

The Policy of Muddling Through: The Consequences of Trump's Contradictory Middle East Policy

Khodr M. Zaarour

North Carolina State University

Abstract: The foreign policy of the Donald J. Trump administration in the Middle East shows U.S. foreign policy in a rather negative light. With inconsistencies, fragmentation, and contradictions, he was unable to implement a positive change on the Israel-Palestine track, contain Iran's aggressive behaviors, or maintain the American diplomatic tradition which previously allowed the U.S. to gain well-grounded political, economic, military, and diplomatic leverages in the region. Under the Trump administration, America's vital interests were in a precarious position at best which allowed Iran, Russia, and China to pose a serious challenge to American hegemony. Although its influence has been weakened as a dominant power, the U.S. remains the most influential power in the Middle East. However, due to President Trump's lack of major foreign policy expertise or knowledge of the region, his policies mostly failed due to a disorganized or a clear strategy and unpredictability which made the situation in the Middle East dangerously chaotic and counter-productive to American strategic interests.

Keywords: United States, Middle East, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Palestine, Syria, Israel, Donald Trump, right-wing, Islamophobic

The United States never had a head of state who displayed a quick-shifting between contradictory positions without offering an explanation or justification in one presidential term with the extremism as President Trump. President Trump has been consistent with policies such as banning people from Muslim-majority nations, ending Obamacare and effectively reducing the role of the Environmental Protection Agency. However, he never produced "anything approaching a strategy" (Cook, 2020, p. 1) concerning his policies toward the Middle East. President Trump marked a profound departure from the U.S. diplomatic traditions and hence proved himself to be dangerously chaotic and counter-productive to American strategic interests in the region.

During the 2016 presidential campaign and shortly after his inauguration, many experts have already highlighted the fact that Donald Trump's controversial and derogatory statements on Islam, Muslims, and the Middle East are likely to enhance anti-American and anti-Western sentiment (Winter 2016; McKernan 2017). In addition to his inconsistencies of his foreign policy toward the Middle East maintain political uncertainty for the region (Burke 2016; Walt 2017). However, after his departure from the White House, we are still struggling to understand how his foreign policy vision was framed as these inconsistencies destabilized the region and allowed room for an emboldened Russia, and a rising China. Did Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East create more divisions and chaos or increased stability and collaboration? Such diverging interpretations of his policies clouded the already complex struggles for power among the players in the region leading to increased instability.

Before he was elected president, candidate Trump declared on the campaign trail 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" (Aljazeera, para. 2). As an outsider to the Washington foreign policy establishment, he appeared to be by some observers an impartial player and they hoped to bring a more pragmatic and even-handed approach to U.S. policy in this troubled region. But even as an outsider, "the president of the United States owes the American people a strategy. After four years, the Trump administration has failed on that count" (Cook, 2020, para. 10). He only offered sporadic statements addressing whatever issue stops on his desk without thinking of the consequences of his actions or inactions. Trump's rhetoric placed America first to "Make America Great Again" 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.... A superpower understands that caution and restraint are signs of strength." (Aljazeera, para. 2)

The 2016 elections came in the shadow of the disastrous outcome of the Afghan and Iraq Wars, which had tempered the more extreme hegemonic goals coming out of policies of the neo-conservative foreign policymakers in Washington. Therefore, candidate Trump's position allowed him not only to strengthen his loyal Republican base and take advantage of the growing isolationist and anti-interventionist sentiments among the American electorate, but he also received some praise from foreign policy experts on the Middle East for bringing fresh thinking with the realization of the limitations to American military power.

After toning down its touch rhetoric in foreign policy in the 1990s, The Republican Party had a dramatic shift from recent years with the “new embrace of its old hawkish foreign policy” (Altman & Miller, 2015, para. 3). Historically Republicans have always displayed a more hawkish, toughness and fortitude in utilizing military force in foreign policy. Candidate Donald Trump during the 2016 presidential election was successfully able to present himself as less war-prone 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. Although candidate Trump supported the invasion of Iraq and the military intervention in Libya, he “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” (Aljazeera, para. 3).

