

## The Middle East that Awaits a New US Administration

**John McLaughlin**

**John McLaughlin** was Deputy Director of the CIA from 2000 to 2004. He now teaches at the Johns Hopkins University and conducts research for the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies of Washington.

Along with a history marked by intervention from external powers, the Middle East is now confronting conflicts which combine political, ethnic and religious dimensions. The United States can not withdraw its leadership in the area. Aside from the Syrian question, the next American administration will have to redefine the network of partnerships and alliances in the region and grapple with a multitude of problems, none of which have simple solutions.

politique étrangère

Not since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire after World War I has the Middle East been wracked with so much change, violence, and uncertainty. When long building pressures erupted with the so-called "Arab Spring" in 2011, Henry Kissinger presciently said that it was only "scene one of act one of a five act play". Before we can venture even a guess about the next scene or act and how American policymakers might approach it, it's necessary to step back and examine the region in its broader setting.

### **Strategic context**

Contemporary events are so riveting that it is easy to forget how much the Middle East has been shaped by external forces. In this century, this has been the case ever since Mr. Picot and Mr. Sykes drew their lines on the map delineating some of the new Middle Eastern boundaries exactly a century ago this year.

Indeed, the United States (US) and other great powers have long seen influence in the region as tightly related to their security and viewed its resources as essential to their economic health – convictions demonstrated repeatedly since the end of WW II and the onset of the Cold War.

During the Cold War, direct great power competition in the region was a kind of zero-sum game as the United States and the Soviet Union vied for influence and access. Even as hot wars flared in Asia – thinking of Korea and Vietnam – the US, Russia, and many European nations still saw the Middle East as an arena for competition. It played out in relations with Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran, and Libya, in weapons sales, and in the Arab-Israeli conflicts.

But when the Cold War ended, the major powers' approaches to the Middle East became more individualistic and fluid, either by necessity or choice. During the early post-Cold War years, Russia and China were mindful of the Middle East but thoroughly absorbed with internal transformations – Russia moving from a command economy to private enterprise and China digesting Deng Xiaoping's market economic reforms and purging sympathizers of the 1989 Tiananmen Square protests. Without the overlay of U.S.-Soviet rivalry, Europe focused on rebuilding traditional relationships in the Middle East, while elsewhere deepening integration within the European Union, and laying the groundwork for bringing in former Soviet satellite countries as new members. For its part, the US was absorbed in consolidating its post-Cold War position in Europe (the uniting of Germany within NATO, for example), building a new relationship with Russia and the former Soviet Union's newly-independent states, and dampening ethnic conflict in the Balkans. America's focus on the Middle East sharpened dramatically of course as terrorism escalated and particularly after the 9/11 attacks and in the chaotic aftermath of the 2003 Iraq invasion.

Meanwhile, the global financial crisis of 2008 weakened confidence in the US, including among Middle Eastern partners. At the same time, Russia was becoming more assertive, as evidenced by its occupation of parts of Georgia in 2008 and parts of Ukraine in 2013. And the perception grew that China was "rising" in a way bound to challenge American international dominance.

As the major powers were adjusting to these new dynamics, the Middle East was rocked by three phenomena that changed the character of the region and the terms on which outsiders must engage it. *First*, the Iraq war polarized the countries of the region and roiled relations among the major outside powers. *Second*, Islamic extremism sunk deeper roots and sparked divisions among outside powers about how to respond to it. And *third*, the region experienced the Arab Spring, which upset not only the domestic norms of many countries but also changed many of the personalities and institutions that served for years as conduits to the outside powers.

In short, the end of the Cold War meant that Middle Eastern competition among the great powers was separated for the first time in decades from a global struggle. The Middle East has thus become the world's principal laboratory for practicing the new balance of power politics likely to characterize the coming decades. It is the arena where the first rounds of a new "Great Game" are playing out. The game has begun, whether the great powers are ready or not.

