

# EGYPT AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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## ABSTRACT

*In the early days of his presidency, Donald Trump has rolled out the red carpet for Arab leaders and reaffirmed the traditional U.S. privileging of alliances over human rights narratives, two decisions which radically differed from the Obama administration. Despite these developments, which regional leaders welcomed, Trump's failure to articulate a comprehensive strategy to defeat ISIS and his preference for military might over diplomacy have caused concerns. While it is clear the U.S. has re-exerted itself in the Middle East, much of the Arab population (and their leaders) remain perplexed as to the Washington's plans for the region.*

*That Trump is a novice in foreign affairs and diplomacy is a given, and his early attempts at navigating the international arena may have appeared erratic. However, that does not mean there is no consistent philosophy behind his inconsistencies. Arguably, the most illustrative example of Trump's foreign policy successes in the Middle East are the mistakes he has not made. His handling of the U.S. embassy in Israel is case in point. Despite promising to move the U.S. embassy to Jerusalem during his campaign, Trump has since adopted a more nuanced approach. Trump views himself as a peerless negotiator and has set his sights on securing the "ultimate deal:" a comprehensive, negotiated settlement to the Arab-Israeli conflict. His acknowledgment that continued settlement expansion in the West Bank hinders the peace process and his willingness to meet with Abbas show he is not the blind supporter of Israel many feared.*

*However, stabilizing the region will require more than confronting ISIS and cementing a deal between the Palestinians and the Israelis. He must also contend with the growing regional ambitions of two outside powers: Iran and Turkey.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

Despite expectations that, as a political novice, President Donald J. Trump would use his first 100 days as a learning phase to establish a solid base, he chose to approach this timeframe aggressively. Convinced of his popularity and the veracity of his mandate from the American people, Trump's prime objective was to project authority from day one. Much to his satisfaction, Middle Eastern states, many of whom carry a grudge against his predecessors, provided Trump with a fertile ground to undermine former President Barack Obama's posture, and portray him as a weak and ineffective president incapable of acting.

Governments and peoples in the region have welcomed the election of President Trump with open arms, revealing their annoyance and disappointment with the Obama Administration.

Trump, by his actions, clearly indicate his intention to reverse much of his predecessor's foreign policy in the region, particularly with regards to human rights. Already, the State Department has pursued a major arms deal with Bahrain, which had been formally suspended under President Obama due to human rights concerns. Similarly, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson signaled his intent to lift the U.S. freeze on sales of cluster munitions to Saudi Arabia, which Obama had similarly blocked due to their purported role in civilian casualties in Yemen. Finally, President Trump's energetic embrace of Egyptian President Sisi drastically contrasts the adversarial position of the previous president.

This chapter will discuss the moves of the new Trump Administration in the Middle East region. It will attempt to address whether or not President Trump has succeeded in combining military actions with diplomacy in his first 100 days. His maneuvering by surprise bombing strikes and troop deployment, along with his cordial meetings with the leaders of the major Arab countries in the White House, is reviewed. The conclusion drawn is that much of the results of Trump's rhetoric and actions are yet to materialize.

### ***The Egyptian Reaction to the Trump Presidency***

The government of Egypt takes pride in having reconstituted some of its regional statute after the long overdue visit of President Abdul Fattah al-Sisi to the White House. Yet, Egyptians act more cautiously, dreading a repetition of the experience they had with President Obama following his speech in Cairo on June 4, 2009. Though ecstatic and overjoyed at President Obama's praise of Islam and the clear attempts towards rapprochement with the Islamic world, Egyptians soon after realized that it was more rhetoric than reality. Egyptians' disappointment with the Obama administration was all the greater after the so-called Arab Spring and its support of the Muslim Brotherhood, even after Egyptians had rebutted the legitimacy of that regime with a march of over one million people. Cairo has made it no secret that it perceives the Trump Administration as presenting new vistas for a revamped relationship between the two countries.

Similarly, the Gulf States, led by Saudi Arabia, have found in President Trump a potential ally to rebuild the historic relationship with Washington after years of apathy. Unlike the Obama Administration, President Trump seems to consider Saudi Arabia and GCC States as key partners in his regional foreign policy plans. Under the previous administration, the Gulf States were disappointed with the U.S. policies towards the region, which they felt marginalized their role in favor of other regional actors (Boghardt & Henderson, 2017, p. 2). For example, one particular

issue was not engaging them in the primary rounds of the political dialogue that led to the nuclear deal with Iran (Ibid, p.3)

Even Israel, which has always relied on bipartisan support and levied its legislative allies to convince Barack Obama to provide a lavish military assistance package, was content to see a change of guards. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu was among the first international leaders to visit his American friend in the Oval Office.

### ***The Middle Eastern Reaction to the Style of the Trump Presidency***

The Middle East's reaction to the Trump presidency should not cause anyone to overlook the common perception that President Trump is unpredictable, overhasty, and seemingly uninterested in including his international friends and allies in his decisions, let alone reassuring or even justifying his actions to them. The airstrikes on regime installations in Syria, which occurred while the Egyptian president was still in Washington, is illustrative. The hastiness of Trump's decisions has led to ill-conceived executive orders, as evidenced by its repeated failure to stop citizens from seven then six Muslim-majority countries (Iraq was excluded from the second list) to enter the United States.

