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2-2016

TEN PROPOSITIONS ABOUT THE US AND THE MIDDLE EAST

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Published by: The Norwegian Atlantic Committee
Editor: Magnus Vestby Thorsen
Printed by: Heglands AS, Flekkefjord
ISSN: 0802-6602

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Ten Propositions about the US and the Middle East

Steven Simon

This article is based on the author's speech at the Leangkollen-conference 2016

One

Since 9/11 and certainly since 2003 we have gotten used to being massively present in the Middle East. Long, significant wars – maybe not significant compared to WWII, Korea or Vietnam – but still real bloody wars have come to define a new normal.

But looking back over the course of US involvement in in the region since WWII (and before then if you set aside operations against the Barbary pirates in 1805), it has been for the most part non-military in nature.

There were obvious exceptions during the post-War period: the 1990 /91 Gulf War and the very brief interventions in Lebanon in 1958 and early 1982-3, but these were exceptions to a much longer record of American pursuit of regional objectives by means other than war.

Until the first Gulf War, from the late 1970s when the Carter Doctrine declared the Gulf to be a vital strategic interest, the US had only a small flotilla in the Gulf. At the same time hundreds of thousands of troops were forward deployed to Europe and Asia. In 1968 there were 500,000 troops in Vietnam, 250,000 in Germany, as well as a somewhat smaller number in Spain, Italy, the United Kingdom, Korea, Okinawa and the Philippines.

In the Persian Gulf the US role was as an offshore balancer and apart from that small flotilla – now the carrier-based Fifth Fleet – the US confined itself to an over-the-horizon presence, partly by necessity, given the overextension of US military resources in Southeast Asia.

By the mid-1980s the US had base access in Israel, and for a period in Egypt as well, to deal with the possibility of hostilities with the Soviet Union in the eastern Mediterranean. Access and prepositioning in the Persian Gulf started in 1971 when the UK handed off its naval base in Bahrain to the US and, in 1979, in Oman with whom the US signed its first Persian Gulf prepositioning agreement.

At least directly the US stayed out of Middle East wars. Clearly there were other kinds of intervention that could and did have serious consequences, - like the US support for the 1953 coup in Iran. It included no American troops, but made a large impact.

In contrast, 9/11 triggered a US intervention in the region that was massive. It aimed explicitly at regime change and the reengineering of an entire society and its relationship to the state. This intervention was anomalous against the background of historical US involvement in the region, but because it has lasted so long has come to seem normal, as simply in the nature of things.



Company A, 1st Battalion, 325th Airborne Infantry Regiment, move into position shortly after air assaulting into Lwar Kowndalan, Afghanistan, 2005.

Credit: Spc. Mike Pryor, USA/Public Domain

But the fact remains that the great wars in the Middle East since 9/11 were a departure. Since 2008, when the George W. Bush administration signed an agreement with the then-Iraqi government stipulating the withdrawal of US forces by the summer of 2011, the US has been trying - in fits and starts - to return to the status quo ante.

Two

The second Gulf war re-formatted the geopolitics of the region in ways that have constrained US options going forward. That restructuring occurred in two main ways.

First, it removed the main regional brake on Iran's ambitions, which made US regional friends understandably very nervous, while Iran, one assumes, was content with the new dispensation. My sense is that this is no longer a controversial assessment, although there is a variety of views regarding the extent of Iranian influence and the degree to which the Iraqi government is responsive to Iranian desires. The other way in which US options were constrained was by the Suez-effect. Recognizing the dangers of thinking in time, as the late Harvard historian Ernest May would have put it, the US intervention in Iraq seems inescapably reminiscent of the British intervention at Suez. In the words of The Times obituary of Anthony Eden in 1977, he "was the last Prime Minister to believe Britain was a great power and the first to confront a crisis which proved she was not". It is all too tempting to substitute G.W. Bush for Eden, President for Prime Minister, and the US for Britain in that encomium.

The US of course is still clearly a great power, but the Iraq intervention proved that there were harsh limits to its power. After Suez, Britain's clout in the region steadily deteriorated, until the Union Jack was lowered over the old Trucial states in 1971. After Iraq, America's own clout in the region has been perceptibly declining.