### **Cross-Cutting Regional Trends**

What makes today's Middle East so radically different and vexing for American policymakers are the many inter-locking dimensions of conflict now roiling the region. To be sure, the United States has sought to deal with localized or single-issue flare-ups frequently in the past – such as the Palestinian intifadas or the 2006 Israeli-Hezbollah conflict. But since 2011, multiplying layers of conflict have merged with long-simmering societal trends to produce a highly destabilizing mix of forces.

Looking first at the societal level, American analysts have long worried that the quality of governance trails behind the needs and desires of the populace. Arab public opinion is hard to measure and interpret, but the most reliable recent surveys show strong support for democracy and a strong desire for its perceived economic benefits, such as provision of basic necessities and elimination of corruption.<sup>1</sup>

This is not surprising in a region where the public is increasingly well connected to social media and two-thirds are under the age of 30 – and where youth unemployment hovers around 23 percent, the highest in the world according to the UN.<sup>2</sup> Education systems, meanwhile, are not uniformly geared to the modern world and opportunities for women are uneven throughout the region. The result has been a build up of needs and aspirations that governments were either unable or unwilling to address.

This was the fuel behind the explosion of discontent in so many parts of the region in 2011. In only one of the affected countries, Tunisia, have the public's aspirations not been wholly disappointed. In others the outcomes have ranged from civil war to revived authoritarianism.

The dashing of so many hopes then ushered in what we see now – the confluence of six dimensions of conflict.

---

1. Arab public opinion, see M. Tessler, A. Jamal, M. Robbins, "New Findings on Arabs and Democracy", *Journal of Democracy*, No. 4, 2012, available at: <<http://muse.jhu.edu>>.

2. "Youth Unemployment in Arab Region is Highest in the World:International Labour Organization", *Al-Arabiya*, February 2013, available at: <<http://english.alarabiya.net>>.

## Dimensions of conflict

These conflicts are not mutually exclusive but we can peel each away from the bundle enough to examine its uniqueness.

First, there are today's bitter battles between Persians and Arabs – echoing centuries-old tensions between the two. The US-driven nuclear deal with Iran was not the primary stimulus but it added to Arab (especially Saudi) suspicion and resentment at Iran's growing influence. This fueled the war in Saudi Arabia's neighbor Yemen, where the Saudis are convinced Iran was behind a Houthi tribal rebellion that displaced the Saudi-backed Hadi government; Abd Rabbuh Mansur Hadi had been in power since long dominant dictator Ali Abdullah Saleh was driven from office in 2012.

The Saudis are also convinced Iran is behind protest and episodic terrorism in their Eastern provinces where the country's Shia minority is thought to be susceptible to Iranian advances. Regarding the Iranian nuclear agreement, Riyadh is not only deeply skeptical that Iran will comply but also worried that the agreement could presage an eventual Iranian-US rapprochement that would leave Saudi Arabia less secure and less influential in the region.

Second, layered on top of and partially derivative of this conflict is another factor complicating US calculations: a broader regional *split between Sunni and Shia Arabs*, with the latter of course sharing their sectarian identity with Shia Iran. While Iran is a party to this conflict, it extends beyond the Arab-Persian dimension to set tribes, militias, and terrorist organizations against each other throughout the region. This is most pointedly the case in Iraq, where the United States recognizes that the country's fundamental political problem is the failure of the Shia-dominated Baghdad government to address the grievances of Sunni tribes. They comprise about 20 percent of the population and occupy strategically important provinces where the Islamic State (IS) has had the most success. The longer this problem goes unresolved, the harder it will be to dislodge the IS from its Iraqi strongholds.

