

BJIR

Brazilian Journal of International Relations

ISSN: 2237-7743 | Edição Quadrimestral | volume 4 | edição nº 3 | 2015

The United States in the Middle East (2001 - 2014): from intervention to retrenchment

Peter R. Demant,
Ariel Finguerut



A Brazilian Journal Of International Relations (BJIR) está indexada no International Political Science Abstracts (IPSA), EBSCO Publishing e Latindex

THE UNITED STATES IN THE MIDDLE EAST (2001–2014): FROM INTERVENTION TO RETRENCHMENT

Peter R. Demant¹
Ariel Finguerut²

Abstract: The main purpose of this paper is to discuss the paradoxical consequences the so-called “Arab Spring”, from 2011 to 2014/15, which has led in various countries of the Arab world and beyond to different outcomes, but nowhere to stable democracy. We intend to discuss the outcomes of those political mobilizations and revolts, paying special attention to (a) the role of Islamist movements and (b) U.S reactions to the recent Mideast upheavals. We start with a general analysis and go to a few case studies (e.g. Egypt, Syria, and Turkey). In discussing the impact of Islamism, we attempt a classification of currents along two coordinates, one parameter contrasting Sunni and Shiite movements, the other laying out the continuum from pacific-modernist to violent jihadist. We defend that the dynamics of intra-Islamist tensions (such as Sunni jihadist against the Shiite Hizbullah-Syria-Iran axis) are no less crucial than the religious-secularist divide for understanding recent developments. Regarding US policies, we emphasize the dilemmas and contradictions within U.S government. We investigate the hypothesis that the US was caught largely unaware by the Arab Spring, and that its reactions suffered from the amorphousness of prior positions of the Obama administration, combined with leftovers from the Bush period. Internal contradictions of Obama’s Middle East doctrine coupled with a general isolationist trend have precluded the US from assuming more forceful policies, creating frustrations on all sides, and enflaming rather than dousing the fires of anti-Westernism in the Islamic world.

Keywords: Arab Spring ; U.S policies ; Syria; jihadist

OS EUA NO ORIENTE MÉDIO (2001–2014): DA INTERVENÇÃO AO CERCEAMENTO

Resumo: O principal objetivo deste artigo é discutir as consequências paradoxais da chamada "Primavera Árabe", que a partir de 2011 aos nossos dias produziu em vários países do mundo árabe diferentes resultados, mas em nenhum lugar chegou-se à democracia estável. Temos a intenção de discutir os resultados dessas mobilizações políticas e revoltas, com especial atenção para (a) o papel dos movimentos islâmicos e (b) as reações e posturas dos EUA ante os recentes levantes no Oriente Médio. De uma análise geral partiremos para estudos de caso (como Egito, Síria e Turquia). Ao discutir o impacto do islamismo, tentamos uma classificação das correntes ao longo de duas coordenadas, um deles contrastando movimentos sunitas e xiitas, e outro que define o continuum de pacifista - modernista para jihadista –violento. Postulamos que a dinâmica das tensões intra-islâmicos (como a de jihadistas sunitas contra o eixo Hezbollah -Síria- Irã xiita) não são

¹ Historian (PhD Amsterdam University, 1988) and Middle East and Islamic world researcher, History Department and International Relations Institute, University of São Paulo. E-mail de contato: prdemant@usp.br

² Political scientist, PhD Unicamp, Campinas, 2014. Researcher at Grupo de Trabalho Oriente Médio e Mundo Muçulmano of Laboratório de Estudos da Ásia at University of São Paulo and of the Sem Diplomacia project of Unesp, São Paulo, San Tiago Dantas Program. E-mail de contato: arielfing@gmail.com

menos importantes do que a divisão religiosa - secular para compreender os desdobramentos recentes. No que diz respeito aos EUA, destacamos os dilemas e contradições dentro do governo dos EUA. Nós investigamos a hipótese de que os EUA foi pego de surpresa em grande parte pela Primavera Árabe, e que as reações do governo Obama traduzem mais um recolhimento do que um novo engajamento.

Palavras-chave: Primavera Árabe; Políticas dos EUA; Síria; jihadismo.

Introduction

If we look at US policies in the Middle East and the Islamic world in the period from 2001 to mid-2014, we notice a cycle from heavy involvement to far reaching disengagement. We can pinpoint some specific and distinct strategies of power projection, under G.W. Bush II first based on internationalist foreign policies. The cycle of political transition that started with the Iraq and Afghan wars in 2001/03 moved towards and end with the unfolding of the Arab Spring, and from 2008 under Obama, started to move in opposite direction, towards an ever more marked aloofness.

This article intends to discuss the above-mentioned cycle, highlighting and discussing likely geopolitical consequences of the American involvement in the Middle East. Our aim is to explore the consequences of this cycle of events while also discussing how the new US position is contributing to an unstable and dangerous setting for the international order.

Before analyzing US foreign policy we have first to highlight two aspects, one general and the other specific: (1) in the US as elsewhere some foreign policy traditions remain relatively unaffected by the domestic politics: specific and historically informed foreign policy paradigms have relative autonomy; (2) In the US perhaps more than elsewhere public opinion is an important and sometimes decisive factor that can drive changes in foreign policy. In order to make sense of the trends, continuities, and breaks that define the 2001-2014 period we must pay attention to this interplay between public opinion and foreign policies.

One way of summarizing the post-millennium vicissitudes of US foreign policy is to contrast periods of expansion with periods of counterbalancing retraction. Moments of expansion may be named in many ways (imperialism, idealism, etc.). They may interact with strands in American philosophical traditions such as pragmatism, or notions of exceptionalism.³ Such traditions, as Lynch & Singh show (2008), were based on the decisive historical experiences that shaped the US as a nation and a State. Classical authors like Tocqueville and Hofstadter emphasize that the political experience of national consolidation created not just a national ideology but also an ideological projection onto

³ Cf. e.g. Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr. (1992) for a liberal point of view, or G. Herring (2008) for a conservative one. Cf. Lipset (1992).

the outside world. America's founding documents speak of inalienable human rights, and a political organization based on universalistic principles.⁴

These ideas left their marks and are still today embedded in US foreign policy. The continuity can be observed over a nearly 200 year period, from 1823, when the Monroe Doctrine proclaimed US hegemony over the hemisphere (while at the same time keeping distance from European conflicts) to 2002 when the George W. Bush Doctrine announced that the US would if necessary act alone in defense of its values – now no longer defined in isolationist but in universalistic terms: global freedom, democracy, and free trade.

Isolationist impulses often reflect an attempt combine an idealism of ends with a realism of means.⁵ Moments of withdrawal tend to occur after moments of power projection in a cyclical manner. That happened for instance after World War I under Harding, Coolidge and Hoover (1921 to 1933), after the second World War with Robert Taft's criticisms, and with US withdrawal from Vietnam as defended by George McGovern during the 1972 presidential elections. Something similar happened in the post Cold War era, for example in the 1992, 1996, and 2000 election campaigns, when conservative columnist Patrick "Pat" Buchanan tried to present himself as populist alternative to the existing Democrat-Republican polarization on a platform of "return to the national interest". Paradoxically, the minimalist-State conservative Bush oversaw a huge expansion of US state involvement, while his liberal-internationalist Democrat successor Obama reverted to the earlier direction. However, isolationism is present among liberals and conservatives. For many liberals the ideal is that of a State which exists to provide security and conditions for prosperity to its citizens, and does not enter unnecessary conflicts. Among conservative libertarians, many view interventionist internationalism as a path that will only multiply enemies and deepen economic deficit (following the classical liberal argument that free trade obviates war).

Similarly, as we shall see, the rise of Barack Obama in 2007 and his victory in 2008 were based on a discourse that reacted against what was seen as an unsustainable (and undue) expansionism under Bush. Without spelling it out, "isolationism" or "withdrawal" were among the intended targets of Obama's ubiquitous "change". That does not mean that the policies of President Obama have completely followed the promises of Obama the candidate. Observers commonly assume that Obama's Mideast policies represent a sharp

⁴ Tocqueville (2002) and Hofstadter (1965). Cf. Huntington (2004) and Mead (2002).

⁵ Itaussu (2001).

break with Bush's. This impression is superficial. As demonstrated below, by most national interest-related criteria there has been more continuity than change – *except* on the crucial “idealistic” variable of human rights and democracy promotion, the Wilsonian hallmarks of Obama's two predecessors Clinton and Bush. These agendas, largely delegitimized by the clumsy and ultimately counterproductive interventions of the Bush years, were much less pursued by Obama.

