

# Mid East Issues Facing the Trump Administration: a discussion with Shoshana Bryen

by Jerry Gordon (December 2016)



The Trump Administration faces compelling issues in the roiling Middle East upon inauguration on January 21, 2017. Many of these involve allies in the region like Israel, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf emirates. They are compounded by Putin's actions in Syria, Iran and its proxy Hezbollah in the Syrian conflict. In addition there is the Houthi rebellion in Yemen and the war against the Islamic State mired in campaigns to reconquer Mosul in Iraq and the administrative capital of Raqqa in Syria. Then there is Turkey's Islamist President Erdogan's role in both the war against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and reconciliation with Putin's Russia making its role in NATO problematic.

The conundrum about the Kurdish aspirations for autonomy in a federalized Syria and possible independence in Iraq are also problematic. The Kurds have provided the "best boots on the ground" in the war against ISIS. Syria's Bashar Assad, now on the verge of conquering Aleppo with Russian air support, has rejected that possibility, even as Putin has met with Kurdish delegations. Putin's aim is to perfect Russia's economic interests in the eastern Mediterranean.

There is also the over arching matter of what to do about the Iran nuclear pact under the JCPOA. Its behavior since adoption of the nuclear pact is tantamount to imposing regional hegemony from the Persian Gulf to the Red Sea and ultimately the Mediterranean endeavoring to create a long sought "Shi'ite Crescent."

Israel is increasingly concerned about threats to its northern border from Hezbollah, Iran's proxy. Then there is the threat from ISIS affiliates the Israel Defense Force is fighting on the Golan frontier. A new form of

Palestinian terror has arisen. A “fire Intifada” was set ablaze by Palestinian terrorists from the disputed territories that ravaged communities in central Israel, in Haifa and near Jerusalem. The arson perpetrated by these terrorists destroyed Israeli communities forcing temporary evacuation of tens of thousands of its citizens

During the 2016 electoral campaign, President-elect Trump threatened to ‘tear up’ the nuclear pact with Iran, which some consider useful to monitor Tehran’s violations and behavior. His Israel advisors issued a statement that indicated his support for moving the US Embassy to Jerusalem, authorized under a law passed by Congress in 1995, but waived periodically by the Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations. Moreover, the Trump campaign issued a statement suggesting that it did not consider Israeli settlement building, in areas permitted under the Oslo Accords, as a barrier to a possible peace settlement. The reality is that a two state solution no longer looks viable. Moreover, Palestinians are internally focused on protesting the corrupt rule by PA Chairman Abbas serving in the 12th year of a four year elected term.

Against this background we held a discussion on these Middle East policy issues with Shoshana Bryen. [InFocus](#). Her incisive views on Middle East and US policies in the region have previously been published in articles in the *New English Review*. She has also been [aired](#) on Salem media outlet in Phoenix, KKNT960The Patriot.



**Jerry Gordon:** Shoshana welcome back for this timely discussion.



**Shoshana Bryen:** Thank you for inviting me.

**Gordon:** How would you prioritize the foreign policy initiatives for the Trump Administration to address in the first 100 Days of the Administration?

**Shoshana Bryen:** There is a temptation to make a list of “priorities” by simply citing a series of problems and assuming they can be resolved. If they could have been, they would have been. It would be useful instead to consider priorities for American behavior – political, economic and military. First, there are four questions to be asked:

- What should the United States do to ensure that allies feel secure and adversaries don’t?
- How can the U.S. encourage countries that are neither allies nor adversaries to cooperate on issues of importance?
- How can the U.S. encourage countries to want to be “more like us” (politically and economically free with more transparent government) and “less like them” (totalitarian, communist, *jihadist*, and less transparent)?
- What if they choose to be “more like them”? What are the limits of American encouragement or coercive capabilities?

