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America and the World—The Effects of the Trump Presidency

The Trump Administration and the Middle East: Not Much Change, Not Much Success

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Much like its predecessor, the Trump administration came into office rhetorically committed to reducing the American military and political footprint in the Middle East and left office with the American role in the region largely unchanged; like its predecessor, it came into office ready to engage diplomatically on Arab-Israeli questions, with an eye toward a final settlement of the Israeli-Palestinian issue, and it left office with little progress on that core conflict of the Arab-Israeli arena. It succeeded in expanding the number of Arab countries that diplomatically recognize Israel, but those recognitions did little to change the immediate geopolitical dynamics of the Arab-Israeli issue. They were more a testament to the enduring centrality of the United States in the Middle East, a backhanded acknowledgement that Trump's initial desire to de-emphasize the region in American foreign policy had failed. Unlike its predecessor, the Trump administration increased pressure on Iran, in the failed hopes of either renegotiating the 2015 nuclear deal or, more ambitiously, bringing about regime change in Tehran. The new Biden administration is seeking to restore dialogue with the Islamic Republic. The Trump administration privileged relations with Saudi Arabia even beyond what previous administrations had done, but with the result of making Saudi-American relations a more toxically partisan issue than in the past.

The Trump administration leaves office with the Middle East and America's role in it mostly unchanged. That fact is testament to the pressures for continuity in America's approach to the region. Reducing the American footprint would require a rethinking of 30 years of military policy, since the Gulf War of 1990-1991. The Pentagon has established bases and facilities all along the Persian Gulf littoral's Arab side – in Kuwait, Bahrain, Qatar, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Oman. Where the American military has poured concrete, it is loath to leave. Such a military reduction would also require reversing twenty years of American focus on counterterrorism that resulted from the 9/11 attacks. With salafi jihadist groups continuing to play a role in the Middle East, if counterterrorism is a primary goal it would be hard for any administration to declare the region unimportant to American security. Continued, bipartisan support for Israel raises the costs to any American president of de-emphasizing the region. The Trump administration's specific policy of pressuring Iran was absolutely inconsistent with a desire to reduce the U.S. military and political presence in the Persian Gulf. A real reduction of the American focus on the Middle East would require a profound reassessment of American interests there. While that might be overdue, it was not a task the Trump administration was willing to undertake.

The United States Military in the Middle East: Not Much Change

When President Trump entered office, there were about 58,000 American troops in the Middle East (including Afghanistan). In December 2020, there were about 42,000 in the region (excluding Afghanistan), but regular rotational deployments by air and naval units meant that the number could rise to as many as 65,000 at any particular time.¹ Like President Barack Obama before him, Trump came to office committed to avoiding military engagements in the region. He did draw down the number of American forces in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, though not to zero. However, the system of American military bases in the region did not change at all during Trump's four years in office. The Fifth Fleet remains headquartered in Bahrain; 13,000 U.S. troops were stationed in Kuwait in December 2020; Al

¹ Ash Carter, "The Logic of American Strategy in the Middle East," *Survival* 59:2, 13-24.

Udeid airbase in Qatar is home to 8,000 troops.² The administration surged forces into the region on numerous occasions, frequently in response to Iranian actions. President Trump left office with the American military infrastructure in the Middle East basically unchanged.

The Trump administration fell victim to the same temptations as the Obama administration regarding military force and the Middle East. America's stick is so big that it is hard to resist using it. Trump did not do anything as substantial as the Libya campaign. But he launched missile attacks on Syria in 2017, increased the intensity of the air campaign against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) in 2017-2018, and maintained the very active drone strike campaign that his predecessor conducted against what the U.S. saw as terrorist targets. He began his term by increasing the American force presence in Afghanistan but subsequently reduced it before leaving office. Trump avoided any major new military commitments in the region, but he did not completely end any of the commitments that he inherited and, through his policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran,³ added a potential escalation risk that had to be managed.