Obama promised vague “change”, yet until 2014 no “Obama Doctrine” had crystallized. That does not mean his foreign policy in the Middle East is ad hoc or rudderless. It appears on the contrary to be based on a combination of definable and rather constant elements, - and these are rather consonant with the preferences of the American public: (1) guarantee the energy flow to the West and its allies; (2) defend US security interests by careful balancing and by forestalling nuclear proliferation; and (3) maintain US protection of Israel. (4) reduce the more idealistic-universalist components of US foreign policy.

Public declarations notwithstanding, the human rights and democracy promotion agenda has indeed taken a definite backseat, with US absenteeism bordering at times on the callous, for instance in the issue of chemical attacks by the Syrian regime. This last theater has understandably captured the lion's share of public attention: less attention is given to the continuities in US foreign policy.

Obama's Middle East policies can be divided in four arenas: (a) liquidation of the Bush II inheritance in Afghanistan and Iraq; (b) ambiguous engagement with Iran; (c) lackluster attempts at Israeli-Palestinian peacemaking; and (d) an initially ambivalent but then progressively more undeniable indifference to Arab popular attempts to democratize their states and societies.

After the overextension under G.W. Bush, Obama seems to follow a course based on the premise that intervention does more harm than good, and that Bush and his neoconservative allies had underestimated the counterforces. Obama and his foreign secretaries Hilary Clinton and John Kerry have shown a sharper sense of the limitations of US power than their predecessors, a perception that has informed more reticent postures. It is also possible that US global power has objectively declined over the past years.⁶ It is even thinkable that the present deciders of US foreign policy subscribe to a certain degree to recently again popular declinist theses and forge their policies accordingly. We do not

⁶This discussion can also be found in: Acharya (2014), Kupchan (2012), Zakaria (2012).

know (nor can anybody yet document) if Obama's policy has followed from a premeditated project or developed step by step.

The legacy of the Bush years

In this section our focus is on Bush' Mideast policy which, despite the exceptional circumstances created by the 9/11 attacks and the fierce criticism it later garnered, possessed a rather clear direction, and even had a few positive outcomes.

In response to the 9/11 attacks, Bush launched a "war against terror" meant to defeat terrorism worldwide.⁷ After the rather cautious Clinton years, US foreign policy switched to an offensive mode: assertive action should prevent new attacks on the US homeland. Countries hosting, training, or subsidizing terrorist groups were liable to become targets. The U.S, Bush promised, would go on the offensive against States allied with terrorists, in particular in the Middle East, either by itself or (preferably) in coalition with its allies. The new global US antiterrorist assertiveness called in the domestic sphere for a new balance between civil liberties and security demands: hence the Patriot Act of 2001, which provides for extra-judicial wiretaps and surveillance of potential terrorists on US territory – provisions sometimes seen as being at loggerheads with constitutional liberties.

The sense of urgency of combat against a non-conventional enemy forced the US to rethink its strategic agenda and shift its alliance priorities. Washington accepted the need for unilateral actions. The wars in Afghanistan (2000) and Iraq (2003) marked the onset of a new cycle of US engagement with the Middle East.

Bush' strategy was immensely ambitious. He believed that victory in the war against terror would come when America's enemies would be transformed in democracies. That would not just solve the immediate problem – to defeat the terrorists who had attacked the USA – but build in the Middle East a new international order more propitious for global security. A Pentagon document spelled out regime change of enemy states as the new national security doctrine that would replace the Cold War era strategy of containment.⁸

The progressive and morally argued case for international US intervention, based not just in humanitarian (mostly emergency) interventionism but on the moral ground of

⁷ According to the 2002 National Security Strategy: "(ESN, 2002, p. 84).

⁸ Lynch e Singh (2008).

bringing freedom and self-government to other peoples, has in the US a historical pedigree. However, its post-9/11 expression differed in projecting military action abroad, sold to US public opinion not just on the classical progressive internationalist argument but on the security argument that eliminating the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq would make the US safer.

The National Security Strategy (NSS) annual report of the Bush Administration published in 17 September 2002 affirms that the US does not act in its own unilateral interest only, but launches the war against terror to further world peace by freeing the world of terrorists and tyrants. Leaving aside any residue of containment thinking, the NSS document defines terrorism as an enemy of global reach that targets innocent people.⁹

Only political transformation would bring peace and security. Based on this internationalist approach Lynch and Singh (2008) argue that the Bush Doctrine rests on a triad of three major threats: terror, tyrannical regimes, and access to weapons of mass destruction (WMD) technology. The combined presence of any two of the three would be enough to trigger a US reaction. Thus a despotic regime with WMD access would pose a security threat to the US, but so would, say, a North African terrorist outfit actively pursuing chemical or nuclear arms.

After 9/11 the perception of the need for an urgent US response was widespread. Bush called his war against terror and insisted the world must choose to either be with the U.S or against it.

According to a declaration of Vice President Dick Cheney, the US operated by a logic that if there were a one percent chance of Iraq possessing WMD, then US armed forces would “100% sure” react.¹⁰ Such impulse to action was seen differently and more critically by other Western actors - from the idea to confront the enemy on his own soil without first waiting to be attacked – over the intense debate about the influence of neoconservative intellectuals on US decision-making – and until the thesis of a new imperialism.¹¹

⁹ “The United States of America is fighting a war against terrorists of global reach. The enemy is not a single political regime or person or religion or ideology. The enemy is terrorism premeditated, politically motivated violence perpetrated against innocents.” In: <<http://www.state.gov/documents/organization/63562.pdf>> Accessed 10/10/2014

¹⁰ Cf. Farnsworth and Lichter (2013). Cf. interview in <<http://youtu.be/Ibd12OogFPI>> accessed 15/04/2014.

¹¹ Harvey, 2004, Finguerut, 2008.

Farnsworth and Lichter from the George Mason University's *Center for Media and Public Affairs* (CMPA) interpret international reaction to the Bush Administration through the prism of a president perceived as wanting to remodel the world. This had two consequences – one favorable and the other negative for the Bush administration.

In a first moment, Bush succeeded in convincing US civil society that the nation had to respond to external attack, and that his project was adequate to the task. He thus restored a sense of trust and security among the American public. This helped the Republicans win the 2002 midterm elections, and his own reelection as president in 2004. However, from 2006 on, and in particular in the international sphere, his credibility sank ever deeper, and Bush became ever more unpopular. With two wars going on at once, by 2006 the US Administration was getting worse marks from European media than in the Arab world¹².

The prime justification for invading Afghanistan and attacking the Taliban regime was to destroy al-Qaeda's main refuge and the military stronghold of those responsible for 9/11, and to capture its leaders. These objectives were only partly met, though. Although the US easily and swiftly defeated the Taliban, it failed to uproot their resistance, and the Taliban at once began to threaten the new regime implanted by the West. Nor did they succeed in laying their hands on Osama bin Laden.

The most important tasks the US needed to fulfill in order to bring about a successful post-Taliban political transition in Afghanistan were (a) to create a central government with a nationwide professional army and (b) to stimulate the growth a pro-democratic civil society and elite, and an active and growing middle class.¹³ These objectives proved much harder to realize than expected.

Similar to the Afghan case, the Iraq War was driven by the intelligence that Saddam Hussein might shelter and train anti-American terrorists, and by (subsequently proven incorrect) information that Iraq was developing WMD.¹⁴ These two motives, later

¹² According to data in Farnsworth and Lichter (2013), p. 134, the percentage of unfavorable views of the U.S. in France and Germany in 2006/07 reached 60%. In Pakistan or Turkey it was 56%.

¹³ According to UN data of 2006, 90% of Afghan women were illiterate in the previous year. Sodoro (2008).

¹⁴ On 08 November 2002 the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1441 which demanded that Iraq authorize the entry of WMD inspectors. In his report the chief of inspections Hans Blix detailed the ambivalent behavior of the Saddam Hussein regime, suggesting a refusal to destroy its chemical arms stockpile. The Blix Report was a crucial factor in convincing the US government that Saddam was hiding WMD: Sodoro (2008).

disproven, drove US intervention. Regime change was pursued to improve at once US security and regional stability.

The threat of WMD proliferation was in March 2003 a much more central factor than Saddam's support of terrorists (in fact the US had already since the 1990s been actively trying to depose the Iraqi dictator). More idealistic motives such as outrage at Saddam's massive human rights violations, and the wish to spread democracy to Iraq and the Arab world beyond, while not unheard of before, gained more propaganda traction after the US failed to discover Saddam's WMD.

