
-UNIS

The Choice for the West: Focus or Strategic Failure

The Middle East and North Africa would be better off with diminished Western ambitions in the region. However, rather than coalescing around a more manageable and realistic set of goals, the West is beset by confusion and growing discord

By Daniel Levy

The last decade of the twentieth century and first decade of the twenty-first might be described as an attempt at peace-driven, then war-driven American-led approaches to the region. In effect, this was nothing new, Western policy was American policy, and America's allies in the West dutifully fulfilled the role of mostly ornamental accessories, who on occasion brought significant dowries to the table. This was most on display during the defining moment of the era, Operation Iraqi Freedom. Then-British Prime Minister Tony Blair actively supported the United States hoping to give Britain a seat at the table. And yet, Blair's pretensions were given short shrift by American leaders. On the flip side, French attempts to prevent the Iraq war were just as easily dismissed by the George W. Bush administration.

The Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region is most certainly better off when faced with shrunken Western ambitions. However, Western leaders have failed to define and agree on a realistic and manageable set of objectives vis-à-vis the region. This confusion is occurring at a moment of enhanced geopolitical contestation in the MENA region (whether in the shape of militarized Russian re-engagement or Chinese-led plans for a Eurasian-led future with the Middle East central to the far-reaching Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). The lack of clear Western leadership in the region gives Middle Eastern leaders themselves more space to play the angles between global powers and to navigate these competing ambitions in ways which could benefit the region's interests. Or at least that would be the case were not so many of the region's leaders locked in their own internal and external zero-sum struggles that appear to be condemning the region to further conflict and lost opportunity.

If Europeans, or at least a coalition of leading Western Europeans made up of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom could get their act

◁ U.S. former Secretary of State John Kerry and former French Foreign Minister Jean-Marc Ayrault during a meeting on Syria in Paris, Dec. 10, 2016. *Thibault Camus/Reuters/Pool*

together, then they might form an axis around which ad hoc but meaningful coalitions could be formed with the advancement of two particular goals in mind. First, how to work with the MENA region in pursuing the vital aspects of broader human security in the twenty-first century—environmental protection, prevention of human trafficking, as well as economic, health, food, and political security. Second, how to prevent, contain, and ultimately de-escalate the conflicts metastasizing in the region with devastating effects on the hopes and lives of millions of inhabitants and with spillover effects for Europe and elsewhere.

Pax Americana Is Past

To grasp the outsized influence that Western powers have had on the Middle East in the contemporary era, one has only to pause for a moment to consider the nomenclature of the region itself. The "Middle East" is a part of the world that in the most accurate geographical sense is Western Asia. In fact, the "Middle East" is only the Middle East when looked at through the lens of Western Europe and more particularly from the perspective of the two leading colonial powers, Britain and France, who most defined the lines of state division in the MENA region as we know them today.

As the sun set on the colonial era, the focus of Western power itself migrated to the United States, made clear during the Suez crisis of 1956. For much of the second half of the twentieth century, the Middle East as a Western interest was assessed primarily in the context of the Cold War and the competition for influence, allies, resources, and power-projection capacity between the United States and the Soviet Union.

The post-Cold War era for the West in the Middle East can perhaps best be divided into two phases. The first can be defined as a new Pax Americana (1990–2001) built on a peace dividend. The first Gulf War in 1991 captured this unipolar American moment. The United States pushed Iraq out of Kuwait having secured international legal cover, assembling an unprecedented regional Arab military coalition while compelling Israel to sit on the sidelines, even after Israel was struck by Iraqi Scud missiles. America then pursued a policy known as "dual containment" toward Iran and Iraq, themselves exhausted from just having fought a prolonged war from 1980 until 1988 with estimates of over 1.5 million war and war-related casualties.

Within months of Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker convened a regional peace conference that was to solidify a new Pax Americana peace dividend.

Within months of Operation Desert Storm in Iraq, then-U.S. Secretary of State James Baker convened a regional peace conference that was to solidify a new Pax Americana peace dividend. America wanted to create a new Middle Eastern political architecture which would embrace America's traditional ally Israel

and a broader array of Arab actors together under one roof (including Syria, the Gulf, and North African states). Ultimately holding the Madrid Peace Conference in the fall of 1991 under the co-sponsorship of the Russian Federation was an act of theater. The Russians in 1991 under Boris Yeltsin were a shadow of their former Soviet selves. No one was confused as to the supposed "equality" of the co-sponsors' power relations. The Madrid conference was a direct display of Pax Americana power. There were no "junior" power brokers. There was only America.

