

What Does the U.S. Election Mean for the Middle East?

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Abstract: The election of Donald Trump as President of the United States could result in American foreign policy changing dramatically toward the Middle East, as well as everywhere else. In the far more likely event that Hillary Clinton is elected, there will be more continuity than change in American foreign policy. Her ability to pursue her own initiatives in the region, though, will be limited both by regional realities and by broader international and American domestic political and economic constraints. Further, while the next president might prefer to place less emphasis on the region than previous presidents, the Middle East has a way of coming to preoccupy whoever is in the White House.

THERE ARE ALWAYS DIFFERENCES BETWEEN HOW Democratic and Republican presidential candidates in America approach foreign policy, but this year those differences appear to be starker than ever. Whether the Democrat, Hillary Clinton, or the Republican, Donald Trump, is elected will have very different implications for how American foreign policy is pursued, including in the Middle East. At this point, however, it seems far more likely that Clinton will be elected, and so more attention will be paid here to what her foreign policy toward the region might look like.¹ Some attention will also be paid to how Trump will approach the region since, although unlikely to be elected president, some of the ideas he has expressed have appealed to many Americans, and so could have a continuing impact.

First, it is important to note the prevailing concerns of the U.S. Congress, media, and public regarding the Middle East, which the next American president, whoever that might be, will have to contend with. These include: a desire to avoid intervention on the scale that the Bush Administration launched in Afghanistan and Iraq, combined with a fear about how the Obama Administration's aversion to intervention has allowed others—especially Russia—to gain influence at America's expense in the region; concern that the Iranian nuclear accord has not led to a moderation in Tehran's regional policies; fear that Saudi Arabia's current leadership is pursuing counterproductive policies, especially in Yemen; worry that the inflexibility of the Netanyahu government means that no meaningful progress toward an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement can be made, and that American interests in the region will be damaged as a result; concern that the al-Sisi regime's harsh policies will lead to unrest in Egypt, but that efforts to get Cairo to change course will only further undermine Egyptian-

American relations; a general sense that the growth in American shale oil production may mean that the U.S. is less dependent on the Middle East for oil; and, of course, concern for whether Turkey's relations with America and the West can be restored after the serious stresses and strains that they have recently undergone.² With all this in mind, we can now turn to how each of the presidential candidates might view American foreign policy toward the region.

Clinton: More Continuity than Change

Especially due to her experience as Secretary of State during President Obama's first term (2009-2013), Hillary Clinton—unlike most presidents when they first enter office—is already intimately familiar with foreign policy issues regarding the Middle East. She was reportedly inclined toward America playing a more active role in Syria after the uprising against the Assad regime began there in 2011, but this was overruled by Obama. Her recent campaign statements suggest a desire to “do something” about Syria, but also a recognition that with Russia so heavily involved there now, the moment when the U.S. could have done anything significant there may have passed.³ Her policy toward Syria, then, may not be all that much different from the Obama Administration's.

What Clinton is likely to emphasize is rebuilding frayed ties with America's allies in the region, and draw upon her extensive experience with so many leaders there in order to do so. She is highly likely, then, to try reach out to leaders such as President Erdogan of Turkey, Prime Minister Netanyahu of Israel, King Abdallah of Jordan, President al-Sisi of Egypt, and all the monarchs of the Gulf Cooperation Council states. She is also likely to continue President Obama's efforts to defeat ISIS in Iraq both through aiding the Baghdad government and the Kurdish Regional Government. Although she is not likely to see significant improvement in

Iranian-American relations as possible, she will seek to preserve the Iranian nuclear accord which the Obama Administration worked so hard to achieve. The logic of doing so will seem clear: however much the U.S. and (even more) some of its regional allies do not like what Iran is doing in Syria or elsewhere in the region, it is better for us all if there are some constraints on Iran's capacity to acquire nuclear weapons than if there are none. While sharing Saudi concerns about the Houthis in Yemen, she is also likely to inherit the Obama Administration's worries that heavy-handed Saudi intervention there is counterproductive. Further, even though American shale may make the U.S. less dependent on Middle Eastern oil, Clinton is likely to continue to see preserving the region's oil exporting capacity and cooperating closely with Arab oil exporters as important for America's allies and the overall global economy.⁴

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It is possible that Clinton may succeed in engaging Middle Eastern leaders more successfully than Obama. Yet friendlier ties between her and her counterparts in the region alone will not be able to overcome differences over certain issues between them and Washington—especially when these are impacted by U.S. public and Congressional opinion, or by American law. It is highly unlikely, then, that Clinton would be any more willing or able to extradite Fethullah Gulen to Turkey than Obama has been (indeed, it is highly doubtful that the



American legal system would permit this for a very long time, if at all, even if she were willing to extradite him).

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Further, Clinton is likely to prove no more successful than Obama, or any previous American president, at negotiating an Israeli-Palestinian peace. Anticipating this, she may not even seriously try to do so.

Nor will better relations with the region's leaders allow Clinton to alter policies Washington fears are counterproductive (such as Saudi intervention in Yemen and al-Sisi's treatment of his domestic opponents). And she is no more likely than Obama was to succeed in persuading America's Israeli and Gulf Arab allies that the Iranian nuclear accord actually benefits them, and that America's support for it does not imply a lessening of America's commitment to their defense.

