

US Withdrawal from Syria: Offshore Balancing amid Changing Political Dynamics of Middle East

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Abstract

The impulsive U.S withdrawal from Syria cultivated uncertainty among Middle Eastern countries which have, over the years, relied on sustained transatlantic military support. This feeling of abandonment – aided by the heightened threats to regime survival by alternate regional powers – triggered a subtle, yet significant, foreign policy reform altering many conventional alliances. Scholarly debates addressing the motive of foreign interventions, especially in the Syria and Afghanistan, have sought a return to offshore balancing. This analytical dimension elucidates the principle of self-interest that drives foreign interventions; but these debates neglect that such interventions destabilize the socio-political harmony in the host countries. In that context, this paper aims to critically examine foreign interventions in Middle East. The paper investigates how the overreliance of Middle Eastern countries on their foreign masters’ paves way for offshore balancing which leads to further hostility in the region. The paper will adopt Critical Discourse Analysis method to research the substance.

Keywords: US Intervention, Offshore Balancing, Middle East, U.S Troop

Introduction

On 8th May 2018, the U.S unilaterally withdrew from Iran Nuclear Deal – Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). This agreement was adopted by U.S President Barak Obama in October 2015 with rest of the permanent members of the United Nations Security Council.¹ This autarchic U.S decision to withdraw from the agreement faced severe criticism by other participant countries noting that such unilateral action “was dangerous for international peace and security.”²

¹ The nuclear agreement included a group of world powers known as the P5+1 – the U.S, U.K, France, China, Russia and Germany – who sought to reach to an agreement with Iran over its nuclear enrichment program.

² Jordi Quero & Andrea Dessi (2019): Unpredictability in US foreign policy and the regional order in the Middle East: reacting vis-à-vis a volatile external security-provider, British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies.

This move was especially surprising in the wake of authorization of airstrikes³ by President Donald Trump barely a month earlier. Although the foreign interventions are rarely endorsed by the domestic actors, this move particularly eroded the credibility of U.S intervention in Middle East.⁴ This move lent a conspicuous legitimacy to the argument of *self-interest* in international relations. In addition to that, it placed the “issue of foreign policy predictability, international actors’ credibility, and global expectations at center stage in global debates.”⁵

Given the rapidly shifting geopolitical and economic alliances in Middle East, the historical axes of international actors are fast losing relevance in the region. Since the emergence of global alliance to fight ISIS – and in its garb to secure regional geostrategic advantage – political environment in the region has posed challenges to U.S more than ever.⁶ The urge of regional states to become domestically self-sufficient naturally reduces foreign allies in substance and stature. While this has challenged the conventional political order that sustained in the region since the Cold War, there hasn’t been much change in the predominantly authoritarian/nondemocratic political order.

Scholarly debates⁷ about challenges⁸ that intervening foreign powers are facing in the region seek a return to offshore balancing⁹ strategy¹⁰; this retreat aims to contextualize the sustaining of political advantage. And as for native political analysts, any such

³ On 13 April, 2018, U.S President Donald Trump authorized airstrikes against Syrian regime positions over an alleged chemical weapons attack against civilians in the Ghouta area around Damascus. “This was possibly the first time such action was taken by the U.S government over the course of the 8-year-long Syrian war despite being just the latest episode in a long list of chemical weapons use.”

⁴ This is because the regional alliance represented by Saudi Arabia considerably depend on how the U.S engaged in Middle East. So, the abrupt policy reshuffle, pushed Saudi Arabia and its regional allies in a critical to revisit the pattern of dependence on external actors.

⁵ Jordi Quero & Andrea Dessì (2019).

⁶ Walldorf Jr, C. William. "The challenging future for restraint in US foreign policy." US App-American Politics and Policy Blog (2020).

⁷ Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior US Grand Strategy." *Foreign Affairs*. 95 (2016): 70; Brands, Hal, Peter Feaver, John J. Mearsheimer, and Stephen M. Walt. "Should America Retrench: The Battle over Offshore Balancing." *Foreign Affairs*. 95 (2016): 164; Layne, Christopher. "America's Middle East grand strategy after Iraq: the moment for offshore balancing has arrived." *Review of International Studies* (2009): 5-25.

⁸ One of the greatest challenges that U.S – and other intervening forces – faced in the middle was that of *public legitimacy*; because these interventions are primarily done on the behest of hard power.

