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IRAQ, SYRIA, AND LEBANON
IN STRATEGIC POLITICAL
CONSIDERATIONS IN THE UNITED
STATES**

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Dissonance

Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are yet to figure at a place of importance in the United States (US) strategic thinking commensurate with their objective value for US interests and in line with the national interest of each of the three countries, individually and collectively. The reasons for this discrepancy are multiple – and are both of incidental and fundamental characters.

Over the past decades, a constellation of forces displaying open affinity to models of democratic practice as a base for policy making has emerged across Iraq, Syria and Lebanon – calling for a reliance on the will of a free electorate, and steering away from militant rhetoric positing emergency and confrontation justifications for the suspension of political normalcy. The March 14th, 2005 massive demonstration in Lebanon was the catalyst towards the refashioning of political alliances along such principles – a process that has since faltered, but whose constituents continue to adhere to the “pro-democracy” vision. In Syria, a grassroots effort of activists and intellectuals emerged as the primary challenge against dictatorship, in its espousing of liberal democratic values. It is no surprise that the Damascus regime has sought to eradicate this trend,

prioritizing it as a target for liquidation and infiltration, and encouraging illiberal and undemocratic competing tendencies within the internal opposition, including the abject enabling of the most virulent forms of terrorism, soon recycled as the embodiment of the “Universal War” against it. In Iraq, the implicitly communitarian model naively promoted by the US hampered the coalescence of patriotic non-sectarian movements, but did not undo the underlying reality of a latent political base responsive to pro-democracy. The potential of this base has enabled politicians in line with its convictions to break away from factional rhetoric and to increasingly espouse a national discourse. Pro-democracy forces in Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon are a heterogeneous group, that is united, albeit implicitly and without any formal organization, by a vision of their respective countries as driven by the ideals of liberty, democracy, and prosperity – in contrast with the militant confrontational narrative espoused by the Iranian-led “Resistance Axis.”

One major cause for the divergence between the interests of pro-democracy forces in Iraq, Syria and Lebanon, and vocal reflections on US policy in Washington is the dissonance in the conversations. In fact, interlocutors on both sides are often engaged in cross-purpose exchanges that cannot be characterized as true conversations. Unstated assumptions about the positions and purposes of the other party, as well as about one’s own place in the overall worldview of the other party, are often at the

source of problematic conclusions, faulty actions, and costly missed opportunities. This may seem of little consequence from a US vantage point, but is in fact prone to a “butterfly effect” of dramatic proportions, as demonstrated by the unanticipated cascade effect of terrorism. As from the Iraqi, Syrian, and Lebanese side, the effects of both unmeasured policy and unreasoned absence is often disastrous.

These countries share with the US considerable interests. The lack of proper exchange has resulted in tragic effects that could have been avoided. Moving forward, pro-democracy forces in each of Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon should re-assess their perception of US interests and behavior – by deconstructing their own political parochialism, challenging the conspiracy-tainted narratives that continue to inform some of their approach, and recognizing the complexity of the US decision-making process and the modest place of their countries in its consciousness.

Asymmetry

An acute asymmetry dominates the relationship of the US with virtually every interlocutor it engages. Even with the powers that are recognized by Washington as crucial in its strategic vision – the European Union, China, and Russia – the asymmetry still holds, while in the case

of states with less geo-strategic gravitas, it may be overwhelming. The asymmetry operates at two distinct levels, and is particularly disruptive when the nature of correlation between them is not properly ascertained. The first level is that of allocation of resources and margins of action; the second is about the determination of importance, priority and relevance.

Each of any two parties transacting a relationship has to account for both the importance of the relationship from its perspective, and for the amount of resources it is willing and/or able to dedicate to it. If the relationship is approached as a friendly one, the determination due is about the nature and extent of the cooperation; if it is viewed as hostile, the calculus is about what defensive, protective, or preventive measures to prepare. The correlation between the assessment of the nature of the relationship and the dedication of an appropriate fraction of the resources available to tackle it, from the perspective of an individual party, seems evident: More importance demands more resources. Vast resources dedicated demonstrate high importance. It may not be readily so when such an equation is applied to the US.

While evidently far from unlimited, the US has at its disposal a large arsenal of resources, both quantitatively and qualitatively superior to most of its interlocutors by orders of magnitude, so that the expected act of balancing of assessment and resources is often

sidelined. A particular issue may be deemed of minor or marginal importance from a US strategic perspective, yet the ample availability of resources may accord it with allocations that, from the perspective of the outside interlocutor, are massive and substantive to the point that it would be highly unlikely, if not flatly inconceivable, to consider them in terms other than reflective of a high assessment of importance and commitment by the US.

