

# United States Geo-Strategic Interest And The Global Quest For Peace In The Middle East: Syria And Yemen In Focus

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*Abstract: Recent events in the Middle East may mark the beginning of a new epoch within Arab history and redefine the posture of the region given the strategic importance of the region to global powers. These events such as the uprisings present examples of popular action, in which the political and the social domains are intertwined to the extent of being almost inseparable. While the social protest nature at the beginning of the revolutions was central to their outbreak, they cannot be seen in isolation as protest movements that afflicted, in the main, the Arab “republics”. Indeed, protests have repeatedly arisen not only within the Arab countries with nominally republican governments, but also monarchies such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco. It is, therefore the pertinent to make an academic enquiry into the geo-strategic interest of the entire globe and the United States in particular in the Middle East. The paper adopts content analysis in the gathering and utilization of data in a bid to substantiate the strategic interests in the region. The paper finds amongst others that the Middle East is indeed a region that is of strategic importance to world powers and a lot of intrigues and influence from external parties have the propensity to further exacerbate the conflict in the region at exponential level. It therefore recommends amongst other things that giving the importance of the region to the entire globe it becomes pertinent that a considerable level of stability is maintained in the region.*

*Keywords: United States, Geo-Strategic Interest, Global Quest, For Peace, Middle East, Syria, Yemen, Focus.*

## I. INTRODUCTION

Recent events in the Middle East may mark the beginning of a new epoch within Arab history and redefine the posture of the region given the strategic importance of the region to global powers. These events such as the uprisings present examples of popular action, in which the political and the social domains are intertwined to the extent of being almost inseparable. While the social protest nature at the beginning of the revolutions was central to their outbreak, they cannot be seen in isolation as protest movements that afflicted, in the main, the Arab “republics”. Indeed, protests have repeatedly

arisen not only within the Arab countries with nominally republican governments, but also monarchies such as Bahrain, Jordan, and Morocco. It is, therefore, important to understand that these revolutions have an important geopolitical and geostrategic dimension that is reflected in their impact on the region and, inevitably, on the international arena. It has also become clear that geostrategic considerations have had a direct impact, albeit variant from one country’s revolution to the next, on the revolutions’ progress. This geostrategic reality was less obvious at the outset of the popular uprising in Tunisia. It became clearer, however, in the wake of the uprising in Egypt due to the country’s regional geostrategic

importance. By the time the Arab revolutions spread to Bahrain, Yemen, and Syria, the importance of the alternately intersecting and diverging geostrategic interests of the world's major players became undeniable. The popular rebellions appeared (to some) to be expressions of broader geostrategic patterns, rippling through both the regional and global levels in a region seen as an international hotspot because of its strategic location and economics. Revolutions in the Arab world, therefore, demonstrate these dynamics, while taking into account their overlapping and divergent interests, as well as their impact on the position of the geostrategic actors and their role in a region that is regarded as a global conflict zone due to its geostrategic and geo-economic significance. Naturally, popular revolutions in the Arab world were influenced by a changing geostrategic regional order, which, inevitably, produced significant shifts that, if assessed with the aim of forecasting their development, will have a significant impact on defining the regional and international geostrategic map. In other words, popular revolutions in the Arab world introduced important changes to the roles and division of power between the various geostrategic actors in a manner directly proportional to the geostrategic significance of the Arab Homeland as well as the individual affected countries' resources and ambitions.

## II. THE PERSISTING IMPORTANCE OF THE MIDDLE EAST

As a matter of fact, history and geopolitics suggest that America's predicament in the region is neither surprising nor exceptional. For centuries location, history, and religious factors have made this region a key issue in the calculations of Western powers (Pagden, 2008; Wawro, 2010: 1-13; Frémeaux, 2014: 11-38). From the early XX century onward the rising importance of fossil fuels has added a new major reason for continued interest in the area. Both as the world's largest economy and as the West's leading security provider the United States has thus seen its commitment to the stability of the Middle East and the preservation of access to its oil supplies increase.

