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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

Revisiting Historical Legacies of US Policy in the Middle East: The Trump Administration

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It may not have been Donald Trump speaking, but it was perhaps the best possible statement of the case for his achievements in the Middle East. Addressing the Republican National Convention on August 25, 2020, Secretary of State Mike Pompeo spoke in front of a backdrop of the old city of Jerusalem, praising Trump's "America First" foreign policy. The Middle East took up most of the four-minute speech. Among the successes touted was the killing of "the Iranian terrorist Qasem Soleimani," who, he claimed, was "most responsible for the murder and maiming of hundreds of American soldiers and thousands of Christians across the Middle East." The Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) caliphate, Pompeo boasted, was "wiped out," while U.S. troops were "on their way home." Trump exited the "disastrous nuclear deal with Iran and squeezed the Ayatollah, Hezbollah, and Hamas." The U.S. Embassy in Israel had been moved to "this very city of God, Jerusalem, the rightful capital of the Jewish homeland." American mediators had brokered a "historic peace deal between Israel and the United Arab Emirates." To end the talk, he invoked the release of "[a]n American hostage, imprisoned in Turkey for two years, Pastor Andrew Brunson, [who] said upon his release that he survived his ordeal with these words of scripture, 'Be faithful, endure, and finish well.'"¹

Pompeo's message was geared in large part towards the Republican faithful and was thus designed to project an image of strength, decisiveness, and respect for Christian evangelical priorities. At the same time, the speech was not just about the upcoming election. It arguably represented how the Trump Administration saw its own record. Top officials, no doubt, feel that they accomplished an enormous amount in the region, even if some of these victories were superficial. But to what extent did they truly defy existing patterns of American policy in the region?

In an H-Diplo essay written in March 2017, I offered a set of predictions about the Trump Administration's approach to the Middle East, arguing that overall, there would be more continuities than most expected.² I laid out five areas in which the United States could be expected to maintain similar patterns of policy and action: 1) the level of American military and political engagement in the region, 2) policies towards Syria and Iraq (at the time closely linked by the threat of ISIS), 3) policy on Iran, 4) involvement in the Arab-Israeli conflict, and 5) democracy promotion. My point was not that there would be no change whatsoever, but that there were powerful incentives in place to continue policy along the same lines.

A mixture of ideology, domestic politics, and personal interests drove the administration's approach to the Middle East. Trump does not have a formal ideology, but a clear set of ideas animated his policy: America's interests take priority over those of others; allies have been taking advantage of the United States; autocrats are more reliable partners than democratically elected leaders; and multilateral arrangements are suspect unless negotiated by Trump himself. His administration was also filled with officials and advisors who are strongly influenced by ideology, including conservative hawks such as Pompeo and white nationalists like Stephen Miller; their convictions played a role in U.S. policy towards the region.³ Moreover, Trump's international stances were nearly always been aligned with

¹ YouTube, NBC News, "Watch Mike Pompeo's Full Speech At The 2020 RNC", August 25, 2020, available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=05alxh2Zjvw>.

² <https://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AE.pdf>.

³ On Miller, see Amanda Holpoch, "Stephen Miller: the white nationalist at the heart of Trump's White House," *The Guardian*, November 24, 2019, available at <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/24/stephen-miller-white-nationalist-trump-immigration-guru>.

domestic priorities. Strong support for Israel, for instance, stemmed less from respect for its history or people than from a need to satisfy an electoral constituency.⁴ Personal interests were important, too. Many, for instance, have suggested that American accommodation of Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan reflected business arrangements that the Trump Organization maintains in that country.⁵ These forces and trends have pushed hard against the continuities I outlined, but they have brought about bigger changes in some areas than others.

The first continuity was American military and political engagement in the region. My article pondered whether Trump would follow a Fortress America strategy of withdrawing troops, an aggressive strategy of increasing the U.S. troop presence, or a “madman” strategy of threatening violence to achieve a policy goal without having to use overwhelming force.⁶ The Trump administration in fact pursued a bit of all three, with varying levels of success. Fortress America was the most touted, if least pursued. Over most of the past four years, troop levels in the Middle East remained roughly the same.⁷ Only in September 2020 did the Trump Administration announce that it was halving troop levels in Iraq to around 3,000, while keeping some 4,000 troops in Afghanistan and 700 in Syria.⁸ While official explanations for the drawdown stressed increased security in these locations, there can be little doubt that they were intended to feed a narrative of foreign policy triumph going into last November’s election. At times, Trump had even increased troop levels in the region, including during a mini-surge in early 2020 following attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq.⁹ Thus, while Trump left troops levels somewhat lower than his predecessor, he did not manage to truly extricate the United States from any of the regional conflicts in which it was involved.