A third simultaneous dimension of conflict pulling America in is the battle between *regimes throughout the region and surging terrorist groups*. This is most evident of course in Iraq and Syria, where the IS, though under added pressure and losing ground, continues to occupy major cities and large stretches of territory in between – and now has more than

40 jihadi groups pledging allegiance around the world.<sup>3</sup> Al Qaeda and its affiliates also remain active, in some cases posing the preeminent danger; in Yemen, for example, Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), surging amidst the chaos of civil war, came close to bringing off direct attacks on the US homeland twice – in 2009 and 2010 – and continues to try.

Fourth, conflict also rages *between and among terrorist groups themselves*. The success of the IS is pushing Al Qaeda efforts to recapture leadership of the jihadi movement. This plays out principally in Syria between IS and Jabhat al-Nusra, the Al Qaeda affiliate there. But clashes also occur between these Sunni-oriented groups and Hezbollah, the Iranian-sponsored radical Shia group that has enormous influence in Lebanon and has sent fighters to Syria in support of the Assad regime. In combating these two groups, the US encounters a dilemma that is embedded in many of the choices Syria presents: hurting one, helps the other.

Fifth, in the background of all this is the barely suppressed conflict between what might be called *modernizers and traditionalists*. This flared in the early days of the Arab Spring but is now mostly below the surface. It played out most dramatically in Egypt's see-sawing back and forth between a fairly-elected but failed Muslim Brotherhood-led government and the restoration under General Abdul Fatah Al-Sissi of government that is a near-approximation of the Mubarak regime, deposed by popular demonstrations in 2011. The US equivocation on how to respond to these changes – and its ultimate abandoning of Mubarak – did much to shake the confidence of America's regional allies in US leadership.

Elsewhere in the region, leaders have largely bought down potential protest by sharp increases on social welfare, subsidies, and public services. But this is probably only a stop gap that has in no way eliminated the underlying pressures. This has the feel of regimes postponing the inevitable.

Sixth, drawn into this mix very directly now are the *great powers*, who are once again present with arms in the Middle East. The United States seeks to unite and lead a coalition of traditional Western partners and regional allies in military operations against ISIS. The strategy at the moment is to wear ISIS down with air strikes in support of regional partners on the ground and avoid a major US ground deployment while targeting the group with limited Special Operations forces and degrading its funding through a variety of means – all the while pressing diplomatically

---

3. Islamic State affiliates, see at: <<http://intelcenter.com>>.

for a political solution. Russia's bombing campaign sought to prop up the widely-discredited Assad government, ensure that Moscow has a substantial voice in any transition arrangements, and give Russia added diplomatic clout in the region more generally -- objectives that Moscow has generally achieved. Iran joins in propping up Assad, with the additional goals of protecting its Levant proxy, Hezbollah – Iran's way of exerting influence out to the Mediterranean.

China stands apart from the fighting but has begun to see its interests more directly on the line, after years of an essentially mercantilist approach to the region. This is not only because China gets about 60 percent of its oil from the region but also because President Xi seeks to extend China's reach into the region with his New Silk Road plan – a series of transportation and commercial links between China, the Mideast, and Europe.<sup>4</sup>

China projects "soft power" into the region through its more than 1000 peacekeepers in Lebanon, South Sudan, Darfur, and the Western Sahara. More importantly, Beijing's growing interest in the region is signaled by an increased tempo of naval activity activity in the region, notably frequent port calls in the Persian Gulf.<sup>5</sup>

### Way Forward

One clear conclusion for the US is that there is no conceivable master stroke – militarily or diplomatically – that can cut through and resolve all of these problems at once. And no decisive progress is likely during the remaining months of the current US administration.

For the next administration therefore, two starting point guidelines seem advisable. First, it will be essential to establish clear priorities, recognizing that this will almost certainly mean dealing with problems one at a time.

