



*Cover photo: US President Joe Biden delivers remarks on the Middle East in the Cross Hall of the White House, in Washington, DC on 20 May 2021. Nicholas Kamm / AFP.*

## US Foreign Policy Debate Rages, But Fails to Move the Needle

James M. Dorsey

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*A series of reports published by Washington-based think tanks populated by former government officials as well as prominent United States scholars has revived debate about American foreign policy, particularly in the Middle East, and the assumptions that underlie it. The debate took on a new sense of urgency as the Taliban took control of Afghanistan just weeks after the withdrawal of US and NATO forces.*

The debate is informed by multiple factors: Rival schools of thought about the appropriate drivers of US foreign policy, clashing views of what the country's national interest in the Middle East is and how that can best be defended, and (mis)perceptions of American commitments to the region, as primarily expressed in the Carter Doctrine, which is widely viewed by Gulf states and many analysts as a blanket security guarantee.

## New Kid on the Block

The debate about fundamentals of US foreign policy erupted just months after US President Joe Biden introduced a more multilateral approach that broke with the isolationist, "America First" strategy of his predecessor, Donald Trump, whose black and white picture of the world persuaded him to support US allies in the Middle East uncritically and unconditionally.

The debate has been fuelled by the arrival in Washington of the latest kid on the block, the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, founded in 2019 with the goal of challenging the notion that the US should serve as a global policeman and that a failure to do so, as in Afghanistan, is a sign of weakness and decline. It also seeks to break the current, seemingly militarised mould of US foreign policy. It has most recently been informed by a series of duelling Middle East-related reports published by the Quincy Institute and liberal academics, on the one hand, and, on the other, institutions with more traditional foreign policy approaches, such as the Atlantic Council and the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

Funded by libertarian businessman Charles Koch and liberal philanthropist George Soros, Quincy, headed by Andrew Bacevich, a conservative historian who served in the US Army and fought in the 1991 Gulf War, promotes a "foreign policy that emphasises military restraint and diplomatic engagement and cooperation with other nations (that) will serve American interests and values better than policies that prioritise the maintenance of US global dominance through force".<sup>1</sup>

Prominent international relations scholars Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry described the Institute in a critical essay as an "odd alliance of domestic (US) libertarians, balance-of-power-realists and the anti-imperialist left",<sup>2</sup> schools of thought that have been adversaries for much of their history.

They nonetheless acknowledge the Institute's impact on the policy debate in the Biden era. "Given its abundant resources in people, ideas and money, and the salience of its pledge to avoid another Iraq war, the Quincy coalition has appeared well-positioned to help shape US foreign policy and, by extension, the world order," the scholars wrote. They added, however, that the Quincy approach was "fatally flawed" because "its foreign-policy agenda is profoundly outmoded...a critique of the Iraq

<sup>1</sup> Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, About QI, <https://quincyst.org/about/>

<sup>2</sup> Daniel Deudney and G. John Ikenberry, "Misplaced Restraint: The Quincy Coalition Versus Liberal Internationalism", *Survival*, Vol 63:4, 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/full/10.1080/00396338.2021.1956187>

blunder during the post-Cold War unipolar moment provides little guidance for conducting American foreign policy in response to cascading global interdependence, democratic backsliding, and a historic strategic challenge from an illiberal great power”.<sup>3</sup>

Mr Biden’s staunch defence of the withdrawal from Afghanistan despite the fact that it paved the way for the Taliban’s return to power appeared to reflect, in parallel with Quincy Institute thinking, his long-standing rejection of counter-insurgency as opposed to counter-terrorism notions that had nation-building at their core. The counter-insurgency approach was advocated by former President George W. Bush<sup>4</sup> as well as a class of big-picture US military thinkers such as former generals David Petraeus and Stanley McChrystal. “They wanted to try a large-scale counter-insurgency programme in Afghanistan and suggested that (President Barack Obama) could then withdraw safely towards the end of his first term,” noted Middle East scholar Juan Cole.<sup>5</sup> As Vice-President then, Mr Biden, convinced that the generals were wrong and that “it was foolish to think we could do anything more than kill terrorists in Afghanistan”, often sought advice beyond a military command that pushed for the dispatch of additional combat troops, according to Ben Rhodes, then the White House’s Deputy National Security Adviser.

In his withdrawal speech, Mr Biden made that point. “Our mission in Afghanistan was never supposed to have been nation building. It was never supposed to be creating a unified, centralised democracy. Our only vital national interest in Afghanistan remains today what it has always been: Preventing a terrorist attack on the American homeland. I’ve argued for many years that our mission should be narrowly focused on counterterrorism — not counterinsurgency or nation building,” Mr Biden said.<sup>6</sup> He was referring to the initial purpose of the 2001 invasion of Afghanistan: The toppling of the Taliban and the destruction of Al Qaida, which was hosted in the country, in response to the 9/11 attacks.<sup>7</sup>

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Some veterans of US diplomacy suggest that the United States has been hampered in the Middle East by the fact that for decades, it has reacted to events rather than developed a cohesive policy towards the region. “Despite having formally represented American foreign policy in the Middle East from 1963 through 1998, I cannot with any certainty remember that we ever had a defining overarching policy on the region. My country operated on a patchwork of ideas, interests, and assumptions developed at home and reactions (both considered and not) to whatever was happening anywhere else in the world that might have (or not) any consequences for the region,” said Patrick Therios, a former counter-terrorism official and ambassador to Qatar.<sup>8</sup>

In what could be part of a gradual paradigm shift in US policy, Middle East defence and security analyst Bilal Saab argued that the Biden administration will have to revamp the security aspects of its foreign policy if it wants to truly repair the damage done by the Trump administration’s unilateralist approach. “Washington needs to overhaul how it conducts security cooperation. For too long, this enterprise, run mainly by the US Department of Defense since 9/11, has lacked vision, leadership and organisation. It is too narrowly focused on US military sales and tactical and operational support to partners, and insufficiently attentive to the defence governance and institutional enabling mechanisms that allow for the proper employment and sustainment of US military assistance,” Mr Saab said.<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>3</sup> *Ibid.* Deudney and Ikenberry

<sup>4</sup> George W. Bush, *Decision Points*, New York: Crown, 2010, Kindle edition

<sup>5</sup> Juan Cole, “The Biden Doctrine and Afghanistan: Lean Counter-Terrorism and the end of Bloated Nation-Building”, *Informed Comment*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.juancole.com/2021/08/doctrine-afghanistan-terrorism.html>

<sup>6</sup> The White House, Remarks by President Biden on Afghanistan, 16 August 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/08/16/remarks-by-president-biden-on-afghanistan/>

<sup>7</sup> Ben Rhodes, *The World as It Is: A Memoir of the Obama White House*, New York: Random House, Kindle edition

<sup>8</sup> Email to the author, 4 August 2021

<sup>9</sup> Bilal Y. Saab, “Enabling US Security Cooperation”, *Survival*, Vol. 63:4, July 2021, p. 89-99

In Mr Saab's mind, the US should focus on long-term rather than short-term goals, such as building stronger, more sustainable ties to Middle Eastern militaries. That in turn would reduce the risk of America being distracted from its overriding competition with China and Russia.

"Key to this is a determination by US officials not just to train and equip the armed forces and security services of its regional friends, but also to assist them to the extent possible in developing the strategic, institutional, organisational and programmatic fabric of their defence and security sectors. Institutional capacity-building is integral to the success of US security cooperation and assistance programmes because it helps partners improve their abilities to oversee, manage and employ human, materiel and financial resources," Mr Saab said.

Former US Middle East peace negotiator Dennis Ross and one-time National Security Council director of Persian Gulf affairs Kenneth Pollack concluded from separate visits to US allies in the Middle East that they were trying to understand what Washington was seeking to achieve in the region. The Middle East "still lacks a clear region-wide strategy that our friends and partners understand...if Washington is going to overcome that confusion, it will have to articulate an overarching concept that integrates all of the country-specific strategies to accomplish a larger set of goals," Messrs Pollack and Ross wrote in a summary of their tours.<sup>10</sup>

"Absent such a comprehensive strategy, no Middle Eastern state will understand what the US expects from them, what the US intends to deliver for them, or what regional end-state the US seeks to create — and whether it is an end-state that will meet their own needs. As one high-ranking Middle Eastern leader fretted to us, the United States is signalling to the region: 'Don't follow me, I'm lost,'" the two former officials went on to say.

## Is America Back?

The notion of a lack of a cohesive policy, coupled with concern over the reliability of the United States as an ally was reinforced by its negotiations with the Taliban and subsequent withdrawal from Afghanistan, which allowed the militants to retake control of the country. The negotiations focused on getting the US out of a two-decade-long war with little or no consideration of the consequences for Afghan forces and other US allies in the country or its neighbourhood.<sup>11</sup>

As a result, clarity may no longer be enough. The withdrawal sends US allies the same message the Obama administration did in 2011 when it supported change at the expense of long-standing autocratic friends such as Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak. It was US support for the popular revolts which toppled Mr Mubarak and three other Arab leaders that spurred countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to greater assertiveness, with at times disastrous consequences - as with the Yemen war. That is not to say that support for the uprising was inherently wrong, but suggests that it was ill-managed and implemented.