⁹ Offshore balancing is a central concept in realist-inspired approaches in international security studies, and international relations, in general, used primarily to refer to a particular strategy employed by great powers to prevent the rise of rival regional powers to the status of a regional hegemon.

¹⁰ Ashford, Emma. "Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2018): 127-148

intervention – for its sheer self-interest motive – only destabilize the already perilous social-political harmony thereof.

2. Sketching U.S Presence in Middle East

Today’s perplexing U.S presence in Middle East is a historical anomaly. Since World War II, the posture of U.S forces in the region has been considerably light – from 1972-79, the U.S presence in the region was largely invisible. In the next decade, from 1980-1990, the U.S kept its presence in the region to bare minimum.¹¹ This era coincided with United States’ critical historical interest in the Middle East: averting the *Domino Effect* of Soviet influence the region. Yet the Cold War subtleties played their part with Soviet Union resisting the U.S containment policy in the region.¹²

Irrespective of low military presence, U.S protected its interests in Middle East during the Cold War through funding local states and influencing their domestic policies. This, in principle, was an implementation of the Truman Doctrine.¹³ In time, this U.S policy of *offshore balancing* focused on the twin influencers of the region: Saudi Arabia and Iran – of which the later mostly remained at logger heads with the U.S interests in the region. Adhering to the principle of *self-interest*¹⁴, U.S support shuffled persistently from one side to another; this U.S unpredictability, as a result, yielded inconsistent and poor policy results.

In some crucial cases, like ‘Operation Earnest Will’,¹⁵ the U.S leaders sometimes sent troops to the region because of the pure political miscalculation. Another anecdote in this case is the Lebanese civil war, when U.S President Ronald Reagan deployed troops to the region.¹⁶ Interestingly, both of these cases were “impulsive interventions” which yielded modest results.¹⁷

¹¹ Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil,” *Security Studies* 23: 3 (2014):

¹² Ashford, Emma. "Unbalanced: Rethinking America’s Commitment to the Middle East." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2018): 127-148.

¹³ Merrill, Dennis. "The Truman doctrine: Containing communism and modernity." *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1 (2006): 27-37.

¹⁴ Miller, Dale T. "The norm of self-interest." *The next phase of business ethics: Integrating psychology and ethics* (2001).

¹⁵ Operation Earnest Will began on 24 July, 1987 and lasted till 26 September 1988. It was the U.S military effort to “protect” of Kuwaiti-owned tankers from Iranian attacks in 1987 and 1988. “It was the largest naval convoy operation since World War II. The U.S. Navy warships that escorted the tankers, part of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, were the operations’ most visible part, but U.S. Air Force AWACS radar planes provided surveillance and U.S. Army special operations helicopters hunted for possible attackers”.

¹⁶ “The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place: The United States in the Gulf,” *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter, 1988–1989): 142–67.

¹⁷ Ashford, Emma. (2018).

Regardless, the U.S foreign policy of this era did neither seek to end the active conflicts, nor did it completely rely on the sustained military presence. On the contrary, it concentrated on maintaining the “regional balance of power” and in protecting its Cold War advantage.¹⁸

Although the looming Soviet pressure gradually disappeared from the U.S, its urge to sustain military and strategic advantage in the region continued to influence its regional policy.¹⁹ The initial impetus in this shift was the Gulf War. It is essential here to understand that Saddam Hussain’s motives of Kuwait invasion were far different than what American rhetoric made the world believe.²⁰ This U.N-backed military intervention resulted in absolute mayhem in the region. The U.S pushed massive forces in the region to protect Saudi Arabia’s oil fields and ensure that no independent force, with potential to challenge the U.S interests, is allowed to emerge in the region.²¹

Although a substantial section of U.S forces departed from the region by the end of this war, a sizable cohort remained permanently based in the region. This move was a part of Clinton administration’s renewed regional policy of “dual commitment”. This strategy called for a military intervention to “contain Iraq”. This required considerable U.S military presence to deter Saddam Hussain from spreading his influence in the region. During the period between 1991 and 2003, U.S deployed around 5000 ground troops, and more than 10,000 navel personal in the region.²²

This policy of *dual containment* could never generate convincing defense on the part of U.S. Neither was Iraq in a position to militarily reassemble anytime soon, nor was Iran in any condition to mobilize a sway in the region that the alternate regional power bloc could not efficiently resist. A point often ignored by the scholarly debates is that Gulf war itself was a failure

¹⁸ Michael C. Hudson, “To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy toward the Middle East,” *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 329–43,

¹⁹Richard Haass, “The Irony of American Strategy: Putting the Middle East in Proper Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2013), 57–67.

