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Four years of tectonic shifts that redrew the Middle East

What Trump's second administration will face in the region in 2025, compared to what he left in 2021

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Trump returns to a profoundly different Middle East

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The Greek philosopher Heraclitus famously said, "You cannot step into the same river twice." Well, the Middle East that Donald Trump stepped out of in January 2021 is profoundly different to the one that he steps back into in January of 2025. Indeed, to underscore how fast the Middle East river flows, even in the last few days it underwent another profound change with the fall of the Assad regime in Syria.

In 2021, Israel and Iran appeared to be maintaining a long-term and seemingly stable balance of power and deterrence. This was broken in October of last year, when Iranian allies Hamas and Hezbollah — perhaps sensing a decline of unity and deterrence — launched attacks on Israel. The Israeli response, first in Gaza and then in Lebanon, reversed the expectations of Iran's Axis of Resistance and has created an imbalance of power between Israel and Iran decidedly in the former's favor. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime was both a partial consequence and a deepening of this new imbalance of power.

Like all imbalances, it has created risks as well as opportunities. The incoming Trump administration will have to grapple with both. The risks are that a military escalation by Israel against Iran might spiral out of control, with the latter responding with attacks on oil shipping and production facilities in the Gulf, triggering a global energy and economic crisis. Alternatively, or concurrently, Iran might decide to rebuild its lost deterrence by rushing to develop a nuclear weapon, which would also trigger a war with Israel — and the United States. The opportunity is that Iran's acute vulnerability and maximum pressure on it, if it is combined with Trump-led maximum diplomacy, might finally push Tehran into acceding to what's best for the region and I dare say for its own people: walking away from its aggressive "forward defense" strategy, which has been largely destroyed anyway, and normalizing its relations with the region and the world. Trump Nobel?

In the urgent first quarter of 2025, the new US administration is going to have to focus on how to maximize the opportunity while minimizing the risk stemming from the sudden collapse of the Assad regime in Syria. Assad and his father before him cast a long and dark shadow over the Levant for the past half century; the regime's collapse is a cause of intense and bittersweet celebration for Syrians but also an enormous chance for the region. Trump may have used ALL CAPS to say that the US has no interest in Syria, but that is simply not the case. A successful transition in Syria will consolidate Iran's and Russia's defeat and departure from the heart of the Middle East, offering Syrians an opportunity to build stability and economic development for themselves and allowing their regional neighbors to do the same. A failed transition in Syria, on the other hand, might usher that country into a decade or more of renewed civil war, in which Iran and perhaps Russia could find a way back in, in which America's Kurdish allies might suffer greatly, and in which ISIS could make a major resurgence. The US — along with Turkey, the Europeans, and Arab countries — has a critical and fairly low-cost role to play in helping bring about a successful transition. The cost of failure will be much higher.

Finally, today's Middle East has intensely shifted on the Arab-Palestinian issue compared to what Trump faced when he last left the White House. In 2020, his administration had concluded the Abraham Accords normalization deals between Israel and several Arab countries. Those agreements largely sidestepped the Palestinian issue. Israeli, American, and many Arab leaders had concluded, erroneously, that the question of Palestine was no longer central and that the Israeli-dominated status quo over the Palestinians was stable and here to stay — much like the

erroneous miscalculation in the last few years by the same leaders that the Assad-dominated status quo in Syria would endure.

Today, the right-wing Netanyahu-led government has leveraged last year's Hamas attacks to, first, utterly devastate the Gaza Strip and its inhabitants in a now one-sided war that is still ongoing 14 months later and, second, to ramp up the pressure on the civilian population of the West Bank. In the wider Arab and Muslim world, the devastation of the civilian population in Gaza has reignited popular opinion in support of the Palestinian right to self-determination in a way not seen for decades.

The Trump administration will be keen on adding Saudi Arabia to the Abraham Accords countries, but this will not be achieved when a triumphant Israeli right wing is looking forward to annexing most of the West Bank, maintaining a long-term occupation of Gaza, and effectively burying the Palestinian issue. As an Arab Gulf official recently shared with me, his country is eager to engage with Israel, but how can this be achieved if Israel is proposing no alternative besides the permanent subjugation of the Palestinians? This century-old conflict will be harder than the previous two to resolve.

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What a difference four years make in US politics and policy on the Middle East

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When President-elect Donald Trump returns to the White House on Jan. 20, 2025, he will find a Middle East landscape that is dramatically different from the one that existed when he left office in January 2021. The Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023, sparked a conflict that continues to this day and has spread to different corners of the region. During the past five months, Iran and many of its "Axis of Resistance" partners have suffered major setbacks in the Gaza Strip, Lebanon, and now Syria with the collapse of the Assad regime.

Trump is a leader who prides himself on making unexpected moves to gain leverage with foes and friends alike, making it difficult for balanced, clinical analysts and even members of his own team to forecast what he might do on any particular issue in the Middle East.

Given the rapidly changing circumstances in the region, one reasonable prediction is that the incoming Trump administration will likely prioritize the Middle East more in its opening months than the Biden administration did when it came into office in January 2021. The Biden administration faced a set of domestic policy challenges linked to the COVID-19 pandemic and the economic crisis in its early months, and it made the decision to prioritize Asia and Europe over the Middle East in its first year.

The Biden team eventually stepped up its engagement in the region in its second year, driven by higher oil and food prices resulting from Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and China's increased diplomatic involvement in 2023. The second half of Biden's term was dominated by responding to the Israel-Hamas war. The Biden team experienced the limits of its own diplomacy in the region, but it continued to engage in an approach that was mostly reactive to events and can be characterized overall as strategic drift. In its closing weeks, the Biden administration is working hard to build on the November cease-fire between Israel and Hezbollah and produce some results, including a Gaza cease-fire and hostage release.

