

Arab Views on an American Pivot Away from the Middle East

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The US government's "pivot" from the Middle East to focus on Asia, and especially on China, has been much debated but not well documented since President Barack Obama first proposed it a decade ago. The reality behind the notion of a pivot is much more complex than a unilateral American decision. It includes a dozen Middle Eastern and global actors who all at once are diversifying their international strategic and economic relations, in line with their national vulnerabilities and interests.

Americans and Arabs' perceptions of themselves and their global relationships are now evolving steadily and revealing new developments: Arab citizens and governments are converging in their desire to reduce but not end their reliance on the United States and to diversify ties with other powers. Meanwhile, foreign policy decisions by all actors downplay their previous black-and-white, friend-or-foe dichotomy between two ideological camps, in favor of flexible and nuanced relations with a wider network of partners.

Why and How Change Happens

Five critical dynamics occurring simultaneously across the Middle East clarify why so many states have been adjusting their foreign ties, and why most Arabs welcome a lower level of American engagement in the region.

First, half a dozen Middle Eastern states now actively project their power—money, military, trade, and technology—across the region, including by adjusting and even reversing long-standing policies if this serves their best interests (e.g., Saudi Arabia and the UAE’s renewed ties with Iran, Turkish-Egyptian reconciliation, and Israel’s formal agreements with four Arab governments). Activist and often wealthy or militarily powerful regional states—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Israel, for example—can provide more vulnerable states some of the external support that they have long sought from global powers. Arab states have shown higher levels of independent action by resuming full diplomatic ties with Iran, hedging on strong and deep ties with Israel, avoiding taking sides in the Ukraine-Russia conflict, seeking to join the BRICS group of nations, and hesitating to join a regional network of militaries to confront Iran.

Second, the United States is adjusting some of its engagements in the Middle East as it experiences a great reckoning for its past policies during the bipolar and unipolar global eras that existed after 1945, when its power allowed it to dictate to weaker Arab states. But the United States’ few political or military successes in the Middle East in recent decades, especially its heavy reliance on warfare and sanctions, have come at a heavy cost to citizens in the region.¹ Recent studies show that this includes the displacement of at least 37 million, and perhaps as many as 59 million people.² Not surprisingly, polls repeatedly indicate that Arab publics widely dislike or distrust American policies—though many Arab governments rely on American military and economic support to keep

1 Jennifer Kavanagh and Bryan Frederick, “Why Force Fails: The Dismal Track Record of U.S. Military Interventions,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 30, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/ united-states/us-military-why-force-fails>.

2 David Vine et al., “Creating Refugees: Displacement Caused by the United States’ Post-9/11 Wars,” Watson Institute, September 21, 2020, https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/files/cow/imce/papers/2020/Displacement_Vine%20et%20a1_Costs%20of%20War%202020%2009%2008.pdf.

themselves in power.³ Following its military and political withdrawal from Afghanistan, Iraq, and most of Syria, the United States could be reconsidering militarism and sanctions as its most effective foreign policy tools. It participates in sanctions on 27 percent of all countries in the world, which together account for 29 percent of the global economy, with very mixed results.⁴ And even where severe sanctions are applied, they often do not achieve their goals, as *Reuters* reported recently about Iran's growing oil output that reached 3 million barrels per day in May 2023, compared to 2.5 million before the Trump administration imposed oil export sanctions.⁵ The United States henceforth is likely to focus more on areas that directly impact its national interests, such as ensuring both energy flows and Israel's security, containing Iran, preventing nuclear proliferation, and limiting Russia and China's expanding regional links.