One reason for this was the burgeoning regional perception, shaped by the Iraq intervention, of the US as an indiscriminately violent loser of Middle Eastern wars and, domestically, the perception that the US paid an unreasonably high price for a disproportionately small return. This perception is rooted in reality. Joseph Stiglitz and Linda Bilmes, in their Harvard study, estimate that the total cost of the Iraq war was something over \$3 trillion and contributed to the financial crisis of 2008. Bilmes, a public finance expert, has also showed in a separate paper that the adverse impact of Gulf and Afpak operations on the Defense budget into the outyears would be profound.

The public's patience and fortitude were exhausted by these events – as was reflected in part by Obama's election as well as by specific episodes, such as Congressional opposition to administration plans to attack the Syrian regime in the wake of its chemical weapon use in the Summer of 2013. The net effect of this fatigue was to make it more problematic to initiate, renew or sustain future interventions.

Essentially these wars reshaped the battlefield and reshaped the United States. The extent to which they reshaped the US is evident in the isolationist temper of the Trump campaign and its appeal to

many voters. The new mood might well permeate an even broader segment of American society than Trump's followers. According to the Pew organization, the ratio of Americans who believe that "the U.S. should mind its own business internationally and let other countries get along the best they can on their own" has increased sharply.

For the first time since Pew began asking this question in 1964, 52 per cent of respondents say they agree with that statement, up from the normal range of about 20 and 40 per cent. Only 38 percent disagreed. 80 per cent of the respondents – the highest ratio ever recorded by Pew on this question - agreed that the United States should "not think so much in international terms but concentrate more on our own national problems," while only 16 per cent disagreed. 53 per cent – the highest proportion since 1993 -- say that the United States is "less important and powerful as a world leader than it was ten years ago." Disaggregating the result shows a partisan divide, with Republicans much more downbeat than Democrats, probably reflecting years of Republican criticism of Obama's foreign policy. 70 percent of respondents say that the United States is "less respected" abroad than it has been in the past.

Slightly more than half of all Americans think that the country tries to do too much in "solving the world's problems." This metric has an unusually low partisan divide; 52 percent of Republicans and 46 percent of Democrats said they agreed the United States does too much. As many observers have pointed out, there's something to a pendulum effect about these attitudes and they could change dramatically with a change of administration as they did between the Carter and Reagan administrations.

Three

There is a strongly realist tenor to current US policy. By this I mean a serious regard for costs and benefits, the resources available to pursue given objectives, a focus on threats to core interests, prioritizing how well other countries align with the US over their domestic political arrangements, and confidence in deterrence and the behavioral assumptions that underpin it.

So, to take three examples, the Administration's policy toward Syria probably has something to do with a perception that it's not closely related to core US interests and therefore accepting the costs and risks of entering the civil war against Assad as a combatant would be imprudent.

The administration's policy toward Egypt implicitly reflects the view that even if the majoritarian counterrevolution that removed Muhammad Morsi and brought Abdel Fatah al-Sisi to power is antithetical to US values, Egypt remains more-or-less aligned with US strategic interests, and therefore warrants continued US support.

The administration's attraction to negotiating barriers to an Iranian nuclear weapon, rather than destroying Iran's nuclear infrastructure, reflects the administration's intrinsic belief in the efficacy of deterrence as well as an interest in the least cost approach to securing strategic objectives.

I concede that the waters are a bit muddy on this score, in part because the administration continues to deploy the language of liberal hegemony and has acted the part - the Libya intervention being the most striking example. Yet, despite this somewhat messy system, by the middle of his first term Obama's first term, the regulating impulse was fundamentally realist.

Four

Regional allies of the US have evolved in ways that have strained traditional partnerships, especially those in the Persian Gulf and even Israel, with which tensions have been particularly palpable. These countries have developed in ways that have made them more independent from the US.

With Israel this trend reached a crescendo over Iran, with Jerusalem working directly with Congress in an attempt to block implementation of the JCPOA (The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action - the "Iran nuclear deal") and Israeli public statements questioning the administration's resolve and reliability as an ally. This was something of a curious approach to the problem, because it would have contributed to perceptions in Tehran of Israel's strategic isolation. But one infers that Israel's main game was to hamstring the White House, rather than reinforce deterrence.

These tensions will likely persist as Israel works to persuade Congress and the media that Iran is not living up to its commitments under the JCPOA and perhaps, in the worst case, resumes offensive operations a la Stuxnet or the assassination of scientists to generate opposition to the agreement within the Iranian regime itself.

Israeli society and politics are in a transition that portends growing differences with the US, while here at home, the US-Israel relationship

has morphed into a political football. The Democratic Party is cooling a bit toward Israel, even as the Republican Party deepens its ties to Likud party in Israel. The politicization of the relationship will complicate it. Both sides are aware of the problem and, one hopes, will try to fix it.