The administration must reassure our allies, many of whom really aren’t sure where they stand: Israel, of course, but also Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Taiwan, Japan, and the smaller of the European and post-communist states. Bulgaria and Moldova had elections last month – that no one paid attention to – and the pro-Russian candidate won in both cases. This is an indication that vulnerable countries are seeking accommodation with Russia rather than trusting us. Bulgaria had a great record on Israel and was helpful in terms of intelligence on Hezbollah and other terrorist groups. Estonia and Lithuania are worried. The administration has to give them reassurance.

Second would be to enunciate some foreign policy goals, including, perhaps an

“outcome based strategy.” The U.S. should decide what it wants to achieve in various parts of the world and then decide – with the help of military and diplomatic professionals – how to achieve its goals. This is the difference between “doing something” and having something done. Then you open the door to messaging strategy – a much overlooked, but very important, part of American diplomacy abroad.

**Gordon:** Given the evidence of Iran’s violation of the JCPOA signed by the Obama Administration, how might a Trump Administration replace and/or modify its provisions?

**Bryen:** The JCPOA is not a treaty and not even an Executive Agreement. There is no signature to revoke on either side. Rather than “modifying” it, the Administration should put it in perspective. The fact is that the current set of violations by Iran is fairly small – and the violations are likely to remain fairly small. That is because Iran’s short-term goals have to do with regional hegemony, not nuclear weapons. After 8-10 years, Iran can legitimately become a nuclear breakout state – and 8-10 years is a very short period of time.

In the meantime, without comment from the Obama administration, Iran is occupying whole swaths of Iraq and fielding a sizable foreign army inside Syria. They are harassing American ships in the Persian Gulf – hoping to get us to leave the area. They are supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen. If you look at a map, Iran controls the Persian Gulf to the east of Saudi Arabia, and Yemen at the heel of the boot of Saudi Arabia on the Red Sea. To the West of Saudi Arabia – only a few miles from Djibouti on the African coast – Iran is close to controlling both access routes for Saudi (and other) oil from the region to the oceans. Most recently, Iran announced it would be accompanying ships sailing through the Bab el Mandeb Strait at the bottom of the Red Sea. This should make Israel – and anyone who remembers the 1967 Six Day War – nervous.

One way to make the point that the U.S. should want to make is to begin holding up the evidence of Iran’s violations. For each violation, there should be a cost. It could be in trade, banking, visas, or whatever, but there should be some cost to Iran – beginning with being called on the violations. Iran claims it will withdraw from the JCPOA if we don’t do what it wants, but that’s fine. Let Iran withdraw.

**Gordon:** How might a Trump Administration complete the U.S. led coalition campaign to defeat ISIS?

**Bryen:** This is both a military and a diplomatic problem. It is clear that the U.S. has been short on the “public diplomacy” end. It should be stressing what made/makes America what it has been and should be: individual freedom within constitutional Bill of Rights order. That includes rights to property and to profit from one’s creativity and work. It should reflect limited government of checks-and-balances, rule of law, not men. It should campaign against special privileges for any special interest; opportunity for all resulting in (at least relative) prosperity for most.

It should not be confused with “democracy promotion” – a failed concept. The U.S. should promote and advance specific human rights and freedoms for citizens without trying to determine the nature of the political system of any country mostly because it doesn’t work.

Messaging would involve reconstitution of Radio Free Europe/ Radio Liberty types of broadcasting – particularly engaging countries in which free information is limited. The successes of the Cold War period and the early days of assistance to Poland’s Solidarity Movement should be replicated, not discarded, and updated with newer social media. Where direct assistance is not possible, the U.S. can use media, including social media, to inform citizens of those countries that: a) they are not forgotten (taking a page from the Ronald Reagan/George Shultz playbook on Soviet Jewry), and b) ensure that they have accurate information about what is happening in the world they are not permitted to access by their governments.

**Gordon:** Russia has staked out its interests in the Middle East with its intervention in Syria. How might a Trump Administration adjust our foreign policy interests in the region?

**Bryen:** The U.S. holds two contradictory positions vis a vis Syria. On the one hand, we seem to agree that Assad is the legitimate ruler of Syria. We have said he should leave under some agreed-upon plan, but we have not said he has forfeited his position. On the other hand, we arm, train and fund the opposition that wants to kill him.

