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Trump 2.0 Middle East Strategy: Continuity or Escalation?

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(Haidar Mohammed Ali - Anadolu Agency)

This Policy Outlook examines the potential implications of a second Trump presidency on U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, particularly its impact on regional peace and stability. The analysis draws on the policies implemented during the first Trump administration (2017–2021), policy recommendations articulated in the Project 2025 policy framework—designed as a roadmap for a prospective Republican administration—and the profiles of key personnel expected to shape decision-making based on pre-election rhetoric and post-election plans. The findings suggest that a renewed administration will likely maintain a pronounced pro-Israel orientation at the expense of Palestinians. Such a trajectory could further erode the viability of a two-state solution, exacerbating instability and diminishing prospects for lasting peace in the region.

The opinions expressed in this policy outlook represent the views of the author(s) and do not necessarily reflect the views of the TRT World Research Centre.

Introduction

The U.S. presidential election held on November 5 concluded with former Republican President Donald Trump securing a victory over Democratic Candidate Kamala Harris. Although anticipated by several polls, this outcome has prompted a mix of reactions and is expected to carry significant implications for U.S. domestic politics and the nation's role on the global stage. Given the U.S.'s substantial influence in international affairs, numerous analyses have examined the broader impacts of a renewed Trump administration.

This Policy Outlook analyses how the U.S. foreign policy will affect the Middle East amid a large-scale war led by Israel in Gaza and Lebanon. Reference points inform the analysis from Trump's first term (2017-2021), his recent pre-election rhetoric, and the ideological and practical foreign policy recommendations outlined in the Heritage Foundation's Project 2025—a report offering guidance to a prospective Republican administration, though not officially endorsed by the Trump team.

The First Trump Presidency and the Middle East

To assess the new U.S. administration's approach to the Palestinian issue, the ongoing war in Gaza, and efforts to achieve stability in the Middle East, it is useful to first examine the foreign policy orientation of the initial Trump administration, and the key points emphasised in the Project 2025 document. Some analysts argue that specific policies implemented during this period played a role in setting the conditions that ultimately led to the current war in Gaza, which began on October 7.

An analysis of the first Trump Administration's Middle East policy (2016–2020) focuses on two primary objectives. The first was a "maximum pressure" strategy directed at Iran, which included withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the imposition of intensified economic sanctions, and the assassination of senior IRGC commander Qasem Soleimani. The second involved efforts to normalise relations between Israel and Gulf Arab states through the Abraham Accords and a distinctly pro-Israel stance throughout the process. Although the succeeding Biden administration explored efforts to revive the JCPOA, the legacy of the Trump administration's policies largely persisted.

Ultimately, Trump's approach to the Middle East did not contain Iran's influence. According to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reports, the uranium enrichment level set by the JCPOA at 3.67%—sufficient for civilian applications—has since risen to 60%, demonstrating proximity to the 90% threshold required for weapons-grade material. Contrary to anticipated outcomes following Soleimani's assassination, Iran maintained an active regional presence through proxy forces, particularly under Biden, with notable escalations since October 7. This presence has led to confrontations between Iran and Israel, including exchanges of missiles and drone attacks. Consequently, the pressure strategy initiated under Trump and not reversed under Biden has allowed Iran to continue its role as a destabilising actor. Iran-backed Houthi forces, for example, have increasingly disrupted global trade through actions in the Red Sea.

The economic sanctions initially resulted in significant losses for Iran, estimated at $200 billion, according to then-President Rouhani. However, deepening economic relations with China have offered Iran an economic buffer, making China Iran's largest trade partner by 2023. This trade primarily consists of oil and petroleum products. Thus, Trump's maximum pressure policy inadvertently drove Iran closer to China. However, despite these alternative economic lifelines, Iran's economy remains strained by pervasive clientelism and severe inequality in income distribution, with the adverse humanitarian impacts of sanctions continuing to fall heavily on the general population. This situation was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic and other public health crises. In summary, the maximum pressure strategy against Iran did not yield significant progress, particularly considering Iran's continued advancement in its nuclear program, which remains a central concern.

