

# ISSUE BRIEF **01.29.18**

## Trump Policy in the Middle East: ISIS

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### CONTINUITY AND CHANGE UNDER PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP

The Trump administration's approach to U.S. foreign policy is a complex mix of the new and the traditional. This is particularly true when we move beyond the president's own rhetoric—most notably on display in his Twitter feed—to the actual conduct of policy. The Middle East is no exception. How do the Trump administration's policies toward this troubled region differ from that of its predecessors? How do they reflect continuity? How much does Trump foreign policy represent a strategic shift in the U.S. approach to the Middle East? More generally, how can the United States best advance its interests in a region marked by internal instability, interstate rivalries, and external powers (including the United States) jockeying for influence?

In this and subsequent issue briefs, we will focus on three intertwined issues: the battle against ISIS, the ongoing Syrian civil war, and intensified competition between Iran and traditional U.S. partners in the region, notably Saudi Arabia and Israel. These issues do not, of course, exhaust the challenges that the United States faces in the Middle East; we do not, for instance, address the perennial challenge of the Arab-Israeli dispute. But the three areas do, we believe, represent a useful start in assessing the Trump administration's policies toward the Middle East.

### ISIS: DOWN BUT NOT OUT

The case for continuity in U.S. policy is strong when it comes to ISIS, which exploded on the Middle Eastern scene with its capture of the major Iraqi city of Mosul in 2014.

As president, Donald Trump has continued—and intensified—the military effort against ISIS begun under President Barack Obama. In 2017, this policy achieved a signal victory: the caliphate declared by Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 has largely been defeated on the battlefield. With the last October's fall of the Syrian city of Raqqa—ISIS' unofficial capital—the Islamic State, which once stretched over vast swaths of Iraq and Syria, has been reduced to a handful of enclaves manned by a few thousand battered fighters. This does not mean that ISIS no longer represents a challenge to states in the region and elsewhere. ISIS embodied a composite threat: it was both a pseudo-state, governing territory under its direct control, and a terrorist organization, organizing attacks and inspiring others. The physical caliphate may be on the verge of extinction but ISIS as a terrorist threat remains very much alive.<sup>1</sup> It possesses affiliates—of varying strengths—not just in the Middle East but in a number of countries across the Muslim world. And it continues to inspire terrorist attacks in Europe and the United States. Moreover, the broader movement of which ISIS part—violent jihadism—continues to find support among a very small but motivated



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fraction of disenchanted Sunni Muslims in the Middle East and elsewhere. Violent religious extremism remains active throughout much of the Muslim world; indeed, jihadist groups—including al-Qaeda affiliates—remain an important element among forces opposing President Bashar al-Assad in Syria. Not least, as the spectacular rise of ISIS in 2014–2015 itself shows, terrorist groups can evolve in unexpected and dangerous ways.

### THE ANTI-ISIS COALITION

What role did the Trump administration play in the destruction of the physical caliphate? The pace of airstrikes increased. There were increases—albeit modest—in the deployment of U.S. military personnel to Syria and Iraq. And Trump delegated more operational decision-making to U.S. military commanders. But the Trump administration’s policies were closely aligned with that of its predecessor. By the time Trump became president in January 2017, the tide had already turned decisively against ISIS. Obama may have underestimated ISIS before the seizure of Mosul; he notoriously dismissed it as the “JV team” less than six months before the organization routed the Iraqi army and took control of the city.<sup>2</sup> But by the end of Obama’s term, the United States had long since made defeating ISIS militarily a top priority and committed substantial military resources to degrading and destroying the organization.

Needless to say, the United States did not defeat ISIS on its own. U.S. air support may have been a key element in first containing ISIS after its seizure of Mosul and then winning back the immense territory that the organization at one time governed in Syria and Iraq. But others carried most of the burden and sustained almost all the casualties. This was especially true when it came to the deadly business of ground combat in places like Mosul and Raqqa.

Moreover, the “victors” represent at best a temporary, tactical alliance of convenience that united parties with divergent, sometimes contradictory, goals. This unlikely crew included the governments of Iraq and Syria, Kurdish factions within both countries, anti-

Assad opposition groups, Iran, Hezbollah, Turkey, and Russia, among others. All fought ISIS at one time or another, though a number—notably the Syrian government and its allies but also substantial portions of the anti-Assad rebels—were prepared to enable ISIS when it was to their advantage. The major players in the anti-ISIS coalition all had their own agendas. While Saudi Arabia was clearly opposed to ISIS, for instance, its top priority was the removal of the Assad regime. Russia—unsurprisingly, given its fear of jihadist extremism at home and abroad—also opposed ISIS, though Moscow’s preeminent objective was (and is) maintenance of the Assad regime; the same is true of Iran. The United States was formally committed to both the defeat of ISIS and the removal of the Assad regime—though, over time, U.S. support for the latter under the Obama and now Trump administrations has become largely rhetorical. The old adage that “the enemy of my enemy is my friend” is nowhere truer than among the fractious informal coalition that crushed ISIS on the ground. With this particular enemy gone, we can expect further conflict among erstwhile partners.