In addition to crude geopolitical and economic considerations, US policy in the Middle East has been strongly influenced by ideological factors concerning America's status and role in international relations. During the Cold War, the region gradually became a major theater of the confrontation between the US and the Soviet Union. From Henry Truman to Ronald Reagan, the security of the Middle East was a persistent concern of Cold War American presidents – and the theater of both covert operations and full-scale military interventions (Little, 2008: 117-155). In the process, the very concept of Middle East gradually expanded to include large parts of the predominantly Muslim-populated areas of Africa and central and south-western Asia (Bacevich, 2016). It was indeed in the Middle East that the first major crisis of the post-Cold War era – the Gulf crisis of 1990-1991 – prompted American leaders to try to articulate a renewed vision for a US-led international order (Ruggie, 1994). From that moment on, the region has become the main testing ground for competing visions of America's role and purpose in the post-

Cold War world. From Bush 41's "New World Order" to Bush 43's "Global War On Terror," the central role of America's massive military power and the belief that the US possessed an almost unlimited capability to reshape the international environment became the key assumptions underlying the foreign policy approaches of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors (Haley, 2006; Bacevich, 2013).

As Obama took office in January 2009, such an approach appeared no longer sustainable, the most pressing issue on the agenda became the need to cope with the military overstretch and economic imbalances inherited by the past administration. The US was under pressure from both exhausting overseas military engagements and the worst economic crisis since the Great Depression. Inevitably, the administration's main efforts concentrated on avoiding economic collapse and promoting reform at home (Mann, 2012: XIX; Chollet, 2016: 51-53). For both ideological and pragmatic reasons, the new president and his staff felt compelled to engage what Derek Chollet (2016) has defined a "Long Game" aimed at reorienting and redefining the direction of America's grand strategy. Within that framework, Obama tried to articulate a foreign policy outlook which called for a conception of US global leadership based on the international rule of law, multilateralism, and diplomacy rather than outright military power. In practical terms, the key foreign policy priority was "rebalancing" – the idea that it was necessary for the US to resist the temptation of military adventurism and, in general, to adopt a more pragmatic attitude on the international stage (Mann, 2012: 340). The Obama administration also announced bold plans to reorganize America's geopolitical priorities and shift the focus from the Middle East to the Asia-Pacific (Clinton, 2011). Yet, in spite of plans for a "pivot" to Asia, the Middle East has remained a major testing ground for US policy-makers and their quest for a viable post-Cold War global strategy.

## III. GEO-STRATEGY: THE CASE OF THE SYRIA

The popular uprising in Syria took place against the backdrop of a complicated Geo-political reality. The Syrian leadership, which capitalized on its foreign policy and regional alliances as a means to confer a sense of political legitimacy on the ruling regime in Damascus, had engaged in a rapprochement with the West and the United States in an attempt to eliminate tensions. In this vein, the Syrian leadership looked for shared interests on different geopolitical scenes, particularly in Iraq prior to the United States' withdrawal. Simultaneously, the Syrian regime consolidated its alliance with Iran, particularly regarding security and military domains. Moreover, Damascus sought to establish stronger ties with Turkey – a relationship regarded as strategic by the Syrian leadership – focusing primarily on economic aspects that benefited Turkey and allowed Damascus to break the international isolation imposed upon Syria from 2005 until Barack Obama's election in 2008. Perhaps, the Syrian regime, convinced as it was of its own stereotypes of the Syrian people, failed to appreciate the dynamics of its society and its ability to revolt. The Syrian leadership, in this way, failed to predict the popular uprising as it capitalized on its popular foreign policy choices to confer legitimacy on the regime. The

Syrian regime understood the popular uprising in Egypt, for instance, as a result of that country's unpopular foreign policy and, ultimately, failed to grasp the instrumental, domestic drivers of that uprising, including human rights, as well as the political and economic demands of the revolutionaries. Initially, the demands of the Syrian revolution were unclear, being merely confined to calls for reforms and demands for democratic change under the leadership of the current regime. Similarly, international responses were limited to the condemnation of the regime's military crackdown and calls for the beginning of a reform process. Crucially, regional and international governments feared an Iraqi scenario in Syria, delaying the development of enthusiastic support for the Syrian uprising. In addition, the overlapping of regional issues with Syria's strategic geographic position, as well as its Arab and regional role, postponed any international position with regards to this rebellion. Global powers, whose efforts were consumed with the military intervention in Libya, refrained from formulating a clear stance, which may have been regarded as inflammatory, regarding the violent and suppressive measures used against the Syrian uprising in its early months. The Syrian uprising, however, rapidly expanded geographically and quickly adopted a more radical demand – the overthrow of the Syrian regime. Moreover, the leadership in Damascus failed to adopt a suitable political response, or a positive manner of addressing, the political demands of the popular uprising, which is especially evident in the regime's reductionist rhetoric and the claims that the uprising was part of a conspiracy and a Zionist attempt to undermine Syria through foreign intervention. Foreign intervention played, and continues to play, a minimal role in the Syrian revolution in comparison to other popular uprisings in the region despite the protracted nature of the Syrian revolution, the extent of repression, and the number of civilian casualties thus far.

