

MEPEI: Trump's possible moves in Mideast

International Desk The Middle East Political and Economic Institute (MEPEI) has analyzed the approach of Donald Trump's second term as President of the United States towards the Middle East and North Africa. The institute's report suggests that Trump's focus on counterbalancing China's growing influence in these regions will become a central theme. Over the past few years, Beijing has emerged as a significant economic and diplomatic partner for Persian Gulf nations and other regional players. China's mediation to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer last year highlighted its readiness to challenge US influence in the area. Trump's second administration is likely to confront this challenge head-on, leveraging economic incentives, military cooperation, and strategic partnerships to reaffirm US dominance in the region. The full text of the report follows:

US President Donald Trump points past Israel's Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu as they discuss a Middle East peace plan proposal during a joint news conference in the East Room of the White House in Washington, January 28, 2020.
● BRENDAN MCDERMID/REUTERS



With Trump poised to take office as the next president, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) once again find themselves at a critical juncture. Trump's first term left a lasting impact on the region, characterized by an unorthodox mix of transactional diplomacy, various initiatives, and the disruption of established norms. For some regional powers, his policies presented opportunities for realignment and strategic advancement. However, for others, they brought uncertainty and disappointment. As his return to the White House approaches, regional leaders are gearing up for a potential shift that could reshape alliances, redefine priorities, and recalibrate relations with Washington.

During his first term, Trump's approach to the Middle East prioritized two main objectives: Strengthening ties with key allies and recalibrating US engagement to align with a clear "America First" agenda. His administration's landmark achievement, the Abraham Accords (signed in 2020), facilitated the normalization of diplomatic relations between Israel and several Arab countries, including the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan, marking a historic breakthrough. While previous US administrations focused on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict as a pathway to regional stability, Trump flipped the script. By sidelining the Palestinian issue and concentrating on common security and economic interests—especially in countering regional threats—he ushered in a new era of regional cooperation that had eluded his predecessors. For Persian Gulf leaders, Trump's policies were a welcome shift. His administration's close alignment with Saudi Arabia and the UAE bolstered their strategic ambitions and solidified regional leadership. Trump's decision to prioritize bilateral relations over multilateral commitments allowed the Persian Gulf states to pursue their interests more assertively, from Yemen to Libya, without fear of significant US pullback. He proved to be a reliable partner for the Persian Gulf monarchies, understanding their security concerns, particularly during a time when oil markets and energy policies had taken on new geopolitical weight.

Trump's legacy in Middle East

and North Africa policy was also marked by unpredictability. For instance, his decision to move the US embassy to Al-Quds (Jerusalem), while celebrated by Israel and its supporters, alienated Arab and Muslim communities, undermined the trust of Arab and Muslim communities. Similarly, his abrupt decisions regarding US troop movements in Syria raised concerns about Washington's long-term commitment to regional stability. Trump's transactional diplomatic style, which often downplayed grand humanitarian and strategic goals, left both allies and adversaries uncertain about the true priorities of the United States.

The region Trump left behind in 2021 is, remarkably, quite different today. The Middle East and North Africa are increasingly defined by shifting alliances and the emergence of new power centers. Under the leadership of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, Saudi Arabia has solidified its role as a heavyweight in the region. Riyadh's growing independence from Washington in engaging with broader partners, including China and Russia, is evident. At the same time, the UAE has emerged as a dynamic player in both economic and geopolitical spheres, establishing its reputation as a bridge between East and West. Meanwhile, despite ongoing political crises and persistent tensions with the Palestinians, Israel continues to bolster its position as a regional actor.

Trump's second term will undoubtedly revolve around the Abraham Accords, a success he regards as both a personal and political victory. Expanding normalization agreements to include Saudi Arabia is likely to become a priority, representing a historic advancement aligned with both US and regional objectives. While Riyadh has cautiously expressed its openness to such agreements, it has significant demands, including US security guarantees and access to advanced technology, including nuclear capabilities for peaceful purposes. Trump's pragmatic and deal-making approach could position him to provide the necessary assurances to Saudi Arabia, potentially achieving a diplomatic feat with profound implications for the region.

Energy security will also emerge as a key focus for

Trump. With renewed pressure and changing demand patterns in global energy markets, his return could recalibrate US relations with OPEC producers. His previous presidency demonstrated a clear understanding of oil and gas' role in global power dynamics; he may seek to strengthen US ties with major energy players like Saudi Arabia and the UAE to ensure favorable outcomes for American interests. This could manifest in new partnerships, trade agreements, or even strategic interventions in global oil markets to counter the influence of rivals like Russia. The potential ramifications of this focus on energy security include fluctuations in international energy prices, shifts in geopolitical alliances, and increased competition among energy-producing countries.

In addition to energy, Trump's focus on counterbalancing China's increasing influence in the Middle East and North Africa is set to become a central issue. In recent years, Beijing has emerged as a significant economic and diplomatic partner for Persian Gulf countries and other regional players. China's mediation to bring Saudi Arabia and Iran closer together last year underscored its readiness to challenge US influence in the region. Trump's second administration is likely to con-

front this challenge directly, employing economic incentives, military cooperation, and strategic partnerships to reaffirm US dominance in the area. For Trump, addressing China will be a regional priority and a cornerstone of his broader foreign policy agenda.

However, Trump's return could also stir up new waves of uncertainty. His aversion to multilateral frameworks and preference for bilateral agreements may undermine the partnerships that the United States established during the Biden administration. Additionally, his often-controversial rhetoric and actions could exacerbate regional divides, alienating key players while emboldening others. A sustainable, long-term strategy could enhance Washington's ability to serve as a stabilizing force, especially in conflict-ridden areas such as Syria, Libya, and Yemen.

For leaders in the Middle East and North Africa, the prospect of Trump's return presents both an opportunity and a challenge. Those who benefited from his so-called transactional diplomacy may welcome his comeback, viewing it as a chance to advance their national interests in a more flexible, results-oriented environment. Conversely, others might perceive his renewed presence as a destabilizing factor that threatens to undo hard-won progress.



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threatens to undo hard-won progress. It is essential to consider the potential reactions of these leaders, as their responses will shape the region's political landscape. Ultimately, Trump's next moves in the Middle East will depend on his ability to adapt to the evolving dynamics of the region while remaining true to his core foreign policy instincts.

In conclusion, the Middle East continues to be a stage where global powers vie for influence, while local actors maneuver to maintain their positions in an increasingly multipolar world. Whether Trump's second presidency will be a game changer or yet another source of volatility remains uncertain. It is crucial to note that he will face significant challenges, including navigating complex regional dynamics, managing potential backlash from his policies, and balancing the interests of various regional powers. Nevertheless, it is clear that his return will once again place the United States at the center of Middle Eastern and North African politics, reshaping alliances and challenging the status quo in ways that will resonate throughout the region and beyond.

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A Palestinian demonstrator argues with Israeli forces during a protest in Jordan Valley in the Israeli-occupied West Bank on January 29, 2020.
● RANEEN SAWAFTA/REUTERS