

## **Trump's Foreign Policy in the Middle East: Four Key Issues**

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*Donald Trump, the next President of the United States, will soon be confronted with the difficulty of translating campaign rhetoric regarding his foreign policy in the Middle East into policy and positive outcomes. He is thus likely to be forced to make significant concessions.*

On 8<sup>th</sup> November 2016 Donald J. Trump was elected as the 45<sup>th</sup> president of the United States (US). Many foreign leaders around the world were quick to congratulate the new President-elect on his victory. Yet, even after a [year-and-a-half long](#) campaign, many questions regarding Trump's views on foreign policy in general and towards the Middle East in particular are still outstanding. This brief examines what US foreign policy in the region may look like over the next four years by focusing on Trump's views on four key policy issues. The image that emerges is that of an inward-looking isolationist, driven mainly by short-term tangible outcomes, combining a preference for domestic spending with deep scepticism of foreign engagement. Nonetheless, Trump is likely to be forced to make significant concessions with regards to his electoral promises if he is to advance US national interests in the region, in particular national security.

### **The Iran Deal**

Trump has repeatedly promised to scrap the Nuclear Deal (JCPOa) with Iran. In fact, he [stated](#) it would be his "number-one priority to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran." He later appeared to back-peddle somewhat by stating he would rather renegotiate the terms of the deal. Hence two questions arise: Can he end the deal? And will he?

In [response](#) to Trump's victory, Iranian President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammed Zarif said the future US administration should comply "to the commitments of the multilateral Nuclear Deal" and that the deal "cannot be overturned by one government's decision." However, as the deal is structured as an executive agreement, allowing it to bypass a hostile Congress, newly elected President Trump could actually use his executive powers to withdraw from the deal and re-impose US sanctions. The multilateral deal however does involve six other countries, as well as the European Union and the United Nations, who the newly elected

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president cannot force to follow suit. If they don't, the US risks being isolated, in a position neither able to benefit from the deal nor able to impose a tough coherent regime of sanctions on Iran.

Moreover, cancelling or re-negotiating the agreement will come at significant cost, both diplomatically and politically, in the international arena. It will frustrate allies and rivals alike, and damage the US' credibility to honour the international agreements they negotiate. Hence, it is highly likely the next US administration will seek ways to prove Iran is violating the terms of the agreement, rather than cancelling or renegotiating the deal outright, thus gaining other countries' support to cancel the deal.

### **The fight against the Islamic State (IS) in Syria and Iraq**

The war against IS will remain a top priority for the US under Trump. While he opposes American boots on the ground, Trump still needs to devise a long-term strategy that goes beyond [simply bombing them](#). The new President-elect appears to want to [disengage](#) from Iraq completely, as he opined: *"Iran is now taking over Iraq. We spent two trillion dollars in Iraq. We lost thousands of lives, we have wounded soldiers. And we have nothing. We can't even go there. And every time we give equipment to Iraq, the first time a bullet goes off in the air they leave it."*

His negative view towards the Iraqi government is starkly contrasted by his praising of Kurdish forces. Acknowledging the need for ground forces in fighting IS, he intends to significantly ramp up support for the Kurdish groups fighting IS in Syria and Iraq. In [several interviews](#), he praised the Kurdish fighters and said he would increase US support: *"We should be arming the Kurdish... they have proven to be the most loyal to us... they have great hearts, they're great fighters, and we should be working with them much more."*

It is unclear whether Trump has considered the implications of increasing military support for the Kurds and not Baghdad, not only will it cause friction between cooperating partners, but also most IS-held territory is also far away from Kurdish areas. Despite Trump expressing frustration about the trillions of dollars spent by the US in Iraq and the seemingly low return on investment, the fact that he views and laments Iran as "taking over the country" suggests complete disengagement will not be his preferred policy. Instead, the reality of the sunk costs associated with Iraq means Trump is likely to continue supporting Baghdad both militarily and financially, possibly with stricter conditions.

### **Israel**

Trump's stance on Israel seems diametrically opposed to his predecessor. In fact, if Trump follows through on his campaign promises, it would go against decades of US foreign policy. For instance, he has pledged to recognise Jerusalem as Israel's capital and [promised](#) to move the US Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. Netanyahu was quick to contact and congratulate the new President-elect calling him "A true friend of Israel." Although Trump himself would "love to see if peace can be negotiated" he does not condemn Israel's building of settlements in occupied territories, nor does he think there should be a pause during negotiations. In [one interview](#) for instance Trump said: *"Israel should – they have to keep going. They have to keep moving forward. No, I don't think there should be a pause."*

In accordance, Israel's hard-line Education Minister, Naftali Bennet, hailed Trump's election as signalling the end of the two-state solution, while Israel's Science Minister, Ofir Akunis, immediately called for [more settlements](#) to be built in the West Bank.

### **Afghanistan**

Consistent with his views on Iraq, Trump's attitude towards Afghanistan is distinctly isolationist. Although the war in Afghanistan got scant attention from both candidates during the campaign, Trump has consistently called for a complete withdrawal of US troops. In a short [YouTube video](#) uploaded on the 12<sup>th</sup> March 2012

he referred to Afghanistan as a “total and complete disaster” before arguing “money should be spent in our country... let’s get out of Afghanistan.” Most recently, on the 11<sup>th</sup> January 2013, he also tweeted: “Let’s get out of Afghanistan. Our troops are being killed by the Afghans we train and we waste billions there. Nonsense! Rebuild the USA.”

With the security situation deteriorating over time, the Taliban now controls [more territory](#) than at any time since 2001. Moreover, terrorist organisations such as Al-Qaeda and IS have started to gain new footholds in the country. More than 15 years after the war started, Al-Qaeda still has [training facilities](#) in the country. Since withdrawing the army before local government is ready to take over is dangerous, President Obama has [promised](#) to keep 8,400 US soldiers deployed until the end of his term and leave it up to his successor to order further reductions. Trump has made his preference clear, but if he is adamant about withdrawing forces, the US will need to work more closely with Iran [as they have done before](#). Therefore, future President Trump will have to manoeuvre carefully to ease the friction between wanting to “tear up” or re-negotiate the Iran Deal and his desire to leave Afghanistan.

### **The not-so-straight-forward world of geo-politics**

It will not be easy for Trump to streamline his isolationist vision of disengaging with Iraq and withdrawing from Afghanistan with the overarching long-term objective of advancing American national security and combatting terrorism. The US can withdraw only if it establishes and maintains strong relations with local partners. This not only requires much more time but also a careful balancing of relations in the region, including with the state of Israel and the Kurds in Iraq and Syria. It also threatens to be undermined by his desire to cancel the Iran Deal. Trump will therefore need to make serious concessions regarding his electoral promises. Although it would be easy and tempting for him to unconditionally ramp up support for Israel, this would isolate America in the region by alienating other partners thus undermining longer-term objectives in the war against terrorism.

For the Iraqi Kurds on their part, it may be tempting to ride the wave of Trumpian support to the fullest, as it could help advance their goal of independence. However, they should be mindful of the pitfalls and carefully balance their relationship with the US to avoid friction with other regional actors such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia and Baghdad.

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