

#### The Trump Administration and the Middle East

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Published on **14 August 2017** | [issforum.org](http://issforum.org)

Editors: Robert Jervis, Francis Gavin, Joshua Rovner, and Diane Labrosse

Web and Production Editor: George Fujii

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Shortlink: <http://tiny.cc/PR-1-5AV>

Permalink: <http://issforum.org/roundtables/policy/1-5AV-MiddleEast>

PDF URL: <http://issforum.org/ISSF/PDF/Policy-Roundtable-1-5AV.pdf>

With one very important exception, and despite a number of rhetorical and stylistic differences, the Trump Administration's approach to the Middle East is not substantially different from that of the Obama Administration.<sup>1</sup> President Barack Obama prioritized the fight against Salafi jihadist groups (al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria [ISIS], and their offshoots) above other regional goals, as does President Donald Trump. Both came to office evidencing a general reluctance to get involved in large-scale military actions, reflective of their common perception that the 2003 invasion of Iraq was a mistake, though in both cases they proved willing to use military force in the region. Both publicly committed their administrations to finding a solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, though Obama's efforts there failed and the first ventures by Trump do not look promising.<sup>2</sup> While Trump criticized Obama during the 2016 campaign for ignoring the interests of traditional American allies in the region, it is hard to sustain the proposition that the Obama Administration substantially altered American policy toward Israel and Saudi Arabia and that the Trump Administration is thus 'restoring' past ties.

The one significant difference in the Middle East policies of the two administrations regards Iran. President Trump identifies Iran as a major threat to American interests and seems likely to scuttle the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the agreement between Iran, the five permanent members of the U.N. Security Council, Germany, and the EU setting limits to Iran's nuclear program. The Obama Administration sought to engage Iran, mainly through the negotiations for the JCPOA, primarily to restrain Iran's nuclear ambitions as an end in itself and but also in hopes that the nuclear deal might eventually lead to a moderation of Iran's broader regional policies.<sup>3</sup> The Trump Administration rejects that logic, prioritizing

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<sup>1</sup> This essay was submitted on 8 August 2017.

<sup>2</sup> For a larger argument about the continuities in Trump foreign policy, see Elliott Abrams, "Trump the Traditionalist," *Foreign Affairs* 96:4 (July/August 2017): 10-16.

<sup>3</sup> President Obama was always careful to downplay the likelihood of any significant short-term change in Iranian regional policy stemming from the nuclear agreement and to emphasize that the agreement was good in and of

containment, if not rollback, of Iranian influence in the Middle East and indicating that it might pursue regime change toward the Islamic Republic. In this harder line toward Iran, the Trump Administration harks back to previous American policy, suggesting that Obama was more of the outlier than Trump on this issue.

Both the Trump and Obama approaches toward the Middle East suffer from internal tensions that make policy consistency hard to achieve. Their evident reluctance to pursue a George W. Bush-style policy of using large-scale military force to achieve American aims runs up against their commitment to battle ISIS and al-Qaeda and achieve other goals. Obama, whose opposition to the Iraq War was a major factor in his capture of the Democratic nomination and his general election victory in 2008, ended up committing forces to a regime change effort in Libya, vastly expanding American drone attacks in Yemen and other Middle Eastern countries, sending American troops (though in much smaller numbers) back to Iraq to fight ISIS and sustaining a substantial American military commitment to Afghanistan. Trump, in just his first few months in office, has used American military power against the Syrian regime of President Bashar al-Assad and increased American military involvement in Syria, Iraq and elsewhere in the region against ISIS and al-Qaeda. His commitment to roll back Iranian influence also risks escalating to a military confrontation.

Trump's particular style of governance also creates challenges for the achievement of his goals in the Middle East. The shoot from the hip quality of Trump's public pronouncements can mislead both friend and foe alike and complicate the implementation of policy. The breach between American Gulf allies Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) on one side and Qatar on the other that emerged in the summer of 2017 is one example. The overwhelming presence of former and current officers on Trump's foreign policy team means that a military establishment with significant sunk costs in the region will set the parameters of American involvement there, regardless of his previously stated opposition to long-term military commitments in the Middle East.

