
Middle East gets messier

Trump promised to change everything but what has that meant for the region, asks Jane Kinninmont

Trump's election in 2016 brought yet more uncertainty to the Middle East. He was expected to be suspicious of military intervention there and to support strongmen over democracy. But would he tear up the Iran deal, sever ties with Gulf allies, side with Russia in Syria and move the US's Israel embassy to Jerusalem? Would his policies accelerate conflict? One year on, the direction of policy is not much clearer. Contradictions abound, against a backdrop of deep differences of opinion within the US system, and a foreign policy establishment that is in some disarray.

The main change has been renewed hostility towards Iran – a reaction against Obama, but also a reversion to the norms of US foreign policy. The nuclear deal has not been torn up, but remains precarious. While some analysts predicted that Trump's election would usher in a more hardline Iranian leadership, President Rouhani was re-elected in July, in effect a renewed stamp of approval for the deal from the Iranian side.

So far, Trump has reluctantly recertified Iran's compliance with the JCPOA, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, at the behest of his defence, security and foreign policy staff. But he has said this could change. In his speech at the UN in September, Trump hinted that he was keen to pull out. If the US does so there is a good chance that the other world powers who negotiated it – the UK, France, Germany, Russia and China – will seek to uphold it anyway. Iranian diplomats would be likely to work with this reduced group, portraying it as a sign that the US was losing its global superpower status.

But even as these powers might limit the damage that the US could do to the deal, the US remains pre-eminent in the global financial system, and could set tight limits on the ability of other countries to do business with Iran. Even before the UN speech, Trump's rhetoric towards Iran had frightened many international businesses away. The deal could slowly fall apart if Iran fails to see significant economic benefits – which were, after all, its rationale for making the deal in the first place.

In Syria, the US has been more deeply engaged than many predicted. Despite early indications that Trump saw Assad as a bulwark against terrorism, it was his administration which ordered a missile strike on regime targets in response to chemical weapons attacks on Syrian civilians. This was a direct – and deliberate

Living with Trump

An image of Donald Trump defaced by shoes is burnt in protest in the West Bank

– contrast with Obama. When Obama originally considered striking Syria back in 2013, Trump loudly opposed it. But Trump subsequently criticized Obama for not enforcing his so-called ‘red line’ around chemical weapons. Since then, the US has bombed the Syrian regime or its allies at least four times, including the downing of an Iranian-made drone. As Iran has also inserted its own missiles into the conflict – against Islamic State targets, to date – there are growing risks of the US sliding towards direct confrontation with Iran there.

Trump has dispatched his son-in-law Jared Kushner to look into opportunities for Arab-Israeli peace, but the Palestinian president Mahmoud Abbas has said after 20 meetings with the administration’s envoys that he still does not understand what their peace plan is. Meanwhile, a Pew survey in June found that Israel and Russia were the only two countries in which confidence in Trump was higher than in Obama for his last two years in office.

Trump’s policies have been clearest when it comes to the Gulf, where he has embraced the Saudi and UAE leaderships and cheered on their isolation of Qatar, which they accuse of sponsoring extremism. But as divisions within the administration have emerged, the rest of the US’s foreign policy machinery has continued doing business with Qatar, where the US has its main Middle Eastern airbase. Even as the president loudly hailed the Saudi-Emirati stance on Qatar, the US completed a major arms deal and signed an agreement on counterterrorism cooperation.

Saudi and Emirati leaders liked the sound of a strongman-cum-businessman leading the US. But the mixed messages over Qatar raise questions in the Gulf about whether Trump himself is really the kind of strongman he likes to praise. And while Saudi Arabia and the UAE welcome his tougher line on Iran, and his greater support for their offensive in Yemen, they still question how committed the US is to a long-term security presence in the region.

Given the assumption that Trump would have little interest in human rights or democracy, Gulf elites were also surprised by the August announcement that the US would withhold \$290 million of aid from Egypt because of human rights concerns. This may reflect the state department



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‘Mixed messages over Qatar raise questions in the Gulf about whether Trump is really the kind of strongman he likes to praise’

driving policy more than the president.

A survey of Arab youth in May found that two-thirds viewed Trump’s presidency with concern, anger or fear, compared with 19 per cent who said they were excited or hopeful. But the Pew data, based on surveys only in Jordan, Lebanon and Tunisia, found that while Trump was trusted less than Obama, neither were trusted by a majority of the population.

Many people in the Middle East have something in common with Trump’s supporters: a deep mistrust, cynicism, or indeed anger with the American political establishment. As a result, few Middle Eastern voices are lamenting the damage his administration is seen to be doing to the rules-based international order. The US’s security guarantees preserved Kuwait’s sovereignty back in 1991, but in the nearly three decades since then, there is a perception that the US-led international order has at best tolerated, or at worst plotted, growing disorder in the MENA region. ‘America First’ has not surprised people who assumed the US was always promoting its own interest.

Jane Kinninmont is a senior research fellow and deputy head of the Middle East and North Africa programme at Chatham House