In light of the regime's heavy handed military response to the uprising and the Syrian people's insistence on pursuing revolutionary change, the international community began to engage with the Syrian uprising and contradictions between global powers and regional actors began to emerge. It was Arab public opinion, with sympathy for the aims of the Syrian revolution, and the regional revolutionary fervor that initially drove the Arab League to mediate in Syria and call for reform. With the expanding Arab League role in Syria, on behalf of the Syrian masses and Arabs more generally, Western countries adopted an increasingly radical rhetoric toward Bashar al-Assad's regime, demanding his resignation. Turkey, on the other hand, escalated its position on the regime in Damascus, which unavoidably ended its six-year-old strategic alliance with Syria. Within this new geopolitical reality, Iran unequivocally supported the Syrian regime politically and logistically, which exacerbated its strategic standoff with key regional actors, especially the GCC states and Turkey, the most prominent actor in the region. Additionally, Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maleki's support for the Syrian regime enhanced the negative outlook of the nature of the alliance that surrounds the Syrian regime, given al-Maleki's lack of credibility amongst the Arabs as he is the product of foreign military intervention. Russia, on the other hand, reacted to the Syrian uprising exclusively through the prism of geopolitical pragmatism, although Moscow has

traditionally limited its interests and strategic sphere of influence to its immediate neighborhood, especially the Central Asian republics. Nonetheless, for Russia, Syria is a country of immense geopolitical importance since it provides Moscow a strategic foothold on the Mediterranean Sea, a strategic and significant location for the Russian fleet in the Sevastopol naval base of the Black Sea. Despite this, Russia's stance toward the Syrian uprising transcended this simplistic understanding and related directly to the United States' commitment to refraining from direct military intervention beyond its boundaries and the opportunity this presented Russia to expand its influence at the expense of US strategic interests. For Russia, the NATO-led operation in Libya constituted a contradiction to the US' non-intervention policy. As a result, Moscow sought to prevent this NATO-led operation from developing into a new NATO expansion, much as it had resisted NATO expansion in its immediate neighborhood in Georgia. Putin's Russia, therefore, attempted to revive some of its regional sway beyond the country's immediate sphere of influence. The survival of the Syrian regime, though a weak and fragile regime, constitutes a geostrategic cornerstone of Russian foreign policy in the region. Furthermore, Moscow adopted a colonial attitude, promising to defend the rights of religious minorities should the situation in Syria develop into civil war. This, if anything, puts minorities at risk, particularly as Arab communities have persistently demonstrated their rejection of minority status protected by colonial powers or authoritarian regimes. In pursuing this policy, however, Russia decided to oppose the revolution in Syria and confront its supporters by twice using its veto right in the UN Security Council, in cooperation with China, hence preventing international condemnation of, or pre-emptive international measures against, the Syrian regime. This stance, analysts agree, demonstrates Russia's expanding opposition to US interests and strategic aims on the international arena. Nonetheless, Russia remains an international power with limited presence in the region, and, consequently, is incapable of exerting influence on the Syrian people who will ultimately be the final decision-makers. Russia's stance on the Syrian revolution placed it at odds with Arab public opinion; as a result, Russia engaged in a tactical redefinition of its position by seeking compromises with the Arab League and the West, as demonstrated by the Kofi Anan peace plan for Syria, which became clear as change in Syria developed into an imminent demand and the regime's attempts to militarily suppress the revolution proved unrealistic. Russia, therefore, became a major geopolitical actor in the Syrian revolution, capable of punctuating the pace and direction of the political process in Syria, and notably so as the West, Turkey, and the Arab League remain reluctant to intervene. In contrast, the major driving force in the Syrian revolution is the Syrian people's insistence on pursuing revolutionary change. In fact, Syrian political forces that primarily based their positions and disagreements on calling for foreign intervention and wagered on such have proven a failure, and their attempts to encourage such interventions proved futile. In other words, although the popular uprising in Syria may succeed in encouraging foreign intervention in the future, the grassroots movement itself remains the cornerstone of any solution in Syria. Ultimately, the Syrian revolution has

