

United States Involvement in the Middle East: Image vs. Reality

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The gap between the image of the United States as perceived by its traditional allies in the Middle East versus the actual US presence and activity in the region widened over the past year. Indeed, the image of a major power in the process of disengaging from the region is in contrast to the concrete US activity in the Middle East of 2013, especially diplomatic activity. Yet perhaps because of this very image – among other reasons – the US in late 2013 is confronted by a lack of trust from all its important and traditional allies in the region.

The image itself is not entirely groundless. As a result of the tremendous toll in human lives and the enormous financial costs of the military campaigns waged by the US in Afghanistan and Iraq, with no political return or positive results, the US is now reluctant to use military force in circumstances that formerly would have drawn an early and decisive military response. The tenuous and risk-laden results of a military option in both Syria and Iran further detract from the willingness to resort to this option, and the consequent search for political solutions has helped create an image of a major power with military capability that is reluctant to use it. In addition, American political options regarding the key issues of concern to the regional actors and the international community are few. Regarding the “Arab Spring,” the Iranian nuclear program, and the political process between Israel and the Palestinians, the US is perceived as indecisive and inconsistent. The prediction that American dependence on external energy sources will end by 2020 also reinforces the idea that the US is distancing

itself from the Middle East. Local actors assume that for the foreseeable future, the US will focus on maintaining its positions in the Pacific region, and on an effort to limit Chinese advances in the region.

This image, however, does not necessarily reflect the varied aspects of the American presence in the region or correspond to the intensity of American political activism on regional issues, where it remains a key international player.

The “Arab Spring” Upheavals

The outbreak of the civil uprisings throughout the Arab world has generated critical tension between America’s basic values, especially regarding democracy, and interests that have guided American policy over decades of activity in the Middle East. Events in all the main theaters of the civil uprisings have required the US to fashion a response that takes each of these poles into account.

Already at the outset of the civil uprising in Egypt in January 2011, American policy was criticized, particularly by conservative monarchial regimes in the Arab world, for ostensibly assisting the rapid overthrow of Mubarak and thereby facilitating the subsequent rise to power of the Muslim Brotherhood. In the eyes of the Gulf rulers, US acceptance of Mubarak’s ouster constituted the abandonment of an ally, and sparked the concern that in similar circumstances, they would not be able to rely on the US to maintain their regimes. It is doubtful whether the erstwhile trust these rulers had in the US as reliable support in a time of crisis, be it a result of internal instability or external danger, can be restored.

The brief rule of the Muslim Brotherhood and the Morsi presidency (from June 30, 2012 until July 3, 2013) featured formally proper relations between Cairo and Washington. Perhaps for this reason the US administration responded sharply to the military coup that ended the Muslim Brotherhood’s tenure. The administration escalated its response in early October 2013 by delaying the transfer of \$260 million and arms shipments to Egypt that had previously been approved (F-16 warplanes and spare parts for M1A1 tanks).

At the same time, the administration refrained from defining the overthrow of President Morsi as a military coup – a definition whose

practical consequences would have been a total suspension of aid. The administration will now have to wait and weigh its policy in accordance with the process in Egypt designed to institute constitutional changes, scheduled for approval by referendum in January 2014; the administration will then await the results of the parliamentary and presidential elections. Any delay in the timetable will only add to the palpable tension between Washington and Cairo. With the American dilemma between values and interests in the background, at this stage the administration has limited its reaction to public criticism of the use of force by the Egyptian security forces toward those demonstrating against the regime and its restrictions on freedom of assembly. The most difficult test, however, will come if the constitutional approval process and parliamentary and presidential elections are delayed, or if there is evidence of significant tampering with the results. One result of this tension is the rapprochement between Russia and Egypt, and the willingness of the two parties to discuss weapons transactions. Note that from the military and financial standpoints, the acquisition of Russian arms by the Egyptian army is not feasible. The fact that Egypt is willing to publicly flaunt such a possibility, however, is a strong indication of the state of Egypt's relations with the US.

Neither Israel nor the Gulf states have concealed their satisfaction at the July 2013 coup in Egypt. The Muslim Brotherhood regime was careful to avoid causing deterioration in Israel-Egypt relations, primarily because it realized that if these relations worsened, it could harm its chances of receiving American financial and military aid. At the same time, it is clear that Israel would prefer the ability to conduct a dialogue, even a sporadic one, with the military leadership in Cairo – which was not possible during the year that the Muslim Brotherhood was in power.

Since the Soviet presence in Egypt ended in 1972, and later following the 1979 peace agreement between Israel and Egypt, a delicate but stable triangle has existed between Cairo, Washington, and Jerusalem. The ability to communicate in the framework of this triangle prevented escalation in the wake of tense developments between Israel and its neighbors, especially in the Palestinian arena and in Lebanon. For this reason, Israel will likely continue to use its influence behind the scenes in Washington to temper the American response to any delays in the democratization process in Egypt.

From Israel's perspective, a regime that relies on the military's supremacy in the Egyptian political system is preferable to a regime of political parties, in which Islam would play a leading role.

