

PHILIP J. (P.J.) CROWLEY

Professor of Practice and Fellow Institute for Public Diplomacy & Global Communication  
George Washington University

## FROM OSLO TO ISIL TO IRAN : COMPETING AMERICAN POLICIES AND NARRATIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

First of all, let me thank the Maison du Futur and the Konrad-Adenauer-Stiftung for the kind invitation and welcome opportunity to return to the Middle East and to visit Beirut. Let me pay tribute to the people of Lebanon for what you are doing to support those who have been uprooted by the tragic civil war in Syria. You know only too well how challenging it is to recover from conflict. You are shouldering an incredible burden. The resilience of the Lebanese people is nothing short of remarkable.

I don't think it is an overstatement to suggest that we are experiencing the most complex strategic environment in the Middle East in at least 70 years and perhaps a century. The international structure put in place at the end of World War I is coming apart at the seams. In critical places, such as Syria, Iraq and Yemen, we cannot be certain that the existing order will survive. In any case, repairing the damage will take decades.

Given the developments of the past decade, no country is the same as it was. The ground does seem to be shifting beneath our feet. The list of conflicts and challenges continues to grow, with most of them beyond the ability of any country, including the United States, to resolve it alone. The list of regional spoilers also continues to grow, the latest being the Islamic State, with sufficient capability to inhibit an effective international response.

In the midst of this complexity, questions arise. What does the United States want to see in the Middle East ? And what is it prepared to do to promote a stable new order from the current confusion ?

Those are good questions.

In the United States, the American people have their own questions. What is going on in the Middle East ? Why should we jump into the middle of problems rooted in the 7th and not the 21st Century ? These are valid points as well.

Between these two perspectives, there is a wide gap of understanding – in terms of both policy and politics – that has strategic significance and will impact what America is likely to do – and not do – in the years ahead.

Over the past quarter century, since the end of the Cold War, U.S. policy towards the Middle East has included several core objectives. The list hasn't necessarily changed, although the priority given to any one objective has over time. These objectives include :

Regional stability.

Comprehensive Middle East peace.

The security of Israel.

Combatting violent political extremism and preventing acts of terrorism that pose a danger to the United States and its allies.

Protecting the freedom of navigation to ensure the flow of energy vital to both the regional and global economies.

The containment of Iran.

Preventing the spread of weapons of mass destruction and precluding a regional nuclear arms race.

Promoting responsible governance that gives the people of the region a greater voice in the direction of their countries, greater economic opportunity, inclusive civil societies and respect for human rights, particularly for women and minorities.

These objectives include initiatives that have not yet succeeded. They also include clear contradictions and unintended consequences from actions the United States has taken.

One of the positive side effects of the Gulf War in 1991 – besides restoration of Kuwaiti sovereignty – was the development of the Oslo process and the prospect of comprehensive Middle East peace and a Palestinian State. While there have been important accomplishments, including peace treaties

between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, comprehensive peace remains stubbornly elusive. The peace process is currently in a coma and is likely to stay in that condition until there are leadership changes on all sides – in Israel, in America and in Palestine as well.

The sad irony of the peace process is that the parameters of the solution are well known, but the political will and imagination to enable the necessary compromises to achieve peace are not yet manifest. Nonetheless, we must preserve hope in a two-state solution as the only viable path forward.

The United States does value regional stability, but recently has been a leading disruptor of the status quo. Attempts to change the nature of regimes in Iraq and Libya have created significant ripple effects.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 did little to advance America's democratic narrative ; it did for a time reinforce Osama bin Laden's narrative regarding the western occupation of sacred lands in the Islamic world. It also opened the door to increased Iranian influence in Iraq and beyond, and the advance of malign actors like al Qaeda and the Islamic State.

While the United States has reengaged both politically and militarily in Iraq, it has struggled to define a coherent and sustainable strategy regarding Syria that the American people and the region are willing to support. Certainly the Obama administration did not enhance the credibility of American policy in the region with its mismanagement of the so-called red line regarding Syria's use of chemical weapons, and even though chemical weapons have been removed and destroyed over the past two years, the Assad regime's use of chlorine barrel bombs is a gross violation of international norms that the United States, United Nations and Arab League need to address with greater urgency.

The region is obviously focused on the ongoing negotiation with Iran regarding its nuclear program. This was a major topic of discussion at the recent U.S.-GCC Summit at Camp David. It appears the outcome was an agreement that the dialogue is important, and a disagreement whether the dialogue will result in the desired behavioral impact.

Assad has survived four years of civil war only because of the support of Iran and Russia. There is concern that a nuclear agreement will come at the expense of America's traditional allies in the region that will involve a concession that allows Assad to remain in power, or signals a rapprochement with Tehran.

I believe these concerns are vastly overstated.

The backdrop of the negotiation is more than 35 years of hostility between the United States and Iran. The complex history between the two countries, the nature of the Iranian revolution, the takeover of the American Embassy in 1979 and Iran's ongoing support for terrorism as a major dimension of its foreign policy. Iran continues to define the United States as the Great Satan and most of its ongoing policies are rooted in opposition to America and its regional objectives.

These are not the ingredients that lend themselves to a rapprochement. That said, we should not dismiss the possibility that further engagement can identify common interests that can contribute to a just resolution of the crisis in Syria.

If the broad objectives of U.S. regional policy have not changed substantially in recent years, what has changed is the manner in which the United States pursues these objectives.

Chastened by its interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, Washington is far more cautious about the use of military force today. When it does, the United States hopes to act with regional partners and based on a strong international consensus for action. In the case of a conflict like Yemen, where the regional interest may be more compelling than the American interest, the United States will let the region take the lead. In many respects, this is the result of two decades of U.S. policy, to help build regional capabilities to implement local solutions to neighborhood problems.

Where possible, given the narratives advanced by al Qaeda and the Islamic State, if boots on the ground are required, ideally, they should be first and foremost regional forces, promoting a regional political solution, not one imposed by Washington. This is harder than it sounds as we have seen with support to the Syrian opposition. The process has been too slow, frustrating and uncertain.

This revised regional approach – leading from behind is one way it has been described – is controversial within political and policy circles in Washington and will undoubtedly be much debated during the upcoming 2016 presidential campaign in the United States. Regardless of who becomes the next president of the United States, he or she will confront our recent experience in Iraq, which has become a powerful American political narrative and will be an influential sub-text regarding American policy for the foreseeable future.

Here in the region, many have interpreted this policy as the beginning of a disengagement by the United States. I don't see it that way. The Obama administration did believe America was over-invested in purely military solutions in the region – I dare say many in the region agreed. This is not disengagement. It is sustainable engagement.

The United States will remain the most influential actor in the region, but is interested in pursuing multilateral rather than unilateral solutions. The question becomes not what the United States decides alone, but what can be achieved together, but this requires key actors here to develop a consensus for action that both the United States and the region are able to support.