

The authoritarian *status quo* in the Middle East



Mark N. Katz

Ever since coming to power at the turn of the century, Russian President Vladimir Putin has supported the *status quo* in the Middle East. He has backed the region's existing governments, whether authoritarian or democratic, whether anti-Western or pro-Western. Putin has been willing to work and make deals with them all. What he has opposed is the forcible downfall of authoritarian regimes by external or internal forces demanding democratisation. Putin's policy stands in stark contrast to that of former US president George W. Bush, whose administration intervened militarily to oust Russia's friend, Saddam Hussein, in Iraq and called for the democratisation of the greater Middle East and of US President Barack Obama, who supported most of the "Arab spring" revolutions against authoritarian regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, Libya and Syria. The result was considerable animosity between Washington and Moscow over the Middle East.

US President-elect Donald Trump, however, appears to have no interest in promoting democracy in the Middle East and has expressed sympathy with Putin's view that the Assad regime in Syria is more acceptable than any replacement regime, which would likely be both anti-Western and anti-Russian and not at all democratic.

Trump sees Putin as a partner in Syria and both men appear to see eye-to-eye with certain other regional leaders as well. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi has taken great offence at Obama's criticism of his curtailment of democracy and human rights, while valuing Putin for supporting him. Sisi expects Trump to do so as well.

Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu has had a notoriously bad relationship with Obama but quite positive relations with Putin. As long as Iran is present in Syria, Israel prefers that Russian

forces are there as a check on Tehran. The Trump-Netanyahu relationship will almost certainly be much warmer than the Obama-Netanyahu one.

Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan had friendlier relations with Putin than with either Bush, due to US support for Iraqi Kurds, or Obama, who supports the Syrian Kurds. After overcoming the crisis caused by the shooting down of a Russian plane on the Turkish-Syrian border in November 2015, Erdogan's ties to Putin have improved. Like Putin, Trump seems much more understanding of Erdogan's crackdown than Obama has been.

The Gulf Arab states were unhappy with Bush for intervening in Iraq in 2003 and upsetting the Middle East's authoritarian order and with Obama for doing the same by withdrawing from Iraq in 2011. They also feared Obama's push for a nuclear accord with Iran. Despite their differences over Syria and Iran, the Gulf Arabs value Putin's actual and Trump's anticipated respect for the existing order on the Arabian Peninsula. They are also happy that Trump is far more hostile towards Iran than Obama is.

Some Gulf Arab states agree with Israel that they are better off with Russian forces in Syria keeping the Iranians in check; they may even come to accept Moscow's argument that having Bashar Assad as president of Syria is better than the most likely alternative.

With Putin and Trump willing to cooperate with each other and the authoritarian leaders of the region, it is possible that the Middle East may move away from the turmoil it has experienced during the Bush and Obama administrations towards an era of authoritarian stability.

Of course, not all Middle East conflicts will disappear even under these circumstances. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict, Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the challenge of Kurdish nationalism, among others, remain. However, with most external powers unwilling to help the Palestinians, Israel will retain the upper hand. If Turkish-Russian



An October 2016 file picture shows Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan (R) talking with Russian President Vladimir Putin during the 23rd World Energy Congress in Istanbul. (AFP)

relations continue to improve and Trump and Putin do cooperate on Syria, it is possible that external assistance to Syrian Kurds will decline.

Finally, Saudi military exhaustion in Yemen combined with reassurance that Trump will take a harder line towards Iran may result in Riyadh seeking to ratchet down its conflict with Tehran.

How Iran will react to this new situation is unclear but an improved Russian-US relationship under Trump may make Putin more willing to cooperate in restraining hostile Iranian actions.

So, could the Middle East actually become more peaceful with improved Russian-US relations as both Moscow and Washington support the region's authoritarian order?

Maybe but, then again, maybe not. The trouble with authoritarian leaders, as the Putin-Erdogan falling out in November 2015 showed, is that their relationships can deteriorate very rapidly when

they disagree.

Another factor is that leaders, whether authoritarian or democratic, who behave confrontationally instead of reassuringly are highly likely to disagree. Putin and Trump, for example, want to get along with each other now but this desire might not survive a major (or even a minor) disagreement.

Nor must it be forgotten that authoritarian regimes may be stable for a long time but suddenly become unstable, as the "Arab spring" uprisings showed.

There is no guarantee, then, that a peaceful authoritarian order can be maintained in the Middle East even if Trump and Putin cooperate with each other in supporting it but even more so if they do not.

