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## FUTURE NOTES

# THE NEW US PRESIDENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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## THE NEW US PRESIDENT: IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MIDDLE EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

**Robert Springborg<sup>1</sup>**

Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump agree on very little, but they do seem to share the belief that President Barack Obama's overall strategy and many tactics for the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) have not worked well. While Trump has been vocal, if imprecise, in his condemnations, Clinton, seeking to capitalize electorally on the Obama legacy and on her putative expertise as his secretary of state, has necessarily been more discreet. Other than evincing her usual strong support for Israel, she personally has said little about the region.

But those known to be in her policy kitchen, such as Michèle Flournoy, Kurt Campbell and Madeleine Albright, have been visibly cooking up new recipes for the region.<sup>2</sup> Their common theme is a plea for the restoration of "liberal interventionism" as the guiding principle for US policy towards the world in general and the Middle East in particular. Reinforcing speculation that a new President Clinton would indeed pursue a more muscular, interventionist policy towards the Middle East than her predecessor has, she has received endorsements from various neoconservatives previously associated with President George W. Bush and his invasion of Iraq.<sup>3</sup> Candidate Trump's strong, unconditional endorsement of Egypt's President Sisi in their 19 September meeting in New York, as contrasted to Clinton's reference to "respect for human rights and the rule of law" in her encounter with him, is suggestive that Trump would embrace a yet tougher approach to the region in general, abandoning any pretence of support for democratic principles.

So whether Trump or Clinton, the new American president will probably jettison what might be termed the "Obama Doctrine" and its derivative policies for the MENA. The elements of that doctrine which will come under closest scrutiny are those that justified and guided a "softly, softly" approach. The "pivot to Asia," combined with Obama's reticence in ramping up direct US military involvement beyond enhanced weapons transfers to Israel and various Arab states, deployment of special forces and drones, coupled with preservation and utilization of air and naval bases, are unlikely to survive his retirement. In reality the "pivot" never occurred, but even the notion that US strategic interests in the MENA are on the wane will probably not be countenanced by his successor, although it is possible that either candidate would, as president, deem the Middle East just too much of a quagmire and therefore downgrade its handling to the secretary of state,

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1 Robert Springborg is the Kuwait Foundation Visiting Scholar, Belfer Center, Harvard University.

2 For a review of the activities and publications relevant to the MENA of those known to be associated with Hillary Clinton, see Robert Springborg, "Why the Upcoming US Elections are Ominous for the Middle East", in *Bookwitty*, 31 May 2016, <https://bookwitty.com/text/why-the-upcoming-us-elections-are-ominous-for/574dad31acd0d02ff2db3636>.

3 Jim Lobe, "The Neocon-Liberal Hawk Convergence is Worse than I Thought", in *LobeLog Foreign Policy*, 25 May 2016, <https://lobelog.com/?p=34324>.

much as Obama has done with John Kerry. But because a pivot to Asia cannot really be made with the Middle East ablaze, and because of the Syrian precedent of inattention leading to disaster, the avoidance strategy is unlikely. US “energy independence” will be seen less as a reason to downgrade the MENA in American strategic priorities than as leverage to be used within and towards it. Attempts to address perceived deterioration of the Western alliance under Obama will also propel the new president to seek ways and means more effectively to coordinate NATO policies towards the MENA. “Leading from behind” and a general preference for multilateral, indeed global, approaches to regional issues are also likely to be replaced with a more American-centric approach, albeit one probably tempered by the desire to have Europe on board.

### NEW “MISSION STATEMENT”

Similarly, a search for a new “mission statement” towards the MENA is likely to commence, if only because the Obama Administration demonstrated so little interest in articulating one. Instructed by his predecessors’ much heralded, if largely unsuccessful, efforts to democratize polities and liberalize economies, Obama preferred to pay only occasional lip service to such lofty ambitions, leaving the region to grapple with establishing its own priorities – a “leading from behind” approach which manifestly failed. So a President Trump or Clinton might feel compelled to revert to the sloganeering generated by belief in American exceptionalism, possibly rekindling democratization as the guiding beacon.

It is equally possible, however, that the emphasis would shift in the opposite direction, abandoning lofty sentiments in favour of an “if you are not with us, you are against us” approach, rewarding friends and punishing enemies accordingly. Trying to draw clear lines in MENA sands would probably prove to be every bit as futile as seeking to democratize it, as George H. W. Bush attempted to do, or to induce it to abandon old antagonisms in favour of a new spirit of cooperation, as Obama has tried to do. But the belief that a new approach, a new guiding principle for the MENA, is needed will probably cause one to be developed, even if, like its predecessors, it does not serve as a real strategic foundation for US policies.

