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## US Elections 2020

# What are the implications for the MENA Region?

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### Introduction

The 2020 U.S. Elections are now part of the history of the United States and will be remembered as one of the major events that marked it.

Joseph R. Biden, the new President-elect (awaiting the vote of the Electoral College and the confirmation of the US Congress before the official inauguration on January 20th) will have before him critical issues to deal with, several of which require a real break with the policies of his soon-to-be predecessor, Donald Trump.

Before analyzing the results of the elections and measuring their potential impact on the foreign policy of the United States and its international relations, particularly with the countries of the MENA region, it would be useful and interesting to first review the mandate of President Donald Trump and the impact his policies had on this region.

Upon arriving at the White House, President Trump found a somewhat mixed legacy: on the one hand, an economic situation that had largely stabilized after the 2008 economic crisis and, on the other, an international situation in which American leadership was largely eroded. He found a multipolar world, marked by increased geopolitical competition, the result of the "lead from behind" approach put in place by President Obama.

While many critics of President Trump have insisted on his lack of vision and his behavior which was sometimes described as irresponsible and dangerous and marked by sudden changes and unpredictable positions, his supporters, see him as following a logic close to the Jacksonian ideology that his opponents have difficulty in countering.

This ideology, which refers to the 7th American President, Andrew Jackson, is based on a will to defend American interests, free of any international constraint whatever its form or content. This ideology rejects, as a matter of principle, the use of military force, but should the nation be compelled to do so, it must always emerge victorious. "I will not hesitate to use military force if there is no alternative. But if America must fight, it must fight to win," Trump said during his 2016 election campaign. He also did not hesitate to attack the international order and its institutions, stating in his inaugural address: "We have enriched other countries while the wealth, strength and confidence of our country have dissipated on the horizon. As of today, it is America first". This slogan clearly reflects the ideological foundation of a policy that considers the domestic situation to be more important than the international context, which must, in the end, serve America's interests and not limit its action.

In connection with security, he was loyal to this Jacksonian tradition by criticizing the deployment of American troops abroad, particularly in Europe, going so far as to decide on the redeployment of several thousand American soldiers from Germany, believing that European countries must defend themselves or pay for the American umbrella. It is in this same spirit that he called for a greater financial contribution from the European members of NATO to ensure their defense and asked them to take responsibility for dealing with

the security problems of their region, a position that was reminiscent of the Monroe Doctrine<sup>1</sup>. Moreover, pushing in this same logic, that of delegating regional security to powers grouped under the leadership of America, he expressed his will to create an 'Arab NATO' with the aim of thwarting Iran's policy, judged to be dangerous for the region and for American interests.

## **President Trump and the MENA Region**

From the very first days of his mandate, President Trump found himself engaged in the contradictions of the situation in the MENA region. Among his very first actions, he signed a "presidential order" prohibiting nationals of several Muslim-majority countries from entry to the United States that caused a general outcry throughout the MENA region. His first trip to the region came in May 2017 when he attended a conference of heads of state in Saudi Arabia in which he unveiled the main priority of his policy in the region, namely Iran.

Iran has indeed established itself as one of the main concerns of the Trump government and is featured in the National Security Strategy published in December 2017, which stated that preventing the predominance of "any power hostile to the United States" (p. 48) was among its priorities and that the US « will work with partners to neutralize Iran's malign activities in the region » (p. 50).

Relations with Saudi Arabia, which were tense during Barack Obama's presidency, improved significantly with President Trump clearly siding with the government of Riyadh and his ally, the UAE in a sharp departure from the policy of opposition to both Sunni and Shiite extremism.

The criticisms addressed to the Saudi government during candidate Trump's 2016 election campaign seemed to have been forgotten and a warming of relations between the two countries began to take shape against the backdrop of mega arms sales contracts (\$380 billion), the creation of a front against Iran and even the idea of establishing a Strategic Alliance for the Middle East, a kind of Arab NATO whose objective would be to strengthen economic cooperation and global security, notably with a regional missile defense shield. Confronting Iran was of course a prominent element in the new alliance's agenda.