This is where “outcome based” planning becomes important. The U.S. needs to

decide what outcome we seek in Syria and then whether and how we can get the Russians on the same page. It was possible early on, but may be more difficult now.

It isn't only Syria, by the way. We are involved in a shooting war in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Somalia, Yemen and Libya – and we're not at war with any of them.

What are we doing and to what end?

**Gordon:** Russian Premier Medvedev met with Israeli PM Netanyahu following the US presidential elections to discuss trade, red lines with Iran, the conflict in Syria and possible renewal of Palestinian Israeli peace negotiations. What support for Israel's positions might a Trump Administration provide?

**Bryen:** President-elect Trump appears aware that there is no hope of a negotiated "two state solution" right now or in the foreseeable future. That is fine, but most of the time, when people say that, they want to continue U.S. aid to the Palestinians. They want Israel to stop building houses even in the "settlement blocs" that the US has agreed will remain Israeli. They also want Israel to refrain from retaliatory action when there is terrorism inside Israel. Moreover, they and don't seem to care that the Palestinians are ratcheting up the pressure on Israel's legitimacy and are violating the terms of Oslo Accord by confronting Israel in multilateral institutions such as the UN.

The U.S. should be prepared to reduce or terminate aid to the Palestinian Authority if it continues to violate its Oslo commitments. It should agree that Israel can build inside settlement blocks – though not outside. And the incoming administration should press the Palestinians for civil society and democratic reforms that will benefit the Palestinian people and perhaps sow some seeds of moderation. Palestinian Authority ruler Abu Mazen's biggest problem right now is that Palestinians are demonstrating against him and his rule. The U.S. should be clear that time doesn't stand still. If the Palestinians are unable to build the governing institutions they need, the economy they need and the political maturity to come to terms with Israel as a legitimate and permanent country in the region, we can't prevent others from moving ahead with their national interests.

**Gordon:** Russia is heavily involved with Iran in bolstering the Assad Regime in

Syria. Yet, it recently floated the possibility of recognizing Kurdish aspirations for regional autonomy in the context of a federalization option to end the six-year civil war in Syria. What are your views on that possibility?

**Bryen:** Russia has run into some glitches in its Syria policy and may be looking for a way out. The dispatch of a naval flotilla including the Russian aircraft carrier the Admiral Kuznetsov to the Syrian front and the fact that it lost a MiG fighter was not what Putin had in mind. He was trying to stay hands-off.

It was Russia's intention simply to support Bashar Assad as he put down the uprising. Its objective was to reinforce its bases in Tartus and Latakia – making the Russians important in the Eastern Mediterranean. However, it did not work that way. Assad is more war criminal than partner. The rebels didn't surrender. In fact, the first is the cause of the second. Assad's cruelty is the single strongest driving force in ISIS and rebel recruitment. Sunnis trying to escape Assad or find a way to take revenge on the Syrian army have made the war longer and bloodier than it otherwise might have been.

As to the Russian position, the war continues and Assad's supporters have been taking casualties; Iran and Hezbollah as well as Russia itself. Putin is very sensitive to Russian casualties abroad. He is aware that it was casualties that caused an uprising in Russia during the Afghan war and led to the collapse of the Soviet Union. Casualties in Ukraine were tolerated at home because Ukraine is seen as part of Russia, so it was like fighting for the homeland. Casualties in Syria are not the same.

Putin invited the Kurds to Moscow to take part in a meeting leading some to think he was going to go in that direction. However, Assad put his foot down and said there would be no Kurdish autonomy. Putin made an agreement with the Turks for Turkish help instead, partly by promising that there would be no Syrian Kurdish autonomy. It is not a very principled position, but Putin does not have much choice at the moment. It's not a quagmire yet, but the sand is very soft and squishy.

**Gordon:** Shoshana, thank you for this insightful discussion.

**Bryen:** It was my pleasure.

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