

Research Paper

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US Election Note

Middle East Policy After 2016

Summary

- Despite President Barack Obama's efforts to 'rebalance' US strategy towards Asia, the Middle East has dominated his administration's foreign policy agenda and will continue to demand significant attention and resources from his successor.
- Obama's presidency has not resolved the question of whether the United States' quest for primacy in the Middle East is desirable; how the next president answers this question will frame his or her approach to Middle East policy.
- Hillary Clinton seeks to renew the US pursuit of primacy in the Middle East. This agenda is likely to be reflected in a more assertive stance towards Syria, more vigorous efforts to contain Iran and a return to more traditional relations with established Middle Eastern allies, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia.
- Donald Trump questions whether regional primacy is in the interest of the United States, rejects regime change and wants to work with Russia against ISIS. But it is unclear whether such realist impulses would be matched by policy given the likely presence of hawkish Middle East advisers in a Trump administration, while perceptions that Trump is anti-Muslim could limit cooperation from states in the region.
- Under either Clinton or Trump, Middle East policy is likely to become more interventionist and confrontational than it has been in Obama's second term.

Introduction

As president, Barack Obama has sought to ‘rebalance’ US geopolitical strategy by shifting high-level attention and resources from the Middle East to Asia. Despite this, the Middle East has largely dominated his administration’s foreign policy agenda, and it will continue demanding significant attention and resources from his successor.

The next president will have to craft a strategy that addresses a daunting array of challenges at a time of consequential change in the Middle East. These challenges include Iran’s continued rise, Russia’s expanding role, Turkey’s potential realignment away from the West, the growing attraction of jihadi ideas and activism across the Sunni world, and mounting concern about Saudi Arabia’s long-term stability. On the other hand, the next president will be under less pressure than any president since the late 1960s to seriously address the Israeli–Palestinian conflict. This Election Note assesses the strategic and political contexts in which US Middle East policy is likely to develop under the next president, the approaches of the Democratic and Republican nominees, and the international implications of these approaches.

Background

Debate over Middle East policy in the election campaign has been driven by competing perspectives on the demands of US strategy in the Middle East since the end of the Cold War and, especially, since 9/11. On one side, a quintessentially centrist Democrat – Hillary Clinton – endorses the foreign policy establishment’s perceived imperative that the United States pursue security and diplomatic primacy in the region. Against this, a strikingly unconventional Republican candidate, Donald Trump, wants to put ‘America first’ and questions whether Middle East primacy really serves US interests.

The United States has aspired to be the Middle East’s dominant power since the Second World War. For decades successive US administrations have considered military supremacy in the Middle East indispensable to maintaining influence over the flow of hydrocarbons from the region to international markets – an agenda that, in turn, each administration has deemed essential to bolstering America’s global standing. US policy-makers have long seen alliances with Saudi Arabia, Iran (until the revolution of 1979), Israel (after the 1967 Arab–Israeli War) and Egypt (since the 1978 Camp David Accords) as key to realizing these related ambitions.

The United States’ quest for regional dominance was constrained in significant ways by the Cold War.¹ However, as the Cold War ended, this quest entered a new phase with the Gulf War, when the

¹ Keohane, R. (1984/2005), *After Hegemony: Cooperation and Discord in the World Political Economy*, Princeton: Princeton University Press, pp. 139–41, 150–81, 190–95, 202–06; Randall, S. (2005), *United States Foreign Oil Policy Since World War I: For Profits and Security*, Montreal and Kingston: McGill-Queen’s University Press, pp. 110–318; Khalidi, R. (2009), *Sowing Crisis: The Cold War and American Dominance in the Middle East*, Boston: Beacon, pp. 6–16, 40–62, 107–11; Stokes, D. and Raphael, S. (2010), *Global Energy Security and American Hegemony*, Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, pp. 1–53; and Leverett, F. and Mann Leverett, H. (2012), ‘The Balance of Power, Public Goods, and the Lost Art of Grand Strategy: American Policy toward the Persian Gulf and Rising Asia in the 21st Century’, *Penn State Journal of Law and International Affairs*, 1:2, pp. 216–18, November 2012.

