

Power and Strategy

By Jon B. Alterman



o many leaders in the Middle East, the Trump administration is a breath of fresh air. The president's statements about battling extremism and reinforcing the status quo, and his general disinterest in the region's domestic conditions, are a huge relief after President Bush and President Obama pursued regional strategies that tied domestic repression to fomenting radicalization.

To others in the region, the Trump administration is a menace. They not only see it pursuing anti-Muslim (and pro-Israel) policies, but they also see it tipping the region toward greater militarism and conflict.

The two sides agree on one point, though: The Trump administration has many Middle East policies but no visible strategy, and that makes it harder for any of them to cooperate with the United States.

There is no shortage of things the U.S. government would like to do in the Middle East. From Yemen to Syria, and from Iran to Libya, the list is long. Some involve counterterrorism, counterinsurgency, and counter-radicalization. Some involve resolving interstate conflicts, and others resolving intra-state conflicts. There are a host of military basing issues and prepositioning issues. The United States has strong energy interests in the region, and its agricultural trade is robust. The Middle East is also an important locus for many issues the United States cares about globally, including human trafficking, money laundering, and proliferation.

The United States cannot emphasize all of these things simultaneously. It must make tradeoffs, deferring some things it would like to do and doing things it does not want to do in order to pursue the more important things it needs to do.

A strategy helps guide necessary tradeoffs. The Obama administration's strategy, especially in its latter years, prioritized diminishing hostilities with Iran in order to freeze the nuclear program and nudge the Iranian government toward a less confrontational relationship with the rest of the world. The second Bush administration, especially in its middle years, focused on regional domestic reform as a way of attacking the drivers of terrorism. These were not the only things the U.S. government did, either in the Middle East or around the world, but few doubted their primary importance.

(continued on page 2)

FROM BEIJING TO JERUSALEM

Unfamiliar aromas are wafting through the air in Israeli hotels. With Chinese travel to Israel soaring, [jiaozi dumplings](#) and [congee](#) are taking their place alongside hummus and shakshouka in Israeli hotel breakfast buffets.

Prime Minister Netanyahu recently described the relationship with China as a “match made in heaven.” In 2016 alone, [Chinese investment](#) in Israel increased more than tenfold to \$16.5 billion. As business ties expand, new opportunities for people-to-people ties are emerging. One Israeli-Chinese agreement signed this year will see 6,000 Chinese construction workers move to Israel.

China's growing middle class is also providing a new opportunity for economic cooperation. The number of Chinese [visitors](#) to Israel this year is expected to be five times the number it was four years ago, when it was just 20,000.

But traveling to Israel has not been easy for some of these new visitors. Some described Israeli food as “torture.” So when one Chinese visitor stumbled across an authentic Chinese restaurant in Jerusalem, she wrote on TripAdvisor that she cried a “whirlwind of tears of happiness.”

Israel has taken other steps to make Chinese tourists feel at home. For example, the Ministry of Tourism [eliminated fees](#) for Chinese tour groups, helped increase air service between Israel and China, and is teaching certified tour guides Chinese.

Although growing quickly, Chinese tourism numbers are still small in absolute terms. Israel draws about 3.5 million tourists per year, almost a million of whom are from the United States. But China's numbers are growing faster than any country in the world. Pizza is yesterday's food; jianbing pancakes may be the wave of the future. ■ M.Berlin

FALL LINEUP

We have a busy fall and wanted to give you a sense of what to expect from our program in the coming months. We are putting the finishing touches on a report that explores the compulsory military service program that the United Arab Emirates put in place three years ago. 50,000 men (and almost 850 women) have enrolled in a program that has bold ambitions to reshape the country. We are also finishing a year-long effort that explores what makes newly independent countries successful. It has obvious implications for the Kurdish referendum on self-determination that is scheduled for next week. We will soon be releasing original analysis on shifting dynamics in the Eastern Mediterranean, implications of the Maghreb's changing migration landscape, and more. Finally, we have adopted a new template for the laid-out version of our monthly newsletter. It's still two pages, but hopefully more enjoyable to read. Clicking on the newsletter link in our email will take you there. You can stay up to date on all of our program's activities on Twitter [@CSISMidEast](#). ■

IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Jon Alterman and Mara Karlin [assessed](#) the stakes surrounding an Iraqi Kurdish independence vote in *Defense One*, 8/29/17.