### *Surprising Continuities*

If President Trump made Middle East policy based solely upon his rhetoric in the 2016 campaign, we would be seeing a substantially different American approach to the region. His constant focus on the terrorist threat and his promises of a new plan to confront ISIS would have led one to believe that a major departure on the counter-terrorism front was in the offing. His anti-Muslim statements and the role in the campaign played by retired General Michael Flynn, whose extreme views on the nature of the threat from the region were well advertised, seemed to indicate a much more confrontational policy.<sup>4</sup> His promise to move the American

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itself, even if Iranian behavior in other areas did not change. However, he did evince a hope that more moderate voices in Iran, with whom the U.S. negotiated the JCPOA, might lead to different Iranian policies more generally. He told Thomas Friedman in 2015: "The so-called moderate in Iran is not going to be suddenly somebody who we feel reflects universal issues like human rights, but there are better or worse approaches that Iran can take relative to our interests and the interests of our allies, and we should see where we can encourage that better approach." Thomas L. Friedman, "Obama Makes His Case on Iran Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, 14 July 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/opinion/thomas-friedman-obama-makes-his-case-on-iran-nuclear-deal.html> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>4</sup> Flynn's 2016 book, co-authored with noted Islamophobe Michael Ledeen, argued that the U.S. government had underestimated the threat from Islamist groups across the board – Sunni and Shia, overtly violent and more

embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, the dropping of support for a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians from the Republican Party platform, and his tweet in December 2016, after America failed to veto a U.N. Security Council resolution condemning Israeli settlement activity, that Israel should “stay strong” and await his coming to office, signaled a move away from past presidents’ efforts to negotiate Arab-Israeli peace.<sup>5</sup> Trump’s categorization of the JCPOA as a “disaster” and “the worst deal ever negotiated” signaled an immediate change in Iran policy.<sup>6</sup>

In fact, none of that happened. The administration’s conduct of the war against ISIS basically followed the template established by the Obama Administration: reliance on local allies, significant American air support, a relatively small number of American combat forces on the ground to assist, and a reluctance to expand the scope of American goals to include confronting the Assad regime.<sup>7</sup> Given that the existing policy was basically working and that the rollback of ISIS’s territorial hold in both Iraq and Syria continued under the Trump Administration, it is little wonder that major changes did not occur. The new President did not change Obama’s penchant for using drones and special operations forces to attack terrorists in countries like Yemen, Pakistan and Somalia; he simply increased the frequency of such attacks.<sup>8</sup> While the prospect for serious changes in Iran policy remains, as will be discussed below, Trump twice certified in his first six months in office that Iran was in compliance with its obligations under the JCPOA.<sup>9</sup> Flynn was removed as National Security Advisor within weeks of his appointment, replaced by General H. R. McMaster, who let it be known that the phrase “radical Islamic terror” was not a useful description of the threat facing the United States.<sup>10</sup>

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“political,” and not taken aggressive enough actions against them and their state supporters, like Iran. *The Field of Fight: How We Can Win the Global War against Radical Islam and Its Allies*, (New York: St. Martin’s Press, 2016).

<sup>5</sup> Dana H. Allin and Steven N. Simon, “Trump and the Holy Land,” *Foreign Affairs* 96:2 (March/April 2017): 40, 42-43.

<sup>6</sup> Yeganeh Torbati, “Trump election puts Iran nuclear deal on shaky ground,” Reuters, 9 November 2016, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-election-trump-iran-idUSKBN13427E> (last accessed 1 August 2017)

<sup>7</sup> Karen DeYoung, “Pentagon plan to defeat ISIS looks very much like Obama’s approach,” *Washington Post*, 28 June 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-plan-to-defeat-isis-looks-very-much-like-obamas-approach/2017/06/28/d43aa1b6-5c30-11e7-a9f6-7c3296387341\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.c3a40c3ce31c](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/pentagon-plan-to-defeat-isis-looks-very-much-like-obamas-approach/2017/06/28/d43aa1b6-5c30-11e7-a9f6-7c3296387341_story.html?utm_term=.c3a40c3ce31c) (last accessed 1 August 1, 2017)

