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“Trump and Historical Legacies of U.S. Middle East Policy”

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The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States has prompted deep reflection, even soul-searching, by scholars of international affairs.¹ For the historians among them, the natural tendency is to connect the past to the present, and even the future. What major historical continuities in U.S. Middle East policy is Trump inheriting from his predecessor? Will his administration represent a continuation or a break from these policies? Thinking ahead four or even (dramatic pause) eight years, what legacies will the Trump administration leave?

A look at historical legacies is particularly important, considering that the candidate himself spent so much time discussing them. Granted, Candidate Trump criticized many aspects of American foreign policy, including the U.S. roles as global security provider and promoter of human rights, democracy, and open societies. But he had a particularly copious amount to say about U.S. Middle East policy. President George W. Bush had done a “terrible thing” to invade Iraq, but President Barack Obama had been equally foolish to leave without finishing the job, especially without seizing the country’s oil resources.² The Iran nuclear deal

¹ This essay was submitted on 23 March 2017.

² Glenn Kessler, “A distinctive pattern for Trump's biggest fibs: Defend, don't bend, grasp at straws”, *Washington Post*, 29 September, 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2016/09/29/trumps-method-of-fibbing-deny-deny-then-grasp-at-straws>.

was “one of the worst deals in the history of our country.”³ Israel had been treated “very, very badly.”⁴ And so on.

Of course, it was easy for someone who had never served in government and had little experience in the Middle East to criticize those who came before him. Just five weeks after taking office, Trump told a meeting of the nation’s governors in inimitable fashion that “Nobody knew health care could be so complicated.”⁵ Will he come to a similar conclusion regarding the Middle East? Below, I discuss five historical legacies in the Middle East that the Trump administration has inherited, and look at what the President’s campaign rhetoric and early moves in office suggest it will do about them: the degree of American engagement in the region, the situation in Syria and Iraq, U.S. relations with Iran, the Arab/Israeli conflict, and democracy promotion. On the whole, with a few (albeit important) exceptions, it seems that there is a remarkable degree of continuity with previous administrations.

The first legacy is that United States is involved there at all. In fact, the Middle East has only been a key region for American interests since the 1950s, when the disintegration of the British and French empires and the expansion of the Cold War to the Third World led the United States to step in. The main rationales for American involvement were security and economics. Measures like the 1958 Eisenhower Doctrine promised U.S. assistance to regimes threatened by Communism. U.S. policymakers intervened in a variety of ways to keep the oil flowing, from a 1953 covert intervention in Iran and the 1991 overt war in Iraq, to the provision of economic and military assistance to all but a handful of governments in the region. There were other reasons for American engagement in the region, such as protecting Israel, but these were of a secondary order of magnitude: stopping the spread of Communism and continuing the flow of oil were the priorities.

Although the end of the Cold War and the collapse of the Soviet Union led to a dramatic decrease in American military bases and troop deployments around the world, the United States soon re-engaged in the Middle East, particularly after the attacks of 9/11, when the War on Terror assumed first priority amongst U.S. foreign policy interests. Thus, the region witnessed America’s largest military actions in the post-Cold War era, namely the wars in Afghanistan in 2001 and in Iraq in 2003. By 2010, approximately half of U.S. troops deployed abroad were located in the region.⁶

Yet even as the security rationale for U.S. engagement in the region seems to have increased, other American interests, including economic ones, have declined in relative terms. The Middle East is still home to the largest reserves of oil and gas in the world, but as a percentage of global hydrocarbon resources, they have

³ “The CNN-Telemundo Republican debate transcript, annotated”, *Washington Post*, 25 February 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/02/25/the-cnntelemundo-republican-debate-transcript-annotated/>.

⁴ Sarah Begley, “Read Donald Trump's Speech to AIPAC”, *Time*, 21 March 2016, <http://time.com/4267058/donald-trump-aipac-speech-transcript/>.

⁵ Kevin Liptak, “Trump: ‘Nobody knew health care could be so complicated’”, *CNN*, 28 February 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/27/politics/trump-health-care-complicated/>.