Mischaracterizations and Missed Opportunities

The fact that the US, in the context of Operation Iraqi Freedom and the fall of the dictatorship of Saddam Hussein in Iraq in 2003 has proceeded to create on Iraqi soil an infrastructure for its military presence, in the form of bases and logistic supply chains, as well as a large, elaborate, state-of-the-art campus for its embassy in Baghdad – at a construction rhythm and allocation of funds that Iraq has not witnessed before – was not to be accepted by much of the Iraqi political class and public as merely reflective of standard operating procedures to ensure force protection and contingency readiness. Instead, with a long-standing “anti-imperialist” narrative deeply rooted in the Arabic-language media space, the US actions were placed in the apparently now-vindicated context of a pre-meditated conspiracy to occupy Iraq and drain its wealth. In the rehash and recycling of these perceptions in subsequent years into electoral and

popular pressure, by politicians who deemed an Iranian connection of more convenience, necessity, or value, the potential of transforming the contested US incursion in Iraq into a beneficial long-term relationship was wasted, with the dominant characterization of this derailed opportunity being that the US schemes have been thwarted. The recent vocal rhetoric by Iranian-oriented politicians demanding the withdrawal of foreign (that is US) troops should be viewed in this context.

In Syria, despite the continuing absence of a coherently formulated US policy towards the Syrian crisis, spanning from the Obama Administration – with its confused message of “exceptionalism” (the conviction deeply rooted in US political and general culture that the United States, contrary to virtually all other governments, engages the world on the basis of both values and interests) and recurrent delays and inaction, to the Trump Administration, in its highly volatile announcements and erratic change of directions – a steady pattern manifested itself on the ground, in the form of a gradual build-up of both US positions and of robust cooperation with local proxy forces – styled by US agencies as “Syrian Democratic Forces”, and built upon the primary core of a Syrian Kurdish nationalism seeking to reify Abdullah Öcalan’s vision of an independent Kurdistan. It was hard for most local stakeholders, both sympathetic and hostile to these developments, to reconcile the claim (or accusation) of a direction-less Washington with the on-

the-ground fact of an incrementally deepening presence. The ubiquitous explanation was that the lack of clarity from the US is an intentional attempt at confusing and deceiving the opponents, in the context of a presumed developed strategy that manipulates pawns and tackles variables (Israel, Russia, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the jihadists), - even if the readings on which ones and how diverged widely - only to ultimately succumb to Russian resolve, and unceremoniously seek an exit. The US, according to this conviction, is currently in the process of managing its defeat in Syria.

In Lebanon, with a political class that prides itself on its savvy and extensive reach within the US, the consensual reading of Washington's Lebanese policy was that the US values, favors, and will protect the "stability" that Lebanon has displayed in spite of the devastating chaos in its neighborhood. The assessment of the actual thinking in Washington is more subtle. Evidently, when Lebanon is considered separately, its stability is advocated by all relevant parties in the US capital. While facing no opposing view, this is however a "soft" position: it is far from being in itself a conscious priority in the US thinking about the region, and may even be easily sidelined when other considerations are introduced. Yet, it is through the conviction in the (inflated) importance of stability in Lebanon that Washington's proactive and reactive positions towards Lebanon have been explained. The US support of the

Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF), with major provisions of weapons, ammunitions, and training, is thus a definitive demonstration of the US commitment towards stability in Lebanon, and so are the episodic visits, including those of two Secretaries of State. Lebanon shall be shielded from disaster by the attention of its allies, notably the US. In fact, the support for the LAF and the visits are based on further considerations – such as strategic interoperability, security for Israel, and the rivalry between agencies and personnel in Washington, with “stability” often brandished as a generic facade. Yet, assured by the presumed importance of “stability” the slanted calculus in Beirut has allowed Lebanese politicians generally counted as part the pro-democracy camp to seek arrangements with the Iranian satrapy of Hezbollah and associates to secure modest interests, while offering it copious benefits. This calculus has also incentivized Lebanese politicians with personal relations with Washington ones to seek to mitigate the effects of “perplexing” decisions from the US Treasury Department negatively impacting Lebanon. The conviction of the primordial nature of “stability in Lebanon” as a US imperative has apparently even factored in as an element in the decision of the LAF to openly coordinate with Hezbollah – which is also alleged to have considerable influence with them.