While the Trump administration never quite went full “madman,” it did both threaten and employ violence in a limited fashion to achieve policy goals. Two examples in particular stand out. One concerns the Trump administration’s response to the use of chemical weapons by Syrian President Bashar al-Assad. In April 2017, the United States fired Tomahawk missiles at Syria’s Shayrat Airbase after the alleged use of chemical weapons against rebel-held areas.¹⁰ The attacks were announced in advance, giving Syrian forces and their Russian allies plenty of time to move, but the strikes still sent a strong message. Following another set of alleged chemical weapons attacks the following year, France, the U.S., and the U.K. launched a round of missile strikes on weapons production facilities.¹¹ These seem to have sharply reduced – if not totally halted – the Syrian use of chemical weapons.

The other stems from attacks on US troops in Iraq. In early January 2020, U.S. military forces in Iraq launched a drone strike that killed Iranian General Qassem Soleimani, leader of the Quds Force, as well as several high-level Iraqi militia leaders. The strikes were originally explained as retaliation for the missile attacks against U.S. bases in Iraq; a few days later, however, they were re-framed as preemptive

⁴ The Independent, “Why is Jerusalem so important to American Evangelical Christians?” August 18, 2020, available at <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/us-politics/jerusalem-history-explained-religion-evangelical-christians-donald-trump-a9676756.html>.

⁵ Eric Lipton and Benjamin Weiser, “Turkish Bank Case Showed Erdogan’s Influence with Trump,” *New York Times*, October 29, 2020, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/10/29/us/politics/trump-erdogan-halkbank.html>.

⁶ On Nixon’s “Madman” theory, see Timothy Naftali, “The Problem With Trump’s Madman Theory,” October 4, 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/10/madman-theory-trump-north-korea/542055/>.

⁷ A *New York Times* article recently estimated that the United States maintains around 45,000-65,000 troops in the Middle East at any given time. Eric Schmitt, “Top General in Middle East Says U.S. Troop Levels Will Drop in Iraq and Syria,” *New York Times* (Online), August 12, 2020.

⁸ Eric Schmitt, “U.S. to Reduce Troops in Iraq to 3,000, Helping to Fulfill a Goal on Overseas Cuts,” *New York Times*, September 10, 2020: A14.

⁹ Lolita C. Baldor, “US General Says Troop Surge in Middle East May Not End Soon,” *AP News*, January 23, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/2208d8645ac0437024ac71c06fcfb8e1>.

¹⁰ Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, “Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria,” *New York Times*, April 6, 2017, available at <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html>.

¹¹ Arms Control Association, “Timeline of Syrian Chemical Weapons Activity, 2012-2020,” available at <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/Timeline-of-Syrian-Chemical-Weapons-Activity>.

attacks, with the U.S. claiming to have evidence of a planned Iranian-sponsored attack on U.S. forces in the country.¹² In response, Iran lobbed a volley of missiles at U.S. bases that resulted in no deaths, but more than 100 troops were treated for traumatic brain injuries.¹³ Had Iran provided no warning to the Iraqi government, there could have been deaths and greater injuries.¹⁴ Moreover, attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq have resumed, albeit on a smaller scale than before.¹⁵ Thus, while the killing of Soleimani appears to have achieved limited tactical successes, it had little impact on broader regional dynamics.

In the second area, in Syria and Iraq, the Trump administration inherited flawed policies towards countries in conflict – conflict that had been largely stirred by actions of the United States. Syria remains in the midst of a civil war, encouraged by half-hearted Obama-era policies that were largely reactive rather than assertive. Trump touted the defeat of ISIS in Syria and Iraq as a major victory; however, this reflected progress in a difficult battle whose tide had already turned at the time Trump won office. After a U.S.-led raid that killed ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in October 2019, the administration declared victory and pulled the majority of U.S. combat troops out of Syria, exposing America's Kurdish allies to the dangers of an attack from Turkey, while allowing remnants of ISIS to reestablish themselves.¹⁶ Meanwhile, a decade and a half after the U.S. invasion, Iraq has acquired a degree of dysfunctional stability. As Max Boot has suggested, Iran aims at a sort of Lebanonization of the country, funding and arming a set of militias that hold the true power in the country, while allowing a civilian government acceptable to the American government and other Western powers to remain nominally in charge.¹⁷ Ultimately, Iraq virtually disappeared as a U.S. priority in the aftermath of Soleimani's death. The Trump administration even suggested abandoning its embassy there, though it is not clear how serious it was about this proposal.¹⁸ If anything, the fact that its closure was even under consideration demonstrated how far the country had fallen in American strategic priorities.

