

## The Middle East feels Trumped

### Terra incognita

Authored by THC

With many of its media, analysts and public figures predicting and endorsing a US presidential victory for Democratic Party candidate Hillary Clinton, the win by Republican candidate Donald Trump shocked Arab countries.

Trump has unconventional views on Middle East issues, and this left many in the region wondering what is in store for them. Some specific questions in the GCC include the fate of the Iran nuclear deal and the recently passed Justice Against Sponsors of Terrorism Act (JASTA)<sup>1</sup>. Needless to say, and as protocol demands, Gulf leaders all congratulated the president-elect, starting with Saudi Arabia (and Trump stressed an eagerness to “develop the distinctive bilateral relations between the two friendly countries”).

The Gulf Arab media were more apprehensive. The majority conveyed shock and some called for pragmatism. Writing in the UAE’s Al-Bayan newspaper, columnist Mohammed Youssef described Trump’s electoral win as an “earthquake that shook the world and shattered hopes and wishes”. In Bahrain’s Sayed Abdul Qader compared Trump’s victory to one of the biggest tragedies in America’s history. “11/9 has become an unforgettable day for millions of Americans, exactly like 9/11,” he wrote. A line that then spread on regional social media.

This election result comes at a time when relations between the GCC and the United States were tested during the US President Barack Obama administration, with many Gulf leaders seeing Obama as having pivoted towards Iran, along with the passing of JASTA.

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<sup>1</sup> The law that gives families of 9/11 victims the right to sue the Saudi government for liability despite a US government investigation clearing the kingdom

As things stand now, analysts unanimously agree on one thing: where the relationship between the US and GCC is going remains unclear. Business Week (ME) captured the sentiment well by noting “as the world gets to grips with the unthinkable, the Middle East is bracing for the unknowable”.

There is a high level of anxiety. Joseph A. Kechichian, senior fellow at the King Faisal Centre for Research and Islamic Studies (KFCRIS) in Riyadh noted that “the president-elect and several of his senior advisers have repeatedly expressed very anti-Saudi and even anti-Qatari sentiments. Trump and his people have very little knowledge of the kingdom or the GCC”.

#### Possible implications

- Trump’s constructive attitude to Russia could be a welcome new element in geopolitical stabilization generally, especially in places like Syria where we will probably see a de-escalation in 2017, and a re-strengthening of the Assad-Syria-Iran nexus. Indeed, Trump might just leave Syria to Russia, much to the discomfort of many GCC countries.
- The Iran deal will not be torn up quickly, no matter what Trump said during the campaign but will likely be used as a tool to deal with what the Trump camp views as a major problem that needs to be resolved: The Arab Sunni world. This does not necessarily mean a warming of relations with Iran, but a slow continuation of progress on the deal (with the occasional sound-byte). Indeed, this is the direction that even the Saudi government has been proposing (as evidenced by a recent interview with senior officials). However, a lower commitment to the deal will embolden hardliners in Iran; this is something Iran is trying to counter. In a recent FT article (13 Nov), Tehran signalled that it is still open to the possibility of ‘strategic co-operation’ with US in the Middle East.
- On the Israeli-Palestinian peace process front, Trump is unlikely to spend time restarting it. Israel sees Trump as “an excellent partner for Israel and will work to make Israel strong against our enemies.”
- The most important change is that Saudi Arabia and the GCC countries have lost their open door in policy-making circles within the US government. GCC countries will aim to double their efforts in Washington now more than ever.

- Trump's threat to revoke the American security umbrella over Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, and Oman unless they pay for it has already provoked a good deal of anxiety. They may respond by diversifying their security relationships. Saudi Arabia has already opened lines to China and recently for the first time held joint military exercises with that country.