



TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY AT ONE YEAR

POLICY LACKS STRATEGIC COHERENCE DESPITE RHETORIC

SUMMARY

One year into Donald Trump's presidency, few tangible shifts have been made from the policies of former president Barack Obama. The shifts that have been made, however, are undermining regional cooperation and stability. Trump's aggressive counterterrorism strategy has failed to include the critical soft-power tools that will help counter future extremism; Iran continues to expand its influence through proxies in Syria, Yemen and Lebanon; and American policies in Israel and Palestine have only intensified Palestinian rejection of any peace deal brokered by the U.S. With so few successes from the president's first year in office, Trump's campaign promises to eliminate violent Islamic extremism, contain Iran, and broker an end to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict are highly unlikely to be met.

KEY POINTS

- ◆ While a short-term emphasis on kinetic action has effectively countered ISIS and al-Qaeda, the absence of a "whole-of-government" approach to counterterrorism will leave space for future extremism to take root.
- ◆ Trump's focus on the Iran nuclear deal has impeded international cooperation on other issues, including Iran's regional ambitions and status quo revisionism. Russia and China are filling the leadership gap.
- ◆ The administration's Palestine policy has made the PA increasingly unlikely to take part in a U.S.-led peace plan, and has complicated the intercessory efforts and regional credibility of the U.S.'s Gulf allies.
- ◆ Regional leaders are hedging their bets on the U.S. and turning to Russia and China to safeguard against U.S. inconsistency.

INTRODUCTION

While foreign policy was not a central element of President Donald Trump's election campaign in 2016, there were three main planks in his Middle East policy platform that he routinely included in his stump speeches: 1) eliminating ISIS and violent "Islamic" extremism; 2) tearing up the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal) and confronting Iranian regional threats; and 3) brokering a comprehensive resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

One year into his administration, the three elements he highlighted in his campaign remain at the heart of his Middle East policy. But in reality, there have been few tangible shifts from the policies of Barack Obama's administration, and the results of the few changes that Trump has made have been mixed at best.

ELIMINATING VIOLENT ISLAMIC EXTREMISM

Perhaps no foreign policy line on the campaign trail elicited a more raucous response than Trump's pledge¹ to "quickly and decisively bomb the hell out of ISIS" Despite the priority that the president has placed on the fight against Islamic extremism, over a year into his administration there is still no

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clearly articulated strategy for achieving his goal. A Trump administration counterterrorism strategy has allegedly been under development for nearly a year, and purported drafts have occasionally surfaced, but the promised strategy remains unfinished thus far.

In the absence of the promised comprehensive framework, the administration has focused its response to the extremist threat almost entirely in terms of kinetic action. The president declared victory in the fight against ISIS following the fall of Raqqa in October 2017, declaring that his administration has made "more progress against these evil terrorists in the past several months than in the past several years."² The successes against ISIS, he claimed, were the result of "the people I put in and ... the rules of engagement."

Nevertheless, the more cautious analysis from the Department of Defense, which noted the continuity of counterterrorism strategy from the Obama to the Trump administration, made clear that the work of defeating ISIS was not over. Indeed, many months after Trump's victory statement, it remains clear that, even in its narrowest kinetic aspects, the fight against violent extremism in the Syria-Iraq theater remains far from over.

In contrast to the absent counterterrorism strategy, the National Security Strategy does recognize that the U.S.'s ability to prevail in the conflict with extremist groups requires integrating all of the elements of national power.³ But the administration has generally dismissed or downplayed non-kinetic elements of a comprehensive policy. Thus, there is no mention in the National Security Strategy of human rights promotion, development assistance, institutional capacity building, good governance, or other soft power tools that previous administrations had routinely defined as critical elements of their counterterrorism strategies.