In March 2003 the US at the head of a "coalition of the willing" including i.a. Britain, Australia, and Poland, but without approval of the UN Security Council, invaded Iraq with 125,000 soldiers. Like in Afghanistan, military success and political transition came fast but – just like in Afghanistan – a prolonged and ill-prepared occupation eventually led to an impasse. When the US withdrew from Iraq (in 2011) and from Afghanistan (in 2014), it left behind a situation many observers thought worse than the one they had walked into.

One of the earliest critics of the post-Saddam transition in Iraq was L. Paul Bremer III, America's first proconsul in Iraq, who in 2004 warned that the US would need at least half a million soldiers to pacify Iraq.¹⁵ The political transition occurred amidst an insurgency of radical Islamists and Saddam nostalgics. Simultaneous revolts of minority Sunnis and radical pro-Iranian Shiites (i.a. followers of Moqtada al-Sadr) forced the US to change strategy. From 2006 on, US forces led by General David Petraeus initiated a new counterinsurgency method labeled the "surge".¹⁶ But while the military strategy was relatively successful, the political transformation the US sought proved again elusive.

As in Iraq thus also in Afghanistan the difficulties political democratization and social liberalization grew over time, exacerbated by Taliban guerrilla and endemic insecurity. However, so convincing did the success of the post-2006 Surge in Iraq appear that the new president Obama hoped to replicate the formula in Afghanistan. In 2009 US commander General Stanley McChrystal requested an extra 40,000 troops: 33,000 were conceded. However, the Afghan scenario played out differently. Obama announced a fixed timeline for withdrawal of all troops. The officially announced withdrawal date proved a

¹⁵ Paul Bremer III (2006).

¹⁶ Counterinsurgency demands substantial intelligence effort and frequently leads to combat involving urban civilians. Boot (2013) argues that the killing of civilians may play in the hands of insurgents eager to incite the population against foreign troops.

bonus for the Taliban, who had just to await US departure. This was no doubt among the main factors causing US strategy to fail (the hardship of combat on the Pakistani frontier was another one).

Obama won the 2008 election with a rather ill-defined foreign policy platform. However, his campaign slogan of “change” seemed to address Bush’ interventionist legacy more than anything else. Under the aegis of the White House’s new occupant, significant policy changes soon became noticeable.

When Bush left the scene, he bequeathed to his successor a legacy of two unfinished wars and occupations, one of which seemed to go somewhat better, while the other worsened. Apart from questions of the justice or prudence of Bush’ interventions in the Middle East, it is clear that after the 2006 crisis, success came in Iraq thanks to a deeper (and smarter) US engagement; by contrast, the ever rising difficulties in Afghanistan can be written on the account of the Pentagon’s insistence on waging war “on the cheap”. Western troops in Afghanistan committed plenty of culturally insensitive and/or needlessly aggressive acts; but this happened in Iraq, too, so this cannot have been the decisive factor: Bush had seriously underestimated the residual power of conservative and anti-Western forces in *both* countries. As a negative balance, two interventions of doubtful legitimacy had gravely affected the soft power of the US around the globe, and fanned the flames of anti-Western sentiment all over the Muslim world. Even more crucial was the growing war-weariness and isolationism of the US electorate, at the same time grappling with the effects of a serious worldwide recession. Americans had noticed few positive outcomes of interventions that were expensive in both money and lives.

Still, it would be incorrect to state that the US had at that point already lost its two wars in the Middle East. In fact, Obama began with a halfhearted attempt to copy the Iraqi success formula in Afghanistan. We will never know what would have happened had McCain defeated Obama and won the presidency on his platform of deeper engagement. Nor may we ever know if and to what degree Obama already planned America’s chaotic disengagement from the Middle East *before* he was enthroned President in January 2009. The fact remains, nonetheless, that a wide-ranging US withdrawal from one of the world’s most problematic regions has become one hallmarks of his presidency. Regrettably this retreat was to coincide with an unplanned firestorm of popular revolts throughout the Arab world, with unforeseen and globally significant effects: the Arab Spring of 2011.

Obama and the Middle East: liquidating the Afghan and Iraqi interventions

Obama's election victory was widely applauded, and when he entered the White in January 2009, Bush was ending his presidency with historically low rates of approval. Obama enjoyed an exceptionally long honeymoon with the media (only conservative networks such as Fox News were from the start more critical of Obama than they had been of Bush). This long moment was in no small measure due a worldwide expectation of concrete change.¹⁷

Obama's presidency coincided with the departure of a generation of top echelon generals – exactly those who had conducted Bush' war on terror. This may have caused a certain disconnect between Obama and his military advisers. There is no certainty that Obama's declarations on Iraq and Afghanistan reflected the thinking of the top brass.

In fact, Obama own appointees did not hold out long either. John R. Allen who replaced Petraeus as commander in Afghanistan tended his resignation in 2013; James Mattis, who headed Central Command, and had been one of the main architects of US post-Saddam Iraq strategy, retired in the same year. These departures only worsened the crisis between the new Executive and the Armed Forces – and could not have come at a worse moment.¹⁸

Obama had originally stipulated December 2010 as the end point for US withdrawal from Iraq. In practice the exit took a year longer than anticipated. By late 2011, though, America's entire strategy of Iraqi democratic consolidation lay in tatters. From 2012 Nouri al-Maliki, in power since 2006, was confronted with rising domestic violence. The year 2013 became Iraq's most violent year since 2007. While the US withdrawal sowed the seeds of a security vacuum, Maliki, heading an unstable government, oversaw a rapprochement with Iran, in the hope Teheran would help pacify Shiite revolts against the Baghdad government. As American troops returned home, Baghdad declined again from fulcrum of US Mideast diplomacy to center of terrorism.¹⁹

¹⁷ Bush' approval rate had declined to 32 %: Farnsworth e Lichter (2013). Cf. Finguerut (2014).

¹⁸ Boot (2013) Cf. Gates (2014). Both Petraeus and McChrystal were tainted with scandals. McChrystal handed his resignation in 2010 after politically explosive disclosures in Rolling Stone, however, Petraeus' adultery scandal occurred well after his discharge.

¹⁹ Greenwald (2014).

Since American troops left, Iraq has gone from bad to worse and the US bears at least partial responsibility for it. It is true that the deterioration of the security situation in Iraq has to do with the withdrawal of *all* US forces, something counseled against by US military staffers, but imposed by Maliki.²⁰ (Paradoxically this outcome was perhaps not unwelcome for Obama). However, the fact that Maliki, a Shiite politician often accused of authoritarian tendencies, felt he had no political maneuvering room left but to demand total US retreat, militarily unfavorable for both the US and the Iraqis themselves, constitutes in itself already an indictment of US policy in Iraq! Seven years of Western occupation and “democratic education” had failed to resolve Iraq’s ethnic and religious crisis, produced an incoherent and corrupt polity, and irritated its population to the point of projecting its anger with Iraq’s dysfunctional economy onto the power which had delivered them from Saddam’s bloody dictatorship. The Afghan conundrum may well be moving toward the same deadlock, and for similar reasons.

Obama and the Middle East: US reactions to the Arab Spring – North Africa

Before long Obama’s “fresh start” in Mideast policy had given way to “fresh problems”. While Obama’s first year in office stood to a great extent in the sign of his new Afghanistan drawdown plans, from 2011 on the Arab Spring demanded ever more attention. The first anti-government demonstrations in the Arab world occurred in December 2010, in Tunisia, and from here spread like a wildfire.

The first challenge for the US was to understand the nature of the crises encompassing the Arab world. A common problem in Middle Eastern politics is the personalization of power, where regime interest coincides with the ruler’s interest.²¹ Often power is monopolized in a corrupt way without a clear national project. The more personalistic the regime, the less democratic. A personalistic system easily glides into autocracy where the State is split between, on one hand, power holders and those who sustain them, and on the other, a large but largely impotent opposition. Where repression is efficient, gradual internally generated structural reform may be unviable without external support. The US, then, faces the dilemma whether to give priority to stable autocratic regimes or to help democratic movements but at the price of instability.

²⁰ Paul Bremer in interview CNN, 22 June, 2014.

²¹ Shorbagy (2009).

The American sociologist Randall Collins (2013) divides revolutions against autocratic regimes in two types, the “turning point” and “State collapse” revolutions. In the first type an outraged population by a wide margin mobilizes and breaks the autocrat’s legitimacy; the latter ends up dead, jailed, or banished. In the second type, Collins identifies deeper roots of State collapse. These latter revolutions are less spontaneous, reflecting profound structural shifts.

A “turning point” revolution can only occur if there is a well organized and structured opposition. That precondition was precisely lacking in, for example, Iran’s Green Revolution of 2009. In Egypt, on the other hand, an organized opposition was present in the form of the Muslim Brotherhood.