But soon after assuming power, the Trump administration amplified the militarization of American foreign policy in the Middle East with an alarming increase of attacks against suspected terrorist groups resulting in high civilian casualties. Additionally, President Trump distanced himself from supporting democracy in the region, protecting human rights, or stopping authoritarian regimes and ending the Israeli occupation of Palestinian lands. Instead, Trump adopted anti-idealistic rationalizations for American foreign policy, praising Middle Eastern authoritarian rulers and even stating that the U.S. should have taken control of Iraqi and Libyan oil fields to support American oil enterprises.

As stated by Poppe below:

“After over one year in office, it has become clear that presidential candidate Trump’s lack of interest in and disdain for democracy promotion has indeed persisted in office. His secretaries of state so far have also not been inclined to assume leadership on behalf of democracy. Considering that President Trump has vowed to cut democracy promotion efforts on all fronts, the signs point towards significant changes to democracy promotion strategically and operationally” (Poppe, p. 19).

Once in office however, the Trump administration showed that he “has no record of such self-scrutiny. Rather, its record in the region so far is confusing and ineffectual” (Byman, 2020, para. 4). As he started to adopt his positions, “The policies of the Trump administration toward the Middle East have been ... extreme, immoral and counter-productive” (Aljazeera, para. 4) which indicated a tectonic shift from the traditional understandings of U.S. national interests in the region. His heavy reliance on the right-wing advisors within the Republican Party explained his constant shifts between hard positions which appeared to be often reckless and militaristic. This further deepened U.S. military involvement, backing the Israeli occupation and annexation policies of the occupied Palestinian lands, strengthening American ties to Arab authoritarian rulers, and threatening war with Iran and Syria. These hardliner policies only isolated the U.S. in the region and increased the level of anti-American sentiments.

Major Pivot to the Right: The Growing Influence of the Neo-Conservatives on Trump’s Middle East Foreign Policies

It was expected due to his outsider status, President Trump would display a new and non-orthodox view on the major issues leading the United States to adopt a more enlightened and pragmatic policy in the Middle East and hence increased stability. But instead, under President Trump, the traditional American commitment to the rule of law, acceptance of international agreements, and support for universal human rights became much weaker. As the evidence shows, “Trump’s online and off-line hate speech corresponded with his followers’ aggressive rhetoric, violent threats, and actual violence against Trump’s declared “enemies,” most of all, minorities, the news media, and oppositional politicians” (Nacos, Shapiro, and Bloch-Elkon, p. 2). Therefore, making direct military intervention and support for allied dictatorial regimes and occupying armies became more of a norm rather than an exception. This appeared to be an extreme deviation from the longstanding U.S. policies toward the region pursued by the Trump White House making it more difficult to rationalize such destabilizing and militaristic actions.

As an outsider, his lack of basic knowledge of the complicated Middle East, U.S. foreign policymaking, and America’s interests in the region made President Trump’s reliance on his neo-conservative advisors more important and riskier as they pushed their narrow views. The appointees’ position toward the region was heavily influenced and shaped more by their ideological prejudices than by knowledge of the Middle East and consequently resulted in growing concerns by traditional progressive critics of U.S. foreign policy as well as the security and intelligence establishments.

Early in his administration, President Donald Trump increased his anti-Muslim rhetoric, and proposed laws and policies targeting Muslims. To transform his thoughts into actions, “Trump quickly installed notorious Islamaphobes — including Steve Bannon, Michael Flynn, and Sebastian Gorka — in the White House” (Patel, F. and Levinson-Waldman, R. 2017, p. 1). These far-rightwing Islamaphobes were appointed to powerful and

influential positions. Michael Flynn, National Security Advisor; Sebastian Gorka, a senior advisor on counter-terrorism; and, Steve Bannon, Trump's chief White House strategist. President Trump amplified his advisors' anti-Islamic views which shaped his immigration policy banning the entry of people from six majority Muslim countries and eventually led to his shortsighted approach to U.S. policy in the greater Middle East. In an increase of the anti-Muslim and anti-Middle East rhetoric, President Trump handed over major responsibility to his vice president and Secretary of Defense, both of whom held deep Islamophobic views.

