



## US presidential elections: foreign policy candidate's program Analysis

Arab Forum For alternatives

### Arab Forum for Alternatives (AFA)

**Address :** 5 ,Al-Mesaha St., Fourth Floor, App. 4, Dokki, Giza, Egypt

**Telefax:** +202-37629937

**Mail:** [info@afaegypt.org](mailto:info@afaegypt.org)

**Website:** [www.afaegypt.org](http://www.afaegypt.org)

**Twitter:** AFAalternatives

**Facebook :** <https://www.facebook.com/AFAalternatives>

<http://www.facebook.com/groups/113792226817/>

**Skype:** arab.forum.for.alternatives

**Youtube:** <https://www.youtube.com/channel/UCOoJBExCeXW7bO5JMaSPd1Q>



## **Introduction:**

Presidential elections in the United States come at a critical time for foreign policy. The next American Administration will be facing a number of international crises, many of which associated with the Middle East. US-Russian relations have gone sour since the annexation of Crimea, which constitutes a threat to US NATO allies, and most recently over the Syrian conflict. Added to this are the remarkable escalation of terrorist operations and the unprecedented influx of refugees mostly from regions in which the US has been intervening in one way or another.

The upcoming elections, due to be held on November 8, 2016, are the 58<sup>th</sup> in the history of the United States. Primary elections were completed in February 2016 with Donald Trump as the Republican candidate and Hillary Clinton as the Democratic candidate. The two candidates went through three debates held on September 26, October 9, and October 19, 2016. The two candidates also gave a number of statements and press interviews that underlined the main features of their prospective foreign policy.

This paper tackles each of the candidates' vision as far as foreign policy is concerned, with special emphasis on the impact on the Middle East. The Middle East had previously been among the top priorities of US foreign policy, but this has changed particularly after the series of revolutions that took place in the Arab region. The Administration started paying more attention to other parts of the world at the expense of the Middle East and also focused more on the domestic arena that has still not recovered from the 2008 financial crisis. Other factors contributed to US partial withdrawal from the Middle East such as the decline of dependence on fossil fuel, the growing power of Israel as many of its neighboring countries collapse, and the United States' reluctance to engage in any military action in the region especially after the negative repercussions of post-September 11 interventions<sup>1</sup>.

The foreign policy tendencies of both candidates can be traced through three main pivots: the peace process in the Middle East, relations with main regional powers, and the future of the region as seen by each of the candidates.

### **First: US-Arab relations and the peace process in the Middle East:**

US-Arab relations currently revolve around a number of issues, on top of which are the Syrian conflict, refugees and immigration, the war on terror, and the Arab-Israeli conflict. Each of the presidential candidates has a different take on such issues.

The **Syrian conflict** occupies a prominent position on the agenda of US presidential candidates owing to its impact on US-Russian relations and on

---

<sup>1</sup> "Foreign Policy: The Middle East is no Longer a Priority for the US [Arabic]." *Masr al-Arabia*, October 22, 2013: <https://goo.gl/qIZt3B>

American interests in the region and because of the refugee crisis that ensued in its aftermath. While Clinton is keener on reaching a political resolution to the Syrian crisis and lays more emphasis on the humanitarian aspect of the crisis, she, meanwhile, focus on projecting an image of Trump as supported by Russia or at least as the type of politician Russia would like to see as US president, which was demonstrated in the second debate: “But I want to emphasize that what is at stake here is the ambitions and the aggressiveness of Russia. Russia has decided that it’s all in, in Syria. And they’ve also decided who they want to see become president of the United States, too, and it’s not me. I’ve stood up to Russia. I’ve taken on Putin and others, and I would do that as president.”<sup>2</sup> Clinton also believes that Assad is the main reason for ISIS’s ability to control swathes of land in Syria, an issue that she stressed in her Stanford speech on March 23: “We have to support and maintain the ceasefire in Syria. And we should also work with our coalition partners and opposition forces on the ground to create safe areas where Syrians can remain in the country rather than fleeing toward Europe.”<sup>3</sup> Trump, on the other hand, attributes the crisis in Syria to the Obama Administration, which, he argues, created a vacuum in the Middle East that allowed the emergence and expansion of ISIS. For Trump, the disastrous situation in Aleppo is the result of series of wrong decisions. He also believes that Assad is stronger and smarter than Obama and Clinton because he sought the help of not only Russia, but also Iran which had already been given billions of dollars by Washington. Trump made it clear that he knows Assad is bad, but in the meantime believes that his alternative is worse and criticized the US Administration for backing a Syrian opposition it technically knows nothing about: “Let's say you get rid of Assad, you knock out that government -- who's gonna take over?" he questioned. "The people that we're backing? And then you're gonna have, like, Libya?"<sup>4</sup> In an interview with *The Guardian*, Trump said, “Assad is bad. Maybe these people could be worse,”<sup>5</sup> in reference to US-backed Syrian revolutionaries. Trump supports negotiations with the Assad regime and the creation of a safe zone for Syrian civilians: “I do still support a no-fly zone because I think we need to put in safe havens for those poor Syrians who are fleeing both Assad and ISIS and so they can have some place to be safe.”<sup>6</sup> It is noticeable that Trump’s main focus in his talk about foreign policy

