

UNITED STATES POLICY TOWARDS  
THE GULF COOPERATION COUNCIL  
STATES

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*Introduction*

Opinions among experts, researchers and observers on Donald Trump's presidency and his Middle East policy are largely divided. This is merely a consequence of considerably incoherent statements which Trump had delivered during the 2016 presidential campaign. His supporters and opponents could both find statements confirming their beliefs. Those who feared Trump's policy towards the Middle East could find many pronouncements against Arab states and those who were more optimistic found in Trump a candidate giving them hope for a better future.

This first group of declarations include Trump's critical pronouncements about the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), i.e. that the United States should not import any oil from the Kingdom and that without the United States, Saudi Arabia is "gone"<sup>1</sup>. On another occasion, he claimed that he "loves" the Saudis because he does lucrative business with them and showed readiness to cooperate with the rebel groups committed to overthrow Bashar al-Assad's regime, the same groups that are backed by Saudi Arabia<sup>2</sup>.

There were also some references to other Arab Gulf states. For instance, Trump said that Kuwait "never paid

us” for the 1991 Gulf War which United States had won for this small emirate, suggesting that Arab states should pay more for the United States’ protection and military services<sup>3</sup>. Trump also showed no willingness to continue to maintain the United States Fifth Fleet’s base in Manama, a key United States Navy base in the containment of Iran. Trump declared that he would be more willing to overlook human rights abuses in the Gulf states and later declared that he will be no advocate of human rights and political reforms abroad<sup>4</sup>.

It made the Gulf states confused and quite concerned but, in any case, the most common attitude was to “wait and see”.

After Trump’s inauguration on 20 January 2017, many of his declarations have become irrelevant. The simple answer to the question why this has happened is realism. During the campaign, Trump could afford to give idealistic and populist declarations which could be attractive to American voters with a view to winning the election. But after Trump became president he had to secure American interests and this called for actions which were contradictory to what he had said during the presidential campaign. This shows that the presidential campaign is governed by its own rules and many declarations are made just for political purposes because this is what people want to hear.

The aim of this article is to analyze key features of recent relations between the United States and the Arab Gulf states (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates making up the (GCC) Gulf Cooperation Council) based on selected foreign policy determinants. It will focus on the Trump’s presidency in particular.

The premise of this article is that, despite many divergences between the United States and the GCC, these actors remain strategic partners, primarily on economic

and military grounds. The United States will play a vital role in the Arab Gulf states foreign policies. This short analysis should help to find answers to the following two research questions:

1. Do the GCC countries and the United States share common interests in the Middle East?
2. What determines relations between the GCC countries and the United States after the 2016 presidential election in the United States?

There is no doubt that the GCC countries and the United States need each other, mainly because of Gulf investments in the USA, military transactions worth billions of dollars and military presence of the United States in the Middle East (a navy base in Bahrain, air bases in Qatar and the UAE, a military base in Kuwait) which allows the United States to carry out military operations against terrorist organizations (Islamic State, Al-Qaeda) or gun-boat diplomacy against e.g. Iran.

### *Foreign policy*

Foreign policy is an integral part of state policy and can be led only by state actors<sup>5</sup>. Foreign policy has many dimensions and definitions, but realists claim that it is intentional acting with different national interests clashing with each other. One of the purposes of foreign policy is to increase the power of the state and protect the population. Naturally, the *raison d'état* is differently perceived by different state administrations and the Trump administration is no exception. However, as shown in the introduction, it was difficult to catch the essence of his presidential program as his declarations were full of contradictions. One such example was his attitude towards Saudi Arabia. Trump was critical towards the Saudi King-

dom saying that the United States should not import any oil from the Kingdom, yet he chose the monarchy as his first foreign trip on 20 May 2017 and signed with Saudi Arabia an arms deal worth 110 billion dollars.

