

How Trump's Return Could Reshape Middle East Policy

President-elect Donald Trump, who has positioned himself as a 'peace through strength' candidate, faces a Middle East inflamed with recent conflicts.

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Former U.S. President and Republican presidential candidate Donald Trump speaks at a remembrance event to mark the first anniversary of the Hamas attack on Israel at Trump National Doral golf club in Miami, Fla., on Oct. 7, 2024. GIORGIO VIERA/AFP via Getty Images



By Ryan Morgan

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Analysis

As President-elect Donald Trump prepares to return to the White House, he will have to contend with a Middle East inflamed by multiple interconnected armed conflicts.

The Biden administration has secured a cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, but tensions remain high across the region, with Israel twice coming to blows with Iran in the past year, the Israel-Palestine war showing no sign of abating.

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How the incoming Trump team will handle these challenges remains to be seen.



Trump's 2024 campaign [website](#) touts the Middle East policy positions



of his first term, including recognizing Israel's territorial claims over the Golan Heights, recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel,



working to broker normal relations between Israel and its Arab

neighbors through the Abraham accords, and ending U.S.

participation in the 2015 Iran nuclear deal.

On the other hand, the Trump team has said the Biden administration's handling of the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan "emboldened rogue regimes, terrorist groups, and rivals," a trend Trump will have to contend with when he returns.

While promoting the policies of his first term and criticizing the current administration, the Trump team has offered few specifics about his Middle East policy plans once he returns to office.

"The American people re-elected President Trump because they trust him to lead our country and restore peace through strength around the world. When he returns to the White House, he will take the necessary action to do just that," Trump campaign spokesman and

incoming White House press secretary Karoline Leavitt said in an emailed statement to The Epoch Times.

Leavitt declined to answer specific questions about Trump's Middle East policy plans.

Andrew Miller, a Middle East and national security policy analyst and senior fellow for the Center for American Progress, has argued that Trump has no specific foreign policy master plan.

Speaking at a Nov. 12 panel discussion hosted by George Washington University's Middle East Policy Forum, Miller said rather than pursuing an overarching strategy, Trump looks for transactional opportunities that fit within a few basic principles; supporting Israel, preserving U.S. investment and economic opportunities in the region, containing Iran, protecting American lives, and avoiding broader regional war.

“While he’s very belligerent and willing to use force, he has tried to do it previously in ways that would not provoke further escalation and lead to a broader war,” Miller said. “There’s a desire to disengage militarily from the Middle East and turn things over to local actors to play a role.”

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

Among the most prominent Middle East challenges before the incoming Trump administration is how to end the ongoing Israel-Hamas war in the Gaza Strip, which has raged for more than a year following the Oct. 7, 2023, Hamas attacks across southern Israel.

The initial Hamas attack left around 1,200 people from Israel dead, most of whom were civilians. Hamas also took around 250 people hostage back to the Gaza Strip, to trade for the release of Palestinians held in Israeli detention, and for an eventual cease-fire.

Israel launched its military campaign on the Gaza Strip to free those hostages and to destroy Hamas as a political and militant force within the territory.



Gazans sit next to the body of a relative as they look at the rubble of their building after an Israeli strike in Beit Lahia, in the northern Gaza Strip, on Oct. 29, 2024. AFP via Getty Images

The Gaza Health Ministry, which operates under the auspices of a Hamas government in the territory, assesses that more than 44,000 people have been killed in the Gaza Strip in the past year. Exact casualty figures cannot be independently verified at this time, and the Gaza Health Ministry does not differentiate between combatants and noncombatants.

The Biden administration has worked for a lasting cease-fire in Gaza but has yet to finalize a deal as Hamas continues to hold the hostages captive.

Trump has expressed support for Israel in its Gaza military operations but has also warned that Israel releasing too much footage of their military operations is fueling a public relations backlash.

“I don’t know why they released, you know, wartime shots like that. I guess it makes them look tough. But to me, it doesn’t make them look tough. They’re losing the PR war,” Trump said in an April [interview](#) with radio host Hugh Hewitt.

Trump was asked, at an August press conference, whether he encouraged Netanyahu not to agree to a Gaza cease-fire when the two meet in July. Trump didn’t answer directly about a cease-fire but reiterated calls to end the war quickly.

“I did encourage him to get this over with. You want to get it over with. It has to get over with fast. Have victory, get your victory, and get it over with. It has to stop. The killing has to stop,” Trump said. Palestinian statehood has been a central issue in the broader Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In the final months of his first term, Trump oversaw the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and the Muslim world through the Abraham Accords. The accords were a series of U.S.-mediated bilateral agreements through which Israel established diplomatic relations with the Arabian Gulf monarchies of Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates and with the Kingdom of Morocco and the Republic of Sudan in North Africa.

James Robbins, the Dean of Academics at the Washington D.C.-based Institute for World Politics, said the revolutionary aspect of the Abraham Accords was that they signaled an Israeli rapprochement with the wider Muslim world that was disconnected from the question of Palestinian statehood.

The Biden administration had tried to establish a normalization agreement between Israel and Saudi Arabia, but [those efforts have stalled](#) since the start of the Gaza war.



Saudi Arabia Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan attends a session during the World Economic Forum (WEF) annual meeting in Davos. Fabrice Coffrini/AFP

At an Oct. 31 Future Investment Initiative forum in Riyadh, Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Faisal bin Farhan Al Saud said Israeli-Saudi normalization is “off the table until we have a resolution to Palestinian statehood.”

