

1. US Withdrawal from the Middle East: Perceptions and Reality

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When Britain's Minister of State in the Foreign Commonwealth Office toured its "Protected States" of the Persian Gulf in November 1967, he conveyed an important message of reassurance. Yes, they had encountered embarrassing military setbacks in the region recently. And, of course, there were voices at home arguing that the financial resources being dedicated to securing the Middle East would be better used to improve the domestic economy. But any lingering perceptions of an impending British departure reflected only rumors, and certainly not any reality.

Indeed, the Minister confirmed that "there was no thought of withdrawal in our minds" and that Britain would remain in the Gulf "so long as was necessary and desirable to ensure the peace and stability of the area"¹. By all accounts the Minister was honest in his representations of British intentions and sincere in his confidence that British promises would be kept. And yet, merely two months later, on 16 January 1968, the Prime Minister publicly announced that Britain would soon begin withdrawing all its forces East of Suez, to be completed by the end of 1971.

The United States, closing in on a quarter millennium since its declaration of independence, is now an old state with

¹ W.R. Louis, "The British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967-1971", *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 31, no. 1, 2010, pp. 83-101.

a short memory. Most Americans, even including some who have helped craft US policies toward the Middle East in recent administrations, do not remember the details of what was immediately understood to be a terrible British betrayal of its longstanding local partners. The Gulf states, most of which are not yet a half century from their independence, are young but have longer memories. None of their leaders have forgotten.

Today it is the United States' turn to be confronted with questions about its withdrawal when visiting the Gulf and the wider Middle East. For many US diplomats and military officers in the region, such questions are baffling and their repetition frustrating. How can there be any doubts about the US commitment when there are so many US resources dedicated to the region? How can there be any question of American withdrawal when the United States has such clear national security interests at stake?

Perpetual American Interests

Indeed, American policymakers' recognition of US national security interests in the Middle East has remained remarkably consistent across administrations ever since the region's energy resources began to be exploited, and especially since the United States took on the mantle of global leadership.

Some of these regional interests reflect the United States' wider understanding of its global security requirements. As with any part in the world, the United States has a strong interest in ensuring that no power in this region, either state or non-state, has both the will and capacity to directly attack the United States. As such, the United States has traditionally worked to ensure that no single entity could militarily dominate the wider Eurasian landmass, of which the Middle East is part, as such a power would inherently pose a direct military threat.

Over this same time period the United States also concluded that its global interests are best protected by promoting the liberal international order. This order represents a remarkably

idealist break from historic norms of oligarchical societies, authoritarian governments, mercantilist economies, and adventurist militaries. But, with some notable exceptions, the American approach to achieving these idealist aims has been largely defined by a realist reliance on incremental progress towards generational reform, and the clear willingness to compromise in the short term on matters of principle in support of longer-term improvements, notwithstanding the inevitable charges of hypocrisy.

Overall this mix of idealist and realist policies has been remarkably successful, as the post-World War II era has witnessed the greatest global advancement in the human condition ever recorded. And yet, nowhere has that realist acceptance of compromise and incrementalism been more evident than in the Middle East, where representative governments remain scarce, a near-term threat of interstate conflict persists, and many economies are still primarily organized for the benefit of those who rule.

This dynamic cannot be understood without first appreciating the region's unique role as a global energy producer. Oil remains the most important global energy source, representing over one-third of all energy consumption, ahead of coal and natural gas, and far ahead of all renewable resources combined². No matter the rate of the energy transition, oil is going to remain a crucial part of the energy mix for at least the lifetime of anyone reading this, and most likely through the lifetimes of their children. Furthermore, although the effect is not nearly as direct as it was decades ago, a long-term increase in the market price of oil still negatively affects both global economic growth and inflation, and a long-term decline in prices would make energy producers unstable.

US policymakers must still grapple with these realities, notwithstanding the United States' newfound "energy independence". While breakthroughs in fracking and directional drilling

² BP, *BP Statistical Review of World Energy*, June 2019, p. 11.

have doubled US production over the last decade³, this doesn't mean that the United States is now in a state of energy autarky. Increasing domestic production and the growth of renewable energy have indeed gone a long way toward mitigating the strategic risk of a foreign adversary cutting off distant energy supply lines in wartime, but they do nothing to protect the United States from increases in global oil prices. US oil companies do not offer American citizens discount pricing due to their nationality, nor do American consumers choose to pay above market rates for domestically sourced gasoline.

Unfortunately, global oil prices are not the result of an entirely free market, absent from any foreign government influence. This is because roughly four-fifths of the world's proven oil reserves are concentrated in the fourteen member states of the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and about two-thirds of these are located in the Middle East⁴.

Saudi Arabia alone plays a particularly prominent role. It is naturally blessed with some of the cheapest oil in the world to find, develop, and produce. It possesses the second largest proven oil reserves (after Venezuela, which mainly has problematic extra heavy crude), maintains the second largest production (now to the United States due to fracking), and remains the oil market's global swing producer with spare capacity that allows it to make the tactical shifts necessary to influence market prices. These shifts are sometimes designed for global benefit, as when Saudi Arabia acts to prevent unwelcome price volatility in moments of crisis, and at other times are made to maximize the Kingdom's own long-term market position and revenues. As a result, Saudi Aramco is by far the world's most profitable company.