---

<sup>2</sup> “Transcript of the Second Debate.” October 10, 2016:

[http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/us/politics/transcript-second-debate.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/2016/10/10/us/politics/transcript-second-debate.html?_r=0)

<sup>3</sup> “Clinton vs. Trump on Key Middle East Issues: Prepping for the Debate.” *The Washington Institute*, September 22, 2016: <https://goo.gl/ZAzGlo>

<sup>4</sup> Reena Flores. “Triumphant Donald Trump: ‘I can change the game.’ *CBS NEWS*, February 10, 2016: <https://goo.gl/0Cgtdv>

<sup>5</sup> “The Donald Trump doctrine: ‘Assad is bad’ but US must stop ‘nation-building.’” *The Guardian*, Oct. 13, 2015: <https://goo.gl/oZvXGH>

<sup>6</sup> “Clinton vs. Trump on Key Middle East Issues.”

in general and in the Middle East in particular is fighting radical Islamism, which he believes is both an external and internal enemy for the United States<sup>7</sup>, an argument that is supported by several leaders in the region, yet is met with a great deal of apprehension on the part of the people of several countries. Clinton, therefore, sees Assad as the main problem in Syria and does not envision him to be part of the solution to the crisis, hence supports further coordination with the Syrian opposition, which is in line with the policies of the current Administration. Trump, on the other hand, supports further coordination with Russia, which makes his take on the Syrian crisis quite similar to that of the Russian regime, with the exception of the establishment of a no-fly zone. In fact, the no-fly zone is one of the few points on which both candidates agree.

Closely linked to the Syrian conflict is the **immigration and refugee issue**. The conflicts taking place in different parts of the Middle East, particularly Syria, drove many to flee to Europe and at times the United States. Undocumented immigrants, the majority of whom head to Europe, have caused a great deal of pressure on the countries in which they seek refuge and the United States is also facing pressure by Europe for not receiving the same number of refugees. According to reports, the number of refugees amounted to 65 million by the end of 2015, half of whom are from Syria, Afghanistan, and Somalia<sup>8</sup>, all countries that witnessed US military intervention. For Trump, the Syrian conflict has had a negative impact on the US since it increased the number of immigrants. He believes that the United States has a lot on its plate already: “We have enough problems in this country. I believe in building safe zones. I believe in having other people pay for them, as an example, the Gulf states, who are not carrying their weight, but they have nothing but money, and take care of people. But I don't want to have, with all the problems this country has and all of the problems that you see going on, hundreds of thousands of people coming in from Syria when we know nothing about them. We know nothing about their values and we know nothing about their love for our country.”<sup>9</sup> Trump supports protecting the borders of the United States through the construction of a separation wall on the border with Mexico in order to stop smuggling<sup>10</sup>. Clinton also said that she would not allow anyone who constitutes a threat to enter the United States<sup>11</sup>. Clinton had stated earlier that both the United States and Mexico are immigrant

---

<sup>7</sup> “Transcript: Donald Trump’s Foreign Policy Speech.” *New York Times*, April 27, 2016:

<https://is.gd/bnpepy>

<sup>8</sup> “United Nations: Refugees across the World Reached more than 65 Million [Arabic].” *BBC Arabic*, June 20, 2016: <https://goo.gl/bMjW5Q>