²⁰Hal Brands and David Palkki, “Conspiring Bastards: Saddam Hussein’s Strategic View of the United States,” *Diplomatic History* 36: 3 (2012): 625–59.

²¹As part of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, “over 500,000 US troops, 700 tanks, two carrier battle groups, and various air and associated forces poured into the region for a short and successful campaign”. See, Joseph Englehardt, *Desert Shield and Desert Storm: A Chronology and Troop List for the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf Crisis* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1991)

²² Ashford, Emma. "Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East." *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 12, no. 1 (2018): 127-148

of offshore balancing.²³

Quintessential to note is the fact that offshore balancing does not denote that intervention is not – or may not be – necessary. It rather suggests that such intervention “will be rare and restricted to specific scenarios.”²⁴ As a U.S. policy perspective, Saddam Hussain’s invasion of Kuwait comfortably met the benchmark. The U.S. rhetorical embellishment featured it as an “aggressive state” which threatened to disrupt the energy supply for global powers.²⁵ Ideally, regardless of the reason behind this U.S. intervention, the U.S. forces should have returned home and resumed its offshore political balancing endeavors. That did not happen, precisely because for Clinton administration, the domestic political stakes yielded better results with increasing U.S. engagement in Middle East. In the aftermath of the Cold War, it offered the U.S. military a much “needed and not-too-costly new mission” to keep engaged with.²⁶

With this, the economic, military and strategic interests of U.S. in the region increased substantially. The threatening Soviet supremacy was no longer as much of a concern for the U.S. Hence, the renewed U.S. policy rallied around propaganda vocabulary to broaden its regional aspiration. Terms like ‘energy security’, ‘counterterrorism’, ‘defending human rights’, ‘nonproliferation’ and ‘democracy promotion’ began being used as alibis to continue its intervention in the domestic affairs of regional countries. This meant that the political, cultural, social, and religious values of weak states remain under consistent attack and criticism from West’s colonial and supremacist delusions.

As a consequence, the U.S. response to 9/11 further changed the equation. Middle East saw a massive surge in U.S. military presence in the region, especially in the wake of 2003 Iraq invasion. Bush administration’s Iraq policy was particularly troop-intensive with around 130,600 foreign troops on the ground. In contrast, there were only 15,200 U.S. troops in Afghanistan in the same year.²⁷ Although Obama administration brought down the number

²³ John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2016): 70–83.

²⁴ Ashford, Emma. (2018).

²⁵ Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 5–48

²⁶ Hudson, “To Play the Hegemon,” 340.

²⁷ US troop numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan peaked in 2008 at 187,900, a total that does not include support staff on other regional military and naval bases. For further discussion, read, “Amy

of troops actively engaged in these interventions, especially in Iraq, regionally the U.S continued to maintain substantial military presence. And with the anti-ISIS campaign, the number of troops kept on increasing.²⁸

During his presidential campaign, Donald Trump took a rhetorical deviation from the norm that has shaped the U.S policy towards the region mostly critiquing the policy of his predecessors. But this rhetoric was to last only as long as the Trump assumed the presidential charges. Truth is that in the post-Arab Uprising Middle East, Washington no longer controls all aces in the region.²⁹ It is significant to note here that a military solution has never been a convincing approach to fix problems in the region; instead, military interventions have only further escalated the existing socio-political discord resulting in relapse of violence. Also, the fact that U.S military has never been there to fix the problem, its sole aspiration remains to sustain the hegemony in the region and secure its geo-political and security interests. Hence, instead of helping, the U.S intervention, as much as any other foreign intervention, has dragged the region into the abyss of political muddle.