The convictions and assessments that seem to inform the decision-making process in each of Iraq, Lebanon,

and Syria, seem often to be out of synchronization with the directions of thought in Washington shaping US policy towards these three countries. This is further complicated by the fact that US strategic thinking, which is mischaracterized and misinterpreted in these three countries, has itself been undergoing a fundamental paradigm shift.

The Old Model of US Strategic Thinking

For close to three decades, reconsiderations in the US about the international order have been in motion, as a function of the evolving global strategic situation. The role of the US was evidently primordial in conceiving and implementing the post-World War II system — through which the communist challenge to Western democracy was stymied and eventually dissipated, and a third, devastating global conflict was averted, albeit at the price of multiple localized instances of strife. In spite of a number of continuous failures — the Middle East being the most acute — “Pax Americana” corresponds to an actual oddity in world history, in the course of which armed conflict was contained, the size of the human population grew by an order of magnitude, and radical advancements in health, technology, and prosperity were achieved.

It was a US calculus, exemplified in the Marshall Plan in

Europe, the reformative occupation of Japan, but also in the constructive approach to Russia and its former satellites upon the fall of the Soviet bloc, that it is in the US own national interest, as well as in the interest of its global partners, to promote a vision of the world based on representative governments and open economies. The US engagement of the world in favor of democracy and prosperity was ultimately based on the non-zero-sum assessment of the nature of the global economy, one in which wealth is created, not merely divided, to mutually benefit all participants, even if unequally. The US drive herein, as well as that of other participants, is to seek a larger share of the wealth created, in an adversarial but peaceful context that does not deny others a satisfactory portion, so as to maintain disruptive actions.

The US was not the guarantor of international stability or the “police force” of the world, out of sheer benevolence – albeit US political culture displayed pride in “American exceptionalism” which accounted for values in the formulation of policies. Instead, the predominant model for US global engagement, in its “short formulation”, was that US interests and American values were largely in alignment.

The “long formulation” of this model is more complex, in its recognition of the variable nature of the alignment between interests and values, and of the potential of leveraging a stated alignment – whether corresponding

to reality or not – towards advancing US interests. Different schools of US foreign policy had accordingly different usage of elements of the predominant model.

Schools of Thought in US Foreign Policy

Five schools of thought in foreign policy can be discerned as a function of the interplay between values and interests. At the “far-left” is the proposition that values, US as well as universal, establish the framework within which international relations, driven by interests, unfold. There is here the presupposition, whether implicit or explicit, of the primacy of values, even with the recognition of the aspirational character of the proposition. This model of **“internationalism”** envisages the emergence of a world order based on shared notions of justice and fairness, and on international law as the governing principle of the world community. The “Right to Intervene” and the “Duty to Intervene”, as contemplated in the 1990s, in the aftermath of massacres in Africa, were presented by advocates of this model as the natural progression in international law and norms of behavior towards the “end of history” or any other theory that shares with it the conviction in the triumph of values. Despite its seductive character to many, it was clear that this model is burdened with a romanticism that stipulates a departure from the historical norms of behavior of humankind. Whether its messianic character was recognized or

not, this “internationalist” school of thought was an idealistic expectation of the emergence of a new type of international politics. While the Clinton Administration paid homage to internationalism at a time of a US quasi-monopoly on power in global affairs, it was the Obama Administration, in its early “rookie” phase that seems to have proclaimed this collaborative internationalism as its chosen methodology in global affairs.

If “internationalism” is premised on international legitimacy as the basis for pro-active policy, **“interventionism”**, as advocated by another group of idealist public intellectuals and officials, often labeled as “neo-conservatives”, also envisaged a pro-active approach towards the creation of a world order based on democracy and freedom, while withdrawing any most of the endorsement of the putative international legitimacy. International legitimacy is instead viewed as a potential means to disrupt the stated productive outcome of the world order – the actual extension of democracy, open societies, and open markets – by autocratic forces (such as Russia and China) for whom such an outcome is detrimental. Interventionism shares with internationalism the implicit conviction that indeed the world can be re-fashioned to provide freedom and prosperity for most, if not all. The idealism of the interventionist proposition, which dominated the first part of the Bush 43 Administration waned and treated with the parallel failures to achieve the promised results

in each of Iraq and Afghanistan.