During the election campaign, Candidate Trump accused Riyadh of taking advantage of Washington's security protection without any counterpart, but after his arrival at the White House he gave the Saudi government his support for the military operations in Yemen against the Houthis and for the formation of the regional coalition under Riyadh's command.

The return of Russia to the region through the Syrian gate has further complicated the situation and created for the leaders of the region, especially those of the Gulf countries, new security concerns, especially since, in the Syrian conflict, Russians and Iranians stood together on the same side. The installation of the Russian fleet in the Syrian naval base of Tartous will only reinforce the fears of these monarchies and cause them to move closer to Washington.

Relations with Egypt underwent a similar upturn. The criticism Cairo received from the Obama Administration on issues related to governance and human rights, was tuned down by the Trump Administration. This close relationship reached a very high note last October when President Trump « justified » in advance a possible military action by Egypt to destroy the Renaissance dam (4.5 billion dollars) that Ethiopia is building on the Nile and which is the subject of great tension between Cairo and Addis Ababa.

But, in the Middle East no issue has seen a greater change during the Trump presidency than the Palestinian question.

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<sup>1</sup> The "Monroe Doctrine" is a set of principles defined by President James Monroe in his annual message to Congress in December 1823. This doctrine can be summed up in the formula enunciated by James Monroe in this speech: "To Europeans the Old Continent, to Americans the New World".

In fact, Israel is the greatest beneficiary of Donald Trump's presidency. Even though all American governments have given top priority to their relations with Israel and considered it as their main ally, Trump's initiatives have taken on exceptional dimensions and even violated UN resolutions, reflecting political convictions akin to those of the neo-conservatives who consider unconditional support for Israel to be an inescapable foundation and a non-negotiable position.

In this matter, we could recall the following decisions: in addition to his withdrawal from the Iranian nuclear agreement, which the Israeli Prime Minister has always opposed, considering it an "historic mistake", President Trump decided to transfer the U.S. Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem, a decision that breaks the fragile status quo maintained by the international community pending a comprehensive solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and announced that he was closing the Palestinian diplomatic mission in Washington. With these decisions, he struck a serious blow to the two-state solution supported by the international community and accepted by the Palestinians. Finally, he decided to put pressure on the Palestinians to force them to negotiate with the Netanyahu government by halting funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees (UNRWA) and cutting over \$200 million in bilateral aid to the West Bank and Gaza. Finally, he announced in March 2019 the recognition by the United States of Israel's sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights, annexed in 1967.

The "Deal of the Century" that he announced early in his presidency, and whose design and implementation he entrusted to his son-in-law Jared Kushner, was rejected by Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas and almost the entire Arab world. However, American pressure coupled with the weakening of the region by the wars in Iraq, Yemen and Syria and by the upheavals caused by the Arab Spring in various countries, together with the emergence of terrorist organizations of ISIS (Daech, in Arabic) and other similar groups in North Africa, and finally the use of the Iranian threat, particularly with the Gulf countries, as well as that of sanctions, have introduced new strategic considerations which led the UAE, Bahrain and Sudan to recognize the State of Israel and normalize their bilateral relations with it.

Through this initiative, and even though it does not seem to be the result of a well thought-out strategy, President Trump has introduced a major change in the balance of the region and modified its dynamics and its points of reference. One of these changes' most important manifestations is the establishment of the anti-Iran alliance formed of Saudi Arabia and UAE with the strong support of Israel, which, although widely condemned by Arab public opinion, has not been decried by the ruling class in spite of the major geopolitical consequences it would have for the entire region. The League of Arab States' silent attitude towards the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE and Bahrain is indicative of the deepening disagreements in the Arab world.