3. Uncertain U.S Foreign Policy and Regional Status Quo

The withdrawal of U.S troops from Syria exposes a bewildering array of inconsistencies in Washington's policy towards Middle East. This move will strengthen Assad regime's regional and global allies which killed hundreds of thousands of civilians in Syria since the outbreak of Uprising in 2011.³⁰ In this Mesopotamian heartland, the U.S withdrawal leaves an ember under the straw: neither did the US "defeat ISIS in Syria" nor could it really avert Russian-Iranian alliance from protecting the Assad regime. Besides, U.S left its trusted regional ally, Saudi Arabia, on its own to fight the battle.³¹

Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars*, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 9.

²⁸ By 2016, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimated that there were around 7,000 US service members stood as: Jordan, 13,000; Iraq 2,000; Afghanistan, 5,000; Kuwait, 5,000; Bahrain, 8,000; U.A.E 5,000. These numbers kept on fluctuating – most increasing – depending on the regional political situation, and the U.S military engagements elsewhere.

²⁹ Nicholas Kitchen, "After the Arab Spring, Power Shift in the Middle East? The Contradictions of Hegemony," London School of Economics IDEAS Reports (London: London School of Economics and Political Science, 2012), 57.

³⁰ Van Schaack, Beth. "Mapping war crimes in Syria." (2016).

³¹ Saudi Arabia has considerably depended on the ardent U.S support to maintain power balance in the region. In response, the Saudi monarchy gave uncritical legitimacy to Israel's war crimes against the Palestinian citizens. With U.S departure from Syria after the arguably unsuccessful intervention, Saudi Arabia is left to face the challenges on its own.

For Saudi Arabia, this sudden drawdown of U.S forces is absurd, primarily because American presence in Syria wasn't merely about a win-loss dynamic. Like in Afghanistan, the American ambition wasn't to 'defeat the enemy' but to hang-in there to prevent the Russian-Iranian alliance from influencing the regional politics, and to keep the resurgent political Islam in check.³² And as for the Arab monarchies, any manifestation of Islamism that seeks political reform is a threat to their legitimacy;³³ hence, they have crushed such endeavour in past (consider the case of Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood); and it was essentially due to these apprehensions Saudi Arabia joined international intervention against the ISIS.³⁴

Since the hoax War on Terror endeavour, the U.S foreign policy has been through considerable uncertainty. For a section of U.S deep state, such *uncertainty* falls in line of progressive political process where self-interest is a priority.³⁵ There, however, are other consequence as well: its credibility among the regional allies has consistently gone down. This phenomenon has also seen the rise of alternate power bloc in the region where the U.S once used to be an irreplaceable ally. In the aftermath of the mess that George W. Bush had created in the Middle East, the Obama Administration's policy regarding Syria came with certain cynicism.³⁶ Neither did it pursue an outright agenda against Assad regime atrocities, nor did it have the political courage to counter Russian-Iranian influence. This compelled the Saudi Arabia to rethink its strategic aspiration in Syria; the best possible situation was to formulate a *third front* and initiate a ground offensive against ISIS.

At the outbreak of the Arab Uprising in 2011, the U.S and European response towards the political unrest in Arab World was neither clear nor timely. An uncertain ambiguity surrounded the transatlantic endeavors of '*promotion of democracy*' in the region;³⁷ this was also evident in the strategic confusion and

³² Simons, Greg. "Russia in the Middle East: (Re)Emergence of a New Geopolitical Shatter Belt?." (2019): 28-35.

³³ Lacroix, Stéphane. "Saudi Arabia's Muslim Brotherhood Predicament." *The Qatar Crisis* (2017): 51-53.

³⁴ Harrison, Ross. "Towards a regional strategy contra ISIS." *Parameters* 44, no. 3 (2014): 37.

³⁵ Korab-Karpowicz, W. Julian. "Political realism in international relations." (2010).

³⁶ Guerlain, Pierre. "Obama's Foreign Policy: "Smart Power," Realism and Cynicism." *Society* 51, no. 5 (2014): 482-491.