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The US pivot from the Middle East will continue



Mark Habeeb

Donald Trump's election as president of the United States has created global uncertainty about the direction of US foreign policy. US allies in NATO are anxious about whether America will remain committed to European security and US trading partners in Asia are reassessing their relationship with Washington in light of Trump's pledge to kill the Trans-Pacific Partnership (TPP) trade agreement.

Even neighbourly Canada and Mexico, the United States' biggest trading partners, are considering the potential consequences of Trump's vow to renegotiate the North American Free Trade Agreement (NAFTA).

Middle East states also face uncertainties in terms of specific policies and relationships but at the most fundamental level, Trump's foreign policy is likely to continue the strategic pivot away from the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region that began under US President Barack Obama.

The difference – and it is an important one – is how this pivot is carried out.

Obama entered office in 2009 determined to end a decade of costly and ineffective US engagement in the Middle East, an engagement that was primarily military in nature and that aimed to establish democratic, pro-Western governments.

In the 1970s, the United States cut and ran from South-East Asia following military failure, resulting in a North Vietnamese victory,

the genocidal Pol Pot regime in Cambodia and a migration crisis as hundreds of thousands of boat people fled the region.

US strategic interests in South-East Asia, however, were never as vital as are US interests in the Middle East and Obama never considered a similar cut-and-run strategy. Rather, he wanted a negotiated US withdrawal from the region that would leave behind a level of stability that would continue to protect US interests.

Obama's strategy involved 1) an agreement with Tehran to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons and induce the Islamic Republic to become a responsible regional actor; 2) a permanent peace agreement between Israel and the Palestinians; and 3) a multilateral response to crises so the United States did not bear the sole burden.

Obama's strategy may have worked except for one huge unforeseen event: The "Arab spring" that erupted in 2011. Suddenly, Washington was faced with crises in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Syria. The ensuing chaos helped fuel the rise of the Islamic State (ISIS) and provided Israel's Binyamin Netanyahu the perfect excuse to dig in his heels on the peace process.

Despite the growing disorder, Obama signalled clearly – perhaps too clearly – that direct US military involvement would be minimal – consistent with the disengagement strategy – thus opening the door for Russia's Vladimir Putin to insert Russian forces in Syria and become the region's most important

external player.

The fact that Russia, with its feeble economy, declining population and lack of a blue water navy, is the most powerful external actor in the Middle East says a great deal about the consequences of US disengagement.

Obama's one success – the agreement with Iran – was a partial one, in that it was fiercely opposed by US allies Saudi Arabia and Israel, and the verdict is still out on whether it will constrain or embolden Iran. One thing is undebatable: Tehran is a more powerful regional actor today than it was in 2009.

There is no reason to believe that President Trump will reverse Obama's policy of disengagement from the Middle East. Like Obama, he opposes direct US military involvement and supports expanded domestic energy production to lessen dependence on imports.

What will differ is the way Trump carries out the disengagement.

Trump seems more amenable to Russia's key role in the region and has advocated for closer cooperation with Moscow in Syria and in fighting ISIS. Indeed, Putin must have been smiling when the results came in after the election November 8th but he was not the only one: Syria's Bashar Assad surely sighed with relief when he learned that Hillary Clinton, who had spoken of no-fly zones over Syria, had gone down in defeat.

Netanyahu was smiling, too: Although Trump told the New York Times that he wanted to achieve Israeli-Palestinian peace, he

suggested that his son-in-law, Jared Kushner, would be a good potential mediator. Kushner is publisher of the fiercely pro-Israel New York Observer, a newspaper that has called Israel's occupation a "false notion" and published articles equating pro-Palestinian student activists on US campuses with "Nazi Brown Shirts".

Trump's newly named national security adviser, Michael Flynn, is a big fan of Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, who, along with Egypt's Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, also woke up happy on November 9th.

So where is the strategy in all this? It appears that Trump intends to continue the policy of US disengagement from the Middle East by outsourcing the region's stability to a coalition of strong local actors, plus Putin.

Trump condemned Obama's nuclear deal with Iran but is unlikely to abandon it; he should be able to grasp that if he does, Tehran will be strengthened, not weakened. He had criticised Saudi Arabia and the Gulf Cooperation Council view earlier this year.

There is no doubt that Trump, like Obama, will face unforeseen events in the next four years. Given his volatile temperament, no one can wager how he may respond to any specific surprise.

One thing, however, seems clear: The US pivot away from the Middle East will continue.

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