Vice-President Mike Pence held right-wing Christian evangelical views where he saw the 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 Jesus Christ. These views were no secret as Vice President Pence defended them when he served on the Subcommittee on Middle East and Central Asia of the House Foreign Affairs Committee while serving in Congress. He was a strong supporter of the U.S. invasion of Iraq and an opponent of calls for a withdrawal of U.S. forces from the Middle East. He supported the ongoing prosecution of the war in Afghanistan and was an outspoken opponent of the nuclear deal with Iran. Additionally, Pence was 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. (Aljazeera, para. 5)

Another influential neo-conservative of Trump's appointments was Secretary of Defense, General James "Mad Dog" Mattis. As head of the First Marine Division in Iraq, he played a leading role during both brutal and inhumane 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. His belief system can be seen in his famous quote from the Anbar region in Western Iraq when he said that "I come in peace. I didn't bring artillery. But I'm pleading with you, with tears in my eyes: if you fuck with me, I'll kill you all." (Guardian, para. 11) His penchant for large-scale military force and brinkmanship over diplomatic means has helped shape U.S. Middle East policy in the Trump White House. (Aljazeera, para. 6) While a proponent of excessive militarism, support for the Israeli occupation, the 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.

Even with the extreme nature of these new policies there appeared to be an opportunity for the foreign policy establishment for a far-reaching re-evaluation of the American Middle East policy and potentially to bring peace to the region. The danger from the Trump administration is a "major escalation with Iran and across the region at a time when the overall U.S. position is weak and growing weaker" (Byman, 2020, para. 2). This situation is quite serious, and risks provoking even more violence leading to further instability, especially on the two-state solution between Israel and Palestine. The right-wingers' positions on the Israeli-Palestinian issue adopted by Trump only encouraged the extreme elements of the Israeli extremist attacks on Palestinians, settlement building on occupied lands, housing demolitions, displacement, and racism.

The Deal of the Century: The Temporary Suspension of the Israel-Palestine Peace Process

Even before running for office, Donald Trump began to undermine the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. First, he tried to undermine President Obama's Israeli-Palestinian peace efforts and publicly criticized him for pressuring Israel at the United Nations to immediately and completely cease all settlement building in occupied Palestinian territory. Although the United States ended up being the only member of the 15-member Security Council to abstain, 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. (CBS, 2016)

In addition to nominating Trump as a candidate for president at the Republican convention in the 2016 election, the party made a major shift from its previously long-held position of supporting the establishment of a Palestinian state to the opposition of many other nations by rejecting "the false notion that Israel is an occupier"...and "support for Israel is an expression of Americanism" (Aljazeera, para. 8). Additionally, the party declared that the U.S. 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. Furthermore, the Republicans demanded 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." (Zune, 2017)

From the beginning of his administration, President Trump began to undermine the peace process and empower the pro-Israel groups. Early in his administration, he immediately appointed advocates of Israel's right-wing settler movement to key positions. David Friedman who has compared moderate Zionists who opposed the Israeli occupation and settlements to Jewish collaborators with the Nazis was appointed as U.S. ambassador to Israel. The president 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. President Trump's son-in-law Jared Kushner, whom he tapped to take a lead role in the Israeli-Palestinian peace

process, is personal friends with Netanyahu and has major business ties with powerful Israeli financial interests that strongly support Israeli settlements.

However, President Trump began to realize that the Israeli-Palestinian issue can no longer be ignored as the pressure on the White House mounted and needed immediate attention. He introduced a plan known as the “deal of the century,” also known as the Trump/Kushner peace plan. It was designed to do what no American president has ever done before which is to produce a conflict-ending agreement between the parties. As expected by many observers, this peace plan went nowhere because it was one-sided as it demanded from the occupied Palestinians “to negotiate a final, ignominious surrender, something that anyone with even the mildest curiosity about the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians knows that they will not do. Resistance to Israel’s occupation and steadfastness under the duress of that occupation are important components of Palestinian identity. When it became clear that the Palestinians were not interested in such a one-sided deal, the president lost interest.” (Cook, S., 2020)

President Trump further isolated the U.S. internationally and antagonized the Middle East Arab leaders by breaking with decades of American policy by announcing that the U.S. would become the first country in the world at the time to formally recognize Jerusalem as the undivided capital of Israel. Then, he later decided to move the U.S. embassy to that multi-ethnic and multi-faith city justifying the move as a recognition of the reality that Jerusalem is the seat of Israel’s government while ignoring the Palestinian rights to the Holy City. The move not only upset Arab and Western allies alike, but it also ended Washington’s role as a neutral broker in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. This decision not only violated international law and the long-standing American position, but it also reduced if not permanently ended the chances of the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. The absence of an agreement to end the century-old crisis was accurately predicted to increase the level of violence and destabilized the entire region which harmed U.S. strategic interests in the longer run.

