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USA in the Middle East:

Just when I thought I was out, they pull me back in



C O N T E N T S

- Petros Vamvakas **3** The Return of the Eastern Mediterranean
- Charalampos Tsitsopoulos **7** The US and Russia in the new Middle East: Abstract Geopolitical Competition, Elusive Cooperation
- Spyros Katsoulas **11** Turkey and the US breaking up? Beware the Chinese Contender!
- Stavros I. Drakoularakos **15** Energy Interests and US Policy
- Alexandra Nikopoulou **19** U.S. and the Gulf States: Unconventional Alliance or Forbidden Relationship?
- Costas Faropoulos **23** Elvis Has Left the Building (or Not): Prospects of US Disengagement from the Middle East
- Ilias Tasopoulos & Maria Kourpa **27** Globalizing Middle East: Reversing the Irreversible
- Charitini Petrodaskalaki **30** Muslims in America: Religion, Identity and Islamophobia
- Sotiris Roussos **35** USA-Iran-Israel: Stakes Much Higher than Supremacy in the Middle East



THE RETURN OF THE

EASTERN Mediterranean

Petros Vamvakas*

In 1902 an American naval officer, Alfred Thayer Mahan, coined the term “Middle East,” at the time the United States was emerging as a global power. Mahan’s, an advocate of sea power, strategic approach as a means of geopolitical advantage was quickly vindicated by the defeat of the Spanish in 1898. The United States extended its influence from the Caribbean and across the Pacific and eventually to the Mediterranean. Alfred Mahan along with Teddy Roosevelt, Henry Cabot Lodge, John Hay and Elihu Root, were the core of the new cadre of policy makers that pushed for an American imperialism based on the “morality” of manifest destiny and exceptionalism. These are notions that have deeply influenced American public opinion and the exercise of foreign policy, over the last hundred years, as a civilizing agent, making the world safe for liberal democracy.

FROM A GEOPOLITICAL PERSPECTIVE, the shifting in power structure changed as center of global power was moving from Europe to North America. Consequently, what at the time was the Near East was becoming the Middle East. New York and Washington were geopolitically replacing Paris and London.

In 2018, we are once again in the midst of a similar shift in the centers of power resulting from the natural dynamism of geopolitics. Twenty-five years after the creation of the European Union and the American Hegemonic “indispensable nation” of the mid-1990s, the international landscape is certainly more complex due primarily to American overreach during the first decade of the 21st century. As Andrew Bacevich pointed out in 2008 in *The Limits of Power: The End of American Exceptionalism*, the United States was reaching a critical point of overreach. What Bacevich was predicting came to pass and American overreach has ushered in a period of greater uncertainty since 2008. The constant and evolving financial and political crises across the globe of the last decade can be directly attributed to United States’ inability to maintain its hegemonic peace. In 2008, there were multiple incidents of unprecedented challenges to the United States’ underwritten global equilibrium. These were tests that a decade earlier could not be possible due to the American power and to the condition of the contenders. Three incidents in particular pointed to the changing global environment and signaling the beginning of a possible turn in the global power equilibrium: the European allies refusal to follow the United States in the enlargement of NATO in Georgia and Ukraine at the summit in Bucharest in the spring of 2008; the Russian invasion of Georgia in August of 2008 in support of the self-proclaimed republics of Ossetia and Abkhazia; and the collapse of Lehman Brothers in September of the same year, prior to the election of President Obama. These three events were challenges at different levels in different areas, among allies, and antagonists, political and economic. Nonetheless, they represented the beginning of a new period of uncertainty that has spread as a contagion in the next decade, from the Eurozone crisis to the proliferation of fragile and failed states, as the global collateral power has lost its perceived value domestically and internationally. Since the global system is not static, the perceived decline of the United States has allowed different local and regional players and actors to emerge. In the case of American foreign policy, this new environment has also been a period of adjustment, experimentation, and partisan domestic politics. These are all characteristics that we have not witnessed from an American perspective since before the Second World War and by some measure since the beginning of the 20th century.

During the last one hundred years the area that has been loosely defined as the Middle East has been especially affected by the changing global power structure. Since the emergence of the United States as a dominant power after 1945, Nicholas Spykeman viewed this region as the area that contains the world-island of Eurasia. Greece, Turkey and Iran were consequently the cornerstone of that policy which included Iraq, Israel and Saudi Arabia. In the last 40 years following the pivotal 1979, there were major realignments. The United States remained the lynchpin and dominant arbitrator of the area. It was in this area that in 2001 the United States attempted its most ambitious interventionist policy of delivering democracy at the barrel of a gun in the hope of producing a “democratic tsunami” throughout the region. A naïve policy at best, but with disastrous short-term results. The immediate outcome was the collapse of state structures and the reemergence of ethnic, and religious fragmentation with the frustration and vengefulness caused by decades



of dictatorial regimes. The underestimation or miscalculation of the effects of the US policy should not be attributed to one American administration. The Clinton administration, with the indispensable nation argument and the Obama administration with the emphasis on the Arab Street were advocates of the same policy. The speech delivered by President Obama in Cairo in 2009 and his final trip to the Parthenon in Athens in November of 2016, after the election of President Trump, were part of the same neoconservative policy. The emphasis on the universality of liberal democracy and the American commitment to implement and support that policy was carried out by every American administration in the region since the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991.

However, it became evident by the middle of the second George W. Bush's term, in 2006, that there were limits to American power and that there was a general fatigue within the American public for the mission of transforming the Middle East the way that Latin America, and Eastern Europe had been transformed. Furthermore, regional states such as Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, along with other regional and global actors such as China, Russia and Germany have enjoyed the peace dividend that the US distraction with Iraq and Afghanistan have afforded them. The Obama administration had the difficult task of maintaining the policy of the Bush administration, appeasing a frustrated American electorate and, at the same time, deal with the shifting of geopolitical power further east or further west. In the same manner that in 1902, New York, and Washington were replacing Paris and London, the Obama administration was realizing that Singapore and Beijing were becoming increasingly more central to the global and geopolitical landscape. The "pivot to Asia" in 2012 was in response to the nervousness on the part of American policy makers, realizing that the opportunity costs of the decade-long policy in Iraq and Afghanistan were far greater than anticipated. The announced shift to Asia and the focus on China had a counterintuitive effect as it compounded the problem for the United States. The area of the Near East or Middle East or Eastern Mediterranean had been central to American foreign policy since 1812, the perceived shift away from the area created a void in the area for the first time in almost two centuries. Since the eviction of Napoleon from Egypt the Eastern Mediterranean or Near East or Middle East has been securely in the Anglo-American sphere of influence. The area has also been significant in the "sea power" focus of both Great Britain and the United States during this period. One has to look no further than the significance of the Suez Canal to both Great Britain and United States in the 19th and 20th centuries respectively. The apparent withdrawal from the region has created a power vacuum in the region that has heightened local fragmentation and has allowed actors that have been absent from the region or have never been in the region to play an increasingly significant role. Libya, and Syria, are at the one end of the spectrum of state failure, but every state in the region is on the spectrum of state fragility, including the Eurozone states of Greece and Cyprus.