Moreover, the President's tweets will give the region and its leaders much to scrutinize. The international community is ignorant of this new type of presidential diplomacy, its bluntness, and the extent of its seriousness. The challenge is that Trump comes to the presidency with ideas outside the box, which are unfamiliar to the traditional, often parochial, Arab thinking. When coupled with missile attacks on Yemen and Syria and use of the "mother of all bombs" on Afghanistan, presidential tweets underlining the U.S. resolve to pursue its own solutions have indeed raised some misgivings. It is surprising that ten days after striking Syria, Trump chose to drop the world's largest non-nuclear bomb on a desolate stretch of Afghanistan. Ultimately, the

strategic and military significance of the U.S.'s deploying that particular bomb, at a cost of \$16 million, against "one of the smallest militias it faces in the world-[ISIS-Khorasan Province]" was minor to its symbolic importance (Wright, 2014). Bombing Afghanistan was more an attempt by Trump to seek validation from the U.S. media, and his desire to appease the U.S. military, which is institutionally predisposed to testing its weaponry, and temperamentally conditioned to validate U.S. presidents who pursue the use of military force over diplomacy. How can the Arab world, which experienced major vicissitudes with past U.S. administrations, deal with the policies of the new administration as predicated thus far? Should they understand his tweets as setting diplomacy aside, and expect a new administration ready to bomb without room for dialogue or compromise? Alternatively, should they understand the tweets as political rhetoric, divorced from the actions the Trump Administration will take to secure its foreign policy objectives? Despite appearances to the contrary, the intricacies of the Middle East region require the U.S. diplomatic apparatus to remain robust, healthy, and engaged.

President Trump has made his foreign policy preferences quite clear: a policy of deterrence and diplomacy with muscle, thus far making the military choice in the Middle East region the prevailing arm of his diplomacy. Verification and engagement were off the table. Acting swiftly and decisively left many of his aides confused, and without the administration's rationale, they were forced to ineptly justify such actions, notably his first drone attacks on Yemen.

Though the overwhelming majority of people in the region welcome the bombing of so-called Islamic terrorist groups and yearn for a return to stability, they also recognize the need for diplomatic efforts to address intractable conflicts.

#### **THE IMPLICATIONS OF THE SUCCESSIVE WHITE HOUSE VISITS**

It is unprecedented that an American president meets with three Arab leaders during the first 100 days. President Trump also extended an invitation to Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and met with him on May 3, shortly after the expiration of the 100 days. It would be premature to assess the results of these meetings, as the main ideas discussed involve contentious issues, which still need time to develop. Apart from the attempt to establish a so-called Sunni alliance against Iran, there is the much talked about Middle East conference in July. However, the Palestinian President still needs to be convinced to come on board in light of the hard pro-Israeli stance of the administration.

The meetings between President Trump and Arab leaders have instigated a better sense of the president's priorities and objectives. Most Arabs have reacted positively to his reception of these leaders in the White House and are hopeful that the United States will adopt a more constructive approach to the region's problems. Many experts in the region advocate for the necessity of dampening expectations and shying away from building castles in the sand, as the U.S. strategy in the region remains unpredictable and in flux. The many controversies that surround President Trump and his decision-making process, however, do not undermine the fact that the Middle East region falls within his sphere of interest. President Trump is keen on a hands-on approach to managing affairs in the Arab world.

Above all things -perhaps even above his desire to be perceived as physically powerful- Trump wishes to be viewed as a powerful businessman- and by extension, as a powerful negotiator (Malhotra & Moore, 2016). It is therefore unsurprising and natural that Trump has made solving the Palestinian-Israeli conflict an early priority of his presidency. For Trump, it is the ultimate deal, which, if successfully "closed", will render him the world's greatest negotiator- and by extension, the world's greatest businessman. In his approach to conflict in the Middle East,

Trump's desire to project literal power will therefore compete against his desire to be seen as a powerful negotiator.

### ***Israel: The Biggest Winner***

One can easily claim that the biggest winner is the Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, whose relationship with Obama soured considerably. Throughout its two terms, the Obama Administration had suffered constant abuse from the Israeli government, which refused to stop building settlements in the West Bank, calling into question the practicability and feasibility of the two-state solution. The Obama Administration routinely appeared impotent to counter constant Israeli defiance. This did not prevent it from signing the largest pledge of military assistance to Israel three months prior to the Security Council Resolution. The MOU between the U.S. and Israel regarding security assistance, signed September 14, 2016, covers the period 2019-2028. The agreement provides Israel with military assistance to the tune of \$33 billion in military financing funds, in addition to \$5 billion for missile defense programs.<sup>1</sup> However, in an act of apparent retaliation against the Netanyahu regime, President Obama acquiesced and chose not to veto the landmark UN Security Council Resolution 2334 (23/12/2016), which called on Israel to halt all settlement expansion in the Occupied Territories. This unprecedented move angered Israel, which had grown accustomed to its powerful patron protecting the country from the Security Council's criticism.

By contrast, Candidate Trump did not hide his unyielding support for Israel on the campaign trail, and stressed his determination to move the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem (Schaefer, 2016). Despite Netanyahu's prior knowledge of President Trump and his

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<sup>1</sup> The existing MOU from 2007-2018 provided Israel with \$3.1 billion annually plus \$3.1 billion for missile defense programs in the same period.

administration's supportive policies, which sharply diverge from the apathy characterizing the relationship under Obama, the visit exceeded all expectations. President Trump's retreat from the commitment to a two-state solution, conditioned by an apparent acceptance of the two parties, exceeded even the hopes of Netanyahu (Shapiro, 2017). Retraction of such a long-standing principle, which represents the internationally agreed upon cornerstone of the Palestinian issue comes, as an unpleasant revelation to the region (Press Conference, February 15, 2017). While the administration's actions so far, particularly David Kushner's appointment as Special Advisor to the Middle East and David Friedman's confirmation as U.S. ambassador to Israel clearly indicate resolute support for Israel, relations with Saudi Arabia by contrast have fluctuated considerably.

### ***Saudi Arabia: Another Winner***

A successful visit to the White House by the Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, coming after the apparent chill in the relations between Washington and Riyadh during Obama's final term, and support for certain Saudi positions have encouraged the Saudi side to usher in a new phase of relations with the U.S.. This, however, has not prevented the President Trump from reverting to the campaign trail rhetoric and complaints that Saudi Arabia abuses the U.S. by relying on Washington to fund the Kingdom's defense (Hanchett, 2016).

