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Reports

Trump's Middle East Policy: The Ironies of Hawkishness

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Trump and Palestinians (AFP)

Donald Trump ran for president declaring that he would take a more cautious and less-interventionist approach to the Middle East, take a more even-handed approach to Israel and Palestine, and avoid being tied down in endless wars. As an outsider with few ties to the foreign policy establishment, some hoped he might bring a more pragmatic and enlightened approach to U.S. policy in the region. However, once in office, Trump has pursued reckless and militaristic policies, deepening U.S. military involvement, backing the Israeli colonization and annexation of the occupied Palestinian territories, deepening ties to Arab autocrats, and threatening war with Iran. His appointees have tended to be those who are guided more by ideological prejudices than knowledge of the Middle East, resulting in growing concerns not only by traditional progressive critics of U.S. foreign policy, but by many in the security and intelligence establishment as well. The extreme nature of these policies, however, may be providing an opportunity for a serious re-evaluation of U.S. Middle East policy as a whole, which may make possible positive changes in U.S. policy in the longer run. The dangers from Trump administration policies in the meantime, however, are quite serious, and risk provoking even more violence and instability.

In the Company of Right-wingers

As the Trump administration has entered its second year in office, there is little indication that the president's outsider status and non-conventional views on certain issues have led to a more enlightened and pragmatic policy in the Middle East. Instead, under Trump, America's commitment to international law and human rights has never been weaker and

the propensity for direct military intervention and support for allied dictatorial regimes and occupying armies has never been stronger. The one hopeful sign has been that the more extreme manifestations of longstanding U.S. policy toward the region currently being pursued by the Trump administration has made it more difficult to rationalize for such actions, leading to more debate and tougher questions about the U.S. role in the Middle East and thereby raising the prospects for positive changes in U.S. policy in the longer run.

Ironically, during the 2016 general election campaign, Trump was able to present himself as less hawkish and more responsible on foreign policy than his opponent Hillary Clinton, who had long been associated with the more hawkish wing of the Democratic Party. While the Trump campaign was able to portray the Republican nominee as having the toughness and fortitude to more successfully utilize military force in fighting the alleged terrorist threat from Daesh (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) and other extremist groups, they were simultaneously able to attack Clinton from the left over her support for the Iraq War, the Libyan intervention, and other unpopular projections of U.S. military force.

Despite having actually supported the invasion of Iraq and intervention in Libya himself, Trump was largely successful in his disingenuous claims of having opposed these controversial actions and portraying Clinton as a reckless militarist who, as president, would waste American lives and resources on unnecessary, tragic, and seemingly endless overseas entanglements. He was not only able to take advantage of the growing isolationist and anti-interventionist sentiments among conservatives, libertarians, and centrists (recognizing that more traditional Republican hawks would not support a Democratic candidate regardless) to consolidate his base, he was also able to reinforce the unease among progressive Democratic-leaning voters over Clinton's pro-interventionist positions, thereby suppressing turnout and encouraging third party support in some key swing states that made the difference in his Electoral College victory.

Trump's election came in the shadow of the disastrous outcome of the Iraq War, which had tempered the more extreme hegemonic goals coming out of Washington. Barack Obama was elected president in 2008 in large part because he recognized that there were limitations to American power, particularly in regard to military force. Among the American electorate, support for military intervention declined greatly after the invasion of Iraq. Despite this, the Trump administration has amplified the militarization of U.S. policy in the region once in office, with increasing attacks against suspected terrorists and the concomitant growth in civilian casualties. No longer even pretending to support democratization or an end to the Israeli occupation, Trump has eschewed any idealistic rationalizations for U.S. policy, praising Middle Eastern autocrats and even saying that the United States should have taken control of Iraqi and Libyan oil fields following U.S. military intervention in those countries.(1)

