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Report

The New Rulers of the Middle East

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Trump and US policy in Iran [AL JAZEERA]

Introduction

The US-western alliance in the Middle East was roughly formulated around the first Gulf War in 1990-91. Emerging victorious from a long-drawn-out Cold War, which resulted in the unceremonious collapse of the Soviet Union, the US led a massive war coalition of western allies and Arab governments that was meant to send a message of particular significance: A 'new world order' was emerging.

But the triumphant moment didn't last long. Aside from convening the Madrid talks between Israel and its Arab enemies, the American era in the Middle East failed to create a substantial realignment of the region's politics.

However, much branding took place during that time; it was then that some countries were dubbed 'friendly' and 'moderate' regimes while others, were seen as radical and hostile. The latter camp including Syria, Iran, Iraq and other non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas. Iraq and Iran were later placed in a particularly ominous category: The Axis of Evil. The list also included North Korea.

If US policy possessed a future vision of any kind, it would have translated its regional dominance into something more than simply empowering Israel and further humiliating the Arabs and Iran. It would have nurtured a degree of stability and moved to resolve old, festering conflicts. But, it didn't. One lasting quality in US foreign policy is its ability to foment conflict, and its incapacity to bring about lasting peace.

With time, the US-western alliance weakened. The US invasion of Iraq in 2003 failed to muster enough support from Washington's traditional post-World War II western allies. A hasty 'coalition of the willing' was assembled instead, to present a façade of global unity. Of its traditional western allies, only Britain unconditionally conformed to US war objectives; a few Arab regimes hesitantly tagged along. Westerners who opted out were labeled the 'old Europe.' The 'new Europe' - an unimpressive list of eastern European quasi-democratic regimes tried to fill in the gap of the faltering western alliance.

The gambit backfired. True, Baghdad was conquered, and the Iraqi army was disbanded, but that left a gaping political leadership vacuum, which was initially filled by Iraqi exiles with ties to Washington, but eventually by Iran's allies in Iraq.

Since the US partial exit from Iraq in December 2011, the dynamics of the Middle East began changing rapidly. The once triumphant US stratagem descended into confusion. The 'Arab Spring', the Syria war and the rise of Daesh brought the US back to the region, this time with no long-term plan and no clear agenda. Washington was forced by circumstances that although were in part outcomes of its chaotic policies starting in the early 1990's, they were largely unintended.

This time around, the US-western alliance appeared shakier than ever. It was not driven by a vision or agenda, but compelled by fears of a growing Russian influence, as Moscow became officially involved in the Syria war in September, 2015, and a bolstered Iran, which continued to advance westward, through Tehran, to Baghdad and Damascus.

Putin in Iran: A New Powerplay

When Russian President Vladimir Putin landed in Tehran on November 1, 2017, his visit held greater meaning than merely cementing the Russia-Iran alliance. It was the equivalent of a declaration of yet another 'new world order' in the Middle East, one that had little room for the US and would be led by Russia. A joint statement by Putin and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani dismissed US President Donald Trump's disavowal of the Iran nuclear deal. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015 with the support of US President Barack Obama is "working effectively", the statement read, calling on all United Nations member states to continue to rally behind it. (1)

The Russian diplomatic offensive included media statements by top Russian diplomats. Deputy Foreign Minister Sergei Ryabkov told Russia Today that a demand made by Trump

in a recent speech to renegotiate the Iran deal of 2015 was "unrealistic." A day earlier, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov lashed out at the "unpredictable" US behavior. (2)

This lack of predictability also confused and angered traditional US allies, who felt abandoned by isolationist US policy, not only in the Middle East region, but all around the world. Germany which has been alarmed by Trump's troubling statements, tweets and unfriendly attitude towards Washington's European allies warned of any changes in the Iran nuclear deal. The US is sending "difficult and dangerous signals", German Foreign Minister Sigmar Gabriel told Deutschlandfunk radio soon after Trump renounced the Iran nuclear deal. (3)

"My big concern is that what is happening in Iran or with Iran from the US perspective will not remain an Iranian issue," Gabriel said, warning of a regional and global race for acquiring nuclear weapons that would likely result from the US imprudent policies.

However, the 'unpredictability' of US foreign policy is being balanced out with a clear and focused Russian foreign policy, which has invigorated Iran to slowly, but methodically craft its own path towards a long-anticipated regional rise.

Indeed, the nature of the energy and transportation deals signed in Tehran, during Putin's visit speak of a long-term Russian commitment to its Iran alliance.

Trump's Speech: Articulating Impotence

In a recent article, respected US analyst and former CIA official, Graham Fuller, argued that contrary to most claims, the current US administration does in fact possess a clear Middle East foreign policy. However, he asserted, "it is just the wrong one." (4)

According to Fuller, the current US policy on Iran is not radically different from the previous one. It opposes "all Iranian actions and seek to weaken that state, (which) reflects a key Israeli position in the Middle East as well."

