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# US Policies Adrift in a Levant in Turmoil

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## ABSTRACT

The Levant has constituted one of the core areas of interest for US foreign policy since the Second World War. The aim of this article is to shed light on the US policies towards the Levant, mostly during the last two American administrations, to understand how the vicissitudes of the region and of American politics made Washington's policy towards the Levant look biased, at times incompetent, and most importantly inconsistent. This article examines the changes in approach to the region as a whole from one administration to the next on issues such as the protection of Israel's sovereignty, supporting friendly regimes, fighting terrorism, and containing Iran. The hesitations and shifts in policy towards Syria are given a longer treatment as they speak both to the yet not finalized American policy towards the Levant but also to show how the US has shifted track and moved away from unseating President Assad to focus more on containing and if possible rolling over Iran.

**Keywords:** Levant, Middle East, US Foreign Policy, the Syrian Uprising, Post-Islamic State

## ABD'nin Levant Hengamesinde Süreklıen Politikaları

### ÖZET

Levant bölgesi, İkinci Dünya Savaşı'ndan bu yana ABD dış politikasının öncelikli çıkar alanlarından birini oluşturmaktadır. Bu makalenin amacı, ABD'nin, bilhassa da son iki Amerikan yönetiminin, Levant'a yönelik politikalarını açıklığa kavuşturmayı, bölgede ve Amerikan siyasetindeki değişimlerin Washington'un Levant'a yönelik politikasının nasıl yanlı, zaman zaman beceriksiz ve daha da önemlisi tutarsız görünmesine neden olduğunu anlamayı hedeflemektedir. Makale, bir yönetimden diğerine İsrail'in egemenliğinin korunması, dostane rejimlerin desteklenmesi, terörizmle mücadele ve İran'ın kontrol altına alınması gibi konularda ve genel itibarıyla bölgeye yönelik yaklaşımdaki değişiklikleri incelemektedir. Suriye'ye yönelik politikadaki tereddütler ve değişimler daha detaylı ele alınmıştır. Nitekim bu konular Amerika'nın Levant'a yönelik politikasının henüz son halini almadığının, daha da ötesinde gelişmeler karşısında ABD'nin nasıl yön değiştirdiğini ve Esad'ı yerinden etme hedefinden uzaklaşarak İran'ı kontrol altına alma ve eğer mümkünse boyun eğdirmeye odaklandığına işaret etmektedir.

**Anahtar Kelimeler:** Levant, Orta Doğu, ABD Dış Politikası, Suriye Ayaklanması, İslamcılık Sonrası Devlet

## Introduction

The term Levant, which derives from the Italian *Levante*, meaning the rising of the sun in the east, is used to refer to the eastern part of the Mediterranean that includes Lebanon, Palestine, Israel, Jordan and Syria. After Britain's colonial empire shattered, the United States filled the void, especially following the end of the Second World War, promising to use its leadership to forestall conflicts and wars in an unsettled and troubled geographical space. From then on, the US intervened indirectly and directly in the politics of the region. During the Cold War, Washington tried to broker regional reconciliation between Israel and its Arab neighbors and tried to end domestic tensions in the countries of the Levant through its mediation efforts. In the post-Cold War period, the region failed to find peace and stability despite the initial springing of hope that arose as a result of the Oslo agreements. The prevalence of instability in the region can be explained by the presence of unresolved regional conflicts, the pervasiveness of sectarian and ethnic animosities, and the resilience of authoritarian regimes. Both the absence of a coherent American policy towards the region and America's botched military intervention in Iraq contributed handsomely to the instability and the pervasive violence that has engulfed the region and its millions of inhabitants.

Lawrence Freedman concludes his magisterial work, *A Choice of Enemies*, by suggesting that;

the events of the last decade have taken their toll, and the United States does not enjoy the prestige and influence in the Middle East that it did as recently as the early 1990s... For Americans, the challenge is to revive their diplomatic skills, learning how to work with the local political grain without losing a sense of purpose and principle, pushing parties to cooperation, supporting social and economic along with political reform, and encouraging a positive engagement with the rest of the world.<sup>1</sup>

It is hard to conclude from the existing conditions of the region that the US has successfully risen to the challenge.

This paper argues that the vicissitudes of the region and of American politics made Washington's policy towards the Levant look biased, at times incompetent and most importantly inconsistent. Some of the abrupt changes in approach to the region as a whole from one administration to another underscore this inconsistency; the one exception being a pro-Israel tilt that almost invariably informs America's choices. The paper will largely focus on the US policies towards the Levant during the last two American administrations. The first part will explore the early American interest in the Levant and suggest that the (almost) unconditional US support to Israel has proved the most enduring pillar of US engagement in the region. The second part will focus on the complex challenge that the Syrian conflict and its regional repercussions have posed to American leadership and argue that it has changed the power dynamics of the region by introducing Russia once again as a global actor that influences the region's politics. The Syrian Civil War *cum* "regional hegemonic struggle" has also enabled Iran to widen its sphere of influence in Syria and beyond, a power which was already expanding thanks to the failures of the US in Iraq. The third section will analyse the post-Islamic State (IS) period in the region and argue that the intensification of competition between the US and its Saudi and Israeli allies on the one hand and Iran on the other has led Washington to seek a new strategy for a Levant in turmoil. The paper will

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<sup>1</sup> Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East*, New York, Perseus Group, 2008, p.511.

conclude that the balancing, containment and if possible the reversal of Iranian dominance in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon by means of an informal alliance with Israel and Saudi Arabia will become the basic pillar of US policy towards the Levant in the post-IS period under the Trump administration.

## **Levant: Through the Lens of Israel**

The Levant became geopolitically significant for the US following the Second World War due to the region's links to the Persian Gulf. These links would make Washington's policy towards the Levant consequential on accessing oil resources. Indeed, the Levant's geographical proximity to the oil producing countries of the Gulf would partly explain the furious debate that occurred within the Truman administration over the issue of supporting the creation of the state of Israel. Most foreign policy and security professionals were against recognizing the soon-to-be declared Jewish state for fear of jeopardizing American interests in the Arab world, particularly with the oil producing countries of the Gulf. Indeed, one of the most historically significant figures at the State Department, George Kennan, feared that support for partition would endanger US interests:

Palestine occupies a geographic position of great significance to the US. It is important for the control of the eastern end of the Mediterranean and the Suez Canal. It is an outlet for the oil of the Middle East, which in turn is important to US security. Finally, it is the center of a number of major political cross-currents; and events in Palestine cannot help being reflected in a number of directions.<sup>2</sup>

By the end of the first Arab-Israeli war however, almost the entire foreign policy and security bureaucracy had come to the conclusion that it was important to have Israel by the side of the US. On the basis of the reports written by Philip Jessup, who was the US Special Delegate to the UN at the time, Gendzier concludes, "it was desirable to ensure Israel's Westward orientation, which meant lessening Washington's pressure on Tel Aviv to comply with UNGA resolutions to avert its reliance on the USSR."<sup>3</sup> This "deference" to Israel, as Gendzier calls it, would remain a staple of American policy towards the Levant with the exception of a few cases when Israeli actions ran counter to American interests as was the case in the Suez War.