The effect of the withdrawal from Afghanistan is being felt far beyond the Middle East, particularly in Asia, where various nations have territorial disputes with China and are likely to question the value of their security cooperation with Washington. The withdrawal and collapse of the Afghan government called into question the meaning of Mr Biden's assertion that the US is back as a world leader after four years of a foreign policy - driven in part by narcissism - during the Trump administration which resulted in a rejection of multilateralism and a return to isolationism. The chaos that ensued fed Russian and Chinese portrayals of the US as a decaying power that cannot be relied upon.

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<sup>10</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack and Dennis Ross, "Biden needs a Middle East strategy to avoid new crises", *The Hill*, 10 August 2021, <https://thehill.com/opinion/international/567095-biden-needs-a-middle-east-strategy-to-avoid-new-crises>

<sup>11</sup> Vivian Salama, Nancy A. Youssef and Gordon Lubold, "Speed of Taliban Advance Surprises Biden Administration, Dismays U.S. Allies", *The Wall Street Journal*, 11 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/speed-of-taliban-advance-surprises-biden-administration-dismays-u-s-allies-11628708393>

It further strengthened the positions articulated by the Quincy Institute and Democratic progressives. Emeritus Professor Bacevich, the Institute's president and retired career US army officer, argued in a recently-published analysis: "Regardless of whether our self-inflicted apocalypse leads to renewal or further, the United States will find itself obliged to revise the premises informing America's role in the world. Put simply, US policy must change."<sup>12</sup>

Mr Biden's rejection of criticism of his decision appeared to acknowledge the need for change. It constituted a rebuttal of the notion that the collapse of the Afghan government and military demonstrated the importance of US military support for its allies. The critics argued that 2,500 – 3,500 American troops backed by the US Air Force had stopped the Taliban from gaining ground beyond Afghanistan's rural areas until a final date for the withdrawal was announced. But they left unanswered the question of for how long, and at what cost. The answer has potentially far-reaching consequences.

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Mr Biden also left unaddressed the efficacy of privatisation of various functions of the US military that contributed to the collapse of the Afghan security forces. "From the beginning, the United States and NATO partners struggled to develop efficacious training programmes. Training concepts and doctrines changed often as different parts of the recruiting and training mission came under different contractors and national oversight," said South Asia scholar C. Christine Fair. She argued further that the reliance on defence contractors meant that at least 80 per cent of US\$144.98 billion budgeted since 2002 for security training, reconstruction, development and humanitarian aid boosted the US rather than the Afghan economy.<sup>13</sup> The flow towards the US rather than the Afghan economy meant that Kabul's security forces were far too dependent on foreign defence contractors to ensure the creation of an independent police and military that would be able to sustain itself.<sup>14</sup>

A longstanding proponent of a more cohesive US policy in the Middle East, Senator Chris Murphy, the chair of the Senate Foreign Relations Sub-committee on the Near East, South Asia, Central Asia, and Counter-terrorism, has laid out elements of a policy that would stroke with the thinking of the Quincy Institute and Democratic progressives, but raise ire among some of America's traditional allies.

"The Saudis and Emiratis cooperate with the United States on an awful lot, but they are acting very differently today than they were 30 years ago. They are acting contrary to our interest all over the region, and we should re-orient our relationship with those countries so that we aren't empowering their bad behaviour...what we want is to try to midwife a conversation about a regional security architecture in which the Iranians and the Saudis and the Emiratis aren't constantly battling with each other through proxy fights," Sen Murphy said.<sup>15</sup>

Much like the progressives, the senator based his proposed approach on the belief that Saudi Arabia and the UAE have nowhere else but the United States to go when it comes to ensuring their security. "I just think it's time to play hardball with the Saudis. I don't believe this argument that the Saudis are going to walk away from a security alliance with the United States. They will never get from the Chinese nor the Russians what they get from the United States today. Yes, they want more. They want us to be tougher on Iran, but they don't have another potential partner like the United States," he said.

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<sup>12</sup> Andrew Bacevich, *After the Apocalypse: America's Role in the World Transformed*, New York: Metropolitan Books, 2021, p. 3

<sup>13</sup> C. Christine Fair, "Pakistan and the United States Have Betrayed the Afghan People", *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/16/pakistan-united-states-afghanistan-taliban/>

<sup>14</sup> Jack Detsch, "Departure of Private Contractors Was a Turning Point in Afghan Military's Collapse", *Foreign Policy*, 16 August 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/16/afghanistan-military-collapse-private-contractors/>

<sup>15</sup> Jon Alterman, "U.S. Restraint in the Middle East", Center for Strategic and International Affairs, 10 August 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/us-restraint-middle-east>

Perhaps more fundamentally, he argued that a revamp of US foreign policy was needed because competition with China in the Middle East and elsewhere in the world centred around economics, rather than security. “We should learn from the success the Chinese have had, and we should empower (US) agencies...with the kind of economic assets that can be comparable to the Chinese, which right now we can't even imagine as a government. That's in part because no one was ever competing with us on that playing field... It's not good enough to just offer some ships or some guns. You have to actually be able to offer real development in a way that we can't today,” he said.

Translating Sen Murphy's approach into practical steps, the United States could build on the recognition by Arab governments of the need to diversify economies and ensure that they are competitive by helping them fine-tune grandiose plans for change and nudging them towards the judicial, educational and governance reforms that are a prerequisite. Plans like Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030<sup>16</sup> are sweeping, but lack a roadmap for implementation that sets priorities and outlines steps for increased labour productivity, stepped-up innovation, and land reform.<sup>17</sup>

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Sen Murphy's suggestions may have become more immediately implementable in a Middle East that in response to Mr Trump's fickleness and in a bid to please the former president and Mr Biden's anticipated policy shifts has, by and large, sought to dial down tensions and shift towards a model of competition and cooperation. Four Arab countries – the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan and Morocco – established diplomatic relations with Israel while Mr. Trump still was in office. Egypt, Israel, the UAE and Saudi Arabia, countries that are at odds with Turkey, are since seeking to take the sting out of their differences. Saudi Arabia and Iran are holding talks mediated by Iraq on regional issues.

Before taking office this year, CIA Director William Burns and National Security Adviser Jake Sullivan argued in a 2019 article about Iran that “diplomacy is the best way to test intentions and define the realm of the possible, repair the damage our unilateral turn has inflicted on our international partnerships, and invest in more effective coercion if and when it's needed to focus minds in Tehran.”<sup>18</sup> Mr Burns argued separately that year that a reduction of tensions would “depend on the prospects for Saudis and Iranians finding some basis for regional co-existence - built not on trust or the end of rivalry, but on the more cold-blooded assumption that they both have a stake in stable competition”.<sup>19</sup> It is a message that most US allies in the Middle East have heard. Israel's covert war with Iran in Syria and on the high seas may be the exception.

The withdrawal from Afghanistan, coupled with the mixed - at best - record on Mr Biden's pledge to make human rights a central plan of his foreign policy casts a shadow over the administration's efforts to shift the paradigm of US foreign policy and is likely to impact its plan to convene a “summit of democracy” in December.<sup>20</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Vision 2030, <https://www.vision2030.gov.sa/>

<sup>17</sup> Hani K. Findakly and Kevin A. Findakly, “Whither the Arabs: The End of the Welfare State and the Start of a Journey into the Unknown”, Atlantic Council, August 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/08/Whither-the-Arabs.pdf>

<sup>18</sup> William J. Burns and Jake Sullivan, “We Led Successful Negotiations With Iran. Trump's Approach Isn't Working”, *The Atlantic*, 16 May 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/trumps-iran-strategy-all-coercion-no-diplomacy/589558/>

<sup>19</sup> William J. Burns, “An End to Magical Thinking in the Middle East”, *The Atlantic*, 8 December 2019, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/12/end-magical-thinking-middle-east/602953/>

<sup>20</sup> Eli Lake, “Will Biden Invite Afghanistan to His Democracy Summit?”, *Bloomberg*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-08-12/afghanistan-withdrawal-undermines-biden-s-commitment-to-democracy?sref=3XwG50X1>

“The sudden withdrawal from Afghanistan after 20 years and so much investment in lives and effort will see allies and potential allies around the world wondering whether they have to decide between democracies and autocracies, and realise that some democracies don’t have staying power anymore,” cautioned Tom Tugendhat, chairman of the British Parliament’s Foreign Affairs Committee.<sup>21</sup>

## Carter’s Commitment

The foreign policy debate is further complicated by an evolution of the perceived meaning of US doctrines, first and foremost the one enunciated in 1980 by then-President Jimmy Carter. Misperception of the US commitment put forward by Mr Carter was most recently evident in expectations of how the United States should respond to an escalating Israel-Iran shadow war involving attacks on shipping in the Gulf, including a drone attack on an Israeli-managed oil tanker off the Omani coast, the brief hijacking of a Panama-flagged vessel, and several other ships reporting having lost navigational control as a result of suspected cyberattacks.<sup>22</sup>

The incidents highlighted the ease with which the US can potentially get sucked into escalations of disputes that are driven by domestic concerns of others. Secretary of State Antony Blinken, in contrast to Mr Trump’s refusal to respond forcefully to the 2019 drone attacks on Saudi oil facilities,<sup>23</sup> appeared to leave the door open to US retaliatory action against the alleged Iranian attacks on shipping.

