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The Unpredictability of US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Increase and the Impact on the Region's Security

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Abstract: This paper discusses the (un)predictability of US foreign policy in the MENA region and the impact of this (un)predictability on the region's (in)security in the light of some IR approaches with a focus on Iran's nuclear program during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. The analysis of Obama's and Tump's policies towards Iran's nuclear program reveals that there were reoccurring fluctuations and inconsistencies in US policies not only across administrations, but it was also noted during the same administration. These fluctuations and inconsistencies made US policies uncertain and difficult to predict, which affirms the notion of 'behavioral repetition' in IR theory. Furthermore, the analysis reveals that the way regional actors responded to US unpredictable policies implied a mixture of fear and confusion, which endorses the realists' and cognitivists' understanding of the notion of uncertainty in IR respectively. Last but not least, we concluded that these responses destabilized the region or risked to destabilize it. The advancement of Iran's nuclear program, the war in Yemen and its destructive effects, the outbreak of mutual attacks between Iran and Israel, the risk to destabilize Iraq again and the deepening of fissures between members of the GCC are all cases in point. This conclusion is in line with Quincy Wright's argument which highlights the importance of predictable political behavior and trust in maintaining the international order. In the same vein, Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA and the conflicts it created support one of the premises of the liberal thought in IR, which highlight the importance of international institutions and international agreements in reducing conflicts and uncertainty.

Keywords: USA, Foreign Policy, Unpredictability, Middl East, Insecurity

1. Introduction

Does US foreign policy have an impact on the security of the Middle East and North Africa? This paper examines the impact of US unpredictable foreign policy on the security of the MENA region with a focus on two major levels of analysis. First, we discuss how predicable is US foreign policy in the MENA area. Second, we examine how regional actors respond to this unpredictability and whether these responses affect the region's security.

The increase in the US unpredictable foreign policy in the MENA area since the war in Iraq in 2003 may have engendered an increasing insecurity in the region. [1] To

illustrate, US foreign policy actions in the MENA area, including military interventions since 2003, have been characterized by uncertainty and unpredictability. While the US chose to play the role of a foreign security provider and directly intervened in some regional crises, it opted for a full disengagement in similar crises. For example, Obama was enthusiastic about intervening in Libya to topple Muaamar Al Gaddafi during the *Arab Spring*, but he did not express the same zeal with the Syrian, Egyptian, Tunisian and Yemeni uprisings at least in their beginnings.

The nuclear deal with Iran, or what is referred to as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), is another example that illustrates the unpredictability in US foreign policy in the region. This agreement was signed by Iran along with the US and the remaining permanent members of the UN Security Council in addition to Germany [1]. The fact that this deal was

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[1] It is very important to point that we are not including Israel in this discussion because US-Israeli relations have largely been characterized by a great level of predictability and continuity despite the minor disruptions during Obama's presidency because of the nuclear deal with Iran and the expansion of Israeli settlements.

unilaterally annulled by President Trump illustrates the unpredictability that has characterized US foreign policy in the MENA region since the beginning of the 21st century. The cancellation of the Iran nuclear deal may have aggravated insecurity in the region because it engendered mistrust in international deals and may have prompted Iran to continue developing its nuclear program resulting in producing a nuclear weapon in few years. In so doing, the region's security was likely to be undermined.

The increasing unpredictability of US foreign policy in the MENA region pushes regional actors to respond to such unpredictability in order to fulfill their responsibilities in self-securitization. Some countries tried to achieve this goal through conglomerating in regional entities such as the Gulf Cooperation Council. Furthermore, we have noticed a change in some countries' foreign policy such as Saudi Arabia's vis-à-vis its neighbors including its intervention in Bahrain in 2011, the war in Yemen and the disturbed diplomatic relations with Qatar since 2011. Hence, the attempt to accomplish self-securitization may sometimes lead to more insecurity.

