

# Back to square one: the United States in the Middle East

---

Ana Echagüe

>> The United States' (US) military intervention in Iraq and Syria has brought President Barack Obama full circle. He started out his first term with the clear purpose of extricating the US from ten years of military involvement in the Middle East and putting an end to what he regarded as an overblown focus on the 'global war on terror'. Now he finds himself drawn into warfare once again, re-applying a counter-terrorism lens to the region. The 'new beginning' in relations with the Middle East turned out to be a premature announcement. Six years into Obama's presidency, he has lost his initial sense of purpose and the US is in reactive mode, overcome by regional events, including the spread of violent extremism, the reassertion of authoritarianism, and increased state fragility across the region.

Attempts to pivot to Asia and focus more on geo-economic relations have lost momentum on the back of flawed assumptions that quiet diplomacy and a lighter footprint would be sufficient to manage US relations in the Middle East. To correct what Obama regarded as an over-militarised policy in the Middle East, he proposed greater reliance on more targeted operations, including drone strikes, target lists, Special Forces, cyber-attacks, and cooperation with local governments. Prospects for greater domestic energy self-sufficiency also made it tempting for the US to believe it could step back from Middle East involvement. Instead, the US is again gradually and reluctantly expanding its presence in the

## HIGHLIGHTS

- The US is in reactive mode in the Middle East, overcome by regional events, including the spread of violent extremism, the reassertion of authoritarianism, and increased state fragility.
- Four years after the Arab uprisings, counter-terrorism has once again become the guiding focus of policy, defining much of the US involvement in the Middle East.
- The Obama administration has shown great resolve and determination on the nuclear negotiations with Iran, and if successful, it would represent an important diplomatic and geostrategic turning point.



region, starting with air strikes in Iraq and then in Syria and followed by the slow increase in the number of US troops in Iraq.

The one initiative that could still produce a breakthrough is negotiations with Iran on the nuclear file. The Obama administration has shown great resolve and determination on the nuclear issue and, if successful, it would represent an important diplomatic and geostrategic turning point.

### **OBAMA THE REALIST**

Obama, despite liberal inclinations, is a realist at heart. Although his speeches continue to be punctuated by appeals to the defence of liberal values, in policy terms there has been little follow through. Cognisant of the limits of American power, the president is wary of liberal interventionism and over time has narrowed the definition of US national interests. Four years after the Arab uprisings, the Obama administration has resorted again to a narrow, security-focused approach to the Middle East.

Following a White House foreign policy review at the beginning of his second term, in a speech to the United Nations (UN) General Assembly on 24 September 2013 Obama defined US core interests in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as: confronting external aggression against allies and partners, ensuring the free flow of energy from the region to the world, dismantling terrorist networks that threaten Americans, and opposing the development or the use of weapons of mass destruction. On these issues, the US would be prepared to act alone, if necessary. Meanwhile, the promotion of democracy and human rights would instead require cooperation with international and regional partners. In the same speech, only two specific objectives in the region were highlighted to occupy the last three years of Obama's presidency: the Iranian nuclear issue and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The peace process is deadlocked and US relations with Israel are at an all-time low, but the extension of negotiations with Iran still offers some hope (despite the potential risks over the next six months).

Policy towards Syria and Iraq falls under the priority of dismantling terrorist networks. In Syria, US regional allies expected that Washington would agree to a repeat of the Libya intervention, all the more so after the use of chemical weapons by the Assad regime. However, it was not until the decapitation of two Americans at the hands of the Islamic State (IS) that the US decided to step in, with the clear caveat of fighting the Islamist extremists rather than the Syrian regime.

Obama has used international fora to rally multilateral action. He has been careful about crafting multinational coalitions for interventions in Libya, Syria and Iraq, and where possible has sought UN backing. He has also twice presided over meetings of the United Nations Security Council during the UN's annual General Assembly – the first time in 2009 to encourage measures on nuclear non-proliferation and then in 2014 to press for cooperation on counter-terrorism.