Fuller is right, but the fact that the US policy on Iran remains largely intact has to be seen in the wider context. The Middle East is changing and that policy, teetering between political pragmatism and overt hostility is no longer effective. In other words, even if arguably US policy regarding Iran hasn't changed, the region itself has.

In two different speeches, first in the UN General Assembly on September 19 (5) and the second in the White House in October 13 (6), Trump tried to articulate his supposedly new aggressive Iran policy.

In his UN speech, Trump referred to Iran 12 times, each in a negative context. He concluded:

"It is time for the entire world to join us in demanding that Iran's government end its pursuit of death and destruction. " (7)

In his White House remarks, he refused to certify that Iran has met its obligations under the nuclear deal and demanded that Congress take proper action in punishing Iran for its alleged transgressions.

However, in both talks, Trump only cemented the view that the US is stubbornly moving forward in its isolationist route. All co-signers of the JCPOA - Russia, France, Germany, the UK and China - save the US, believe that Iran is meeting its obligations under the agreement. Inspectors from the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) share the same view.

Yet, only one party seemed reassured by Trump's assertions: The Israeli government. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu called Trump's decision to decertify the nuclear deal 'courageous.' (8)

The latter speech, that of October 13 in particular can be seen as the lowest point of western consensus on the Middle East in decades. But Trump's words were not as arbitrary as they may seem. They reflect a deep split within his own administration.

Interventionists & Isolationists

In truth, Trump is presiding over an old power struggle between the neo-conservative-type ideologues, seeking more political and military interventions and the military brass who wish for the US to reign supreme, but through a steady and predictable course.

While Trump himself rejected the idea of regime change during his campaign for the White House (9), Politico reported on June 25 that his secretary of state, Rex Tillerson, "appeared to endorse subverting the Iranian regime," and the "philosophy of regime change." (10)

Meanwhile, the neocons vs. the military brass battle, which had defined both terms of the George W. Bush administration, is returning in full force. Foreign Policy detailed that ongoing fight in a revealing report on June 16. Indeed, contradictions in US foreign policy have become the norm, not the exception. (11)

That in mind, Trump's allies are simply unable to sum up the 'Trump doctrine.' A top administration official stumbled over his words as he tried, to no avail. He told Time.com that it is a "combination of very good personal skills - one-on-one ... defeating ISIS and ... commitment to people that there are certain things that the United States isn't going to put up with." (12)

At the center of Trump's balancing act is an attempt to reconcile US and Israeli interests. In Russia's case, Israeli interests are only part of a far-reaching, but certainly Moscow-centered agenda. This is one of the main reasons that Putin's stratagem is gaining momentum, and the US is faltering.

To understand how vastly Israel's relationship with Washington and Moscow differs, one needs to marvel at the words of John R. Bradley in the Spectator:

"Netanyahu has been holding meetings with Putin. During one, he was almost in tears as he, like the Saudis, begged the Russian leader to rein in Iran and Hezbollah". And while Russia considers Israel "an important partner, Iran will, come what may, remain its indispensable ally." (13)

Compare this to the "special relationship" between the US and Israel, in which the latter almost dictate US foreign policy. Repeated Netanyahu visits to Moscow is an indication that Tel Aviv now understands the weighty role played by Russian, not only regarding Syrian and Iran, but throughout the Middle East region. Russia is now in a position that it could, in the long run, change the dynamics of the whole region.

"For while the consequences of Netanyahu beating the war drums over Iran used to be non-existent, now Moscow could give the green light to battle-hardened Iran, Syria and Hezbollah to unleash hellfire against the Jewish state," wrote Bradley. (14)

Israeli Fears of Iran in Syria

But there is another reason of why "Netanyahu is quaking in his boots" (15): the likely long-term Iranian presence in Syria. Despite the apparent love affair between Trump and

Netanyahu, Israel is feeling cheated by an agreement that the US reluctantly made with Russia regarding Syria that could ultimately give Iran a permanent base at the Israel-Syria border.

Concurrently, first steps at a permanent Syrian ceasefire are bearing fruit, compared to many failed attempts in the past. The Russians are expected to declare 'victory' in Syria in coming weeks, and with it reshape that country contrary to Israel, US and some Arab countries' designs. (16)

The sequence of events followed a ceasefire agreement between the US and Russia on July 7 at the G-20 meeting in Hamburg, Germany, where three provinces in southwestern Syria - bordering Jordan and Israeli-occupied Golan Heights - became relatively quiet. The Israeli government has made it clear to the US that it is displeased with the agreement, and Netanyahu, has, since then been leading relentless efforts to undermine the ceasefire. To no avail, of course. (17)

Netanyahu's worst fears are maybe actualizing: a solution in Syria that would allow for a permanent Iranian and Hezbollah presence in the country. In the early phases of the war, such a possibility seemed remote; the constantly changing fortunes in Syria's brutal combat made the discussion altogether irrelevant. But things have changed since then.

