

Can Europe and the U.S. disengage from the Middle East?

By George Joffé

■ Executive summary

Western policy towards the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East is inextricably intertwined with the policies of the European Union and the U.S. towards the civil war in Syria, Iran, and the sectarian crisis in Iraq. In consequence, neither can disengage from the affairs of the Middle East. Globally, the Middle East crisis also reflects the changing relationship between the West and Russia, as well as U.S. reluctance towards a continuing commitment to Middle East and North African security as it reduces its external energy dependence and seeks engagement in Asia. Europe remains entrapped in the region through geographical contiguity and the migration and refugee crisis. The problem of IS exacerbates these issues, as recent terrorist attacks in Europe have shown. It is impossible to know what the new presidential administration in Washington in 2017 will mean for U.S. policy options in the Middle East and North Africa. It seems likely that the main lines of policy laid down by the Obama administration will largely remain in being.

Introduction

Western policy towards the phenomenon of the so-called Islamic State (IS) in the Middle East is inextricably intertwined with the policies of the European Union (EU) and U.S. towards the civil war in Syria, Iran, and the sectarian crisis in Iraq. In consequence, neither can disengage from the affairs of the Middle East, even though the U.S. seeks to make its 'Asian pivot' and the EU wants to strengthen its external borders. At a more global level, the crisis in the Middle East also reflects the changing relationship between the West and Russia, as well as U.S. reluctance towards continuing commitment to Middle East and North African security as it reduces its external energy dependence and seeks greater engagement in Asia. Europe, however, remains entrapped in the region's problems through geographical contiguity and the burgeoning migration and refugee crisis. Multipolarity, in short, is beginning to replace the U.S.-dominated unipolarity of the past thirty years.

It is, of course, impossible to know with certainty what the new presidential administration in Washington in 2017 will mean for U.S. policy options in the Middle East and North Africa. It seems likely, however, that the main lines of

policy laid down by the Obama administration will remain in place, even if the rhetoric becomes more aggressive and the U.S. becomes more assertive in the region. In other words, the priorities sought for U.S. engagement in Asia will continue to be the new administration's primary objective, despite the distractions caused by Islamic extremism in the Arab world, U.S. ambivalence over the nuclear agreement with Iran and the recrudescence of the neoconservative vision in Washington.

Western ambitions

The reasons for this desire to downgrade U.S. engagement with the region are easy to identify. They reflect widespread popular disillusion with the outcomes of the past – the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, as well as the implications of the civil war in Syria and the renewed threat of aggressive extremism encapsulated in IS. They also reflect the U.S.'s potential liberation from reliance on imported energy through the fracking revolution, despite the calamitous fall in oil prices engineered by Saudi Arabia over the past 18 months in an attempt to gain increased market share, largely with the aim of killing off this new energy industry by undermining oil prices.¹ The U.S. may still be perceived by its domestic audience as the world's sole hyperpower,

¹ The significance of this is profoundly cultural as well as economic; see Herbstreuth (2016).

but isolation – at least as far as the Middle East and North Africa are concerned – seems more attractive than engagement.

And, finally, the U.S.'s desire for disengagement reflects the deep disappointment of the Obama administration with Israel's refusal to seriously contemplate a resolution of its Palestinian dilemma as a result of its occupation of the West Bank and its isolation of the Gaza Strip. Of course, this may change with the advent of a new administration: Hillary Clinton, for example, has gone out of her way to reaffirm her support for Israel, whatever the circumstances, although Donald Trump has been far more circumspect. But there is the underlying reality that Americans are also slowly tiring of what they see as an unremittingly unsuccessful commitment to one side in the conflict, whatever their legislators may promise.

This frustration is more overt in Europe where, despite being massively overshadowed by crises in Syria, Iraq and Libya, there is a realisation at both the official and popular levels that the fundamental problem in the region is still the Israeli-Palestinian dispute, and that a failure to resolve it soon will inflame all the other tensions and threats that are now emerging there. Thus, France is committed to organising a major conference to find a solution to the dispute, Sweden has recognised the Palestinian state and parliaments in several European countries have called on their governments to do the same. The EU, in its turn, has timidly begun to give practical sanction to the continent's rejection of the legality of Israel's settlement policy in the West Bank.