Obama's one big potential breakthrough would be the successful conclusion of a nuclear deal with Iran that could open the way for greater coordination with Tehran on regional crises such as Iraq and Syria. However, the extension of the negotiation timeframe also opens the way for potential spoilers on both sides, and will make it difficult for the US to continue to hold together the disparate group of negotiating partners. But Obama deserves credit for his efforts to engage Iran and for persuading the US Congress to refrain from actions that could jeopardise negotiations. Obama's aim to achieve a normalisation of relations with Iran and the country's reintegration into the international community is a marked departure from the policy pursued by most previous presidents. As described in an interview with *The New Yorker's* David Remnick in January 2014, Obama would like to see 'an equilibrium developing between Sunni, or predominantly Sunni, Gulf states and Iran in which there's competition, perhaps suspicion, but not an active or proxy warfare'. While such a new balance of power is appealing, not least because it could allow the US to disengage somewhat from the region, the White House has had little success in selling this idea to the Arab Gulf states and Israel.

---

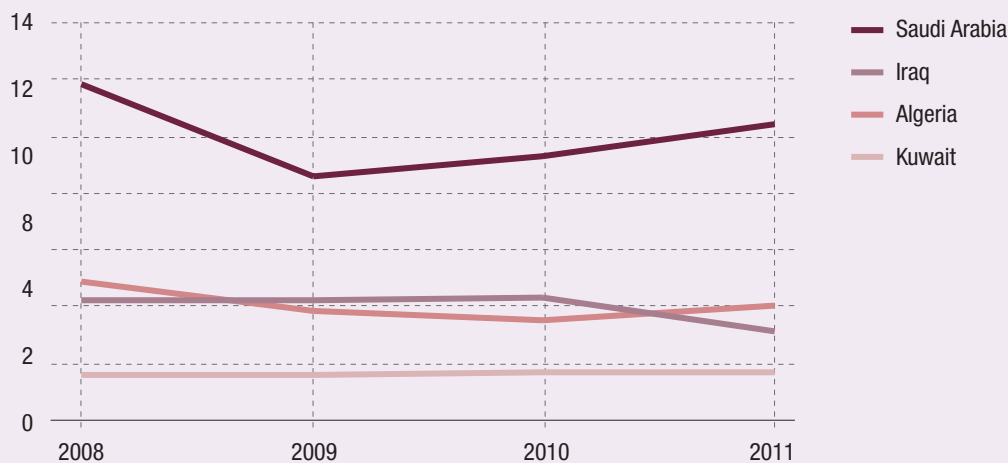
The US has historically been a close ally of the authoritarian Gulf states, owing to the imperative of energy security. The Gulf states provided stable energy markets while the US extended security guarantees to counter Iran. As US energy import needs diminish, some analysts expect this dynamic to change. While the US imported close to 30 per cent (25 per cent of net imports) of the energy it consumed in 2000, by 2013 that figure was closer to 25 per cent (13 per cent of net imports). Imports from the Middle East have not yet diminished drastically as the shale revolution has

led to increased production of light sweet crude (as opposed to Saudi Arabia’s mostly sour quality) that has replaced imports from West Africa (see Figures 1 and 2).

In any case, the US will have continuing interests in the Gulf, as any disruption of the global oil supply would have important economic implications. Gulf states also recycle hundreds of billions of dollars in oil revenues through Western economies by purchasing weapons and other assets, including US Treasuries and corporate