Without a joint Israeli-US plan, Israel is now emerging as a weak party. Making that realization quite belatedly, Israel is become increasingly frustrated. After years of lobbying, the Obama Administration refused to regard Israel's objectives in Syria as the driving force behind its government's policies.

Failing to obtain such support from newly-elected President Donald Trump as well, Israel is now attempting to develop its own independent strategy. The Wall Street Journal reported that Israel has been giving "secret aid" to Syrian rebels, in the form of "cash and humanitarian aid." (18) This comes at a time that the Trump administration decided to end its direct support of Syria's rebel group. (19)

The New York Times reported on July 20 of large shipments of Israeli aid that is "expected to 'give a glimmer of hope' to Syrians." (20) Needless to say, giving hope to Syrians is not an Israeli priority. Aside from the frequent Israeli bombing of Syria and refusal to host any refugees, Israel has occupied the Syrian Golan Heights since 1967 and illegally annexed the territory in 1981.

Instead, Israel's aim is to infiltrate southern Syria to create a buffer against Iranian, Hezbollah and other hostile forces. Termed "Operation Good Neighbor," Israel is reportedly working to build ties with various heads of tribes and influential groups in that region. (21)

Yet, the Israeli plan appears to be a flimsy attempt at catching up, as Russia and the US, in addition to their regional allies, seem to be converging on an agreement independent from Israel's own objectives. Israeli National Security Council head, Yaakov Amidror, threatened in a recent press conference that his country is prepared to move against Iran in Syria, alone.

Vehemently rejecting the ceasefire, Amidror said that the Israeli army will "intervene and destroy every attempt to build (permanent Iranian) infrastructure in Syria." (22) Netanyahu's equally charged statements during his European visit also point at the growing frustration in Tel Aviv. (23)

This stands in sharp contrast with the days when the neocons in Washington managed the Middle East through a vision that was largely, if not fully, consistent with Israeli impulses. True, there was that euphoric movement in Israel when the Trump administration struck Syria. (24) But the limited nature of the strike made it clear that the US had no plans for massive military deployment similar to that of Iraq in 2003.

The initial excitement was eventually replaced by cynicism as expressed by this headline in the Monitor: "Netanyahu puts Trump on notice over Syria." (25)

Moreover, the receding global leadership of the US under Trump makes the Israeli-American duo less effective. With no alternative allies influential enough to fill the gap, Israel is left, for the first time, with limited options.

With Russia's determined return to the Middle East, and the decided retreat by the US, the outcome of the Syria war is almost a foregone conclusion.

The New 'New World Order'

But the fight over the 'New Middle East' is just getting started.

Trump's strong words on Iran is partly an attempt to allay Israeli – and Saudi - fears that the US will not fully abandon Israeli interests in the region. However, with no clear plan of action, Trump's Iran strategy can only highlight the muddled American priorities.

Meanwhile a turf war is underway throughout the Middle East. Emerging triumphant from Syria, Russia is hoping to consolidate its new power status in the region with the help of Iran. The US-Israel-Saudi axis is working diligently to counter the new, unwelcome reality, but with Trump's lack of strategy and faltering US-western alliance, their chances at succeeding are quite dim.

In a speech by George H. Bush during the Gulf War of 1991, the vitalized US president declared a new era:

"Now, we can see a new world coming into view. A world in which there is the very real prospect of a new world order... The Gulf war put this new world to its first test..." (26)

As 2017 concludes, Bush's words sink further into oblivion. With an emerging Russian-Iranian alliance that goes beyond Syria, coupled with recently signed long-term agreements with Damascus that allow Moscow to maintain control over air and sea bases in Syria's western coast region (27), the US-led 'new world order' is in rapid decline.

US allies are not amused. Writing in the Huffington Post, Llewellyn King paints a surreal picture of the new reality:

"In Europe, I found a resignation about Trump. People who...were expressing deep concern are now shrugging and considering the president as a dancing bear, amusing and dangerous. Europe... is looking at a new uncertain future, but one that depends less on US leadership than it has at any time since 1945." (28)

With the US-European alliance gasping for breath, the power structure that attempted to remake the Middle East region repeatedly in recent decades is now breaking up.

On the other hand, a new power paradigm is taking shape. Backed by Russia's focused and coherent politics, Iran is emerging from its isolation, vying for greater regional role despite relentless Israeli and American threats.

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