One thing that Clinton will definitely not see as useful is any renewed attempt at cooperation with Russia in resolving the conflict with Syria, or on any other issue. While Obama never gave up on this effort, Putin's personal hostility toward her due to his belief that she sought to launch a "color revolution" against him in 2011-12, as well as more recent Russian efforts to undercut her presidential bid through releasing hacked information damaging to her campaign, means that Clinton will see Russia as an opponent and not a partner in the Middle East and everywhere else from the very outset of her administration.⁵ On the other hand, she will not see actively challenging Russian intervention in Syria as worth the risk of a wider conflict—though she will seek

to take advantage of disillusion with Russian policy toward Syria both in the Middle East and in Europe.

Trump: More Change than Continuity

Unlike Clinton, Trump has no foreign policymaking experience—and apparently very little knowledge of the Middle East. Early on in the Republican nomination process, he indicated strong opposition to the Bush Administration's intervention in Iraq. On the other hand, he has promised to "destroy ISIS," but has not explained how he will do this. He has also indicated hostility toward the Iranian nuclear accord, and a desire to see it altered, if not scrapped altogether. How he would prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without the accord, though, is unclear.⁶

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Unlike Clinton, Trump is highly likely to seek to work with Russia's Putin on Syria and other issues.⁷ What he would be able to achieve through doing this, however, is extremely unclear. And although Trump has expressed a very positive view of Putin throughout the presidential campaign, if he and Putin are unable to cooperate, it would be no surprise if Trump suddenly, and vehemently, declared Putin to be an enemy.

Trump may feel that his vaunted negotiating ability will help him get what he wants from most, if not all, Middle Eastern leaders. He is likely to be very disappointed, then, in the highly likely event that this does not occur. Indeed, instead of helping him reach agreements with Middle Eastern leaders, Trump's combative personality is likely to clash with those of the Middle East's own combative leaders as well as alienate its less combative ones. Far more than Clinton,



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But whatever the cause of Trump not getting his way in the Middle East, he may react by deciding that the region simply is not worth his attention. America's decreased dependence on the Middle East for oil may be seen by Trump as further reason to withdraw from, or even ignore, the region. America's allies who remain dependent on oil imports from the region may be invited by him either to buy oil from other sources (such as America and Russia), or deal with the Middle East on their own if it is so important to them.

Needless to say, an approach such as this would not serve to enhance America's influence in the Middle East, much less increase stability in the region. But this may not bother Trump if he concludes that the Middle East simply is not as important to American foreign policy as previous administrations thought it was. Indeed, he—and many of his supporters—may well believe that the Middle East is going to be a mess whether America is actively involved in it or not, and that therefore the U.S. is better off avoiding involvement in the region's perennial problems rather than becoming bogged down in them.

American Policy Preferences and Regional Realities

The foreign policy of a Trump administration toward the Middle East (and the world) would be far more erratic and melodramatic than that of a Clinton administration. But since Clinton appears far more likely to become president, it is her policy emphasizing continuity instead of change that is the one that is most likely to be implemented. Still, factors such as the American public's aversion to intervention; America's decreased dependence on Middle Eastern oil; heightened American concerns about Russia, China, and Europe; and the general

sense that America cannot achieve much of anything in the Middle East are all likely to limit the Clinton administration's ability to pursue an active policy in this region.

And as has so often occurred with previous American presidents, the Clinton administration is likely to end up pursuing a policy that is more reactive to events in the Middle East in place of one that focuses on pursuing the vision her administration may have for the region. Indeed, seeing how the different grand visions of the Bush and Obama administrations were both thwarted by the realities of the Middle East, she may dispense with one altogether and focus on reacting to events as they occur, as well as on attempting just to contain rather than resolve the problems of the region. Her experience as Secretary of State may have persuaded her that this is the best, as well as the most, that America can accomplish.

But whether they are interested in the region or not, the Middle East has had a way of coming to preoccupy past American presidents. That being the case, it is more likely that this will happen to the next American president as well.



Endnotes

- 1- For summaries of the latest polls, updated every few hours, see "FiveThirtyEight 2016 Election Forecast," <http://projects.fivethirtyeight.com/2016-election-forecast/>
- 2- On American attitudes toward the Middle East, see various studies by Shibley Telhami published by the Brookings Institution available at <https://www.brookings.edu/author/shibley-telhami/?type=research>
- 3- Josh Rogin, "Will Hillary Clinton deliver on her promise to ramp up U.S. involvement in Syria?" Washington Post, October 23, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/will-hillary-clinton-deliver-on-her-promise-to-ramp-up-us-involvement-in-syria/2016/10/23/1f2788e4-97bd-11e6-bc79-af1cd3d2984b_story.html?utm_term=.a551388cc8ca
- 4- "From the Middle East and Asia to Europe and our own hemisphere, Hillary will strengthen the essential partnerships that are a unique source of America's strength." "National Security" issues page, <https://www.hillaryclinton.com/issues/national-security/>
- 5- Jack Goldstone, "The results of the US election will greatly influence relations with Russia," Russia Direct, October 5, 2016, <http://www.russia-direct.org/opinion/results-us-election-will-greatly-influence-relations-russia>
- 6- "Donald Trump on foreign policy," http://www.ontheissues.org/2016/Donald_Trump_Foreign_Policy.htm
- 7- "Donald Trump, Putin's puppet," Washington Post, October 10, 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/global-opinions/donald-trump-putins-puppet/2016/10/10/451f099e-8foe-11e6-a6a3-d50061a9fae_story.html?utm_term=.939840c307fc

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