The most important outcome of the meeting between President Trump and the Crown Prince of the Kingdom was the reiteration of their common stance against Iran. Throughout the campaign, Candidate Trump caustically criticized the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which he viewed as naïve, and swore to renegotiate. Speaking to the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) in March 2016, Trump declared, "my number-one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran," a position shared by Riyadh (Begly, 2016). In addition, the two

states identified common language on Iran, which provides support to Saudi Arabia in its engagement in Yemen. Such language transpired without any delay and subsequently has resulted in strikes on Yemen and Syria, escalating the war in Iraq, all of which are clear attempts to abate the pro-Iranian resistance in the region. Additionally, the Crown Prince and Trump agreed to form a military force of forty thousand soldiers to fight terrorism under the umbrella of the so-called «Islamic Alliance», but also implicitly directed towards Iran. Despite the ongoing tensions over Saudi's financial contributions towards its own security, the Crown Prince's visit to Washington D.C. set the stage for President Trump's landmark visit to the Kingdom a few months later and helped reset the relationship between the two traditional allies.

### ***The Islamic Sunni Alliance***

The Islamic alliance initiative conceptualized by Washington and Riyadh, however, does not bode well for many countries in the region and is viewed unfavorably by sectors of Arab society. Leaks about forming a Sunni alliance with a certain kind of unofficial association with Israel and co-sponsored by the United States, are offensive to the people in the region, to say the least. Not to mention, Egypt and Turkey, which remain at loggerheads over President Recep Tayyip Erdogan's open hostility towards President Sisi, following the overthrow of the Muslim Brotherhood. Turkey and its president continue to godfather the Muslim Brotherhood and provide safe haven for its insurgents and fugitives from Egypt and the Arab world. Saudi Arabia is keen on reconciliation between Cairo and Ankara to pave the way for the establishment of the so-called Sunni bloc, but the rift between the two countries runs deep. For Egypt, fighting Islamists remains the top priority, and Turkey's adoptive child, the Muslim Brotherhood, tops the list. Moreover, Egypt is firmly convinced that Turkey harbors manipulative and devious ambitions vis-à-vis the region, which is detrimental to Arab countries and their people. The

relationship between Egypt and Turkey is illustrative of the geopolitical challenges of creating the Islamic Sunni Alliance.

Despite these concerns, President Sisi's visit to Washington depicted the considerable common ground between Egypt and the U.S. The two most important outcomes of President Sisi's visit were the consensus that fighting terrorism is a top priority and the resolve to end the Arab-Israeli conflict. Regarding the latter, the parties agreed to hold a five-nation summit next July in Washington, including Egypt, Jordan, Palestine, Israel and the U.S., in an effort to reach a deal on the Palestinian issue. These two goals, if fulfilled, would undeniably portend a new beginning for the Arab world and the entire Middle East region. Indeed, Trump's meeting with Sisi is characterized as part of a pattern in which he "[showcases] his determination to reshape America's relationship with a number of Middle Eastern countries regardless of their human rights concerns" (Baker & Walsh, 2017).

### ***Implications for Russia***

Despite the accomplishments of successive visits by Middle Eastern leaders to the White House and the clear understandings they cemented with President Trump, the practical results remain contingent on many variables, foremost among them, Russia's reaction and its relations with the U.S. The Obama Administration, and its apparent detachment from the Middle East as part of its pivot to Asia, provided Russia with the opportunity to exert ever-growing power and influence in the region. Trump's rhetoric on the campaign trail and his upfront admiration to President Putin further nurtured such a situation. Trump's strategy in the first 100 days, however, left Russia with many question marks. The world is still waiting for the two presidents, —Trump and

Putin—to meet. Will there be a new Sykes-Picot Agreement<sup>2</sup> for the region? Will the non-Arab emerging powers of Iran and Turkey act as spoilers, as they have no interest in staying on the margin as the equation shifts? There is also the question of Trump’s personality itself, and the known sharp fluctuations and apparent contradictions that make it difficult to predict his next steps. The decision to launch airstrikes on regime installations in Syria came as a surprise and drastically contradicted his campaign rhetoric. Most ironically, Trump previously counseled Obama against striking Assad in 18 separate tweets, describing any U.S. military intervention in Syria as fundamentally dangerous, and unlikely to produce tangible economic or security benefits (Hoffman, 2017).

Furthermore, the American internal situation and the evolution of Trump's relationship with Congress must be considered an added consideration. Will the Congress be a support or a hindrance to the President’s military decisions and policies, particularly in light of the fact that all the military strikes undertaken so far were unilateral decisions? Not only does the Congress appear divided and marginalized, but it re-raises questions over whether the President constitutionally needs Congressional authorization for military action.<sup>3</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> The **Sykes–Picot Agreement** was a secret 1916 agreement between the United Kingdom and France partitioning the Arab provinces of the Ottoman Empire, after its defeat in WW I, into areas of British and French control. The terms were negotiated by British diplomat Mark Sykes and a French counterpart, François Georges-Picot, defining agreed sphere of influence between the two countries. France received control of Syria and Lebanon, while Britain gained control of Iraq, Jordan and the coastal strip between the Mediterranean Sea and the River Jordan.

<sup>3</sup> In this context, the military strikes have prompted a serious discourse on the powers of the executive branch. According to Article II of the Constitution the president, as Commander in Chief of the Armed Forces, is already entrusted to take military action, including directing the country into battle without necessary reverting to Congress. Article I of the Constitution, however, gives only Congress the authority to declare war — and to appropriate funds to the Defense Department to wage it. No doubt, President Trump will hold tight to Article II in his future military actions and continue bragging about his authority as commander in chief.

## TRUMP RHETORIC VERSUS ACTION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Though on the campaign trail, Candidate Trump catered to an American people with no appetite for military engagement, President Trump soon unraveled his promises and unexpectedly rushed to use force even in unsubstantiated and highly controversial circumstances. In the Middle East, Trump's policy has reversed 180 degrees from his campaign rhetoric, particularly in regards to Syria and Yemen. President Trump wanted to demonstrate "who is in charge" at the domestic, as well as at the international level with a show of force. He provided no explanation to Congress or, for that matter, the international community about his strategic insight and underlying reasons to attack Yemen or Syria. It was clear that the choice was solely his, and he did not even attempt to engage the Congress or even an inner circle in his Administration. It was incumbent upon the White House spokesperson to justify the consecutive military actions in the region and deviation from campaign rhetoric by explaining that it normal for people to change as they receive more information, as Trump had done.

