

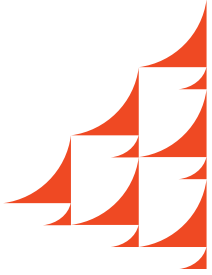


The Arab Gulf States
Institute in Washington
Building bridges of understanding



In Search of a Trump Administration Middle East Policy

Hussein Ibish



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Executive Summary

U.S. President Donald J. Trump is about to embark on his first overseas trip, with an emphasis on Middle East peace and security. His visit to the region raises the question of whether a definitive Trump administration Middle East policy may be starting to take shape, and how that process relates to both the policies and regional strategic circumstances that the new administration inherited from its immediate predecessor. There are several significant reasons to think a coherent new approach may be emerging, but also serious grounds – particularly given unprecedented unpredictability in U.S. Middle East policy – for doubting it. This paper seeks to identify and evaluate both perspectives, and provide a framework for appraising the ongoing evolution of U.S. Middle East policy under Trump.

Emerging key themes are:

- Rebuilding ties with traditional allies
- Countering Iran
- Engaging on Israeli-Palestinian peace
- Willingness to use military force
- “Quiet diplomacy” on human rights

Ongoing problems include:

- Policy incoherence
- An arguable lack of U.S. leadership
- Potential dangers of unrestrained rhetoric and ineffective military messaging
- Institutional weaknesses, especially in the U.S. Department of State
- Perils of sustained unpredictability for a status quo power

Introduction

U.S. President Donald J. Trump is about to embark on his first overseas journey, which reflects an ambitious agenda including stops in Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the occupied Palestinian territories. The trip will therefore focus on Middle East peace and security and include meetings with the Gulf Cooperation Council and a broader group of Arab and Muslim leaders. Trump’s initial travel to the region comes just four months after he took office, bringing to the White House a unique blend of political inexperience and policy incoherence. The administration’s commitment to a disruptive, “America First” populism aimed to overturn the way everything in Washington, including foreign policy, has been pursued in recent decades. The administration has enjoyed few successes to date, particularly regarding its domestic agenda. However, the sense is growing that Middle East policy is a developing bright spot for the Trump

administration. In this sphere, at least, clear policy themes seem to be emerging, and some of the most effective Cabinet secretaries, such as Secretary of Defense James Mattis, seem to be guiding some encouragingly sound decision making.

Just over a hundred days is not a long time when it comes to a set of policy challenges as complex as those in the Middle East. No administration, however experienced, is likely to have developed a clear and coherent policy approach to this dizzying set of issues in such a short period of time. However, given the emergence of a number of Trump Middle East policy priorities, some clear-cut and others more inchoate – and despite all of the domestic missteps thus far – the new administration may be on track to develop its own coherent, and creditable, approach to the region.

This paper will examine several themes running through the new administration's Middle East policies that may prove to be the building blocks of a new and distinctive Trump approach to the region. Many policies remain largely unchanged from those of previous administrations. For example, the Trump administration's emphasis on counterterrorism is not a significant innovation or deviation from foreign policy approaches inherited from the administrations of former Presidents George W. Bush or Barack Obama, although it may diverge when applied to immigration policies and practices. What bears more scrutiny are those aspects of counterterrorism in foreign policy that seem to constitute a significant change of course. This paper also looks at a series of apparent shortcomings and questions – especially unpredictability in U.S. policy – that suggest that the administration has yet to fix on a policy, or where it does have one, may be charging in the wrong direction.

Emerging Themes

Rebuilding Ties with Traditional Allies

One of the most striking instances of a recent U.S. policy adjustment is the Trump administration's evident determination to not only rebuild, but enhance, traditional U.S. partnerships with key regional allies such as the Gulf Arab countries – notably Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain – as well as Egypt and Israel.

The primary motivation behind this recalibration toward long-standing allies appears to be a renewed focus on countering two major threats to long-term U.S. interests in the Middle East. The first is confronting the rise of Iranian influence and hegemony in the region. The second is combatting the spread of terrorist and extremist groups, particularly Sunni Salafist-jihadist organizations like the Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant and al-Qaeda. But this also includes halting the spread of pro-Iranian Shia militias and terrorist groups, focusing on the transformation of Hizballah into a regional military strikeforce and revolutionary vanguard for Tehran, above all in Syria, that is increasingly unmoored from its Lebanese origins. These two paramount concerns – Iran and terrorism – therefore overlap. All of the traditional U.S. partners in the Middle East, including Arab countries and Israel, oppose both the terrorist and extremist groups and the expansion of Iran's influence.

