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Policy Recommendations on the Middle East for the Trump Administration

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The United States' stature as a leading global power in the Middle East has eroded in recent years. The administration's decision to play a reactive rather than a proactive role in the Middle East created a vacuum in the region that was filled by elements that worked against the interests of the United States and its regional allies. The administration's policy, which was perceived in the region as an abandonment of allies (Egyptian Presidents Mubarak and el-Sisi, and the Gulf states), coupled with its closer ties with Iran, created a crisis of trust between the administration and the Sunni regimes. This negative attitude toward US policy peaked with Sunnis supporting Russian moves aimed at formulating a solution for the crisis in Syria (despite conflicts of interest between them and Moscow in this context), and even arms purchases from Russia and other countries, instead of American weapons (Egypt's purchase of Russia's S-300 missile system, and Saudi Arabia's intention to purchase Russia's S-400 missile system; purchases of French Rafale fighter planes by Egypt and Qatar, and more).

There is no doubt that President Barack Obama's decision to refrain from striking the chemical weapons stockpiles and manufacturing plants in Syria, despite the fact that the Assad regime had crossed the declared American red line, dealt a severe blow to the United States' position in the region, and substantially eroded its deterrence. The nuclear agreement with Iran also weakened the stature and deterrence of the country that is supposed to be the most powerful nation in the world. Furthermore, the American response to Iranian provocations, as well as to the missile tests, the seizure of US Navy ships, the harassment of American ships in the Strait of Hormuz, the firing by Houthis in Yemen of Iranian-supplied missiles at a US battleship and the near sinking of a United Arab Emirates vessel in the Bab el-Mandab Strait – exacerbated the erosion of United States stature and deterrence.

Statements by Commander of the United States Pacific Command Admiral Harry Harris at the International Security Forum conference in Halifax emphasized that deterrence is based on three components: capabilities, resolve, and signaling. US conduct in the above incidents did not show any resolve, which is why the United States' power of deterrence was drastically undermined. Furthermore, the vacuum in the Middle East, which steadily diminished US deterrence and influence in the region, was filled by Iran, Turkey, the Islamic State, and Russia.

Iran

Iran is the country that gains the most from the nuclear agreement (the JCPOA) signed by Tehran and the world powers in the summer of 2015.

- a. Iran retains its ability to manufacture uranium-enriched fissile material and a nuclear bomb within less than a decade and a half, without breaching the agreement. The significance of this is that it retains its military nuclear option.
- b. It benefits from the removal of the political blockade.
- c. It benefits from the removal of some of the economic sanctions.
- d. It extends its influence and even gains control in Baghdad, Damascus, Beirut, and Sana'a, through Shiite political factors that are under its influence, if not its authority.
- e. The Obama administration perceives Iran as an important component in stabilizing the region, due to its willingness to fight against the Islamic State. In this context, the administration has disregarded Iran's violations of Security Council resolutions on proliferation of arms and terrorism, coupled with missile testing and human rights violations (opponents of the regime are incarcerated and even executed). The participation by Revolutionary Guard commanders and forces (the Quds Force, commanded by Qasem Soleimani) in warfare against the Sunnis throughout the region increases its power, influence, and control over the region.

Turkey

The Turkish regime, led by President Erdoğan:

- a. has funded the Islamic State through oil purchases, without paying a price for this (and note Turkey is a member of NATO);
- b. for a prolonged period, has enabled jihadists from all over the world to join the Islamic State in Syria and in Iraq, through enabling use of Turkish airports to gain access to the battlefields and then return to their home countries as experienced and trained terrorists; all this, out of its view that fighting the Kurds is its top priority;
- c. continues to launch offensives against the Kurds, who for their part, are effectively fighting against the Islamic State;
- d. is enabling (and even increasing) the flight of refugees (from Syria and Iraq) and mainly illegal immigration to Europe from Muslim countries not in a state of war (including North African countries, Pakistan), while demanding that the European Union grant visa-free travel to Turkish citizens.
- e. is looking to gain more influence in the region (the neo-Ottoman approach) and is leading the Muslim Brotherhood camp in the Middle East (in the Palestinian arena, for example, Turkey supports Hamas and not Fatah).