proven the futility and inaccuracy of conspiracy theories not only because the uprising continues in spite of the weak international response to the revolution, but also because the uprising unilaterally challenges the Syrian regime and its allies, who stand a lot to lose. Indeed, the Syrian regime's alliances with Iran, Russia, and Iraq appear to be its main asset against the popular uprising. Nonetheless, these alliances will not guarantee the regime's victory over the revolution without addressing its core demands. Viewing the survival of the Syrian regime as a victory of the "resistance axis" will contribute to that axis' international isolation in the future. Regionally, the Syrian revolution resulted in complicated and complex geopolitical dynamics as demonstrated by the competition between Turkey and Iran. The role of both countries is especially important given that the previous flexibility shown by the international system allowed for the expression of regional actors' influence in regions that were vital to their interests, allowing these regional powers to express their political aspirations and pursue their strategic geopolitical interests directly. During the past decade, Turkey sought to ensure and expand its economic interests in the Arab world by all means as its focus shifted away from EU accession toward enhancing its influence in the Middle East. Arab revolutions, however, problematized Turkey's influential policies in the region, which capitalized on economic interests and a similarity in ethnic, sectarian, and demographic makeup. Moreover, the Turkish regime and its bureaucratic structure and mechanism constituted cornerstones in Turkey's response to popular uprisings in the Arab world. This is demonstrated in Turkey's experience with issues such as the analysis of the public opinion input, democratic electoral systems, the conservative stances of the army, and the commonality of the Kurdish question in Turkey and its neighboring Arab countries. Turkey also dealt with the Arab revolutions from the prism of its strategic interests in the region and its role as a NATO member state. With the spread of the Arab revolutions, Turkey agreed to the instalments of the US anti-missile shield on its territories, refused to take part in the second Gaza-bound Freedom Flotilla II, and resumed its security and intelligence cooperation with Israel in response to decreased cooperation with Iran and Syria and the revival of the Kurdish question. Iran, on the other hand, reacted to Arab revolutions in accordance with its national interests and regional alliances, which is important given the primacy of foreign policy for the Iranian regime in the absence of a complex or democratic domestic policy. Iran, which proclaims its support for the resistance option, including its support for Hamas and Islamic Jihad, adopted a sectarian policy in its reaction to Arab revolutions. In doing so, Iran claimed to represent Shiites across the region, despite the fact that said Shiites are, in fact, Arabs and not Iranian. This stance seeks to exploit Arab sectarian diversity, converting it into conflicting foreign allegiances. Iran's regional influence appeared to be dwindling in the aftermath of the Arab revolutions, especially in light of its hostile stance toward the Syrian revolution and Tehran's inclination to establish regional alliances based, exclusively, on sectarian affiliations. This is most evident in Iraq where the ruling regime appears to be settled into a civilian dictatorship with a clear sectarian approach and an exclusionary attitude toward the other, both within Iraq and while interacting with

the Arab regional order. Iran's sectarian foreign policy in the region, it must be noted, expanded at the expense of Turkey's declining regional influence and Arab states' inability to exert influence in Iraq. This explains Nouri al-Maleki's stance toward the Syrian revolution and the protests in Bahrain. Al-Maleki overlooked his country's political disagreements and hostility with the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad during previous eras, and, instead, expressed his support for the regime in Damascus. Moreover, al-Maleki's government adopted economic policies aimed at undermining European sanctions imposed on Syria and allowing Damascus to overcome the repercussions of these sanctions, especially with regards to Syria's foreign currency reserves. Relations between Turkey and Iran witnessed a considerable regression in light of their disagreement over the uprising in Syria. This was first evident in a statement, on July 21, 2011, by Ramin Mehmanparast, the spokesman of Iran's Foreign Ministry in which he declared: "if we had to choose between (our alliance with) Turkey and (our alliance with) Syria, we would choose Syria without a doubt." Tensions between the two countries became public as Ankara summoned its Ambassador to Tehran, protesting the Iranian criticism of Turkish foreign policy in the wake of the second "Friends of Syria" conference hosted in Istanbul. Moreover, protesting Turkey's stance on the Syrian revolution, Iran proposed that Baghdad should host the P5+1 nuclear talk instead of Ankara, demonstrating the extent of the two countries' disagreements.

