

TRUMP AND THE GULF

The Art of the Deal

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Introduction

Few in the world anticipated the return of Trump as much as the Arab Gulf states. A transactional leader, guided by a refreshingly non-ideological pragmatism, the patron of a medieval court staffed with obedient loyalists, a businessman who is eager to sell regional policy to the highest bidder. Yet, Trump enters his second term at a time of tectonic shifts in the Middle East. The United States' commitment and strategic depth in the region is at the weakest in decades – arguably America's ability and willingness to shape the region has not been in question since it decided to intervene to defend Kuwait's independence against Iraq in 1990.

In the Gulf capitals, no one is under the illusion that Trump will be able to fill the void left by a gradually disengaging US since 2011. However, his few guiding principles on foreign policy, non-interference, and attracting business to the US, appear well-suited to a Gulf expecting very little from Washington these days. To suit his first principle of leading from behind, the Trump administration will have to rely on delegation to local partners who need to be empowered to do so. The Gulf states are the first choice for local force multipliers able to unlock wicked problems. Not wanting to get sucked into another conflict in the region also means that there will be limitations on how permissible the White House will be when it comes to Israeli adventurism in the region. On the second principle, few if any US partners have the money and mechanisms to invest strategically in America.

As a consequence, the Gulf states will be in a very different position vis-à-vis the United States in 2025 when compared to 2017 when Trump started his first term. The GCC is far more united than it has been at any point since the early 2000s. While there are differences of opinion on the “how-to” or “ways” element of strategy in the Gulf, most Gulf states agree on the overall ends to be achieved. Trump will be in for a strategic bargain with more confident and strategically more autonomous Gulf states.

In a networked global order shaped by hyperconnectivity and entanglement, the US is rarely more than a *primus inter pares*. A multiplicity of regional actors – state and non-state – shape an increasingly fragile equilibrium of stability that is easily upset by microevents. October 7, 2023, and December 8, 2024, are both testimony of upheavals to which Washington is a mere onlooker. But like the Gulf, Washington has a shared interest in returning the equilibrium to a form of stability working through a range of interlocutors. In so doing, the incoming Trump administration will find itself competing for legitimacy, credibility, and capability with rivals like China and Russia. And where there are opportunities for US-Gulf integration, there are some points of friction at the horizon when it comes to regional security.

Trump's Regional Priorities

In absence of a formulated regional strategy, the Trump administration's lack of a regional strategy *au milieu*, i.e., a proactive strategy to shape the region, the new White House will not be able to avoid developing a positional strategy toward the two pressing security issues in the region: the ongoing War in Gaza, and a post-revolutionary Syria. Even as the incoming president might have wished to prioritize other global issues, the chaos in the Levant that unfolded after October 7, 2023, is too serious to ignore. Both crises also touch upon the four priorities the Trump administration has for the region.

On top of the agenda will be Arab-Israeli normalization with Saudi Arabia as the key focal point of this effort. Unlike the UAE-centric Abraham Accords, Riyadh's terms and conditions for normalizing with Israel will likely create a blueprint for normalization other Gulf states will follow. The new White House will appreciate that the kingdom's bargain will create a ripple effect that at least Oman and Qatar will have to respond to.

The second – and in part related priority – will be the containment of Iran. Even though some hawks in the Trump team will jump on Netanyahu's illusion of regime change in Tehran, Trump is unlikely willing to jeopardize the regional stability equilibrium to be sucked in a new forever war against Iran. More likely, Washington will return to a degradation strategy following the dogma of 'maximum pressure,' undermining Iran's ability to do business while physically disrupting the entanglement of the 'Axis of Resistance' from Lebanon, over Syria and Iraq to Yemen. All that while keeping a tiny backdoor open for engagement should the Islamic Republic show willingness to negotiate.

Third, Washington would want to contain and, where possible, disrupt the footprint of China in the region. There is an expectation that the Gulf will assist in downgrading their exposure to and entanglement with Chinese tech and data networks. Most importantly, while all Gulf states are considerably exposed to China via their hydrocarbon trade with Beijing, de-dollarizing this trade is a clear red line for Trump.