“Iran continues to act with tremendous irresponsibility when it comes to, in this instance, threats to navigation, to commerce, to innocent sailors who are simply engaged in commercial transit in international waters. We are in very close contact and coordination with the United Kingdom, Israel, Romania, and other countries, and there will be a collective response,” Mr Blinken said.<sup>24</sup> Briefing ambassadors of the five Permanent Members of the United Nations Security Council, Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid and Defence Minister Benny Gantz identified Saeed Ara Jani, head of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps’ Unmanned Aerial Vehicle Command, as the person responsible for the attack on the Mercer Street, the Israeli-managed vessel.<sup>25</sup>

The escalating shipping war was sparked, prominent Israeli journalist Yossi Melman reported, by the leaking to the media of a largely unreported three-year Israeli naval campaign that targeted Iranian tankers in a bid to stop the flow of oil to Syria. Israel asserts that the proceeds of the oil sales are used to fund Hezbollah, the Iranian-backed Lebanese Shia militia. “The Iranians, who were ready to swallow their pride as long as silence was maintained, couldn’t tolerate it anymore. Iran opened its own naval offensive targeting merchant boats with remote links to Israel,” Mr Melman wrote.<sup>26</sup>

Saudi and Emirati journalists and pundits implicitly invoked the Carter Doctrine by arguing that the escalation was a global, not just a Gulf, problem. Journalist Yahya Al-Talidi asserted that “safe passage is the responsibility of all countries...that benefit from navigation through these lanes and not limited to Saudi Arabia.”<sup>27</sup> Calling for US military action against Iran, Adwan Al-Ahmari, editor-in-chief of

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<sup>21</sup> Steven Erlanger, “Afghanistan’s Unraveling May Strike Another Blow to U.S”, *The New York Times*, 13 August 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/08/13/world/europe/afghanistan-eu-us-credibility.html>

<sup>22</sup> Peter Beaumont and agencies, “Suspected tanker hijacking off UAE coast is over, says British military”, *The Guardian*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/uk-news/2021/aug/03/extreme-caution-urged-in-gulf-of-oman-after-non-piracy-incident>

<sup>23</sup> Humeyra Pamuk, “Exclusive: U.S. probe of Saudi oil attack shows it came from north – report”, *Reuters*, 20 December 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-probe-of-saudi-oil-attack-shows-it-came-from-north-report-idUSKBN1YN299>

<sup>24</sup> Reuters, “U.S. sees ‘collective response’ to ship attack blamed on Iran”, 3 August 2021,

<https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-confident-iran-carried-out-attack-tanker-secretary-blinken-2021-08-02/>

<sup>25</sup> Rina Bassit, “Gantz says Israel ready for military action against Iran, if necessary”, *Al-Monitor*, 6 August 2021, <https://www.al-monitor.com/originals/2021/08/gantz-says-israel-ready-military-action-against-iran-if-necessary>

<sup>26</sup> Yossi Melman, “Deadly attack on Israeli-owned ship raises spectre of open confrontation with Iran”, *Middle East Eye*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/news/iran-israel-ship-attack-huge-miscalculation>

<sup>27</sup> Yahya Al-Talidi, Twitter, 31 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/talidi11/status/1421143887234621440>

Independent Arabia, insisted that the US refused to accept that “terrorists cannot be counselled”. He was referring to negotiations to revive the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>28</sup>

The calls for US action were rooted in an evolution of the perceived meaning of the doctrine that, according to Gulf scholar and former US Defense Department and White House official David B. Des Roches, neither conforms with its text or intent, nor was anything more than a statement made by Mr Carter during his 1980 State of the Union address. Referring to the Iranian occupation of the US embassy in Iran and the 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Mr Carter asserted that “this situation...demands collective efforts to meet this new threat to security in the Persian Gulf and in Southwest Asia.” He went on to declare that “an attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>29</sup>

Speaking at a Middle East Institute–NUS webinar, Colonel Des Roches noted that “over time, the Carter Doctrine has accreted...to be something more than just a presidential utterance into a pillar of US national security... this idea that it was on a par with, say, Article 5 of the NATO treaty, is mistaken.” Article 5 defines an attack on one member of NATO as an assault on all members, and obliges treaty members to defend their aggrieved associate. Col Des Roches went on to argue that Mr Carter’s statement referred to outside forces like the Soviet Union seeking to gain control of the Gulf, not regional threats emanating, for example, from Iran, or domestic pressures. “The Carter Doctrine is not what we think it is.... and American policy is still consistent with the Carter Doctrine,” he said.<sup>30</sup>

## Rethinking Assumptions

While no doubt accurate, Col Des Roches’ back to basics analysis was at odds with the rethink of assumptions underlying US Middle East policy advocated in recent publications by the Quincy Institute as well as prominent scholar Danny Postel. The publications challenged perceptions of Iran that constitute a key pillar of the approach of both the US and its allies.

The Institute’s most recent report, ‘No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010-2020,’ argued that instability in the Middle East was the product of interventions in the Middle East by multiple regional players, not just Iran.<sup>31</sup> It pointed to a significant number of instances in the last decade in which US allies Turkey, the UAE, Saudi Arabia and Israel projected military power beyond their borders. Their interventions were driven as much by competition for regional influence among US allies as they were by rivalry with Iran.

“Iran is highly interventionist, but not an outlier. The other major powers in the region are often as interventionist as the Islamic Republic – and at times even more so. Indeed, the UAE and Turkey have surpassed Iran in recent years,” the report said.

The ability to project power militarily is reflected by the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute’s (SIPRI) ranking of Middle Eastern countries’ military expenditure. SIPRI ranked Iran as having the fifth-largest budget in 2020 at US\$15.8 billion, behind Saudi Arabia at US\$57.5 billion, the UAE’s US\$29 billion, Israel’s US\$21.7 billion, and Turkey’s US\$17.7 billion.<sup>32</sup>

Hussein Ibish, a widely respected scholar at The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, ridiculed the Quincy report as “the Middle East studies version of climate change denial or anti-vaccine ravings, oblivious to the obvious facts in favour of a politically convenient but patently absurd

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<sup>28</sup> Adwan Al-Ahmari, Twitter, 2 August 2021, <https://twitter.com/Adhwan/status/1422148252745469953>

<sup>29</sup> Office of the Historian, “Foreign Relations of the United States, 1977-1980”, Volume XVIII, Middle East Region, Arabian Peninsula, US Department of State, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1977-80v18/d45>

<sup>30</sup> NUS Middle East Institute, Between Co-operation & Confrontation: Has the US Renounced the Carter Doctrine?, YouTube, 8 August 2021, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=geLk3MMOYHk>

<sup>31</sup> Matthew Petti and Trita Parsi, “No Clean Hands: The Interventions of Middle Eastern Powers, 2010-2020”, Quincy Paper No.8, 19 July 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/no-clean-hands-the-interventions-of-middle-eastern-powers/>

<sup>32</sup> Annelie Sheline, Twitter, 6 August 2021, <https://twitter.com/AnnelieSheline/status/1423365810463154176>



conclusion.” While acknowledging that there were multiple regional interventionist powers that at times employed similar tactics, he argued that Iran was in a class of its own.<sup>33</sup>

A recent analysis by the Washington Institute concluded that United States’ efforts to deter Iran by projecting overwhelming military force had produced mixed results. “Experience shows that it is not so much the size or capability of forward-deployed forces that deters, but rather, the credibility of US deterrent threats,” said analysts Michael Eisenstadt and Henry Mihm.

In a nod to a more nuanced approach, they suggested that the US may have greater success in shaping Iranian behaviour if it deployed a smaller force and bolstered its non-military deterrence.

