

A New President, A New Approach: What Can We Expect From Trump On Iraq?

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Abstract: A new U.S. president means a new foreign policy for the world. With the election of Donald Trump as president, his priorities and diplomatic style will have its effect on different parts of the world, including the Middle East and Iraq. For almost 30 years, the fate of Iraq has been dramatically affected by U.S. presidential decisions. Trump's own arguments and his team's declarations provide us some clues about the future direction of U.S. policy in the Middle East. Their pro-Israel and anti-Iran attitude will dramatically alter the existing policies of the Obama administration in the region. High on Trump's agenda in his policy towards Iraq will be the fight against ISIL and curtailing the influence of Iran in Iraq. The positions of other regional players like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel will be crucial in devising and implementing these policies. Like many other U.S. presidents, Trump will leave his own imprint on Iraq, and like many other U.S. presidents, he will come in for much criticism at the same time.

THE POST-COLD WAR HISTORY OF IRAQ, FROM GEORGE Bush Senior up until Barack Obama, cannot be written without reference to the impact of U.S. policies, and hence U.S. presidents' attitudes, towards the country. The origins of 'Pax Americana' in the Middle East start with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 and the subsequent Gulf War in 1991. During the Clinton presidency, Iraq was one of the targets of 'dual containment' and the Saddam administration continued to rule Iraq under international military and economic sanctions. There were also sporadic air strikes against Iraqi targets during the Clinton years. During the presidency of George Walker Bush, we witnessed the occupation of Iraq in 2003 and the toppling of the Saddam regime there, leaving a problematic legacy for Iraq with most of today's problems having their roots in his period of office. One of the most important priorities for the Obama administration was to withdraw U.S. forces from Iraq and overcome the negative military, political and economic outcomes of the invasion. Due to Obama's policy of 'no boots on the ground', U.S. forces withdrew from Iraq prematurely, without leaving a properly-functioning state or army. Obama's policy and the attitudes of Maliki government provided fertile ground for the development of ISIL in Iraq.

With the Trump presidency, we are at the beginning of a new era in terms of U.S. presidential policy in the Middle East and Iraq. Much has changed since U.S. forces were withdrawn from the country in general, but the presence of nearly 6,000 U.S. troops to face the ISIL threat and U.S. military, political and economic support in the country are making Trump's Iraq policy an important issue for his administration. In this paper, I will try to analyze what should we anticipate from a Trump administration in its policies towards Iraq.

In the early days of Trump's presidency, Iraq became a topic of discussion due to a U.S. travel ban along with six other countries. In response to the presidential decree to ban travel for the citizens of seven countries including Iraq, some members of the Iraqi parliament demanded a reciprocal decision by their government.¹ The fury over the travel ban came to an end after court decisions in the U.S., but this issue signaled possible points of crisis to come.

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The Obama Legacy

Before going into detail about what should we expect in U.S.-Iraq relations during Trump's presidency, we should keep in mind that the biggest question for the U.S. in Iraq is whether to leave or remain. Nearly fifteen years after the invasion, conditions in Iraq have forced the U.S. to try to deal with the problems of the country, whether the U.S. wants to be a dominant player there or not. Former president Obama opted for a policy of withdrawal and pursued his strategy accordingly, despite the emergence of ISIL and its extension of control over large portions of Iraqi territory. In order to differentiate itself from the Bush administration, Obama ordered U.S. troops to withdraw from Iraq by the end of 2011. The order came into effect at the end of 2011, leaving only very few U.S. military advisors in Iraq. The emergence of ISIL and its control over one-third of Iraqi territory by 2014 forced the Obama administration to send more military advisors and some special forces to the country to aid it in its fight against ISIL.

