



US troops in the Middle East. Photo: Travis Muller (CC.BY 2.0)

# US Engagement and Disengagement in the Middle East: Paradox and Perception

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This article examines how key actors in the Middle East came to view the United States as disengaging from the Middle East in the decade following the Arab Spring uprisings. This perception was evident not only in the statements from key officials across the region, but more importantly, in the actions of principal regional actors, particularly from 2015 to 2020. The article argues that it is a paradox that the United States is perceived as withdrawing from the region given the scope of the US military presence and the importance of the US military operations in the region over the last decade, particularly in Iraq and Syria. At the heart of this paradox are US statements implying that diplomacy and force are mutually exclusive alternatives for US policy. The challenge facing the Biden administration will be convincing the region that “aggressive diplomacy” is a complement and not a substitute for a credible military deterrent.

*Keywords:* Arab Spring, United States, Syria, Iraq, disengagement, diplomacy

## Introduction

Since 2011, there has been an ongoing debate whether the US was withdrawing or disengaging from the Middle East, despite the fact that former Obama officials, like Derek Chollet (2017), have referred to the notion of American withdrawal from Middle East as a “myth” (Chollet, Sullivan, Simes, & Long, 2017, p. 6). Indeed, as Micah Zenko has shown, in terms of facts on the ground, the notion of a physical withdrawal or disengagement seems hardly to square with reality. The US maintains large troop deployments in the Middle East (approximately 54,000 in September 2017); it also has multiple air bases and conducts regular naval port visits. Moreover, there are bilateral security programs across the region that include weapons sales, training, consulting, logistical support, and intelligence sharing and support (Zenko, 2018; see also Juneau, 2014).

Rather, the belief that the US was disengaging from the region was rooted in the US discourse and actions during the Obama administration, which was actively recalibrating how the US should “rightsize” its role in the region (Bahgat & Sharp, 2014; Hamid, 2015; Hunter, 2015; Lynch, 2015). This contributed to a recurring refrain sounded across the region over the past decade since the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings, namely that the US was retreating from the Middle East (Al Shayji, 2013; Inbar, 2016; Lipner, 2017; Melham, 2016; Nafi, 2016; Obaid, 2016b; Taheri, 2013; Young, 2011). Paradoxically, this claim was reiterated persistently despite the fact that the US played a major role in the military intervention that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi’s regime in Libya in 2011, and despite America’s role in assembling and leading a military coalition of more than 70 countries to destroy the State of the Islamic Caliphate between 2014 and 2017 (and its caliph, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi). This dissonance between the actual scope and importance of the US military presence and operations in the region, and the widespread perception throughout the region that the US was withdrawing or disengaging

from the Middle East, is the great paradox of the past decade in the region.

The growing perception of a declining American presence in the Middle East has paralleled a recurring theme in the recent literature on international politics that the structure of the international system has changed over the last decade (2011-2019). This idea is most commonly articulated as a shift from what was a post-Cold War unipolar system dominated by the United States to a multipolar system of several Great Powers, including China, Russia, and the US, but dominated by no one. This line of reasoning is based on theoretical literature that assumes that polarity is a central fact of international politics. The concept of polarity is based on ranking the relative power of countries, which is determined by assessing the relative distribution of military and economic power among states.

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The idea of a multipolar world has become part of conventional wisdom—so much so, in fact, that within months of each other Russian President Vladimir Putin (in May 2014) and Chinese President Xi Jinping (in November 2014) declared the world to be “multipolar.” Despite the widespread acceptance of this concept in evaluating the balance of power in international politics, recent scholarship has raised the question of whether aggregate material power is the best way to gauge historical change in the structure of international politics (Brooks & Wohlforth, 2015-2016). Nevertheless, it is not the purpose of this essay to challenge the conventional wisdom that a new multipolar international system has emerged.

Instead, this essay explains how US actions in the Middle East over the last decade have led regional actors to perceive the US as withdrawing or disengaging from the region. The central argument is that since 2009, American leaders have elected to minimize security commitments in the region and restrict strategic engagements, leaving the impression of a “power vacuum” that has led regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates—to project power beyond their borders in an attempt to fill the vacuum. However, the widespread perception that has emerged in the Middle East over the last decade was *not* that the US’s relative economic or military power has declined, but rather that the *attitudes* of American leaders about how the US should use its military power to uphold its security commitments in the Middle East have changed distinctly. While there were significant differences between the Obama and Trump administrations’ policies toward the Middle East from 2009 to 2020, the perception in the region has been that both the Obama and Trump administrations were seeking to reduce US military commitments to the region.

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This article presents a chronological interpretation of the US actions in the Middle East that gave rise to the perception of American disengagement in the decade since the 2010-2011 Arab Spring uprisings. The following section presents a brief history of the US role in the region during the twentieth century, and makes the case for why a US withdrawal would be viewed as a sea change in the region. Thereafter, the paper analyzes how US behavior between 2010 and 2015 contributed to the perception of American withdrawal from the

region, in part by contrasting it with Russian behavior during the same period. The next section, dealing with 2015 to 2020, explains how regional actors responded to the Obama administration’s call to take more responsibility for their own security, which has led to US partners fighting on the opposite sides of the three different conflicts in the region (Libya, Syria, Yemen). Finally, the paper suggests how the Biden administration will be judged on its approach to the region, and sketches its prospective framework for addressing the challenges it has inherited.