It is not accidental, for instance, that the successor state to the Ottoman Empire has adopted a revisionist attitude even vis-à-vis the mutually agreed 1923 Treaty of Lausanne or that there is a Persian resurgence and an Arab resurgence for the soul of Islam in the region. As the Near East has become a historical term, so has the Middle East and the administrative regime structures that defined it. As global power is shifting to further west from Washington to Beijing and from New York to Singapore, the region that has been known as the Middle East will continue to be a crossroad, to be more accurately identified as the Eastern Mediterranean. More likely, it will be some time before there is any type of regional stability, as the administrative and power landscape will be completely different. Whether the process of restructuring is years - or decades - long, the Middle East will not be an accurate identifier as the shift in power will dictate the change.

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THE **US** AND **RUSSIA** IN THE **MIDDLE EAST**

Abstract Geopolitical Competition, Elusive Cooperation

Charalampos Tsitsopoulos

President Barack Obama's term signaled a cautious approach towards the Middle East. New careless escapades were avoided in favor of a redefinition of America's regional interests. At the same time, these years witnessed an increasingly assertive Russia. The latter's policy has rested on certain pillars: it seems to enter vacuums created by either American complacency or American withdrawal, and –Russia being far from a power broker yet – it has exploited the country's more neutral reputation and status to nimbly manoeuvre between and engage with all sides. While talk of a new regional power might appear slightly exaggerated, Russia's increasing involvement has indeed created new regional dynamics. Under President Trump, the regional environment looks more fluid than ever.

Shifting sands under Obama: Russia resurfacing

BARRACK OBAMA'S PRESIDENCY marked a starkly different approach to his predecessor. Partly due to G.W. Bush's legacy of aggressive idealism and partly because of his different political outlook, Obama's approach towards the Middle East marked a return to the cautious realism of Bush Sr. Obama was careful not to get involved in new high-risk adventures and when he did (as in Libya) he made sure to do so under a veneer of multilateralism and in the form of coalitions. Paradoxically, it was this mindset of cautious realism that created a widespread sense that the US was no longer interested or willing to invest in the region.¹ And while this was to some extent true, a flailing economy, war fatigue and the Asia-Pacific's increasing significance served as the structural reasons for America's partial retreat.

In light of this, Russia cautiously entered the regional fray via Syria. It is often forgotten today, but, under Bashar al-Assad, the latter had been far from a client state: between 2000 and 2011 President al-Assad only visited Moscow once, while the naval base in Tartus was a decrepit, underused facility with a staff of fifty. In 2005, after a request by then Israeli Prime Minister Ehud Olmert, Russia cancelled the sale of Iskander missiles to Damascus.² Syria's importance lay elsewhere: it was an ideal outlet for Russia's regional return geopolitically (warm waters of the Mediterranean, epicenter of a number of regional conflicts). And it straddled multiple divides (Kurd vs. Arab, Sunni vs. Shia) via which Syria would later get the chance to pose as a competent interlocutor. A cross section of Middle Eastern politics, in Syria all single actors of relevance had some kind of stake. Russia would soon sit at the table with each and every one of them. Precisely because Syria was part of a wider picture, the Russians were scarcely gung-ho. In May 2013, State Secretary John Kerry was invited to Moscow where he was offered a Dayton-type deal for Syria. But the Americans refused as they asked for nothing short of President al-Assad stepping down. This was all the more curious given that hitherto, President Obama had doggedly resisted calls from his staff to do more in terms of arming the country's rebels. It seemed as if, in the eyes of the Americans, geopolitical competition with Russia was a given. Competition became the order of the day, even in areas where the US and Russia shared important interests.³

A new power struggle in the offing?

Regarding Russia's recent reemergence, region watchers have been divided. Some see a Cold War playing out anew. Others see Russia as weak, relatively poor and focused mainly on the Eastern Mediterranean, with no grand strategy.⁴ The truth seems to lie somewhere in the middle: Russia is a skilled strategic spoiler that prioritizes its relations with other like-minded powers.⁵ At the same time, it does have some staying power.⁶

Power struggles are informed by superpowers with relatively rigid doctrines, divergent goals and clear strategies to get there. By regional standards, Russia has had a relatively successful Syria campaign. Yet, the going has just started to get tough: in the country, Russia has at times accommodated US, Turkish, Iranian and Israeli concerns. Yet these countries' respective strategic interests are profoundly incompatible.⁷ In the long run, this is bound to lead to friction that Russia might not be able to manage. In ad-



dition, Russia's regional footprint is for the moment mostly in the security field.⁸ Deputy defense minister, Yuri Borisov, recently claimed that since its intervention in the conflict, Russia has tested over 600 new arms, driving potential customers to queue up.⁹

Schematically, Russia's highest priorities in the region seem to be: fighting jihadism (which has an obvious internal dimension too), maintaining some control over oil prices, selling weapons and proving its steadfast support for those it calls partners.¹⁰ None of these should automatically lead to a much-ballyhooed new Cold War. Russian agility has so far proven efficient only in the context of the absence of a clear US strategy and America's partial disengagement from the region. But it is unlikely that American policy will remain in limbo for too long.

Will Trump go for heightened tension?

Donald Trump's flirt with Vladimir Putin was short-lived. But the recent souring of relations has not abolished the delicate balance of power the two leaders have struck in the Middle East. Following the recent US, UK, and French strikes on three (alleged) chemical weapons sites in Syria, Russia did not respond forcefully, despite warning it would do so.¹¹ For the moment, it looks like the US and Russia are engaged in a peculiar relationship where big decisions are on hold.

Whatever the future brings, one should keep in mind that US-Russia relations in the Middle East will be informed by two considerations: first, it will be difficult for the two powers to work together in the region, while relations remain acrimonious in other areas. Second, even if they decide to work together, they will be hard-pressed to ensure the support of the region's increasingly assertive actors (Iran, Turkey).¹² Thus, while Syria will likely be the theater where the next US-Russia episode will be played out, one would do well to also look at places like Egypt, Algeria, Libya and Turkey where both countries have contacts and which neither one can call allies in the true sense.

But even in the case US foreign policy shows signs of dynamism and a sense of direction, none can be sure about its contours. Donald Trump does not seem to have a clear view of America's national interests in the same way Obama did. For example, his recent decision to stay in Syria after announcing plans of imminent withdrawal beggar's belief. It has been suggested that one possible reason for this is Saudi Arabia's frustration with the Syrian war's denouement.¹³ The same holds true regarding the JCPOA, which the US administration seems keen to go the extra mile to alter (at best), despite the lack of clear evidence Iran is in violation.

Evidently, the region is going through a fluid phase where US interests and strategies are ill-defined, while Russian ones have made some headway but are in the short term bound to crystallize, when the dust of regional turmoil begins to settle. It is then that the real game will begin.



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TURKEY AND THE US

BREAKING UP?!

There has been much ado lately about a possible Turkish-American “divorce”. Regional and policy experts, as well as think tanks and authoritative magazines, have taken up the “marriage breakdown” metaphor, albeit not without caution.¹ Indeed, Turkish-American relations have reached a low point and the idea of following separate ways has been looming large, but the “divorce” analogy can be more misleading than helpful. Notwithstanding the vows of loyalty in good and bad times found in international treaties, alliances are not formed out of affinity, neither are they dissolved out of a sudden aversion. They are based on geopolitical reasoning. Although the two sides might even agree on the irreconcilable differences ground, a Turkish-American break-up would be far from consensual, even as a new rival contender is lurking just around the corner.

