

COMMENTARY

No. 444

Wednesday, 20 September 2017

The Trump Administration and the Middle East: A Preliminary Appraisal

Robert O. Freedman

John Hopkins University, Maryland, U.S.A.

It has now been almost eight months since Donald Trump took office as the 45th President of the United States, and by now (11 September 2017), Trump's priorities in the region have become clear---stopping ISIS and containing Iran. Trump has also sought to improve relations with two countries, Saudi Arabia and Israel, whose relations with the United States had sharply deteriorated during the Obama Administration. Indeed, Trump's first visit to the Middle East was highlighted by trips to Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, Trump's efforts to improve ties with both countries have had an overall negative effect on the dynamics of the Middle East, leading to an exacerbation of the war in Yemen, a clash between Saudi Arabia and another US Gulf ally, Qatar, and a further deterioration of relations between Israel and the Palestinians. In addition, in two key Middle Eastern countries, Syria and Iraq, it is not yet clear what Trump's policies will be, and if his policies fail in these two countries, he risks jeopardizing his central priorities in the Middle East. Furthermore, after a positive beginning, US-Turkish relations have deteriorated sharply with potentially negative consequences for US policy in the region. In all, Trump's early efforts in the Middle East have displayed an activism not expected because of the "America First" thrust of his election campaign, although it is questionable whether Trump's activism has brought the success he had hoped for. Unlike his domestic policy, which has remained remarkably consistent during his first eight months in office, Trump has shown far more flexibility in his foreign policy. Thus despite the exodus from his Administration of such right-wingers as Steve Bannon and Sebastian Gorka, Trump has stuck to the domestic priorities proclaimed during his election campaign such as deporting undocumented aliens, trying to build a wall on the US-Mexican border and calling for Mexico pay for it, and seeking to overturn President Obama's signature medical insurance program, the Affordable Care Act [OBAMACARE]. Furthermore, he

has continued to cultivate his right-wing American political base by pardoning the racist Arizona sheriff, Joe Arpaio, less than enthusiastically denouncing the neo-Nazis who marched in Charlottesville, Virginia to “protect” Confederate Monuments, and seeking a ban on immigrants from six predominantly Moslem countries. By contrast, in foreign policy, he has shifted considerably from his campaign pledges. Thus after calling on South Korea and Japan to defend themselves (possibly with nuclear weapons), Trump has pledged support to both countries and has stepped up his support during the crisis over North Korea. In addition, after raising questions during the campaign as to whether the US should support NATO, Trump has come out in support of the organization, although he continued to call for NATO nations to spend more in their own defense. However, it was in the Middle East, and especially in US relations with Israel, that we see the most important changes from the promises made during his election campaign.

Perhaps nowhere is the contrast more evident than in relations between the United States and Israel. During the election campaign Trump promised to move the US Embassy in Israel from Tel-Aviv to Jerusalem, and after Trump was elected, his Middle East advisor, David Friedman [later to become US Ambassador to Israel] assured the right-wing Netanyahu government of Israel that it would have a freer hand in building settlements on the Israeli-occupied West Bank once Trump took office [settlement construction had been one of the major causes of conflict between the Obama Administration and Israel]. Yet when Trump met Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu in mid-February he said that the question of moving the US embassy required further study, that both sides had to make concessions in any peace agreement, and that he wanted Netanyahu to hold back a bit on settlement construction. While both during the election campaign and after being elected Trump said he would make “the deal of the century” to bring peace between Israel and the Palestinians, and even appointed his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, to negotiate the agreement, by September 2017, any deal seemed far away. The chief Palestinian negotiator, Mahmoud Abbas, was 82, and facing a succession crisis, while Netanyahu faced three major police investigations (his wife was already under indictment); and with a new Israeli election an increasing possibility, was under heavy pressure from a major political rival Naftali Bennett of the Jewish Home Party, to build more settlements on the West Bank. Under these circumstances, Israeli-Palestinian relations, already bad during the Obama Administration, had deteriorated further during Trump’s first eight months, despite the US President’s desire to work out a peace agreement between them.