Adding more insult to injury, President Trump has repeatedly ignored the Palestinian Authority’s claims to the city and declared the issue to be “off the table” (Aljazeera, para. 8). Furthermore, Trump closed down the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington and slashed funding for the United Nations Relief and Agency (UNRWA) for Palestine Refugees in the Near East and other programs supporting Palestinian refugees.

Realizing the international and domestic rejection of U.S. policy towards the Israeli-Palestinian issue, President Trump appeared in a joint White House appearance with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu on January 28, 2020, announcing a new plan to end decades of conflict. But, as it became customary in the Trump administration, the deal was developed without Palestinian input and strongly favors Israel (Council on Foreign Relations) by awarding it large portions of Palestinian lands in the West Bank and Jerusalem and hence reducing any realistic chance for a fully autonomous Palestinian state. As expected, Palestinian, Arab, and most world leaders soundly rejected the proposal leading to further isolation of the U.S. throughout the Middle East and around the world.

Mismanaging Trouble Spots: Syria and Iran

Syria’s Complicated Civil War

In a dramatic departure from the Obama White House, under the administration of President Donald J. Trump, the United States has dramatically increased its military operations in Syria and Iraq, not only to fight ISIS or Daesh but also for broader strategic American goals. While President Obama put limits on the use of American air power to minimize civilian casualties, Trump has given the military much wider latitude, resulting in a dramatic increase in innocent civilian deaths from U.S. air assaults on the northern Iraqi city of Mosul, Raqqa in eastern Syria, and other cities. Additionally, in retaliation for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s use of the chemical weapon sarin in an attack against civilians, President Trump authorized a limited cruise missile strike on the regime-controlled Shayrat Air Base in April 2017 and attacked pro-government militia on several occasions. A year later on April 13, 2018, the president ordered the U.S. military to strike three facilities in Syria linked to the Bashar al-Assad regime’s chemical weapons program. The airstrikes were in response to the Syrian government’s alleged use of chemical weapons against civilians and were carried out in coordination with forces from France and the United Kingdom. (Council on Foreign Relations)

President Trump increased the presence of American troops to 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 ISIS or Daesh forces which have left that group holding on to only narrow strips of relatively under-populated territories in eastern Syria. A major reason for the increased American military presence despite fulfilling much of their initial strategic objectives appears to be part of an effort to counter pro-Iranian militia. In addition, the U.S. was playing a major role in fighting Daesh and other radical groups, which were seen by the Trump administration as representing the Iranian government’s efforts to increase its political and military influence across the region. While this move was welcomed by U.S. allies such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries,

this policy became somewhat problematic in both Syria and Iraq as both were increasingly becoming Iranian satellite states influencing both governments. Hence, both countries labeled U.S. troops' presence as illegal occupation and called for their removal by force if necessary. In both countries, then, the U.S. role has now gone beyond simply fighting terrorists 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.

In the wake of a call with Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Trump abruptly decided to withdraw all remaining U.S. troops from Kurdish-controlled northern Syria. Two days later, Turkish troops invaded northern Syria to combat Kurdish groups, which Ankara labels as terrorist organizations, and the Kurds seek protection from Assad's regime and his Russian allies. The Trump administration responded with sanctions on Turkey, a NATO ally, leading to talks for a permanent cease-fire. The deal allowed the Syrian Kurds who are U.S. allies to evacuate and divide control of the territory along the Syria-Turkey border among Turkish, Russian, and Syrian government forces.

