



Conclusions

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In early 2001, prior to the 9/11 attacks and the War on Terror (WoT) that followed, only the Palestinian Territories and some rural areas in Sudan and Yemen were featuring armed conflicts within the Arab Middle East and North Africa. The situation in the Western Sahara/South of Morocco was overall calm, Algeria had virtually completed its transition to a post-civil war new order, and only Somalia and Afghanistan, then both considered on the outskirts of the MENA region, were facing particularly difficult times after the fall of their respective internationally recognized government, the decade prior. Twenty years of WoT after, nearly two thirds of all Middle Eastern and North African countries are either facing a situation of civil war (e.g., Libya, Syria, Yemen), of frequent armed incidents or armed conflicts (e.g., Iraq, the Palestinian Territories, Somalia, South Sudan, Sudan), or are dangerously close to economic collapse while hosting millions of vulnerable refugees and/or internally

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displaced people (i.e., Afghanistan, Iran, Lebanon, and to a lesser extent, Jordan and Turkey). Tellingly, the vast majority of these dozens of million refugees and IDPs originate from the region, chiefly Afghanistan, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, i.e., countries of various American interventions in the name of fighting terror.

Meanwhile, in the global terrorism index 2022 of the Institute for Economics and Peace, Afghanistan ranked first and Iraq second, as they were by far the countries most affected by terrorism in the world.¹ Syria, a country which still hosts US troops to fight terror groups like Daesh/ISIS, ranked five, out of 178. Unfortunately, the year before, the ranking was overall similar, and it has been so for several years. At the time of writing this book, no one can anticipate what will happen in the short or medium term, as the situation on the ground seems far from settled. But the WoT's outcome becomes clear if put into perspective.

The United States has never fought for so long a war (more than 20 years, as it is still legally continuing), and the political structures of the Middle East never had been so fundamentally challenged—and in a few countries, destroyed—since World War I and the collapse of the Ottoman Empire, a century ago. With these failures to rebuild states and nations that were supposed to become pro-American, as it had done in Germany and Japan after World War 2, this is also the image of the United States and its influence in the region and the world which has become a matter of speculation. The US government has repeatedly announced, since the Obama administration, a change in geostrategic priorities with a de facto relegation of the Middle East region. A trend which has accelerated—despite great difficulties—under the Biden administration at the time of writing this book. In clear terms, the War on Terror, under its various forms, has completely failed in eradicating terror organizations and in building more stable, more democratic, and more pro-American states in that region. And with the catastrophic 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, the WoT leaves a tarnished and much-diminished image of the United States' role in the broad area. At the very least, the Pax Americana is no more in the region, and the American hegemony has left the place to a Post-American Middle East.

¹ The Global Terrorism Index 2022 ranks countries of the world according to four quantitative annual terrorism activity indicators: the numbers of terrorist incidents, of fatalities and of injuries caused by terrorists, and the total property damage caused by it. Retrieved from: <https://www.visionofhumanity.org/maps/global-terrorism-index/>.

Understanding the reasons behind the failure of the WoT and this new geopolitical regional order constituted the main goal of this book. As developed in the first section, the post-9/11/2001 imperial project of state- and nation-building has transformed the countries where the United States directly intervened into failing, more unstable and/or adversary places: the Taliban are now ruling over fragile Afghanistan again, with Al-Qaida allies and the Haqqani network as part of their government. More importantly maybe, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been able to shrewdly maneuver its way amid all these crises and further spread its influence and power regionally. Sanaa and large swathes of Yemen are now under the control of the Iranian-influenced Houthis rebels. Baghdad is now under the influence of hardline Shiite parties and pro-Iranian militias and critically dependent on Beijing and Teheran for its economic activity and its own energy provision. And the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad is now heavily dependent on Russian and Iranian military, diplomatic and economic support, while remaining in a state of strategic Cold to Mild War with Washington and its regional allies, via the Lebanese Hezbollah and Shiite militia groups. Finally, the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" toward Iran and its polarization of the Middle East, at play in the launch of the US-supported East Mediterranean Gas Forum to counterbalance the larger Doha-based Gas Exporting Countries Forum, because it included Iran and Russia, has led to a certain fragmentation of the gas industry landscape in the Middle East and a once dangerous rise in tensions around gas resources in the Eastern Mediterranean Sea, as explained in chapter nine, shortly before the invasion of Ukraine by Russia actually made gas cooperation in the MENA more needed than ever (Lambert et al., 2022).