But foreign policy is carried out in an international system and all variables of the system influence its form and content. Researchers of the international relations divide these variables into internal (objective and subjective) and external (objective and subjective) ones. We can observe this division in the table below:

TABLE I: *Determinants of foreign policy*

INTERNAL ENVIRONMENT	EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT
OBJECTIVE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Geographical environment of the state</li> <li>• Demographic capacity</li> <li>• Economic and scientific development</li> <li>• Political and social system</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Evolution of the neighbouring environment</li> <li>• Standing of the state in the system</li> <li>• The range of mutual links and adherence to international law</li> </ul>
SUBJECTIVE	
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Perception of the international system through its own society and state and social attitudes towards other states and nations</li> <li>• Visions, foreign policy conceptions and programs</li> <li>• Quality and activity of the state's own foreign policy services and diplomacy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• International perception of the state and nation by others and expectations towards them</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Foreign policy ideas of other states</li> </ul>
	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Quality and activity of foreign policy services and diplomacy of other states</li> </ul>

Source: R. Zięba, "Uwarunkowania polityki zagranicznej Polski w strefie euroatlantyckiej" [in:] R. Zięba, *Polityka zagraniczna Polski w strefie euroatlantyckiej*, Warszawa 2013, pp. 15–38.

The determinants mentioned above can be shaped by state policy in a way that will be beneficial to that state. Foreign policy, when rational and planned, aims to create

advantageous and remove disadvantageous conditions. These factors determine the purposes and instruments of foreign policy, as well as the way the state builds its foreign policy. In the Arab Gulf states, personal relationships at the leadership level play a vital role. This means that relationships with the United States are dependent on the ties of Gulf kings, emirs and crown princes with the American president, since the Gulf monarchies hold the real power in their hands.

Because of the limitations of this paper, it will only focus on selected variables which include the perception of international environment, evolution of the neighbouring environment, and the vision of foreign policy and expectations.

### *Perception of the international system*

The first factor: the perception of the international system by elites and ruling groups, the media and society is derived from tradition, religion, political culture, ideology etc. However, policies that depend on emotions, stereotypes and prejudices are vital obstacles to the construction of a rational foreign policy. If the perception of international processes corresponds to reality then a statement of purpose of foreign policy is relevant. But there might be erroneous assessments as a result of the misperception of international processes. This wrong perception might derive from the historical background, national attitudes or interests.

Such a different view of rapprochement to Iran appeared between the United States and the GCC countries during the presidency of Barack Obama. The Obama administration negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran in 2015, keeping it secret from the GCC countries (except Oman which was involved in the negotiations). For the GCC countries this was a treacherous and damaging deal.

It led to the lifting of economic sanctions imposed on Iran, allowing it to rebuild its economy and strengthen its presence in the oil market. This contributed to rising insecurity among the GCC countries which believe that the growing Iranian engagement in the war in Iraq and Yemen are results of the agreement. While the USA's purpose was to prevent the Islamic Republic of Iran from building a nuclear weapon for at least the next decade, before leaving the White House, Obama said that the Saudis have to "find an effective way to share the neighbourhood" with Iran<sup>6</sup>.

Trump's attitude towards Iran remains more sceptical than Obama's and closer to the GCC's view of Iran as a security threat. Suzanne Maloney from the Center for Middle East Policy claims that the Trump administration "shares an Iran-centric interpretation of the problems that plague the Middle East and threaten vital American interests there"<sup>7</sup>. According to Trump administration, the Obama policy towards Iran empowers the leadership of Islamic Republic of Iran within the region. So what we can see after Trump's inauguration in 2017 is essentially an inversion of American policy towards Iran. Trump criticized the deal calling it "terrible" and claiming that it need to be renegotiated. But walking away from the negotiated deal might mean that Iran will go back to its nuclear program. So the challenge for the American administration is how to blunt Iran's nuclear ambitions and simultaneously renegotiate the deal in a way to deter and contain Iran's involvement in regional conflicts. There is an opinion that American president will try to catch Iran cheating on the deal and have a clear reason to react.