Realizing the dangers of miscalculations that could lead to a wider war, in December 2018, President Trump announced that the United States will withdraw all of its more than two thousand troops from Syria, but without specifying a timeline. He asked the Pentagon to come up with a plan to withdraw half of those serving in Afghanistan as well. Many Democrats and Republicans in Congress called the decision precipitous, and his Secretary of Defense Jim Mattis offered his resignation the next day, saying the president deserves a secretary "better aligned" with his views. (Cooper, 2018)

Despite the strategic value of such a policy, it was considered highly dangerous, particularly in Syria, as it became apparent as U.S.-armed Turkish and Free Syrian Army forces battled the U.S.-armed Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces in 2018 and an unknown number of Russian mercenaries were killed in U.S. strikes in contested areas in northern Syria. Such attacks only increased the risk of a wider war. More ominously, U.S. threats of additional attacks against Hezbollah and other pro-regime forces dramatically increased the risks of direct engagement with Russian and Iranian forces which could spiral out of control and hence undermine American interests across the Middle East.

Iran and the Nuclear Deal

Even before deciding to run for president, Donald J. Trump was highly critical of the Obama administration over the nuclear deal with Iran. The new president strongly denounced the deal because he believed that the agreement provided much-needed money to Iran and encouraged it to control much of the Middle East and threaten U.S. allies. After months of deliberation after his electoral victory, on October 13, 2017, President Trump announced that he would not recertify Iran's compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action to Congress (JCPOA), saying that Iran's behavior violated the spirit of the nuclear agreement. But while Trump did not take steps to abrogate the JCPOA; instead, he asked Congress to deliberate on reimposing sanctions. But, on May 8, 2018, President Trump announced the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Trump said it did not sufficiently curb the country's civilian nuclear program or its regional aggression. Without citing any clear Iranian violations, the Trump administration announced that the U.S. will reinstate two sets of punishing sanctions on Iran that had been waived with the deal's implementation ranging from aircraft imports to oil and petroleum product exports. (Council on Foreign Relations)

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" (Romaniuk, Tobias, Burgers, 2017). The overarching feature of the U.S. Department of Defense's Joint Vision 2020, referring to the ability of US forces to confront, engage, and defeat adversaries in the twenty-first-century security environment alone or tandem with military partners and allies. The strident opposition by the Trump administration to the 2015 Iran nuclear agreement was not because it enabled Iran to produce nuclear weapons since it did just the opposite but because it eliminates an excuse to go to war. Consequently, finding other excuses to confront Iran has become the focus of the Trump administration.

Focusing on this new policy, 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." Indeed, it was Mattis's obsession with Iran, in a manner reminiscent of the hyperbole regarding the alleged Soviet role behind leftist movements in Central America during the 1980s, that caused President to remove him his position. Additionally, alarmist rhetoric regarding the supposed threat to Israel by Iranian forces in Syria appeared to be designed to deny agency to those resisting U.S.-backed governments while providing an excuse for a direct military confrontation with Iran in the name of self-defense.

As the war of words escalated in early 2019, and the Iranian Revolutionary Guards downed a U.S. drone, President Trump authorized military action on Iranian targets but called off the operation at the last moment to prevent a regional war. The incident came after months of rising tensions, including increased U.S. sanctions on Iran for violating the terms of a 2015 nuclear deal and Iranian threats to shut down the Strait of Hormuz, a crucial global shipping lane affecting the global economy.

In retaliation to the downed drone, President Trump ordered a U.S. drone strike killing Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Iranian Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' elite Quds Force, at Baghdad International Airport. The Pentagon links Soleimani to violent demonstrations at the U.S. embassy in Baghdad and the deaths of hundreds of American and allied troops in the region. Though Trump said he ordered the strike "to stop a war," Soleimani's killing raised fears of further escalation. Tehran retaliated by firing missiles at two Iraqi bases hosting U.S. soldiers, prompting Washington to impose new sanctions on Iran. These attacks and counter-attacks continued to escalate, risking a wider war as the Iranian regime threatened to retaliate against American interests using its terrorist networks. These actions continued until President Trump left the White House in the 2020 general election.

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 are not about regional security, but maintaining U.S. regional hegemony. With all of the increased tension, however, there was a bit of a silver lining in Trump's Middle East policy. The President was able to mobilize a coalition of Arab Gulf states and Israel to confront Iranian expansion and threatening posture. In a September 2020 ceremony at the White House, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu signed U.S.-brokered agreements to normalize relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates.