In other words, the Syrian revolution resulted in discord and antagonism between the two regional powers, highlighting their interests according to their sectarian, as well as regional, differences. This divergence of interests, however, cannot be seen as an irreversible regional polarization comparable to the traditional rivalry and polarization between Iran and Saudi Arabia which took its first stance in support of the Arab revolutions, driven, in essence, in an attempt to antagonize Iran, hoping to halt the latter's influence expansion in the Gulf and the Arab Levant at large.

#### IV. THE MIDDLE EAST AND AMERICA'S GRAND STRATEGY

Breaking with his predecessor's missionary rhetoric, Obama outlined a pragmatic and realist policy outlook concerning the US role in the Middle East (Obama, 2009b; Gerges, 2012: 8-9). As for the "War on Terror," the president identified the Iraq War as the "war of choice" that had made it harder to pursue the "war of necessity" – the effort to defeat the Taliban and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. As it emerged from public statements and insider accounts, however, Obama was in fact determined to end both conflicts as soon as possible (Obama, 2009b; Woodward, 2010). Soon after taking office, the new president pushed for a new strategy aimed at better addressing the transnational dimension of the Taliban revival, and authorized a temporary increase in troop numbers in Afghanistan in order to help stabilize the country (Obama, 2009a; Bergen, 2011: 309-334). His success in pursuing that goal has been limited. Despite years of US and allied military, political, and economic efforts, Afghanistan's institutions remain extremely fragile, and a sizable number of American

troops is set to stay in the country through the end of Obama's mandate (Kugelman, 2016; Salinas, 2016).

The desire to scale down American presence in the Middle East has been further frustrated by the wave of political instability, regime change and violent conflict that has erupted in the Arab world since the end of 2010. Game-changing events – such as regime change and persistent political instability in a long-standing partner of the US such as Egypt, conflict and the risk of a humanitarian catastrophe in oil-rich Libya, and the collapse of the Syrian state followed by the outbreak of an intractable civil war – have made sure that the region remains a central source of concern for Obama and his advisers as well as a key destination for America's troops and military assets. As sudden and fast-paced events unfolded in the Arab world, the Obama administration tried as much as possible to remain "on the right side of history" without going off track with the rebalancing agenda (Lynch, 2013: 193-235; Gerges, 2012: 106; Chollet, 2016: 91). The crises in Libya and Syria, however, put additional pressure on Obama's effort to reorient America's grand strategy by confronting the administration with the challenge of humanitarian emergencies.

In Libya, the administration faced the challenge of dealing with a popular uprising that quickly degenerated into a mounting humanitarian crisis compounded by the explicit threat of indiscriminate mass atrocities on the part of Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi. In March 2011, with France and Britain ready to intervene militarily, a supportive Arab League and UN Security Council authorization, the Obama administration eventually opted for a policy of "leading from behind." The result was a British- and French-led NATO air campaign in which the US played a crucial but discrete back up role (Chollet, 2016: 101-115; Hastings, 2011). Such an approach succeeded in preventing a mass slaughter and eventually tipped the military balance in favor of the Libyan rebels without the need to deploy US forces on the ground (O'Hanlon, 2011). As Libya's persistent political instability demonstrates, however, neither the US nor its Western and Arab partners had a sound plan to stabilize the country in the aftermath of regime change (Kuperman, 2015; Goldberg, 2016; Wintour and Elgot, 2016).

Syria presented the Obama administration – and the rest of the world – with yet another massive humanitarian emergency. In fact, as evidence that the Assad regime used chemical weapons against Syrian civilians emerged in August 2013, the call for military intervention became even more compelling. Close regional partners of the US such as the Gulf monarchies strongly supported the resort to military force and France was ready to participate. Contrary to the Libyan case, however, there was neither international consensus around the idea of intervention – Iran and Russia actively supported the Syrian regime of Bashar al-Assad – nor an apparently viable local opposition to the Syrian dictator (Holland and Bremer, 2013; Lewis et al., 2013). The strategic imperative not to get bogged into in another Iraq-style, large scale and open-ended military engagement in the Middle East – "don't do stupid things" as famously suggested by Obama himself – eventually persuaded the administration to adopt a cautious but controversial policy of military restraint and constant but frustrating diplomacy (Chollet, 2016: 10; Remnick, 2014;

Goldberg, 2016; "Syria War: Cessation of hostilities comes into effect," 2016).

