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Obama and the Middle East: No We Can't

I. Introduction

Since Barack Obama handed over the sceptre to Donald Trump, journalists, commentators and analysts have been attempting to assess the legacy of the departing 44th President of the United States. While liberals around the world might be sentimental about Obama's departure in view of his successor, many policy makers and commentators in the Middle East are hopeful that things might change for the better. And this is not so much due to an appreciation for Trump as much more about their deep dislike of the US' stance vis-à-vis the region under President Obama. The president, who had commenced his term by reaching out to Muslims and Middle Easterners in 2009, is leaving office having done little, in the minds of locals, to rebuild the relationship President Bush had broken in Iraq in 2003.

Obama's unprecedented embrace of the Middle East, Islam and the Arab world in particular had created expectations, particularly among the youth, that this new president would come to see the region not so much as just a battle ground for US strategic interests but a potential partner. More than that, Arabs hoped that the US could become a transformational power across North Africa and the Levant, supporting liberalisation and possibly democratisation efforts.¹ Maybe, many believed, the US under Obama could even force Israel to make necessary concessions en route to a two-state solution. In the aftermath of lengthy military engagements in Afghanistan and Iraq, Obama appeared ready to alter the US' approach to the Middle East. The hope was that the US

would militarily disengage from the region and instead employ its soft power in partnership with Middle Easterners.

Obama's rhetorical embrace of the region, packed with values, visions and ideals, was quickly put to the test during the Arab Spring in late 2010. With the Arab world plunging into a state of socio-political disintegration, the Obama administration was hesitant to provide full support to those protesting. Only when the rise of the so-called Islamic State (IS) became an undeniable fact in 2014 did Obama alter his policy from regional disengagement to re-engagement – a policy of salami tactics arguably lacking a coherent and decisive strategic endgame.² Obama was also unable to translate his rhetoric into tangible outcomes in the Arab-Israeli conflict. Looking at Obama's Middle East portfolio, the only achievement sticking out is the nuclear deal with Iran – a deal that both Israel and the US partners in the Gulf consider detrimental to their interests.

After eight years, the US might have less influence and say in the Middle East than it had when Obama came to power in 2009. The rightsizing of US commitments in the region meant that most of the burden of conflict management and resolution was externalised to local partners, who have taken matters into their own hands.³ This article argues that Obama's path dependency amid a rapidly changing regional security context in the Middle East has exacerbated the already existing trend of the US' superpower status in the region diminishing. The US in 2017 is unable to singlehandedly shape regional affairs in the same manner it has been able to since World War II.

¹ Bettiza and Phillips, *Obama's Middle East Policy: Time to Decide*, 2010.

² Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, 2015.

³ Krieg, *Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, 2016.

This article will commence by defining the context of Obama's Middle East policy before analysing his foreign and security policy doctrine. The article will then continue by looking at four key events in the region – the Arab Spring, the rise of IS, the Arab-Israeli conflict and the Arab-Persian crisis – and analyse how the Obama administration responded to them.

II. The context of Obama's Middle East policy

The geo-strategic backdrop of Obama's Middle East policy has been one of unpredictability, global apolarity and a diminishing role of US power and influence in the wake of this. Obama found himself leading the allegedly last remaining superpower into the 21st century – a century that would be defined by globalisation, the privatisation of security, the disintegration of state power and an ever-growing sentiment of insecurity in Western publics due to the intangibility of new threats.

Since the year 2000, the fourth industrial revolution has consolidated the dynamics of globalisation, increasing the interconnectedness of people and communities as well as conflicts and threats in a growing transnational sphere.⁴ The resulting state of uncertainty has often been referred to as anarchical in the absence of appropriate state regulation. The symptoms of this new geo-strategic context are global financial crises, transnational migration streams, the spread of disruptive ideologies such as global Jihadism, and ultimately the collapse of state authority in the developing world, including in the Middle East. In this new apolar system, just like the one of medieval times, no one actor can dominate an increasingly anarchic environment across all dimensions of power.⁵ The United States, still the

strongest economy in the world with the most potent military force, finds itself in a global system that exceeds realist notions of international anarchy. The anarchical apolarity of the 21st century is far less than just a leaderless state-centric construct; it is a competitive system of a transnational nature that is no longer shaped exclusively by territorial integrity and state sovereignty, but by dynamic interaction between state and non-state authority across and beyond the boundaries of states.

