

# Trump's Middle East policy and the art of improvisation

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Washington

US President Donald Trump makes no bones about his rejection of the nuclear agreement with Iran. "I feel strongly about what I did. I'm tired of being taken advantage of," Trump said a few days after he put the international community on notice about a possible US withdrawal from the accord. "It might be total termination. That's a real possibility. Some would say that's a greater possibility."

However, if you listen to his advisers, "termination" is not on Trump's mind. "We want to take the agreement as it exists today" and improve it, US Secretary of State Rex Tillerson told CNN. "Right now, you're going to see us stay in the deal," US Ambassador to the United States Nikki Haley said on NBC. "We're in the deal to see how we can make it better."

The contradictions are not unusual for the Trump administration, analysts said. Trump's Middle East policy is more of a hodgepodge of go-it-alone rhetoric, tweets and improvisational, off-the-cuff remarks than the product of a comprehensive strategy. The wait for a Middle East policy package under Trump is turning into a growing recognition that none will be forthcoming.

"The attention of the White House shifts with every news cycle and when the American president does take a few moments to pay attention to this important region, it is often to make bold but largely empty statements deriding the policies of his predecessor and declaring his intention to undo them entirely," said Tally Helfont, director of the Programme on the

Middle East at the Foreign Policy Research Institute in Philadelphia. "There is no comprehensive strategy. There are reactive statements, publicity stunts and a short attention span when it comes to all things Middle East."

Senator John McCain, an outspoken Trump critic within the Republican Party, accused the president of turning away from values that guided US foreign policy for decades. In a speech on October 16, McCain warned of refusing "the obligations of international leadership for the sake of some half-baked, spurious nationalism cooked up by people who would rather find scapegoats than solve problems."

Trump's frequent use of Twitter to weigh in on policy matters adds to the confusion. "As a new diplomatic tool, Trump's tweets are making world leaders and US officials anxious since they are unpredictable in their nature and timing," Joe Macaron, an analyst at the Arab Centre in Washington, told *The Arab Weekly*.

The president has also contradicted and undercut Tillerson on so many occasions that some observers in Washington expect Tillerson to resign or to be fired before the year is out. In one incident in June, Tillerson supported mediation efforts to solve the ongoing crisis between Qatar and its neighbours. Less than an hour later Trump called Qatar a "funder of terrorism," placing the United States firmly on the side of the Saudi-led group opposing Qatar.

Despite the inconsistencies, two basic themes for the region are emerging under Trump, said Jeffrey Martini, a senior Middle East analyst for the RAND Corporation and a former State Department official. "They are a more aggressive posture towards Iran, which was



Reactive statements. US President Donald Trump's Twitter feed on a computer screen in Washington. (AP)

formalised in the recent Iran policy review, and an attempt to improve relations with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and Israel," he said via e-mail.

Martini and other analysts point out that personal and inter-agency rivalries in the world of US foreign policy did not start with Trump's presidency but the question of which camp is winning is harder to answer than in previous administrations. There is also an effort by Tillerson and influential Secretary of Defence James Mattis to impose discipline on a free-wheeling president to keep US foreign policy predictable.

No one can be certain that these influences on Trump will be permanent, however. Mattis, for

example, might be politically strong at the moment, said Helfont, "but it remains to be seen if he can weather the next storm and the next and the next."

The Trump administration has not been hit by a foreign policy crisis that has forced the government to prove its mettle, said James Zogby, president of the Arab American Institute in Washington.

Zogby said he does not think that Trump would prove to be a steady pair of hands in a full-blown crisis. "I would hope that Mattis would emerge and take control of the situation but am I confident? No, I am not," Zogby said.

Given the many uncertainties, Middle Eastern countries trying to work out what the United States is up to should look for long-established trends in Washington's stance towards the region, Martini said. "The important consideration for Middle East officials is discerning where the current administration's policies break from longer-term US strategic interests and thus may be subject to reversal by fu-

ture administrations," he said.

Some of Trump's positions, such as his hard line towards Iran, could change under the next president. "Although this risks confusion among allies and partners, it is also a normal part of the US system," Martini said.

Zogby said Middle Eastern politicians should be careful when dealing with Trump. "He is a pitchman. Everything he does is a sales pitch," he said, "but none of the great deals he has promised has happened. If I had to work with America, I would not have great expectations."

Their experience with the tumultuous political scenes in their own countries could give Middle Eastern officials a privileged vantage from which to observe the Trump administration's endeavours.

"I would argue that Middle Eastern officials are likely to understand the ever-shifting centres of power, the personality politics and the institutional rivalries that are ongoing in Washington better than American politicians themselves," Helfont said.

