

TURKEY, EGYPT, SAUDI ARABIA AND ISRAEL: OLD FRIENDS OR UNTRUSTWORTHY ALLIES?



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In the Middle East it is not always easy to distinguish your allies from your rivals. Rather than solid blocs there are informal alliances that are pliable depending on the issue. Also, in a matter of days, a change of alignment can cause a domino effect that rips the complex fabric of alliances and counter-alliances woven in this region. The United States does not escape this dynamic. Although an external actor, it is a power in the Middle East and, therefore, participates fully in these dances of alliances. And what has happened in recent years is a crisis of mutual trust. Washington has seen allies as sources of instability and they, in turn, have started to doubt they have the security guarantees that have sustained this alliance.

In an attempt to calm the situation, Obama is ending his mandate with promises of renewed military aid for Egypt, Israel and the Gulf states. But he also has to listen as media supporting the Turkish president, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, accuse the United States of disloyalty during the attempted coup d'état of July 15th 2016, and watch as the Israeli prime minister, Benjamin Netanyahu, shows his defiance (all will recall his speech to Congress on March 3rd 2015 in which, allied with the Republicans, he criticised the negotiations on the Iranian nuclear programme). All of this while various traditional allies have made efforts to build bridges with Moscow and Beijing, whether to diversify their alliances or as a warning sign. It may be said that a large number of region's leaders are eager to see Obama leave the Oval Office.

It is habitual to hear members of the Republican Party say that Obama leaves behind a more unstable Middle East with fewer friends. But assuming that the responsibility fundamentally lies in the decisions taken by the White House over the past eight years is a biased, partial vision. There is broad consensus around the idea that the 2003 invasion of Iraq represented both the peak and the limit of North American power. It is also seen as the key to understanding the spiral of sectarianism devastating the region, along with the emergence of the "Islamic State" organisation as a challenge with global reach. Neither is it convenient to forget that Obama has seen his room for manoeuvre reduced by having to coexist, for much of his mandate, with a hostile Congress. Lastly, and

no less important, is the fact that the United States' alliances in the region have been weakened not only as a result of US foreign policy in the region but also because of the events taking place and the decisions made in Cairo, Riyadh, Jerusalem and Ankara.

Similarly, over the coming years, US policy on alliances will depend not only on presidential will but, also, on how the conflicts in the Middle East evolve and how the regional powers position themselves. But what is certain is that the next president of the United States will have to decide whether their opening gambit is to rebuild the alliances and return to the status quo ante or whether they opt, as the countries in the region have done, to diversify and reduce their importance. And, above all, they will have to decide on their policy framework: strong involvement in Middle East conflicts (understood as a vital issue for US strategic interests and as a test of its condition as global superpower), or containment and gradual disengagement that allows it to focus on other geopolitical spaces that are considered more decisive and concentrate its efforts on domestic issues.

A Clinton victory seems likely to favour a more interventionist policy, while Trump, whose priority would be to reduce the exposure to regional conflicts, would opt for a policy of outsourcing of responsibilities. In other words, Trump's message may be that the Middle East should sort out its own problems (with one exception: Israel). Clinton, by contrast, continues to mention issues like the rule of law and fundamental freedoms that may introduce tensions to relations with her allies. If she reaches power she will certainly nuance this appropriately, but it is likely that among those who advise her the conviction holds that the current levels of repression and the absence of reforms ensure higher levels of future instability. Trump, by contrast, does not hide his sympathy for strong leadership and drastic decisions. He has recently displayed this in his meeting with Abdel Fattah al-Sisi in New York and his support for how Erdoğan has handled the attempted coup d'état.

US allies in the Middle East look at both candidates as risks, but also as opportunities. And this is the Trump paradox: despite his clearly Islamophobic discourse, leaders of Muslim countries may think they could get more support (or less criticism) from him than if Hillary Clinton wins. This is probably one of the main differences with Europe, where there is an almost unanimous preference for a Clinton victory. And it is in Brussels and the major European capitals that the belief is held that a Trump victory could raise the levels of insecurity in the Middle East and, above all, increase the defiant attitude of the regional leaders. If this coincides with a weakening of the transatlantic alliance, Europe could find itself left alone to face the threats emanating from an even more unstable Middle East.