Third, Russia and China have been expanding their interactions with states across the region in multiple sectors (including military, economic, infrastructure, and energy arenas), often responding to requests by Arab states that want to diversify their global links. The American political elite feels its global reach and former dominance are threatened by a China that is more globally active and expanding its ties with Middle Eastern states of all ideological stripes.⁶

Fourth, fast-growing new coalitions across the Global South, such as BRICS (Brazil, Russia, India, China, South Africa) and the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, might provide alternatives to a US-dominated world economic order, including reserve and trade currencies that challenge the US dollar and development aid mechanisms that challenge

3 Merissa Khurma, "Ukraine, Russia and the Arabs," Wilson Center, February 18, 2022, <https://www.wilsoncenter.org/article/ukraine-russia-and-arabs>.; "15th Annual ASDA's BCW Arab Youth Survey," BCW Global, June 20, 2023, <https://arabyouthsurvey.com/wp-content/uploads/whitepaper/presentation-2023-en.pdf>.; Mohamed Younis, "Muslim-Majority Countries Doubt U.S. Motives," Gallup, April 7, 2023, <https://news.gallup.com/poll/473546/muslim-majority-countries-doubt-motives.aspx>.

4 Francisco R. Rodriguez, "The Human Consequences of Economic Sanctions," Center for Economic and Policy Research, May 4, 2023, <https://cepr.net/report/the-human-consequences-of-economic-sanctions/>.

5 Alex Lawler, "Iran's Oil Exports Hit 5-Year Highs as US Holds Nuclear Talks," June 16, 2023, *Reuters*, <https://www.reuters.com/markets/commodities/irans-oil-exports-output-hit-five-year-highs-us-holds-nuclear-talks-2023-06-16/>.

6 "Americans See China as Biggest Security Threat," What's News: WSJ Podcasts, December 2, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/podcasts/whats-news/americans-see-china-as-biggest-security-threat/843ac88b-0384-4b9c-81b5-487faa6bb091>.

the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund's roles. Half a dozen Middle Eastern states have already become associate members of these organizations or are seeking to join them.⁷ As analyst James Durso recently noted, "The US is still the world's pre-eminent economic and military power, but BRICS countries will continue to grow their share of the world economy."⁸

Fifth, growing divides on key domestic and regional policies between pauperized, disgruntled, and powerless Arab citizens and their autocratic governing elites have sparked mass citizen rebellions and civil wars. In the short term these have led to brittle or fractured states, and have also increased and hardened autocratic rule. Yet this could also accelerate Arab leaders' perceptions that their long-term security relies more on addressing critical local human needs and environmental threats and reducing destructive confrontations than on maintaining "security guarantees" from global powers (mostly the United States in recent years) that have contributed to greater regional poverty, sectarianism, tensions, and strife.

As key regional and global actors make their policy adjustments, none are doing so in absolute terms; none are aiming to shape policy on a black-or-white basis, to pivot or remain static, to be in or out of the region, or to promote dynamics of war vs. peace, competition vs. cooperation, or economic and energy vs. military and ideological interests. Rather, most actors are pursuing more nuanced and flexible foreign policies that can be modified or totally and abruptly reversed if need be, as has been seen in the past year among Saudi Arabia, Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Qatar, and others.

Arab Self-Interest Drives Policy Changes

Middle Eastern states have taken the initiative to form more diversified networks of trade, finance, investment, and security partners while also seeking to have fewer conflicts in the region as a recipe for lasting national security and well-being. Time will tell if this will be more productive and sustainable than the political autocracy, economic inequality, and active conflicts that accompanied half a century of relying on foreign military alliances.

7 Tim O'Connor, "Why Saudi Arabia Is Following Iran to Join China and Russia's Security Bloc," *Newsweek*, March 29, 2023, <https://www.newsweek.com/why-saudi-arabia-following-iran-join-china-russias-security-bloc-1791326>.

8 James Durso, "Washington and a Changing Middle East: A Dramatically Shifting Narrative?," *Eurasia Review*, April 14, 2023, <https://www.eurasiareview.com/14042023-washington-and-a-changing-middle-east-a-dramatically-shifting-narrative-analysis/>.

Saudi Arabia is leading this adjustment among Arab states because it has both the motives and capabilities to change. These include its substantial financial assets, influence in global energy markets, trade and arms sales opportunities, infrastructural and developmental investment requirements, and—since the lack of any serious American response to a September 2019 attack on its Abqaiq petroleum facility, allegedly orchestrated by Iran—its abrupt realization that the long-standing American security commitment to the Gulf region is neither reliable nor comprehensive. As respected analyst Dina Esfandiary noted in a recent press interview, “It is very engraved in [Saudi and UAE leaders’] minds that, ‘We can’t count on Washington to defend us, so we have to do it ourselves.’”⁹ And the recent China-brokered Saudi-Iran restoration of diplomatic relations could not have been negotiated by the US, a fact that is spurring Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states to diversify their political, economic, and military networks.

