

The U.S.: Between Being the World's Policeman and Trusting Regional Partners

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Oct 28, 2019

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Despite long-documented public weariness with Middle East conflicts, Trump's successor could well recognize the value of reestablishing American credibility in the region.

The Middle East today is a cauldron of uncertainty and mixed messages. On the one hand, American hard power still exists—as the raid to kill ISIS leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi shows. The raid was an example of the fusing of specialized military and intelligence capabilities—and U.S. forces have the skill and wherewithal to carry out such operations. On the other hand, U.S. President Donald Trump has made it clear he wants to withdraw from the region. We may have much hard power, but Trump realizes the American people are weary from Middle East conflicts that appear endemic and have cost the U.S. so much blood and treasure.

Trump's predecessor, President Barack Obama, also understood the American public's weariness. He once commented that he had been elected to get the United States out of Middle Eastern wars, rather than into them. No two American presidents could be more different than Obama and Trump, but they both understood and reflected the desire to disengage from the region.

Ironically, it was Obama who, in response to the emergence of ISIS, fashioned a strategy for countering and defeating it. His administration assembled a large coalition to fight ISIS militarily, diplomatically, and economically.

Notwithstanding his reluctance to be drawn into the conflicts in the area, Obama understood that ISIS represented an international threat, not just a regional one. He and his team also identified a local partner willing to fight ISIS—the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), led by the Kurdish YPG militia forces—and provided the means and the air and artillery support to help them succeed.

The Trump administration's continued support for the SDF gave local U.S. commanders more leeway to intensify the use of force in support of the local militias. But it is also Trump's leadership that was quick to walk away from the

YPG and effectively gave Turkey a green light to carve out a zone free of the Kurds in northeast Syria. President Trump may take credit for the U.S.-brokered ceasefire, but he is not the arbiter of events in Syria. Nor does he want to be—he is letting Russian President Vladimir Putin fill the vacuum.

American power has been a constant in the region at least since the Gulf War in 1991. While certainly flawed and very costly at times, especially during the Iraq war which began in 2003, American force has imposed some limits on regional conflict. It is true that those constraints may not have affected asymmetrical threats, especially by non-state actors. However, direct, aggressive attacks by one state against another have largely ceased.

Moreover, the free flow of energy resources has unmistakably been a U.S. objective, one which the U.S. was previously prepared to implement. The Reagan Administration reflagged tankers during the Iraq-Iran war to prevent Iranian attacks designed to disrupt the oil supply and Iraq's oil revenues.

Now President Trump signals that he is not prepared to impose such limits. He has already stated that because the U.S. no longer depends on oil supplies from the region, it is up to those who do to ensure that the Strait of Hormuz remains open. He also makes clear he does not mind the Russians filling the vacuum—as seen in his statement that it is up to Russia, Turkey, Syria and the Kurds to sort things out in Syria—despite the fact that nearly 12,000 SDF fighters died battling ISIS. Beyond Syria, it is obviously no accident that Putin showed up in Saudi Arabia and the UAE on the heels of Trump's decision to withdraw forces from Syria.

For an area that has suffered from ongoing conflict, regional rivalries, Iran's increasing use of Shia militia proxies, and increasing challenges by publics fed up with terrible governance and widespread corruption, there are a number of things to keep in mind.

First, there remains no other country like the U.S. in terms of real capability and hard power. Even now when Trump speaks of bringing his boys home, the U.S. military retains over 40,000 forces in the area. The U.S. military has just added more than 2,000 forces in the Arabian Peninsula to enhance defense against ballistic missiles, drones and cruise missiles. No other power can do what the U.S. can do—and that includes the Russians. Of course, capability has to be matched by intention and will. For now, the U.S. posture is likely to be purely defensive, but its continuing presence does create a reality.

Second, Trump's position does reflect broader sentiment in America about Middle East conflicts. But there is also much polling that suggests the American public will support commonsense positions on deterring conflicts, opposing outright aggression and having allies all around the globe. It is very possible that Trump's successor will believe it is important to re-establish American credibility and the image of being a reliable ally and partner. Indeed, if the U.S. does not want to be the world's policeman, it needs allies. The U.S. won't have partners if they are berated or betrayed.

Third, regional countries are going to have to come together in an environment where vacuums are forming and Ankara, Tehran, and Moscow are all seeking to fill the space. If there is a change in leadership in Washington, the readiness of a new administration to look at the region differently, and do more with its partners, will surely be influenced by the reality of demonstrably more effective local partnerships.

Fourth, the developments in Iraq, Lebanon, Algeria and Sudan are reminders that frustration with governments ineffective in delivering services, jobs and decent infrastructure will sooner or later boil over. In Iraq and Lebanon, in particular, it shows that even if the Iranians have gained enormous leverage, even veto power, over what those governments can do, there may well be a backlash against the Iranians because of governance failures. While Iranian proxies—Lebanon's Hezbollah and Iraq's Popular Mobilization Units—will go to great lengths, using force, propaganda and targeted killings, to preserve their power, there is genuine vulnerability. It will be interesting to see if the Iranian leadership recognizes this.

Regardless, the lesson for all Arab governments is to produce better governance and continuing modernization, and reforms that can be seen and felt by their publics. That, too, is likely to influence American readiness over time to continue to play a role in the Middle East.

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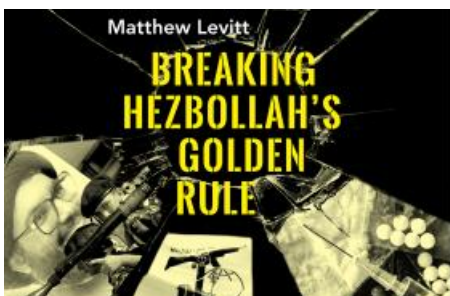
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