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Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

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DIEGO PAGLIARULO, JAN 3 2017

“One of the things that I’ve learned to appreciate more as President,” Barack Obama told reporter David Remnick (2014), “is you are essentially a relay swimmer in a river full of rapids, and that river is history.” As Obama took over from his predecessor in January 2009, the US economy was in the midst of the greatest financial crisis since the Great Depression of the 1930s. The American military machine was stuck into two major overseas quagmires, Afghanistan and Iraq. During his two mandates, the 44th president of the United States concentrated his efforts on restructuring and reviving the American economy and social fabric, while disentangling as much as possible the US from military commitments in the Middle East. Eight years on, Obama and his staff leave behind them a stronger and more orderly United States. As the president himself recognizes, however, the next administration will face the difficult task of building upon that legacy (Obama, 2016).

The Middle East was a key testing ground for Obama’s foreign policy. Events such as the Arab Spring, the NATO-led multinational military intervention in Libya, the Syrian civil war, and the tough process that led to the Iran nuclear deal can be seen as the formative passages of the “Obama Doctrine” (Chollet, 2016; Friedman, 2015; Goldberg, 2016). Dealing with the many crises that tragically still torment the Middle East is likely to be a defining challenge for the incoming Trump administration as well (Nasr, 2016). After all, the region has been a longstanding major source of concern for American leaders due to its eternal religious and cultural relevance, a strategically pivotal location, huge oil reserves, interlocked and intractable conflicts, and the persistence of major security threats such as terrorism and the risk of nuclear proliferation. In addition, as discussed below, Trump’s key national security advisers turn out either to have had extensive experience in the Middle East, or to hold very strong opinions about the region – in fact, some of them happen to have both extensive experience and strong opinions. Hence, as inauguration day approaches, an examination of the president-elect’s and his advisers’ attitudes towards the Middle East can help us develop a better sense of the overall national security outlook of the incoming Trump administration.

A Jacksonian Presidency

Trump’s personal outlook and leadership style are likely to play a major role in his Middle East policy – as well as in his administration’s overall foreign policy approach. Trump’s rise and success, however, have been a puzzle for analysts and observers of American politics. Even before entering the Republican race for the nomination, Trump was very well known to the general public as an entertaining but controversial public figure and TV personality. Trump’s campaign statements have often been inconsistent and alarmingly hyperbolic. The xenophobic tone of many of his campaign statements and his praise for the ruling style of past and present authoritarian leaders have dismayed and alarmed a great many commentators – even within the conservative camp (Coleburn, 2016; Kagan, 2016). However, oddly enough for a billionaire who is the heir of a real estate empire (Swanson, 2016), Trump’s political message has been anti-elite and populist. In fact, despite being the Republican frontrunner, Trump has often defied the orthodoxy of his own party, both in the field of economic policy and in the realm of foreign policy. Such an approach may have embarrassed a great many leading Republican policy-makers, but it served him very well in the Republican primaries, and eventually turned out to be a winning strategy in the actual presidential race, although in terms of popular vote he was strongly outperformed by Hillary Clinton (Wasserman, 2016). In the domain of foreign policy, Trump has fiercely defied the internationalist consensus that has characterized American foreign policy since

Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

the Second World War (Wright, 2016). His message has reflected a nationalist and isolationist outlook at odds with America's leading role and responsibilities in today's international affairs (Diamond and Collison, 2016).

Trump's success has raised serious concerns regarding the state of American politics as well as the future of America's role in the world, but may sound less surprising for students of American history. In fact, as suggested by his chief strategist, Steve Bannon, we can draw a parallel between Trump's incendiary but successful campaign style and the aggressive, controversial, and successful political approach adopted by Andrew Jackson in the XIX century (Wolff, 2016). Jackson famously challenged the elitist trend that characterized the early workings of the American political system – and such an approach ensured him the presidency from 1829 to 1837 (Inskeep, 2016). His success, however came along with a controversial propensity for intolerance and recklessness. Jackson's political experience has also strongly influenced the way a great many Americans see the international role of the US. As famously observed by Walter Russell Mead (2002: 218-263), according to the Jacksonian worldview, Americans should mind their business and avoid entanglement with the rest of the world. However, when foreigners threaten the US, the nation must respond with devastating force.

Most of Trump's outspoken, unconventional, often provocative, and sometimes dismaying campaign statements can be understood at least in part as attempts to catch attention and strengthen his image as an outsider. However, it is reasonable to assume that such statements – along with Trump's cabinet picks – also signal the policy outlook the new administration is determined to follow. As Trump and his cabinet prepare to take office, the review of the statements of this modern "Jacksonian" president and his closest advisers suggests that, as far as the Middle East is concerned, the central issues that inform the administration's strategic outlook are the Syrian crisis, the challenge posed by Islamic State, and puzzle of US-Iran relations.