As in the case of Israel, relations between the United States and Saudi Arabia had seriously deteriorated during the Obama Administration. The cause was the Saudi perception that the US, under Obama, was favoring Saudi Arabia’s main Middle Eastern rival, Iran. Consequently, the anti-Iranian position of the Trump Administration was very welcome in Riyadh. However, US offers of support may well have proved counterproductive to US interests in the region. As Saudi Arabia stepped up its war in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthi rebels, and got increased US military aid in doing so, there was a sharp increase in civilian casualties for which the US was

blamed. In addition, Saudi Arabia sought to isolate a Gulf rival, Qatar, and together with other Gulf Arab States put an economic embargo against it. The problem for the United States was that not only did it have an important military base in Qatar, but also that Saudi pressure forced Qatar over to the Iranians---not the outcome the US wanted. While the US sought to mediate the Saudi-Qatari conflict, so far, at least, the mediation effort has not been successful. The end result, therefore, of the stepped up US support for Saudi Arabia was a strengthening of Iran and a weakening of the US position in the region.

In the case of Iran, Trump during the election had denounced the nuclear agreement with Iran [the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA] as a “horrible deal”. Trump’s dilemma, however, was that the International Atomic Energy Agency [IAEA] regularly reported that Iran was in compliance with the agreement, and there was no guarantee that Britain, France and Germany, let alone Russia and China, all of whom were signatories to the agreement along with the Obama Administration would join the US in cancelling it. For this reason, during its first six months, the Trump Administration reported to the US Congress, as required by law that Iran had complied with the agreement. However, the Trump Administration was still unhappy with it, claiming that Iran had violated the spirit of the agreement, if not its letter, by continuing to develop long-range missiles as well as by supporting groups which the US had deemed terrorist, like Hamas and Hizbollah. Compounding the problem were regular incidents between Iranian naval forces and the US navy in the Persian Gulf, and the potential for clashes between US and Iranian supported forces in both Syria and Iraq (see below). Whether this would be enough for the US to unilaterally cancel its participation in the agreement remains to be seen.

Turkey was another country with which the US had difficulties. While there was an initial improvement of relations between the two countries after Trump was elected—unlike Obama, Trump did not publically complain about the human rights abuses in Turkey as its President, Recep Erdogan, increasingly became an authoritarian Islamist---conflicts of interest soon caused an even more serious deterioration of US-Turkish relations. First, in Syria, the US backed the Syrian Kurdish organization, the YPG, as its main ally against ISIS. Turkey considered the YPG an offshoot of the Kurdish PKK, an organization which both the US and Turkey consider terrorist. Turkey was afraid that the YPG, with US support, would unite the Kurdish-populated areas along Turkey’s southern border, creating a Kurdish mini-state that would aid the PKK uprising in Turkey’s southeast region that Erdogan was trying to suppress. Second, Erdogan accused Fettullah Gullen, a Turkish cleric living in the United States of organizing a coup against him. Erdogan demanded Gullen’s immediate extradition, something the US would not agree to, stating that the extradition process had to go through the US court system. Third a number of Turks, including a former Turkish economy minister, were indicted in the US in a scheme to help Iran evade sanctions. Given the fact that the case was connected to a corruption case in Turkey involving businessmen close to Erdogan, this was a particularly sensitive issue in US-Turkish relations. As US-Turkish relations deteriorated, Erdogan moved to improve relations with both Iran and Russia,

going so far as to carry on negotiations with Russia for the purchase of a Russian anti-missile system. Should this sale be consummated, it would strike a major blow to Turkey's status in NATO, and it could lead to a major reorientation of Turkish foreign policy, given Turkey's difficulties with the European Union.