Ultimately no US president managed to move the conflict to its internationally anticipated and widely accepted conclusion. Walt argues that:

As Nathan Thrall shows clearly in his recent book *The Only Language They Understand: Forcing Compromise in Israel and Palestine*, past progress toward peace required extensive and persistent American pressure on *both sides* -not just one- and such pressure has been consistently lacking after 1992, when United States took on the role of 'Israel's lawyer'. Small wonder that former Israeli foreign minister Shlomo Ben Ami identifies Jimmy Carter and George H. W. Bush as the only presidents who made 'meaningful breakthroughs on the way to an Arab-Israeli peace', and argues they succeeded because they were 'ready to confront Israel head on and overlook the sensibilities of her friends in America.'<sup>4</sup>

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2 Irene L. Gendzier, *Dying to Forget: Oil, Power, Palestine and the Foundations of U.S. Policy in the Middle East*, New York, Columbia University Press, 2015, I-book screen 230.

3 Ibid, I-book screen 778.

4 Stephen Walt, "What Dennis Ross Gets Wrong About the 'Israel Lobby'", *Forward*, 6 October 2017, <https://forward.com/opinion/384492/what-dennis-ross-gets-wrong-about-the-israel-lobby/> (Accessed on 14 February 2018).

Presidents Carter and George H. W. Bush really pushed Israel hard to make concessions as they strongly opposed Israeli settlement policies.<sup>5</sup>

Yet, from the Eisenhower administration through the Obama era, there were always some efforts to push the process forward. Nevertheless, in recent years, Elgindy argues that:

when it comes to Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking, no US president has promised more and accomplished less than Obama. He entered office with a strong start; appointing a special envoy for Middle East peace on his second day in office, calling for an end to Israeli settlement construction, and working to bring the parties back to the negotiating table. But it went downhill from there.<sup>6</sup>

There were indeed many instances when Obama's rhetoric and stated goals were not matched by his or his administration's deeds. After an initial burst of enthusiasm, Obama had given up on determinedly pursuing a settlement of the long-standing conflict. In fact, in his second term he did next to nothing to support the efforts of his Secretary of State, John Kerry, in any substantive way. He ultimately even gave up trying. As he addressed a youthful audience during his visit to Israel in 2013, Obama conceded that there was not much he could do to persuade the Israelis to move ahead with the peace process and that they would have to live with the consequences of their choices.<sup>7</sup> Although as a parting shot in December 2016, the Obama administration decided to abstain on a UNSC vote condemning construction of settlements in occupied territories.<sup>8</sup> President Obama, whose administration raised the level of military aid to Israel to new heights,<sup>9</sup> had no leverage over Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. In fact, Netanyahu, always spiteful of Obama, actively tried to undermine him and worked to push the Iran nuclear deal off track.<sup>10</sup> As such, Obama ended his term as the first US president who did not bring about any progress or breakthroughs in the admittedly dormant, if not comatose, peace process that had begun in the early 1970s.

Ever the unpredictable political actor, President Trump, in turn, changed a long-standing American position concerning Jerusalem. When he announced in a short speech delivered at the White House that the US Embassy in Israel would henceforth be in Jerusalem, he justified the move

5 Daniel C. Kurtzer, "The U.S. Must Get Tough in Promoting Arab-Israeli Peace Efforts", *Palestine Israel Journal*, Vol.13, No.4, 2007, <http://www.pij.org/details.php?id=971> (Accessed on 15 March 2018).

6 Khaled Elgindy, "Obama's Record on Israeli-Palestinian Peace", *Foreign Affairs*, 5 October 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/israel/2016-10-05/obamas-record-israeli-palestinian-peace> (Accessed on 15 December 2017).

7 Megan Slack, "President Obama Meets Young Israelis and Palestinians on Second Day of his Middle East Trip", 21 March 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2013/03/21/president-obama-meets-young-israelis-and-palestinians-second-day-his-middle-east-trip> (Accessed on 10 May 2018).

8 Peter Beaumont, "US Abstention Allows UN to Demand End to Israeli Settlements", *The Guardian*, 23 December 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/dec/23/us-abstention-allows-un-to-demand-end-to-israeli-settlements> (Accessed on 16 March 2018).

9 The Obama administration signed a 10-year military assistance package of \$38 billion with Israel. Peter Baker and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "US Finalizes Deal to Give Israel \$38 Billion in Military Aid", *The New York Times*, 13 September 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/14/world/middleeast/israel-benjamin-netanyahu-military-aid.html> (Accessed on 2 March 2018).

10 Carol Morello and William Booth, "Netanyahu Warns that Iran is Building Terrorist Cells Worldwide", *The Washington Post*, 1 October 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/netanyahu-warns-that-iran-is-building-terrorist-cells-worldwide/2015/10/01/653fbcc2-6850-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.e32557895b79](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/netanyahu-warns-that-iran-is-building-terrorist-cells-worldwide/2015/10/01/653fbcc2-6850-11e5-8325-a42b5a459b1e_story.html?utm_term=.e32557895b79) (Accessed on 1 April 2018).

by referring to the Jerusalem Embassy Act of 1995.<sup>11</sup> Every President since then, including Trump, has exercised the law's waiver to avoid further complicating negotiations for an elusive comprehensive settlement of the Palestinian-Israeli conflict. Trump has said that, "today, we finally acknowledge the obvious, that Jerusalem is Israel's capital. This is nothing more, or less, than recognition of reality. It is also the right thing to do. It's something that has to be done."<sup>12</sup>

There was enough speculation in the international media that Trump's announcement on Jerusalem was actually linked to the Middle East peace plan prepared by his son-in-law Jared Kushner, and the young Crown Prince of Saudi Arabia, Mohammed Bin Salman. A charitable or optimistic reading of President Trump's statement on Jerusalem would suggest, based on his invocation of the two-state solution, that he would support it if it were agreed upon by both sides. By the same token, unlike the 1980 Israeli Basic Law, which declared a "unified" Jerusalem "the eternal capital" of the state of Israel, Trump did not use the term "unified" when he recognized it as Israel's capital.<sup>13</sup> Then, the question emerges: Does Trump really have a vision for the region, or is he going to follow the narrowly defined geopolitical interest of Saudi Arabia whose legitimacy depends on protecting Islam's holy places, but whose immediate interests could lead it to ignore the plight of the Palestinians? In the wake of the bloody events on the day of the Embassy's opening when over 60 Palestinian protesters from Gaza were killed by the Israeli military, no great protestation was raised by the "custodian of the two holy mosques". This absence of a strong protest suggests that the Iran threat trumps the Palestinian cause for the current Saudi rulers.