**Beware
the
Chinese
Contender!!**

THERE SHOULD BE NO DOUBT that Turkish-American relations have been going downhill ever since they passed their diamond jubilee of sixty years since Turkey walked NATO's wedding aisle in 1952. Not that their conjugal life had been up until then without problems, even in the high days of the Cold War. "After experiencing a honeymoon period in the 1950s," Nasuh Uslu points out in his study of the so-called "distinctive" Turkish-American relationship, "the durability, strength and cohesion of the US-Turkish alliance were tested by the severe problems between 1960 and 1975".² Then, the logic of geopolitics and balance of interests ultimately prevailed. Why should it not be so now? To be sure, Sir Halford Mackinder himself argued, against charges of determinism, that every century has its own geographical perspective; but the value of Turkey's geopolitical dowry remains high in the 21st century.

Truly, long gone now seem the days of 2012 when US President Barack Obama was naming Turkey's Recep Tayyip Erdoğan among the few leaders he was able to forge "bonds of trust". By mid-2016, both Obama and Erdoğan were pleading disillusionment with each other.³ Trust flew further away after the failed coup attempt in July 2016 and the vitriolic Turkish accusations of US complacency. Naturally, the news of Donald Trump's victory were received ecstatically in Ankara. But besides a change in style and attitude, Turkey did not see any substantial change and so the two NATO allies continued to pursue opposite interests in the Middle East.

The US is disturbed as it watches its NATO ally dallying with Russia and Iran in the Middle East over the Syrian and Kurdish questions. Of all the problems in their bilateral relations, two specific points of contention stand out according to the latest CRS report for the US Congress: first, Turkey's military operations in Syria against Kurdish militias supported by the US; and second, Turkey's planned purchase of S-400 air defense systems from Russia.⁴

Regarding the first point, Turkey's uncompromising position in Syria should not come as a surprise, as Turkey considers the establishment of a Kurdish autonomous enclave in its soft underbelly as nothing less than an existential threat. Scorning Turkey's "unfortunate allies", Hürriyet's Yusuf Kanlı reminded the perennial cliché among the Turkey's political elite that should there ever be a Kurdish state, only Turkey itself could establish it.⁵ The Kurds are aware of that, as well as of America's state of dilemma: at a CEMMIS symposium in March 2018, PYD's diplomatic representative in Greece, Ibrahim Moslem, stated soberly that the Kurds understand the expedient nature of their alliance with the US and also argued that "in Syria, the Kurds help the Americans; not vice versa".

Neither should the second point of contention come as a surprise, for Turkey traditionally turns to the Russians when it feels alienated by the Americans.⁶ Turkey's planned acquisition of S-400 missile systems may be a bid too far, as it would give the Russians access to NATO systems, including sensitive data related to F-35 capabilities. Meanwhile, Turkey seeks also to buy more than a hundred F-35 fighter jets from the US, but a draft defense bill is calling for a temporary halt on American weapons sales to Turkey. As the tug of war continues, Turkish FM Mevlüt Çavuşoğlu said that Ankara will retaliate if the "illogical" measures are implemented: "Turkey is not a country under [US] orders, it's an independent country... Speaking to such a country from above, dictating what it can and cannot buy, is not a correct approach and does not fit our alliance".⁷ And this is where it all comes down to: Turkey feels that it is not given the attention it deserves; not only the Americans do not recognize its security concerns, but also they do not appreciate the geopolitical importance of their country.



Turkey feels that its current standing is not commensurate to its rising significance. The Americans are also to blame for this: for years they have been pampering Turkey thus rising expectations and feeding Turkish intransigence. When interests collided, they both had a rude awakening. As this was expressed by Çavuşoğlu in a meeting with students in Moscow, the US “does not keep its word, it always lies”; hence, the Turkish-American relationship is brought at the point of break-up because of “unfulfilled promises”.⁸ Surely, the fact alone that the US considers life without Turkey is revealing of how far apart the two sides have drifted. The CRS report puts the finger on the problem by rightly framing the two following questions: “to what extent does the US rely on the use of Turkish territory or airspace to secure and protect US interests”, and “to what extent does Turkey rely on US/NATO support, both in principle and in functional terms, for its security and its ability to exercise influence in the surrounding region?”.⁹ A sharp answer to the first question came from NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg: “It’s just enough to look at the map and see the strategic geographic location of Turkey to understand its importance”.¹⁰ No further explanation needed. But it is not just the Americans who look at the map. While the Americans have been pivoting to the east to contain China’s rise, the Chinese have been pivoting to the west to expand their influence. So, the answer to the second question must be examined within the broader geopolitical framework.

The new contender for Turkey’s “heart” may not be as attractive as America’s soft power has been for its largest part, but he comes with riches, promises, and—unlike Turkey’s western fellows—with little care for domestic politics. Turkey’s geographical position is vital for China’s One Belt One Road initiative providing an easy passage between continents. President Erdogan’s attendance of the New Silk Road Summit last May in Beijing showed Turkey’s professed willingness to be part of it and take advantage of the multi-billion dollar project plans. Still, as the Director of the USAK’s Centre for Asia-Pacific Studies Selçuk Çolakoğlu argues, moving Sino-Turkish relations from “strategic cooperation” to “strategic partnership” is not easy at all for a number of reasons, from stalling economic progress to the Uyghur issue,¹¹ not to mention the complications arising from China’s relations with Greece and Cyprus. Turkey’s long haggling but last-minute stepping back from a Chinese missile system deal in 2013 may even be indicative of its deeper aspiration not to leave NATO’s table, but to try to get a better seat at the table, as Turkish experts opined.¹² But the Sino-American *bras-de-fer* has just began and President Xi’s call to Erdoğan to deepen “strategic mutual trust” is too remarkable to pass idly over.¹³

In international politics there is no such thing as a wedded bliss. All alliances are marriages of convenience, for—as Thucydides pointed out—identity of interest is the surest of bonds. Inevitably, there will be ups and downs in the common life of the NATO family, but what will keep them together or apart at the end of the day is the larger balance of interests. The Thucydides Trap, as Graham Allison described the defin-



ing struggle of power of our times between the US and China, will not happen in void. It will be played out in critical geographical junctions on the Eurasian continent and through the seeking of geopolitical matchmaking. Whether old loves rekindle or new beginnings lie ahead is going to be decided through a long and tough process of cold and calculated reasoning and bargaining. This is how transitional phases look like.

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Stavros I. Drakoularakos

The US policy for the Middle East is dictated by a number of factors, one of which is the energy dimension. Energy seems to be the driving force in developments recently, a statement made even more relevant by the many natural gas discoveries that have occurred in just the span of a few years in the Eastern Mediterranean basin.

and US
Policy

THE US ARE NOT PARTICULARLY energy dependent on Middle Eastern countries, going so far as to export oil to the United Arab Emirates last February.¹ However, that is not the case for Europe, the latter being increasingly dependent on Russian energy imports. The Russian Federation is an energy exporter country with more than half of its GDP depending on energy prices and countries willing to import it. As a result, Russia greatly values its relationships with Middle Eastern countries and indirectly with OPEC, in an effort to maintain energy prices, as the latter impact the state of the Russian economy. Europe, on the other hand, is exceedingly dependent on Russian energy exports as the European economies lack another importing option on the Russian scale. It is estimated that the European market accounts for approximately 70% of Russian energy exports. Given that the US keep a close eye on the European energy dependency, it is no surprise that they would be in favour of limiting Russian exports and would go the great lengths in order to make a dent on the Russian energy monopoly.²