Given Trump's lack of knowledge in the Middle East, his reliance on advisors has been even greater than for most presidents. Trump initially surrounded himself with notorious far-rightwing Islamophobes, including Michael Flynn, his first National Security Advisor; Sebastian Gorka, a senior advisor on counter-terrorism; and, Steve Bannon, his chief White House strategist. While no longer in the White House, Trump's anti-Islamic views have not only shaped immigration policy, but his approach to U.S. policy in the greater Middle East. He has also handed over major responsibility to his vice-president and Secretary of Defense.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0SixlnmO7u0>

Vice-President Mike Pence, when he served on the Subcommittee on Middle East and Central Asia of the House Foreign Affairs Committee while in Congress, was a strong supporter of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and an opponent of calls for a withdrawal of U.S. forces. He supported the ongoing prosecution of the war in Afghanistan, was an outspoken opponent of the nuclear deal with Iran and an outspoken proponent of the Israeli right, blasting international organizations and leading international jurists for recognizing Israel as an occupying power and defending or denying Israeli war crimes in the Gaza Strip and elsewhere. His ideological perspective is rooted in his right-wing Christian evangelical base which sees conflicts in the Middle East through a Biblical lens, including a belief that the establishment of the modern State of Israel and its conquest of neighboring territories is a fulfillment of God's plan and a step toward the second coming of Christ.

Trump's appointment for Secretary of Defense, General James "Mad Dog" Mattis, as head of the First Marine Division in Iraq, played a leading role during both U.S. sieges of the Iraqi city of Fallujah in 2004, in which apartment blocks, hospitals, and mosques were targeted and over 5000 civilians were killed. (2) His penchant of large-scale military force and brinkmanship over diplomatic means has helped shape U.S. Middle East policy in the Trump era.

While excessive militarism, support for the Israeli occupation, backing of allied dictatorships, and related policies have been a constant in U.S. Middle East policy for decades, the Trump administration has taken them to new and very troubling levels. One of clearest examples is in regard to Israel and Palestine:

Israel-Palestine

The rightward shift in Republican Party policy became apparent in the 2016 Republican platform adopted at the convention in which Trump received their presidential nomination. (3) Not only did it fail to support the establishment of a Palestinian state alongside a secure Israel, as it had in previous years, it put the party in opposition to virtually the entire international community by proclaiming Republicans "reject the false notion that Israel is

an occupier.” It also insists that Israel “stands out among the nations as a beacon of democracy and humanity,” that “support for Israel is an expression of Americanism,” and that there should be “no daylight between America and Israel.”

The platform also declared that the United States would withhold funding from the United Nations, the World Court, or any other international authority, which attempts to impose any kind of peace settlement or pressure Israel to withdraw. (The only mention of Palestine or Palestinians in the platform is in the Environmental section, where the Republicans demand an immediate halt to U.S. funding for the 2014 Framework Convention on Climate Change signed in Paris because it “grants Palestinians membership as a state.”)

Even before coming to office, Trump officials tried to undermine the Obama administration’s Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts during their final weeks in office: The United Nations Security Council was scheduled to vote December 23 on a resolution (2334) that called on both the Israeli and Palestinian governments to prevent violence against civilians, condemn and combat terrorism, refrain from inciting violence, and comply with their obligations under international law, specifically for Israel to immediately and completely cease all settlement activities in occupied Palestinian territory.

The resolution reiterated four previous UN Security Council resolutions, unopposed by the United States, which underscored the illegality under the Fourth Geneva Convention of any occupying power settling civilians into territories seized by military force. Trump’s National Security Advisor-designate Michael Flynn met secretly with Russian officials in an unsuccessful attempt to postpone a scheduled vote at the United Nations until Trump came to office and could veto the resolution. The United States ended up being the only member of the 15-member Security Council to fail to support the resolution, yet— by abstaining instead of vetoing the resolution – Trump declared that Obama’s failure to block the measure was “anti-Israel” and “extremely unfair to all Israelis” and that U.S. opposition to Israel’s colonization drive in the West Bank and East Jerusalem would end once he assumed office.(4)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=LfqvHzXkfoM>

