Expectations from Trump on the Middle East

written by Ruth Wasserman Lande | 03.01.2025

The Middle East has long been awaiting a strong hand vis-à-vis radical Islamism, which has become widespread and is almost unchecked.

Such extremism not only threatens the lives of Israeli citizens and the State of Israel but is seen as a true and significant threat to the stability of the regimes of many other countries in the region, including Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia.

In the Middle East, in which strength is respected, the Sunni partners of the Abraham Accords have impatiently waited for Washington to take a stronger stance against the Islamic Republic of Iran and its proxies in the region.

Given the perceived weakness of the Biden Administration towards Tehran, Saudi Arabia has even begun a so-called process of rapprochement with Iran, despite the underlying and ever-present, deep tensions between the two countries.

The rapprochement aims to address the impact of Tehran's growing strength during the last few years via the Iranian-backed Houthi militias in Yemen.

Furthermore, the perceived weakness of the outgoing Administration is also partially responsible for reintroducing Qatar into the Gulf countries' circle, as well as Syria, before president Bashar al-Assad was deposed.

Both Assad and Qatar had been declared unwelcome some years ago, given Assad's murderous policies toward his people and Qatar's export of Islamic Brotherhood ideology.

Hence, the arrival of President-elect Donald Trump, perceived as a dominant and strong leader, is already impacting the Middle East even before he has been sworn in.

Trump's influence can be seen in Iran's hesitancy to carry out its promised retaliation on Israel for attacking Iran on October 26, in response to Iran's ballistic missile attack on Israel on October 1.

The Iranian retaliation was originally planned for the period prior to the elections but has been postponed to an unknown date, owing to the understanding that any form of retaliation would legitimize a full-blown Israeli attack – backed by the United States – against Iran's energy sources and/or its nuclear program.

WHAT NEEDS to be on the table is not simply an "end to the regional wars," as promised by Trump, but one that would ensure the security of Israeli citizens while also preparing the ground for true reconciliation with Lebanon as an independent country, as well as with Saudi Arabia, and perhaps additional countries in the area.

In order to reach reconciliation in Israel's North, the borders between Syria and Lebanon, as well as between Syria and Iraq – all currently unsupervised and permeable to weapon smuggling masterminded by Iran – need to be closed and surveilled by a responsible authority in the international arena.

It is doubtful whether Russia would fit this role despite offering itself to perform the task.

Israel's neighbors

In a similar line, Hezbollah needs to be disarmed, pushed back from the Israeli border, and surveilled in a manner that will discourage it from continuing its murderous objectives ensconced amid civilians in central and northern Lebanon.

For this to happen, the Lebanese army needs to take an active stand rather than a make-believe one as it has been doing for at least the last two decades, all the while allowing Hezbollah – or rather the Islamic Republic of Iran – to make Lebanon its own private playing ground.

Similarly, the IDF must be given the right to defend itself from its northern neighbor, given the assumption that Hezbollah is not suddenly going to become a peace-loving organization and that the remnants of its operatives will try to rearm following the current war.

On the southern border, a buffer zone should be formed and maintained in the northern part of Gaza in order to prevent Hamas from rearming and rebuilding its strength right next to Israeli villages and towns in the South.

The rebuilding of Gaza following the war should only be allowed beyond that buffer zone and in the center and south of the Gaza coastal enclave.

Moreover, a civilian body such as the UAE and/or Saudi Arabia must be encouraged to take upon itself the civilian ruling of Gaza, at least for an intermediary period, given the lack of a trusted, strong, and legitimate Palestinian leadership either in Gaza or in the West Bank.

During this period, a full restructuring of the educational system must be put in place, and the prime condition for receiving any rehabilitation funding and/or financial assistance must be made, not only in Gaza but, even more importantly, in the West Bank.

The latter has, in past years, become a hotbed of terrorism, supported by Iran, with weapons periodically being smuggled to its operatives via Jordan, much to the displeasure of the Jordanian regime.

THE ELEPHANT in the room is, of course, the Islamic Republic itself, which cannot be left untended since much of the instability, chaos, and radicalism nurturing the region originates in Tehran.

But – and this is a very big but – it is crucial not to be drawn into a situation similar to what happened when the US targeted the radical Sunni group ISIS with an international coalition, only to forget that by doing so, it was, de facto, clearing the arena for Shi'ite radicalism led by the Iranian regime.

Likewise, now, while targeting the capabilities of the current Iranian regime, it is vital to remember that Qatar, as well as Turkey's Erdogan, has funded, encouraged, and supported the exportation of Muslim Brotherhood ideology throughout the region, as well as to Europe, the US, Canada, and Australia.

This cannot be overlooked and will be a huge challenge for any American administration, given the US's $7 billion investment in Qatar in the form of its army bases.

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