The rest of the decade saw an on-again, off-again American-led effort to embed peace deals between Israel and all of its neighbors—Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, and the Palestinians—in a regional American system. Israel and Jordan did sign a peace treaty in October of 1994, following fast on the heels of the 1993 Oslo breakthrough with the Palestine Liberation Organization and in May of 2000 the Israeli military finally withdrew from southern Lebanon after an eighteen-year occupation. Nevertheless, Israeli–Syrian and Israeli–Palestinian negotiations ended in acrimony and Israeli–Lebanese talks never got off the ground in the absence of a breakthrough on those other two fronts.

Prior to the collapse of the Soviet Union, Egypt had already shifted to the Western camp following the American-brokered peace deal with Israel in 1978 and became the second-largest recipient of U.S. military aid, a position Egypt held for over three decades.

The 1990s were also a time of continued stagnation in the Arab World, as witnessed by the findings of the first Arab Human Development Report (AHDR) published in 2002. The report highlighted the endemic lack of freedom and human rights, empowerment of women, and knowledge acquisition as obstacles to development in the region. As such, the peace dividend-driven Pax Americana effort never took root. It was decisively unravelling when in late 2000 Israeli–Palestinian relations descended into the deadly cycle of the Second Intifada. However, a much greater shock to the system was to come a year later with the Al-Qaeda attack on the American homeland on September 11, 2001. This ushered in an approach that might be thought of as an attempt to impose a war dividend Pax Americana on the Middle East.

The ostensible reasons given for launching the Iraq war in 2003 were all proven to be spurious, and for many observers that was already clear when Bush administration officials were marketing their public pleas for the war in 2002. Rather, the plans for the Iraqi invasion and the dynamic its architects hoped to set in motion in the region harked back to ideas that had been promoted for several years by neoconservatives in the United States and their Likud allies in Israel. This would be a Pax Americana forced into place through regime change and submission. Neocons assumed these regimes would be favorable

to Israel, to American commercial—and especially energy—interests, and to a more expansive definition of American global pre-eminence and military forward-deployment for the post-Cold War and post-9/11 era. Many of these ideas were included in a paper entitled "A Clean Break: A New Strategy for Securing the Realm" published in 1996 and prepared by pro-Likud neoconservative circles in the United States when Benjamin Netanyahu first became prime minister of Israel.

Predictably enough, the consequences were disastrous—although not for the American neoconservative protagonists themselves who continue to be treated as serious individuals in media, consultancy, and governmental circles. The domestic American fallout from the ill-conceived Iraq war was sufficiently chastising so that when the events of the so-called Arab uprisings exploded onto the scene at the start of this century's second decade, Americans were already busy recalibrating and downsizing their ambitious for the region.

Managing the Fallout

Those two decades of post-Cold War experience provide the backdrop to today's Western approaches to the region. Both the Barack Obama and now Donald Trump administrations, with stark differences, have attempted to manage the post Second Iraq War fallout.

Obama's attempt to reduce American exposure in the Middle East in the context of shifting global power and to distill core American interests came up against constant pushback from both inside and outside his government—from what he eventually termed the "Washington foreign policy blob." Obama never fully took on, let alone vanquished, that blob and never fully presented a more realistic articulation of American regional interests—something that often appeared to lie just beneath the surface of Obama administration initiatives but was never spelled out. As regional crises proliferated, Obama mostly avoided the knee-jerk American predilection toward military interventions and owning solutions. It was an approach that also conspicuously failed to produce effective diplomatic and coalition-building alternatives (the Iran nuclear deal being an exception). This approach also oversaw the weaponization of the U.S. Treasury as a tool of coercive power to an unprecedented degree.

Obama's attempt to reduce American exposure in the Middle East came up against constant pushback from both inside and outside his government—from what he eventually termed the "Washington foreign policy blob."

The Trump presidency's policy toward the Middle East and North Africa seems to veer between a more libertarian America first, hands-off approach and a return to neoconservative fantasies of reshaping the region, often, confusingly,

in the same day or even in the same speech. One main and ongoing problem of American foreign policy is how to manage and cajole U.S. allies in the region to more closely align with American interests. This has apparently morphed under Trump into an American willingness to be wholly deferential to key allies (think Israel and Saudi Arabia) and to abandon any attempt to independently define U.S. interests.

The Trump presidency's policy toward the Middle East seems to veer between a more libertarian America first, hands-off approach and a return to neoconservative fantasies of reshaping the region.

