

Transcript of Episode 10, “Great Power Politics in the Middle East and Arab-Israeli Conflict—Détente to 2020”

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[Note: This is a rough transcript of the audio recording, based on digital transcription and human review.]

[00:00:00] One, two, three, go.

Morgan: [00:00:18] Hello, and welcome to *International Security: Off the Page*. On today's episode, we are talking about great power politics in the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli conflict, with a particular focus on the period of detente between Washington and Moscow during the Cold War, as well as major power relations in the region today.

I'm Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. And we will be speaking with Galen Jackson, author of the recent *International Security* article “Who Killed Détente? The Superpowers and the Cold War in the Middle East, 1969 to 1977.” And a little later, we'll go off the page with Aaron David Miller, who is a senior fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace and is among America's foremost experts [00:01:00] on the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and U.S. policy in the Middle East.

Benn: [00:01:09] You can find past episodes as well as supplemental reading materials at belfercenter.org/offthepage. It is also where you can subscribe to Off the Page on your favorite podcast platform.

Morgan: Galen Jackson is an Assistant Professor of Political Science at Williams College.

Joining us now, we have Galen Jackson, who wrote a fascinating article for us here at *International Security* called, “Who Killed Détente? The Superpowers and the Cold War in the Middle East, 1969 to 1977.” Galen, welcome to the show.

Galen: [00:01:43] It's great to be here, Morgan. Thanks for having me on.

Morgan: [00:01:46] Perhaps you could start by telling our listeners a bit about what is this moment in time, this détente from 1969 to 1977 in the region? How did it come about? What were its goals? What's the conventional wisdom, [00:02:00] and how did it fall apart?

Galen: [00:02:01] Detente is typically viewed as this period where the United States is struggling to find its way in the world in the wake of the Vietnam War. You now have strategic nuclear superiority, and everyone's worried about a potential nuclear war, especially just a few years after the Cuban Missile Crisis. The Soviets have to worry about the rise of China and their emerging partnership with the United States. This is sort of a period where it seems like the superpowers, the United States and the Soviet Union, can enjoy a kind of cooling off and maybe even potentially strike up a real accommodation that allows

them to relate to each other on a businesslike basis, maybe not become allies or take their partnership to a really deep level, but learn to relate to one another on a power political basis in a way that makes the world more secure for everyone.

Morgan: [00:02:52] So, how does this play out specifically in the Middle East?

Galen: [00:02:56] Well, the reason I studied the Middle East is because I think it shows [00:03:00] that the way this whole period is generally held up is more or less incorrect. The Soviet Union is ordinarily seen as the principle reason for the collapse of detente in the late 1970s, that the Soviets were basically so committed to their communist ideology that they were unable to relate to the United States on a businesslike or power political basis. At least in the case of the Arab-Israeli conflict, I argue that just the reverse was the case, that actually it's the Soviet Union that really is trying to bend over backwards to cooperate with the United States in the area, and it's the United States that refuses to cooperate on the issue.

Morgan: [00:03:38] What is the reason why? If you could talk about why the Soviet Union is interested in cooperating with the United States on these issues – and I imagine we're predominantly talking here about the Arab-Israeli conflict – but also why does the U.S. pull back from cooperation?

Galen: [00:03:54] Yeah, both really good questions. On the Soviet side, the Soviets have a real dilemma in the Middle East. They [00:04:00] are deathly afraid of another large-scale Arab-Israeli war like the one they just witnessed in June 1967. One, it's pretty clear that their clients, the Arabs, are going to lose. The Israelis were widely seen as the stronger power. More importantly, an Arab-Israeli war always raised the specter of a superpower confrontation, one that could conceivably escalate to the nuclear level. And the Soviets had all sorts of concerns that if you had another Arab-Israeli war, you might have to intervene, and that could be very dangerous. Moreover, this is really costly to the Soviets, at a time when they're economically struggling. So I think the Soviets have very good reasons to want an Arab-Israeli settlement.

The reason the Americans don't reciprocate, at least as I see it, is that the American strategy, which is formulated by Secretary of State Henry Kissinger in the wake of the October 1973 Middle East war, is based on reducing Soviet influence to the extent possible in the region. In fact, [00:05:00] he even says on a number of occasions that, even leaving the merits of the Arab-Israeli dispute aside, his principle goal in the Middle East is to move the Soviet Union to the sideline and prevent Moscow from sharing in the credit of reaching an Arab-Israeli settlement. That sort of approach obviously meant that a combined U.S.-Soviet strategy for resolving the Arab-Israeli conflict was just not in the cards.