During 2013, the events in Syria posed problems that were no less complex for the US administration, and this will presumably continue for the foreseeable future. The use of chemical weapons against a civilian population by the Damascus regime presented President Obama with a troublesome dilemma. Many in the US and elsewhere called on him to use force to stop the slaughter, which had already cost the lives of some 100,000 people before the chemical weapons were used. President Obama explored every possible way of avoiding the military option for the sake of at least limiting the use of chemical weapons. The failure of the opposition to the Assad regime to organize under a moderate (i.e., not extreme Islamic) leadership and the Assad regime's success to prevent further occupation of more Syrian territory by the various opposition groups made the US and other countries less eager to use military force. Such military intervention might have caused the regime's collapse, but would also have aggravated the chaos in Syria and greatly increased the number of victims caused by the fighting – without any viable alternative government. As with the overthrow of President Mubarak, Saudi Arabia expressed dissatisfaction with American behavior regarding Syria, yet the US hesitation to use military force is understandable.

While the American administration found a political solution to the urgent issue of Syria's use of chemical weapons – which was negotiated in coordination with Russia – regional problems created by the prolonged civil war in Syria will continue to engage the attention of the US and other international and regional parties, with no clear solution at hand. The presence of Syrian refugees in neighboring countries (especially Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey), the entrenchment of extremist Islamic organizations that have penetrated Syria in recent years, and the possibility that the conflict will spread beyond Syria's borders are the most significant of these regional problems.

As of late 2013, it appears that other countries in the Arab world, especially in the Gulf states, have succeeded in containing the waves of popular protest within their borders. If the civilian protest resumes, the US

will be unable to ignore the effect on regional stability and the ramifications for its ability to protect its interests and those of its allies, particularly in matters pertaining to the security of energy sources. Even if the United States attains energy independence, energy prices are still significantly affected by the amount of oil flowing from the Gulf region to the global economy, as well as by major events therein. A rise in oil prices caused by regional tension would affect the US economy, even if the US itself is not directly involved in events in the Persian Gulf.

The Iranian Nuclear Issue

Most of the criticism directed against Washington, particularly by official sources in Saudi Arabia, concerns US policy on Iran. The escalating Sunni-Shiite conflict in the region, along with the belief among Persian Gulf states that the Iranian regime poses a real threat to the Sunni monarchical regimes, has intensified the anxiety in the Gulf. The readiness of the US to conduct negotiations on both the chemical weapons in Syria and the Iranian nuclear program is perceived as weakness and an early warning that these regimes cannot rely on help from the US if confronted by domestic trouble or external danger.

The Israeli view of US policy differs from that of the Persian Gulf monarchies, and is clearly unrelated to anxiety about the survival of the regime. It involves the fear that failure to stop Iran will mean increased nuclear proliferation in the Middle East and create an existential threat to Israel. The fact that both Israel and Saudi Arabia view with alarm the progress of the Iranian nuclear project and what is perceived as American developing weakness, has given rise to many far reaching interpretations concerning relations between them. In fact, Israel and Saudi Arabia, along with the Saudis' junior allies in the region, will likely continue their respective dialogues with the US on the Iranian issue. Even though Saudi Arabia has no viable alternative to its reliance on the US for all its security problems, and the US can continue the present course of political activity in the region for the foreseeable future, it appears that the US does listen to the criticism coming from the region, and tries to calibrate its military presence there accordingly, in the belief that this will also prove useful in its negotiations with Iran.

The Iranian file will continue to capture center stage in Israel-US relations in 2014, and the dispute between Jerusalem and Washington will intensify if the negotiations with Iran are prolonged, and if the emerging solution deviates from Israeli positions on the problem (and if a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict proves elusive). The efforts by Israel and the US to moderate their rhetoric on the issue have not succeeded in concealing the personal differences of opinion between the US President and the Israeli Prime Minister, and they stand to re-emerge in full force over the coming year. An agreement acceptable to both Iran and Israel is very unlikely, and thus what will be perceived in Israel as the eagerness of the US to reach an agreement with Iran will almost inevitably lead to friction with Israel. To the consideration of the Iranian issue in the context of Israel-US relations, one must add the overall relations between the US administration and Congress, the Congressional election campaign in late 2014, events in the Arab world, and the political process between Israel and the Palestinians.

A state of ongoing negotiations with Iran, even with no realistic prospects of an agreement, will influence the dialogue between Washington and Jerusalem. If Iran does not deviate from the agreed activity allowed by the interim agreement signed with it in November 2013, Israel may become accustomed to this situation. Even if the interim agreement does not explicitly provide for this, the situation is liable to continue until the end of President Obama's term, with the negotiations alternatively stopping and resuming while Iran does not significantly deviate from the restrictions it accepted. Israel could find itself in a situation in which it must accept the state of affairs forced on it, to a large extent due to the international community's acquiescence to a situation of non-agreement, since it prefers a freeze of Iranian activity at the current level to the use of stronger measures against Iran. Where Israel-US relations are concerned, this means an open wound that complicates constructive relations.