President Trump heralds the event as the "dawn of a new Middle East" as the new coalition unites Israel and several Arab Gulf states against Iran. In the following months, President Trump announced that Sudan and Morocco will also begin rapprochements with Israel. President Trump was successful in using his close connections with these authoritarian leaders for good use such as securing the release of several Americans abroad who had been suffering in Middle Eastern jails.

In exchange, the United States granted Sudan financial assistance and delisted it as a state sponsor of terrorism. In addition, the U.S. recognizes Morocco's claim to the long-disputed region of Western Sahara with Algeria. But even with such a positive note, siding with Morocco over Western Sahara pushed Algeria into Iran's orbit of influence and hence exacerbated tensions between the two Arab neighboring countries in North Africa. This was another episode where President Trump miscalculated policy without realizing the consequences.

Befriending Dictators and Undermining Democracy

During his second inaugural address, George W. Bush openly laid out his policy of promoting democracy claiming that "The survival of liberty in our land increasingly depends on the success of liberty in other lands. The best hope for peace in our world is the expansion of freedom in all the world") clearly emphasizing democracy in Iraq and throughout the Middle East. His successor President Barak Obama also gave much lip service to the Arab Spring mainly led by the younger generation demanding human rights, democracy, transparency, accountability, and work opportunity.

In a major schism from his predecessors however, President Trump openly and warmly embraced Egypt's brutal military regime crackdown led by Abdel Fattah El-Sisi, tolerated Erdogan's increasingly authoritarian rule in Turkey. Most of the repressive monarchies in the Arab Gulf states 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. President Trump, however, had no interest in democratization, human rights, and the rule of law. Rather, his goal was to contain threats to America and its partners and allies with minimum effort by the former and maximum effort by the latter. (Transatlantic Policy, March 22, 2021)

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 made it impossible to even pretend the United States under this president is at all interested in supporting democracy in the Middle East.

Therefore, "for Trump job one was Iran" (Transatlantic Policy, March 22, 2021) and believed that its aggressive behavior in the region must be confronted even militarily when necessary. Based on such a view, the Trump administration dramatically increased arms sales to authoritarian Arab Gulf states while minimizing and often flatly ignoring democratization and human rights concerns. Such a policy, experts claim, will only embolden authoritarian rulers' crackdown on the opposition. In May 2019, President Trump citing increased Iranian threats invoked a rarely used national emergency aspect of federal law waving a congressional review requirements by passing Congressional oversight to push through arms sales to Saudi Arabia worth billions of

dollars. Rep. Eliot Engel, a Democrat from New York who also served as the chairman of the House Committee on Foreign Affairs, said there is no emergency that calls for Trump to go around Congress with these arms deals.

“The President’s veto sends a grim message that America’s foreign policy is no longer rooted in our core values – namely a respect for human rights – and that he views Congress not as a coequal branch of government, but an irritant to be avoided or ignored,” Engel said in a news release. “Worse still, this veto is going to cost innocent lives. These weapons are going to continue fueling a reckless and brutal campaign of violence and exacerbating the world’s worst humanitarian catastrophe.” (Cohen and Klein, 2019)

In addition, only seeking profits for powerful American companies involved with the arms trade does not promote United States’ strategic interests and will most likely provoke a dangerous regional arms race while diverting public sums of money away from human needs. Furthermore, Trump also pushed Saudi Arabia to purchase American reactors for nuclear power development despite that country’s ample oil, natural gas, and sunlight, further cementing Saudi Arabia ties with the United States which may be designed to provoke Iran to negate the meticulously-negotiated nuclear agreement.