### *The Strike on Yemen*

Controversy has surrounded the Trump Administration's early decision to initiate excessive military airstrikes against Yemen without explicitly linking the strikes to a full-fledged strategy against the Islamic State. Unlike public perception, the Yemen dilemma is tribal rather than religious. The rift between the Sunnis and Shias is less distinct than in other countries in the region. Saudi Arabia, in search of an enhanced regional role, believed that handling the problem in Yemen would elevate the Kingdom to a regional power to be reckoned with. Saudi Arabia has plunged itself and its allies into a quagmire, with no easy way out according to many veterans in Yemeni affairs (AUC, 2017). Former Yemeni President Abdullah Saleh, a shrewd politician and a major adversary of the Saudi Kingdom, is the one pulling the strings and remains the make-or-

break player at the heart of the Yemeni impasse. In contrast, the Saudi-backed president, Mansur Hadi, presents as a weak leader and the Yemeni people question his legitimacy. The Houthi insurgents, siding clearly with Abdullah Saleh, are in control of the most populated areas, including the capital Sana'a and the second largest city of Ta'izz. The situation is further compounded by resurgent Al-Qaeda presence in the south, particularly around Aden. At some point, the Saudis will have to accept that their original ambitions in Yemen will not materialize. Iran, though a significant supporter of the Houthis, is a bystander with immense 'schadenfreude' to drain the Kingdom's financial and military resources and continue to muddy its image abroad. It is highly debatable whether additional involvement in Yemen at this stage serves U.S. interests and its national security. The U.S. military strikes and increased drone attacks on Yemen, at first instance, appear to be simply the product of White House havoc. However, the attacks in Yemen affirms the U.S. relationship with Saudi Arabia and prove its support for the Saudi military option, antagonize Iran, and abandon the previous administration's attempt to promote a political solution in Yemen. Gaining tangible victories in the fight against the Islamic State and Al-Qaeda as a result of the strikes in Yemen seems less of an objective than regional signaling. However, the new Trump Administration needs to be cautious about sinking into the Yemeni conundrum. Yemen is an internal conflict, exacerbated but not created or imposed by outside forces. The entry point for peace in Yemen is neither through a premature mediation attempt nor by using missile strikes to intimidate the Houthis and/or the Sunnis.<sup>4</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> A peace-building strategy should begin with staged negotiations between key Yemeni stakeholders and politicians, and be conducted without external manipulation or influence. At a later stage, regional and international parties could join the process to safeguard and guarantee a durable peace in Yemen. One could even envisage establishing peace in Yemen as an integral part of a comprehensive settlement to the region's crisis, including Iraq, Syria and maybe even Libya. Such a settlement may entail exchanging concessions pertaining to Syria and Yemen on the part of the regional powers, notably between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

i. *The Bombing of Syria*

Yemen does not seem to have been a stand-alone military adventure during President Trump's first 100 days, as other strikes have followed in Iraq and Syria. Whether these moves are strategic, with the objective of defeating the Islamic State, or merely a tactic to provoke Iran and irritate Russia, leaves room for speculation. However, Trump must be aware that Russia is adamantly committed to not losing control over its ally and allowing an Iraq-Libya-type power vacuum to recur once again.

Nowhere has President Trump contradicted his most fundamental campaign promises regarding U.S. foreign policy more than in Syria. "We should stay the hell out of Syria; the rebels are just as bad as the current regime," reads Trump's tweet from June 16, 2013, articulating his opposition to the use force in Syria. Though this was a 2013 tweet, his opinions had not changed much prior to the campaign, during which he stipulated again in a campaign rally on October 5, 2016, in Reno, Nevada "You're going to end up in World War Three over Syria if you listen to Hillary Clinton. You're not fighting Syria anymore; you're fighting Syria, Russia, and Iran." However, on April 3, 2017, his shift in approach to Syria became apparent. Reports emerged<sup>5</sup> alleging that the Bashar al Assad Assad's regime had used chemical weapons on civilians, killing at least 80 people, including women and children. In the two to three days that followed, President Trump quickly condemned the attacks through an official statement stipulating that President Assad crossed the red line by killing "innocent babies". Yet the White House also spoke of the need to acknowledge the "political realities that exist in Syria," insinuating admittedly the power of the Assad regime (Rahim, 2016). Without the slightest attempt to verify

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The U.S. and Russia, as the major international powers having a stake in the region, should be willing to guarantee the final settlement (AUC, 2017).

<sup>5</sup> NBC News, CNN Politics, April 7, 2017

why President Assad, who had gained momentum to the extent of convincing the new Trump Administration to consider his potential usefulness, would throw himself into an abyss, Trump ordered airstrikes against the Syrian regime, exactly what he had warned Obama against doing three years earlier.

The attack on Syria also served as an affirmation of former President Bill Clinton's doctrine of unilateral intervention for humanitarian reasons, coupled with former President George Bush's preemptive war doctrine. The 2005 Right to Protect (R2P) consensual UN summit resolution provided Trump with the legitimization of unilateral action, and the Trump Administration has found no reason to resort to cooperation with the international community or even show that it contemplated doing so. Neither the Organization of the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW) nor the OPCW Joint UN Investigative Mechanism has released their final report, nor have they pronounced themselves on any perceived result. Both are still collecting and analyzing information from all available sources and refuse to position themselves prematurely. It is worth noting, however, OPCW is investigating the events of April 4, 2017 upon direct request by the Syrian government. Despite the lack of verification, the Trump Administration decided to act directly against the regime. Such an approach recalls memories of the U.S. rash military intervention. The then Secretary of State Colin Powell accused that the Saddam regime had acquired nuclear weapons prior to the 2003 invasion of Iraq.