Collins concludes that the revolts of the Arab Spring, which swiftly flowed from one country to the other, suffered from vastly different conjunctures among Arab societies. Below we will see how US foreign policy positioned itself vis-à-vis a number of cases in the Middle East.

After the relatively smooth revolution in **Tunisia**, the Arab Spring produced its first serious crisis in **Egypt**, which since 1972 had been a regional ally of the US. In January 2011 tens of thousands of demonstrators in Cairo’s Tahrir Square demanded the removal of Hosni Mubarak. In power since 1981, Mubarak had always been a reliable ally of the US. Despite repeated concessions to Egypt’s unofficial Islamist opposition, the Muslim Brotherhood, he had also maintained a basically secular framework. Besides, Mubarak was central to peace with Israel, and a partner against Iran. The demonstrators clamored for greater freedom and for change that would empower the people. They hoped to have the US on their side, whose president after all had also won on a platform of “change”. Obama, however, responded neither to the appeals of the Tahrir revolutionaries - nor did he help Mubarak. Mubarak’s fall thus owed nothing to the US, and as a result the US could hardly influence what followed. Mubarak’s disappearance ushered in three years of instability, in which power was contested between three forces: the liberal youth who had constituted the mass of demonstrators; Islamists, divided between the reformist Muslim Brotherhood and more conservative an-Nour salafis; and the army, mostly interested in restoring a modicum of stability, and in protecting its own (also economic) entrenched interests.

In this triangular competition, the liberals were the first to be defeated. The first round saw the election as president of the Muslim Brotherhood candidate Mohammed

Morsi, in mid-2012. Though popularly elected, Morsi, no paragon of democratic virtue, used his position to consolidate Islamist power. The ensuing crisis brought liberals, Christians, and the military together in a monster coalition that in July 2013 ousted Morsi. Egypt's new military leaders and its new president Abdel-Fattah Sisi next outlawed and set out to destroy Islamists and liberals alike. As of this writing it is too early to evaluate their success but is already clear that the new order has destroyed the democratic promise of the revolution of 2011. Throughout its entire unstable transition, however, it is hardly surprising that Egypt, one of the main beneficiaries of US foreign aid, has become one of the world's most anti-American nations. This animus remains as perhaps the only conviction to cross its by now unbridgeable ideological faultlines.

The same oscillation was in evidence in **Libya**. In February 2011 Mu`ammar Qadhafi, brutally repressed pro-democracy protests. His brutality turned an emergency into open civil war. An erratic and megalomaniac autocrat since 1969, Qadhafi had never been popular with his European neighbors across the Mediterranean. Now his repression of the Libyan revolt created a refugee crisis threatening to worsen Europe's already overtaxed (and politically ever more incendiary) absorption of Muslim immigrants. France and Britain recognized the rebels: their initiative pressed the US to take the lead in an intervention to forestall a massacre in Benghazi. Secretary of State Hilary Clinton signaled, however, that the US would not comply: paradoxically the US would "lead from behind", following without deploying American troops any French or British intervention. It was enough to topple the Libyan regime, but not much more.

In contrast to Afghanistan or Iraq, NATO's seaborne intervention immediately abandoned Libya to its own devices. Qadhafi's brutal fall exposed a country with neither center nor functioning institutions, torn between incompatible regionalisms and ideologies, and at the mercy of warring militias. In 2012 Islamist radicals killed the US ambassador. The incident led to partisan recriminations in Washington, but to no change in US policies. It is hard to avoid the conclusion that US passivity in Libya was a significant factor in the spread of turmoil to other African countries such as Mali, Chad and Nigeria - not to mention Somalia and the Central African Republic.²²

Syria from Arab Spring to civil war - and America's inertia

²² France intervened in Mali in 2013. Greenwald (2014).

Events started in March 2011 in Syria much like they did elsewhere in the Arab world, with spontaneous mass demonstrations demanding an end to human rights abuses, corruption, and censorship – though as yet not regime change. But they soon took another, far more dramatic turn as a result of the brutality of the security forces' reaction. Like elsewhere, repression of one demonstration triggered other protest demonstrations, but unlike elsewhere, the Syrian government answered each wave of peaceful demonstration with an increase in violence. The number of victims rose incessantly and by late 2011, pacific protests had given way to armed insurgencies, and requests for reform, to demands for overhauling the regime and democracy. By early 2012 entire neighborhoods of all the important cities except Damascus were in rebel hands. The dictator Bashar al-Assad responded with unleashing his full army force against all oppositionists (which the regime insisted in labeling indiscriminately “terrorists”), bombings, and sectarian mass killings by Assad's Special Forces, which in turn provoked revenge massacres against the dictator's own Alawite community. Thus what began as civil unrest soon took on traits of an ugly civil and inter community war replete with unending mutual atrocities. Fear for their survival drove more and more Syrians from their home and paralyzed economy and social life. More and more driven into a corner, the Assad regime was saved more or less at the latest moment, when Russian arms, Iran's expeditionary Quds Force, and Hizbullah troops rushed to its rescue. By early 2013 the advance of rebel forces had been halted. Since then, the civil war grinds on, with regime forces perhaps gradually regaining terrain. Half the Syrian population (9 million) is on the run – six million inside Syria, another 3 million refugees in neighboring countries. As of writing, the Syrian killing fields have cost 220,000 lives. The UN has stopped counting, and after several fruitless attempts, given up on mediating ceasefires or negotiation (so have the Arab League and other mediators). What went wrong? It is hard to deny that the Syrian tragedy owes as much to catastrophic Western, particularly US policy choices, as to unfavorable internal preconditions.

It is true that a number of internal and structural peculiarities make Syria a less promising candidate for democratization than for instance Tunisia or Egypt (though not worse than Lebanon's or Iraq's). Syria lacks geographical cohesion, historical continuity, and a clear collective identity. The country is situated on a geopolitical faultline that has condemned it (like Lebanon and Israel) to act as perpetual battleground for invaders. More crucially, its population is deeply divided among mutually hostile religious and ethnic communities: Sunni Arabs (the majority), Alawites, Isma`ilites, and other Shiites, Kurds,

Druze, Greek Orthodox, and a plethora of other Christian churches. Alawites have controlled the armed forces and since the 1960s, and rule through the (formally pan-Arab) Ba`th party. The main opposition grouping, the Muslim Brotherhood, was savagely cut down in the 1980s. An extremely repressive dictatorship, Syria lacks experience in self-government. Perhaps as a result, its anti-regime opposition has remained fragmented and ineffectual.

So much for Syria's internal, certainly unfavorable, preconditions. For the tragedy currently unfolding, however, international factors are largely co-responsible. The Syrian opposition against a dictator allied to Iran and Russia sought, but never received decisive outside military aid. Only Turkey has helped with concrete acts, sacrificing its relationship with Assad, and bearing the brunt of over one million Syrian refugees. In the UN, sanctions and even limited humanitarian support has been blocked due to Russian vetoes in the Security Council. The US under Obama has hidden behind this cloak of specious international law to legitimize its failure to intervene.

Nor has help to Syrian civilians, through the imposition of no-fly zones, safe havens, and other military measures short of direct intervention, been forthcoming. Obama has not only refused to allow the Free Syrian Army serious arms aid, but also been lukewarm in diplomatic support. Roughly, his calculation appears to be: Syria does not represent a vital US interest, the US neither bears responsibility nor possesses the means to settle its conflict, and passively letting the fortune of limited internal war decide outcomes is domestically and internationally the least costly course. Without US engagement, Germany and many other European states do not wish to meddle in this hornet's nest either, leaving France and the UK basically alone in clamoring for intervention. In practice, the West has done very little.

The results have been as terrible as predictable. As Assad receives arms and fighters, and shows no compunction in using the cruelest means against his challengers – including systematic torture, rape and other depredations not just against combatants, but against defenseless civilians - the civil war has turned into an unequal struggle.

Unable to either make significant gains or protect civilians, the “official” relatively secular and moderate opposition has weakened, losing morale and popular support. The only groups to profit from the disarray are externally-funded radical Sunni Islamist militias, of which the most dangerous are linked to (or seceded from) al-Qaeda: the Nusra Front, the Islamic Front, and in particular ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) or Da`esh

(since June 2014 “the Islamic State”, IS), financed by Saudi Arabia and Gulf sympathizers, and bolstered by thousands of jihadi volunteers from all over the Middle East, Europe, and even the US. These groups have succeeded in conquering vast areas, particularly in Northeast Syria, where they are establishing oppressive Taliban-like emirates that are far more anti-Western than Assad, or even Iran. These extremist and expansionist ideological proto-Statelets are a consequence of the West’s own permissive attitude. The most violent and expansionist of all, the IS “Caliphate”, has conquered in 2014 and 2015 an area of hundreds of thousands of square kilometers with millions of inhabitants straddling Syria and Iraq. IS already commands virtual “provinces” in Libya, Sinai, North Africa, Nigeria, and elsewhere. IS rejects the Middle East state system along with the UN principles, democracy, and human rights, and promises at some point to spread all over the whole world, posing a threat to the Middle East and the West alike.