Some of these relationships are more straightforward than others. Israel functions as much as a U.S. domestic political consideration, with especially strong support in the Republican Party, as it does a foreign policy issue. Even for most Democrats, the “special relationship” with Israel, and the broad commitment to its defense, is largely viewed as a consensus U.S. policy. Egypt is seen as an indispensable asset both against Iran and its proxy groups, and against radical Sunni Islamists and their ideology. Human rights concerns have taken a backseat to Cairo’s importance in addressing these major challenges, as outlined below, and the Obama administration’s criticisms of Egypt’s domestic policies have largely been abandoned in favor of reinforcing the bilateral relationship to try to secure these broader regional goals.

Perhaps the most noteworthy and emblematic of these trust-rebuilding projects is with the Gulf Arab countries. These states believe they will fare well on the transactional, mercantile, and ledger-book formulation of Washington’s relationship with its partners around the world, as outlined in much of Trump’s rhetoric. During the campaign Trump criticized Saudi Arabia, along with Germany, Japan, and South Korea, for not paying enough for its own defense, and he has recently reiterated these complaints about Riyadh.¹ But the Gulf Arab states are still confident that such criticisms can be answered once the president becomes more familiar with the actual financial accounts.² This issue will certainly come up during Trump’s first overseas trip as president,³ which will tellingly begin with a visit to Riyadh, and include participation in an annual U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council summit meeting and an additional meeting with a broader group of Arab and Muslim countries.

Saudi Arabia has further sweetened the deal by reportedly promising up to \$200 billion in new investments in the United States.

Military procurements,⁴ balance of trade, investment in the United States, and other key factors suggest that an accurate evaluation of such an emerging Trump “partnership metric” should favor the Gulf Arab states, and U.S. policy already appears to generally reflect that understanding. Saudi Arabia has further sweetened the deal by reportedly promising up to \$200 billion in new investments in the United States,⁵ which apparently helped solidify what both sides described as an excellent outcome to the White House meeting between Trump and Deputy Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman in March.⁶ In the aftermath, officials from both Riyadh and Washington reported that the countries had turned a new page in their relationship⁷ and recommitted to a long-standing partnership that had frayed of late, but is now thoroughly rejuvenated.⁸

¹ Stephen Mason, Jeff J. Adler, and Steve Holland, “Exclusive: Trump Complains Saudis Not Paying Fair Share for U.S. Defense,” *Reuters*, April 28, 2017.

² David Ignatius, “A Young Prince is Reimagining Saudi Arabia. Can He Make His Vision Come True?” *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2017.

³ Mark Landler and Peter Baker, “Saudi Arabia and Israel Will Be on Itinerary of Trump’s First Foreign Trip,” *The New York Times*, May 4, 2017.

⁴ Clay Dillow, “The U.S. Sold \$33 Billion in Weapons to Gulf Countries in the Last Year,” *Fortune*, March 28, 2016.

⁵ Simeon Kerr and Shawn Donnan, “Trump Backs Plan to Boost Saudi Investment in the US,” *Financial Times*, March 15, 2017.

⁶ Jeremy Diamond and Jim Sciutto, “Trump, Saudis Hit Reset Button,” *CNN*, March 17, 2017.

⁷ “Saudi Arabia: Trump Meeting a ‘Historic Turning Point,’” *Al Jazeera*, March 15, 2017.

⁸ Josh Rogin, “Trump Resets U.S.-Saudi Relations, in Saudi Arabia’s Favor,” *The Washington Post*, March 16, 2017.

Burden sharing on defense – in terms of spending and undertaking military actions without an overreliance on Washington – is also a metric on which Saudi Arabia and the UAE, in particular, can claim a creditable record, particularly through the Yemen intervention and with regard to counterterrorism. There are, to be sure, serious and growing reservations in the United States and much of the West about the course and conduct of the Yemen campaign, and particularly civilian suffering in the context of what looks increasingly like a military stalemate, especially in the north. However, the intervention nonetheless stands as an important example of the United States' Middle East allies taking the initiative for themselves, and pursuing their national security goals – some shared with Washington and some not – at their own peril and with their own personnel and materiel.

Trump's tendency to defer to the uniformed military, and assign foreign policy and national security decision making to retired or serving officers, should prove highly advantageous to U.S.-GCC relations, which tend to emphasize, above all else, military-to-military ties.

Finally, Trump's tendency to defer to the uniformed military, and assign foreign policy and national security decision making to retired or serving officers, should prove highly advantageous to U.S.-GCC relations, which tend to emphasize, above all else, military-to-military ties. The pledge of military support for the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen "until the war is over,"⁹ and greater willingness to confront Iran have strengthened these alliances. Repairing these relations is essential to U.S. interests in the Middle East, because the Gulf Arab states share broad U.S. policy goals on most major regional issues, and close collaboration will be necessary to realizing these aims.