<sup>9</sup> Aaron Blake. “Everything that was said at the second Donald Trump vs. Hillary Clinton debate, highlighted.” October 9, 2016: <https://goo.gl/LzDNuP>

<sup>10</sup> Adham Haggag. “US Presidential Elections: The Last Debate... Hillary in the White House [Arabic].” *Sasa Post*, October 20, 2016: <https://goo.gl/Msqt9m>

<sup>11</sup> Ibid.

countries and that this issue needs to be tackled from a legal perspective. She also said that she will never reject refugee women and children, yet added that refugees will be accepted only after examining their files thoroughly and supported the deportation of violent immigrants if necessary. Clinton also stressed the necessity of protecting the borders of the United States or having “secure” borders, which contradicts her earlier statements, posted on WikiLeaks, about wanting open borders, an issue that Trump holds against her<sup>12</sup>. Trump also criticized Clinton’s plan to increase the percentage of Syrian immigrants by 550%, arguing that she will be exposing the United States to a grave threat<sup>13</sup>.

**Regarding the war on terror**, Trump stated in the first debate that ISIS is one of the most dangerous groups that pose a serious threat to the security of the United States. For Trump, the emergence and expansion of ISIS is the result of the Administration’s failed policies, especially its withdrawal from the region and its inability to control its oil which is now ISIS’s main source of power. Clinton believes that it is necessary to cooperate with US allies to fight terrorism while Trump specified seeking the support of the NATO<sup>14</sup>. Trump prioritized the elimination of ISIS over that of Assad: “They are fighting each other. We are supposed to go and fight them both? How do you fight them both when they are fighting each other? And I think that ISIS is a threat that’s much more important for us right now than Assad.”<sup>15</sup> Clinton finds it necessary to work with US allies in the Middle East in order to eliminate ISIS. She believes that retrieving Mosul is an important step towards eliminating militant groups and their allies and objects to sending American troops to Iraq as occupation forces. As for Syria, Clinton believes it will remain hotbed for terrorism as long as the civil war continues with Iran’s support. She also stressed the necessity of besieging ISIS on different fronts: “we have to go after them from the air, on the ground, online.”<sup>16</sup> Trump, on the other hand, is not interested in intervening in Syria as much as he focuses on eliminating terrorism: “I would have stayed out of Syria and wouldn’t have fought so much...against Assad because I thought that was a whole thing...So now you have Iran and you have Russia in favor of Assad.

---

<sup>12</sup> “The Third and Last Debate between Clinton and Trump before the US Presidential Race [Arabic].” *AlJazeera Mubasher*, October 19, 2016: <https://goo.gl/Msqt9m>

<sup>13</sup> Adham Haggag.

<sup>14</sup> “US Elections: The First Debate Reveals Deep Divisions between Clinton and Trump over the Middle East [Arabic].” *BBC Arabic*, September 27, 2016: <https://goo.gl/FzR5D7>

<sup>15</sup> “Transcript: Donald Trump on NATO, Turkey’s Coup Attempt and the World.” *New York Times*, July 21, 2016: <https://goo.gl/1H5nSV>

<sup>16</sup> “The final Trump–Clinton debate transcript, annotated.” *The Washington Post*, October 19, 2016: <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/the-fix/wp/2016/10/19/the-final-trump-clinton-debate-transcript-annotated/>

We're supposed to fight the two of them. At the same time, we're supposed to fight ISIS, who is fighting Assad.”<sup>17</sup>.