Syria And Islamic State: "Counter-Terrorism" vs. "Nation-Building"

As a candidate, Trump fiercely criticized America's policy in the Middle East. Trump repeatedly expressed contempt for longstanding Arab partners of the US such as Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries, on the ground that Washington gives them protection without getting enough in return (Meet the Press, 2015; The New York Times, 2016a). During the campaign, however, Trump showed a radically different attitude toward Israel. The new president described Israel as "our great friend and the one true Democracy in the Middle East," and frequently declared – with perhaps debatable accuracy – that his predecessors were not supportive enough (Trump, 2016a). What Trump's rhetoric appears to suggest, at any rate, is that the new president appreciates Israel's military prowess as a valuable asset for America's security policy.

In fact, as far as the Middle East is concerned, military power appears to be a central concern for the new president. Trump, however, seems inclined to conceive the US military role in the region more in terms of "counter-terrorism" than in terms of stabilization or "nation-building." As he stated during a campaign speech, "If I become President, the era of nation-building will be ended" (Politico Staff, 2016). Although he has constantly refused to outline a detailed and articulated policy approach toward Middle Eastern trouble spots such as Syria, during the campaign he stated that under his leadership US military interventions would be muscular and would likely not be restrained. As he famously and bluntly declared, he would "bomb the sh*t" out of Islamic State (IS, AKA ISIS or Daesh), or "terrorists" in general. He also added that he would then seize the oilfields controlled by IS in the region and enlist American oil companies to manage them (Engel, 2015; The New York Times, 2016a). This may suggest that in the military sphere, Trump is inclined toward a lethal but "light footprint" approach, with emphasis on targeted drone strikes and special operation forces raids. In a somewhat consistent way, Trump has also expressed praise for Middle Eastern strongmen and regret for the US decision to do little to prevent, or to actively favor, the fall of long standing Middle Eastern dictators such as Egypt's Hosni Mubarak and Libya's Muammar Qaddafi during the Arab uprisings of 2011. According to Trump, the US should not lecture Middle Eastern regimes on civil liberties but rather focus on how effective they are at suppressing "terrorism" in the region (Weinstein, 2015; The New York Times, 2016a). This quintessentially realist rhetoric suggests that he would be ready to reach out even to dictator Bashar al-Assad in the quest for a settlement in the Syrian civil war (The New York Times, 2016a; Wintour, 2016).

Other aspects that characterize the attitude of Trump and his staff toward the Middle East, however, point in the

Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

direction of a much more expansive and ideology-driven policy approach. Top figures in Trump's national security team – including early and close political advisers such as Bannon and general Michael Flynn – are rather hawkish and inclined toward an assertive and interventionist approach. Both Bannon and Flynn seem to support the idea of a somewhat civilizational clash between the US – that they see as the leader of the “West,” or the “Judeo-Christian West” – and “Radical Islam” (Bergen, 2016; Feder, 2016; Friedman, 2016; Ricks, 2016). Flynn – who has been appointed national security adviser – describes “Radical Islam” as a “totalitarian ideology” and argues that it is engaged in a “world war” against the “West,” particularly against the US and Israel. The strategy he proposes is a massive, World War II-style military, economic, and diplomatic effort to crush “Radical Islamists,” discredit their ideology, and deny them safe havens (Flynn and Ledeen, 2016: 1-12, 113-156). Even though they reject Vladimir Putin's authoritarian tendencies, both Bannon and Flynn have also made the case for increased cooperation with Russia against “Radical Islam” in the Middle East (Feder, 2016; Flynn and Ledeen, 2016: 94-96; Priest, 2016). Trump himself seems to share enthusiastically such an outlook. As he suggested during a campaign speech, the fight against “Radical Islam” should become a major theme of his national security policy as well as the basis to give a new meaning and purpose to NATO and to America's alliance network in the Middle East (Politico Staff, 2016). In a major break from the orthodoxy of the Republican party, Trump has often declared his admiration for Putin, and has made clear that he will seek greater cooperation with the Kremlin on a broad range of security issues, especially Middle Eastern policy (Bradner, 2015; Labott, 2016; Shapiro, 2016: 4; Wright, 2016). As far as the region is concerned, Trump's choice of Rex Tillerson – ExxonMobil's CEO and a recipient of the Russia's “Order of Friendship” award – as secretary of state seems to confirm both a sensitivity to the interests of the oil industry and a desire to get closer and broader cooperation with Putin (Calamur, 2016; Mitchell, 2016).