In reaction, then, to this outcome of its own passivity, the Obama administration (as well as other Western countries, and Turkey) encountered a novel situation worse than the old one. This has forced him to reassess the risks, and the US now views the Islamist opposition as the worse security threat. The West has mitigated its stance against Assad, who thus sees his brutality rewarded. As little is done, practically, to stop the bloodletting, the conflict is spiraling and threatens to spill over to Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq in particular. The menace to regional stability is real.

The turning point occurred in August 2013 when Syrian troops killed 3000 civilians in a chemical arms attack near Damascus. Obama certainly did not and does not wish a generalized Mideast conflagration. But the internationalization of the Syrian conflict had until then been a gradual process that the US allowed to happen. On the other hand Obama had declared that use of WMD would cross a red line. Now Assad called his bluff. This created a discrete, and unavoidable, choice point. Reluctantly Obama announced an (albeit very limited) punitive intervention.

The announced intervention at once raised tensions with Russia. If Putin put “trapwire” Russian advisers on Syrian ground, international peace might be in jeopardy. Domestically Obama had bound his own hands by making US retaliation conditional on Congress approval, which appeared very dubious. The American president was now between a rock and a hard place. If he attacked, he risked clashing with Congress or Russia or both, with unforeseeable consequences. If he did not, the US would be unmasked as a vacillating power whose word could no longer be trusted. When Russia pressed Syria to

“voluntarily” deliver its chemical stockpile for UN-overseen destruction, Obama rushed to accept the fig leaf. US prestige was severely damaged, and it lost its last vestige of credibility with the Syrian opposition. Anti-Western Islamization of the anti-Assad front accelerated. Russia, and Assad, won. Autocrats all over the world were watching and, no doubt, relished the spectacle.

Syria destabilizes the further Arab East – discomfiture of US absenteeism?

Jordan, another historical US ally indirectly involved in Syria, must no doubt feel isolated, too. Apart from its endemic Palestinian problem (the majority of inhabitants of the Hashemite monarchy are of Palestinian descent) the kingdom is now inundated by over 600,000 Syrian refugees. In theory Abdullah II, pro-Western, modernist, moderate, and at peace with Israel, might be one of the more important strategic regional partners of the US in the region. Despite its British-imperialist roots, the Hashemite dynasty has gained a modicum of acceptance and as a relatively “soft” absolutism, has so far weathered remarkably well the Arab storms. However, absent any forceful protagonism from Washington, the Jordanian monarchy is internally more and more at the mercy of a growing Sunni (fiercely anti-Israel) Islamist movement, and externally buffeted between Shiite pressure from Damascus (and further afield, Iran) and the expansion of IS jihadis in North Syria and Iraq.

In parallel to US loss of military and diplomatic credibility, the Syrian government, abetted by Russia and Iran, advances against its own population. Apart from hundreds of thousands of dead and wounded, half the population is chased from its home, and more than 4 million Syrian refugees are destabilizing Turkey, Jordan, Iraq, and in particular **Lebanon**, whose delicate post-civil war powersharing arrangements look ever more frayed, and pro-Iranian Hizbullah militias are openly intervening in Syria on Assad’s side.

Syria, then, is key to understanding the deterioration of US relations with a number of its most important regional allies: Jordan, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia (US relations with Israel have for other reasons also become strained, however, as Israel has fewer alternatives, this tension may subside, or take awhile to play itself out).

In summary, anti-autocratic revolts happened all over the Arab world but - whether due to Western inaction or independently of it - led to regime changes in only a few states. Nowhere did the Arab Spring fundamentally affect the Arab states system. Except for the

obvious example function of the revolts in other Arab capitals, external pressures were secondary at most.

Occurrence and outcome of the uprisings corresponded in general to two variables: (a) how democratic or dictatorial was the regime before 2011? And (b) how united or heterogeneous was its population?

In terms of political system, in the Middle East only Israel and Turkey, both non-Arab states, qualify as functional democracies, responsive to the popular will through institutionalized, equalitarian and universally accessible channels. These two have indeed been spared the kind of revolts that shook the region; Turkey's current turmoil started much later, for reasons unrelated to its constitution, and without any obvious influence of the Arab Spring. In the Arab world itself, only Lebanon, the West Bank, and Iraq can count as democracies albeit weak and partial exemplars: still, their systems were strong enough to absorb such protests as occurred. The same was true for Jordan and Morocco, where royal absolutism was already moving toward a watered-down parliamentarism - here the Arab Spring slightly accelerated a transition already underway, without ever threatening regime continuity.

At the other extreme end, one finds the unreformed absolutisms of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, and to a lesser degree the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait: for the most part politically too primitive and economically too oil-rich for contestation mass movements to have a real chance - but unrestrained in their violence whenever they did feel threatened, as happened in Bahrain.

All-out repression was even more manifest in cases such as Syria and Iran. Syria belongs to the type of dictatorships where a brutal minority rules (with a greater or lesser veneer of strictly controlled pseudo-democratic institutions) and acts as the only cement to keep a sophisticated but deeply divided population together. Although Iran is also divided along ethnic and religious lines, here the ideological faultline (Islamism or democracy?) is more decisive than ethnic or religious differences. Khamenei and Assad will stop at nothing to keep their hold on power - and can count on the loyalty of substantial minorities. The crushing of Iran's Greens movement in 2009 may well have been the only alternative to a civil war scenario of the sort currently playing itself out in Syria. Had Saddam Hussein still been in power in 2011, Iraq would today no doubt experience the same tragedy.

The only regimes that succumbed to the Arab Spring, then, were relatively homogeneous North African countries with brittle autocracies whose legitimacy and social basis had evaporated to the point of losing even the support of their armed forces: Tunisia, Egypt, Libya. As for Yemen, it is proving to be a Syria-type society where ethnic and religious fragmentation is destroying whatever slight chances once existed for democratic transition.

Guiding principles of US policies in the Middle East: continuities and ruptures

One of Obama's first international speeches addressed the Arab world. In Cairo in July 2009 the new president paid his respects to Islam and promised to restore American relations with the Muslim world and curb Western extremism against Muslims. He also spoke out against Islamic extremism and in favor of religious tolerance and women's rights. However, the crux lay elsewhere: Obama expressed regret at earlier American interventions against Iran, vowed to remove US troops from Iraq, called for a Palestinian state alongside Israel, and distanced himself from Bush' export of democracy agenda. Most Muslim opinion leaders cautiously welcomed this fresh attempt to mend fences; others called it a public relations stunt. At home and in the wider West, many leaders were pleased with the new tone. (by contrast Conservative Republicans were of course livid). In October of the same year, Obama was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize.

By the end of Obama's second term little was left of the widespread enthusiasm that initially greeted his presidency. Most foreign policy observers have only bitter words, though (as usual) for discordant reasons. America is today more hated in the Middle East and by Muslim populations across the world than in the Bush years.

Nor is there a lack of critical voices in America itself. *Commentary* editor Abe Greenwald (2014) emphasizes two weaknesses in his Mideast policy: lack of timing (i.e. failing to sense opportunities) and zigzagging postures have helped create in the Middle East a formidable power vacuum that has reignited dormant conflicts and fostered new ones.²³ Towards the end of the Bush era, US opinion was fed up with US foreign entanglements. This reaction against what was widely perceived an empire stretched too thin by too many unnecessary engagements abroad, was exploited in Obama's campaign, when he emitted ambiguous signs, at times reminding his audience that as a senator he had

²³ Abe Greenwald (2014).

opposed the Iraq War, and at times promising he would never negotiate with Hamas and would not cede terrain in Bush' war on terror.²⁴

The same ambiguity which had characterized his electioneering carried over to his policymaking. This becomes visible when we attempt to draw the balance of six years of Obama policy in the Middle East. As president, Obama's campaign promises translated in a "listening" posture, in acts to wind up existing wars, and in the president's resistance – sometimes against his own Ministers – against new military adventures. Nowhere do the inconsistencies show more clearly than in US betrayal of Middle Eastern populations struggling for self-government, in Iran, Egypt, Syria, Bahrain and elsewhere. At the same time, Obama continued traditional US policies in protecting Israel and Saudi Arabia, continuing antiterror interventions, and struggling – albeit through novel, diplomatic, means - against nuclear proliferation of Iran and elsewhere. Yet this has in no way improved US friendship with or influence over Israelis, Saudis or Iranians. As a whole, post-Bush US Mideast policies give the impression of being incoherent, vacillating, and ineffective.