Global affairs in the 21st century are governed by non-state actors providing security as an exclusive private good to transnational societies.⁶ Particularly in the developing world, from which many of the threats to US national security arguably emanate, states are unable to exercise a monopoly on violence as they compete with warlords, war profiteers, organised crime, terrorists, rebels and paramilitary groups.⁷

In this context of anarchy and unpredictability, the US is finding it harder to define threats. The Soviet Union has disappeared as its nemesis, and China and Russia lack the attributes in a highly globalised world to be framed as the significant other against which to develop US foreign and security policy. Instead, Obama entered office in an era in which the formulation of a national security strategy is often based on a process of subjective securitisation, whereby threats are no longer constructed on the basis of tangible evidence of intent and capability, but based on risks. As the natural antagonist, traditionally another state power, has disappeared, threats in the modern sense of the word have ceased to exist, spatially and temporally. As Beck argues, conflict resolution in the 21st century has become an exercise in risk construction, prevention and management.⁸

⁴ Schwab, *The Fourth Industrial Revolution*, 2016.

⁵ Haass, *The age of nonpolarity: what will follow US dominance?*, 2008.

⁶ Leander, *Conditional Legitimacy, Reinterpreted Monopolies: Globalisation and the Evolving State Monopoly on Legitimate Violence*, 2002, 11.

⁷ Wulf, *The Bumpy Road to Re-Establishing a Monopoly of Violence*, 2005.

⁸ Beck, *Living in the Risk Society*, 2006, 332.

Within an environment of de-localised global risks, preventive diplomacy and war have become a necessary evil in mitigating the political costs of ignoring risks; namely, it has become more socially acceptable to overreact to a potential risk than to underreact.⁹ The precautionary principle, something that had already guided the Bush administration to war in Iraq in 2003, has indeed opened the Pandora's box of the 'everywhere wars'.¹⁰ The consequences of trying to mitigate the unknown within a global sphere of uncertainty confronted the president with an ironic reality in which the lines between rationality and hysteria became blurred. Hence, the US public has an ever higher demand for security while at the same time displaying an ever-growing aversion to wars and casualties, as establishing a logical link between military engagement overseas and national security at home increasingly becomes an intellectual challenge.¹¹

Particularly in the direct aftermath of the Bush administration, the US public displayed an increased aversion to direct military engagements overseas – first and foremost in the Middle East. Entering into office, Obama was haunted by the legacy of the Bush administration's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, in hindsight perceived as 'wars of choice,' which involved two million servicemen and women, left 6,000 Americans dead and 40,000 wounded, and cost more than 1.5 trillion USD.¹² The financial costs of these wars plunged the US into the worst budgetary deficit in its history, triggering austerity measures that would drastically curtail government spending on the military. The reputational costs of these wars for the US were perhaps even more severe: the

Bush legacy diminished the status of the US in the Middle East. As Haass wrote upon Obama's inauguration in 2009, the war in Iraq severely reduced US regional influence and put into question its role as a superpower.¹³

III. The Obama Doctrine: Rightsizing the United States' role in the world

Assuming office amid a context shaped by the Bush legacy, namely a financial crisis, an extraordinary budgetary deficit and a tainted foreign policy reputation, Obama's priorities were in domestic affairs while initiating the withdrawal of US troops from Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁴ Whereas Bush believed the US should be able to project force overseas, potentially geographically dispersed, to protect its national interests wherever possible, Obama was aware that the United States lacked the funds, the will and the capacity to do so. As Obama said in a TIME Magazine interview in 2012, US leadership today was "an American leadership that recognizes the rise of countries like China and India and Brazil. It's a U.S. leadership that recognizes our limits in terms of resources, capacity."¹⁵ While the US was going to stand up to protect its values and interests overseas, Obama was adamant that the means of defending these interests would not necessarily be those of hard, but of soft power – and where possible in cooperation with local and regional partners.¹⁶ Obama's foreign and security policy would be guided by the maxim of 'multilateral retrenchment' in an effort "to curtail the United States' overseas commitments, restore its standing in the world, and shift burdens onto global partners."¹⁷

⁹ Ibid. 335.

