of gravity was located on the Gulf. Iran had expanded its reach beyond Iraq and Lebanon into Syria and Yemen. The Arab Gulf States had tried to respond in Syria and Yemen in first attempts to conduct a foreign and security policy widely independent from the U.S. as their traditional protector. As a consequence, regional partners had looked for alternatives in the East – China, Pakistan and even Russia being the most prominent new patrons. Turkey had been left to its own devices trying to deal with a refugee crisis, a porous border infiltrated by ISIS and Kurdish nationalist forces, and exposed to U.S. surrogate warfare in Northern Syria employing the PKK-affiliated YPG.¹⁶ And Israel had to learn that U.S. support under Obama was no longer unconditional but depended on the freeze of Israel’s settlement activities.¹⁷ As Kroenig writes, “In Europe, Asia, and the Middle East, Obama left behind a far more dangerous world than the one he inherited in 2009.”¹⁸

Towards a Trump Doctrine in the Middle East

Donald Trump's administration inherited an America in transition from the sole remaining superpower in a unipolar world to a *primus inter pares* in an apolar world. The world's centers of power have moved eastward towards Moscow, the Gulf, New Delhi, and Beijing, leaving the old liberal Western system at its weakest since World War II. At a time when the United States need strong, decisive, and consistent leadership, a politically inexperienced real-estate mogul and entertainer such as Trump might be a tough choice for commander-in-chief.

Emotional, impulsive, and widely irrational, Donald Trump has so far been unable to formulate a clear strategy on how to achieve any of his visions. He entered the Oval Office with a considerable inferiority complex built up in a long campaign against an allegedly politically and intellectually superior Washington establishment. In his continuous personal rivalry with Obama and presidential contender Hillary Clinton, Trump is still trying to outperform his predecessor on who is more decisive and resolute in protecting American values and interests –something that became obvious during the missile strike against Assad in April 2017. As a narcissist with an excessive admiration for himself and his abilities, Trump is driven by the need for public admiration and approval. This narcissistic orientation has prompted him to take risks impulsively and irrationally, which do not serve collective, public interests, but rather personal, private ones.¹⁹ So far, Trump has presented himself in his presidential decision-making as irresolute, indecisive, contradictory, and instinct-driven. He has repeatedly praised his own good instincts, which he claims guide his decision-making in business and now in politics.²⁰ Narcissistic instinct combined with emotional impulsiveness explain Trump's sudden decision to respond to Assad's use of chemical weapons in Idlib with a measured, punitive missile strike on a Syrian air force base. As Boot writes sarcastically about Trump's improvised foreign policy doctrine: "The United States reserves the right to use force whenever the president is upset by something he sees on TV."²¹

In following these impulses, the President is contained only by a disintegrating State Department (DoS) and an empowered Pentagon. Tillerson and his State Department have been side-lined, left underfunded and understaffed.²² Without undersecretaries or assistant secretaries and key administrative positions being filled, the DoS is in no position to really assist in the formulation of foreign policy.²³ Instead, it becomes increasingly apparent that Trump has put his trust in Defense Secretary James Mattis and National Security Advisor H. R. McMaster to steer foreign and security policy.²⁴ Both are accomplished soldier scholars with extensive experience in the Middle East, able to assist the President in understanding the complexity of the region.²⁵ Above all, retired Marine

General Mattis seems to have taken the lead on defining America's Middle East policy. Dubbed a 'warrior monk,' Mattis has dedicated his life to the military and although having assumed some diplomatic responsibility as CENTCOM commander, views the world through the eyes of a general. He has been described as hawkish and uncompromising in the pursuit of securing American interests.²⁶ His personal antipathy towards Iran has thereby already had a shaping impact on the administration's foreign policy approach to the region.²⁷

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Nonetheless, despite a capable team of advisors, the Trump administration still lacks a clear strategic direction. Statements by different members of the administration have been contradictory, and the impulsive President seems to have been consistently inconsistent about where he stands on NATO, Russia, China, and the Middle East. Most of the rhetoric that defined his election campaign was based on an unnuanced *Weltanschauung* and the illusion that globalization and its consequences could be reverted in an effort to make the United States the sole superpower again. References to Iran, ISIS, and the Arab-Israeli Conflict did not provide enough substance to be translated into policy. The various foreign policy U-turns over the past four months suggest that there *is* no U.S. global strategy, let alone a strategy for the Middle East that goes beyond impulsive, albeit limited, escalation.²⁸