“Real-Politik” or the utilization of the existing balance of power to further one’s interests re-emerged in the second term of Bush 43 Administration as the restoration of the pragmatic mainline of US foreign policy, which may indeed maintain a values discourse in immediate concerns – in calling for partners to display respect for human rights, while remaining largely agnostic towards the fate of democracy and freedom at the global scale. While such **“realism”** faced criticism from both internationalists and interventionists at one side for its willingness to sacrifice “values”, it was in turn subject to objections at the other side for the cost it incurs in its discursive references – that its catering to the “values” proposition is coupled with an actual entanglement in “nation-building” and other pricey and unproductive endeavors.

The **“national interest”** approach as adopted by many intellectuals and politicians crossed the line upon which realism rested – that of a nominal adherence to values coupled with a de facto indifference or agnosticism. “Nationalists” tilted towards the position that the promotion of US values outside of the national borders is both ineffectual and detrimental to US interests and need not factor in the conception and implementation of policy. Saddam’s Iraq, with its putative arsenal of weapons of mass destruction as a threat to the US? The

action favored by the “nationalists” is to eliminate the threat but refrain from any nation-building that seeks the transformation of Iraq along the lines advocated by the neo-conservatives, judging it to be a futile effort and a potential resource drain. Instead, the effort to reconstruct Iraq, along any appropriate formula, should be passed on to the international community, with the US refraining from any individual/bilateral role.

“National interest” advocates resided openly and vocally in the Bush 43 Administration – which in fact had the three schools at the center – interventionism, realism, and nationalism – in co-habitation. In a deliberate effort to negate Bush 43 Administration, the Obama Administration embraced internationalism at its onset – with successive failures in virtually all the dossiers of international policy in which it engaged, and with repeated spectacular demonstrations of its inability to lead or assume the initiative from North Korea to Ukraine, and from the Israeli-Palestinian question to the Arab Spring, culminating in its effort to secure an agreement at any cost with Iran.

The Obama Administration can thus be “credited” of having demonstrated the inadequacy of internationalism. President Obama himself, however, engaged in a trajectory of transformation from US engagement to US withdrawal from international responsibilities, adopting, albeit not vocally, much of the logic of the advocates of

the “national interest” approach.

Obama himself may not have openly endorsed the fifth school in foreign policy, that of **“isolationism”**. His actions and inactions, policies and abstentions, statements and reconsiderations, indeed amounted to a gradual laying the foundation for isolationism, whether in its aggressive variant, adopted by Donald Trump as “America First”, or in its traditional libertarian abandonment variant promoted by others.

The Paradigm Shift in US Foreign Policy with Trump

Isolationism shares with nationalism the skepticism towards the receptivity of the rest of the world for US values, and/or the validity of the application of these values outside of the confines of the US. In its aggressive form, isolationism assumes that the international order is custom made to abuse the US and deny it its advantage. While the Trump Administration featured a wide spectrum of foreign policy schools at its onset, including a “reformed interventionism” – stressing the dividends to the US over the global transformation previously heralded – realism, nationalism, and isolationism, the high rate of attrition within the Trump Administration has slimmed the profiles towards an open allegiance to an aggressive isolationism, even if stealth interventionism sporadically persists.

US institutions – departments, agencies, the armed forces, the intelligence community – serve at the pleasure of the White House, with the President as the Chief Executive. It may be uncertain whether Donald Trump will be able to secure a second term, or whether he will remain consistent in this second half of his first term. Nonetheless, the current dynamics in foreign policy is towards a realization of the coalesced vision of an aggressive isolationism, stressing the US national interest and seeking to overcome, bypass, or even dismantle non-bilateral arrangements considered detrimental to it. Built into the US administration, and reinforced in the 1970s through further checks and balances on the executive, is a systemic sluggishness in realizing change. Trump and his supporters may brand the lack of immediate responsiveness to the new vision as resistance from “the Deep State”. It may be viewed instead as a safeguard against impulsive change, mitigating and temporary slowing the executive intent, but ultimately realizing it.

Stances and Implications for Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon

The radical re-appraisal into which hawks of the new approach in foreign policy are engaged has not yet impacted Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon dramatically – the “sudden” decision to withdraw from Syria notwithstanding. This is not an intentional or lasting

exception, but rather a reflection of the low importance accorded to these three countries in the current revision of US policy.