Even more unfortunately, the Middle East is a fundamentally unstable region of the world, beset with interstate military

³ U.S. Energy Information Administration, *Total Petroleum and Other Liquids Production – 2018* (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

⁴ OPEC, *OPEC Share of World Crude Oil Reserves*, 2018 (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

rivalries and deeply challenged by internal tensions. Additionally, most of the region's energy resources have to move through one of two critical geographical chokepoints. The most important is the Strait of Hormuz that connects the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, sandwiched between Iran, Oman, and the United Arab Emirates. It is so narrow that ships moving through are restricted to one inbound or outbound lane, each only two miles wide. Through this tight passage transits about one-third of total global seaborne traded oil and, in total, over a fifth of the entire world's global oil supply. Over one-quarter of global liquefied natural gas trade also moves through the channel. Moreover, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, the similarly narrow waterway between the coasts of Yemen and the Horn of Africa at the southern end of the Red Sea, itself accounts for just under one-tenth of total seaborne traded petroleum. It is painfully easy to disrupt the movement of tankers through these chokepoints, and it doesn't require a sizable military to shut it down entirely.

Given these energy and geographic realities, the United States has long identified four principal national security objectives that are specific to the Middle East: the region's energy resources must continue to be extracted, they must be able to move freely to consumers, regional stability should be supported, and regional prosperity should be encouraged. Ideally, perhaps, these American objectives could be realized by freeriding on another benevolent global power eager to provide them. Alas, no such option currently exists.

The steady extraction of the region's energy resources can be threatened either by military aggression from outside powers or by local rulers deciding to reduce production. Local rulers have in the past done so both directly for political purposes and indirectly through anti-competitive policies designed to maximize producers' revenue at the expense of global economic growth. This US objective requires the United States to seek to prevent any one power, regional or external, from dominating local production decisions – a concern that becomes immediately pressing if that power is an American adversary.

This helps explain why the Middle East was relevant to the US fight against Nazi aggression during World War II and was a critically contested area for great power competition during the subsequent Cold War with the Soviet Union (USSR). It also helps explain why the United States has felt its interests threatened, at various points in time, by pan-Arabist movements, the Iranian revolution, Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and the more recent rise of Salafi jihadist non-state actors. For the same reasons, American planners today are growing increasingly concerned by growing Russian influence and Chinese presence across the region.

After those energy resources are extracted they must then be allowed to move freely to buyers around the globe, their destinations primarily determined by market conditions rather than imposed by political diktats or diverted by military threats. American policymakers still remember the powerful impact of their own restrictions on energy shipments to Japan before the attacks on Pearl Harbor. And in 1973 the American people quickly came to appreciate the consequence of any failure to ensure the unfettered flow of energy when OPEC imposed a formal boycott of nations that were seen to support Israel during the Yom Kippur War, resulting in gas rationing across the United States and contributing to a global economic recession.

This threat became even more immediate after the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Iran's geographic position means that it will always have the ability to threaten the security of shipping through the Strait of Hormuz. After the revolution, this power changed hands from the pro-American Shah who helped maintain maritime security to an anti-American regime that brazenly threatened it.

Furthermore, the 1980 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan then convinced the United States that Moscow was "now attempting to consolidate a strategic position that poses a grave threat to the free movement of Middle East oil"⁵. The result was the

⁵ J.E. Carter, "State of the Union address 1980", Joint Session of the 96th US

Carter Doctrine, which declared that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force”⁶. Critically, this policy was then accepted and enforced by the next administration, across American partisan lines. In 1987, after the Iran-Iraq war expanded to the Gulf and Iran began attacking non-combatant shipping, President Reagan announced:

Our own role in the Gulf is vital. It is to protect our interests and to help our friends in the region protect theirs [...] Let there be no misunderstanding: we will accept our responsibility for these vessels in the face of threats by Iran or anyone else. If we fail to do so [...] we would abdicate our role as a naval power. And we would open opportunities for the Soviets to move into this chokepoint of the free world’s oil flow [...] If we don’t do the job, the Soviets will, and that will jeopardize our own national security as well as our allies⁷.

The US Navy has consistently maintained its role as the leading guarantor of freedom of navigation in the Gulf ever since. And as the US military refocuses for an era of great power competition and makes plans for future conflict scenarios, it no doubt recognizes the potential utility of keeping an American hand on the throttle of Middle Eastern energy bound for China. Along similar lines, our war plans need to reflect the critical importance of ensuring that US naval forces based in the Mediterranean can always transit unmolested through the Bab el-Mandeb and into the Indo-Pacific region.

In addition to protecting the sea lanes, the United States has also traditionally sought to promote wider regional stability, recognizing that the region was awash with inherently fragile

Congress, Washington, DC, 23 January 1980.

⁶ *Ibid.*

⁷ R. Reagan, “Address to the Nation on the Venice Economic Summit, Arms Control, and the Deficit”, White House Television office Video, 15 June 1987.

governing systems, unstable domestic social structures, and numerous interstate rivalries. Of course, this is a generalization, but one that explains far more than it obscures. The United States has been particularly concerned whenever threats arise either to the region's energy rich areas or to Israel, which was long the sole local supporter of the United States' idealist vision of a liberal international order. This also meant working to deny the USSR (and then Russia) a significant diplomatic or security role in the region, as its objectives were seen to be antithetical to both regional stability and to global US interests.