Morgan: [00:05:23] What's the ultimate effect or outcome of the fact that not only does detente collapse in the region, but that it was particularly the United States' initiative to allow the cooperation between the two powers to collapse? What was potentially lost?

Galen: [00:05:36] Yeah, I'll make two points here. One, I think, this whole period has a real bearing on the way that this period is viewed particularly among Americans today and has a

lot to do with the discrediting of realpolitik principles in the United States because Kissinger's policy was viewed as part and parcel of a realpolitik [00:06:00] strategy, and it was viewed to have failed because the Soviets didn't respond. That sort of thinking was discredited to a great extent, and my argument is that that conclusion is based on an incorrect reading of this period.

The other major consequence, I would argue, is that this was a period when there was potentially a real missed opportunity to make more progress in the Arab-Israeli peace negotiations. Again, the two superpowers wanted more or less the same thing in the Middle East, and even though you eventually do get an American-brokered Egyptian-Israeli bilateral peace treaty in 1979, that agreement did nothing about the Palestinian question, about the Syrians. Of course, we still don't have an Israeli-Palestinian peace today in the Middle East. I think that if the superpowers had been able to work together, there was a real opportunity here, especially after October 1973, to make more progress than ultimately was made.

Morgan: [00:06:56] Another question I have is, you know, the history of [00:07:00] U.S.-Soviet relations during the Cold War and also particularly within the Middle East is a topic that's very well researched and well-studied. Why does this conventional wisdom hold for so long? What particular pieces of evidence did you find that gave you that moment where you realize actually the conventional wisdom should be overturned or relooked?

Galen: [00:07:19] That is a really terrific question, and one that I think about a lot. With respect to the first part, I think there's a good bit here that has to do with Winston Churchill's famous quote when he said, "History will be kind to me, for I intend to write it." Because so much of this period is based on Henry Kissinger's memoirs (and they really are quite remarkable memoirs, it's a three-volume set totaling something like 4,000 pages), it's unsurprising that many people have accepted that sort of wisdom.

My approach was to go much more deeply into the primary sources, and especially into the archival sources, to try to get a more unvarnished view of [00:08:00] this period. And what's really interesting is, if you compare the contemporaneous conversations that people had, the private notes that American diplomats pass to one another, you will find real gaps between the way this whole period was portrayed in places like Kissinger's memoirs and the way people spoke about it at the time.

Morgan: [00:08:19] So, what do you think is the takeaway of this finding for contemporary politics? I mean, obviously it's hard to take a historical analogy from the Cold War and a bipolar system and apply it to today to 2020, especially in the Middle East, but if you had to distill the one policy takeaway that could be applicable today, what would it be?

Galen: [00:08:39] My takeaway from this is if there is an opportunity for a detente with an adversary or to reach an accommodation with your adversary, that opportunity is not going to be seized unless one proceeds on the basis of a realpolitik policy, in other words putting to the side things like ideology and proceeding on a business-like [00:09:00] basis. That, to me, is the reason superpower cooperation in the Middle East did not succeed during the 1970s, and the takeaway for me is unless you take that sort of approach today, the United

States is not going to reach that sort of accommodation with countries like Iran, China, Russia, or North Korea.

Morgan: [00:09:18] Fantastic. Well, Galen, I only have one more question for you and that is, are you ready?

Galen: [00:09:22] Am I ready for what?

Morgan: [00:09:24] To go off the page.

Galen: [00:09:26] Yes, I am, Morgan.

Benn: [00:09:33] If you enjoy listening to Off the Page, you'll enjoy reading our quarterly journal *International Security*, which is edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. To learn more about the journal, please check out belfercenter.org/is.

Morgan: [00:09:46] Aaron David Miller is a Senior Fellow at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace. Between 1978 and [00:10:00] 2003 Miller served at the State Department as a historian, analyst, negotiator, and advisor to Republican and Democratic secretaries of state, where he helped formulate U.S. policy on the Middle East and the Arab-Israeli peace process.

Well, joining us now, we have Aaron David Miller. Aaron, thank you so much for coming on the podcast today.