On the third issue, Iran, the Trump administration did indeed embark on a new path, vowing to take a stronger stance towards the country than its predecessor. The Obama Administration believed that preventing Iran from developing a nuclear weapon without the use of force requires international cooperation, including from European countries, Russia and China. American diplomacy led to the creation of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that placed significant restrictions on Iran's nuclear program. Though it took two and a half years, the Trump Administration finally abandoned its participation in the JCPOA, the main legacy of Obama's Iran policy. Although the U.S. no longer participates, other countries remain in the agreement, at least for the moment, even as Iran exceeds the agreed limits of uranium production.¹⁹

Nevertheless, the Trump administration discovered that the U.S. could not implement an effective sanctions program towards Iran alone. Ironically, U.S. diplomats were forced to invoke the deal their country renounced in a failed effort to re-impose so-called "snapback

¹² "Soleimani 'Days Away' from Killing Americans," *The Daily Telegraph*, January 8, 2020.

¹³ Shawn Snow, "American troops had only hours to react to Iranian ballistic missile attack," April 21, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2020/04/21/american-troops-had-only-hours-to-react-to-iranian-ballistic-missile-attack-heres-what-they-did/>.

¹⁴ Ian Williams, "Uncomfortable Lessons: Reassessing Iran's Missile Attack," February 6, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/uncomfortable-lessons-reassessing-irans-missile-attack>.

¹⁵ Namu Abdulla, "Iran-backed Militias Resume Rocket Attacks Toward US Embassy in Iraq", *Voice of America*, November 19, 2020, available at <https://www.voanews.com/extremism-watch/iran-backed-militias-resume-rocket-attacks-toward-us-embassy-iraq>.

¹⁶ Time, "ISIS Fighters Are Gaining Strength After Trump's Syria Pullout, U.S. Spies Say," November 19, 2020, available at <https://time.com/5732842/isis-gaining-strength-trump-syria-pullout>.

¹⁷ Max Boot, "Iran-Backed Militias in Iraq Poised to Expand Influence," Council on Foreign Relations: In Brief, October 13, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/iran-backed-militias-iraq-poised-expand-influence>.

¹⁸ Humeyra Pamuk and Jonathan Landa, "U.S. pleased Iraq doing more to protect U.S. embassy – Pompeo," Reuters, October 14, 2020, available at <https://www.reuters.com/article/usa-iraq-pompeo-int-idUSKBN26Z2I3>; Scott Peterson, "Ultimatum signals modest US goal in Iraq: Avoid defeat," Christian Science Monitor, October 15, 2020, available at <https://www.csmonitor.com/World/Middle-East/2020/1015/Ultimatum-signals-modest-US-goal-in-Iraq-Avoid-defeat>.

¹⁹ Kelsey Davenport and Julia Masterson, "Iran's Nuclear Program Remains on Steady Trajectory," Arms Control Now, September 10, 2020, <https://www.armscontrol.org/blog/2020-09-10/irans-nuclear-program-remains-steady-trajectory>.

sanctions” on Iran that were authorized by the JCPOA framework.²⁰ Even though the Trump Administration had taken the United States down a different path, it still had to contend with the same international circumstances as the Obama administration. Unilaterally implementing sanctions had only a limited effect, meaning that the Trump administration could not easily abandon the multilateral approach that Obama was more willing to undertake.

On the fourth issue, the U.S. role in the Arab-Israeli conflict, I noted that the Trump Administration had “inherit[ed] a legacy of intense American engagement” that aimed towards a negotiated two-state solution, even as Israeli settlement activity and regional turmoil had kept the two sides from reaching an agreement. I was not optimistic about the Trump administration’s ability to resolve the conflict. However, the administration made more progress than most observers, including myself, expected. Nominally, the Trump administration seemed to aim for two states, leading a region-wide negotiating initiative that culminated in the so-called “Deal of the Century,” the most detailed and specific American peace plan in history, unveiled in January 2020. As with previous American efforts, there was a combination of carrots and sticks to nudge both parties into an agreement. As has usually been the case, the agreement was tilted in favor of Israeli demands at the expense of Palestinian ones.