How to decipher Obama's seemingly contradictory policies? The US must juggle a number of difficult issues in the Middle East. Most of the time these issues develop more or less autonomously, on parallel tracks. From time to time, they interact, and a crisis erupts. When we look at the overall picture, though, the appearance of incoherence evaporates. We can see that a **clear and consistent set of principles underlay the US Mideast policies.**

The US has **six basic priorities in the Middle East:** (1) oil, (2) balance of power, (3) WMD proliferation, (4) the war against Islamist terror, (5) Israel, and (6) expanding "the American way of life" – democracy, human rights, modernity. These priorities are long term. Obama inherited them, and he will leave them to his successor.

1. US economic interest in maintaining a steady and affordable flux of oil. 40 % of US energy consumption comes from petroleum. Although the US is a major producer in its own right, its dependency on oil from abroad has only increased over the years. Today it is the biggest oil importer in the world: Saudi Arabia is the biggest exporter. Other

²⁴ Cf. Obama's campaign speech for AIPAC on US-Israeli relations: <<http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=91150432>> Accessed 13/05/2014. Cf. from Barack Obama, *Renewing American Leadership*; Foreign Policy NY, August 2007. <<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2007-07-01/renewing-american-leadership>> Accessed 06/05/2015>.

(pro)Western nations and major commercial, security and political partners of the US such as the EU and Japan are even more dependent. Since World War II an informal alliance binds the USA and the Saudis, who provide affordable oil against military protection. The same is true to a lesser degree for smaller Gulf producers such as Kuwait, Qatar, and the Emirates.²⁵ Other major oil exporters such as Russia, Iran, and Venezuela, are unreliable or hostile. Despite the recent attrition in US-Saudi relations related to America's reticence in Syria and recent US rapprochement with Iran, Obama has essentially maintained this principle. When Saudi soldiers and police restored the Sunni sultan's regime in Bahrain, the US looked the other way. When they enforce one of the world's most misogynistic systems at home, idem. We may predict that as long as the US (along with the rest of the industrialized world) keeps its dependence on imported fossil fuels, it will not significantly alter its policies vis-à-vis the Arab petromonarchies, no matter how unjust their rule or how egregious their human rights abuses.

2. US geopolitical interest in preventing the rise of any indigenous power the Middle East that could credibly challenge US power. In the past such challenges have arisen from Nasser's Egypt in the 1950s and 1960s; from Saddam Hussein's Iraq in the 1980s and 1990s. Lately, they have come from Iran. Alternatively, the US must **prevent any outside power from becoming dominant in the region.**²⁶ Since the fall of the Soviet Union until recently, this latter specter was distant. However, over the last years, Russia has clearly been expanding its sphere of influence over Syria, Iran and more recently, Egypt. Crude though it sounds, in cold geopolitical terms, a chaotic and internally divided Middle East would from a balance-of-power perspective be for the US the second best scenario - after a Middle East dominated by pro-American regimes. (This is of course not to say that other or even opposed agendas may not inform US Mideast policies too). Bush bet on this best-case scenario. He believed that intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq would unleash a tsunami of democratic revolutions in the Middle East, and that these new democracies would naturally gravitate to American ideals and to the American sphere of influence. But in fact the opposite happened, and US popularity took a nosedive. Now we see the opposite, and Obama needs to fall back on the second option. Rightly or wrongly, the Obama Administration showed little belief in and offered little support to the Arab world's democratic revolutions. The unspoken assumption appears to be: if (as old fashioned

²⁵ The US imports most of its natural gas from Canada, and is self-sufficient in coal.

²⁶ Cf. Friedman (2009).

punditry would have it) the Arabs are really “unsuited for democracy”; and if Arab democracy, if and where it prevails, does not lead to liberal and/or pro-Western orientations anyway – then better endemic instability and even proxy wars, than a new Arab Bismarck such as Nasser or Saddam Hussein, or *Muslim Reconquista* led by an Osama bin Laden or a Khamenei.

But then again, fostering (or allowing) turmoil instead of stability may negatively impact on the other spheres: security of oil shipping, preventing new rounds of anti-Israel wars, avoiding WMD from falling in terrorist hands etc. So should the US isolate and weaken its foremost antagonist in the region – or bind it in a structure of peaceful coexistence, hoping that in time peace, trade, and the social media would dissolve it from within? The US dilemma with Iran resembles that with the Soviet Union in the Cold War.

3. US security interest in preventing proliferation of WMD to both states and nonstate actors. This leads directly to the West-Iran nuclear negotiation, and the question if the US is under Obama looking for a powersharing formula with **Iran**.

In perhaps no other case is the conflict between Obama’s “Jeffersonian” and his “Wilsonian” impulses clearer – and, the eventual supremacy of realist over idealist motives, more unambiguous. In fact when Obama promised in 2008 dialogue and a “new beginning” he was referring in particular to Iran.²⁷ What Obama may have had in mind was a US amenable, in the framework of the general disengagement he projected may, to divide the Middle East in spheres of influences with Iran, or even to accept some US-Iranian condominium. This would represent a complete reversal not only of Bush’ policy (which was frontally hostile against Iran as a member of the “axis of evil”) but of *all* US presidents since Reagan. Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979 Iran has consistently been America’s most intransigent foe in the region, and the US has retaliated by trying to isolate, and if possible, topple its regime.

From the declinist perspective that may implicitly govern Obama’s international behavior, there is a logic to this accommodationist position. But the US government has so far not been able to overcome the difficulties that stand in the way to its implementation. Iran possesses the fourth strongest army in the Middle East, and the only one which in theory might challenge the US (Turkey, Israel, and Egypt, the first three, are pro-Western powers). Iran increasingly produces its own military hardware, is a Russian protégé, and is

²⁷ Cf. Obama’s Cairo speech of June 2009. Transcription in < http://www.nytimes.com/2009/06/04/us/politics/04obama.text.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0 > accessed 14/05/2014.

one of the world's epicenters of radical Islamism, today's most viable antimodernist, anti-Western and antidemocratic ideology. Iran also aspires to nuclear power and to regional hegemony. Syria, Lebanon's Hizbullah, and lately also Iraq have become satellites. Iran has attempted and largely succeeded in projecting its power in any territory left in a vacuum by the US – not only in Syria, but also in Egypt, Yemen, and even Turkey.²⁸

Iran is also suspected of abetting terrorist groups, though the evidence is murky. To arrive at a peaceful coexistence, then, the US would have to peacefully disarm Iran's nuclear potential, somehow appease its messianic fervor, and counteract Russian influence. And as in the case of Russia and China, the price of embracing Iran instead of knocking it out, would presumably be to leave its internal politics alone – one more negative score for the human rights crowd. Furthermore Iran's uncompromising anti-Israel stance has made accommodation even more difficult to achieve and constituted an even more serious constraint. When Obama came to power in 2009, Iran was governed by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, its most anti-Western and anti-Semitic president since Khomeini. Nor is unrequited love flowing in opposite direction: according to Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei the US can *never* be a reliable partner.

For the Iranian theocrats, regime survival takes of course precedence over any competing consideration, whether regional stability, economic progress, or anything else.²⁹ Like every nondemocratic government, the Iranian regime is more vulnerable than it appears. For at least the twenty years now Iranians have been demanding political change and economic and personal freedoms. Reformist tendencies came already to the fore during Khatami's presidency (1997-2004), a "thaw" repressed by the Iranian power elite – not only by the clerical establishment, but also by ideologically-driven former Revolutionary Guards who had infiltrated both the military and the commanding heights of the economy. The latter's chief Ahmadinejad won the 2005 presidential election with populist, religious, and anti-Western rhetoric. During his first mandate he alienated the West even further.

Ahmadinejad's reelection in June 2009, by contrast, was hotly contested, and his 63% "victory" at the polls was widely seen as fraudulent and fed mass protests in all big cities. In retrospect we can understand this "Green Movement" as the bellwether of the Arab Spring. Iran's popular, liberal, democratic and reformist movement, inchoate and

²⁸ Greenwald (2014).

²⁹ Pollack (2013).

leaderless though it was, commanded a majority among Iran's youth, its women and educated classes. From the vantage point of democracy promotion, the West could not have hoped for a "better" movement ever. This was in fact Obama's first great Mideast test. Yet it did not elicit more than a couple of tepid comments from Washington.