The one defining narrative that has emerged from the Trump campaign has been 'America First,' stating that the United States cannot be strong abroad without being strong at home. The key focus of the Trump administration has been on domestic policies, particularly in the realm of trade and economics. After Trump's repeated claims to 'make America great again,' many commentators and observers feared that the U.S. would become even more isolationist than under the Obama administration.²⁹ In reality, however, Trump is far too much of a realist to withdraw the United States from the interconnected world of the 21st century. In an effort to stay relevant and to contain the newly created boogeymen of Iran, ISIS, and North Korea, Trump appears to be ready to employ all means necessary, making him, as Wertheim argues, a militarist rather than an isolationist.³⁰ It remains to be seen what military action under this administration would look like, and for what ends Trump is willing to use the military lever of power over that of economic or diplomatic power.

The two recurring themes in the Trump administration's realist foreign policy rhetoric on the Middle East are the fight against the ISIS and the containment

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during the campaign that the fight against ISIS would be his primary foreign policy objective.³² Trump's argument, that Obama did not do enough to stop Syria, Iraq, Libya or Yemen from becoming incubators of terrorism, pressures the new president to become more proactive against ISIS; yet, he has so far failed to specify the ways and means to do so.³³ The second priority for the Trump administration in the Middle East has become the containment of Iran, "the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East," as Mattis argues.³⁴ Grown out of the conservative opposition to Obama's Nuclear Deal with Iran, Trump and many in his team are united by a common antagonism towards the Islamic Republic's spread of influence in the region since the Arab Spring. During the campaign, Trump shunned the Nuclear Deal as a 'bad deal,' arguing that it would provide Iran with too much leeway to continue developing a nuclear capability.³⁵ Post campaign, Trump has revised his initial calls to cancel the deal and left it open whether he would renegotiate it or keep it in place with a more strenuous enforcement mechanism.³⁶ Apart from the Nuclear Deal, Mattis has been an outspoken critic of Iran's subversive activities in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, a position allegedly causing Obama to replace him as CENTCOM commander.³⁷ As Trump's most important advisor on security matters, Mattis' personal preoccupation with Iran has had a tremendous impact on the President's perception of friend and foe in the region.

Hence, Trump's infant policy in the Middle East is defined by a grand strategic vision of 'America First' that provides little room for the administration to engage extensively in the Middle East beyond two main focal points: first, ISIS and the spread of jihadism; and second, Iran's covert and overt operations in the region. However, the administration has so far not suggested any credible and consistent ways and means to achieve these ends. This lack of strategy has led to a reality in which the Pentagon creates policy through operations, the State Department responds to unfolding crises reactively, and the White House undermines both efforts with unsubstantiated, populist rhetoric. While Donald Trump might be prone to impulsively allow for limited military esca-

of the spread of Iran.³¹ Both factors seem to be vital U.S. national interests that will define the administration's approach to the region. Trump's obsession with the ISIS is founded on a deeply ingrained aversion to what he calls 'radical Islamic terrorism,' which has been the main boogeyman in conservative Christian circles in America since 9/11. Aware of the attention the subject receives within his electorate, Trump had already promised



U.S. President Donald Trump joins a traditional sword dance at a welcome ceremony ahead of a banquet at the Murabba Palace in Riyadh on May 20, 2017.

AFP PHOTO / MANDEL NGAN

lations, the new president cultivates links to partners to whom America can potentially externalize its regional burden of war.

Implementing Policy: 'More of the Same Please'

Despite the fact that Trump's approach to foreign policy appears to be more centered on hard rather than soft power, there does not seem to be a massive difference between his and his predecessor's view of the Middle East.³⁸ Like Obama, Trump is aware of a widespread American distaste for long-term military adventures in the region.³⁹ In the aftermath of long and costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the American public does not consider the U.S. interests in this part of the world worthy of being secured by massive military engagements⁴⁰ Washington would have to invest into a re-securitization of the region in order for the Americans to overcome their war and casualty aversion. That is to say, the Trump administration would have to create a compelling case that military engagement was absolutely necessary to contain a tangible threat to U.S. soil –something that at this point no one in Washington is willing to do. After all, Trump won the presidency based on his promises to boost economic growth, and to reduce the trade deficit and unemployment.⁴¹ It is in this light that one must look at his announcement to initiate one of the 'greatest military buildups in American history.'⁴²

