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DONALD TRUMP'S MIDDLE EAST POLICY AND THE KURDS

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Donald Trump's victory in the recent presidential election opened up a vast area for research on the anticipated outcomes of his presidency for not only the US policy line in general, but also regarding the Middle East in particular. Considering the blueprints of his Middle East Policy, it can be assumed that during the era under his presidency, one of the key challenges would be the relationship between the US and different Kurdish groups in Iraq and Syria and the impact of this relationship on the US policy line regarding Turkey, Syria and Iraq. His policy line would also possibly have an important impact on the power dynamics between the US, Russia, Iran in the region. This paper discusses the future policy steps of the new administration based on the first statements and the close associates of Trump as well as the blueprints of his speeches throughout the presidential campaign.

Since Donald Trump, as Henry Kissinger (US Secretary of State 1973-77) has put it, “has absolutely no baggage” for foreign policy,¹ this paper focuses on the anticipated broad lines of his policy towards the Middle East, and his policy towards Kurds within that context. For the time being, such an analysis can only be deduced from the blueprints of his election campaign and the interviews he has given to the press. Based on his statements so far, Kurdish groups in the region might solidify some of their recently obtained gains, and the new administration would possibly put some pressure on Kurds (both in Turkey and Syria) to come to some terms

with Turkey. Moreover, due to the pressure from Trump’s administration, and the Iraqi government’s post-Mosul policy to reassert itself and expand its territorial reach at the expense of Kurdistan Regional government (KRG), Kurdish groups would probably distance themselves from both Iran and Iraq.

The Blueprints of Trump’s Middle East Policy

Unlike President Obama’s policy of relative isolationism from the Middle East, indecisiveness, and “no boots on the ground” policy, Trump will most probably follow a policy line based on *ad hoc* and business-minded foreign adventures. His policies will be impulsive and occasionally



forceful. Trump will probably let the Pentagon finish the job against DAESH in Mosul and Raqqa, if it has not done that by the end of January.

Instead of higher levels of intervention and the permanent troop presence in Iraq, Syria, and the Gulf region, which many Sunni political groups and regional leaders wish, the US government under Mr. Trump might shy away from long-standing Arab allies which would significantly increase the Russian and Iranian leverage. Nonetheless, the Saudi Foreign Minister, Adel al-Jubeir, tweeted: “Congratulations to President-Elect, looking forward to strengthening KSA-US historic ties to serve their mutual interests”.² Ties between Washington and Riyadh have been occasionally icy recently, despite President Obama’s willingness to ramp up military sales to protect an absolute monarchy. Based on his often stated stance, Trump might intervene in favor of Arabs, only if the latter were ready to pay the bills which Pentagon will present.³

Since Trump’s stance is strictly against refugees, especially Muslims coming to the West, he might, in coordination with Turkey, put some serious effort to promote safe zones in Syria, to prevent refugee influx. Trump stated that he is against supplying more arms to Syria’s Sunni rebels or enforcing a no-fly zone to protect them. Trump says he is against intervention for ideological reasons, such as regime-change, democracy and nation-building abroad. Referring to the past American interventions in Iraq, he said “I don’t think that was a very helpful thing.”⁴ Trump’s approach prioritizes stability over democratic values that can produce uncertainty. In addition, Trump has already expressed readiness to work with Russia and the regime in Damascus to defeat ISIS. If this policy is pursued as stated, it will be a big relief for Bashar Assad and his allied Shiite militias and Iran. In such a scenario, not only they can continue their policy of expansion, but also Iran’s design and efforts to build the Shiite crescent will be realized, and the ongoing sectarian conflict in the region will reach a much

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more alarming level. This will probably force the EU to act alone, or the threatened Arab regimes to search for security through new partnerships. The Revolutionary Guards of Iran, the bastion of hard-liners and a pivotal player in the wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, gave notice that Trump's election will make no difference in their approach to regional issues.