³⁷ Hanau Santini, Ruth, and Oz Hassan. "Transatlantic democracy promotion and the Arab Spring." *The International Spectator* 47, no. 3 (2012): 65-82.

incoherence of the transatlantic policymakers.³⁸ One of the major causes of this complexity was the national interest of U.S and E.U in the region. More than the promotion of democracy, the action that was initiated after September 11, 2001, by the powerful transatlantic states have sought to secure the free flow of energy into the global markets. Besides, the motive of ensuring free and secure moment of commercial and military traffic through the Suez Canal and “to contain the hostile regimes.”³⁹

Amidst these immediate and necessary strategic interests, the promotion of democracy takes the back seat. It is here that the policy paradox of the West towards the Arab region prioritizes the conflict of interest over genuine political reform. This paradox of democracy promotion becomes more complex with the bilateral relation of the transatlantic nations with the regional hegemons – Saudi Arabia and Iran. Though not on paper, the U.S’ ostensible desire to promote democracy in the region is not endorsed by the Saudi Kingdom. This is primarily because any initiative of democracy or reform is a threat to the survival of Saudi regime and other Gulf monarchies.

4. Reshaping Regional Power Balance

During 2016, Saudi Arabia and its allies went on to formulate the ‘*Islamic Coalition*’ – also called Northern Thunder – as a preparation for the combined military action in future.⁴⁰ But Saudi Arabia’s ultimate objective in Syria was to overthrow Assad regime and neutralize Iran-sponsored Shia militias. Though, the emergence of Northern Thunder was a major political dilemma for the US, it did not help Saudi’s cause in Syria.⁴¹ This coalition was a tactical move from Saudi Arabia to sustain war in two fronts – Syria and Yemen. Despite considerable support from its regional allies, Saudi monarchy failed to reasonably sustain its supremacy on either of the two fronts.

On the other hand, despite Iran’s indigenous technological ascendancy, Saudi Arabia manages to maintain a *majoritarian*

³⁸Janković, S. (2015). Transformation of the Middle East after the Arab Spring. Ed) Taro Tsukimura, Ivona Ladevac, Major International Issues in the 21st Century from a Perspective of Japan and Europe, Global Resource Management Program, Doshisha University, Japan Institute of International Politics and Economics, Belgrade, 178, 127-145.

³⁹Hassan, O. (2015). Undermining the transatlantic democracy agenda? The Arab Spring and Saudi Arabia’s counteracting democracy strategy. *Democratization*, 22(3), 479-495.

⁴⁰Widdershoven, Cyril. "Military Alliance Arab States to Confront Iran Soon? Reality and Disagreements Hitting Capabilities." *Energy Policy Turkey* 3 (2017): 13-27.

⁴¹Costantini, Irene, and Ruth Hanau Santini. "Saudi Arabia's Regional Space-Shaping: Making or Unmaking a Region?." In *The EU in a Trans-European Space*, pp. 113-131. Palgrave Macmillan, Cham, 2019.

supremacy⁴² in the region. But recent years have seen a conspicuous shift in Saudi regional policy, especially regarding Palestine. After sponsoring a coup against Brotherhood government in Egypt, Saudi monarchy pliantly drifted towards pro-Israel nexus. The Kingdom went further to brand Hamas as a terrorist organization⁴³ while Israel's crimes in Gaza continue unabated. Not only did this radical policy shift of Saudi Arabia wound the larger Arab sentimentality towards Palestine, it also allowed Iran to exhibit itself as the legitimate advocate of Palestinian freedom.

This Saudi inconsistency has been at the centre of criticism over the past half-a-decade. In 2013, Saudi Kingdom ardently supported the overthrow of Egypt's first ever democratically elected government⁴⁴. Later in 2017, Saudi Arabia imposed economic embargo on Qatar – once a trusted ally in the GCC. Over the past many years, Saudi war in Yemen, which killed thousands of civilians, brought severe condemnation from the international community⁴⁵. Subsequently, in the wake of Jamal Khashoggi's murder, the Saudi Arabia's sympathy at the international level further waned to all time low.

In the backdrop of these issues, the Kingdom hesitated to take a moral stand on the issues at its backdoor – occasionally relying on a capricious Donald Trump to bail out the country in diciest situations.⁴⁶ But now, after the US departure, the survival of Assad regime in this eight-year-long civil war is a concern for Saudi kingdom than ever before. For Saudi Arabia, it is time to understand that alliances work on mutual interest instead of mutual compassion.⁴⁷

⁴²Majoritarian supremacy is a consequence of numerical strength that Sunni Muslims comprises in the region. Given that the Middle East's central political difference is based on the sectarian rhetoric, this numerical majority plays a significant role in maintaining regional power equation. No side wants to lose its traditional regional ally. Consider, for example, the Saudi Arabia role in overthrowing Muslim Brotherhood government in Egypt.