2. Literature Review and Theoretical Framework

The notion of uncertainty or unpredictability remains significant in the main research traditions pertaining to studying international relations. However, the meaning of uncertainty differs from one school of thought to another [2]. While the realists view uncertainty as *fear* about the other's aspirations, the rationalists conceptualize it as *ignorance* about the other's aspirations. As for the constructivists, they consider uncertainty as a form of *indeterminacy* unlike the cognitivists who conceive of it as *confusion* about the other's aspirations. In fact, we believe that there is a fine line between the concepts of fear, ignorance, indeterminacy and confusion, especially when we consider that all these feelings lead to uncertainty.

The literature that examines the impact of uncertainly on states' behavior in international relations is replete with both theoretical and empirical contributions in various academic focuses such as economic cooperation, military disputes and international organizations. However, the theoretical contributions are especially prodigious in comparison to the empirical ones which remain relatively scant. More particularly, there are very few empirical contributions on the impact of unpredictability and uncertainty on regional security with a focus on the MENA area.

The theories of International relations have extensively discussed the importance of predictability or expectations in maintaining international peace and stability. For example, the English School of International Relations theory highlights the significance of predictability in maintaining the global order [3]. Hedley Bull, one of the most prominent scholars in the English School, talks about the notion of behavioral repetition in inducing predictability [4]. Quincy Wright expressed Bull's argument differently. According to Wright,

maintaining a certain level of predictability or expectations about states behavior in the international system contributes to maintaining the international order [5]. In other words, if states' international behavior is inconsistent, it will be difficult to predict it, which may result in mistrust and engender insecurity.

While this theoretical framework remains helpful in understanding the importance of predictability in maintaining the international order, there is a lack of empirical studies that test the validity of this approach in various contexts through conducting comparative or case study analyses.

One of the very few attempts to examine the impact of unpredictability on regional security with a focus on the MENA region came from Quero and Dessi [6]. They argued that there is a *double-level uncertainty* in US foreign behavior towards the MENA area. The first level has to do with the degree of fluctuations in US engagement in the region while the second level relates to the reactions of regional actors to these fluctuations.

Quero and Dessi argued that the US engagement in the MENA area remains unpredictable, which creates an uncertainty about what to except from Washington including its role as an external security provider. As a result, regional state actors have become aware of the necessity to reconsider their dependence on the US as an external provider of security.

While Quero and Dessi raised an important point about the impact of US inconsistent foreign policy on the MENA region's stability, they did not clarify the type of relation that exists between the two levels of uncertainty they highlighted. To put it differently, they did not clarify whether the level of fluctuations in US foreign policy in the region explains or causes a particular response from regional actors and how such a response affects the region's security or insecurity.

The lack of predictability in international relations often results in uncertainty about states' behavioral expectations. In fact, uncertainty is considered a very important concept in IR theory as well as the most important factor that explains the unique dynamics of international relations. Claudio Cioffi-Revilla defines uncertainty as "the puzzling lack of sureness or absence of strict determination in political life" [7].

The impact of uncertainty on the international order has been broadly examined by political scientists. Many of those believe that uncertainty has a considerable impact on the probability to engender conflict and insecurity [8-10].

To put it differently, the increasing decrease in predictability and the increasing increase of uncertainty in the international system prompt states to make strategic decisions through careful calculations of threat, risk, the other states' intentions as well as their capabilities to shape the distribution of power. However, these strategic decisions are not necessarily based on predictable and reliable information, which may have a negative impact on international security.

To reduce uncertainty and the likelihood of conflict, Oneal and Russett conducted an empirical study to examine the role of the Kantian tripod in this regard [11], namely, democracy, economic interdependence and involvement in international

institutions. This study confirmed Kant's argument which highlights the importance of these three factors in reducing conflicts including militarized ones. These findings are grounded in the liberal international relations theory.

This paper examines these theoretical approaches in the context of US foreign policy in the MENA region with a focus on Iran's nuclear program during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. In so doing, we discuss the following questions:

Q1: How unpredictable has US foreign policy been towards Iran's nuclear program?

Q2: How have regional actors responded to this unpredictability?

Q3: To what extent have these responses affected the region's security?