Trump’s position received bipartisan endorsement less than two weeks later in the first foreign policy vote of the newly-convened 115th Congress, in which a majority of House Democrats joined virtually every Republican in voting for a resolution that criticized the U.S. refusal to veto and also declared UN opposition to Israel’s illegal colonization efforts as being “anti-Israel,” effectively equating opposition to the illegal colonization drive by Israel’s right-wing government with opposition to Israel itself.(5) A similar resolution in the U.S. Senate also received overwhelming bipartisan support.(6)

Trump immediately appointed advocates of Israel's right-wing settler movement to the key positions. David Friedman, whom Trump appointed as U.S. ambassador to Israel, has insisted the United States should end the "two-state narrative"(7) and has compared moderate Zionists who oppose the Israeli occupation and settlements as comparable to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis.(8) Trump named as his senior negotiator Jason Greenblatt, who not only insists the settlements are legal and are not an obstacle to peace, but is a former resident of an Israeli settlement himself. Trump son-in-law Jared Kushner, whom the president tapped to take a lead role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, is personal friends with Netanyahu, has major business ties with powerful Israeli financial interests that support Israeli settlements, and has served as co-director of his family's foundation, which has funded these illegal settlements.

President Trump announced this past December that the United States would become the only country in the world to formally recognize Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and that the U.S. embassy would be moved to that multi-ethnic and multi-faith city. The broad consensus of observers familiar with this volatile issue agree that such a move further reduces the chances of Israeli-Palestinian peace, raises serious questions in relation to international law, and risks a violent and destabilizing reaction targeting U.S. interests globally.

Though the Palestine Authority had long expressed a willingness to allow Israel to have its capital in West Jerusalem in return for recognizing currently-occupied East Jerusalem as the Palestinian capital, Trump has ignored Palestinian claims to the city and has referred to the issue as "off the table." (9) The Palestinian refusal to resume negotiations under the leadership of a government which no longer even pretends to be a fair arbiter resulted in the Trump administration retaliating by slashing funding for UNRWA and other programs supporting Palestinian refugees and others, insisting that a refusal to deal under U.S. terms meant the Palestine Authority was no longer interested in peace, despite repeated Palestinian calls for the Europeans or the United Nations to oversee peace talks.(10)

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=FNq8Jm1fhkA>

Syria, Iraq, and Iran

Under the Trump administration, the United States has dramatically increased its military operations in Syria and Iraq, not just to fight Daesh, but for broader strategic goals as well. While President Obama put limits on the use of American air power in order to minimize civilian casualties, Trump has given the military much wider latitude, resulting in a dramatic increase in civilian deaths from U.S. air assaults on Mosul, Raqqa, and other cities. (11) In addition, U.S. forces carried out air strikes against a Syrian air base in April 2017 following the chemical weapons attack on Khan Sheikhoun and have attacked pro-government militia on several occasions.

There are at least 2000 U.S. forces in Syria and 9000 in Iraq, a dramatic increase in the numbers under Obama. This comes despite a series of major victories against Daesh forces which have left that Islamist cult holding on to only narrow strips of relatively under-populated territories. A major reason for the increased U.S. military presence despite fulfilling much of their initial strategic objectives appears to be part of an effort to counter pro-Iranian militia which, while playing a major role in fighting Daesh and other Salafist groups, are seen by the Trump administration as representing Iranian efforts to increase their political and military influence. This U.S. policy is problematic in both countries, given the close ties with Iran by influential blocs within the Iraqi government and, in regard to Syria, the strong opposition by the government to the illegal presence of U.S. forces on their soil. In both countries, then, the U.S. role has now gone beyond simply “fighting terrorism” to trying to influence the Baghdad and Damascus governments regarding their diplomatic and security relationships with Iran through the presence of armed U.S. forces.