The Trump administration's budget submissions to Congress, which propose deep cuts in programs that would address underlying issues feeding violent extremism in the region, reinforce the point that

"nation building" will not be part of the administration's approach to counterterrorism. In fact, as Steve Tankel, a counterterrorism analyst at American University, wrote in *Foreign Policy* magazine, "Trump's preference for military action over other instruments of national power extends to the support he is prepared to offer other countries. His proposed budget would invest heavily in building partner nations' militaries over improving their civilian security sectors or assisting with economic development."⁴

Underlining Tankel's point, the U.S. has intensified its kinetic-only response to extremist threats in Yemen, Libya and Somalia. Under the Trump administration, the number of drone strikes has increased significantly in Yemen and Somalia. Using the Obama-era designation of temporary battlefields or "areas of active hostilities," the administration has taken a more muscular approach than Obama.⁵ This includes relaxing standards for military operations from the Obama-era rule that necessitated near certainty that there would be no civilian casualties. In Libya, Trump has continued the Obama administration's late drift toward a greater focus on the fight against violent extremism at the expense of continued support for U.N.-led efforts to resolve Libya's internal political conflicts.

The consequences of the administration's shift toward increased use of kinetic force in its counterterrorism policies are clear as the number of civilian casualties in U.S. operations has increased substantially. A botched U.S. Special Forces raid in January 2017 on the village of al-Ghayil in Yemen's Bayda governorate resulted in at least 30 civilian casualties, including six women and ten children under the age of 13, according to award-winning reporting from Iona Craig.⁶ In Syria, an alleged U.S. strike on the Omar Ibn al-Khattab Mosque in the rebel-held village of Jeeneh in Aleppo province, crowded with over 300 worshippers, reportedly killed over 40 civilians.⁷ Implementation of the Trump administration's more aggressive counterterrorism approach has brought the U.S. short-term tactical advantage as extremist groups are pressured and denied territory. The relative success of efforts in Syria and Iraq, which are largely a continuation of initiatives launched by the Obama administration, have succeeded in eliminating ISIS control of most but not all of the territory it gained over the past several years. In Yemen, there is some evidence that al-Qaeda has been weakened by the intense counterterrorism campaign waged by the U.S. and Saudi-led coalition.

But the long-term consequences are not nearly as promising. The absence of a clear commitment to providing reconstruction aid to war-torn societies and assisting in the development of sustainable political and economic institutions will mean the continued existence of ungoverned spaces in which existing or new extremist groups can take root. Moreover, intensified U.S. kinetic operations in countries like Yemen, where U.S. intelligence collection is limited and our understanding

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of the situation on the ground murky, risk generating high numbers of civilian casualties. In turn, the death of innocent civilians will alienate populations whose goodwill is essential for sustainable outcomes as the U.S. combats extremist groups. Based on its first year in office, the Trump administration's prospects for success in its purported goal of defeating and eliminating violent extremism are unpromising.

CONFRONTING IRAN

On par with his pledges to eliminate Islamic extremism, and often conflating the two, Trump on the campaign trail expressed his determination to either aggressively enforce the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), also known as the Iran nuclear deal, or to walk away from it entirely. In a speech in Youngstown, Ohio, Trump declared that “the nuclear deal puts Iran, the number one state sponsor of radical Islamic terrorism, on a path to nuclear weapons. In short, the Obama-Clinton foreign policy ... put the nation of Iran—which chants ‘Death to America’—in a dominant position of regional power and, in fact, aspiring to be a dominant world power.”⁸

As president, Trump continued his attacks on the JCPOA. In September 2017, in his first address to the U.N. General Assembly, Trump declared that the U.S. “cannot abide by an agreement if it provides cover for the eventual construction of a nuclear program. The Iran deal was one of the worst and most one-sided transactions the United States has ever entered into. Frankly, the deal is an embarrassment to the United States ... ”⁹ Just a few weeks later, Trump unveiled his Iran strategy, which once again focused heavily on what he perceived as the deep

flaws in the nuclear deal. The president declared that he would decline to issue the certification required by Congress in the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA), which stipulates that the administration consider the suspension of sanctions under the JCPOA to be “appropriate and proportionate” to measures taken by Iran to terminate its nuclear weapons program.¹⁰ While the president’s action was in response to U.S. domestic legislation unconnected to the JCPOA itself, it started a 60-day clock in which Congress could vote to reinstitute U.S. sanctions waived under the terms of the JCPOA, effectively ending U.S. participation in the agreement.

