

default to a preference for overdetermination in the face of just-so narratives, ranging from Russian interference to the almost neurological existence of something like an authoritarian personality.

As an epistemological strategy, the beneficence of temporal eventfulness is most clear in relationship to recognizably big events. An explanation for those events built on radically heterogeneous temporalities clearly “trumps” those that imagine path dependency or positivist certainty as meaningful explanations for social phenomena when the stakes are raised. Such a standpoint can filter down to events that are less *prima facie* world historic. Why imagine that an event like Trump’s election functions any different than any other event? In this way, the global surprise that greeted Trump’s rise provides an object lesson in eventful temporality, a pedagogical “silver lining” for those of us trying to help students across the globe make compelling interpretations of their world. ■

NOTES

1. For an exploration of this in relationship to broader intellectual and research culture, see Adams and Gleeson-White (2018).
2. For an excellent recent discussion of history of “populism” as a term and its relationship to status anxiety and Cold War social science, see Jäger (2019).

REFERENCES

- Adams, Thomas Jessen, and Sarah Gleeson-White. 2018. “American Cultures: The View from the Pacific.” *Journal of American Studies* 52 (3): 589–92.
- Jäger, Anton. 2019. “The Masses Against the Classes, or, How to Talk About Populism Without Talking About Class.” *Nonsite.Org* 28 (May).
- Sewell, William H., Jr. 2005. *Logics of History: Social Theory and Social Transformation*. Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 100.

TEACHING TRUMP’S “AMERICA FIRST” IN/FROM BEIRUT

Karim Makdisi, *American University of Beirut, Lebanon*

DOI: 10.1017/S1049096519001963

Viewed from Beirut, US policy toward the Middle East under the Trump presidency, as of late summer 2019, appears to be largely incoherent and unpredictable, reflecting Trump’s volatile nature and personalization of policy. It also reflects his (and his inner circle’s) deep ignorance of the region. For example, one day he vows to keep US troops in Syria to ensure ISIS’s destruction and combat Iranian influence; the next day, after a telephone call with the Turkish president, he tweets his intention to completely withdraw all US troops—apparently without consulting his generals—imperiling local allies such as Kurdish forces in northeastern Syria. Trump threatened to “obliterate” Iran and ordered a military strike, only to halt it (apparently on the advice of Fox News presenter Tucker Carlson) and call for negotiations without preconditions. Similarly, Trump’s support for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates’ siege of Qatar—home to the largest US military base in the region—simply could not have been predicted. Neither could his tacit approval of Saudi Arabia’s dramatic forced detention of and alleged physical assault on Lebanon’s prime minister.

At the same time, US regional Middle East policy under Trump appears from Beirut to be conspicuously consistent, organized around unwavering support for a narrow far-right-wing Israeli agenda. This consistency reflects both his inner circle’s individual ideological positions—particularly his son-in-law Jared Kushner, who is “unabashedly pro-Israel” (Rothkoph 2019)—and the influence of his evangelical popular base (Borger 2019). His so-called Deal

of the Century to end the Arab–Israeli conflict is based unabashedly on legitimizing Israel’s control over occupied land and ensuring Palestinian submission to unilateral Israeli demands. This approach abandons his predecessors’ (nominal) references to liberal “values,” international law, and long-standing US policies (e.g., supporting a two-state solution and recognizing Syrian sovereignty over occupied Golan). Trump’s regional strategy thus far prioritizes the consolidation by any means necessary of Israel’s hegemonic regional position in the face of a perceived Iranian–Hezbollah threat. Reversing Barak Obama’s strategy, Trump rebuilt ties with an increasingly militaristic Saudi Arabia, unilaterally withdrew the United States from the Iran nuclear deal, and imposed a “maximum-pressure” policy on Iran (and Hezbollah) with unprecedented US economic sanctions and threat of military action.

In light of this, is there anything new in teaching US foreign policy in the age of Trump, from the vantage point of Beirut? No and yes.