George H. W. Bush administration deployed nearly 1 million troops to defend the foundations of a pro-American regional order against an expansionist Iraq and then sought to consolidate that order by leaving US forces on the ground. The pursuit of primacy continued to drive Middle East policy during the presidencies of both Bill Clinton and – in intensified, post-9/11 mode – George W. Bush. Even after what many around the world and (by now) most Americans consider George W. Bush’s counterproductive wars in the region, many mainstream US elites – including Republican neo-conservatives and Democratic liberal interventionists – believe that Middle East primacy remains vital to American security and prosperity.²

Barack Obama emerged as a presidential candidate partly because he challenged aspects of this regional primacy agenda. In the 2008 Democratic primaries, he distinguished himself from his main rival, Senator Hillary Clinton, by highlighting his opposition to the 2003 Iraq War (which Clinton had endorsed in the Senate) and advocating diplomacy with Iran (which Clinton had opposed). Eight years later, as his presidency approaches its end, Obama’s camp is crafting a narrative about how he put US Middle East policy on a more sustainable course by raising the threshold for US military intervention, reducing the United States’ on-the-ground military presence, and recalibrating relations with established yet problematic Israeli and Saudi allies. Arguably, Obama’s 2011 Libya campaign failed to meet his own criteria under which direct US military engagement would have been justified. By the president’s acknowledgment, this had negative results. But partly as a result of this experience, Obama has, his defenders say, more rigorously resisted pressure for large-scale military intervention in Syria, thus avoiding another Middle Eastern quagmire.³ Obama’s supporters also cite the 2015 Iran nuclear deal – the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) – as having strengthened the United States’ regional position by precluding Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons without the need for the United States to use force.⁴

‘Primacists’ claim that Obama’s high threshold for military action and his mishandling of long-time allies have eroded US influence in the Middle East, and that this has set the stage for the explosive emergence of Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and for Russia’s expanded regional role.⁵ More

² For critical assessments of this view, see Mearsheimer, J. (2011), ‘Imperial by Design’, *National Interest*, January/February 2011; and Leverett, F. and Mann Leverett, H. (2013), *Going to Tehran: Why America Must Accept the Islamic Republic of Iran*, New York: Metropolitan/Picador, pp. 1–11, 238–34.

³ Goldberg, J. (2016), ‘The Obama Doctrine’, *The Atlantic*, April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Tierney, D. (2016), ‘The Legacy of Obama’s “Worst Mistake”’, *The Atlantic*, 15 April 2016, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2016/04/obamas-worst-mistake-libya/478461/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Shapiro, J. (2016), ‘Speaking Nonsense to Power: Misadventures in Dissent Over Syria’, *War on the Rocks*, 24 June 2016, <http://warontherocks.com/2016/06/speaking-nonsense-to-power-misadventures-in-dissent-over-syria/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016). Obama and his associates also claim that he has bolstered the United States’ regional position by reinforcing security ties with Israel, Saudi Arabia and smaller Arab monarchies while deflecting their efforts to co-opt American power for their narrow interests; Goldberg, ‘The Obama Doctrine’ and Miller, A. (2016), ‘A Defense of Obama’s Middle East “Balancing Act”’, *Foreign Policy*, 15 August 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/15/a-defense-of-obamas-middle-east-balancing-act-syria-russia-iran-nsc/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

⁴ As president, Obama grew concerned that, if Iran kept developing fuel-cycle capabilities, he would face escalating pressure to strike Iranian nuclear facilities. He judged that the prospect of yet another US-initiated Middle Eastern war – to stop Iran from enriching uranium under international safeguards – would be potentially as damaging to the United States’ regional position as the Iraq invasion; see Leverett, F. and Mann Leverett, H. (2016), ‘Iran After the Nuclear Deal: A Rising Power’s Strategic Orientation’, *China International Strategy Review*; and Miller (2016), ‘A Defense of Obama’s Middle East “Balancing Act”’.