Such a confrontational attitude is shared by only some of the GCC countries because it is well known that inside the organization there are supporters of both tough (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates) and soft policy (Qatar, Oman) towards Iran<sup>8</sup>. It is still

uncertain, however, whether the Trump's plan for Iran will enter into force and whether he will fulfill expectations of the tough policy camp.. This could be found in the new sanctions for its missile tests imposed on Iran by the United States Treasury Department in July 2017. The Treasury Department sanctioned 16 entities and individuals for what it said was "engaging in support of illicit Iranian actors or transnational criminal activity"<sup>9</sup>. Also from May to July 2017, the United States shot down Iranian drones and an Iranian-backed militia convoy in Syria, which means that Trump treats the Iranian threats to regional stability seriously. But it is worth remembering that Trump's hardline policy against Iran is nothing new in American history and there are no doubts that such an attitude towards Iran will remain the key to United States-Gulf relationships.

Some experts viewed that Trump's travel ban targeting seven Muslim-majority states (Iran, Iraq, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria, Yemen) was due to his Islamophobic sentiment. Security experts underlined that there were no contradistinctions between regular citizens and suspected terrorists. However, this might be considered proof against cooperation with the United States for its opponents in the Persian Gulf.

### *Evolution of the neighbouring environment*

Influence of the neighbouring environment on countries and their foreign policies depends on their power of.. The stronger and bigger the country the less it depends on its environment. Countries with big economic and military potential have more instruments to neutralize external threats like terrorism, organized crime or wars. However, if we take into account the Saudi Arabian-led intervention in Yemen, the realistic assumption that the more advanced the weapons and the bigger the country the more

powerful it is is flawed. The United States' engagement in this war is limited. The authorities in Washington agree on weapons and intelligence deliveries. Underscoring its campaign against Al-Qaeda militants through drone strikes; the USA also refused to support military actions in Yemen. But even this limited American engagement is criticized in the United States on the grounds that buoying up the Saudis and the Emirates means supporting the ideological heirs of those who attacked the United States on 11 September 2001 and killed 10,000 people in the controversial aerial bombing campaign in Yemen, displaced more than 3 million Yemenis and left millions more struggling to feed themselves. Despite this limited American support, the GCC countries see their relations with the United States as a kind of deterrence or even defence against regional concerns and this also pertains to other regional conflicts (e.g. in Syria, Iraq)<sup>10,11</sup>.

Another environmental factor that influences the policies and mutual relations of the United States and the GCC countries is the war in Syria. The Gulf states have long urged the United States to strike Assad because they see the regime as a proxy of Iran. During the war in Syria, the Gulf states have put political pressure not only on the USA but also on Western countries to convince them to carry out anti-Assad strikes. Obama decided to take a middle course in response to this pressure by showing its objection towards the Assad regime and providing logistical support to rebel groups but he never chose direct military involvement<sup>12</sup>. In contrast, Trump ordered an airstrike in April 2017 after chemical weapons were used by the Syrian regime. He took this decision despite his previous statements that he will want to stay out of the Syrian civil war.

The clearest issue facing the United States-GCC relations seems to be a war against Islamic terrorism. Saudi king Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud and president Trump



together inaugurated the Global Center for Combating Extremism headquartered in Riyadh in May 2017. But this seems to look like a kind of façade. Upon closer inspection, the interests of both actors are not exactly the same. If we talk about the Islamic State in Iraq, the condition *sine qua non* to defeat this terrorist organization is to strengthen the Iraqi military and political state. But supporting the Shia-led government in Baghdad means restoring the Iranian client state which seems to be not an ideal scenario for the GCC countries. There are opinions, especially in the KSA, that the Islamic State is a counterweight to Iran and that fighting with jihadists might bring new terrorist attacks to Saudi Arabia. On the other hand, despite his criticism of the KSA during the campaign, Trump has realised that leading a war on terrorism (as well as Iran policy) without Saudi Arabia and the United States' regional allies is impossible.