Apart from the economic motivations to invest in the U.S. military, a military build-up complements Trump's strongman posture. It is hard to determine

whether Trump's hard power rhetoric and militaristic approach to foreign policy is more than just posture, particularly when it comes to the Middle East. A military build-up is supposed to enhance the capability of the U.S. military to defend the homeland and its vital security interests overseas, rather than provide the President with an extended toolbox to conduct military diplomacy for peripheral interests. Although more hawkish and realist than his predecessor, Trump's plan to invest in the military, even if approved by a budget-resistant Congress, will not automatically raise U.S. willpower to take more expansive military action in the Middle East. The most recent punitive missile strikes against Assad in Syria are not at all evidence for an increased American propensity to escalate under Trump. As former Defense Secretary Cohen pointed out, "one strike doesn't make a strategy."⁴³

Similar to the ongoing socio-political disintegration in Syria, failing statehood in Libya, parts of Egypt, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen are not perceived by the administration to be directly connected to the two key vital U.S. interests: the defeat of ISIS and the containment of Iran. While Trump wants to take a more assertive stance in the Middle East, the various crises have yet to generate the needed urgency for Washington to intervene militarily beyond what the Obama administration has already done. Hard power politics in the Trump era will for the most part employ the same ways and means the Obama administration had already used in previous years: remote warfare by technology, surrogate, or proxy.⁴⁴ That is to say, with a limited urgency to escalate, both measured in terms of public pressure and national security interests, Trump will rely on local surrogates, on air power, or on partners such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to bear the main burden of war. In so doing, Trump can achieve his primary objectives in the region without having to put boots on the ground. For the public at home, well-staged missile or air strikes from a safe distance can conceal the reality that U.S. Special Forces will continue to run operations covertly training and equipping local groups to act as *de facto* U.S. infantry.⁴⁵ While in Syria the remnants of the Free Syrian Army and the Syrian Defense Forces will continue to be Trump's surrogates of choice, in Iraq Trump's advisors have to settle for the Kurdish Peshmerga or Iraqi Security Forces, including some Shia militias, to run America's war on the ground. The containment of Iran on the Arabian Peninsula was supposed to be externalized to the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, Trump's slippery tongue in response to allegations of Qatar's support for extremism empowered the UAE and Saudi Arabia to isolate their neighbor –thereby, against the advice of Mattis and Tillerson, undermining GCC unity. Nonetheless, both the Pentagon and the White House have allowed for a more relaxed policy on defense procurement to the Gulf.⁴⁶ With procurement deals worth tens of billions of dollars being approved, the administration seeks to build militarily potent proxies in Arabia.⁴⁷

The real U.S. policy shift in the Middle East will be on the soft power end of the spectrum. After eight years of diplomacy and subtle military action, Trump has assumed office as a president whose comically undiplomatic remarks on Twitter have had a detrimental impact on the United States' soft power in the world. Beyond his own persona, Trump's approach to foreign and security policy is hard power-heavy, side-lining those departments responsible for projecting America's soft power.⁴⁸ At the heart of the announced budget cuts is the State Department, which will be left underfunded and understaffed, depriving Secretary of State Tillerson of the ability to conduct a proactive foreign policy. Degraded from a decision maker to a mere envoy of the administration,⁴⁹ Tillerson has so far not played a decisive role in the Trump administration's approach to the Middle East. Neither in Iraq nor in Syria or in the Gulf has Tillerson been able to shape the foreign policy debate. As a consequence, strategy, as far as it exists, is widely being formulated by the Pentagon without the political input of the State Department. In the absence of a political strategy, the United States is unable to currently employ its full bandwidth of power to achieve sustainable outcomes. Without the diplomatic and military levers of power complementing each other, the Trump administration will be unable to tackle the root causes of insecurity in the Middle East.⁵⁰ Particularly concerning is the announcement to curtail the budget of international aid and development programs, undermining the ability of US-AID to effectively respond to emerging crises before a point of escalation.⁵¹ The liberal aspects of social and human security, cornerstones of international aid and development since the 1990s, are currently being ignored by the widely militaristic White House of Donald Trump. The administration's obsessions with physical security widely disregard the complexity of the concept of security in the 21st century. In comparison to Obama, Trump seems to refrain from using the diplomatic lever of power as a means in itself in the absence of military coercion. Air power diplomacy, whereby coercive military means are employed remotely to pressure opponents and partners into accepting the administration's terms and conditions for negotiation, will take precedence over soft power diplomacy. And the protection of human rights will no longer provide a conditionality for U.S. foreign and security policy, as the administration's rapprochements with Egypt's Sisi, Israel's Netanyahu, Turkey's Erdoğan, and Saudi Arabia's Mohammad bin Salman suggest.⁵² The reason behind this shift is that developing sustainable relationships with potential partners who

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can provide the United States with the capacity and capability to achieve its vital national interests in the region, namely defeating ISIS and containing Iran, has absolute priority.