With notable exceptions that largely date back to the early Eisenhower administration, US presidents generally looked askance at casual calls to shift borders, change regimes, or support domestic unrest. And even in these early years of growing American involvement in the region, the United States quickly shifted its approach from supporting British covert operations in Iran during the first year of Eisenhower's presidency to opposing British, French, and Israeli aggression in Egypt just three years later.

Indeed, for decades since American efforts to promote stability have typically sought little more than to sustain the prevailing regional *status quo*. To this end, the United States has been repeatedly required to help resolve local crises, lead diplomatic negotiations, maintain a carefully calibrated regional military balance of power, and deter aggression from aspiring regional hegemons. Given the region's underlying volatility and the personal style of diplomacy favored by its leaders, this has required administration after administration to devote a disproportionate amount of its most precious resource, the personal time and attention of the US President.

When such efforts were successful, such as with the peace process between Egypt and Israel, American presidents tended to resolve conflicts with agreements to withdraw forces, restore borders, formally recognize the *status quo*, and improve diplomatic relations – all facilitated by the provision of increased American economic and military assistance. Even when US military force

had to be used it was typically restrained in its scope and limited in its objectives to reinforcing instead of upending the *status quo*. In this way, George H.W. Bush's Gulf War successfully restored international borders while keeping in power both the monarch that was saved and the dictator that was defeated.

The US commitment to the *status quo* in the Middle East was so resolute that American efforts to promote democracy, human rights, and religious tolerance in the region were especially modest, even in comparison with efforts in other regions of the world with similarly authoritarian traditions. They were therefore ineffectual. In this area American agency was certainly limited but its political will was even more lacking. The United States' historical reluctance, compounded over decades, to quietly encourage its Middle Eastern partners to adopt goals for even gradual change or to take even largely symbolic reforms was deeply unfortunate. This repeated failure by the United States to apply its own preferred mix of idealism and realism by persuading its regional partners to act in their own enlightened self-interest helped allow the conditions for continued domestic unrest. It thus contributed to the growth of both Shia and Sunni extremism, to the rise to power of both the Ayatollah Khomeini and Osama bin Laden.

This failure was seized upon by President George W. Bush to rationalize his Iraq war, particularly after the purported *casus belli* of Iraqi weapons of mass destruction proved non-existent. But his decisions to upend the regional *status quo* – invading Iraq, toppling the regime, occupying the country, and forcibly imposing a representative system of government – are most accurately understood not as a rectification of past American omissions but as a sharp departure from the traditional American approach to the region. And, compounding the exception, his decision was taken in the absence of a clear and present threat to either the US homeland (the reason for invading Afghanistan), the region's energy resources (which had triggered his father's earlier war against Iraq) or to Israel (which viewed Iran as the far greater strategic threat).

Indeed, the Bush Administration openly boasted that it had broken from historic American norms. As then Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice announced in Cairo, “For 60 years, my country, the United States, pursued stability at the expense of democracy in this region here in the Middle East – and we achieved neither. Now, we are taking a different course”⁸. And yet in the end the American occupation of Iraq was widely seen both as a singularly unattractive model for democratization and as a destabilizing force for the region. The predictable result was the expansion again of Shia and Sunni extremism, in the form of Iranian interstate power and the Salafi jihadist movement. The Bush Administration’s deviation from longstanding norms was widely recognized to be a failure. The US foreign policy establishment then sought to return to those norms.

American Presence and Power

The US military presence in the region has since declined sharply from the historically anomalous deployments under President Bush, but has sustained its traditional profile of “forward engagement” through routine exercises and temporary deployments, by working “by with and through” its partners and proxies, through a near-permanent allocation of at least one carrier strike group to the region, and by maintaining a series of military bases, typically with significant host nation subsidies.

Key elements of the US presence are focused along the region’s critical maritime lanes. At the bottom of the Red Sea just past the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, for instance, the United States has long operated out of Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti. In 2014 President Obama agreed to a new twenty-year lease for those facilities at twice the previous annual expense, reflecting the base’s expanded operations. And along the Persian Gulf on the way to the Strait of Hormuz, key facilities include several

⁸ C. Rice, “[Remarks at the American University in Cairo](#)”, U.S. Department of State, Archive, 20 June 2005.

facilities in Kuwait, the headquarters of the US 5th Fleet in Bahrain, Al Dhafra Air Base in the United Arab Emirates, and Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, the largest American military base in the region⁹. And needless to say, when US forces deploy to the region they do so with training and equipment drawn from the world's largest military budget and most advanced arsenal.

The United States has also continued to use its position as the world's largest arms exporter to build relationships, balance power and thus attempt to prevent conflict. Of the seventeen nations deemed "Major Non-NATO Allies" under the US Foreign Assistance Act, seven are in the Middle East and North Africa (Bahrain, Egypt, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco, and Tunisia) and two others (Afghanistan and Pakistan) are just to the east, but still part of the US Central Command's area of responsibility¹⁰. As a result, roughly half of global American military exports have gone to the Middle East in recent years¹¹.

