

The U.S. Presidential Election and its Implications on Middle East Policy

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Introduction

Amidst an unpredictable U.S. election campaign, a populist revolt against Washington's political establishment is in the making. An increasingly frustrated electorate has handsomely rewarded New York businessman Donald Trump at the ballot box for vigorously - and at times crudely - taking on political taboos as he remains the Republican Party's undisputed frontrunner, despite having proposed to ban Muslims from entering the U.S. This and his proposal to defeat the Islamic State group, or ISIS, by "taking its oil" have undoubtedly contributed to cementing his frontrunner status.

Senator Ted Cruz of Texas, a conservative firebrand and Tea Party favorite, has from the outset of his campaign sought to portray himself as the ultimate political outsider. This, along with his constant condemnation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPA, the U.S.-negotiated nuclear agreement with Iran, has become the signature issue of his foreign policy platform.

Before eventually dropping out of the race after failing to win his home state of Florida, Senator Marco Rubio pledged to unify the Republican Party between its traditionally business friendly elite, its conservative base and neoconservative foreign policy establishment.

Governor John Kasich of Ohio is the only moderate GOP contender, which also translates into his foreign policy positions. In order to defeat ISIS, Kasich has pledged to build an international coalition similar to the one President George H. Bush assembled in 1990 when liberating Kuwait from Iraq's Saddam Hussein.

Senator Bernie Sanders of Vermont, a self-proclaimed Democratic socialist, along with Trump, seeks to challenge the political status-quo by taking on what he calls the "billionaire class" and its influence on Washington.

Despite having served as President Barack Obama's first secretary of state, voters continue to question Hillary Clinton's trustworthiness as she struggles to put a high-profile email scandal behind her, while avoiding answering questions about how her husband Bill could continue to receive donations from foreign leaders for his foundation while she served as America's top diplomat.

Challenges Ahead

With the Middle East growing increasingly unstable by the year, the next U.S. president will inevitably face similar challenges to those of President Obama, namely how to defeat ISIS, roll back Iran's quest for regional hegemony while bringing an end to the Syrian conflict. These challenges along with preventing fragile states and entities such as Egypt, Tunisia and the Palestinian Authority from collapsing will likely be immediate top priorities for the next U.S. administration. Secondary priorities will be to accelerate Yemen's embattled peace process, help stabilize Libya by supporting a unified government while finding mechanisms to reduce Israeli-Palestinian violence. Unresolved tensions between Israel and Hamas is another crisis of regional proportions in waiting, especially given the fact that the coastal enclave's humanitarian conditions have not improved significantly since its 2014 war.

Partisanship and Unrealistic Expectations

From the outset, President Obama's Middle East policies have predictably been criticized by Republicans and by neocon-

servatives in particular for his relatively soft touch approach to the region, notably his hesitance to get the U.S. more deeply involved in the Syrian civil war. However, with the rise of ISIS as a threat to Iraq during the summer of 2014 followed by Russia's intervention in Syria, a growing sentiment is emerging among the U.S. populace that the administration's foreign policy is fundamentally adrift. These factors, the GOP presidential contenders argue, contribute to the perception that under President Obama, the U.S. has turned into a declining power, without the will to protect its global interests.

Amid an increasingly partisan division between the president and the Republican controlled Congress, it is not surprising that the election has become a referendum on Obama's Middle East policy.

Cruz has repeatedly stated that once elected he would "tear up" the Iran agreement and "carpet bomb" ISIS into submission, the latter proposal demonstrates his utter ignorance of a basic understanding of the Geneva Convention in general.

Rubio has from the outset of his campaign called for his competitors to nullify the agreement on their first day in office.

While Trump has not explicitly called for nullifying the JCPA, he continues throughout the campaign to criticize it as a "horrible deal." His core criticism of the JCPA is based on a false premise: that the agreement requires the U.S. to pay Iran \$150 billion. To the extent that Iran will reap a financial windfall from the JCPA, it will be from the return of Tehran's own assets and proceeds from oil sales that have been frozen in international accounts abroad. This is not U.S. money, as he alleges.