It might have been impossible to imagine a worse geopolitical outcome two decades ago, when the idea of the WoT was announced. Ironically, chapter seven shows that where the US did not intervene violently, as in the Arabian Gulf monarchies, the policies of Countering Violent Extremism (CVE), which were locally designed and only supported by the Obama administration, were overall successful. Yet even there, the fight against terror had its limitations and serious shortcomings, with several thousand citizens of Gulf countries—mainly from Saudi Arabia—joining ISIS over the past decade. The idea of fixing the Middle East—which reflected a neo-colonial approach—is now totally discredited, and the last attempt to resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict by the Trump Administration without truly involving the Palestinians as key actors in the

process, as analyzed in chapter eight, was doomed from the start. Sadly, the subsequent rise in violence in Palestinian and Israeli cities at the time of writing this conclusion is simply unsurprising.

But the most concerning aspect from a Middle East perspective has been the human toll and humanitarian impact of the whole strategic folly and failure of the USA named War on Terror. Both militarily and politically, the WoT has generated vast humanitarian consequences. Chapter six highlighted the region's unprecedented migration flows of the past two decades, that have largely been generated by the successive military campaigns in Afghanistan and Iraq, but also in Pakistan, Yemen, Libya, Somalia, and Syria, among others. The populations of refugees and IDPs in the Middle East have increased and reached all-time high proportions, with between 38 and 60 million persons forced to leave their home due to the WoT operations (Vine et al., 2021), and with more than two dozen millions of them still living in tents and temporary shelter far from home, often in awful conditions. Against this background, the EU's major project of migration control, especially in Libya, and the (US-equipped) Saudi-Emirati disastrous military intervention in Yemen in the name of fighting pro-Iranian "terror", have only added to the political and economic misery in MENA countries. For these vulnerable and disenfranchised millions of individuals and families of Afghanistan and the Middle East and North Africa, clearly, the American vision of a "Greater Middle East" that should be constituted of stable, democratic states, and more prosperous societies, never materialized. Despite vast sums of money injected in development projects and despite undeniable education gains for girls and minorities in Afghanistan, the WOT has overall led to such disastrous situations in Afghanistan and across the region, that millions have been fleeing their country however perilous is the journey.

THE FOUR *WHY*.S OF THE WOT FAILURE FROM A MIDDLE EAST PERSPECTIVE

As mentioned in the introduction, there is an abundant and detailed literature on *how* some policies of the WoT failed. This book, however, took the perspective of the retrospective *why*, and essentially from a Middle Eastern perspective. We share our conclusions via the four following main points, acknowledging that other elements have also played a role, such as the US political tensions between succeeding administrations at the White

House, a general war fatigue among NATO allies, and denunciations of “forever wars” on social media, *inter alia*. The following points, nevertheless, reflect what was of major importance and direct consequence for the broad Middle East region, in terms of transforming it over the past two decades into a region that is today less stable and certainly not free from terror groups or enemy states of the USA.

1. The US Authorities mis-read the geostrategic moment

In late 2001, the US and their allies easily won the first battles against the Taliban and captured or killed dozens of terrorists from Al-Qaida in Afghanistan, with then the support of the international community (Iran and Russia included), only to realize within a few years their lack of lasting accomplishments and strategic victory. The White House had too rapidly believed that they had won the Afghan war or was close to it. Based on this flawed analysis, the Bush administration believed it could also easily win the peace as well as the hearts and minds of the population, with generously funded state- and nation-building programs across Afghanistan and the region, while antagonizing neighboring Iran and other countries (including Russia with pro-US ‘color’ revolutions in former Soviet nations). This major analytical mistake about Afghanistan and its neighborhood, first, and then about Iraq and its neighborhood (which also includes Iran), a year and a half after, led to asymmetric and bloody armed conflicts that the US imperial project, despite its formidable conventional military might, could not win anymore. It was taken by surprise on two main fronts and not militarily fit for purpose to win over Islamic and tribal militias and Internet-savvy terror networks. Meanwhile, the US didn’t recognize until too late the rising strategic challenge being posed by three powers of increasing influence in the Middle East, namely China, Iran, and Russia. These three nations have increasingly benefited from the American difficulties there, its deteriorated image in many countries, and its gradual strategic withdrawal from the region without any capable pro-US force to replace it, as chapter two and five illustrated well with the case studies of Afghanistan, Iraq and Syria.

