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## The U.S. in the Middle East: --- Exercising Patience in an Impatient Environment

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*The 2015 National Security Strategy states that the United States will face world's complex challenges with "strategic patience". As the United States has been stepping back from the Middle East and pivoting to the Far East, the current article examines how the doctrine of strategic patience is exercised in practice, and presents the risks that this policy is running through.*

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Patience, as found in Ambrose Bierce's mock dictionary, is "a minor form of despair, disguised as a virtue." The chaos of the Middle East and North Africa, with numerous conflicts dragging on and spilling over into neighbouring countries, is certainly a source of despair. US President Barack Obama advises that "the challenges we face require strategic patience and persistence."<sup>1</sup> By adding the powerful adjective "strategic" before patience, he means that it is patience with a reason and a plan. The most important reason—besides war fatigue, the risk of over-reach, and the burgeoning indigenous shale energy industry—is the so-called rebalance to the Asia Pacific and it is based on the concern that the United States has been "over-weighted" with military commitments in the Middle East while being "under-weighted" in the Far East where it has a growing number of economic and security interests. But the plan to hold patience until a balance of power emerges in the Middle East is easier said than done.

President Obama explained his Middle East policy in an interview in January 2014 with *The New Yorker's* David Remnick presenting his vision of "an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there is competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare."<sup>2</sup> Almost a year and a half later, Obama's vision is far from being accomplished, as proxy warfare is omnipresent in the region, and regional powers seem far from willing to consider peaceful solutions.<sup>3</sup> In an interview in April 2015 with *New York Times'* Thomas Friedman, Obama repeated that, under certain conditions, it is possible to "start seeing an equilibrium in the region, and Sunni and Shia, Saudi and Iran start saying, 'Maybe we should lower tensions and focus on the extremists like [ISIS] that would burn down this entire region if they could.'"<sup>4</sup> The US President believes that the United States has the luxury to test the proposition that engagement and diplomacy trumps isolation and warfare. This has come largely to explain America's restrained response to the dramatic events in the Middle East since 2011. The four tenets of Obama's doctrine are: first, avoid committing US troops in another ground war; second, rely on airpower, drones, intelligence, and Special Forces; third, encourage regional powers to get responsibly involved and sort issues out amongst themselves; fourth, restore the regional balance of power that was shattered by the Iraq War. This sounds very nice in theory, but the question is what exercising strategic patience means in practice.

Obama came in determined that US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq inflicted too much pain with no much gain, and set as his ultimate goal to put an end to these conflicts. In the 2015 State of the Union address, Obama declared with pride that the number of US troops in these two countries has been reduced from 180,000 in 2009 to less than 15,000.<sup>5</sup> However, problems in both countries remain serious. Afghanistan may now look as the less imminent problem of all, but it could soon drag the world's attention back to the country's problems. Kabul cannot yet afford to pay for the cost of its own security, while various incidents by Islamic State-affiliated groups remind that security risks continue to metastasise and the power vacuum may be once again filled by Islamic extremists. Showing patience with Afghanistan means continue spending billions of dollars of foreign aid until the development of trade infrastructure and major resources projects pays dividend, but, as long as the Afghan government remains unstable, the future of the country seems precarious.<sup>6</sup>

After twelve years of intermittent conflict, Iraq is in shambles. Notwithstanding the long and heavy investment in building skillful Iraqi forces that would be able to protect the country after US forces would be gone, Iraq's army was quickly disarrayed when the Islamic State unleashed its attack in the summer of 2014 capturing key cities including Mosul, Fallujah, and Tikrit. The US military has been conducting airstrikes in Iraq for ten months now—reaching a total of nearly 1,500 strikes—with virtually no casualties, but also with limited results.<sup>7</sup> The retaking of Tikrit in April 2015 was important in eroding Islamic State power; yet, this is far from enough. Showing patience in Iraq means continue supporting the fight against the Islamic State, but the shaky anti-Islamic coalition faces serious challenges expanding its military operations to the north and west where there are bigger battles to fight.

Obama's doctrine of strategic patience was first tested in the 2011 intervention in Libya, in what became then known as the leading-from-behind strategy. The Libyan airstrikes campaign was a military success: Qaddafi was shortly toppled without the deployment of ground forces and no NATO casualties.