The second core component of the Trump Administration's Middle East policy—normalisation through the Abraham Accords—has constrained the Palestinian issue and substantially limited prospects for a two-state solution. These normalisation efforts have, to a degree, come at the expense of the Palestinians, strengthening Israel's position in any prospective negotiations. This approach continued under the Biden administration, which has supported commercial partnerships like I2U2 to enhance economic ties that could foster political rapprochement. However, rather than fostering regional peace, these developments have contributed to Israel's growing dominance and perceived impunity, allowing for systematic war crimes in the aftermath of the October 7 events and the expansion of the war into other areas like Lebanon.

Beyond normalisation, Trump formally recognised Israeli sovereignty over the occupied Golan Heights, moved the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, and appointed David Friedman, a strong proponent of a "single Jewish state," as ambassador. The administration also cut humanitarian aid to Palestinians through channels like UNRWA and USAID. In essence, the pro-Israel orientation of Trump's first term—under the banner of normalisation—cemented a diplomatic and strategic advantage for Israel. Rather than securing a lasting peace, this one-sided approach has contributed to a cycle of continuous warfare and instability in the region.

The Second Trump Presidency: Agency and Political Orientation

In a second Trump administration, continuity in Middle East policy is anticipated, building upon strategies enacted during the former term. The Project 2025 document underscores core policy priorities likely to guide this trajectory, including intensified pressure on Iran, unwavering military and political support for Israel, increased push for Saudi-Israel normalisation, and expanded economic engagement between Israel and the Gulf states.

The profiles of key officials designated for critical foreign policy roles provide further insight into the administration's anticipated posture, which diverges from institutional norms and reflects a more personalist approach. First, Senator Marco Rubio, announced for Secretary of State, is known for his robust pro-Israel stance. A vocal opponent of the Boycott, Divestment, and Sanctions (BDS) movement, Rubio was a leading figure for reintroducing anti-BDS legislation in Congress. Additionally, he has been an outspoken critic of campus protests addressing war crimes by Israel in Gaza, previously referring to such protestors as "anti-Semitic zombies."

The announced National Security Advisor Mike Waltz also exemplifies a firm commitment to assertive regional policies. Waltz has been critical of the Biden administration's Israel policy, viewing it as insufficiently supportive, and has consistently opposed calls for ceasefires. His hawkish perspective has led him to critique Biden's restraint in the Iran-Israel conflict, particularly regarding attempts to avoid strikes on Iran's oil and nuclear facilities.

Mike Huckabee, announced U.S. Ambassador to Israel, presents a profile strongly aligned against the conventional two-state solution endorsed by the UN for the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Huckabee's support for settlement expansion in the West Bank is well-documented, and he has previously stated that "there is no such thing as the West Bank – it's Judea and Samaria. There is no such thing as settlements – they're communities, they're neighbourhoods, they're cities. There is no such thing as an occupation."

Profiles of Major Foreign Policy Officials

Donald Trump's cabinet nominees

After winning the US presidential election, Donald Trump continues his efforts to form his cabinet. Those appointed to Trump's cabinet will be able to assume their roles following Senate approval



47th US President
Donald Trump



Department of State
Marco Rubio
A senator known for his hawkish stance on Iran, China, and pro-Israel views



Department of Defense
Pete Hegseth
A former soldier and television presenter
Served in Iraq and Afghanistan



Department of Justice
Matt Gaetz
Florida Congressman



Department of Homeland Security
Kristi Noem
Governor of South Dakota



Department of the Interior
Doug Burgum
Governor of North Dakota



Director of the CIA
John Ratcliffe
Former Director of National Intelligence



Director of National Intelligence
Tulsi Gabbard
Served many years in the Democratic Party and a former member of Congress



White House Chief of Staff
Susie Wiles
One of Trump's campaign managers



Permanent Representative to the UN
Elise Stefanik
Member of the House of Representatives



Department of Government Efficiency
Elon Musk,
Businessman
Vivek Ramaswamy
Entrepreneur





Special Representative for the Middle East
Steven Witkoff
Real estate mogul

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Finally, Elise Stefanik, announced as the U.S. Envoy to the United Nations, similarly supports this assertive policy direction featuring a staunch pro-Israeli stance. Known for her advocacy of defunding UNRWA and her accusations of anti-Semitism within the UN, Stefanik also supports settlement expansion and has consistently opposed campus protests against Israel's war crimes.