But Congress had little interest in revisiting the JCPOA and the 60-day window passed without any congressional action. Thus, in January 2018, when the administration was again confronted with the need to respond to a legal requirement—this time to roll over the sanctions waiver as required by the JCPOA—the president grudgingly agreed to do so but with another threat to abrogate U.S. participation in the nuclear deal unless Congress and the U.S.’s European allies agree on a stricter follow-up agreement. The new deadline the president has set is in mid-May 2018, when the waiver rollover is once again required by the deal. While talks are

underway to find a workable solution to the president's demands, prospects for a successful conclusion remain limited. According to press reports, the president told Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu in March that he was dissatisfied with European proposals to date and would not waver from his hard-line approach.¹¹

Despite his intense focus on the terms of the Iran nuclear deal, the bulk of the president's assertions regarding Iranian behavior are unrelated to its nuclear program. Indeed, the issues that U.S. regional allies (with the exception of Israel) have pressed generally do not concern a potential Iranian nuclear weapons capability. Instead, they looked to the Trump administration to reverse what they considered Obama's failures to respond to Iran's ballistic missile threat, its support for terrorism, and its interference in the internal affairs of its neighbors, especially Yemen and Bahrain. Trump has echoed these concerns. In Riyadh, speaking to an audience of leaders from the Arab and Islamic states, the president charged that "from Lebanon to Iraq to Yemen, Iran funds, arms, and trains terrorists, militias, and other extremist groups that spread destruction and chaos across the region."¹² Similarly, at the U.N., Trump declared, "It is time for the entire world to join us in demanding that Iran's government end its pursuit of death and destruc-

tion ... Above all, Iran's government must stop supporting terrorists ... and respect the sovereign rights of its neighbors."¹³ But Trump's policy actions have not reflected his robust rhetoric on Iran. He laid out four pillars for countering Iran in his strategy announced in October 2017:

- Work with our allies to counter the regime's destabilizing activity and support for terrorist proxies in the region.
- Place additional sanctions on the regime to block their financing of terror.
- Address the regime's proliferation of missiles and weapons that threaten its neighbors, global trade, and freedom of navigation.
- Deny the regime all paths to a nuclear weapon.

Nearly six months later, the administration has taken few tangible steps to achieve any of the elements of the declared Iran strategy. As Dennis Ross noted in a Foreign Policy article, "To date, Trump's support for the Israelis and Saudis is primarily symbolic ... While symbolism clearly counts for something, it needs to be backed by substance lest it lose its meaning."¹⁴ Instead, while the Trump administration focuses on symbolic gestures and rhetorical statements, Iran continues to strengthen its grip in Syria and

Iraq; expand its assistance to the Houthis in Yemen, including providing missile technology enabling them to threaten major Saudi and Emirati population centers; and enhance the role of Hezbollah as Iran's proxy in the Arab world, deeply engaged as it is in Syria and Yemen and threatening Israel's security.

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Ironically, the president's threats to walk away from the JCPOA, which the deal's other signatories see as the one element of Iran policy that is working, impedes international cooperation to address the other problematic elements of Iranian behavior. Following a January 2018 meeting with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign ministers of the U.K., France, Germany, and the EU insisted to the press that the nuclear deal "made the world safer and prevented a potential nuclear arms race in the region."¹⁵ EU senior diplomat Frederica Mogherini emphasized that any effort to address other issues with Iran, including its ballistic

missile program and aggressive regional behavior, had to be separate from the nuclear deal.

While the administration will continue to engage with the Europeans on revising and strengthening the JCPOA, the effort is at best likely to result in an agreement to consider work on a new and separate

agreement. Even that would require a retreat by Trump, as well as buy-in from Russia and China, which are unlikely to look on such a project enthusiastically. This will leave the administration once again facing a dilemma when the sanctions waivers

are due to be renewed this spring. Meanwhile, U.S. friends and partners in the region are increasingly skeptical of the ability of the U.S. to achieve real progress in reducing Iran's threat to regional security and stability, and are looking to other global powers, including Russia and China, for support.