⁴³ Hassan Abu Hanneih. Why does Saudi Arabia describe Hamas as a terrorist organisation? Middle East Monitor (2018). [URL: <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20180309-why-does-saudi-arabia-describe-hamas-as-a-terrorist-organisation/>]

⁴⁴ Steinberg, Guido. "Leading the counter-revolution: Saudi Arabia and the Arab Spring." (2014): 27.

⁴⁵ Salisburry, Peter. "Yemen and the Saudi-Iranian 'Cold War'." Research Paper, Middle East and North Africa Programme, Chatham House, the Royal Institute of International Affairs 11 (2015).

⁴⁶ Grafov, Dmitriy B. "Lobbying the Interests of Saudi Arabia in the USA under the Presidency of Donald Trump." Vostok. Afro-Aziatskieobshchestva: istoriia i sovremennost 5 (2019): 126-141.

⁴⁷When an alliance partner realises it doesn't benefit from the *mutual interest*, it finds a way out of the partnership. Not so long ago, Saudi Arabia did that to Qatar – though, in the wake of political suffocation, Saudi Arabia is striving to pull back the alliance partner.

5. Regional Peace and the Realism of U.S Departure

This sudden U.S retreat gets to the heart of the debate about how the post-Cold War internationalism has been exercised in Middle East over the past four decades. The realists have been trying to present a “false choice between endless wars and total withdrawal... but they offer the false comfort that immediate withdrawal will not impose high costs to U.S. interests.”⁴⁸ Hence, it becomes difficult to predict how long the unbalanced arrangement between Kurdish forces and the United States could have continued in the region. Most of Trump’s advisors beheld that this relationship was sustainable for a foreseeable future. Irrespective of their belief, the fact is that this alliance was very untidy and not properly thought through. However, “the U.S president was not forced to make a decision by circumstances on the ground. Rather, this was unambiguously a retreat of choice, not of necessity.”⁴⁹

In leaving Syria, the U.S President revealed yet again how inconsistent his foreign policy is and that how he can be easily manipulated by foreign autocrats. It is only obvious that Russia, China, and North Korean remained mindful about how deftly Turkey played Donald Trump in the regional political game; as a consequence, America’s visible policy shift on Kurdish issue further jolted its credibility in the region as an international ally. Although *realists* usually dismiss the relevance of this notion, but in the paradigm of policymaking, allies and adversaries attribute value to it, States, especially in the intricate context of Middle East, contemplate their choices partly assessing “whether they regard the promises of the United States as credible or not.”⁵⁰ On the other hand, the advocates of restraint tend to blame the inherent drawback of military interventions by the global powers in the region. However, when the military (or diplomatic) retreat leads to political disaster – like it happened in Syria –these intervening powers always find something else aspect to lay blame on.⁵¹

And in a situation when rhetorical schemes fail to yield suitable results, the restraint advocates fall back upon their most sought after and abused argument – “blame some earlier intervention for

⁴⁸ Peter Feaver and Will Inboden. *Elephant in the Room. The Realists Are Wrong About Syria.* Foreign Policy (November 4, 2019).

⁴⁹Ibid.

⁵⁰Ibid.

⁵¹ A similar situation happened during the U.S exit from Afghanistan. The U.S essentially intervened Afghanistan to eliminate the Taliban and install a client regime in the country that could operate at the behest of U.S diktats. Around two decades later, an arguably defeated U.S finds itself on negotiating table with ever stronger Taliban.

creating the problem in the first place, as if this absolves them from dealing with the actual consequences of the policies they advocate.”⁵² One of the greatest policy delusions of such advocacy has been that if the intervening power – the U.S in that case – can trace the current situation to an earlier policy decision, all the blame about this undignified and perilous exit can be put on some abstract policy miscalculation that happened in the past.

Given West’s containment policy towards Middle East, the benefits of Syria invasion were considerable. But the policy shift, that lead to sudden withdrawal of U.S from Syria changed the equation. It allowed the Islamic state and its affiliates an opportunity to reorganize. Apart from that, it also allowed Bashar al-Assad to strengthen his brutal regime exposing millions of Syrian citizens to further risk. This troop drawdown has also resulted in a fresh round of displacement in the region that has already endured the largest refugee crisis since World War II.⁵³

There is yet another paradox in the restraint position, which is mostly veiled by the moniker of realism: it is called *implicit utopianism*. When the advocates of restraint critique U.S. internationalism for failing to achieve its ambitious “goals of peace, stability, and freedom, they counsel instead a military retrenchment beyond the country’s borders.”⁵⁴ But the truth is that internationalism often offers more restrained goals than what U.S as a global hegemon tends to believe in, and subsequently how it has shaped the U.S foreign policy since the Cold War.