Lastly, but no less important, for the new White House is maintaining America's energy dominance. America's energy independence means the US is far less directly exposed to the ups and downs of regional energy policy. Nonetheless, the leading position of the Gulf states in global energy markets means that their decisions over quotas affect market stability. The oil price in particular is an important lever in the US' toolbox of commercial statecraft and the Gulf are expected to help delivering it.

A Fragile Sense of Unity in the Gulf

The Gulf in 2025 is unrecognizable to the divided Gulf of 2017 when different Gulf states were courting Trump for favors and the president was able to extract concessions from one Gulf state in return for denying favors to another. In 2025, the Gulf is more united in the overall ends it wants to achieve. And while there are disagreements over the means and ways to be used, achieving the ends is perceived far less of a zero-sum game than it was in Trump's first term.

The Gulf states broadly agree on core principles of engagement over confrontation, stability for economic growth over regional adventurism, and regional confidence in leadership over being someone else's vassal. From Kuwait to Muscat, the six Gulf states are eager to avoid open conflict with Iran. There is broad consensus that their own security is intrinsically wedded to the stability of Iran. On Palestine, the

GCC states all want to see a roadmap to self-determination, ideally within the context of the Arab Peace Initiative. Yet, the extent to which the fate of Palestinians takes precedence over the Gulf states' own national interests, varies drastically. On Syria, the Gulf states would like to see a transition to sustainable governance post-Assad, with some friction between Doha and Abu Dhabi over who should lead this transition. Finally, as leaders in global energy markets, the countries of the GCC will want to do anything to keep energy prices stable to balance their account sheets.

A Hesitant Regional Leader: Saudi Policy Goals

The kingdom's strategic priorities vis-à-vis the United States are still shaped by both a deep-seated feeling of security abandonment by consecutive US administrations, and the fallout from the killing of US-based Saudi journalist Jamal Khashoggi in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul. While on the latter, Riyadh has been able to somewhat reconcile with Washington's relevant elites, on the issue of America's security framework for the region, Riyadh is still haunted by the events from September 2019 where Iran was able to strike the hydrocarbon heart of the kingdom in Khobar with little American response. It was the Trump White House at the time that appeared hesitant to come through on American security commitments to Saudi Arabia. Since then, the security establishment in Riyadh has been trying to combine security diversification through a more multipolar entanglement with growing self-reliance often underwritten by US defense support, training, and hardware. However, Saudi Arabia treads lightly, only hesitantly assuming a leadership role regionally.

Riyadh's key principles appear to widely overlap with those of the Trump administration. A risk-averse policy of engagement and de-escalation appears a good fit with the new White House's priority of non-interference and leading from behind. Saudi Arabia is eager to please Washington where it can help to accommodate American interests and concerns as long as they do not upend the fragile stability in the Gulf. There appears to remain a subtle ambition in the kingdom to be treated as the first point of call for Washington on all matters Gulf. Saudi Arabia's emergence as the facilitator of a US-Russian rapprochement is an attempt by Riyadh to signal to the Trump White House that the kingdom can act as a diplomatic force multiplier for United States diplomacy.

On the objectives side, Saudi Arabia is keen to extract a US defense deal from Washington during the Trump term. Aiming for a defense treaty with a mutual defense clause might be ambitious but the kingdom might settle for a comprehensive agreement if the terms are favorable. Access to critical US defense technology and acquiring an ally status above Gulf peers might be enough for the kingdom to make meaningful steps toward normalizing with Israel. The red lines for the kingdom have been publicly set through repeated statements from all senior Saudi interlocutors: no normalization without Palestinian self-determination. Prior to the War in Gaza, Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) might have been more flexible on these red lines. However, since October 7, the narratives and actions by Israel's Jewish fundamentalist government have made it extremely difficult for the Crown Prince to sell normalization to the wider public and the old guard in the royal family. It is hard to imagine how dealmaker Trump can bend Saudi's red lines while finding it hard himself to offer a defense deal comprehensive enough to make normalization palatable.