What is more, recent discoveries in the Eastern Mediterranean make it seem as the tide might be changing in favour of an alternative European option. Since the early 2010s, natural gas discoveries have made international news and have given much food for thought and a number of alternative scenarios for Eastern Mediterranean countries. The Republic of Cyprus has discovered the Aphrodite and Calypso natural gas fields, Israel found Tamar and Leviathan, while Egypt found the Zohr gas field. These discoveries enabled the Republic of Cyprus, Israel, Egypt, and to an extent Greece, to begin meeting and negotiating on possible future joint endeavours that would be able make mining and exporting the gas fields profitable for all involved. The impact of these discoveries is twofold: on the one hand, domestic energy needs could be satiated for the decades to come, while on the other hand the parallel and shared interests could make mining and exporting the natural gas fields a viable option on a regional scale that would not be available independently on a domestic one. The potential revenue stream for such initiatives would not be negligible³ For instance, Israel, until six years ago, was an energy importing country. Ever since the discovery of the Tamar and Leviathan gas fields, its economy is planned to switch to an energy exporting one.⁴ The latter's effects are being felt already, opening up new options for the Israeli foreign policy in forging bilateral ties. It should be noted however, that the new energy options could help strengthen already

established bilateral relations, and not open up new ones.⁵ Nonetheless, the many gas reserves, and the Zohr one especially, have been rightfully characterized as a game changer, since they would turn the Eastern Mediterranean region into an energy hub directly connected to the European market. In other words, they could potentially be the missing link in the region that would make all other energy discoveries worth investing in.⁶

Furthermore, the repercussions of such joint initiatives would be deeply felt by Turkey, who is self-excluded from



the process due to its strained relations with all four countries and its political foreign and domestic instability.⁷ It comes as no surprise that Turkey has loudly reacted to the development of the joint talks and the contracts that have already been negotiated between the countries and the interested companies. By being left out of the loop, Turkey stands to endanger both its regional standing as a possible venue for providing Europe with Eastern Mediterranean energy, as well as its say in the several open matters and disputes with its neighbours.⁸

These developments would greatly favour the European economy, as a positive outcome of the countries' negotiations could provide it with a viable alternative that would in turn diversify from the Russian imports and break the European Russian energy dependency. As a result, US policy supports such a turn of events, focusing even more on aspects that could jeopardize it.⁹ It should be noted that due to the Syrian civil war, no natural gas exploration could be conducted along the Syrian coastline. Given that all other neighbouring countries were found to hold important natural gas fields, it stands to reason that Syria would have a significant one as well. Therefore, Syria holds an additional point of interest to the geopolitical and domestic aspirations driving the conflict.¹⁰ It should be noted however, that the prospect of the Syrian gas fields could be applied to Schrödinger's cat paradox: no one knows if the gas reserves are really there and important enough until they go down that road.

As a result, it comes as no surprise that US co-owned or US-based companies, such as Delek or Noble Energy, have formally expressed an active interest in the exploration and mining of the discovered gas fields, as well as in the results of the involved countries' bilateral and multilateral negotiations and joint partnerships.¹¹

Finally, it certainly seems as if a new playing field is slowly coming to the forefront, at least when it comes to Russia and China. South from the Eastern Mediterranean and adjacent to the Maghreb region, a significant part of the African continent, is poised to turn into the next region of the world where interested parties aim to stake their claim, via economic cooperation or exchange and humanitarian aid with African countries or via a more direct involvement in the exploration of the countries' resources.¹² For instance, aspects of the shifting interests can be found in the China-based film industry, where nowadays more and more patriotic movies choose the African continent as their backdrop, and push an agenda that seems to be geared towards improving the relations with African countries.¹³ It remains to be seen how quick the turnaround will be for the US to refocus its energy policy priorities towards the African continent as well.



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U.S. and the Gulf States

Unconventional Alliance or Forbidden Relationship?

Alexandra Nikopoulou

The Gulf states, and specifically Saudi Arabia, have played a pivotal role in facilitating U.S. interests in the Middle and attempting to contain powers that oppose the U.S. in different periods, such as Soviet Union, Iran and Iraq. Despite being characterized by continuity, changes in U.S. administration over the last years have had a significant impact on their relations. The Obama administration challenged the Gulf allies by criticizing their domestic and regional policies, while the Trump Presidency has adopted a fundamentally different approach by engaging Gulf countries without any precondition, even though his pre-election rhetoric towards them indicated the continuation of the Obama policies or even more radical approaches. This article aims to examine how the Obama and Trump administrations have influenced the strategic U.S. relationship with the Gulf.

U.S. relations with Gulf countries, have been relatively strong in periods of republican administrations and particularly in the cases of Ronald Reagan and George H.W. Bush. It is pertinent that while Democrats focus more on the different outlook on human rights, Republicans focus on shared interests, investments and on having strategic allies in the region that can function as U.S. satellites.¹ The close cooperation built by U.S. administrations over the previous years, including George W. Bush, was deeply affected by the Obama period, as the latter adopted a more critical stance towards the Gulf countries. The former U.S. President posed a number of challenges to the Gulf allies ranging from his insistence towards human rights issues and civil liberties to its reaction to the Arab Spring and the Iran's nuclear program. Iran has been a major factor affecting US-Gulf relations as Obama believed that it was the Gulf states that were responsible for tensions with Tehran. In fact, Obama was the driving force behind the 2015 nuclear deal, an important step towards the normalization of relations between the two countries that softened the sanctions towards Iran.² The Gulf countries however saw this U.S. policy choice in the Middle East as allowing Iranian expansionism in Iraq, Syria and Yemen.³ These developments were most discouraging for Saudi Arabia and other Gulf states as well, as the U.S. seemed to be taking a more moderate approach on the Saudi-Iranian rivalry.

Even more, Obama has been highly critical on the Gulf countries' domestic policies and, mainly, on their human and civil rights record. This has caused the dissatisfaction of their Gulf allies that would prefer a hands-off approach regarding such issues. This is evident in the case of Yemen, as Obama implemented restrictions on arms sales after a mistaken targeting in a wedding in Sana'a and also caused the withdrawal of U.S. critical material, intelligence and support from the Saudis.⁴ Similar has been the U.S. reaction to the Arab Spring, where Obama welcomed the revolutions as a step towards democracy and justice and abandoned former U.S. allies such as Hosni Mubarak in Egypt. This sparked uncertainty for the U.S. support towards Gulf states as they feared that should an uprising take place in their countries, U.S. would not provide them with the necessary support. In addition, Obama has accused Saudi Arabia of contributing in the rise of Islamist militant groups through funding and of not doing enough in the campaign against the I.S., which has created a sense of pressure to the Saudis regarding their role in Syria.⁵