The outlines of the forthcoming review, in realistic anticipation, are that much of the current status quo will be shaken. The maximalist hawkish desire is to reduce the relationship with Iraq to a transactional level, abandon Syria, and further the squeezing of Lebanon in recognition of its Iranian Satrapy status. Each of these maximalist elements faces institutional and political resistance, but each is also animated with the desire to reverse what is portrayed as conditions detrimental to the US interest.

The argument against the new approach in Iraq is that it has been a major US investment in blood and treasure, and that the downgrading of the relationship to transactions of immediate relevance amounts to an abandonment of this investment. The counter-argument is that exiting a bad investment is a sound decision. The argument for a US withdrawal from Syria is that Washington ought to recognize the upper hand that Russia has secured in Syria, largely due to the confused policies of the Obama Administration, and identify its interests in Syria as being limited to the security of Israel and the containment and/or reversal of Iranian influence – both objectives being more adequately fulfilled by an empowerment of Israel and coordination with Russia.

The argument against is that such a withdrawal would amount to the abandonment and the betrayal of the Syrian Democratic Forces – the counter argument is that the relationship, cordial and productive as it was, was understood by both parties as contractual, and limited to the now-completed fight against the Islamic State. As to Lebanon, the assertive argument is that all aid accorded to Lebanon is diverted to the direct or indirect advantage of the Iranian satrapy, while failing to accumulate towards challenging it or even towards maintaining true stability in Lebanon. The focus on stability, it is further understood as having been merely a teleological recognition of a precarious absence of instability, rather than an actual promotion of a lasting stability. The collapse of the Lebanese order – political as well as economic – is thus viewed as inevitable, with the large US investment, which is diverted to serve Iranian interests, merely delaying the agony.

The Questionable Future

These are harsh ideas that may or may not come to fruition. Their future, however, will not be determined by the input of the Iraqis, Syrians, and Lebanese, who for the most part have failed to capitalize on past US interest in their affairs to anchor credible voices in Washington, as an insurance policy against US political volatility. Instead, the debate will be one between

opposed and contending US visions and interests, with the momentum of the institutions still in favor of the status quo, while the trajectory of the Administration pushing strongly towards radical change.

Irrespective of the outcome, the real lesson that regional pro-democracy forces ought to carry from the looming danger is that more attention to Washington's internal debates, more humility, less conspiracy, and more direct engagement are the recipe towards avoiding another slide towards the abyss in the future, provided that they still have a recognizable one.

Biography

Hassan Mneimneh is Principal at Middle East Alternatives in Washington DC. He is Scholar at the Middle East Institute, Contributing Editor at Fikra Forum at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and Senior Advisor for the Middle and North Africa at the International Republican Institute. Since the 1990s, he has served as scholar, policy analyst, and civil society practitioner specializing in the affairs of the Middle East, North Africa and the wider Islamic world. From August 2011 to August 2014, he was Senior Transatlantic Fellow at the German Marshall Fund of the United States (GMF), where he focused on socio-political and cultural developments in the MENA region and the Islamic world and their significance to US and European policies. Mneimneh was also Acting Director of GMF's Tunis office and of the Tunis-based MENA Partnership for Democracy & Development, a support project for civil society. Prior to joining GMF, Mneimneh was Senior Fellow at the Hudson Institute where he co-led a program to assess civil reaction to radicalizing tendencies in Muslim societies. From August 2008 to September 2009, Mneimneh was Visiting Fellow at AEI where he conducted a study of the evolution, record, and prospects of radical Islamist formations worldwide. He also co-led the Malta Forum, a dialogue program between intellectuals from the Arab and Western worlds, coalescing as the Center for Global Engagement at the Institute for American Values. Between 2004 and 2008, Mneimneh was Director at the Iraq Memory Foundation, an organization dedicated to documenting Iraq's recent past and to fostering reflection on issues of political responsibility, social order,

and transitional justice. The documentary holdings of the Iraq Memory Foundation were deposited at the Hoover Institution in 2009. Mneimneh continued to serve as the non-resident curator of this collection until June 2014. The Iraq Memory Foundation was the continuation of the Iraq Research and Documentation Project which Mneimneh co-directed at Harvard University then at the Iraq Foundation in Washington DC. Mneimneh is a frequent commentator on broadcast media. He is a regular contributor of analysis and opinion pieces to the pan-Arab newspaper al-Hayat since 1993, and has written, in English, Arabic, and French, on political, cultural, historical, and intellectual questions relating to the Arab and Muslim worlds.