⁶ Michael J. Lostumbo, et. al, “Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs”, RAND Report, 2013.

declined in the last few decades.⁷ This, along with the failure of American military force to resolve conflicts, declining domestic support for American engagement around the world,⁸ and concerns about a rising China and a re-emerging Russia, created what could be seen as the groundwork for a major change in the prioritization of the region.

The Obama administration certainly read the tea leaves in this manner and tried its best to adjust accordingly, making the so-called ‘pivot’ towards Asia away from the Middle East a centerpiece of its foreign policy. But although the United States made at least some strides in its policy towards the former region, it was never truly able to extricate itself from the latter.⁹ Despite a withdrawal of so-called “combat troops” from Iraq and drawdowns in Afghanistan, the emergence of the Arab Uprisings in 2011 and wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen kept U.S. attention firmly fixed on the region. There is little doubt that Obama himself would have preferred a lower level of involvement.¹⁰ But as an anonymous senior Department of Defense official said in January 2016 regarding Iraq and Afghanistan, “What we’ve learned is that you can’t really leave.”¹¹

President Trump came into office without a clear message on the future of American involvement in the Middle East. To some, he appeared to criticize the depth of U.S. engagement around the world, heralding a potential withdrawal of troops posted abroad and reversion to a “Fortress America” ideal.¹² Others, paying more attention to statements that he would “bomb the hell out of [the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant] ISIS,” anticipated a more aggressive presidency that could lead the United States to step up its military involvement there. Finally, some thought Trump would adopt a Nixonian “madman” strategy, threatening extreme measures, but at least in part as a bluff to get others to do what he wanted.¹³

⁷ The Middle East contained 58.9% of total global oil reserves in 1995, 55.0% in 2005, and just 47.3% in 2015. *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2016, 7.

⁸ See RAND Research Brief, “Exploring America’s Role in a Turbulent World: Strategic Rethink”, Document Number: RB-9944-RC, 2017, http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9944.html.

⁹ For a critical appraisal of Obama’s moves in Asia, see Victor Cha, “The Unfinished Legacy of Obama’s Pivot to Asia”, *Foreign Policy*, 6 September 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/09/06/the-unfinished-legacy-of-obamas-pivot-to-asia/>.

¹⁰ See, for instance, Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”, *The Atlantic* (April 2016), <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>.

¹¹ Greg Jaffe and Missy Ryan, “Checkpoint”, *Washington Post*, 26 January 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/checkpoint/wp/2016/01/26/the-u-s-was-supposed-to-leave-afghanistan-by-2017-now-it-might-take-decades>.

¹² Thomas Walkom, “Donald Trump’s realistic retreat to Fortress America”, *Toronto Star*, 25 January 2017, <https://www.thestar.com/opinion/2017/01/25/donald-trumps-realistic-retreat-to-fortress-america-walkom.html>.

¹³ Charles Krauthammer: President Trump and the ‘Madman Theory’, *Pittsburgh Gazette*, 25 February 2017, <http://www.post-gazette.com/opinion/Op-Ed/2017/02/25/Charles-Krauthammer-President-Trump-and-the-Mad-man-The-ory/stories/201702250041>.

Two months in, none of these things has come to pass. The administration has not put forward a major vision for the role of the Middle East in U.S. foreign policy. The President has unveiled plans to increase America's defense spending by 10%, offset by cuts in other parts of the government (including foreign aid), but it is not clear how this spending is supposed to translate into strategic changes regarding any particular region. He has also spoken of his desire to cooperate with autocrats, including President Vladimir Putin in Russia, fueling fears by some that he was about to cede American influence in the region to America's former enemy. But there is no sign of American withdrawal, or any concrete deals or understandings with Russia.