An assessment of Trump's first term, combined with the strategies delineated in Project 2025 and the profiles of appointees for these pivotal roles, suggests a Middle East policy characterised by hard-line, pro-Israel positions and prioritisation of maximum pressure on Iran. Trump's trademark unpredictability in foreign affairs will likely underscore this strategic direction. Moreover, with an "America First" approach shaping initial priorities, a focus on domestic policy may dominate in the early stages of the administration, particularly within the first year. Nonetheless, the intensifying focus on Middle East issues, especially the war in Gaza and its spillover across the region, suggests that foreign policy signals in this area may emerge from the onset of the new term. The future trajectory of the U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East can be examined in three major areas. Each of the following titles is a case in point that has a shaping effect on regional stability.

Continuity with Maximum Pressure on Iran

In the new term under Trump, the administration is likely to continue and intensify its maximum pressure policy on Iran, mirroring its approach during the first term. Any avenues for dialogue surrounding the revival of the nuclear deal may be effectively closed, while Iran is anticipated to persist with uranium enrichment amid escalating economic sanctions and intensified military pressure.

On the economic front, Trump's approach could involve a recalibrated sanctions regime that selectively targets Iran's strategic advantages alongside existing measures. For instance, while likely supporting initiatives introduced during the Biden era, such as the I2U2 framework and the IMEC, Trump's administration may resist India's INSTC partnership with Iran or its decade-long contract to operate the strategically significant Chabahar Port. While Biden's administration suggested potential sanctions, Trump's tolerance for such activities may be considerably lower. Illustratively, following the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, Chabahar Port initially encountered sanctions, though then-Secretary of State Mike Pompeo subsequently granted a sanctions waiver due to its logistical value for humanitarian aid to Afghanistan and its potential to counterbalance China's CPEC project. Should the new Trump administration prioritise countering Chinese influence, it may permit India limited engagement with Iran for strategic purposes while preserving a rigorous sanctions posture in other areas.

The continuity and intensification of economic sanctions on Iran seem highly probable, particularly regarding the country's oil production. Here, the administration may seek a substantial impact akin to the previous reduction from 2.9 million barrels to 775,000 barrels following the U.S. exit from the JCPOA. Iran, in response, may further diversify its export markets, with China expected to remain a key partner. To reinforce maximum pressure, Trump's administration may implement a more sophisticated sanctions program that precludes loopholes exploited by Chinese companies purchasing Iranian oil, often facilitated by small firms known as "teapots," the renaming of ships, and route misreporting. Such practices enabled Iran to export approximately $70 billion in oil to China in 2023. Consequently, a reassessment of current sanctions and a comprehensive strategy to mitigate these evasions could be central to a new Trump administration's policy.

The second dimension of the maximum pressure approach would likely include military operations led most likely by Israel on the ground and the U.S. Army prioritising decapitation strategy. Priority may be given to dismantling Iran's regional proxy networks and targeting high-ranking IRGC officials, as illustrated by the 2020 assassination of General Qasem Soleimani and PMU Leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis. Soleimani, who held significant influence as the head of the IRGC's Quds Force and played a critical role in Hezbollah's operational capabilities, was targeted as part of a broader effort to curb Iran's regional influence. While Biden's term witnessed continued Israeli operations against Hezbollah, the Trump administration may scale up support for such actions. Although a direct U.S.-Iran confrontation appears unlikely, Trump could signal increased endorsement for Israeli ground operations, deviating from Biden's stance on restraint. Moreover, Trump's administration might actively encourage Israel to pursue more assertive measures targeting Iranian oil facilities and nuclear sites, while the latter is less likely as it may prompt a stronger reaction and retaliation by Iran.