Although President Trump made it clear that he sided with the Arab Gulf states against Iranian threats, in a public and embarrassing fashion, he demanded more financial responsibility for the stability and security of the region. He did not elaborate on the nature of the relationship with the Gulf states that he envisions or his opinion on his predecessor’s policy, but President Trump “chose Saudi Arabia to be the destination of his first foreign visit, from where he articulated his vision of “peace, security, and prosperity” in the Middle East. (Al Saud, A. and Mahlouly, D., p. 5)

In another destabilizing move, President Trump sided with Saudi Arabia and its allies in their dispute with Qatar alleging its ties with ‘terrorism’ and insisting that Qatar sever diplomatic relations with neighboring Iran and expel exiled members of non-violent opposition groups working against multiple dictatorships as well as dissident scholars teaching at its universities. Additionally, there was a push to shut down the liberal Al-Jazeera television, which has allowed non-violent dissidents who are critical of these governments and U.S. policies an opportunity to share their grievances. President Trump’s warm and uncritical embrace of such a view was certainly seen as reckless especially when the tiny country of Qatar serves as America’s largest military base in the entire Middle East, serving as the regional command center to coordinate operations in Syria, Iraq, and Afghanistan, and hosts over 10,000 U.S. military personnel. Furthermore, what was also ignored by Trump was that Qatar has also previously assisted the United States in freeing hostages, provided 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 by Trump’s initial reaction to that small but important nation could be lasting.

Conflicting Policies but Signs of Hope

The often conflicting and extreme positions taken by President Trump have raised serious concerns at home and abroad. Paradoxically, it became easier to challenge some of the assumptions which have underscored American foreign policies in the Middle East since World War II. Many in Washington began to realize that such extreme policies could seriously undermine American interests in the long run. On a positive note, the right-wingers’ hard line adopted by President Trump has ironically created space for courageous Democratic opposition to unconditional American support for the policies of Benjamin Netanyahu and his right-wing Likud-led government. With the White House now under a democratic president, Joe Biden has been working on reversing many of Trump’s chaotic policies to reestablish stability in the already turbulent region.

Although most Congressional Democrats still adhere to their traditional 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, in a reversal of the popular vote from previous years. In terms of Democratic voters, polls show there has been a dramatic shift away from the traditionally strong support for Israel, with a majority of self-identified liberals expressing more sympathy for the Palestinians than for the Israelis. According to a poll of more than 1,500 Americans conducted by the Pew Research Center in 2018, “among Democrats who self-identified as liberal, nearly twice as many said they sympathized more with the Palestinians than with Israel. In 2016, a University of Maryland found that 60 percent of Democrats supported economic sanctions or taking more serious action in response to new Israeli settlements.” (Thrall, para. 17)

Under normal circumstances, there is often a lag time between shifts in public opinion and policy changes. However, the extreme, dangerous, and counter-productive Middle East policies advanced by President Trump promoted many American leaders and the public to overhaul the U.S. role and to make it more

meaningful and fairer for the people of the region. For the first time, public opinion is beginning to demand the U.S. foreign policy establishment become less biased in their support of the Israeli occupation making America reappear as a fair and honest broker once again.

Conclusion

As expected, “many of President Donald Trump’s actions following his assumption of power in January 2017 stand at odds with his previous rhetoric on the earlier campaign-trail” (Al Saud, A. and Mahlouly, D., p. 4) including the promise of putting America and Americans before all else. Instead, his administration pursued a reckless and dangerous militaristic policy causing enormous human suffering and threatening the United States’ long-term strategic interests. As the drama played out, President Trump’s Middle East foreign policy caused major turbulence, unpredictability, and dangerous global politics, which made it almost impossible to down play or reverse his rhetoric. Such actions and positions only exacerbated the current dangerous uncertainty engulfing the Middle East. President Trump’s long-term strategic vision and unpredictable approach to foreign policy call for refashioning new political alliances to limit the people’s suffering since the U.S.-led invasion and occupation of Iraq 2003.

The American reputation of being a responsible superpower and a somewhat honest broker in managing global conflicts turned into resentment and began to slip, turning domestic and international public opinion against U.S. hegemony in the international arena. The United States under President Trump was no longer viewed as an ethical and responsible power in its foreign policy towards the Middle East. It became evident that it is too risky to show American hawkishness in Middle East foreign policy and this policy has become increasingly challenged by the region and the international community to an unprecedented degree. The results may be good news for the region in the long run as the U.S. influence becomes weaker. But in the meantime, the people of the Middle East will continue to suffer and endure Washington’s miscalculations.