At the same time, the Trump administration is redefining the notion of the "West" by taking an overtly adversarial approach to Western allies. The U.S. National Security Strategy report published in December 2017 defines Europe as a competitor. This is at a time when Russia's re-emergence as a significant regional powerbroker has been cemented and when Chinese commercial and financing power is coming to the fore in the Middle East alongside the initial and tentative staking out of a Chinese security presence with naval patrols off the Somali coast and the establishment of a military base in Djibouti. Add to the mix Europe's internal problems and divisions and it becomes clear that to talk of a Western policy in the Middle East is increasingly a misnomer.

Non-Convergence in the MENA Region

It is hard in 2018 to think of important policy areas where there is a strong convergence of both thinking and action between Washington and Brussels, or separate European governments. There are clear European differences with the White House on Iran, Israel–Palestine and the intra-Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) split. There are also differences of emphasis on Syria and Libya, and how to handle Egypt. Even where there was agreement, for instance on being more supportive of the new leadership in Saudi Arabia, this had mostly translated into competition for the expected economic opportunities of contracts and investments. It might be helpful to think in terms of three categories of problems relating to Western convergence on the MENA region: issues on which there is a disagreement, not only on policy to be pursued but also on whether the specific issue is even a priority; areas in which there is a shared approach and prioritization but also competition for the spoils; and areas in which the priority and the goal are shared but not the means for achieving them.

For example, migration would fall into the first category. For many European governments handling the refugee and asylum-seeker crisis generated in large measure from, or through, the Middle East has become a preeminent policy challenge. That is simply not the case for America. But it goes further, in key European capitals such as Berlin and Paris, there is an apparently well-founded suspicion that Washington is keen to sow internal European division over the migration crisis and is doing little to help solve it at its source. If the United

States sees Europe through a competitor zero-sum lens, then the debilitating effect that the migration debate is having on European cohesion is a net positive.

While it is true that at the crux of this issue is a need for Europeans to get their own house in order (on national and collective levels) and that the challenge of migration will continue beyond the immediate Middle East-generated crises, it is also the case that Europe is in a far weaker position to effectively respond when alone in terms of the key conflicts and third parties driving the refugee phenomenon. Europe is hamstrung when there is no ability to work in effective alliance with the United States and little European appetite to work constructively beyond the circle of traditional allies or to prioritize in its relations with Russia (for instance, prioritize Syria and migration or Ukraine).

Europe is hamstrung when there is no ability to work in effective alliance with the United States and little European appetite to work constructively beyond the circle of traditional allies.

Regarding the second category, Western actors certainly share a keen interest in enhancing economic ties with much of the MENA region, but for obvious commercial reasons they often seek to do so in competition; that is unlikely to change. As Gulf actors have become increasingly active in inward investments internationally, in spreading the asset portfolios of their sovereign wealth funds, and recently in significantly ramping up their military purchases, competition for those spoils between the United States, France, and the UK, for instance, has intensified. When Saudi Arabia started discussing an IPO flotation for part of the Saudi Arabian Oil Company, also known as ARAMCO, there was a queue of international stock market suitors backed by their respective governments. Following visits to both London and Washington D.C. earlier this year, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed Bin Salman unlocked 65 billion pounds sterling in mutual trade and investment opportunities with the UK as well as announcing that the Kingdom is considering $400 billion in U.S. investments over the coming period.

Energy remains a principal driver of Western interests in the region and goes a long way to explaining positions taken by Western leaders and companies in Libya and Algeria, in Iraq and the Kurdish regional areas and elsewhere. Also, we see some of the divisions over Iran and the overall desire to avoid being entangled in the intra-GCC crises being born from Western leaders' desire for Middle Eastern energy and other spoils. This is not just about the energy reserves but, often just as important, the transportation networks. So, one should be clear-eyed on the political policy carryover of economic interests. Western leaders' attempts to coordinate pushback, for instance vis-à-vis Saudi Arabia on the Yemen war, frequently will crash on the rocks of protecting commercial interests vis-à-vis Riyadh.

The security challenges posed by the region, not least in terms of the spillover threats emanating from the Middle East and North Africa to Western homeland security, represent the third arena in which there is a consensus on the importance and the basics but not on best policy practices. As the threat of both organized and atomized Middle East-related terror has become a consistent and prominent feature on the homeland security scene across Western nations, cooperation and coordination between intelligence agencies have intensified to an unprecedented degree. This holds true both among Western intelligence agencies and between them and allied states in the region.