It is pertinent to understand that U.S. intervention in Middle East has never sought to solve the existing problems, but to secure strategic advantage over the alternate global power bloc. Hence, it would be unwise to expect these interventions to produce genuine stability in regional political order. In contrast, the United States intervention has only further worsened the political divide in the region and caused more harm to its interests and the interests of its allies.

6. The Constant – U.S Patronage of Israeli Apartheid⁵⁵

The only constant in the ever-changing dynamics of Middle East politics is the U.S support of Israel’s military aggression in the region – especially in Palestine. Over the decades, the U.S policy

⁵² Peter Feaver and Will Inboden. (2019).

⁵³ Gulland, Anne. "Global refugee total reached almost 60 million in 2014, highest since WWII." (2015). Peter Feaver and Will Inboden. (2019).

⁵⁴ Feaver and Will Inboden. (2019).

⁵⁵ Abdelnour, Samer. "Beyond South Africa: Understanding Israeli apartheid." (2013).

towards Israel has been widely questioned, albeit in theory only, by alternate leadership and intelligentsia.⁵⁶ This, however, did not alter the equation. Other than the occasionally superficial rebukes, Washington has been maintaining its large-scale “military, financial, and diplomatic support for the Israeli occupation in the face of unprecedented violations of international law and human rights standards by Israeli occupation forces.”⁵⁷

Over the decades, the U.S has ardently supported blatant violations of international law and human rights whenever it sees anything falling within the ambit of its strategic interests. It has time and again blocked the United Nations referendums in favor of its allies. Irrespective of this norm, the U.S support of Israeli Occupation of Palestine and the unprecedented rights violations is unique in a way.

The uncritical support that U.S has lent to successive Israeli governments has been largely rationalized on certain moral grounds. There is, however, sufficient evidence to establish that “moral imperatives have no role in guiding U.S. policy in the Middle East”⁵⁸— especially vis-à-vis Israel’s occupation of Palestine.⁵⁹ A great section of U.S *deep state* does cherish a moral commitment towards the survival of Israel as a Jewish state. But, *realism* is most unlikely to consider a massive financial, military, and diplomatic support for a country on moral principle. Hence, American aid and other support to Israel’s war crimes goes well beyond merely protecting Israel’s security needs.⁶⁰ For the U.S *deep state*, Israel is a buffer against the misperceived threat of *terrorism* emerging from the region.

A small section of U.S society, in contrast, questions their government’s policy towards Israel; but there is a widespread consensus among the U.S *deep state* and the mainstream media to uncritically back the Israeli occupation of Palestine. This support is so deeply entrenched in U.S institutional structure, that it is not affected by regime change in Washington.⁶¹ In Trump era, however, the rise of far-right has provided further legitimacy to Israel’s oppressive politics in the region.⁶² Consequently, while the perceived strategic imperative has been the basis of U.S. to

⁵⁶ Mearsheimer, John J., and Stephen M. Walt. "The Israel lobby and US foreign policy." (2006).

⁵⁷ Stephen, Zunes. "Why the U.S. Supports Israel." Institute for Policy Studies. May 1, 2002.

⁵⁸ Goodman, Amy, and Juan Gonzalez. "Noam Chomsky: 'How the US backs Israeli war crimes'." Green Left Weekly 1021 (2014).

⁵⁹ *ibid*

⁶⁰ Stephen, Zunes. "Why the U.S. Supports Israel." Institute for Policy Studies. May 1, 2002.

⁶¹ Walker, Martin. "The Israel Lobby and US Foreign Policy." (2008): 149-151.