The Islamic State

The Islamic State took advantage of the evacuation of the American forces from Iraq in order to conquer areas in Iraq and in Syria, and announced the establishment of the Islamic State. At a

later stage, the United States decided to return to the arena leading a coalition of Western countries against the Islamic State in Iraq, and attacking the Islamic State in Syria within the scope of an Arab coalition led by the United States.

The US administration subsequently decided to support the Kurds; improve its air strikes against the Islamic State while focusing on destroying the organization's economic resources; launch pinpoint attacks against individuals, improve the Kurds' fighting capabilities against the Islamic State, and apply pressure on Turkey to stop financing the organization and stop enabling the passage of jihadists through Turkey in order to join the ranks of the Islamic State – all of which intensified pressure on the Islamic State and damaged many of its assets, to the point of arresting its momentum.

Russia

Russia took advantage of the American weakness to seize a leading stance and influence (most of the region's leaders and their representatives visited Moscow more times last year than they did in Washington and began purchasing weapons and materiel from Russia). Moscow's interests in the Middle East do not converge with Washington's, and sometimes run counter to them. Beyond the competition between the United States and Russia over power and influence in the region, Russia is supporting the Shiite axis in general, and the Assad regime in particular, and is not focusing on fighting the Islamic State but rather, is launching attacks on all groups opposing the Assad regime, and with its indiscriminate bombings, slaughtering many civilians.

Russia's military and political involvement in Syria was rationalized by Russian President Vladimir Putin as saving the Assad regime; preventing chaos in Syria of the magnitude that developed in Iraq and in Libya (while blaming the United States for this chaos); and reflecting Putin's preference for killing the 2,000 Russian-speaking jihadists who joined the rebels on Syrian soil, rather than having to deal with them in Russia itself. Nevertheless, it is clear that, beyond its declared objectives, Russia achieved additional gains from its involvement in Syria:

- a. Readmission to the world powers' playing field: the hesitant response by the United States to Assad's crossing Washington's red line gave Russia a double boost – first: the United States was depicted as unreliable and weak compared to Russia; second: Russia, as the initiator of a compromise for Syria's chemical weapons disarmament, earned international credit for saving the situation, and even as the power that rescued the United States from an embarrassing situation.
- b. It proved to the regimes in the region and elsewhere that it is loyal to its allies (as opposed to the US abandonment of the Sunnis).
- c. It succeeded in diverting attention from the crisis in Ukraine to Syria.
- d. It displayed its military capabilities and used the battlefield in Syria as a testing field for its weapon systems.

- e. It preserved and even rehabilitated its military assets in Syria: its naval facility in the port of Tartus, its air force base south of Latakia, and its intelligence facilities inside Syria.
- f. It created leverage against the United States and Europe by pushing refugees out of Syria, through Turkey and into Europe.

Looking Ahead to the New US Administration

The administration that will assume office on January 20, 2017 will have to formulate a grand strategy for the Middle East, based on a number of decisions that will have an impact on the situation in the region and beyond, in the long and short ranges. Of the pivotal questions, the first is whether the United States intends on playing a more active or even proactive role in the Middle East.

I believe that the United States will have no other choice but to take a grand proactive strategy in the region – both in order to regain its standing as a world power, in a way that will also project its power in other regions, and in order to distance the Middle East threats from America, Europe, and elsewhere. Such a strategy will require:

