

The Middle East's wars

Trump should try to end, not manage, the Middle East's oldest conflicts

And he should see the region as more than a source of instability and arms deals



Time to get stuck in Photograph: AFP

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IT IS becoming an odd tradition: America's secretaries of state use their final days to catalogue their failings in the Middle East. John Kerry did it in 2016. Antony Blinken took his turn on January 14th. In a speech at the Atlantic Council, a think-tank, he described a litany of problems in Gaza: the misery of civilians; the failure to find an alternative to Hamas; the lack of a broader peace plan. As a piece of analysis, it was spot-on; as a farewell from America's top diplomat, it was self-indictment.

Joe Biden never worked out how to exert American power to achieve his goals. For a year his aides begged Binyamin Netanyahu to moderate Israel's scorched-earth tactics in Gaza and to accept a ceasefire. Israel's prime minister faced no consequences for ignoring them. If allies did not fear Mr Biden, adversaries certainly did not. He wanted to force Iran into a new nuclear deal, yet failed to enforce the sanctions that were his main tool of pressure.

At other times, he did not even know his goals. Take his relationship with Saudi Arabia. Mr Biden promised to make the kingdom a "pariah". Then he begged it to pump more oil. Eventually he offered the Saudis a package of goodies to recognise Israel. He accomplished none of this.

He was not an aberration. America has not had a Middle East policy for almost two decades. George W. Bush was the last president with an ambitious regional agenda; unfortunately, the centrepiece was a disastrous invasion of Iraq. Since then, presidents have viewed the region as a headache, and their policy was an exercise in contradictions. They talked about disengaging but never actually did. They managed endless crises but rarely resolved them (and often made them worse).

Donald Trump's in-tray is already overflowing: fragile ceasefires in Gaza and Lebanon, a fraught transition in post-Assad Syria and an Iranian nuclear programme that has advanced to record levels. If he is to tackle these crises, he should learn from his predecessors' mistakes.

First is to stop acting like an absentee hegemon. When Hamas attacked Israel on October 7th, no one was particularly interested in how Russia, China or the European Union would respond. Like it or not, America is still the only outside power with real influence in the Middle East.

It should behave accordingly. Under the past two administrations, key diplomatic posts often sat empty. Both Mr Biden and Mr Trump took more than a year to nominate ambassadors to Saudi Arabia. Advisers in the

White House micromanaged their pet projects, while everything else was ignored. The goal was to keep the Middle East off the president's desk, which left America in reactive mode.

When events forced it onto their desks, presidents became enamoured of shortcuts. Barack Obama talked of Iran and Saudi Arabia needing to "share" the region: Arab states should accommodate the Islamic Republic and its network of proxies, because they were too strong to confront. Then came Mr Trump, who saw Arab-Israeli normalisation as a magic wand that would isolate Iran and stabilise the Middle East. Mr Biden embraced that idea too.

The events of the past 15 months should dispel such illusions. Iran's "axis of resistance" was strong only because its enemies were weak: faced with a real challenge, it crumpled. At the same time, Israel's new Arab allies wanted no part of the regional war. They sat on the sidelines.

The path to regional stability is to end the region's oldest conflicts. It is fanciful to think that any American president could end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict in the next four years: circumstances are too bleak. But Mr Trump has unique freedom to break with Republican orthodoxy and present a fair-minded peace plan. That could offer a road map for future presidents, constrain Israel's far right and offer the Palestinians some needed hope.

He must also decide what sort of deal he wants from Iran, and how far he is willing to go if negotiations fail, two questions he ducked in his first term. For once, there is a chance of a grand bargain: Iran is weak, and Saudi Arabia, which once opposed diplomacy with its rival, now supports it.

Many of America's relationships in the Middle East are based on outdated notions of stability. The oil-for-security bargain with Saudi Arabia is creaky: America is the world's largest oil producer, and imports of Saudi crude are at their lowest in decades. Yet presidents still approach the kingdom on transactional terms. On January 20th Mr Trump joked that he would trade a presidential visit for a pledge to buy \$500bn of American weapons (a hard sell: that is around 50% of Saudi GDP).

Gulf states are desperate to transform their oily economies. A deal-minded president should look for more opportunities to boost ties around artificial intelligence (AI), clean energy and other vital sectors. Mr Biden did that in September, when he struck a deal with the United Arab Emirates to co-operate on AI. Oil and guns were a foundation for America's ties in the Gulf in the 20th century. Trade and investment make for a better foundation in the 21st.

Presidents are used to seeing the Middle East through the lens of hard power—but economics is also a threat to regional stability. Sanctions are too often a wheel that turns in only one direction. Leaving them in place against post-Assad Syria will make that country more unstable.

Egypt is another example. America sends it \$1.3bn in annual military aid in the name of regional stability. Yet one of the biggest threats to Egypt's stability is the army itself, which gobbles up an ever-larger share of the economy. America has enormous influence at the IMF, which has \$9bn in outstanding loans to Egypt. Mr Trump should insist that the fund pushes Egypt for serious economic reforms.

America has tried to ignore the region's problems. They only get bigger. If Mr Trump wants the region off his desk, he will need to start by making it a priority. ■