The **Arab-Israeli conflict** remains the historic issue in the Middle East. Since its beginning, the Arab-Israeli conflict has played a major role in US-Arab relations, which are in many cases shaped by the relations between Israel and its Arab neighbors. In her speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC) on March 21, Clinton said that “Israelis deserve a secure homeland for the Jewish people. Palestinians should be able to govern themselves in their own state, in peace and dignity. And only a negotiated two-state agreement can survive those outcomes. If we look at the broader regional context, converging interests between Israel and key Arab states could make it possible to promote progress on the Israeli-Palestinian issue. Israelis and Palestinians could contribute toward greater cooperation between Israel and Arabs.”<sup>18</sup> Trump, on the other hand, believes that the solution to the Arab-Israeli problem is contingent upon Israel in the first place: “A lot will have to do with Israel and whether or not Israel wants to make the deal — whether or not Israel's willing to sacrifice certain things.”<sup>19</sup> Trump also stressed his neutrality as far as the Arab-Israeli conflict is concerned: “let me be sort of a neutral guy, let's see what - I'm going to give it a shot. It would be so great.”<sup>20</sup> In his AIPAC speech, Trump said that “A [peace agreement] imposed by the UN would be a total and complete disaster...It will only further delegitimize Israel and it would reward Palestinian terrorism.”<sup>21</sup> Both candidates are quite similar in their stance on US-Israeli relations. Clinton said, “as President, I will make a firm commitment to ensure Israel maintains its qualitative military edge. The United States should provide Israel with the most sophisticated defense technology so it can deter and stop any threat.”<sup>22</sup> As for Trump, he pledged: “When I become president, the days of treating Israel like a second-class citizen will end on Day One.”<sup>23</sup> The policies of both candidates vis-à-vis Israel are not really different from those of the Obama Administration. However, Trump’s policies might have a more harmful effect on the Arab region, especially in the light of his statements against Muslims.

---

<sup>17</sup> “Clinton vs. Trump on Key Middle East Issues: Prepping for the Debate.”

<sup>18</sup> “Read Hillary Clinton’s Speech to AIPAC.” Time, March 21, 2016:

<http://time.com/4265947/hillary-clinton-aipac-speech-transcript/>

<sup>19</sup> Interview with the Associated Press, December 3, 2015: <https://goo.gl/2DDeol>

<sup>20</sup> “Full Transcript: MSNBC’s Town Hall with Donald Trump.” *MSNBC*, February 17, 2016:

<https://goo.gl/DRuXu1>

<sup>21</sup> “Clinton vs. Trump on Key Middle East Issues: Prepping for the Debate.”

<sup>22</sup> “Remarks at AIPAC in Washington, D.C.” March 21, 2016: <https://goo.gl/Ko67Vb>

<sup>23</sup> “Clinton vs. Trump on Key Middle East Issues: Prepping for the Debate.”

## **Second: US relations with regional powers:**

Middle East issues are currently shaped through a conflict between two main factions that represent the major powers in the region such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Iran, Israel, and relatively Egypt. That is why it is important to examine the policies each of the candidates is expected to adopt with each of those powers.

**US-Israeli relations** are generally characterized by strategic cooperation, which is common among US presidents who all seem to agree that Israel's security has to be protected and that its qualitative superiority among its neighbors has to be maintained. This stance is not expected to be any different with any of the two current candidates, which is obvious from the statements both of them made about Israel, some of which are mentioned above. While the two candidates are similar to other US presidents in their view on US-Israeli relations, none of them mentioned the peace process, which was on the agenda of several previous US administrations.

**US-Iranian relations** have featured remarkably in the agenda of both candidates, especially as far as Iran's nuclear program is concerned. While Clinton believes that Obama's approach to the Iranian issue has been a success, Trump sees it as disgraceful. In the first debate, Trump described the Iranian nuclear deal as a grave mistake on the part of the Obama Administration and said he is determined to defeat Iran while Clinton argued that the Administration managed to make Iran offer a number of concessions. Trump labeled the deal "terrible" and added that "There's no way the Iranians are going to adhere to any deal we make." He also argued that Iranian negotiators were much better than their American counterparts: "We don't have good negotiators. They have great negotiators, and they're making us look like fools."<sup>24</sup> Clinton, on the other hand, believes that the deal took into consideration businessmen who would want to invest in Iran and argued that although the US is bound to face a number of challenges in the implementation of the deal, it was still a major achievement: "the most important thing we have, in my view, prevented Iran from racing to getting nuclear weapons, which is very much in America's interest."<sup>25</sup> She also said that the deal has made the world a safer place and gave more room for focusing on other important issues related to Iran: "What I am focused on is all the other malicious activities of the Iranians — ballistic missiles, support for

---

<sup>24</sup> Erica Terry. Trump Interview with Jewish News Agency: 'I'm No Apprentice On Israel', *Jspace News*, June 29, 2015: <https://goo.gl/THX05P>