Following the missile strike, President Trump told the media that the strike was an 'emotional and impulsive reaction' and he said "that attack on children yesterday had a big impact on me — big impact. That was a horrible, horrible thing. And I've been watching it and seeing it, and it doesn't get any worse than that" (Lander, 2017). On the contrary, Trump's advisers do not view this move as neither emotional nor impulsive (Ibid). They insisted that it was carried out based

on well-thought-out strategic calculations (Ibid). Commenting on the strike in Syria, Secretary of State Rex W. Tillerson said “Mr. Trump had looked back on Mr. Obama’s decision not to carry out a strike and decided that the United States could not yet again turn away, turn a blind eye” (Ibid). Both versions of the official explanation for the attack on Syria come up short if the purpose is to understand its underlying rationale. To bomb a Syrian airstrip with 59 tomahawk missiles, under the pretext of being moved by the death of children, sounds fake. Nor does it seem realistic that he is principally committed to halt the use of weapons of mass destruction or engaged in a calculated battle plan. A likelier explanation is that the chemical attack provided Trump with a pretext to make a show of force. Not only has he succeeded in demonstrating that he is willing to act where Obama had not, he also showed unpredictability in acting so decisively in a matter where he himself had urged Obama not to act. In doing so, Trump effectively showed that he was willing to respond violently in unexpected cases where he had formulated no red lines and given no warning. This unpredictability and decisiveness seems to be central to Trump’s foreign policy. Whether it is an ‘emotional’ or ‘strategic’ act, the missile strike has certainly marked an unexpected shift and some new benchmarks in the new Administration’s foreign policy towards handling conflicts and wars in the region sending few messages worth considering.

#### **THE CONCEIVABLE REASONING BEHIND THE SYRIAN ATTACK**

The hasty attack on Syria contains a number of messages, seemingly none addressed to Syria in particular. The new administration simply politicized the situation in an attempt to assert itself at the international level and to send messages to China, Russia, and Iran.

#### ***Message to China***

First, at the time of the bombing, President Trump was preparing for the Chinese President's visit to the White House and wanted to exude strength and authority. Attacking Syria prior to his meeting with the President Xi Jinping, and right after some tough talks on North Korea, seemed convenient, and served to further Trump's desired "strong man" image. Such an approach is not without precedent in American domestic politics, and was popularized by former President Ronald Reagan. His decision to fire all 11,000 striking Air Traffic Control employees in August 1981 changed the Soviet's perception of the former actor-turned president. After this show of strength, Moscow considered Reagan a more serious adversary. During his campaign, Trump emphasized, particularly in regards to Reagan's legacy, that leadership style trumps experience when it comes to managing affairs overseas. Like Reagan before him with Gorbachev and the Soviet politburo, President Trump had to prove to Xi Jinping that he is a man of action to ensure a balanced discourse on trade and North Korea. The Syrian attack signaled clearly that President Trump, unlike his predecessor, would translate his threats into actions on the ground and was resolved to carry his threats through to the end. In turn, he expects President Xi to give that same message to North Korea.

### ***Message to Russia***

The second goal of the attack was to send a direct warning to Russia, Syria's protector and ally. This message had dual objective, setting the record straight that the U.S. intends hereinafter to be an integral player in the Syrian conflict and notifying Putin that he must contain Bashar al Assad or the U.S. is ready and willing to expand its military action. Under Trump, the U.S. will no longer accept a peripheral role in Syria, nor will it allow Assad to flaunt openly Washington's "red line." Trump clearly intends to pursue a major change in the balance of power on the ground

in its favor, and signal that it, and not an alliance between Moscow and Tehran, will drive the solution.

### ***Message to Iran***

The third message spoke directly to Iran. The U.S. military strike on Syria coincided with the escalation of U.S. pressures on Iran in response to its ballistic missile tests, which convinced the former that Iran is not acting in good faith. The message of the new U.S. strikes, which targeted Iran's closest regional ally, highlights that undermining Iran is one of the Trump Administration priorities as they move forward. Convinced that it lacks the international support to abrogate the nuclear deal with Iran or reinstate international sanctions, the Trump Administration is employing a range of tactics to pressure Iran into submission. However, U.S. strike itself has precipitated counter warning signals from Iran and Russia. In their eyes, the U.S. has crossed a "red line" by directly targeting the regime, and both states will respond to any future attack and continue intensify their support for the Syrian regime.

The linkages between U.S. actions in Syria and the previous attacks on Yemen, together with the new sanctions on Iran have not escaped the attention of Tehran. Iranian dignitaries have repeatedly accused Washington of destabilizing the Middle East, which indicates continued conflict between the two states.<sup>6</sup> Such statements will only undermine the moderates in Iran and turn public support in favor of the hardliners, to the detriment of the nuclear deal.

In this context, the Trump Administration must attempt to reconcile with Russia. The two powers need an understanding, a *déjà vu* of a Sykes-Picot-type plan, created by the major power without the interfering voices of Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey. Such an approach is not without risks, as Iran has invested too many military and financial resources in Iraq and Syria to accept

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<sup>6</sup> The President of the Islamic Shura Council, Ali Larijani, on 10 April 2017.

exclusion from the endgame. However, Tehran's fears extend beyond the consequences of the U.S. strike, and the regime has its eyes on the outcome of a potential rapprochement between the U.S. and Russia concerning Syria and its implications on Iran's position in the region.

Though the strikes were meant to strengthen the U.S. bargaining position at the negotiating table on Syria and to eliminate the emerging regional powers from the equation the Trump Administration has put at risk its number one priority in the region: fighting ISIS. To achieve this goal, the Trump Administration will need to rely on the help of Russia and Syria, two of the strongest foes of the Islamic State with the most dedication to exterminate it. The recent strikes in Syria risk alienating these crucial allies.