A Big Change, But Not Much Success: Policy toward Iran

The one area where the Trump administration took a completely different approach to regional issues from its predecessor was Iran. President Trump campaigned against the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement among the United States, the other permanent members of the UN Security Council, Germany, the EU and Iran that set limits on Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the lifting of U.N. sanctions. He disparaged the agreement as a "disaster" and "the worst deal ever negotiated" while campaigning.⁴ Upon entering office, and bowing to the advice of more conventional foreign policy advisers like Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, Secretary of Defense James Mattis and National Security Adviser H.R. McMaster, Trump maintained the agreement even as he continued to criticize it. In October 2017 he finally "decertified" American participation in the JCPOA.⁵ As that first group of advisers left the White House, the administration adopted a policy of "maximum pressure" on Iran, centering on surprisingly effective unilateral American sanctions that had the effect of cutting Iran off from the world financial system. Iran's oil sales plummeted amidst economic hardship and scattered protests around the country.⁶ The COVID-19 crisis and the resultant plunge in world oil prices in March 2020 further increased the pressures on the Islamic Republic.

The ultimate goal of the "maximum pressure" policy was not clear. Official administration policy was that the U.S. sought a return to negotiations with Iran for a better deal, one that would strengthen and extend the limitations on Iran's nuclear program, limit Iranian missile capabilities and roll back Iranian involvement in regional trouble spots. President Trump even sought direct contact with Iranian President Hassan Rouhani during the U.N. General Assembly meeting of fall 2019. At the same time, Tillerson's successor as Secretary of State, Mike Pompeo, laid out a set of preconditions for talks with Iran that could only have been reached through regime change. In the end, Trump never had to decide just what he wanted from Iran, because Tehran was not willing to engage with his administration on Washington's terms.

The Iranian response to "maximum pressure" was to create crises in the Persian Gulf, in hopes that international pressures would bring Washington back to a multi-lateral negotiation. In the summer of 2019 Iran mined ships in the Arabian Sea, just outside the Strait of Hormuz and shot down an American drone flying over the Persian Gulf. In September 2019 Iran launched an audacious missile attack on

² Mike Sweeney, "A Plan for U.S. Withdrawal from the Middle East," *Defense Priorities*, December 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/a-plan-for-us-withdrawal-from-the-middle-east> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

³ <https://www.heritage.org/defense/event/after-the-deal-new-iran-strategy> (last accessed 7 March 2021).

⁴ Yeganeh Torbati, "Trump election puts Iran nuclear deal on shaky ground," *Reuters*, 9 November 2016, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-iran/trump-election-puts-iran-nuclear-deal-on-shaky-ground-idUSKBN13427E> (last accessed 7 March 2021).

⁵ For references to the early months of the Trump presidency, see the author's "Donald Trump and the Middle East" in Robert Jervis et al., *Chaos in the Liberal Order: The Trump Presidency and International Politics in the Twenty-First Century*, (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018): 273-286.

⁶ Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "With Brutal Crackdown, Iran is Convulsed by Worst Unrest in 40 Year," *New York Times*, 3 December 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/01/world/middleeast/iran-protests-deaths.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

Saudi oil facilities that took over 5 million barrels of oil a day off the market for weeks.⁷ These crises exposed the tensions in Trump's approach to the region. He did not want to launch yet another military adventure. At the last minute, he called off a planned bombing of Iranian sites in retaliation for the downing of the American drone.⁸ Despite the decades-long contention that the free flow of oil from the Persian Gulf was a vital American interest, Trump made no proportionate response to the attack on the Saudi oil facilities, the most serious challenge to oil flows since Iraqi President Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait in 1990. Yet in order to maintain "maximum pressure," the administration had to sustain the military presence in the region as an ultimate threat to Iran. It also sought more piecemeal payback, most notably killing the commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' (IRGC) Quds Force, Qasem Soleimani, in a drone attack in Baghdad in January 2020.⁹ The Quds Force is the IRGC's overseas arm, extending Iran's military and political presence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere, and Soleimani had become the face of Iran's regional presence.

The "maximum pressure" policy failed. Iran did not negotiate the theoretical "better deal" that Trump sought;¹⁰ nor did the regime collapse. Rather, it began to exceed the limits on its nuclear program set by the JCPOA. By the time the Trump administration left office, Iran arguably was closer to nuclear weapons breakout capability than it had been when he took office.¹¹

A Complicated Embrace: Saudi Arabia

The Saudi-American relationship has been close for decades, but President Trump elevated it to an unprecedented level of direct presidential involvement and access. In the process, he also moved it into the field of partisan politics in an unprecedented way. Saudi Arabia has never had many defenders in the American political system, but Democratic and Republican residents of the White House have always wanted to have a good relationship with Riyadh, the largest oil exporter in the world and a major player in the politics of the Middle East and the Muslim world. Increasing numbers of Democrats in Congress and the foreign policy establishment now see the country through the lens of Trump's embrace of it, which will inevitably affect how Saudi-American relations develop under the Biden Administration.