Although this military presence was very unpopular among segments of American society, there was also some criticism directed at the Obama administration for the ill-planned and executed policy of withdrawal without leaving behind a stable structure to secure the successes of post-Saddam Iraq.²

Given the pressure from American society and the promises made during the Bush administration, the withdrawal of U.S. troops was the only possible scenario. However, the belief by American leaders that Iraqi politicians like Maliki would provide the country's citizens with security and address the demands of different groups in the country was ill-founded. Currently, there are estimates that nearly 6,000 US troops are stationed across Iraq to provide guidance to the Iraqi military and fight against ISIL. The Trump administration intend to keep these troops in the country as part of their strategy to fight ISIL. Currently this strategy is in the making, but we may get some ideas by looking at President Trump's appointments to positions dealing with foreign and security policy. When we look his cabinet, we see that James Mattis, Secretary of Defense, served in Iraq several times, beginning with the Gulf War in 1991. As the Secretary of Defense, he and his team are preparing a plan to fight ISIL in Iraq and Syria. CIA Director Mike Pompeo also served in the Gulf War.

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With these foreign and security policy names in his team, we can say that the president's



limited political experience can be overcome through the contributions of these officials. Having said that, we can also conclude that neither Iraq, nor any other foreign policy issue, will be high on Trump's agenda, although he will have to spend some time on Iraq because the U.S.'s current level of engagement there. In addition, both Trump and his team have made comments on foreign policy and the Middle East which have indicated that they are paying more attention to Iraq.

First of all, in order not to repeat the mistakes of the past, U.S. troops will likely remain in Iraq for some time in order to defeat ISIL. There are different estimates for the time required to defeat ISIL. The fight against ISIL requires a coordinated effort from local and international actors, and it is not easy to bridge their conflicting priorities in this fight. It seems that recent optimism that ISIL can be defeated in a short period of time is no longer valid, and that 2017 will witness a long battle against ISIL in both Syria and Iraq. Operational reports from the west of Mosul show that preparations are ongoing but everyone agrees that it will be a long battle.³

The Iranian Factor

Secondly, and more importantly, the perceptions of Trump and his team about Iran will be very important in terms of their policy in Iraq. It is easy to make the case that Trump and his team are anti-Iran and pro-Israel. Being anti-Iran will garner support for the policies of the U.S. in the Middle East, and especially in the Gulf. The U.S.'s tone towards Israel and its policies in the region, however, may cause challenges for Trump and his allies in the Middle East in terms of societal support. Hence, it will be a tight equilibrium to balance anti-Iran and anti-Israel sentiments in the region.

Iran was among the seven countries included in Trump's travel ban. Besides Iraq, and maybe more than Iraq, Iran and Iranians were

the biggest critics of the travel ban. The U.S. official statement argued that the aim of the travel ban was the protection of U.S. citizens from foreign terrorists.⁴ This ban, however, created an outcry across different parts of the world, including Iraq. Members of the Iraqi parliament demanded a reciprocal ban. The ban also created disappointment among some groups in Iraq who are cooperating with American forces in the country.⁵ It is generally accepted that, despite this legal correction, the attempted ban will discourage Iraqis from cooperating with American soldiers and civilian contractors in Iraq.

Rather than affecting Tehran's behavior, open and direct criticism of Iran and its presence in Iraq may endanger U.S. citizens in Iraq. In today's Iraq, some militia groups are directly subordinate to Iranian commanders. There has also been a history of clashes between U.S. soldiers and Iraqi militias after the toppling of the Saddam regime. If tensions between Washington and Tehran continue to rise, we may witness some attacks on the U.S. presence in Iraq.

The Trump administration's rhetoric about Iran in general and its policies in Iraq in particular are not friendly. In contrast to the Obama administration's attitude towards Iran's nuclear program, Trump and his team are very publicly critical about Iran's nuclear intentions and its foreign policy in the Middle East. One of the latest critical remarks came from former National Security Advisor Michael Flynn after an Iranian missile test and an attack on a Saudi warship by Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen. He argued that Iran pursues destabilizing behavior across the Middle East and the Trump administration is officially putting Iran on notice.⁶ Close contacts between Saudi officials and the new Trump administration even before Trump took office show that there are expectations of



a return to the former relationship between the U.S. and Gulf countries. Despite criticism from Iranian and Iraqi officials to the travel ban, the UAE's foreign minister has said that "the travel ban is not Islamophobic and does not target any one religion".⁷

The Israeli factor and Islamophobic signals coming from the new administration may create extra hurdles for the U.S. in Iraq in future.