There remains the slight possibility that either Trump or Clinton would seek to couple hard-nosed “America first” rhetoric with an “offshore balancing” strategy, in which US military, diplomatic and economic weight would be applied as required to maintain the region’s general equilibrium, while preventing the emergence of a threatening, dominant actor. But this combination of America-first rhetoric with a strategy of offshore balancing would be tricky. It would require Washington to distance itself from existing US allies, at least on many tactical issues, thereby generating suspicion and mistrust and possibly opening the door yet wider to Russian intervention, especially if it consolidates in Syria. Moreover, lobbying efforts on the Hill intended to force the Administration to reaffirm its undying, unqualified support for whichever country was concerned, top of the list being Israel, would also present a challenge to the Administration. An American-centric, offshore balancing strategy might also run counter to efforts by a new Administration to coordinate more effectively with Europe, acting through NATO, as all involved would have to repackage existing alliances and also see more or less eye to eye on how best to maintain delicate balances in challenging circumstances.

## TACTICAL CHALLENGES

### IRAN

Ultimately it will not be scepticism about the Obama strategy, or the lack of one, that will drive the formation of new policies towards the region. Rather, they will emerge in response to tactical challenges. Under Obama the list of such challenges has lengthened appreciably, with both presidential candidates displeased with many of the Administration's responses. At the top of the list is management of the threat posed by Iran. The Obama approach of seeking to build reconciliation on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reached in July 2015 has visibly faltered. Neither candidate has called for this nuclear agreement to be abrogated, but both endorse a policy of actively countering Iranian non-nuclear threats throughout the region. Assuming the new president would do so in the present zero-sum atmosphere in the Gulf, it would drive the USA back into a closer embrace of Saudi Arabia and other Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states. Hillary Clinton and her husband have long had close relations with the Saudi ruling family, as reflected in the substantial contributions made by its members to their controversial foundation. So she at least, and probably also Trump, would not shrug off the Saudi embrace as Obama has done. A further implication of active pushback against Iran and closer coordination with Saudi Arabia would be greater US engagement in Syria and possibly also in Iraq. While this would carry substantial risks and is unlikely to be clearly articulated as a new US objective, one can imagine that covert operations would be enhanced, if only to send a message to Tehran.

### ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

No new US administration since Nixon's in 1969 has failed to declare as a or the primary objective in the MENA the settlement of the Israeli-Arab conflict, it being renamed the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the wake of the 1993 signing of the Oslo Accords. The renaming may indeed reflect how Trump or Clinton would approach this thorny, seemingly irresolvable issue. Obama commenced his administration much like Jimmy Carter did his, intending to pressurize Israel to reach a bilateral agreement with the Palestinians. When newly elected Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu successfully pushed back against Obama and the Palestinians failed to coalesce around a viable negotiating position, Obama reluctantly pushed the issue to the back-burner, protecting his legacy from attack from this quarter by committing the USA to provide 38 billion dollars in military assistance in the decade commencing in 2018. But over the last year or so the broader Arab-Israeli issue has been moved closer to the front not by his hand, but by virtue of Israel and key Arab states, most notably Egypt and Saudi Arabia, perceiving common strategic interests. To act more effectively on those shared interests, key of which are containing Sunni jihadists and Iran, requires them to finesse the Palestinian problem, to which the solution from their view is some version of the old Arab Peace Initiative, first launched by Saudi King Fahd back in 2001 and then endorsed by the Arab League the following year. So a potential deal is already on the table. Either presidential candidate is unlikely to want to try to turn the clock back to the bilateral negotiating framework of yore. The multilateral framework offers the additional benefit to a new president of cementing ties with various Arab states while further isolating Iran. Saudi Arabia in particular could easily be tempted to be more accommodating with Israel in order to gain US support for its anti-Iran posture, to cover its unpleasant tracks in Yemen and to highlight the leadership role of Muhammad bin Salman. So one can assume the new president, whoever it is, will push harder on

this issue than Obama has.

## **RUSSIA**

Whether and how Trump or Clinton will respond to Russian challenges in the MENA is difficult to foresee, especially in the case of the former. His apparent ties to Russian President Vladimir Putin may induce him to imitate the Obama approach as implemented by Secretary of State Kerry. That approach is to seek to work at a tactical level with Putin, most especially in Syria, while avoiding anything other than verbal strategic confrontation and maybe even forswearing that. Clinton might choose a more belligerent alternative, lumping Russian adventurism in Syria together with that elsewhere in the MENA, to say nothing of Eastern Europe, and seeking to use the Russian strategic challenge to mobilize NATO to propel renewal of the broader Western alliance. The response to Putin's adventurism thus seems to be the greatest potential difference in the MENA policies of the two candidates. If Syria is still ablaze in January 2017, this analysis suggests that, paradoxically, Trump would be more likely than Clinton to follow Obama's "softly, softly" approach in the hopes he could establish a working relationship with Putin.

## **TURKEY**

In contrast to the case of Russia, as president, Trump and Clinton would probably not take markedly different approaches to Turkey. Both are virtually certain to follow Obama's lead in seeking to prevent Ankara's further drift towards Iran and Russia. Concessions to Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan may place pressure on US-European relations if Turkish-EU ties are further strained, and certainly on US-Kurdish ones. But Turkey is too central to the American geo-strategic position in the region to be easily let go, regardless of Erdogan's provocations. So both Europe and the Kurds can anticipate some collateral damage from predictable US efforts to repair its relations with Turkey.