The United States' continuing forward engagement extends to its civilian diplomatic, economic, cultural, and economic personnel as well. In recent decades, the United States has routinely been involved, usually centrally, in almost every negotiation to resolve regional interstate disputes. Indeed, it has not been uncommon for American diplomats to become engaged in domestic debates as well in a number of Middle East countries. In most regional capitals, the American embassy is the largest and most active foreign presence, sometimes dwarfing its peers. Nowhere is this more evident than in Baghdad, where the US embassy is its largest in the world, was built at a cost of \$750 million, and at its peak housed about 16,000 persons.

A key priority for those American diplomats has been to promote local economic development, as general prosperity has

⁹ M. Wallin, "*U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East*", American Security Project, June 2018.

¹⁰ 22 CFR § 120.32 - Major non-NATO ally, Legal Information Institute.

¹¹ P.D. Wezeman, A. Fleurant, A. Kuimova, N. Tian, and S.T. Wezeman, *Trends in international arms transfers, 2018*, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, March 2019.

long been recognized as the most effective driver of internal stability. The United States has done so for decades through the provision of billions of dollars in direct development assistance and by supporting the allocation of billions more through the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank. The United States has sought to increase bilateral commerce as well, concluding free trade agreements with Bahrain, Israel, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. These constitute a full quarter of all the countries in the world that have such agreements with the United States – and a majority of those outside of the Americas¹². Nevertheless, despite these efforts, within the region only Israel and certain energy-rich countries on the Arabian Peninsula rank reasonably high on global rankings of per-capita economic production, global competitiveness, or human development¹³. The lack of economic opportunity combined with rapid population growth remains a recipe for long term volatility and thus future risk to regional stability and US interests. This risk further reinforces the need for continued US engagement.

Overall, therefore, the United States has relatively consistently recognized its national security interests across the Middle East and has steadily built an American presence sized and structured to be able to confidently protect those interests, notwithstanding the underlying instability of the region. Today, even though it is half a world away, the United States enjoys greater air and naval power, diplomatic and intelligence presence, and economic and cultural influence across the region than any other external power. Indeed, along most of these

¹² Office of the United States Trade Representative, [Free Trade Agreements](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019). Twelve of these agreements are with countries in the Western Hemisphere, and of the rest the only three non-MENA agreements are with Australia, Korea, and Singapore.

¹³ See International Monetary Fund (IMF), [World Economic Outlook Database](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019); World Economic Forum, [Global Competitiveness Report 2018](#), (last retrieved on 26 September 2019); UN Development Programme, [Human Development Indices and Indicators: 2018 Statistical Update](#), 2018 (last retrieved on 26 September 2019).

factors the United States is stronger than most local actors as well. Moreover, it has demonstrated its ability to project land power into the region both rapidly and at large scale, and to be able sustain that presence for many years, a quality that no other nation possesses.

None of this US power has declined in recent years. No facts have changed that would fundamentally alter US interests. No other benevolent nation has magically emerged that might harmlessly replace the United States as the guarantor of stability and freedom of navigation. So how could any reasonable observer conclude that the United States is a waning power, likely to withdraw substantially in the years ahead?

Quite easily, as it turns out. The questions being posed today are less about American capability than about American will, leading to deep uncertainty as to whether the United States still defines its regional interests as it once did. And it is that very perception that is driving much of the turmoil in the region today.

A Question of Will

There are many reasons for this perception, but one of the most fundamental is the deep strain of isolationism that still resides within the American public, exacerbated today by a weariness with the Middle East after seemingly unending wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. Of course, presidents have historically had little difficulty rousing Americans to fight an enemy abroad, especially if they feel directly threatened, such as in the darkest days of the Cold War and in the immediate aftermath of the 9/11 terrorist attacks. But Americans tend to expect such fights to end with a clear victory over a relatively short period, and can sour quickly when they determine that the United States is stuck in a quagmire with little prospect of success. Moreover, polls have consistently shown that Americans do not want to sacrifice their own well-being for abstract US foreign policy objectives and would clearly prefer their tax dollars to be spent at

home for their own direct benefit rather than leave the country through foreign assistance.

Reflecting this, each of the last four American presidents came to office having promised, at least implicitly, that he would seek fewer global commitments than did his predecessor and, often specifically, that he would seek to do less in the Middle East. In the wake of the first Iraq War, a model conflict that drove President George H.W. Bush's approval ratings above ninety percent, Governor Bill Clinton nevertheless won the subsequent election by arguing that "it's the economy, stupid" and calling for a domestic "peace dividend" that would come from reducing overseas commitments. Eight years later Governor George W. Bush, long before he decided to remake Iraq in America's image, proposed a "humble" foreign policy and ridiculed his predecessor's commitment to nation building.

Eight years after that Senator Barack Obama won first his party's nomination and then the presidency, in no small part because he was the candidate most opposed to his predecessor's "dumb war" and most committed to bringing American troops home. And another eight years later, then-candidate Donald Trump campaigned against his predecessor's signature diplomatic agreement with Iran, while at the same time going even further than President Obama in his criticism of the war with Iraq. "It's one of the worst decisions in the history of the country", Trump explained to applause from a Republican primary audience in South Carolina. "We have totally destabilized the Middle East" he continued, "We spent two trillion dollars, we could have rebuilt our country"¹⁴.