Amongst this "destabilizing behavior" under the spotlight of the U.S. administration is Iran's influence in Iraq. President Trump himself has criticized the increasing control of Iran over Iraq despite U.S. spending in the country.⁸ He has blamed the policies pursued by the Obama administration, especially the nuclear deal, for empowering Iran economically and militarily.⁹ Criticism direct from the president and his intimate circle reveal that the Trump administration is unhappy about the Iranian presence in Iraq. It will not be easy, however, to change this reality in the short run.

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In a recent interview, President Trump argued that the U.S. should have gained the rights to Iraq's oil following the invasion.¹⁰ This argument received a very negative reaction from both Iraqi officials and the public.¹¹ Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi had to respond, which

was not helpful to U.S. interests in Iraq, since Abadi is the most effective political figure in the pro-U.S. camp. Similar declarations may weaken the position of figures like Abadi and embolden figures like Maliki, thus empowering pro-Iranian groups within different Shiite parties.

Future Priorities

Given all of these factors, the priorities for Trump administration in Iraq will be balancing Iran, not repeating past mistakes in terms of leaving Iraq as a failed state, and maintaining the country's territorial integrity after the defeat of ISIL. In order to achieve these objectives, the U.S. administration should work on a comprehensive strategy and cooperate with regional actors such as Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Jordan. The U.S. should also work closely with different political, sectarian and ethnic groups in Iraq to that end. Washington should continue to pressure Kurds to curb their aspirations for independence. In order not to repeat the mistakes of the past, the Trump administration should help the Iraqi government to build an effective state structure and eliminate dysfunctional sectarian institutions.

If the first priority for Trump in Iraq is to fight against ISIL and he is against sending more soldiers, then he will have to rely on local forces. The U.S. is providing equipment and training not only to the Iraqi army, but also to the Kurdish Peshmerga. Other than these forces, there are other militia groups mainly founded and funded by Iran. Legal initiatives to place them under state control will require long-term planning and lots of effort. Here, Washington should help the Iraqi government in establishing functioning, merit-based institutions and eliminate sectarianism.

From the point of view of many different U.S. administrations, the Kurds have been an important ally in Iraq. The peshmerga



took part in the fight against ISIL to a certain extent. Benefiting from the Kurds as an ally and equipping them is contrary to America's stated aims, which are to keep Iraqi territorial integrity intact. We should keep in mind the Israeli factor as well in terms of regional politics. Both Trump and his team appear to be very pro-Israel. Israel has good relations with the Iraqi Kurds, but other segments of Iraqi society have a very negative view of Israel. The Israeli factor and Islamophobic signals coming from the new administration may create extra hurdles for the U.S. in Iraq in future.

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Traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East are also demanding more engagement from the new administration in order to stabilize the volatile region in their favor. The rhetoric of President Trump and his foreign and security policy team provide hints of more engagement. The style and depth of this engagement remains to be seen, but we can expect that Trump administration will be more engaged than the previous one.

From the Gulf War onwards, every American president has made an impact on Iraq, and developments in Iraq have in turn had their impact on the foreign policy legacies of these U.S. presidents. This will be true for the Trump administration as well. Iraq might not be high on the agenda, as it has not always been at the start of a new president's first term. Conditions in the Middle East and Iraq, however, will definitely push the U.S. towards playing a greater role. Traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East are also demanding more engagement from the new administration in order to stabilize the volatile region in their favor. The rhetoric of President Trump and his foreign and security policy team provide hints of more engagement. The style and depth of this engagement remains to be seen,



Endnotes

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