Repression was fierce and in the end effective in deadening the best hope for internally-generated Iranian regime change.

Once his power was consolidated, Ahmadinejad continued his anti-Western policies, pushing full steam toward nuclearization.³⁰ Fear of a nuclear Iran now stoked hardly veiled Israeli threats of a preemptive attack; and US fear of *that* was the motor behind ever more draconian international sanctions. It was their bite, and the economic difficulties the Iranian population faced, that in June 2013 drove the election victory of Hassan Rouhani, a centrist cleric (still the least conservative of the allowed candidates) who promised to get the West to lift its economic blockade.

Rouhani presented himself as a moderate ready for dialogue with the West, and Obama answered positively to the new president's charm offensive. Iranian declarations of good intentions and conversations have helped it break out of a decades-old international isolation, though little as yet beyond that. Despite optimistic announcements, the stranglehold of economic boycott has not been lifted yet, as negotiations over Iran's nuclear program are now reaching a climax. As both Obama and Rouhani appear to be in thrall to the hardliners in their respective constituencies, the question remains what concessions they may gain from the other side – and at what price.

4. US security interest in preventing terrorism. Despite liberal promises and public pronouncements to the contrary, Obama's **war against terror** has shown little discontinuity with Bush's. Obama did not close down Guantánamo, hardly mitigated the negative civil liberties effects of the Patriot Act and took a hard position against undesirable disclosures of US security policies. In fact, the Wikileaks affair, though dealing i.a. with Iraq scandals under Bush, occurred entirely under Obama. Neither here nor in the subsequent NSA spying program discovered by Snowden was Obama's stance very different from Bush's. Obama had Osama bin Laden liquidated the moment it was possible, continued a hidden all-out war to dismantle al-Qaeda, and expanded the drone

³⁰ Cf. estimates of the IAEA, Iran's protestations of peaceful intentions notwithstanding. Proliferation is, of course, not a uniquely Middle Eastern problem, but one that over the past decade and a half has largely been associated with the crisis of Islam.

war against suspected terrorists to new theaters. In none of these aspects has there been more than a shift in nuance compared to Bush.

5. US ideological-domestic interest in protecting Israel. Within the US, the Israeli-Arab conflict attracts extra attention, in deference to its potential to destabilize the entire region, the global ideological ramifications of the Holy Land, but in particular because of the contrasting loyalties it commands in parts of the American public – pitting an influential pro-Israel lobby of Jews and fundamentalist Protestants against an ever-potent isolationist tendency, and a growing though as yet much less entrenched Arab vote. Israel's security value for the US has become much more problematic over time, but a turnabout remains unthinkable for domestic reasons: no presidential candidate and no president can circumvent the disproportionately powerful Israel lobby.

A peaceful solution of the Palestinian question can for the foreseeable future only mean a two states solution, with Israeli withdrawal from Palestinian territories. Disarming the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would be in the best interest of everybody in the Middle East, except Palestinian terrorists and Israeli settlers. Israeli-Arab peace is also a US interest. If peace were to be mediated by the US, it would give a considerable boost to America's battered prestige. However, since the complex parameters just mentioned dictate that the US cannot pressure Israel too much, each administration must at least be *seen* as making a bona fide broker's effort. This was as true for the Bush government, which ideologically identified with the Israeli Right, as for Obama who detests it.

Unlike not only Bush and his evangelical supporters but also the Clintons, Obama does not appear to be emotionally linked to Israel, and this does not go unnoticed by US Jews. But like all presidents, he must go through the motions of showing solidarity. And this explains the rather energetic attempts of Obama, Hilary Clinton, and Kerry to force through a solution, after a period of "benign neglect", and despite Obama's glacial personal relations with Israeli leaders. At least for outside spectators, US peace-brokering goodwill was visible. Predictably, US efforts led first to clashes with Israel's Rightist government of Netanyahu, and from there, nowhere. And predictably, the US folded - so far without negative consequences for Israeli-US security cooperation.

Is Israel really a vital interest for the US? Many have begun to doubt it, but at least in this sphere, values consistently trump realist calculus. For historical reasons, Israel's wellbeing has become an internal US interest. Kissinger once quipped that Israel has no foreign policy, only domestic politics. Is it too risky to suggest that since his days, the US

has no longer an Israel policy, only Israel-related domestic politics? Each administration hands this hot potato over to its successor. Obama has not been and neither, it seems, will he be an exception.

6. US global interest in pursuing its ideological agenda. Only in the last instance is there room for genuine **values-driven policy of promoting democracy, human rights**, liberal capitalism, and the modernization of patriarchal, authoritarian and anti-liberal Middle Eastern societies. This project had probably its best chance under G.W. Bush who explicitly adopted it. After 9/11, multiculturalist ideologues who had become hegemonic in the 1990s were temporarily at a loss, and neoconservatives, whose worldview amalgamated these ideals with the overall US strategic interest, were the only ones to step forward with a coherent strategy, and became influential in the Bush administration. But the failure of Bush' interventions signaled at the same time the eclipse of the democratization and human rights agenda. Despite Obama's humanitarian rhetoric and his appointment of Susan Rice and Samantha Power, his political praxis has consistently been that of a Jeffersonian neorealist: foot-dragging in Libya, wishy-washy with the Egyptians, disastrous toward the Syrians. Ideals took a back seat.

Results

Obama fulfilled his promise to disentangle the US from Afghanistan and Iraq, and this doubtless conforms to the wish of the majority of Americans. It remains to be seen if this outcome is beneficial for either of these countries. It is also too early to evaluate if disengagement helps or harms US security. With or without overt intervention in the Islamic world, terrorism has remained a substantial threat to the US. *Besides this "cleaning up" operation, though, the only sphere where Obama's Middle East policy significantly differs from his predecessor's, is that of protection of human rights and promotion of democracy.* After inspiring both Clintonian and neocon strategy, this agenda has for all practical purposes been laid to rest. In this respect, whether from convictions or to pander to public antipathy to new military adventures, Obama has been the one to press on the brakes e.g. when he blocked intervention in Syria, against Kerry's wishes.

Whatever the motives, results have not been positive so far. *The US may have tactically destroyed the al-Qaeda nucleus, but failed to strategically combat the attraction of jihadist ideology among fractions of the Muslim populations.* And this hangs of course together with its neglect of the ideological struggle to foster democracy, tolerance, and

respect for human rights against totalitarian foes such as radical Islamists! As a result, al-Qaeda's original core has fragmented, but jihadist terror has expanded to new areas and targets. *Democracies and their underlying values, coexistence of civilizations etc. are worldwide on the defensive, and in the midst of a deepening malaise.* To chalk all of this up to Obama's failures would be unfair. It stands to reason, however, that more proactive and idealistic US policies might have prevented or at least alleviated the current crisis.

In 2009 Obama let down the Iran's Green Movement. The result has been to strengthen the Iranian regime. In 2011 and 2012 he dropped longstanding US allies in the Arab world, but without embracing the popular revolts that brought them down. In Cairo, the world's new "conspiracy theory capital", Islamists believe the US is in a plot with the generals. Secularists swear it is hand in glove with the Muslim Brotherhood. The Egyptian army is considering switching to Russian suppliers.

Strategic failure: the same verdict can be given to Obama's handling of the Syrian tragedy. Rather than risk a limited military operation against a murderous regime using chemicals to poison its own people, in July 2013 Obama eagerly accepted a problematic Russian-brokered decommissioning of Syrian chemical arms, as if it were a lifeline thrown to him by the Russians. But accepting Putin's proffered poisoned cup was the easy way out. New mass murders are committed every day. Despite the degradation of part of its arsenal, the Assad regime continues gassing and bombing its citizens. But the new evidence does not elicit the same shock anymore. *The use of WMD is becoming the new normal.* Obama's posture has helped break a taboo.

In the end, then, Western passivity has strengthened Assad, demoralized the secular opposition, and played in the hand of jihadist groups, now in control of an Islamist state that includes nearly half the Syrian territory plus West Iraq, where its realm of terror mirrors and outcompetes Assad's! Obama has empowered a post-al-Qaeda state whose chickens may yet come home to roost. Meanwhile the bloodbath continues, and the world's worst refugee crisis is destabilizing Jordan, Iraq, Turkey, and Iraq.

Obama's weakness has strengthened and emboldened Russia. The Ukrainian crisis, where the US and the West in general hold fewer cards than it had in Syria, is an indirect fruit of the Syrian catastrophe.