A Renewed Focus on Countering Iran

During its second term, the Obama administration focused on bringing into force the nuclear agreement with Iran, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, and, arguably, exploring the potential for additional levels of reconciliation with Tehran. The nuclear agreement was indeed secured, but nothing further proved possible because of Iran's intransigence. The Trump administration has, with the encouragement of its Middle East partners, decided not to scrap the nuclear agreement, and has recently confirmed that Iran is in compliance,¹⁰ while accusing Tehran of violating its "spirit." The administration is not going ahead with additional sanctions relief but is conducting a policy review of whether such a step would be in the U.S. interest.¹¹ Moreover, the administration has renewed its rhetoric calling Iran the primary state agent of destabilization in the Middle East. Iran's harassment of U.S. naval vessels is being more aggressively confronted,¹² as are its allies in Syria and Yemen.

⁹ ["Statement of General Joseph L. Votel on the Posture of U.S. Central Command,"](#) U.S. Central Command, March 9, 2017.

¹⁰ Paul Waldman, ["Trump Administration Grudgingly Faces Reality on the Iran Nuclear Deal,"](#) *The Washington Post*, April 19, 2017.

¹¹ Lesley Wroughton, ["Tillerson Accuses Iran of 'Alarming Provocations' as U.S. Reviews Policy,"](#) *Reuters*, April 20, 2017.

¹² Barbara Starr and Joe Sterling, ["Official: US Navy Ship Fires Warning Shots at Iranian Boats,"](#) *CNN*, January 9, 2017.

This return to a tougher line toward Tehran,¹³ without scrapping the nuclear agreement or charging Iran with noncompliance, may have been an unavoidable response to Iran's destabilizing behavior and opposition to most major U.S. policy goals in the region. Iran remains the premier anti-status quo power in the region, and it relies on the promotion and empowerment of a range of nonstate actors, terrorist groups, and militias to achieve its goals. The United States, by contrast, remains the primary guarantor of the regional order and status quo. As long as this fundamental equation prevails, and Iran continues to act as a would-be regional hegemon and more of an international revolutionary center than a normal state, the Trump administration appears convinced it has little practical choice than to take a harder line. Even the outgoing Obama administration appeared to be drifting in this direction in its final months, although the Trump approach certainly seems much firmer and more confrontational.

Renewed Engagement on Israeli-Palestinian Peace

For many observers, one of the more surprising pillars of the Trump administration's Middle East policy has been a renewed focus on Israeli-Palestinian peace.¹⁴ The new administration had been expected by many observers, particularly on the Israeli far right, to indulge a virtual wish list for the settler movement and other Israeli extremist elements. Thus far, this has not been the case, and most major aspects of U.S. policy toward the conflict remain unchanged, even as outreach to both parties has intensified. For example, vows made by Trump to move the U.S. Embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, which could have greatly disrupted the political and diplomatic equilibrium, have been shelved.¹⁵

The administration has slightly attenuated U.S. criticism of settlement activity, no longer calling it an "obstacle to peace,"¹⁶ instead saying that additional settlement activity is "not good for peace."¹⁷ Both are distinct from the traditional, and still probably legally operative, U.S. position that Israeli settlement activity in the occupied territories is a violation of the Fourth Geneva Convention and therefore prohibited by international law. Trump urged Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu to "hold off" on new settlements,¹⁸ and has not encouraged settlement expansion. Washington and Israel have apparently reached an informal understanding on settlement expansion¹⁹ that resembles the George W. Bush administration's "up not out" arrangement with Netanyahu, which effectively allowed more settler housing units in already built-up areas but not the expansion of settlements into additional occupied territory. This understanding may not prevent an increase in the size of the constituency among Jewish

¹³ Tom Vanden Brook, "[Mattis Tries to Downplay Confusion over Carrier's Roundabout Korea Mission](#)," *USA Today*, April 19, 2017.

¹⁴ Brian Bennett and Tracy Wilkinson, "[Trump's Approach to an Israeli-Palestinian Peace Deal: Get to Yes, and Figure Out the Details Later](#)," *Los Angeles Times*, May 3, 2017.

¹⁵ Hussein Ibish, "[Is Trump Walking Back the Israel Embassy Move?](#)" *The Atlantic*, January 25, 2017.

¹⁶ Ruth Eglash, "[Top Trump Adviser Says Israeli Settlements are Not an Obstacle to Peace](#)," *The Washington Post*, November 10, 2016.

¹⁷ Jack Moore, "[U-Turning Trump Now Labels Settlements Unhelpful to Peace](#)," *Newsweek*, February 10, 2017.

¹⁸ "[Trump Urges Israeli Premier to 'Hold Off' on Settlements](#)," *PBS Newshour*, February 15, 2017.

¹⁹ Josh Rogin, "[If Trump Has a Strategy on Israeli-Palestinian Peace, It's Remaining a Secret](#)," *The Washington Post*, April 30, 2017.

Israelis opposed to territorial concessions to Palestinians, but it might prevent, or at least greatly diminish, the potential for settlement expansion that would alter the strategic territorial equation between Israelis and Palestinians and significantly erode prospects for either an interim or a final-status agreement.

