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## Trump's Return and U.S. Policy Toward the Middle East in 2025

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### **Middle East Issues and Arab/Muslim Voters in the U.S. Presidential Election**

In April, during the election campaign, former President Trump focused on domestic issues that could highlight the failures of the Biden administration, such as inflation and illegal immigration, instead of the Middle East wars that are causing fatigue among the public. However, he once mentioned that if he were president, there would not have been a war in the Middle East and that he could end the war immediately with a phone call. The Republican Party platform also contained vague statements, such as “bringing peace to the Middle East and standing with Israel.”

Meanwhile, Arab and Muslim voters in swing states such as Michigan, Pennsylvania, and Arizona strongly criticized the Biden administration's support for Israel and its failure to reach a ceasefire in the Israel-Hamas war. Thus, it is feasible to assume they did not vote for Vice President Kamala Harris. Those who supported Biden in the 2020 presidential election launched the “#Abandon Biden” campaign in early 2024 and continued the no-confidence vote during the Democratic primary. In fact, Arab and Muslim voters in Michigan, the state with the largest Arab population, were greatly disappointed with the Democratic Party and inadvertently contributed to Trump's victory by supporting the Green Party's Jill Stein as an alternative to Trump, who issued an anti-immigration executive banning citizen of seven Muslim countries from entering the United States during his term.

### **The Second Trump Presidency and Its Middle East Policy: Impulsive and Blatant “America First”**

#### ***Israel-Palestine Conflict***

President-elect Trump favors Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu and his hard-line policies in the Israel-Palestine conflict. In a phone call with Netanyahu in July, Trump said, “End the war by January 2025, when I will be inaugurated.” He also vowed to push for a quick end to the war. Trump will actively reflect Netanyahu's stance on the reconstruction of the Gaza Strip and demand financial

support from the Gulf countries without paying much attention to the capacity-building of the Palestinian Authority. Former President Trump violated UN Security Council Resolutions 242 and 497 to back Netanyahu's position. His administration also closed the PLO's mission in Washington and the Jerusalem consulate and eliminated funding for UNRWA.

### ***Iran's Nuclear Development and Reorganization of the Proxies***

Trump prefers a maximum-pressure approach to Iran's nuclear development and its regional proxies. Moreover, Trump's level of pressure on Iran will likely increase as the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' assassination plot targeting him was discovered, and Iranian hackers were found to have hacked candidate Trump's data and sent it to Democratic campaign officials. As Iran is known to be closer to nuclear weapons capability than ever before, the second Trump administration will likely attempt to stop it through high-intensity sanctions and military threats rather than diplomatic means. In 2018, former President Trump ordered an abrupt withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani in Iraq. Later, the Iranian reformist faction was greatly reduced, and hard-line conservatives gained power, which further intensified Iran's military adventurism.

### ***Security Cooperation with the Gulf Countries***

Trump's stance on cooperation with the Gulf countries is highly favorable. These oil-producing countries are also willing to respond to the transactional approach in arms trade and defense cooperation with the United States without much discomfort, and Trump will not pressure them to adhere to human rights and democratic principles. The relationship between President-elect Trump and Saudi Arabia is so strong that former President Trump's first overseas trip in 2017 was to Saudi Arabia. In 2018, when Saudi intelligence agents brutally murdered journalist Jamal Khashoggi in Istanbul, then-President Trump vetoed the U.S. Congress's attempts at an arms embargo and sanctions on Saudi Arabia. However, despite the friendship between the Trump family and the Saudi royals, the relationship between the two countries was not always smooth. In 2019, when the Houthi rebels attacked Saudi oil facilities with missiles and drones, the Trump administration did not take any particular action for its ally. Since then, Saudi Arabia, as well as the UAE and Qatar, have viewed Trump as unreliable and have pursued a policy of diplomatic diversification toward China and Russia.

## **U.S. 'Withdrawal' from the Middle East**

Trump will push ahead with the U.S. withdrawal from the region without much consideration of the security situation of its allies. The withdrawal of American troops stationed in Iraq and Syria will be carried out quickly, and the influence of the IRGC there will rapidly expand. In 2019, former President Trump withdrew U.S. troops from Syria, abandoning the Syrian Kurdish YPG, which had fought as a key ground force in the anti-ISIS international coalition. Three days after the withdrawal, the Turkish army crossed the Syrian border and attacked the U.S.-allied YPG, but the Trump administration turned a blind eye. Instead, Trump announced plans to deploy additional troops and

advanced weapons to Saudi Arabia, stating that the country had promised to pay for the costs. In 2020, he signed a peace agreement with the Taliban without consulting the allied Afghan government, which served as a decisive opportunity for the Taliban to regain power in Afghanistan. In addition, former President Trump showed off his strange friendship with authoritarian leaders, such as Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan and Egyptian President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.

### **Multi-layered Dilemmas in the Region and the Future of ‘Trumpism’**

However, former President Trump played a successful mediating role in achieving the Abraham Accords, which brought about monumental Arab-Israeli détente. In 2020, the Sunni Arab state of the UAE and the Jewish state of Israel reached a surprise agreement to establish diplomatic relations, and Bahrain soon joined to hold a historic agreement ceremony at the White House. President-elect Trump regards the Abraham Accords as a proud achievement and will actively mediate to normalize relations between Israel and Saudi Arabia this time as well.

President-elect Trump’s second administration will show an even stronger Trumpism, as it will take control of the legislative, judicial, and executive branches and fill the cabinet exclusively with loyalists who align with the president-elect’s views. The current Middle East policy of the United States is entangled in several dilemmas: while militarily supporting Israel, the only democratic ally in the region, the United States must prevent an all-out war between Israel and Iran while protecting civilians in the Gaza Strip and southern Lebanon, the United States must also destroy the radical Iranian proxies deeply rooted there; while withdrawing from the Middle East to focus on the Indo-Pacific region and contain China, the United States must appease disillusioned Middle Eastern allies to prevent them from siding with China and Russia. Yet, Trump and his surrounding elite do not seem to be particularly interested in such complex and nuanced challenges.

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