## **The Syrian Conflict: The Changing Matrix of Power Relations in the Levant**

The crisis in Syria has posed a profound challenge to American leadership in the Levant. Since the outbreak of the conflict in 2011, US policy in Syria has demonstrated a high degree of ambivalence and prevarication. Both the Obama and Trump administrations have sought to restrain US involvement in Syria and have failed in setting out clear objectives that could have allowed the US to play a constructive role in ending the conflict and transitioning the country. A policy of reticence in return has created an opening for Russia to intervene militarily in support of the Assad regime in September 2015.

When Obama came to power in 2009, he sought to restore America's image in the Middle East and the wider Islamic world. His choice of Turkey as the site of his first bilateral visit outside the North American continent, followed by his historic speech on June 4, 2009 in Cairo indicated that he sought to herald a new beginning between the US and Muslims around the world. Thereupon he promised that these relations would be based upon mutual interest and respect.<sup>14</sup> The new President considered Syria "as a key player in Washington's efforts to revive the stalled Middle East peace process."<sup>15</sup> The Obama

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11 Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/> (Accessed on 1 March 2018).

12 Ibid.

13 "Statement by President Trump on Jerusalem", 6 December 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-trump-jerusalem/> (Accessed on 17 January 2018).

14 "The President's Speech in Cairo: A New Beginning", <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/issues/foreign-policy/presidents-speech-cairo-a-new-beginning> (Accessed on 15 November 2017).

15 Harriet Alexander, "John Kerry and Bashar al-Assad Dined In Damascus", *The Telegraph*, 3 September 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/syria/10283045/John-Kerry-and-Bashar-al-Assad-dined-in-Damascus.html> (Accessed on 7 February 2018).

administration decided to re-engage with Damascus after years of isolation that followed the killing of former Lebanese Prime Minister Rafiq al-Hariri in 2005.<sup>16</sup> Thus, the new administration sent Robert Ford as ambassador to Damascus in 2010, the first such appointment in five years.<sup>17</sup> However, as Phillips argues, “re-engagement efforts were led by individuals such as Ford and Clinton’s adviser Fred Hof, but there was little coordination between the State Department or the White House.”<sup>18</sup> Outside the State Department, Syria continued to be seen through the lens of relations with Israel, and re-engagement with the Assad regime did not cultivate a meaningful relationship in the pre-uprising period.

During the early days of the Syrian uprising, President Barack Obama extended the pattern of ambivalent and inadequate engagement that has traditionally characterized US policy towards Syria. He released a statement on August 18, 2011 that, “the future of Syria must be determined by its people, but President Bashar al-Assad is standing in their way. ... [He] must lead a democratic transition or get out of the way. He has not led. For the sake of the Syrian people, the time has come for President Assad to step aside.”<sup>19</sup> Even though the Syrian opposition believed that Obama’s words were the harbinger of an American involvement to remove Assad, he was far from making such a clear decision. Based on the President’s determined strategy of limiting the US’s footprint in the Middle East, a strategy clearly driven by the legacy of the Bush administration’s ambitious and failed intervention in Iraq, Obama was reluctant to fully engage the US in Syria following the Arab Awakening. Having run on a platform of withdrawing troops both from Afghanistan and Iraq, he was not inclined to intervene militarily in another Middle Eastern country. Yet, upon the insistence of powerful voices in his cabinet, notably Hillary Clinton, Susan Rice and Samantha Power, he did assist the British and the French in their attack against the Libyan dictator Muammar Gaddafi.<sup>20</sup> Similarly, at the beginning of the Syrian civil war, he asked for the ouster of Bashar al-Assad and drew a red line on the use of chemical weapons,<sup>21</sup> a statement that would later haunt him as the situation deteriorated and the brutality of the civil war reached new heights.

In a lengthy 2016 interview with Jeffrey Goldberg of the Atlantic Magazine that would serve as a *post-mortem* of his administration’s foreign policy, President Obama explained his decision not to become massively involved in the Syrian conflict, citing the conditions in post-Gaddafi Libya following his intervention there. Obama’s original Syria policy was evidently based on wishful thinking and the flawed assessment that Assad would leave the way Mubarak went in Egypt. He also believed that the danger to the US posed by the Assad regime was not as serious as threats that would require direct military intervention, such as the threat posed by al-Qaeda or a nuclear-armed Iran.<sup>22</sup> Syria was not a major American security concern or an important subject in American national security assessments.

16 Christopher Phillips, *The Battle for Syria: International Rivalry in the New Middle East*, New Haven, Yale University Press, 2016, p.27.

17 Robert F. Worth, “A New Ambassador to Syria, but Little Hope to Change”, *The New York Times*, 30 December 2010. <https://www.nytimes.com/2010/12/31/world/middleeast/31ambassador.html> (Accessed on 17 March 2018).

18 Phillips, *The Battle for Syria*, p.27.

19 Macon Phillips, “President Obama: The Future of Syria Must Be Determined By Its People, But President Bashar al-Assad Is Standing In Their Way”, 18 August 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2011/08/18/president-obama-future-syria-must-be-determined-its-people-president-bashar-al-assad> (Accessed on 25 October 2017).

20 Micah Zenko, “The Big Lie About the Libyan War”, *Foreign Policy*, 22 March 2016, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2016/03/22/libya-and-the-myth-of-humanitarian-intervention/> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

21 Jeffrey Goldberg, “The Obama Doctrine”, *The Atlantic*, April 2016. <https://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/> (Accessed on 3 November 2018).