Unlike the U.S., however, Europe cannot ignore the stark realities of the crises in the Middle East and North Africa. The states of the Mediterranean littoral of the region are, in effect, also Europe's external border, and the massive outflows of refugees from the Middle East via Turkey and of sub-Saharan African migrants through Libya underline this reality every day. These flows underline another reality, too, namely that Europe's collective external policies – the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, European Neighbourhood Policy and Union for the Mediterranean – have failed to provide the security it sought through regional economic development along neoliberal lines. There has been a similar failure, too, to support countries like Tunisia, which is trying to recover from the economic consequences of the spillover of Libya's chaotic violence or, indeed, to help Libya itself to recover from the civil war there in 2011 (Joffé, 2016).

This failure has been cruelly demonstrated in recent months by the revival in Europe itself of terrorism emanating from the region, as the violence in Paris and Brussels in November 2015 and March 2016, respectively, made clear. Even more cruelly, the incidents revealed the failures of European states to successfully integrate their minority ethnic communities, especially those from North Africa. This is, incidentally, not the first time that this has hap-

pened, as Britain discovered in 2005 with its South Asian communities; as Spain had found out a year before with respect to its engagement with Morocco; and, indeed, as France had experienced throughout the latter half of the 1990s, during the Algerian civil war. Migrants and extremism force European engagement in the Middle East, and especially in North Africa, lukewarm though it may be.

Regional realities

Europe, in short, does not have the luxury of disengagement, because of its geographic location. But, ironically enough, for reasons of global geopolitics, nor does the U.S. Four factors limit its freedom of action: the atavistic but opposed legacies of past engagement with Iran and Saudi Arabia, together with concerns over energy security in the Gulf; similar commitments to Israel, despite current administration disillusion with the Netanyahu government there; the revival of Russia as a regional power as a result of its engagement in Syria alongside Iran; and, perhaps most acutely, the blossoming of violent non-state extremism in the form of IS. Until these issues are resolved, an unrestricted 'Asian pivot' will be unattainable.

The Obama administration's vision of disengagement required a resolution to its 30-year-long diplomatic breach with Iran, hence the recent nuclear agreement. This, in turn, however, has incensed Saudi Arabia, given its belief that Iran as a radical Shia state threatens the security of the Sunni world through its 'Shia arc of extremism' with Iraq, Syria and Hizbullah in Lebanon. Since Saudi Arabia is the U.S.'s key ally for ensuring energy security in the Gulf and plays an essential role in Syria's civil war, Washington has had to placate Riyadh – and, coincidentally, Turkey, the other major regional player – although it has resisted becoming actively involved in the overthrow of the Assad regime in Damascus.

The stark contradictions inherent in the dialectic between Middle East realities and Western reluctance to engage are most tellingly revealed by Western policy towards the Syrian civil war. On the one hand, Western politicians and commentators have been resolute in condemning the Assad regime for its cruelty and intransigence, insisting that the Syrian president be removed from office. Yet, on the other hand, Western states have both failed to act towards achieving such ends and have failed to materially support the actual opposition to the regime. Instead, they have relied on Middle East allies – primarily Turkey and Saudi Arabia – to undertake this function, despite the consequences. These are largely a consequence of the intense fragmentation of Syria's opposition forces, while Turkey's and Saudi Arabia's moderate Islamist partners of choice have differed in objectives and tactics from those in the Syrian Free Army, which Western states had originally sought to support.

In addition, the U.S., despite threatening the Assad regime over its alleged use of chemical weapons, chose to cooperate with it in eliminating the weapons stocks it held. Middle

East states interpreted this as a sign of U.S. weakness, an impression not countered by the subsequent Western decision to confront IS and the Nusra Front because of their extremism and aggression, both towards the Assad regime and towards more moderate voices in the Syrian opposition. The result has been that Western policy appears to have become empty rhetoric and bombast as far as the Assad regime is concerned, a situation now highlighted by the Russian intervention in support of the regime and, latterly, against IS.

In the short term, however, the twin challenges of Russia's regional revival and the eruption of IS in Iraq and Syria have had a much more immediate effect than perceptions of Western policy weakness. IS, an amalgam of Iraqi Ba'athist vengeance for its overthrow in 2003 and violent Islamist extremism seeking to found an Islamic state in the Levant, is itself, of course, a consequence of the U.S.-led intervention in Iraq between 2003 and 2011 and of the opportunities for non-state actors created by the Syrian civil war. This allowed for IS's revival after the original movement (al-Qa'ida in Iraq) had been virtually annihilated in 2010. It has profoundly challenged the Iraqi state, expanding the Syrian civil war into Iraq's Sunni domains and thus menacing Iran.