This sense of uncertainty and awkwardness between the formerly close US and Gulf allies increased even more as Saudis and other Gulf states feared what the next U.S. elections might bring to them. Hillary Clinton was traditionally not supportive of the Gulf states, while Trump employed a particularly aggressive rhetoric towards them during his pre-election campaign.⁶ He even threatened Saudi Arabia and other states to stop U.S. oil purchases unless the Saudi government provided troops to fight the Islamic State, questioning even the continuation of their alliance, if they do not



reimburse U.S. for the military protection they provide them with.⁷ He also engaged in the promotion of Islamophobia, while proposing a ban on Muslim immigrants.⁸ This rhetoric has not have been welcomed by many Saudis, who would prefer Clinton in the President's position, the latter being considered as the less of two evils.⁹ After the elections, Trump has fundamentally altered his outlook towards the Gulf countries and followed the same path as former republican presidents. He appears to be fully supportive of the Gulf states' interests in the Middle East and has already constructed a more open and closer relationship with them. The Gulf states welcomed this development, hoping the Republican President would reverse the Obama foreign policy in the region and, most importantly, would not follow his pre-election rhetoric. President Trump made his first foreign trip to Saudi Arabia, a symbolic move that highlighted the beginning of closer cooperation. Furthermore, Trump has lifted U.S. restrictions on arm sales to Saudi Arabia, while he recently signed a 100\$ bn arms deal with the country, a development that is indicating the renewal of U.S. support towards the Saudi-led coalition fighting in Yemen. Under the new Presidency, U.S. and the Gulf states are on the same page regarding the Yemeni issue as both are in favor of restoring the internationally recognized Hadi government and pushing back the Houthi-Saleh alliance, thus limiting Iran's influence in the region. Regarding Iran, Trump has also recently opted out from the Iranian nuclear deal, further deteriorating bilateral ties. Also important is the Trump administration's stance regarding human rights, as the U.S. is focusing less on the latter and more on radical extremism, a development that is welcomed by the Gulf rulers. Meanwhile, Trump has already opposed climate change and the U.S. has not signed the Paris Treaty. This favors the imports of natural resources and namely crude oil from the Gulf.¹¹

However, it cannot be deemed certain that the relations of the two sides have been completely restored. Trump did after all impose a Muslim ban on certain Muslim majority countries. Nevertheless, this seems to be overlooked given that Trump is focusing on ISIS and other radical groups and not his allies. The most important issue currently regards the Qatari crisis and the embargo imposed by the GCC states and Egypt on the country due to the latter's alleged support of terrorism and, specifically, Hezbollah. U.S. is undertaking a mediating role between the two and in a meeting between Trump and Sheikh Al Thani on April 10, Trump praised their very good relations and their efforts to maintain unity in the region. Al Thani referred to Trump's personal involvement and efforts to solve the crisis.¹² However, this might be a double-edged sword for the U.S. as a failure in solving the crisis would result in greater instability in the region and would harm U.S.' credibility.

To conclude, U.S. foreign policy towards the Gulf states is in generally characterized by continuity, despite the recent fluctuation in their relations. Even though the Obama administration adopted a critical stance towards its Gulf allies and limited the support provided to them, his administration maintained an acceptable level of relations. The Trump Presidency, however, has already constructed a closer relationship with the Gulf, despite Trump's pre-election rhetoric. As the Gulf states are the on-the-ground allies of the U.S. in the Middle East, a strong relationship with them will be maintained, either an open and strong one in periods of Republican administration, as the one with the Trump Presidency, or a more low-key one in periods of Democratic presidencies.



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ELVIS HAS LEFT THE BUILDING OR NOT?

Prospects of US Disengagement from the Middle East

Costas Faropoulos

Under Donald Trump, the United States have so far had an inconsistent Middle East policy. While he has used a rhetoric pointing to an isolationist approach to the region, his statements and actual policies indicate that he is following Obama's model of indirect approach. While the ever-going debate over U.S. disengagement from the Middle East continues, facts on the ground, such as the Russian and Iranian consolidation of gains in Syria, create conditions that render the whole discussion obsolete. Nevertheless, an actual withdrawal (even if only partial) of the United States could lead to a major realignment of power in the region, which would affect the entire globe.

FOR THE PAST 18 MONTHS, under the presidency of Donald Trump, the United States policy of regarding the Middle East has been, to say the least, ambiguous. While Trump campaigned for the presidency on a somewhat isolationist platform, talking about the return of US troops from battle zones, like Afghanistan and Syria, his overall stance on several issues (Syria, Iran, Jerusalem) points more to a U.S. policy fully engaged with the political struggles in the region, than one which is actively trying to disengage. In all fairness, developments in the region such as the ever-deepening Russian involvement in Syria, Bashar al-Assad's increasing control of the country and Yemen's ever-raging war between Saudi-led forces and the Houthis, currently make it rather difficult for the United States to decrease its international commitments in pursuit of a policy of withdrawal. Nevertheless, the United States under president Obama carried out a major strategic realignment, when in 2011 it declared the shift of U.S. strategic focus to Asia and the Pacific, in order to counter the increasing political and military Chinese presence in the region.¹ This policy shift, which has not been abandoned, at least verbally, by the current administration, has reinforced the ongoing discussion about a possible U.S. disengagement from the Middle East.

Donald Trump's expressed isolationism, through his "America First" slogan, is nothing new in U.S. policy. During the Cold War era, non-intervention was a main component of US foreign policy, and one that proved rather successful in that it managed to maintain a fragile balance of power in the Middle East throughout this period. This policy switched entirely and escalated to direct interventionism during the first Gulf War in 1991 under President Bush. This was a doctrine that was extended to the new century, when the United States, under President G.W. Bush, unilaterally attacked Afghanistan and invaded Iraq, in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks.² The first major overhaul of this policy in almost twenty years came under President Obama, who in an attempt to salvage the disastrous invasion of Iraq, decided on a strategic retreat that once again involved the indirect approach. Nevertheless, the United States did not remain on the sidelines of developments in the region. In 2011, NATO commenced an airstrike campaign against Libya, while in 2014 the U.S. led the air campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria.

This policy of disengagement that the United States are adhering to, could lead to a major realignment of the power balance in the Middle East and globally. Currently, there is such a redistribution of power taking place in Syria. Russia has assumed the role of arbitrator in the country, while Iran is deeply involved through its Shiite militias fighting on the side of government troops and its support to the Assad regime. Turkey, a U.S. NATO ally, has invaded the autonomous Kurdish region in the north and has captured Afrin, making the situation even more complex. All these developments directly undermine the US stand in the region and its ability to effectively protect its interests and those of its allies. Israel and Saudi Arabia have openly disagreed with the prospect of a US disengagement from the region, as it would pose a severe risk to their security and their strategic interests. This move would most certainly jeopardise Israel's security, as it would allow Iran and its proxies in Syria to approach even closer to its borders. Saudi Arabia, on the other hand, will find itself in a more vulnerable position, as it will have lost its main ally and the reassurance that comes with it.³ Moreover, US disengagement will leave the floor open to Russia to fill the power vacuum in Syria, and it will give a rather discouraging message to U.S. allies, in relation to its commitment to respect and uphold alliances. In addition, Sunni jihadism, one of



the main threats of U.S. national security as perceived in Washington, is still quite active in the region. Leaving the region, and without a coherent, effective policy regarding the elimination of jihadist cells after the defeat of ISIS, would most probably allow offsprings of ISIS and other jihadist groups to rally and eventually pose a renewed threat to U.S. security.⁴

From a global perspective, retreating from the Middle East could potentially have detrimental effects on U.S. standing across the world. The withdrawal of the United States in Syria has allowed other players to step forward and fill the power vacuum, namely Russia and Iran, who have increased their overall influence in the region. Arab countries, who counted on U.S. support and cooperation, are now forced to open channels of communication with the new powers in the region and to reevaluate their strategic alliances, in order to secure their national interests.⁵ This line of thinking may very well spread to other regions of the world, such as the Pacific, where China has been consistently trying to expand its influence.⁶ Consequently, regional countries, like their Arab counterparts, could very well be attracted to other rival narratives. In essence, there is a real and present danger that the soft power of the United States around the world will suffer because of the disengagement. Its credibility as a leading global power may come under question, and it could eventually lead to a decisive shift in the global balance of power.