Furthermore, the issue of terrorism is more complicated than it looks. As a matter of fact, the United States' allies in the Gulf are part of the problem and part of the solution as well. In spite of the strong involvement of the Gulf states in counterterrorism efforts, most of them also feed terrorism. Oman and the UAE are more exceptional cases in this context because they promote interreligious tolerance<sup>13</sup>.

Another decision taken by president Trump that hurt Gulf airlines' interests was a ban on bringing laptops and other electronic devices on board United States bound flights from the Arab world and Turkey. The first reason for implementing this ban was the Islamic State threat, another reason being the interests of United States airlines. In February 2017, the CEOs of United States carriers (American Airlines, United Airlines, Delta Air Lines) met with Trump and "pressed him" to accuse Gulf airlines of receiving unfair state subsidies (despite the fact that United States carriers also received billions of dollars in

United States federal government support). Even if the threat of terrorism was the main reason why Trump undertook these actions, the result might be that passengers will switch to United States carriers. Emirates Airlines claim that this ban led to a 35% reduction in booking on United States routes<sup>14</sup>.

*Vision or concept of the foreign policy*

The well-known *Foreign Policy* magazine called the Trump foreign policy a “return to realism”. So far, this can be observed in signals such as: ceasing the promotion of democracy (in August 2017, Secretary of State Rex Tillerson proposed to remove democracy as a United States foreign policy objective), human rights (in March 2017 Trump lifted a human rights embargo to allow sale of F-16 jets to Bahrain) and nation-building efforts in the region (Trump had declared to end nation building if elected president); a willingness to work with dictators, monarchs and theocrats (meeting with Egyptian President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi) if they are ready to cooperate; defeating the Islamic State (US-led intervention in Iraq: military aid to the Kurds and Iraqis; US military actions: airstrikes, limited ground forces, operation *Inherent Resolve*)<sup>15</sup>. But United States engagement during the Trump presidency has not changed the war against the Islamic State led by the Obama administration, with continued reliance on local allies, significant American air support and limited American forces on the ground.

Thus, on the one hand, supporting the Arab Gulf allies by the United States has not changed, but on the other hand, supporting human rights and democracy became less important (or not important at all). Trump prefers to keep controversial topics for private meetings as he did with President al-Sisi when he led to the release of Aya Hijazi, an Egyptian-American humanitarian worker. For the Gulf states this is a positive shift because they do not

like to talk publicly about human rights, democracy, political reform or gender equality. This also gives the Gulf states more freedom to limit the space for human rights activists and any debate about these issues. Many of them have left the KSA already. Trump's ignorance about human rights was also evident in April 2017 when he congratulated Turkish president Recep Erdogan on winning a referendum that would significantly increase the power of his presidency.

The motivation to enhance partnerships with the Arab Gulf states stems from the perception of threats to the United States interests in the Middle East that Trump wants to counter. These are the Iranian influence and hegemony in the region: the rivalry for power, and combating the spread of terrorist and extremist groups, primarily the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. These threats are similarly perceived by the United States and the Arab Gulf states and have strengthened this alliance. Without good relations with the GCC countries, United States interests in the Middle East could be jeopardized<sup>16</sup>.

Trump is also aware of the oil wealth present in the Middle East and that several Arab states are world leaders in finance. Saudi Arabia holds over one hundred billion dollars of the United States debt and the Gulf states are a source of investment in the growing United States economy. The Saudi Arabia's Public Investment Fund has tight connections to hi-tech US companies. The KSA has sweetened the deal by promising up to 200 billion dollars in new investments in the United States. The Abu Dhabi Investment Authority and Kuwait Investment Authority manage 729 and 500 billion dollars respectively. As a businessman, Trump cannot ignore or miss the chance of potential investments<sup>17</sup>.

