

Why many in the Middle East prefer Trump over Obama



Tom Regan

It looked like it would be, in the words of Humphrey Bogart's character Rick Blaine of *Casablanca* fame, the beginning of a beautiful friendship. US President Barack Obama's overtures to the Middle East at the beginning of his presidency in 2009 not only looked set to make over the United States' relationship with the region but also led to Obama's being awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

So why is it that, nearly eight years later, that "beautiful friendship" has turned sour? While Americans wonder what will happen in the next four years under the presidency of the Twitter-happy Donald Trump, many Middle Eastern leaders and diplomats say they look forward to dealing with Trump, despite his inflammatory comments about Muslims and Islam.

Boiling it down to its essentials, many of them prefer, as one said at a recent conference in Morocco, to deal with someone who hates Islam rather than an administration that "loves Iran".

Obama's efforts – or lack thereof – in the Middle East will go down as one of the

biggest disappointments of his administration.

Despite his tough talk, he was unable to move the Israeli-Palestinian peace talks an inch; in fact, one might argue that they have gone backward.

Obama's pro-democracy comments during the "Arab spring", and particularly after the 2011 uprising in Egypt, angered conservative regimes in the region.

His wishy-washy stance on Syria was even worse. From the moment he did not follow through on his red-line comment about the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons, Obama's lack of direction and the aggressive stance of Russian President Vladimir Putin made the American president look weak and foolish.

It was the nuclear deal with Iran, however, that was the final straw. Saudi Arabia, Egypt and the Gulf countries saw the agreement as a total win for Iran, lifting the burden of sanctions, giving the Iranians access to billions of dollars and not exacting any requirements from them to stop their meddling in the affairs of neighbouring countries.

Then came the interview with the Atlantic's Jeffrey Goldberg, in which Obama's distaste for

the region and what he saw as its never-ending conflicts and political quagmires further pushed Middle Eastern leaders away from the United States.

Which goes a long way to explaining why many are looking forward to Trump.

They probably view the incoming US president as a blank slate on which they can project their agendas. Some are counting on his lack of interest in the region and of foreign policy experience to give them a freer hand to do as they please. (Nation-building and promoting democracy and human rights likely will be sharply reduced under Trump.) Also, his seemingly chummy relationship with Putin, who may have helped him win the US presidency, could complicate relations with Iran considering that Russia and Iran have been close for years.

Arab governments, however, probably envision Trump being more pragmatic and blunt than Obama. Trump does not do diplomacy and there is a sense that the Arab world will have a better notion of where it stands with the US government under Trump than under Obama.

There are some caveats: Trump

can change his mind on a whim and the region may find his temperament more puzzling than Obama's. If the United States is less engaged in the Middle East, count on Russia and China to be more active. Nature abhors a vacuum, after all.

Surprisingly, Iran wanted Trump to win, too, not because they prefer him to Obama or Hillary Clinton, but because they see his election as a potential massive headache for what it calls "the Great Satan".

That other great determinate of public sentiment in the region – the Arab street – probably does not care much about who won the US presidential election. One US leader is much like another to it and none offers the region very much and what is offered is frequently undesirable.

In the end, Trump will probably not seem much better than Obama but since the expectations are not as high, the disappointment will be noticeably less.

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The Somalisation of Yemen



Khairallah Khairallah

Yemen is rapidly deteriorating towards total chaos. As feared by the country's supporters, the imminent demise of Yemen's last state institution will turn it into a lawless state and hasten its Somalisation. With a population of more than 25 million, the ensuing humanitarian disaster in Yemen will likely surpass the one in Syria.

Yet those in power – or so it seems to them – in Yemen ignore the mounting danger. Some 19 million Yemenis do not have access to potable water and 14 million do not have enough to eat. Worse, a whole generation has been lost to poverty, sickness and illiteracy. This generation will become easy prey for terrorist organisations, such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) and their offshoots.

It is useless to speak at length about the evils of the presence of these two groups in Yemen. The December 11th terrorist attack in Aden, in which 48 soldiers were killed, is a good indicator of the extent of the threat to the country. Statistics released by international

groups are alarming. Every day hundreds of Yemeni children die because of lack of minimal living conditions.

Yet, the crisis in Yemen persists and peace negotiations have reached a dead end. A political solution does not seem attainable in the short run. This does not mean that the various parties in the crisis cannot arrive at a negotiated solution. They can if they accept to be realistic. "Realistic" is indeed the key word here. Being realistic means, first and foremost, abandoning delusions.

The first delusion to go is the belief in the ability of any of the parties involved to achieve a military victory on the ground. This means, of course, to recognise that none of the parties is going to be able to eliminate the others and therefore a military solution must be abandoned.

Potential military solutions in Yemen have reached their limit. Operation Decisive Storm stopped the Iranian project for Yemen. Following their victory in Sana'a in September 2014, the Iran-backed Houthis became deluded about controlling all of Yemen. They

did not see the military operation against them coming.

