

MENA: Back to Oblivion?

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The World in 2022



Nonwithstanding the U.S.' disengagement, the Middle East will not disappear into global powers' oblivion.

When was the Middle East ever so marginal to world politics as to even **suggest its "return" to oblivion**, as some now do? Without delving far back in history (to Alexander, the Romans, the Crusades or Napoleon), this part of the world has **never been marginal to world politics**. During the Cold War, six out of twelve nuclear alerts between Moscow and Washington were generated by conflicts erupting there, in 1958, 1967 and, again in 1973. Was the region marginal when, in 1953, the two Dulles brothers engineered their

coup against Iran's Mossadegh? Was it marginal in 1956, during the Suez Crisis, when the UK and France joined Israel in a tripartite attack against Nasser's Egypt, a misadventure that ended in the steep decline of European influence, rapidly replaced by the more intrusive policies of the two Cold War superpowers? Was it marginal when Presidents Carter or Clinton spent weeks and months in a quest for a settlement of the Arab/Israeli conflict? Was it marginal when, in 1990, Bush senior gathered one of the largest military coalitions in history to expel Saddam Hussein from Kuwait? Was it marginal when Bush Junior attacked Afghanistan and then, in 2003, in one of the most catastrophic decisions ever taken by a US president, Iraq, in an interval of 18 months? Was it marginal when, with great difficulty, international diplomacy produced the JCPOA in 2015 to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power?

We are now hearing a new argument: **the Middle East will become marginalised by the US's focus on China.** But did we not hear Obama announcing "a pivot to Asia" only to intervene in Libya and push for a deal with Iran? There is nothing new here but a lazy linear thinking that, from the US declaring interest in one region, concludes the fall of all others into irrelevancy. A more sophisticated mind would tell us that, despite its oft-repeated leitmotiv of "returning to basics", the **US can hardly ignore a region where her main competitors are investing** so much economically, politically and, of course, militarily. How could the US ignore Russia's active deployment in Syria, Libya or the Sahel? How could it ignore China's reliance on Middle Eastern oil and trade routes? How could America ignore the polymorphous reincarnation of Islamist extremism? A more lucid mind would advise against confusing the evident reduction in US (and Western) strategic impact in the world, along with the large deregulation of force by major regional powers (the theme of my next book) with the region's fall into oblivion.

Yes, an isolationist trend has partially impacted US foreign policy over the past few years, largely in reaction to the ill-inspired and overambitious military ambitions of Bush junior and crazy neo-conservatives to "reshape

the Middle East". But this trend did not stop Obama from leading a coalition against Daesh, nor Trump from ordering General Qasem Suleimani's assassination, **nor Biden from keeping troops in Iraq and Syria**. Isolationism is part of the cyclical mechanics of US politics. Europe has been impacted by it as much as if not more than the Middle East. US isolationism comes and goes: to understand it, one would do better to look at the evolution of public opinion at home rather than at any particular part of the world. Opinion can change very quickly in one direction or another. In early July 2014 it considered ISIS irrelevant to US national interests. A horrible photograph of an American citizen beheaded by the "Caliphate" partisans radically and rapidly changed it. Only weeks later, US troops were camping on the banks of the Euphrates.

The Middle East, for its geographical configuration on the world map, for its resources, both material and symbolic (notably religious) and for its long history of appeal to ambitious empire builders, **simply cannot disappear into oblivion**. It never has in the past and, for its luck according to some or, more likely, for its misfortune, it never will do.

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