The increased operational tempo of the US military and diplomats in the waning days of Biden's presidency will likely push the Middle East higher on the Trump team's agenda than it had initially planned. Trump may also have an incentive to prioritize the Middle East more than the Biden team initially did because of his aspirations to expand the signature achievement of his first term, the 2020 Abraham Accords, to include Saudi Arabia and other countries. Trump may also see an opening to make some moves on the unfinished business related to Iran's destabilizing role in the region and its nuclear program. These factors may explain why Trump announced early on appointments for some key Middle East policy making positions below the cabinet level slots.

One factor to watch in 2025 is how the Democratic Party positions itself on Middle East issues. In Trump's first term, some voices on the extreme left in the Democratic Party adopted a polemical rather than pragmatic approach and engaged in neo-Orientalist tactics that used the people and countries of the Middle East as little more than props in America's domestic social and political debates. These tactics did little to produce pathways for progress in the region. Similarly, the often-vociferous debates within the Democratic Party on issues like the Gaza war in 2023 and 2024 failed to build new coalitions to achieve outcomes — and in many ways may have pushed the party further toward the margins of power and influence.

What happens in the Middle East in 2025 will mostly be determined by the key powers within the region. The United States remains the most influential external power, and how the incoming Trump administration and the next Congress engage key regional partners the region will impact

whether the Middle East turns away from war and conflict and toward greater peace, prosperity, and regional integration.

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Post-Assad Syria presents a more complex, nuanced, and urgent challenge to a second Trump administration

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As Donald Trump returns to the White House in January 2025, the situation in Syria could not be more different. Despite having adopted a policy of minimal engagement for much of the past four years, and more recently having considered a possible easing of sanctions on Syria's regime, the rule of Bashar al-Assad rapidly collapsed in December 2024. That dramatic new reality presents an entirely new set of policy challenges, which are a great deal more complex, nuanced, and urgent.

A political transition is currently underway in Damascus, run by Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) — a group that remains a designated terrorist organization in the United States. Notwithstanding the significant complications that HTS's role presents, the transition itself has been remarkably efficient, constructive and stabilizing — at least for now. After three days of face-to-face working consultations between Assad's prior cabinet and the HTS-linked Salvation Government in Damascus, a formal handover has now taken place. Civil servants and public-sector workers are back at work, and Syria's airports will soon be re-opened. Almost every government in the Middle East now has diplomatic communication with HTS and its transitional body, and Syria's diplomatic missions are all still at work, having hoisted the green revolutionary flag. Even Assad's hand-picked ambassador to the United Nations is now issuing formal letters to the UN Security Council under the new HTS-led authority.

The outgoing Biden administration looks to be establishing its own lines of communication with actors on the ground, in close coordination with regional allies, including Qatar and Turkey.

Steps will be taken to begin pulling away the huge set of sanctions enforced against Assad's regime, which should ease pressure on the economy and allow for foreign investment. Given HTS's strong and years-long desire to be delisted, the US has considerable leverage to use to direct the transition underway to move in the right directions — ensuring that the new government slated for creation in March 2025 is credible, inclusive and non-sectarian.

The US also has an acute interest in sustaining the troop presence in northeast Syria, as ISIS is well placed to exploit new vacuums in central and eastern Syria. In doing so, the US faces additional challenges, with its Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) partners more isolated and vulnerable than ever before. While HTS and the SDF have come to a non-aggression pact, the latter group has faced significant escalation from the Turkish-backed Syrian National Army. US-mediated cease-fires have sought to calm SDF-SNA tensions, but the SDF is also losing the allegiance of Sunni communities in Raqqa and Deir ez-Zor, as the anti-regime revolutionary cause surges in popularity. An incoming Trump administration will have a tough challenge on its hands to manage the SDF's fraying at the seams, while still prioritizing the fight against a resurgent ISIS.

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The Red Sea crisis demands a forward-thinking approach to solve the Yemen problem

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This year marks a decade of conflict in Yemen. While the dynamics have shifted considerably in the past three years, peace remains elusive. Yemen's economy is in freefall, with two-thirds of the population requiring humanitarian assistance and 4.5 million Yemenis displaced.

In 2021, the Houthis escalated their offensive, making considerable territorial gains and advancing on Marib city — home to Yemen's oil and natural gas infrastructure and the last stronghold of the Yemeni government in the north. They also increased their cross-border attacks in both number and

frequency, with a 56% rise in combined drone and missile attacks that year. These events allowed the Houthis to dictate the terms of the war and marked a turning point in the conflict.

The relentless cross-border aggression compelled Saudi Arabia to reassess its involvement in Yemen, leading to the United Nations-sponsored cease-fire in April 2022. Saudi-Houthi talks, combined with the transfer of power from President Abed Rabbo Mansour Hadi to an eight-member Presidential Leadership Council (PLC), were intended to pave the way for comprehensive political negotiations. Despite these efforts, peace has remained a distant goal.

The Houthis' rise to power is, in part, a direct consequence of the international community's response, which has been reactive, relying on containment strategies that have failed to deliver results. Diplomacy alone has been unable to hold the Houthis accountable for their violent actions, signalling weakness that the Houthis have exploited repeatedly to consolidate their control. Airstrikes by the United States and United Kingdom against Houthi targets, meant to deter their aggression, have also fallen short, and the group has continued to escalate its attacks.

The Houthis have consistently demonstrated an ability to use negotiations as a stalling mechanism and violence as a means to extract concessions from the Yemeni government, the Saudis, and the international community. This pattern, evident since the beginning of the war, has allowed the group to secure tactical advantages. The UN roadmap announced in December 2023 has been similarly undermined by the Houthis' actions, including unprecedented attacks on shipping in the Red Sea and Israel. These acts invited retaliatory strikes by the US, the UK, and Israel, further complicating the conflict.