Now it has metastasised into Sinai and Libya, putting itself forward as an alternative and superior brand of violent religious extremism to al-Qa'ida. Its objectives are twofold: firstly, to restructure the political order in the region by destroying the state system bequeathed by colonialism in favour of a universal caliphate and, secondly, to create intense antagonisms between Muslim and non-Muslim communities, so that the former are forced to turn to it for protection – hence its anger at the mass of Syrians fleeing to Europe instead. In reality, however, its driving force is vengeance rather than religious commitment, hence the importance of the roles played in its ranks by the remnants of the Ba'ath and the Iraqi military displaced from leadership in Iraq by the U.S. in 2003. Hence, too, its interest in Sirte, Libya, where the disgruntled remnants of the Qaddafi regime, destroyed by the NATO intervention and the civil war in 2011, still reside.

It has also been able to exploit the frustrations and alienation of young Muslims in the minority communities in Europe, particularly North African communities in France and Belgium, because it offers an alternative cultural and political relevance to the anomie created by daily life there. These young Muslims, together with generally disenfranchised and disenfranchised youth in the region, have flooded to its banner, bolstering its fighting strength and administrative reach, even if its project of a caliphal state proves to be ultimately unsustainable. It is this objective that explains its desire to threaten European societies and that, combined with its threat to regional states, has forced the U.S. and its allies to seek to roll it back, thus forcing a reluctant renewal of U.S. commitment to the region.

Yet U.S. reluctance to fully engage in restoring regional order, combined with Western rhetoric condemning the Assad regime without the commitment to remove it from office, has created an opportunity for both Iran and Russia to put themselves forward as alternative players to achieve this end. Iran might have been predicted to occupy such a role, given its longstanding engagement in both Syria and Iraq, as well as with Hizbullah. The Russian intervention, however, has much wider implications, because, despite Western – particularly U.S. – distaste over the issues of Ukraine and Russia's domestic governance, Russia is now an essential strategic partner for the West in ensuring regional security.

Implications

Multipolarity, in short, is beginning to replace unipolarity as the dominant theme in global geopolitics, not because the U.S. lacks the material resources to remain the sole hyperpower, but because it lacks the commitment to do so. It is an opportunity that Russia – still smarting from Western and NATO's attempts to capture Ukrainian attention three years ago – has exploited enthusiastically, along with Iran, by actively protecting the Assad regime from defeat. Implicitly, therefore, its actions have challenged the Western paradigm of intervention and rejection of the Assad regime, offering an alternative model to beleaguered autocracies instead. By extension, therefore, Russia's actions also challenge the paradigm of hegemonic stability embodied by the U.S. since the end of the cold war.

Now Western states must decide with alacrity whether they are prepared to accept the implications of such a change, for behind Russia lie China and India. If they are not, then they must restore hegemonic security under the U.S. umbrella. With the passage of time, however, this will become increasingly untenable as states outside its hegemonic control achieve agency, and multipolarity challenges Western-dominated unipolarity. Such outcomes, however, will demand far more acute understanding of and sympathy with the social and political realities of the Middle East and North Africa than their political leaderships have manifested in recent years. And, if Western states want the Assad regime to disappear, they should persuade Russia to force Assad himself from power, but will have to accept that the regime itself – in whatever modified form – will endure. That is the price of past failure.

References

- Herbstreuth, S. 2016. *Oil and American Identity: A Culture of Dependency and US Foreign Policy*. London: IB Tauris.
- Joffé, G. 2016. "Barcelona twenty years on." In Y. H. Zoubir & G. White, eds. *North African Politics: Change and Continuity*. London: Routledge.

■ THE AUTHOR

George Joffé is a lecturer in the Department of Politics and International Studies, Cambridge University. He specialises in the Middle East and North Africa.

Disclaimer

The content of this publication is presented as is. The stated points of view are those of the author and do not reflect those of the organisation for which he works or NOREF. NOREF does not give any warranties, either expressed or implied, concerning the content.



- **The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre**
- **Norsk ressurscenter for fredsbygging**

The Norwegian Peacebuilding Resource Centre (NOREF) is a resource centre integrating knowledge and experience to strengthen peacebuilding policy and practice. Established in 2008, it collaborates and promotes collaboration with a wide network of researchers, policymakers and practitioners in Norway and abroad.

Read NOREF's publications on www.peacebuilding.no and sign up for notifications.

Connect with NOREF on Facebook or @PeacebuildingNO on Twitter

Email: info@peacebuilding.no - Phone: +47 22 08 79 32