22 Ibid.

As Assad clung to power, Obama continued to pay lip service to the need for Assad's to step down. Obama also sent mixed messages about the possibility of an American intervention when he drew his famous red line over the use of chemical weapons in the summer of 2012. In one of his interviews, Obama specifically noted that if chemical weapons were used, it would be a game-changer in Syria: "That's an issue that doesn't just concern Syria. It concerns our allies in the region, including Israel. It concerns us."<sup>23</sup> However, when the red line was indeed crossed and the regime's use of chemical weapons became obvious in 2013, Obama balked and sought a UN mandate and congressional support, which were non-forthcoming. As Goldberg observes:

History may record August 30, 2013, as the day Obama prevented the US from entering yet another disastrous Muslim civil war, and the day he removed the threat of a chemical attack on Israel, Turkey, or Jordan. Or it could be remembered as the day he let the Middle East slip from America's grasp, into the hands of Russia, Iran, and ISIS.<sup>24</sup>

Instead of using direct force, the Obama administration, with the help of Russia, succeeded in launching a multinational effort to remove most of Syria's chemical weapons through the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW).<sup>25</sup> However, as Lynch states, "Gulf and Turkish frustration over the aborted American air strikes had provoked ever more reckless support for anyone who might be able to hurt Assad, regardless of the radicalism of their jihadist ideology."<sup>26</sup>

Contrary to the expectations of the supporters of a more interventionist policy, Obama consistently promised "no boots on the ground" in Syria.<sup>27</sup> As Chollet puts it, "the administration's incremental approach to military involvement in Syria was driven by a desire to avoid mistakes."<sup>28</sup> The US military involvement that contributed to state failure in Libya and later to the tragic murder in September 2012 of the American Ambassador to Libya J. Christopher Stevens reinforced Obama's reluctance to more deeply engage in Syria.<sup>29</sup> In line with this policy, Obama formulated a strategy of giving critical support to certain local opposition forces in Syria who were identified as "moderate". By 2012, the CIA had already provided intelligence and other support including shipments of secondhand light weapons, including automatic rifles, rocket-propelled grenades and ammunition to groups fighting the Assad government through Turkey's southern border.<sup>30</sup>

The cost of Obama's incrementalism has been an increase in the numbers of jihadi veterans of Afghanistan, Iraq and Yemen fighting in Syria and the emergence of new jihadist groups including *Ahrar al-Sham* and *Jabhat al-Nusra*. However, it was not until the IS's capture of large swaths of

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23 Chuck Todd, *The Stranger*, New York, Little Brown, 2014, p.431.

24 Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine".

25 By June 2014, OPCW announced that the over 1,300 tons of Syria's declared chemical weapons were destroyed. The OPCW was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize for performing such an action. Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2016, p.52.

26 Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East*, New York, PublicAffairs, 2016, p.388.

27 Obama said: "I will not put American boots on the ground in Syria, I will not pursue an open-ended action like Iraq or Afghanistan", "Barack Obama's Speech on Syria in Full", *The Telegraph*, 11 September 2013, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/barackobama/10300943/Barack-Obamas-speech-on-Syria-in-full.html> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

28 Chollet, *The Long Game*, p.220.

29 Ibid.

30 Eric Schmitt, "C.I.A. Said to Aid in Steering Arms to Syrian Opposition", *New York Times*, 21 June 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/06/21/world/middleeast/cia-said-to-aid-in-steering-arms-to-syrian-rebels.html?mtrref=www.google.com&gwh=79461C000C947A46B173C360C9E381E7&gwt=pay> (Accessed on 16 December 2017).

Syrian and Iraqi territory and the declaration of a Caliphate in newly conquered Mosul by Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in 2014 that the US administration was truly and seriously concerned. The IS's victory brought a vivid recognition that the spillover effects of the Syrian war could no longer be contained, which accelerated the establishment of the US-led anti-IS coalition. The coalition was formed based on UNSC Resolutions, including UNSCR 2170, which states "terrorism can only be defeated by a sustained and comprehensive approach involving the active participation and collaboration of all States."<sup>31</sup> The US-led coalition, formed by a dozen nations, began airstrikes on IS targets in Iraq on August 9, 2014, and in Syria on September 22.

The number of airstrikes increased significantly in Syria in September 2014 as IS laid siege around and attempted to capture Kobane, a predominantly Kurdish town located on the Turkish border. The events in Kobane created the first major spat between Turkey and the US over American support for the Democratic Union Party (PYD) in Syria. Since the PYD was an extension of the separatist Kurdish movement *Partiya Karkerên Kurdistanê* (PKK) that has waged war against Turkey since 1984 and has been designated by the US as a terrorist organization. Turkey demanded that the same label be accorded to the PYD. Due to the long-standing enmity between Turkey and the PKK, notwithstanding a brief interlude of attempted peacemaking, Ankara was more alarmed by the PYD-led Kurdish expansion than by the menace posed by IS in northern Syria. As a result, while allowing Kurdish civilians to cross the border into Turkey, the Turkish government obstructed access to Kobane in an attempt to block supplies from reaching the PYD. Turkey also denied the US request for the use of the İncirlik Air base in southern Turkey.<sup>32</sup> Despite Turkey's discomfort, the US intensified airdrops of weapons and supplies to the armed wing of PYD, the Peoples' Protection Units (YPG) to ensure that Kurdish forces kept control of Kobane. Due to international pressure, Turkey eventually allowed Masoud Barzani's Peshmerga forces to move through Turkey into Kobane with the expectation that these forces would help counterbalance YPG influence among Kurds.<sup>33</sup>

Turkey's strategic decision to refrain from intervening in Kobane not only empowered YPG forces in Syria, but also brought a profound shift in American policy toward Syria, which had previously subcontracted everything to regional actors, most notably to Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Qatar. The critical divergence between the American and Turkish positions during the siege of Kobane proved to be consequential and poisoned the two allies' relations. The United States determined that the YPG was the most capable and reliable force to fight for the US on the ground against IS and decided to support it in spite of vociferous objections from Ankara.

In the meantime, as the Pentagon decided that airstrikes alone would not be able to defeat the IS, the Obama administration initiated a series of special programs designed to arm and train the Syrian opposition without committing American soldiers to ground warfare, in line with the administration's policy of "no boots on the ground." In September 2014, the US Congress appropriated \$500m for the train-and-equip program with the aim of training and vetting 5,000 members of the Syrian opposition

31 "The Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS", <https://www.state.gov/s/seci/> (Accessed on 1 December 2018).