¹⁰ Gregory, *The Everywhere War*, 2011.

¹¹ Mueller, *Policy Principles for Unthreatened Wealth-Seekers*, 1996, 31.

¹² Haass, *The irony of American strategy: putting the Middle East in proper perspective*, 2013, 59.

¹³ Haass and Indyk, *Beyond Iraq: A New US Strategy for the Middle East*, 2009, 41.

¹⁴ Lindsay, *George W. Bush, Barack Obama and the future of US global leadership*, 2011, 772.

¹⁵ Zakaria, *The Strategist*, 2012.

¹⁶ Gerges, *The Obama approach to the Middle East: the end of America's moment?*, 2013, 301.

¹⁷ Drezner, *Does Obama have a grand strategy? Why we need doctrines in uncertain times*, 2011, 58.

Realising that the United States, although the most powerful player, would not be more than a *primus inter pares* in the globalised world, Obama knew that unilateral interventionism without the consent of regional partners would generate long-term financial and political costs that the US would be unable to bear. Instead, Obama assumed office with a strong idealist ambition to transform the US into a world power that prefers the diplomatic to the military lever of power.¹⁸ As laid down in the 2015 National Security Strategy,

“The threshold for military action is higher when our interests are not directly threatened. In such cases, we will seek to mobilize allies and partners to share the burden and achieve lasting outcomes.”¹⁹

Thus, the military lever of power was reserved for the rare cases concerning vital US national interests. Nonetheless, Obama’s appeal for soft power over hard power, which had already come out of the campaign trail, did not make him an idealist. Obama proved to be much more of a realist and pragmatist in the application of his foreign and security policy – something that became obvious during his direct interventions in Libya and against IS in Syria and Iraq, or during his indirect interventions in Pakistan and Yemen.²⁰ His initial idealist rhetoric had ultimately been undermined by the reality of the Arab Spring and the rise of a new form of Jihadism in its aftermath.

Burden-sharing, or the externalisation of the burden of warfare to partners and surrogates, has been a key feature of this pragmatist foreign policy approach.²¹ As Obama

said in a press conference in 2015, “Ultimately, it’s not the job of ... the United States to solve every problem in the Middle East. The people in the Middle East are going to have to solve some of these problems themselves.”²² With the United States widely overstretched in its overseas commitments, Obama was convinced that local partners had to bear the burden of fighting local terrorism and insurgency or conducting stabilisation operations.

Obama imagined the engagement with the Middle East to be founded on understanding, respect and the support for regional liberalisation. In his famous Cairo speech, Obama tried to open a new chapter of US interaction with the region that would deliver a clear message of the US being a friend instead of an enemy of the Muslim world. Despite allegations of a ‘US pivot towards Asia,’ the Obama administration repeatedly stressed that Washington’s deepened engagement in East Asia would not come at the expense of US engagement with the Middle East. The means of engagement with the region between Morocco in the west and Iran in the east, however, were envisaged to be more transformational than transactional.²³ In his remarks in Cairo, Obama made references to cultural relativism, the promotion of human rights, liberalisation and democratisation – all of which with a carrot, not the stick.²⁴

Overall, Obama’s foreign and security policy would not be one of isolationism. But by prioritising domestic policies and taking a soft power approach to the enforcement of the objectives of the US’ National Security Strategy, Obama’s strategy – to the extent

¹⁸ Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, 2015.

¹⁹ The White House, *National Security Strategy*, 2015, 8.

²⁰ See Boyle, *The costs and consequences of drone warfare*, 2013.