Turkey and the US are at odds over important issues to both countries as well, even as Erdogan proceeds to recast his country's politics in ways that will probably reduce the scope for strategic cooperation over time.

Saudi Arabia was already distancing itself from the US and criticizing US policy publicly before the death of King Abdullah; with the accession of King Salman to the throne and the pivotal role of his son HRH Muhammad bin Salman, this trend has accelerated. The Saudi claim, echoed by the UAE, is that the US has failed to exercise leadership in the battle between Arabs and Iranians for control of the Middle East.

At this stage, the options open to the Washington to restore intra-alliance comity are limited as its traditional partners are drifting away from the US in terms of interests, concerns, and priorities.

At the same time, the administration has signaled – nearly from its outset – that US interests in Asia were more compelling than in the Middle East and that a pivot, or rebalancing, was in the works.

Some of these differences are over tactics and with effort on both sides, things can be patched up. But some are deep. Yet from a net assessment perspective, these allies and partners have no other plausible security guarantor, so the tether to the US might be stretched even to the breaking point but probably still not snap.

Five

America has very limited stake in the sectarian struggle between Sunni and Shi'a, the Arab Cold War between the Saudi and Turkish /Qatari axes, or intra-Sunni struggle between Wahhabis and Muslim Brothers, or even the Turkish-Kurdish feud, especially now that the Kurds have emerged as an important partner in the war against ISIS. These are important points of contention in the region, they're driving at least some of the violence, they constitute the framework for much of our allies' bilateral diplomatic discourse, but they're not fundamentally US issues.

Each of these intramural competitions could contribute to – indeed already is contributing to – instability. The question is, which side does the US take in these rivalries? Can the US avoid taking a side? Is it really possible to have the coherent, consistent foreign policy that we would want to have given these crosscutting regional conflicts and our individual allies’ demands that we defend their competing positions?

In an eerie replay of 2001, we hear from allies that if the US is not against the Muslim Brothers then we are for them. The US reply that we are neither for nor against the Brothers, but we are for elections, democracy and orderly transitions, seems to have convinced no regional partner of anything but that the US was in the grip of a kind of dementia.

And of course, there are other challenges the US must to attend to that are of little interest to our Middle Eastern partners:

- notably China’s military investment, geared toward offsetting US maritime and cyber-dominance, in a region where trade and security stakes are currently seen to be much higher than in the Middle East.
- and Russia’s military surge, recognizing that spending there is already on the decline owing to serious economic pressures – sanctions and declining oil prices. Europe, rather than Syria, or the Middle East more broadly, is the locus of strategic concern about Russia.

Six

Then there is the so-called “end state problem” in humanitarian interventions. The problem, in a nutshell, is the difficulty of stabilizing and rebuilding states and societies in the aftermath of military intervention. For the US, this is all about Libya, but the implications for Syria were profound.

In Libya, the tacit deal that the US struck with its European allies was that the US would facilitate their military intervention and they would facilitate the reconstitution of the Libyan state. The problem was that no country with responsibilities under this plan had the energy, focus, or resources to carry it out.

There was simply too much else going on and too few people in the US and Western European governments who had both an understanding of the situation in Libya and the proximity to senior policy makers that would be necessary – at a minimum – to alert them to the

unraveling of Libyan society and clarify the stakes for their respective governments. The NATO offensive therefore inadvertently turned Libya from a squalid dictatorship into a Hobbesian dystopia.

This is a secular constraint, in that - down the road - it will apply equally to interventionists and “retrenchers”. Whether the former choose to disregard this constraint or expand capacity to surmount it, or the latter err on the side of caution is hard to say.

Seven

Then there is the question of affinity groups. Who is it – institutions, elites, sectors of the population, civil society – that identifies with the US, sees the US and its partner, wishes to be aligned with the US? Who’s America’s interlocutor?

Let me give you an example of an affinity group. In Syria, the Russians have an affinity group in the form of the Assad regime and its mix of Alawite, Christian and Sunni constituents. They’re all committed to the same vision of Syria, broadly secular, hate Islamist militancy, and have matching views about the use of force. Over the course of a half-century, thousands of Russians have served in Syria, intermarried extensively and so forth. In comparison, who is the US affinity group in Syria?



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry stands with Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov, Saudi Foreign Minister Adel al-Jubeir, and Turkish Foreign Minister Feridun Sinirlioğlu on October 29, 2015, at the Hotel Imperial in Vienna, Austria, before a four-way discussion focused on Syria.