Nonetheless, Iranians have been alarmed and nervous with the repeated statements of Trump to dismantle the 2015 nuclear deal known as Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran. Trump repeatedly referred to the nuclear

deal as the "worst agreement ever" and promised to dismantle it. Since the JCPOA is a multinational agreement, it will not be so easy to abrogate. However, the new president and Republican-dominated Congress could do a lot to make it toothless. The Vice President-elect Mike Pence and seems to be more persistent and determined to rip up the deal, which he and Trump consider as a threat to the security of Israel. On the other hand, the right-wing Netanyahu administration in Israel was one of the administrations which welcomed Trump's victory the most.⁵ Trumps thinks Iran is still a state which



sponsors terrorism, and he expressed great displeasure about Obama administration's failed policy line in the Middle East, which have enabled Iran and its Revolutionary Guards to have undue influence in the region.⁶

Trump and the Kurds

The Kurds have not presented a unified response towards Trump's election victory. Kurdish officials of the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq (KRG) have welcomed it and hope to receive his support for achieving independence. On the other hand, Syrian Kurds have a mixed feeling of continued cooperation with the US against ISIS while they fear a possible abandonment by Trump administration in favor of Turkey. Both Masud Barzani, the head of the KRG and Nechirvan Barzani, the prime minister of the KRG, sent warm letters of congratulation to Trump. The KRG Head of Foreign Relations, Falah Mustafa, told ARA News in an exclusive interview, "As a friend and ally of the United States, we want to develop a strategic partnership with the US."⁷ The Iraqi

Kurds think that the Republican Party's policies towards the Middle East have always been more practical, especially in Iraq. They expect more support from Mr. Trump. Many KRG officials hope that Trump will change America's traditional 'One Iraq Policy' and recognize the KRG as an independent state.⁸

Mr. Trump's anti-establishment and unpredictable style of politics could all prove very beneficial to the Kurds. Unlike elites and officials in many Middle Eastern countries, who are critical of US policies in the region, Kurdish leaders appear to trust the Americans and western governments. Moreover, Kurdish leaders try to prove to Westerners that they are "America's most reliable partners in the region." According to the people close to Mr. Trump, he values unconditional loyalty more than any other quality, and he considers the "Kurds most loyal" US allies in the region. If all of this translates into foreign policy, the Kurds stand to benefit considerably. David Romano, a noted Kurdologist, who claims

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to have been in contact with people close to Trump, writes “A number of Mr. Trump’s foreign policy advisors, or people close to them, already seem favorable to Kurdish statehood under the right conditions.”⁹ Some of Trump’s key advisers are allies and very close to the Kurds. Retired general Mike Flynn, who is expected to be a National Security Advisor, is someone who has led a special operation in Northern Iraq with Peshmerga and Kurdish intelligence. John Bolton and Newt Gingrich, who are strong candidates to be his Foreign Minister, have taken the stand for independent Kurdistan. Another person in his circle, Alabama Senator Jeff Sessions, advocated granting of the Kurds independence at the end of the 1990s. Former US ambassador to Baghdad, Zalmay Khalilzad, who also counseled Barzani, may receive an assignment in the new administration. Mike Rogers and Lebanese-born Walid Phares are also Kurdish-friendly figures waiting for effective positions on the Trump team. It will not be an exaggeration to say that if the Kurds look for allies for their

desire for independence or equality with Baghdad, “they will have a management team that will listen to them seriously and provide support”.¹⁰