⁵ Easton, N. (2014), ‘Anne-Marie Slaughter on Obama’s Failure to Recognize ISIS Extremism’, *Fortune*, 17 October 2014, <http://fortune.com/2014/10/17/anne-marie-slaughter-on-obamas-failure-to-recognize-isis-extremism/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Bolton, J. (2015), ‘Putin Unleashed’, *Weekly Standard*, 12 October 2015, <http://www.weeklystandard.com/putin-unleashed/article/1039611> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Rogin, J. (2016), ‘Obama’s Biggest Mistake Isn’t Libya. It’s Syria’, *Bloomberg*, 11 April 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-04-11/obama-s-biggest-mistake-isn-t-libya-it-s-syria> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Ross, D. (2016), ‘Why Middle Eastern Leaders Are Talking to Putin, Not Obama’, *Politico*, 8 May 2016,

than a year after the JCPOA's conclusion, support for the agreement remains weak and mainstream US elites show growing concern that it is empowering Iran's regime.⁶ Alternatively, those on both the left and the right who see the primacy agenda as damaging to the United States' long-term position criticize Obama for falling short of his campaign pledge to end not just the Iraq War, but also the mindset behind it. Besides Libya, they cite Obama's limited but still destabilizing support for the overthrow of President Bashar al-Assad in Syria and anti-Americanism fuelled by drone strikes as proof of his failure to break with the hegemonic approach to the Middle East.⁷ At least some critics focused on human rights would add to this list of failures Obama's record on Egypt: first, his willingness to defend President Hosni Mubarak almost to the last in 2011, despite mounting popular protests against an autocratic regime; and the US administration's tepid reaction to the July 2013 military coup that deposed Egypt's democratically elected Muslim Brotherhood government.

Whatever one thinks of Obama's Middle East legacy, his presidency did not resolve the question of whether primacy in the region is desirable for the United States. Whether and how President Clinton or President Trump attempts to answer this question will frame her/his approach to high-priority Middle East challenges, including Syria, defining post-JCPOA policy towards Iran, and dealing with established allies such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.

Policy positions

Hillary Clinton

While Hillary Clinton is often portrayed as in effect running for Obama's third term, on Middle East policy the metaphor is potentially misleading. Clinton is as devoted to the 'primacist' approach to foreign policy as any Democrat at the uppermost levels of US politics, and she is committed to its continued pursuit in the Middle East. Indeed Obama's choice of Clinton as secretary of state during his first term surprised those expecting him to pursue a more realist approach to the region.

While Clinton's electoral strategy relies on Obama's support, she has publicly disagreed with or distanced herself from the parameters by which the president's camp now seeks to define his Middle East legacy. Her foreign policy advisory apparatus is vast and encompasses defenders of Obama's Middle East policies as well as critics of key elements of those policies.⁸ On balance, in a

<http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2016/05/putin-obama-middle-east-leaders-213867> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Krauthammer, C. (2016), 'The Price of Powerlessness', *Washington Post*, 18 August 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-price-of-powerlessness/2016/08/18/f61d2c34-6575-11e6-96c0-37533479f3f5_story.html?utm_term=.1ae02a8b82ed&wpisrc=nl_opinions&wpmm=1 (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

⁶ Solomon, J. (2016), 'Why the Ayatollah Thinks He Won', *Wall Street Journal*, 19 August 2016, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/why-the-ayatollah-thinks-he-won-1471627970> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

⁷ See, for example, Shapiro, J. (2016), 'Obama's Syria Failure is a Perfect Case Study in How Bad Foreign Policy Is Made', *Vox*, 16 March 2016, <http://www.vox.com/2016/3/16/11244980/obama-syria-policy> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Kristian, B. (2016), 'Obama's Drone Warfare Makes More Terrorists Than It Kills', *RealClearDefense*, 9 August 2016, http://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2016/08/09/obamas_drone_warfare_makes_more_terrorists_than_it_kills_109683.html (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

⁸ Rogin, J. (2016), 'Clinton Quietly Building Her Own National Security Council', *Bloomberg*, 28 January 2016, <https://www.bloomberg.com/view/articles/2016-01-28/clinton-quietly-building-her-own-national-security-council> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Hudson, J. (2016), 'Inside Hillary Clinton's Massive Foreign Policy Brain Trust', *Foreign Policy*, 10 February 2016,

Clinton administration liberal interventionists would likely have the upper hand over those with more realist outlooks, even if figures seen as relatively realist in their strategic orientation might take some cabinet-level posts. Clinton's views and her administration's probable composition suggest that, if she is elected president, her policies will be more militarily interventionist, more accommodating of traditional US allies and tougher on Iran than Obama's current posture – in other words, her approach would be evocative of Obama's first term, when she was secretary of state.