32 Amy Austin Holmes, "Kobane Says about U.S. Overseas Military Bases", *Monkey Cage*, 2 February 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/02/what-the-battle-for-kobane-says-about-u-s-overseas-military-bases/?utm\\_term=.4c8372704450](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/02/02/what-the-battle-for-kobane-says-about-u-s-overseas-military-bases/?utm_term=.4c8372704450) (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

33 Colin Kahl, "The United States and Turkey Are on a Collision Course in Syria", *Foreign Policy*, 12 May 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/05/12/the-united-states-and-turkey-are-on-a-collision-course-in-syria-trump/> (Accessed on 3 December 2017).

by the end of 2015. The US hoped that by training and equipping a proxy force of Syrian rebels they might be able to rely on these forces to support US efforts against IS and other terrorist organizations in Syria. The administration believed that these force may also help in “setting the conditions for a negotiated settlement to Syria’s civil war.”<sup>34</sup> The locations of training facilities have not been publicly acknowledged, but according to various press reports Turkey, Jordan, Saudi Arabia and Qatar have hosted program activities.<sup>35</sup>

The complex nature of the Syrian conflict and the conflicting interests of the local allies have made the success of the train-and-equip program exasperatingly unlikely. The anti-IS focus of the program alienated vetted fighters whose primary goal was to topple the Assad regime. Not surprisingly, the controversial program finished in an embarrassing failure when *al-Nusra* Front militants attacked the headquarters of US-backed fighters in July 2015.<sup>36</sup> An additional embarrassment came when General Lloyd Austin, head of the US Central Command, testified to Congress that there were only 4-5 US trained militants fighting IS in September 2015.<sup>37</sup>

In October 2015, the Obama administration changed the program’s focus toward equipping select vetted fighters inside Syria, instead of training them in neighboring countries.<sup>38</sup> Accordingly an Arab-Kurdish coalition force in northern Syria known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) became the most effective operational partner of the US in combat against IS. The SDF’s strategic military objective of cleaning northeastern Syria from IS so that it could consolidate its own political control over an autonomous region was concurrent with the American objectives. Founded in 2015, with the YPG militia constituting its backbone,<sup>39</sup> non-Kurdish fighters would soon become nearly forty percent of SDF forces.<sup>40</sup> According to Stein, the SDF’s pragmatic relationship with the Syrian regime proved quite effective for its recruitment efforts as the YPG would be “focused on Arab tribes and families that were not committed to regime change.”<sup>41</sup>

Russia’s involvement in the Syrian crisis fundamentally changed the balance of power on the ground and contributed to the durability of the Assad regime. When Russia started launching airstrikes in Syria, the US and Russia signed a de-confliction agreement in October 2015 to ensure that US and Russian air forces would not engage one other.<sup>42</sup> The Euphrates eventually emerged as an informal “de-confliction” line between the Russian-backed forces to the west of the river and the US-

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34 Christopher M. Blanchard *et al.*, “Train and Equip Program for Syria: Authorities, Funding, and Issues for Congress”, 9 June 2015, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R43727.pdf> (Accessed on 9 December 2017).

35 Soner Cagaptay and Andrew J. Tabler, “Regional Dimensions of the Syria Train-and-Equip Program”, *PolicyWatch*, 10 April 2015, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/regional-dimensions-of-the-syria-train-and-equip-program> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

36 Kareem Shaheen, “US-trained Syrian Rebels Killed and Leaders Captured by al-Qaida Affiliate”, *The Guardian*, 31 July 2015.

37 Thomas Gibbons-Neff, “Only 4 to 5 American-trained Syrians fighting against the Islamic State”, *Washington Post*, 16 September 2015.

38 Douglas Lovelace Jr., *Terrorism: Commentary on Security Documents Volume 143: The Evolution of the Islamic State*, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 27 October 2016, p.190.

39 [https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Syrian\\_Democratic\\_Forces.html](https://ipfs.io/ipfs/QmXoypizjW3WknFiJnKLwHCnL72vedxjQkDDP1mXWo6uco/wiki/Syrian_Democratic_Forces.html) (Accessed on 20 March 2018).

40 Barak Barfi, “Ascent of the PYD and the SDF”, *Research Notes*, No.32, April 2016, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/ResearchNote32-Barfi.pdf> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

41 Aaron Stein, “Partner Operations in Syria: Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the Way Forward,” *Atlantic Council*, July 2017, p.12

42 “US and Russia Sign Deal to Avoid Syria Air Incidents”, *BBC News*, 20 October 2015, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-34588286> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

backed forces to the east. Thus, the US found a *modus vivendi* with its Cold War rival. This particular arrangement between the two powers underscored the relative unimportance of Syria as a strategic concern for the US at the time, despite the fact that Eastern Mediterranean was rising as a critical area for geo-economic competition, mainly because of recent energy discoveries.

Thus, under President Obama, American policy towards Syria struck observers as unfocused, haphazard and a failure, disappointing friends and allies.<sup>43</sup> His decision not to honor his own pledge that using chemical weapons was a 'red line', the crossing of which would bring about swift retaliation, came to symbolize the shambolic conduct of his administration. That the Syrian regime would ultimately have to give up the bulk of its chemical arsenal did not rescue his reputation. Nor did the fact that he was just in favor of a non-interventionist policy in a country where the US did not have vital national security interests.<sup>44</sup> The argument that since America's fingers were badly burnt by the unsuccessful war in Iraq that proved disastrous for that country and its people, avoiding a similar "gamble" in Syria would be wise was not sufficiently persuasive for Obama's critics either.<sup>45</sup>

### **The Trump Twist**

So far, American policy towards the Levant under President Trump has been difficult to nail down when it comes to the festering conflict in Syria and radically off the beaten track concerning the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. With the ascent of the new administration, the central focus of the American presence in and involvement with Syria would evolve towards the containment, if not the rollback of Iran, even though that goal was not part of the initial military objective of the United States.

In an aside during a speech he gave in Ohio at the beginning of April 2018, President Trump surprised friend and foe alike by suggesting that he would wish to withdraw troops from Syria "very soon."<sup>46</sup> This came as a shock to most observers of American policy as well as members of the administration since as of late January it looked like the US policy was finally set on a seemingly consistent course. In his speech at the Hoover Institute at Stanford, Trump's first-Secretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated a policy whereby the US would maintain its military presence in Syria in order to completely eradicate IS and added, "we cannot make the same mistakes that were made in 2011... when a premature departure from Iraq allowed al-Qaida in Iraq to survive and eventually morph into IS."<sup>47</sup> Now Trump was going against the advice of his national security team and insisting on withdrawal within six months. Whether or not such an exit will take place cannot be ascertained at this point. It is clear though that this new position contradicts both the military's overwhelming desire to finish off IS in Syria and Iraq and the desire to contain Iranian influence in Syria and beyond.<sup>48</sup>

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43 Lynch, *The New Arab Wars*.

44 Ibid.

45 John Cassidy, "Obama's Foreign-Policy 'Failures': A Word for the Defense", *New Yorker*, 7 May 2014 <https://www.newyorker.com/news/john-cassidy/obamas-foreign-policy-failures-a-word-for-the-defense> (Accessed on 1 November 2017); and Josef Joffe, "Obama's Greta Garbo moment", *The American Interest*, <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2014/04/08/obamas-greta-garbo-moment/> (Accessed on 28 October 2017).

46 Julie Hirschfeld Davis, "Trump Drops Push for Immediate Withdrawal of Troops From Syria", *The New York Times*, 4 April 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/04/world/middleeast/trump-syria-troops.html> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

47 Rex Tillerson, "The Way Forward for the United States Regarding Syria", <https://www.hoover.org/news/rex-tillerson-hoover-institution> (Accessed on 1 February 2018).