Summing up, while Obama has continued most preexistent US Mideast policies, these policies got him and US global power in trouble because the underlying US commitments are inconsistent: protecting pro-American oil exporters bites US promotion of human

rights, rapprochement with Iran angers Saudis without weakening terrorists, sheltering Israel only strengthens the impetus to build up a countervailing Arab or Islamic power, etc. And the points where he deviated from the existing US strategic agenda, although the most visible such as retreat from Iraq and Afghanistan, appear to have only deepened instability and chaos. Obama has shifted a few accents and dismantled a few US engagements that had outlived their usefulness or popularity. He has seriously diminished US power and influence across the region, but has signally failed to develop a new and coherent US strategy to compensate for these losses.

To the extent that US geopolitical decline is not fatally determined by irremediable external factors (for instance economic or military competition of the BRICS), but results from human choice, it is hard to deny that Obama's policies have contributed to it. Five hundred years ago Machiavelli pontificated that it is better for a prince to be feared than to be loved. Liberals disagree. The world Obama helped to create is one in which the USA, and what it stands for, is hated without inspiring any more fear.

Conclusion

We did not set out with any pretension to cast judgment on US Mideast policy over the past six years, just to analyze its force lines. At the end of our analysis a few, perhaps harsh, values-based conclusions appear, however, unavoidable. Six years Obama have severely undermined America's position in the Middle East. The project of political transition that morally underlay US intervention in Afghanistan and Iraq - transition toward a fairer government more representative of its diverse population groups - suffered disastrous reverses on Obama's watch. The Syrian civil war the West might have contained if not prevented, is now destabilizing its three Arab neighbors, and indirectly affects Israel, Turkey, Iran, and Saudi Arabia. Old friends like Egypt, Turkey and even Israel are taking their distance vis-à-vis an American foreign policy of retraction and growing disengagement.

More than that, Obama's vacillations and his aversion to use force when necessary have helped dictators here, extremist jihadist rebels there, and weakened everywhere the cause of moderate and modernist-minded popular reform – whether of the secular liberal or the Islamic variety. He has emboldened on the one hand Russia, China, Iran, and a host of minor absolutist forces, and on the other, neglected the fight against al-Qaeda offshoots

such as ISIS and Islamist extremists in Afghanistan, Iraq, Libya, Pakistan, Somalia, Nigeria, and in the West itself.

Both the elites of autocratic states and the champions of a new transnational caliphate mask their anti-Western and antimodern programs under an “anti-hegemonic” discourse, and both reject the democratic aspirations of the peoples they claim to represent – the first in the name of national interest, the second in the name of God. It would be unwarranted to blame Obama for the global crisis of democracy, which has deeper causes over which no American president would have much power. Nor can it be claimed that Obama is out of sync with the general public mood of isolationism in the US. In our opinion, however, Obama has done little to stop the downward slide and the demoralization of democratic forces worldwide.

Country by country, Obama’s Mideast policies have left each state increasingly on its own, in a region gripped by seemingly uncontrollable forces. Within each country, a priori anti-Americanism of large sections of the population is worsened by the disappointment of those liberals who had pinned their hopes on the US. Muslim civil society which expressed great hopes when Obama entered the White House is today more anti-American than under Bush.

In theory democratic forces might fill the vacuum. In reality we witness the victory of autocratic and authoritarian forces.

This is more the result of US inertia than of US “oscillation”. Alternatives existed and are still present. It is not the case that the US was at a loss as to how to react (at least not more so than in other crises, under other presidents). It is that opposing foreign policy interests clashed and temporarily paralyzed decision-making. In most instances, the interest of democracy and human rights promotion clashed with US strategic interests (e.g. in Bahrain, Egypt, Syria); sometimes, democracy and human rights were deemed to weaken the war against terror (also in Egypt; and later in Syria); and occasionally, democracy and human rights conflicted with US economic interest (Saudi Arabia, Bahrain), or with the pro-Israel imperative (in the Palestinian question). In each and every of these cases, the US ended up sacrificing democracy promotion and respect for human rights to other, and more immediate, geostrategic, antiterrorist, economic, or domestic (Israel-related) interests.

We do not mean to imply by this that American interest in democracy and human rights is only skin deep or hypocritical: many sincere efforts dating from the Bush period

or earlier have continued under Obama. Still, the cause of promoting human rights and democracy as a US interest has over the past years encountered increasing obstacles.

The old Wilsonian slogan “to make the world safe for democracy” is understood as meaning: a more democratic world, and a world where human rights are respected, will be a more peaceful world. More democracy will make the world also safer for Americans. By and large, this premise holds. It bears repetition that in many parts of the Middle East regime change is needed, although it should of course emerge from the people rather than from foreign occupation.

There are, however, many ways (including sometimes military ways) in which foreigners can, and have the moral duty to, protect people far away and help them express their will. The problem is that engagement is dangerous, expensive, often unpopular, and always takes longer than originally foreseen. Democratizations such as the Arab revolutions are transformative projects that will be necessarily long, costly and certain to be traversed by fallbacks. These projects may demand help from friends abroad. Often the process surpasses the stamina of electorates. Democracy has many virtues, but patience is not one of them. Short-term emergencies too often take precedence. One day, we may all pay the price.

Bibliography

Acharya, Amitav. *The End of American World Order*. Polity, NY. 2014

Bremer III, L. Paul. and Malcolm McConnell. *My Year in Iraq*. Threshold Editions, NY. 2006.

Boot, Max. *How America Lost Its Four Great Generals*. Commentary Magazine. January 2013.

Collins, Randall, “Êxito e Fracasso de Revoluções”. Novos Estudos Cebrap. N. 97. 2013. Estratégia de Segurança Nacional. Publicado em 17.09.02. Fonte: <http://www.defense.gov/> Acessado em 12.05.2010.

Finguerut, Ariel. *Entre George W. Bush (2000-2008) e Barack H. Obama (2009): a efetividade da Nova Direita no consenso político norte-americano*, Tese de Doutorado, Unicamp, 2014.

Friedman (George), *The next 100 years: A forecast for the 21st century*. New York, etc.: Doubleday, 2009.

Gates, Robert. *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War*. Knopf, NY. 2014.

Greenwald, Abe. *He's Made It Worse: Obama's Middle East*. Commentary Magazine; Janeiro 2014.

Harvey, David. *Spaces of Global Capitalism: A Theory of Uneven Geographical Development*. Ed. Verso. Chicago. 2004.

Herring, George C. *From Colony to Superpower*. Oxford University Press, NY. 2008.

Hofstadter, Richard. *The American Political Tradition*. Vintage Books, NY. 1965.

Huntington (Samuel P.), *Who are we? The challenges to America's national identity*. Simon & Schuster. New York, London, and Toronto, 2004.

Itaussu, Arthur. “Ideias e Política Externa Americanas: Uma discussão”. *Contexto Internacional*, dez., RJ. 2001.

Kristol, William; Kaplan, Lawrence F. *The War Over Iraq: Saddam's Tyranny and America's Mission*. Encounter Books, NY. 2003.

Kupchan, Charles. *No One's World*. Oxford University Press; NY. 2013.

Leca, Jean. “Comparative, Arab, and European Studies: Still a French Exceptionalism?” *International Political Science Review* V. 30 N. 5 Novembro 2009.

Lechter, S. Robert, Farnsworth, Stephen J. e Schatz, Roland. *The Global President*. Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, NY. 2013.

Lipset, Seymour Martin. *American Exceptionalism: A Double-Edged Sword*. Ed. W. W. Norton & Company. NY. 1992.

Lynch, Timothy J., Singh, Robert S. *After Bush: the case for continuity in foreign policy*. Cambridge Press. NY. 2008.

Mead (Walter Russell), *Special providence: American foreign policy and how it changed the world*. New York and London: Routledge, 2002.

Moghadam, Valentine M. "What is democracy? Promises and perils of the Arab Spring." *Current Sociology* V. 61 N. 4. Julho 2013.

Shorbagy, Manar. "Egyptian Views on the Politics of Egypt Today". *International Political Science Review* V. 30 N. 5. Novembro , 2009.

Sodoro, Michael J. *Comparative Politics*. Ed. McGraw & Hill , NY. 2008.

Schlesinger, Jr. Arthur M. *Os Ciclos da História Americana* Civilização Brasileira, RJ. 1996.

Pollack, Kenneth M. *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb, and American Strategy*.. Simon & Schuster, NY. 2013.

Tocqueville, Alexis de. *A Democracia na América*, Livro II, Martins Fontes. SP. 2002.

Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*, W. W. Norton & Company. NY. 2012.

Recebido em: Janeiro de 2015;

Aprovado em: Maio de 2015.