### **The Legacy of American Engagement in the Middle East**

The United States, shaped by exigencies of the Cold War, has played an integral role in managing the security affairs of the Middle East since World War II. In this it succeeded the British and French, who played the leading roles in establishing the Middle East state system following World War I. The US created a chain of global security partners and institutions that were intended to contain the expansion of Soviet influence during the Cold War. In the Middle East, the Baghdad Pact and its successor the Central Treaty Organization (1955-1979), which initially included Iraq, Iran, and Turkey (as well as Pakistan), represented the US effort to shape the security architecture of the region in line with its global interests. These relationships were put into practice during US operations conducted under the auspices of the Eisenhower Doctrine (1957-1960), the Nixon Doctrine (1969-1976), and the Carter Doctrine (1980-the present). Therefore, for much of the Middle East, US disengagement from the region would represent a sharp break from the historical pattern of Western involvement in managing the security affairs of the region over the past century.

Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, US policy objectives in the region have consisted of securing access to oil, brokering Arab-Israeli peace, countering terrorist threats,

and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. More broadly, US regional partners came to rely on the US to use its power to maintain stability in the region. Once the Soviet Union collapsed and the Cold War ended (1989-1991), the US found itself as the sole global superpower. It exercised its power and influence during the 1990-1991 Gulf War (Operation Desert Storm), rolling back Saddam Hussein's August 1990 invasion and occupation of Kuwait. Washington mobilized a coalition of 35 countries to defeat Iraq and secured UN Resolution 678, which authorized the coalition to use "all necessary means" to reverse the aggression. The US pursued a policy of "dual containment" against both Iraq and Iran during the 1990s, effectively sanctioning and isolating both regimes. It also expanded its commitments in the Persian Gulf during this period, creating a web of strong security partnerships with all the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The Arab Gulf States were added to the US's longtime security partners in the region, which included Egypt, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia, as well as Israel and Turkey (Jeffrey & Eisenstadt, 2016).

A decade after the end of the Cold War, on September 11, 2001, the United States was attacked by al-Qaeda in simultaneous attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon in Washington, D.C. George W. Bush's administration responded to the suicide plane attacks by invading Afghanistan and toppling the Taliban government in 2001, and then removing Saddam Hussein from power in Iraq in 2003. While the military operations led to swift victories, the post-war stabilization and occupation of both countries proved enormously challenging and prohibitively expensive. These American wars did not decisively defeat al-Qaeda or destroy the appeal of Salafi-jihadism, and did not result in stable, pro-American, democratic governments in Iraq and Afghanistan. Indeed, Iraq appears to be fighting to avoid becoming a dependent of Iran, and Afghanistan is still fighting to avoid a Taliban takeover, even as the Islamic State

gains ground there as well. The overarching political effect of these wars in the US was to generate widespread skepticism about the efficacy of using military force to advance US interests abroad.

The Obama administration's perspective was that the previous administration had mismanaged American power and allowed the US's military commitments in the Middle East to command a disproportionate amount of resources at the expense of other, more urgent priorities. Obama viewed the drag on American power caused by the war on terror as ultimately empowering US rivals, with the US unilateral approach alienating partners. There were four practical consequences of these views. The first was that Obama took "a more restrained, economical, and precise approach to using US military power" (Brands, 2016; see also Chollet, 2016). Second, Obama emphasized diplomatic engagement, with both allies and adversaries. Third, Obama sought to rebalance US engagement geographically. He believed that the US needed to redirect its strategic resources away from the Middle East and toward the Asia-Pacific region. Fourth, during the Obama years, defense spending was significantly reduced, from \$849.9 billion in 2010 to \$669.5 billion in 2016.

The economic shock of the global financial crisis between 2008 and 2012 created a public debate in the US about whether the country could and should continue its profligate defense and military spending during a period that became known as the Great Recession (Parent & MacDonald, 2011; Brooks, Ikenberry, & Wohlforth, 2012-2013). In particular, the US's post-Cold War decision to maintain its security commitments to partners and allies in Europe, the Middle East, and East Asia came under renewed scrutiny. During the Cold War, these commitments were made to prevent Soviet encroachment into the world's wealthiest and potentially most resource-rich states. After the Cold War, the logic of maintaining the commitments was to advance the aims

of the three core objectives of the US grand strategy: reducing near and long term threats to US national security; “promoting a liberal economic order to expand the global economy and maximize domestic prosperity”; and “maintaining the global institutional order to secure necessary interstate cooperation on terms favorable to US interests” (Brooks et al., 2012-2013). The US commitment to its security partners and allies was a constant in US foreign policy from the end of World War II through the Obama administration.

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### **The Arab Spring and US Pullback from the Middle East, 2010-2011**

During the years following the global financial crisis (2008-2012), US security commitments to the Middle East began to be more critically examined and debated, with a particular emphasis on evaluating the return the US received on the cost of maintaining its military commitments abroad. Domestic critics bemoaned the growing US budget deficits and the billions spent on defense personnel and infrastructure during a period of economic crisis, and called for one form or another of military downsizing and greater distribution of the burden with respect to international security commitments. Other critics argued that the US security partnerships engendered resistance to US power that was counterproductive, creating more friction than leverage for the US abroad. Finally, a third line of argument claimed that resources devoted to maintain US commitments abroad could instead be used in service of domestic goals such as infrastructure, education, civilian research and development, and innovation that would increase US global competitiveness more than its military commitments abroad (Brooks et

al., 2012-2013). These views planted doubts among US partners and rivals alike about the US’s appetite for maintaining its security commitments in the Middle East (Hokayem & Wasser, 2014).