Furthermore, after several years of relative U.S. inaction on the peace process, the new administration appears eager to once again engage. Peace envoy Jason Greenblatt surprised many actors on all sides by quickly establishing a mutually respectful and serious relationship with Palestinian leaders, who have expressed optimism the Trump team can push the issue forward.²⁰ Greenblatt is also actively pursuing short-term economic measures, which may be the only immediate means of stabilizing the situation. The May 3 visit of Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas to Washington and meeting with Trump, early in the new administration, was yet another gesture to the Palestinian Authority without significant strings attached, and an additional encouraging sign.²¹

The administration is also seriously considering attempts to bring Arab countries into the mix, providing a crucial regional component to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process.

The administration is also seriously considering attempts to bring Arab countries into the mix, providing a crucial regional component to the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The essential idea behind this so-called “outside-in” approach is that the engagement of the Arab states, particularly Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, can provide both parties with crucial additional inducements to compromise.²² Israel would gain regional legitimacy and, perhaps, diplomatic recognition, in a more open strategic partnership with these Arab countries, in addition to Egypt and Jordan, to oppose the spread of Iranian influence. The Palestinians could receive political cover, diplomatic support, and crucial economic assistance to help them make compromises toward Israel.

The prospects for such a development may depend on the extent to which the Gulf Arab countries perceive Washington as effectively cracking down on Tehran and prioritizing their goal of limiting, and even rolling back, Iran’s strategic expansion. Should Washington meet these expectations, and link them clearly and systematically to Arab-Israeli cooperation designed to stabilize the region and revive the peace process, this strategy could provide a new path toward a more stable interim Israeli-Palestinian arrangement that sets the stage for a final-status agreement in the more distant future. Gulf states including Saudi Arabia and the UAE are reportedly open to enhanced ties with Israel – including on telecommunications, aircraft overflights, and trade – if the Israelis are willing to restrict settlement activity in areas of the occupied West Bank and ease trade restrictions on Gaza, and have drafted a “discussion paper” on the prospect.²³

²⁰ William Booth, [“Palestinians Think Trump Can Make a Deal,”](#) *The Washington Post*, May 2, 2017.

²¹ [“Remarks by President Trump and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Joint Statement,”](#) The White House, May 3, 2017.

²² Ian Fisher and Ben Hubbard, [“Trump’s Shift to ‘Outside-In’ Strategy for Mideast Peace Is a Long Shot,”](#) *The New York Times*, February 14, 2017.

²³ Jay Solomon, Gordon Lubold, and Rory Jones, [“Gulf States Offer Better Relations if Israel Makes New Bid for Peace,”](#) *The Wall Street Journal*, May 15, 2017.

That presidential advisor and Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner has reportedly been given direct authority over the Israeli-Palestinian portfolio can only be regarded as an additional sign of seriousness. The administration is intent on at least trying to tackle this issue in a meaningful way. Trump is also determined, at least for now, to keep it within the White House's direct purview and even to play a personal role in it, as underscored by his comment that there is "no reason" for a lack of Israeli-Palestinian peace²⁴ and his vow to Abbas that "we will get it [this peace deal] done."²⁵

Such engagement by the White House is vital because the ongoing Israeli occupation, now in its 50th year, does not allow for benign neglect. There are only three plausible scenarios: progress, deterioration, or dangerous stagnation, which can only set the stage for more conflict. Therefore, positive, proactive, and realistic U.S. activity is essential.

Nothing practical has been achieved thus far, to be sure, and the challenges are great. But the disaster on this issue that many had feared in the aftermath of the U.S. presidential election has not unfolded. To the contrary, what appears to be emerging is a relatively sober and serious effort to re-engage the mission of Israeli-Palestinian peace, despite generally dim assessments of what is possible given the positions of the parties, their attitudes toward each other, and a problematic and chaotic regional context that undermines the willingness of leaders to take security and political risks for peace.

Increased Willingness to Use Military Force

Increased willingness to use U.S. military force in the Middle East and beyond by the Trump administration, although thus far limited, appears to be a deviation from the Obama administration's cautious, and arguably risk-averse, attitudes that caused considerable consternation among Washington's Arab allies. Greatly increased bombing and special forces activities in Yemen,²⁶ new rules of engagement in Somalia²⁷ and elsewhere, a U.S. missile strike targeting an airbase in Syria, and certain dramatic military actions in Afghanistan are all examples.²⁸ But, to what extent does heightened military activity and the use of force translate into coherent new policies? In most cases, this very much remains to be seen. The intensified engagement in Yemen can be viewed, broadly, as an extension of two other imperatives: rebuilding partnerships with the Gulf Arab countries and confronting Iran and its proxies in the region. And greater engagement in Somalia can be viewed as an iteration of the expanded counterterrorism agenda. But there is hardly an identifiable new Trump doctrine regarding the use of military force in the Middle East, South Asia, or elsewhere.