At the level of North Africa, President Trump's policy has been characterized by a low profile attitude and a manifestation of interest almost exclusively related to security considerations expressed by the quasi regular visits of the US-Africom commander to the region. However, there is no shortage of areas of concern for the United States in the region, not only security-related matters, but also issues of economic and political nature and in terms of diplomatic interests and positioning. Indeed, in addition to the persistent problem of Western Sahara, the region has been living through a difficult decade that has seen (i) a revolution in Tunisia, (ii) social and political movements in Algeria that have led to a still delicate situation as a result of a low participation in both the presidential election and the referendum on the Constitution, (iii) a situation of civil war in Libya with foreign interventions and the arrivals of large numbers of mercenaries, (iv) a hastened race for energy resources that creates situations of great tension between Turkey on the one hand and France and Greece on the other, (v) economic difficulties generated in Tunisia by a fall in production capacity, social tensions and constraints linked to the requirements of a democratic transition and changes in development paradigms.

As far as Libya is concerned, the Trump Administration has followed a changing and sometimes hesitant policy. Tilting between supporting Marshal Kalifa Haftar and boosting the GNA of Fayed Al-Sarraj and oscillating between a non-involvement attitude of and a public condemnation of foreign interventions

including the sending of mercenaries<sup>2</sup>, Washington was, in reality, only interested in securing the free flow of libyan oil in an attempt to further control the commodity prices.

Regarding Algeria, the foreign policy of the Trump Administration "kept its distance" and only manifested itself in October with the visit of former Secretary of Defense, Esper, who insisted on Washington's willingness to strengthen its relations with Algeria, adding: « We want to say to the Algerian People, how much we respect their sovereignty. We enjoy their cooperation and admire their history ». This visit was preceded by the visit of General Stephen Townsend, Commander of US-Africom, and that of Dimitrii Shugaev, Director of the Federal Service for Military and Technical Cooperation of the Russian Federation, a way for Algeria to underline its position of balance between the two powers.

For Tunisia, President Trump's term in office has not brought any changes to the foundations of bilateral relations, which are rarely affected by a change of administration, mainly because of the bi-partisan support the country has always enjoyed in the US Congress in both the Senate and House of Representatives. In this regard, the former U.S. Ambassador to Tunis, Gordon Gray, recalls in his recently published article the resolution presented earlier this year jointly by Senators Murphy (Dem. Connecticut) and Graham (Rep. South Carolina) calling for the opening of negotiations with Tunisia for the conclusion of a free trade agreement. The meetings of the joint economic and military commissions were held regularly as well as the consultations within the framework of the Strategic Dialogue initiated under the Obama Presidency. The economic and military assistance program has also continued and the financial envelope granted to Tunisia has been maintained at its traditional levels. In recent years, this envelope has reached a total of 245 million dollars and the Appropriations bill currently in discussion provides an allocation of 241 million dollars for the fiscal year 2021.

At the regional level, security aspects continued to prevail through the visits of the Commander of US-Africom and more recently the visit of the former Secretary of Defense, Esper, who signed a 10-year security cooperation agreement with both Morocco and Tunisia. In a statement made during his visit to Tunisia, he stressed the importance of relations with the country, this time giving them a broader framework by noting the determination of the United States to counter Russia and China throughout Africa. "We look forward to deepening this relationship to help Tunisia protect its ports and borders and curb terrorism," the U.S. Secretary said, adding that the goal is to confront "violent extremists who pose a threat" as well as "our strategic competitors, China and Russia »...« Today, our strategic competitors, China and Russia, continue to intimidate and coerce their neighbors while expanding their authoritarian influence around the world, including on this continent »...« At the same time, violent extremists continue to pose a threat not only to regional stability, but also to our homeland. America's enduring partnership with like-minded countries - including here in North Africa - is essential to meeting these challenges ».

## **President-elect Joseph Biden and the MENA Region**

It is in this regional context that the countries of the MENA zone followed the American elections and the arrival (though not yet official) of the Democratic candidate, Joseph Biden at the White House.

Looking at the results of this election, some argue that it would be difficult to say that the new President-elect has obtained a mandate from the American people to act and restore a new coherence to the policies of the United States both internally and internationally. The differences between the popular vote (75 million for the Democratic candidate and 71 million for the incumbent President) are far from « the blue wave » that the majority of polling houses predicted. In addition, President Trump has further broadened his support base by getting four million more votes than in 2016. This means that the policy he put in place was not as unpopular as observers had thought, or that it had an irrelevant impact.

