

Why the U.S. Presidential Election Matters for the Middle East

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A Wary, Unsettled Mideast Awaits U.S. Elections

By Tamir Hayman and Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis / Oct 31, 2024

At a time when Israeli and Middle Eastern security is shifting at breakneck speed, the coming U.S. elections have tremendous implications for the region.

On a few crucial fronts, policy areas will remain the same no matter which candidate wins. China will likely remain the main rival of the United States, and Washington will seek to curtail its reach, setting the stage for constant pressure to lock out Chinese influence in the Middle East. Second, either administration would almost definitely resume President Joe Biden's pursuit of an Israeli-Saudi bargain. Third, both Vice President Kamala Harris and former President Donald Trump voice strong commitment to Israel's security. However, this is where the similarities end.

Generally, Trump represents a high risk–high reward path for regional actors. He is viewed by leaders and experts as willing to use force against enemies, but his reputation for volatility could lead U.S. regional allies to worry whether current security commitments will persist. Harris is expected to maintain the current administration's approach, supporting regional allies while aiming to limit armed conflicts involving major shows of U.S. force.

On Iran, Trump's first term was marked by withdrawing from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (the Iran nuclear deal), a "maximum pressure" sanction campaign, and the assassination of Qasem Soleiman. For those reasons, it is understandable that Tehran views Trump's possible return to office with concern. Harris recently declared Iran the United States' greatest adversary. Nevertheless, she is more likely to opt for negotiations to roll back Iran's nuclear program than use force.

Both candidates have called for an end to the war between Israel and Iran's proxies like Hamas, Hezbollah, the Houthis and Iraqi Shiite militias, but mean different things by it. Trump has voiced support for high degrees of force on Israel's part to achieve its goals. Meanwhile, Harris consistently voices support for a cease-fire and hostage deal, and expresses concern for the well-being of Palestinian civilians. Still, she has ruled out an arms embargo on Israel. Whether she would expand restrictions on the sale of specific munitions remains to be seen.

The two are also likely to diverge on the relationship between a Saudi-Israeli deal and broader questions of regional peace. Harris will likely connect Saudi-Israeli normalization to Israeli commitment to Palestinian statehood. She will also likely intensify current sanctions against violent Jewish settlers. Trump, for his part, would likely support Israeli-Saudi normalization without a Palestinian component, and could endorse Israeli annexation in the West Bank.

For Israel, this amounts to a mixed balance. Trump will likely grant Israel more freedom of action, but his policy on the war in Ukraine could have the paradoxical effect of boosting Iran. Trump calls for an end to the war, even if that entails Ukrainian defeat, while Harris would maintain support for Kyiv. A Russian victory and corollary Ukrainian defeat would favor the anti-liberal democratic alliance in which Iran and its proxies play a key part.

Tamir Hayman

Executive Director, Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)

Avishay Ben Sasson-Gordis

Senior Researcher and Ruderman Family Foundation Visiting Scholar, Institute for National Security Studies (Israel)

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