<sup>25</sup> Anna Staver. "Brandon Rittiman's Hillary Clinton Interview Transcript." August 3, 2016: <https://goo.gl/XZRLMD>

terrorists, being involved in Syria, Yemen, and other places, supporting Hezbollah, Hamas.”<sup>26</sup>

**US-Saudi relations** feature prominently on the agenda of both candidates owing to Saudi Arabia’s attempt to establish itself as an influential regional power, which is demonstrated in the role it is currently playing in Syria and Yemen and its impact on several developments in the region. In the first debate, Trump stressed that the United States cannot defend Saudi Arabia if the latter does nothing in return: “Saudi Arabia was making a billion dollars a day, prior to the oil collapse, so now they're making half, OK, they're making plenty. And yet we take care of them. They pay us peanuts... And if we're taking care of Saudi Arabia they're going to have to pay us.”<sup>27</sup> This is contrary to Clinton’s opinion since she pledged sticking to all agreements with US allies and coordinating with them in order to eliminate terrorism in the region<sup>28</sup>.

**US-Turkish relations** are among the priorities of each of the two candidates. Trump thinks Erdogan dealt with the coup in a smart manner and finds it necessary to coordinate with Turkey in fighting ISIS. When asked about violations committed by Erdogan and how willing the United States is to ally with him while he commits such violations, Trump answered that there are even problems with American civil freedoms, which should be prioritized over Turkish ones, and that the US does not have the right to teach other governments how to deal with their domestic affairs. Regarding the Turkish-Kurdish conflict, Trump said he will work on helping both parties forge an alliance, but did not give further details<sup>29</sup>. Clinton sees Turkey as a powerful ally: “it is a Sunni-majority nation aiding the U.S. military against the Sunni extremists. Turkey has allowed the U.S. Air Force to use a base as a major staging area for bombing and surveillance missions against ISIS.” She also questioned Trump’s ability in dealing with Turkey objectively owing to his interests there: “In other words, Trump would be in direct financial and political conflict with Turkey from the moment he was sworn into office. Once again, all his dealings with Turkey would be suspect: Would Trump act in the interests of the United States or his wallet?”<sup>30</sup>

---

<sup>26</sup> “Hillary Clinton’s interview at the Commander-in-Chief Forum (VIDEO – Full Transcript).” September 8, 2016: <https://goo.gl/TMvVu5>

<sup>27</sup> “Full Transcript: MSNBC’s Town Hall with Donald Trump.”

<sup>28</sup> “Before the Second Debate, Get to Know the Main Points in the First Trump–Clinton Debate [Arabic].” *Tahrir news*, October 10, 2016: <https://goo.gl/BQ5ItN>

<sup>29</sup> “**A transcript of Donald Trump’s meeting with The Washington Post editorial board.**” *Washington Post*, March 21, 2016: <https://goo.gl/noSfpl>

<sup>30</sup> “20 Questions Trump Is Avoiding.” *Hillary Speeches Website*, September 17, 2016: <https://is.gd/o6L9sO>



Russia's influence in the Middle East is among the most prominent reasons why **US-Russian relations** are of substantial significance for both Trump and Clinton. Clinton said the US cyber-security is in danger and accused Russia of hacking US public and private institutions. Trump said that Russia has nothing to do with the cyber-war on the United States and that Clinton has no proof of otherwise. Clinton also accused Russia of trying to interfere in US presidential elections and to influence public opinion<sup>31</sup>, which contradicts the WikiLeaks releases in which Clinton expressed her admiration of Russia and its president. In the emails hacked from the computer of Clinton's campaign chair John Podesta, Clinton stressed in 2013 the importance of establishing good relations with Russia and said that she likes talking with Russian President Vladimir Putin<sup>32</sup>. Leaked emails, however, can be looked upon as routine diplomacy, especially when seen in the light of the Democrats' fluctuating opinion of cooperation with Russia as far as the Syrian conflict is concerned. Trump, on the other hand, defends Russia ardently, which was demonstrated in his response to Clinton's accusations and his praise of Russia. In the first debate, Trump said that Russia's nuclear power is more advanced than that of the United States: "Russia has been expanding their [nuclear power] -- they have a much newer capability than we do. We have not been updating from the new standpoint."<sup>33</sup>