²⁴ Mark Hensch, "[Trump: 'No Reason There's Not Peace between Israel and the Palestinians,'](#)" *The Hill*, April 28, 2017.

²⁵ Jordan Fabian, "[Trump on Israeli-Palestinian Peace: 'We Will Get It Done,'](#)" *The Hill*, May 3, 2017.

²⁶ Andrew Buncombe, "[Donald Trump Administration Orders 70 Airstrikes on Yemen in a Month - Twice as Many as 2016 Total,](#)" *Independent*, April 4, 2017.

²⁷ Charlie Savage and Eric Schmitt, "[Trump Eases Combat Rules in Somalia Intended to Protect Civilians,](#)" *The New York Times*, March 30, 2017.

²⁸ Michael R. Gordon, "[U.S. General Seeks 'a Few Thousand' More Troops in Afghanistan,](#)" *The New York Times*, February 9, 2017.

The missile strike notwithstanding, the Trump administration still does not have a clear or coherent Syria policy. Early in the Trump administration, several officials suggested Washington might be amenable to the continued rule of Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.^{29,30} However, following a chemicals weapons attack by the regime that killed dozens of civilians, the Trump administration made clear that there must be a transition of power.³¹ On April 6, in response to the chemical weapons attack, the United States conducted a Tomahawk missile strike on a Syrian airbase,³² in largely a symbolic move, though it indicated, for the first time in many years, a meaningful limitation to U.S. patience with the Assad regime. This could signal a new U.S. approach toward both Syria and Assad.

And it's telling that even the Obama administration's deepest skeptics regarding the efficacy of U.S. military power praised the missile strike.³³

However, this military action is not sufficient to signal the emergence of a new and coherent policy approach to

Syria, let alone a more serious re-engagement with the realities on the ground that could allow Washington to influence the outcome of the conflict. Washington's conundrum in Syria is underscored by the recent need to deploy U.S. forces to separate Kurdish fighters, needed for the campaign to remove ISIL from its de facto capital of Raqqa, and the Turkish military, which considers the Kurdish fighters terrorist affiliates.³⁴ The United States, therefore, not only lacks truly effective allies on the ground, in northern Syria it must now physically prevent two sets of forces, with which it is simultaneously affiliated, from devouring each other.

The Trump administration has finally agreed to send a representative to peace talks in Astana,³⁵ Kazakhstan, but that is a process thus far almost entirely defined by a Russian-Turkish conversation and agenda. The U.S. role and aims in Syria remain largely undefined, even as Russia, Turkey, and Iran have agreed on a tentative plan to establish four "de-escalation zones" in the war-torn country,³⁶ perhaps beginning to sketch the broad outlines of a lasting cease-fire without significant input from Washington.

The United States, therefore, not only lacks truly effective allies on the ground, in northern Syria it must now physically prevent two sets of forces, with which it is simultaneously affiliated, from devouring each other.

²⁹ Michael R. Gordon, "[White House Accepts 'Political Reality' of Assad's Grip on Power in Syria](#)," *The New York Times*, March 31, 2017.

³⁰ Yasmeh Joshua, "[Haley Says Assad Must Go. Tillerson Is Less Sure. McMaster Slams Russia, Iran. Trump White House Issues Mixed Messages On Syria](#)," *The Daily Wire*, April 9, 2017.

³¹ Kaitlan Collins, "[Rex Tillerson Says 'It Is Clear' Bashar Al-Assad Must Go](#)," *The Daily Caller*, April 11, 2017.

³² Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper, and Michael D. Shear, "[Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria](#)," *The New York Times*, April 6, 2017.

³³ "[Fmr. Obama Admin Official Blinken: Trump 'Did the Right Thing' with Missile Strikes](#)," *CNN*, April 7, 2017.

³⁴ Matt Broomfield, "[US Deploys Troops to Stop Fighting in Syria - between Two of Its Allies](#)," *Independent*, April 29, 2017.

³⁵ Peter Baker and Neil MacFarquhar, "[Trump and Putin Agree to Seek Syria Cease-Fire](#)," *The New York Times*, May 2, 2017.

³⁶ Anne Barnard, and Rick Gladstone, "[Russia Reaches Deal for Syria Safe Zones, but Some Rebels Scoff](#)," *The New York Times*, May 4, 2017.

One of the standard arguments for the administration's willingness to use force is the notion that the use of U.S. weapons such as Tomahawk missiles in Syria or the "mother of all bombs"³⁷ in Afghanistan sends a powerful message to potential adversaries and rivals around the world, particularly states such as Iran and North Korea. There is scant evidence for this assertion, both historically and empirically.³⁸ States certainly respond to threatening messaging but it's almost always only effective in the form of serious, actionable assets or specific threats that can and will be carried out against them and not some other party. Such actions in Syria or Afghanistan therefore probably do little to signal renewed U.S. resolve to Tehran or Pyongyang.