The joint efforts that have gone into tracking foreign Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS) fighters is a case in point. In the pushback against ISIS and Al-Qaeda affiliates, a number of Western and regional security agencies and militaries are several years now into conducting an array of joint actions across significant swathes of the Middle East that include parts of Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, and also occasionally further afield in the Sahel. However, the ability to maintain practical cooperation belies substantive policy differences over how to understand and impact broader trends and trajectories, how to achieve sustainable de-escalation, and address root causes. Some of those differences, especially between Americans and Europeans, have been exacerbated under the Trump administration. Trump has demonstrated a delight and enthusiasm in cooperating most closely with neo-authoritarians. While Europeans hardly have a great track record in that regard, there is an underlying assumption in many European capitals that domestic repression breeds the conditions for recruiting and advancing the agenda of violent extremists. That argument fails to resonate within the Trump White House.

As conflicts permeate so much of the regional landscape, gaps in Western responses have become visible across a wide range of regional dilemmas. European and American leadership are at odds as to the way in which to interpret a variety of issues, including: how to interpret and indeed whether to meddle in Iranian domestic politics as well as the prospects for downsizing Iranian influence in Iraqi politics; how far to align with Saudi Arabia over the Yemen war or the intra-GCC split with Qatar; whether to discreetly re-engage the Bashar Al-Assad regime; how far to alienate Turkey; whether to view Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi as an asset or a liability; how to approach Israel's ever-hardening line against the Palestinians; and the relative merits of cooperating with Libya's competing factions, not least General Khalifa Haftar.

Some differences have of course always existed. Part of the discord currently on display is also the result of the number and complexity of crises happening in parallel. Yet, there is also something new at play that is likely to be more long-lasting and could lead to a recalibration in important aspects of where the region fits into global geopolitics and geostrategy. Europe itself is experiencing massive

internal ruptures and divisions. It is hard to think of a period of such Western incoherence. At stake is the entire Western project, or mission, for the world.

After the Liberal International Order

Western policy has always been transactional and rooted in self-interest. That is legitimate. Western attention and a more significant degree of unified and coherent ambition have not exactly been a harbinger of endless happiness and joy for the peoples of the region. From colonial administrations to the Iraqi Coalition Provisional Authority; the International Monetary Fund's structural adjustment programmes to the military pre-eminence of the U.S. Central Command; and the ubiquity today of unmanned aerial vehicles operated from afar patrolling the region's skies, Western domination and denial of local agency has been more of a curse than a blessing. The shortcomings highlighted in the series of United Nations AHDRs speaks to local failings but also to this legacy and continued prevalence of Western (and other) external interference.

And yet, there has also been an overarching story to tell, an attempt at a grand narrative portrayed by Western governments to their people and the greater world. Mostly this story has revolved around promoting something called the "liberal international order." Partly, the liberal international order constituted a post-colonial continuation of the colonial mindset. This mindset stressed the so-called civilizing mission under the guise of which, in practice, colonized people were invariably exploited and their colonizers enriched. Despite its inherent imperialist flaws, the liberal international order was also in part a sincere attempt to absorb the lessons of the horrors of the first half of the twentieth century (especially in Europe) and to establish an international set of rules and conventions to be universally respected. Partly too, the establishment of the liberal international order became indistinguishable from what is known as American exceptionalism—an attempt to rebrand American hegemony as something more warm, fuzzy, and altogether altruistic.

The merits and failings of the liberal international order paradigm as it pertains to the Middle East can be debated ad infinitum. The key point for our purposes is that it is over. Vestiges remain, attempts at rehabilitation will no doubt be periodically pursued, but a combination of America and Europe no longer retains enough capacity, ambition, mutual comity, or domestic political legitimacy to revive the project. In electing Trump, America definitively killed the brand. The pertinent question is what could, and perhaps should, replace the liberal international order. The current White House apparently has something more transparently brutish and self-serving in mind. American defense contractors, lobbyists and consultancies will double down on enjoying the fruits of this harvest, possibly along with members of the Trump family itself. Saudi and Israeli leadership will be encouraged and supported to further accelerate down their current self-destructive paths.

Palestinians and Yemenis among others will bear the brunt of the direct consequences. As long as the U.S. administration is acting primarily as a spoiler in the region, Europeans will have to tease out their own ideas and impact-generating policies.

As long as the U.S. administration is acting primarily as a spoiler in the region, Europeans will have to tease out their own ideas and impact-generating policies.