Aaron: [00:10:18] It's a pleasure to be here with you and Galen.

Morgan: [00:10:22] Great. Well, I thought we'd start by asking about your general impressions of the article and Galen's analysis on who killed detente in the Middle East. And I feel like that there's not a better person to ask this question to, as someone who entered the State Department in 1978, essentially a year after this period under observation ends. You also worked on the FRUS series, the Foreign Relations of the United States, so I'm very curious to hear your perspective on the subject.

Aaron: [00:10:48] You know, I admit to a certain, what I would call, ahistorical bias here. It derives from having spent 25 years working on U.S. Middle East policy, and it unfortunately leads to a very [00:11:00] annoyingly negative analysis of most things contemporary and historical. My years working for half a dozen secretaries on a variety of Middle Eastern issues basically colored my view of what transpired during the earlier years, particularly during that period, let's say 1969 to the eve of Sadat's visit to Jerusalem, and beyond. It colored my views on what was possible; I would argue not much during that period. It colored my views on Henry Kissinger's role, which frankly, given how hard it is to get anything done in government, let alone in the Arab-Israeli conflict, producing three disengagement agreements in 18 months was an extraordinary accomplishment by any standard.

And it also has led me to the conclusion, and I buy Galen's essential point on detente that it takes two to tango, that you would have needed a balance of interests. That was not what Henry Kissinger had in mind. His objective, [00:12:00] frankly, was to minimize the Soviet

role, which he did, but I would argue as important as Kissinger's realpolitik or ideology (whether this was realpolitik or ideology, I don't know, they could be two halves of the same coin), I think the real reason the Soviets failed at détente, at least as it applied to negotiating these agreements and issue of American influence in the wake of the 1973 war, was that the parties themselves, and not just the Israelis, were suspicious of a Russian role, although Abba Eban [Israel's Minister of Foreign Affairs] went to great lengths at the Geneva conference to make sure he was photographed with Andrei Gromyko [the Soviet Union's Minister of Foreign Affairs]. The parties themselves, including the Egyptians and the Syrians, particularly Sadat, rapidly realized that Soviet couldn't produce. [Inaudible] wanted to use the Russians to counterbalance the Americans, but he didn't want to become a Russian client. They quickly realized that by working with the Americans, they could actually get something done. The [00:13:00] Soviets more or less disappeared from view after the Syrian-Israeli disengagement agreement in June of 1974. I think Gromyko actually showed up in Damascus, and Assad wouldn't even see him during Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy.

I buy the notion that that was in fact Kissinger's intention. I just don't think that there was much of a prospect for really applying meaningful détente, if by detente you mean not simply the absence of confrontation but the presence of a working relationship with Moscow and Washington that could have produced much more than was produced. Then I think there was chances of that happening, frankly, were slim to none.

Galen: [00:13:44] I think it's a really crucial point that certainly you see in the literature very regularly and certainly one that needs to be taken very seriously in any analysis of this issue. My impression with the PLO to start is somewhat different, at least by [00:14:00] the sort of 1976, 1977 period. I've seen CIA analyses now that the Soviets were turning up the pressure on the PLO, and, you know, maybe this is most evident with the October 1977 U.S.-Soviet joint statement. And it seems like the Palestinians were pretty pleased with that, so I'm not totally sure they objected completely to having the Soviets involved.

The Egyptians, I think, are a different story, although I should say my view on Sadat is, his dislike of the Soviet stems from mainly their unwillingness to provide him with arms. I think that does indicate to a real extent the degree to which the Soviets were exercising restraint in the Middle East.

But, you know, even if you don't find the point on the PLO persuasive, I think the Soviets did have influence with the Syrians. In June 1974, it's true, Gromyko does not a great welcome there, but they recover pretty quickly, and they are willing to play a cooperative role there, as Kissinger [00:15:00] himself recognized. The other thing is they certainly have the ability to try to obstruct the negotiations and again, Kissinger gives them a lot of credit for doing so. I think as long as progress is being made towards settlement, I don't think it's the Arabs who objected all that much to Soviet involvement.

At a more basic level, you know, if the Soviets are trying to help achieve a settlement, they're willing to do things like guarantee one, it's not clear to me why you'd want to alienate them needlessly. Even the Americans, and Kissinger in particular, acknowledged at times that they're willing to play somewhat of a helpful role.