RESOLVING THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Unlike the hot-button issues of Iran and Islamic extremism, Trump's approach to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the cam-

campaign trail appeared to reflect his interest in the problem primarily as a challenge that would engage his unique qualifications as a superior negotiator. In March 2016, Trump told the *New York Times* that he “would have a better chance than anybody of making a deal” between the Israelis and Palestinians.¹⁶ Although he suggested at that time that he would negotiate the agreement personally, he made clear on the eve of his inauguration that he would tap his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to take on the responsibility. Trump told his audience at a Jan. 19 event that “All my life I’ve been hearing that’s the toughest deal to make, but I have a feeling Jared is going to do a great job.”¹⁷

Within weeks of his inauguration, Trump followed up with a White House meeting with Netanyahu. At a joint press conference, Trump declared, “we’re going to make a deal. It might be a bigger and better deal than people in this room even understand.”¹⁸ He struck the same positive note in a September 2017 meeting with Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas in New York. Trump told Abbas, “we have a very, very good chance [at peace between the Israelis and Palestinians], and I certainly will devote everything within my heart and within my soul to get that deal made. Our team is expert; your team is expert. Israel is working very

hard toward the same goal, and I must tell you, Saudi Arabia and many of the different nations are working also hard.”¹⁹

Despite his expressed determination to resolve the conflict, the administration’s approach to the details of a resolution have been extremely vague. In the press conference with Netanyahu, Trump stirred confusion when he declined to confirm that the U.S. would continue its traditional commitment to a two-state solution.²⁰ “I’m looking at two-state and one-state,” Trump suggested. “I like the one that both parties like.” Trump’s reference to the Saudis in his joint press conference with Netanyahu further reflected the administration’s interest in an “outside-in” approach that would rely on regional partners, especially the Saudis, to lead the way to a political normalization with Israel that would, in turn, pressure the Palestinians to accept an administration proposal and facilitate a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

The administration’s public airing of the outside-in concept put the Saudis in an uncomfortable position. While expressing support for the administration’s commitment to pursuing an Israeli-Palestinian peace initiative, the Saudis joined the other Arab League leaders, at least in public, in underscoring that their po-

sition remained in line with that of the Arab Peace Initiative first unveiled in 2002 by the late Saudi king, Abdullah bin Abdul-Aziz Al Saud.²¹ That initiative pledged the normalization of Israeli-Arab relations, including the establishment of normal diplomatic relations following an Israeli-Palestinian agreement rather than preceding one. Nevertheless, the administration viewed the growing confluence of interests between Israel and the Arab states, especially their shared concerns about Iran, as a window of opportunity to press for a more aggressive Arab approach to normalizing relations with Israel.

The decision in December 2017 to “recognize” Jerusalem as Israel’s capital and to move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem severely complicated, though did not completely end, the administration’s expressed interest in promoting a final Israeli-Palestinian settlement. The administration continues to insist that it will move ahead with its efforts to table an Israeli-Palestinian deal. Administration spokespersons, including U.S. ambassador to the U.N. Nikki Haley, assert that the details of the U.S. plan will be released shortly.

Subsequent decisions by the administration to punish the Palestinians over

their harsh response to the Jerusalem announcement by cutting aid to the Palestinian Authority and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency, however, have only served to intensify Palestinian rejection of the Trump administration’s policy. In addition to refusing to meet with senior U.S. representatives, including Vice President Mike Pence, Abbas has rejected the U.S.’s role in leading peace efforts. In a speech to the U.N. Security Council in February 2018, the Palestinian leader called on the council to organize an international conference later this year; admit the Palestinian state as a full member of the U.N.; and recognize the 1967 armistice lines as the international border between Israel and Palestine.²² Under current circumstances, even if the U.S. proposal is significantly more favorable to the Palestinian position than is currently anticipated, it is unlikely that the Palestinians will be willing to engage.

For their part, the Saudi public response to the Jerusalem announcement was extremely negative, but Palestinian officials reported that Crown Prince Mohammed tried again to encourage Abbas to remain open to a U.S. peace deal. Abbas was apparently unmoved by the Saudi appeal.²³

The harsh Palestinian and international reaction to the administration’s position

on Jerusalem has caused the Saudis and the other Persian Gulf states to retreat further from their support for the administration's effort. Their reluctance to embrace the administration's initiative deepened as the White House position hardened. Repeated assertions that the Jerusalem issue was now "off the table," as well as the announcement that the actual embassy move would take place in May 2018, heightened concerns in Riyadh that cooperation with the administration might seriously compromise the Saudi's domestic and regional standing. They have been especially sensitive to criticism of their involvement with the Trump peace plan coming from rivals Turkey and Iran.