2. The US Authorities poorly and inconsistently defined its enemies, main mission, and policies

If the unrecognized, simply organized, and economically poor regimes of the Afghan Taliban and Yemeni Houthis seem to have locally won the WoT against the US so far, alongside the hardliners of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the above-mentioned near-peer competitors of the US, it has largely been by occupying the political spaces the US had left vacant due to deep policy flaws and inconsistency. While the first course in any public policy program introduces students to the public policy cycle, which starts by a clear policy formulation, the Bush administration had by contrast very hastily planned its reaction to the 9/11/2001 attacks. The invasion of poorly known Taliban Afghanistan started less than a month after the attacks, without updated maps of the entire country and without having a single Pashtun-speaker among some of its national intelligence agencies. Worse, it had never decisively proclaimed any lasting definition of its enemy: Was it Al-Qaida or all terror groups? Shall it always include the hosts and sponsors of terror groups as well? Shall all enemy states be included? Did that end with the original “Axis of Evil” list (Iran, Iraq, and North Korea) or did that include Cuba, Libya, and Syria, as added later in 2002 by John Bolton? And what about Venezuela and Nicaragua, as added by the same Bolton in 2018? Over the past 20 years, the official enemy designation shifted from only Al-Qaida in mid-September 2001 to, at times, include all the above, as in 2018, during President Trump’s term in office. And there also was a lot of ambiguity as to how the Government of Pakistan should be treated under the Presidencies of Bush, Obama, and Trump.

Beyond the fundamental issue of clearly and consistently defining the enemy until it is defeated, there could be no understanding about the *whys* of the failure of the WoT if there was no mentioning of the often-changing goals and priorities of the US foreign policy in the Middle East, or even in a single country. As chapters two and three illustrated well, the inconsistent set of US ideological goals crashed into Middle Eastern field realities, where state- and nation-building proved much harder, slower, and costlier than initially anticipated. Additionally, the two administrations of Georges W. Bush (2001–2009) never devised a sufficient set of clear, detailed, coherent, stable, and complementary post-war policy documents. Instead, they rushed the US military forces into the very

simple yet time-proven trap of Al-Qaida's ideological leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, by triggering a powerful yet *hubris*-blinded superpower into asymmetric warfare in the mountains of tribal Afghanistan. It was there that the British and Soviet empires had been militarily defeated in the previous two centuries, and it was precisely to trigger there the Americans, and for that same purpose, that Al-Qaida had meticulously prepared the 9/11/2001 attacks.

After some changes in priorities following the transition from the Bush administrations (2001–2009) to the Obama administrations (2009–2017), with the latter being eager to disengage from the region, in theory after a military surge to gain the upper hand for diplomatic negotiations, the return of Republican national security advisor John Bolton at the White House in 2018 under President Trump let a seasoned commentator to observe that “*the spirit of George W. Bush has once more begun to inhabit the White House*”.² This renewed spirit included the fact that the most hawkish US form of unilateralism didn't mean having either an elaborate policy for the new Latin American countries who were simply being added to a new Axis of Evil list, or for the already failing US efforts in Afghanistan, let alone for the Greater Middle East project.

There are now many official US reports on the wars and post-war efforts in Afghanistan and Iraq that show the lack of a clear and consistent strategy and clear directives that could have enabled more realistic nation-building efforts.³ This latest, fundamental geostrategic mistake is exactly what has rendered the formidable military might of the US, once a hyperpower in a unipolar world, decreasingly capable to change the complex political situation on the ground, thereby illustrating Bertrand Badie's (2020) paradox of the contemporary powerlessness of power.

² Heilbrunn, J. (May 8, 2018). *Sorry Europe, President Trump doesn't have an Iran plan*. *The Spectator World*. <https://usa.spectator.co.uk/2018/05/sorry-europe-president-trump-doesnt-have-an-iran-plan/>.

³ See e.g., Special Inspector General for Afghanistan Reconstruction. (2021). *What we need to learn: Lessons from twenty years of Afghanistan Reconstruction*. United States Government. <https://www.sigar.mil/pdf/lessonslearned/SIGAR-21-46-LL.pdf>.