48 Ibid.

The primary reason for the US troop presence in Syria was ostensibly to fight IS. In the wake of the territorial losses the terrorist organization suffered throughout 2017 and 2018 which ended its claim to a caliphate in Syrian and Iraqi territories, the real target has arguably begun to shift. As Pillar argues, there is mission creep for the American military by the “habitual use of the misleading vacuum metaphor, according to which not just US involvement but physical and preferably military involvement to fill a space is needed to counter bad-by-definition Iranian or Russian influence in that same space.”<sup>49</sup>

Initially, Trump kept Obama’s Syria policy basically intact when he assumed office in January 2017. He did intensify it though. Contrary to Obama’s policy of inaction, the Trump administration launched the first deliberate American military action against the Assad regime when the President ordered the firing of 59 Tomahawk cruise missiles against the al-Shayrat Air Force Base in response to the regime’s use of chemical weapons in April 2017.<sup>50</sup> Trump’s decision to launch missile strikes caught the world by surprise since he previously opposed intervening against the regime even on humanitarian grounds.<sup>51</sup> Not surprisingly, Trump’s *ad hoc* airstrikes yielded neither decisive military gain nor political result in Syria, as they were not coupled with a coherent plan of action. Many saw this one-time strike, too easily in our judgment, as Trump’s tactical move to divert attention away from problems at home.<sup>52</sup> Overall though, it is hard to argue that the attack on a Syrian airbase represented a shift in the US foreign policy towards Syria that was set by the Obama administration. Like his predecessor, “Trump never viewed Syria as strategically important for the US, and as a result never sought to push for a new approach to the conflict there.”<sup>53</sup> Yet in time, as Iran gained center stage in American strategic calculations in the Levant and the old ties to Saudi Arabia were revitalized, Syria would acquire more meaning in US calculations.

The Trump administration continued to deepen its ties with the SDF through the authorization of a direct shipment of arms to the YPG in an effort to defeat IS on the battlefield. In combatting IS, the Trump administration indeed followed the previous administration’s strategy but there were some tactical changes such as the deployment of more special forces closer to the fight, and by allowing commanders on the ground to make battlefield decisions without waiting to hear from Washington.<sup>54</sup> As Riedel puts it, “Obama fashioned the strategy, the alliance and assembled the forces to destroy the caliphate, but the culmination of the process has occurred on Trump’s watch.”<sup>55</sup> In the final stage, the

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49 Paul Pillar, “The Sources of Mission Creep in Syria”, *National Interest*, <http://nationalinterest.org/blog/paul-pillar/the-sources-mission-creep-syria-23609> (Accessed on 1 March 2018).

50 Michael R. Gordon, Helene Cooper and Michael D. Shear, “Dozens of U.S. Missiles Hit Air Base in Syria”, *The New York Times*, 6 April 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/04/06/world/middleeast/us-said-to-weigh-military-responses-to-syrian-chemical-attack.html> (Accessed on 19 December 2017).

51 Yasmeen Serhan, “Very Soon or Not So Soon’: Parsing Trump on Syria”, *The Atlantic*, 12 April 2018, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2018/04/trump-syria/557768/> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

52 Ibrahim Al-Marashi, “Trump’s Strike on Syria: A Convenient Distraction”, *Al Jazeera*, 8 April 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/2017/04/donald-trumps-symbolic-strike-syria-170407122029617.html> (Accessed on 18 December 2017).

53 Michael Young, “From Sad to Asad”, *Diwan*, 6 July 2017, <http://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/71423> (Accessed on 13 January 2018).

54 Glenn Kessler, “Trump’s Claim that He’s Done More ‘by far’ Than Obama in the Fight Against ISIS”, *The Washington Post*, 25 October 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/25/trumps-claim-that-hes-done-by-far-more-than-obama-in-the-fight-against-isis/?utm\\_term=.f4abc82accb6](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/fact-checker/wp/2017/10/25/trumps-claim-that-hes-done-by-far-more-than-obama-in-the-fight-against-isis/?utm_term=.f4abc82accb6) (Accessed on 27 November 2017).

55 Ibid.

Trump administration has taken credit for the two significant victories against the IS: the recapturing of the Iraqi city of Mosul in July 2017, and of Raqqa, the *de facto* capital of the IS in northern Syria, in October 2017. Ironically, the fall of Mosul was made possible by the not so insignificant assistance of Iranian backed Shi'a militias, *Hashd al-Shaabi* (Popular Mobilization Forces).<sup>56</sup>

The deepening tactical alliance between the US and SDF has continued to aggravate tensions between Washington and Ankara. Turkey believes that an autonomous entity in northern Syria under the PYD/YPG leadership posed a vital threat to its own security. Therefore it set a firm red line and demanded from its NATO ally that PYD/YPG forces be not allowed to deploy to the West of the Euphrates river. Despite promises made to Ankara the US military allowed the Kurdish forces to be part of SDF presence in the strategically critical town of Manbij to the West of Euphrates. Although Turkey maintained open lines of communication open with the PYD, whose leader Salih Muslim made numerous visits to Ankara, until mid-June 2015, it continued to treat the YPG as an affiliate of the PKK. Thus, cutting the cross-border links between the PKK and the YPG has evolved into the highest strategic priority in Turkey's Syria policy.<sup>57</sup> Even though the US considers the PKK a terrorist organization, both the Obama and Trump administrations have insisted that the PYD/YPG is not on their terrorist organizations list.<sup>58</sup> Turkey's various efforts to convince the US to end its cooperation with the YPG and work with Turkish-backed forces have proved fruitless, and the US continued to support the YPG in the fight against IS, "partly driven by a desire to avoid becoming enmeshed in the conflict."<sup>59</sup>

The growing mistrust between Turkey and the US led Ankara to act alone, leading it to launch *Operation Euphrates Shield* on August 24, 2016, with the support of Free Syrian Army (FSA) fighters. Ankara's officially declared goals were to fight against IS in Syria and to maintain border security. However, Turkey was much more concerned with preventing the emergence of a PYD-controlled zone near its border. Ultimately, the operation was made possible by the reconciliation between Turkey and Russia whose relations had deteriorated considerably in the wake of the downing of a Russian RU-24 by Turkish F-16s.<sup>60</sup> The Russians who controlled the air space in Syria allowed Turkey to use its air force during the operation.