More important is what the Trump regime's hasty and difficult to comprehend actions represent in terms of implications on the region. Many in the region remain suspicious of U.S. intentions, regardless of which party controls the Executive Office, and the Trump's bellicose statements, could lend credence to those fears. Whether Trump has taken these daring steps merely according to his business intuitions for taking calculated risks or whether sound tactics are at the basis of these scattered military attacks is debatable. It remains to be seen whether his foreign policy is on solid ground or whether it is a leap in the dark, the consequences and implications of which are unknown even unknowable.

### **THE FIGHT AGAINST THE ISLAMIC STATE**

It is critical to note first that Washington has been fighting its "War on Terror" since 9/11 without a long-term bipartisan strategy. It is needless to recall now that such an approach to arming opposition in Afghanistan in the 1970s actually gave rise to the Taliban. By calling the Taliban freedom fighters and comparing them with the anticolonial movements in their own war for independence, Reagan gave them a holy mission to win over the so-called "evil empire". The

copious military and financial support the Reagan Administration provided the mujahedeen in Afghanistan, coupled with their apparent military success over the Soviet Union, confirmed the image of the rising Islamist movement, Al Qaeda. The narrative of Islamists as victorious freedom fighters quickly became the *raison d'être* for marginalized Islamists groups in Saudi Arabia and Egypt. This apparent victory over the Soviet Union galvanized extremist organizations, prompted the creation of transnational Islamist movements, and encouraged competing organizations to attempt increasingly spectacular attacks, culminating with the heinous 9/11 attack. The 2003 invasion on Iraq further exacerbated the situation by creating a power vacuum in the center of the Middle East and inciting public rage at the Western world. Things may have turned different, had the Bush Administration helped establish an effective Iraqi government commanding support from both the Sunni and Shia communities, instead of presenting Iraq on a silver plate to Iran. It is in this context that the demobilized and marginalized Sunni army emerged as the nucleus of the Islamic State.

Ironically, it seems that the havoc created by U.S. support for the Taliban was not a lesson that has been learnt from history. Today, prominent journalists advocate leaving so-called Islamic State (ISIS) undefeated to be Assad's, Iran's, Hezbollah's and Russia's headache — the same way the mujahedeen fighters were encouraged to bleed Russia in Afghanistan (Friedman, 2017). Leaving ISIS to become the final nail in Assad's coffin borders naivety, as the U.S. will fail to contain the movement afterwards inasmuch as the world is still fighting Taliban.

The intensified pressure on the Islamic State in Mosul, Iraq, and the missile attacks on Syria have prompted two Islamist organizations—ISIS and the El Sham Liberation Front (the “Victory Front’ loyal to Al Qaeda in Syria)—to fall in each other's arms. Traditionally, ISIS and Al Qaeda were hostile towards each other, but recently their leaders reached an agreement antithetical to

past interactions. This reorganization of forces between the two extremist groups reflects pragmatic assessment of shared objectives. First, this will reduce their losses and improve resilience in the face of the war of attrition to which they are exposed on numerous fronts. In addition to the well-publicized advances of Iraqi troops on the ISIS stronghold in Mosul, the Syrian army was conducting its own successful war against Al Qaeda on its territory. Second, while facing a losing battle against Iraqi and Syrian forces, the groups were keen to streamline the deployment their forces in the field, focus on the most pressing enemy, and position troops to minimize their losses. It is no longer a war for supremacy between the two groups, but a war for their mutual survival against the U.S. and its allies. This pragmatic and tactical agreement between ISIS and El Nusra Front means expansion of Al Qaeda's power and strengthening of its influence not only in Syria, but also in Libya and Yemen, without any internal competition between the two major Islamist factions. The new Trump Administration will certainly have to acknowledge these changes on the ground and be prepared to adjust policy decisions accordingly.

In his inaugural speech, President Trump pledged to “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate from the face of the Earth.” President Trump vowed that defeating ISIS would be one of his key priorities and he heavily criticized the Obama administration for not taking serious measures against ISIS (Sherfinski, 2017). Once elected, President Trump ordered his Secretary of Defense to put together a new strategy to defeat ISIS forces in Syria and Iraq (Starr & Collinson, 2017). The new ‘secret plan’ submitted by the Pentagon is said to be including different military, diplomatic and financial tactics (Ibid). On the website of the Department of State, the Trump Administration seems to embrace the five-point plan, known as the Five Lines of Effort, set by the NATO back in 2014. This plan includes: (1)

Providing military support to our partners, (2) Impeding the flow of foreign fighters, (3) Stopping financing and funding, (4) Addressing humanitarian crises in the region, and (5) Exposing true nature (Department of State, 2017). On Monday, May 8, President Trump authorized the Department of Defense to arm the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the Syrian Kurdish Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) to fight against ISIS in Syria and recapture Raqqa (Dewan, Starr, & Browne, 2017). This announcement has greatly upset the Turkish government that considers the YPG as terrorist organization in its own right. This move is expected to shake the long-term American-Turkish relations over the question of the Kurds.

It is still debatable whether the Trump Administration has shown any signs of defeating ISIS during the first 100 days. It is true that in Iraq, ISIS has lost much of its land, reducing the territory it controls from one third of the country to a mere 7% according to a recent CNN report (Trump, 2017). According to the same source, however, this retreat is *a priori* not attributable to President Trump, as his Administration only followed through with plans originally implemented by the Pentagon during Obama's presidency. On the contrary, the feeling is that Trump, with his strike on Syria, has detoured from the priority of defeating ISIS. In doing so, he has also antagonized the Syrian regime and Russia, two solid supporters in the fight against ISIS. Nowadays, even Turkey seems less preoccupied with fighting ISIS and more invested in facilitating Erdogan's rise to become the most powerful Turkish leader since Atatürk, under the purported justification of giving the civilian government control over the military. Moreover, Turkey's actions, in contrast to the U.S. approach, focus on Kurdish militias in Iraq and Syria, which are viewed by the U.S. as the most effective partners for countering the Islamic State.