3. Over-estimation of US capacities; under-estimation of the enemies?

As the first chapters have shown, the *hubris* and political delusion in the Bush administration reached alarmingly high levels under the leadership of key figures such as Vice-President Dick Cheney or Karl Rove, the Deputy Chief of Staff of the White House (2001–2006), Director of the White House Iraq Group (2002–2004), and principal adviser to President Georges W. Bush. In early 2004, he claimed that “[w]e are an empire now, and when we act, we create our own reality”.⁴ At that time, Al-Qaida leaders Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri had not been captured; the Taliban in Afghanistan had already proven their resilience on the ground, had taken control of some of the lucrative traffic of opium, and were fighting back for their return to power, with a strong presence in the South of the country; Iraq was rapidly sleeping into a civil war as formerly secular Iraqi rebellion leaders were coordinating attacks on US troops with foreign Sunni jihadists; Syria provided temporary refuge to some Iraqi insurgents; and Iran was supporting and influencing various Shiite political parties and militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon and beyond, and would eventually resume its nuclear program. We can clearly say now that not only were the US authorities not achieving their own over-ambitious plans at that time, but they were largely in denial of the true extent of their failures and that US troops were being fought back hard by a large and diverse group of resilient enemies. The latter were more resilient than expected and, despite their ideological oppositions, they sometimes managed to collaborate as they shared the common goal of breaking the American hegemony over the region, for their very own survival initially, and then to evict the Americans from the area by causing it losses too heavy to bear in a democracy.

During the many years of the WoT, Afghanistan, Iraq, Yemen, and later Libya and Syria kept on siphoning American military budgets and

⁴ SUSKIN Ron, “Faith, Certainty and the Presidency of George W. Bush”, *The New York Times Magazine*, 17 October 2004. <https://www.nytimes.com/2004/10/17/magazine/faith-certainty-and-the-presidency-of-george-w-bush.html>. In that press article, published before the November 2004 election, Karl Rove was not named directly. It’s in 2014, in the review *Mother Jones*, that journalist Ron Suskin revealed the name of K. Rove see: ENGELHART Tom, “Karl Rove Unintentionally Predicted the Current Chaos in Iraq”, *Mother Jones*, 19 June 2014. <https://www.motherjones.com/politics/2014/06/us-karl-rove-iraq-crisis/>.

human resources at a daunting scale, over the long term and at very heavy costs, as the expenditure has largely been financed via public borrowing. As detailed in the introduction, the economic costs have been colossal, in trillion dollars, and will be felt by the US government for decades, due to the costs of health care of veterans, families, and pensions for disabled service men and women. It didn't lead, though, to a situation of imperial military overstretch leading to collapse (Kennedy, 1987), as expected by jihadists. But the military failures, civilian victims, and systemic corruption fed by foreign aid and military occupation became unacceptable to the public in the region and in the US, especially as American citizens saw an increasing number of civilians and military men and women suffering with life-long traumas, amputations, or premature death. By that time yet, the US military was already deeply engaged in several conflicts in the Middle East. Though terribly costly, the US could not rapidly withdraw anymore without losing its credibility and international status. It needed some forms of lasting achievements. Hence the military surge in Afghanistan, which failed to achieve lasting results as the Taliban knew they needed to wait for the already announced American withdrawal.

The Taliban victory was also made possible with the discreet help of foreign powers that the US hegemony had coalesced against itself: Pakistan, whose secret services were decreasingly trustful of, and trusted by, the US to the benefit of arch-rival India while it could certainly not keep an Indian-friendly Afghanistan on its Northern border; Iran, which initially helped Americans in 2001 to invade Afghanistan, only to find itself placed in 2002 on the Bush Administration's "Axis of Evil" list; as well as Russia and China, as the former sold modern armaments to the Taliban and as both countries provided early diplomatic goodwill gestures and commercial reassurances to the conquering rebel movement in early 2021. If both Russia and China have long and deeply resented the Taliban's religious extremism, both countries managed to better read the geostrategic moment than the White House. Moscow and Beijing understood that the defeat of the USA in Afghanistan could lead to the removal of US military bases and installations from the whole area and that the Taliban represented a much lower menace, especially if some trade arrangements could be put in place to create some commercial dependency in a post-conflict setting. And while the Taliban, some other insurgents, and various enemy states managed to repeatedly collaborate, America's unilateralism regularly generated frictions or even tensions with its allies.