The Houthis' attacks, branded as part of a "battle of Promised Conquest and Holy Jihad," are ostensibly aimed at pressuring Israel over the Gaza war. In reality, they reflect the Houthis' ambitions to assert themselves as a regional power. Internally, they have established a theocratic authoritarian regime marked by repression and systematic indoctrination. Stepping up their recruitment, the Houthis announced they have enlisted 370,000 new fighters and, in the summer of 2024 alone, 1.1 million children graduated from their ideological training camps. This underscores their commitment to militarizing society.

Externally, the Houthis are emerging as Iran's most capable regional proxy, especially in light of the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the dramatic weakening of Hezbollah in Lebanon. Their growing military capabilities, including advanced weapons supplied by Iran, enable them to threaten international shipping. They are also creating their own "Axis of Disruption," forging alliances with terrorist groups like al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, al-Shabaab in Somalia, and ISIS. Additionally, an emerging collaboration with Russia, reportedly including recruitment of fighters for Ukraine and support for Red Sea attacks, further highlights their expanding global connections. This positions the Houthis not only as a local threat but as a destabilizing force

across the broader region, undermining Western interests and exporting their revolutionary model.

The international community's blindness to these realities has emboldened the Houthis since 2014 and continues to do so today, allowing them to reshape the regional landscape in line with their ideological ambitions. To navigate the complexities of the Yemen conflict, the international community, and now the incoming Trump administration, must learn from the mistakes of the past. The Houthis' rise to power has been fuelled by reactive, short-term strategies that failed to address the group's broader ambitions. This moment presents an opportunity for the United States to adopt a forward-thinking, strategic approach that prioritizes long-term solutions over crisis management.

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Iran must choose a path as Trump reenters the picture

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In the four years since President Donald Trump left the White House, Iran's international, regional, and domestic affairs have experienced a whirlwind of turbulence. Pressure on the Islamist regime is expected to increase if it continues to insist on dodging domestic policy reform and necessary compromises.

Setting aside the issue of who is to blame, Tehran has been unable to bring about the end of sanctions that have devastated its economy. Concepts touted by the regime, such as the "resistance economy" and "self-sufficiency," proved largely to be only slogans. The best Tehran could achieve was an informal deal with Joe Biden's White House: in exchange for refraining from weaponizing its nuclear program, Washington looked the other way as Iran sold its oil to China.

While Iran saw a major increase in oil exports between 2021 and 2024, positive spillover effects were elusive. Ever greater numbers of Iranians fell into poverty, more emigrated, and the

general sense of hopelessness reached new depths. Meanwhile, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei struggled to dampen public anger.

In 2021, he engineered for the hardliner Ebrahim Raisi to become president. Khamenei's hope was that full control of all levers of power (presidency and parliament) by the hardline faction would yield better governance. That did not happen, and instead Khamenei began to fear the predatory ways of the far-right. Raisi's death in a helicopter crash in 2024 was an opportunity for Khamenei to go in a new direction.

President Masoud Pezeshkian, his successor, speaks to the grievances of Iranians, but he has so far proven incapable of changing unpopular policies or initiating meaningful reform. For example, he vowed to fight against mandatory veiling for women and internet censorship but has been stopped at every turn by the rest of the regime. It is no wonder the average Iranian sees Pezeshkian as someone put in the presidential office to divert the public's anger, not as a man who can bring about real change.

The silver bullet to counter sanctions and mitigate against economic protest was meant to be Khamenei's "Look East" policy, which led to Tehran's controversial backing of Russia's war against Ukraine. But while Russia and China have given diplomatic support to Tehran in its conflict with Western powers, they have not been able to stop the fast decline of the Iranian economy, about which even the most senior officials openly warn of an impending cataclysm.

Meanwhile, Tehran's regional fortunes have been in free-fall since the Hamas attack on Israel on Oct. 7, 2023. The Israeli decision — backed by its Western allies — to confront Tehran's regional partners, from Hamas to Hezbollah to the regime of Bashar al-Assad, has put Iran in a bind as it navigates the fast-changing environment to its disadvantage. The challenge is plain: should leaders in Tehran focus on nation-building and delivering the basic needs of the Iranian people or stay the course and pursue the costly and permanent campaign against the United States and Israel?

Certainly, the "shadow war" between Iran and the Israeli-US alliance is no longer tenable. Tehran must decide to double-down or change course. It remains to be seen if the incoming Trump administration can find the necessary combination of pressure and incentives to force the leadership's hand.

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On Israel-Palestine dire conditions, formidable challenges as Trump returns to office

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While dynamics on the Israeli-Palestinian front were already quite negative when Donald Trump left office four years ago, the reality today, on the eve of his return to the White House, is nothing short of catastrophic. The first half of Joe Biden's presidency saw the West Bank explode into the deadliest violence in the region in 20 years as well as the election in Israel of the most extreme government in the country's history. Moreover, since then, Hamas's Oct. 7, 2023, attack marked the deadliest day in Israel's history, while Israel's shockingly disproportionate response has led to apocalyptic levels of death and destruction in Gaza, including some 45,000 killed, the vast majority of them civilians, 90 percent of its 2.3 million people uprooted, and most of its civilian infrastructure reduced to rubble. Meanwhile, Israeli restrictions on food, medicine, and other lifesaving aid have led to widespread starvation and disease as well as accusations that Israel is using starvation as a weapon of war. Conditions are especially alarming in northern Gaza, which is being flattened and depopulated at this very moment. Meanwhile, internal Palestinian politics continue to be plagued by fragmentation, paralysis, and an acute leadership vacuum. If prospects for a negotiated two-state solution were already dim before Oct. 7, they are all but shattered today, even as the conditions are being laid for generations of instability, violence, and radicalization.