Syria would likely be an early arena in which these dynamics could apply. As secretary of state, Clinton championed the US intervention in Libya over opposition from the vice-president, the National Security Advisor and the Secretary of Defense.⁹ During Obama's second term, Clinton – as well as some of her prominent advisers and her running mate, Senator Tim Kaine – criticized the president's reluctance to support anti-Assad fighters more robustly (including by imposing no-fly zones), his reticence to enforce his 'red line' after the alleged use of chemical weapons by Syria's government, and the creeping prioritization of fighting ISIS over removing Assad. All these positions were viewed as failures and mistakes that diminished US credibility.¹⁰

Advisers likely to have major positions in a Clinton administration say that she would order a 'full review' of Syria policy as a 'first key task of her presidency'.¹¹ Options would probably include the establishment of no-fly zones (which Clinton's campaign now calls 'safe zones'), increased backing for anti-Assad fighters, and intensified public diplomacy that would seek to delegitimize Assad by classifying him as a war criminal. Whichever options her administration chose, they would likely be combined with expanded US military action – airstrikes, special forces operations and possibly the deployment of regular combat units – against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

A more assertive Syria policy would blend into another near-certain early focus for Clinton's Middle East strategy: more vigorous containment of Iran. During Obama's first term, Clinton restrained the development of substantive diplomatic engagement with Iran, including acceptance of the reality and (at least implicitly) the principle of safeguarded Iranian nuclear enrichment as essential to progress on the nuclear issue.¹² It was only in Obama's second term, when Clinton was no longer

<http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/02/10/inside-hillary-clintons-massive-foreign-policy-brain-trust/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Ghattas, K. (2016), 'The Democratic Party's Silence on Syria', *Foreign Policy*, 12 August 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/12/the-democratic-partys-silence-on-syria/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

⁹ Hastings, M. (2011), 'Inside Obama's War Room', *Rolling Stone*, 13 October 2011, <http://www.rollingstone.com/politics/news/inside-obamas-war-room-20111013> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Decker, J. and Shane, S. (2016), 'Hillary Clinton, 'Smart Power,' and a Dictator's Fall', *New York Times*, 27 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/hillary-clinton-libya.html> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Decker, J. and Shane, S. (2016), 'A New Libya, With 'Very Little Time Left'', *New York Times*, 27 February 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/02/28/us/politics/libya-isis-hillary-clinton.html> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016). In contrast to Obama, Clinton and her surrogates keep defending the intervention; see Friedersdorf, C. (2015), 'Hillary Defends Her Failed War in Libya', *The Atlantic*, 14 October 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2015/10/hillary-clinton-debate-libya/410437/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Steinberg, J. (2015), 'Why Hillary Was Right to Back Intervention in Libya', *Politico*, 21 October 2015, <http://www.politico.com/magazine/story/2015/10/hillary-clinton-2016-libya-intervention-213277> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Ghattas, K. (2016), 'Hillary Clinton Has No Regrets About Libya', *Foreign Policy*, 14 April 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/14/hillary-clinton-has-no-regrets-about-libya/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁰ Ghattas (2016), 'The Democratic Party's Silence on Syria'; Collins, E. (2016), 'Clinton Blames Obama for Libya, Syria Messes', *Politico*, 14 April 2016, <http://www.politico.com/blogs/2016-dem-primary-live-updates-and-results/2016/04/hillary-clinton-blames-obama-for-libya-syria-mess-221995> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Burns, N. (2016), 'Barack Obama Has Risked US Credibility in the Middle East', *Financial Times*, 22 March 2016, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/3590f250-ef6b-11e5-9f20-c3a047354386.html#axzz44GmO1cUL> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹¹ Sherlock, R. (2016), 'Hillary Clinton Will Reset Syria Policy Against 'Murderous' Assad Regime', *Telegraph*, 29 July 2016, <http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016/07/29/hillary-clinton-will-reset-syria-policy-against-murderous-assad/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹² Leverett and Mann Leverett (2013), *Going to Tehran*, pp. 134–38, 354–67.

secretary of state, that the president could translate his view of the downside risks of US-initiated war with Iran into more serious nuclear diplomacy with Tehran.¹³ Once the JCPOA was concluded, Clinton endorsed it. But she has elaborated that it ‘isn’t the start of some larger diplomatic opening’ and that America needs to do more with its traditional regional allies to ‘confront’ Iran ‘across the board’.¹⁴

Clinton’s statements and those of her advisers suggest that her administration would take early steps to reaffirm the Persian Gulf as a US vital interest, and that it would start working to build a regional coalition explicitly to counter Iranian ‘proxies’.¹⁵ A Clinton administration would also likely intensify criticism of political conditions in Iran, with an implication that the United States would be prepared to lend overt support to popular calls for fundamental political change – precisely at a time when President Hassan Rouhani, less popular domestically as a result of US unwillingness to provide more tangible sanctions relief under the JCPOA, faces re-election.¹⁶ Clinton has also urged new sanctions over Iran’s missile tests, even though the Obama administration says that these do not violate the JCPOA.