4. A failed public diplomacy

Despite the widespread international support of the USA following the 2001 terror attacks, including in the Middle East, the reputation of the US rapidly deteriorated there and beyond. By late 2002, it became increasingly clear that the US would invade Iraq with or without a green light from the United Nations Security Council, thus violating international law and causing a heated and divisive debate at the United Nations between the US-led coalition and some of its own allies in Afghanistan, such as France, Germany, and several other EU member countries. Additionally, the US leadership wrongly anticipated to be welcome to Iraq as liberators by the oppressed Iraqi people, as defended by Vice-President Dick Cheney, Deputy Secretary of Defence Paul Wolfowitz, and their academic mentor on the region, the sulphurous historian Bernard Lewis.⁵ Yet decades of Shiite clerics' and secular Baath party's staunch anti-US propaganda, the disastrous legacy of the US-led international embargo over Iraq (1990–2003), Washington's continuous support to Israel, the lies about the Iraqi program of weapons of mass destruction, the broadcasted images of lootings in un-securitized invaded Baghdad, the graphical images of torture emanating from the Abu Ghraib and Bagram prison camps,⁶ as well as the arrestation and deaths of many civilians at the hands of the US-led coalition and private companies (like the infamous Blackwater group), led to a distrustful relationship between the US—and especially its army—and the Iraqi people. It rapidly deteriorated into a feeling of oppression and alienation among vast sections of the Iraqi and Arab societies as various survey polls have monitored over the years.

⁵ Late medial historian Bernard Lewis has been a controversial figure in academia. He has been heavily criticized for his Orientalist, outdated and generalizing views on Muslim populations, especially in the Arab Middle East. See on the Iraqi invasion file Cookson, J. R. (2018, May 21). The Legacy of Bernard Lewis. *The National Interest*. <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/the-legacy-bernard-lewis-25909>.

⁶ 780 men and boys were deported to the camp of Guantanamo Bay, where over a hundred persons were interrogated by the CIA in what was officially reported as torture (Frank, 2018; Higham & Stephens, 2004; Singh, 2013; Taguba, 2008; Tayler & Epstein, 2022). In the end, though, only two prisoners have ever been convicted of any crime. Twenty years after its opening, the prison camp is still functioning and costing the US its credibility as to the defense of human rights in Afghanistan and the MENA region (Higham & Stephens, 2004; Taguba, 2008; Tayler & Epstein, 2022).

Meanwhile, the “invasion” narrative of Baghdad, one of the most powerful symbols of the Arab Muslim heritage, was very skillfully used against the Americans by its enemies. It was regularly reinforced by the graphic images and appalling reports of torture, of innocent victims being gunned-down at home, of the large-scale destructions of urban areas in Iraq (especially in Sunni urban areas) and in other countries of the region. This was shrewdly utilized by media- and technology-savvy Jihadists to generate a strong and lasting resentment towards foreign military presence—though, ironically, many of the jihadists were foreigners too. The occupation of Iraq only became a net gain to the strategy of the theoreticians of “global jihad”, as part of an elaborate propaganda war. While the US tried to stop the damage done by the videos of destruction and random arrests and the critical voices on Arabic media outlets, most particularly from the Al-Jazira news channel,⁷ the damage to the US reputation nevertheless became permanent and benefitted its enemies within and without the region as was developed in the book introduction.

Even President Obama’s emphasis on “countering violent extremism” to replace the more aggressive approach and terminology of “war on terror”, has not managed to repair the image of the US in the Middle East. His drone policy particularly, supposed to provide surgical strikes against well-identified targets while keeping a lighter footprint in the region, actually led to the deaths of thousands of Afghan, Pakistani, Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni civilians, among others.⁸ Generally denied, or simply not investigated, the few acknowledged victims of these drone strikes, which have logically fuelled much anti-American resentment in rural areas of these countries, were generally dismissed as tragic but exceptional collateral damage. Yet the processing of data of incidents by investigative journalists has repeatedly shown that it was nothing but exceptional, with one in five drone strikes ending up killing a civilian (Khan, 2021;

⁷ The Doha-based Aljazeera Arabic tv news channel rapidly became the main source of critique of the US operations in Afghanistan and Iraq. Though US officials were invited to and did talk and debate on the channel, the US tried to decrease its influence across the region, including by bombing its offices in Iraq and by launching its own tv channel in Arabic (*Al-Hurra*, ‘the free one’, in Arabic).

⁸ *The New York Times* has published several articles which have demonstrated that coalition air strikes have been causing many more civilian deaths than initially anticipated, at a rate calculated to be 31 times higher than officially acknowledged. See e.g., the elaborate and meticulous reporting of Khan and Gopal (November 16, 2017) as well as Khan (December 19, 2021).

Khan & Gopal, 2017). It was revealing that even the last drone strike of the US in Afghanistan's capital city during the chaotic withdrawal of August 2021, didn't kill any terrorists but took the life of civilians. A week after the American press revealed the affair, the U.S. military finally admitted their mistake that had killed 10 persons, including seven children and, ironically, an Afghan humanitarian professional who had long worked for an American aid NGO.⁹ This whole story was itself abundantly mediatized worldwide as the US were leaving Afghanistan to the Taliban after 20 years in the country. The whole sequence gave to the withdrawal process and, by extension, to the whole War on Terror, the appearance of an Afghan fiasco. It was worse than that.

