

A photograph of Donald Trump, wearing a dark blue suit jacket, a white shirt, and a red tie. He is looking slightly to the left with a serious expression.

# Trump's Iraq Policy the Destabilization Impact



Kurdistan conflict and Crisis Research Center



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Dr Othman Ali



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## Abstract

Trump Middle East policy Donald Trump's Iraq policy is a part and parcel of his Middle East policy which is seemingly based on hawkish hard-power, mercantilist approach, and leaving Obama's policy of using soft power and multilateralism. Trump administration policy in Iraq has initially focused on defeating of ISIS, containment of Iran, and supporting al-Abdai to accomplish this policy. However, in reality this policy is full of contradictions, and it is in many ways the Obama policy being continued. The US withdrawal from Iran nuclear deal and attempt to force Iraqi future Iraqi government to impose sanction against Iran will have serious destabilizing impact for Iraq. To demonstrate this we try to read Trump's mind by looking at factor shaping ideological outlook. Then we provide a brief survey of the contradictions in his Middle East policies. Then we try to make connections between destabilizing impact of Trump's policies in Iraq and fall of al -Abdi Government. Finally we try to discuss possible challenges of Trump's policy in Iraq during the current government of Adel Abdul Mahdi.

## Donald Trump doctrine on Foreign policy:

Just after his election Henry Kissinger,

the former Secretary of States and National Security Advisor of President Nixon has this to say in Nov 2016: "This president-elect, it's the most unique that I have experienced in one respect. He has absolutely no baggage," Kissinger told CNN's "Fareed Zakaria GPS." "He has no obligation to any particular group because he has become president on the basis of his own strategy."<sup>1</sup>

Since his foreign policy stems from some of his ideological beliefs, it is relevant to make some references to them. 'America-First' policy, "Make America Great", These were the slogans under which He sought US presidency and his ideological allies include , right wing Zionist lobby , Anglican Christian networks , and tea party ideologists<sup>2</sup>.. There are some gaps between his perception of the United States power capabilities and the reality of 21<sup>st</sup> World politics, and vision.

Trump wants to preserve The United States as sole superpower against all odds of reality: The re-emergence of Russia as a rival power, Chinese economic might, and the emerging independent spirit of EU are factors which Trump has difficulty to accept in the emerging new international world order. Besides, the emergence of new non-state actors such as terrorist organizations and the proliferation of nuclear weapons to Korea, Iran, and the environmental challenges need multilateralism and soft

power engagement not overreliance on America's hard power<sup>3</sup>.

The Impact of the ideological beliefs and personal traits of Trump on his foreign policy cannot be underestimated. Eliot A. Cohen, director of the Strategic Studies Program at Johns Hopkins writes:

“Trump is neither conservative nor neoconservative. Nor is he reliably realist, idealist, or neo-isolationist. His tightly drawn circle of loyal aides and adult children reflect only the light of the “army of one” at their center. .... Trump lacks the kind of biographical paper trail that might bring into sharper focus his vague convictions. But it's not quite that simple<sup>4</sup>. “His ideological perspective is rooted in his right-wing Christian evangelical base which sees conflicts in the Middle East through a Biblical lens, including a belief that the establishment of the modern State of Israel and its conquest of neighboring territories is a fulfillment of God's plan and a step toward the second coming of Christ<sup>5</sup>.

However, mercantilism seems to be a dominant factor shaping the foreign policy of President Trump. This has roots in the conviction which grew among US business elite after the end of the cold war. George Friedman in his study, *The Coming War with Japan, 1991* argued that with the end of the Cold War, the United States would no longer endure Japan's economic encroachments, making a “hot war” between the two allies likely in the coming decades. “That time period when Japan was eating our economic lunch was the searing geopolitical event that shaped Trump's

thinking,” S. Feaver writes. “The lesson he seems to have taken from it is that the international arena is a very competitive place, and if we're not alert and tough, our friends as well as our adversaries will take advantage of us”<sup>6</sup>.

In his Business style of leading foreign policy there are evidences thus far that suggest that Trump is a pragmatist who possesses a mercantilist instinct and boundless confidence in his ability to negotiate trade deals that put “America First”<sup>7</sup>. It suffices to mention here that Trump is not at pain to say that the United States should have taken control of Iraqi Kuwaiti and Libyan oil fields following U.S. military intervention in those countries<sup>8</sup>.