The persistent state of war and humanitarian catastrophe in Syria has had a major and negative impact on the Obama administration's effort to extricate the US military from Iraq. Building upon a modicum of political stability and a status of forces agreement achieved in the last phases of the George W. Bush presidency, the Obama administration successfully managed to complete the withdrawal of US combat troops in December 2011 (Gordon and Trainor, 2012: 523-559, 690-693; Logan, 2011). Post-Saddam Iraq, however, failed to develop stable and truly democratic political institutions. Ethnic and sectarian rivalries and violence, compounded by state failure in neighboring Syria, turned the area into breeding ground for extremism – a process that eventually allowed the brutal extremist group and terrorist network known as Islamic State (IS, AKA ISIS, ISIL, or Daesh) to conquer vast swathes of territory in both Iraq and Syria ("Sovereignty without security, 2011; "The slow road back, 2013; Weiss and Hassan, 2015). By late summer 2014, IS advances created a direct threat to the Iraqi state, and the Obama administration eventually opted for a new military campaign (Salman and Coles, 2014). Arguably, Obama's response to the rise of IS has been slow – and the idea to dismiss the organization as a "jayvee team" was rather unfortunate – but in the event it seems to reflect the administration's overall strategic vision: a multilateral framework, no massive deployment of American combat troops overseas, and a preference for reliance on air power and local ground forces (Remnick, 2014; Mason, 2014; Stewart and Ponthus, 2014; Irish and Szep, 2014). In fact, the administration's military strategy against IS appears geared at managing and containing the threat while working with allies and other powers with a stake in the conflict in order to find a longer term political solution (Chollet, 2016: 138; Georgy, 2014; Packer, 2014; Kerry, 2014; De Luce, 2015). In the ultimate analysis, however, this new round of American military involvement in Iraq – and Syria – further underscores how difficult it is for America to readjust its global strategic priorities.

During the second term, the foreign policy approach of the Obama administration has evolved toward a loosely framed doctrine of "engagement" directed at countries that have been persistently at odds with the US but appear ready to negotiate (Friedman, 2015; Slaughter, 2015). The most notable result of Obama's "engagement" policy has been the July 2015 deal which sets limits on, and increases international supervision over, Iran's nuclear program in exchange for the gradual lift of international economic sanctions against the Tehran regime (Borger, 2015). The deal has reversed another destabilizing trend inherited by the Obama administration – a dangerous escalation in the longstanding confrontation between the US and Iran – America's longtime Persian Gulf nemesis. The Iranian government has constantly maintained that its nuclear program is peaceful (Zarif, 2014). However, by the time Obama took office, evidence collected by the US and Western intelligence communities strongly suggested that the Tehran regime had explored weaponization options (Pollack, 2013: 39, 51-52). From the standpoint of leaders in Tehran, in the aftermath of America's military interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq the

quest for a nuclear deterrent made sense (Nasr, 2006: 185-226). Yet a nuclear armed Iran would increase the risk of instability and arms races in the Middle East (Pollack, 2013: 403-404). After years of sanctions and threats of an American – or Israeli – military strike, the 2015 nuclear deal has established a multilateral monitoring framework aimed at ensuring the peaceful intent of the Iranian nuclear program (Mostafavi, 2012; Pollack, 2013; Lewis, 2015). As these lines are written, the eventual normalization of relations between Iran and the US is far from certain. The deal has given rise to heated debates in the US political arena as well as to disorientation and resentment among long-standing US allies such as Israel and the Gulf monarchies (Drew, 2015; Odenheimer and Ben-David, 2015; McDowall and Al Sayegh, 2015). Considering Iran's unquestioned economic potential and geopolitical clout, however, it seems fair to argue that besides minimizing the odds of a nuclear-armed Iran, the deal reflects a pragmatic conception of American national security policy that had been lacking in the strategic approach of Obama's post-Cold War predecessors.