As we look at the various stages of the election campaign, one aspect emerges: the 2020 election was almost exclusively a test of domestic politics. Of all the meetings and political rallies organized by the two

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<sup>2</sup> Statement of M. Robert O'Brien, National Security Advisor – August 4th, 2020

candidates, few were those where foreign policy issues were raised, except for a few references to China. No change to this trend was made even by the two presidential debates.

A reading of the document published by Democratic candidate Biden in the spring of 2020 ("Why America Must Lead Again- Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump" - Foreign Policy March-April 2020), gives us a fairly clear idea of Biden's foreign policy orientations. In this document, he outlines his priorities and methods for dealing with the major international issues of the day, and how he proposes to restore America's standing and leadership in the world.

In terms of priorities we find Russia, China, Latin America and a return to the Democratic Party traditional foreign policy foundations, namely principles and values (democracy, human rights, fundamental freedoms). But the most important elements are the return to multilateral engagement by rejoining the World Health Organization and the Paris Agreement on Climate Change, a reaffirmation of the commitment to NATO and a rebuilding of the common front (now to confront China) with the European Union and other allies such as Japan.

On the other hand, if we look at North Africa and the Middle East in the broadest sense, only Iran is included in this foreign policy document. It is mentioned in the context of the 2015 Nuclear Accord which the democratic party candidate says he is ready to rejoin provided that Iran comply with all its clauses. The other country in the region mentioned in this document is Saudi Arabia only to be called upon to end its war in Yemen.

It can be argued without great risk of error that the Middle East and the North African regions are not at the top of the new Administration's priorities. Observers agree that the new Administration will maintain and reinforce the shift of US interests from the Middle East to Asia and that, independantly of who the new President turns out to be, the United States will withdraw its forces from the Middle East and Afghanistan.

Furthermore, the lack of focus on international issues during the election campaign is a clear indication that Americans are not particularly concerned about foreign policy issues. It might be more accurate to think that the first few months of President Biden's term, if confirmed, will be used for a readjustment of direction, or as Richard Haas calls it, a "repair"<sup>3</sup> of the choices made by President Trump. In addition, it will take several months to establish the presidential team in charge of foreign policy and security, to structure the Administration's operational modes and to make an overall assessment of inter-governmental coordination.

All observers agree that the policy of the new Administration will bring only marginal changes to the overall position of the United States in the Middle East. As such, the Palestinian question, which continues to dominate the concerns of the people of the region, is unlikely to see any major readjustment. Indeed, we do not expect a "reversal" of President Trump's decision to transfer the American Embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem or his recognition of Israel's sovereignty over the Syrian Golan Heights. It would be possible to see a reopening of the Palestinian Embassy in Washington and the U.S. Consulate General in the Palestinian territories, a resumption of financial support to UNRAW and discussions with the Palestinian Authority of Mahmoud Abbas. We could also see a return of diplomatic activities at the United Nations level to try to rekindle Israeli-Palestinian dialogue. We could also expect an easing of the pressure exerted by the Trump Administration on some Arab countries to normalize their relations with Israel. If the attitude of the Obama Administration is still a valid indicator, we could expect a cooling of U.S.-Israeli relations, due to the attitude displayed during the Obama presidency by Prime Minister Netanyahu on the issue of expanding Israeli settlements in the Palestinian territories, and especially his virulent campaign to oppose the Iranian nuclear agreement. A return to a position of intermediary to facilitate an agreement between Palestinians and Israelis could be envisaged.

The main issues that seem most likely to undergo changes or, at least, generate an interest on the part of the new Administration are: Iran, the Gulf countries and Libya with, as a backdrop, the forceful return of Russia on the regional chessboard.