**Figure 1**  
Percentage of US Imports of Crude Oil and Petroleum Products (thousand barrels)

Source: US Energy Information Administration



**Figure 2**  
US Imports from Gulf Countries of Crude Oil and Petroleum Products (thousand barrels)

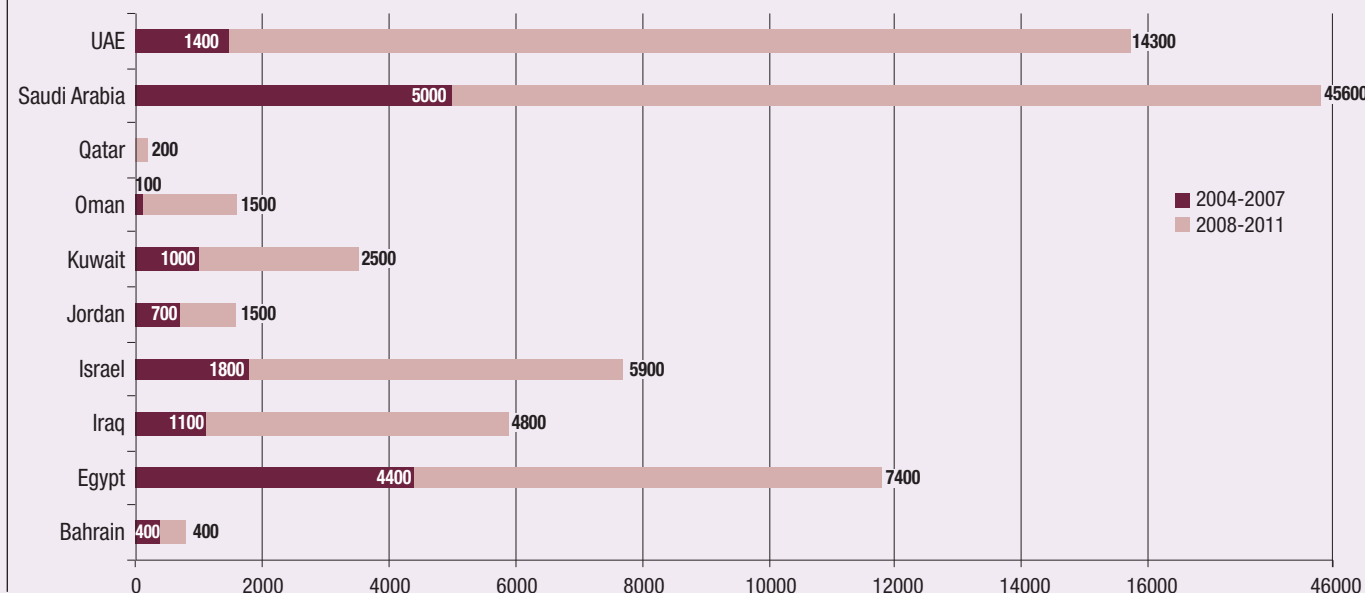
Source: US Energy Information Administration





**Figure 3**  
**Arms Transfer Agreements from US (in millions of current US dollars)**

Source: Richard F. Grimmet and Paul K. Kerr, 'Conventional Arms Transfers to Developing Nations, 2004-2011', Congressional Research Service, 24 August 2012, pp 44-45.



bonds, equities, and real estate. In 2014, the US signed an agreement for an \$11 billion arms sale to Qatar and in 2010 President Obama approved a \$60 billion arms sale to Saudi Arabia (see Figure 3). The Saudi Arabian Monetary Agency (SAMA) is known to invest a large percentage of its \$757 billion in assets in the US, mainly in fixed income, equity, and some alternative investments. In addition, collaboration with the Gulf states is now as much about countering IS as it is about stable energy markets.

### REFOCUSING ON COUNTER-TERRORISM

Two years after Obama stated that al-Qaeda was 'on the path to defeat' counter-terrorism has once again become the guiding focus of policy, defining much of the US's involvement in the Middle East. The US has crafted a broad coalition to aid in the effort of rolling back the IS threat. For the sake of legitimacy, it was important for the administration to enlist the support of Arab states. However, several of the 10 Arab countries included in the coalition

have expressed misgivings about the US policy of targeting IS but not the Assad regime in Syria.