“Responding more consistently to challenges would demonstrate US commitment and resolve, while acting more unpredictably would complicate Iran’s efforts to manage risk and might cause it to act with more caution,” they said.<sup>34</sup>

## Friends Versus Enemies

By implication, the Quincy report tackles the US’ frequent identification of one or more regimes, most notably Iran, as the enemy rather than a threat to regional security. “We remain a ‘friends versus enemies’ society, which is perhaps the most important reason that we have never done balance of power well,” said former State Department official and ex-US ambassador to NATO Robert E. Hunter.<sup>35</sup>

Viewed through the friends versus enemy lens, Iran is the latter and Israel America’s closest friend. “The US establishment—has been brought up to regard Israel as virtually a part of the United States, or at least very closely identified with it in terms of culture, society, and values. It’s a bit like the way the British used to see Australia, or the Russians saw Serbia. The result has been that the enemies and critics of Israel are seen automatically as enemies of the United States,” said Anatol Lieven, a Quincy Institute scholar who focuses on Russia, Europe, and South Asia.<sup>36</sup>

Unwittingly, Mr. Biden may initiate a revision of perceptions of Israel by withdrawing from Afghanistan. The withdrawal leaves Israel as the last Western country occupying foreign lands. “Suddenly, in one fell swoop, Biden is stating that an occupation can only have concrete, security-related aims and when they’re achieved, it needs to end... In the process, he has also pulled the rug out from under the justifications that Israel has created over many years for continuing to maintain the occupation... today, Biden is talking about the Afghans. Tomorrow, he’ll be saying the same things about the Palestinians” said Israeli journalist and analyst Zvi Bar’el.<sup>37</sup>

Prof Lieven draws three lessons from the last two decades of US policy that were shaped by the 9/11 attacks and reinforced Washington’s inclination to think of friends and enemies in black and white terms. “The first is not to become so obsessed with the enemy of the particular moment that this drowns out other important interests. Second, the United States should be careful not to allow a belief in the absolute evil of the enemy to justify its own evil actions and support for evil regimes. Third, it is absolutely essential not to lump a range of very different countries and forces in the world into one allegedly homogenous enemy camp,” he said. He identified the 2003 invasion of Iraq, even though it had nothing to do with 9/11, as an example of the pitfalls of US inclinations.

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<sup>33</sup> Email exchange with the author, 13 August 2021

<sup>34</sup> Michael Eisenstadt and Henry Mihm, “Do Aircraft Carriers Deter Iran? The Washington Institute for Near East Policy”, 6 August 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/do-aircraft-carriers-deter-iran#:~:text=Assurance%20and%20contingency%20response,calculus%20and%20provide%20other%20benefits>.

<sup>35</sup> Email to the author, 2 August 2021, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, 19 July 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/no-clean-hands-the-interventions-of-middle-eastern-powers/>

<sup>36</sup> Michael Young, “America Often Wrong”, Malcolm H. Kerr Carnegie Middle East Center, 2 August 2021, <https://carnegie-mec.org/diwan/85059>

<sup>37</sup> Zvi Bar’el, “Biden Pulls the Rug Out From Under Israel's Justifications for Its Occupation”, *Haaretz*, 19 August 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/.premium.HIGHLIGHT-biden-pulls-the-rug-out-from-under-israel-s-justifications-for-its-occupation-1.10130377>

In other words, he was arguing that the problem with the “friends versus enemies” approach is that it encourages policies that are based on a distorted picture of reality. That was evident in conservative criticism of Mr Biden’s troop withdrawal from Afghanistan that was rooted in a perception of the Taliban as immutable.

The criticism failed to take into account the fact that the current threat of attacks on US soil emanates from the Islamic State rather than Al Qaida and that the Taliban and the Islamic State are at odds with each other.<sup>38</sup>

“Our enemies are ideologically opposed to Western civilization and will gladly stage another 9/11 if they have the opportunity and means. They are at war with us whether or not we are at war with them,” said Republican House of Representatives member Dan Crenshaw.<sup>39</sup>

The Obama administration’s negotiation of the JCPOA demonstrated that adopting a different lens is a gargantuan task, albeit one that is gaining support from more critical trends emerging in both the Democratic Party<sup>40</sup> and among evangelicals.<sup>41</sup>

A recent Washington Institute for Near East Policy poll in Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Bahrain suggested that public opinion did not overwhelmingly favour interventionist policies to counter Iran. The poll showed that 60 per cent of the public favoured a revival of the JCPOA, for instance.

A whopping 75 per cent of those polled agreed with the proposition that “right now, internal political and economic reform is more important for our country than any foreign policy issue, so we should stay out of any wars outside our borders.” Only a quarter of those surveyed suggested that US policy should focus on containing Iran.<sup>42</sup>

More critical attitudes towards US Middle East policy among Democratic progressives and Evangelicals are not limited to perceptions of Iran. They also potentially affect long-standing US support for Israel. The party’s progressives have called for probes into alleged Israeli violations of US law, accused Israel of apartheid and violations of basic human rights, and attempted to block the sale of precision-guided missiles to it, prompting attacks on members of Congress Alexandria Ocasio Cortez, Cori Bush and Rashida Tlaib.

### **“More critical attitudes towards US Middle East policy among Democratic progressives and Evangelicals are not limited to perceptions of Iran. They also potentially affect long-standing US support for Israel.”**

The split in the American Jewish community was highlighted when 45 prominent liberal and left-wing rabbis and Jewish activists and intellectuals took Israel’s main lobby in Washington, the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), to task in an open letter. It denounced AIPAC for inspiring “bigotry, harassment and violence” by accusing the members of Congress of “inciting hate by demonising Israel and spreading vicious, dangerous lies about our democratic ally”.<sup>43</sup>

The letter reflects broader trends that are borne out by recent surveys. The Jewish Electorate Institute, a group led by prominent Jewish Democrats, found that 34 per cent of American Jewish voters

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<sup>38</sup> James M. Dorsey, “Taliban and Al Qaida: Putting a fox in charge of the chicken coop?”, *The Turbulent World of Middle East Soccer*, 19 August 2021, <https://mideastsoccer.blogspot.com/2021/08/taliban-and-al-qaeda-putting-fox-in.html>

<sup>39</sup> Dan Crenshaw, The ‘Endless Wars’ Fallacy, *The Wall Street Journal*, 17 August 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/endless-wars-neocon-biden-afghanistan-withdrawal-kabul-taliban-terrorist-jihadist-11629209389>

<sup>40</sup> Ben Samuel and Amir Tibon, “Israel’s Brutal Month With the Democratic Party – and Its Impact on Public Opinion”, *Haaretz*, 31 May 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/premium.HIGHLIGHT-israel-s-brutal-month-with-the-democratic-party-and-its-impact-on-public-opinion-1.9858442>

<sup>41</sup> William Roberts, “Support for Israel shifts among young US evangelical Christians”, *Al Jazeera*, 4 June 2021, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2021/6/4/support-for-israel-among-young-us-evangelical-christians-shifts>

<sup>42</sup> David Pollock, “Good News from the Gulf, for a Change”, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 29 July 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/good-news-gulf-change>

<sup>43</sup> Logan Bayroff et al., “Jewish Americans Letter To AIPAC Leadership”, Scribd, August 2021, <https://www.scribd.com/document/519950490/Jewish-Americans-Letter-to-AIPAC-Leadership>

agreed that “Israel’s treatment of Palestinians is similar to racism in the United States,” while 25 per cent approved the notion that “Israel is an apartheid state” and 22 per cent asserted that “Israel is committing genocide against the Palestinians.” The poll found that 9 per cent of voters agreed with the statement “Israel doesn’t have a right to exist”. Among voters under 40, that proportion was 20 per cent.<sup>44</sup>

## Pitfalls of US Policy

The pitfalls of US policy in the Middle East are exacerbated by structural problems associated with policy inputs, particularly US embassy cables in various capitals that report on the situation on the ground, which land ultimately in an upper echelon of the State Department that is populated by political appointees, rather than career diplomats.

Too often, cables are ignored by the higher echelons if they portray an on-the-ground picture that is at odds with the prism of a political appointee and/or the administration. That was evident in realms of cables captured and published by Iranian militants who occupied the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 and held American diplomats hostage for 444 days.<sup>45</sup>

Similarly, Libya, a one-time international pariah in the view of the West, regained favour in the first decade of the 21st century as an ally in the war on terrorism and bulwark against illegal migration to Europe. The US reverted, however, to its earlier description of Muammar Qaddafi as a “madman” when he bloodily suppressed a 2011 popular uprising with an assault on Benghazi, Libya’s opposition-controlled second-largest city.

Diplomacy scholar Pablo de Orellana noted that US diplomats in Libya reported at the time on “vital nuances and warnings about the complex composition of the ‘peaceful pro-democracy protesters’ and how best to ‘mitigate the potential for Islamic extremists and Al Qaida to exploit the transition’”. These reports were rarely pursued by the Secretary of State and were de-prioritised across US diplomatic knowledge production. Instead, “Secretary Hilary Clinton relied on a small circle of informal advisers, who insisted on a simpler view featuring freedom-loving democrats rebelling against a tyrant”.<sup>46</sup>

By the same token, US perceptions of Iran resulting as much from perception and politics as from reality on the ground and the ambitions of rival forces in the Islamic Republic have shaped attitudes towards the nuclear accord in both countries.