The dangers of such a strategy, particularly in Syria, became apparent as U.S.-armed Turkish and Free Syrian Army forces battled the U.S.-armed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces earlier this year and an unknown number of Russian mercenaries were killed in U.S. strikes in contested areas in northern Syria. More ominously, U.S. threats of additional attacks against Hezbollah and other pro-regime forces increases the risks of direct engagement with Russian and Iranian forces.

The administration’s obsession with Iran goes beyond concerns about the Islamic Republic’s growing influence in the region, but the very existence of a regional power that could act as a potential deterrent to U.S. hegemonic aspirations and the desire for “full spectrum dominance.” The strident opposition by the Trump administration to the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement was not because it enables Iran to produce nuclear weapons—since it does just the opposite—but because it eliminates an excuse to go to war. As a result, finding other excuses to confront Iran has become the focus of the Trump administration.

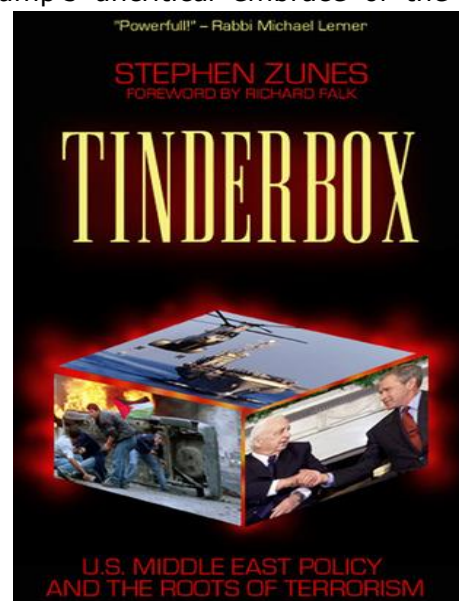
For example, Secretary of Defense Mattis has proclaimed that the three greatest threats to U.S. national security are “Iran, Iran, Iran,” insisting that the Islamic Republic is “the single most enduring threat to stability and peace in the Middle East.”(12) (Indeed, it was Mattis’s obsession with Iran which led Obama to replace him as commander of the U.S. Central Command.) In a manner reminiscent of the hyperbole regarding the alleged Soviet role behind leftist movements in Central American during the 1980s, exaggerated claims of Iranian support for Hamas, the Houthis, and the Bahraini opposition—along with alarmist rhetoric regarding the supposed threat to Israel by Iranian forces in Syria—appear to be designed to deny agency to those resisting U.S.-backed governments and provide an excuse for a direct military confrontation with Iran in the name of self-defense.

Friendly Dictators

Trump's warm embrace of the Sisi's brutal military regime in Egypt, Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule in Turkey, and most of the repressive monarchies in the Gulf have belied efforts by previous administrations of both parties to convince the people of the region of U.S. concern for human rights and democratic governance. Support for the Saudi-led bombing campaign in Yemen, which has taken thousands of civilian lives in a country which saw a mass popular pro-democracy uprising earlier in the decade, has underscored how U.S. support for such war crimes in the name of fighting "terrorism" is not reserved just for Israel.

Increased arms sales to Arab Gulf states do not just bring up human rights concerns, but – whether for the sake of profits for powerful American companies involved with the arms trade or promotion of U.S. military objections—the regional arms race provoked by such measures and the diversion of public moneys away from human needs to arms procurement will likely make the region less secure. By pushing Saudi Arabia to purchase American reactors for nuclear power development despite that country's ample oil, natural gas, and sunlight further cements ties with the United States and may be designed to provoke Iran to negate the meticulously-negotiated nuclear agreement.