As for **US- Egyptian relations**, Trump is in agreement with the current regime in Egypt in several points especially the Muslim Brotherhood, which Trump describes as fanatic. Trump also accused Clinton of helping the Muslim Brotherhood come to power in Egypt: "She helped force out a friendly regime in Egypt and replace it with the radical Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian military has retaken control, but Clinton has opened the Pandora's box of radical Islam."<sup>34</sup> In her meeting with Egyptian president Abdel Fattah al-Sisi, Clinton focused on human rights and the rule of law and expressed her concern over the clampdown on activists and NGOs. When Trump met with Sisi, he praised his efforts in protecting Egypt's national security and his role in the war on terror. He also pledged that the United States will be Egypt's close ally if he wins the elections and stressed the importance of Egypt's role in the security of the

---

<sup>31</sup> "Clinton Accuses Russia of Interfering in US Elections [Arabic]." September 11, 2016:

<https://goo.gl/ykf7xS>

<sup>32</sup> "Clinton Talks Well about Russia [Arabic]." *Sputnik News*, September 11, 2016:

<https://goo.gl/ykf7xS>

<sup>33</sup> Aaron Blake. "The first Trump-Clinton presidential debate transcript, annotated." *The Washington Post*, September 26, 2016: <https://goo.gl/sgIZti>

<sup>34</sup> "Full transcript: Donald Trump NYC speech on stakes of the election." June 22, 2016:

<http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/transcript-trump-speech-on-the-stakes-of-the-election-224654>

Middle East<sup>35</sup>. Both candidates, however, are aware that Egypt's collapse constitutes a disaster for US interests in the region and that is why both are keen on establishing ties with the Egyptian regime as a means of avoiding such a disastrous scenario. The difference is that Clinton wants cooperation with Egypt in the war on terror with relative consideration of human rights while Trumps wants unconditional cooperation in the war on terror.

**Conclusion: The future of the region under each candidate:**

If Hillary Clinton wins the elections, which seems the most likely scenario, disputes over Middle East issues are expected to continue. The Syrian and Yemeni files and the immigration and refugee crisis will be referred back to the UN Security Council, which will stall any possible political solution especially in light of the tension between the US and Russia. However, if the Clinton Administration reaches an agreement with Russia, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt—which seems a far-fetched possibility—reasonable solutions can be reached in both Syria and Yemen. Clinton, could, in this case, put pressure on Egypt through its human rights record and US military aid so that the Egyptian regime would agree to play a more active role in the war on terror in the region and would reach an agreement with Saudi Arabia and Gulf states over Syria and Yemen. Egypt's flexibility on this issue would be repaid by the United States, which in turn would guarantee the protection of Egyptian national security.

If Trump wins, an agreement with Russia, Iran, and Turkey might constitute a resolution of the Syrian conflict in favor of the Syrian regime, which will then remain as part of a transitional stage. This solution will consolidate the power of dictatorships in the region as authoritarian regimes will present themselves as the alternative to terrorism and chaos. Such agreements are bound to highlight the discrepancy between what the people in each country in the region want and what their respective regimes decide to do.

Trump will prioritize the war against Islamist radicalism, in what would constitute a return to the post-9/11 policies that laid more emphasis on military intervention and exercised more pressure on countries in the region to take part in this war. If Trump believes that countries in the Middle East should pay the US for protection, this means Saudi Arabia might have to accept Iranian, Egyptian, and Israeli roles in different issues in the region, particularly Syria and Yemen. Otherwise, the JASTA law can be put into force, which might lead to freezing Saudi and Gulf assets in the West or at least lobbying for channeling these assets towards the war on terror. However, it is impossible to overlook the role played by domestic factors in Middle Eastern countries and the way these factors can alter, or at least put into question, the choices of international and

---

<sup>35</sup> “The stark difference between Trump’s and Clinton’s meeting with a dictator.” *The Washington Post*, September 22, 2016: <https://is.gd/j8vaSr>

regional powers. The situation in Libya, Syria, and Yemen has not yet been resolved in favor of one party or another and the war against ISIS in Mosul continues while there is no guarantee that the people are not going to rise once more against their respective regimes.