## **LIBYA AND YEMEN**

Finally, either new president might seek to bolster his/her counter-terrorism (CT) credentials by increasing American involvement in the Libyan and Yemeni quagmires, both of which are breeding grounds for jihadists of various stripes and colours. This could take the form of more special forces in the former and yet more drone attacks combined with support for ongoing Saudi and Emirati operations in the latter. As potential theatres of increased US action, they would serve as barometers of intent to emphasize presidential firmness in the face of terrorism.

Ratcheting up CT activities alone, however, in the absence of other steps, might be viewed more as a sign of weakness than strength. A truly stronger American position would be attained through effective multilateral action in Libya and Yemen, involving regional and extra-regional actors led or at least effectively coordinated by Washington. Paradoxically then, if the Obama approach, which ostensibly was based on enhanced cooperation with allies and willingness to compromise with opponents, but which failed under his guidance as indicated by the Syrian imbroglio and the failure to arrest the decline not only of US bilateral relations with key regional states, but also its reputation with the people of the region, could be made to work by a new president, it might reinvalidate US influence in the MENA. Intensified CT as the centrepiece of US policy is unlikely

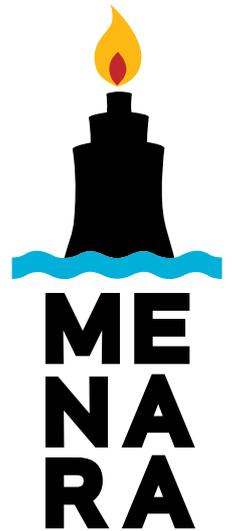
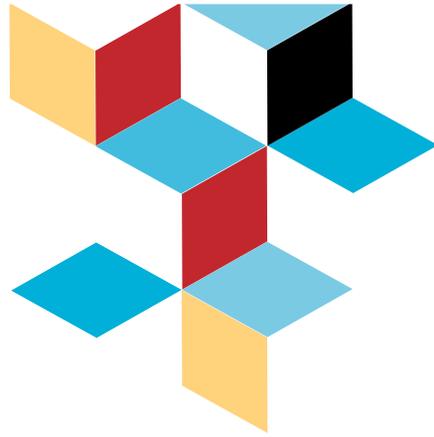
to do so.

But as we have seen over Obama's almost eight years in office, herding the many cats of the MENA is a demanding task. Neither Trump nor Clinton is likely to be disposed to want to emulate the cooperative, "lead from behind" approach, at least without wielding a much bigger US stick while doing so. A possible starting place for a new policy of this nature would be enforcement of "humanitarian zones" in Syria. If he/she did so effectively, encouraging friends and dissuading enemies, as Obama had hoped but failed to do – both because the stick was small and confusion was great – he/she might enjoy more success than by unilaterally wielding a big stick, à la George W. Bush.

## CONCLUSIONS

Striking the right balance between positive inducements and coercion is the essence of presidential leadership. The MENA presents extraordinary challenges to any president seeking to achieve that balance, which by its nature is remarkably delicate. Candidate Trump has demonstrated profound disinterest in nuance of any sort, so would be unlikely to devote the attention required to fine-tune regional power balances. His provocative, anti-Muslim statements are but one indicator of his crude approach. Despite his attempt to reconcile this caustic rhetoric with support for regional strongmen, as evidenced by his reference to "peace loving Muslims" in his meeting with President Sisi, strong doubts about his real beliefs will surely linger within the global Muslim community. His provocative statements might be sufficient in themselves to bring down a swarm of jihadists on US interests in the region, stimulating predictable and counterproductive US reactions.

Candidate Clinton, although more familiar with the region and judicious in her comments, seems inclined to reach into the old, worn kitbag of liberal interventionism to come up with remedies for today's problems in the MENA. Hers is the approach which Obama rejected. His perception of the challenges posed by the MENA for the USA and his implicit strategy to meet them are more sophisticated than hers. But implementation of a nuanced, multilateral approach is by its nature extremely challenging and requires for successful implementation political patience and skills which he appears to lack. She, by contrast, would probably pursue a less complex, less innovative approach, but perhaps enjoy greater success in its application. In the final months of the Obama era, then, it looks as if his presidency may have been an eight-year interlude in US post-WWII interventionism in the MENA, even if that interlude did not include real withdrawal, and it is unlikely to be followed by an unbridled adventurism of the George H.W. Bush variety.



**Middle East and North Africa Regional Architecture: Mapping geopolitical shifts, regional order and domestic transformations (MENARA)** is a research project that aims to shed light on domestic dynamics and bottom-up perspectives in the Middle East and North Africa amid increasingly volatile and uncertain times.

**MENARA** maps the driving variables and forces behind these dynamics and poses a single all-encompassing research question: Will the geopolitical future of the region be marked by either centrifugal or centripetal dynamics or a combination of both? In answering this question, the project is articulated around three levels of analysis (domestic, regional and global) and outlines future scenarios for 2025 and 2050. Its final objective is to provide EU Member States policy makers with valuable insights.

**MENARA** is carried out by a consortium of leading research institutions in the field of international relations, identity and religion politics, history, political sociology, demography, energy, economy, military and environmental studies.



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