The revived jihadist threat has led to the development of unlikely collaborations that overlap the traditional US policy alliance with Israel (and related peace signatories Egypt and Jordan) on the one hand and the Arab Gulf states on the other. In the fight against IS the US has even sought the cooperation, if not the coordination, of Iran, as reflected in a letter President Obama sent Iran's supreme leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, at the beginning of November 2014 highlighting their battle against a common enemy. Likewise, Washington indirectly relies on Iraqi Shiite militias (alongside other forces such as the Kurdish Peshmerga) in the fight against IS.

While Obama understandably feels the need to counter the immediate threat of what he has called the 'network of death', there are at least three risks with the current US approach to IS. First, there is a risk of mission creep in Iraq and Syria. Targeted drone strikes led to air strikes and shipments of weapons to indigenous forces and,

despite repeated reassurances that there would be no 'boots on the ground', the White House recently announced that 1,500 additional soldiers, albeit on non-combatant missions, would be sent to Iraq, doubling its personnel on the ground. Second, the danger of a mainly military approach is that it risks ignoring the motivations that lead groups to resort to terrorism and how military campaigns may play into extremist hands by causing sufficient collateral damage to strengthen their support. Third, there is a lack of clarity of the ultimate aim of US policy (and whether it is backed up with sufficient resources) – is the US trying to destroy or contain IS?

While Obama vowed to make counter-terrorism operations more transparent and rein in executive power, he has so far failed on both counts, as reflected in the extensive use of drone attacks and the shaky legality of air-strikes in Iraq and Syria.

## The Obama administration has always been ambivalent about democracy promotion

In a policy guidance document in May 2013, Obama, responding to the backlash provoked by the collateral damage from drone attacks, set out new guidance on the use of drones. Strikes would only target terrorists posing 'a continuing and imminent threat to the American people', and be constrained by 'a near-certainty that no civilians will be killed or injured'. The extent to which these measures have been enforced is a subject of dispute. The new guidance also expected the CIA to turn over drone strikes and counter-terrorism operations to the Pentagon in an effort to increase transparency and devolve the CIA to an intelligence-gathering role. But turf wars, congressional resistance, and the demands of host governments have delayed the handover despite Obama's reiterations to the effect in a speech in May 2014.

The White House has been relying on two congressional Authorizations for Use of Military Force (AUMF) passed in 2001 against al-Qaeda

and in 2002 against Saddam Hussein to justify its actions in Iraq and Syria, despite previous statements that they should be repealed on the grounds that they were overly broad and obsolete. The administration had already relied on the 2001 AUMF to justify drone strikes in Yemen and Somalia. Only after congressional elections in 2014 did Obama state he would ask for new formal congressional authority to combat IS. A lack of urgency has seen the issue postponed to the next congressional term.

In a speech to the UN General Assembly in September 2014 Obama stated: 'There can be no reasoning – no negotiation – with this brand of evil'. The ongoing campaign can contribute to degrading IS capabilities over time. However, destroying IS would be very difficult to achieve, and such an objective would disregard the decentralised nature of militant extremism, its ability to resurface under a different guise, and the mobilising effect of the fight in attracting radicalised militants from the region and well beyond.

### DEMOCRACY BY THE WAYSIDE

In the wake of the Arab uprisings, in May 2011 Obama pledged that it would be US policy to 'promote reform across the region, and to support transitions to democracy'. Nevertheless, pre-2011 policies remain in place, particularly in Jordan, Morocco, and the Gulf countries. As conveyed in the Project on Middle East Democracy's report on 'The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal 2015', in terms of the countries in transition only Yemen has received a considerable increase in US aid to support democracy and governance. The administration's only larger-scale reform initiative, a proposal for a \$770 million Middle East and North Africa Incentive Fund, has since been abandoned in favour of a much smaller MENA Initiative Fund that emphasises development assistance rather than political or economic reform. Of the total foreign assistance requested by the Obama administration for the MENA for fiscal year 2015 of \$7.36 billion, the percentage requested for peace and security purposes increased from 73 per cent in 2010 to 76 per