On Iraq and Syria, Trump has inherited the legacy of the Bush and Obama administrations. President Obama succeeded in fulfilling a campaign promise to remove American combat troops from Iraq. Although he hoped to leave a force of up to 10,000 troops behind for training and support, he was unable to reach a 'status of forces' agreement with the Iraqi government that would grant American troops immunity from prosecution.¹⁴ While Iraq at that point did not seem to be in grave danger, its state remained fragile and fragmented, with an autonomous Kurdish region, strong Shi'a militias, and a disaffected Sunni population which did not feel that Baghdad represented its interests. Thus, after the outbreak of civil war in Syria, the groundwork was laid for ISIS to quickly emerge in 2013-14 and capture a large portion of the country's territory, including its second largest city, Mosul.

From the beginning of the Syrian uprising in 2011, U.S. support for protesters and then rebels was primarily in word rather than deed. Obama ruled out a military intervention against the regime of Bashar al-Assad after members of Congress indicated that they would not pass a resolution approving it.¹⁵ Two training missions were created for the rebels, and some military aid was supplied, but these were half-heartedly implemented and, by most accounts, largely ineffective.¹⁶ By the end of 2016, no doubt in part motivated by a desire to change the status quo on the ground before the next U.S. presidential administration took power, the Syrian military and its allies took Aleppo, the country's largest city and the symbol of the resistance's power.

Obama, Candidate Trump maintained, had erred in trying to support some factions of Syria's rebels with radical ideologies, as well as in failing to ensure the defeat of ISIS. In other words, the United States had been too involved in some areas, and not enough in others. Trump claimed to have a secret plan to defeat the

¹⁴ Tim Arango and Michael S. Schmidt, "Despite Difficult Talks, U.S. and Iraq Had Expected Some American Troops to Stay", *New York Times*, 21 October 2011, <http://www.nytimes.com/2011/10/22/world/middleeast/united-states-and-iraq-had-not-expected-troops-would-have-to-leave.html>.

¹⁵ Peter Baker, "Obama Seeks Approval by Congress for Strike in Syria", *New York Times*, 31 August 2013, <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/01/world/middleeast/syria.html>.

¹⁶ One program, launched by the Department of Defense, spent some \$500 million training rebels, to little effect. Paul McLeary, "The Pentagon Wasted \$500 Million Training Syrian Rebels. It's About to Try Again", *Foreign Policy*, 18 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/18/pentagon-wasted-500-million-syrian-rebels>. Another, CIA-led, program may have had more impact, but was largely funded by the Saudis. See Mark Mazzetti and Matt Apuzzo, "U.S. Relies Heavily on Saudi Money to Support Syrian Rebels", *New York Times*, 23 January 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/01/24/world/middleeast/us-relies-heavily-on-saudi-money-to-support-syrian-rebels.html>.

Islamic state—“a way of beating ISIS so easily, so quickly, so effectively, and it would be so nice.”¹⁷ It turned out that his plan was to ask America’s generals to come up with a strategy to defeat them. He would also work more closely with Russia and the Syrian government. At least in theory, should all of that go according to plan (ISIS is quickly dispatched, a Russian-Syrian-American effort quickly defeats the rebels or forces them to negotiate a peace), a brutal peace might reign, which, one could conceivably argue, would be better than the current, bloody stalemate.

In these early months, it is difficult to see how anything the Trump administration has done up until now is substantially different than what a Hillary Clinton or even a continued Obama presidency might have contemplated. Trump’s anti-ISIS planning is underway, but key details remain sketchy. Not only has there not been an agreement with Russia or Syria, but any such agreement would anger American allies who have supported the rebels, particularly the Gulf States. Trump may switch U.S. support aid from one faction to another; there is talk, for instance, of moving support from Arab rebels, some of whom share ideological tenets with al-Qaeda, to Kurdish forces. However, such a move would almost certainly harm U.S. relations with Turkey and the Gulf States. Plans appear to be underway for an assault on Raqqa, the capital of the Islamic state, possibly with more military advisors and special forces on the ground than Obama was willing to commit without Congressional approval. This has the potential to backfire, too, should U.S. troops be harmed. And even if ISIS is defeated militarily, the Syrian civil war might not end. However this plays out, there is no evidence that there will be any radical shift in the policy on the ground.