Territories under Houthi control have shrunk considerably but they are not out of the equation yet. They still control Sana'a and northern Yemen. They are a presence in Taiz, thanks to their alliance with former president Ali Abuallah Saleh, who lost power to the Muslim Brotherhood in 2011. Since then, the highly centralised regime has been in disarray.

Yemen is living a new reality. Consequently, new solutions are in order. It is useless to insist on the past and to appeal to a bygone legitimacy. Interim president, Abd Rabbo Mansour Hadi, champion of this legitimacy, has spent his time since February 2012 when he was handed the presidency by Saleh, in settling old scores with the latter. Almost five years in power and nothing has changed on the ground.

There is a vicious circle that must be broken. In addition to what has been agreed upon during the peace talks in Kuwait, US Secretary of State John Kerry's initiative would reduce Hadi's presidential prerogatives in preparation for

sidelining him. This is unavoidable if the desired outcome is to relieve Sana'a from the Houthis' grip. Sana'a would become the capital of a federation of regions enjoying decentralised powers. This new Yemen would be a far cry from the old Yemen under Saleh.

It is in the interest of the Gulf countries and the international community to work towards implementing such a solution to avoid worsening the Yemeni crisis. In the long run, the only people who will benefit from a continuing crisis in Yemen are the terrorists, be they sponsored by Iran or by al-Qaeda or ISIS.

To break the vicious circle of violence in Yemen, a consensual figure must be found to prepare for resolution of the crisis. Concessions must be made by all sides or Yemen will continue to be held hostage by the Houthis, a fanatical group that believes that backwardness can solve Yemen's problems, and by another group claiming "legitimacy" and refusing to accept that its days are forever gone.

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Trends in the new year



Khattar Abou Diab

In all probability, 2017 is going to be a year of transition for the new directions in the world order within the context of the strategic disorder and polarisation among the powers.

This will be especially so economically between Washington and Beijing. Transition will also be the optimal word regarding the rise of Russia, the future of the European Union after Brexit, the coming elections in France and Germany and the shaping of a new Middle East out of its destructive chaos.

Amid rising Putinism, loud Trumpism, a hungry Chinese dragon, an ageing Europe, a generation of nostalgic dreamers of bygone empires, merchants of religion and fables, globalisation refuseniks and pushers of the clash of civilisations, the new era in international relations does not look so bright.

Regardless of the achievements of both the digital and technological revolutions in our global village, history draws us back to the first fall of global capitalism, which led to the first

world war in 1914. Today, with the growing gap between classes, the shrinking space of freedoms and the rise of nationalism, we are witnessing conditions like those that led to the Bolshevik revolution of 1917. Of course, we will not see the unfolding of the same scenario but we will need to seriously review our thinking patterns and approaches.

With the withdrawals from the International Court of Justice, the use of brute force to settle international disputes (Russia resorted to the card of sanctioned wars to rejoin the circle of big players) and the spread of terrorism, we have come to the end of the Westernised era of international relations. Today, it seems that ethics or human considerations no longer have any role to play in international relations nor can international law and concerted multilateral diplomacy stand in the face of narrow national interests.

We can see the decline in the limited gains of the previous world order reflected in the ascension of Putinism, not just in relation to military successes in the Syrian

theatre but also in the rise in Europe of nationalistic or right-wing leaders close to Moscow. In case the accusations levelled by Washington regarding Putin's team hacking US elections turn out to be true, we can conclude that these digital wars are preliminary tests for new forms of confrontation in a feverish race to control decision makers worldwide during the coming decades. Donald Trump's election under the slogan "America First" clearly indicates the return of nationalistic discourse to the detriment of globalisation and international cooperation.

Future trends in international relations will be decided by Trump administration policies towards China and China's reactions to them. During the new era, China will focus on increasing its benefits from the new Silk Road while the United States will focus on the South China Sea and countering China's game in Asia and the Pacific.

In the wider Middle East, everybody is waiting for the Trump administration's positions regarding Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey. It will be interesting

to find out the extent to which this administration is willing to concede Russia's rising role in the eastern Mediterranean.

In many places, 2017 is shrouded in mystery. It is difficult to predict the global effects of a strong US dollar and the fluctuations of the oil markets. In France, Iran, Germany, the Netherlands and Nigeria, the coming elections are a waiting game and we cannot clearly read the aftermath of the Islamic State's defeats in Mosul and Syria. The future of the Kurdish issue remains uncertain.

Some observers are quick to dismiss any potential changes in the Arab world for 2017.

Nevertheless, and despite the continuous destructive chaos in more than one Arab country, the profound changes taking place since 2010 in many are indicative of the covert strength of Arab youth to meet challenges head-on and move forward with reforms while strongly opposing any form of colonisation.

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