Following the seizure of the town of al-Bab, Turkey repeatedly stated its desire to push YPG from Manbij to the east of Euphrates River. Despite the Turkish 'red line' of no YPG presence on the western bank of the river, the US continued to strengthen its ties with the Kurdish fighters in Manbij in preparation for the Raqqa operation. This, in turn, further strained the relations between the US and Turkey. Eventually, the Trump administration excluded Turkey and its affiliates from the Raqqa operation.<sup>61</sup>

56 Renad Mansour and Faleh A. Jabar, "The Popular Mobilization Forces and Iraq's Future", *Carnegie Paper*, 28 April 2017, <https://www.negie-mec.org/2017/04/28/popular-mobilization-forces-and-iraq-s-future-pub-68810> (Accessed on 12 May 2018).

57 Aaron Stein and Michelle Foley, "The YPG and PKK Connection", *Atlantic Council*, 26 January 2016, <http://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/the-ypg-pkk-connection> (Accessed on 13 May 2018).

58 Ibid.

59 Amanda Sloat, "Turkey Wants to Crush US Allies in Syria. That Shouldn't Surprise Anybody", *Foreign Policy*, 24 January 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/01/23/turkey-wants-to-crush-u-s-allies-in-syria-that-shouldnt-surprise-anybody/> (Accessed on 1 March 2018).

60 Can Kasapoglu and Sinan Ülgen, "Operation Euphrates Shield and the Al-Bab Campaign: A Strategic Assessment", *EDAM Foreign Policy and Security Paper Series*, No 1, 2017, p. 10, [http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/elbab\\_eng.pdf](http://edam.org.tr/wp-content/uploads/2017/01/elbab_eng.pdf) (Accessed on 12 May 2018).

61 Turkey offered to set up an army of 10,000 TAF-supported local fighters to liberate Raqqa from IS. Fehim Tastekin, "Is Turkey Trying to Disrupt Raqqa Operation", *Al-Monitor*, 27 April 2017.

By the time of Turkey's second military incursion in Syria, *Operation Olive Branch* that sought to clear the province of Afrin from YPG fighters, a debate intensified among foreign policy and security experts in Washington. This debate concerned the choice the administration had to make between continuing the fight against IS with the Kurds or forsaking them in favor of a closer co-operation with NATO ally Turkey. Based on numerous articles published in the US, one could ascertain that the consensus view was not to abandon Turkey, although Ankara's commitment to NATO and to its alliance with the US were deemed suspect by some pundits.<sup>62</sup> Yet, given the number of outstanding issues between the two allies, including the intensity of the mistrust between them and the lack of a clear common objective, it would have indeed been a tall order to find a functional *modus vivendi*. In the meantime, Russia has managed to lure Turkey towards itself, a strategy with as yet unknown consequences for Turkey's place in and relations with the members of the Atlantic Alliance. As this book went to press Turkey and the United States reached an agreement on Manbij. The last Kurdish troops left the region by mid-July.<sup>63</sup> However, despite this move that may usher in a new, less conflictual period between Ankara and Washington, the American commitment to Kurds has not disappeared either.

## **What is Next: US Policies in post-IS Levant**

In the aftermath of the territorial defeat of the self-proclaimed caliphate of the IS in Iraq and Syria, the greatest uncertainty centers on "the day after" in Syria. According to Parsi, "the absence of a clear order draws all major powers into a fierce competition to define the new equilibrium. This is also why Israel and Saudi Arabia have found common cause against Iran and why they have been pushing the US to take military action against Iran."<sup>64</sup> It seems that all relevant stakeholders in the Syrian conflict — to various degrees — are concerned by the increasing influence of Iran in Syria's future as well as in the wider region. Therefore, the weakening of Iranian dominance in Syria and beyond would be more likely to shape the basic determinants of US policy towards the Levant in the post-IS period. The Trump administration suspects that Iran is seeking to establish a long-term foothold in Syria to build an international corridor of influence stretching from Tehran to Beirut.<sup>65</sup>

As the transition from the Obama to the Trump administration took place, the former's more relaxed and permissive approach to widening Iranian hegemonic presence in Iraq and Syria came to an end. Not only were Saudi Arabia and Israel gravely concerned with Iran's ambitions and actual power projection capabilities in their neighborhood, many of the principals in the Trump security team, including Secretary of Defense James Mattis, Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff Joseph Dunford, Trump's second Secretary of State Max Pompeo and his third National Security Adviser John Bolton believed in the necessity of containing, if not rolling back, Iran and its proxies in the

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62 The following are a sampling of articles on the matter: Amanda Sloat, "The West's Turkey Conundrum", Brookings-Robert Bosch Foundation Transatlantic Initiative, February 2018; Walter Russel Mead, "Getting to Yes with Turkey", *Wall Street Journal*, 12 March 2018; David Ignatius, "It's time to untangle the mess in Syria. Here's how to do it", *Washington Post*, 7 February 2018; Nick Danforth, "The Only Thing Turkey and the U.S. Can Agree On", <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/01/10/opinion/turkey-united-states-erdogan.html> (Accessed on 10 March 2018).

63 Carlotta Gall, "US and Turks Agree on Kurds' Withdrawal from Syrian Town", *New York Times*, 4 June 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/06/04/world/middleeast/turkey-syria-kurds-manbij.html> (Accessed on 15 July 2018).

64 Trita Parsi, "Saudi Arabia Wants to Fight Iran to the Last American", *The National Interest*, 15 November 2017, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabia-wants-fight-iran-the-last-american-23212> (Accessed on 1 December 2017).

65 Tom O'Connor, "How the US Lost the War in Syria to Russia and Iran", *Newsweek*, 10 November 2017.

region.<sup>66</sup> Therefore, the Trump administration moved closer to America's traditional allies and began to challenge the validity of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which Trump declared he was going to opt out of during his campaign. On May 8, 2018 he finally announced US withdrawal from JCPOA.<sup>67</sup>

The presence of Iranian-backed militias in Syria has also particularly worried Tel Aviv, which was intent on preventing Iran-backed forces from establishing a permanent presence in Syria.<sup>68</sup> Creating a buffer zone along Israel's border with Syria is one of the ideas proposed as a solution.<sup>69</sup> In July 2017, a confidential cease-fire agreement for southwestern Syria was signed between the US and Russia to ban Iranian forces and their proxies, including Hezbollah, from near the Israeli-occupied Golan Heights.<sup>70</sup> The agreement aimed to transform southern Syria into an exclusion zone for "non-Syrian origin", namely Iranian, troops and their proxies, as well as *al-Qaida* and IS fighters. Given the track record of Russia's ability to persuade Iranian-backed militia groups and the Syrian regime to comply with a "de-confliction zone" in southeastern Syria since May 2017, the enforcement mechanisms of the agreement raise important questions.<sup>71</sup> However, it indicates that American anxiety about the Iranian presence in Syria is also shared, to some extent, by Russia.