The Trump Administration is yet to articulate a strategy to militarily defeat ISIS, decrease the number of jihadists, or undermine the group's ability to recruit. It will have to explore new and more effective multi-faceted policies to weaken the appeal and capacity of the Islamic State. Escalating drone attacks and taking out the so-called leaders of different extremist movements do not dislodge their organizations or lessen their support. It is true that the Trump Administration has flexed its muscles, intensified its counterterrorism deployments, and carried out air strikes in Yemen, Iraq, and Syria. However, it remains open to debate, to what extent these policies have deterred the Islamic State or decreased its capacity.

#### **EGYPT: AN IMPORTANT PARTNER TO THE U.S.**

Long gone are the days when Egypt was considered the make or break player in the region during which both Kissinger and Carter's Middle East diplomacy relied on Egypt as the lynchpin. Egypt was an essential player and the "key to war and peace in the Middle East. If Egypt chose peace, other Arab states would eventually follow, and if they did not, at least there would be no full-fledged wars" (Quandt, 1986, p. 358). As the Arab Spring unleashed disorganization and created political voids, the regional power equilibrium tilted towards outside forces, particularly Iran and Turkey. Yet, Egypt has shielded itself from the lingering violence of the Arab Spring syndrome and rebuilt the political system without disintegration or civil war. Egypt did not shy away from its fight against Islamic extremism, even when the name of the political game was inclusiveness. There should be no doubt in the minds of the international community that Egypt is and always will be a staunch ally in the War on Terror.

It is important for Egypt to think independently, charter its own political course and evaluate what is best for itself and the region. The differences between Saudi Arabia and Iran are at the heart of many conflicts in the region and present one of the largest and thorniest challenges.

Many political commentators and academics have grown to believe that Iran is part of the regional equation.<sup>7</sup> At no time, however, does this condone or tolerate egregious Iranian actions in the Arab World, but it does seek to emphasize the importance of understanding Iran's intentions. According to an interview published in the privately owned daily *Al-Masry Al-Youm* on Jan. 17, 2017, the Egyptian Foreign Minister has not ruled out a "dialogue" between Cairo and Tehran, if the latter changes its "approach".

Iran will need to reorient its foreign policy approach, to gain regional acceptance. For Egypt to play a role in the emerging regional order, it will need to come to terms with Iran sooner rather than later. When the time is ripe and ISIS is defeated, there will be a dire need for a political solution to the region's conflicts. Egypt, with the cooperation of a country like Oman, known for its independence and sound judgment, can set a new trajectory for dialogue and understanding towards ending this continuing drift into sectarianism and proxy conflicts.

Yet, the question of who would support Egypt's mediation role and how Cairo would position itself remain wide open. First, it is not too far-fetched to consider the U.S., or even Israel, as potential behind-the-scene partners, since they both have a stake in the stability of the Middle East. Second, Egypt will have to coordinate closely with Saudi Arabia, as an ally which Egypt cannot afford to lose. Third and finally, Egypt will have to lure small but crucial regional players like Oman, but also Jordan, to play a part in order to pave the way for a new trajectory. There is a need for a new discourse between the Arab countries, which accepts Iran as a new regional power; yet, not a power to interfere in the Arab region.

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<sup>7</sup> For a more in depth discussion on Iran's role in the region, See: Karagiannis, Emmanuel. "The rise of Iran as a regional power: Shia empowerment and its limits," *NATO Review*, 2016; Modell, Scott. "Iran's Destabilizing Role in the Middle East," Testimony before the House Foreign Affairs Committee on 16 July 2014. Retrieved from *Center for Strategic and International Studies*; Pillamari, Akhilesh. "Iran's Important Role in the Future of the Middle East." *Diplomat*, 2016.

It is also evident that President Trump is a political realist who sees international relations through a transactional lens. Egypt can be a partner in the battle against international terrorism, if in Trump's calculation, that is more important to the U.S. than concerns over any suppression of domestic dissent (Baker & Walsh, 2017). In this, Trump does not differ from previous American presidents or other political leaders who pursued the same approach regardless of their political rhetoric. To allege that Trump differs from his predecessors in this regard is to misunderstand fundamentally both U.S. presidential history and the realist paradigm of international relations. Moreover, describing Trump's human rights policies as representing a "fundamental shift" in U.S. foreign policy towards support of authoritarian dictators is to ignore Washington's decades of support for authoritarian regimes in the region, particularly in the Gulf. After the meeting between Presidents El Sisi and Trump, Egypt could become more pro-active and refrain from the "wait-and-see" approach, which characterized its policy towards Turkey during the Obama era. Egypt is capable of returning to its historic role as a regional mediator and power player, but Egypt's top two priorities should be fighting the Islamist insurgents and securing assistance for its economy, both of which will decide upon its future stability and regional power. In this context, the new Trump Administration realizes that there is no alternative but to help Egypt reclaim its traditional role in the region. In a turbulent region, Egypt will have to calibrate very prudently and sensibly, its future steps between conflicting poles and critical impasses. In that regard, Egypt should also be prepared to deal with the more dangerous objectives of Turkey in the region.

### ***The Palestinian-Israeli Conflict***

The Palestinian-Israeli conflict remains close to Egypt's heart and mind. This conflict, perpetually relegated to the backburner, continues to be the cornerstone the regional order. In

spite of some apparent attempts by Presidents Sadat and Carter at Camp David to bring the Palestinian issue to the negotiating table, Israel would not agree to any meaningful concessions to the Palestinians. The American Jewish lobby was also not helpful, thereby allowing the Palestinian issue to fall out of the priorities of U.S. leaders, as the latter did not want to compromise their domestic support (Quandt, 1986, p. 361). Indeed, until now, the Palestine question remains hanging over the Middle East.