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<sup>3</sup> « Repairing the World, The Imperative -and Limits- of a Post-Trump Foreign Policy », Foreign Affairs, November 9, 2020

For Iran, the Democratic candidate has clearly indicated his intention to rejoin the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA - in which he participated as Vice President in the Obama Administration), though with some conditions. But this decision would take time to materialize. Indeed, he will have to engage in new negotiations to get Iran to confirm its re-commitment to the full respect of the terms of the agreement, and perhaps even seek to extend it to other issues such as the Iranian ballistic program or Tehran's interference in the Gulf region and its interventions in Syria, Lebanon, Yemen and Iraq. The new President will also have to cancel the sanctions imposed by President Trump on Iran following Washington's withdrawal from the agreement in 2018 and probably accept to remove the Revolutionary Guards and the Iranian Central Bank from the list of terrorist organizations. Furthermore, there are reports indicating that President Trump will use the last few weeks at the White House to strengthen the sanctions regime on Iran in an attempt to block any move from the new Administration to cancel them. However, and despite the clear difficulties this change of policy towards Iran entails, it will nevertheless, help reduce tensions and somewhat push back the threat of a catastrophic confrontation in the region.

Related to this issue, one could also expect new directions in the relations of the new Administration of President-elect Biden with the Trump-created anti-Iran axis grouping Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) which Israel strongly supports. President Trump relied on Saudi Prince Mohamed Ben Salman and the (de facto) UAE leader Mohamed Ben Zayed Al Nahyan to give his anti-Iran policy a regional base and push forward his project of creating the Middle East NATO. To do so, the Trump Administration has given little attention to the criticism voiced by many people inside the United States with regard to the issues of governance and human rights in the region including the Gulf. This attitude could be expected to change with a democratic Administration. Indeed, Tony Blinken (former Under Secretary of State and one of Biden's foreign policy advisers) stated that "democracy is at the heart of everything we do"<sup>4</sup> adding that "leadership, cooperation and democracy" are the fundamental principles of Biden's foreign policy. This new scale of priorities could lead to a review of relations between Riyadh and Washington as announced by candidate Biden himself, who said last October: "Under a Biden-Harris administration, we will reassess our relations with the Kingdom [of Saudi Arabia], end US support for Saudi Arabia's war in Yemen, and make sure America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil".

As to the UAE, the agreement to which the State Department has just given its green light for, namely, the sale of the stealth aircraft, the F35, may not go through given the reluctance of the new Democratic Administration for such arm sales.

However, this change of attitude may not be as clear cut as it seems. Indeed, even though the discovery of oil and shale gas, has diminished the strategic importance of the Gulf region for the United States, the balance between policy principles and interests will always remain a subject of great debate in Washington, especially today when economic recovery is becoming a truly vital issue for many companies and individuals across America. Furthermore, observers point out to the President Elect's track record as vice-president which suggests that he tends to give preference to dialogue over exerting pressure. Finally, The Israeli Government supported by its Washington lobby would most likely act to influence this « assessment » exercise in order to maintain the Trump anti-Iran policy and prevent any initiative to lift the sanctions decided by the previous Administration.

Many observers also view Egypt as another country that could experience a change in US attitude for similar considerations. Indeed, President Trump's policy towards Egypt has been criticized by many American political actors for limiting its foundations to the role played by Egypt in the war against terrorism and jihadist groups. This priority went so far as to lead President Trump to take position in favor of Egypt on its dispute with Ethiopia over the "renaissance" dam that Addis Ababa is building on the Nile. He went as far as justifying a possible Egyptian military operation to destroy the dam, raising the anger of Ethiopia, which is already facing an insurgency in the Tigray region.

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<sup>4</sup> Article by Gordon Gray, former US Ambassador to Tunis (Leaders magazine, Novembre 8th, 2020)



Some observers have also placed President Trump's policy towards Egypt in the context of his opposition to political Islam that President Sissi is fighting. In this regard, people throughout the region believe that the Democratic Party played the card of political Islam during the Obama presidency and the tenure of Mrs. Clinton as Secretary of State, an attitude that earned them a lot of public criticism and attributed to them hidden agendas and a deliberate policy aimed at destabilizing the entire region.

However, Egypt will always constitute an essential element for the United States in the region and even if bilateral relations experience a down turn, strategic relations will continue in view of the high stakes both countries have in the region.