Trump's flirtation with Riyadh began even before Trump took office, with the establishment in late 2016 of a close relationship between his son-in-law and adviser Jared Kushner with Prince Muhammad bin Salman, the young son of the Saudi king known as MBS, and then the Minister of Defense. Trump made Riyadh the destination of his first foreign trip, upending a long tradition of American presidents visiting either Mexico or Canada for their first venture abroad. Shortly after the visit, on June 6, 2017 Trump publicly backed by tweet the boycott and embargo of Qatar that had been declared by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, despite the fact that Qatar hosted America's largest airbase in the Middle East and that his secretaries of State and Defense were attempting to mediate the crisis. Later that same month, MBS muscled his way into the crown prince position, turfing out his older cousin, Prince Muhammad bin Nayif, who had been America's primary interlocutor on counter-terrorism issues since the 9/11 attacks. The Trump administration signaled that they not only approved of the change, but perhaps even had a hand in it. That level of involvement, or at least public signaling of such involvement, by the United States in the politics of the Saudi ruling family was unprecedented. Trump had personalized the relationship with Riyadh in a dramatic way.

⁷ "Special Report: 'Time to take out our swords' – Inside Iran's plot to attack Saudi Arabia," *Reuters*, 26 November 2019, <https://mobile.reuters.com/article/amp/idUSKBN1XZ16H> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

⁸ Michael Shear, Helene Cooper and Eric Schmitt, "Trump Says He Was 'Cocked and Loaded' to Strike Iran, but Pulled Back," *New York Times*, 21 June 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/06/21/us/politics/trump-iran-attack.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

⁹ Mark Mazzetti, Ronen Bergman and Farnaz Fassihi, "How Months of Miscalculation Led the U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War," *New York Times*, 13 February 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/02/13/us/politics/iran-trump-administration.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

¹⁰ David Sanger, Farnaz Fassihi and Rick Gladstone, "Urging Iran to 'Make the Big Deal,' Trump Ties Nuclear Negotiations to Election," *New York Times*, 5 June 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/05/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear.html> (last accessed 7 March 2021).

¹¹ Sune Engel Rasmussen and Laurence Norman, "Iran's Nuclear Program: How Close Is Tehran to Developing Nuclear Weapons?" *Wall Street Journal*, 10 February 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-nuclear-program-11610564572> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

The negative consequences of that personalization became clear in October 2018, when Saudi dissident journalist Jamal Khashoggi was killed at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. United States intelligence agencies assessed that the operation was ordered by MBS.¹² The outcry in Washington was immediate and bipartisan. Khashoggi was living in Virginia, was well known to American elites and was writing an occasional column for the *Washington Post*. The brutality and brazenness of the act struck a chord. Combined with the continuing Saudi military campaign in Yemen, which was creating a humanitarian disaster without resolving the political crisis there, the Khashoggi killing made MBS persona non grata to the American political establishment. But not to President Trump, who continued to defend him, provide U.S. military support for Saudi Arabia's Yemen campaign, and tout the benefits of arms sales to the Saudis for the American economy.¹³

In his 2020 campaign, President Biden termed Saudi Arabia a “pariah.” Upon entering office, he suspended American military aid to Saudi Arabia's Yemen operations.¹⁴ It is unlikely that the Biden Administration will completely break with Saudi Arabia. The equities in the areas of regional geopolitics, counterterrorism and oil that have always sustained the relationship are still there. But President Trump's personal embrace of MBS, and the equal and opposite Democratic reaction against MBS, has introduced a level of partisanship into the relationship that is a new and unpredictable factor going forward.

