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## **Trump Presidency and the Pragmatic Sunni Regimes**

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For many of the Sunni regimes in the Middle East, the beginning of Donald Trump's presidency is a positive development, if only because it marks the end of Barak Obama's presidency. Obama's policy was seen as damaging and, in certain cases, treacherous towards those considered traditional American allies. No less important, especially for Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, is the fact that the Trump administration is expected to toughen its stance towards Iran and broaden the scope of U.S. policy towards the Islamic Republic beyond Obama's narrow nuclear approach. These regimes blame Obama not only for mishandling of the Iranian issue, but also for the upsurge of political Islam; although it was suppressed in Egypt, its presence and influence still threaten them. They also blame Obama for the rise of ISIS due to the United States' hasty withdrawal from Iraq and Obama's hesitant policy on Syria.

In accordance with the Obama administration's "leading from behind" policy, Washington sought to distance itself from the traditional leadership role that it had played in recent decades in the Middle East. In the view of many of the Arab regimes, the Obama administration preferred forging closer relations with Iran, which it saw as part of the solution to problems in the region, alongside showing weakness towards Turkey, which acted against US and NATO interests. The United States' failure to meet commitments, soft responses, or lack thereof to provocations, and even by attempts to harm American forces also eroded its credibility, image of power, and deterrence.

One of the immediate results of this policy was the increased involvement and influence of external players in the region, especially Russia. Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates were, in many cases, forced to adopt a more independent policy to protect their vital interests, and even looked for additional external diplomatic and military backing, which did not always match American policy objectives.

The Trump administration's first steps in the region will significantly influence how it is perceived. Trump has already managed to distance himself from some of his statements condemning Muslims, and Arab figures who criticized him are seeking to turn over a new leaf. The Gulf states especially are encouraged by the more assertive tone towards Iran sounded by

Trump and Defense Secretary James Mattis, who see Iran as the main source of instability in the region. Indeed, it appears that the policy towards Iran will be broader, with fewer inhibitions than the previous administration demonstrated in acting to curb Iran's activities in the region.

Contrary to Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's statements, the leaders of the pragmatic Sunni camp, chiefly Saudi Arabia, do not want Washington to walk away from the nuclear agreement at this point. In their view, this would cause more harm than good, since it would lead to strengthening the extremist camp in Iran, and to a complete revival of the Iranian nuclear program, as well as making it harder to renew the sanctions. The rulers of the Gulf states are more concerned by Iran's regional conduct, which seems to have become more aggressive since the signing of the agreement, and by its increasing influence in Iraq, Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. All of them, especially Egypt, hope that Trump will focus less on the human rights situation in their countries, and allow them greater freedom of action in suppressing the challenge to their rule posed by political Islam and Salafi Jihadism. Indeed, Trump has declared that his top priorities include "wiping out radical Islam" and the war against ISIS and similar groups, though he too may discover that a serious struggle against terrorism may draw him into excessive involvement in the region.

Trump's presidency also raises concerns. He will probably want to see some of the Arab regimes taking on more of the defense burden, beyond purchasing weapons and hosting American bases. In addition, there are concerns about the new winds blowing in Washington towards Russia, and their implications for Syria's future. Trump will find it difficult to rehabilitate relations, especially with the Gulf states, while he is simultaneously improving relations with Russia and taking its interests into account when formulating agreements regarding the new regional order. If Trump does indeed reach an agreement with Russia on Syria political future, many in the Gulf states will see this as granting a victory to Assad and Iran.

In addition, Trump, who has emphasized that his top priority is making America great again and returning it to Americans, could move away from personal involvement in Middle Eastern issues and reduce US overall involvement in the region. Also, even if he adjusts American policy in the Middle East, some consequences of the policies of former president Obama may continue to affect the region for some time, primarily the strengthening of Iran and Russia's influence. One such consequence is that it appears that the Sunni camp led by Saudi Arabia will have to accept the creation of an American-Russian-Turkish front that will help defeat ISIS at the price of leaving President Assad in power, at least in the near future.

Arab leaders must also be dissatisfied with some of President Trump's statements regarding Israel, primarily his announcement that he will move the American embassy to Jerusalem. Although, the Palestinian issue is not their top priority, the fulfillment of this commitment could, in their view, lead to wide-scale public protests and perhaps violence, threatening the stability of their regimes. Even if Palestinian threats "to open the gates of hell" sounds more like an expression of frustration and misunderstanding of the balance of power, it appears that if the new American administration is taking that into consideration, it will need to find creative ways to fulfill Trump's election promise.

Demonstrating American determination could cause the leaders of the pragmatic Arab camp to coordinate and cooperate more closely with Israel against Iran, political Islam, and Salafi Jihadism, and place pressure on the Palestinian leadership to resume direct negotiations with Israel to reach an agreement. In a reality of determined American leadership that supports Israel and is in coordination with Russia, the range of possibilities open to the leaders of the pragmatic Arab camp is limited, and the choice to join the US will remain the preferred option. Under such conditions, it is likely that the split in the Arab world, along with deep fears of Iran, political Islam, and Salafi Jihadism, will create a solid basis for cooperation with Israel, which remains the United States' staunchest ally in the Middle East.

It would be best for the Israeli government to refrain from making public statements that could increase the pressure on the leaders of Arab states by their citizens due to Trump administration's perceived identification with Israel. Israel should prefer a quiet channel of communication with the administration and with its allies within the pragmatic Arab camp, especially Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia, and collaborate with the United States on weakening the radical axes led by Iran and the Salafi-Jihadists.