For Clinton, toughness towards Syria and Iran would restore momentum to the United States’ primacist agenda of bringing as much of the Middle East as possible under a highly militarized, US-led security order while ostracizing and undermining those unwilling to subordinate their strategic independence so fundamentally. To this end, a Clinton administration would return to more traditional modes of interaction with established Middle Eastern allies compared with the approach adopted by Obama. For Clinton, two of these allies, Israel and Saudi Arabia, remain essential to forestalling the emergence of independent regional powers. Today, the leading candidate for such status is Iran. Clinton’s circle believes that, to contain Iran, it is vital ‘to be raising the confidence of our Sunni partners that the United States is going to be there’ to protect these partners’ regional positions.¹⁷

Obama has boosted weapons sales to traditional partners like Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as military and intelligence cooperation with them, to unprecedented levels.¹⁸ But he has also

¹³ According to Iranian, US and Omani officials, it was only with Clinton gone that Obama sent Deputy Secretary of State William Burns to Oman in March 2013 to meet secretly with Iranian diplomats and convey, for the first time, US recognition that a deal would necessarily include acceptance of safeguarded enrichment in Iran. See also Rozen, L. (2015), ‘Inside the Secret U.S.-Iran Diplomacy That Sealed Nuke Deal’, *Al-Monitor*, 11 August 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html#> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016). This launched the diplomatic process that culminated in the JCPOA. Throughout the process, Clinton held that the administration should insist on ‘zero enrichment’ as part of any deal. See, for example, Goldberg, J. (2014), ‘Hillary Clinton: ‘Failure’ to Help Syrian Rebels Led to the Rise of ISIS’ *The Atlantic*, August 2014, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/08/hillary-clinton-failure-to-help-syrian-rebels-led-to-the-rise-of-isis/375832/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁴ Galston, W. (2015), ‘Hillary Clinton on the Iran Nuclear Deal: ‘Distrust and Verify’’, Brookings Institution, 9 September 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2015/09/09/hillary-clinton-on-the-iran-nuclear-deal-distrust-and-verify/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁵ *Ibid.* and Sullivan, J. (2016), ‘Remarks on Foreign Policy and Campaign 2016’, Truman National Security Project and the Truman Center for National Policy, 24 June 2016, <https://www.c-span.org/video/?411726-4/jake-sullivan-foreign-policy-campaign-2016> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁶ Galston (2015), ‘Hillary Clinton on the Iran Nuclear Deal’. Clinton surrogate Howard Dean, a paid advocate for the Iranian opposition group *mujahedin-e khalq* (MEK), told an MEK rally in Paris in July 2016 that Iran policy would get tougher under a President Clinton; see Mackey, R. (2016), ‘Newt Gingrich Pals Around with Terrorists Saddam Hussein Once Armed’, *Intercept*, 10 July 2016, <https://theintercept.com/2016/07/10/hey-donald-trump-heres-newt-gingrich-palling-around-terrorists-saddam-armed/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁷ Sullivan (2016), ‘Remarks on Foreign Policy and Campaign 2016’.

¹⁸ White House (2016), ‘Fact Sheet: Implementation of the U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council Strategic Partnership’, 21 April 2016, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2016/04/21/fact-sheet-implementation-us-gulf-cooperation-council-strategic> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and White House (2015), ‘Five Things You Need to Know About the U.S.-Israel Relationship Under President Obama’, 1 March

sometimes spoken out publicly when he has judged that they were acting against their own – or US – interests. A Clinton administration would largely stop such criticism. While it might superficially renew US efforts to mediate the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, it would be highly unlikely to push for outcomes limiting Israel’s strategic autonomy. Similarly, a Clinton administration would almost certainly be disinclined to press Egypt’s government for serious political reform.¹⁹ Obama’s resistance to more direct US involvement in Syria unsettled allies whose security strategies depend on a US commitment to Middle East primacy. Also unsettling for some was the (ultimately theoretical) prospect that the JCPOA might enable wider US–Iranian rapprochement. A Clinton administration would reassure these allies that the United States was once again fully committed to being the Middle East’s prime power and the ultimate manager of its security dynamics.