Others maintain that Trump is a product of growing Right wing Populism. Walter Russell Mead, professor of foreign affairs and humanities at Bard College, writes that the Trump's foreign and domestic policies are echoes of the “fiery nationalism and populism of the US president Andrew Jackson”. Mead describes Trump as Modern -day, Jacksonians which is reflexively support Israel, demand an overwhelming response to terror attacks, agitate for tight immigration controls, resist diplomacy with Iran and North Korea, want the detention facility at Guantanamo Bay to remain open, maintain a cynical stance towards the United Nations, doubt climate change science, and believe in torture's affectivity<sup>9</sup>.

There are also those who provide some psychological insight into Trump's style of leadership which has been described as impulsive, emotional and ad hoc-based in

and exhibits traces of insecure and Narcissistic feelings in his Personality<sup>10</sup>. They maintain that he has an Inferiority complex towards the Washington Establishment which is more intellectual than him, especially Barak Obama and Hillary Clinton were from these intellectual elite which Trump has a lot of contempt for. He is looking for public admiration and attentions. He thinks he is great, more decisive, and resolute than his predecessors. This explains why he tries to sideline state department and US Pentagon in decision making. He sacrifices anybody regardless how loyal were they to him to preserve himself<sup>11</sup>. A close scrutiny of his foreign policy towards the Middle East bears out some of the ideological and psychological state of mind of President Trump. The latter has campaigned to move the U.S. embassy in Israel to Jerusalem, and he has subsequently implemented this policy. In contrast to his predecessor in the white house, he states that the West Bank settlements, is “no longer seen as an obstacle to peace”<sup>12</sup>. This policy has already prompted right-wing members of the Israeli government to declare the death of the two-state solution. Therefore, he is literally killing a U.S. policy which has been embraced by Republican and Democratic presidents and goes back to four decades. Trump immediately appointed advocates of Israel’s right-wing settler movement to the key positions<sup>13</sup>. David Friedman, whom Trump appointed as U.S. ambassador to Israel, for instance, has insisted the United States should end the “two-state narrative”<sup>14</sup>. These policies are in

clear violation of the Oslo Treaty which US had sponsored and Trump’s own statement to CBSNEWS on September 28, 2018 in which he stated that he is still committed to two state solution<sup>15</sup>.

### **Containment Policy against Iran**

Even his stated policy of containing Iran is not free of contradictions, unilateralism, and being ad-hoc in nature. His top aides attended conferences which called for the overthrow of the Islamic Republic. Then President Trump tweets that he is not seeking the regime change in Iran and he only wants to see a change in Iran’s foreign policy behavior. In fact, he is on record asking to meet top Iranian officials to differences with the regime in Iran<sup>16</sup>. Besides, the unilateral abandonment of Nuclear deals with Iran (the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in Vienna on 14 July 2015), is in contradiction of the cooperation with in the US war on terror. His numerous statements to contain Iranian expansionist policies in the Middle East do not resonate well with US forces’ (in Iraq and Syria) open coordination with pro-Iranian Shiite militias in fighting ISIS in Syria and Iraq<sup>17</sup>.

Finally, the Trump administration’s stated and practiced policy towards Turkey is another case in point of the lack of articulation, unilateralism, and being contradictory in nature. **The promise of continuing work with Turkey** in the war against ISIS and his declared policy to fight terrorism are creating a serious friction with an important US ally in NATO. The arming of PYD in Syria and the promise of the formation of 30,

000 PYD militias on the frontiers with Turkey to isolate it totally from Syria were perceived by Turkey as unfriendly act. It was this action which forced Turkey to enter Syrian town of Afrin. Besides, the road map for joint action which Trump administration has reached with Turkey with regard to Minbaj, a town held by Syrian Democratic forces, provides another glaring example of the chaos in his the US foreign policy. The US side is showing clear procrastination in the implementation of this agreement. This has created a series of frictions and open diplomatic confrontation. It suffices to mention here, on 15 February, 2019, President made two contradictory tweets on his countries stand on Turkey. In the first he threatened to devastate Turkish economy should latter attack Syrian Democratic forces after the US troop withdrawal from Syria. In the second one which was only 12 hours later President Trump has promised to expand strategic and trade ties with Turkey<sup>18</sup>.

### **Trump policy in Iraq**

It is within this general context we have to evaluate Trump administration policy towards Iraq. The President is on the record saying that "Iraq invasion was wrong but we should not have left"<sup>19</sup>. Trump policy here like his policy in the rest of the Middle East is ad-hoc based and lacks clear vision and strategy. The president first policy on Iraq was to put Iraqis on travel ban to US but he was later forced to reverse this policy<sup>20</sup>. After his January 2017 inauguration, Trump suggested that the U.S. "should have

kept the oil" after its forces invaded Iraq in 2003. "Maybe we'll have another chance," he said in his first speech at the CIA headquarters, Foreign Policy. In January 2017, having described Iraq's premier Haider al-Abadi in public as US ally, in March 2017, After meeting Al-Abadi in the white house, he has referred to him and his delegation in a private gathering as "the most accomplished groups of thieves he'd ever met," a former U.S. official told<sup>21</sup>.