These comments did not escape the notice of US partners in the region. They were generally reassured, however, by the commitments to the region made after Presidents Clinton and Bush took office. After a year working on a Middle East strategy (and a limited strike to retaliate against an Iraqi assassination

¹⁴ I. Schwartz, "Trump on Iraq: How Could We Have Been So Stupid?", *Real Clear Politics*, 17 February 2016.

attempt against George H.W. Bush) President Clinton adopted a “dual containment” policy against Iraq and Iran that signaled a fundamental continuity with his predecessor. Despite having deprioritized the focus on al-Qaeda after he took office, President George W. Bush sharply reversed course after 9/11. And while his occupation of Iraq represented an unnerving break from American policy traditions, the United States’ partners in the region nevertheless remained confident that their views on energy and Iran would continue to be well appreciated by a Bush-Cheney administration.

More recently, however, campaign rhetoric has become governing reality for US presidents. Only months after taking office President Barack Obama detailed his approach to the Middle East in a speech in Cairo, calling for a “new beginning between the United States and Muslims around the world, one based upon mutual interest and mutual respect”¹⁵. The United States’ regional partners noted, however, that President Obama did not reference the mutual interests that had defined bilateral relations for decades, energy security and regional stability. In contrast, he stressed that “we do not want to keep our troops in Afghanistan” and reiterated campaign promises to “leave Iraq to Iraqis [...] and to remove all our troops from Iraq by 2012”¹⁶.

Moreover, President Obama told Iran that “my country is prepared to move forward without preconditions” with an understanding that “any nation – including Iran – should have the right to access peaceful nuclear power if it complies with its responsibilities under the nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty”¹⁷. He downplayed the longstanding US designation of Iran as a leading state sponsor of terrorism by describing it merely as one that “played a role” in acts of violence¹⁸. To President

¹⁵ B. Obama, “[Remarks by the President on a New Beginning](#)”, Remarks by the President at Cairo University, The White House Office of the Press Secretary (Cairo, Egypt), the White House President Barack Obama, 4 June 2009.

¹⁶ Ibid.

¹⁷ Ibid.

¹⁸ Ibid.

Obama these ideas would fulfill promises he had made to his voters and reflected his personal focus on nuclear disarmament, since “when one nation pursues a nuclear weapon, the risk of nuclear attack rises for all nations”¹⁹. To leaders in Iraq, Israel and the Gulf, however, these were seen as breaking with past American precedents in a manner that was naïve and potentially dangerous.

President Obama went on to stay true to his promises, withdrawing US troops from Iraq on schedule in his first term and successfully reaching a controversial agreement with Iran on its nuclear program in his second, prioritizing that above confronting Iran’s malign behavior across the region. He spoke repeatedly about the need to “free ourselves from foreign oil” and at the same time announced a “pivot to Asia” that was clearly intended to also imply a pivot away from the Middle East²⁰. These messages were received in the region.

Perhaps even more concerning, again from the perspective of the traditionally pro-American regimes in the region, was the growing inconsistencies in US policies, underscoring the perception of the United States’ increasing reluctance to play its traditional leadership role. President Obama famously announced a “red line” against the use of chemical weapons in Syria²¹, but then opted not to enforce it when tested. During the Arab Spring, he was perceived to be shockingly quick to discard Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, a key American ally for decades, and to then welcome a government led by the Muslim Brotherhood. He steadfastly refused to intervene in the Syrian civil war even as Iran expanded its operations there, or to help defend the Iraqi government from the growing menace of the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) – until Mosul

¹⁹ Ibid.

²⁰ B. Obama, “[Transcript of President Obama’s Election Night Speech](#)”, *The New York Times*, 7 November 2012.

²¹ B. Obama, “[Remarks by the President to the White House Press Corps](#)”, The White House Office of the Press Secretary, the White House President Barack Obama, Washington, DC, 20 August 2012.

fell and the newly-declared caliphate was marching towards Baghdad.

As a result, Russia was allowed the opportunity to intervene militarily in Syria to protect its client, the first time it sent forces into combat beyond the former Soviet frontiers since the invasion of Afghanistan. Regional leaders recalled that not too long ago such aggression in the region spurred the American president to announce the Carter Doctrine. Now the president was content to predict that Russia would get “stuck in a quagmire”²². Many local leaders worried that this might mark a watershed in the path toward American strategic disengagement.

Many of these same leaders were so eager to see President Obama term’s end that they allowed themselves to believe that President Donald Trump would represent a return to normalcy. Instead, President Trump has already proven to be even more inconsistent and unpredictable, and even more willing than either of his last two predecessors to depart from longstanding American policy norms.

His policies in the region have seemed erratic, even to officials in his own administration. He committed at the beginning of 2018 to keep an open-ended US military presence in Syria, only to declare at the end of the year that he would withdraw those forces. He announced a national security strategy that focused on great power competition, but has also welcomed Russian involvement in the region, saying that “now it is time to move forward in working constructively with Russia”²³.