To be sure, there were good reasons for these doubts. During Obama’s first term in office, his Middle East team believed the region’s importance was exaggerated, as were the risks it posed to US interests. They claimed the region did not really need the US to the extent held by the conventional wisdom in Washington, and that the US presence actually contributed to the region’s problem. Not only could the US afford to disengage from the Middle East, but the region would be better off for it. And even if the situation in the region soured, it wouldn’t affect core US interests (Pollack, Pillar, Tarzi, & Freeman, 2014; Pollack & Takeyh, 2014).

In the Middle East, these doubts about the US commitment to the region were exacerbated by three developments at the end of Barack Obama’s first term. First, in 2010 and 2011 the US completed its military withdrawal from Iraq. Second, the US withdrew its support for the Mubarak regime in Egypt during the January-February 2011 Arab Spring uprising. Third, the US backed the multilateral military operation that toppled Muammar al-Qaddafi from power in Libya during the Arab Spring, but its “light footprint approach” provided little strategic leverage in the aftermath of the intervention (Brands, 2016). The Obama administration was guided by the principle, “engage where we must, disengage when we can.” This approach was driven by the administration’s perception that the primary lesson of the previous decade’s wars was that for all of the US’s military power, its ability to control the outcome of events in the region was limited (“Remarks by President Obama,” 2013; Simon, 2007).

The Obama administration’s political engagement in Baghdad during Iraq’s 2010 election cycle and the subsequent failed negotiations for a new Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) left the impression that

Obama's priority was withdrawing US forces rather than maintaining US strategic leverage in the region (Hill, 2014; Jeffrey, 2014). The US conduct toward the Mubarak regime during the 2011 uprising in Egypt sowed further doubt about the US commitment to its partners. After seventeen days of mass protests, the Obama administration concluded that the rule by Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak could not survive, and withdrew its support for his regime. Obama's decision to side with the protesters against Mubarak was made "remarkably quickly," according to Marc Lynch, who explained that Obama believed siding with the protesters would improve America's image with the Arab public and place the US on "the right side of history" (Lynch, 2011). The region took note of the speed with which the US abandoned a core regional ally of more than thirty years.

In the case of Libya in 2011, the Obama administration ultimately conducted the kind of military intervention that it professed to eschew, a swift-regime change (even if unintended) without any means for stabilizing and influencing governance in the aftermath (Chollet & Fishman, 2015; Kuperman, 2015; St John, 2016). This created mistrust among both rivals and allies. Russia viewed the US and NATO as exceeding the mandate that Russia supported in UN Security Council Resolution 1973, which authorized the use of force in Libya to protect civilian protesters from attack by the Qaddafi regime's military forces. On the other hand, the US adopted the approach of "leading from behind" (Hachigian & Shorr, 2013), which demanded that NATO allies assume responsibility for the conflict, a burden for which, militarily, they were not fully equipped (Barry, 2011). The US withdrew its forces from a direct combat role on April 4, 2011, approximately 3 weeks after the operation began (March 19-20). And while the US continued to play a vital role in supporting the operation with logistics, munitions, and intelligence, UK and French forces took the NATO lead in backing the rebel

army that defeated Qaddafi's regime on August 20. Following the fall of Qaddafi's regime, the US ceded responsibility for the transition to the United Nations, and the assassination of US Ambassador to Libya Christopher Stevens by Ansar al-Shari'a on September 11, 2012 succeeded in deterring the US from taking a more prominent role in brokering a successful transition in Libya (Wehrey, 2018).

### **The Syrian Tipping Point, 2011-2013**

If these episodes planted the seeds of doubt in the region about the US resolve to remain engaged in the Middle East, the tipping point was the US approach to the Syrian civil war between 2011 and 2014. In August 2011, President Obama called for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad to step down, but did nothing to make it happen. In August 2012, Obama declared "a red line," which was intended to deter the Assad regime from using chemical weapons against the Syrian opposition. However, a year later, in August/September 2013, the Obama administration opted not to enforce it, instead making a deal with Russia that was supposed to destroy the Assad regime's stockpile of chemical weapons (Goldberg, 2016). The administration's half-hearted efforts to arm the opposition in 2012 and 2013 led to the better armed and better financed Salafi-jihadi militias cannibalizing the Free Syrian Army (FSA) (Weiss, 2014). Administration officials privately conceded that the lackluster effort to arm the opposition was intended as much "to assuage allies who thought the US wasn't engaged," as they were to help the rebels (Entous & Gorman, 2013).

The decade-long war has killed more than 600,000 people; it has created more than five and a half million refugees dispersed across the Middle East and Europe; and internally displaced more than half the Syrian population. In 2012 and early 2013, the Obama administration considered a full range of options in Syria. These included "a US-enforced no-fly and buffer zones, regime change by force (facilitated by far more substantial American

and allied military assistance to anti-Assad rebels), and limited retaliatory air strikes against the regime in response to its use of chemical weapons” (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). Ultimately, the administration decided against all of these options because it was concerned that US intervention would bring it into direct conflict with Iran in Syria, and forestall the possibility of engaging Iran diplomatically on its nuclear program (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). In a January 2014 interview, Obama explained that “at the core of his thinking” was the idea that US military involvement could not be the primary instrument for bringing about a “new equilibrium” between Iran and the Sunni Gulf states and Israel that the region “so desperately needed” (Remnick, 2014).