Second, it is important to realize that nearly all of the possible choices, particularly on Syria, have significant downsides, and that all decisions will carry significant risk. This in the early days of the conflict created disagreement among US policymakers about how and when to best oppose

---

4. China in the Middle East, O.Daniels and C. Brown, "China's Energy Security Achilles Heel:Middle Eastern Oil" *The Diplomat*, September 2008 available at: <<http://thediplomat.com>>; K. Johnson, "China Tops U.S as Biggest Oil Importer", *Foreign Policy*, May 2015, available at: <<http://foreignpolicy.com>> and S. Tiezzi, "China's New Silk Road Vision Revealed", *The Diplomat*, May 2014, available at: <<http://thediplomat.com>>.

5. D. Sun, "China's Soft Military Presence in the Middle East", Middle East Institute, March 2015, available: <[www.mei.edu](http://www.mei.edu)>.

the regime and the terrorists. The result was to delay decisions, with the result that the next round of decisions became still harder. It was a classic case of "no decision equals a decision".

In terms of priorities, the next US administration will have to first roll back the idea that the US is reluctant to lead, is somehow unreliable, or is not sufficiently committed to the region. This is in many ways an unfair impression, particularly in light of the vigorous efforts US Secretary of State Kerry has made on a range of issues. Nonetheless, one does not have to scratch much below the surface in the Middle East to encounter that conviction. It seems to flow from episodes such as perceived US vacillation on leadership issues in Egypt in 2011-2013, the lack of follow through on "red line" threats to Syria over its chemical weapons use, the slowness of US engagement on Syria, and, more recently, the contrast between US policy and Russian President Putin's creation of dramatic "facts on the ground" – never mind his motives or methods – by inserting Russian forces to back his Syrian ally.

Combating this impression will require deep engagement with and high level attention to the region. It will be essential to be in close consultation at senior levels throughout the region and to field a persuasive strategy for dealing with the region's most pressing problems, particularly the Islamic State; a losing strategy is to take refuge in the thought that this is the region's own problem and these countries need to deal with it themselves: regional leaders often acknowledge this is unlikely to happen without US leadership. And ultimately, it may require an increased US physical presence on the battlefield – what Middle Eastern officials call "skin in the game".

In terms of substantive priorities, Syria and the Islamic State have to be number one, to include of course the Iraq dimension of the problem. How these end will have a dramatic effect across the board: on US leadership status, the Iranian and Russian roles in the region, and, going forward, the level of tension between Sunni and Shia factions.

US policymakers now routinely say that Syria is the toughest and most complex problem they have seen in decades – and the Islamic State is at the heart of it. As difficult as it was to disrupt and degrade Al Qaeda after 9/11, the Islamic State is harder – because it has at least five things Al Qaeda did not possess in anything approaching the same measure.

First the Islamic State has a sophisticated global strategy that gives it flexibility and resilience. The Institute for the Study of War delineates

three concentric circles of planning by the group: an “interior ring” (Syria, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, and Palestine) where their objective is to conquer, defend and expand; a “near abroad” ring (the rest of the Middle East, extending to Afghanistan and Pakistan, and North Africa) with Libya as the main external hub – with the objective to establish affiliates and increase disorder; and a “far abroad” ring (Europe, the US, and parts of Asia and sub-Saharan Africa) with the objective of attacking and polarizing.<sup>6</sup>

Second, the group holds territory beyond anything Al Qaeda was ever able to achieve. As this is written, it appears the IS has been pushed off some proportion of this – 25 to 40 percent, depending on how one calculates – but it still holds major cities such as Mosul and Fallujah in Iraq and Raqqa in Syria.

Third, it has money, somewhat diminished now it appears, as a result of coalition airstrikes on bank storage sites and the group’s oil assets. But given earlier estimates putting IS holdings in the \$500 million to \$1 billion range – with \$1 million to \$3 million dollars a day from oil earnings alone – chances are they are still richer than any previous terrorist group, giving them unparalleled means to acquire expertise and materiel for operations.<sup>7</sup>

Fourth, they have a more developed and professional propaganda narrative to appeal to potential recruits, highlighting the allegedly rewarding lifestyle in their “caliphate”.