“The real question is why powerful political forces in the US opposed the JCPOA from the start. The answer is that these forces do not want the US to normalise relations with Iran. What they want is that pressure on Iran causes the exacerbation of the country’s many problems, including its ethnic fault lines, and eventually leads to its disintegration... Meanwhile, Iran’s hardliners pay no attention to the country’s national as opposed to revolutionary objectives and, by continuing to insist on untenable positions, they contribute to Iran’s drift towards growing internal discord and, potentially, disintegration,” said the Iranian scholar and former diplomat Shireen Hunter.<sup>47</sup>

## Revolutionary vs Counter-revolutionary

Against that background, Middle East scholar Danny Postel sought in the summer of 2021 to shake Washington groupthink of Iran as a destabilising, revolutionary force by portraying it in a [contrarian paper as a counter-revolutionary, status quo force](#). His paper saw daylight as the US sought to manage a

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<sup>44</sup> JTA and Ron Kampeas, “Israel ‘Is an Apartheid State,’ a Quarter of U.S. Jews Say in New Poll”, *Haaretz*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/us-news/a-quarter-of-u-s-jews-agree-that-israel-is-an-apartheid-state-in-new-survey-1.9995986>

<sup>45</sup> Malcolm Byrne, “Iran’s 1979 Revolution Revisited: Failures (and a Few Successes) of U.S. Intelligence and Diplomatic Reporting”, National Security Archive, 11 February 2019, <https://nsarchive.gwu.edu/briefing-book/iran/2019-02-11/irans-1979-revolution-revisited-failures-few-successes-us-intelligence-diplomatic-reporting>

<sup>46</sup> Pablo de Orellana, “How Gaddafi went from friend to foe in US eyes”, *International Affairs Blog*, 2 June 2021, <https://medium.com/international-affairs-blog/how-gaddafi-went-from-friend-to-foe-in-us-eyes-e09cd4373b51>

<sup>47</sup> Email to the author, 31 July 2021

collapse of the state in Lebanon as well as threats of popular unrest in Jordan and elsewhere in the Middle East.

It argued that “the view of Iran as a ‘revolutionary’ state has been dead for quite some time, yet somehow stumbles along and blinds us to what is actually happening on the ground in the Middle East. A brief look at the role Iran has played over the last decade in three countries — Lebanon, Iraq, and Syria — reveals a very different picture: Not one of a revolutionary, but rather of a counter-revolutionary force.”

**“It argued that “the view of Iran as a ‘revolutionary’ state has been dead for quite some time, yet somehow stumbles along and blinds us to what is actually happening on the ground in the Middle East.”**

Mr Postel noted that Hezbollah, the powerful Iranian-backed militia in Lebanon, and pro-Iranian armed groups in Iraq had responded in similar ways to mass anti-government protests in 2019 and 2020 in Lebanese and Iraqi cities that transcended sectarian divisions and identified Iran-aligned factions with the widespread corruption that was dragging their countries down. The pro-Iranian groups attacked the protesters in an attempt to salvage a failed system that served their purpose and suppress what amounted to expressions of popular will.

“Do they really think that we would hand over a state, an economy, one that we have built over 15 years? That they can just casually come and take it? Impossible! This is a state that was built with blood,” said an Iraqi official with links to the pro-Iranian militias. A Hezbollah official, speaking about Lebanon, probably could not have said it better.<sup>48</sup>

Iranian support for Syrian President Bashar al-Assad’s brutal suppression of a popular revolt was no less counter-revolutionary, and illustrated the lengths to which Iran was willing to go to protect its interests.

“Indeed, for all the talk of Iran’s ‘disruptive’ role in the region, what the cases of Syria, Iraq, and Lebanon reveal is instead an Islamic Republic hell-bent on keeping entrenched political establishments and ruling classes in power while helping them quell popular movements for social justice, democratic rights, and human dignity,” Mr Postel concluded.

“The idea that Iran is a revolutionary power while Saudi Arabia is a counter-revolutionary power in the region is a stale binary. Both the Islamic Republic and the Saudi Kingdom play counter-revolutionary roles in the Middle East. They are competing counter-revolutionary powers, each pursuing its counter-revolutionary agenda in its respective sphere of influence within the region,” he added.

Counter-terrorism expert Matthew Levitt appeared to contradict Mr Postel in a paper published at about the same time, which asserted that Hezbollah remained a revolutionary pro-Iranian force in its regional posture beyond Lebanon.<sup>49</sup>

“Hezbollah’s regional adventurism is most pronounced in its expeditionary forces deployed in Syria and elsewhere in the region, but no less important is the group’s advanced training regimen for other Shi’a militias aligned with Iran, its expansive illicit financing activities across the region, and its procurement, intelligence, cyber, and disinformation activities,” Dr Levitt said.

His analysis suggested that the cyber activities of Iran and its proxies were offensive rather than defensive – a conclusion apparently questioned by some Israeli analysts. Israel’s liberal Haaretz newspaper quoted a maritime source with ties to the Jewish state’s defence sector as saying that recently leaked

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<sup>48</sup> Fanar Haddad, “Iraq protests: There is no going back to the status quo ante”, *Middle East Eye*, 6 November 2019, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/iraq-protests-there-no-going-back-status-quo-ante>

<sup>49</sup> Matthew Levitt, “Hezbollah’s Regional Activities in Support of Iran’s Proxy Networks”, Middle East Institute, July 2021, [https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-07/Hezbollah%E2%80%99s%20Regional%20Activities%20in%20Support%20of%20Iran%E2%80%99s%20Proxy%20Networks\\_0.pdf](https://www.mei.edu/sites/default/files/2021-07/Hezbollah%E2%80%99s%20Regional%20Activities%20in%20Support%20of%20Iran%E2%80%99s%20Proxy%20Networks_0.pdf)

documents describing the shadow maritime and cyber battle between Iran and Israel as potentially “more defensive research than an offensive attack plan”.<sup>50</sup>

The documents, originating from a secret intelligence unit within the IRGC, argued that “Iran must become among the world's most powerful in the area of cyber.” They also described incidents at sea involving Israel and Iran.<sup>51</sup>

One document, which detailed ways of attacking or sabotaging a vessel at sea, included a diagram that “showed how commands could be sent remotely to a ship from a control centre on land via a satellite link”. It suggested that the commands could be used to target water pumps and be used “to bring water into the tanks through centrifuges (and)... could result in the sinking of the ship”.

It argued further that “any kind of disruptive influence can cause disorder within these systems and cause significant and irreparable damage to the vessel”.

Two other documents revealed that the Iranian intelligence unit had researched “computer-based systems that control lighting, ventilation, heating, security alarms and other functions” and electrical equipment produced for ships by a German company with potential “vulnerabilities in what is called a programmable logic controller, or PLC – a computer control system”.

“I don’t think they have such capabilities and if they do, we have yet to see them used against Israeli ships,” the maritime source said.<sup>52</sup>

## America’s National Interest

At the core of the divergence between the analysis of Mr Postel and the Quincy Institute, on the one hand, and Dr Levitt and other proponents of a continued significant US military presence in the Middle East, on the other, lies a debate about what constitutes America’s interest in the region. Political scientist Eugene Gholz argued in an earlier paper published by the Quincy Institute that US military objectives in the region should be limited to preventing the establishment of a regional hegemon and protecting the flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.<sup>53</sup>

Countering this definition, former US Defense Department official William F. Wechsler cautioned in a paper published by the Atlantic Council against narrow definitions that underestimated the threat posed by Iran and failed to include US values-based interests.<sup>54</sup> Mr Wechsler’s paper did not mention Dr Gholz or the Quincy Institute by name. Instead, it was framed as a response to a commentary<sup>55</sup> published by the Council on the same day as Mr Wechsler’s paper, in which two of his colleagues argued in favour of a US military drawdown in the Middle East along lines similar to Dr Gholz’s.