Obama’s reluctance to directly intervene in Syria was regarded by administration officials as a policy “correction” rather than as an indication of American withdrawal. The US was restoring stability by exercising a policy of restraint rather than one of aggressiveness, according to Steven Simon and Jonathan Stevenson, two former Obama officials (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). In the Middle East, the Saudis, who had done everything they could to incentivize, cajole, and goad the US into intervening in Syria, referred to the American restraint as a strategic “disaster” (Obaid, 2016a), because they viewed a new equilibrium with Iran as an unfavorable revision to the regional status quo. Qatari Prime Minister Hamad bin Jasim al-Thani argued in April 2013 that the “United States has to do more” in Syria, adding, “I believe that if we stopped this one year ago, we will not see the bad people you are talking about” (“US Wary as Qatar Ramps Up,” 2013).

### **Russia Rescues Obama’s Red Line, 2013**

The Syrian civil war paved the way for Russia’s return to the Middle East. More generally, the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings in the Middle East presented a strategic challenge for Russia, which viewed the Middle East as a neighboring region.

There were four factors that shaped how Russia responded to the Arab Spring. First, Russia feared the Arab Spring uprisings were a continuation of the “color revolutions” in Serbia (2000), Georgia (2003), Ukraine (2004-5), and Kyrgyzstan (2005), where popular protests overthrew sitting governments. The Kremlin viewed the West as encouraging and supporting the protesters in the Middle East. Russia believed the West was eager to see vulnerable, authoritarian regimes replaced by Western-style democracies that would more closely align themselves with the US and Europe. Second, there was some concern that the Arab Spring would fuel the West’s appetite for supporting NGOs that sought to promote democracy in Russia. Indeed, the mass protests in Moscow during the winter of 2011-2012 seemed to reinforce that perception. Third, Russia’s Middle East area experts were skeptical that the Arab uprisings would lead to the democratic transitions that the West was encouraging. They viewed the most likely outcome to be an “Islamist Winter” that would lead to chaos, empowering the most radical forces in the region. Finally, Russia did not want to see the West (the US and NATO) return to unilateral action in the region, as was their wont almost a decade earlier in Iraq (Trenin, 2017; Zvyagelskaya, 2013).

The Libya uprising was a test case for Russia. Moscow believed it could work with the West through the UN to manage the crisis in Libya. When the UN-authorized no-fly zone turned into a NATO operation in support of regime change, Putin believed the US, and NATO took advantage of the tacit support Russia had implicitly lent UNSCR 1793 by abstaining from the vote. While Russia lost \$4 billion in potential arms sales to the Qaddafi regime, as well as at least \$3 billion in strategic oil and natural gas investments, what galled Putin was the precedent of using a humanitarian intervention as a pretext for violating state sovereignty and toppling an authoritarian regime (Blank & Saivetz, 2012). When Putin returned to the Kremlin in 2012, the Libya experience led him to take a much

tougher approach with the West on the Syria crisis. Russia blocked any draft resolution in the UN that might have served as the basis for foreign intervention in Syria, and, at the same time, began providing the Assad regime with military support to suppress the opposition (Trenin, 2017).

Putin used UN obstruction and limited military intervention during the Syria crisis to demonstrate Russia's Great Power status in the Middle East. In the initial stage (2011-2013), Russia's approach in Syria had a symbolic value that transcended the value of its weapons deals with the Assad regime and its access to the naval port at Tartus. Russia's ability to thwart international action repeatedly against the Assad regime and create the impression that the US was impotent in the face of Assad's defiance undermined the image of US power and demonstrated the value of Russia's friendship (Nizameddin, 2013).

On August 21, 2013, the Assad regime used chemical weapons to gas the opposition in Ghouta, a suburb of Damascus. The attack killed 1,400, including more than 400 children. The Obama administration found itself under immense pressure to enforce its red line and attack the Assad regime. On the sidelines of the G20 summit in St. Petersburg in early September, Putin offered the US a deal that would remove Syria's chemical weapons stockpile in exchange for the US backing down from military strikes against the regime. Obama, who was not convinced of the value of striking the Assad regime, seized the Russian offer. Apart from removing large amounts of chemical weapons from Syria, the deal had three secondary but equally important effects.

First, the deal cemented the impression of many in the region, such as Emir Tamim of Qatar, then-Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan of Turkey, and Saudi Prince Turki al-Faisal, that Obama had no appetite for using American military power (Erlanger, 2013; "Turkey's Erdogan says Assad buying time," 2013; "HH the Emir's Address," 2016; see also "Obama's

Policy in Syria," 2016). Erdogan referred to the chemical weapons deal with Russia as a "big gaffe"; Tamim suggested the US was not willing to "raise a finger" to enforce its red line; and, Prince Turki suggested "there is an issue of confidence" and credibility with the Obama administration. In September 2013, *al-Thawra*, the official newspaper of the Assad regime, referred to Obama's decision not to use force as the beginning of a "historic American retreat" (Bayoumy & Younglai, 2013). Obama, for his part, believed he was accomplishing more by forgoing deterrence for disarmament, but in reality, he did not achieve either (Baker, 2017).