As a matter of fact, it should be noted that the apparently unconventional and often incendiary rhetoric adopted by Trump and his advisers reflects a worldview that has been advocated for a long time by a number of conservative ideologues and policy-makers. In fact, it seems fair to draw parallels between the concepts promoted by Trump national security team and many of the ideas that informed the “War on Terror” launched by the George W. Bush administration in the aftermath of 9/11. In particular, the idea of a civilizational confrontation between the US and “Radical Islam” echoes Samuel Huntington's (1993; 1997) “Clash of Civilizations” thesis and – perhaps even more closely – the conception of America's struggle against terrorist groups such as Al Qaeda as “World War IV” famously articulated by Norman Podhoretz (2004). Even the idea of cooperating with foreign strongmen, in spite of their poor human rights record, for the sake of winning a greater existential conflict is not that new to conservative foreign policy thinking (Flynn and Ledeen, 2016: 90-93; Kirkpatrick, 1979).

In sum, as far as statements on Syria and Islamic State can help us understand Trump's and his advisers' strategic outlook, we can expect the new administration to care little about the nature and human rights record of the political regimes it deals with and to focus instead on the military contribution US partners can provide in the struggle against violent extremist groups. However, it should be noted that in fact such a “counter-terrorism” approach doesn't necessarily reflect an “isolationist” mood, nor does it imply a smaller military involvement in the region. As the architects of the “War on Terror” painfully discovered in Afghanistan and Iraq, in practical terms the distinction between “nation-building” and “counter-terrorism” turns out to be much more blurred than abstract theoretical reasoning may suggest (Jones, 2010; Ricks, 2007). Furthermore, it is not very clear whether Trump and his advisers find any significant difference between the vision promoted by extremist and violent groups such as Al Qaeda and Islamic State and today's mainstream Muslim faith, nor what kind of social and economic model they refer to when they speak of “the West,” or “the Judeo-Christian West,” or when they make the case for reform in the Muslim world. What does seem clear, however, is that such a civilizational struggle would require a massive and open-ended effort.

Team Trump and Iran

When it comes to the Middle East, America's policy toward Iran is another important but ambivalent indicator of Trump's foreign policy outlook. Iran has been for decades the nemesis of the US in the region. Relations between the two countries, however, have become less confrontational since the July 2015 nuclear deal. The agreement – one of the most notable diplomatic achievements of the Obama administration – aims at ensuring the non-military development of Iran's nuclear program, in return for the gradual lifting of international economic sanctions against the Tehran regime. In a somewhat rare display of consistency with longstanding Republican orthodoxy, Trump harshly

Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

criticized the deal and argued it was negotiated poorly (Baker, 2015; Republican Platform 2016, Smilowitz, 2016). The new administration's animosity toward Iran, however, appears to go beyond the subtleties of the art of deal-making. General Flynn, for example, writes that Iran is the "linchpin" of a large and variegated "international alliance of evil countries and movements" that viciously opposes the US and its Western allies. He sees the Tehran regime as the harshest and most irreconcilable competitor of the US in the Middle East, as well as an existential threat to Israel, and has repeatedly made the case for a much more confrontational stance toward Iran (Flynn and Ledeen, 2016: 76-77, 79-94; Priest, 2016). Trump's pick for secretary of defense, former CENTCOM commander and recently retired general James Mattis, seems prepared to uphold the July 2015 deal. However, he too seems rather wary of Iran, and supports an assertive attitude toward the Tehran regime (De Luce and Mcleary, 2016; Stewart, 2016).

A confrontational attitude toward Iran might please some regional allies of the US such as Israel and Saudi Arabia (Bruton, 2016; Peterson, 2016). In fact, the Iran nuclear agreement is not a "grand bargain" (Litwak, 2015); the normalization of relations between Iran and the US is also far from granted. Yet the deal seems to serve quite well the economic interests of both the US and its major Western allies (Aleem, 2016; Motevalli and Soper, 2016). Even more importantly, the deal does provide a credible set of incentives and a serious international monitoring framework to ensure the non-military development of Iran's nuclear program (Lewis, 2015). Scrapping the deal would remove these checks and incentives. As it was the case prior to the deal, preserving international consensus around an effective sanctions regime would be an extremely difficult and probably short-lived effort (Lorber, 2016). Since it is very hard indeed to imagine any responsible leader engaging in a full scale, Iraq War-style effort to bring about regime change in Iran, the only feasible military options available would be the threat of, or resort to, occasional US or Israeli military strikes against suspected Iranian nuclear military installations (Pollack, 2013: 103-104, 288-289). Such an approach, however, would by no means ensure that Iran does not get a nuclear bomb. In fact, it would likely encourage the Tehran regime to pursue a clandestine and highly protected military nuclear program, and that in turn would significantly raise the risk of another major military crisis in an area that is already riven by multiple and interlocking conflicts (Weaver, 2016).