Mr Wechsler insisted that US interests included “promoting democratic transitions, advancing human rights, combating corruption, providing humanitarian relief, and ending local military conflicts. These omissions are notable, as it would strain credulity to assert that the United States would be well-positioned to influence these interests after being seen as withdrawing from the region.” Mr Wechsler

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<sup>50</sup> Omer Benjakob, “Leaked Iranian Intel Sheds Light on Proxy War With Israel”, *Haaretz*, 28 July 2021, [https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/leaked-iranian-intel-sheds-light-on-proxy-war-with-israel-1.10046005?utm\\_source=mailchimp&utm\\_medium=content&utm\\_campaign=haaretz-news&utm\\_content=62088c5215](https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/leaked-iranian-intel-sheds-light-on-proxy-war-with-israel-1.10046005?utm_source=mailchimp&utm_medium=content&utm_campaign=haaretz-news&utm_content=62088c5215)

<sup>51</sup> Deborah Haynes, “Iran’s Secret Cyber Files”, *Sky News*, July 2021, <https://news.sky.com/story/irans-secret-cyber-files-on-how-cargo-ships-and-petrol-stations-could-be-attacked-12364871>

<sup>52</sup> *Ibid.* Benjakob

<sup>53</sup> Eugene Gholz, “Nothing Much to Do: Why America Can Bring All Troops Home From the Middle East, Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft”, Quincy Institute, 24 June 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/nothing-much-to-do-why-america-can-bring-all-troops-home-from-the-middle-east/>

<sup>54</sup> William F. Wechsler, “No, the US shouldn’t withdraw from the Middle East”, Atlantic Council, 24 June 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/issue-brief/no-the-us-shouldnt-withdraw-from-the-middle-east/>

<sup>55</sup> Robert A. Manning and Christopher Preble, “Reality Check #8: Rethinking US military policy in the Greater Middle East”, Atlantic Council, 24 June 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/content-series/reality-check/reality-check-8-rethinking-us-military-policy-in-the-greater-middle-east/>

mirrored Dr Deudney and Prof Ikenberry's criticism that the Quincy approach would "diminish the prospects for liberal democracy and human rights globally".<sup>56</sup>

At the same time, Mr Wechsler's rejection of the notion of a US withdrawal from the Middle East appeared to acknowledge that promotion of US values-based interests has more often than not served to pressure countries like Iran, which are defined by Washington as hostile, rather than as a yardstick that applies to all. "Rather than seek a near-total withdrawal from the region, which would once again upend the status quo, the United States should seek to return to the traditional US role of protecting and restoring that status quo while pushing for incremental improvements in regional security, prosperity, and general welfare," he cautioned.

The irony is that the facts on the ground suggest that US policy is to fortify rather than diminish America's presence in the Middle East. "When the US chose to prioritise its limited defence assets towards the Indo-Pacific... the Gulf actually increased in importance. It was and remains one of the few areas where the US has established bases to project power into the Indian Ocean... in recent years, the US returned combat troops to Saudi Arabia for the first time since 2003. As the Afghan withdrawal winds down and the Biden administration talks about 'over the horizon' support, ask yourself what bases exist 'over the horizon,'" said a prominent Gulf scholar.<sup>57</sup>

Former Trump national security and intelligence take the analysis of the Gulf scholar and Mr Wechsler a step further, arguing that rather than reviewing US foreign policy wholesale, the Biden administration will have to double down on a security-driven Indo-Pacific approach if it wants to repair the damage done by the Afghanistan withdrawal. Robert C. O'Brien, the former president's national security advisor, and John Ratcliffe, his former national intelligence director, suggested as the Afghanistan debacle unfolded that the Biden administration should expedite arms sales to Taiwan, redeploy to the Indo-Pacific the troops withdrawn, revive the US naval base on American Samoa, and forward base in Australia Washington's only heavy icebreaker to shorten the distance it travels to Antarctica each year.<sup>58</sup>

Beyond defining objectives of US policy, the truth in the differences between Mr Postel and the Quincy Institute and Dr Levitt's and Mr Wechsler's analysis may lie in the middle. Their differences, for example, on the ultimate purpose of Iran's employment of proxies appear to constitute two sides of the same coin. Supporting proxies representing marginalised or disgruntled communities that have a popular base and are opposed to the status quo in countries where the state is weak or fragile is a pillar of Iranian foreign and defence policy. So is the opposite: Supporting the status quo in those countries where Iranian proxies have emerged as powerful forces, like Lebanon and Iraq, even if the popular mood has turned against them.<sup>59</sup>

That conclusion adds weight to Mr Postel's analysis that tactics employed by Iran are not unique, but have been adopted at various times by all interventionist players in the Middle East.

## Compartmentalisation Vs a Holistic Approach

By implication, the Quincy Institute study further raises the question of whether compartmentalising security issues like the nuclear question and framing them exclusively in terms of the concerns of the West and its Middle Eastern allies, rather than discussing them in relation to diverging security concerns of all regional players, including Iran, will lead to a sustainable regional security architecture.

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<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.* Deudney and Ikenberry

<sup>57</sup> Email on a private mailing list, 3 August 2021

<sup>58</sup> Robert C. O'Brien and John Ratcliffe, "After the Debacle: Six Concrete Steps to Restore U.S. Credibility", *Foreign Policy*, 18 September 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/08/18/afghanistan-withdrawal-biden-indo-pacific-military-china-us-allies-credibility/>

<sup>59</sup> Thomas Juneau, "How War in Yemen Transformed the Iran-Houth Partnership", *Studies in Conflict and Terrorism*, 30 July 2021, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/1057610X.2021.1954353?scroll=top&needAccess=true&journalCode=uter20>

That question is so far not being debated, nor is there an indication that thinking in Washington is paying heed to it. That could change if either the Biden administration or the new Iranian President, Ebrahim Raisi, opts to make concessions needed to conclude a deal, or if both sides accept the talks' failure and choose a Plan B that prevents the situation from spinning out of control. The International Crisis Group suggested in a report released as Mr Raisi assumed office that "a Plan B would be to agree to an interim arrangement that would freeze the crisis. Both sides, having learned from the JCPOA experience, could then build a stronger and more durable nuclear accord in parallel with talks aimed at de-escalating tensions in the region".<sup>60</sup>

Such a plan would, however, leave the question raised by the Quincy report unanswered, particularly given that agreement on a return to the JCPOA appears to be elusive because of deep-seated distrust on the part of both sides. This distrust, shared by US allies, prompted Washington to demand that a revival of the accord be linked to an Iranian willingness to discuss its ballistic missiles and proxies, without including similar programmes and policies by US regional allies. By the same token, the talks stalled because of Iranian fears that the US remains fundamentally committed to regime change in Tehran, and, given Mr Trump's abandonment of the nuclear accord, cannot be trusted to fulfil its contractual obligations.

**“This distrust, shared by US allies, prompted Washington to demand that a revival of the accord be linked to an Iranian willingness to discuss its ballistic missiles and proxies, without including similar programmes and policies by US regional allies.”**

Mr Raisi's predecessor, Hassan Rouhani, reflected Iranian fears and distrust when he warned in his last interview as president that legislation passed in December by the Iranian parliament, the basis for Mr Raisi's expected approach to negotiations, threatened to prevent a deal. The law compels the government to adopt a series of escalatory nuclear-related steps in the absence of a reversal of the US withdrawal from the agreement. It also makes obligatory the lifting of all US sanctions imposed by the Trump administration, including those related to Iran's human rights record, alleged support for terrorism, and ballistic missile programme.<sup>61</sup>

Similarly, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei warned on the eve of Mr Raisi's swearing-in that "it became obvious that trusting the West does not work. They won't help. They will try to hit us everywhere they can, and if they don't hit us in some place, it's because they can't... on paper and in their promises, they say they'll remove sanctions. But they haven't lifted them and won't lift them. They impose conditions... to say in the future Iran violated the agreement and there is no agreement if Iran refuses to discuss regional issues or ballistic missiles".<sup>62</sup>

Ayatollah Khamenei's remarks seemed to bolster suggestions that once in office, Mr Raisi would seek to turn the tables on the Biden administration by insisting on stricter verification and US implementation of its part of a revived agreement. To achieve this, Iran is expected to demand the lifting of all rather than some sanctions imposed or extended by the Trump administration; verification of the lifting; guarantees that the lifting of sanctions is irreversible, possibly by making any future American withdrawal from the deal contingent on approval by the United Nations Security Council; and iron-clad provisions to ensure that obstacles to Iranian trade, including the country's unfettered access to the international financial system and its overseas accounts, are removed.<sup>63</sup>

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<sup>60</sup> International Crisis Group, "Iran: The Riddle of Raisi", Report no. 224, 5 August 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/iran/224-iran-riddle-raisi>

<sup>61</sup> Amwaj.media, "In exit interview, Rouhani says Raisi won't reach deal with the US", 3 August 2021,

<https://amwaj.media/media-monitor/iran-s-rouhani-says-the-jcpoa-revival-isnt-possible-owing-to-the-law-passed-by-pa>

<sup>62</sup> Euronews Persian, "Khamenei's assessment of the outcome of the Vienna talks: The Americans did not take a single step forward" (ارزیابی خامنه‌ای از نتایج مذاکرات وین: آمریکایی‌ها یک قدم هم جلو نیامند), 28 July 2021,

<https://per.euronews.com/2021/07/28/iranian-leader-assesses-results-vienna-nuclear-talks>

<sup>63</sup> Amwaj.media, "How Raisi wants to handle the Iran nuclear deal", 29 July 2021, <https://amwaj.media/en/article/how-raisi-wants-to-handle-the-iran-nuclear-deal>

Iran's anticipated harder line in negotiations was echoed in a warning by US officials that the new president would not get Iran a better deal, and that there could be a point in the near future at which it would no longer be worth returning to the 2015 deal because Iran's nuclear programme would have advanced to the point where the limitations under the 2015 pact would not produce the intended minimum one year "breakout time" to get enough enriched uranium for a bomb.<sup>64</sup>