Trump's Reception: Implications for Regional Players

After eight years of Obama's Middle East policy shaped by hard power retrenchment and moderate soft power expansion, many of the region's main players welcomed the regime change in Washington with high hopes that Donald Trump would return to the old orthodoxies of U.S. leadership in the region.⁵³ In particular, those Arab states which have traditionally looked toward the United States as a protector not just of national but also of regime interests, expected a more realist approach for dealing with the underlying insecurities in this tumultuous region. In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, however, the Trump administration seems to subscribe to the illusion of authoritarian stability over liberal socio-political experiments. Instead of taking what many regional partners criticized as Obama's transformational approach to the region, Trump is expected to be more transactional and thereby potentially more predictable. His belief in great power politics, as well as his personal aversion to interventionism and regime change, are perceived in Arab capitals as a promise that Trump will not intervene in Arab domestic affairs while taking a hard-line stance against the two most pressing Arab concerns: ISIS and Iran.⁵⁴

In Iran, Trump was long regarded the more favorable candidate during the campaign, despite his anti-Iran rhetoric. His obsession with 'America First' and his anti-interventionist stance appeared promising, suggesting to the regime in Tehran that it would be able to continue implementing its 'campfire strategy' –namely the idea that Iran had to defend the Islamic Revolution outside its own borders. Instead of fighting the war of ideological survival on its own soil, Iran has tried since 1979 to externalize its strategic defense overseas to Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.⁵⁵ The political establishment in Iran and the public generally saw Trump as a pragmatist with fewer idealist principles than his predecessor or his presidential contender, and as a businessman eager to make a deal.⁵⁶ The travel ban directly targeting Iran, however, as well as the missile strike on Syria in April 2017 and the rhetoric from key Trump advisors on Iran, most notably from Defense Secretary Mattis, have curbed the enthusiasm in Tehran for the new president. McMaster and Mattis have both stressed the



The U.S. fired 59 Tomahawk missiles at a Syrian military airbase after the Assad regime's chemical attack on the rebel-held town of Khan Sheikhoun in North-Western Syria on April 4, 2017.

AA PHOTO / PENTAGON / HANDOUT

importance of working in close cooperation with the Arab Gulf States and Iraq to ensure that Iran's subversive activities across the region are not only contained but reversed –something that directly threatens Iran's campfire strategy.⁵⁷ Despite concerns that Trump's confrontational foreign policy course towards the Islamic Republic might escalate, Iran is wary that its current, deeply entrenched positions in Lebanon, Iraq and Syria cannot be easily reversed without a major military escalation. From this posi-

tion of strength, Iran hardly views limited U.S. military actions, such as the April missile strikes against Assad, as a threat to its strategic position in the region. Trump's announcements to cancel the Nuclear Deal might have been more concerning for the Islamic Republic. Yet, in the meantime Trump has approved the agreement retreating from his campaign rhetoric.⁵⁸ Thus, despite putting Iran 'formally on notice,' the Trump administration's Iran policy lacks credibility as it has so far not indicated what means and ways it intends to implement to contain Iran in the Middle East.

In Russia, Trump's election created high expectations. The Kremlin hoped that Trump would deliver on his campaign promises to open a new chapter in American-Russian relations, wherein both Putin and Trump would solve crises cooperatively. In particular, the Syrian Civil War and the fight against global Salafi-jihadism seemed to provide opportunities for both powers to cooperate in the Middle East. Any hope of an American-Russian rapprochement under Trump was diluted, however, when Trump authorized missile strikes on a joint Syrian-Russian airbase in April 2017. Disappointed by the unilateral military action taken by the new administration, Putin reacted by declaring that American-Russian relations had 'degraded'⁵⁹ and 'worsened' under Donald Trump.⁶⁰ Trump responded by saying that U.S. relations with Russia 'might be at all-time low.'⁶¹ Trump's sudden change of direction in Syria had come at a surprise to Putin who, despite being warned prior to the strike, took personal offense. Seeing the United States taking unilateral military action in Syria against Russian interests reignited Putin's personal paranoias about U.S. interventionism, which had long shaped his aversion to Western humanitarian

rhetoric.⁶² Despite the fact that the Syrian missile strike severely damaged the improving, albeit indirect dialogue between Washington and Moscow, Russia does not have the capacity or resources to further escalate in Syria. What started as a mediatized love affair between two strongmen might more realistically advance as a pragmatist partnership whereby both sides can negotiate now from a position of roughly equal strength.⁶³ The disappointment expressed by the Kremlin cannot hide the fact that Putin and Trump require each other's support in achieving mutual interests, most importantly in the defeat of ISIS.

