

# Cyclone

Journal for Policy and Strategic Affairs | Vol.1, 2021

Marking a decade to the Arab Spring:  
The turmoil that changed the Middle East


## The Great Power Competition in the Middle East following the Arab Spring: What has and has not Changed?

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The decade that passed since the Arab Spring erupted enables sufficient perspective by which to examine the change in the role played by the great powers in the Middle East following the shifts in the region. The present paper analyzes several key questions: How have the superpowers, who have always "meddled" in the Arab sphere and shaped it, responded to the regional turbulence and transformations? Did the great powers, particularly the United States – the most dominant actor in the region – view the Arab Spring as an opportunity or risk? Has the power balance shifted between the great powers, with Russia, pushed out of the region in the mid-1970s, having renewed its involvement and presence in it? Has the Arab Spring altered the directions taken by the great powers' foreign policies? And finally, how is the new U.S. administration expected to conduct itself in the region, having learned the lessons of its predecessors' grapple with the challenges posed by the Middle Eastern turmoil?

### "On its way out": The Obama Administration and the Arab Spring

The revolutions in Tunisia and Egypt in early 2011 caught the Obama Administration off guard as it prepared to reduce American presence in the Middle East, forcing it to address the question of democracy in the Arab world.



In May 2011, President Obama delivered a programmatic speech on the turmoil sweeping over the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> He underscored that the transition to democracy has become a top priority, and that the United States would pursue this goal by insisting on democratic values, helping collapsing economies, and generating a dialogue with local audiences.

In practice, the U.S. foreign policy reflected a gap between what was said and what was done. The United States employed a hesitant approach to regional revolutions, and continued to gradually reduce its involvement: in December 2011 the American forces completed their withdrawal from Iraq, a step that, in retrospect, paved the way for the "Islamic State" (ISIS) to spread throughout it; following the attack against the U.S. consulate in Benghazi in 2012, the United States also reduced its presence in Libya; and in 2013, President Obama chose not to take action against the Assad regime when it used chemical weapons against its own citizens.

President Obama believed that the United States had been involved in the Middle East for too long, and, contrary to the idealist views held by President Bush, had adopted a more pragmatic and realistic approach. He preferred to avoid investing significant resources in building civil state and society in the region – an effort he believed the chances of which were low. Moreover, President Obama feared that such steps would place U.S. interests at risk, primarily Washington's relations with Arab leaders, the stability of local regimes, and advancing the campaign against terror. Obama therefore chose to focus on the nuclear deal with the Iranian regime, and to turn his attention to Asia, where China's growing power was posing a substantial threat.

The Trump Administration continued to reduce American involvement in the Middle East, focusing on interests at the expense of values. In 2018 his administration published the national defense strategy<sup>2</sup>, stating that the great power competition with China and Russia, and not the war on terror, is the United States' greatest challenge.

In line with this same view, President Trump had instructed the withdrawal of additional U.S. forces from Iraq and Afghanistan, leaving the Syrian arena, to a large extent, to Russia and Turkey. The pressure he exerted on Iran was based on economic levers, and, as a rule, President Trump avoided all military friction with the Iranian regime for fear that he would run into trouble there.

## Russia "slips into the crack"

Whereas the actions of the Obama Administration were based on a realistic approach, and its members hesitated to support the forces of change in the Middle East, Russia, and to a lesser extent China, had identified them as a threat. China was predominantly concerned that the shockwaves would disrupt the flow of oil into its territory, while Russia's considerations were more complex. Moscow feared that the collapse of Middle Eastern regimes would lead to the rise of fundamentalist Sunni movements and denominations in a manner that could inspire extremists in its Muslim districts.


Themselves "living in glass houses", China and Russia do not believe in intervening in other countries' internal affairs, and object to external involvement in an effort to replace regimes and dictators who have lost their legitimacy.

True to this principle, Russia came to Assad's aid in September 2015. Its involvement in the Syrian Civil War allowed Moscow to regain a position of influence in the Middle East, to project the image of a superpower once more, and establish a long-term maritime hold in the Mediterranean. Over the past year, Russia has taken advantage of the exacerbating crisis in Libya, as well as the United States' absence from the scene, to deepen its military involvement there once more, and even reached an agreement with the Khartoum government, allowing it to build the first Russian military seaport in the Red Sea at Port Sudan.