Looking ahead, the challenges both for and under a Trump administration will be formidable. Renewed cease-fire talks in Gaza after months of diplomatic stagnation, along with reports that Trump is eager to see the war concluded by the time he takes office next month, could finally bring an end to the horrific war in Gaza. Beyond a cease-fire, however, Trump is unlikely to invest significant bandwidth or political capital in the Palestinian issue. As a result, Israel will continue to have a free hand in both the West Bank and Gaza. At best, Trump will keep providing unlimited weapons as well as diplomatic support to Israel — but without the pretense of concern for civilian lives, US law, or international law that prevailed during the Biden administration. At worst, Trump could green light the ethnic cleansing in Gaza and formal annexation in the West Bank now being advocated by members of Benjamin Netanyahu's government.

There are three possible exceptions to this that create both opportunities and challenges. One wild card will be a potential Saudi-Israeli normalization deal. Although Trump is committed to expanding the Abraham Accords, whether it is possible to find a formula that satisfies both the Saudis' need to show meaningful progress on the Palestinian front and Netanyahu's need to maintain the support of his far-right, annexationist coalition partners seems highly questionable. The second relates to internal Palestinian politics. The likely departure of 89-year-old Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas in the coming years will create an opening for a more credible and representative leadership to emerge but could just as well lead to power struggles and chaos. Regardless, any unitary leadership, which will by definition require the consent and cooperation of all factions, including Hamas, would pose a direct challenge to the Israeli government and the Trump administration, neither of which is likely to tolerate any role for Hamas in Palestinian politics.

Finally, there is the new dimension of international justice. The unprecedented rulings by the International Court of Justice (ICJ), which already found that Israel's occupation was unlawful and tantamount to apartheid as well as a "plausible" risk of genocide in Gaza, and the International Criminal Court (ICC), which has issued arrest warrants for Israeli leaders on charges of war crimes and crimes against humanity, could impose constraints on Israeli conduct where American and international diplomacy have failed. Trump and congressional Republicans have rejected these rulings and vowed to punish the ICC or any government that complies with its ruling, threatening the viability of these institutions and the very concept of a rules-based international system.

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Four years of political, diplomatic, and security transitions in Israel, but Oct. 7 overshadows it all

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When Donald Trump enters the White House, his counterpart in Jerusalem will still be Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, the same Israeli leader Trump worked with during his first term. But other than that, since early 2021 and especially following the Hamas terrorist attack of Oct. 7, 2023, much has changed in Israeli politics, diplomacy, and security.

The trauma of Oct. 7 overshadows it all. It was a game-changing moment for Israel, in terms of suffering mass losses, shattering deep-rooted societal beliefs, and jeopardizing the sense of security. Oct. 7 still lives on in the Israeli mindset. This is likely to continue during Trump's second term and to bring multiple domestic and regional ripple effects.

Over the last four years, Israel has experienced an uptick in democratic backsliding, highly impacted by Netanyahu's handling of corruption charges against him. The judicial overhaul advanced by the current Israeli coalition since December 2022 is the decisive element. In the V-Dem 2024 global index, Israel was no longer ranked as a "liberal democracy" — for the first time in this index's history.

In parallel, far-right extremism has been increasingly mainstreamed and legitimized. Ministers Itamar Ben-Gvir and Bezalel Smotrich were on the fringe of Israeli politics a few years ago but are now in charge of powerful cabinet portfolios. Netanyahu's political calculations led him to rely on far-right support. Extremism has a growing impact on Israeli political discourse, decision-making processes, and security realities. It is coupled with increased populism, including within Netanyahu's own party, leading ministers to blame the security and legal establishments for Oct. 7 and for seeking to topple Netanyahu.

Many Israelis are appalled by these changes, and a majority seeks early elections. Unlike in early 2021, Israelis now have a political model of what a new order could look like. The "government of change" led by Naftali Bennett and Yair Lapid in 2021-2022 was the broadest coalition Israel has ever had in ideological terms and even included — for the first time — an Arab party. It prioritized national interests and good governance, and it managed to achieve

progress on some key issues. Although short-lived, the Bennett-Lapid government made the previously abstract possibility of the day after Netanyahu vivid.

Some notable changes also took place in Israel's foreign policy and security arenas. In early 2021, the Abraham Accords were still new, with their fate uncertain. Four years later, their resilience — even in the wake of the war in Gaza — has become clear. Formally engaging with Israel was a strategic decision for the Arab countries involved. It serves their interests and needs, remains intact, and holds potential for broader regional cooperation and normalization (including with Saudi Arabia) once the war ends. Moreover, Israel and Lebanon managed to reach two ad-hoc arrangements, in 2022 (the maritime border deal) and 2024 (the Israel-Hezbollah cease-fire), which highlight the future potential of diplomacy in driving even further progress in this bilateral relationship.

The war in Gaza did, however, limit the scope and visibility of Israel-Arab cooperation; generate a crisis in Israel-Turkey relations after a lengthy process of rapprochement; and damage Israel's global standing, leading to unprecedented legal procedures against it, widespread criticism, and an uptick in boycotts — especially in academia, culture, and sports. The war has also resulted in a renewed — and possibly long-term — Israeli military presence in the Gaza Strip, and to additional obstacles on the pathway toward an Israeli-Palestinian two-state solution.

The most dramatic geopolitical change, which is currently taking shape and would have repercussions during Trump's second term is the weakening of the Iran-led Axis of Resistance. Israel's military achievements against Hamas and Hezbollah, attacks in Iran, and efforts to de-weaponize Syria following the toppling of Bashar al-Assad create an improved regional security landscape for Israel as a new administration prepares to re-enter the White House.

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Under Donald Trump, Washington can decisively defeat Hezbollah

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The Levant is unrecognizable. Bashar al-Assad is gone, Hezbollah is decapitated, and Iran — once the looming shadow convinced of its inevitable rise — is in descent. What was once dismissed as wishful thinking by Washington's foreign policy establishment is now unfolding before our eyes. Lebanon, long and needlessly surrendered to be inevitably lost to Hezbollah and Iran, stands at the threshold of a transformative moment — and Donald Trump is entering office with the unprecedented opportunity to redefine its future.