This will perhaps be clearest when it comes to the Kurdish question. In Iraq and Syria, Kurdish groups were resolute opponents of ISIS both early and late in the conflict. Yet the governments of Iraq, Syria, and Turkey remain—to put it mildly—extremely wary of Kurdish separatism. An ill-conceived and poorly timed referendum on independence called by Iraqi Kurdish leaders in September 2017 prompted the Iraqi government to retake territory—including the strategic city of Kirkuk—seized by the Kurds in their conflict with ISIS.<sup>3</sup> The situation in Syria is, if anything, more perilous. There, Kurds (backed by the United States) stand between the Assad government and its reassertion of control over significant portions of northern Syria. Turkey, with a large and restive Kurdish population of its own, considers a Kurdish state to be an existential threat. In 2016, Turkey launched an incursion into northern Syria designed, in part, to stop Syrian Kurds from creating a contiguous area of control along the Turkish-Syrian border; in January 2018, Turkey struck yet again, this time against the Kurdish-

controlled Afrin region.<sup>4</sup> In its relationship with the Kurds, the United States is pulled in contradictory directions. It relies on Kurds as the major fighting component of the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and as a potentially long-term bulwark against Iranian and Russian influence. At the same time, the United States seeks to maintain workable relations with Turkey. And while the United States has recently reiterated its support<sup>5</sup> for a Kurdish Border Force in northern Syria, it also appears to recognize the Kurds' limitations in retaking and holding territory from ISIS. The United States is training and heavily relying on Arab components of the SDF (who hold more local cultural legitimacy in Arab parts of Syria) to hold territory retaken from ISIS. The "Kurdish question" is representative of the complex dynamics of the Syrian civil war, and we will return to the issue in the next article in this series.

## AFTER ISIS

The costs of reconstruction in the wake of ISIS are immense. The Islamic State exacted a huge human and financial cost in the areas under its brutal control. Defeating ISIS also entailed a heavy price—including thousands of dead civilians.<sup>6</sup> Large areas of cities like Mosul and Raqqa have been devastated. Reconstruction of the former alone will cost billions. There is, however, little sign that major international donors will be prepared to foot anything more than a modest part of the cost of reconstruction in Iraq.<sup>7</sup> The situation in Syria may be even more acute. Destruction there predates ISIS and the civil war continues. There is little taste among the donor community (particularly the Gulf states that are the regional donor-investors of choice) to provide assistance that would be funneled through the much (and rightly) detested Assad government. Assad's allies—Russia and Iran—are simply not in a financial position to make up the difference. China has indicated interest in partially supporting Syria's reconstruction<sup>8</sup> but Chinese investments are likely to be relatively modest, pragmatic, and slow moving. In all cases, serious rebuilding cannot take place until the end of the conflict and, during the interim,

reconstruction will be concentrated in regime-held areas, potentially exacerbating Syrian domestic grievances.

At one level, the struggle against ISIS has merely been a part—if, in recent years, a critical one—of our ongoing strategy for combatting jihadist terrorism since 9/11. Here, again, there has been broad continuity between the approaches of the Obama and Trump administrations. Differences have mainly been a matter of degree. Under Trump the United States has expanded Obama's drone program, attacking jihadist militants in the Middle East and Africa; further afield, in Afghanistan, the president has increased U.S. ground forces. The United States continues to work with partners in the region—of varying reliability—to reduce the threat posed by jihadist groups. The United States' relationship with one traditional ally—Turkey—is particularly tenuous. Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan is clearly disenchanted with the Trump administration for what he considers U.S. support for Kurdish separatism in Syria.<sup>9</sup> He has recently attempted to rehabilitate Ankara's relationship with Moscow, which reached a nadir when Turkish forces shot down a Russian military aircraft in 2015.

Still, there is no sign of any change in the United States' broad approach to jihadist terrorism (which includes allies beyond the region, notably in Europe). In addition to direct military action, this approach includes intelligence sharing, coordination among law enforcement, and cooperation to stem the flow of funds to terrorist organizations. Addressing the deeper causes of jihadist extremism—weak states, inadequate economic performance, alienated Sunni populations—remains beyond our reach, though the United States can help on the margins, in places like Iraq, through fostering more inclusive political systems. Complicating this effort are what many consider to be the anti-Muslim bias of Trump himself and some of his administration's policies—notably the travel ban on certain Muslim countries. We should not overestimate the impact of such rhetoric and policies on ISIS and similar organizations; after all, the anti-U.S. views of jihadist terrorist groups long predate Trump's assumption of office. But a widely held belief

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that the president of the United States holds a personal animus against Islam is surely unhelpful in sustaining support among the vast majority of Muslims who oppose terrorism.

In short, the defeat of ISIS on the battlefield may be cause for celebration. But the organization remains a significant threat in the region and beyond. Moreover, the movement of which it is part—jihadist terrorism—represents a major challenge, not just across the Muslim world, but in places as far flung as the United States, Western Europe, and even Oceania. Not least, the defeat of the physical caliphate still leaves the Middle East a region in turmoil, with the Syrian civil war a major focus of instability. Syria will be addressed in our next paper.

## ENDNOTES

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