The main question, then, is whether the United States are truly committed to retreating from the Middle East. Up until now, while President Trump has been exhibiting a rather incoherent Middle East policy, in general terms he seems to be following his predecessor's policies. Although he has requested Congress to increase the budget for the fight in Syria by \$300 million for the next fiscal year, he seems reluctant to commit to a long-lasting engagement in the region.⁷ In addition to that, the overall cost of US involvement in the Middle East has been a recurring theme in Trump's rhetoric in favor of disengagement, as several studies suggest that the latter currently rests at \$3.6 trillion since 2001.⁸ On the other hand, the United States have been the main arms provider of Middle Eastern countries for the past two decades, and especially after the collapse of the Soviet Union. In the last five years, alone, there has been an increase of 25% in arms exports to the region.⁹ That is a market that no one would abandon to its competitors light-heartedly.

On May 8, President Trump announced that the United States is withdrawing from the Iran Nuclear deal and has instantly created high political tensions across the world. This decision could have serious implications for US standing around the globe, besides the hardening of Iran's stance concerning its nuclear program. It certainly casts a light of uncertainty on the prospects of reaching an agreement in the upcoming June 12 summit in Singapore between Donald Trump and the President of North Korea, Kim Jong Un. Dropping out of a UN-sanctioned international agreement, such as the one with Iran, will most certainly hinder a possible deal in the short term, while in the long term, it could have multi-faceted consequences, especially on the reach of US soft power on a global level.



Trump's unpredictability leaves ground for much speculation regarding his policies on the Middle East at the moment. Nonetheless, it seems highly unlikely that the United States will retreat from the region, let alone abandon it completely. President Obama attempted to retreat and failed, considering the consequences of the withdrawal from Iraq and the altogether failure of leaving Afghanistan. Still, if the United States insist on their policy of retrenchment from the Middle East, they may have to deal, in the not too distant future, with the consequences of that decision in other parts of the world.

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GLOBALIZING MIDDLE EAST

REVERSING
THE IRREVERSIBLE

Ilias Tasopoulos & Maria Kourpa

It may be difficult to discern whether the impact of globalization on the Middle East was more significant than the impact the region had on globalization itself. Ever since oil was discovered in the Arabian Peninsula and its exploitation fueled the rise of a global economy, the Middle East has been on the forefront. Several decades later, however, the impact of jihadi networks in combination with the advent of social media gave a new meaning to globalization, rather obstructing the linear evolution of the process. Could this complex interaction between the region show the ambivalent nature of the American approach towards the Middle East and globalization?

INTEGRATION OF THE REGION IN THE GLOBAL ECONOMY ran through US policy during the Cold War decades, although the geopolitical struggle with the Soviet Union topped its priorities. And if someone could argue that Washington was always in favor of a major branch of globalization that consisted of a functioning open market economy, this could not be said of a second equally important branch, promoting democratic principles and guaranteeing that human rights are respected. American involvement in the Middle East has been heavily criticized for its backing of repressive regimes, while lacking any fervor to actively support the transition to more democratic structures. When it halfheartedly pushed for the promotion of human rights in the Middle East, during the 1970's for example, its attempt backfire, Iran being an apt example. On the other hand, US support towards Israel, perhaps the only state that managed to take the globalization path,¹ failed to produce any results in regards to either the promotion of democracy or conformity with basic human right principles in the wider region. The wind of change in 1990 did not alter this course, while insistence on the economic part of globalization continued.

When the New World Order rhetoric was then deployed, marketization and democracy had a big part to play for its establishment. If peace and stability go hand-in-hand with globalization, America's "Unipolar moment" was the time to prove it. Both could be promoted in the region, if a way could be found for Arab states to embrace it. However, before capitalizing on the peace agreements between Israel and Arab states, the 9/11 attacks initiated a period that actually reinforced all previous tendencies. The "War on Terror"² put a further strain on any attempts to incorporate the Middle East on the global economy on an equal footing, as its launching meant that US would support without any qualms every regime willing to cloak its actions as part of counterterrorism. Arab regimes, already slow in following the vast majority of economic and political openness proposals, were quick to jump on the bandwagon, especially after admitting the benefits of the "Washington consensus" reforms to their financial and trade flows and economic numbers.³

US traditional allies and former foes seized the opportunity, vying for a free hand to deal with their domestic enemies, while reaping any potential benefits accruing from cooperation with the US on a new basis. After having to implement an unpopular IMF stabilization program, which included cutting subsidies and applying new taxes and not succeeding in alleviating inequalities,⁴ the Egyptian regime

strived to tighten its grip on the highly outward-looking society. On the other hand, following varying combinations of "sticks" and "carrots", Qaddafi's Libya decided to renounce terrorism, abandon its weapons of WMD program and bring the isolated Libyan economy closer to the Western world, opening it to foreign banks and corporations and proceeded to privatizations of state enterprises.⁵ Neither of them, however, escaped the wrath of the Arab Spring that blossomed in Tunisia and quickly spread beyond it.

Albeit unsuccessful in many countries, the Arab Uprisings



showed that democratization in could indeed be achieved from the inside. Globalization has affected them in more ways than one, although new media technology, a great facilitator of the Arab spring protests, is seen as the most important. Calls for political change have been there for too long. Barack Obama, in his 2016 Athens speech, highlighted one of the most significant aspects of globalization, the awareness that people now have on inequality, since “people in the smallest African village can see how people in London or New York are living”.⁶ The prime example of a global culture, satellite TV and social media, became the catalyst of a young, urban and educated Egyptian youth, or so to say; the media of a more developed civil society, influenced by western values and achievements, as it also did in Iran during the Green Movement. The widespread use of social media in Egypt managed to bring people out onto the streets, while new media in Libya increased the strength and inclusiveness of the anti-Gaddafi fighters. This was not enough to change the situation in the Middle East however.

The attitude of the United States towards globalization seemed to have changed more, as Washington has begun to diverge from its European partners in peripheral and crucial issues, ranging from the climate to even their strategic outlook regarding the Middle East. The chaos that followed the US involvement in Libya, being a recurring theme in the Presidential race between Donald Trump and Hillary Clinton, the civil war in Syria, the power struggle between both moderate Islamists, radical jihadists and the army in Egypt seem to have influenced American foreign policy much more than the positive signs in the transition of Tunisia. President Trump seems to be adopting a much more inward-looking approach to globalization and prone to further support monarchical regimes, such as Saudi Arabia, while not having any of the human rights concerns of his predecessor and being impervious to any liberal critique. Even if the U.S. remains the major force associated with globalization and the spread of Western ideas across the world, it might be premature to assert that the whole globalization process could prove reversible. There are signs, however, that it would continue to be non-linear and unpredictable.