To answer these questions, we analyzed case studies illustrating US foreign policies and regional actors' responses to these policies with a focus on Iran's nuclear program during the presidencies of Barack Obama and Donald Trump. We collected data from different reliable sources including the Presidents' and their officials' speeches, actions and decisions. In addition, we used reliable media sources which reported on the administrations' foreign policy decisions and actions.

As for the responses of regional actors to US inconsistent policy in the region, we mainly relied on the actions and statements of these actors as they were officially reported by their politicians or by reliable media sources.

Last but not least, to examine the impact of these responses on the region's security, we used data from secondary sources such as books and articles published by recognized printing houses and academic journals, reports and briefings by international organizations and think tanks as well as statements by scholars and politicians.

3. Mapping US Foreign Policy Towards Iran's Nuclear Program: Constant Fluctuations and Uncertainty

3.1. Obama and Iran: A Total Departure from Bush's Policy and an Invariable Oscillation Between Confrontational and Conciliatory Discourses

Unlike Bush's confrontational 'axis-of-evil' language towards Iran, Obama started his term with conveying positive messages of his determination to resolve the conflict with Iran through diplomatic means [12], He sent a short recording to the Iranian people and leaders to congratulate them on the Persian New Year (*Nowruz*), praise Iran's rich cultural heritage and wish Iran a bright future [13], In a more practical step and departing from Bush's disengagement policy towards Iran, the Obama administration decided to fully engage in the P5+1 negotiations with Iran on April 8, 2009.

The election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and the resulting protests in Iran delayed the beginning of the negotiations. In the meantime, Obama changed his rhetoric towards Iran and accused it of building another secret uranium-enrichment

facility despite the IAEA's declaration that it was already informed of the new facility. In July 1, 2010, Congress adopted the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act, which was signed by Obama and aimed at imposing more sanctions on the companies that invest in a sector relating to Iran's energy [14],

The failure of Obama's first diplomatic attempt with Iran resulted in resorting to sanctions again both on the international and national levels. The Security Council adopted Resolution 1929 on June 9, 2010, which toughened the previously imposed sanctions including further restrictions on nuclear proliferation and test-related measures as well as a total arms embargo on exports to Iran [15],

The change of leadership in Iran seemed to bring about a glimmer of hope for the negotiations with the election of the moderate Hassan Rouhani who, three days after his inauguration on August 3, 2013, called for resuming serious negotiations with the P5+1 [16], This was a clear breakup from Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Rouhani's predecessor who was known for his confrontational rhetoric with the US in particular. A similar breakup from his predecessors' was Obama's phone call with Rouhani in September 2013.

Following this positive exchange, a series of meetings were held between Iran and the P5+1 with the IAEA's involvement. Despite the few stumbling blocks that hindered the negotiations, a deal was finally reached and the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) was signed in Vienna on July 14, 2015, few months before the end of Obama's second term.

This brief historical overview on Obama's policy towards Iran's nuclear program does not only illustrate constant fluctuations in US policies across administrations, but it also demonstrates how such fluctuations occur during the same administration. Such fluctuations make US policies difficult to predict, which is likely to create an atmosphere of uncertainty about how the US would react to and cope with critical issues in the region.

3.2. Donald Trump: The Utmost Uncertainty of US Foreign Policy in the MENA Region

Trumpism or Trump's Doctrine in foreign policy is often linked to ambiguity and uncertainty [17], His foreign policy seemed to have no pattern and has been more unpredictable in comparison to his predecessors' and throughout his own presidency.

Trump's unilateral withdrawal from JCPOA is a case in point, which he expressed as a presidential candidate in a speech at the American Israel Public Affairs Committee's (AIPAC) annual conference. He said: "number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran" [18].

Trump chose to withdraw taking into consideration that it was one of Obama's most significant diplomatic accomplishments in the Middle East. Trump strongly criticized the deal claiming that it was very poorly negotiated [19], Trump's withdrawal from the agreement was criticized by many countries including the remaining countries from P5+Germany as well as the United Nations and other

international organizations. In contrast, it was supported by others including Israel and Saudi Arabia. Trump's withdrawal damaged the image of the US and its ability to live up to its commitments despite IAEA's confirmation that Iran was abiding by the restrictions stated in deal. Such a drastic change further augmented the level of unpredictability of US policies in the region.