- a. *Continued resolute fighting against the Islamic State*, which must be defeated in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and the Sinai Peninsula. Striking at the territorial strongholds and economic assets of the organization will not completely eradicate the covert terrorist infrastructure that it has already built in various locations around the world any time soon, but would deal it a severe blow, and particularly, to its image of triumph. Such a blow would also affect the organization's recruitment capabilities and would lead to its subjugation in the more distant future. In order to achieve this, the United States must lead the coalition fighting the Islamic State, while helping the Kurds and the non-jihadist Sunni organizations that are willing to fight against the Islamic State (and also against the Assad regime). The Kurdish example needs to serve as a model for "local boots on the ground," fighting for their objectives on the basis of American, European, and other assistance, which includes weapons, money, and political support. The Kurds, for example, were initially defeated by the Islamic State, until the Americans decided to assist them.
- b. *A change in policy toward Iran*: The Iranian regime is the most significant destabilizing factor in the Middle East, and therefore should not be seen as if it were a key element in stabilizing the region, since it is not part of the solution, but rather is the essence of the problem.

The Iranian regime must suffer political and economic pressure, as a consequence of its violations of Security Council resolutions relating to weapons proliferation and to the development and manufacture of missiles (unrelated to the nuclear agreement), and due to its subversive operations and terrorist activities in Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Lebanon and Syria, alongside terrorist activities in the Palestinian arena and on five continents (where there are Iranian sleeper terrorist infrastructures). Another reason that pressure must be applied on the Iran regime is the human rights situation in this country.

Above all, the US administration must take immediate action to prevent Iran from achieving military nuclear capability. Even if Iran complies with the nuclear agreement, it will be capable of manufacturing nuclear weapons within less than fifteen years. Coordinating the policy in this context with additional countries first requires immediate action in order to prevent any surprises in the future. Furthermore, a change in US policy toward Iran would strengthen relations and restore the trust that was lost between the United States and the Sunni Arab countries – its more natural partners.

- c. *A change in policy toward Turkey:* due the United States weakness in the Middle East, the Turkish regime dared to take action contrary to Western interests in general and American interests in particular. Discussions clarifying the Americans' red and yellow lines, while stressing that any crossing of them will harm Turkish interests, could put a stop to Turkey's rogue behavior.
 - i. In coordination with Turkey, the illegal immigration to Europe from Muslim countries through Turkey must be stopped, by creating a "safe zone" in northern Syria, or refugee camps on the Turkish side of the border (similar to the refugee camps on the Jordanian-Syrian border).
 - ii. Turkey must stop attacking the Kurds indiscriminately, and focus solely on terrorists.
 - iii. Turkey must stop accommodating the Hamas terrorist headquarters in Istanbul.
 - iv. An improved situation vis-à-vis Turkey will have an additional positive effect on the United States' position in the international arena – both in light of this achievement and considering the unstable relations between it and Russia, which would weaken the intensifying Russian influence in the region.
- d. *A change in policy toward Russia:* The United States needs to institute a more assertive policy against the indiscriminate bombing of Syrian civilians and against attacks on non-jihadist rebels. The operations against the Islamic State may be coordinated with Moscow, but the Americans should not allow Iranian-Shiite dominance in Syria under Russian protection and support. It is also possible to reach an American-Russian understanding regarding the future of the Syrian "Alawistan" (where the Russian interests in Syria are concentrated). Furthermore, confidence-building measures are necessary, along with the creation of an infrastructure for coordinating between the United States and Russia in the region. The entry of a new administration into office constitutes timing that is both natural and warranted for promoting actions in these directions.
- e. *A change in approach to the Syrian arena:* In relation to Syria's future in general, the United States needs to abandon the idea of reuniting the country that has been torn apart by fighting, and accept the fact that Syria has already been fragmented into ethnic/religious enclaves: "Alawistan," Kurdistan and "Druzistan." Once the Islamic State is defeated, it will be necessary to establish Sunni leadership/s in the Sunni regions.

Conclusion

The new US administration will be under the scrutiny of the international community, and the first steps that it takes will have critical implications for the way in which the various actors in the Middle East and the entire international community perceive it. Consequently, the first actions by the new administration in the region offer tremendous potential for improving the United States' position and image, and the new administration should do its utmost to realize this potential. Particularly at issue are a number of measures to be instituted by the incoming administration at the outset of its term, which will have the power to restore the United States' stature and deterrence in the Middle East, and as a result, in other regions of the world as well.