Peripheral Success, Core Failure: The Arab-Israeli Arena

The most significant Middle Eastern diplomatic success of the Trump administration in the Middle East was the late 2020 diplomatic recognition of Israel by four Arab states: the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan.¹⁵ Jared Kushner made what came to be called the “Abraham Accords” the major focus of his efforts at the end of the administration. While important as further indicators of the continuing normalization of Israel's role in the region, these recognitions did not change the fundamentals of the Arab-Israeli arena. Contrary to the way they were portrayed by Trump and his loyalists, they were not “peace” agreements.¹⁶ None of the four Arab states had fought a war against Israel (although some Moroccan troops participated in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War¹⁷) or were even geographically close to it. All except Sudan had some level of relations short of diplomatic recognition with Israel in the past. Most importantly, this diplomatic movement came after the administration failed to create any breakthrough in the core Israeli-Palestinian issue. In an unintended way, that failure might have actually led to the Accords themselves.¹⁸

The Trump administration came to office, like many of its predecessors, proclaiming a renewed commitment to Arab-Israeli peace. Signaling its importance, Trump gave that portfolio to Kushner. But Trump also wanted to be an historically pro-Israeli president, as his evangelical Christian base wanted. Before Kushner presented his “deal of the century” to the Israeli and Palestinian governments in 2019, the Trump Administration in November 2017 recognized Jerusalem as Israel's capital and moved the American embassy there. This step gave the government of Benjamin Netanyahu something that it always wanted, without a quid pro quo to advance the peace process, and

¹² <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2021/02/26/us/report-jamal-khashoggi-killing.html> (last accessed 7 March 2021).

¹³ F. Gregory Gause, III, “After the Killing of Jamal Khashoggi: Muhammad bin Salman and the Future of Saudi- U.S. Relations,” *CSIS Brief*, 12 December 2018, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/after-killing-jamal-khashoggi-muhammad-bin-salman-and-future-saudi-us-relations> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

¹⁴ Ben Hubbard and Shuaib Almosawa, “Biden Ends Military Aid for Saudi War in Yemen. Ending the War Is Harder,” *New York Times*, 5 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/05/world/middleeast/yemen-saudi-biden.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

¹⁵ Karen DeYoung and Steve Hendrix, “Trump critics hail accords between Israel and Arab countries even as original goal of Palestinians peace remains unmet,” *Washington Post*, 31 October 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/trump-middle-east-accords/2020/10/31/f0585dec-19fc-11eb-aeec-b93bcc29a01b_story.html (last accessed 19 February 2021).

¹⁶ Fred Kaplan, “A Big Deal but Not a Peace Deal,” *Slate*, 15 September 2020, <https://slate.com/news-and-politics/2020/09/trump-israel-uac-bahrain-deal.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

¹⁷ Chaim Herzog, *The Arab-Israeli Wars*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1982): 285, 287, 296.

¹⁸ Martin Indyk, “Trump's Accidental Diplomacy in the Middle East: How a Botched Peace Plan Produced the Abraham Accord,” *Foreign Affairs*, 19 August 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-08-19/trumps-accidental-diplomacy-middle-east> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

alienated Palestinian opinion. When Kushner finally did present his peace plan, which called on Palestinians to forsake independent statehood for theoretical commitments of tens of billions of dollars in investments in their territory, the Palestinian Authority did not give him the time of day.¹⁹

Conclusion: Not Much Change, Not Much Success

President Trump, for all his unconventional diplomatic style, blustery rhetoric, and promises to put “America first,” ended up pursuing a relatively conventional American foreign policy toward the Middle East. Despite his oft-stated belief that America’s global allies were free-riders taking advantage of U.S. naiveté, he did not substantially change the American military footprint in the region. He prioritized counterterrorism, as had his two immediate predecessors. His administration developed its own plan for Arab-Israeli peace, which failed. So had the plans of many of its predecessors, however, including the Obama and Bush 43 administrations. Trump maintained close relations with traditional American allies, though his pro-Israel tilt was more pronounced than that of previous administrations and his embrace of Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman has complicated Saudi-American relations for the Biden administration. He departed substantially from the Obama administration’s approach to Iran, but it was Obama who was more the outlier among recent American presidents on this issue. Trump’s hard line toward Iran was much closer to George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” and Bill Clinton’s “dual containment” stances.