<sup>8</sup> Micah Zenko, “Donald Trump is Pushing America’s Special Forces Past the Breaking Point,” *Foreign Policy*, 1 August 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/08/01/donald-trump-is-pushing-americas-special-forces-past-the-breaking-point-jsoc-navy-seal/> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>9</sup> Peter Baker, “Trump Recertifies Iran Nuclear Deal, but Only Reluctantly,” *New York Times*, 17 July 2017, [https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal-recertify.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/17/us/politics/trump-iran-nuclear-deal-recertify.html?_r=0) (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>10</sup> Evan Perez, “National security adviser: Term ‘radical Islamic terrorism’ isn’t helpful,” *CNN Politics*, 25 February 2017, <http://www.cnn.com/2017/02/25/politics/nsa-radical-islamic-terror-term-unhelpful/index.html> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

The gap between campaign rhetoric and Trump Administration policy is perhaps most apparent in the Arab-Israeli area. The U.S. embassy in Israel was not moved to Jerusalem in the early months of Trump's presidency. He spoke of an Israeli-Palestinian agreement as "the ultimate deal." He visited Israel and met with Palestinian leaders on his first foreign trip in May 2017, encouraging Israel to be responsive to Arab states who were holding out the prospect of better relations in exchange for movement toward a Palestinian state. Most telling, Trump delegated the peace process portfolio to his son-in-law and arguably most trusted adviser, Jared Kushner.<sup>11</sup> The prospects for success for Trump's peace process initiative are no greater than they were for Obama's efforts in this regard, but that fact simply reaffirms the continuities in American Middle East policy.

It was not unreasonable to assume that Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric on the campaign trail might complicate American relations with Muslim allies in the Middle East. The fact that his first major action upon taking office was an effort to ban travel to the United States from a number of Muslim-majority countries might have been expected to have led to backlashes in the region at both the elite and popular levels. But that has not happened. Saudi Arabia and Egypt, among other Muslim countries, overlooked Trump's immigration policies and rhetoric and, because of their own problems with Obama, celebrated Trump's arrival in office.<sup>12</sup> The new President's first foreign trip in May 2017 began in Saudi Arabia, where King Salman convened a meeting of dozens of leaders of Muslim countries for the occasion.<sup>13</sup> On that visit the Saudis agreed to a set of arms deals totaling over \$100 billion, though many of those deals had been in the works for some time and others were simply preliminary commitments, not actual contracts.<sup>14</sup> The Saudis pulled out all the stops to ingratiate themselves with the new President. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi visited the White House in April 2017, with the two leaders sharing positive statements about each other and the state of Egyptian-American relations.<sup>15</sup> Public opinion in the Muslim Middle East about the United States and President Trump was not particularly positive during the early months of his Administration, but that is not something

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<sup>11</sup> Nathan Thrall, "Trump chases his 'ultimate deal,'" *The New Yorker*, 22 May 2017, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/trump-chases-his-ultimate-deal> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>12</sup> Susan B. Glasser, "Why the Middle East Hated Obama But Loves Trump," *Politico*, 31 July 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/07/31/donald-trump-middle-east-barack-obama-215441> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>13</sup> Peter Baker and Michael D. Shear, "Trump Softens Tone on Islam but Calls for Purge of 'Foot Soldiers of Evil,'" *New York Times*, 21 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/21/world/middleeast/trump-saudi-arabia-islam-speech.html> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>14</sup> Mark Lander, Eric Schmitt and Matt Apuzzo, "\$110 Billion Weapons Sale to Saudis Has Jared Kushner's Personal Touch," *New York Times*, 18 May 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/18/world/middleeast/jared-kushner-saudi-arabia-arms-deal-lockheed.html> (last accessed 1 August 2017); Bruce Riedel, "The \$110 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia is fake news," *Markaz* blog, Brookings Institution, 5 June 2017, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2017/06/05/the-110-billion-arms-deal-to-saudi-arabia-is-fake-news/> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

<sup>15</sup> "Donald Trump says US is 'very much behind' Egypt's Sisi," *al-Jazeera*, 3 April 2017, <http://www.aljazeera.com/news/2017/04/donald-trump-welcomes-egypt-sisi-white-house-170403164810319.html> (last accessed 1 August 2017).

new. The United States is normally unpopular in the Muslim world.<sup>16</sup> If there is a public opinion revulsion against Trump, it has not affected regional states' policies toward the United States.