A good portion of the failure of Iraq government under the former Prime Minister Haider al Abadi (2014-2017) resides with U.S., which true to Trump's "America first" philosophy, dispelled any notion of taking a proactive role in nation-building. His emphasis in Iraq policy was the sole dependence on hard power. Rex Tillerson, former US Secretary of State, was quoted saying we put 75% of the cost of the military campaign in Iraq, and requested that allies should shoulder the rest, especially with regard to the construction process in Iraq<sup>22</sup>. This mercantilist approach was apparent during the February 2017 conference to raise fund for Iraq reconstruction. Even as Tillerson himself was flying to the conference in Kuwait City to personally encourage attendees to loosen their purse strings, back in D.C., Trump tweeted that the U.S. in the past was "stupidly" pumping money into the Middle East. Iraq needed 88 billion only \$30 b was raised and US role was only to give Iraq credit with zero direct investment<sup>23</sup>. Iraq election of May 12, 2018 is an indicator of defeat of Trump's containment

policy towards Iran in Iraq Abdul Wahab Ahmed, Washington-based near east institute expert stated that **The U.S. was hoping the elections would give Abadi a new mandate that empowers him to launch an anti-corruption crusade and implement much-needed economic reforms as well as “claw back power that’s been ceded to both Iran and to independent militias, which are largely backed by Iran”**<sup>24</sup>. To be sure, the Iraqi election results that constitutes a stunning setback for Trump’s containment strategy against Iran. Washington had bet heavily on the alliance led by Prime Minister Heidar al-Abadi to win, but it has been relegated to third place. In the expert opinion of the Washington-based think tank Brookings Institution: “His (Sadr’s) victory has turned America’s Iraq policy upside down, and Washington now faces a severe political crisis in a country where it has invested substantial blood and treasure”<sup>25</sup>

### **Contradiction in US policy towards Kurds**

On 16 October 2017, Abadi gave a green light to Qassem Soleimani, the head of Iran’s al Quds Force, to attack the Kurds in Kirkuk. In that same vein, the Trump Administration bet so heavily on Abadi that it allowed a Shiite militia commanded by the convicted terrorist Abu Mahdi Muhandes, sentenced to death in absentia for blowing up the U.S. embassy in Kuwait in 1983, to use U.S. supplied Abrams tanks in the assault. The Kurds had mistakenly thought their role in fighting ISIS, after

the Iraqi Army collapsed in 2014, made them America’s men in Iraq. This policy alienated Masud Barzani from the US government. This was a serious blow to US influence in Iraq and its impact was seen after Iraq election. In spite of numerous visits by Brett McGurk to Barzani the latter has refused to join the Reform bloc which was trying to reinstate Abadi for second period in government in Baghdad. Tehran has managed to bring on board the two main Iraqi Kurdish parties – KDP and the PUK – who feel aggrieved that the US connived with Abadi’s crackdown in Kirkuk last October, to align with Hadi al-Amiri to form the bloc of Construction to oppose al-Abadi camp <sup>26</sup>.

### **Future Challenges for US in Iraq**

The post election Iraq witnessed considerable growth for Iranian influence. Now the pro-Iranian militias are acting as political bloc and they have comfortable majority in the Iraqi parliament. To demonstrate this upper hand Iran has used its newly gained power to secure the three most important positions: the presidency, speaker of the parliament, and the post of prime minister for her allies in Iraq. Muhammad Ali Jafari, commander of Iran’s Revolutionary Guard has this to say on November 5, 2018 “we won 3 to nil”<sup>27</sup>. Iran is now the dominant foreign actor in Iraq,” said Renad Mansour, an analyst with the UK’s Chatham House, “Iran has deeply penetrated several Iraqi state institutions.”<sup>28</sup>

This newly gained power may provide the US government with many challenges

The pro-Iranian parliamentary bloc may ask Time table for us withdrawal of American troops from Iraq<sup>29</sup>. The Trump administration must prepare for such an eventuality since it has left Tehran in no doubt that continued US military presence in Iraq poses an existential threat of “regime change.” Trust Tehran to pull out all the stops – short of directly targeting US troops.<sup>30</sup>

Trump’s policy of tightening economic sanction on Iran may have destabilizing impact in Iraq. The reason is that Iraq, which shares a 1,458-kilometer border with Iran, could be badly hurt by the sanctions. Iraq relies on its eastern neighbor for everything from gas supplies to electricity to water and foodstuffs. Not only is Iraq in a no-win position, but it is the United States, which still maintains some 5,200 troops in Iraq, that put it there: The country’s dependence on Iranian trade and public services is largely due to the U.S. invasion in 2003.