On Iran, the kingdom might support a degradation strategy as long as Saudis are not directly implicated in delivering it. The 'Axis of Resistance' remains a strategic thorn in Riyadh's side it wants to see disintegrating. Nonetheless, Riyadh will continue to deepen and widen bilateral relations with the

Islamic Republic on a bilateral, diplomatic level. After all, Qatar and Oman in particular have been able to maintain their links with Iran in the shadow of Trump's 'maximum pressure' campaign. The most immediate security issue for Saudi Arabia remains Yemen where for years the kingdom has been trying through Omani mediation to bring the Houthis into the fold. Yet, the War in Gaza and the Houthis' emergence as an important but often unhinged lynchpin of Iran's 'Axis of Resistance' have made a diplomatic settlement less likely. Rumors of Trump wanting to bring the war to the Houthis on the ground in a surrogate operation to recapture the port of Hodeidah would be a form of escalation Saudi Arabia wants to desperately avoid.

Economically, Saudi Arabia wants to expand its role as a global energy market leader. Most importantly, amid a strained budget, Riyadh has to ensure an oil price that allows it to balance its budget as public spending is skyrocketing. Likewise, Saudi Arabia wants to increase its downstream market share vis-à-vis its competitors. This could become a tight rope walk with an American president reacting quite sensitively to oil price fluctuations. But more disposable income in Riyadh could allow the kingdom to leverage investments in the United States more strategically. Learning from Trump's term one, Saudi Arabia has now a more robust investment infrastructure to not just inject cash into the US economy but to entangle the community of Trump appointees and confidants in the business community strategically. Riyadh will be at the forefront of the Gulf lobby in Washington to secure favorable US foreign and security policy terms.

Saudi Arabia's China business on the other hand could be a concern for a White House wanting to be tough on China. Chinese companies have flocked to Saudi Arabia to help the kingdom with its Vision 2030. Chinese companies are invested in almost all Saudi giga projects, especially where high-tech, cyber, and AI expertise is required. Chinese companies are also pushing into Saudi Arabia's defense sector as the kingdom could join BRICS in the next four years. While Washington might not interfere when it comes to joining BRICS, Chinese talking points about de-dollarizing the energy trade with the Gulf touch a highly sensitive red line for Donald Trump. It is therefore unlikely that Riyadh would take such a risk.

The Other Middle Power in the Gulf: UAE Policy Goals

Unlike its neighbors, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) present themselves as a far agile and assertive player in the region. With a highly diversified portfolio of statecraft, both in terms of the domains it uses to advance its interests and the nature of the relationships Abu Dhabi keeps, the UAE are the unlikely middle power in the Gulf. For Abu Dhabi, the return of Trump is a godsend not just because he is transactionally malleable but also because the Emirates are still benefitting from the 'Abraham Accords bonus.' It was them who delivered Trump arguably the greatest foreign and security policy win in the first term by normalizing with Israel.

The UAE's regional policy is multilayered, combining engagement with coercion and deterrence. Abu Dhabi has successfully weaponized its regional and extra-regional entanglement via financial, logistical, commercial, and technology networks. The UAE want to maintain their entanglements both East and West, tying China and Russia into its hub as much as the Europe and the United States – a position that will be a sure cause for friction in US-UAE relations under Trump. Weaponized interdependence is the name of the Emirati game in Gulf, trying to create unity through commercial connectivity that runs essentially through either Abu Dhabi or Dubai. Thereby, the UAE act more assertively and confidently even than Saudi Arabia. Unlike its neighbors, Abu Dhabi has a track record of pushing back against

criticism and even pressure from the United States. The notion of Emirati exceptionalism is founded on the belief that even for Washington the UAE are indispensable due to its strategic depth across Africa and the Middle East. Much of the rise of Emirati influence across the region since 2013 has been the assertiveness with which it has promoted its counterrevolutionary narrative of ‘authoritarian stability’ in the aftermath of the Arab Spring. Abu Dhabi has been on the forefront of promoting regimes that are tough on political Islam and civil society – regimes that contain the ‘Arab Street’ with an Iron Fist. Many within the Trump team are ideologically wedded to this Emirati narrative.