THE UNCERTAIN POST-AMERICAN MIDDLE EAST

The jihadist quest for a never-ending war with the West never really unfolded as planned (Roy, 2006). Though the US eventually became resented in all the countries it militarily intervened in, jihadists never could durably capitalize on it as developed in Chapter 5. Their life-stiffening moral constraints, death cults-like support for kamikaze missions, and heavy retaliation towards any supposed moral deviance made them rapidly resented by the populace wherever they managed to temporarily establish their control. While there are more than 1.6 billion Muslims in the world, jihadist movements were never joined by millions, nor even hundreds of thousands of foreign volunteers. At the peak of their recruitment, several thousands of foreigners joined the Sunni jihadist movements in the Near East campaigns, but this rapidly dwindled after the self-titled "caliphate" of ISIS fell, in 2017. By then, there were mostly people fleeing the so-called caliphate, disenfranchised by the propaganda of a new Islamic geopolitical renaissance. Bin Laden and Al-Zawahiri, and Daesh leaders after them, had vastly over-estimated the potential appeal of a global jihad against the military occupations of Muslim lands, and even more so how long the attracted Muslim fringe groups would support their new state under the heavy bombing of an international coalition.

Paradoxically, after 20 years of guerrilla warfare and their military victory in August 2022, the Taliban have been facing the same problem

⁹ Aikins, M. (2021, September 10). Times Investigation: In U.S. Drone Strike, Evidence Suggests No ISIS Bomb, *New York Times*. <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/09/10/world/asia/us-air-strike-drone-kabul-afghanistan-isis.html>.

than the Americans in 2002, or that their enemy Daesh/ISIS in Iraq and Syria in 2015. The Taliban believed that the hardest had been done (winning battles and re-establishing their rule) and that peace and stability shall eventually be won, only to gradually realize that even if the war had been won, the peace may be harder to win for them too. The 2022 US and IMF sanctions against the Taliban regime, including the freezing of Afghanistan's financial assets abroad have been pushing the country to the brink of total economic collapse. At the time of writing this conclusion, more than 95% of the country is food insecure and for months, people have been queuing in front of banks to withdraw a minimum of cash to pay for food. There is no clarity as to whether Afghanistan will fall back into a period of deep political instability and civil war, wherein warlords, important opium traders, and Al-Qaida-linked groups could thrive and transform Afghanistan into a major platform of trans-national drug smuggling, weapons trading, and terrorist activities. In Yemen, too, the Houthis Islamist militia works hard at presenting itself as the sovereign government of Yemen, by developing a narrative of sovereignty and legitimate oil governance, amid the ongoing war and devastation, in what actually remains one of the worst humanitarian crises in the world.

In Syria and Iraq, surviving cells of ISIS are expected to keep on fighting the national governments of these countries and also clash with Iran-aligned Shiite militias. The latter have grown in influence, especially in Iraq, but equally failed to transform this military advantage into sufficient parliamentary seats and political clout at the time of writing this conclusion. If by now it is clear that global jihadism cannot take control of the region, nor even keep whole countries under their tight control for long, it is also clear that Islamist terror groups are a regional feature that is not expected to disappear anytime soon despite the very vast military means utilized for that purpose by the US and its partners during two decades. Against this fractured political landscape, actors from outside the region have been gradually replacing the political and economic spaces abandoned by the Americans.

JOINT THREAT FROM CHINA AND RUSSIA TO THE US ROLE IN THE REGION

At the time of writing this conclusion, the important state visit of Chinese leader Xi Jinping to Saudi Arabia in December 2022, which included a high-level China-Arab States forum, followed a few months after by the China-brokered reconciliation deal between Saudi Arabia and Iran,

in April 2023, have been widely commented as further proof of Washington's loss of political clout in the region to the favor of other international powers. This had indeed followed the refusal by the Saudi and Emirati leadership to increase oil production at the demand of the US President Joe Biden at a time of high oil prices, and while the two Gulf states followed instead the Russian proposal to decrease oil production quotas as part of OPEC+ policies to stabilize the level of crude prices. Although it is too early to draw definitive conclusions, these symbolic developments indicate that things have changed in the region, including what used to be one of its main stability partnership since the post-World War 2 deals with Saudi Arabia and later with the other Gulf petro-monarchies: in essence, US protection against the free flow of crude oil. And none of these changes seem to currently benefit the US and its place in the world order.