Under these circumstances it is not improbable to infer that Adil Abdul Mahdi, the current prime minister, may face Abadidestiny. Abadi lost his post partly because he stated that he would implement the US sanction on Iran. Erem dailyin Tehran abadi reported that al Abadi was appointed by “Iranian general and he will face Saddam’s fate”<sup>31</sup> .

On August 13, he said: “I did not say we abide by the sanctions, I said we abide by not using dollars in transactions. We have no other choice,” the prime minister told reporters in Baghdad .Iran is now the dominant foreign actor in Iraq,” said Renad Mansour, an analyst

with the UK’s Chatham House, Iraq. “Iran has deeply penetrated several Iraqi state institutions”<sup>23</sup>.

According to Iraqi media reports, U.S. Treasury officials visited the Central Bank of Iraq in July and said the U.S. would sanction any Iraqi bank that conducted financial transactions with Iran. According to the Wall Street Journal, the Iraqi government has bank accounts with the U.S. Federal Reserve, where its dollars are kept. And these dollars, which the Iraqi economy relies upon, could be frozen should Iraq violate sanctions<sup>33</sup>.

As soon as the most recent round of U.S. sanctions, announced by the Trump administration on August 7, hit Iran, Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al Abadi said his country would reluctantly comply. But a week later, reality has sunk in and many Iraqi officials have pushed for Baghdad to maintain trade relations with Tehran.

### **The US policy towards post 2003 Iraq has created Iraqi dependency on Iran for the following reasons:**

First, Iraq needs Iran’s refined gas. Iraq’s electricity minister said in July 2017 that Iraq would be reliant on Iranian gas to generate electricity for at least seven years. Iraq does produce natural gas of its own, but lacks the facilities to process it into fuel for local consumption. The gas Iraq receives from Iran constitutes approximately 20 percent of the electricity it produces. Already, Iraq meets only 70 percent of its electricity demand. Iraq has been sending Iran oil to pay for its gas imports and to pay its electricity debt.

Second, Iraq's water supplies are dependent upon the flows of the Euphrates and Tigris rivers from where it gets 98 percent of its surface water. If it chose to do so, Iran could divert 13 percent of Iraq's water resources. Iraqi Deputy Water Minister told Gulf News in April that 20 to 30 percent of the Tigris River's water in Iraq originates in Iran. If Iraq complies with sanctions, Iran could easily cut the flows of water, as it already has done in the northern Kurdistan area in Sulaimaniyah province, according to the Kurdistan regional government's Ministry of Agriculture. At a time of serious drought in Iraq, this is no idle threat.

Third, Iran has deliberately flooded the Iraqi market with cheap imports, such as foodstuffs<sup>34</sup>.

While Gulf States object to Iraq's economic reliance on Iran, governments have done little to help Iraq become more independent. The Kuwait-sponsored reconstruction conference to help Iraq, held in February, has yielded no results, according to Iraqi sources; even though millions of dollars of pledges the amount feel short of Iraq's actual need and nothing of significance has been delivered to Iraq<sup>35</sup>.

### **Future challenges for Iraq**

The government of Abdul Mahdi will face difficult choices internally, the absence of a needed parliamentary majority bloc to support him steadfastly in addressing these challenges. It is noteworthy, that he came to power because of the inability of the Shiite party groups to obtain the parliamentary majority for

their candidates. The powerful blocs in the parliament have not expressed support reform projects adopted by Abdul Mahdi do not go beyond rhetoric. The political parties that have been forced to support him in the nomination will not continue to do so if the policies of Abdul Mahdi affect their interests. These parties are dominated by what is known locally a "whales of corruption", who has the will and capability to hinder all government's efforts to reform. Economic and administrative reform will not take place without the elimination of this corrupt elite, which has root in all the institutions of the state and there are regional countries that support them. Abdul Mahdi admitted just a week before he accepted the nomination that he was unwilling to accept the nomination for prime minister because Iraq was going through a stage where his reform vision could not be achieved. He summarized in an article his current challenges of Iraq in seven points and said that they are insoluble dilemmas in Iraq's internal conditions and external challenges. Adel Abdul Mahdi said that as an economist he understands the importance of relying on the policy of rent economy (total dependence on oil resources). But the Iraqi elite and the current economic structure of Iraq cannot afford this fundamental change. Corruption is rooted in the institutions of the state and this requires a comprehensive revolution and determination on its symbols and causes. Abdul Mahdi believes in the federalism set out in the constitution, but influential circles in Baghdad do not believe in this and insist on centralization.