Trump has spoken of his ability and willingness to negotiate a deal between the Israelis and Palestinians. One cannot but take such eagerness with a grain of salt because of the intricacies of the conflict and the taboos set by the parties. Revealing his personal preference for a one-state solution to the Arab-Israeli conflict few weeks after taking office indicates that President Trump began the process on the wrong foot. Taking Netanyahu's side and contradicting two decades of his country's policy support for a two-state model (Shapiro, 2017) does not augur well for a neutral mediator. However, a positive sign seems to have emerged from his meetings with President Sisi and King Abdullah II of Jordan. The decision to hold a summit next July in Washington for regional actors, including Israel and the Palestinians to reach a deal to solve the Palestinian issue, is a giant step after years of stalemate and a total breakdown in the negotiations under the Obama administration. If the Arab League Summit held in Amman this past April succeeded in anything, it was mandating King Abdullah of Jordan to share with the U.S. President the Arab position on the Palestinian issue. The King clearly reiterated that the basis of any solution remains the establishment of a Palestinian state within the 1967 borders, with East Jerusalem as its capital, living in peace alongside the State of Israel. It reaffirms the principle of all land in exchange for a durable, equitable peace and the inevitability of a two-state solution. It ensures normal, peaceful relations between Israel and the Arabs to achieve peace and security for

all the countries of the Middle East. President Sisi and King Abdullah confirmed this clearly articulated position during a time when the new Trump Administration is still in the process of crystallizing its policies in the Middle East.

If Trump is determined to reach a durable solution for the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, he will have to deal directly with the remaining four contentious issues: security, refugees, territory, and Jerusalem. Much of the solution will depend on the alliance forged between the Secretary of State, Rex Tillerson, and Trump's Middle East adviser, Jared Kushner. While the State Department will cater to Tillerson's more traditional position, the expectation is that Jared Kushner will push in the opposite direction, in light of his well-known background and support for Israel. In this resolve, Egypt, as well as Jordan, can serve as the U.S. partner and intermediaries. Egypt was the first in the region to recognize Israel, and today the two countries have established a relationship based on mutual and successful cooperation in the Sinai, to counter terrorism and to fight the Islamic State. At the same time, Egypt is a staunch supporter of the Palestinians and has solid relation with the Palestinian leadership, which mandated President el Sisi to speak on their behalf in his encounter with President Trump. Egypt has also a considerable sway with the new leadership of Hamas, an organization viewed as a potential spoiler for the peace process. After 22 years of imprisonment in Israeli jail, Yehia Sinwar has taken over from Ismail Haniya in Gaza strip and now must make a tough decision between relying more heavily on the Iranian camp to strengthen the military power of Hamas, or heeding to the sufferings and misery of the people in the Gaza Strip and deciding to reconcile with Egypt. If Hamas chooses conciliation, this means another winning card and the indispensable Egyptian role in the region.

## CONCLUSION

There is no doubt that President Trump has reinvigorated U.S. policy in the Middle East and distanced himself from the Obama's approach. The people and leadership of the Middle East are firmly convinced that President Trump has shown interest and resolve in the region, but remain cautious after their experience with his predecessor. The new Trump Administration has expressed interest in finding solutions to the many intractable conflicts, which are exacerbated by a twofold problem: ISIS and the growing confrontational ambitions of Iran and Turkey. The Trump Administration has also resolved to be part of the solution in Syria, by rejecting Russia's attempts to sideline it. Though policies undertaken in the region are still fresh and need to be tested, the one thing that is clear is that the U.S. will not venture to disengage from the Middle East in favor of other regions.

President Trump's first 100 days in the Middle Eastern region cannot be assessed in isolation of the changing environment around the world, including the mainstream populism now spreading in Europe, potentially to the detriment of a strong and stable European Union, which includes political fallout that could follow the United Kingdom's Brexit, and the rise of China and Russia. The change of heart in Turkey and peoples' decision to grant the power of dictatorship to its leader is yet another daunting challenge. If excluded or denied a voice in the region, Turkey will not hesitate to play an irritating role, and most concerningly, Turkey's authoritarian regime allegedly asserts that it is entitled a leadership role in the region. With an antagonized Iran, disappointed Turkey, and a frustrated Russia, the region now faces a new triangle of opposition and an apparently more engaged U.S. Administration. This has already diminished Russia's goodwill and Iran's readiness to participate in the fight against ISIS. The endgame of the two powers, the U.S. and Russia, has reversed. Instead of managing the region together, each is now competing to exclude the other.

After 100 days into the Trump presidency, ambiguity and bewilderment continue to frame U.S. foreign policy in general and its policy in the Middle East in particular. It is bordering on naive to think that it is possible to anticipate or predict future foreign policies of the Trump Administration on the basis of Trump's parochial rhetoric and erratic presidential actions during his first 100 days. His two campaign foreign policy priorities,—defeating ISIS and dismantling the “catastrophic” Iranian deal—have taken a backseat, overtaken by the firm resolve to destroy his predecessor's positions. Though the early signs of the first days in the presidency have had some successes in the region, such as Trump's positive meetings with regional leaders and decision to at least forestall moving the embassy to Jerusalem , major disappointments in relation to heavy-handed bombing campaigns and a disorganized approach to combatting ISIS do not augur well. It is unprecedented that a Republican President and a Republican controlled Congress have failed to bond on any major foreign policy issues. Little that has happened in the first 100 days of the Trump presidency has matched Trump the Candidate's rhetoric or his supporters' expectations. On the contrary, his Administration has acted where least expected, leaving much room for speculation as to where this is heading and why.

In many ways, Trump is resistant to traditional ideological constraints that could limit his actions. If we can define Trump's initial foreign policy doctrine , it is by his commitment to unilateral interventionism and his willingness to change his mind about fundamental political issues. It is still too early to tell whether the protean nature of Trump will be established as the foundation of his foreign policy strategy and future doctrine, or whether it will prove that he has no doctrine. Experts and analysts are still looking for a Trump strategy in the Middle East, especially after his erratic attacks on Syria, Yemen, and for that matter Afghanistan. All three countries are facing rare complex crises that are locally intertwined with regional and

international dimensions. But the region must come to terms with dealing with a non-traditional U.S. president who does not abide by — even rejects—the traditional principles of international relations. Moreover, his first 100 days cannot confirm that President Trump has a clear vision about the prevailing crises in the Middle East region or their dimensions, implications or methods of termination.

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