Trump's initial siding with Saudi Arabia and its allies in their dispute with Qatar was likely based less upon the alleged claims of its ties with 'terrorism'; but on the Saudi insistence that Qatar sever diplomatic relations with Iran and expel exiled members of non-violent opposition groups opposing the governments of Egypt, Bahrain, and other dictatorships (including dissident scholars teaching at its universities). They also pushed for shutting down Al-Jazeera, which has allowed non-violent dissidents who are critical of these governments and U.S. policies an opportunity to share their grievances. U.S. military and intelligence officials were understandably upset at Trump's uncritical embrace of the Saudi-led moves against Qatar, however, given that it is the home of the United States' largest military base in the Middle East, the regional command center coordinating operations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and the home of 10,000 U.S. military personnel. Furthermore, Qatar has also assisted the United States in freeing hostages, providing valuable intelligence, and strategic planning. Eventually, the State Department was able to assert itself in advocating a more neutral stance in trying to resolve the conflict between these U.S. allies, but the damage done to relations with that small but important nation by Trump's initial reactions could be lasting.



Signs of hope

The extreme positions taken by the Trump administration have not only raised serious concerns about the specifics but have paradoxically made it easier to challenge some of the assumptions which have underscored U.S. Middle East policies for decades. For example, the hard line taken by Trump has ironically created space for bolder Democratic opposition to U.S. support for the policies of Netanyahu and the right-wing Likud-led government. Though most Congressional Democrats still adhere to their tradition support for Israeli policies, not a single Democrat voted in favor of Friedman's nomination to be ambassador to Israel, and only a small number of Democrats in Congress endorsed the recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital, despite having previously gone on record by huge majorities in favor of just such a move in previous years.(13) In terms of Democratic voters, polls show there has been a dramatic shift away from the traditional strong support for Israel, with a majority of self-identified liberals expressing more sympathy for the Palestinians than for the Israelis.(14)

As with foreign policy debates in previous years regarding Vietnam, Central America, South Africa, and the nuclear arms race, there is often a lag time between shifts in public opinion and changes in policy. However, the policies of the Trump administration have been so extreme, immoral and counter-productive—even within traditional understandings of U.S. national interests—that meaningful re-evaluation in the U.S. role in the Middle East could be forthcoming. For example, the U.S.-led peace process between Israel and Palestine has always been hopelessly biased in support of the Israeli occupation that a fair and equitable settlement was impossible, but there was at least some degree to which the United States could pretend to be an honest broker. No longer is this the case. While support for human rights and accountable governance in the Arab world has always been more rhetoric than reality, Trump's enthusiastic embrace of tyrants in Riyadh, Cairo, Abu Dhabi and elsewhere make it impossible to even pretend the United States is interested in supporting democracy in the region. Similarly, the wildly exaggerated claims of an Iranian threat and hostility towards the nuclear agreement emanating from the Trump administration underscore the longstanding reality that expressed U.S. concerns about Iran is not about regional security, but maintaining U.S. regional hegemony.

Trump was able to defeat both his Republican rivals for the 2016 presidential nomination and even his Democratic opponent in the general election by taking a position as an anti-interventionist, calling for the United States to be "neutral" and more "even-handed"(15) in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, placing American first instead of "losing thousands of lives and spending trillions of dollars" resulting in the U.S. being "in far worst shape in the Middle East than ever, ever before."(16) He declared that "unlike other candidates for the presidency, war and aggression will not be my first instinct. You cannot have a foreign policy without diplomacy. A superpower understands that caution and restraint are signs of strength."(17) As with many of Trump's campaign promises, this promising pragmatism

has fallen by the wayside, with the administration pursuing a reckless militaristic policy which is resulting in enormous human suffering and threatening the United States' long-term strategic interests.

However, the fact that Trump felt compelled to pretend to take a more pragmatic and less interventionist stance, that he felt a need to lie about his support for the Iraq War and his belief that the United States to be a honest broker between Israel and Palestine is indicative that he recognized dramatic shifts in American public opinion towards a more ethical and responsible Middle East policy. The longstanding assumption in both major political parties that it is safer to err on the side of hawkishness on foreign policy in the Middle East and elsewhere is being challenged to an unprecedented degree. The result may therefore be good news in the longer term. The question is how much more suffering the peoples of the Middle East will have to endure from Washington's actions in the meantime.

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-FvIs8wuRHY>

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