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USA/Middle East

# What does Trump's victory mean for the Middle East?

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### **Syrians and Palestinians to suffer most with the doors to refugees slammed while US-Israel relations are in question.**

Regarding foreign policy in general and the Middle East in particular, Donald Trump, as the new president of the United States, would stand out as the most unpredictable man to have occupied this position ever since his country started deploying an overseas imperial policy in the late 19th century.

Trump has contradicted himself and changed positions and/or tone on several issues time and again during the electoral campaign. Judging, however, by a few key themes that he persistently reiterated over the past year, here is what can be guessed at this point about the way his presidency may affect the Middle East:

The Syrian people will be the first to suffer from his election. The doors of the United States will be slammed shut in the face of would-be Syrian refugees, with maybe an exception made for Christians as Trump's agitation against Syrian refugees has always centred around Islamophobia.

To stop altogether the outflow of refugees from Syria, Trump has advocated the creation of a "safe zone" within the country's borders [1], where Syrian displaced persons would be concentrated rather than allowed to go abroad as refugees. He boasted that he would make the Arab Gulf states pay for this as he would make Mexico pay for the wall that he intends to build on the border between the two countries.

Secondly, Trump will inaugurate a new policy of friendship and collaboration with Russian President Vladimir Putin, based on accommodating Russia's interests. In the Middle East, this includes accepting Russia's role in Syria as positive and supporting Bashar al-Assad's regime as the lesser evil.

It would logically involve demanding from the United States' traditional allies in the region that they cease supporting the Syrian armed opposition. Washington would then co-sponsor with Moscow a Syrian "coalition government" that would include conciliationist "opposition" members. This could open the way to US collaboration with the Assad regime in the name of the "war on terror".

Pursuing the policy of favouring "strong men" in power, which he shares with Putin, Trump will want to improve Washington's relations with both Egyptian President Abdel-Fattah el-Sisi and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan.

He may try to mend fences between the two men and coax them into adhering to a joint effort against "terrorism" that would accept each president's definition of what he regards as terrorism in his own country.

Since Trump is poised to antagonise Iran by revoking the nuclear deal negotiated by the Obama administration, he may even try to entice Saudi Arabia into joining what would emerge as a Sunni triangle of Ankara, Cairo and Riyadh backed by Washington.

Herein lies the principal inconsistency in Trump's vision for the Middle East (whereas his hostile stance towards China is the principal inconsistency of his global vision): overcoming it requires luring both Moscow and the Assad regime into breaking with Tehran.

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Lastly, another regional "strong man" whose relations with Washington will greatly improve under Trump is Benjamin Netanyahu. Thus, another direct victim of Trump's election will be the Palestinian people as Netanyahu will be given more of a free hand in dealing with them than any Israeli prime minister has had since Ariel Sharon in the aftermath of the September 11, 2001 attacks.

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