The Middle East and the Elusive Quest for a "Trump Doctrine"

The 2016 US presidential race has prompted a major rethinking of the internationalist consensus that has informed American foreign policy-making at least since the end of the Second World War. Although his nationalist and isolationist rhetoric is at odds with America's leading role in international affairs, Trump seems to have cleverly interpreted a popular trend. As a matter of fact, we may argue that one of Trump's greatest political skills is indeed his capacity to modulate his outlook and his political message according to his audience, as well as to the political circumstances of the moment. Hence, during the Trump presidency even being an "isolationist," may eventually mean something different than being ready to disengage from world affairs. Trump's instinct and rhetorical skills, however, also point to a weakness: an extreme difficulty to devise clear, credible, and sustainable policies, on both the domestic and the international level. As a result, what we are left with as inauguration day approaches is great uncertainty, particularly as far as foreign policy is concerned. An examination of Trump's outlook concerning the Middle East can nonetheless at least help assess the practical and ideological patterns that define the way the new administration sees the world.

Trump may turn out to be a pragmatist. After all, he proudly sees himself as a great "deal-maker." According to Max Boot (2016), beyond the blatant differences in terms of style and rhetoric, Trump's foreign policy may in fact show a substantial degree of continuity with the foreign policy approach of the Obama administration. In fact, during a major campaign speech, Trump himself (2016b) argued that he seeks "Peace Through Strength" and that "In a Trump Administration, our actions in the Middle East will be tempered by realism." This may be a daunting perspective, Boot argues. Others – including your writer – may think that in fact continuity with the cautious, realist, and pragmatic approach adopted by Obama would serve very well both the US and the rest of the world.

However, the foreign policy of the Trump administration may also turn out to be much more adventurist and much less pragmatic. American military power remains unchallenged (SIPRI, 2016: 17); however, Trump has pledged to spend more on defense and to embark in a massive military buildup (Tiefer, 2016; Trump, 2016b). He has also often argued that the US doesn't "win" enough and has loudly expressed his desire to "make America respected again"

Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

(The New York Times, 2016b; Trump 2016a). Trump's Jacksonian rhetoric and the worldview he and his closest advisers have been promoting throughout the presidential race – especially the frequent calls for a more belligerent approach toward “Radical Islam” and Iran – suggest that the Trump administration may have hard times resisting the temptation to undertake some major military adventure overseas, particularly in the Middle East (De Luce, Groll, O'Toole, and Jakes, 2016). From this point of view, the story of Trump and his foreign policy team may end up resembling that of Bush and the “Vulcans” – unilateralist but restrained at first, then increasingly messianic, militarist, and adventurist, with a major Middle Eastern military entanglement as the main theme (Mann, 2004). The Middle East has been for decades a magnet for American troops, and military interventions devised by strategists in Washington and intended to be short and decisive have consistently ended up in costly and bloody quagmires. Moreover, from a broader perspective, it seems reasonable to argue that – as it was the case during the Bush presidency – a new major American military commitment in the region would overstretch America's global power and complicate relations with its allies.

Conclusions

Donald Trump has proved to be a very good observer and a shrewd interpreter of the popular mood. He also seems prepared to change his tune for the sake of personal and political accomplishment. He has backed off from some of his most controversial campaign statements and disavowed some of his most vocal but extremist supporters. In contrast to his promise to “drain the swamp” in Washington, he has appointed quite a few insiders to key cabinet posts (The New York Times, 2016b; Todd, Murray, and Dann, 2016). Such an approach served him very well during the 2016 presidential race, and it is reasonable to expect Trump to stick to it as he prepares to run for a second mandate in four years. All that suggests that Trump's foreign policy may turn out to be more pragmatic and less bullish than suggested by many of his campaign statements. Trump and his top advisers, however, seem to share a defined, quintessentially Jacksonian worldview. They also seem to share a strong, staunchly assertive outlook concerning the Middle East, and they appear confident that they can do much better than their predecessors in the region – as well as in the rest of the world. As they take office, the new president and his national security staff should remember the key lessons learned in the Middle East by their predecessors. First, power – no matter how great or apparently unchallenged – always has limits. Second, unilateral actions always produce multilateral, unexpected, and often unwanted consequences. After all, as German general Von Moltke the Elder famously argued, no plan survives the first contact with the enemy (Stevenson, 2005: 45).

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Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

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Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

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Donald Trump, the Middle East, and American Foreign Policy

Written by Diego Pagliarulo

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