6



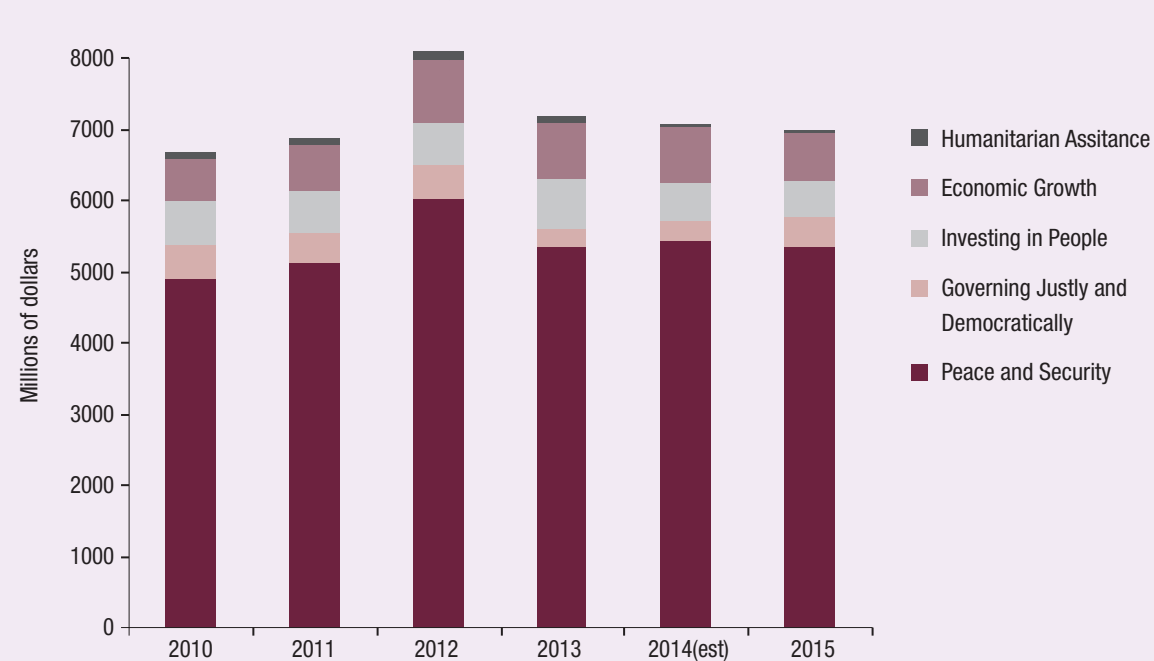
cent, while that for democracy and governance fell from 7.4 per cent to 5.8 per cent.

The Obama administration has always been ambivalent about democracy promotion, partly because it has doubts about what the US can accomplish on this front. Nevertheless, in his speeches Obama continues to make appeals to defend democracy and liberal values. Most recently, in a speech at the 2014 Clinton Global Initiative he stated that ‘America’s support for civil society is a matter of national security’ and that government agencies are now expected to ‘oppose attempts by foreign governments to dictate the nature of our assistance to civil society’, somewhat implausible statements considering the feeble US response to regime crackdowns on civil society, and dissenters in general, in Egypt and Bahrain. For example, as the Egyptian government continued its clamp down against civil society with a 10 November 2014 deadline for their registration under a highly restrictive 2002 law, the State Department held a large investment conference for American businesses in Cairo coinciding with the deadline.