Many other names on Trump’s team spoke positively about Kurds and supporting their cause. For instance, speaking to K24 TV station, John Carter, Republican from Texas, said that if Donald Trump, was to be elected President, the aid to the Kurds will continue increasingly. He added Donald Trump thinks the Kurds are the only group which fought against the brutal armed group (ISIS) and achieved very good results. From that point, the US must arm the Peshmerga and support them in every field.¹¹ Sam Yono, a member of Trump’s American Middle East Advisory Committee (AMCT), on his part said that the new administration respects the people of the Kurdistan Region and their struggle for independence. Moreover, Yono stated president-elect Trump would not “stand in the way” of the Kurdish independence as long as there is an agreement

between the Kurdistan Region and Iraq.¹²

Nonetheless, Michael Knights, who has firsthand experience with Iraqi groups in the post-Saddam era, advises the Kurdish leaderships to take a cautious approach in dealing with the new administration. He writes “Now the advent of a Trump presidency begs the question: will the Iraqi Kurds once again be tempted to “short-circuit” the path to independence by seeking to gain the new U.S. administration’s support for Kurdish statehood outside of the negotiations with Baghdad?” He suggests a negotiated separation or sharing of sovereignty (aiming at co-equal status) in the formation of a confederation system between Abadi government and the KRG. This will thwart what he considers undue Iranian or Turkish interference in Iraq. Knight considers over-dependence on Turkey or Trump administration alone will have a disastrous impact on the Kurds. The lesson here is that alliances may be helpful and necessary, “but it is unwise to put all one’s eggs in any single basket.” This

might bring on the Kurds again the tragic episodes of Kurdish history where over-dependence on an external partner, including the US in 1975, led to disaster. Knight added: “The Kurdistan Region can strengthen its hand in negotiations by demonstrating that there is now unprecedented support for the Kurdish independence in the White House, Senate, and Congress.”¹³ This author shares Knight’s assumption that over dependence on an external power would easily damage the KRG’s interests. The Kurdistan Republic of Mahabad’s heavy dependence on the USSR during WWII is another case to point out the futility of such a policy line.

The Kurdish leadership has to face the challenge of how to develop this newly gained leverage in the US, while keeping their eyes on achieving a more realistic goal of having a “functional relationship with Baghdad that facilitates the internationally-recognized transfer of sovereign powers to Iraqi Kurdistan.” They could ask the new Trump administration to stay engaged, reinforce the

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success of talks which have recently started with Abadi government.¹⁴

However, this proposal by Knight would be a wrong message to be given to the Kurds. Because neither Abadi nor Iran, which has a dominant influence in Iraq, are ready to allow the peaceful emergence of an independent Kurdistan on their doorsteps which will have destabilizing impact for them. KRG leaders are well-advised to avoid attempt to maximize their gains by taking hasty decisions, hoping that US will come to their aid. During the Gulf War of 1991, the Kurds, instigated by George Bush administration, launched an uprising

against Saddam's regime only to find themselves abandoned by the US to face Saddam's heavy vengeance. The more realistic option available to them now is to use the new US administration's will to confront the hegemonic and expansionist policies of Iran in Iraq and the Middle East to their advantage. Forming a confederate regime with the Sunni regions of Iraq, especially Mosul, will give Kurds a real and safe self-rule, and it will be most probably acceptable to Turkey and regional Arab countries such Saudi Arabia and Jordan, too. Donald Trump, who values close relations with Turkey, would possibly be also willing to render his



support to such a scenario. It is in Turkey's national interest to support this confederate regime which will inevitably be Turkey-oriented.

Syrian Kurds and Trump

Where Trump stands on the support being provided to the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) which is America's allies on the ground fighting ISIS and are currently engaged in a major offensive to oust the terrorist group from their *de facto* capital, Raqqah, is still unclear from his interviews and statements so far. Although Trump pointed to the mistreatment of the Kurds by the United States in the past and showed admiration for them, it remains to be seen how all of this will play out with regards to the Syrian Kurds. The interest of the Syrian Kurds seems to clash with Trump's mentioned desire to strengthen the Assad regime's stance and his wish to see stronger ties with Turkey. A closer relationship between the U.S. and Turkey, thus, could significantly damage the partnership Obama has forged with

the Syrian Kurdish groups, especially PYD.