If America's position in the Middle East was not negatively affected by Trump's rhetoric and policies, neither was its position substantially improved, either. The atmospherics of the bilateral relationships with Israel and Saudi Arabia are certainly better under Trump. Both American allies had little sympathy for Obama, whom they saw as naïve in his outreach toward Iran and, in the case of the Netanyahu government in Israel, too willing to pressure Jerusalem for concessions to achieve a negotiated solution with the Palestinians. During the campaign Trump promised to restore what he saw as Obama's retreat from supporting Middle East allies. But it is hard to argue that the Obama Administration actually did 'abandon' the American role in the region. When Obama left office, there were over 58,000 American military personnel in the region, on land and sea, including over 5,000 in the campaign against ISIS in Syria and Iraq and 8,400 in Afghanistan.<sup>17</sup> The campaign against ISIS was so well-established that the Trump Administration basically continued Obama's policy there. Despite its misgivings, the Obama Administration supported the Saudi campaign in Yemen with logistical and political support. It negotiated a series of arms deals with Riyadh and continued a deep engagement with the Saudis on intelligence issues. It also concluded a ten-year, \$38 billion memorandum of understanding on U.S. military aid to Israel and offered what two authors term "unstinting military and security cooperation."<sup>18</sup> Trump has neither been as harmful nor as helpful regarding the American position in the region as either his worst critics or most enthusiastic boosters contend. In a word, not that much has changed.

All this continuity raises the question: Why has someone so fond of disruption, so dismissive of his predecessors' policies and achievements, so critical of recent American military campaigns in the region, so committed to an 'America First' policy of radically reassessing overseas commitments brought about so little change in American Middle East policy? It is not from lack of interest. Trump has traveled to the region, received numerous Middle Eastern leaders in Washington, presided over sustained military engagement there and even tweeted about it. It has to do with what Marc Lynch describes as the "structural realities" of the American position in the region.<sup>19</sup> Those realities include an active post- 9/11 counter-terrorism agenda, domestic lobbies that support American involvement there, regional allies who are important to the counter-terrorism agenda and other American interests demanding American attention and commitment, and a U.S.

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<sup>16</sup> Richard Wike, Bruce Stokes, Jacob Poushter and Janell Fetterolf, "Worldwide, few confident in Trump or his policies," *Global Attitudes & Trends*, Pew Research Center, 26 June 2017, <http://www.pewglobal.org/2017/06/26/worldwide-few-confident-in-trump-or-his-policies/> (last accessed 1 August 2017). For a broader discussion of public opinion toward the U.S. in the Arab world, see Amaney A. Jamal, Robert O. Keohane, David Romney and Dustin Tingley, "Anti-Americanism and Anti-Interventionism in Arabic Twitter Discourses," *Perspectives on Politics* 13:1 (March 2015): 55-73.

<sup>17</sup> Ash Carter, "The Logic of American Strategy in the Middle East," *Survival* 59:2 (April/May 2017): 13-24.

<sup>18</sup> Allin and Simon, "Trump and the Holy Land," 38-39.

<sup>19</sup> Marc Lynch, "Belligerent Minimalism: The Trump Administration and the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly* 39: 4 (Winter 2017), 128.

foreign policy and military establishment grooved into supporting the regional status-quo through considerable American involvement.

Pursuing goals that Trump identified as central to his foreign policy agenda, like counter-terrorism, makes it difficult to change other elements of Middle East policy, because those elements are necessary to sustain domestic and regional support for his overall agenda. For example, Trump authorized a missile attack on Syrian regime assets in May 2017 to punish Assad for the use of chemical weapons, despite his stated desire to stay out of the Syrian civil war.<sup>20</sup> That attack, while in tension with Trump's desire to avoid the Syrian imbroglio, was justified by his desire to restore what he saw as damaged American credibility in front of regional allies and to deter the use of weapons of mass destruction more generally.<sup>21</sup> Trump frequently criticized Saudi Arabia on the campaign trail, and occasionally in office, portraying the Saudis as free-riders who should be paying more for American military protection, but quickly found that a strong relationship with Saudi Arabia was necessary for his counter-terrorism and Iran policies.<sup>22</sup>

Barack Obama came to office in 2009 looking to pivot away from intense American military involvement in the Middle East, actively seeking an Israeli-Palestinian peace deal and, with the Arab Spring, seemingly committed to encouraging democratic change in the region. He left office with tens of thousands of American troops in the region, America involved in wars in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq, a redoubled commitment to the war on terrorism through drone strikes and special forces, no progress on peace in the Holy Land and America still tightly connected to Arab authoritarians from North Africa to the Persian Gulf. It should not be surprising that Donald Trump could not radically change American Middle East policy in his early months in office.