⁶² Telhami, Shibley. "Trump Is Too Pro-Netanyahu for His Own Base." Foreign Policy. (2019).

support Israel, there are several additional dimensions which make this *alliance* different:

- 1) **The Christian right**– which forms a massive vote-bank in the U.S. This has always been on the side of Zionism and has thrown its immense media and political clout in support of right-wing Israeli leaders.
- 2) **The sentimental attachment of ‘liberal’ politicians towards Israel** – which see any alternate political idea, especially the one represented by Muslim political thought, as a potential threat.
- 3) **Jewish lobbying in the U.S political structures**– which lend a massive financial support behind the election’s campaigns during the U.S elections. Through this lobbying it is able to build pressure on U.S mainstream media and other forums of public discourse to encourage the policies of Israeli government against the Palestine.
- 4) **The arms industry** – which contributes massive finances towards the U.S GDP. Every year, billions of dollars of arms trade take place between the two countries. One of the most significant joint ventures involves Israeli participation in the development of the F-35 Joint Strike Fighter. In December 2016, Israel was the first country to receive the F-35 fighters outside the U.S.
- 5) **The pervasive xenophobia toward Muslims in U.S** – which defined the collective social behaviour of U.S society. With President Trump being elected to power, this racism, in the form of white supremacy, has been on a meteoric rise especially directed against the Muslims and Black community.
- 6) **The failure of progressive movements**– to build any pressure on the U.S policy making. Most of the rights groups have avoided fiddling with the issue because it could potentially alienate or displease many Jewish and other liberal constituents supportive of the Israeli government. So, the fear of social and political reprisals pushed these groups to ignore the issue.

Analysing all the above variant of U.S-Israel nexus, it becomes evident that the relationship between these two countries extends beyond the conventional alliance that U.S shares with its other allies in Middle East. Not only has this uncritical U.S support led to immense grief among the Palestinians, it has also hurt the U.S’ credibility among other regional countries. This equation is the primary reason that gives birth to *extremism* in the region and in other parts of the Muslim world.

Conclusion

The sudden – and consequently perilous – withdrawal of the U.S from Syria cultivated additional uncertainty among regional countries, especially among the *status-quoists* in Gulf and Israel. The feelings of ‘*abandonment*’ aided by the heightened threats to regime survival by alternate regional powers triggered a radical foreign policy shift in many countries. This altered the scene of ‘*security responsibility*’ in the region, which also makes traditional U.S allies progressively less accountable to their foreign masters. The security threat posed by this ‘U.S neglect’ also challenges the conventional alliances and paves a way for new collaboration with regional and extra-regional powers. It also makes the Gulf countries less dependent on U.S for security and other politics necessities.

A significant anecdote exemplifying this process is the renewed Saudi Arabia’s policy in the wake of the Arab Uprising of 2011. This Saudi assertiveness to secure regional power supremacy began by its intervention in Bahrain in 2011. This was followed by Saudi intervention in Yemen around the same time. To secure the larger political advantage, states sometimes turn against their allies; this dimension of foreign policy shift was exhibited by Saudi Arabia’s role in Qatar crisis in 2017. Although Washington’s inconsistent policies are being largely blamed for the regional uncertainty, the inability of regional countries, especially the Gulf countries, to advance in technological and military sector has made these countries over-dependent on the foreign allies which, therefore, perpetuates regional uncertainty.

There is, of course, another aspect to the U.S departure from Syria: the fragmented pieces of such movements reassemble in time (we have an example of Taliban in Afghanistan). If that happens, this will be a double worry for the Saudi Arabia – a fight against two opponents, the rising Iranian influence in the region and the transnational ISIS ideology. Given Muslim Brotherhood’s presence in the region, Saudi Arabia could have turned towards it in pursuit of informal support. But the Kingdom closed that door in 2013 at the expense of a military dictator who is neither popular nor powerful enough to be trusted.

The US withdrawal also brings to fore some significant queries regarding the U.S’ regional policy and the potential implications of this decision. This withdrawal falls in line with Trump’s ‘America First’ rhetoric; but is the U.S considering a shift in its political, economic, and strategic alliance in Middle East? Or is Washington

making its way out of the rehabilitation expenditure? Or is this withdrawal an indication about a possible direct confrontation with Iran? None of these possibilities can be ruled out; but the disillusionment of failed revolution has pushed Arabs to a brink, and all this will only escalate the social and political discord in the region. And with Russia gaining a stronghold in the region, Saudi Kingdom will always be at the receiving end, which, consequently, will further destabilize the security situation in the region.

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