Riyadh’s policies have affirmed Arab states’ prioritization of their own national interests over the desires of their foreign allies and protectors. This has included pursuing oil production policies that defy American demands, not getting sucked into the Ukraine-Russia war on the side of NATO, and resuming relations with Iran. Such independence of mind was on vivid display in mid-June, when within a span of two days, Saudi Arabian Crown Prince and Prime Minister Mohammed bin Salman Al Saud met with US Secretary of State Antony Blinken, phoned Russian President Vladimir Putin, welcomed the visiting president of Venezuela, and hosted a major Chinese-Arab business conference whose aims and message to the West far transcended commercial contracts.¹⁰

Other examples of this repositioning are found in the UAE’s expanding financial and energy ties with Russia, its independent-minded engagement in conflicts across the region (Yemen, Libya, Sudan, Ethiopia, and Syria, most notably), its expanded military cooperation with China—reportedly including allowing construction of a new Chinese military base

9 Ben Hubbard, “From ‘Pariah’ to Partner, Saudi Leader Defies Threats to Isolate Him,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/06/10/world/middleeast/saudi-leader-prince-mohammed.html>.

10 James M. Dorsey, “Rebalancing US-Saudi Relations,” Substack, June 12, 2023, <https://jamesmdorsey.substack.com/p/rebalancing-us-saudi-relations>.

while ignoring American demands—and its withdrawal from a US-led multinational marine protection group in the Gulf.¹¹

Security Ties Critical, But Less Flexible

The Arab uprisings of 2010–2011 and the lack of an American response to the 2019 attack on Saudi Arabia’s Abqaiq oil facility were two important security-related factors that rattled Arab states’ views of the United States as a reliable ally. But security ties are the most difficult to diversify quickly, and most Arab states still prefer American arms to other options due to their technical performance and the stubborn sense that only the United States has the capacity and the will to step in to protect threatened Arab or American interests. Key Arab states cannot and do not wish to quickly drop their primary security reliance on Washington given its global military dominance since WWII, its more than 40 military bases in the Middle East (out of 750 worldwide), and its proven will to go to war there.¹² China, Russia, Turkey, Israel, and Iran all continue to expand their military footprints across the region, including bases and port facilities, arms sales, and training schemes.

Analyst Mona Abu Shanif presciently noted last year that, “Relations between the US and its Gulf allies are now governed by mutual doubts over intentions, commitments, ongoing haggling over what each can offer the other, alternative options, and their respective bargaining chips. Undoubtedly, China’s presence in the equation expands the Gulf states’ room to maneuver in their relations with Washington and puts them in a stronger negotiating position. However, this position does not come without a cost, as the Gulf states also harbor their own suspicions regarding China’s close strategic relationship with Iran.”¹³

11 Matthew Hedges, “United States Cannot Stand Idly By as United Arab Emirates Sidles Up to China, Russia,” *Washington Times*, June 6, 2023, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2023/jun/6/united-states-cannot-stand-idly-by-as-united-arab-/>.

12 Mohammed Hussein and Mohammed Haddad, “Infographic: US Military Presence around the World,” *Al Jazeera*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/9/10/infographic-us-military-presence-around-the-world-interactive>.

13 Mona Abu Shanif, “Strategic Maneuvering: The Gulf States amid US-China Tensions,” Middle East Institute, January 20, 2022, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/strategic-maneuvering-gulf-states-amid-us-china-tensions>.