Aaron: [00:15:34] I think that all that may be true, it's just that the architecture and regional landscape, in sort of deterministic way, was weighted toward separate agreements and not just minimizing, but running away from two things. The Israelis ran away from any prospects of a West Bank settlement because it would have opened with Jordan, and the King was alienated and angry because it would have essentially opened up [00:16:00] the prospects of territorial compromise. Even if the Israelis were willing to do it, that would have involved Jerusalem. Within a month of the October 1977 communique, Sadat figured, rightly, that Carter was embarked on a strategy that actually took an international conference seriously. Kissinger, of course, did not. It was very little preparation for the Geneva Conference. The Soviets were viewed by Kissinger as potted plants, much the way we viewed the Russians on the road to Madrid in 1991. I mean, Baker staged that conference, even though Gorbachev was there, Bush 41 was there, Pankin was the Russian foreign minister, the Madrid Conference was emptied of any real authoritative or meaningful Russian role.

My bottom-line point was, and as I looked back and mean labored in the fields of Arab-Israeli peacemaking for almost two decades, I have come to be fundamentally distrustful because I've seen what happens [00:17:00] when comprehensiveness becomes an ideology. Now I'm not arguing that pursuing a phased set of agreements didn't have its price and cost, but things got done in Arab-Israeli negotiations, minus the Soviets, as a consequence of the parties' own calculations. Forget what the Americans intended or didn't. You look at the Arab-Israeli confrontation line today and you look at it in 1948, and what you see essentially are two separate agreements. One [was] between Israel and Egypt, which has held despite the murder of the man who signed it and an 18-month period in which the Muslim Brotherhood ran the country. You have an Israeli-Jordanian peace treaty, which no one ever anticipated, that Hussein would be the second Arab head of state to sign a full treaty peace with Israel. And you had a set of Israeli-Syrian negotiations through the nineties, which came extremely close to giving Assad what he wanted, minus three hundred yards off the northeastern portion [00:18:00] of the Sea of Galilee. And even with the Palestinians, you saw a set of interim arrangements at Oslo, which failed.

So I've come to understand certainly limitations of the approach the Americans took, but it was an approach validated and accepted, however imperfectly, by the parties themselves, and that's why I think it's endured.

Morgan: [00:18:18] Just to kind of tie this all together, it sounds like what you're saying, Aaron, is that in some ways, the fact that maybe the U.S. was the one who kind of pulled away from detente, it was in some ways towards a productive end, because that is what was required to achieve those step-by-step negotiations. Is that kind of a correct way of thinking about what you're saying?

Aaron: [00:18:41] I interviewed Kissinger for the *Much Too Promised Land* book, as well as the other secretaries of state. I mean, Kissinger has his detractors in the Middle East. I mean, there are people I know and respect who fundamentally believe that the two Egyptian-Israeli disengagement agreements in the peace treaty essentially was a failed exercise [00:19:00] because it virtually ensured that neither the Egyptians nor the Israelis would have much of

an incentive in satisfying Palestinian national aspirations, which remains obviously an unrequited and critically important piece of stability in the Arab-Israeli arena.

It's just that I look back realizing how hard anything in the Arab-Israeli arena is to get done. I may be wrong here because it's an ahistorical argument, and Galen is a political science historian who's looking at the evidence. I'm just arguing backwards, and even based on the realities at the time, I just don't think much more than what was accomplished could have been accomplished with or without the Russians.

Galen: [00:19:46] Yeah. I mean, I don't want to be glib about what Kissinger produced, but the point Aaron is making raises some interesting questions in my mind, you know, one, one having to do with basic power political realities. The United [00:20:00] States and the Soviet Union were by far the two most powerful countries on Earth at the time. In strictly power political terms, they seem to me to have had the capacity to move the parties towards settlements. As far as I can tell, their views on what a settlement needed to be, at least a comprehensive settlement, largely overlapped.

And, you know, they had cooperated very closely on other issues, for example, the nonproliferation treaty, which is considered a resounding success, even though you would think many countries would want to have a nuclear capability as the ultimate defense. They cooperated very closely in Europe creating a stable security architecture there. So it's puzzling to me that they're not able, even though they want more or less the same thing here and seem to have the wherewithal to accomplish it, that not only do you not get cooperation, you get increased conflict. As far as I can tell, that's because that was part and parcel of the Kissinger strategy. Yes, [00:21:00] these are achievements, and I don't want to be too glib about it, but it still raises puzzling questions to me that you could have these outside actors with that level of influence and not be able to engineer a settlement.