At this juncture, the Gulf states will almost certainly not be willing to press the Palestinians hard, although Crown Prince Mohammed made every effort to sound encouraging during his visit to Washington in March 2018.

ONE YEAR IN, CONFIDENCE IN THE TRUMP ADMINISTRATION BEGINS TO FRAY

Donald Trump's election was warmly welcomed by governments in Israel and in many quarters of the Arab world. From Tel Aviv to Cairo to Riyadh, his policy views

were seen as an antidote to the perceived failures of the Obama administration. But U.S. regional partners are beginning to recognize that this administration's record is long on rhetoric and short on achievement. In fact, the Trump administration may simply be too chaotic and unpredictable to implement anticipated new policies while its freedom of maneuver is constrained by traditional bureaucratic forces. As a result, U.S. regional partners are hedging their bets. They still express confidence in the administration and undoubtedly would embrace administration success. But U.S. regional partners and allies are also looking more broadly for international support and are becoming more assertive in defending their interests:

- Saudi Arabia and the UAE have resisted U.S. entreaties to resolve their conflict with Qatar, which the U.S. sees as undercutting Gulf security and stability. The promise of a Gulf Cooperation Council summit at Camp David if there are positive steps toward normalizing relations within the organization has not affected their uncompromising position.
- The decision to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem has sidetracked if not brought to an end Saudi willingness

to partner with the administration in pressing the Palestinians to accept an as yet undefined U.S.-brokered Israeli-Palestinian peace plan.

- Despite his enthusiasm for Trump administration policies in the Israeli-Palestinian context, Netanyahu looks to Vladimir Putin and not Trump in seeking to constrain Iran and reduce tensions in Syria.

In fact, at the same time that leaders in the region continue to insist that they rely on the Trump administration as their partner in confronting Iran and violent extremism, they are also strengthening relations with other global powers, especially Russia and China. Saudi and Emirati senior leaders have traveled to Moscow and Beijing in order to balance against Tehran's relations with the two countries and secure a friendlier hearing for their interests. The Saudis announced a substantial arms buy from Russia, undoubtedly a signal to the U.S. that Saudi Arabia has options to protect its interests. Even Egypt, the critical pillar of U.S. presence in the Middle East for nearly 40 years, has strengthened its ties with the Russians and pursues potential arms deals with Moscow as a safeguard against U.S. inconsistency.

CONCLUSION

Rhetoric aside, it's unclear what direction the Trump administration intends to take in its Middle East policy in the coming years. Significant advances in challenging Iran or achieving breakthroughs in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process appear unlikely given the current trajectory of administration policies. While there will likely be continued success in the effort to defeat the ISIS through military means, eliminating violent extremism will remain an enduring challenge to U.S. and global security. The absence of a sufficiently resourced "whole-of-government" approach to violent extremism will make long-term success difficult, if not impossible, to achieve.

Nor is it clear that the U.S. is prepared to dedicate significant resources to the region. Friends and allies who were shaken by Obama administration talk of a pivot to Asia are unlikely to be reassured by the blunt statement in the Trump administration's National Defense Strategy that: "Interstate strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security."²⁴ If, in fact, the focus of U.S. national security efforts over the remaining years of the Trump administration is to be strategic competition with China and Russia, it's unlikely that there

will be consistent effort devoted to the problems of the Middle East. Inevitably, U.S. political and diplomatic influence will decline in the region along with its fading security umbrella.

The U.S. position in the Middle East has been weakening since the Bush administration's mismanaged invasion of Iraq in 2003. The deterioration of U.S. strategic dominance there accelerated during the Obama administration. In the absence of dramatic new developments, it appears that the Trump era is likely to witness the continued unraveling of the dominance the U.S. has enjoyed since the mid-1970s and the rise of a multipolar great power competition for power and influence in the Middle East.

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