He announced back in 2017 that “conditions on the ground not arbitrary timetables will guide our strategy” on Afghanistan and warned that “a hasty withdrawal would create a vacuum that terrorists, including ISIS and al Qaeda, would instantly

²² A. Bell and T. Perry, “Obama warns Russia’s Putin of ‘quagmire’ in Syria”, *Reuters*, 2 October 2015.

²³ P. Rucker and D.A. Fahrenthold, “Trump vows to ‘move forward in working constructively with Russia’ after Putin denied election hacking”, *Washington Post*, 9 July 2017.

fill”²⁴. But by 2019 he directed his administration to strike a deal that would pull all US troops out before he stood for reelection the following year. He later sought to sign a peace agreement with the Taliban at Camp David before canceling the meeting the day before it was to occur.

He flip-flopped on the rift within the Gulf Cooperation Council, first wholeheartedly supporting the isolation of Qatar before later welcoming its Emir to the White House. He has imposed a “maximum pressure” campaign against Iran after withdrawing from President Obama’s nuclear agreement, with no discernable plan for the predictable military requirements of such an approach. In the wake of an Iranian downing of an American unmanned aircraft in international airspace, President Trump first ordered a military strike on Iran but then called it off with only minutes to spare. Leaders in the region were left to debate what was more worrisome: that the United States was backing away from its campaign against Iran, or that the United States almost triggered a war with little consultation that would have left them on the front lines.

President Trump also has called into question the bedrock principles of longstanding US energy policies in the region. As a candidate, he argued that the United States should have seized ownership of Iraqi oil: “It used to be to the victor belong the spoils. Now, there was no victor there. But I always said, take the oil”²⁵. And once in office he reportedly proposed this to the Iraqi Prime Minister, much to the chagrin of the administration’s policy experts²⁶.

And perhaps most critically, President Trump has raised doubts regarding the longstanding US commitment to

²⁴ D. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump on the Strategy in Afghanistan and South Asia”, National Security and Defense, Fort Myer, Arlington, VA, 21 August 2017.

²⁵ L.A. Caldwell, “Trump Said ‘Take the Oil’ From Iraq. Can He?”, *NBC News*, 8 September 2016.

²⁶ J. Swan and A. Treene, “Trump to Iraqi PM: How about that oil?”, *Axios*, 25 November 2018.

defending freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Under President Obama, there was no material diminishment of the US military presence in the region dedicated to protecting the maritime commons, and never any suggestion that the United States no longer saw this as a core responsibility. But it is worth quoting in full the remarks that President Trump gave in July 2019 at the Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit:

I mean, we're fighting for countries that are so wealthy, some have nothing but cash. Nobody ever asks them, "Why aren't you paying us for this? Why aren't you reimbursing us for the cost?". But we now ask those questions. On the Straits – so we get very little oil from the Straits anymore. In fact, yesterday was very interesting. They said, "It's very interesting there are no USA tankers here. They're all from China, from Japan". China gets 65 percent of their oil from the Straits, right? Japan gets 25 percent. Other countries get a lot. And I said, "So let me ask you just a really stupid question". We hardly use it. We're getting 10 percent, only because we sort of feel an obligation to do it. We don't need it. We have – we've become an exporter. Can you believe it? We're an exporter now. We don't need it. And yet we're the ones that for many, many decades, we're the ones that policed it. We never got reimbursed. We police it for all these other countries. And I said, a while ago, I said, "Why are we policing for China? Very rich. For Japan? Very rich. For all these others?". And we're policing also for countries, some of whom we're very friendly with, like Saudi Arabia and others – UAE, others too. But why are we doing it without getting – why do we have our ships there and we're putting our ships in the site²⁷?

These sentiments were undoubtedly welcome news in Tehran. A few months earlier Iranian leaders had begun to threaten the Gulf in response to the United States' "maximum pressure" campaign. When President Trump made these remarks, Iran was already widely suspected of attacking several foreign oil tankers – and just days earlier had seized a British-flagged tanker in the Strait of Hormuz.

²⁷ D. Trump, "Remarks by President Trump at Turning Point USA's Teen Student Action Summit 2019", The White House, Washington, DC, 23 July 2019.

Iran continues to operate asymmetrically and with only the flimsiest of deniability, taking incremental steps up the escalation ladder to measure where the American red lines might be, since they are not clearly evident. As of this writing, President Trump has answered this question twice, first indicating that his red line would be the death of an American, and then writing that “any attack by Iran on anything American will be met with great and overwhelming force”²⁸. So it is unsurprising that the Iranians have now seemingly decided to begin attacks on non-American oil infrastructure across the Persian Gulf, on the territory of longstanding US partners.

Only time will tell whether President Trump is able to de-escalate the current conflict while preserving US interests, or whether he will lead the United States into war with Iran, or whether he will go down in history as the president who fatally undermined the longstanding American objectives of protecting energy production and freedom of navigation in the Gulf. Leaders in the region believe that the last option, though unfathomable not very long ago, is now becoming increasingly possible. After all, as President Trump himself often reminds us, “I want to get out of these endless wars. I campaigned on that. I want to get out”²⁹.