Resisting American Hegemony, Arrogance, and Con Games

Arab states that enhance economic and security links with China, Russia, Iran, Turkey, and other powers expect to play a role in shaping evolving new orders, whether regional or global. Prominent analyst Fareed Zakaria has noted that Saudi Arabia and its GCC partners can create global networks to satisfy their own priorities while also influencing global trends due to their immense financial power, stating, “The [G]ulf states are all deepening their relations with China, which is now the region’s largest customer. [...] They want to be able to deal freely with everyone, including Russia. [...] They have growing ties with India and are even building new links with Israel.”¹⁴ Former German Foreign Minister Joschka Fischer coined what is perhaps the best phrase to describe the evolving nature of the global and Middle Eastern systems: “the Great Revision.” He notes that Russia’s invasion of Ukraine “represented the global order’s first major revision in the twenty-first century, and now China and Russia have entered a deeper (albeit unformalized) alliance to challenge the United States and the West’s dominance.”¹⁵

Arabs and others across the Global South widely resent the arrogance of big powers that feel they can act as they wish to pursue their own interests across the world, without acknowledging the views of local allies. The common talk in the United States of an American pivot away from the Middle East offers a classically colonial western view of a complex global issue with many actors across multiple arenas. It suggests that the United States can unilaterally move in and out of various regions of the world when it serves its interests, regardless of the material carnage or human ill will it leaves behind. This attitude sees the Middle East as a passive, inert actor that is acted upon by foreign powers and that lacks the agency to define its own priorities or shape its own regional and global policies. The United States pivots, in this picture, but the Middle East passively watches to learn its fate. Respected American diplomat and scholar Chas Freeman put this most starkly and accurately when he recently wrote, “We treat diplomatic dialogue as little more than the deceptive foreplay that precedes an intended assault. In fact, our ‘diplomacy’ now is mostly aimed at

14 Fareed Zakaria, “The Rise of the Persian Gulf Is Reshaping the World,” *Washington Post*, June 16, 2023, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2023/06/16/saudi-arabia-gulf-reshaping-world/>.

15 Joschka Fischer, “The Great Revision,” Project Syndicate, March 31, 2023, <https://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/russia-war-means-europe-transforming-and-global-order-realigning-by-joschka-fischer-2023-03>.

appeasing domestic opinion rather than persuading foreigners to see their interests as we do. This is diplomacy as transnational con-game.”¹⁶

A 2023 Gallup poll identified another reason why citizens in Arab and other Muslim-majority societies dislike US foreign policies: Washington is not serious about promoting democracy in foreign societies and it does not allow them to shape their own future. This echoes persistently strong anti-colonial sentiments across the Arab region and much of the Global South. Gallup reported in April 2023: “Iraqis and residents of 12 other Muslim-majority nations [nine Arab states and Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan] do not view the US as serious about encouraging the development of democracy in the region, nor allowing people to fashion their own political future as they see fit.”¹⁷ A recent Cato Institute report captures widespread popular and official exasperation with American-led militarism and economic sanctions around the world. It notes that the US is always eager to attack and invade other countries when it serves its interests, and that it has recently begun using economic warfare against the Global South as well.¹⁸

Views of Arab Citizens and Their Governments Are Converging

Some leaders in the region have recognized since the 2010–2011 Arab uprisings that they should pay more attention to the opinions of their citizens, whose condition will ultimately drive national policies—though in the short run most states are resisting this and still rely on what they know best: using security measures to quell popular discontent. Citizens and leaders appear to converge on whether the United States should reduce its presence in the Middle East—one of the few arenas of such congruence. Polls and surveys such as the Arab Center for Research and Policy Studies’ Arab Opinion Index, the Arab Youth Survey, the Arab Barometer, and Gallup polls reveal clear trends in citizen sentiments, alongside contradictions and inconsistencies.

First, the 2022 Arab Opinion Index confirmed Arab opposition to the United States in its continuing efforts to promote greater Arab-Israeli agreements and to harness Arab power to check Iran’s regional links and

16 Chas Freeman, “Time to Try a Different Approach to Foreign Relations?,” Chasfreeman.net, December 6, 2022, <https://chasfreeman.net/time-to-try-a-different-approach-to-foreign-relations/>.