When Trump left office in early 2021, Lebanon was in disarray, yet, as always, there was enough hope to hold on. The country was in freefall, battered by an unprecedented financial collapse, yet the nationwide protest movement — despite setbacks from the pandemic — remained determined to reform Lebanon's dysfunctional political system.

In the years that followed, hope would rise and fall. On Aug. 4, 2020, Beirut's port was rocked by a devastating blast that obliterated the capital. The explosion embodied Lebanon's dysfunction: Hezbollah had turned the country into a hub for Iran's broader Axis of Resistance, while a corrupt political class, beholden to Hezbollah, bankrupted the state. Yet in an important lesson for policymakers often resigned to the inevitabilities of geopolitics, the aftermath revealed a willingness among the Lebanese to fight for a new future.

Judge Tarek Bitar's push to investigate, with significant public backing despite Hezbollah's intimidation, demonstrated that proponents of the state still existed within Lebanon's institutions. But Hezbollah's ability to obstruct the investigation underscored the difficulties of upholding the state when faced with a deeply illiberal opponent, armed and protected by a regional hegemon.

That coercive ability has been devastated by the Israel-Hezbollah war. Intelligence reports confirm significant weakening of its stockpiles, and its retreat from Syria will hinder efforts to regroup and rearm. However, the full extent of the damage, including the psychological blow from Hassan Nasrallah's assassination, is still unfolding. Most striking, perhaps, is the overwhelming rejection by the Lebanese people of Hezbollah's role in bringing this calamity upon them. The war has already cost the bankrupt country billions and displaced over a million

people still reeling from its protracted economic crisis. This is not 2006. Hezbollah has not only lost the war — it has lost the Lebanese. The question that should be on the mind of the new administration is whether the militia will be allowed to retain the arms to continue to impose its control over Lebanon.

It would be a mistake for a new administration to consider either the rise or fall of Hezbollah as inevitable. The leadership in Washington will be faced with tough choices. But still, a battle against an Iranian adversary that can be won is an outcome that would benefit the Lebanese, the US, and the region. The first step is finally realizing Lebanon's strategic importance: as the arena where Iran's vision for the region will succeed or fail. Amidst the rapidly changing context that followed the Arab uprisings, Iran leveraged Hezbollah to sustain Assad's brutal regime in Syria and engineer its regional network of armed actors. Hezbollah was more than the blueprint — it was the chief trainer that helped Iran build up its "unity of the fronts" strategy.

The way forward is clear: disarm Hezbollah. The alternative — allowing Hezbollah to remain armed and giving it time to regroup — will only condemn Lebanon and the region to further failure. Washington must rally its local and regional partners to reject consensus on Lebanon and instead focus on empowering strong Lebanese leaders committed to restoring the integrity of the state and reforming its broken political economy. The fight must be carried out by the Lebanese themselves — but Washington can at least ensure they take on that fight free from the threat of Hezbollah's weapons. As a new administration revises its strategy for Iran, it must not compromise on Lebanon. By returning to a maximum pressure strategy, the US can force Iran to abandon its "forward defense" doctrine and concede Hezbollah's disarmament. Only then can Lebanon be given a fighting chance to emerge as a functional state and reliable partner, instead of remaining Iran's strategic hub — one that has so effectively disrupted the region's security landscape that it has left behind a string of failed states. By pressing Iran to relinquish Hezbollah's arms and empowering a new, credible Lebanese leadership to push out a discredited political class, Lebanon can transform from the platform for Iran's malign regional agenda to a functioning, sovereign state that can rewrite its future and redefine its place in the region.

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The perils of neglecting a more unstable Red Sea region and Horn of Africa

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A quick glance at the current turbulence in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa might lead observers to think that area was suddenly plunging into turmoil. Yemen's Houthis are at the epicenter of this instability, as the Iran-backed militia has been attacking shipping along one of the world's most essential maritime routes, ostensibly to protest the Israeli assault on Gaza. Conflicts in Sudan, Somalia, and Ethiopia — all of which are undergoing vulnerable transitions of various sorts — are rippling out beyond their borders, creating an emboldened set of actors capable of challenging and posing a direct threat to Western interests. Those actors are themselves being supported by external players. These developments have not come about suddenly, however.

During President-elect Donald Trump's previous term in office, Middle Eastern states, particularly Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Turkey, became increasingly involved in the Horn of Africa. With its arable lands and ports as well as its crucial position as a link between the Red Sea, the Indo-Pacific, and the Mediterranean, the region has always been hugely important for the Gulf states. Between 2000 and 2017, they poured $13 billion in investment into local countries as their involvement in, and competition over, the region dramatically accelerated. By the end of Trump's first term, several things had become clear. Firstly, regional influence had split into two shifting but largely consistent camps: Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and, to a lesser extent, Egypt on the one hand, and Qatar and Turkey on the other. The second was that even though it effectively controls 12% of global trade, the region somehow failed to register as a US foreign policy priority, despite the presence of several core interests. Under President Trump, strategic competition with China and Russia were overwhelmingly the top foreign policy priorities. Consequently, external players continued to jockey for power in a region undergoing fragile transitions with increasingly high stakes.

Several years on, the situation has only become more complex. Sudan's transition has disintegrated into a ruinous civil war that has killed over 60,000 people and precipitated the world's largest displacement crisis.

An agreement between Ethiopia and Somaliland to lease a port in return for Ethiopia's recognition of the breakaway republic enraged Somalia, which drew closer to Egypt and Eritrea, further stirring a pot that was already threatening to boil over.

