

# A New President and the Middle East

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Nov 15, 2016

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Norman Ornstein is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, election analyst for BBC News, and coauthor of the 2012 book *It's Even Worse Than It Looks: How the American Constitutional System Collided with the New Politics of Extremism*.



### [Dennis Ross \(/experts/dennis-ross\)](#)

Dennis Ross, a former special assistant to President Barack Obama, is the counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute.



Brief Analysis

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**How will the election's outcome shape the direction of U.S. Middle East policy,**

## **and how do America's friends in the region view the prospect of a new administration? Read or watch a conversation between leading Middle Eastern journalists and U.S. policy experts.**

*On November 10, Jamal Khashoggi, Jumana Ghunaimat, David Horowitz, Norman Ornstein, and Dennis Ross addressed a Policy Forum at The Washington Institute. Khashoggi is editor-in-chief of Al-Arab News Channel (Saudi Arabia). Ghunaimat is editor-in-chief of al-Ghad newspaper (Jordan). Horowitz is founding editor of the Times of Israel. Ornstein is a resident scholar at the American Enterprise Institute. Ross is the Institute's counselor and William Davidson Distinguished Fellow. The following is a rapporteur's summary of their remarks.*

### **JAMAL KHASHOGGI**

**W**hen it comes to the Middle East, Donald Trump's stances are contradictory, especially regarding Iran. Saudi Arabia, while certainly concerned about the Islamic State's presence in Syria and Iraq, is much more perturbed by the actions of Shiite Iran. Trump is vocally anti-Iranian, but he also supports Bashar al-Assad in the Syrian conflict, which ultimately bolsters Iranian regional control. Thus, Saudi Arabia is rightfully nervous about a Trump presidency.

The expectation that "Trump as president" will be starkly different from "Trump as candidate" is a false hope at best. Saudi Arabia should be ready for some surprises, likely in the form of negative rhetoric from the Trump administration. Ultimately, the kingdom needs to create an alliance of Sunni countries to serve as a bulwark against a potentially anti-Sunni Trump.

### **JUMANA GHUNAIMAT**

**T**ump's election is a massive setback for humanitarian issues, and Jordan was just as shocked as the rest of the world by his victory. This is not to say that all Jordanians were upset by the news: in fact, many welcome him, despite his rhetoric on Muslims, women, and minorities. Most troubling, however, is that many of our questions about his approach to the Middle East cannot be answered right now because he literally has no experience in foreign policy.

It is safe to say that American institutions like The Washington Institute will still have the ability to influence Trump's decisions abroad. Yet progress on issues such as the Palestinian conflict seems farfetched; although there will always be hope for an end to that conflict, Trump is highly unlikely to push for peace, human rights, and equality anywhere, let alone the Middle East.

Regardless, the continuity of U.S.-Jordanian relations seems assured. Jordanians ultimately expect the relationship to remain stable, and given the long history between the two countries, many hope that bilateral ties will grow even stronger.

### **DAVID HOROVITZ**

**I**sraelis tend to have little faith in polling, so they were not surprised by the election results. Unlike Jordanians, however, Israelis would have voted for Hillary Clinton by a 15 percent margin according to some reports. In general, Israelis hope for three traits in an American president: empathy, a good understanding of the region's evils, and guaranteed dependability as a (military) ally. While Trump has shown credible empathy for Israel and its hardships in the Middle East, the last factor -- being a dependable ally -- remains untested.

Yet Israel also has two major disagreements with President Obama that Trump can capitalize on: the Iran deal and the Palestinian conflict. Although Trump has no stance on the latter issue, Palestinian Authority president Mahmoud Abbas enjoys less legitimacy today than ever, so it is not as grave a matter to Israelis as the Iran nuclear agreement --

a deal that Trump has frequently and vociferously criticized. Although Israelis want to see American leadership abroad, some uncertainty persists on their fundamental national security issues, engendering a sense of drift.