Within and without the Middle east region, the US government acknowledged that it is facing various threats from so-called "near-peer competitors" to an extent unseen since the Cold War.¹⁰ This tougher competition from China and Russia had become one of the key ideas of the 2018 Department of Defense's National Defense Strategy (NDS) of the United States. Produced every four years, the NDS replaced the US Quadrennial Defense Review and now gives broad strategic direction to the department of defense (DoD) and armed forces. Realistic and straight to the point, after nearly two decades of ill-defined policies and sandcastles in the skies, the 2018 NDS recognized the stiff and increasing competition from China and Russia, the weakened military standing of the US, and that the narrow focus of the uniquely long and costly War on Terror across the world was ill-placed and debilitating on the strategic level and tactical levels.

Today, we are emerging from a period of strategic atrophy, aware that our competitive military advantage has been eroding. (...) Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security. China is a strategic competitor using predatory economics to intimidate its neighbors while militarizing features in the South China Sea. Russia has violated the borders of nearby nations and pursues veto power

¹⁰ US Department of Defense. (2020). *Statement of Matthew P. Donovan SASC confirmation hearing to be under-secretary of defense for personnel and readiness*, March 10, 2020. https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Donovan_03-10-20.pdf.

over the economic, diplomatic, and security decisions of its neighbors. (...) Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability. Despite the defeat of ISIS's physical caliphate, threats to stability remain as terrorist groups with long reach continue to murder the innocent and threaten peace more broadly. This increasingly complex security environment is defined by rapid technological change, challenges from adversaries in every operating domain, and the impact on current readiness from the longest continuous stretch of armed conflict in our Nation's history.

Source: US Department of Defence (2018).¹¹

Shortly after the start of President Biden's administration, and amid the most acrimonious presidential transition in recent US history, the new administration could have easily taken its distance from Secretary Mathis' 2018 NDS on many issues. Yet, its first major strategic document, the Interim National Security Strategic Guidance,¹² is remarkably in line with all the points mentioned above. And regarding the Middle East more particularly, the Biden Administration goes even further, clearly stating that "*we do not believe that military force is the answer to the region's challenges*" (Biden, 2021, p. 11). Published less than two months before the May 2021 deadly week of armed conflict between Israel and the Hamas, in the Gaza Strip, the words of the US administration have clearly not influenced all the Middle East's longest political issues, grievances, and deeply entrenched problems. Yet Washington is not supportive anymore of military threats to settle each and every issue in the region. The May 2022 assassination of American-Palestinian journalist Shireen Abu Akleh by an Israeli sniper was even condemned by the White House and showed that the time of quasi-systematic full support of Israeli military actions was over. The logic of systematically transforming the region by force or the threat of it, has largely been discredited and abandoned to more multilateral approaches and, whenever possible, negotiations. The US supported meetings in 2021 and 2022 between Saudi and Iranian officials to develop a *modus vivendi*, something which constitutes a major difference with the previous American administrations over the past two decades, from the

¹¹ US Department of Defence. (2018, p. 1). Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy. <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

¹² NSC-1v2.pdf (whitehouse.gov).

Bush administration's Axis of Evil approach towards Iran, to Obama's cautious threats, negotiations, and *on and off* sanctions, to the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy towards Iran.

The 2022 National Defense Strategy reinforces this new approach, which is much less aggressive and ambitious than the WoT. It aims to achieve its goals via three main ways: integrated deterrence, campaigning, and actions that build enduring advantages.¹³ This is very far from the imperial philosophy of reshaping a region by force or the threat of it, extending US core values of democracy and liberalism to many other nations, and eradicating terrorism worldwide.

Despite clear diplomatic fatigue, Western diplomats are still trying to convince the Iranian leadership to commit again to a form of Obama-era Iranian nuclear deal (technically, the "Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action") and peacefully contain its nuclear ambitions, even if the country has been engulfed in a troubled period of mass demonstrations and civic disobedience against the regime following the killing of a young female Iranian by the morality police due to her supposedly non-conform wearing of the compulsory hijab. In parallel, the Taliban regime, which is under heavy international sanctions, has kept a line of communication opened via mediators in Doha.

