




Does the US know what it is doing in the Middle East?¹

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Does a power like the US know what it is doing in a region as important and complex as the Middle East? The question may sound like a provocation, but from its answer stem enormous implications for the international system. This is not an issue raised only by critics or enemies of the US. Increasingly more allies, partners and friends alike, wonder if Washington has a clear strategy towards the Middle East, if it foresees the possible consequences of its actions or rather if, as some believe, it is gradually dissociating itself from the region as part of its announced strategic shift towards Asia and the Pacific.



The experience of successive US administrations in the Middle East during the last decade cannot be described as very successful. Large projects of regional transformation, risky military adventures, costly reconstruction programmes and questionable methods in fighting against fanaticism have not given the US the security, new alliances or sympathies of hearts and minds that had been promised. All too often, US policies have given rise to results contrary to those desired and whose long-term consequences go against American national interests.

The invasion of Iraq in 2003 was presented as an investment to transform the country into a faithful US ally. The new Iraq was to be an example for the democratisation of other neighbouring countries as well as a base to act, if necessary, against the Iranian regime. The reality, a decade later, is nothing like the foreseen plan: Iraq is a fractured country, plagued by violence and whose government is in the hands of close allies of Iran.

The regional rise of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its hegemonic aspirations cannot be understood without the involuntary help of the US. On the one hand, in 2001 it put an end to the Taliban regime in Afghanistan (enemies of the Iranian ayatollahs), thus placing in power in Kabul groups allied to Tehran. On the other hand, in 2003 the George W. Bush Administration toppled Saddam Hussein, who had acted as a barrier against Iranian ambitions in the Arab neighbourhood. Unwittingly, neoconservatives in the US *handed over* the Bagdad government to Shia leaders over which Iran exerts great influence.

Syria has become a new source of bewilderment regarding the objectives and leadership capabilities of the US in the Middle East. What started in March 2011 as a pacifist uprising against the totalitarian regime of Bashar al-Assad has become a proxy war whose price is being paid by the Syrian population. In this war, the regime and its foreign supporters (Iran,

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Russia and Hizballah) fight against the rebels and their allies (Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the US and Jordan, among others).

Although Syria is suffering one of the bloodiest conflicts so far in the 21st century, capable of destabilising the entire Middle East and putting the interests of the US and its allies at risk, the Obama Administration has opted for an extraordinary passivity. Not even the 'red line' declared by Obama –Assad's use of weapons of mass destruction– seems relevant. The facts have demonstrated that the latter must have understood he had the 'green light' to continue making use of Scud missiles, military aircraft, heavy artillery and, presumably, chemical weapons on a limited scale against populated areas, in the name of the fight against 'terrorist groups'.

When Libyan rebels were at risk of being annihilated in Bengasi by Muammar Gaddafi's troops in March 2011, the Obama Administration opted for 'leading from behind' during the military campaign approved by the UN Security Council. In the case of Syria, and after 27 months of massacres involving the direct intervention of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard and the Hizballah Lebanese militia, it seems that Obama wants to take a step back and remain uninvolved with the conflict, delegating his policy to countries like Qatar and Saudi Arabia.

Obama's policy towards Syria is exasperating a multitude of Syrians suffering the consequences of the conflict. He is also receiving harsh criticism from analysts and politicians from within the US –some of which had opposed the invasion of Iraq– as they observe that the interests of their country are being damaged in the short term (radicalisation of the uprising, weakening of their allies, image of powerlessness in the eyes of Russia and Iran) and in the long term (less ability to influence the future of Syria and the future of the region).

For a decade now, it seems that US administrations are intent on employing the wrong arguments in the Middle East to justify policies that, in the long run, are counterproductive and increase instability. It already occurred with the alleged weapons of mass destruction and the alleged connections between Saddam Hussein and al-Qaeda. Another argument employed a decade ago was that strong sanctions against the Syrian regime would result in its moderation and yielding to the US, when in reality the sanctions delivered the country into the arms of Iran and the Assad regime contributed to the destabilisation of Iraq.

Something similar could occur in Syria, as Washington is refusing to support rebel groups that oppose the Assad regime by alleging that there are radical and Jihadist elements among the rebels. It is evident that these groups exist (in part, because timely action was not taken to prevent radicalisation), but there are also other rebels who want their country to be free and without extremists. Why they are not receiving more external support is difficult to understand.

North Africa and the Middle East are undergoing a period of deep socioeconomic transformations that have serious political implications, of which we may have only seen the beginning. The impression is that the US is acting on the basis of reactive measures and it does not have a clear vision as to what future for the region is in its interest. The speech Obama delivered in Cairo in 2009 seems very distant, as do the expectations that he would be able to promote peace between Israelis and Palestinians, as made evident last March in his visit to the Middle East.



One risk of Washington's 'passive policy' is that its rivals will see their suspicions confirmed that the US is willing to accept a *fait accompli*, even if it is contrary to its interests. This is leading many secular inhabitants of the Middle East to criticise the attitude adopted by the US Administration, which they judge to be complaisant toward the Islamists who are rising to power, especially in Egypt, despite their abuses and doubtful competence as rulers.

It is surely premature to declare that the US has opted to retreat from the Middle East, although the indications are there. Those who believe so argue that the foreseeable energy independence of the US, thanks to new technologies like fracking (hydraulic fracturing used to extract non-conventional gas and petroleum from the subsoil) might favour a 'minimalist' foreign policy in the Middle East. It is, however, hard to imagine that Washington would be aloof to the future of the State of Israel or the energy resources that exist in the Gulf's Arab petro-monarchies.

When the US gradually retreated from Europe after the Second World War it left behind solid structures that guaranteed stability and security. If the country retreats now from the Middle East it will leave nothing of the sort, but rather huge sources of instability and conflict.

Perhaps the question heading this commentary should read: does the US know what it *wants* in the Middle East? And a second question deserves to be mentioned: is Europe aware of what that entails?