The Iran nuclear deal, too, illustrates the difficulty of changing course on the Middle East. As part of Obama’s mission to reduce the American footprint in the region, the President aimed to achieve a sort of détente with Iran, and to broker a similar relationship between Iran and other powers in the region. At the same time, he knew that Israel perceived Iran as a serious threat, and if unchecked it could use military force in an attempt to stop its enemy from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Working closely with European powers, Russia, and China, the United States brokered a diplomatic arrangement that would allow Iran to keep a civilian nuclear program while ensuring that only a minimum level of uranium enrichment took place within Iran, thereby minimizing the risk of the country acquiring a nuclear weapon.

Candidate Trump predictably took a hard line on Iran. At various times, he promised to ‘rip up’ the Iran deal, but soon after the election he reversed course, promising strict enforcement of the agreement instead. This meant in practice a continuation of the Obama policy. Trump initially appointed a strongly anti-Iran figure, Michael Flynn, as National Security Advisor, but since Flynn’s resignation a more level-headed individual, H.R. McMaster, has taken his place. This may be alarming to some leaders of Sunni Arab Gulf states, who, while disappointed with Trump’s rhetoric during the campaign, found at least some consolation in the administration’s antipathy towards Iran, which matched their own. Regardless, getting rid of the deal negotiated by Obama would be much more difficult than had been expected.

On the Arab-Israeli conflict, Trump inherits a legacy of intense American engagement begun by National Security Advisor and Secretary of State Henry Kissinger through his shuttle diplomacy and interim peace agreements, and solidified by President Jimmy Carter’s Camp David Accords and the Egyptian-Israeli Peace Treaty. Looking back over the previous 50 years of history, it seems that negotiations have marched

¹⁷ RightWingWatch, “Trump: Why Won't Obama Ask For My Secret Foolproof ISIS Plan?,” Soundcloud, <https://soundcloud.com/rightwingwatch/trump-why-wont-obama-ask-for-my-secret-foolproof-isis-plan>.

inexorably towards a set of peace treaties between Israel and its neighbors, even if agreements with Syria and Lebanon, and then other Arab states, remained elusive. And, unofficially since the Oslo Accords and officially since the George W. Bush administration, U.S. policy has encouraged negotiations towards a Palestinian state, a trend supported by Arab peace initiatives that offer Israel recognition and peaceful co-existence, provided that its territory be based on the country's pre-1967 borders. Today, U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue is based on urging the parties towards just such a negotiated two-state solution.

At the same time, however, patterns, seemingly just as unalterable, have prevented this from happening. Israeli settlement activity, encouraged by government policy, has intentionally undermined a possible two-state solution by moving Israeli citizens onto Palestinian lands, thereby establishing "facts on the ground" for Israeli claims to territory, leaving Palestinians isolated and divided in a virtual archipelago.¹⁸ In 2004, as part of an exchange of letters with the United States, Israeli leaders agreed to stop the "outward" growth of settlements, but claimed an exception for so-called inward "natural growth." Apologists maintain that natural growth was necessary to accommodate families; critics point out that it covers up the expansion of existing settlements, as well as the creation of new "illegal outposts," or unrecognized but protected settlements.¹⁹ Palestinian campaigns of violence against settlers and soldiers offer an excuse for military crackdowns, and prevent a return to the negotiating table. Since 2011, turmoil in Arab regimes, particularly in Syria and Egypt, provides an additional convenient excuse to avoid even discussion of these difficult issues.