Credit: U.S. Department of State/Public Domain.

In Israel, there was a recent survey of Knesset members who were conversant in English. Not necessarily fluent, but able to have a reasonably good conversation that didn't involve technical subject matter. It turns out that the number of Parliamentarians who can do this is shrinking, as is English language competence more generally.

This is consistent with the observable trend in emigration of the group that commentators call "global Israelis." They have all the characteristics of an affinity group - except for the fact that increasingly they don't live in Israel. It is often rightly said that demographics isn't destiny and that there have been political reversals in Israel's history that could reoccur. Strains could also diminish if there's a Republican administration that endorses continued occupation of the West Bank and seeks to abrogate American commitment to the JCPOA. So the jury is out.

In Saudi Arabia, the elite affinity group emblemized by HRH Bandar bin Sultan is no longer prominent. The new leadership sees the US as unsympathetic to the Saudi agenda.

Eight

The Middle East, with the exceptions of Israel and some Arab Gulf states, is obviously in bad shape.

The labor supply overhang is astounding, infrastructures are creaky, environmental problems are growing, economic performance is poor, education and public services are weak, religion is ascendant in some countries, there's a brutal civil war in Syria and Yemen, and there's a large migrant flow to Europe because Middle Easterners are voting with their feet. In some ways you can look at this trend as the final phase of the urbanization of Middle Eastern peasantry. Western Europe is the last stop on the urbanization train.

Neither the US nor its allies is well equipped to fix these problems. The mix of public and private investment needed to generate enough employment to make a serious difference is unlikely to eventuate.

Nor is it likely that the kind of governance essential to sustained economic growth will emerge, at least in the near to medium term.

The UN estimates that a basic reconstruction effort in Syria would cost about \$100 billion, assuming that the destruction ended right

now. Since fighting would almost certainly continue for several years, a near term reconstruction effort would look like shingling a roof in a hurricane.

Nor is the US or Europe equipped to counter the ideology that has animated the ISIS Caliphate.

The US will continue to chip away at these problems – as it should – but the challenges are so profound that policy responses will be mostly palliative and mostly military.

Nine

None of this is necessarily relevant to the next Administration. Ted Cruz, the previously leading Republican candidate, seems to favor greater activism and, to a less radical degree, Hillary Clinton suggests that she will feel less constrained than the Obama administration and would be inclined toward greater commitment.

On the other hand, John Kasich and Donald Trump both appear to favor more cautious policies, except in Trump's case, in the counterterrorism domain. And Bernie Sanders seems more likely to refrain from more intensive engagement in the region.

My reliance on words like “appear” and “seem” reflects not only the very shallow discussion of foreign relations that normally characterizes this early stage in a campaign, but also anticipates the pressure on a new president to show resolve in the first year of his or her first term should an early challenge arise.

Ten

The broad thesis undergirding these propositions has been that the US can expect to achieve relatively little – certainly in comparison to the Cold War and immediate post-Cold War period – and to pay a high cost for the little it does achieve.

Over against this general – and dour – prognosis stands the nuclear deal with Iran.

JCPOA was a remarkable diplomatic achievement, in terms of the complex diplomatic coordination required to implement the multilateral sanctions that forced Iran to negotiate seriously; the sensitive, secret negotiations mediated by Oman that opened the door to 5+1 talks; the intensive day-to-day diplomacy required to

maintain 5+1 focus and cohesion; and the determination to wrest profound concessions from Iran.

The thing about the JCPOA that is so important is that it very possibly staved off a war between the US and Iran or Israel and Iran, the latter a conflict that would probably have drawn in the US willy-nilly.

I don't know if this is an exception that proves the rule of unmanageable fragmentation and decline, or an intriguing, even inspiring exception that raises serious questions about the immutability and ubiquitous applicability of the rule. It certainly complicates the narrative.

The answer I suspect will reside in the success or failure of the next administration to leverage the diplomatic gains from the JCPOA – assuming Iran remains in compliance – to draw Tehran into problem solving efforts elsewhere in the region.



Iran nuclear deal: agreement in Vienna. From left to right: Foreign ministers/ secretaries of state Wang Yi (China), Laurent Fabius (France), Frank-Walter Steinmeier (Germany), Federica Mogherini (EU), Mohammad Javad Zarif (Iran), Philip Hammond (UK), John Kerry (USA).

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