Moreover, the use of the Massive Ordnance Air Blast bomb in Afghanistan against ISIL may only reinforce the widespread perception that the conflict there is not going well for U.S. and Afghan government forces, which are bogged down combatting ISIL while the momentum in the conflict has largely shifted to a resurgent Taliban. Because it is the closest thing to a tactical nuclear weapon yet developed for conventional firepower, its deployment could convey at least as much desperation as determination. Such apparently dramatic military actions may hearten traditional U.S. allies in the Middle East, such as Israel or the Gulf Arab countries, but the idea that they seriously change the perceptions of adversaries and rivals, which is the main argument that is made for them, is harder to defend.

This is not the only kind of ineffective messaging that may be at work in the emerging policies. There is also the potential that the administration could be boxing itself in to confrontations through heightened and at times uncalibrated rhetoric regarding Iran, ISIL, al-Qaeda, North Korea, and other threats, both in the Middle East and beyond. Such rhetoric might eventually commit Washington to ill-advised and potentially avoidable kinetic action. Particularly anxiety-inducing is a potential for more than one low- or mid-level conflict erupting simultaneously, or that Washington might talk itself into a conflict in one theater, for example in Iran or Korea, only to find another adversary taking advantage of the situation to force a second, simultaneous conflict with which even the U.S. military is incapable of coping. Putting potential adversaries "on notice,"³⁹ or "ending strategic patience"⁴⁰ and warning of "a major, major conflict" with them,⁴¹ is the kind of potentially reckless rhetoric that can become a self-fulfilling prophecy and lead to dangerous miscalculations.

Such rhetoric might eventually commit Washington to ill-advised and potentially avoidable kinetic action.

³⁷ Helene Cooper and Mujib Mashal, "[U.S. Drops 'Mother of All Bombs' on ISIS Caves in Afghanistan](#)," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2017.

³⁸ Max Fisher, "[Do U.S. Strikes Send a 'Message' to Rivals? There's No Evidence](#)," *The New York Times*, April 21, 2017.

³⁹ Robin Wright, "[Trump Puts Iran 'On Notice'](#)," *The New Yorker*, February 2, 2017.

⁴⁰ Merrit Kennedy, "[Pence Tells North Korea: 'The Era Of Strategic Patience Is Over'](#)," *NPR*, April 17, 2017.

⁴¹ Stephen J. Adler, Jeff Mason, and Steve Holland, "[Exclusive: Trump Says 'Major, Major' Conflict with North Korea Possible, but Seeks Diplomacy](#)," *Reuters*, April 28, 2017.

“Quiet Diplomacy” on Human Rights

The Trump administration has not been shy about downplaying human rights advocacy as a pillar of U.S. foreign policy,⁴² particularly as it has functioned since the second term of former President Ronald Reagan. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson, in a speech to his State Department employees, drew a clear line between U.S. values, which he said are constant, and U.S. policy, which he said is ever changing.⁴³ He emphasized that the Trump administration draws a clear distinction between values and policies, and said the latter must always take priority over the former in order to protect U.S. national interests. A sympathetic reading of this would identify it as merely an honest and clear-headed statement of what, perforce, must practically be a great power’s de facto considerations no matter what its impulses might be.

Critics like Senator John McCain have slammed Tillerson and Trump for “abandoning” the U.S. commitment to human rights.⁴⁴ However, the administration and its supporters cast the approach as one of quiet diplomacy on human rights, rather than the abandonment of the issue. And they insist that this approach is simply a more honest and forthright accounting of a constant tension in U.S. foreign policy, and note that Obama, too, distinguished between U.S. values and interests, even as he pushed for a closer link between the two.⁴⁵

They note that while Trump’s enthusiastic embrace of Egyptian President Abdel Fatah al-Sisi and his government, for example, may be problematic in terms of Egypt’s human rights record, in practice it continues the Obama administration’s pragmatic, pro-Cairo policies but without an ineffective, and indeed hypocritical, pretense. Moreover, warmer relations at the optical and rhetorical levels appear to be paying some human rights dividends, however limited. The Obama administration was unable to achieve the release of unjustly imprisoned U.S. aid worker Aya Hijazi with its public pressure. However, apparently through engagement and quiet, private diplomacy, the Trump administration secured her release.⁴⁶ Senate Foreign Relations Committee Chairman Bob Corker took the lead in praising this approach calling it, “the way things like this should be handled.”⁴⁷

The role that human rights may play in a Trumpian “America First” foreign policy remains unclear, and will probably evolve slowly over time.

This by no means resolves serious concerns among many Americans about the long-term direction in which human rights policy may be headed, and the consequences of such a shift for U.S. interests, policies, and values alike. The role that human rights may play in a Trumpian “America First” foreign policy remains unclear, and will probably evolve slowly over time.

⁴² Carol Morello, “[Rex Tillerson Skips State Department’s Annual Announcement on Human Rights. Alarming Advocates](#),” *The Washington Post*, March 3, 2017.