Saudi Arabia has also escalated its anti-Iran policies thanks to Trump administration's animus towards Iran. Trump's approach has radically departed from Obama's policy of accommodating Tehran with an intention to make the latter a responsible power in the region. Trump has turned a blind eye to Saudi Arabia's destabilizing moves across the region, including its support for extremist jihadi organizations and its destructive strikes against the Houthis in Yemen. The young Prince Mohammed Bin Salman's search for hegemonic domination in the Persian Gulf and Trump's policy of preventing Iran from consolidating "an arc of influence", consisting of land corridors across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, has created a closer relationship between the US and Saudi Arabia in the new era. Saudi Arabia's botched attempt to force Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri's resignation has shown that the Saudis are becoming more and more invested in the international politics of the Levant, if for no other reason than containing Iran in the post-IS period.

The Saudis' crude foreign policy considerations in Lebanon backfired when France successfully mediated to solve the resignation crisis before Lebanon was dragged into sectarian tension.<sup>72</sup> However, Saudi Arabia's main nemesis Hezbollah and its allies obtained more than half of the seats in the

66 Richard Sokolsky and Aaron David Miller, "Trump's Policy on Iran: Dr. Jekyll and Mr Hyde", *Real Clear World*, 12 January 2018, <http://carnegieendowment.org/2018/01/12/trump-s-policy-on-iran-dr-jekyll-and-mr-hyde-pub-75249> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

67 Remarks by President Trump on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, 8 May 2018, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-joint-comprehensive-plan-action/> (Accessed on 11 May 2018).

68 Josh Lederman *et al.*, "US, Russia seek understanding on next steps in Syria", *The Washington Post*, 10 November 2017, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2017-11-09/syria-deal-in-the-works-ahead-of-likely-trump-putin-meeting> (Accessed on 11 December 2017).

69 *Ibid.*

70 Colum Lynch *et al.*, "Secret Details of Trump-Putin Syria Cease-fire Focus on Iranian Proxies", *Foreign Policy*, 11 July 2017, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2017/07/11/exclusive-trump-putin-ceasefire-agreement-focuses-on-iranian-backed-fighters-middle-east/> (Accessed on 1 March 2018).

71 *Ibid.*

72 Annabelle Timsit, "The Strange Case of Lebanon, France, and a Prime Minister's Unresignation", *The Atlantic*, 5 December 2017, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2017/12/macron-hariri-france-iran-saudi-arabia/547391/> (Accessed on 22 May 2018).

128-members parliament during parliamentary elections held on May 6, 2018. Owing to that electoral victory, Hezbollah has reasserted its power and heralded a new popular legitimacy in Lebanese politics and beyond.<sup>73</sup> As Sobelman argues:

two wars later -one with Israel, another one in Syria- Hezbollah is a battle-hardened actor with regional influence, political clout, and a fierce military arsenal of 150,000 rockets and other advanced military hardware. Its bargaining position within the Lebanese political arena is stronger than ever.<sup>74</sup>

The escalating confrontations between Israel and Iran in Syria carry the real possibility of another war between Israel and Hezbollah in Lebanon, a likelihood both sides tried to avoid after the last Lebanon war in July 2006. Israel recently launched a massive air operation against Iranian military installations in Syria, which was the largest attack it carried out in Syria since the 1973 Arab-Israeli war.<sup>75</sup> Should Israel continue to conduct airstrikes in Syria, Hezbollah may find it difficult not to engage in the conflict at a time when the regional order is being reshaped in the Levant. Russia gave tacit support for the Israeli strikes against the Iranian military assets in Syria. President Putin received PM Netanyahu warmly in Moscow right after these strikes. Yet, Moscow also sets limits to what Tel Aviv can do inside Syria. An agreement that involved Jordan, the US, Russia and Israel gives some hints about a *modus vivendi* between the US and Russia and a common desire by involved parties to keep Iran and Hezbollah away from the Golan Heights.<sup>76</sup>

## Conclusion

This paper has shown that the US policies towards the Levant have maintained both a degree of continuity between former President Barack Obama and his successor President Donald Trump and a significant shift in regional geopolitical preferences concerning Iran. According to Cook, the continuity stems from the US's adherence to the three age-old, basic components of its approach to the region: "fighting terrorism, containing Iran, and supporting Israel."<sup>77</sup>

Despite his erratic rhetoric and intellectual inconsistency, Trump's policies "get the United States back to basics in the Middle East –securing the oil flow, assisting Israel, holding Iran in check, and fighting terrorists."<sup>78</sup> While the Obama administration chose to accommodate Iran in order to hold that country's nuclear program in check, Trump reversed the policy of accommodation and

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73 Hanin Ghaddar, "What Does Hezbollah's Election Victory Mean for Lebanon?", *The Washington Institute Policywatch*, 8 May 2017, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/what-does-hezbollahs-election-victory-mean-for-lebanon> (Accessed on 20 May 2017).

74 Daniel Sobelman, "Preventing the Next Big War in the Middle East", *The National Interest*, 26 April 2018, <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/preventing-the-next-big-war-the-middle-east-25586> (Accessed on 22 May 2018).

75 Alex Lockie, "Putin May Have Given Israeli PM Netanyahu The Green Light to Wipe Out Iran in Syria in a Massive Air War", *Business Insider*, 10 May 2018, <http://www.businessinsider.com/putin-given-israeli-pm-netanyahu-the-green-light-to-hit-iran-in-syria-2018-5> (Accessed on 22 May 2018).

76 Osama Al Sharif, "Daraa Takeover: The Penultimate Chapter of Syrian War", *The Jordan Times*, 26 June 2018, <http://jordantimes.com/opinion/osama-al-sharif/daraa-takeover-penultimate-chapter-syrian-war> (Accessed on 15 July 2018).

77 Steven Cook, "Trump's Middle East Strategy is Totally Boring", *Foreign Policy*, 21 February 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2018/02/21/trumps-middle-east-strategy-is-totally-boring/> (Accessed on 20 May 2018).

78 Ibid.

sought for Israel and Saudi Arabia to contain the Iranian threat. What is not clear is the extent to which Israel and Saudi Arabia could succeed in diminishing the Iranian sphere of influence in the Levant. However, as Mead concludes, “the more active America’s Middle East allies, the smaller the risk of heavy American engagement in a Middle East ground war.”<sup>79</sup> And this appears to be the single most important priority for the incumbent president.

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<sup>79</sup> Walter Russel Mead, “Trump, Iran and American Power”, *The Wall Street Journal*, 14 May 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-iran-and-american-power-1526338180> (Accessed on 16 May 2018).