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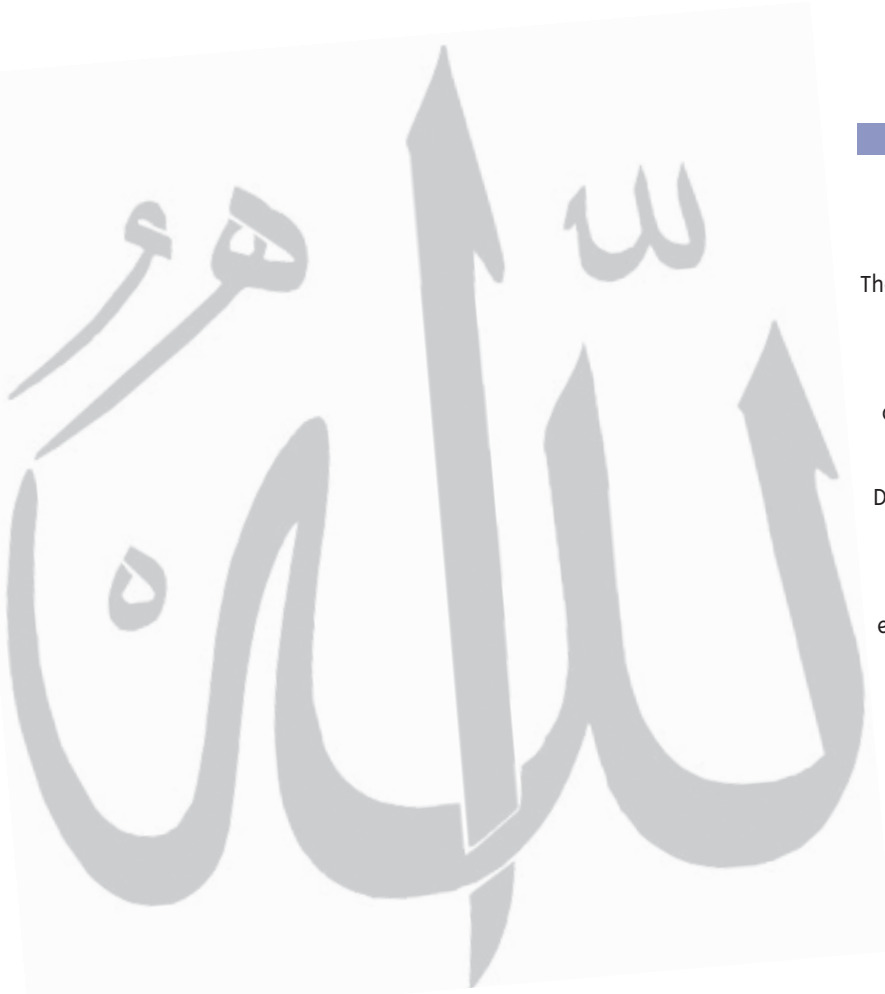


MUSLIMS IN AMERICA

Religion, Identity and Islamophobia

Charitini Petrodaskalaki

The Muslim population is growing fast, expecting to be the second largest religion in the US by 2040. At the same time, there is a sharp increase in incidents of discrimination and hate crimes towards them, fueled by the media representation and political reality. Despite their long presence in the US history and their social and economic inclusion, being perceived as a single homogenous group is deeply problematic, especially as suspicions towards them are increasing.



THERE ARE NO OFFICIAL STATISTICS on the number of Muslims in the US, as government-conducted surveys are not allowed to collect data on religious affiliation. According to Pew Research Statistics in 2017, there were 3.45 million Muslims of all ages living in the US, making up about 1.1% of the total population; what is more, the American Muslim population is growing at a rate of 100,000 per year and is expected to replace the Jews as the nation's second-largest religion by 2040.¹ Nonetheless, American Muslims are a very diverse group in terms of ethnicity, religious allegiance and age. Regarding socio-economic terms, they are generally educated, graduating from college at higher rates than the national average; a third of the Muslim population is earning at least \$50,000 annually, and about 27% are successful business owners.² These are all indicators that American Muslims are more educated and more culturally integrated than Muslims in Europe.

Islam has a long history in the United States, as the first large-scale documented Muslim presence dates to the late 1700's. Thomas Jefferson was the first president to hold an Iftar dinner in the White House, and he was the first one to declare the principal of freedom of religion in the United States—with a specific mention to the religious rights of Muslims.³ However, the vast majority of the first Muslims in the US were not citizens, but slaves – most of whom ended up converting to Christianity. By the end of the 19th century and the beginning of the 20th, the immigration wave brought to the American soil tens of thousands of Muslims from the Middle East, South and Central Asia, and Eastern Europe.

In the 20th century, African-American Muslim associations had a significant impact on the face of Islam in America, by portraying Islam as part of their African heritage. The largest and best-organized African American group was the “Nation of Islam” (NOI), which paved the way for the emergence of Islam as an influential part of Black Nationalism and the broader civil rights movement in the 1950s and 1960s. Nevertheless, its religious beliefs, rituals, and practices—mainly the belief of black superiority over whites—is far outside mainstream Islamic ideology. Even though the NOI has moved closer to mainstream Islam since the 1990s, it is still seen by most Muslims as separate from Islam.

For decades, the attitudes towards Muslim Americans were influenced by the geopolitical reality in the Middle East, such as the Six Day War, the Oil Embargo, or the Iranian revolution. Yet, prior to 2001, there was no bias against Muslims. However, 9/11 sparked a debate in the mainstream American society that continues up to this day: are the American and the Muslim identities compatible? Despite the fact that Muslims are overwhelmingly proud of their American identity (92%),⁴ they are being rejected from the national collective when they project their religiosity. This has created a chasm within American society, separating Muslim Americans from the others. Being perceived as a single homogeneous group by the general public, Muslims are racially profiled, despite their diverse ethnic and racial background. Regardless of their skin color, Muslims carrying physical markers, such as religious clothing or a Muslim name, are being perceived as different, even as foreigners, by their fellow citizens. In a sense, what constitutes a Muslim identity is also imposed by the social imaginary, thus hindering any individual attempt to self-identify.⁵ According to polls, half of Americans claim Islam is not part of the mainstream American society, 41% believe Islam encourages violence more than other religions, with 27% of Americans believing that the militant group ISIS is representative of a true Islamic society, while 35% consider American Muslims to be extremists.⁶



This situation has been endorsed by the media in their representation of Muslims. Particularly since the San Bernardino terrorist attack in December 2015 – the first international terrorist attack in US territory since 2001 — the media reporting of terrorist attacks is being largely done in a simplistic manner, presenting Muslims as indistinguishable from terrorists and Islam as inherently violent. While new outlets are not directly inspiring any form of violence, they generally cultivate apathy and acceptance of the uneven treatment of Muslims, and ultimately making the audience skeptical towards them. What is more, as the religion and traditions of Islam remain unfamiliar to most US citizens, mainstream media are the main, or even the only, source of information on these issues. It is noteworthy that more than half of Muslims reject the media coverage of Muslims as unfair.⁷

Moreover, in the last three years, anti-Muslim rhetoric has entered the mainstream, being used frequently by Donald Trump in his presidential campaign. In a way, Trump has validated the feelings of those who were suspicious towards Muslims, portraying Islam itself as the root cause of all terrorist attacks. As a presidential candidate, his statements included the claims that refugees might be ISIS terrorists, that Muslims have not been really assimilated in the American society, and that “Islam hates us”; he also said he was considering closing mosques in the United States.⁸ What is more, he has not been particularly vocal in condemning anti-Muslim and Islamophobic attacks. In addition, he quickly transformed his rhetoric into policy, as one of his first acts as President was signing the so-called “Muslim Ban”, an executive order prohibiting travelers from seven Muslim-majority countries from entering the United States; meanwhile the number of Muslim refugees admitted to the US has plummeted, even though the percentage of refugees of other religions stayed the same.⁹