On a recent visit to the Middle East, Mr Blinken insisted that the US was "committed to diplomacy, but this process cannot go on indefinitely. At some point, the gains achieved by the JCPOA cannot be fully recovered by a return to it if Iran continues the activities that it has undertaken concerning its nuclear programme. We have clearly demonstrated our good faith and desire to return to mutual compliance with the nuclear agreement...the ball remains in Iran's court, and we will see if they're prepared to make the decisions necessary to come back into compliance."<sup>65</sup>

Another US official cautioned that US-Iranian relations could involve a "Back to the Future" scenario, a reference to a movie in which a 17-year-old high school student is sent 30 years into the past. "Ultimately, it is going to look a lot like the dual-track strategy of the past — sanctions pressure, other forms of pressure, and a persistent offer of negotiations. It will be a question of how long it takes the Iranians to come round to the idea that they will not wait us out," the official said.<sup>66</sup>

## Time May be Running Out

The US' sanctions policy is one reason for the stalemate in JCPOA talks. "The challenges facing the JCPOA negotiations are a really important example of how a failed experience of sanctions relief, as we had in Iran between the Obama and Trump admins, can cast a shadow over diplomacy for years to come, making it harder to secure US interests," said Iran analyst Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj.<sup>67</sup>

The Biden administration appeared to be heeding Mr Batmanghelidj's notion that crafting sanctions needs to take into account the fact that lifting them can be as difficult as imposing them as it considers more targeted additional punitive measures. Those measures would involve sanctions aimed at hampering Iran's evolving capabilities for precision strikes using drones and guided missiles by focusing on the providers of parts of the weapon systems, particularly engines and microelectronics.<sup>68</sup>

A sense that time may be running out and the conviction that pressure would ultimately force Iran's hand informed a proposal by Mr Ross, the former US Middle East peace negotiator, on how to respond to the Islamic Republic's refusal to discuss its ballistic missiles programme and support of armed proxies as well as Mr Al-Assad as part of the nuclear negotiation. Mr Ross suggested that the US sells the GBU-57 Massive Ordnance Penetrator, a 30,000-pound mountain-buster bomb capable of destroying hardened underground nuclear facilities, to Israel. He argued that the sale would constitute "the best inducement for Iran to negotiate a 'longer and stronger' deal".<sup>69</sup>

Members of Congress last year offered legislation that would authorise the sale<sup>70</sup> as a way to maintain Israel's qualitative military edge as the US moves to reward the UAE for its establishment of diplomatic relations with Israel by selling it top-of-the-line F-35 fighter jets. The administration is

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<sup>64</sup> Barak Ravid, "4. U.S. warns Iran's new government that it won't get a better deal", *Axios From Tel Aviv*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.axios.com/newsletters/axios-tel-aviv?id=33&name=axios-tel-aviv>

<sup>65</sup> Simon Lewis, "Blinken says Iran negotiating process cannot go on indefinitely", *Reuters*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/blinken-says-negotiating-process-with-iran-cannot-go-indefinitely-2021-07-29/>

<sup>66</sup> Laura Rozen, "Iran's Khamenei complains US seeking follow-on talks, as US urges return to Vienna negotiations", *Diplomatic*, 29 July 2021, <https://diplomatic.substack.com/p/irans-khamenei-complains-us-seeking>

<sup>67</sup> Esfandiyar Batmanghelidj, Twitter, 29 July 2021, <https://twitter.com/yarbatman/status/1420723038996291586>

<sup>68</sup> Ian Talley and Benoit Faucon, "US plans sanctions against Iran's drones and guided missiles", *The Wall Street Journal*, 29 July 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-plans-sanctions-against-irans-drones-and-guided-missiles-11627556400>

<sup>69</sup> Dennis Ross, "To Deter Iran, Give Israel a Big Bomb", *Bloomberg*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2021-07-23/u-s-should-give-israel-mountain-buster-bomb-to-deter-iran-s-nuclear-program?ref=3XwG50X1>

<sup>70</sup> Al Jazeera, "US senators push to sell bunker-busting bombs to Israel", 29 October 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2020/10/29/us-senators-to-introduce-bill-on-sale-of-bunker-bombs-to-israel>



expected to move ahead with the sale after putting it on hold for review when Mr Biden took office In January.<sup>71</sup>

## Iran's Future

The Quincy Institute and Mr Postel's calls for a paradigm shift in thinking about the Middle East and/or Iran take on added significance in the light of debates about the sustainability of the Iranian clerical regime. Despite the resilience demonstrated by Iran over the decades, the country's detractors in the US, as well as American allies in the Middle East, cling to the notion that the regime is teetering on the brink of collapse, and that continued pressure and sanctions will push it over the edge.

Several Iranian Americans sponsored by the Washington-based Institute for Voices of Liberty (iVOL) visited Israel in July 2021 in a manifestation of that hope, as part of the organisation's effort "to promote democracy, human rights, and freedom in Iran after the prospective collapse of the Islamist regime".<sup>72</sup> Erfan Fard, an activist and independent counter-terrorism scholar, suggested that the visit "could lay the basis for a future relationship between Israel and Iran after the collapse of the ayatollahs' dictatorship".<sup>73</sup>

The hope was bolstered by protests in the Iranian province of Khuzestan that were sparked by water shortages.<sup>74</sup> "Khamenei is on fire... the mullahs' regime is reeling," headlined *Okaz*, a Saudi newspaper that hews close to government thinking.<sup>75</sup>

However, widely-respected Iran expert Karim Sadjadpour argues that the regime could last at least another generation.<sup>76</sup> He drew a comparison with the Soviet Union: "Post-Soviet Russia... didn't transition from the Soviet Union to a democratic Russia, but essentially became a new form of authoritarianism which took Communism and replaced it with grievance-driven Russia nationalism — led by someone from the ancient regime and a product of the KGB, Vladimir Putin."

"Likewise, if I had to make a prediction on Iran, I think that the next prominent leader is less likely to be an ageing cleric - like an Ayatollah Khamenei or an Ebrahim Raisi - and more likely to be someone who is a product of either the Revolutionary Guards or Iran's intelligence services. Instead of espousing Shia nationalism, they will substitute that with Iranian nationalism - or Persian nationalism," he added.

The prediction is shared by a growing number of Iran scholars. "A faction of right-wing leaders has the opportunity to reshape Iran's politics and society in ways that will expand the IRGC's control over the country's economy, further diminish political freedoms, and yet display limited tolerance on religious and social issues. It will champion Iranian nationalism to widen its popular base domestically, while relying on Shia and anti-American ideologies to project power regionally," said international affairs analyst Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar.<sup>77</sup>

In that vein, Mr Raisi's election campaign, as well as debates on social media, may be harbingers of a more nationalist, less religious, policy approach that is designed to create greater popular support for transition from Shia nationalism. The new president has promised to fight domestic violence and pledged

<sup>71</sup> Agence France Press, "Biden to proceed with UAE F-35 sales, with rules", *France 24*, 14 April 2021, <https://www.france24.com/en/live-news/20210414-biden-to-proceed-with-uae-f-35-sales-with-rules>

<sup>72</sup> Institute for Voices of Liberty, Mission to Israel – Delegation, 19 July 2021, <https://ivol.institute/2021/07/19/ivol-mission-to-israel-delegation/>

<sup>73</sup> Erfan Fard, "Iranian Dissidents to Visit Israel, Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies", The Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, 26 July 2021, <https://besacenter.org/iranian-dissidents-to-visit-israel/>

<sup>74</sup> Agencies, "Iran accused of using unlawful force in water protest crackdown", *The Guardian*, 23 July 2021, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2021/jul/23/iran-accused-of-using-unlawful-force-in-water-protest-crackdown>

<sup>75</sup> Fahim Al-Hamid, "Khamenei is on fire... the mullahs' regime is reeling" (خامنه‌ی یحترق... نظام الملالي یترنج), *Okaz*, 29 July 2021, [https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2076929#.YQIRiB\\_HRWY.twitter](https://www.okaz.com.sa/news/politics/2076929#.YQIRiB_HRWY.twitter)

<sup>76</sup> Jon Alterman, "Iran's Future", *Babel*, 13 July 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/irans-future>

<sup>77</sup> Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar, "Iran's War Within", *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2021-08-05/irans-war-within-ebrahim-raisi>

to discourage the much-despised morality police from harassing ordinary people by urging them to go after economic and bureaucratic corruption instead.

Other hardliners have struck a similar tone. Conservative activist Masoud Dehnamaki, known for his denunciation of reformists as “un-Islamic”, declared in a recent debate on the Clubhouse chat app that compulsory veiling was no longer a serious concern for the regime.<sup>78</sup>

## Opportunity Presents Itself

An Iranian nationalist regime could potentially contribute to regional stability. It would likely see groups like Hezbollah, militias in Iraq, and the Houthis as liabilities rather than assets. That would reduce the threat of Iranian meddling in the domestic affairs of various Arab countries.