With a new White House cabinet likely to adopt a hawkish posture on Iran and an assertive stance on bolstering Israel's security at all fronts, the second Trump administration could feasibly work toward a vision of Iran significantly constrained by a weakened Hezbollah. Key components of this revised maximum pressure policy would likely encompass intensified economic sanctions, greater latitude for Israeli military action against Iran's oil and nuclear infrastructure, comprehensive support for operations targeting Hezbollah, and selective targeting of senior IRGC leadership.

Unwavering Support for Israel

In the second Trump administration, a marked increase in the United States military and political support for Israel appears highly likely. The enthusiastic response of Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu and National Security Minister Ben Gvir to the recent U.S. election results suggests an impending period of intensified U.S.-Israel cooperation. Data from Brown University's Costs of War platform indicates that, from October 7, 2023, to September 30, 2024, U.S. support for Israel has surpassed $22.7 billion. This figure is expected to increase during the Trump administration. It would be incorrect to link this trend to a potential reduction in U.S. military aid to Ukraine in a new Trump term, as support for Israel stands as an independent and enduring reality in American foreign policy, irrespective of other assistance policies.

Beyond increased military assistance, heightened diplomatic support is anticipated to be a core pillar of the new Trump term. This includes the continuation of the pro-Israel stance in United Nations votes and affiliated bodies like UNSC, aiming to mitigate rising international opposition to Israeli actions in Gaza and Lebanon involving thousands of civilian casualties and prevention of humanitarian assistance. Furthermore, Trump's backing of Israel on settlement policies—subject to condemnation from the UN and various human rights organisations—is expected to bolster Israeli policies. Mike Huckabee, who is aligned with the perspectives of David Friedman (the U.S. Ambassador to Israel under Trump, renowned for advocating for the annexation of Area C in the West Bank and dismissing the two-state solution), is anticipated to assume this diplomatic role. Huckabee's and other senior appointments reflect a distinctly pro-Israel orientation that will inevitably shape U.S. foreign policy under such a framework.

Some reports have speculated that U.S. support for Israel may not be entirely unconditional under Trump's renewed leadership, yet a closer look reveals that these assumptions may lack a solid foundation. Observers who posit that Netanyahu will not have carte blanche argue that Trump's hesitancy reflects a desire to swiftly end prolonged Middle Eastern conflicts. However, interpreting "ending conflict" in this context is critical. Given Trump's previous undermining of diplomatic resolutions—marked by political rhetoric, cabinet appointments, and past confrontational stances—expectations that his administration might pursue a peace-based approach are likely misplaced. Thus, continued U.S. backing for Israel suggests an enduring cycle of conflict without any prospects for the establishment of a diplomatic ground for the two-state solution.

The extent to which this could extend to Iran remains uncertain. While there is significant discourse around potential Israeli targets such as Iran's oil-rich regions and nuclear facilities, speculation also persists that Israel aims to draw the United States into direct conflict with Iran. Although a new administration prioritising America First might resist such engagement, Israel's actions leading up to Inauguration Day could be decisive in clarifying the possibility of a U.S. involvement. Nonetheless, it remains clear that the aggressive trajectory beginning in Gaza, extending to Lebanon, and occasionally spilling into Syrian territory is set to continue, underscoring Israel's maximalist objectives in the region.

Expanding Normalisation: The Saudi Factor

In President Trump's prospective Middle East policy, a third primary axis will likely focus on expanding normalisation efforts with Israel. This objective was a recurrent theme in Trump's campaign, presented as a pivotal measure to foster regional peace and stability. The 2020 Abraham Accords, which facilitated diplomatic normalisation between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, could be further extended in this period, with particular emphasis on incorporating Saudi Arabia into the process. Given Saudi Arabia's close alliance with the United States and its significant economic and political standing in the Gulf, the importance of its role in the normalisation process is all the more pronounced.