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Second, it legitimized Russia's Great Power status in the Syria conflict, and more broadly in the Middle East, without deterring either Assad or Russia from using chemical weapons in the conflict (Lynch, 2017; Melham, 2017). Third, the September 2013 US-Russian agreement, which eventually became incorporated into UN Security Resolution 2118, provided a condition for using force against the Assad regime if it violated the deal (Lund, 2017): "In the event of non-compliance, including unauthorized transfer, or *any use of chemical weapons* by anyone in Syria, the UN Security Council should impose measures under Chapter VII of the UN Charter" ("Framework for Elimination of Syrian Chemical Weapons," 2013, emphasis added). Chapter VII permits the international community to authorize the use of sanctions and military force (Charter of the United Nations). Instead, Russia used the agreement with the US and its position in the United Nations to subvert any strong response to the Assad regime's repeated violations of the deal, which began almost immediately: of the 161 documented chemical attacks between 2012 and 2016, "77 percent occurred after the



passage of U.N. Security Council Resolution 2118, which mandated cessation of use and elimination of the Syrian chemical weapons stockpile” (Hersman, 2016). Russia succeeded both in shielding the Assad regime from US military strikes in September 2013, but also used the subsequent UN agreement with the US to undermine international institutional mechanisms that would have facilitated taking stronger action against the Assad regime in the future.<sup>1</sup>

Third, the chemical weapons deal demonstrated the value of a partnership with Russia. Russia not only provided weapons to the Assad regime during this period; it provided strategic intelligence, international institutional protection, and vital diplomatic acumen during a crisis with the US that threatened to destroy the regime.

### **The Islamic State and the US Light Footprint, 2014-2015**

In June 2014, the Islamic State (IS) overran the Iraqi military and conquered Mosul, putting pressure on the Obama administration to redeploy the US forces in the region. IS, which led a growing insurgency in Iraq and Syria between 2011 and 2014, shattered the western border of Iraq and the eastern border of Syria, establishing a territorial caliphate on large swathes of Iraqi and Syrian territory. The new sovereign entity controlled territory that made it approximately the size of the United Kingdom, and sought to expand both westward and eastward at the same time. The Obama administration defined its September 2014 strategy for defeating the Islamic State in terms of a counterterrorism mission. It promised to conduct air strikes in Iraq and Syria, work with the Iraqi military forces, increase assistance to the Syrian opposition, and cut off funding and stem the flow of foreign fighters into the region (“Statement by the President on ISIL,” 2014). In practice, the US fought the war against the Islamic State by providing air support and intelligence to its local partners in Iraq and Syria

that served as the “boots on the ground.”<sup>2</sup> The US coalition also contributed valuable Special Forces units to support its local partners on the ground.

In Iraq, the US officially partnered with the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) and the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG)’s Peshmerga in the fight against the Islamic State. However, the US also found itself indirectly providing air cover for the Iraqi Shiite militias al-Hashd al-Sha’bi (Popular Mobilization Forces, PMF), many of which were organized, armed, and trained by Iran (Robinson, 2016; Weiss & Pregent, 2015). In Syria, the US provided air support to the Kurdish People’s Protection Units or Yekîneyên Parastina Gel (YPG), which resisted an Islamic State siege at Kobani in October 2014. This led to a valuable strategic partnership with Syrian Kurds. The YPG ultimately formed the military backbone of the US-organized Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), a multi-ethnic force that did much of the fighting against the Islamic State in northeastern Syria and in the Middle Euphrates River Valley. The US military’s new approach to fighting the Islamic State became known as “by, with, and through” (“BWT”), which referred to the US partnerships on the ground (Kaplan, 2019).

This approach should be viewed as the US military’s effort to provide the means to achieve Obama’s aim of “rightsizing” the US “footprint” in the region. As a result, it took three and half years for the US-led coalition to reconquer the territory that the Islamic State had claimed for its caliphate in Syria and Iraq, despite the coalition’s overwhelmingly superior military capabilities. Four factors contributed to this outcome: First, the US coalition faced the complexity of identifying and coordinating with competing partners across two different theaters of war. In Iraq, the US fought against the Islamic State through the Iraqi military and the KRG’s independently-commanded Peshmerga forces. In Syria, the US had to bring together the Sunni Arab fighters from the tribes of the Middle Euphrates and the Kurds of the Kobani

and Jazira cantons. Second, the coalition's reluctance to use its own forces on the ground led to prolonged engagements (in Raqqa and Mosul, for example) and massive collateral damage (Barndollar, 2019). Third, the US fought the Islamic State without fully addressing the preexisting Syrian civil war between the Assad regime and the opposition. Fourth, and relatedly, for many of the parties involved in the fight, defeating the Islamic State was not the top priority. For example, Turkey was more focused on defeating the Assad regime and containing Kurdish autonomy; Russia was more interested in protecting the Assad regime and using the conflict to expand its international and regional influence vis-à-vis the US.

### **The JCPOA and the Russian/Iranian intervention in Syria, 2015**

On November 24, 2013, two months after the US-Russia chemical weapons agreement, the P5+1 signed an interim nuclear agreement with Iran in Geneva, Switzerland. The US and Iran had initiated secret backchannel talks in Oman beginning in March 2013 (preceded by initial contacts in July 2012), and Obama's reluctance to use force and punish Assad in September 2013 was related to the delicate start of the secret US diplomatic engagement with Iran earlier in the year. The US agreed to isolate the nuclear negotiations from Iran's regional involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen. A period of 20 months of multilateral international negotiations followed, leading to the JCPOA, which was achieved on July 14, 2015. Less than two weeks after the nuclear deal was reached, Qasem Soleimani, Iran's Quds Force commander, who was responsible for Iranian engagement in Iraq and Syria, traveled to Russia (in violation of Western sanctions) and met with President Putin. During his visit of July 24-26, 2015, Soleimani presented Putin with a plan for military intervention to save a rapidly weakening Assad regime, which for Russia was a means to a greater end (Baev, 2016). Russia's ultimate aim in Syria has been to

force the United States "to deal with Moscow on a more equal footing" (Lukyanov, 2016; see also Baev, 2016; Yaari, 2015); it strives to be a regional "rule-setter," like the US (Lain & Sutyagin, 2016; see also Mardell, 2016).

