

The US and the Middle East in the Context of Shifting Global and Regional Politics- Meliha Benli Altunışık



In recent years, one of the primary debates in the study of international relations of the Middle East has been understanding the United States' changing role in the region. After being the most important extra-regional power for decades, the question emerged as to whether the region has lost its importance for Washington, especially since the Obama

administration. Those who argued for the declining importance of the Middle East for Washington have referred to several reasons. First and foremost, it was argued that Middle Eastern oil which was one of the original reasons for the US involvement in the region after WW II, was losing its importance as the US once again became a net exporter of oil for the first time since the early 1950s with the discovery of shale oil. Secondly, it was argued that with the rise of China, the US was finally determined to pivot Asia and thus wanted to focus its energy and attention on the Far East rather than the Middle East. Finally, the frustration with the results of the US involvement in the Middle East, particularly with the invasion of Iraq, has been cited as one of the reasons for declining US interest in the region.

However, despite the arguments that the Middle East losing its importance for Washington, it has also been clear that the US has not been really withdrawing from the region as it is sometimes claimed. Instead, the concept of retrenchment has been used to argue that the US was still involved in the region, but the extent and the nature of its involvement have changed and overall declined. There are several indicators of continuing US relevance for regional politics. In fact, what the US does and does not do continues to impact regional politics. When a new administration comes to power, the regional actors still reposition themselves accordingly based on their expectations of the policy choices of the new administration. Specifically, US policies also have an impact on different issue areas. The fact that the Obama administration chose to sign the nuclear agreement (formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action-JCPOA) with Iran and then the Trump administration unilaterally withdrew from it, and the Biden administration made a pledge to come back to it, all had an impact not only on Iranian politics and foreign policy but also on regional politics.

Similarly, the US decision to withdraw its combat forces from Iraq has had repercussions on how Washington has decided to get involved in the Syrian crisis. The Trump administration's decision to move the US embassy to Jerusalem and its pivotal role in signing the Abraham Accords impacted the Palestinian issue. It also triggered a wave of shifts in regional politics. Therefore, it really

is not possible to talk about a US withdrawal from the region, although it is still possible to argue for an important shift in US engagement with the region.

I would argue that the most significant shift in the US engagement with the region has been the disappearance of Washington's order-making role. This role which had been the overarching element in the US policy towards the region since the end of World War II, has disappeared in recent years.

The Cold War Years

As the emerging global hegemon after World War II, the US had already recognized the rising importance of the Middle East during the War due to the region's oil potential. Thus, as Daniel Yergin writes in *The Prize*, a State Department memo during the War predicted that "the center of gravity would shift to the Middle East after the war" and advised the US to prepare to act accordingly. In fact, the US was ready to compete with its closest ally Great Britain to have access to the region's oil resources right after the War. With the emergence of the Cold War between the wartime allies, the US and the Soviet Union, the strategically located oil-rich Middle East became even more important. Washington tried to prevent any Soviet encroachment into the region. To that end, it built a network of alliances and did not hesitate to interfere in the domestic affairs of its allies to protect their regimes. In this context, it perceived the rising Arab nationalism as a threat and mainly a stooge for Soviet expansionism. Especially after the 1967 War, support for Israel also became an important part of US policy in the region. Thus, the US vision of a Middle East order aimed to protect its interests mainly by protecting access to Middle East oil at reasonable prices and preventing Soviet influence in the region. However, the original US policy of building a NATO-like alliance system to achieve these objectives and support its regional allies failed mainly due to the Arab-Israeli conflict that constituted the core issue in the region. Thus, to achieve its goals, the US instead build a network of bilateral alliances.

End of the Cold War

The end of bipolarity and thus the Cold War opened the way for the US to be the sole order maker without competition from a global superpower. The 1990s

started with the Gulf Crisis, which provided further opportunities to consolidate US dominance in the region and its acceptance by regional actors. Thus, the Clinton administration that came to power soon after the Gulf War engaged in an effort to create a new Middle East order as part of the new global order in the making. This vision was composed of several elements: The most important one was an Arab-Israeli peace process that would end the conflict, which

had been a source of instability in the region and had been one of the challenges to the US policy of alliances between like-minded states. Thus, a peace process between Israel and the Arab states and a resolution of the Palestinian issue would open the way to the integration of Israel into the region and bring stability. As the multilateral tracks of the Madrid peace process demonstrated, there were more expectations from the peace process as to creating economic interdependencies, water cooperation and arms control agreements in the region. This was in line with the global agenda of political and economic liberalization promoted by the US and global institutions like the IMF and the World Bank in the region. Iran and Iraq were seen as the spoilers of this vision of a new Middle East. Thus, the Clinton administration adopted the policy of Dual Containment (later Dual Containment plus), which basically aimed to contain these two states and, better yet, put enough pressure on them to change their regimes. In the meantime, the US increased its military presence in the region to unprecedented levels, especially in the Gulf. By the end of the 1990s, however, the project of a new Middle East order was facing serious problems and can be argued to collapse by the beginning of the new century. The Arab-Israeli peace process only produced a peace treaty between Israel and Jordan, which was not surprising. The rest of the process collapsed in 2000. The start of the second Palestinian intifada was a symbol of that collapse. The US policy of dual containment also weakened and started to be criticized in the US as well. After all, it failed to achieve its aim of regime change. The US allies did not even support the containment of Iran. In the case of Iraq, the international consensus started to crumble beginning in the

mid-1990s.