And finally, as the attacks in Paris, Brussels, Ankara and elsewhere show, they have access to their preferred external targets by the unprecedented number of Western passport holders in their ranks – something Al Qaeda struggled to acquire with limited success.

It’s hard to fit this tough combination into the classic three-part counter-terrorism formula: destroy the leadership, deny it safe haven, and change the conditions that give rise to extremism. Strategy needs to address all three vectors, but the highest priority needs to be on what the 19<sup>th</sup> century strategist Carl von Clausewitz called the opponent’s “center of gravity” – the point where a decisive blow promises to do the most damage to the other side’s cause, balance, or capability.

---

6. Islamic State strategy: <[www.understandingwar.org](http://www.understandingwar.org)>.

7. Z. Laub and J. Masters, “The Islamic State”, Council on Foreign Relations, March 2016 available at: <[www.cfr.org](http://www.cfr.org)>.



In this case, the closest thing is probably the Islamic State's hold on territory. This is what gives substance and credibility to their narrative, enables their fund-raising, and provides safe haven for training and recruitment. And that is presumably the rationale for the current US strategy of slowly squeezing the Islamic State and loosening its grip on land it holds. That is working but at an uncertain pace – and with the Islamic State's demonstrated ability to carry out external operations and set up bases outside its Iraqi-Syrian heartland – Libya in particular – time is not on our side. A new administration may need to look for ways to advance the timetable, particularly with regard to taking back major cities, a goal on which deadlines have repeatedly slipped.

To compound the problem, it's important to recognize that territorial gains against the IS fall under the heading of "necessary but not sufficient" for defeating it. The other critical part of the equation involves ensuring that governments in Syria and Iraq address the grievances of Sunnis (70 percent of Syria, 20 percent of Iraq) who in Syria have long been abused by the regime's Alawite minority rulers. In Iraq, Sunnis have yet to recover from the discrimination experienced under the preceding Shia-dominated Baghdad government of Nouri Al-Maliki. The current prime minister, Haidar Al-Abadi, also a Shia, has cobbled together a reform program that has yet to overcome hard-line Shia opposition, probably backed by Iran – so the alienation of the Sunnis, mostly resident in areas of IS influence, persists. As long as this is the case, it will continue to be a magnet for other Sunnis and their sympathizers – from the region and beyond.

Progress on this will require persistent diplomatic effort by the US and its partners as in the gatherings of the major powers and the combatants so far in Vienna, Munich, and Geneva. The toughest task is finding a pathway to a new and more inclusive government in Syria – assuming the fighting does not just create an enduring partition. The dilemma is that the parties, as of this writing, are nowhere close to consensus on how and with what result the conflict should end.

In sum, resolving these two interrelated problems – the IS hold on territory and the grievances of Sunnis in Syria and Iraq – is really the only way out of the dilemma created by the IS and the fracturing of Syria and Iraq. The anti-IS coalition is at last engaged on both fronts with halting progress – but not yet enough to dispel the conviction that this will be a very long-term struggle requiring strategic patience and persistent engagement.

Beyond the Syria-Iraq arena, the new US administration will have to give priority to a variety of other issues, beginning with the Iran nuclear agreement. The first task will involve monitoring Iranian compliance with the restrictions the agreement places on its possession of advanced centrifuges, enrichment of uranium (nothing above 3,7 percent), and its stockpile of enriched uranium (no more than 300kg, about 3 percent of what it had in early 2015). So far, no violations have been reported.<sup>8</sup>

The second task will be gauging Iran's behavior in other arenas and calibrating the US approach accordingly. To date, there has been no lessening of Iranian aggressiveness in fields such as missile tests and support to pro-Assad forces in Syria; many proponents of the nuclear agreement had hoped cooperation would spill over into such areas. On the other hand, early signs are that the benefits flowing to Iran economically from the agreement have strengthened pragmatic forces, grouped around president Rouhani, who were Iran's principal advocates of the nuclear agreement as a pathway to reduced economic sanctions.