In Israel the new U.S. President has been received positively. Populist calls by candidate Trump to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem and to follow Netanyahu's hardline anti-Iran policy bought him a lot of credit with the Jewish community in both America and Israel.⁶⁴ Like no other candidate, Trump employed an un-nuanced pro-Israel rhetoric that appealed to many Israelis who feared that the United States under Obama had abandoned the Jewish State.⁶⁵ Not only did Trump appear to return to a traditional American Israel policy of unconditional support, he also seemed willing to discard the traditional maxim of U.S. foreign policy towards the Arab-Israeli Conflict: the two-state solution.⁶⁶ After assuming office, however, Trump slightly toned down his rhetoric, understanding that any progress in this protracted conflict between Israel and the Palestinian Authority requires concessions from both sides. Despite designating an outspoken advocate of Israel's settlement policy as his Israel envoy, Trump surprisingly voiced concerns about Israel's continued building of settlements.⁶⁷ His plans to relocate the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem have been postponed indefinitely. Nonetheless, for Israelis, Trump appears to be the hardliner needed in the White House to deal with Iran, which in Israel's public and government perception remains the single most important threat to Israel's national security.

As the pillar of Trump's policy in the Middle East, the GCC remains America's most important regional partner in containing the spread of Salafi-jihadism and Iran. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar in particular have developed into strategic partners over the past decade using their soft –and increasingly their hard power– to manage regional crises with limited U.S. oversight. Since the Arab Spring, the wealthy rentier states of the Gulf have been forced to emancipate themselves from U.S. dependency due to the perceived American pivot towards Asia. Despite the fact that Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and the UAE have invested in alternative defense cooperation agreements, the Gulf monarchies still look toward Washington as their main foreign protector. After eight years of a critically-viewed U.S. rapprochement with Iran, the Arab monarchs of the Gulf hoped that Trump as a fellow strongman with a hawkish, somewhat emotional approach to politics, could be convinced to take a more proactive stance in the Gulf. Most importantly, Trump's anti-Iran rhetoric suggests to the GCC that the new president will try to cooperatively find solutions for Iran's 'ex-

pansionism' in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen.⁶⁸

In addition, Gulf decision-makers are confident that the businessman Trump can be won over by the Gulf's *Realpolitik*: amid a deteriorating regional security context, the

GCC countries are eager to continue spending their expansive defense budgets on American armaments and munitions.⁶⁹ The new administration has so far kept its promises. The U.S. policy towards the Gulf under Trump has become more realist and interest-based, ditching Obama's value-based approach. Instead of taking a soft power approach, whereby military support for the GCC is tied to a human rights conditionality, Trump and General Mattis have identified the GCC as a strategic military partner with shared interests against Iran as a common adversary.⁷⁰ Announcements by the Defense Secretary to boost U.S. support for the Saudi-led military operation against the Houthis, a distant Iranian surrogate in Yemen, were well received in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.⁷¹ Trump's decision to strike Assad's airbase in Syria was cherished by Saudi Arabia as a sign of the new U.S. President's assertiveness in achieving common objectives in the region.⁷² Trump's Riyadh speech to Muslim leaders in May 2017 reassured the Arab Gulf states that the Trump administration would work closely with the GCC in defeating ISIS and confronting Iran.⁷³

However, Trump's casual consent to the leaders of Saudi Arabia and the UAE during meetings in Riyadh to taking action against Qatar's alleged support for extremism, have put the entire effort at risk.⁷⁴ The consequent move by Riyadh and Abu Dhabi to isolate Qatar on June 5, 2017 has left the GCC at a state of severe crisis. Instead of achieving more unity of effort across the region in taking on Iran and ISIS, Qatar has effectively been forced to seek Iranian support to alleviate the effects of the political and economic embargo. This strategic miscalculation, facilitated by an incoherent U.S. regional strategy, will make it increasingly difficult for the Trump administration to rely on the GCC as America's regional deputy. Similar to Obama, Trump is faced with a scarcity of resources, capacity, and capability to make extensive hard power commitments to the region. The administration has shown that it can disregard major ideological differences with the Gulf in favor of a mutually beneficial pragmatism that would see Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Qatar accept their role as the United States' regional policemen. While a united GCC approach appears to be unrealistic, Trump might nonetheless be able to exploit the Gulf States' need for Washington's attention to invoke loyalty to his agenda.