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In September 2015, Russia and Iran launched a massive military intervention to prevent the collapse of the Assad regime, which was steadily losing territory and manpower against the jihadi opposition (Zisser, 2015). Russia's pretext for the intervention was to provide air support to the regime in its fight against the Islamic State (Williams & Souza, 2016). However, the regime and its partners did not target the Islamic State in Syria; instead, they targeted the Jaysh al-Fatah (Army of Conquest) alliance and other Syrian opposition groups that were receiving support from the West and were based in areas outside the territory controlled by the Islamic State (Balanche, 2015). In reality, Russia's goal was to ensure that the Syrian regime was "the only legitimate and viable actor in Syria worth backing" (Kofman, 2015).

The timing of these two events was carefully orchestrated. The Russian/Iranian military intervention did not take place until it became clear that Obama would have enough Congressional support for the JCPOA to avoid a veto (Barmin, 2015). The US administration had invested all of its domestic political capital to secure the nuclear deal, and Russia and Iran gambled that the US would not jeopardize the deal over their intervention in Syria. While the Obama administration viewed the deal as the best available means to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, the region viewed the deal through the prism of the September 2013 US-Russia chemical weapons agreement,

which technically was to have denied the Assad regime its chemical weapons capability, but in practice did not. The chemical weapons deal allowed Obama to retreat from his commitment to enforce his red line, and Jerusalem and Riyadh viewed the JCPOA as the means whereby Obama would avoid a military option to prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons, but without fully cutting off Iran's access to the nuclear and military technologies necessary to weaponize its nuclear program in the future ("Deficiencies in the Iran Nuclear Deal," 2015; Morris & Naylor, 2015). More broadly, the Obama administration saw its nuclear diplomacy as a means to reduce US military engagement in the region.

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**The Obama administration seemed to regard diplomacy and military force as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually reinforcing tools to be used in concert.**

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In fact, the Obama administration appeared to believe that its 2015 diplomatic breakthrough on a nuclear deal with Iran could serve as a springboard to broker an agreement to end the Syrian civil war. Writing in late 2015, Simon and Stevenson argued that all of the major players in Syria shared a common threat perception regarding the Islamic State, which could serve as the basis for a political agreement to end the civil war and "validate the rapprochement with Iran" (Simon & Stevenson, 2015). This seems like a leap of faith given the Iranian-Russian military intervention launched in Syria in September 2015, which followed Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014. Iran and Russia seemed to view their intervention as a means to preserve their gains in Syria and deter any possibility that the US-led coalition fighting the Islamic State would expand its mission to include the Assad regime, rather than a gambit to improve their position for a potential negotiation with the US, which they recognized would "restore much of the American prestige that has waned in the region" (Simon & Stevenson, 2015).

The Obama administration seemed to regard diplomacy and military force as mutually exclusive, rather than mutually reinforcing tools to be used in concert. Derek Chollet (2016) appears to have identified the crux of the issue when he wrote in his book *The Long Game*, "When comparing Russia's recent behavior in Ukraine and Syria alongside the US approach, one sees two starkly contrasting approaches to wielding influence—and very different approaches to what it means to be 'strong.'" In Syria, Russia combined diplomatic power (between 2011 and 2013) with limited military intervention (2015) to protect the Assad regime and advance Russian interests. The Obama administration, in contrast, was privileging diplomacy over military force in principle, and thus reducing the political leverage available to the US, given the broad range of its military power.

### **The Middle East Tries "Self-Help," 2015-2020**

The US 2015 National Security Strategy argued that the US aim of bringing long-term stability to the Middle East depended on "partners who can defend themselves." Indeed, the Obama "Responsibility Doctrine," rooted in the belief that US partners needed to do more to protect themselves, was a consistent theme of the administration's approach to the region (Hachigian & Shorr, 2013). It was one that was reaffirmed, albeit in a very different manner and style, by the Trump administration's transactional approach to America's longstanding global security commitments. Both Presidents tended to view the US security partnerships in the Middle East as economic burdens and strategic liabilities rather than as tools that helped the US control risk, exert influence, and enjoy the rewards of a US-led international order (Schroeder, 1975).

The decisive evidence that US partners in the region internalized the American emphasis on self-help can be seen in their efforts since 2015 to project power beyond their borders. It is no

coincidence that these efforts have unfolded in Syria/Iraq, Libya, and Yemen, three regional theaters of war in which the US effort to exercise restraint has not led to stability, but instead contributed to prolonged war and a security vacuum.