Furthermore, Trump signed a presidential memorandum on May 8, 2018 to impose the 'highest level' sanctions on Iran. [20], Additionally, he ordered the establishment of the Iran Action Group whose mission was to direct, review and coordinate all aspects of US policies about Iran [21], In a more aggressive tone, Trump addressed Iran at the UN General Assembly saying: "Iran's leaders sow chaos, death, and destruction [22], This was followed by designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a foreign terrorist organization on April 8, 2019.

4. Regional Responses to US Unpredictable Policies: Serious Security Implications for the Region

4.1. The Responses to Obama's Policies and their Repercussions on the Region's Security

In response to the fluctuations in Obama's policies before the conclusion of the deal and especially after the imposition of sanctions, Iran decided to expand its nuclear activities, especially pertaining to uranium enrichment, which ran against the fundamental goals of the US and the P5 + Germany. Iran declared that it planned to multiply the level of 20 percent-enriched uranium production by three using more-developed centrifuge models. In addition, it announced its intention to delocalize the production to the Fordow enrichment plant near Qom [23],

Such an attempt to enrich the uranium risked to threaten the stability in the region, especially with Israel's and Saudi Arabia's as well as the international community's strong concern about this Issue. As a matter of fact, Israel Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu threatened to attack Iran in case this latter chooses to advance its enrichment of the uranium beyond the 20 percent level [24],

The increase in Obama's oscillations in dealing with Iran and the prevailing uncertainty about Iran nuclear program generated a high level of uncertainty among regional actors about the role of the US as a reliable external security provider.[2]. Consequently, local leaders started to develop new ways to guarantee their survival through establishing new alliances and strengthening regional organizations such as the Gulf Cooperation Council (Quero & Solar, 2017).

This uncertainty cultivated a feeling of neglect among many states in the region, especially the Gulf states and, more

particularly, Saudi Arabia. The Saudis and their allies in the Gulf, which have always been longstanding US allies, were perturbed by how Obama turned his back to Ben Ali, Mubarak and Saleh who had always been faithful US allies [25], As a result, Saudi Arabia adopted a new assertive policy in the region since 2011 to assure its political existence, especially with an increasing uncertainty about the US engagement in the region, the rise of the Muslim brotherhood in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere as well as the reemergence of Iran as a regional power.

Furthermore, Obama's new conciliatory approach with Iran has made *Sunni* monarchs more uncertain about US commitments to their security during Obama's tenure. With the disappearance of Iraq as a balancer of Iran, this latter re-emerged as a regional power with influence on Syria, Lebanon and Yemen. The Saudis became increasingly concerned with this influence and became more proactive and aggressive in their foreign policy [26], The Saudi intervention in Bahrain in 2011 as well as the war in Yemen since 2011 are significant examples that illustrate the new assertive approach in Saudi foreign policy in the region.

The Saudi intervention in Bahrain was justified by its claim that Iran was behind the protests taking into consideration that the majority of Bahraini population are *Shia*. Moreover, Saudi Arabia's main purpose was to send a clear message to the US, Iran and its neighbors that it is a powerful regional actor with a respectful ability to secure its borders and defend its interests.

The other example illustrating Saudi Arabia's and other GCC members' responses to US unpredictable foreign policy in the region was the war in Yemen. After the uprising in Yemen and in the absence of a clear US engagement in the crisis, Saudi Arabia, through GCC, tried to secure a peaceful transition of power between Abdullah Saleh and Mansour Hadi. However, these efforts failed and the *Houthis* took over *Sanaa* in September 2014. As a response, Saudi Arabia launched Operation Decisive Storm to support Hadi against the Houthis who were influenced by Iran.[3]

The Saudis believed that this military intervention was necessary in order to establish security in the Gulf, especially with the increasing disengagement of the US. However, did Saudi interventions in Bahrain and Yemen help secure the region? Or did they contribute to worsening the region's insecurity?