Finally, Trump inherits a difficult relationship with long-time NATO ally Turkey. Obama's hesitant and half-hearted support for rebels in Syria, the alleged

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American harboring of Fetullah Gülen, the man Ankara deems responsible for the attempted coup in 2016, and the continuous U.S. military support for the Syrian Defense Force (SDF), including the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG), have severely strained American-Turkish relations. Like other U.S. partners, Turkey was confident that a change of presidents in Washington would trigger a course correction of U.S. foreign and security policy in Syria and Iraq.⁷⁵ So far, although Trump has refrained from commenting on the outcome of the April referendum, Ankara has been disappointed by the new administration. Instead of supporting the Turkish plan for defeating ISIS in Syria, General Mattis decided to boost support for the SDF and YPG as critical U.S. surrogates in the country. In an effort to protect YPG forces from Turkish airstrikes and military advances by the Free Syrian Army (FSA), a Turkish surrogate, the Pentagon increased U.S. troop levels on the frontline, not just with Special Forces but also with regular forces.⁷⁶ This unprecedented show of U.S. solidarity with the YPG has blighted the budding relationship between Erdoğan and Trump. With Erdoğan undeterred to continue probing U.S. resolve in Syria, and with U.S. troop levels too low to actually protect all YPG forces in Northern Syria, the Trump administration might have to find diplomatic ways to return to an effective working relationship between Washington and Ankara.⁷⁷ Once more, the lack of a political strategy and insufficient U.S. soft power engagement might undermine U.S. long-term policy in the region.

Conclusion

Donald Trump embarked on his presidency in an era of fundamental geopolitical upheaval in which the United States, after decades of global leadership, has to find its place in a globalized, transnational power game. Trump inherits an America whose inevitable relative decline *vis-à-vis* the East has been managed by a risk-averse predecessor who was consumed by an idealist vision of conducting international relations solely by multilateral diplomacy. Not only but particularly in the Middle East, the United States has meanwhile been degraded from a superpower to a *primus inter pares*. Although his guiding principle of 'making America great again' might not directly refer to the United States' standing in the world, Trump nonetheless expressed ambitions to restore U.S. leadership in areas where Obama allegedly failed to lead. In the Middle East, the Trump administration intends to defeat ISIS and with it Salafi-jihadism as a whole, while containing Iranian influence across the region – two vital U.S. objectives that Trump accuses Obama of neglecting.

Thereby, the Trump administration's policy towards the Middle East has been shaped negatively in contrast to Obama's policy. So far, the team surrounding the new president has not formulated a clear strategy, neither defining the

key objectives to be achieved nor, and more importantly, explaining which means and ways to employ to achieve them. Considering that the Obama legacy leaves the United States' standing in the region weakened *vis-à-vis* Russia, Iran, and Turkey, the new administration has failed to credibly illustrate how it intends to deliver on its hardline rhetoric. Particularly in light of the announced radical downsizing of the State Department, the president is left with only one lever of power: the military. Yet without a considerable soft power engagement to manage the increasingly complex conflicts of the region, the military can only respond reactively to changing events on the ground, further relegating the U.S. to the position of an observer rather than a decider. Mattis' airpower diplomacy can only generate enduring outcomes if complemented by a credible and coherent political strategic vision for the region.

Therefore, amid an uncertain and apolar global context, bearing in mind the persisting American public distaste for major combat operations and the relatively low urgency of regional threats to the U.S. homeland, the Trump administration will continue employing remote warfare by airpower, partner, and surrogate, in an attempt to achieve its objectives of defeating ISIS and containing Iran. In so doing, Trump –despite his hawkish rhetoric to take more decisive actions in the Middle East– is bound by a path dependency that does not allow for expansive unilateral U.S. commitments in the region. After all, the U.S. will have to consult other regional players in its most fundamental regional decisions –doing so, without the comfort of a functioning State Department. ■

Endnotes

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