Donald Trump

As noted, Donald Trump questions whether Middle East primacy is really in the United States’ interest – and he assesses that interest relatively narrowly in terms of direct material economic and political benefits and costs.²⁰ He rejects US-instigated regime change, presenting himself as a prescient opponent of the invasion of Iraq in 2003 and of the intervention in Libya in 2011 (even though he made statements supporting both actions before and as they were launched).²¹ Early in his candidacy, Trump made statements that broke with mainstream policy views on some aspects of the US–Israeli special relationship.²² He now professes support for Israel’s security and strategic preferences with as much ardour as any major-party presidential candidate, at least on the surface. Overall, though, Trump seems less inclined to view long-term US allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia as partners in projecting US power and influence, and more inclined to question the United States’ seemingly unconditional security ties to them.²³ His rhetoric also suggests that he is more comfortable than most members of the US policy elite with elements of classical balance-of-power thinking (e.g. great power concerts, spheres of influence), which would make him less concerned about the involvement of other major powers – such as Russia – in the region.²⁴

2015, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/blog/2015/03/01/5-things-you-need-know-about-us-israel-relationship-under-president-obama> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

¹⁹ Landler, M. (2016), ‘U.N. Meeting a Farewell for Obama, and a Dress Rehearsal for Clinton’, *New York Times*, 16 September 2016, <http://mobile.nytimes.com/2016/09/17/us/politics/united-nations-obama-clinton.html> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁰ Sanger, D. and Haberman, M. (2016), ‘In Donald Trump’s Worldview, America Comes First, and Everybody Else Pays’, *New York Times*, 26 March 2016, <http://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/27/us/politics/donald-trump-foreign-policy.html> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²¹ Fallows, J. (2016), ‘Was Donald Trump Really Against the Iraq War?’, *The Atlantic*, 14 February 2016,

<http://www.theatlantic.com/politics/archive/2016/02/donald-trump-says-he-was-against-the-iraq-war-thats-not-how-i-remember-it/462804/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Haberman, M. (2016), ‘Donald Trump Questioned About Previous Positions on Libya and Iraq’, *New York Times*, 6 June 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/2016/06/07/us/politics/donald-trump-questioned-about-previous-positions-on-libya-and-iraq.html?_r=0 (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²² See, for example, Pace, J., Colvin, J. and Peoples, S. (2015), ‘AP Conversation: Trump Says Mideast Peace Rests with Israel’, Associated Press, 3 December 2015, <https://www.yahoo.com/news/ap-conversation-trump-calls-mideast-peace-toughest-deal-082050498--election.html?pref=gs> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Diamond, J. (2015), ‘Trump to Republican Jewish Coalition: ‘I’m a Negotiator Like You’’, CNN, 3 December 2015, <http://www.cnn.com/2015/12/03/politics/donald-trump-rjc-negotiator/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); Hensch, M. (2016), ‘Trump: I’ll Be ‘Neutral’ on Israel and Palestine’, *The Hill*, 17 February 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/269806-trump-ill-be-neutral-on-israel-and-palestine> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²³ Knowles, D. (2015), ‘Donald Trump Adds Saudi Arabia to List of Countries Ripping Off the U.S.’, Bloomberg, 16 August 2015, <http://www.bloomberg.com/politics/articles/2015-08-16/donald-trump-adds-saudi-arabia-to-list-of-countries-ripping-off-the-u-s-> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Hensch, M. (2016), ‘Trump: ‘I Would Want to Protect Saudi Arabia’’, *The Hill*, 5 January 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/264748-trump-we-made-iran-a-power> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁴ While prominent realists like Stephen Walt reject Trump as a standard-bearer, his views are evocative – if clumsily so – of some aspects of realist thinking; see Walt, S. (2016), ‘Donald Trump: Keep Your Hands Off the Foreign-Policy Ideas I Believe In’, *Foreign Policy*, 8 August 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/08/08/donald-trump-keep-your-hands-off-the-foreign-policy-ideas-i-believe-in-nation-building->