So, again from the perspective of traditional US regional partners, the last three American presidents each reversed longstanding elements of US policy toward the Middle East. President Bush acted to upend the *status quo* rather than reinforce it, and his failures in execution undermined regional confidence in American competence. President Obama, in their view, too often abdicated the United States’ unique regional leadership role, and when he did lead he did so in directions they thought unwise and contrary to mutual interests. And now

²⁸ A. Ward, “Trump lowers the bar for attacking Iran after its president insults him”, *Axios*, 25 July 2019.

²⁹ D. Trump, “Remarks by President Trump and Prime Minister Trudeau of Canada Before Bilateral Meeting”, The White House, Washington, DC, 20 June 2019.

President Trump has forced them to question how much longer the United States will remain committed to protecting the region's energy resources and the sea lanes that undergird global energy markets. Despite the protestations of American ambassadors and generals, it looks to many like the United States is beginning down the road earlier travelled by the British. And that road ends in strategic withdrawal, whether or not this is currently recognized by US policymakers.

This perception is further exacerbated by the region's increasing skepticism about the basic tenets of the traditional liberal international order. Undemocratic leaders have long claimed that the American model of governance was not appropriate for their societies, but they have nevertheless long recognized the benefits that the United States accrues from it. Today, however, what they observe is that democratic systems in the West, including the current system in Washington, often lead to paralysis and polarization. Long-term thinking has given way to short-term, zero-sum politics, driving unpredictability and precluding any ability to plan for the future. Difficult decisions of governance become impossible, national budgets get tighter, and government's promises remain unmet. Elections are seen as drivers of domestic instability rather than societal consensus. The free flow of information is weaponized to pit one group against another. This is not a system that many regional leaders want to emulate, especially when they believe that in their environment representative systems risk empowering religious extremists.

The wars in Iraq and Afghanistan demonstrated to them that the United States has lost its ability to lead the global security system, and the global financial crisis demonstrated that the United States has lost its ability to lead the global economic system. China seems to be doing very well without a commitment to representative government or human rights, and with a mercantilist approach to trade and a top-down plan to drive economic growth. One doesn't have to share these views to appreciate their resonance, especially in the Middle East.

Resulting Ramifications and Risks

When it comes to the continuing US interests and overwhelming US power in the Middle East, the perceptions of American withdrawal do not begin to capture the reality. But perceptions can create a reality all their own, especially when regional leaders decide to act in response to those perceptions. And they have begun to do so.

Regional leaders have been forced to imagine what a region would look like in the absence of clear and convincing American leadership. The region's energy resources would be less secure. Iran would feel free to be more aggressive. Turkey would be tempted by its latent neo-Ottoman aspirations. The relative power of external powers like Russia and China would grow. Other regional actors – partners, competitors and adversaries alike – would feel increasingly unconstrained to advance their own interests. This, they reason, is the region after an American withdrawal.

Based on this perception and preparing for this future, leaders are predictably building their own unilateral capabilities, starting to use those capabilities to maximize their own relative positions, establishing new relationships within the region and spheres of influence in their near abroad, and hedging their partnerships with the United States by expanding relationships with other global powers. This dynamic will make the region – and those longstanding US interests – less secure.

In recent years governments throughout the region, and especially in the Gulf, have improved their own capacities to act, and not just through their ability to offer economic assistance. Arab governments' military spending has historically far exceeded their resulting military capacities, resulting in what has been aptly described as armies of sand³⁰. But this is beginning to change. The best example is the UAE, which has built a

³⁰ K. Pollack, *Armies of Sand: The Past, Present, and Future of Arab Military Effectiveness*, New York, Oxford University Press, 2019.

meaningful set of air and special operations capabilities and has partnered effectively with the United States in Afghanistan, Syria, and elsewhere³¹. Iran has also improved its capabilities over the same period. Through their near-continuous engagement in Syria and Iraq, Iran's proxies have become more battle-hardened and Iranian military leaders have undoubtedly become more expert at ways to employ those proxies for their own ends.

Many nations of in the region have also invested heavily in cyber technologies, which they can now employ for information warfare purposes, including hacking into their rivals' computers and manipulating social media³². And there has been an explosion of government-sponsored media available across the region, used to further both their domestic and international objectives, including new satellite television news channels and various online platforms.

These new capabilities are not sitting on the shelf. Of course, the historical norm is that the adoption of new capabilities typically outpaces the wisdom in which they are employed. Therefore, the risks of reckless misuse and dangerous escalations that drive unintended consequences rise significantly during the transition period before leaders and their lieutenants gain experience. This risk further increases if those decision makers are themselves relatively new to power, the product of a generational shift in leadership. This unfortunately describes several countries in the region today, and given the expected lifespan of some of their counterparts, it will come to describe more in the years ahead.

Overall, Iran has thus far been the greatest beneficiary of the perception of American withdrawal, vastly expanding its regional power notwithstanding the crippling economic sanctions under the United States' "maximum pressure"

³¹ R. Chandrasekaran, "In the UAE, the United States has a quiet, potent ally nicknamed 'Little Sparta'", *Washington Post*, 9 November 2014.