### *Expectations*

The Arab Gulf states' expectations of Trump presidency have always been quite high. There were at least a few

reasons that gave them hope for winds of change after the Obama presidency and his nuclear deal with Iran. The first reason was the selection of particular people for the Trump cabinet: 1) James Mattis as Secretary of Defense with his hawkishness towards Iran during the Obama administration and support for the aggressive deployment of American forces in the Middle East, as well as close cooperation between the United States and its Gulf allies; 2) Rex Tillerson as Secretary of State, former CEO of ExxonMobil, the world's largest publicly-traded oil company, whose nomination was important to the Gulf/international oil markets and for OPEC, and who also played a pivotal role in expanding ExxonMobil's activities in the Middle East; 3) John Kelly as Secretary of Homeland Security who treated Iran as a threat to regional security and a sponsor of terrorism and participated in the Persian Gulf War 4) Mike Pompeo as CIA director who views Iran's policy in the Middle East in the same way as the Gulf states do. These nominations were very warmly welcomed by the Arab Gulf states<sup>18</sup>.

The second reason was Trump's statements about putting aside human rights; indeed, he lifted a human rights embargo to allow the sale of F-16 jets to Bahrain in March 2017.

The third reason was the policy of continuation, especially the United States' readiness to continue hi-tech arms deliveries. The military expenditures of the GCC countries in 2015 exceeded 114 billion dollars. The Gulf states' expectations rose when, during Trump's first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, the American president signed a 110 billion dollar arms deal. It benefited both the United States and the GCC countries.

But there appear also to be some concerns on the GCC side connected with a Trump statement that United States allies should pay more for their own defense and that the GCC countries should take more responsibility

for regional security; otherwise, he might demand additional payment for America's overseas deployment<sup>19</sup>.

Another concern that still remains is Trump's expectations that the GCC countries formalize relations with Israel before a peace deal with Palestine is signed. But this prerequisite seems to be overstated in the context of the shared concerns over the Iranian threat. In reality, it is the other way round: the Gulf states will normalize their contacts with Israel after an agreement with the Palestinians is signed<sup>20</sup>.

### *Conclusion*

If we take a look at Trump's foreign policy towards the Middle East we can notice many similarities to the Obama administration. The priority of both presidents was to fight terrorism (Islamic State, Al-Qaeda and its offshoots). Both distance themselves from any involvement of the United States in large-scale military actions, and yet both expressed their will to use military force in the Middle East. Both publicly declared their efforts to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The only exception (or one of a few exceptions) to these similarities is the policy on Iran<sup>21</sup>. Nevertheless, it is more justified to characterize Trump's Middle East agenda as continuity rather than change.

There is no coherent American foreign policy towards the Middle East under the Trump administration. There are opinions that there is no doctrine or strategy but only improvisation and instinct. But looking back on the history of the United States engagement in the Middle East, its policy has been devastating and has divided the Middle Eastern states into United States puppets and its enemies. Trump sees potential for cooperation with the GCC countries but at the same time he expects his allies to bear a "fair share" in ensuring regional security. After

the Obama presidency, the GCC countries look at Trump with optimism and both sides are aware that they need each other.

There is no agreement as to the future scenario of the GCC-U.S. relations. Discussions among experts have brought them to the conclusion that 1) the *status quo* might be preserved (the United States will supply the GCC countries with military equipment, some military involvement of the USA might take place in Yemen, Iraq and/or Syria, but without any commitment of troops and the JCPOA will be a policy priority for Trump administration), 2) the United States will reduce its involvement in the Middle East (a less possible scenario: the GCC countries will have their own regional policy looking for alternative security coalition), 3) the United States will expand its involvement in the Middle East (especially if a security crisis occurs in the USA e.g. a terrorist attack)<sup>22</sup>.

The United States-Gulf relationship might be compared to a troubled but traditional marriage: they remain together despite some quarrels and there is no possibility of divorce, because there exists no better alternative partner for them and this marriage brings them more profits and benefits than losses<sup>23</sup>.

#### NOTES

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