The Obama administration’s policy towards Egypt has been particularly muddled and characterised by mixed signals. For example, the US voiced only mild concern as the Morsi government adopted increasingly authoritarian policies. When the military deposed Morsi the US refused to call the ouster a coup, since doing so could trigger a congressional halt in military aid. Although part of the aid was eventually suspended, Secretary of State John Kerry subsequently declared that the military’s ‘road map’ of a return to democracy was ‘being carried out to the best of our perception’. The aid suspension was a significant signal, as it was the first time the US had suspended any of the annual \$1.3 billion military package. However, it came reluctantly, several months after the military coup and has been accompanied by contradictory statements from Kerry who has opted for a policy of private pressure and public praise in the attempt to minimise the extent of the authoritarian regression. Ten Apache helicopters that had hitherto been withheld were delivered in December 2014 allegedly in support of Egypt’s counter-terrorism operations in the Sinai. This gave credence to concerns that Senate

**Figure 4**  
**Total Assistance by Objective 2010-2015**

Source: Project on Middle East Democracy ‘The Federal Budget and Appropriations for Fiscal Year 2015’



defence legislation unveiled in June 2014 would allow the Pentagon to sidestep aid prohibitions as it sought to secure counter-terrorism alliances with unseemly allies in the Middle East. US leverage has further been sapped by the Gulf states' unconditional financial support to Egypt since the coup, which is said to amount to at least \$20 billion (in loans, grants and oil products from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Kuwait).

The Obama administration has also avoided public condemnation of human rights abuses on the part of the Bahraini regime, preferring a more quiet diplomacy that will not jeopardise its valuable security relationship with the kingdom (the US fifth fleet is stationed in Bahrain). Even the expulsion of a high-ranking State Department official failed to elicit condemnation. Although \$53 million worth of security assistance items remain on hold, including crowd control weapons and other dual-use security items, in December 2013 a \$580 million expansion of the US Navy's presence in Bahrain was announced.

It is not only aid to support democracy that is declining. The US is also overlooking the connection between anti-terrorism measures and domestic repression in its Arab partner countries. As part of its strategy against IS, Washington is encouraging its Arab allies to counteract terrorist financing and support emanating from their countries. But, as the Gulf Centre for Human Rights has highlighted, newly enacted terrorism laws in several Gulf states are leading to arbitrary arrests and imprisonment, reflecting the vague wording and broad scope of legislation which gives the regimes power to arrest and prosecute people for politically motivated reasons.

## OUTLOOK

Since 2011, crises on the ground have shaped the American agenda in the Middle East more than the other way around. In the face of a very difficult regional scenario characterised by instability derived from the fall out of the 2011 uprisings and the spread of violent extremism, the Obama

administration's response has been heavily focused on security and has brought about a return to the traditional support for authoritarian regimes in an effort to restore stability. However, this approach ignores the fact that repressive regimes tend to exacerbate the problem of regional terrorism that the US seeks to combat and foment the socio-political dissatisfaction that led to the uprisings in the first place. This short-termism on the security front contrasts with the opening of a possibility for a long-term accommodation with Iran.

Obama has sought to focus US foreign policy in the MENA on a few priority goals, including nuclear negotiations with Iran and the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. He changed the parameters of negotiations with Iran by injecting the US position with much needed flexibility. If he is able to withstand the pressure from factions opposed to the talks and clinch the nuclear negotiations, this would prove to be a game changer for the region. Prospects for the Israeli-Palestinian Peace Process, however, are dire. At the beginning of 2015, the US opposed a UN draft resolution demanding an end to Israeli occupation within three years, a missed opportunity to signal a change in course.

*Ana Echagüe is senior researcher at FRIDE.*

*This Policy Brief belongs to the project 'Transitions and Geopolitics in the Arab World: links and implications for international actors', led by FRIDE and HIVOS. We acknowledge the generous support of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs of Norway. For further information on this project, please contact: Kawa Hassan, Hivos (k.hassan@hivos.nl) or Kristina Kausch, FRIDE (kkausch@fride.org).*

**e-mail: [fride@fride.org](mailto:fride@fride.org)  
[www.fride.org](http://www.fride.org)**