Many in the Israeli government, such as Labor Party leader Isaac Herzog, are positioning themselves to benefit from Trump's victory. As for Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu, not all is as wonderful as one might believe. While he understands the region's sensitivities and sees the imperative of separating from the Palestinians, both the left and the right are criticizing his settlement policies (albeit for very different reasons). Given the lack of pressure from the Obama administration to reduce settlement activity, Trump's right-wing platform might further embolden the Israeli right, who have been an obstacle to Netanyahu's centrist political maneuvering.

## **NORMAN ORNSTEIN**

**T**ump's platform of "no confidence in Washington" clearly gripped large swaths of the American population, many of whom ascribed to angry populism and partisan tribalism. While citizens had definite grievances about issues such as wealth disparity, Obamacare, and limited job opportunities, their negative partisanship was largely reactionary: "We hate the other side," they said with their vote.

In addition to Trump's skillful maneuvering of the antiestablishment wave, his Republican supporters also played the game well, guaranteeing themselves control over the House and Senate. The appointment of Supreme Court justices is now the prerogative of a unified Republican government, which will influence social policy for the next twenty to thirty years. Ultimately, the outcome is a case of the dog catching the bus.

So what are the best and worst-case scenarios? Hopefully, Trump's infrastructure plan will go forward, possibly creating jobs for low-income communities. He also seems bent on replacing Obamacare with another form of Obamacare, and perhaps even expanding national healthcare. Essentially, though, America is facing a potential kleptocracy, evidenced by Trump's refusal to explicitly state that he will put all of his business holdings in a blind trust. What will happen when a serious decision arises that affects both his personal funds and the future of the United States?

Trump has also enflamed the "War on Islam" rhetoric, and the resultant spike in Islamophobia could conceivably lead to increased torture, bans on American Muslims, and indiscriminate bombings in the Middle East -- all of which would exacerbate the problem of international terrorism. Alternatively, Trump may be inclined to outsource his Middle East policies to Russia.

## **DENNIS ROSS**

**T**he international community has no idea what to expect from Trump, and such diplomatic uncertainty is a humbling experience at best. Trump needs to reassure our nation's allies before he becomes president; assurances and commitments are especially crucial when times are tough, as they are now. NATO is important, but so are the Sunni Arab states. Given that one of Trump's few clear aims is to destroy the Islamic State, it is absolutely imperative that Saudi Arabia and similar countries be involved, since the group's ideology cannot be discredited without them.

Cozying up to Russia would be fine in theory if the relationship were a two-way street. But if Trump wants the Sunnis on his side, he will need to be careful when handling Syria. At the moment, Russia seems intent on subjugating East Aleppo through bombing, and any such campaign would likely result in around 100,000 additional refugees in the coming weeks. Thus, by the time Trump is inaugurated in January, he may be well positioned to call for a ceasefire and diplomatic ties -- essentially paving the way for Assad's return to power. If that is in fact his aim, Trump needs to tell Moscow that the United States will respond if Assad continues his abysmal human-rights track record. Furthermore, Russia needs to understand that there will be consequences for disobeying global norms.

While Trump has long signaled a desire to get out of the Middle East, candidates often flip positions when they face difficult decisions as president. Yet the ultimate outcome of any given regional crisis will depend heavily on the cabinet members and advisors surrounding him. Whatever the case, given the region's current situation -- the Palestinians more divided than ever, the Iranians bent on regional expansion, and the Saudis in the midst of a "revolution disguised as economic reform" -- our historical allies in Israel and the Sunni Arab countries need a strong America now more than ever.

*This summary was prepared by Omar Alhashani. ❖*

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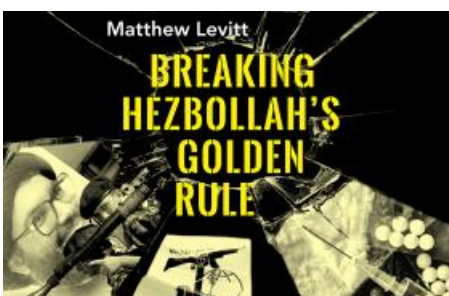
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