17 Younis, “Muslim-Majority Countries.”

18 Doug Bandow, “Western Sanctimony Drives Global South Away from Supporting Ukraine,” Cato Institute, February 25, 2023, <https://www.cato.org/commentary/western-sanctimony-drives-global-south-away-supporting-ukraine>.

influence. According to the latest poll, 59 percent of Arabs see the United States and Israel as the greatest threat to their security and stability (followed by Iran and Russia). And 84 percent of Arabs disapprove of their countries recognizing Israel, even though the last two US presidents have pushed hard to secure more Arab recognition of it.¹⁹ Arabs in general resent such American persistence, pressures, or financial and political inducements to get their governments to sign on to agreements (for example, on peace with Israel or confronting Iran) that Arab publics have repeatedly opposed.

Second, 61 percent of Arab youth support US disengagement from the region, and a sizeable majority ranks China, the UK, and Turkey (80 percent, 79 percent, and 82 percent, respectively) as their most important allies, with the United States coming in seventh, at 72 percent.²⁰

Third, the Arab Barometer 2021-22 analysis notes that, “Across the region, China tends to be viewed somewhat more favorably than the US in the majority of countries surveyed. Roughly half or more say they have a very or somewhat favorable view of China in eight of the nine societies surveyed. [...] By comparison, only in four of nine countries surveyed do half or more have a positive view of the US.”²¹ Yet this same survey reveals conflicting perceptions of Arabs’ desire to improve economic ties with world powers, and also shows youth more favorable to the United States than to China when it comes to the economy: “When asked about closer economic ties between their country and the two global powers, in the majority of countries surveyed, citizens are significantly less likely to say they want stronger ties with China than they were in 2018-19. In no country is there an increased desire for stronger economic ties with China while in multiple cases there has been a 20-point shift against China. By comparison, in most countries the desire for closer economic ties with the US has increased or remained unchanged over the same period.”²²

Conclusion: Trends Set to Continue

For the first time since 1945, when American and Russian colonial interests with local partners and proxies shaped the contemporary Middle East,

19 “Arab Opinion Index 2022: Executive Summary,” Arab Center Washington DC, January 19, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/arab-opinion-index-2022-executive-summary/>.

20 “15th Annual ASDA’A BCW Arab Youth Survey.”

21 “Public Views of the U.S.-China Competition in MENA,” Arab Barometer, July 2022, pp. 3-4, https://www.arabbarometer.org/wp-content/uploads/ABVII_US-China_Report-EN.pdf.

22 *Ibid.*, 2.

Arab states today recognize that existing strategic links and rivalries are unsustainable and have ravaged both the well-being of citizenries and the security of regimes. As the US reduces some military engagements in the region and transitions in slow-motion to more pressing Chinese issues, more Arab states are in turn seeing the US as an unreliable security partner and as lacking conviction about genuine, sovereign, Arab national development. This has sparked an unprecedented Arab assertion of self-interest, autonomy, and options to diversify relations with mid- and large-level powers across the world in all key sectors (military, economic, political, energy, and infrastructure). Some governments are openly snubbing American demands regarding energy, participation in global economic organizations, and relations with China, Russia, Israel, and Iran. These trends are likely to continue for years to come, as Washington concentrates on military, terrorism, and energy issues in the region, and as Arabs recalibrate their dominant strategic links with NATO states into more balanced worldwide relations that better meet their needs and reduce their vulnerabilities.

In practice, most Arab states now experience the strange phenomenon of government and public opinion coinciding on the need to reduce their exaggerated dependence on former colonial patrons, expand their relations across the globe, and resolve active conflicts in the region. If this ultimately triggers reforms to temper autocracy and promote greater citizenship rights and public accountability, the region might finally see progress on key deficiencies in equitable economic growth, environmental challenges, and healthy citizen-state relations. Yet the Arabs proceed on this historic path with limited leverage and bargaining chips beyond the energy and financial assets of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Kuwait. As economic links expand with China, India, Turkey, Iran, and others—especially BRICS states—security will remain skewed toward the United States due to its large troop presence across the region and its long-term training and spare parts responsibilities with Arab militaries.

A more stable, nonviolent Middle East that is linked more closely with global powers and trading states, and that prioritizes its own citizens' rights and well-being, can only augur better decades ahead—but only if powers like the United States, China, Russia, the United Kingdom, Israel, Turkey, and others allow the Arab people to enjoy greater prosperity, self-determination, and sovereignty, something that has not happened in the past half century.