

HAARETZ

Brave new region? America's Mideast allies face U.S. withdrawal

Obama's modest new Middle East policy is costing the U.S. the trust of its allies while emboldening its adversaries.

Anthony Bubalo

November 19, 2013

These days the United States' allies in the Middle East seem to trust it less, and its enemies fear it less. Allies are grumbling about shortcomings in U.S. policy. Adversaries seem emboldened by an America that has become more cautious in the way it uses its power.

It is tempting to dismiss this as the usual cacophony that accompanies U.S. policy in the Middle East. But what we are witnessing is not a recent development, nor a passing one. The Obama administration is subtly changing America's position in the Middle East in ways that will have a major effect on regional alliances and potentially on the regional order.

American policy towards Iran is the most recent issue to raise the blood pressure of allies like Israel and Saudi Arabia. Both fear that President Obama is being outmanoeuvred by the wily mullahs of Tehran in negotiations over Iran's nuclear program.

But this is only the latest in a growing list of complaints. Gulf Arabs have grown particularly disillusioned with Washington's purported failure to save the regime of former Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, and to punish that of Syrian President Bashar Assad.

Meanwhile, adversaries and competitors seem to sense an opportunity. The way in which Russia, Iran and Hezbollah have firmly rallied around the Assad regime is just one example of how these actors feel empowered to take advantage while Washington seems to dither.

Of course, Saudi Arabia's or Israel's ties with the U.S. have survived deep policy disagreements before, and America remains vital to their basic security.

And behind the current braggadocio of America's adversaries lies continuing wariness about American power. Syria was worried enough about the impact of even limited U.S. strikes to offer up its chemical weapons capabilities.

It is also true that the notion of America drifting away from the region is still more a premonition than a reality. In recent years the Obama administration has talked

determinedly about pivoting to Asia, yet has found it impossible to shift its focus from the Middle East.

But it would also be wrong to assume that what we are seeing today is just surface turbulence. Something deeper is happening.

The president is recalibrating America's policy in the region, albeit gradually, often ham-fistedly, and sometimes on the run. This recalibration has three features: Less grand ambition; less reliance on the military; and a narrowing of U.S. interests in the Middle East.

Obama has said repeatedly that America is over-invested in the region. Since the nineties successive Democrat and Republican administrations have made heavy payments in time, blood, treasure and reputation to remake the region through both peace and war. Even Obama, in his first term, was tempted by grand gestures, most notably in his now infamous Cairo speech.

The return on more than two decades of ambition has been paltry. Israeli-Arab peace has eluded U.S. administrations, as have efforts to democratize the region through wars in Afghanistan and Iraq.

And yet while America has failed at the big things in the Middle East, it has succeeded at the smaller but no less important things: Intelligence cooperation; military presence; the provision of basic security guarantees; and building strong economic ties, to name just a few.

In short, when America has been prudent, modest and focused on its core interests it has succeeded, even if these successes were not always worthy of a Nobel Prize.

The idea that Obama is giving up on grand ambition might appear an odd suggestion given his return to Israeli-Palestinian negotiations. But this is an exception; an administrative concession to a Secretary of State still living in a previous era of American policy.

By contrast Obama's Syria policy is a better reflection of where U.S. policy is heading. The president has conceded that he can do little to respond to the humanitarian catastrophe and geopolitical tumult caused by the conflict. Instead, in forcing the Syrian regime to give up its chemical weapons, he has focused on the thing most threatening to American security: The possibility that these weapons might fall into extremist hands.

This approach is also evident in relation to Iran. The president is narrowly focused on preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons power. He wants to do it diplomatically; he seems prepared to make concessions and even to accept some risk.

But his approach also places him at odds with many U.S. allies. For Obama, Iran's nuclear ambition is the problem. For governments in Israel and Saudi Arabia it is a symptom of a bigger problem: Iran's overarching ambition to dominate the region. They don't want a diplomatic deal with Iran, they want the Islamic Republic cut down to size, whether by force or by sanctions.

This is something Obama won't do and a war-weary America can't do. Obama wants to be the president who ended American wars in the Middle East, not started new ones. He sees sanctions as a tool to force Iran to negotiate, not as something that can be sustained indefinitely to cripple the regime.

Differences like this, with respect to both interests and strategy, will become a more regular feature of U.S. relations with regional allies.

Nor should these allies expect things to change once Obama is gone. America's politics, on both the right and left, is becoming more domestically focused. Its resources are stretched. Even if its economy bounces back its strategic priorities will eventually shift toward Asia to meet a rising China.

As President Obama noted in a recent speech, the United States is often chastised for meddling in the Middle East and condemned for not doing enough to solve the region's problems. In coming years the region will need to get used to the idea of an America prepared to do a lot less of either.

Anthony Bubalo is Research Director at the Lowy Institute for International Policy in Sydney, Australia.