The US has remained consistent in its absence. The Biden administration has not prioritized the crises in the Horn of Africa in particular in any meaningful manner; and while it is too soon to glean any realistic insights into how the Trump administration will proceed, it's very unlikely that it will be more engaged. That would be a mistake. The Houthi attacks on Red Sea shipping, which have crippled one of the world's most crucial maritime routes, are a clear illustration of how an apparently localized issue can rapidly become a global problem. There needs to be a diplomatic strategy to ensure that the countries of the region do not simply become political footballs for competing outside powers. US assistance needs to be weighted toward inclusive growth and legitimate governance to buttress the vulnerabilities of poverty and conflict; and the direct connection between the region and global trade and security needs to be emphasized. There is no shortage of international interest in the Red Sea and Horn of Africa, and if the US does not take steps to ensure its core interests there, then it risks being displaced.

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Turkey on a better foreign policy footing as Trump returns to office

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When Donald Trump left office in 2021, Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan was struggling with a host of domestic and regional challenges. In 2019, his ruling Justice and Development Party (AKP) had lost almost all of the country's major cities in municipal elections and the Turkish economy was facing a number of problems. The Turkish lira had lost more than 40 percent of its value against the dollar and the country's debt had been downgraded by Moody's and Standard & Poor's. Trump's decision to impose double tariffs on Turkish metal exports to put pressure on Ankara to release a jailed American clergyman had contributed to the country's economic woes.

Erdoğan was facing problems on the foreign policy front as well. Chief among them was Turkey's relations with the United States. Turkey had received the Russian S-400 missile-defense system in July 2019, straining ties with its North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) partners, particularly the US. Washington was worried about the S-400s' compatibility with NATO systems and the potential security risks it posed to the F-35 fighter jet program. Bilateral ties received a further blow when Washington decided to remove Turkey from the F-35 program and slapped sanctions on Ankara. Turkey's military operation against the Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia — a key US ally in the fight against ISIS that Ankara considers a terrorist organization — complicated relations even more. At the time, Turkey was also trying to repair its fraught relations with Middle Eastern countries, badly damaged by its support for Islamists trying to topple regional autocrats.

As Trump prepares to return to the White House in January 2025, Ankara finds itself better positioned on the foreign policy front this time around. Turkey has normalized ties with former regional foes such as Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and Saudi Arabia. Russia's 2022 invasion of Ukraine turned Turkey into an important Western partner in efforts to mediate the conflict. There are still problems in Turkey-US ties but the countries have found common ground in places like the Black Sea and Africa. The ouster of Bashar al-Assad in Syria further strengthens Ankara's hand on the foreign policy front as Western and Arab countries turn to Turkey to discuss the country's post-Assad future.

Erdoğan still faces a challenging domestic environment, but Assad's ouster could offer him opportunities there too. One of the biggest problems he faces at home is Turkey's 3.6 million Syrian refugees. With Assad gone, many of them may return to Syria and he can tell his constituency that the problem has been solved.

This context may help Turkish-US ties under the second Trump presidency as well. One key factor that will affect how relations evolve is whether the incoming American president decides to withdraw troops from Syria. If he does, that will remove one of the thorniest issues in bilateral ties: US cooperation with the YPG. Ankara is then likely to strengthen its relations with the new US administration by committing to the fight against ISIS, curbing Iran's influence, and playing an active role in ending the war in Ukraine.

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Geostrategic shifts have deepened divisions between Arab Gulf states and Israel, challenging assumptions for Trump II

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The conventional wisdom is that Donald Trump's second administration will seek to follow the same Middle East playbook as during its first term, emphasizing support for Israel and its anti-Iran coalition with Gulf partners as well as anticipating that Gulf leaders will continue to demonstrate little regard for Palestinian interests while pursuing normalization agreements with Jerusalem. Dramatic shifts in conditions and the balance of power in the region may make that plan inoperable. The Hamas attack of Oct. 7, 2023, and Israel's military response have brought dramatic changes to the regional security environment but also increased Arab popular opposition to normalization with Israel, including in Saudi Arabia. Anger and frustration in the Arab world have frozen further expansion of the Abraham Accords, reduced the influence of the United States, and reignited Arab public support for the Palestinian cause. Meantime, with support from Iran, the Houthis have used their military position on northern Yemen's Red Sea coast to demonstrate support for Hamas and the Palestinians, threatening international shipping in the Red Sea, Bab al-Mandeb, and Gulf of Aden and menacing Israel itself with offensive weapons, making the group a leading source of regional as well as Yemeni internal tension and instability.

As the geopolitical sands have shifted, so, too have Gulf political alignments. Encouraged by expanding Russian and Chinese influence, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have engaged in a detente with Iran and are committed to reducing tensions in the Persian Gulf arena. The GCC members have welcomed visits by senior Iranian leaders in recent months, joining them in condemning Israel's military operations in Gaza and Lebanon and declaring that they will remain neutral in the event of future Israel-Iran confrontations. With the collapse of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria and the significant debilitation of Hamas and Hezbollah, however, Iran is in a much weaker position than it has been in decades. Iran's diminished power may provide Riyadh with new leverage to secure Tehran's cooperation in ending the Yemeni civil war. Its efforts to resolve that conflict have been put on hold because of the Gaza war and the Houthi response in support of the Palestinians. In the absence of a resolution of the Gaza problem, the Saudis and their Gulf partners have tread carefully in challenging the Houthis. Their caution is motivated by concerns that a strong stance regarding the group's maritime

attacks would be deeply unpopular at home should it be perceived as supporting Israel and that it could trigger a renewal of Houthi attacks against the Saudis and the GCC states more broadly. Thus, the incoming Trump administration will need to balance between deepening divisions between Israel and the Gulf, whereas during the first term there was a general alignment among these key US partners.

