

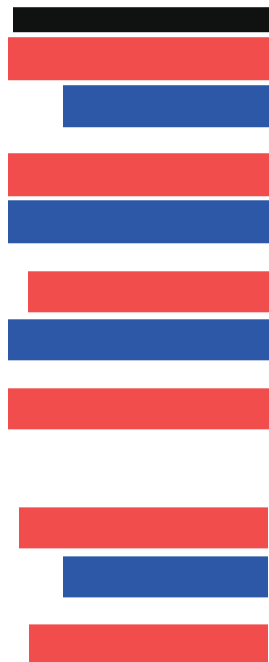
Impact of US presidential election on Middle Eastern countries



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OPINION EXCLUSIVE

In November, the American people will exercise their right to vote in the presidential election. This event carries immense significance not only for the United States but also for other nations around the globe, and the governments of the Middle East are no exception. Since its establishment, the United States has consistently maintained a distinct focus on the Middle East.



The illustration shows Kamala Harris (L) and Donald Trump, candidates for the 2024 US presidential election.
● FT



The initial significance of the region stemmed from its favorable geopolitical position and the vital issue of energy. The waterways situated in the Middle East have played a significant role in shortening the route for commercial ships traveling from the West to the East, thereby eliminating the need to circumnavigate the continent of Africa. Furthermore, the discovery of oil and gas resources has underscored the importance of the Middle East and has been a primary factor in the presence of the United States in the region. In the wake of World War II and the increasing influence of communism, the United States found itself politically engaged in the Middle East. In the 21st century, the United States has also prioritized security considerations as part of its objectives for involvement in the region.

While it is acknowledged that there has been a shift in US foreign policy towards East Asia in the past decade, it is important to underscore the continued significance of the Middle East for Washington. Additionally, the close security ties that many Middle Eastern countries have with the United States make a complete US withdrawal from the region, at least in the short term, seem unlikely.

The confluence of these factors has prompted American politicians to articulate a clear plan regarding their position on the Middle East. Simultaneously, leaders of Middle Eastern governments are closely monitoring political developments in the White House. This matter also holds significance in the context of the forthcoming US presidential election. Following President Joe Biden's decision not to seek re-election, Kamala Harris assumed his position, prompting various speculations about her ability to contend with Republican candidate Donald Trump. Many are curious about her prospective stance on the Middle East, and discussions have arisen as to which candidate Middle Eastern governments may prefer to emerge victorious.

Trump favorable for Saudi Arabia, unfavorable for Iran

During his presidency, Donald Trump made an official visit to Riyadh as part of his first Middle Eastern trip. His administration maintained a particularly close relationship with Mohammed bin Salman throughout his four years in office. Given President Trump's emphasis on economic

considerations in international affairs, Saudi Arabia viewed his election victory as a more advantageous outcome. Furthermore, President Trump's consistent support for Saudi Arabia led Riyadh to feel less pressure to address its regional challenges.

With the change in the administration to Joe Biden, Riyadh found it necessary to explore different avenues to ensure its security. Consequently, it pursued a normalization of relations with its neighbor, Iran, in order to mitigate potential future tensions. Concurrently, it sought to cultivate strong partnerships with China and Russia, emphasizing its commitment to diversifying its strategic alliances.

In general, Saudi Arabia tends to favor Republican control of the White House for several reasons. Firstly, they perceive that Republicans focus less on human rights issues, potentially leading to fewer accusations directed at Riyadh regarding its involvement in Yemen compared to when Democrats are in power. Secondly, Saudi Arabia finds that Republican Middle East policies are more aligned with its interests. For example, Republicans take a firmer stance on Iran than Democrats, which creates a sense of reduced threat for Saudi Arabia in the short term. Thirdly, Saudi Arabia notes that Republicans place less emphasis on climate change issues, a factor of importance for Riyadh due to its heavy reliance on oil exports.

The situation presents a set of unique challenges for Iran. During his presidency, Trump imposed significant sanctions on Iran, unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA nuclear agreement, and authorized the military action that resulted in the death of Lieutenant General Qassem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force. Consequently, Trump's return to the White House would create a particularly challenging scenario for Iran.

In relation to the Palestinian issue, President Trump expressed unwavering support for Israel in the region, most notably through the introduction of the "Deal of the Century" during his tenure. There is an expect-

tation that a victory for Trump could lead to a significant increase in US military assistance to the Israeli cabinet amid the Gaza conflict, potentially further complicating the prospects for a two-state solution, particularly in the short term. Additionally, a re-election for Trump could stimulate the revival of the Abraham Accords, potentially prompting more Arab nations to establish diplomatic ties with Israel. In the event of a victory for Trump and the heightening of tensions with China, the Middle East could potentially experience new conflicts and shifts in alliances. It is believed that, under such circumstances, maintaining close relations with both Beijing and Washington simultaneously would present challenges for many countries. While it is possible to glean insights into Trump's Middle East policies from his previous presidency, it's important to recognize that the current dynamics in the Middle East differ significantly from the time when Trump was in the White House. For instance, a notable development is the peace agreement between Iran and Saudi Arabia as well as a shift in international support for Israel makes it more challenging to back Tel Aviv on the global stage.

Harris carrying on legacy of Obama

Kamala Harris's primary position regarding the Middle East entails non-intervention in regional conflicts. Her senior foreign policy and national security advisor, Philip Gordon, previously served as the special assistant to president Obama for the Middle East and North Africa. Gordon's perspective is that the interventions in Iraq and support for movements during the Arab Spring inadvertently bolstered Islamism in the region. Accordingly, he advocates for the United States to pursue a strategy of refraining from direct intervention in Middle Eastern regional affairs.

Harris places a strong emphasis on addressing humanitarian issues and has consistently expressed concern about the difficult conditions faced by civilians in the conflicts in Yemen and Gaza. This position may raise concerns for countries like Saudi Arabia, particularly in light of President Joe Biden's past criticisms of Saudi actions in Yemen. It's important to note that Harris has not supported the Saudi-led coalition in Yemen.

Regarding the Palestinian issue, Vice

Then US president Donald Trump (sitting) holds a proclamation recognizing Israel's sovereignty over the Golan Heights as he is applauded by Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (c) and others in the White House on March 25, 2019.
● REUTERS



US Vice President Kamala Harris (R) and Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu (2nd-R) walk to their seats prior to talks in the vice president's ceremonial office at the Eisenhower Executive Office Building in Washington, DC, on July 25, 2024.
● ROBERTO SCHMIDT/AFP