Aaron: [00:21:13] The more I see of the international community's response, again fast-forwarding, but even then, the more I realize the Middle East is littered, literally, with the remains of great powers who believed wrongly, I might add, that they could impose their will on smaller countries. At no point has the Arab-Israeli conflict been amenable, so the notion that somehow the Russians and the Americans could have gotten more from the parties than they actually did, I think it assumes a certain willingness. It assumes that these leaders were prepared to take tremendous risks. I mean, let's remember [Yasser] Arafat and [Ehud] Barak negotiated in the same cabin [00:22:00] that [Menachem] Begin and Sadat did at Camp David. I heard Arafat say at Camp David, at least five times, "You shall not walk behind my coffin." [Yitzhak] Rabin was murdered as a consequence of his peace efforts, and so was Sadat.

If you combine the profound risk aversion with the domestic politics of which Kissinger and Nixon were acutely aware, even though they had it much different interpretations (Nixon, I think, was prepared to bring a lot more pressure on the Israelis than Kissinger was), I think you would have had to have the sun, the moon and the stars all align at the same time, and they haven't aligned yet. I watched Syria as Exhibit A. The vaunted international community was either unwilling, uninterested, preoccupied, or had their own specific agendas to preside over the largest refugee flows since the end of the Second World War and willful

mass killing on the part of the Assad regime and its security services. I have [00:23:00] a profound respect for the weakness of the big and the power of the strong. Their neighborhood, not ours.

Morgan: [00:23:08] So this is a good of place as any to start thinking forward and talking about actually 2020, right? I mean, you've brought up the case of Syria. We can talk about the current state of affairs in the Arab-Israeli conflict or Israeli-Palestinian negotiations, but the question still remains here, and that is, to what extent do the major powers actually matter for outcomes on the ground? And we could think of this both from the perspective of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations now, or broader regional issues, but also is there area for overlap between the United States and other major powers such as Russia at the moment? Could that possibly lead to more cooperation, or is this dead on arrival?

Aaron: [00:23:52] Part of my own analysis, which I concede to both of you is annoyingly negative, flows from the reality that we have a broken, angry, [00:24:00] dysfunctional region. Beginning in 2011, it is far more broken, far more angry, far more dysfunctional, far more divided than at any point in the preceding 50 years and, in some respects, hopeless. You have empty spaces controlled by transnational groups with millennium-like ideologies, the three Arab states that have traditionally competed for influence and power in this region, Egypt, Syria and Iraq, are either offline completely, like Syria, or preoccupied with our own problems.

The three core actors in this region, the ones that have the power to project their influence abroad, are the three non-Arab states, Israel, Turkey, and Iran. And frankly, if you watch the last several years and you watch it still in Syria and Iraq, you've got those powers, with the exception of Russia, which has made it will very clear, beginning with the incursion and the projection of Russian military power into Syria.

You've got other actors outside the [00:25:00] region, particularly the United States under this administration, playing a much more risk-averse role. And I would argue that for America, not just in the years of the Trump administration, the Middle East is losing its centrality. You've got the unhappy experience in Iraq and Afghanistan. We're weaning ourselves off of Arab hydrocarbons. China is a much bigger threat and focus for American policy makers. Finally, you've got the absence of any single problem that any of us could map out and actually cooperate in solving. There's not a single issue here in my judgment that has what I would call an end state. The Russians have been very skillful in Syria is set up this Astana process with the Turks and Iran. They've had ceasefires come and go. They've managed the issue of Northern Syria with Turks relatively well, but Syria continues to defy solution. The Israeli-Palestinian problem has been made much [00:26:00] harder by the articulation of a peace plan that is clearly not ready for prime time. And you've got a U.S.-Iranian arc of confrontation, which frankly in my judgment is not being well managed at all, which has no end state.

I think the Middle East is going to remain an arena of great power competition, but not in an arena in which one power would be able to create a unipolar reality. It's a funny situation. No single power will come to dominate the region, yet the Russians have managed very skillfully taking advantage of U.S. retrenchment to pick up some points here and there. But

even the Russians don't have the capacity. That's the cruel paradox here. They don't even have the capacity to fix all this. It's all being "managed" with not a hint that we're anywhere near directing matters or events toward any sort of solutions.