For much of President Obama's time in office, the administration pressured Israel to fully reign in settlement activity as a prerequisite to talks, a policy that did not play well with Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's base of conservative groups and settlers. This, along with a failure to take what Israeli leaders thought should be a tougher position on the Iran deal, was enough to prompt a massive Israeli backlash against the Obama administration. Relations between the President and the Israeli Prime Minister were notoriously bad. The final blow came when the Obama administration abstained on a December 2016 UN Security Council vote on Israeli settlements. This action was geared in the language of preserving a two-state solution, as the U.S. feared that settlement building could "close the door to any hope of negotiating side-by-side Israeli and Palestinian states."²⁰

Naturally, Candidate Trump promised to reverse key aspects of this U.S. policy. Under his presidency, he claimed, Israel would now have a friend in the White House. His real estate lawyer, Jason Greenblatt, would be a special representative for international negotiations. His bankruptcy lawyer, David Friedman, a man who

¹⁸ For an artist's conception of this, see Robert Mackey, "The West Bank Archipelago", *New York Times*, 7 May 2009, <https://thelede.blogs.nytimes.com/2009/05/07/the-west-bank-archipelago/>.

¹⁹ Jodi Rudoren and Jeremy Ashkenas, "Netanyahu and the Settlements", *New York Times*, 12 March 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/03/12/world/middleeast/netanyahu-west-bank-settlements-israel-election.html>; Elliot Abrams, "The Obama 'Settlements' Crisis", *National Review*, 30 December 2016, <http://www.nationalreview.com/article/443422/israeli-settlements-obama-freeze-went-too-far>.

²⁰ Karen DeYoung, "How the U.S. came to abstain on a U.N. resolution condemning Israeli settlements", *Washington Post*, 28 December 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/how-the-us-came-to-abstain-on-a-un-resolution-condemning-israeli-settlements/2016/12/28/fed102ee-cd38-11e6-b8a2-8c2a61b0436f_story.html.

referred to Jewish critics of Israel as “kapos,” would be U.S. Ambassador to that country.²¹ His son-in-law Jared Kushner, whose family had long provided financial support to settlers, would be a key adviser with a diplomatic role in the Arab-Israeli conflict.²² As a first step, on his first day in office, the U.S. embassy in Tel Aviv would be moved to Jerusalem, fulfilling a long-time wish for pro-Israel groups.²³ All of this indicated that he would indeed make a radical departure from existing U.S. policy, perhaps even embracing the possibility of a one-state solution.

Yet, in the two months since taking office, U.S. moves on the issue have come only haltingly. The United States Embassy move was immediately put on hold. After Israel approved the construction of 6,000 new homes, the Trump administration responded by mildly criticizing settlements as unhelpful. During a visit by Netanyahu, Trump briefly caused a stir by stating that he was open to whatever solution the two parties wanted, whether two states or one state, but this was then quickly walked back by members of his administration. President Trump has invited Palestinian leader Mahmoud Abbas to the White House, though reports indicate that he primarily intends to listen, rather than to take action.²⁴ Greenblatt appears to have made a good impression with both sides during a recent trip to the region. In short, Trump is remaining on the well-worn path of American diplomacy, regardless of whether it leads anywhere new.

There is one final legacy that Trump has inherited, but has a much shorter pedigree than many of the others: U.S. democracy promotion in the Middle East. Democracy promotion had become an important factor in American foreign policy even before the end of the Cold War, but it really only took off in the Middle East under President George W. Bush.²⁵ As with the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, these efforts were arguably abject failures, and upon taking office, President Obama sought to change the tone of American policy. As Middle East scholar Fawaz Gerges wrote, Obama would focus on “stability” rather than an “ideology of proselytization of democracy” that had characterized the Bush approach.²⁶ In the aftermath of the Arab Spring, the Obama administration did, hesitantly, take steps in the direction of pushing for democracy in places like Tunisia, Libya, and Egypt, even if these were limited. Still, under both Bush and Obama, democracy promotion was never a consistent driver of policy, and when it clashed with other American

²¹ Jon Sharman, “Donald Trump's Israel ambassador said Jews who back two-state solution are worse than Nazi collaborators”, 16 December 2016, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/americas/donald-trump-david-friedman-israel-ambassador-j-street-worse-kapo-nazi-concentration-camps-a7478651.html>.