The incoming administration will encounter a stronger, more independent partner in Iraq

Robert S. Ford
Senior Fellow

In 2025, the United States-led coalition forces that help train and support Iraqi counter-terrorism units will withdraw a substantial portion of their troops, as agreed between the Iraqi government and the Biden administration in September. Some American forces will remain, including elements at an airport near Erbil, the capital of Iraqi Kurdistan, but those, too, likely will depart in 2026 unless the Iraqi government asks them to extend. Iraqi security forces, with coalition support, have grown stronger and more capable and now lead counter-terrorism efforts in Iraq. In December 2024, the United Nations special envoy to Iraq told the Security Council that Iraq was safer and more stable than it had been for the previous 10 years. Iraq has enjoyed success against the Islamic State, but Iran-backed Shi'a Islamist militias continue to operate in the country. Tehran will redouble efforts to sustain its influence in Iraq after setbacks in Lebanon and Syria. The militias might test American patience again with new harassing attacks, but there is no political appetite in Baghdad for a battle against remaining American forces in Iraq or Syria. Instead, Iraq hopes to build a positive relationship with the incoming administration of Donald Trump.

The Iraqi government seeks the role of a bridge between Iran and regional and international states and will gently assert more independence. Notably, Iraqi political parties, including the Shi'a Islamist parties in coalition in the government, were reluctant to see Iraq dragged into the last stage of the Syrian civil war, leaving the Iran-backed militias politically isolated and more

hesitant to intervene in Syria. Baghdad will seek to further bolster relations with Gulf states and Jordan in 2025. It will also watch developments in Syria with great interest. There is fear among some communities in Iraq that Islamist terrorists could again cross into Iraq from Syria as occurred in 2014. The Iran-backed militias will exploit that fear to try to attract public support.

Prime Minister Mohammed Shia al-Sudani will be up for reelection in 2025. His government faces a wiretapping scandal, and his Shi'a Islamist political allies might desert him. The prime minister, however, has developed political ties to several important southern governors and elements of Iraq's Kurdish and Sunni Arab communities. He might be able to establish himself independently from the Shi'a Islamist political coalition that brought him to power. Meanwhile, the Iraqi economy is in full rebuilding mode. An American business magazine in November said Iraq has about $400 billion in construction and investment projects underway or in planning. Climate change and drought represent major challenges for Iraq in the longer term and already post a serious threat to its economy and public health.

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North African and Sahel countries increasingly seek partnerships far beyond the US and Europe

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The past four years revealed growing misalignment between Western interests and domestic priorities in North Africa and the Sahel. Unlike previous periods of global contestation, today's environment features more diffuse power centers and more local agency. States are not choosing sides in a Cold War-like ideological contest — rather, they are building diverse partnerships based on practical considerations, often diverging from their historical relationships with the West. This is strategic autonomy in action, and it is as observable in North Africa as in other regions around the world.

North Africa's transformation is clear. Tunisia under President Kais Saied — who has been quickly rolling back his country's post-Arab Spring democratic

gains in recent years, while reaching out to autocratic regimes around the world for economic and political support — directly challenges Western models, affecting Mediterranean stability and migration flows. Morocco has deepened its ties with Israel via the Abraham Accords while expanding military cooperation with Turkey, India, and China, building a web of partnerships that serve its regional ambition. Though still an ally of the West, Morocco demonstrates how regional states can pursue autonomous policies that, even when they occasionally align with US strategic goals, are on their own terms. Morocco is looking to leverage these multifaceted partnerships into international support on the issue of Western Sahara; indeed, Rabat's position on the status of this territory has very gradually gained more acceptance, particularly since the first Trump administration's recognition of its claims in 2020. Algeria, meanwhile, is looking to regain its regional clout after having settled its domestic transition. It is now also diversifying its foreign partnerships in an effort to maximize its geopolitical positioning. Given Algeria's historical proximity to Russia and strong economic cooperation with China, such overtures paradoxically open the door to more engagement from European neighbors concerned about Moscow's and Beijing's growing influence on the southern side of the Mediterranean basin.

The divergence the Sahel has experienced between early 2021 and today is even starker. New military-led governments in Mali, Burkina Faso, and Niger have rejected French forces, welcomed Russian military contractors, and formed the Alliance of Sahel States — a direct challenge to Western security frameworks. Turkey and the United Arab Emirates increasingly compete for influence in this region through defense agreements, while China is building long-term economic leverage through infrastructure and resource extractions, particularly in sectors critical for energy transition technologies.

These misalignments complicate the United States' ability to secure its strategic interests. The Sahel's security shift affects counterterrorism capabilities, creates greater openings for extremists, and challenges US military reach in the region. In North Arica, these shifting alignments impact crucial dynamics from Mediterranean security to trade and energy flows to migration controls. China's growing commercial presence, particularly in critical minerals and technology infrastructure, could constrain future US economic and security cooperation options. Meanwhile Russia's opportunistic military presence in several local countries, including Mali, Libya, and Niger, complicate regional security cooperation.

The key for US policy, and what the next administration will have to grapple with, is recognizing that while Washington cannot reverse this trend toward greater regional autonomy, it can protect core American and Western interests through focused engagements in areas of genuine mutual benefit. This means leveraging the United States' unique advantages in technology, private-sector investment, and security cooperation — but doing so through frameworks that respect local sovereignty and domestic priorities while advancing specific US objectives.

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Black Sea region in disarray as Trump returns to the scene

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In the four years since President Donald Trump left office, the Black Sea region has transformed into one of the most insecure areas in the world. The legacy of the first Trump administration for Central and Eastern Europe is a positive one. From Ukraine to Romania, US military support under Trump, such as the delivery of Javelin anti-tank missiles for Ukraine, and his administration's pushback against China in the context of great power competition, left this corner of Europe relatively stable and American commitments there unquestioned. But that temporary calm was shattered when Russia's full-scale-invasion of Ukraine in February 2022 catapulted the Black Sea region into the headlines. The brutality and extent of the Russian aggression devastated Ukraine in what has become the largest war in Europe since World War II. The war has sown turmoil far beyond the frontlines of southeastern Ukraine. Millions of Ukrainian refugees have fled to surrounding countries, while many, including thousands of children, were forcibly relocated inside the Russian Federation; at the same time, Russian military operations and its blockade of Ukrainian ports disrupted vital grain exports on which millions in developing countries across Asia and North Africa depend.