Jon Alterman and Frank Verrastro discussed the intersection of Qatar's energy and geopolitics in a CSIS Energy Program [podcast](#), 9/5/17.

Jon Alterman [analyzed](#) the state of U.S.-Egypt relations for Carnegie Middle East Center's *Diwan*, 9/7/17.

Jon Alterman [spoke](#) about the drivers of social and political change in the Middle East at the Chautauqua Institution, 7/19/17.

IN THE MEDIA

"For a number of leaders, this is going to be their first chance to see [Trump], to judge him, to try to get on his good side." Jon Alterman in [The New York Times](#) on the stakes surrounding President Trump's first UN General Assembly, 9/16/17.

Mattis and Trump's other generals are "looking for ways to leverage the costs and sacrifices the United States has already made [in Iraq]." Jon Alterman in [The Atlantic](#), speaking from Iraq shortly after Mattis's visit, 8/26/17.

The Middle East Notes and Comment

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CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

Jon B. Alterman, Senior Vice President, Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostrategy, and Director, Middle East Program

Haim Malka, Deputy Director and Senior Fellow

Emily Grunewald, Associate Director

Will Todman, Associate Fellow

Margo Balboni, Research Associate

Abigail Kukura, Research Assistant

Mark Berlin, Aaron Christensen and Ben Westfall, Research Interns

Nine months in, the Trump administration does not have a similarly robust strategy. It is alarmed by Iranian behavior, but it neither seems to have a theory for what causes it nor a plan to change it. The administration is fighting the Islamic State group (ISG), which Iran and Russia are also fighting, without an end game. It wants to stabilize Iraq, find a solution in Yemen, and end the chaos in Libya. Meanwhile, envoys talk about the importance of Arab-Israeli peace with not much to show for their efforts.

None of this is to minimize the difficulty of constructing a strategy. Instead, it is to point out the large number of conflicting policies that need to be ordered and coordinated.

Those looking for order and coordination have been frustrated. The Trump administration has shown a keen interest in holding its cards close to the vest. As a candidate, Donald Trump bitterly [criticized](#) the Obama administration in October 2016 for revealing that it planned to launch an operation on Mosul. As President Trump, he appears to take glee in surprising his audiences. He wants to keep enemies off balance.

But in private conversations, officials of allied governments—and of supportive international organizations—just shrug their shoulders and smile uncomfortably when asked about the White House. They never thought the presidential election was about them, and they are not trying to re-litigate the outcome. But they are baffled at how they might support the president, frustrated that the president seems so disinterested in supporting them, and unclear what it all means for the role of the United States in the future. They speak with U.S. diplomats, but the diplomats do not have a much better sense of where the policy is going than they do. Instead, U.S. officials overseas have serious debates over whether a [tweet represents U.S. policy](#), and they wonder when vital senior positions in the State Department will be filled. It is no better for officials in Washington.

When the president talks about "Making America Great Again," he is partly talking about regaining American leadership in the world. But there was a vital element to that leadership: America was able to lead because the government had a sense of purpose, the world had a sense of where the United States was trying to go, and many around the globe agreed with the direction.

Compared to now, the Cold War was an easier time. While thoughtful people differed on the best way to confront Soviet aggression, there was little debate that it was the principal security priority. The current national security debate is in disarray, not only in the Middle East, but also more broadly. Should we be preoccupied with armies or with terrorists? Are environmental issues or health issues that know no boundaries the real human killers? The president inherited this world, he did not make it.

Today's complex world makes it all the more important not only that the president fill the myriad of senior positions in his government that remain vacant, but also that he shape debates within his senior ranks so his nominees can advise him on the issues that confound him. This is not an effort to usurp his authority or render him powerless. As president, he decides. But the U.S. government has an elaborate system intended to shape options for the president to choose between, and to weed out bad ideas. That system is broken, filled with acting officials who fear ruining their careers by crossing the wrong person.

As a candidate, Donald Trump relished being disruptive. As a president, the massive tools at his disposal are weakened when the people operating them cannot anticipate his decisions or divine his preferences. Governments around the world want to help the United States, but they do not know how. They neither understand U.S. policy nor its direction. A strategy would strengthen the president, not make him more constrained. ■ 9/19/2017