What is more, as they are an extremely diverse population, no single group can claim to represent the Muslim community as a whole; by contrast, there are lobbies acting on behalf of different governments (e.g. the Egyptian Lobby or the Saudi Lobby), or different Muslim groups, who push for their own, and often rival, agendas. Therefore the term “Muslim Lobby” as employed by the media is misleading, as it is used to describe different advocacy groups trying to combat Islamophobia and raise awareness, and not strong civic or political actors. However, American Muslims are slowly making their entrance into the civic society and are starting

to assert themselves politically.¹⁰

At the same time, the FBI has reported that hate crimes against Muslims have escalated significantly since 2015, surpassing the number of incidents of 2001, while government sources show that the number of incidents might be much higher. Types of hate crimes include destruction of property, defacing of mosques, and verbal and physical attacks. Three quarters of adult Muslims claim that there is a lot of discrimination in the US, and at least 32% of American Muslims claim to have experienced some sort of discrimina-



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USA IRAN ISRAEL

STAKES
MUCH
HIGHER
THAN
SUPREMACY
IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Sotiris Roussos

The relations of U.S. and Iran after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 did not always pass through Tel Aviv. Although there was intelligence co-operation between the U.S. and Israel on Iranian issues, Israel did not initially see the Shi'a factor in the Middle East as a potential threat. On the contrary, Shi'as in South Lebanon saw the first Israeli invasion in the 1980s as an opportunity to rid themselves of Palestinian control. Similarly, Shi'as in Iraq were seen as a welcome opposition to Saddam Hussein's regime, which was considered a major threat to Israel's security.

THE ASCENT OF HEZBOLLAH as the major force of resistance against Israeli occupation of South Lebanon altered Israel's perception regarding Shi'a political Islam. Moreover, the formation of an alliance between Iran, Hezbollah and Hafez al-Assad's regime in Syria changed the geopolitical status quo in the region. There were other two developments that cemented US-Israeli common stance against Iran. The first was the US invasion and occupation of Iraq. The most important, though unintended, result of the American strategy of reshaping Iraq was to save Iran from a formidable antagonist in the region. Moreover, it offered the Shi'a majority to the hands of Tehran, transforming a vast area from Western Afghanistan to the Mediterranean shores into an influence zone for Iran. The second development was the active involvement of Tehran in Palestinian politics, by assisting Hamas at a point when the Arab friends of the Islamist movement were taking distances.

Apart from the geopolitical influence, the Shi'a political Islam of Tehran and Hezbollah was of different intellectual and social origin from that of the Muslim Brotherhood. It was the offspring of three major trends. First, the encounter of the neo-Marxist, Third-Worldist theory of Ali Shariati with the outcast nature of Shi'a Islam. Second, the opposition of the Shi'a clergy to the Shah government and its identification with certain rural and bazaar strata of the society. Last, but not least, the identification of Shi'a Islam with nationalism, be it Iranian, Lebanese or Iraqi. The last elections in Iraq and Lebanon are cases within this last trend. The conjunction of these trends creates an influential ideological pattern, which could reach out to other political forces in the region, secular, nationalists and leftists.

The nuclear capability of Iran would have shielded this geopolitical-ideological preponderance from a regime change operation by the U.S. and their allies in the region. Even a non-military nuclear program would offer Tehran enormous energy capacity reducing the dependency of the country on oil and natural gas industry.

However, the advent of a hegemonic Iran in the region was perceived by Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies as a major threat to their very existence and, thus, the latter pressed upon consecutive US administrations to take measures against not only the Iranian nuclear program but also the Iranian regional influence in general. At the same time, Israel saw in Iran's nuclear capability an unprecedented threat given that Israeli nuclear weaponry would have been balanced by the Iranian. Hence, Israel would have lost the "Samson option", the last resort deterrence strategy of massive retaliation with nuclear weapons against nations whose military attacks threaten its existence, and possibly against other targets as well. Moreover, the defeat of the Israeli army by Hezbollah in 2006 increased Tel Aviv's anxiety. US sanctions against Iran's nuclear program put Iranian economy and society under considerable pressure.

The war in Syria gave Israel, USA and Saudi Arabia the impression that the days of Assad's regime would have been counted and that the Assad's fall would have been a severe blow to the Tehran-Damascus-Hezbollah "axis". Any Sunni regime or, even better, a chaotic situation resembling that in Libya would weaken Iranian influence and cut the artery of aid between Tehran and Hezbollah. However, Iran and its allies managed to keep Assad's regime alive in the first year of the war and the Russian intervention changed the situation radically reinstating Assad to the driver-seat. At the same time, Obama administration struck a deal on the Iranian



nuclear program (JCPOA), paving the way for the easing of sanctions. These developments brought Israel and the Saudis closer than ever, forming a new alliance in the Middle East and sidestepping the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Palestinian issue. This more or less open alliance is a major development not of tactical but of strategic importance. Egypt signed a peace agreement with Israel but the former never, until today, entered in alliance with Israel against a third party in the region.

The Trump administration is changing the rules of the game. Trump's foreign affairs and security staff, particularly those who have been hired in the last six months, have a clear strategy in the Middle East. They believe that Iran is the major threat to Israel, Saudi Arabia and, foremost, to the American interests in the region. Their strategy towards Tehran resembles *mutatis mutandis* that of Reagan administration against the Soviet Union; steady escalation of economic and military pressure until the regime collapses under the unresolved economic and social problems. In the case of Iran, they expect that the regime would first roll back its presence and influence from Syria, Iraq and Lebanon leaving its allies alone under relentless pressure by Israel and Saudi Arabia.

The withdrawal of the U.S. from JCPOA is also a major test for the European powers, China and Russia. Trump's administration is trying to co-opt both allies and antagonists in a flagrant violation of the international normative framework. If he succeeds, then the U.S. would continue to be the unchallenged global hegemon. If, on the other hand, the EU covers the economic losses and undertakes the legal defense of European firms, which are doing business in Iran, the American world hegemony will be seriously injured and the world system of the 21st century will be heading towards a balance of power model.¹

Russia is not willing to become Iran's linchpin in its conflict with the U.S., Israel and Saudi Arabia. Moscow has maintained excellent relations with Israel and is striving to maintain working relations with the Saudi kingdom. Russia has made clear that her understanding with Iran is clearly confined in the case of Syria and by no means extends over the whole of the region.² China has until now shown no intention to compete with Washington outside her periphery, that is East and South East Asia. If the Chinese defy American sanctions and invest heavily in Iran, it would upgrade the rivalry between China and the U.S. from the level of trade to the level of world hegemony. The only reason that would persuade the Chinese to go ahead investing in Iran is the heavy dependence of the Chinese growth on the Gulf and Iranian hydrocarbons.³

The U.S. rivalry with Iran and, most importantly, the withdrawal from JCPOA is not simply the result of the capricious attitude of a president and cannot be fully explained by the -certainly mighty- role of the Jewish lobby, the flow of Saudi money or the support of right-wing Evangelicals. It should be largely attributed to the world view of a considerable part of the American ruling elite. They believe that US political and economic interests would be better served should they disengage themselves from the international normative framework, which was built on the UN foundations after the Second World War. This is today the answer to the question of Tony Judd: "why the im-



perial might and international reputation of the United States are so closely aligned with one small, controversial Mediterranean client state.”⁴

NOTES

All links accessed on 01/05/2018

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