

### Donald Trump and Washington's Arab Gulf Allies

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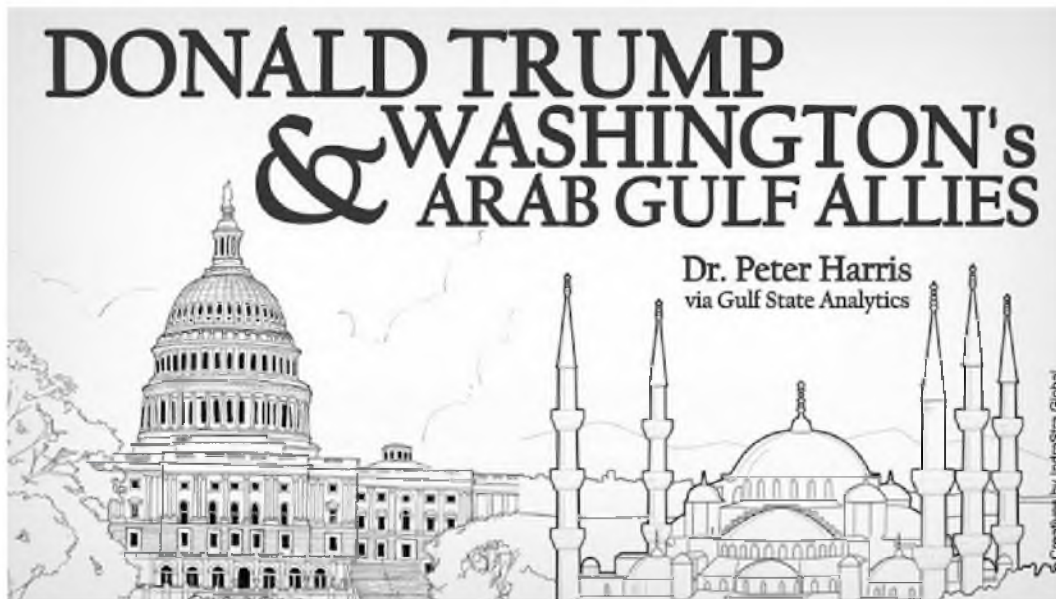
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## OPINION | Donald Trump and Washington's Arab Gulf Allies

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The presidency of Donald Trump has great potential to bring about significant changes in global affairs. Throughout his candidacy, Trump railed against so-called “globalism” while advocating an “America First” posture that would unabashedly place the country’s narrow self-interests above the concerns of friends, allies, and trading partners. Trump styled himself as an iconoclast, someone who could be relied upon to bring a new approach to almost every facet of U.S. foreign relations, including trade and investment policy, alliance commitments, support for international organizations, nuclear proliferation policy, and respect for international law and human rights.

The impending transformation of U.S. foreign policy undoubtedly poses a number of challenges for the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states – if, that is, the promised revolution materializes. But it would be wrong to assume that the Trump presidency will be devoid of opportunities for Arab Gulf leaders. On the contrary, there is good reason to believe that the next four years could be somewhat propitious for the GCC members’ core interests – even if any optimism must be tempered with a heavy dose of caution.

### The Obama Legacy

President Barack Obama bequeathed to his successor a Gulf policy that emphasizes the importance of regional stability. Despite fears that the Obama administration might sideline the Middle East in favor of a military and diplomatic pivot to the Asia-Pacific region, steady cooperation between Washington and its allies in the Gulf characterized Obama’s two terms in office. In 2011, for example, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Qatar joined the NATO-led military coalition against the Qaddafi regime in Libya. And beginning in 2014, several Arab Gulf states supported Washington’s military campaign against Daesh targets in Syria and assisted in training anti-Assad rebel groups. On his end, Obama resisted domestic pressure to use the Arab Spring as an excuse to push for political change in the Arabian Peninsula’s oil-rich monarchies. The U.S. was especially muted in its criticism of how Bahraini leaders, with support from Saudi Arabia and the UAE, suppressed dissent in Bahrain, a conspicuous

silence that stood in pronounced contrast to Obama's public support for protestors in Egypt and elsewhere.

Of course, America's relationships with the GCC states were not always rosy on Obama's watch. In general terms, the administration's apparent eagerness to downsize the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East was a cause for concern among Arab Gulf leaders, who, for decades, have viewed the U.S. as an anchor of regional security and their most important defense guarantor. More specifically, Obama's commitment to improving relations with Tehran raised questions about whether they could count on Washington as a bulwark against Iranian expansionism. Even if the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) ultimately succeeds in terms of preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons capability, the deal's critics correctly point out that the lifting of sanctions has empowered Iran and its proxies across the region.

On balance, however, the Obama legacy in the Gulf region is one of lending broad support to the regional status quo. The partial rapprochement between the U.S. and Iran is certainly a development that Saudi Arabia and Bahrain would like to see undone – even if Oman and Qatar have been more openly supportive of a long-term thaw in Washington-Tehran relations as well as a détente between the Islamic Republic and all Sunni Arab Gulf monarchies – but it would be wrong to conclude that regional actors are looking to Trump for a major reversal in U.S. policy.

## Trump's Calculus

So far, signs indicate that Trump is unlikely to do much to worsen ties between the U.S. and the GCC. Despite some well-founded concerns about Trump's inner circle of advisers, the president's eventual picks for the major foreign policy positions have been conservative choices: Defense Secretary James Mattis is a retired general, known to be a hawk on Iran; Secretary of State Rex Tillerson is a former head of Exxon Mobil who shows little inclination for radical change; UN Ambassador Nikki Haley is expected to be a steady and level-headed diplomat; and new National Security Adviser Herbert Raymond "H. R." McMaster, who replaced Michael Flynn after just a few weeks in the role, is almost universally respected as a truth-teller and strategic thinker. Along with Vice-President Mike Pence, the message from these top-level bureaucrats is that President Trump carry on with GCC relations in much the same way as did the Obama administration, even if their careful insistences on moderation do not always chime with the more bombastic and unpredictable utterances of the president himself.