### *A Major Change? Trump Policy toward Iran*

The one area in which the Trump Administration has exhibited the greatest desire to change American policy in the Middle East is Iran. While Trump certified Iranian compliance with the JCPOA on the first two occasions the issue crossed his desk, he made clear in July 2017 that he is looking for a rationale for the

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<sup>20</sup> In the summer of 2017 Trump ended the CIA's covert program to arm and train "moderate" Syrian rebels, a program begun by the Obama Administration that had little impact on the battlefield in Syria. Greg Jaffe and Adam Entous, "Trump ends covert CIA program to arm anti-Assad rebels in Syria, a move sought by Moscow," *Washington Post*, 19 July 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html) (last accessed 3 August 2017).

<sup>21</sup> Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, "Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria," *New York Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>22</sup> Stephen J. Adler, Jeff Mason and Steve Holland, "Exclusive: Trump complains Saudis not paying fair share for U.S. defense," *Reuters*, 27 April 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-mideast-exclusive-idUSKBN17U08A> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

United States to declare Iran to be out of compliance and to increase American pressure on the country.<sup>23</sup> He told the *Wall Street Journal* in an interview that month that he “would have had them [Iran] noncompliant 180 days ago,” and that he expected Iran would be declared noncompliant at the next review.<sup>24</sup> Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, at a Congressional hearing in June 2017, said that United States policy is “to work towards support of those elements inside of Iran that would lead to a peaceful transition of that government,” reviving the issue of regime change that the Obama Administration had repeatedly foregone.<sup>25</sup> The Trump Administration approved a series of new sanctions against Iran in the summer of 2017, ostensibly unrelated to its nuclear program and thus not a violation of the JCPOA, though Iran has formally charged that these steps violate the agreement.<sup>26</sup>

These signals of a new, harder line against Iran have been accompanied by an increased willingness to confront Iran and its allies across the region. After threats by then candidate Trump to shoot Iranian ships “out of the water” if they harass American naval vessels in the Persian Gulf, there have been several incidents of American ships warning Iranians against provocative behavior in 2017, including two times when warning shots were fired.<sup>27</sup> Twice in June 2017 American fighter jets shot down Iranian-made drones that were flying toward American-backed Syrian fighters and their American advisers; a U.S. plane also shot down a Russian-made Syrian warplane that was attacking America’s Syrian partners during the same month.<sup>28</sup> In May 2017 American jets bombed an Iranian-backed militia convoy in Syria that was heading toward an area where U.S.

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<sup>23</sup> David E. Sanger, “Trump Seeks Way to Declare Iran in Violation of Nuclear Deal,” *New York Times*, 27 July 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/27/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-agreement.html> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>24</sup> “Excerpts: Donald Trump’s Interview with the Wall Street Journal,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 25, 2017, <https://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2017/07/25/donald-trumps-interview-with-the-wall-street-journal-edited-transcript/> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>25</sup> Eric Pelofsky, “Tillerson lets slip he wants regime change in Iran,” *Newsweek*, 27 June 2017, <http://www.newsweek.com/tillerson-lets-slip-he-wants-regime-change-iran-629096> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>26</sup> Rick Gladstone, “Iran Says New U.S. Sanctions Violate Nuclear Deal,” *New York Times*, 1 August 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/01/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-trump-sanctions-complaint.html> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>27</sup> On Trump’s threat against the Iranians, see “Foreign Policy Experts Push Back on Trump’s Iranian Ships Comment,” *NPR*, 13 September 2016, <http://www.npr.org/2016/09/13/493721843/foreign-policy-experts-push-back-on-trumps-remark-to-shoot-iranian-ships-out-of> (last accessed 2 August 2017); on the incidents in the Persian Gulf in 2017, see Ed Adamczyk, “U.S. Navy ship fires warning shot at Iranian ship in Persian Gulf,” *UPI*, 25 July 2017, [http://www.upi.com/Top\\_News/World-News/2017/07/25/US-Navy-ship-fires-warning-shots-at-Iranian-ship-in-Persian-Gulf/3211500997047/?nll=1](http://www.upi.com/Top_News/World-News/2017/07/25/US-Navy-ship-fires-warning-shots-at-Iranian-ship-in-Persian-Gulf/3211500997047/?nll=1) (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>28</sup> Michael R. Gordon, “American Warplane Shoots Down Iranian-Made Drone Over Syria,” *New York Times*, 20 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/20/world/middleeast/american-warplane-shoots-down-iranian-made-drone-over-syria.html> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