So far, despite heated campaign rhetoric from Cruz, Rubio and Trump on Obama's failure to defeat ISIS, little substance has been given to how they would differ from the administration when it comes to defeating the terrorist organization. On the JCPA, neither of those pledging to nullify it has presented an alternative as to what it would be replaced with. Kasich is the only GOP candidate explicitly stating that he would not nullify the JCPA, but appears to have backtracked on this matter following Iran's missile test on March 9.¹

Despite Rubio and Cruz's pledges to nullify the JCPA, the prospects of a unilateral U.S. initiative to re-instate Iran sanction through the UN Security Council are unrealistic at best.

The prospects of enhanced interrogation techniques as initially advocated by Trump, although he has since backtracked, and Cruz's proposal to "carpet bomb" ISIS are among the many unrealistic policy proposals floated this

election cycle. While these outlandish proposals are nothing but partisan blustering, they have created angst amongst many of America's allies about what a Trump or Cruz presidency may entail for global peace and stability.

Israel, Iran and Special Interests

With the U.S. media having initially portrayed Rubio as the GOP "establishment's" candidate of choice, it was not surprising that many high-profile Republican foreign policy leaders immediately chose to close ranks behind him once Jeb Bush exited the race. At the time, Rubio not surprisingly won support from neoconservatives over his rhetorical support for Israel and opposition to the Iran agreement.²

Cruz, for his part, has made his pro-Israel bona fide a centerpiece of his campaign while Kasich has taken a softer rhetorical stand on Israel but has praised Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu of Israel as a "strong leader" and attended his controversial address to the U.S. Congress last year before declaring his candidacy.³ Should either of them end up winning the nomination, the party's neoconservative foreign policy elite is expected to close ranks around the nominee with the eventual goal of staffing a future Republican administration.

With Trump, not so much: His pledge to remain "neutral" on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict not only breaks with the GOP's pro-Israel orthodoxy, but is a thinly veiled reference that he will not be " beholden" to any donors or "special interests," a principle that also sees to apply to the pro-Israel donor community. During the 2012 election cycle, pro-Israel donor Sheldon Adelson, one of America's wealthiest, spent \$150 million to defeat Obama, who he considers to be anti-Israel.⁴

Despite Cruz's pro-Israel record and rhetorical support, Adelson has yet to endorse him or Kasich, arguably because he does not want to alienate Trump, whose campaign is self-funded. Between Trump's vocal opposition against the 2003 Iraq war and his pledge to remain neutral on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, the chances of a Trump-administration staffed by neoconservatives seem slim at the moment, especially after many of them have publicly repudiated him.

AIPAC Conference

Every election year, all presidential contenders, Democrat or Republican, travel to Washington, D.C. to deliver a speech at the annual conference held by the American-Israel Public Affairs Committee, or AIPAC, in which they outline their respective commitments to the U.S.-Israel alliance. This year, all the presidential contenders, except for Sanders,

1 J. Kornbluh, "Kasich would 'suspend' Iran deal in response to missile tests," *Jewish Insider*, 10 March, 2016.

2 J. Rogin, "Rubio Turns to National Security in Crucial Campaign Stretch," *Bloomberg View*, 7 March, 2016.

3 H.J. Gomez, "Ohio Gov. John Kasich to attend Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's speech to Congress," *Northeast Ohio Media Group*, 27 February, 2015.

4 S. Cline, "Sheldon Adelson Spent \$150 Million on Election," *U.S. News & World Report*, 3 December, 2012.

addressed the influential pro-Israel lobby. While each of the candidates, including Trump, received standing ovations for showering Israel with praise and lambasting Iran, Sanders outlined his own Middle East policy at a separate location in which he recognized Palestinian grievances and reiterated his commitment to help bring about a two-state solution.

Although he was invited to address the AIPAC conference, Sanders' stated that due to a prior commitment, he was unable to attend. AIPAC also declined his offer to address the group through a video conference. Nonetheless, Sanders' positions on Israel and the peace process not only differed from his current competitors, including Clinton, but also from candidate Obama's AIPAC address in 2008 in which he too lavishly showered the Jewish state with praise. Instead, Sanders underscored that should he win the presidency, there could be daylight between the White House and Israel on issues pertaining to the peace process and Iran.