President Trump’s Middle East policy was not that different from his predecessors, but it was also distinctly unsuccessful.²⁰ The Abraham Accords should be put in the win column, but there was no movement on the core Arab-Israeli issue, the Palestinian-Israeli relationship, that could be the basis for real peace. The ISIS territorial caliphate was destroyed, but that result was well on the way by the time Trump took office. Trump’s singular innovation in the Middle East, the “maximum pressure” policy toward Iran, was a complete failure. He neither brought Tehran back to the table nor changed the regime. Iran’s regional influence in the broken Arab states – Iraq, Syria, Lebanon and Yemen – was as great in 2021 as it was in 2017, if not more so. Trump left office with Iran closer to developing a nuclear weapon than when he entered. The Biden administration is thus seeking a return to negotiations with Iran to undo the damage.

The lack of success of American policy in the Middle East in the last three administrations is notable. The Clinton administration, despite its unparalleled regional position in the wake of the Cold War and the Gulf War, could not close the deal on its Syrian-Israeli and Palestinian-Israeli peace initiatives. The George W. Bush administration defeated the Taliban and Saddam Hussein militarily, but could not stabilize the successor regimes in Afghanistan or Iraq. Iran’s regional influence increased markedly as a result of Bush breaking the states to its east and its west. The Obama administration tried to support democratic change in the Arab Spring and ended up with civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen and reconsolidated authoritarianism in Egypt. Its diplomatic success with the JCPOA was easily overturned by Obama’s successor. Trump’s failures in the region do not make him unique among recent American presidents.

These failures, along with the palpable American fatigue with the Middle East, have led many to speculate that American power in the region is in decline.²¹ It is hard to argue that America’s power position is as enviable as it was in the early 1990’s. However, it would be a mistake to discount the American regional role too much. It is still the dominant regional military power. Its regional allies dwarf those of Russia and China. Only the U.S. can put substantial economic pressure on regional states. The Abraham Accords offer an indication that regional states still want to be on America’s good side. Every Arab state opening to Israel, from Egyptian President Anwar Sadat’s treaty in 1979 through the negotiations of the 1990’s up to these recent recognitions, has been first and foremost an effort to cultivate the United States. The UAE, Bahrain, Morocco and Sudan had little to gain from direct relations with Israel, but they had plenty to gain from

¹⁹ Michael Crowley and David M. Halbfinger, “Trump Releases Mideast Peace Plan That Strongly Favors Israel,” *New York Times*, 28 January 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/28/world/middleeast/peace-plan.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

²⁰ For a similar argument about Trump’s failures in the Middle East, see Steven Cook, “Trump’s Middle East Legacy is Failure,” *Foreign Policy*, 28 October 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/10/28/trumps-middle-east-legacy-is-failure/> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

²¹ “The United States proved to be an unreliable ally [for democracy movements]. And other powers that intervened forcefully to stamp out the revolts and bend the region to their will – Iran, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia and the Emirates – have only grown more powerful.” Ben Hubbard and David Kirkpatrick, “A Decade After the Arab Spring, Autocrats Still Rule the Mideast,” *New York Times*, 14 February 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/14/world/middleeast/arab-spring-mideast-autocrats.html> (last accessed February 19, 2021). In a poll of academics who study the Middle East conducted in February 2021, 75% believed that the United States was weaker in the region than it was ten years ago. Marc Lynch and Shibley Telhami, “Here’s how experts on the Middle East see the region’s key issues, our new survey finds,” *Washington Post*, 16 February 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2021/02/16/heres-how-experts-middle-east-see-regions-key-issues-our-new-survey-finds/> (last accessed 19 February 2021).

Washington.²² For the UAE, which is linked to Saudi Arabia in the Yemen military campaign and in its coziness with the Trump administration, recognition of Israel was a way to signal to both American political parties that it wanted to be part of the American project in the Middle East. Saudi and Emirati willingness at the end of Trump's term to end the boycott of Qatar stems from the same readings of the regional balance of power. The United States still has plenty of cards to play in the Middle East. A new administration with a defter diplomatic touch and a more modest agenda could reverse the recent string of failures.

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²² Lara Jakes, "Trump Incentives for Signing Peace Accords with Israel Could Be at Risk," *New York Times*, 20 December 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/12/20/us/politics/trump-israel-sudan-peace-accord.html> (last accessed 19 February 2021).