Despite the Saudi monarchy’s recent statements, Robbins expressed optimism that the incoming Trump administration will be able to revive the Abraham Accords without any specific deal for Palestinian statehood. While he believes Biden has strained U.S.-Saudi relations, Robbins said Trump has a positive working relationship with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman that could prove critical to restarting Israeli-Saudi normalization talks.

“With Trump coming in, someone who has historically had a very good relationship with the Saudi leader and Saudi Arabia, I think there is much more capacity to have progress,” Robbins said in a recent phone interview with The Epoch Times.

Even if Palestinian statehood isn't a requisite for further Israeli-Muslim rapprochement, efforts to expand Israeli control over the West Bank could elicit pushback across the Middle East. Israeli settlements in the West Bank have been a longstanding point of contention in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, with opponents arguing these settlements increasingly encroach on territory claimed by the Palestinian people and undermine efforts at a two-state solution.

Some Israeli settlement activists have already signaled hopes that Trump's incoming administration will bolster Israeli efforts to annex the West Bank.

"There has never been an American president that has been more helpful in securing an understanding of the sovereignty of Israel," Mike Huckabee, Trump's nominee for ambassador to Israel, told Israel's Army Radio earlier this month, when asked about the possibility of West Bank annexation.

Trump has yet to weigh in directly on how his incoming administration would deal with the lands that form the core of the Palestinian cause. Robbins said he expects Trump "will be circumspect" on the question of Israel's West Bank settlements and "will not be interested in a blank check for Israel on that particular issue."



Israeli forces gather on a road during a raid at the al-Faraa camp for Palestinian refugees north of Nablus city in the occupied West Bank on Oct. 10, 2024. JAAFAR ASHTIYEH/AFP via Getty Images

Miller expects Trump will make at least some effort for a peace agreement between the Israelis and Palestinians, “because that’s the Holy Grail.”

“If he can do that, then that would truly cement his legacy,” Miller continued.

Miller believes Trump would be more open to backing Israeli sovereignty over the West Bank if he first fails to secure a peace agreement.

Iran

Following the outbreak of war in the Gaza Strip, Iranian-aligned groups like Hezbollah in Lebanon and the Houthis in Yemen launched attacks on Israel. Pro-Iranian Shiite militias in Iraq and Syria have also directed drone and rocket attacks at U.S. military outposts in those two countries over the past year.

Trump will have to contend with Iran and its network of partners in the Middle East.

The challenge also entails preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.

During his first term, Trump withdrew the United States from the 2015 Iran nuclear deal, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Following his withdrawal from the deal, Trump resumed sanctions against Iran under what he called a “maximum pressure” strategy.

Robbins and Miller both predict Trump will restart this “maximum pressure” strategy.

Netanyahu has said Israeli aircraft [targeted part of Iran’s nuclear program](#) when they conducted airstrikes across the country last month. Whether this has deterred Iran from pursuing further nuclear development is unclear.

In its latest quarterly report, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) said Iran has accumulated more than [32 times more uranium](#) than permitted under the JCPOA.

Robbins said if Iran tests a nuclear weapon, the question becomes whether they will be able to obtain additional weapons sufficient to deter Israel before Israel can snuff out their effort.



A display featuring missiles and a portrait of Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is seen at Baharestan Square in Tehran, Iran on Sept. 27, 2017. Nazanin Tabatabaee Yazdi/TIMA via Reuters

“I think the answer to that, so far as Israel is concerned, is definitely no. And I would hope also from the United States, under a Trump administration, it would be no,” Robbins said.

Miller believes Trump may ultimately try for a deal to replace the JCPOA.

“If he could negotiate a new agreement, I wouldn’t put it out of question that he would do so and even reverse prior positions to achieve it, because that would reduce the threat of regional war, and he would be credited with heading off a potential nuclear-armed Iran,” Miller said.

Still, Miller said any effort to negotiate a new nuclear deal with Iran could test Trump’s control over his own administration. While Trump may be more deal-oriented, Miller believes some within his incoming administration would be more interested in toppling the current Iranian government.

Syria and Iraq

With his return, Trump will have the opportunity to draw down U.S. forces from Syria and Iraq.

U.S. troops entered Syria in 2015, ostensibly to counter the rise of ISIS. The counter-ISIS mission, known as Operation Inherent Resolve, also saw the return of U.S. troops to Iraq for the first time since 2011.

Trump repeatedly called for a full U.S. military withdrawal from Syria during his first term but didn't follow through. This time around, Miller predicts Trump will be less easily dissuaded.

“I think the arguments for not proceeding have been exhausted, and he's just going to find a way to get it done,” Miller said.

Miller said ISIS still poses some threat in the region, but that threat has receded notably in recent years.

Robbins believes Trump has no preset decision on Iraq and Syria and will consider his options.



U.S. Army soldiers provide security during a dismounted patrol, Syria, Jan. 26, 2023. U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Julio Hernandez

“I think that the Trump administration will assess, you know, what is the purpose of continued troop presence? If there is still a purpose behind it, then I think that they'll leave them there,” he said.

While he agrees the ISIS threat is diminished, Robbins believes Trump will want to avoid a situation like the 2021 U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan “where a very flawed withdrawal plan leads to a collapse, and then, you know, an international embarrassment for the United States.”

The Associated Press contributed to this article.

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