Already, differences have emerged between Iran and some of its proxies in Iraq, as well as among the militias themselves. At the same time, anti-Iranian public sentiment in Iraq is on the rise and Tehran’s ability to influence Baghdad is diminishing.

This was evident during Quds Force commander Esmail Qaani’s recent visit to Baghdad. He encountered unusual blowback when he asked pro-Iranian Iraqi militia leaders to refrain from attacking US targets until the nuclear talks were concluded. One militia commander insisted that they could not do so as long as the killing in January 2020 of Qassim Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, a senior Iraqi militia commander, remained unavenged.<sup>79</sup>

An official of Kata’ib Hezbollah, the militia led by the late Al-Muhandis, warned in response to the announcement of a US combat troop withdrawal that an American failure to keep its promise would mean confrontation. “We may have a decision that is effectively independent of Iran, and this complicates things,” the official said.<sup>80</sup>

The differences between Iran and some militia leaders speak to a more fundamental divergence that could open the door to the kind of relationship with Iran that the US is seeking with China: Strategic competition, coupled with cooperation in areas where the two countries’ interests converge. That is if the US does not repeat its mistake of two decades ago, when it failed to exploit opportunities created by Iranian help in bringing Afghan President Hamid Karzai to office in the wake of the US invasion, and Syrian cooperation with the US war on terror in the immediate aftermath of 9/11.

A similar opportunity may be presenting itself in Iraq now. Iraqi Shia leaders, including Ayatollah Ali Sistani, the country’s most respected cleric, powerful nationalist political and religious leader Moqtada al-Sadr, and Hadi al-Amiri, head of the Iran-backed Badr Organization, have embraced the fact that the US will withdraw combat troops from Iraq by the end of this year but keep a sizeable force in the country to train their Iraqi counterparts, share intelligence, and provide other support.<sup>81</sup> Mr Al-Amiri’s support, in particular, appears to signal that Iran does not reject a continued US training and advisory role.

The divergence between Iran and some of the Iraqi groups fleshes out the notion of Middle East scholar Thomas Juneau that the widely-held belief in the US that the concept of an Iranian proxy means absolute control and subservience to the interests of the Islamic Republic may be inaccurate. Dr Juneau draws his conclusion from studying the relationship between Iran and the Houthi rebels in Yemen. The notion that “the Houthis are Iran’s proxy, with the bigger power using the smaller actor to advance its

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<sup>78</sup> *Ibid.* Tabaar

<sup>79</sup> Qassim Abdul-Zahra and Samya Kullab, “Keeping up attacks, some Iraq militias challenge patron Iran”, *Associated Press*, 9 July 2021, <https://apnews.com/article/joe-biden-middle-east-religion-iran-lebanon-17a5d13c97f72e1992bb6254445e32f2>

<sup>80</sup> Mustafa Saadoon, “Exclusive: Kata’ib Hezbollah warns that US failure to withdraw ‘means confrontation,’” *Ammaj.media*, 28 July 2021, <https://ammaj.media/article/the-mission-of-the-american-forces-in-iraq-is-not-over-will-it-return-under-the-n>

<sup>81</sup> David Ignatius, “Biden seems to have found a sweet spot in Iraq”, *The Washington Post*, 3 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/03/bidens-careful-approach-iraq-is-built-all-thats-absent-afghanistan/>

own purposes... is, at best, only part of the story: The Houthis use their ties with Iran to advance their own interests as much as the reverse,” he said.<sup>82</sup>

The shades of grey in the analysis of facts on the ground in Iraq and Yemen, coupled with Mr Sadjadpour’s prognosis, the Quincy Institute reports, and Mr Postel’s paper, suggest that the Biden administration has an opportunity to gradually reframe Middle East policy in the long-term interests of the United States as well as the region and the international community, though this would be a gradual process, rather than an overnight change.

## Potential Entry Points

The US withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq are potential entry points. So are the troubled nuclear talks.

A potential breakdown in the talks is already prompting calls for a Plan B. In the same vein, Mr Ross, the former Middle East peace negotiator, and hardliners like Trump-era official Elliott Abrams are calling for a return to the policy of maximum pressure by invoking a snapback of United Nations sanctions that were lifted as part of the original accord.<sup>83</sup>

The policy failed then, and there is little reason to think that it would produce results now, which means that the time for a fundamental policy rethink is ripe, although US domestic politics is likely to foreclose that option. Plan B could involve the gradual exploitation of cracks, with the risk that from Iran’s perspective, it would be too little too late.

One potential crack that the Biden administration could spin as a more balanced approach is giving human rights greater weightage when it comes to US arms sales.<sup>84</sup> The policy under consideration by the administration could affect Iran’s foremost rivals, Saudi Arabia and the UAE, two primary clients of the US defence industry. Similarly, Egypt could constitute an imminent test of the shift, with Secretary of State Blinken about to decide whether to withhold US\$300 million from a US\$1.3 billion annual military aid package. Congress has linked disbursement of the US\$300 million to the release of political prisoners and respecting freedom of the press – conditions few would assert that Egypt has met.<sup>85</sup>

The problem from Iran’s perspective is that the shift is likely to affect those arms and systems that would be used domestically in violation of human rights by police and paramilitary forces rather than the big-ticket, cutting-edge weapons that concern Iran the most. The shift, moreover, would constitute a double-edged sword for Iran. On the one hand, it signals US willingness to be more critical of its regional allies. On the other, this increases pressure on the Islamic Republic, whose human rights record is equally tarnished.

By the same token, concern in Beijing, Moscow, and Tehran about the fallout of the US withdrawals suggests that stabilising the greater Middle East in ways that conflicts can be sustainably managed, if not resolved, creates grounds for China, Russia, and the US to cooperate on what should be a common interest: Securing the free flow of oil and gas as well as trade. Iran, like China and Russia, is bracing itself for worst-case scenarios in the wake of the Taliban takeover, which enhances the potential for some form of cooperation.

Changes in the assumptions underlying US Middle East policy would facilitate the search for a more inclusive security architecture and potentially reduce the risk of conflicts spinning out of control

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<sup>82</sup> *Ibid.* Juneau

<sup>83</sup> Elliott Abrams, “Biden Needs a Plan B for the Iran Talks”, *National Review*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2021/08/biden-needs-a-plan-b-for-the-iran-talks/>

<sup>84</sup> Mike Stone and Patricia Zengerle, “EXCLUSIVE-Biden plans shift in arms policy to add weight to human rights concerns”, *Reuters*, 5 August 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/us/exclusive-biden-plans-shift-arms-export-policy-favor-human-rights-sources-2021-08-04/>

<sup>85</sup> Editorial Board, “Is Biden serious about fighting for democracy? Egypt will be a decisive test”, *The Washington Post*, 4 August 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/08/04/is-biden-serious-about-fighting-democracy-egypt-will-be-decisive-test/>

and/or the US being sucked into escalating tensions, such as the most recent shipping incidents. Emerging alliances between regional players could also allow US allies to take greater responsibility and produce interesting results.

One such emerging relationship, dubbed the Indo-Abrahamic bloc by analyst Mohammed Soliman, would group India, the UAE and Israel, and could attract Saudi Arabia and others. Saudi Arabia held its first-ever naval exercise with India in mid-August.<sup>86</sup> The burgeoning Indo-Abrahamic relationship raises the question of how it would deal with Iran, given that India is the main backer of the Iranian Arabian Sea port of Chabahar, 70 km down the coast from the Chinese-supported Pakistan port of Gwadar.

“The size, power, and influence of the Indo-Abrahamic states — India, Israel, and the UAE — have the potential to transform the region's geopolitics and geoeconomics,” Mr Soliman said.<sup>87</sup>

## Conclusion

Ironically, reality in the Middle East is less likely to drive a fundamental change of US policy than domestic politics. That makes debate about the policy more important, even if its impact will not be immediate. Policy change is likely to be a gradual process resulting from the evolution of public opinion in key US domestic constituencies, including the Democratic Party and the evangelical and Jewish communities. The most recent debate reflected in a flurry of studies, reports, and analysis which suggests that, ever so slowly, the guardrails of the discussion are shifting. The earlier US allies hear which way the wind is blowing, the better they will be able to accommodate inevitable change. ◆

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<sup>86</sup> Middle East Monitor, “Saudi Arabia and India carry out first ever joint naval exercise”, 11 August 2021, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210811-saudi-arabia-and-india-carry-out-first-ever-joint-naval-exercise/>

<sup>87</sup> Mohammed Soliman, “An Indo-Abrahamic alliance on the rise: How India, Israel, and the UAE are creating a new transregional order”, Middle East Institute, 28 July 2021, <https://mei.edu/publications/indo-abrahamic-alliance-rise-how-india-israel-and-uac-are-creating-new-transregional>



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