²² Aaron David Miller, “Could Jared Kushner resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict?”, *CNN*, 18 January 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/01/18/opinions/could-jared-kushner-resolve-the-israeli-palestinian-conflict-miller/>.

²³ Tom Batchelor, “Donald Trump ‘to announce US embassy move from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem”, *The Independent*, 22 January 2017, <http://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/middle-east/donald-trump-us-embassy-israel-tel-aviv-jerusalem-reports-israeli-media-a7540476.html>.

²⁴ Luke Baker, “Trump invites Palestinian leader Abbas to White House”, *Reuters*, 10 March 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-palestinians-abbas-idUSKBN16H1IK>.

²⁵ Michele Durocher Dunne, “Integrating Democracy into U.S. Middle East Policy”, *Democracy and Rule of Law Project*, Carnegie Papers, No. 50, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, October 2004.

²⁶ Fawaz Gerges, *Obama and the Middle East* (New York: St. Martin's Griffin, 2012), 8.

interests, such as the ‘war on terror’ or the security of Israel, U.S. policymakers tended to side against democratic trends.

As a candidate and as president, Trump has dropped any pretense of interest in democracy, human rights, and a number of other liberal ideas. His refusal to criticize Putin received the most attention from pundits, but this attitude may be even more important for his relations with autocratic regimes in the Middle East, from Egypt’s under Abdel Fattah el-Sisi to the Gulf potentates. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson has already backed away from any criticism of human rights. The Department of State issued a report on human rights in countries around the world, including the Middle East, as is required by law, but Tillerson did not attend the 3 March ceremony for this report.²⁷ This can only please those leaders who see democracy as a threat to their country’s political stability or to their personal power.

For these reasons, contrary to what many might have expected for a President who called for a ban on Muslims entering the United States, regimes in the Middle East have been relatively open to Trump. There is no good polling data available at this point about the impact of the Trump administration on the level of favorability that the United States enjoys in the Middle East, but in any case, it is unlikely that U.S. actions are going to result in it falling.

It is still the early days of the Trump administration. Yet, at least in regards to the legacies above, most signs indicate that American policy on the Middle East will stay neatly within the bounds described here. In four years, the United States will almost certainly still be heavily engaged in the Middle East militarily and diplomatically. The defeat of ISIS, if accomplished, may indeed help stabilize Iraq, but it will not mark an end to that country’s conflict or to the war in Syria. Barring any unforeseen factors, the Trump administration will be privately bickering with Israeli leaders over settlements, even as it continues to proclaim the importance of the American-Israeli friendship. The U.S. deal with Iran may or may not still be in place, but there is little reason to think that U.S.-Iran relations on the whole will have improved or deteriorated markedly. In short, the Trump administration, for all its bluster, is unlikely to change much in the region. The one exception to this trend is the drop in rhetoric about democracy, which does seem to have found an end, at least for the moment. But does anyone think that talk of the importance of democracy and human rights will fade permanently from the American foreign policy lexicon? Look for it in the 2020 presidential debates.

The bottom line is to suggest that we may have somewhat less to fear from Trump than many have suggested, at least in regards to the Middle East. Even if the Trump administration seems unlikely to do much that will improve U.S. relations with the region, at the moment it does not seem likely that there will be actions that make the situation much worse. That does not mean that there will not be any major crises in the region; indeed, it is safe to assume that one will occur sometime during his presidency: a new Palestinian intifada, another Israeli intervention in Lebanon or Syria, a revolution or internal crisis in another Arab country—all are possibilities. And the way that Trump and his advisers react will indeed matter. But is it really possible for

²⁷ Carol Morello, “Rex Tillerson skips State Department’s annual announcement on human rights”, Washington Post, 3 March 2017, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/rex-tillerson-skips-state-departments-annual-announcement-on-human-rights-alarming-advocates/2017/03/03/7fbf8584-002d-11e7-8f41-ea6ed597e4ca_story.html.

Trump's policies to have worse outcomes than those of the previous 16 years? We will be living the answer to this question for some years to come.

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