Perhaps the most salient feature of this trend toward security self-help—with the exception of the Israeli-Iranian conflict in Syria—has been that many US regional partners now find themselves on opposite sides of these conflicts:

- a. At the end of March 2015, Saudi King Salman and his ambitious son, Prince Mohammed, launched a war to roll back the Houthi coup d'état in Yemen, which was viewed by the Saudis as backed by Iran (Khashoggi, 2015). The war has turned into a quagmire for Saudi Arabia and a humanitarian disaster for Yemen (Clausen, 2019). It has not prevented Iran from using the Houthis against the Saudis in northern Yemen, much as Iran has used Hezbollah against Israel in southern Lebanon (Knights, 2018).
- b. In August 2016, following a domestic war against the PKK in southeastern Turkey in 2015, Erdogan launched Operation Euphrates Shield, sending the Turkish military into northwest Syria to block the expansion of Kurdish territorial autonomy from northeastern Syria toward the Mediterranean Sea.
- c. Between 2017 and 2019, the United Arab Emirates was responsible for backing the emergence and ultimate drive of the Southern Transitional Council (STC) toward separatism in southern Yemen, creating “a civil war within a civil war,” and leading to conflicting agendas between the UAE and Saudi Arabia in Yemen (Hubbard & al-Batati, 2019; Juneau, 2020; Lackner, 2020; Mukhashaf, 2019; “South Yemen in Tumult,” 2020).
- d. In January 2018, Turkey launched Operation Olive Branch, again sending Turkish forces across the border, this time to drive the Kurds out of the Kurdish majority Afrin district of far northwest Syria (Gurcan, 2019). This operation drove Kurds from their homes and led to the resettlement of Turkish-backed Sunni Arab rebels in Afrin (Van Wilgenberg & Holmes, 2019).
- e. In October 2019, the US permitted Turkey to launch its Operation Peace Spring, (“Donald Trump Gives the Green Light,” 2019; Williams, 2020) which has effectively destroyed Kurdish autonomy in northeast Syria and led to the Turkish occupation of northeastern Syria (Testekin, 2020). The Kurdish autonomy in northern Syria was one byproduct of the Syrian Kurds’ partnership with the United States in the war against the Islamic State in Syria (Ignatius, 2019; Kanat & Banno, 2018; Sly, Dadouch, & Khattab, 2019). Turkey, a US NATO ally, repeatedly denounced the US partnership with the YPG, which was a product of the US’s new “by, with, and through” approach to war in the region (“Erdogan Urges US to Ensure Withdrawal,” 2019; Kingsley, 2019; “Turkey Will ‘Walk into’ Manbij,” 2018). The upshot of Turkey’s incursions into Syria was that US forces have repeatedly faced challenges to their presence in Syria that created the circumstances for direct or indirect armed conflict between US and Turkey, two NATO allies.
- f. In 2019, Israel is believed to have expanded its “campaign between wars” against Iran from Syria into Iraq (Yadlin & Heistein, 2019a). There have been consistent reports of Israeli military strikes against Iranian supplied military sites throughout Iraq (Ahronheim, 2019; Yadlin & Heistein, 2019b). These attacks are a response to the Iranian effort to supply Hezbollah with precision missiles and create “a corridor of influence” that extends from Tehran across Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon (Adesik, McMaster, & Taleblu, 2019). The increased Israeli military activity should be seen as part of a broad response to the US desire to withdraw from its post-Islamic State military commitments in Syria and Iraq

**The core argument presented here is that the attitudes and actions of the Obama and Trump administrations toward using force and diplomacy in the Middle East were interpreted as a mechanism to wind down and minimize US military engagement in the Middle East, representing a break from the post-WWII history of the US attempting to manage the security affairs of the region through an architecture of regional partnerships.**

(Frantzman, 2020; Schmitt, Gibbons-Neff, Savage, & Cooper, 2020).

- g. In Libya, Turkey's 2020 military intervention swung the civil war in favor of the Tripoli UN-backed government (Walsh, 2020), but it prompted greater counter-intervention from Russia and the UAE, which have provided key support to Khalifa Haftar since 2014, along with Saudi Arabia and Egypt, in opposition to Tripoli in the civil war (Eljarh, 2020; Megerisi, 2019).
- h. Since its intervention in Libya, Turkey and the United Arab Emirates have repeatedly violated the 2011 United Nations arms embargo on Libya in 2020, fueling a dangerous arms race on opposing sides in the civil war, despite signs of a permanent ceasefire agreement (October 23, 2020) ("Fleshing out the Libya Ceasefire Agreement," 2020; Michaelson, 2020; Walsh, 2020).

These are just a few of the examples over the last decade that one might examine. The securitization of the Horn of Africa could also be included. In practice, US partners and adversaries in the Middle East alike have interpreted US military restraint and US encouragement to security self-help as a vacuum. The core argument presented here is that the attitudes and actions of the Obama and Trump administrations toward using force and diplomacy in the Middle East were interpreted as a mechanism to wind down and minimize US military engagement in the Middle East, representing a break from the post-WWII history

of the US attempting to manage the security affairs of the region through an architecture of regional partnerships.

The Obama administration's "geopolitical equilibrium" and "strategic patience" were euphemisms employed to signal its intention to reduce and revise the nature of US security commitments in the Middle East. Obama's reference to creating a "geopolitical equilibrium" between Sunnis and Shiites in the Middle East was his way of signaling that he did not believe it was in US interests to use American military power to protect Saudi Arabia from Iran. "Strategic patience" was also used as a euphemism to justify the US reluctance to confront the Assad regime in Syria ("US National Security Strategy," 2015).