Post 9/11 and the US Response in the Middle East

The Bush administration, which was already critical of the Middle East vision of the Clinton administration, came up with another Middle East order project. The new vision was crafted by the neo-conservatives that were dominant in the administration and influenced by the 9/11 terrorist attacks on the US, putting the “war on terror” at the center of that order instead of the Arab-Israeli conflict. According to its advocates, this would have mainly two interrelated dimensions: First, the invasion of Iraq, which would not only bring long-awaited regime change in that country but accompanied by the discourse of “rogue states” and “axis of evil”, which would also install fear in foe regimes in Iran and Syria. Second, the so-called “freedom agenda” that was based on the idea that authoritarianism was the main problem in the region would also target the friendly regimes. This new vision which was tried to be implemented through military and economic means, also failed. It agitated not only the foes but also Washington’s friends; thus, all in their own ways, they tried their best to make sure that US policies failed. But the main challenge to the US position in the region emanated from the Iraq invasion. Although it became a symbol of US hegemonic overlay, it also marked the beginning of shifting US position in the region. This War, which was declared as “illegal” by UN Secretary-General Kofi Annan, was criticized not only in the region but also in the US itself.

The Lack of a Grand Strategy: Obama, Trump, and Biden Years

The criticisms of the Iraq experience and a reassessment of the evolving US interests in the region have led to an overall US retrenchment from the Middle East, starting with the Obama administration. However, as argued above, the US continued to be engaged in varying degrees with the region and its

policies, such as Syria, Iran nuclear issue, and Arab-Israeli relations continued to have far-reaching consequences. Yet what is different is that Washington no longer seems to have an overarching vision for the region. The Obama administration's most important initiative, which aimed to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, did not come with a vision of how the region should be organized after such an agreement. Similarly, it is not clear what have been the general strategic objectives of the US in Syria beyond defeating ISIS and how its specific policies have been serving those objectives. As to the Abraham Accords, again, there has been ambiguity as to whether these have been part of a broad vision of a Middle East order that the Trump administration had in mind. Similarly, it was unclear how the Trump administration planned to tackle the Iranian nuclear issue after withdrawing from the JCPOA.

The Biden administration has not developed a comprehensive Middle East strategy either. Until recently, it has had two major policy lines: to restart nuclear negotiations with Iran, which have so far produced no results; and to make democracy and defend human rights the core of its relations with regional countries, which in practice meant unlike President Trump distancing from the GCC countries, mainly Saudi Arabia and to some extent the UAE. This policy also seemed to change with the reset of US policies towards Saudi Arabia, which was blamed for **Jamal Khashoggi's** brutal murder in the Saudi consulate in Istanbul.

The Consequences

Changing US engagement with the Middle East has already had some consequences. First, it has allowed more room for maneuver for regional powers to develop and try to implement their visions for regional order. This development initially led to a deterioration of regional stability and insecurity as main contenders engaged in fierce geopolitical competition in and around the region. However, in the last two years, regional countries have

seemed to realize the unsustainability of this competition which has led to a wave of normalization in the region. The main project of a regional order currently is a “Gulf-centered” one which is mainly underwritten by the Gulf states’ financial and economic power. However, such efforts are still highly fragile.

Second, it has also allowed other global actors to be more active in the Middle East. Russia recognizing US disinterest in comprehensive involvement in Syria

has become the leading actor. Russian interest in the Middle East has expanded to the Gulf, Egypt, and Libya. Similarly, especially after the Belt and Road Initiative launch in 2013, China has increasingly become interested in the region, and its economic and strategic reach has expanded. These developments also led regional countries increasingly adopt hedging strategies. As these two countries have increasingly become US’s global competitors, their involvement in the region may turn it into an area of global competition.

Third, the US policies and lack of a clear commitment to a regional order led to questions of the dependability of the US and even worse suspicions about its aims in its allies. The disastrous withdrawal of the US from Afghanistan further strengthened these views. On the other hand, US foes looked for ways to extend their influence in a region where the US was retrenching.

The Russian invasion of Ukraine seems to have changed things to some extent. The Biden administration is under pressure domestically for high energy prices. Thus, especially Gulf oil producer states became important in the US policy calculations once again, which led to a reset in relations with Saudi Arabia, which was initially considered a pariah state. But more significantly, the invasion ended the already weakened ambiguity about Russia’s place in the emerging global order for the Biden administration in the wake of its quest to consolidate the US hegemonic position in global politics and its leadership role. Parallel to this, relations with China continued to deteriorate amid the arguments for a “new Cold War”. These recent shifts seem to push the Biden administration to re-engage the Middle East as well. The significance of President Biden’s first trip to the region

in July 2022 was not only the reset with Saudi Arabia but also the beginning of a new strategic network of allied Arab states and Israel. It is still not clear to what extent this would turn into a project of a new Middle East order. Yet one of the most important challenges to such an effort by the US is how to deal with the two other significant non-Arab states of the region, Iran, and Turkey, in this new order.

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