⁴³ Rex W. Tillerson, “[Remarks to U.S. Department of State Employees](#),” U.S. Department of State, May 3, 2017.

⁴⁴ John McCain, “[John McCain: Why We Must Support Human Rights](#),” *The New York Times*, May 8, 2017.

⁴⁵ “[Remarks by the President in Address to the Nation on Libya](#),” The White House, National Archives and Records Administration, March 28, 2011.

⁴⁶ Declan Walsh, “[American Aid Worker Is Cleared of Child Abuse Charges in Egypt](#),” *The New York Times*, April 16, 2017.

⁴⁷ Philip Rucker and Karen DeYoung, “[Freed Egyptian American Prisoner Returns Home Following Trump Intervention](#),” *The Washington Post*, April 20, 2017.

But the Hijazi case does suggest that, at least in some cases, headway can be made more effectively through constructive quiet engagement rather than ineffective public criticism. Trump administration supporters will be hoping to produce a similar effect on a broader level not only in Egypt, but in Bahrain,⁴⁸ with regard to humanitarian concerns in Yemen, Palestinian human rights, and gender equality, issues in which Washington has traditionally pushed its allies to better conform to accepted international standards. The quiet diplomacy approach could prove to be a capitulation, but, thus far, the only tangible evidence suggests it can be effective in certain instances, whereas public criticism without major policy pressure has, frankly, not been.

Conclusion: Does Trump Have a Distinctive Middle East Policy?

This review of the emerging themes that may define a Trump Middle East policy suggests there is as yet no distinctive or clearly discernible overall approach by the new administration. Some of the key building blocks for an innovative and integrated approach are in place, but the policy mix has not yet gelled into anything coherent, internally consistent, sustainable, or, most importantly, predictable. The Trump administration's actions still seem far too ad hoc, reactive, and even impulsive to constitute a policy toward the region. Some analysts have even argued that the "Trump Doctrine" in the Middle East and beyond is not to have any doctrine at all, and to rely primarily on improvisation and instinct.⁴⁹ But this is to ascribe calculated intent to a set of eventualities that might more accurately be read as reflecting confusion and mismanagement rather than a deliberate embrace of extemporization.

This apparent impulsiveness in policymaking was perhaps most dramatically reflected in the whipsaw transformation of attitudes toward the Assad regime. Seemingly overnight it went from being described as, in effect, a potential ally against terrorism and a "political reality" that must be tolerated to a gang of bloodthirsty baby murderers who must be bombed and who cannot be part of a long-term solution. This jarring about-face suggested, at least at the presidential level, a precipitate rather than strategic judgment, despite the endorsement the U.S. missile strike received from both critics and supporters of the administration. Moreover, it remains to be seen whether this sets the stage for the emergence of a coherent Syria policy.

Similarly, the administration appears to be of two minds on Israeli-Palestinian issues. There are forces within the White House, including the president, who appear to be serious about pursuing peace, but they also seem to be very deeply tied to Israeli concerns and primarily informed by those perspectives. Others in the administration, who do not dominate this policy but continue to have influence, remain committed to the settler movement and the cause of a greater Israel, and are therefore fundamentally hostile to the most basic Palestinian interests. The administration's blocking of the United Nations' attempted appointment of former Palestinian Authority Prime Minister Salam Fayyad as the U.N. envoy for peace in Libya, after

⁴⁸ David E. Sanger and Eric Schmitt, "[Rex Tillerson to Lift Human Rights Conditions on Arms Sale to Bahrain](#)," *The New York Times*, March 29, 2017.

⁴⁹ Peter Baker, "[The Emerging Trump Doctrine: Don't Follow Doctrine](#)," *The New York Times*, April 8, 2017.

initially approving the appointment,⁵⁰ was a gratuitous and fundamentally inexplicable anti-Palestinian action. It was even roundly criticized across the Israeli political spectrum, with the exception of the most extreme right-wing forces.

There remain ample grounds to doubt that, even with the will to engage in peacemaking, the administration would be able to create a plausible initiative or generate meaningful cooperation from the two parties and their neighbors. The question is whether there is any plan behind the impulse to “get this [Israeli-Palestinian peace] done,” as Trump vowed during his public appearance with Abbas.⁵¹ Thus far, there is little real indication of one, especially as Trump was quick to add that “any agreement cannot be imposed by the United States, or by any other nation,” language that Washington has traditionally used to signal backing away from, rather than re-engaging on, the peace process.