The Israeli-Palestinian Conflict

The US effort to broker a political settlement between Israel and the Palestinians will continue in 2014. As the situation appeared in late 2013, the parties are far from the goal established together with the American

administration for the negotiations, namely a comprehensive permanent agreement. It is doubtful whether the American attempt to generate progress through a solution to the issue of security in order to enable agreement on borders will succeed. In the first half of 2014, the administration will have to choose between the following alternatives in its further handling of the Israel-Palestinian issue: abandonment of the process; pursuit of a US proposal for a comprehensive solution; endorsement of a US proposal for a comprehensive solution by the UN Security Council; and an attempt to move the two sides to a discussion of partial solutions, leading to a comprehensive solution according to an agreed timetable.

In the absence of any desire or ability to impose a solution on the two sides, the US does not have much room to maneuver. It can try to manage the conflict, as opposed to attempt to solve it, in order to prevent a violent outbreak, through improvement to the standard of living in the territories, including in the Gaza Strip (through boosting employment, improving the supply of water and electricity, and allowing more freedom of movement) and restraints on Israeli construction in the territories, at least east of the security barrier. Special agreements, such as the proposed water agreement signed in early December 2013 between Israel, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority, are likely to reduce the possibility of violence and advance a comprehensive solution, if the internal political circumstances on the Israeli and Palestinian sides permit this.

The fact that President Obama has put Secretary of State John Kerry in charge of dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, while reducing his own involvement, will help minimize but will not completely prevent friction between Israel and the US on this issue if none of the American alternatives for action produce results. The US will face a demand from its partners in the Quartet, especially the European Union, to adopt measures, even if symbolic, to express dissatisfaction with what is described as Israel's recalcitrance or foot-dragging on the way to a solution to the conflict.

In the absence of a partial or complete political solution, both Israel and the US will be confronted with a renewal of Palestinian activity aimed at the accession of Palestine as a full member in the UN and its various institutions. While Israel will continue to oppose such a measure, the assumption that in the absence of progress in the political process or

without a series of unilateral Israeli measures indicating an intention to advance toward separation from the Palestinians the US can be expected to veto a Security Council resolution to accept Palestine as a UN member will be put to the test. Israel is less able to influence the administration's considerations on this issue through Congress than the Iranian issue. Israel therefore must consider whether to use its lever of influence in Congress to exert pressure on the administration to veto the admission of Palestine as a UN member state.

Conclusion

The metaphor of a straw man used by statesmen and analysts to depict the United States in the region does not correspond to the level of American activity on various issues in the Middle East. Although the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq and the 2008-2011 recession have had an attenuating effect, they were not the sole reasons for American reluctance to use military force in the various crises in the region. Even precise and casualty-free American military action in Syria would only have limited the extent of the killing and destruction, while not promoting a full political solution to the crisis. Military action in Iran, whether by the US and/or another party, would set back the Iranian nuclear program, but it cannot eliminate the ability and will of a determined Iranian regime that is ready to pay the price of success in attaining nuclear military capability.

In the fairly recent past, it was possible to use military power in various conflicts, isolate the consequences, and limit the resulting political, economic, and military shockwaves. Even today, the use of military force in Africa, for example, does not necessarily have much impact beyond the limited area in which force is used. In Syria and Iran, however, many contend that it will be necessary to use a force far in excess of the few hundred soldiers deployed by France in Mali. The number of regional and international players that will be involved in any military action and its results will greatly outnumber those involved in military action in Africa, and will dictate more complex considerations. Nonetheless, the possibility of use of military force by the US cannot be ruled out. It is possible to argue that Russia's last minute intervention before the American threat to use its military in response to the Assad regime's use of chemical weapons

proves the effectiveness of military deterrence. Either complete failure of the talks in Iran or serious miscalculations by the Iranian regime may prompt an American military response, even if not of the dimensions expected by several countries in the region. Such an American response would rebuild the American image in the Middle East that has deteriorated in recent years.

In the coming years, the US will continue to face more active competitors from outside the region, mainly China and Russia. It is likely that the decision taken by Beijing to expand and intensify its activity in China's periphery has been extended to the Middle East, with China searching for a potential field for political activity, in addition to its ramified economic activity. China's negotiations with Turkey on the supply of an air defense system indicate an effort to undermine the near-monopoly of the US in the supply of armaments to countries in the region. Russia, which is negotiating arms deals with a number of countries in the region, is also liable to utilize its success in 2013 to reassume a role as a significant player in the Middle East. For both China and Russia, only partial and limited successes are possible, and there is insufficient evidence for sweeping and erroneous conclusions about an end to the American era in the Middle East. These successes do indicate, however, changes in the decades-long perception of their ally by the region's traditional friends of the US.

In 2014, the US will have to take a series of difficult decisions about its relations with Egypt, its confrontation with the Iranian nuclear issue, and the continuation of its effort to achieve a political solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Each of these three issues can potentially generate friction between Israel and the US, and in the absence of progress, even partial, in the political process with the Palestinians and the negotiations with Iran, the potential friction will almost certainly materialize into actual friction. The resulting damage can be minimized through dialogue at the most senior level, but it cannot be completely avoided.