He said that Iraq needs genuine national reconciliation, which is not appreciated by the stakeholders in Baghdad. Abdel Abdul Mahdi expressed his intention to control the militias and incorporate them within the regular armed forces. He also said that he wanted to reform the relationship with the Kurdistan Regional Government thanks to the historical relationship which he has with its leaders<sup>36</sup>.

These challenges are greater than Abdul-Mahdi, who is not supported by a powerful party bloc, except for Sairun bloc. Sairun has given him conditional support. But the decision-makers, including its leader Mr. Moqtada al-Sadr, who has an unstable and mercurial personality, has given Abdul Mahdi only one year to achieve these difficult reforms, which need at least a decade. Besides, the mood in the Iraqi street is not politically conducive to any concession to be given to the Kurdistan Regional government in the disputed territories. Maliki and Abadi governments' anti-Kurdish stand and the referendum in the region have created a mood which is hostile to the Kurds and federalism<sup>37</sup>. Moreover, Iran funds the militias and to use it for its foreign agenda and will not be subject to the declared policy of Abdul-Mahdi to refrain from regional conflicts. Besides, Hadi al-Amiri, head of the powerful and heavily financed Al-Badr militia bloc, is one of the main parties that enabled Abdul-Mahdi to come to power.

In his discussion of the Abdul Mahdi's government future challenges, Iraqi writer Dr. Harith Hassan points out:

The change in the socio-political conditions and economic structure are insurmountable challenges for a government like that of Abdul Mahdi which lacks strong political party backing and is dependent on consensus, of many parties which is not easy to maintain for a long time. How will he be able to sustain his parliamentary support at the same time carry out major reforms and reduce the discontent of the street which is rising beyond control?<sup>38</sup>. It is worth mentioning that the US government has praised the government formed by Adel Abdul Mahdi and accuses some of the Iraqi parties that they are trying to make this government sectarian like its predecessors. Some Iraqi groups have accused the cabinet which won the confidence of the Iraqi parliament as having several leading personalities who had been associated with the former administration of Paul Bremer, the former US governor in Iraq<sup>39</sup>.

Political Observers pointed out that Adel Abdul Mahdi will focus on defusing internal and regional political tension; he is a man of dialogue and his character is not one that which prefers confrontation. At the regional level, he will pursue a calm approach to the crises in the region and tries to remedy the strained relations of Iraq with some countries, such as Turkey<sup>40</sup>.

## Conclusion

It appears that Trump's foreign policy doctrine is based, to a considerable degree, on a revisionist approach in which he tries to defy his predecessor's approach

in dealing with allies and opponents. This doctrine bears the impact of his personal traits. This can be seen in Trump's persistent attempt to dominate the decision making process in foreign policy and his anti-establishment tendency. Besides , mercantilism is visible in his most foreign policy approaches , especially in his dealings with the Middle East actors. The Trump policy towards Iraq has so far developed within this mercantilist context. In addition , the US administration policy under President Trump has been articulated with the purpose of keeping in line with the fighting of ISIS terror and containing Iran. This policy has far , and it is expected, to have devastating and destabilizing impact on Iraq's national security. For these reasons, the government of Adel Abdul Mahdi needs to tread on a tight rope to maintain Iraq's stated foreign policy of not taking side in the conflict between US and Iran.

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## Kurdistan conflict and Crisis Research Center

### About KCCRC

The Kurdistan Conflict and Crisis Research Center (KCCRC) is an independent and not-for-profit organisation based in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq. KCCRC conducts research and produces policy papers regarding Kurdish, Iraqi and related studies. Within this framework, KCCRC focuses its research on the politics and economics of the region at the macro level, and at the micro level, it concentrates on issues surrounding but not limited to the following;

- Ethnic and Sectarian Conflict
- Terrorism
- Islamism, extremism and radicalisation
- Instability
- Internally displaced peoples
- Oil and Gas
- Political Economy
- Ethnic and Sectarian conflict
- International politics

KCCRC delivers for its clients by using its unique geographic position to take advantage of the expertise of local and international scholars to give the most precise picture of Kurdish, Iraqi and Middle Eastern affairs.