²¹ See Krieg, *Externalizing the Burden of War: The Obama Doctrine and US Foreign Policy in the Middle East*, 2016.

²² CNN transcripts, *President Obama continues his news conference on the Iran deal*, 2015.

²³ Haass and Indyk, *Beyond Iraq: A New US Strategy for the Middle East*, 2009, 41.

²⁴ The White House, *Remarks by the President at Cairo University*, 2009.

that it was existent in 2009 – rightsized US ambitions in a globalised world.

IV. Obama and the Middle East: From idealism to realism

In 2009, an idealist Obama was confronted with the reality of a highly dysfunctional region comprised of failing authoritarian regimes, which the US had propped up for decades. Reality hit hard when in 2010 Tunisians took to the streets to protest the regime of Ben Ali. What had been simmering for years but brought to the forefront by the financial crisis in 2008 – rampant corruption, a lack of socio-political representation, an unfair distribution of wealth, a concentration of power in the hands of few and a sense of robbed dignity²⁵ – exposed the Obama Doctrine to a mismatch of strategy and context. The collapse of regimes in Tunis and Cairo as well as protests turning violent in Sanaa, Benghazi, Damascus and Manama were a reality the Obama administration was not prepared for. After the inspiring speech Obama had delivered in Cairo in 2009, Middle Easterners were expecting the US to take over leadership, actively supporting the protestors to achieve their objectives – objectives that turned out to be incoherent, contradictory and miscommunicated.²⁶

Obama chose to provide moral support. But taking a non-interventionist approach in his foreign and security policy meant that the US would not provide the resources to allow for transformation. Only in Libya, where intervention came cheap and the protestors appeared to be a united, coherent force at first sight, did Obama allow for the use of air power to remove Gaddafi from power.²⁷ Yet without the political will to oversee a proper

transition and stabilisation operation, and the European NATO partners too incapable to fill the US' void, Libya was left for regional powers to dissect.

Without a strategic vision of what a non-authoritarian Middle East could look like, the Obama administration applied a policy of wait-and-see.²⁸ Salami-tactics and indecisive rhetoric created momentum for other powers to exploit, filling the void the lack of US leadership had left behind. Syria might be the best example of the failure of the Obama administration's reliance on soft power. Diplomacy could not stop the atrocities committed primarily by the al-Assad regime and its allies. Red lines were drawn in the sand while regional partners were entrusted to act as US proxies – Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia being the most prominent ones.²⁹ However, instead of enabling these partners to implement their strategic visions, Obama was initially hesitant to allow them to execute, train and equip missions for fear of a Jihadist backlash – something that turned out to be a self-fulfilling prophecy. The US sanctioning of adequate support for the widely secular and cohesive Syrian opposition in 2011 and 2012 facilitated the radicalisation of their narratives in the face of growing despair.

By the time IS had arrived on the battlefield in 2013, the Syrian insurgency had grown into an uncontrollable Frankenstein monster. With Turkey, Qatar and Saudi Arabia losing control of events on the ground, Russia and Iran had created their own self-fulfilling prophecy: al-Assad's release of Jihadists from prison had undermined the previously widely moderate Syrian opposition.³⁰ Moscow and Tehran could now pose as immaculate counterterrorists whose sup-

²⁵ Miller, *A Defense of Obama's Middle East 'Balancing Act'*, 2016.

²⁶ Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, 2015.

²⁷ Haass, *The irony of American strategy: putting the Middle East in proper perspective*, 2013, 58.

²⁸ Singh, *Barack Obama's Post-American Foreign Policy: The Limits of Foreign Policy*, 2012, 134.

²⁹ Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, 2015.

³⁰ Cordall, *How Syria's Assad has helped forge ISIS*, 2014.

port Washington needed to secure. At that point, the US had already lost control over events in Syria and Iraq, which reduced its role to 'leading from behind'.³¹ The US-led anti-IS coalition was not provided with a strategic US vision as to what the Levant would look like after IS, causing members to pursue their own strategic interests.