During the Trump presidency, the US continued to encourage more security self-help in the region, which resulted in the Saudis and the UAE unsuccessfully imposing a blockade on Qatar. This dispute is a subset of a broader intra-Sunni feud between pro- and anti-Muslim Brotherhood camps represented by Qatar and Turkey on the one hand, and Saudi Arabia/UAE/Egypt on the other hand. All of these regional parties are traditional US security partners, with whom the US presumably possesses some degree of political leverage. Further, the Trump presidency continued the Obama administration's posture of restraint by demonstrating to the Saudis that the US would not use its military power to respond to Iran's September 14, 2019 cruise missile and drone attack on Saudi oil infrastructure at Biqayq and Khurais. Even the Trump administration's abrupt decision to kill Iranian Quds Force Commander Qasem Soleimani in January 2020—which sent shockwaves through the region and crippled Iran's effort to project its power into Iraq and Syria—has not changed the widespread perception that the US seeks to disengage from the region ("In Light of the Expected American Withdrawal," 2020). The new US administration will be judged not on the array of military power that it bases in the Middle East but rather on how

it uses it. Force and diplomacy are not mutually exclusive alternatives, but two sides of the same coin that have historically complemented and reinforced one another in the US approach to its allies and adversaries in the region.

### **Whither the Biden Administration?**

The region will assess the Biden administration's commitment to the Middle East in the same way it took stock of its predecessors in office: by measuring the consonance between its rhetoric and its actions. The new administration also faces the challenge of distinguishing its views and approach to the region from those of the Obama administration, in which Biden and his team played important roles. For example, National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan played a role in establishing the diplomatic backchannel to Iran (through Oman) in 2012-2013 that led to the nuclear deal in 2015. Secretary of State Antony Blinken helped plan Obama's withdrawal of US combat forces from Iraq by August 2010. Blinken's remarks that Biden will place more emphasis on the Indo-Pacific and "as a matter of time allocation and budget priorities, I think we would be doing less not more in the Middle East" (Mead, 2020), made at a July 2020 campaign event, will only strengthen the perception in the region that the US disengagement from the Middle East has become a feature and not a quirk of American policy.

Sullivan co-authored a May 2020 essay in *Foreign Affairs* with Daniel Benaim, a former foreign policy speechwriter for Biden and member of the US State Department Policy Planning Staff, titled, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East." The essay returns to many of the same themes used to support the Obama administration's approach in the Middle East. The authors argue, "The United States has repeatedly tried using military means to produce unachievable outcomes in the Middle East. Now it's time to try using aggressive diplomacy to produce more sustainable results." At the same time, the article makes it clear the US will be reducing its military presence in the region. The

authors refer to the tension between these two goals as "threading the needle," or "how best to square diplomatic ambition with the desire to lessen the US military footprint." The key to threading the needle, they argue, is "finding a more constructive approach with Iran," which is essential to the sustainable redeployment of US forces from the region (Sullivan & Benaim, 2020). They contend this could be achieved by restoring nuclear diplomacy; lowering regional tensions; and establishing American-led "structured regional dialogue," principally between Iran and Saudi Arabia. It is clear that Sullivan and Benaim envision a reduced US military presence in the Middle East, which will be commensurate with a policy based on minimizing the need for US military action.

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The Biden administration will almost certainly be tested during its first 100 days in office, in ways intended to determine the new administration's resolve in demonstrating "a credible military deterrent," which Sullivan and Benaim argue is part of their strategy. Syria's Bashar al-Assad tested the Trump administration's resolve during its first 100 days in office, when on April 4, 2017, the regime reportedly killed dozens, using sarin gas against rebels in the northern Idlib province. The Trump administration responded by attacking the Shayrat airbase southeast of Homs with 59 cruise missiles: US officials believed the airbase was used to store chemical agents and launch chemical weapons attacks in 2015. The missile strikes damaged the base's infrastructure but did not threaten the regime or degrade its military. Moreover, the strikes did not signal a "profound shift in US policy" or demonstrate a greater resolve to confront the Assad regime

in Syria (Byman, 2017). Four years later, it is reasonable to expect regional leaders will test Biden as well.

Such tests are likely to occur in parallel to renewed US engagement with Iran. The administration's credibility as a diplomatic broker will depend on its ability to convince both its adversaries and partners that it is still willing to use military force in combination with diplomacy, directly or in support of its partners when its presence and influence in the region is challenged. Iran will test US forces in Iraq and Syria; and, Russia, the Assad regime, Iran, and Turkey are all likely to test the US presence in Syria, particularly US support for the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF); Turkey may also use a show of force to test US partners in the Eastern Mediterranean and northeastern Syria. How the US responds to these tests may play a decisive role in determining whether the Biden administration will be given the chance to "thread the needle" in the Middle East. If the new administration is not willing or able to demonstrate a credible military deterrent alongside its ambitious diplomatic agenda, the regional perception of US withdrawal will no longer be a paradox; it will simply become a reality.

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## Notes

- 1 In 2017, Russia [vetoed](#) renewing the joint UN-OPCW investigative mechanism established by UNSCRs 2235 (2015) and 2319 (2016). See also Hart (2018), Deutsch (2018), and Becker-Yakob (2019).
- 2 The key operational phrase for the [Combined Joint Task Force – Operation Inherent Resolve \(CJTF-OIR\)](#), which was established in October 2014, was “in conjunction with partner forces.” [The global coalition](#) against the Islamic State ultimately included 81 countries.