The primary security objective for Abu Dhabi will be the degradation of Iranian networks across the region while retaining backchannels to the regime in Tehran through commercial networks. The UAE will likely support a tougher policy on Iran than any other Gulf state and embolden Trump’s maximum pressure approach – even if the Emirates shy away from all-out escalation.

Secondly, the UAE will further advance its position in a multipolar world through network-centric statecraft, i.e., expanding global entanglement with other trading hubs and commercial centers across the world. Emirati networks into Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Libya have elevated the relevance of the UAE as a broker and intermediary even when engagement has seen the promotion of one side in a conflict over the other. The Emirati ‘Axis of Secessionists’ – a network of UAE-aligned non-state actors building alternative power hubs to central governments in Sudan, Somalia, Yemen, and Libya – has become a powerful tool for Abu Dhabi to rally great powers around Emirati policy objectives in these conflicts. The Emirati toolbox for statecraft boasting with violent non-state actors trained, funded, and armed by Abu Dhabi could be a welcome offer to President Trump who would like to delegate US foreign and security policy in the region to partners in the Gulf. Especially in Yemen, Abu Dhabi is offering Washington a potential force of non-state actors able to bring the war to the Houthis, empowering just another warlord, promising short-term gains, and further conflict polarization in the long run.

Thirdly, Abu Dhabi wants to grow its bridge role keeping one leg firmly in the West while reaching deeper and wider into the East. The UAE have become the main hub for Russian businesses and individuals to bypass sanctions during the Ukraine War. Russia’s Wagner Group and its offshoot the Africa Corps use the UAE to access financial, logistical, and commodity trading networks across Africa. China, meanwhile, has expanded its footprint in the high-tech, cyber, and AI sector in the UAE, with Emirati state-owned companies investing in Chinese companies to create joint ventures and Chinese engineers flocking to the UAE. The emergent hub position of the UAE as an AI hub drawing on US and Chinese know-how will sit very uneasy with a Trump administration wanting to contain Chinese commercial and technological statecraft.

Lastly, the UAE’s very *raison d’être* depends on its ability to securitize and ostracize any form of Islamist rule in the region. The success of the counterrevolution is hinged on a consensus that only secular, security-sector-based regimes can keep the regional peace. An Islamic government in Syria risks undermining this Emirati objective. It is therefore likely that Abu Dhabi will act as a spoiler amid the political transition in Damascus, pushing weaponized narratives against HTS while possibly promoting alternative contenders for power. While the outgoing Biden administration seems to have embraced the Syrian transition team around the Islamist HTS, the Trump team might be more receptive to anti-HTS narratives if the UAE started to push for ‘authoritarian stability.’

The Gulf's "Mediator-in-Chief": Qatar Policy Goals

For Qatar, Trump's second term will start very differently than his first term. Not only does Qatar enjoy more solid relations with its neighbors, but the small emirate has been elevated to a major non-NATO ally for the United States, following Qatar's unique role in securing a safe passage for the US military from Afghanistan. Beyond Afghanistan, Qatar has proven to be America's 'mediator-in-chief,' from the conflict between Israel and Hamas, over Iran to Venezuela. Whatever the future of Gaza holds, Qatar will retain a pivotal position in brokering engagement with a constituency in Palestine that other mediators – let alone the United States – have difficulty engaging. Meanwhile, Doha has caught up with its neighbors Saudi Arabia and the UAE on building expansive and diverse influence networks across the US political and commercial landscape. Since the days of the UAE-Saudi-led blockade in 2017, Qatar has been trying to accommodate the United States at all costs and at every junction.