While Trump may appear to offer an alternative to Clinton's adherence to the concept of US primacy, it is unclear whether, as president, he would translate this into coherent policy. His rhetoric on Middle East strategy is inconsistent. For example, he can, in the same speech, denounce regime change and nation-building while insisting that the United States should 'take the oil' after intervening in countries such as Iraq and Libya.²⁵ Beyond Trump's views, one must also consider the potential influence of advisers who remain invested in the US quest for Middle East primacy. Trump's advisory apparatus is nowhere near as large as Clinton's, and many neo-conservative and other Republican foreign policy experts have taken a public stance against his candidacy and have pledged not to serve in a Trump administration.²⁶ Nevertheless, his advisers include figures who have taken hardline neo-conservative positions on Middle East issues.²⁷

On this point, it is noteworthy that George W. Bush ran for president in 2000 on a less interventionist foreign policy platform than his Democratic opponent, Vice-President Al Gore. In office Bush reversed course on advice from neo-conservatives in his administration and as a result of his own reaction to the 9/11 attacks. Trump's neo-conservative advisers and his tendency to react impulsively in certain situations could similarly steer his Middle East strategy towards military intervention. Moreover, Trump's body of statements and proposals widely perceived as anti-Muslim could drive public opinion in Middle Eastern societies in ways that would make it hard for the region's governments to be seen as cooperating with a Trump administration.

On Syria, Trump argues – in line with his opposition to regime change – that the United States should not seek to bring down Assad and his government.²⁸ A Trump administration would likely prioritize fighting ISIS over removing Assad. He favours (without offering specifics) intensified US military action to 'destroy' ISIS, and has expressed interest in cooperating with Russia on this goal.²⁹ But if Trump ever thought he had been double-crossed by President Vladimir Putin, the likelihood of intensified US military action in Syria could rise. At the same time, he has endorsed no-fly zones over Syria to protect civilians – something the United States would surely have to lead in implementing, over objections from Syria, Russia and others.

united-states/ (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Brooks, R. (2016), 'Donald Trump Has a Coherent, Realist Foreign Policy', *Foreign Policy*, 12 April 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/04/12/donald-trump-has-a-coherent-realist-foreign-policy/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁵ Tharoor, I. (2016), 'Trump's View of the Middle East Would Make Sense If Nobody Lived In the Middle East', *Washington Post*, 15 August 2016, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/worldviews/wp/2016/08/15/trumps-view-of-the-middle-east-would-make-sense-if-nobody-lived-in-the-middle-east/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁶ *New York Times* (2016), 'A Letter from GOP National Security Officials Opposing Donald Trump', 8 August 2016, http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2016/08/08/us/politics/national-security-letter-trump.html?_r=0 (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁷ These include Newt Gingrich, another paid MEK spokesman, who told the July 2016 rally referenced in footnote 16 that US policy would get tougher under a President Trump; see Mackey (2016), 'Newt Gingrich Pals Around with Terrorists Saddam Hussein Once Armed'. They also include Walid Phares, adviser to Mitt Romney's 2012 campaign, and Zalmay Khalilzad, an architect of Bush's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq. More recently, Trump's advisory team has taken in former Representative Michele Bachmann and former Director of Central Intelligence James Woolsey; see Yilek, C. (2016), 'Michele Bachmann: I'm Advising Trump on Foreign Policy', *The Hill*, 21 August 2016, <http://thehill.com/blogs/ballot-box/presidential-races/292126-michele-bachmann-donald-trump-foreign-policy> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Landay, J. (2016), 'Donald Trump Hires James Woolsey, Former CIA Chief Who Urged Iraq War', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 13 September 2016, <http://www.smh.com.au/world/us-election/donald-trump-hires-james-woolsey-former-cia-chief-who-urged-iraq-war-20160912-grewkf.html> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁸ Gass, N. (2016), 'Trump Pledges to Hit Islamic State, Not Assad', *Politico*, 20 May 2016, <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/05/trump-islamic-state-syria-223399> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

²⁹ Political Insider (2015), 'Donald Trump Announces His Plan to DESTROY the Islamic State', 11 August 2015, <http://www.thepoliticalinsider.com/breaking-news-donald-trump-announces-his-plan-to-destroy-the-islamic-state-isis/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016).