#### V. THE MIDDLE EAST AND THE UNITED STATES LONG GAME

Since the end of the Cold War, the Middle East has been the theater of the boom-and-bust of a peculiar American conception of international order – the idea that the US has a mission to transform the world and that the main tool to perform this mission is America's unchallenged military power. The region has been, and remains, a major testing ground of American power.

Encouraged by budgetary constraints and the recent memory of military quagmires, the Obama administration has been ready to engage in a profound and long-lasting reappraisal of America's role in the world (Mann, 2012; Brands, 2014; Chollet, 2016; Goldberg, 2016). Changes in policy have been small and incremental. On the one hand, Obama's foreign policy outlook does not question the assumption of American exceptionalism, and under his watch US foreign policy has remained quite militarized. The administration has shown a very restrained attitude toward the idea of putting boots on the ground overseas. However, a counter-terrorism strategy highly reliant on the massive resort to air power – including controversial drone strikes – and special forces – including the Navy Seal raid that led to the killing of Osama bin Laden on May 1, 2011 – suggests that after all Obama and his foreign policy staff have neither repudiated the military instrument nor abandoned the objective of preserving America's military edge (Mann, 2012: 151-155; Schmidle, 2011; Becker and Shane, 2012). On the other hand, major foreign policy initiatives adopted by the Obama administration in the Middle East, such as the drastic reduction in troops numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan and the “leading from behind” approach in Libya – reflect a genuine effort to challenge conventional wisdom and try new approaches. The “engagement” policy adopted during Obama's second term and the Iran nuclear deal suggest that Obama's strategic outlook has been much more pragmatic and less militaristic than that of his predecessors. This approach

appears to have allowed the US to manage international crises without the need to resort to new, large-scale, and open-ended overseas military commitments, although not all of the high expectations originally raised by Obama have been turned into actual policies (Gerges, 2012: 90-91; Cohen, 2014; O'Hanlon, 2014; Dueck, 2015).

#### VI. INTERNATIONAL AND REGIONAL ACTORS

The geostrategic changes brought about by the popular uprisings in the Arab world, and international stances toward them, require a definition of the world order prevalent today in order to assess the extent to which international and regional actors can, in fact, influence the course of these revolutions. The world order structure necessitates a clear distinction between the global superpower (the US) and global actors (Russia and China, specifically) in which the latter are capable of articulating independent positions toward global policy issues and defending their national interests while ensuring their national security, in its broad military and developmental sense. These global actors aim to prevent US hegemony over their own policies and resources. They seek to limit the US' ability to maneuver freely, whence it would expand its sphere of influence in different geographical and geostrategic regions of the world, with impunity from international law.

#### VII. CONCLUDING REMARKS

Location, massive oil reserves, powerful transnational forces such as religion and ethnicity, and the persistence of global threats such as terrorism and nuclear proliferation, have made the Middle East a focal point of instability in the modern world as well as a source of concern for a global power such as the United States. The area somewhat invites intervention from great powers with global ambitions. As recent history shows, this power of attraction can become an irresistible urge to intervene for policy-makers that conceive status and leadership in narrow terms of military power. From this point of view, it is not surprising to observe how the Middle East has become as relevant as a testing ground for competing conceptions of America's role in the world in an age of unchallenged US military primacy. The enormous human and economic costs of US military interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan, combined with the financial crisis of 2008, however, significantly tamed America's appetite for military adventures. Such a critical situation has made the quest for a new American grand strategy even more compelling, and Obama's fresh and unconventional foreign policy outlook has had a significant impact.

As the record of policy in the Middle East – especially the Iran deal – shows, Obama's approach can indeed bring positive, even game changing results at a relatively small cost. Progress toward a less militarized, more inclusive, and more sustainable order in the region may indeed signal the transition to a more pragmatic and less militaristic – and perhaps more effective – conception of America's global leadership. The other side of Obama's pragmatism, however, is a certain

difficulty to discern a truly long term vision, something that leaves us a bit uncertain about his legacy and the future of his “Long Game.” As Election Day 2016 comes close, it is open to question whether Obama’s successors will continue along the path of a more pragmatic American leadership or the “Long Game” will turn out to be only a momentary policy adjustment. From Libya to Afghanistan, the multiple and interrelated crises that tragically continue to torment the Middle East will provide a great many opportunities to test the direction of US global strategy and the quality of America’s global leadership.

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