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On the global stage, Donald Trump's key objective remains ensuring the United States retains its status as the preeminent world power in the 21st century. At the core of this vision is containing China's rise, which Trump believes necessitates pulling the U.S. away from "unproductive" conflicts that drain resources. A crucial part of this approach is to maintain stability in the Middle East while avoiding interventions like the 2003 Iraq invasion, which he sees as weakening the U.S. and inadvertently empowering China. From 2003 to 2011, as the U.S. focused on regime changes in Iraq and Afghanistan, China quietly ascended to the world's second-largest economy—an ascent Trump is determined to prevent from going further.

Middle East Strategy: Balancing Power without Full Withdrawal

While Trump envisions reducing U.S. engagement in certain conflicts, he is clear on not fully withdrawing from the Middle East or conceding it to the Eurasian axis of China, Russia, and Iran. For Trump, the region's wealth, particularly its hydrocarbons, and its strategic geographical position are invaluable assets that the U.S. must influence. Ensuring the stability of Gulf states, especially the oil-rich monarchies, will be a priority, as these states' economic ties and trade surplus investments benefit the U.S. economy. The Trump administration would seek to restore ties with Saudi Arabia under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, which had soured under Joe Biden. Notably, Trump's stance differs from Biden's on human rights; he has shown minimal interest in pressuring MBS on issues like the Jamal Khashoggi case, anticipating that renewed U.S.-Saudi relations will diminish the regional influence of Qatar and the UAE.

Unyielding Support for Israel

Trump's support for Israel remains steadfast, an approach that finds strong backing from Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. Under his previous administration, the U.S. recognized Israel's annexation of the Golan Heights, acknowledged Jerusalem as Israel's capital, and moved the U.S. Embassy there. Trump also brokered the Abraham Accords, which normalized relations between Israel and several Arab states, including the UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan. Although Saudi Arabia supports these agreements, it awaits further Palestinian negotiations before formally signing on. Following Israel's October 7 offensive against Gaza, Trump would likely encourage an end to hostilities—not by seeking negotiations with Hamas or Hezbollah but by bolstering Israel's military capabilities to decisively confront these groups. With Trump's recent win, Israel has intensified strikes in Gaza and Lebanon, feeling a renewed sense of U.S. backing. However, a more pressing



question remains: Will Trump support large-scale strikes on Iran, potentially targeting its oil infrastructure to destabilize its economy and disrupt its nuclear program funding?

Rising Tensions with Iran

Tensions between Israel and Iran are expected to escalate after Trump's inauguration in January 2025. Until then, the Israeli Defense Forces are likely to focus on Hezbollah and its missile arsenal in Lebanon and Syria. Iran's regional influence, through Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon, is a complex issue for Trump, given Syria's predominantly Sunni population that opposes Iran yet is under an Iranian-backed regime. Syrian President Bashar al-Assad's government relies heavily on Iran for military and economic support, while Iranian weaponry flows through Syria to Hezbollah in Lebanon. Trump's administration may increase strikes on pro-Iran targets in Syria, potentially destabilizing Assad's government further. Meanwhile, in Idlib, Hayat Tahrir al-Sham eyes an opportunity to move against Assad, but Turkey has thus far restrained it, possibly anticipating a future territorial arrangement with Russia involving Kurdish-controlled areas.

The Role of the U.S. in Northeast Syria and the Kurdish Issue

Turkey's aspirations for Kurdish territories have been a point of contention for the U.S., particularly in the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES). With American forces stationed in AANES, Turkey requires U.S. approval for any territorial advances. Trump's previous decision in October 2019 to withdraw U.S. troops from the Syrian-Turkish border allowed Turkey to seize key towns, a move that significantly affected the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Trump has expressed a desire to pull out U.S. troops from Syria and Iraq, though maintaining a presence to counter ISIS may prevent a full exit. Nevertheless, a U.S. withdrawal would undermine the SDF's ability to defend against threats from ISIS, the Syrian regime, Iran-backed militias, and Turkey, which has long held ambitions to control AANES. This issue could grow more pressing if Israel-Iran tensions heighten the strategic value of Northeast Syria, justifying continued U.S. presence in the region.

Trump's opposition to Iran is open and resolute, and he views military strength as a necessary precursor to any diplomatic discussion. The potential reshuffling of power dynamics in Syria, alongside the broader regional struggle between the West and the Eurasian alliance, underscores that abandoning the SDF would harm U.S. credibility and stability in the Middle East. For Trump, a calculated balance of power, grounded in strategic alliances and selective military engagement, will guide his administration's approach to the region.