Galen: [00:26:56] So I don't disagree with you at all on the changing U.S. role, [00:27:00] and that's been one of the major developments of the last, I don't know when you want to date it to, 10, 20 years.

I will say, I think there have been some areas where outside powers can play a role, both for good and for ill. Whatever you think of the JCPOA, the Iran nuclear agreement, it's hard to see how an agreement like that could have been reached without a major power by it. Both the Russians and the Chinese were on board during those negotiations, including for some quite serious sanctions, which may have played a role in bringing Tehran to the negotiating table. You know, even in places like Libya, which you see basically widespread chaos at the moment, you see outside powers playing a quite significant role, not necessarily the great powers but countries like the United Arab Emirates or Turkey really shifting the balance of forces in that war. Now, maybe that's having a negative effect, but it does show that outside powers can play a certain [00:28:00] role.

Not to say that there aren't things that you could criticize about Russian foreign policy, but I think that the Americans and Russians do have some overlapping interests to a certain degree. The Russians don't like extremism either; this is one of their big concerns. Now, the Russians did play a role in propping up the Assad regime, which was not what the United States wanted, and [it] is backing a war criminal, but it's hard for me to see how you get a stable political settlement in Syria at some point, without some sort of Russian buy-in. I think we're seeing that play out at the moment.

And on the point about Russia sort of making strides in the Middle East, I think I take a somewhat different view. It's not clear to me what Russia gets out of all of this, and by the way, this is a criticism that I think you could have made of the Soviet Union during the period that my article addressed. The Russians have helped in conjunction with countries like Iran to turn the tide in Assad's favor. It's not totally clear what they [00:29:00] get out of that. You know, Syria is a war-ravaged country at this point. Maybe in terms of status or prestige, they've won some points, but Russia has got some real problems domestically, as did the Soviet Union toward the end of the Cold War. It now has one of the largest outbreaks of coronavirus. I don't know, in power political/strategic terms, whether the Russians are actually looking as good in the Middle East as you sometimes see portrayed in the press.

Aaron: [00:29:27] I mean, I would agree. They're certainly not taking over the region and there's no reason for U.S. panic. Russian gains are primarily a result of our retrenchment, and the Russians are not viewed as an indispensable power, but they're acting in a way that is much more skillful and much more agile than we are. They have relations with the Israelis. Putin has now met 14 times with Netanyahu, and the Israelis understand the logic and the utility of a relationship with Russia. They have a relationship with the Iranians. We don't. I think Assad has played his cards quite well. [00:30:00]

And I think you're right, Galen, that he's stuck, but keep in mind that the Russians are a lot closer to this region than we are. They have traditional interests, warm water ports. Latakia was the only warm water port [Russia had] at the time of the collapse of the former Soviet Union. Putin was determined to reassert Russian influence there, which was a traditional area of Russian activity going back 40, 50 years with the Assads, and to frustrate any effort by the United States to initiate a *pax Americana*. He watched as we dispatched Gadhafi, he watched as we dispatched Saddam Hussein. He made it unmistakably clear by intervening in 2014 to save Assad, that he was not going to allow the Americans [to overthrow Assad]. There was no danger, I might add after the Russian intervention, despite Barack Obama's cries of "Assad must go, Assad must go," that we were going to do anything to dislodge Assad, despite the fact that he remains a mass murderer.

Like the Chinese, [the Russians] [00:31:00] have understood that the world is no longer unipolar, and both of them are determined not only to carve out their spheres of influence (Crimea, Eastern Ukraine, Syria), but also to delve into areas and with parties that are much more closely aligned still with the U.S. The Chinese, for example, even though they don't think in geopolitical terms as the Russians do, you know, have decided to identify five countries in this region that they want to use their economic power and their money to expand relations with. Saudi Arabia is one. The Chinese are the Saudis' largest trading partner. There are now 200,000 Chinese nationals in the Emirates, and China is the UAE's largest trading partner. They have a very close relationship with Iran. The Chinese are now negotiating with the Israelis to run the port of Haifa, and the Chinese, again, are using their money to [00:32:00] to cut deals with Egypt.