Trump has been scathing about the Iran nuclear agreement. But he has said that, as president, he would not rip it up. Part of his critique focuses on the Obama administration's failure to use the agreement to create business opportunities for US firms in Iran. Trump would be unlikely to pull out of the JCPOA unilaterally; he has acknowledged that, as long as Iran complies with its terms, there will be little international appetite for scrapping it. Trump might even want to explore options for US–Iranian commercial interaction. But if, as seems likely, this proves impossible on terms that a Trump administration would deem politically acceptable, it would revert to what he has described as 'polic[ing] that contract so tough they don't even have a chance' – in other words, implementing the JCPOA in such a way that Iran would eventually conclude that the United States was violating the accord and thus decide to withdraw.³⁰

Trump's self-image as a successful negotiator might push him to try mediating between Israelis and Palestinians, but he is no more likely than Clinton to push for a settlement that would seriously limit Israel's strategic options. A Trump administration would also be highly unlikely to have much interest in pressing allies in Egypt, Saudi Arabia and elsewhere over their internal political conditions.

International implications

For most international constituencies, US Middle East policy is unlikely to get 'better' under the next president. Instead, it will almost certainly become more interventionist and more confrontational than it has been during Obama's second term.

Neither a Clinton nor a Trump administration is likely to take steps to facilitate more tangible sanctions relief for Iran under the JCPOA. For those in Europe, Asia and elsewhere eager to expand economic ties to Iran, this will be an ongoing source of frustration. It also means that Iran's economic and strategic relations with non-Western powers such as China and Russia will probably develop faster and more extensively than relations with Europe and Japan, as the former have more channels for financing trade and investment in Iran that are uncompromised by residual US Iran-related financial sanctions.³¹ (South Korea is also creating channels to finance Iran-related trade and investment in euros.)

Beyond sanctions relief, the next US president is likely to be more confrontational towards Iran on several fronts – e.g. demanding to inspect non-nuclear military sites as part of implementation of the JCPOA, imposing new sanctions over Iran's missile programme and undertaking new efforts to contain its regional influence. These steps are virtually certain under Clinton, while at least some are probable under Trump. They will raise tensions between the United States and Iran, with potential escalatory fallout in the region.

³⁰ Sherfinski, D. (2015), 'Donald Trump on Iran Nuclear Deal: 'We Have a Horrible Contract, But We Do Have a Contract'', *Washington Times*, 4 September 2015, <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2015/sep/4/donald-trump-iran-nuclear-deal-we-have-horrible-co/> (accessed 20 Sep. 2016); and Saletan, W. (2016), 'Is Donald Trump the Only Leading Republican We Can Trust on Iran?', *Slate*, 19 January 2016, http://www.slate.com/articles/news_and_politics/politics/2016/01/donald_trump_is_the_only_serious_gop_candidate_who_hasn_t_promised_to_rip.html (accessed 29 Sep. 2016).

³¹ Leverett and Mann Leverett (2016), 'Iran After the Nuclear Deal'.

If Clinton wins, US policy towards Syria is likely to evolve in ways that will extend rather than wind down the conflict there, with profoundly negative implications for many constituencies – e.g. renewed refugee flows (especially to Europe) and growth in pro-jihadi sentiment among Sunni Muslims. If Trump wins, there could be renewed efforts to expand US–Russian cooperation on Syria, including in fighting ISIS and other jihadi groups as well as in developing a diplomatic process aimed at a political settlement. But this would depend on Trump and Putin maintaining minimally productive working relations. Also, perceptions that Trump is anti-Muslim could restrain Middle Eastern states’ cooperation with his administration.

Neither Clinton nor Trump is likely to engage on many of the Middle East’s biggest challenges, e.g. climate change, looming water shortages and the growing risk of instability in Saudi Arabia. Whether Clinton or Trump wins, the United States is unlikely to become more effective at brokering a negotiated resolution to the Israeli–Palestinian conflict.

All this means that, for Europe and Asia especially, political risk emanating from the Middle East will almost certainly grow more acute, in multiple aspects, under the next US president. As for the potential of allies to influence US Middle East policy, a Clinton administration would be more receptive than a Trump one to European calls for intervention in the region, as was the case with the Obama administration and the 2011 intervention in Libya. Regarding Asia, a Clinton administration would be relatively more attuned than Obama’s has been to Japanese and Indian perspectives on the Middle East, and relatively less focused on courting China’s support for US positions. A Trump administration would only be likely to assign much weight to European and Asian views on the Middle East when those views overlapped with its own agenda.

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