For nearly three years now, Ukrainian resistance has depended on the continued flow of financial and material support from its Western partners. But as the latter's — often already aging — stockpiles have become drawn down, it has spurred these countries to invest more into their military-industrial capacities. Likewise, the Russian aggression has galvanized the buildup of military reinforcements along the North Atlantic Treaty Organization's (NATO) eastern flank and elevated defense budgets across the alliance.

As another winter sets in, the only (potential) end in sight for the war is President-elect Trump's promise to bring about a cease-fire. But this pledge entails its own risks for long-term peace and stability in the wider Black Sea region if the settlement is temporary or lacks concrete security guarantees for Ukraine that would enable it to sustainably rebuild.

Meanwhile, the war in Ukraine has already had critical economic and political effects for the region. Inflation, particularly in the energy and agricultural sectors, and the severing of established trade flows — a direct consequence of the conflict itself as well as from the passage of sanctions in response — have generated growing political instability. In Bulgaria, the seventh

round of elections in four years has not yet resulted in the formation of a government. In Romania, shocking presidential election results in early December catapulted an extreme-right candidate into first place in the first round, leading to the annulment of the vote by the country's constitutional court, based on alleged evidence of foreign, presumably Russian, interference in the campaign. In the South Caucasus, the situation is just as volatile. Armenia and Azerbaijan have engaged in armed conflict over Karabakh twice, in 2020 and 2023; peace negotiations are ongoing but unlikely to reach any sort of resolution until well into 2025. In Georgia, accusations of rigged election results and pro-Russian laws enforced by the ruling Georgian Dream party resulted in the European Union freezing of the country's integration process. This has sparked massive, continuous demonstrations over the past several weeks. Finally, direct Iranian and North Korean support for Russia's war in Ukraine, along with tacit but crucial backing from China, are contributing to regional instability as well as raising concerns in Western capitals about the developing nature and scope of these powers' cooperation in the Black Sea region and around the globe.

When Donald Trump returns to the White House, he will find the Black Sea region in disarray. Russia's aggression in Ukraine, patterns of cooperation with Iran, North Korea, and China, and spillover effects across the region ought to place it at the top of the administration's foreign and security policy agenda.

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Afghanistan and Pakistan now a vastly different landscape but unlikely to regain Washington's close attention

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The Afghanistan and Pakistan that a second Donald Trump administration will confront are vastly different from what existed when his first term ended in January 2021. At that point, President Ashraf Ghani and his government still had control of Kabul and provincial capitals, although the country was deep in the throes of a civil war in which insurgent Taliban forces were poised to make major gains. Under President Trump, the American military presence had been drawn down to only 2,500 troops and a peace deal negotiated with the Taliban in Doha was about to be signed. The centerpiece of that agreement was the departure of all American troops in a few short months. The document's terms also all called upon the Taliban to negotiate with other Afghans on forming an ideologically and ethnically inclusive government and included a Taliban pledge that Afghan soil would be not used to export terrorism.

In Pakistan, a government headed by Prime Minister Imran Khan seemed comfortably in power four years ago, due in no small way to the backing of the military, which had aided in its ascent in the 2018 elections. The prime minister remained popular with the public, but he and his government faced increasing criticism as incompetent and ineffective at addressing the country's mounting social and economic problems. The government was also dealing with a surge of terrorist activity from Pakistan's own Taliban sanctuaries in Afghanistan and a stubborn, ethnically based insurgency in Balochistan. With the war dragging on in Afghanistan, American relations with Pakistan had cooled considerably during the Trump administration, and President Trump openly accused the country of having deceived the US in taking American funding but failing to crack down on the Afghan Taliban. Yet relations had improved by 2020 as the Pakistan military reportedly used its influence with the Taliban to facilitate the Doha agreement.

As Trump again assumes office, the American military presence in Afghanistan has been gone from the country for three and a-half years and the Taliban, following the collapse of the Ghani government, is firmly in control. The US is living with the stain of its hasty departure and has for the most part disengaged diplomatically from the country. Like the rest of the international community, Washington has refused to officially recognize the Kabul government but has not

followed many countries in gradually granting the regime de facto recognition. Even so, a Trump administration will inherit what has been a more than $3 billion humanitarian aid program for Afghanistan that has also propped up its economy, while the American public remains deeply troubled over the Taliban's human right rights practices, above all the treatment of girls and women.

Pakistan also looks strikingly different than it did four years ago. Imran Khan is in prison, having been ousted by opposition parties assisted in March 2023 by a military that had grown displeased by his often independent-minded domestic and foreign policies. The once close ties between Pakistan and the Afghan Taliban have been replaced by a tense relationship over Kabul's unwillingness to fully rein in the hosted Pakistani Taliban. The US relationship with the Islamabad government has normalized and some assistance programs have resumed, but their interests clash, especially over Pakistan's increasing economic integration with China and its budding defense and economic ties to Russia.

Neither Afghanistan nor Pakistan appears likely to figure prominently on the foreign policy agenda of a second Trump administration. Despite current expectations in Kabul and Islamabad that the US might now break from President Joe Biden's standoffish policies by directing greater attention to the two countries' problems, the opposite seems more probable. With the incoming administration in Washington expected to be more transactional while weakening international ties and cutting funding commitments, only a major terrorist attack on the US or its Western allies traceable to Afghanistan or Pakistan might again bring them to center stage.

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