I keep thinking to myself that neither Russia nor China are going to take over the region, but they both are there in ways they haven't been before. We're talking about a region that is still in turmoil. It just seems invulnerable to the kind of unipolar fantasies, partly reality, that the Americans had in mind for the Middle East during the 1970s.

Morgan: [00:32:28] How does this multipolar reality actually influence the ability of regional actors to play off the different outside powers who may be interfering? That's the angle we haven't talked about, agency on the parts of regional states, how they've approached competition over relationships with them. Does this provide more room to maneuver for different states, or is it perhaps more constraining that more states such as the Chinese and now [00:33:00] perhaps the Russians a little more than in the past, a couple of decades now have influence again as well?

Galen: [00:33:04] That's a really tough question that we don't necessarily have the answer to just yet. I guess my initial inclination was to say it gives them more room to maneuver. And, you know, I was thinking about the post-1991 Gulf War, when there was a real price to saying no to the United States, and the United States was in a position where it could really influence the states in the region to a real degree.

On the other hand, to the extent that those outside powers now have the ability to nurture some dependence of the states of the region upon them, there's a tradeoff there in terms of what you can get away with in exchange for external support. You're even seeing that with, like I said, more middle powers. The GNA, the Government of National Accord in Libya right

now, has had to make some concessions to Turkey on things like maritime rights, because Turkey is its principal [00:34:00] outside patron. I think there's going to be somewhat of a push-pull dynamic there if we are indeed moving toward a more multipolar system in the Middle East, which I tend to agree with Aaron that we probably are.

Aaron: [00:34:12] I mean, Galen raises an excellent point. To some degree, the costs of saying no to the United States have gone way down. Now, I would argue to you, however, that that is not necessarily a new reality. I mean, the last serious foreign policy we had in this country, in my judgement, and I'm showing my characteristic bias here, was Bush 41 and Jim Baker, where means were tethered to ends, where the use and deployment of American power was prudent, wise, and effective. We have not been admired, feared, and respected in this region since 1992.

The costs of saying no to the U.S., and this is really a paradox, I have to say, in the Trump administration seem have gone up. None of these Arab leaders, [00:35:00] in part for different reasons, want to say no to Donald Trump. Abdul Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt is a prime example. The Jordanians' King Abdullah may or may not mute the severity of his reaction. If the Israelis go ahead and annex parts from the West Bank or the Jordan Valley, in large part, it's because [Netanyahu] doesn't want to cross Donald Trump. The Saudis are manipulating the hell out of the Trump administration, but there is still a connection there, which the Saudis simply don't want to break, partly because Trump administration has given Mohammed bin Salman an enormous amount of cover to pursue his destructive behavior, not only over the murder of Jamal Khashoggi, but in Yemen and two years ago in Lebanon.

I think Trump has emerged as a larger than life sort of forceful figure in all of this, and he's related well to dictators and authoritarians. They respect that, and they don't want to cross him, [00:36:00] even though, and this is the interesting feature in the paradox, we seem to be playing less of an influential role in this region than we have for quite some time. He keeps saying, you know, the latest spending figure was \$7 trillion, and what have we got? I think it affords some opportunity for maneuver, but some of these leaders are also quite constrained by his unpredictability and the need to, for reasons sometimes I don't even understand, not to cross him.

Morgan: [00:36:30] That brings up the interesting point, given the current time period we're in. We have an election coming up, and you've brought up the Trump power paradox in the Middle East. To what extent would a potential Biden administration upend that paradox? How would it change those relationships you're talking about? Of course, we're talking in the hypothetical here.

Galen: [00:36:53] I think there will be some meaningful changes and some meaningful continuities. I think [00:37:00] on the Israeli-Palestinian issue specifically, the change there will be quite noticeable, I think. Trump, of course, has done things like move the U.S. embassy from Tel Aviv to Jerusalem. He has recognized Israel's authority over the Golan Heights. He has deemed Israeli settlements in the West Bank legal under international law, which broke with longstanding U.S. policy on that issue. It seems like the administration won't oppose the Netanyahu government if it decides to annex large swathes of the West Bank.

