

WHAT THE US ELECTION MEANS FOR THE MIDDLE-EAST AND NORTH AFRICA

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For the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region, United States' (US) politics are a matter of life or death. The fate of millions can be decided by American voters and a new American administration. For some MENA countries where elections, if they are held, are but a farce the US elections are arguably more important than local ones. But while for many in the US, the choice between Republicans and Democrats carries a very substantial difference in terms of policy and a clear ideological distinction, for the MENA region the differences between the two American parties can be far more subtle and, historically, Democrats are not by default less deadly for the region than Republicans.

US involvement in the MENA region, whether under a Democrat or a Republican administration, has historically entailed support for despots and corrupt regimes often in pursuit of resources such as oil (Cook, 2019; al-Rasheed, 2018) and to enhance the regional strength of Israel at the expense of Palestinian rights (US Department of State, 2020). Barack Obama's era brought with it death and destruction with his support and expansion of the drone strikes programme (Purkis and Serle, 2017). In fact, as co-founder of the peace group CodePink (2020), Medea Benjamin (2017) writes:

“Obama authorized over 10 times more drone strikes than George W Bush, and automatically painted all males of military age in these regions as combatants, making them fair game for remote controlled killing”.

For many people in the Middle East and North Africa, the Obama years were not so different to the Bush presidency. The bombs kept falling and the wars never stopped. Trump, however, brought with him a new and lasting damage

adding a new layer to the American role in the region's war: an open and unapologetic support for brutal dictators and a clear policy to drop any pretence about concern for human rights (Haltiwanger, 2017). This was a clear break from Obama's policy of speaking firmly about the importance of human rights and democratic reform in the region. He was, of course, still supporting these dictators (Jilani and Emmons, 2016) but at least it came with the occasional criticism of their human rights record (Roth, 2017; Kirkpatrick, 2015).

Looking back in recent history, Democrats have been in power while some of the most grave atrocities were committed in the Middle East. Bill Clinton was president while thousands were starved to death under brutal sanctions imposed on Iraq, and he launched several military operations in Iraq and Somalia (Kagan, 2001). Under Barrack Obama on the other hand, the US bombed Syria, Libya, Iraq, Yemen, Somalia, Pakistan and Afghanistan and expanded its deadly drone programme (Clarke and Herbst, 1996; Parsons and Hennigan, 2017; Liptak, 2014). This is not to suggest that there are no significant differences between the two American parties, but to highlight the nuances that exist in the role of US interests in the MENA region. There are some things that are stable and rarely change from one administration to the next: support for strategic partners and allies such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt and other brutal regimes in the region, that serve the US strategic and economic interests (Bove, 2018).

Despite all of this, most people in the MENA region are as relieved as many US voters at the outcome of the November election which means that far right President Donald Trump will be leaving the White House. However, even if incumbent Joseph Biden's election brings some relief for the MENA countries, it is also tinged with much skepticism about his administration's bringing meaningful change to the region. The Trump years brought with them a deadly change both on the ground and more severely in the discourse. This had a direct impact that was most clearly felt in the deterioration of freedom of expression, the crackdowns on dissent and opposition, and the emboldening of the region's authoritarian regimes. Despite not launching any new major

wars in the region, Trump turned the US role as the world's bully into a matter of national pride rather than an unspoken truth.

Like their European counterparts, American politicians in power were usually required to speak about human rights abuses and democracy in the world. This is usually done with high tones of condemnation when it comes to authoritarian regimes that are not allied with them, and less harsh criticism that could amount to justification when it comes to their authoritarian allies. During Trump's tenure: the US withdrew from the Iran nuclear deal; moved the American embassy in Israel to Jerusalem; and imposed the infamous "deal of the century" thus essentially ending any prospects for a viable Palestinian state or justice for Palestinians (Landler, 2018; Plett Usher, 2018; Alnajjar, 2020). This was a clear signal that the US abandoned the role of mediator in the Middle-East conflict, but rather nakedly served as an agent for Israeli ambitions. Trump was also clear in his unapologetic support for regimes mired by human rights abuses, having even as he put it, a 'favorite dictator' (Youssef, Salama and Bender, 2019). Trump withdrew large numbers of US troops from Afghanistan and Iraq (BBC News, 2020), but at the same time greenlit the Turkish invasion of northern Syria that resulted in the ethnic cleansing of the Kurds (Cockburn, 2020).

And as Trump approached the end of his term, he issued a pardon (De Young, 2020) to four Americans convicted of killing 14 Iraqi civilians while working as contractors with Blackwater in 2007, a pardon that UN human rights experts say violates US obligations under international law (Reuters, 2020). The pardon is also a clear message confirming what many in the region already knew: Iraqi lives do not matter.

The question looming over the next four years at the time of writing (January 2021) is will a Biden presidency add a friendly diplomatic face to the same destructive policies, or fundamentally change them? Few will be holding their breath for radical change in policy. In fact, the decision not to pursue a more radical agenda was probably made when Biden won the Democratic primaries and nomination for president, and the more radical Senator Bernie

Sanders was voted out of the race. It is likely that Biden will represent a return to the centrist status quo both locally and internationally. The new president will be dealing with a strongly divided US, and many polarising and pressing local issues. In the MENA region, he could find himself mired in a spectacular rise in repression, tensions, wars, instability, and insecurity. A reality that his predecessor had an active role in fomenting.

As Arab states line up to sign peace treaties with Israel (Erakat, 2020) at the expense of Palestinian rights, the Gulf crisis seems to be heading towards a resolution which leaves the question of what happens to the Iranian and Palestinian dossiers, which are more pressing than ever (Aljazeera, 2021). It is unlikely that Biden will roll back on any of the major decisions taken by the Trump presidency when it comes to Israel and Palestine such as relocating the US embassy, but what might be on the cards is the restoration of humanitarian aid to the Palestinians that Trump had withdrawn when he decided to cut funding to UNRWA (United Nations Relief and Works Agency), the UN agency for Palestinian refugees (Amira, 2018). This might also usher in an attempt to resume peace talks and regain the role of ‘mediator’. However, on more substantial issues of Middle-East policy such as the construction of Israeli settlements in the Palestinian West Bank and the continued siege of the Gaza Strip, there is unlikely to be any significant change of position from the Biden administration.

What is likely to change, though, is US relations with Iran, with a possible return to diplomacy and an attempt at an agreement that would ease tensions raised in the aftermath of the assassination of Iranian General Qassem Suleimani by the Trump administration in 2020 (Cohen et al., 2020). For better or worse, this situation holds the fate of millions in the region hostage in its proxy wars. A return to diplomacy here is likely and, most importantly, necessary. The Biden administration’s relationship with Iran will also have knock-on effects for its relationships with Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and the future of the war in Yemen. Biden may not be as strong a supporter as Trump for the Saudi monarch’s belligerent strategy in the region.

One thing is certain, Trump supported ruthless dictators across the region, despite grave human rights abuses, and Biden will most likely continue to do the same. But, unlike Trump, he will at least talk about democracy and human rights. This might sound trivial, but one thing that we have learned from Trump's presidency is that words do matter.

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