Special Forces had been deployed.<sup>29</sup> Warnings of the possibility of a direct American-Iranian military confrontation have been heard from responsible voices in the Washington foreign policy community.<sup>30</sup>

Trump's hardline against Iran does not make him an outlier in the recent history of American Middle East policy. If anything, his jaundiced view of Tehran is more consistent with the approach taken by American presidents since the Iranian Revolution of 1979 than Obama's effort at outreach. The Reagan Administration sent the U.S. Navy into the Persian Gulf in 1987 to confront Iran, leading to a number of armed encounters, culminating in the shooting down of an Iranian civilian airliner in July 1988. The Clinton Administration's policy in the Gulf of 'dual containment' equated the threats from the Islamic Republic and from Saddam Hussein's Iraq. George W. Bush included Iran in the "axis of evil" after the 9/11 attacks, despite the fact that Iran had no involvement in that event at all. American hostility toward Iran is reciprocated by most Iranians leaders, including the Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, who evince a profound mistrust of and ideological opposition to the United States. Iran has gone to great lengths to oppose American policy throughout the Middle East, including directly supporting groups that killed American soldiers during the Iraq War.<sup>31</sup> One can argue with the wisdom of the Trump Administration's policy toward Iran, but it is part of what is now a long American tradition.

*Style Impeding Substance: The Trump Modus Operandi and the Middle East*

President Trump's Middle East agenda is characterized more by continuity than change, even allowing for his departure from the Obama approach to Iran. But his unique and disruptive style has damaged his ability to achieve his goals in the region. An obvious example is the spat among American allies that emerged in May 2017 between Qatar on one side, supported subsequently by Turkey (and also Iran) and Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain and Egypt on the other.<sup>32</sup> The Saudis and the Emiratis, who took the lead on this matter, wanted Qatar to end its backing for Islamist groups, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, that Riyadh and

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<sup>29</sup> Dennis Ross, "Trump Is on a Collision Course with Iran," *Politico*, 20 June 2017, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2017/06/20/trump-foreign-policy-syria-middle-east-iran-215285> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>30</sup> Philip Gordon, "A Vision of Trump at War," *Foreign Affairs* 96:3 (May/June 2017): 10-19; Paul R. Pillar, "The Growing Danger of War With Iran," *Lobelog*, 28 June 2017, <http://lobelog.com/the-growing-danger-of-war-with-iran/> (last accessed 2 August 2017).

<sup>31</sup> On the recent history of American-Iranian relations and American policy toward the Persian Gulf more generally, see Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs*, (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); David Crist, *The Twilight War: The Secret History of America's Thirty-Year Conflict with Iran*, (New York: Penguin Books, 2012); and F. Gregory Gause, III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf*, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

<sup>32</sup> For background on this incident, see Kristian Coates Ulrichsen, "The Gulf's Demands on Qatar Look Designed to be Rejected," *The Atlantic*, 24 June 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/06/qatar-saudi-arabia-trump-mattis-gcc-uae/531474/> (last accessed 3 August 2017); Hussein Ibish, "Unfulfilled 2014 Riyadh Agreement Defines Current GCC Rift," *The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington*, 6 June 2017, <http://www.agsiw.org/unfulfilled-2014-riyadh-agreement-defines-current-gcc-rift/> (last accessed 3 August 2017).