I don't think that a Biden administration would take a similar line on that issue. I think you would see a policy more in line with how the United States has traditionally approached the Arab-Israeli conflict, although there's a real question in my mind line of path dependence. Now the Trump administration has taken those steps, there's a question of whether they can be rolled back. [00:38:00] Just as one example from the period we were talking about earlier, in 1975, the United States gave Israel assurances that it would give great weight to the Israeli view that Israel should not have to withdraw from the Golan Heights. Aaron, maybe you can tell me if I'm wrong, but the Israelis would bring that document up well into the nineties during Israeli-Syrian negotiations.

I think that a Biden administration would probably move to try to reinstate the Iran nuclear agreement. Again, there's a real question in my mind if that ship has sailed at this point, whether the Iranians would still be interested in negotiating that sort of deal. On the other hand, I think you would see continuity in the sense that a Biden administration would continue to take a relatively hard line towards Iran and try to continue this coalition or tacit coalition that the Trump administration has tried to erect between the Israelis and Sunni Arab states. Some of these goals work at [00:39:00] cross purposes, but I think those would be some of the objectives you would see a Biden administration trying to accomplish.

Aaron: [00:39:07] I think Galen has done a really good job of summarizing the difference and similarities of a Biden administration. Also, consider the broader context: This virus has a mind of its own. Who knows where are we going to be by the fall, let alone by January 2021? One thing is certain, whether it's Trump or Biden, governing is about choosing. If it's about anything, it's about setting priorities of what's important and what isn't. National recovery, with that the economic side, the societal side, and the public health side will be, to borrow a *Star Trek* image, the "prime directive" of the Biden administration.

That's particularly for a 78-year-old guy, you know, who may will think of his own presidency as a transitional presidency, a one-termer. I think on foreign policy, because it's in Joe Biden's blood, because [00:40:00] he represents a certain consensus within the mainstream Democratic Party, the whole question of restoring alliances and relations with allies, countering the fact that we are MIA, in my judgment, in probably the most significant global events since the end of the Second World War, will push the administration to raise its profile abroad. Those will be, in my judgment, the kind of easy lifts, restoring the confidence of our NATO allies, doing more with the G7, the G20. I'm sure he's going to convene at some point, because he said he would, a kind of community of the democracies conference somewhere in Washington to basically demonstrate that we don't coordinate with dictators and authoritarians. But the heavy lifts, I think that's another matter.

One last point. I think the risk aversion with respect to deploying large numbers of American forces abroad, finding a way to get out of the two longest wars in American history in Afghanistan and Iraq, there will be more [00:41:00] similarities than differences there with the Trump administration.

Morgan: [00:41:02] Well, Aaron, we have a bit of a tradition on the show, which is before we wrap up, we'd like to ask our special policy guest, what advice you'd have for junior scholars,

practitioners, public servants, service members, given your long experience straddling the policy, academic, and analyst worlds.

Aaron: [00:41:25] I just give two pieces of advice. Whatever anybody chooses to do in life, I don't think I will ever do anything more meaningful than the 25 years I spent in government, despite all of the failures, all of the imperfections, all of the bad advice provided to Republican and Democratic administrations. The centerpiece of that experience [was] the fact that life in a career has to be meaningful, in my judgement, organized around the idea of the we, not the me. [That's] something that has made my [00:42:00] professional life incredibly meaningful. People who can't turn the "m" in "me" upside down so that it becomes a "w" and it's "we" enterprise, I think, are missing out on a lot.

And secondly, probably the only piece of advice my kids ever took from me, was that the happiest people that I know professionally (not personally, but professionally), are the ones who combined passion (they love what they do they do) with expertise (they know what they're talking about). Passion without expertise can be dangerous, and expertise without passion can be incredibly boring. If you're lucky enough to seek out a career in which you love what you do, and you know what you you're talking about based on a lot of time spent learning and doing, I don't think regardless of what's accomplished or not, you'd look back and say anything but that was really meaningful. I'm glad I went down that road.

Morgan: [00:42:59] Fantastic. Well, thank you so much, Aaron, and thank you so much, Galen, for joining the podcast today and providing such great insights to keep moving this conversation forward.

Julie Balise: [00:43:15] Off the Page is a production of *International Security*, a quarterly journal edited and sponsored by the Belfer Center at Harvard Kennedy School and published by the MIT Press. Our program is produced and edited by Morgan Kaplan, the Executive Editor of *International Security*. The associate producer and technical director is Benn Craig; digital communications by me, Julie Balise; production support by Carly Demetre.

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