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## The US administration between Iraq and a hard place



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**While Abadi is grateful that the United States helped to retrain the Iraqi Army after its dismal performance against ISIS in 2014, US largesse is not what it used to be.**

The recent offensive by Iraqi troops to take the multi-ethnic city of Kirkuk and its oil fields put the United States in a difficult situation, as it has been allied

with both the central Iraqi government and the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG).

US policy has been to support the central government of Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, a Shia politician who is considered more moderate and inclusive than his predecessor, Nuri al-Maliki. At the same time, the United States has worked closely with the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) for several decades.

Militarily, the United States has trained both the Iraqi Army and the peshmerga, the Iraqi Kurdish militia. Both forces have fought successfully against the Islamic State (ISIS) over the past couple of years but, with ISIS in retreat and with the Kurdish independence referendum having caused so much controversy within Iraq, the two military forces have now set their sights on each other.

Complicating matters is that the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF), a mostly Shia group whose sub-components often take orders from Iran, have also mobilised to move into the Kirkuk area.

Although the peshmerga, under the control of the Kurdish Democratic Party (KDP) of KRG President Masoud Barzani, called on all Iraqi Kurds to "resist and

defeat the attackers," it appears that the peshmerga under the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK), a rival group that shared power in an uneasy alliance with the KDP, made a deal with the Iraqi central government to allow Iraqi troops to move into Kirkuk without much resistance. This heightened tensions within the Kurdish region of Iraq as well as dissatisfaction among many Kurds, particularly those living in Kirkuk, who say the political leadership abandoned them.

The Pentagon, upset that its two main allies in Iraq were in conflict, issued a statement during the initial fighting calling on both to avoid escalating actions that could detract from the fight against ISIS. It has active forces in western Iraq along the Syrian border.

Nonetheless, US leverage seems to be limited. The United States failed to compel the KRG from having the independence referendum despite many warnings, and Abadi under pressure from other Iraqi politicians, such as Maliki, to demonstrate toughness, went ahead with a military offensive.

While Abadi is grateful that the United States helped to retrain the Iraqi Army after its dismal performance against ISIS in 2014 and US air strikes assisted Iraqi Army and special forces in taking the fight to ISIS, US largesse is not what it used to be.

For all of his talk against ISIS, US President Donald Trump's fiscal 2018 budget for Iraq includes less than \$1 billion from all accounts to

help the beleaguered Iraqi economy. It has paid a heavy price in the ISIS conflict. Abadi not only faces large budget deficits (approximately \$20 billion a year) because of low oil prices, high government expenditures on civil services salaries and high defence spending, he has to deal with hundreds of thousands of internally displaced refugees from the ISIS conflict as well as the enormous task of rebuilding the heavily damaged cities such as Mosul that will cost in the tens of billions of dollars.

Trump and his team apparently believe that they can assist Abadi on the cheap or rely on the Saudis and the other Gulf Arabs to foot the bill. They are likely to be disappointed on both accounts. This means Abadi will likely chart his own course.

Although Kirkuk is back in Iraqi government hands, the issue could erupt again. The city lies just outside the boundaries of the KRG and its final disposition (to become part of the KRG or remain outside it) was supposed to have been settled by a referendum of the city's inhabitants in 2007. However, the issue was so controversial – the Kurds claimed that Saddam Hussein moved in thousands of ethnic Arabs over the years to change the city's character while the Arabs and Turkmen of the city say they want to be under the Iraqi central state – that the plebiscite was delayed many times. Then, in the summer of 2014 when ISIS was occupying part of northern Iraq and the Iraqi Army

collapsed, the Kurds seized Kirkuk and made it part of the KRG.

Kirkuk has both symbolic and economic value for the Kurds. They have often referred to the city as their "Jerusalem" for historic and nationalistic reasons. The city and its environs have long held substantial oil resources, which the Kurds were able to take since 2014 when they incorporated Kirkuk into the KRG and withheld these oil revenues from Baghdad when the Iraqi central government helped up the sharing of government revenues to the Kurds.

Abadi, therefore, needed to show, for his own political standing that he will no longer tolerate the Kurds keeping Kirkuk. At the same time, he knows the military offensive that reclaimed Kirkuk has bred a great of resentment among the Kurds and could explode into violence. For this reason, he has called for dialogue between the central government and the KRG.

So where is the United States in this conflict? Initially, it took a neutral stand between the Iraqi government and the KRG, which many Kurdish nationalists took as an abandonment of their cause. Now the United States simply hopes that, with the situation "settled" in that the 2014 borders between the Iraqi central government and the KRG have been re-established, the issue will go away. However, it behoves Washington to mediate this dispute diplomatically otherwise Kirkuk could become a violent flash point very soon.