Optimism has proven groundless often in the past regarding Iran, but gains scored by Rouhani's supporters in recent parliamentary elections may be the opening wedge heralding greater influence for pragmatists who question the hardline approach of Supreme Leader Khamenei and elements such as the Revolutionary Guard. A new US administration should look for ways to encourage this trend while continuing to oppose Iranian external behavior favoring terrorists and other adversaries in the region and beyond.

The Israeli-Palestinian dispute was once regarded as the single issue whose resolution would have the most salutary effect on the region. That distinction is now held by the Syrian problem but any US administration will remain steadfast in defense of Israel. Prospects for progress in Israel's conflict with the Palestinians have receded dramatically, however. This results from declining support among Israelis and Arabs for a "two-state" solution (Pew Research Center surveys this year show a 24 percent drop since 2014); rising terrorism in Israel; the Palestinian movement's split between the West Bank and Hamas-led Gaza; an aggressive Israeli settlement policy on disputed land; and a coming Palestinian leadership transition with an uncertain outcome. It is no exaggeration to say that a new US administration will find itself back to square one in efforts to resolve this dispute.

---

8. J. Tirone, "Iranian Nuclear Program", *Bloombergview*, February 2016, available at: <[www.bloombergview.com](http://www.bloombergview.com)>.

Elsewhere in the region, the arriving US administration will need to pay special attention to relations with long-standing ally Saudi Arabia, whose confidence in its relationship with Washington was shaken by the Iran nuclear agreement that it strongly opposed. Saudi Arabia, moreover, is in the midst of a leadership transition to a new and untested generation at precisely the moment when plunging oil prices – likely to remain low for the foreseeable future – have brought unprecedented pressure to diversify the economy; Riyadh's budget over the last three years has come 70-90 percent from oil revenues. And its oil wealth has been the source of subsidies and public works – 60 percent of the working population is in the public sector – that have helped the country escape the societal turmoil witnessed elsewhere.

Another bellwether of trends in the region is Egypt, the world's largest Arab country and the recipient on \$1.3 billion in US military assistance. Here ISIS has a significant presence in the Sinai east of Cairo, where Ansar al-Bait has declared allegiance to ISIS and is getting weapons from ISIS's Libyan base. Terrorist attacks have soared – over 700 in a 22-month period last year compared to fewer than 90 in the previous 22 months. There are more than 40,000 political prisoners and Egypt is one of the world's top two countries issuing death sentences with 509 condemned in 2014.

President Abdul Fatah Al-Sissi has managed to restore a measure of order but the economy is fragile and sustained mainly by subsidies from Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Kuwait. Although the population is wary of more chaos, it looks like Al-Sissi is just clamping a lid on inexorably building pressures, given all these problems and the fact that Islamists are mostly alienated from the government after showing electoral strength in 2012. Another political explosion seems likely during the term of the next US administration.

While these are the key touch points for a new US administration, it clearly will have other objectives in the region – continuing to encourage Tunisia's uniquely successful democratic evolution after the Arab Spring, bolstering close partners in the more progressive monarchies such as Jordan, Morocco, and the UAE, and working through an ever-complicated relationship with NATO partner Turkey.

With the US on its way to energy independence sometime in the next couple decades – the result of increased production, conservation, and "green" technology – some voices will inevitably be raised questioning the need for continued deep engagement in the Middle East. Heeding such advice would be ill-advised for two reasons: First, America's allies,

given their proximity and energy needs, cannot avoid involvement in the region, and for the US to back away would be to abandon its leadership role in an arena important to those it hopes to lead.

Second, recent years have demonstrated the truth of an ancient adage among Middle East watchers that “what starts in the Middle East never stays in the Middle East”.

For all these reasons, a new US administration must not let problems and priorities elsewhere turn it away from a region that it has helped to shape – for better and for worse – and whose trends will continue to have a direct bearing on a broad range of US interests.