Unlike previous American efforts, however, Trump’s plan did not even pretend to be balanced. It offered Israel almost only carrots, most of which were delivered in advance of the deal’s announcement, including moving the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem, recognizing Israel’s annexation of the Golan Heights, and abandoning the longstanding position that Israel’s West Bank settlements are illegal.²¹ Israel would annex some 20% of the West Bank and maintain full control over security, borders, and air space. The sole restriction placed on Israeli settlements was an obligation to temporarily refrain from building in 15 “isolated settlements” far within the territory of the West Bank. The Palestinians, by contrast, found mostly sticks awaiting them. They had four years to accept the imposed territorial limitations, a permanent Israeli military and security presence on their territory, and the abandonment of any right to a national military. Plus, the entire deal would be contingent on the willingness of Islamic militant group Hamas – the Palestinian Authority’s rival in control of the Gaza Strip – to abandon violence against Israel. If, and only if, all of these conditions were fulfilled, Israel and the Trump administration would recognize a Palestinian state, which would then benefit from massive economic aid.²²

This was not a deal that was designed to be accepted by both sides. It was an expression of what Trump has called an ‘unshakable’ bond with Israel, and ultimately a domestic campaign strategy to boost Trump’s political fortunes. Long before the deal was announced, the Palestinian Authority refused to negotiate with the Trump Administration, instead turning to international fora such as the International Criminal Court to plead its case. In response, the Trump Administration closed the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) office in Washington, D.C.²³ The U.S. also cut massive amounts of aid for the Palestinian territories, as well as for Palestinian refugees in neighboring countries.²⁴

Had the situation remained as such, this would have been evidence that the Trump administration had been unable to avoid the trap of failed negotiations that previous administrations had fallen into. As it happened, changes out of view to most observers resulted in the most surprising development in decades: Israel opening relations with a number of Arab states, first the United Arab Emirates and

²⁰ Nike Ching, “US Imposes Sweeping New Sanctions on Iran,” September 21, 2020, www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/us-imposes-sweeping-new-sanctions-iran.

²¹ Alexia Underwood, “The controversial US Jerusalem embassy opening, explained,” *Vox*, May 16, 2018, <https://www.vox.com/2018/5/14/17340798/jerusalem-embassy-israel-palestinians-us-trump>; BBC, “Golan Heights: Trump signs order recognising occupied area as Israeli”, March 25, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47697717>; BBC, “US says Israeli settlements are no longer illegal,” November 18, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-5046802>.

²² Lahav Harkov, Herb Keinon, “The ‘Deal of the Century’: What are its key points?” January 29, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/arab-israeli-conflict/the-deal-of-the-century-what-are-its-key-points-615680>.

²³ Karen DeYoung and Loveday Morris, “Trump administration orders closure of PLO office in Washington,” *Washington Post*, September 10, 2018, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-administration-orders-closure-of-plo-office-in-washington/2018/09/10/7410fe6c-b50c-11e8-a2c5-3187f427e253_story.html.

²⁴ Hady Amr, “In one move, Trump eliminated US funding for UNRWA and the US role as Mideast peacemaker,” September 7, 2018, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2018/09/07/in-one-move-trump-eliminated-us-funding-for-unrwa-and-the-us-role-as-mideast-peacemaker/>; Yolande Knell, “US stops all aid to Palestinians in West Bank and Gaza,” BBC, February 1, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-47095082>.

Bahrain, followed by Sudan and Morocco. Granted, these countries were not at war and had been signaling peaceful intentions for years. As part of the so-called Abraham Accords, the Israeli government promised to temporarily abstain from annexing a large section of territory in the West Bank.²⁵ How much credit the Trump administration truly deserves for these deals will no doubt be debated by historians, but there is little question that U.S. officials were intimately involved in the negotiations that led to the outcomes.

While many have scoffed at the notion of “peace agreements” between countries not at war with one another, the fact is that these agreements are of enormous strategic and psychological significance. They mark the first opening of relations between Israel and an Arab country since the 1994 Israel-Jordan Peace Deal, signaling unprecedented acceptance of Israel in the Arab world, as well as the death knell for the Arab Peace Initiative of 2002, which offered recognition in return for the resolution of the Israel-Palestine conflict with a two-state solution on the 1967 borders.²⁶ What they did not do is resolve a fundamental issue underlying the Arab-Israeli conflict: the status of the Palestinian people. Indeed, by circumscribing the territory of a potential Palestinian state and legitimizing Israel’s settlements, the Trump administration’s policies have virtually eliminated whatever slim possibility remained of a just, two-state solution.