Syria and Iraq pose related problems for the Trump Administration. In the case of Syria, in addition to its ongoing conflict with ISIS in the city of Raqqa and its environs, US backed forces—and their American advisors—face a possible conflict with Iranian and Russian-backed Syrian forces and their Shia allies, including Shia militias from Lebanon (Hizbollah), Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as from Turkish backed forces. The Turks are in Syria, not, primarily, to fight ISIS (to which Erdogan appeared to give tacit support before it turned on him) but to prevent the YPG from forming its mini-state in Northern Syria. There have already been skirmishes between US and Turkish-backed forces and the chances for escalation are growing. Given the deterioration of relations between Turkey and the US, the Trump Administration faces a serious problem of choice as to how to handle the situation—to continue to back the YPG, its trusted ally against ISIS, or to switch to back its rather fickle NATO ally, Turkey. It is a choice the Trump Administration has not yet made. Yet another problem lies in US relations with Russian-backed Syrian, Iranian and allied Shia forces. While the US has a military connection with Russia to prevent any clashes between US and Russian forces, and a de-escalation zone agreement with Russia in southwest Syria near the Jordanian border; as Syrian-backed forces move into the province of Deir-el Zour whose capital is Raqqa where US-backed forces are fighting ISIS, there is a growing possibility of conflict with the US. The Assad regime's goal is to reunite all of Syria under Assad, while also forging a connection to Iraq through which Iran can have an overland supply route of weapons to both Syria and Hizbollah. The Trump Administration, given its opposition to Iran, is opposed to such a development but it has yet to commit the military forces to prevent it. Under the circumstances, unless Russia is able to work out a de-escalation zone in southeast Syria, once ISIS is defeated in Syria, US- and Syrian-backed forces may come into conflict, and Russia may find itself caught in the middle. In the case of Iraq, the US faces two major problems. First, Iran is seeking to exercise influence in Iraq through militias it controls there and also through Iraqi politicians such as former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki who is close to Tehran. As in Syria, ISIS is gradually losing control of the territory it controls in Iraq and once it is fully defeated on the ground, there is a real possibility of a clash between the Iranian supported popular mobilization units and US forces. Currently, there is a political battle going on between the current Prime Minister, Heidar al-Abadi, and Maliki over who will be Iraq's next Prime Minister in an election which will also be a measure of Iran's influence in Iraq. From the US perspective, the issue is whether to push for a status of forces agreement that would legalize the presence of US forces in Iraq once ISIS is defeated. The question is whether Trump will push hard for such a status of forces agreement. Obama's failure to do so helped lead to the rise of ISIS as then Prime Minister Maliki thoroughly alienated the Sunni minority in the country. Whether Trump, who strongly criticized the US intervention in Iraq, will seek such an agreement remains an open question. The second

problem in Iraq lies with the Iraqi Kurds who have called for an independence plebiscite on 25 September 2017. The US is caught in a dilemma. The US has backed the Kurds in northern Iraq since 1991, but it also has an ally in Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi whose support is needed to limit Iranian influence in Iraq. While the US has formally opposed Kurdish independence, it has not been able to prevent the Kurds from at least formally opting for independence. How, and if, the Trump Administration will mediate between the Kurds and Iraq's central government remains to be seen.

Conclusions

In looking at the first eight months of the Trump Administration, it appears that the US position in the region has deteriorated. Too much encouragement to Saudi Arabia prompted the Saudis to intensify their war in Yemen and to try to isolate their Gulf enemy, Qatar. Neither policy has proven successful, nor the US position in the Middle East have been damaged as a result. Similarly, US efforts to promote a peace settlement between Israel and the Palestinians have proved unsuccessful, and relations between them are now worse than ever. Meanwhile, US-Turkish relations have also deteriorated, because of differences over Syria, the extradition of Fethullah Gulen and US indictments of Turks involved in trying to aid Iran in avoiding sanctions. As far as Iran goes, the US has yet to decide whether to walk away from the JCPOA nuclear agreement, in part because it is unlikely to get support from its allies, France, the UK and Germany which also signed the agreement. Finally, as the chances of conflict with Syrian and Iranian backed forces rise in Syria and Iraq as ISIS nears defeat, the US faces a number of problems of choice and it is not clear whether the Trump Administration has made up its mind as to what to do. Whether it will do so in time to rebuild the US position in the Middle East remains to be seen.

Note: This is an exclusive article for Middle East Institute, New Delhi (MEI@ND).

Prof. Robert O. Freedman is Peggy Meyerhoff Pearlstone Professor of Political Science Emeritus at Baltimore Hebrew University. He is currently Visiting Professor of Political Science at Johns Hopkins University.

Email: rofreedman@comcast.net

As part of its editorial policy, the MEI@ND standardizes spelling and date formats to make the text uniformly accessible and stylistically consistent. The views expressed here are those of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views/positions of the MEI@ND. Editor, MEI@ND: P R Kumaraswamy