Qatar will remain true to its roots, championing engagement with all players in the region – state and non-state actors. Conflict mediation and resolution remains the cornerstone of Qatar's foreign and security policy. Maintaining and strengthening consensus across the GCC is thereby a core principle of Qatar after the blockade. Unlike Saudi Arabia and the UAE, Doha has not developed the confidence and assertiveness to use its leverage particularly in global gas markets for strategic gain. On the contrary, particularly in reference to Washington, Doha will try to accommodate US interests and concerns, come what may, under Trump. Unlike its neighbors, Qatar will continue to prioritize Western integration as a matter of principle. Doha's exposure to Russia and China is minimal and when it comes to gas exports to China, relations are a one-way street where Beijing is far more exposed to Qatar than the other way around.

Haunted by the trauma of the Arab Spring, whereby the geostrategic adventurism of the previous Qatari government failed to secure tangible gains for the Gulf state, Qatar will tread lightly seeking opportunities for engagement and facilitation. Trump will rely on Qatar to maintain relations with Iran to avoid a regional military escalation, engaging with Hamas and the Palestinian cause, while hoping to be able to rely on Doha to bring together the various opposition groups in Syria amid what is deemed to be a long and fragile process of political transition. Also, on Ukraine, Qatar might draw on its good relationship with Kiev to build confidence with Moscow for a potential diplomatic off-ramp in the conflict. In partnership with Saudi Arabia and the more Russia-leaning UAE, Qatar will support a Gulf initiative to help the new US administration to end a war that among Trump circles is highly unpopular.

Meanwhile, Doha will be looking toward Riyadh when it comes to normalization with Israel. Qatar concurs with the red lines publicly stated by the kingdom, hoping that Saudi Arabia will not settle for less as pressures from the Trump administration to normalize with the Jewish state are so far absorbed by a strong Saudi position on the need for Palestinian statehood. Qatar's position on normalization has not changed and depends on the adoption of the Arab Peace Initiative – or a derivative of that.

Finally, Qatar will grow its position as a global leader in LNG. In the second Trump term, most of the gas field expansion will come online, pouring in billions of dollars of undesignated cash into Qatari coffers. Up and downstream, Qatar will further invest this money into its dominant market position from the Americas, over Africa and Europe to Asia. Doha has always found ways to do so in partnership and joint venture with American energy giants, appeasing the Trump administration.

Conclusion

Aligning Trump's vague policy principles with those of the Gulf states does not have to be difficult. A simple Venn diagram would show that there is more space for collaboration than competition, more areas of overlap than areas of exclusion. The Trump administration will come to realize that delivering a credible Middle East policy requires Gulf state buy-in as middlemen, brokers, facilitators, and mediators. Much of the repulsive Trump narrative about transforming Gaza into the 'Middle East Riviera,' is about pushing the Gulf states to rise to the occasion and take over responsibility in managing the Gaza conflict. Thereby, delegating large chunks of regional security policy to the Gulf means that Trump finds himself at times to be a beggar who cannot be a chooser. He will have to compromise and accommodate the Gulf states who have gotten much better in 2025 in brokering a deal and stand their ground if necessary. While the UAE might be more assertive in pushing their policy objectives over Saudi Arabia, let alone Qatar, all Gulf states have an advantage in pooling their leverage to stand their ground on fundamental security issues in the region.

From Syria, over Palestine and Iran, the Gulf states are better off nurturing Trump's desire for non-interference. America's track record in the region over the past three decades has been disastrous. The impotence of Biden amid the atrocities committed by Israel with American weapons in Gaza have further undermined the Gulf state's belief that America can play the role of a regional hegemon. The US is grand-strategically weak – something even a more confident US president cannot change. The few principles Donald Trump has as it concerns the Middle East do not suggest that US leadership is going to return. On most security issues, most notably Iran and its 'Axis of Resistance,' the Gulf states will have to continue to rely on themselves.

However, the US can lead from behind, set the terms and conditions to shape the framework for regional policy – not through coercion but through consensus with its partners in the Gulf who want to be respected as near equals. This is particularly true when it comes to Trump delegating regional policy to partners in the Gulf. Something has got to give also when it comes to dealing with Russia and China as well. Here, Donald Trump will set some red lines for acceptable behavior – boundaries the Gulf states will likely respect when negotiated carefully. In the end, it will all come down to great bargains where the old, new US president will have to test his 'art of the deal.'

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