Perhaps these developments should have been anticipated, given the fifth area that my article looked at: U.S. democracy promotion and human rights in the Middle East. It might have been easy to roll one’s eyes at the importance of these issues, given the largely negative American record in recent years, including the destruction created by the George W. Bush Administration in its efforts to impose democracy by force, as well as the failure of the Obama Administration to effectively support the Arab Spring uprisings. However, Trump’s abandonment of any interest in democracy and human rights showed that the opposite attitude can be equally destructive, as his administration doubled down on relationships with authoritarian regimes in Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain, and expressed little support for democratic movements in Egypt, Lebanon and elsewhere. The nadir for this was President Trump’s nonchalance in the aftermath of the murder of U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi, a *Washington Post* journalist, who was killed and dismembered in a Saudi consulate following the mildest of criticisms of the regime.²⁷ The United States also continued to facilitate the Saudi-led war in Yemen, which has caused the death of more than 120,000 people and produced the worst humanitarian crisis in the world.²⁸ Finding reliable partners that favored good relations with Israel and that were strongly opposed to Iran trumped virtually any other considerations in Trump’s U.S. policy in the region.

All in all, Trump’s legacy in the Middle East does represent a departure from previous patterns, though not in all of the areas I outlined. The region remained a key focus of American foreign policy, even if many inside and outside of the Trump Administration would have liked to shift their attention elsewhere. The U.S. was unable to withdraw a significant number of troops from the region. It could not yet fully step away from Syria and Iraq, even as conflicts in those countries wound down. Trump did make a remarkable amount of progress in bringing about recognition for Israel from other Arab states, even if he left the Israeli-Palestinian conflict even more intractable than before. On Iran, Trump abandoned efforts to reach a modus vivendi via an agreement on nuclear activities, but he got no closer to reaching a satisfactory resolution to this challenge than did his predecessors. Moreover, the United States government spent four years largely ignoring human rights violations in the region that are not committed by Iran – a policy that does not seem sustainable in the future.

Now that Joe Biden has assumed the presidency, there will be new opportunities to approach these issues, even as many of the same constraints apply. In the short- to medium-term, there will be strong pressure to continue the American military and diplomatic engagement in the region.²⁹ Fighting in Syria continues, but the conflict over territory appears to have largely ended, so there may be an

²⁵ Steven A. Cook, “What’s Behind the New Israel-UAE Peace Deal?” August 17, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/whats-behind-new-israel-uae-peace-deal>.

²⁶ On the Arab Peace Initiative, see Al-Jazeera, “The Arab Peace Initiative,” Mar. 28, 2010, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2010/03/28/the-arab-peace-initiative>.

²⁷ Peter Kenyon, “Justice Efforts For Jamal Khashoggi Were Hindered By Trump Administration’s Response,” October 1, 2019, <https://www.npr.org/2019/10/01/766176676/justice-efforts-for-jamal-khashoggi-were-hindered-by-trump-administrations-respo>.

²⁸ Edward Wong, “U.S. Rationale for Military Aid to Saudis in Yemen War Is Fraying,” *New York Times*, September 23, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/23/us/politics/yemen-us-weapons-saudi-arabia.html>.

²⁹ Charles A. Kupchan, “America’s Pullback Must Continue No Matter Who Is President,” *Foreign Policy*, October 21, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/21/election-2020-smart-retrenchment/>.

opportunity to finally broker a settlement, though it will involve some degree of reconciliation with a regime that many find abhorrent. In Iraq, conflict with ISIS has already subsided, but the country must address the status of its militia groups, which continue to challenge the sovereignty of the state. The United States must devise a new strategy towards Iran, whether reviving the JCPOA – a tall order, given the circumstances – or departing in a new direction.

The two-state solution to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict long championed by the United States has now become untenable, while other solutions – including the creation of a single, bi-national state or a permanent Palestinian political entity subordinate to Israel – remain unpalatable to the parties in the region. In the past, Biden has prided himself on his support for Israel, but he may now find himself having to be more assertive. Israel has grown used to uncritical support from President Trump, and it will be more difficult than ever to convince its government to make meaningful concessions in exchange for peace. In the short term, Biden may restore some aid to the Palestinian Authority, but while this could improve living conditions for Palestinians, it is unlikely to prompt meaningful change. Biden must also reassess U.S. relations with autocratic regimes. While there is little chance of a full break, the Biden administration will likely pressure the Saudi regime to wind down its war in Yemen, leading to tensions. Will it take the one of the most experienced presidents in American history to finally reduce the U.S. footprint in the Middle East, or will the patterns of the past prevail? Only time will tell.

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