Abu Dhabi dislike, its support for the satellite news channels of Al Jazeera, and its close relations with Iran. The Saudi and Emirati moves to isolate Qatar came just weeks after Trump's visit to Saudi Arabia. Secretary of State Tillerson and Secretary of Defense James Mattis immediately pursued conventional diplomacy, seeking to end the dispute among American allies through quiet contacts. President Trump undercut their efforts, with a tweet supporting the Saudi-Emirati position, implying that his visit had led to the Saudis and the UAE taking these steps.<sup>33</sup> As of August 2017 the tensions among the Gulf states persisted.

It is not unreasonable to assume that Saudi and Emirati leaders thought they had at least a tacit green light from the new President to escalate the issue with Qatar. The idea that proposals put forward by cabinet secretaries might not be the final word on American policy and that appeals directly to the White House might lead to different answers on sensitive topics has prolonged the Gulf dispute. Trump's penchant for off-the-cuff remarks and tweets has certainly complicated the resolution of this issue.

It is also interesting to note that just one month after Trump's trip to Saudi Arabia, King Salman shook up the line of succession, replacing Crown Prince Muhammad bin Nayef, a long-time favorite of Washington and primary contact on counter-terrorism issues, with his young son, Prince Muhammad bin Salman. Some in the Trump White House wanted to take credit for the change, which might or might not end up being in America's interest.<sup>34</sup> Given the opacity of Saudi royal family politics, it is impossible to determine if Trump had any role in the change. But the effects of American presidents' comments, lack of comments, and body language cannot be underestimated in the calculations of Middle East actors, both friends and adversaries. The fact that President Trump is so cavalier in his comments on diplomatic issues has already had a negative effect on American diplomacy in the Gulf and could cause more problems in the future.

Reports have emerged that President Trump has delegated to Secretary Mattis the authority to determine troop levels in Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria,<sup>35</sup> although it is not completely clear that he will be as hands-off on military decisions as has been depicted.<sup>36</sup> If the President does in fact allow these key decisions to be made by the Secretary and his military advisers, he will have given an institution with over a decade of sunk costs in these conflicts and a propensity to see the possibility of solving any problem with increased troop levels the

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<sup>33</sup> Mark Lander, "Trump Takes Credit for Saudi Move against Qatar, a U.S. Military Partner," *New York Times*, 6 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/06/world/middleeast/trump-qatar-saudi-arabia.html> (last accessed 3 August 2017).

<sup>34</sup> Mark Lander and Mark Mazzetti, "Trump's Preferred Candidate Wins Again, This Time in Saudi Arabia," *New York Times*, 21 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/21/world/middleeast/trump-saudi-arabia-mohammed-bin-salman.html> (last accessed 3 August 2017).

<sup>35</sup> Michael R. Gordon, "Trump Gives Mattis Authority to Send More Troops to Afghanistan," *New York Times*, 13 June 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/13/world/asia/mattis-afghanistan-military.html> (last accessed 3 August 2017).

<sup>36</sup> Steve Holland and John Walcott, "Trump, frustrated by Afghan war, suggests firing US commander: officials," *Reuters*, 2 August 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-afghanistan-idUSKBN1AI2Z3> (last accessed 3 August 2017).

decisive say in American military involvement in the region.<sup>37</sup> It must be noted that his Secretary of Defense, his National Security Advisor and, as of August 2017, his Chief of Staff are all generals who served in either Iraq, Afghanistan or both. Deference to military advice at the strategic level could run directly against Trump's desire to avoid greater American commitment in Middle Eastern wars.

### *Conclusion*

President Trump's Middle East policy does not represent a significant departure from that of his predecessors. While his approach to Iran is very different than that of President Obama, it represents a return to the norm of hostile bilateral relations that Obama tried to change. It is clear that Trump wanted a new approach toward the Middle East—less military involvement, greater cooperation with Russia. But he has been stymied in making significant changes by the difficulty of untangling the web of American interests in the area, the power of sunk costs for the American military and foreign policy establishment and, in the case of Russia, his forfeiting of trust across a bipartisan range of opinion that he can manage the relationship with Putin. The big question about the Trump Administration in the Middle East is not strategic direction, but whether it will be competent enough to avoid major problems and achieve short-term goals.

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<sup>37</sup> Paul Pillar, "Trump and the Middle East," *The National Interest* 147 (January/February 2017), 49.