Certain aspects of Trump's foreign policy, with its hardline approach to Iran, will most likely please most GCC members. It is still unclear, however, just how hawkish Trump will be on Iran. Candidate Trump promised to tear up the Iran deal and Tillerson has since promised a "full review" of the agreement, but these statements do not concur with Mattis' opinion that the deal should be given a chance to succeed. It is too early to know which viewpoint will eventually win out. Even so, it is unthinkable that the next four years will see the U.S. moving any closer to Iran. In the meantime, GCC states will be looking to the Trump administration to approve additional arms sales – the new president already seems poised to approve the sale of precision-guided missiles to Saudi Arabia and F-16 fighter jets to Bahrain - and to bolster cooperation in terms of energy policy.

Still, there are some major questions surrounding Trump's foreign policy that GCC leaders cannot ignore. Trump has shown himself to adhere to a realist school of thought that abjures permanent friends and permanent enemies. The new president has no compunction about criticizing Washington's alliances or announcing his desire to improve relations with longstanding adversaries like Russia. In specific terms, Trump has regularly called for U.S. allies – including Saudi Arabia – to pay more for their own defense. It would not be unthinkable for the president to act upon these statements now that he is in office. Either the GCC could be asked to take on more responsibility for regional security or Trump might demand some form of payment in exchange for America's overseas deployments. Therefore, while there is little reason to suggest that the U.S. is preparing to abandon its six GCC allies, it is certainly within the realm of possibility that Trump might look to redefine the scope and nature of U.S. defense policy in the region.

Trump's recent travel ban targeting seven Muslim-majority countries should also cause concern for the GCC's governments and citizens. There are reports that Trump had originally wanted a more comprehensive ban on travel from Muslim-majority countries (during his campaign, Trump infamously called for a "total and complete shutdown of Muslims entering the United States"), but legal concerns led the administration to restrict the ban to citizens from the seven countries already singled out for special treatment under U.S. immigration law: Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, and Yemen. Even in its truncated form, however, the travel ban spells bad news for Arab Gulf states and other Muslim-majority countries because it was a blanket ban that did not discriminate between suspected terrorists and law-abiding citizens. Security experts almost universally judged it to be unnecessary. It seems to have been implemented for the sole purpose of indulging Islamophobic sentiment inside the U.S. and stoking fear of immigrants and visitors from Muslim-majority countries. In sum, the travel ban gambit serves to highlight how Trump and his core circle of advisers are not above implementing controversial and even self-defeating foreign policy measures if they judge there to be a sufficient pay-off in terms of domestic politics.

## Actions and Counteractions

It is not just the decision-making calculus of the U.S. that warrants investigation. There is also the question of how Trump's foreign policies might provoke actions or reactions from others in the Gulf region. Iran's leaders, in particular, will find themselves in an invidious position if they feel spurned by a new U.S. administration after being coaxed into signing the JCPOA not even two years ago. There is also an abiding risk of confrontation between US and Iranian naval forces. In the recent past, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps speedboats have come close to U.S. vessels in the waters of the Gulf, prompting candidate Trump to pledge that he would "blow them out of the water" if elected president. In January 2017 – just weeks before Trump's inauguration – a U.S. destroyer fired warning shots at Iranian vessels after they reportedly came within 800 meters of the U.S.S. *Mahan*, signifying that the risk of escalation cannot be discounted. Israel, too, will be monitoring Trump's true level of commitment to regional security, which will perhaps inform future Israeli security policy toward Iran. Additionally, the Iraqi government, which is quite dependent upon the U.S. for its survival, may well reassess its ties with Washington, contingent on the Trump administration's handling of diplomatic affairs.

Over the long term, however, it is Trump's lukewarm attitude toward U.S. global leadership that could prove to be the most consequential and enduring legacy of his presidency. Is Trump – populist and anti-globalist par excellence – a harbinger of a major realignment in US politics? Is he primed to denounce the international order that his predecessors spent seven decades putting together? Or will Trump's brand of anti-internationalism prove to be a short-lived aberration?

Either way, Trump's election is a reminder that U.S. preeminence in world affairs cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, if Washington ever does choose to relinquish its role as a regional power in the Gulf, the consequences will be profound, just as the British Empire's decision to withdraw "East of Suez" upended the security order during the 1960s and 1970s. The GCC states – and others who rely heavily upon a relationship with the U.S. – must start preparing themselves sooner rather than later for this eventuality.

## Uncertain Futures

In conclusion, there is little to suggest that the Trump administration is imminently prepared to overhaul Obama's policies toward Washington's allies in the Arabian Peninsula. In the short term, Trump might reinvigorate the U.S. military for GCC members and is almost certain to halt America's diplomatic thaw with Iran. Unquestionably, Saudi Arabia and some other GCC members would welcome such initiatives.

In the longer term, the fate of the JCPOA's and Trump's level of commitment to GCC security remain the key issues which require clarity. The wildcard, perhaps, is whether Trump's reputation in the Muslim world will deteriorate to the point where even longstanding relationships between the U.S. and Muslim-majority countries, including the six GCC states, are called into question. This is something over which the Arab Gulf leaders have little control, but which has the potential, going forward, to loom large

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