The two major Syrian groups, PYD and the pro-Barzani Kurdish group of ENKS, have welcomed Trump's victory and expressed their desire to work with the US to establish a federal secular democratic state in Syria. "We, Syrian Kurds, are looking for American support to help establish a federal system in Syria because we don't agree with the Syrian regime or opposition," Salih Zrar of Yekiti Party stated. "[Neither side will] give Kurds any national rights. They reject federalism because they believe that it will divide Syria," he added. A Syrian Kurd who is fighting alongside the Peshmerga in Iraq told ARA News that he "stands behind Trump. He will be the same as George Bush."¹⁵ However, PYD is largely pursuing an agenda that clashes with the anticipated Trump policy in the Middle East. It is therefore concerned with Trump team's desire to work more closely with Turkey, which was expressed by Flynn. The opposing policies of PYD and Turkey have already led to PYD-Turkish clashes

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in Syria. Trump appears to be aware of this clash between two “US allies” in Syria. When he was confronted with it, he said he will try to reach reconciliation between the Syrian Kurdish groups fighting ISIS and Turkey. Speaking to two New York Times journalists, Trump said, “it would be ideal if we could get them [Turkey and the Kurds] together and that would be a possibility.”¹⁶

Reconciling PYD and Turkey is a challenging task, but not impossible to accomplish. The former prime minister in Turkey, Ahmet Davoutoglu, tried to achieve this through the efforts of KRG leader Masud Barzani. The latter tried to establish a joint administration in Rojava with peshmargas

loyal to Barzani and belonging to ENKS to be a part of that government. Turkey had good relations with the latter Kurdish group which is a part of the Syrian National Council. But PYD rejected such a plan and, instead, tried to increase its leverage and rely on its own power in order to exclude Barzani loyalists. Turkey had several rounds of talks with Salih Muslim, the head of PYD. However, the two sides could not reach a compromise due to the unwillingness of the Syrian opposition to agree to the demands for self-rule for Rojava region, the failure of peace process in Turkey, and PYD’s belief that it would be able to establish an independent entity which could reach to Jarabulus and the

Mediterranean Sea and would not need Turkey that much, especially in economic terms.

However, the situation has considerably changed now. PYD's plan to reach the Mediterranean Sea was not materialized. Moreover, the Russian and Iranian support for the Assad regime had given some teeth to it, and it would possibly oppose a federal regime which PYD has declared in Rojava. A Kurdish entity with self-rule will not be acceptable to the Iranians, too. The regime in Damascus has made it clear that it would not accept it, since it violates the Syrian constitution. Assad might possibly plan to deal with PYD after crushing the opposition forces in Aleppo. Moreover, Rojava is a small territory which is not feasible to be turned into an independent region. Economically, the region is dependent on other parts of Syria and lacks a safe external outlet. There are only two options for PYD's 'Rojava project' in the future to survive: first, to agree to be part of the Assad regime which will not give Kurds any degree of self-rule. Such re-integration of

Rojava with the rest of Syria is feasible only if Syria turns into a federal regime. The second option for 'Rojava project' is to drop its totalitarian nature, sever ties with PKK and agree to incorporate other Kurdish groups and the peshmerga loyal to Barzani into the administration in Rojava. This will give the Syrian Kurds an outlet to the KRG, and it will probably provide Turkey with an assurance that the Rojava regime will not be involved in any activities that threaten Turkey's security. This option would also be in line with the future Trump administration's policies in the Middle East.

To sum up, Iran's policies in Iraq and the Middle East, and the nature of the regimes in Iraq and Syria leave the Kurds in the KRG and Syria with no option but to reconcile their differences and align with Turkey. Such a necessity and a policy line derived from this necessity would most possibly enjoy the blessing and support from the future U.S administration under President-elect Donald Trump.

To sum up, Iran's policies in Iraq and the Middle East, and the nature of the regimes in Iraq and Syria leave the Kurds in the KRG and Syria with no option but to reconcile their differences and align with Turkey.

Endnotes

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