Also, Turkey, Greece, Cyprus, Israel, and Lebanon have managed to de-escalate their maritime demonstrations of force in the Eastern Mediterranean. The problems are certainly not solved and there are still two international gas fora in the MENA region and not enough cooperation, yet there is no longer an imminent risk of armed conflict surrounding offshore gas drilling operations. Remarkably, during the Fall 2022 World Cup hosted in Qatar, the previously hostile leadership of neighboring countries Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates went to Qatar to mark the end of hostilities between and among the Gulf monarchies. And this is largely due to the push of the Biden administration in that direction, and the 2022 elevation of Qatar as "Major Non-NATO Strategic Ally" by the White House. This highlights too, that the White House's regional policy shift from a two-decade long and counter-productive paradigm of constant military engagement and diplomatic

¹³ US Department of Defense. (2022). *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy*. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

tensions towards a new paradigm, marked by greater roles for negotiations and military disengagement, has been understood by several MENA countries as an opportunity to decrease tensions, if not solving old issues.

NEW PRIORITIES

As articulated in March 2021, Joe Biden’s foreign and military policies have abandoned most of what remained of the WoT and the geostrategic center of gravity is being reoriented towards other world regions. Only Iran was considered an important state opponent in the region, worth the attention of Washington, yet for which a lower level of military presence was established.

The United States should not, and will not, engage in “forever wars” that have cost thousands of lives and trillions of dollars. (...) [W]e position ourselves to deter our adversaries and defend our interests, working alongside our partners, our presence will be most robust in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. In the Middle East, we will right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.

Source: Biden (2021, p. 15).¹⁴

In line with President Obama’s “Pivot to Asia” strategic orientation,¹⁵ announced a dozen years prior, the Biden administration has been reorientating its forces and diplomatic capacities towards the Indo-Pacific region, wherein the US has already positioned 300,000 service men and women, and to a much lesser extent towards Europe, where the focus is about Russia, especially since its February 2022 invasion of Ukraine.¹⁶ While the strategic departure of most American troops from the Middle East and towards the Indo-Pacific region and Europe might sound like a relief to the ears of many in the region, the US public might well wonder

¹⁴ Biden, J. R. (2021). *Interim National Strategic Security Guidance*. The White House. <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.

¹⁵ Lieberthal, K. (2011). The American Pivot to Asia. *Foreign Policy*, 21, 20–35.

¹⁶ US Department of Defense. (2022). *Fact Sheet: 2022 National Defense Strategy*. <https://media.defense.gov/2022/Mar/28/2002964702/-1/-1/1/NDS-FACT-SHEET.PDF>.

if this is a durable change or yet another temporary shift that may not survive much longer than the Biden Presidency.

For now, one of the very few positive elements of legacy from the WoT catastrophe, alongside the greater scrutiny of offshore banking centers and the greater state prevention of violent extremism in Gulf monarchies, has been the deeper appreciation by some leaders in the Middle East region of the limits of military tools and the value of diplomatic settlements achieved via negotiations, rather than threats or coercion. The 2021 normalization of diplomatic relations between Qatar and blockading Arab neighbors, and the 2022 thaw in ties between Israel and Turkey, for instance, show a change in Middle East inter-state relations and strong departures from the polarizing Bush administrations' emphasis on "with us or against us" geopolitics. Nevertheless, the legacy of the Trump administration's 2021 divisive policy in the Maghreb region is still negatively impacting the sub-region, as explained in chapter nine.

Finally, and to conclude, with all its military might and policies of pressure and threats, the US has solved no major diplomatic or security issue in the Middle East region in over 20 years and the security level in the MENA countries, and from the region towards the US, is no better than prior to the so-called "forever wars". The latter had to come to a halt, and the War on Terror might well be remembered as a period of actual US terror among the populations of the broad Middle East. These wars have even failed to secure more oil and gas supplies for the international market, as the 2022 international energy crisis blatantly revealed. Yet the unilaterally decided withdrawal from the region, decided under President Obama, after a surge in troops and violence, has only produced disappointment among traditional allies. Israel, Egypt, and the Gulf monarchies have decided in Spring 2022 not to abide by the US sanctions against Russia following its invasion of Ukraine. Twenty years of unilateralism at all costs and this strategic withdrawal could certainly not entice these allies to antagonize a new and growing regional hegemon, Russia, when Washington decides to become more distant. China, after becoming the main importer of the region's oil and gas exports, has become a key broker of diplomatic agreements. In the end, the War on Terror, as such or under different names, was a two-decade period of grand, ill-prepared, and delusional policy aims, American unilateralism in regional decision-making, failed American diplomacy and welcomed Asian alternatives to it, failed counterinsurgency with massive violence, large-scale destruction, and unprecedented levels of forced migrations

from and across a transformed Middle East that will need decades to reconstruct itself and heal from deep scars and profound trauma.

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