In alignment with its Vision 2030 strategy, Saudi Arabia seeks to consolidate its influence within the Gulf as a leading political and economic power, attract substantial foreign investment, diversify its economy beyond oil dependence, and distinguish itself from the UAE, which has emerged as a secondary regional power. Achieving these strategic ambitions would hinge on securing a stable and conflict-free regional environment. With Israel's larger conflicts potentially concluded, President Trump's administration would likely prioritise encouraging Riyadh's participation in normalisation, bringing key conditions for negotiation to the forefront. Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's primary demands are anticipated to include an arrangement that would integrate Saudi Arabia under a U.S. security umbrella, support for establishing a nuclear program officially designated for civilian use, and assurances that this framework would remain insulated from future shifts in U.S. leadership. Such objectives may prompt Saudi Arabia to advocate for a distinct agreement with the United States, separate from the Comprehensive Security Integration and Prosperity Agreement (C-SIPA)signed with Bahrain.

Another central condition for Crown Prince MBS in this normalisation process is a departure from the framework established under the Abraham Accords during Trump's initial term, in which the UAE played a dominant role. Saudi Arabia would oppose being positioned as a secondary partner within this framework. However, if Saudi Arabia



U.S. President Donald Trump (2nd R), Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2nd L), UAE Foreign Minister Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan (R) and Bahrain Foreign Minister Abdullatif bin Rashid Al Zayani (L) attend a signing ceremony for the agreements on "normalization of relations" reached between Israel, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Bahrain at the White House in Washington, United States on September 15, 2020. (The White House / Tia Dufour - Anadolu Agency)

were granted a unique status relative to other Abraham Accords members, this could undermine the egalitarian structure of the normalisation framework and potentially erode mutual trust. Thus, if President Trump intends to expand normalisation by including Saudi Arabia, he may face pressure to make certain security-related commitments, even if reluctantly.

However, Saudi Arabia's—and, by extension, other potential members'—request for a security guarantee from the United States that transcends political administrations carries inherent limitations. This is largely due to the complicated nature of ongoing threats in the region, notably from Iran, and ambiguities surrounding how proxy attacks might be addressed under any prospective defence pact. For example, a security framework would need to precisely delineate its stance on both direct Iranian threats and proxy hostilities from groups like the Houthis.

Furthermore, finalising the contours of a revised normalisation process that includes Saudi Arabia cannot be accomplished until hostilities in Gaza have fully subsided. Until the two-month transition period leading up to President Trump's possible inauguration is observed and a new regional equilibrium emerges due to his administration's military and political posture, the broader expansion of normalisation will remain a complex issue fraught with unresolved questions. In a contrary scenario, there would be a regional disequilibrium where Israeli aggression continues, and complexities surrounding the normalisation become more apparent. In this context, Saudi Arabia may continue leveraging its economic engagement with China to secure concessions from the United States, using this diversification strategy as a bargaining tool, similar to the approach observed during the Biden administration. Given that this approach would run counter to the objectives outlined in Project 2025, which aims to curb China-Gulf proximity, it remains to be seen how a new administration—if similarly concerned about this engagement—might respond to Saudi Arabia's strategy and what stance Trump would ultimately adopt in such a scenario.

Conclusion

Given President Trump's policies during his first term (2017–2021), his pre-election rhetoric, and the profiles of senior officials recently designated for his new administration, prospects for genuine peace and stability in a "Trump 2.0" Middle East appear tenuous. The administration is anticipated to reinforce and intensify its military and political support for Israel, while also maintaining its "maximum pressure" policy toward Iran.

Meanwhile, the new administration will continue to push for expanded normalisation with regional powers like Saudi Arabia even when Israel's maximalist expansionism persists. Furthermore, without a framework grounded in a two-state solution, the continuation of a U.S. policy that sidelines the Palestinian people's right to self-determination and right to statehood may risk entrenching the region in a prolonged cycle of conflict.

All in all, the Trump administration is poised to shape the future of the Middle East in significant ways. However, the challenges and contradictions inherent in these policies could lead to further instability and deepen the cycles of conflict and confrontation.