**Against the backdrop of Russia's entrenchment in the Middle East, the United States is no longer the only player on the field. Moreover, its tendency to reduce its involvement in it has harmed its credibility as well as the image of its deterrence**

## Has the great power balance in the Middle East shifted?

Against the backdrop of Russia's entrenchment in the Middle East, the United States is no longer the only player on the field. Moreover, its tendency to reduce its involvement in it has harmed its credibility as well as the image of its deterrence. Nevertheless, contrary to its pretensions, Moscow is unable to outline a new order in the Middle East, the vision required to shape it, or the economic resources required to implement it. De facto, the Russian strategy is based on opportunity seizing, not long-term, organized planning.



China, however, has the economic strength required to become an influential actor in the region, but is not interested in shaping the events and strategic processes in it. In the foreseeable future, Beijing prefers to avoid entering an unstable space that is deteriorating economically, where, in its view, investments are associated with more risk than opportunity.<sup>3</sup>

Under such circumstances, the United States remains the most dominant political, economic, and military force in the Middle East. Washington has a strong alliance with Israel, as well as strategic relations with key states in the Arab world to the security of which it vouches, particularly in face of the Iranian threat. The United States ensures free passage through the Gulf and the flow of oil from it to international markets, particularly in Asia; it has huge bases and extensive military presence in the region; and is the main arms supplier to Israel and the Arab states.

## **What is next? The Biden Administration and the Middle East**

President Biden and his foreign policy team are projecting continuity with regard to intentions to scale down the United States' presence and involvement in the Middle East in favor of freeing attention and resources to the great power competition. However, unlike Presidents Obama and Trump, President Biden has entered office with a global approach of restoring liberal-democratic order and bolstering democracies worldwide, including in the Middle East.

The Biden Administration may therefore find itself entangled in deep tensions in the Middle East. On the one hand it could get "dragged" into the region against its will in order to address the challenges posed by Iran and Afghanistan, or the great power competition that will inevitably take place in the Middle East as well. On the other hand, from a value-based perspective, President Biden may ultimately prefer, much like his predecessors, to adopt a realistic approach over an idealistic one. Over the years, Biden has been directly exposed to the "unintended consequences" of American attempts at "transformations" in the region, from which he has had his reservations back when he was vice president. It is likely that he has learned a similar lesson from the Arab Spring, which led to instability, civil wars, the spread of terror forces, and finally, in a "historical closure" of sorts, the return to power of authoritarian rulers in most countries in the region.

## Summary: What has and has not changed in the great power balance in the Middle East?

The extreme shifts caused by the Arab Spring in the Middle East have not driven a similar change overseas – in the great powers' policies with respect to the region. In the early 2000s, the United States tried to force the Middle East to democratize by toppling regimes and making an effort to build states in Iraq and Afghanistan. These steps have probably sown some of the seeds of the Arab Spring. And yet, despite the opportunity for deep change in the region indicated by the Arab Spring in its initial stages, as democracy seemed to take hold, the United States remained unconvinced, often making grand declarations about freedom and equality, but never intervening to ensure that the process was moving forward in the desirable direction.

It seems that the combination of increased destabilization as the events of the Arab Spring progressed and China's rise as a power threatening American supremacy and values has pushed Washington to continue, and even accelerate, reducing its involvement and presence in the region. In parallel to this process, Russia returned to the Middle East, impacting several arenas significantly, primarily Syria. However, the Russian steps have yet to indicate a shift in the great power balance in the region. Russia has not gained the trust of most Arab states, and lacks both vision and resources necessary to shape or outline a new regional order. Under such circumstances, the United States remains the dominant superpower in the Middle East, and is expected to stay in the lead in the foreseeable future.

### Notes

1. Remarks by the President on the Middle East and North Africa | [whitehouse.gov](https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2012/02/28/20120228-middle-east-north-africa) ([archives.gov](https://www.archives.gov)).
2. Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy ([dod.defense.gov](https://www.dod.defense.gov)).
3. China's Middle East Policy: Between Continuity and Change., INSS, Strategic Survey for Israel 20160-2017 (December 2016).