No, because historicizing US–Middle Eastern relations has always been central to the classroom experience. This is in contrast to many political science courses in the United States that view history as a prop to be “engaged with at the 30,000-foot level” (Musgrave 2019). From Beirut, it is self-evident that the US Middle East strategy is marked structurally more by continuity than rupture on such issues as unqualified US support for Israel, protecting oil resources and client monarchies in the Gulf, consolidating military bases throughout the region, and fighting “terrorism.” There also is continuity in classroom investigations theorizing the diminishing US influence both within an international liberal order in crisis and, more specifically, in the Middle East, particularly following the catastrophic 2003 Iraq War—a war that continues to loom large and shape the regional order even after the 2010 Arab uprisings (Makdisi 2017).

History, moreover, is something students and teachers in the region are continuously living, experiencing, and practicing. This has not changed in the age of Trump. We regularly interact in and beyond the classroom—either directly or structurally within clear power discrepancies—with people who experience insecurity but whose agency is denied in mainstream political science literature. The challenge in the classroom is how to make sense of these interactions. My colleagues and I have argued that even before Trump’s election, teaching from Beirut (as in other parts of the Global South) “requires recognition of how others experience insecurity.” We have sought to encourage approaches and class discussions on “local understandings of insecurity that recognize the destabilizing impact of recent US policy, and in which local actors might play a meaningful role in shaping practices of global governance” (Hazbun, Makdisi, and Pison-Hindawi 2019). So, the idea is not only to assess US action and policy in the classroom (or in our research) or to question the extent of scholar activism needed (as perhaps is the case in more progressive US classrooms) but rather to think meaningfully in both theoretical and empirical terms about local agency (without being parochial).

Despite this sense of strategy or policy continuity and contemporary relevance of both history and the lived experience of students, teaching Trump’s US politics from Beirut also feels different—even new—albeit in ways that admittedly are still difficult to pin down.

The uniquely personalized nature of Trump’s rule, seemingly free of party or ideological restrictions, makes us examine even more closely the individual/personality level in the classroom. This is difficult to teach systematically because it appears to be shorn of context.

As Wright (2019) recently observed, Trump oscillates dramatically between two “carefully nurtured” self-images: “as a dealmaker and as a militarist.” Trump’s seemingly extremist anti-Iran policy, for instance, is largely understood as (1) a zero-sum strategy driven by neoconservatives left over from George W. Bush’s presidency, and (2) intractable regime-change and militaristic ideologues like his

of US “decline” and the crisis of the liberal international order (although these topics remain important) and to explore how notions of “white insecurity” (in Hage’s words) test world order, generally, and the Middle East in particular.

Although it might be premature to judge whether Trump’s tenure represents something new, a Beirut classroom serves as

Despite this sense of strategy or policy continuity and contemporary relevance of both history and the lived experience of students, teaching Trump’s US politics from Beirut also feels different—even new—albeit in ways that admittedly are still difficult to pin down.

National Security Advisor John Bolton. This is relatively simple to present in class.

However, Trump’s unpredictable nature means that such militaristic policies on Iran might be suddenly reversed if, for example, Bolton falls out of favor¹ or Trump can secure a “Trump” deal to replace the “Obama” nuclear deal. In other words, there does not appear to be a particularly identifiable strategy, ideology, or interest to rely on in the classroom. Moreover, Trump further amplifies the images that Wright presents by his dramatic use of reality-TV timing (e.g., his last-second cancellation of air strikes against Iran) or his promise—more than two years ago—to officially unveil the “Deal of the Century” with great pomp and circumstance yet always delaying it.

There also is a new aspect in teaching about Trump on a more macro level. As anthropologist Ghassan Hage (2017) suggested, an important way to understand Trump’s foreign-policy orientation is the centrality of the “America First” agenda and the willingness to “engage in an exhibitionist flexing of the muscles.” For Hage, Trump is the first US president to truly accept that a US-controlled world order is no longer a “normalized” fact, as opposed to Obama being the last president who tried to preserve the US “aura of world policeman” in the face of a palpably decreased sense of domination as felt by people, for example, in the Middle East. As such, Trump has a “far more realist sense of the kind of domination” that the United States is capable of exercising in the contemporary world (Hage 2017). These conceptions have allowed classroom discussions to go beyond questions

an important laboratory in which to debate what “new” actually means within the long history of European colonialism and US empire—as well as what this might mean for the Middle East region and its peoples’ lived experiences of insecurity. ■