In North Africa (Maghreb), American policy is not expected to undergo major changes. Bilaterally, relations with Tunisia and Morocco will continue both at the political and security level but also in terms of financial support and equipment. However, due to the economic crisis that hit the United States following the pandemic, a cut in the budget allocations to these two countries could occur (even though the foreign aid bill does not show any reduction in the amounts allocated to Tunisia for FY-2021). If that happens, the reduction could be offset, possibly, by a greater recourse to supplies from surplus American equipment under the "non-NATO major ally" status enjoyed by both countries.

In the regional context, the Libyan crisis emerges as a central element to assess the prospects of a possible US repositioning. The entry into the Libyan Crisis of Russia through the Wagner group, that of Turkey through its military presence, the involvement of thousands of mercenaries from Syria, the interference of the UAE and Qatar alongside respectively Marshal Haftar and the NGA of Sarraj, the active positioning of Egypt at its western border, the frictions in the Mediterranean between the naval units of Turkey on one side and France and Greece on the other, the political tensions between Paris and Ankara, all these elements could lead the new Administration to reconsider its position in this crisis, which, if unchecked, has all the ingredients to evolve into a conflict of greater intensity and scope. The visits in the region of the Commander of US-Africom and the more recent visit of the former US Secretary of Defense, Esper, could be read as a prelude to a change in the American position towards the Libyan crisis.

Even if a direct military intervention by the United States is currently not conceivable in view of the statements of the elected democrat candidate, a proxy action would not be excluded, perhaps also through NATO which, according to press reports, has established a presence in the air base of Maitigua and the naval base of Misrata. In the meantime, Washington would be inclined to leave it up to the United Nations to find the necessary arrangements to put an end to this crisis while ensuring that American interests are preserved.

The competition with Russia in the Libyan crisis took an important turn in the last few months of President Trump's mandate with the statement of former Defense Secretary Esper, who made it clear that the United States will work to counter Russia and China in this region and beyond. Observers see the importance of US relations with Algeria in this context and note the significance of the rapprochement that Washington is trying to make with Algiers in order to distance it as far as possible from its Russian ally and consolidate its support base in this region where it already enjoys strong relations with Morocco and Tunisia. In this scenario, Algeria could have a more prominent role to play in the war against terrorism and jihadist groups which are strengthening their presence in the African Sahel. If this US strategy succeeds, and with a favorable position in Libya as part of the solution to the current crisis, Washington could have a strategic line of support that would link the Atlantic to the Red Sea and from there to the Gulf. With a return to normality in its relations with the European allies -- if president-elect Biden succeeds in re-energizing -- one could envision that Washington would regain its central position in the Mediterranean and deprive Russia of lines of support and other footholds on the southern flank of the Mediterranean.

However, on the basis of the current situation and the signals emanating from the region, this approach seems rather very difficult to envisage and that it would be, at best, a long term strategy which still remains to be confirmed.

## Conclusion

When President-elect Joseph Biden arrives at the White House, he will find on his desk many questions that require his full attention and that of his staff and members of his Government. Foreign policy does not seem to be part of the priority list he will have to deal with in view of the major internal problems that he will inherit from his predecessor, Donald Trump, as well as the difficult transition process his team will go through.

While some international relations issues will nevertheless be dealt with relatively quickly given their importance or because the international calendar imposes it (Paris Agreement on Climate Change, World Health Organization, Iran's nuclear issue, NATO), others, including those in the North Africa and Middle East region, will have to wait. For most of them, no major changes in political orientations or choices are expected (such as the Palestinian question), but some will nevertheless see more or less important changes that could have serious repercussions in the region (Iranian nuclear agreement, relations with the Gulf countries).

All these considerations are intertwined in an international context that sees a strong comeback of Russia on the regional scene, the arrival of China which continues to follow its ambition of becoming one of the world major powers and the emergence of new regional powers (Turkey in particular) that aspire to a place among the important players and the creation of a sphere of influence in the service of their interests.

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