³² See O. Pinnell, "The online war between Qatar and Saudi Arabia", *BBC Arabic*, 3 June 2018; C. Bing and J. Schectman, "Inside the UAE's Secret Hacking Team of American Mercenaries", *Reuters*, 30 January 2019.

campaign. Today it operates both directly and indirectly through its growing array of proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. It has substantially expanded its infrastructure used to threaten Israel despite the resulting Israeli air operations. Iran encourages and arms its proxies to fire rockets across international borders into Israel and Saudi Arabia, and it has expanded its ability to foment domestic unrest in countries like Bahrain. And it is now it is threatening the Gulf's energy resources and its critical sea lanes.

Other countries in the region are also operating beyond their borders in ways that would have previously been unlikely. Qatar has taken on an especially activist foreign policy, lending strong encouragement to the Muslim Brotherhood when it was in power in Egypt and supporting proxies in Syria and Libya, including those with links to Salafi jihadist movements. Qatar's regional foreign policy is generally aligned with Turkey's, whose forces are now operating across its southern border where they are occupying parts of Syria in order to establish a "safe zone" aimed at basing operations against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces, a key partner for American operations against ISIS.

The UAE and Saudi Arabia are aligned against this pair, having imposed an embargo on Qatar and joined the military government in Egypt to support their own proxies in Libya. Saudi Arabia also launched a terribly indiscriminate air campaign against Houthi forces in Yemen, which continues to result in massive civilian harm. The UAE has special operations forces and proxies on the ground in Yemen and is building a series of military facilities across the Red Sea and the Gulf of Aden in Eritrea, Somaliland, and Puntland. Overall, internal Gulf conflicts have been exported to the Horn of Africa, with Qatar currently supporting Somalia and Djibouti and Saudi Arabia and the UAE providing substantial economic support to help resolve the disputes between Ethiopia and Eritrea and to further their own interests during the government transition in Sudan.

The expansion of Iran's malign activities has also resulted in growing cooperation between states that would have been unimaginable even a decade ago. Israel, which has cooperated with Egypt and Jordan on security matters for decades, is now reportedly exploring new intelligence and security relationships with the UAE, Bahrain and even Saudi Arabia. Both reflecting Russia's growing regional role³³ and as a hedge against a potential American withdrawal, local leaders are sharply increasing the tempo and the seriousness of their engagements with Moscow, sometimes appearing as if President Vladimir Putin not President Trump is their preferred interlocutor³⁴. In a scene that would have been inconceivable in decades past, for instance, the party of the incumbent Israeli Prime Minister recently draped two large banners in front of its campaign headquarters, one showing him with President Trump and one with President Putin³⁵.

China is also deepening its relationships in the region through its "belt and road" infrastructure investments, demand for oil, non-oil trade (it is already the UAE's most important such partner), and systematic increase in diplomatic engagement. China's diplomats organize their relations through a hierarchy of five types of partnerships, the highest two being "Strategic Partnerships" and, at the pinnacle, "Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships". In just the last five years China has expanded these relationships in the region dramatically. It now has "Strategic Partnerships" with Turkey (2010), Qatar (2014), Iraq (2015), Jordan (2015), Morocco (2016), Djibouti (2017), Kuwait (2018), and Oman (2018). And it has "Comprehensive Strategic Partnerships" with Algeria (2014), Egypt (2014), Iran (2016), Saudi Arabia (2016), and the UAE (2018)³⁶. In 2017 China also opened its first overseas military base in the region

³³ M. Katz, *When the Friend of My Friends Is Not My Friend: The United States, US Allies, and Russia In the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, May 2019.

³⁴ L. Sly, "In the Middle East, Russia is back", *Washington Post*, 5 December 2018.

³⁵ R. Wootliff, "Netanyahu touts friendship with Putin in new billboard", *Times of Israel*, 28 July 2019.

³⁶ J. Fulton, *China's Changing Role in the Middle East*, Atlantic Council, June 2019.

in Djibouti, which just happens to be in close proximity to the US base, Camp Lemonnier.

China is also a major exporter of technology to the region, and the UAE, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Bahrain, and Egypt each have telecommunication firms that have partnered with Huawei, notwithstanding Washington's stated concerns about the security of that company's 5G technology³⁷. This diplomatic disagreement with the United States is likely to foreshadow greater disputes to come. As noted previously, an economically successful and technologically advanced China is perceived by many in the region to represent an increasingly attractive alternative model to the troubled American one. Moreover, it can offer nondemocratic governments in the region economic advantages without any governance or human rights conditions. More significantly, however, in the years to come China will also likely begin to export to the Middle East the technology-based systems it is building to help it control its own population. It will likely find eager buyers.

Once again, all of the elements of American power in the region have remained relatively steady, but recent history has led local leaders to question the American will to lead. That question is now prominent enough that it has driven a growing perception of American withdrawal. And that perception has driven actions that have predictably undermined longstanding US interests by threatening energy security and regional stability, and by welcoming in the United States' global peer competitors.

The biggest risk of all is that the perception of American withdrawal may become self-fulfilling. As nations in the region act and hedge in anticipation of American withdrawal, they are likely to encourage the circumstances that will eventually lead to it. And make no mistake, a full US withdrawal would be a disaster for the region and beyond.

³⁷ A. Satariano, "U.A.E. to Use Equipment from Huawei Despite American Pressure", *The New York Times*, 26 February 2019.