NOTE

1. Trump subsequently fired Bolton on September 10, 2019.


REFERENCES

- Bolton, John. 2015. “To Stop Iran’s Bombs, Bomb Iran.” *New York Times*, March 26.
- Borger, Julian. 2019. “‘Brought to Jesus’: The Evangelical Grip on Trump’s Administration.” *The Guardian*, January 11.
- Hage, Ghassan. 2017. “Reading Trump’s Foreign Policy with Bourdieuan Eyes.” April 17. Available at <http://hagebaza.blogspot.co.nz/2017/04>.
- Hazbun, Waleed, Karim Makdisi, and Coralie Pison-Hindawi. 2019. “Writing about Insecurity and Global Politics in Beirut.” *American Political Science Association, MENA Politics Newsletter* (Spring).
- Makdisi, Karim. 2017. “Intervention and the Arab Uprisings: From Transformation to Maintenance of Regional Order.” In *Between Regional Autonomy and Intervention: New Conflict Dynamics in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. R. A. Boserup, W. Hazbun, K. Makdisi, and H. Malmvig, 93–107. Copenhagen: Danish Institute for International Studies.
- Musgrave, Paul. 2019. “IR Theory and ‘Game of Thrones’ Are Both Fantasies.” *Foreign Policy*, May 23.
- Rothkopf, David. 2019. “Is Jared Kushner Dangerous for America?” *Haartz*, January 28.
- Wright, Thomas. 2019. “Trump Couldn’t Ignore the Contradictions of his Foreign Policy any Longer.” *The Atlantic*, July 5.


SPOTLIGHT CONTRIBUTORS


Thomas Jessen Adams  is a historian of US political economy, labor, and social inequality and is senior lecturer in history and American studies at the University of Sydney. His most recent book, with Matt Sakakeeny, is *Remaking New Orleans* (Duke University Press, 2019). He can be reached at thomas.adams@sydney.edu.au.


Claudia Franziska Brühwiler  holds a PhD in political science and a *venia legendi* (Privatdozentin/PD) in American studies, both from the University of St. Gallen, Switzerland, where she teaches US politics. She is the author of *Political Initiation in the Novels of Philip Roth* (Bloomsbury, 2013) and the coeditor of *A Political Companion to Philip Roth* (with Lee Trepanier; University of Kentucky Press, 2017). She can be reached at claudia-franziska.bruehwiler@unisg.ch.

Jin Min Chung  is professor of political science at Myong Ji University in Seoul. He received his PhD in political science from Syracuse University. His research


interests include comparative political process, political behavior, and party politics. He has published articles in such journals as *Western Political Quarterly*, *Asian Perspective*, and *Korea Observer*. He can be reached at jmchung34@gmail.com.

Karim Makdisi  is associate professor of international politics and director of the graduate program in public policy and international affairs at the American University of Beirut. He can be reached at km18@aub.edu.lb.

Masaru Nishikawa  is a professor of international and cultural studies at Tsuda University, Tokyo. He can be reached at nishikaw@tsuda.ac.jp.

Hiroshi Okayama  is professor of political science at Keio University, where he teaches US politics and US political history. He holds a doctorate degree in law from the University of Tokyo and is the author of *Judicializing*

the Administrative State: The Rise of the Independent Regulatory Commissions in the United States, 1883–1937 (Routledge, 2019). He can be reached at okayama@keio.jp.

Robert Smith  is lecturer in international relations at Coventry University, United Kingdom. He can be reached at ab8627@coventry.ac.uk or on Twitter @DrRGSmith.

Lora Anne Viola  is professor of political science at the John F. Kennedy Institute, Freie Universität Berlin. In addition to US foreign policy, Viola’s research areas include international organizations and questions of institutional design and change. Her publications include *The Closure of the International System* (Cambridge University Press, forthcoming) and *Historical Institutionalism and International Relations: Explaining Institutional Development in World Politics* (Oxford University Press, 2016). She can be reached at lora.viola@fu-berlin.de.