Obama's policy of leading from behind through multilateral retrenchment was also felt in the Gulf, where Arab partners had hoped for a more decisive US stance against Iran. Early on, Obama had signalled to the GCC that he would try to solve the Iran nuclear crisis diplomatically. However, the Arab monarchies in the Gulf, who view Iran's dealings across the region with varying degrees of suspicion, were expecting more direct US support for the GCC's anti-Iranian campaigns in Bahrain, Syria and Yemen. Again, with vital US interests not concerned, Obama limited US engagement to negotiating a deal. In 2015, Obama reached a deal through a means of diplomacy that preserved vital US security interests without escalating the crisis. What from a US point of view looked like successful policy implementation was shunned by partners in the Gulf and Israel, who claimed that the US was accepting Iran's regional hegemony.³² In reality, Iran has arguably proven to be a more cooperative and compromising partner than either the Gulf monarchies or Israel.³³

The Netanyahu government turned out to be Obama's most inflexible partner in the region. Obama's announcement that he would apply a degree of conditionality to US-Israeli relations – Israel's settlement freeze being the most important one – got his relations with the Jewish state off to a

bad start. Obama's globalist Weltanschauung based on cooperation, concessions and compromise was ill-received in Israel, where ultra-nationalist tendencies had been on the rise since 2009. Obama had misjudged the tribalist nature of Jewish nationalism, which stood in stark contrast to his belief in the two-state solution.³⁴ Unable and unwilling to put more pressure on the US' most important partner in the region, Obama failed to move the peace process forward – much to the discontent of the Arab World.³⁵

V. Conclusion

The Obama Doctrine of 'multilateral retrenchment,' i.e. the externalisation of the burden of conflict to local partners, had been a product of necessity after the Bush era. It was intended to rightsize the United States' role in the world, taking into consideration the domestic political climate in the US, its economic standing and the capacity of its military machine. After overextending its military arm into the Middle East after 9/11, losing local hearts and minds while generating few tangible benefits in the process, the Obama administration's approach to the MENA region was one of soft power. Collaboration and cooperation were the means of supporting local partners in an effort to help them achieve their objectives.

As well-intended as this maxim might have been, it came at the worst time for the region. Amid the power struggles between Arab and Persian spheres of influence and Arabs rising up against those authoritarians that the US had long considered to be poles for stability, the United States took a laissez-faire approach to foreign and security policy in the region. Arguably, few vital US

³¹ Krauthammer, *The Obama Doctrine: Leading from Behind*, 2011.

³² Issacharoff, *The day Obama awarded Iran hegemony in the Middle East, 2015*; Shabaneh, *The Implications of a Nuclear Deal with Iran on the GCC, China and Russia*, 2015.

³³ Lynch, *Obama and the Middle East: Rightsizing the U.S. Role*, 2015.

³⁴ Wilner, *The Globalist: Barack Obama's legacy in the Middle East*, 2017.

³⁵ Haass, *The irony of American strategy: putting the Middle East in proper perspective*, 2013, 59

interests were concerned when the Arab Spring erupted – or at least the interests concerned were believed to be secured by non-military means. When it acted using force, like in Libya or eventually in Syria and Iraq against IS, the Obama administration acted too late, indecisively or without a clear strategic vision.

As a consequence, the outcomes of events in the Middle East were no longer decided by the US but by local powers, of which Iran was arguably the most potent one. Leaving the region largely to its own devices on matters of socio-political restructuring, solving regional disputes and even fighting terrorism, the US forfeited its superpower status.

The Gulf states have taken matters into their own hands, developing alternative regional security complexes to which the US is a mere observer. Iran has created its own footholds in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq and Yemen, while Russia and Turkey have finally agreed to move the ceasefire in Syria to the next level. In all these cases, the US is not consulted anymore and has subsequently lost its position to influence. Unlike during the Cold War, the United States after Obama is just one player of many, trying to secure its diminishing interests in a complex region. The times of regional states and communities looking towards the United States as the foreign protector have come to an end.

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