

President Trump & The Middle East

In January this year I wrote a short piece on how Trump might win the Republican nomination but for various reasons, (especially America's changing demographics), he would never make it to the White House. Well last week I and many others (except Michael Moore) were stupefied to find that the orange-wig will indeed be making the main star appearance at next year's inauguration. There have been a plethora of articles since trying to explain how so many of us got it so wrong; from underestimating the deep distaste for Hillary and the overwhelming desire for a change to the political status-quo, to flawed polls and the incorrect assumption that Hispanic and African-American voters in particular would head out in their droves just to stop Trump from getting over the finish line.

After resisting a strong-temptation to switch channels to an episode of the Simpsons as the results were announced last Wednesday, I was forced to accept the fact that, while we may just have seen the biggest black-swan event this century, just like Brexit the imminent appointment of Trump to one of the most powerful positions on the planet is going to happen and we now need to focus on what could lie ahead rather than how we got here. So today I'm going to try and analyze what a Trump administration could mean for the Middle East, with the caveat that much of this will be conjecture until we at least see the final make-up of his cabinet, however there are some early indicators worth dissecting.

Hawkish or Dovish?

As was the case with his campaign tactics, Trump's policies are likely to retain a strong domestic bias, and this combined with his support base's aversion to any new wars, has encouraged some analysts to suggest he will pursue a more isolationist focus. However when it comes specifically to the Middle East we could see a big shift away from Obama's more tentative approach to the region.

Trump's management style is one that favours creating rival power structures amongst those below him, and this has already been highlighted by this past weekend's appointment of Stephen Bannon as his senior counselor and Reince Priebus as Chief of Staff at the White House. The latter is a Washington insider and acceptable to the wider Republican leadership, conversely Bannon used to head Breitbart News an ultra-conservative website and has repeatedly criticized the GOP in the past for not moving enough to the right.

Conservatism will likely be the underlying basis of a Trump administration, his Vice-President Mike Pence is a hawk and a strong supporter of Israel, while insiders are now suggesting that, Rudy Giuliani, Newt Gingrich and John Bolton are amongst the frontrunners for the Secretary of State position, and that the former head of the DIA Michael Flynn could be given either the post of National Security advisor or the directorship of the CIA. Bolton in particular has specific views about the Middle East and what America's role should be in this region. Last year he wrote an article titled, "Revamping America's Middle East Policy, post-Obama," in which he suggested that the next President should make it clear that "America is not neutral in the region's major, long-standing conflicts, and that a strong US political, economic and military presence in defense of its interests is a force for peace and stability."

Bolton, Giuliani, Pence and Flynn are also vocal supporters of the fight against terrorism and united in their distaste for the P5+1 nuclear accord concluded with Iran last year.

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Egypt

The Egyptian President, Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, was the first leader to call and congratulate Trump on his election victory and reportedly invited him soon to be American counterpart to visit Egypt at the earliest opportunity. Both men met each other for the first time in September this year during which Trump reportedly praised Sisi's government for their efforts against terrorism and promised that should he win his administration would be "a loyal friend to Egypt." Thus relations between Cairo and Washington, which have been relatively frosty following the ouster of Morsi, should improve markedly under Trump's Presidency.

Iran

Trump himself has called the nuclear agreement "the stupidest deal of all time," and one of his campaign promises was to tear it up and re-negotiate "better terms." However in practice such a move would be very difficult for the US to implement unilaterally as the agreement was co-signed by Russia, France, Germany and the UK, it was also endorsed by the UN Security Council. Thus any attempt to do so could be seen as a legal violation and allow Iran to exploit the situation by abandoning the current restraints on its nuclear activity. These facts however do not completely rule-out some sort of US move against the agreement, Trump commented last year that while it may not be possible to totally "rip-up" the accord he would work to "police that contract so tough they don't have a chance." A tightening of US sanctions on Iran would increase existing concerns many Asian and European companies already have on investing in Iran, and may disrupt that country's oil output again. It could also negatively affect President Rouhani's chances in Iran's own Presidential elections next year.

Israel/Palestine

Israel's political right have welcomed Trump's electoral victory, with the mayor of Jerusalem already calling for him to honor his campaign pledge of acknowledging his city as the capital of Israel, by moving the US embassy there from Tel Aviv, something successive US Presidents have avoided doing due to deep Palestinian sensitivities towards such an action. However it's unlikely Trump would follow through on this, and while relations between himself and Prime Minister Netanyahu will be much warmer than Obama, he has also expressed a strong desire to close "the deal that can't be made," i.e. a final resolution to the Israeli/Palestinian conflict. At the same time he is not opposed to ongoing Israeli settlement building on occupied land, so whether or not Trump could eventually pull off this "ultimate" agreement is highly debatable.

Syria

The election of Trump could change the power balance within Syria's ongoing civil war dramatically in favour of the Syrian regime next year. He has stated numerous times that his main priority would be to focus on exterminating ISIS, this suggests he will be happy to give Russia a freer hand in its military actions there. "I don't like Assad at all, but Assad is killing ISIS. Russia is killing ISIS and Iran is killing ISIS, Trump stated during last month's Presidential debate. This view has already been absorbed by Damascus with one advisor to President Assad quoted by NPR as saying last week that his government was ready to cooperate with a Trump administration, and that "the American people have sent a great, a very important message to the world."

The GCC

Despite the justifiable anger expressed by a number of states in the region and indeed across the world, following Trump's offensive comments on Muslims made during his election campaign, many are also now probably hoping that this was just "talk" aimed at a certain section of his domestic constituents, and that "realpolitik" will eventually prevail once he assumes office. US/GCC ties have historically been very strong and remain important for the stability of this part of the world, thus relations both commercial and political, are expected to remain close, especially if he appoints to his cabinet some of the conservative names I mentioned earlier. Already one of Trump's ME policy advisors, Walid Phares, was quoted last week suggesting that the incoming administration will want to work closer with the GCC states, as well as Jordan and Egypt, especially when it comes to combatting terrorism. One potentially negative issue to watch

however could be Trump's desire to make the US completely self-sufficient in oil and gas by removing regulation on the US energy industry and casting aside environmental concerns by allowing shale firms access to state land, thus potentially sending prices lower again and undermining attempts by OPEC and specifically Saudi Arabia, to stabilize the oil market.

In conclusion and as I mentioned at the beginning of this piece, we will need some more clarity on the full make-up of a Trump administration and its early foreign policy actions before getting a clearer view on the effect his Presidency could have on this region. It's also still very difficult to avoid the fact that Trump often ignores the advice of those around him, reverses direction and makes wild statements without first contemplating the possible detrimental impact his words could have, so will being President change those ingrained characteristics? The answer to that remains to be seen, however what is true is that he and us are entering the unknown, where the long-standing world order in place since the end of World War II appears to be shifting significantly, and that the effects of his Presidency could have ramifications lasting far longer than his actual time in office. We can only hope that they will be more positive than negative, and of course make sure our Twitter feeds are set for 3am...

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