While the crisis in Bahrain risked to establish a regional cold war and a proxy conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia, this latter's military intervention in Yemen resulted in serious security concerns that include human lives, food, health, economic and political insecurities. What Saudi Arabia planned to take few weeks lasted for more than five years.

According to the Armed Conflict Location & Event Data Project (ACLED), there has been more than 100,000 Yemenis who were killed from 2015 to October 2019 [27]. The humanitarian situation has been disastrous before the outbreak of COVID-19 pandemic, which made the situation worse in

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[2] It is important to point out that uncertainty in US foreign foreign policy in the MENA areais not the only factor that explains the new dynamics in the region after 2011. However, the irregularity and inconsistency that have characterized US foreign policy in the region since September 11 was largely blamed.

[3] Many Arab states took part in the operation including the UAE, Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, Jordan, Egypt, Morocco and Sudan.

many ways.

Before the outbreak of COVID-19, the UN had described the humanitarian situation in Yemen as the worst in the world because nearly 80 percent of Yemenis were in dire need to some form of help [28], More than 20 million Yemenis suffer from food insecurity including two million children under five years old and over one million pregnant and lactating women. After the pandemic, the situation got even worse as half of Yemen's hospitals were closed or not fully functioning because of war or lack of basic infrastructure and services such as water and electricity [29].

The chaos and anarchy caused by the war in Yemen was taken advantage of by Al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) which succeeded in establishing relationships with some Sunni Yemeni tribes. The reemergence of Al Qaeda risked to have detrimental effects on regional and international security [30].

Furthermore, the war in Yemen has threatened regional and global economic security. On September 14, 2019, the Houthis dared to attack Saudi oil facilities in Abqaiq and Khurais using Iranian drones. The fact that these facilities were closed for repairs after the attacks resulted in cutting Saudi oil production by half, which caused major perturbations in global financial markets [31]. Such financial destabilizations could result in an economic crisis should such attacks reoccur, especially if we take into consideration the importance of Saudi oil for the global economy.

4.2. Trump's Withdrawal from the JCPOA: A Multidimensional Security Ramifications

Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal with Iran in May 2018, the reimposition of US sanctions and unprecedented financial pressure on the Iranian regime as well as the US murdering of Qasem Soleimani, an Iranian Major General in January 2020 prompted Iran to announce its plans to terminate most of its pledges in the JCPOA including abandoning the limitations on uranium enrichment and resuming the construction of heavy water reactor in Arak [32], This risked to engender serious security ramifications in the Middle East.

As a matter of fact, since the US withdrawal from the deal, Iran has managed to increase its stockpile of nuclear fuel which has allowed it to possess enough enriched uranium to produce a nuclear arm without a warhead and a delivery system [33].

Additionally, Iran has carried out many actions against US allies and US military presence in the region. To illustrate, a couple of days only after Trump announced the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal, Iran fired 20 rockets at Israeli targets in the Golan Heights to which Israel responded with extensive strikes against Iran's forces in Syria [34].

Consequently, Trump was prompted to deploy more US forces to the U. S. Central Command region including the USS Abraham Lincoln Carrier Strike Group and a bomber task force [35], In so doing and according to John Bolton, US National Security Advisor, the US will "send a clear and unmistakable message to the Iranian regime that any attack on United States interests or on those of our allies will be met

with unrelenting force" [36], This pushed the two countries to the brink of war, especially after Iran shooting of a US surveillance drone, which prompted Trump to approve strikes on Iran before he suddenly decided to decline his decision [37].

On September 18, 2019, the US and Saudi Arabia affirmed that Iran was responsible for the attacks on the Saudi oil facility in Abqaiq, which resulted in deploying more US forces to Saudi Arabia [38], The US considered this attack as an 'act of war' and designated the Iranian regime as a 'state sponsor of terrorism' [39].