"To my mind, as friends – long term friends with Israel – we are obligated to speak the truth as we see it. That is what real friendship demands, especially in difficult times. Our disagreements will come and go, and we must weather them constructively. But it is important among friends to be honest and truthful about differences that we may have."⁵ The public disagreements, or daylight in diplomatic terms, between President Obama and Prime Minister Netanyahu has for obvious reasons characterized the present state of the U.S.-Israel relationship. Clinton, along with her Republican competitors all pledged their friendship with Israel, a subtle reference to their pronounced desire to turn a new page with Netanyahu. It is unclear, however, how Sanders' address would have been received if he had decided to address AIPAC directly.

Radical Change or Continuation of Obama's Foreign Policy Legacy?

While Clinton's foreign policy approach is believed to have sharply differed from Obama's on key national security matters, including his decision to publicly call for the resignation of then Egyptian president Hosni Mubarak, she has nonetheless refrained from criticizing him publicly whether on his anti-ISIS or on the JCPA. Whether a Clinton-administration will continue Obama's push for Israeli-Palestinian peace is unclear, especially given the present state of regional instability coupled with lessons learned from the acrimonious Obama-Netanyahu relationship. What seems certain, however, is that the broad lines of Obama's foreign policy legacy will continue should Clinton be elected.

Sanders, for his part, has praised the president's foreign policy positions but has struggled with articulating how he would fight ISIS. His initial proposal to partner with Iranian troops to defeat ISIS was swiftly ridiculed by Clinton who

warned of its potentially grave consequences for Israel's security. Between Sanders' focus on domestic affairs and his rhetorical support for Obama's Middle East policy, a Sanders-administration is likely to be a more isolationist continuation of Obama's legacy. Yet, on the Israeli-Palestinian issue, should his prepared remarks for the AIPAC conference serve as a guide for his positions, the U.S.-Israel relationship could deteriorate further should Sanders be elected. Recognizing that the AIPAC conference was perhaps not the best venue to present a balanced position on Israel-Palestine, it was therefore not surprising that he sought to deliver his message to the progressive wing of the Democratic Party, from which he draws his support.

Among the GOP contenders, Kasich's pledge to assemble an "Arab coalition" to defeat ISIS is precisely what Obama is already doing, although that is not how he has framed it. His pragmatic approach to JPCA seem to suggest that a Kasich-administration would leave it in place, but like any GOP contender, Kasich is expected to repair relations with Netanyahu a key priority.

Given Cruz's ideological positions on Israel and Iran, he is expected to adopt a more hawkish approach to the Middle East, although it is far from clear whether that would entail sending U.S. troops to fight ISIS or pushing for regime change in Syria.

When it comes to a Trump-administration, it is anyone's guess what this may entail for the Middle East, especially on whether he would seek to change the premises of the JCPA. But, what seems clear is that given his initial rhetorical support for Putin's fight against ISIS, the billionaire too may end up continuing Obama's policy of partnering with Russia to bring a diplomatic solution to the Syrian crisis under UN auspices. Trump's anti-Muslim rhetoric, however, will inevitable become his biggest challenge as it will be difficult for Saudi Arabia to publicly cooperate with Washington on anti-terrorism matters as the Kingdom sees itself as the ultimate defender of Islam. Should Trump fail to mitigate the damage his rhetoric has caused, it will be difficult to see how any Islamic state, including Turkey, can participate in a U.S.-led coalition to fight ISIS. It is also possible that a Trump-administration could seek to revitalize the Israeli-Palestinian peace process as part of an effort to turn a new page with Saudi Arabia and its Arab allies over his anti-Muslim remarks, which would only confirm the worst suspicions neoconservatives may already have about his intentions.

⁵ "Sanders Outlines Middle East Policy," Prepared Remarks by Senator Bernie Sanders, 21 March 2016.



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