Cowering or Crossing the Abyss

This final eclipse of the Western model has coincided with a period of dramatic change for the region, at both the local and geopolitical levels. The features of local disruption are well known—an Iraq in its second decade of post-Saddam implosion, a collapsed Syria, a self-absorbed and brittle Egypt, a Saudi Arabia where the reform agenda has been eclipsed by astonishingly brazen crackdowns at home and adventurism abroad, an Israel seemingly unaware of limitations on its grandiose ambitions, alongside a Turkey now coming to grips with having over-extended its reach, and an Iran that has mostly benefited from ill-conceived U.S. interventions but now must proceed cautiously. Domestically MENA region states continue to face challenges of consensus-based and publicly legitimized governance, agreed and respected rules of the political, economic and, legal game, and space for civil society. Initial glimpses of progress in some places, following the 2011 uprisings, have gone into retreat (Tunisia being a notable exception). This combustible current regional mix can either be encouraged over the abyss or walked back from the brink. Western leaders can encourage and work toward one or the other of those paths—the choice should be clear.

At the same time, China's footprint in the MENA region is being felt in new and still emerging ways, principally at the level of financing, infrastructure, and trade as part of its BRI. The BRI simply cannot become the consequential support ballast for a Chinese-driven Eurasian future without at least elements of functionality, governability, and predictability in the Middle East. While those considerations, alongside energy dependency, have pushed the region up the list of Chinese interests and priorities, the predominant approach from Beijing currently appears to be a continued avoidance of extending significant equities into the hard-security and conflict prevention/management/resolution realm. China, understandably, feels happy for that to continue to be primarily the headache of Americans and others.

The other significant geopolitical shift, as has been mentioned, is that of Russia's re-emergence. Obviously, this process has been most visible in the Syrian arena, but one should not underestimate Russia's stepped-up diplomatic activity, military cooperation, and economic activity. Russia has an ability now to intensify its ties across the multiple regional divides and fractures. As such, Russia maintains strong and proven working ties, not only with Iran, the Syrian

government, Hezbollah, and Iraq, but also with Israel, Turkey, the Saudis, and Emiratis, alongside Qatar, as well as Egypt, Algeria, competing Libyan factions, and more. This is not a strategy with a hegemonic aspiration. Yet, these activities make Russia an unavoidable and noteworthy player in the region today.

This is the local and geopolitical backdrop against which any attempt at forging a new Western policy will need to be configured. Undoubtedly, there will be many areas in which it is impossible to forge effective working alliances even if in certain places where Western leadership looks to work beyond the level of national governments and to build alliances at the civil society, sub-state local or regional level. Prospects perhaps look most bleak when it comes to promoting enfranchised citizens or open societies in the Middle East. At this point, the diplomatic toolbox is limited. America has, for now, taken a pass in this realm of human rights and open societies. International allies are few and far between and do not include Russia or China, and there is weighty historical baggage of selective engagement and damning inconsistency.

Prospects perhaps look most bleak when it comes to promoting enfranchised citizens or open societies in the Middle East.

In two main areas, however, the prospects for doing a better job of constructive Western engagement with the MENA region are less bleak: that is in conflict de-escalation and overall human security issues.

Not all of the conflicts with which the region is beset lend themselves to short or even medium-term resolution, but across the board, openings exist for improvement, for de-escalation, to put pieces in place for eventual resolutions or even, in some instances, to freeze a conflict, which may be a vastly better reality than that which currently prevails. Elements of each can be pursued, whether in Yemen, Libya, Syria or the occupied Palestinian territories.

Likewise, there are common interests between Westerners and the peoples of the Middle East in pursuing improved human security. That would include Western leaders working with their Middle Eastern counterparts in the realms of environmental, personal, and food security, as well as climate devastation, human trafficking and criminal networks, and public health crises. The West and the MENA region have much to mutually gain from guaranteeing essential global navigation routes that are dependent on movement through Middle Eastern waterways.

While much of this is known, the question is whether Western actors will take the necessary measures to operate more effectively. American partnership in much of this agenda is unfortunately unlikely under the Trump administration, but allies exist in niches of that administration, and in Congress, and some of the

groundwork can be laid for a possible post-2020 change. If Europeans are to take a lead, there are other prerequisites, not least that European leaders will have to get their own house in order, including developing greater independent defense and security capacities and a more ambitious forward-leaning diplomacy.

Overlapping interests vis-à-vis the MENA region do exist between the West, Russia, China, and other international actors. Those should be seen as building blocks rather than discordant sideshows in relationships otherwise characterized by hostility. Most importantly, the fracture lines within the region should be eased rather than rent further asunder. Creating ad hoc external contact groups and interventions on specific conflicts and crises can advance that de-escalation agenda. That could also help empower the UN mechanisms and envoys whose tasks have been well-nigh impossible under the current circumstances.

It is inevitable that the Middle East will remain a globally contested space. However, it is unnecessary and unacceptable that this region should be the source of convulsions which ultimately undermine the interests of and create debilitating and devastating consequences for all the actors involved. ℝ