Apart from Iran's responses to Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA and their negative impact on the region's security, the withdrawal threatened to further endanger the stability of other countries such as Iraq, which was influenced by both the US and Iran and was caught in the middle of a clash between two countries. Additionally, it was still recovering from a tiring war against ISIS. In so saying, it was very difficult for the Iraqi regime to take side in the conflict. Iran's pressure to end US military presence in Iraq would also lead to stopping the Arab Gulf economic aid, which would endanger Iraq's stability and security again.

Furthermore, Trump's decline of the JCPOA contributed to widening the rift between members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). While Saudi Arabia, UAE and Bahrain warmly received Trump's withdrawal, Qatar, Kuwait and Oman were either silent or cautious in responding. This political crack threatened the future of the regional organization, especially after Oman's sympathetic rhetoric towards the uprising in Yemen, which was led by the *Houthis* and backed by Iran. In the same vein*,* the anti-Qatar coalition of Saudi Arabia, UAE, Bahrain asked Qatar to cut off or downscale its diplomatic and economic relations with Iran as conditions to terminate the boycott.

5. Conclusion

This paper examined the following research questions:

Q1: How unpredictable has US foreign policy been towards Iran's nuclear program?

Q2: How have regional actors responded to this unpredictability?

Q3: To what extent have these responses affected the region's security?

As for Q1, the analysis of Obama's and Tump's policies towards Iran's nuclear program revealed that there were reoccurring fluctuations and inconsistencies in US policies not only across administrations, but it was also noted during the same administration. These fluctuations and inconsistencies made US policies uncertain and difficult to predict.

This conclusion affirms the notion of 'behavioral repetition' in IR theory, which was advanced by Hedley Bull from the English School. The notion posits that the reoccurrence of a certain political behavior induces a certain level of predictability, which contributes to maintaining the international order. On the other hand, oscillations and fluctuations in the political behavior are very likely to cause

uncertainty about states' aspirations, which risked to destabilize the international order.

This leads to our second question (Q2) which examines how regional actors responded to the US uncertain aspirations about Iran's nuclear program. On a general level, we noticed that the way regional actors responded to US unpredictable policies implied a mixture of fear and confusion, which endorses the realists' and cognitivists' understanding of the notion of uncertainty in IR respectively.

To illustrate, the shift from a total disengagement with Iran during Bush presidency to a zealous willing to engage in negotiations during Obama, who oscillated between conciliatory and confrontational rhetoric, before arriving to a deal with Iran combined with Trump's unilateral withdrawal from Obama's deal created confusion among the Iranian government. Such confusion was manifested through the cautious response to Obama's early calls to start negotiations, the frequent breakups during the negotiations as well as the final detachment from the deal as a response to Trump's policies.

The feeling of fear was mainly noticed in the responses of Saudi Arabia, especially after Obama's conclusion of the deal with Iran. Fearing that the deal would make Iran close to developing a nuclear arm combined with Obama's overall disengagement policy from the conflicts in the Middle East prompted Saudi Arabia along with the UAE and Bahrain to self-securitize themselves and restrict the expansion of the Iranian influence in the region. This was mainly manifested through the war in Yemen against the Iranian-backed Houthis as well as the boycott against Qatar which maintained good diplomatic relations with Iran.

The third question (Q3) we attempted to answer in this paper relates to the impact of the regional actors' responses to the uncertain US policies on the region's security. Our analysis revealed that these responses destabilized the region or risked to destabilize it. The advancement of Iran's nuclear program, the war in Yemen and its destructive effects, the outbreak of mutual attacks between Iran and Israel, the risk to destabilize Iraq again and the deepening of fissures between members of the GCC are all cases in point illustrating the negative impact on the region's security or the risk that endangered its stability.

This conclusion is in line with Quincy Wright's argument which highlights the importance of predictable political behavior and trust in maintaining the international order. In the same vein, Trump's withdrawal from JCPOA and the conflicts it created support one of the premises of the liberal thought in IR. That is to say, the importance of involvement in international institutions and agreements in reducing conflicts and uncertainty.

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