Airpower, though, has not been enough to deliver satisfying political outcomes. Four years later, the country remains divided between Abdullah al-Thani's internationally recognised government and an array of Islamist forces. In this case, showing patience means waiting until a unity government is somehow formed, but advising negotiations between the two sides is like foisting Islamic extremists upon the Libyan people and this policy may come back to haunt Washington.<sup>8</sup> In the meantime, the Libyan civil war strongly impacts the security situation of Mali and other Sahel countries.

In Syria, the United States did again rely heavily on airpower launching in 2014 an airstrike campaign along with an international coalition of more than sixty countries with the objective "to degrade and ultimately destroy ISIL". But an airstrike campaign could not have been enough, as the political situation in Syria is extremely complicated and the US administration lacks a clear political vision. The reason of confusion is that Assad's government may be distasteful, but it is secular, hostile to the Islamist movement, and, all in all, less threatening than the al Qaeda-affiliated Jabhat al Nusra fighters that dominate the opposition. As long as the United States does not want to see either Assad or the Sunni extremists prevail, the US administration will have to remain patient until a viable third force emerges, but recruiting, training and trusting a moderate opposition is a long-taking and precarious project with few chances of success.

The crisis in Yemen is another serious problem for the United States, which even had to withdraw its military personnel from the country due to the deteriorating security situation. While negotiating with Tehran on its nuclear program and collaborating with Iranian forces in the fight against the Islamic State in Iraq, Washington has contributed with logistical and intelligence support to the Saudi-led airstrike campaign against the Iranian-backed Houthi forces. As Stratfor's George Friedman commented: "That is the nature of refusing large-scale intervention but being committed to a balance of power. The United States can oppose Iran in one theater and support it in another. The more simplistic models of the Cold War are not relevant here."<sup>9</sup> While this may be true, the ongoing chaos in Yemen threatens many important US interests in the Gulf. Showing patience means waiting until a political settlement is eventually reached, but the deepening chaos has already eroded US footprint severely in this strategically located country, and it has provided a great opportunity for a resurgent al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) and Islamic State forces to gain ground and fill in the power vacuum.<sup>10</sup>

Obama's major objective is to see a political equilibrium emerging in the Middle East. As the US President said in his interview with Friedman, the most important step towards this goal is "putting the nuclear issue in a box".<sup>11</sup> On 2nd April 2015 a tentative agreement was reached that would limit Iran's nuclear program for a decade in exchange for gradual sanctions relief. This was an important breakthrough, but a nuclear agreement cannot be isolated from what is happening out of that box. A worrying element of the deal is that Obama—having trust in his theory that engagement trumps isolation—excluded Iran's regional behaviour from the nuclear negotiation. It remains to be seen whether an economically freer and stronger Iran, instead of being allured to become a reasonable regional player, gets emboldened by the lifting of sanctions, its own increased influence in the region, and US distancing from the Middle East to advance its own interests and consolidate its expanding sphere of influence. The US administration will have to be exercising patience, first, until the interim agreement turns indeed into a deal by the next deadline on 30th June, and then—if finally signed—for as long IAEA monitoring of Iran's nuclear facilities lasts. Most importantly, as the United States will be trying to maintain a balance of power between Iran and Saudi Arabia, tilting back and forth might not prove as easy in practice as it is in words. A policy of patience does not only risk emboldening Iran to seek regional hegemony, but also runs the danger of alienating US traditional allies, who might have to look up for other alternatives to ensure their safety and appease their own fears. This could occur either in the form of an 'Arab NATO', as Former Supreme Allied Commander James Stavridis described the Arab League's recently announced plan to create a 40,000-strong joint defense force;<sup>12</sup> or even in the form of a 'Middle East's pivot to Asia', as Foreign Policy's CEO and editor David Rothkopf argued, warning that America's loss of influence to China in that part of the world could in the long run prove

decisive in a wide variety of potential great power confrontations or regional crises.<sup>13</sup>

To be fair, there are many good reasons explaining the US policy of disengagement from the Middle East. In simple words, the US President seems to be following the advice of the Arab proverb “do not stand in a place of danger trusting in miracles”. Obama wants the United States out of the place of danger, saving American blood and treasure, while passing the buck to regional partners. However, the emergence of a political equilibrium in the Middle East is a long shot and requires a lot of “strategic patience” in a series of matters. As the United States is taking distances from the Middle East, a long period of instability with various forces competing to fill the power vacuum might follow that will ultimately test in practice the limits of US “strategic patience”.

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