Furthermore, there is a plethora of evidence that much of the essential infrastructure of U.S. foreign policy is suffering from a profound crisis of morale, as well as being either essentially leaderless or woefully neglected, or both. Such problems appear pervasive throughout the administration, but seem particularly acute in the State Department. There the secretary of state serves virtually alone, without any senior colleagues whom he has appointed, relying on placeholder appointees serving from the last administration who lack significant policy input or influence. Meanwhile, the State Department faces potentially severe budget cuts that could cripple U.S. diplomacy, to the dismay, not least, of the uniformed military leadership. Moreover, the administration’s proposed budget appears to cut a wide range of crucial U.S. foreign policy programs and initiatives that greatly strengthen U.S. diplomacy and soft power, and augment hard power. If these senior staffing shortfalls and budgetary threats are not corrected in short order, lasting damage could be done to U.S. foreign policy around the world.

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Further, the retreat into familiar, long-standing “traditional alliances” and transactional, ledger-book relationships with much-reduced attention to human rights, at least at the rhetorical level, could actually be perceived as a retreat of U.S. leadership rather than its assertion. This approach could be said to effectively take the region as it finds it, in an opportunistic way, measuring U.S. interests in the narrowest possible terms, and attempting to grab tiny “wins” where they are easiest and (at times literally) most profitable. Trump and Tillerson’s insistence that “We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone” through U.S. foreign policy⁵² can be read as an honest and realistic approach to great power policymaking. But it also can, in this context, be understood as instead capitulating to existing but correctable realities that are,

⁵⁰ Colum Lynch, “[Diplomats: Nikki Haley Greenlighted U.N.’s Hiring of Salam Fayyad Before She Blocked It](#),” *Foreign Policy*, February 11, 2017.

⁵¹ “[Remarks by President Trump and President Abbas of the Palestinian Authority in Joint Statement](#),” The White House, May 3, 2017.

⁵² “[The Inaugural Address – Remarks of President Trump](#),” U.S. Embassy in Estonia, January 23, 2017.

in the long run, ultimately harmful to U.S. interests. It could also be seen as squandering the U.S. credibility on values and principles that has served as an invaluable asset in foreign policy generally and intelligence gathering in particular.⁵³

A further concern is the mixed messaging that has come from administration officials on a range of policy issues, including Middle Eastern concerns. At times, senior Trump administration figures – especially Tillerson and U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley – have appeared to seriously contradict each other on a range of issues involving Iran, Syria, Israeli-Palestinian concerns, human rights, and more. Combined with several other features of the administration's approach as outlined, this mixed messaging contributes strongly to the biggest overall drawback to the Trump approach to the Middle East thus far: its fundamental unpredictability. Though Trump is said to personally value unpredictability, it is largely unsuited to a status quo power that seeks to guarantee a far-off regional order. Unpredictability does have its obvious appeals. It can wrong-foot adversaries, such as Iran. It can shake up sclerotic thinking, of the kind that dominates the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. It can create new opportunities when sudden deviations from expectations help to reshape realities in an advantageous manner. Senior administration officials tout these potential benefits, claiming that "It creates a lot of opportunities [that] (sic) a lot of people don't know what our foreign policy is."⁵⁴

However, the pitfalls of unpredictability for the United States in the Middle East over the long run are readily evident and potentially devastating. Countries that seek to disrupt order, and change long-standing arrangements to their benefit, generally profit from unpredictability. This is why Iran, for example, has been so adept at profiting from regional conflicts and instability and in using nonstate actors and other shadowy groups to advance its interests. However, powers that seek to guarantee a regional order, ensure stability, and generally preserve and protect the broad features of the strategic status quo, do not benefit much from unpredictability. It typically plays into the hands of their anti-status quo adversaries, undermines their partners and allies, and, inevitably, disrupts the broad project of ensuring stability and security.

Washington has traditionally served as the decisive status quo power in the Middle East and the guarantor of the regional order. Historically, it has largely done a creditable job of fulfilling this role, and rewarding those regional powers that cooperate with the preservation of security and stability and confronting those that challenge it. Significant miscalculations, such as the Iraq invasion in 2003, have marred the record, to be sure, as, more recently, has relative U.S. inaction regarding Syria. But, overall, in recent decades the United States has been essentially successful in playing the key role in maintaining the basic regional order in most of the Middle East. Despite the chaos raging in some areas, most of the region is calm, and Washington has played a central role in ensuring that and preventing conflict from spreading further.

There seems little doubt that the Trump administration essentially wishes to continue to play that role and its embrace of traditional U.S. allies offers evidence of this intent. Yet unpredictability, more than any other aspect of the new administration's approach, whether

⁵³ David S. Cohen, "[How Trump Hurts the Spying Business](#)," *The New York Times*, May 16, 2017.

⁵⁴ Laura Rozen, "[White House Sees Wild-Card Nature as Asset in Trump's First Foreign Trip](#)," *Al-Monitor*, May 5, 2017.

intentional or not, will ultimately prove largely incompatible with this goal. For all the undoubted promise of many of the administration's emerging Middle East policy themes thus far, chronic unpredictability is by far the most significant hurdle that must be overcome if an effective, coherent, and distinctive Trump Middle East strategy is to eventually develop.