Bibliography

- [1]. Al Saud, A. and Mahlouly, D. (2018) ‘Trump’s Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Conspiratorialism in the Arab Media Sphere’, In Happer, C, Hoskins, A. and Merrin, W. (Eds.) Trump’s Media War. London: Palgrave MacMillan. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/ar/node/1572>
- [2]. Altman, A., Miller, Z. J., (February 27, 2015). CPAC: Republicans Rediscover Their Old Hawkish Message On Foreign Policy. Retrieved from <https://time.com/3726508/cpac-isis-republican-foreign-policy/>
- [3]. Burke, D. 2017. “On Islam, Trump Is Consistently Inconsistent.” CNN, 22 May.
- [4]. Bynam, D. L., January 6, 2020. Trump’s reckless Middle East policy has brought the US to the brink of war. Brookings. Retrieved from <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2020/01/06/trumps-reckless-middle-east-policy-has-brought-the-us-to-the-brink-of-war/>
- [5]. CBS. December 23, 2016. Israel appealed to the Trump team to delay the U.N. vote on settlements. Retrieved from <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/u-n-vote-on-israeli-settlements-delayed-after-u-s-pressure-israel-appeal-to-trump-team/>
<https://www.cfr.org/timeline/trumps-foreign-policy-moments>
- [6]. Cohen, Z. and Klein, B. (July 24, 2019). Trump vetoes 3 bills prohibiting arms sales to Saudi Arabia. CNN. Retrieved from <https://www.cnn.com/2019/07/24/politics/saudi-arms-sale-resolutions-trump-veto/index.html>
- [7]. Cook, S. A. (October 28, 2020). Trump’s Middle East Legacy Is Failure. Council on Foreign Relations. Retrieved from <https://www.cfr.org/article/trumps-middle-east-legacy-failure>
- [8]. Cooper, H. December 20, 2018. New York Times. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/12/20/us/politics/jim-mattis-defense-secretary-trump.html>
- [9]. Nacos, B. L., Shapiro, R. Y. and Elkon-Bloch, Y. Donald Trump: Aggressive Rhetoric and Political Violence. Perspectives on Terrorism, October 2020, Vol. 14, No. 5 (October 2020), pp. 2-25. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/26940036.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A7cd98eaa231d72d22aca2d36dc8564f6&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=search-results
- [10]. Patel, F. and Levinson-Waldman, R. (2017). The Islamophobic Administration. Brennan Center for Justice. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep28431.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A3b6ada77492ff279e2f2761de5157387&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=search-results

- [11]. Poppe, A. E. (2018). DEMOCRACY PROMOTION IN TIMES OF UNCERTAINTY. Retrieved from https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/resrep20032.9.pdf?refreqid=fastly-default%3A3ff7484a440044a34a74991c8780700b&ab_segments=0%2Fbasic_search_gsv2%2Fcontrol&origin=&initiator=search-results
- [12]. President George W. Bush, "Second Inaugural Address," speech given on 20 January 2005, Washington, D.C.
- [13]. Reed, B. (December 1, 2016). Donald Trump nominates James 'Mad Dog' Mattis as secretary of defense. The Guardian. Retrieved from <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2016/dec/01/james-mattis-secretary-of-defense-donald-trump>
- [14]. McKernan, B. 2017. "Isis Hails Donald Trump's Muslim Immigration Restrictions as a 'Blessed Ban'." Independent, 30 January.
- [15]. Romaniuk, S. N., and Burgers, T. J. (2017). The Future of US Warfare. US national security doctrine in the new global security environment. 1st. Ed., Routledge, London, UK.
- [16]. Thrall, N. (March 28, 2019). How the Battle Over Israel and Anti-Semitism Is Fracturing American Politics. The New York Times Magazine. Retrieved from <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/03/28/magazine/battle-over-bds-israel-palestinians-antisemitism.html>
- [17]. Walt, S. M. 2017. "Making the Middle East Worse, Trump-Style." Foreign Policy, June 9.
- [18]. Winter, C. 2016. "Trump Has Unwittingly Become an Asset for ISIS." CNN, November 3.
- [19]. Zune, S., January 10, 2017. Hope fades for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. National Catholic Reporter. Retrieved from <https://www.ncronline.org/blogs/ncr-today/hope-fades-two-state-solution-israeli-palestinian-conflict>