
No Exit

Why the Middle East Still Matters to America

Steven A. Cook

The record of American failure in the Middle East over the last two decades is long and dismaying. The most obvious catastrophe was the 2003 invasion of Iraq. But the trouble started long before that fiasco. The U.S. victory in the Cold War, the “third wave” of democratization around the world, and the wealth that globalization generated were positive developments, but they also produced a toxic mix of American arrogance and overambition. Across the political spectrum, officials and analysts came to believe that Middle Eastern societies needed Washington’s help and that the United States could use its power in constructive ways in the region. What followed were fruitless quests to transform Arab societies, resolve the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, stamp out jihadism, and end Iran’s development of nuclear technology. The fact that five Arab countries are now in various stages of collapse contributes to an overall sense within Washington that the U.S. approach requires a radical overhaul.

A new consensus has formed among U.S. foreign policy elites: it is time for Washington to acknowledge that it no longer has vital interests in the region and vastly reduce its ambitions accordingly, retrench its forces, and perhaps even end the era of “endless wars” by withdrawing from the Middle East altogether. After two difficult decades, such arguments might seem compelling. But leaving the Middle East is not a sound policy. Washington still has critical interests there that are worth protecting, even if political, technological, and social changes have made those interests less vital than they were decades ago. Instead of using U.S. power to remake the region,

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however, policymakers need to embrace the more realistic and realizable goal of establishing and preserving stability.

Unfortunately, all the loose talk in recent years about withdrawal has undermined Washington's influence. Thanks to a perception among Middle Eastern leaders that the United States intends to abdicate its leading role, China and Russia have emerged as alternative power brokers: a negative development not only for Washington but for the people of the region, as well. To prevent a worst-case scenario, in which regional actors take matters into their own hands, sowing more instability, more chaos, and more bloodshed, Washington needs to snap out of it, figure out its real interests in the Middle East, and craft a strategy to advance them.

GET OUT

Those calling for scaling back, retrenching, or withdrawing from the Middle East were once voices in the wilderness. Not anymore: what was once a fringe position has become the conventional wisdom. Take, for example, three places in the region that have bedeviled Washington over the last decade: Syria, Libya, and Iran. In 2011, only a few lonely voices argued for a U.S. military intervention after Syria's dictator, Bashar al-Assad, moved to crush a popular uprising. Meanwhile, opposition to the use of force in Congress, at the White House, in the Pentagon, and among the foreign policy commentariat was overwhelming. Similarly, that same year, when the Libyan strongman Muammar al-Qaddafi threatened to massacre his way out of a rebellion, most U.S. officials and analysts agreed that the American role should be limited to establishing a no-fly zone to prevent the regime from using airpower. The question of what to do about Iran's nuclear program generated more debate than did the conflicts in Syria and Libya, and a number of influential voices advocated U.S. military action. But the primary disagreement was not about whether to use force or pursue diplomacy but about whether the deal that the Obama administration eventually crafted represented the best possible diplomatic outcome.

Perhaps the most striking example of the shift in establishment views about using force in the Middle East was the U.S. reaction to the September 2019 attack on oil installations in Saudi Arabia, which most Western intelligence agencies believe was carried out by Iran. For the better part of the last 40 years, it has been a policy of the



Happy together? Trump in Riyadh, May 2017

United States to defend the oil fields of the Persian Gulf. Yet when an apparent Iranian attack temporarily took a significant portion of the world's oil supply off the market, American foreign policy specialists across the political spectrum raised alarms not about Iran's aggression but about the potentially grave consequences of a U.S. military response. Such restraint may have been appropriate, but the near-total absence of debate was remarkable. After all, the most important strategic rationale for the U.S. presence in the region—and the justification for spending billions of dollars over decades to ensure U.S. military predominance in the area—was the need to preserve the free flow of energy resources out of the Persian Gulf.

More than simply revealing a widespread reluctance to use force, the nondebate over whether to respond militarily to the attacks pointed to a deeper problem: the lack of a shared framework for

thinking through U.S. interests in the region. The set of interests that long shaped U.S. policy toward the Middle East has lost salience. Meanwhile, the always complex region has become even more complicated. Confronted with these new realities, a form of analytic exhaustion has set in among U.S. officials and analysts—a collective throwing up of the hands that partly explains the widespread appeal of retrenchment and withdrawal.

Throughout the Cold War and through the first decade of this century, ensuring cheap gasoline for U.S. consumers, supporting Israeli

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security, fighting terrorists, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction were all goals that Americans and their leaders demonstrated a willingness to spend resources on and even sacrifice lives for. All four remain important, but they have become less critical in recent years. The boom in hydraulic fracturing, or frack-

ing, has allowed the United States to become energy independent (or nearly so). This has raised questions among political leaders and analysts about whether protecting the free flow of fossil fuels from the Middle East is worth the investment to the United States.

Israel continues to enjoy significant U.S. support, but demographic and political changes in the United States will likely reduce Washington's largess in the coming decades. And it is increasingly hard to make the case that Israel still needs U.S. assistance. Israel is a rich country with an advanced economy that is well integrated with the rest of the world, especially in the information technology sector. Its per capita GDP is on par with those of France and the United Kingdom, and Israel's strategic position has never been better. Iran remains a challenge, but the Israel Defense Forces can deter Tehran and its allies, and the Israelis have a far more sophisticated military than any of their neighbors. Israel has developed its ties with Arab countries in the Persian Gulf, including normalizing relations with Bahrain and the United Arab Emirates—even as it has tightened its half-century grip on the West Bank. Put simply, Israel is no longer an embattled ally.

At the same time, terrorism no longer exerts anything like the force it once did on U.S. foreign policy. The United States has not

suffered another mass-casualty assault on the scale of the 9/11 attacks, the Islamic State (or ISIS) has been all but wiped out in Iraq and Syria, and, in the age of COVID-19, Americans seem to have more to fear from the mundane tasks of daily life than from terrorism. What is more, advocates for withdrawal argue, terrorism is largely a function of the U.S. presence in the region, since extremists exploit it to validate their jihadi calls for resistance to a heretical oppressor. At the very least, the argument goes, with fewer U.S. forces in the region, the threat to Americans at home would lessen.

Finally, the cause of nonproliferation took a devastating hit from the ill-fated invasion of Iraq, which was sold principally as a mission to disarm Saddam Hussein's regime. This was an extraordinary blunder given that Iraq did not in fact possess weapons of mass destruction. To the extent that they care about the issue at all, most Americans, including many in the foreign policy community, now see nonproliferation as a problem best solved through diplomacy—or at least a problem that does not require the kind of military infrastructure the United States currently maintains in the region.

STAY PUT

If safeguarding the flow of oil, protecting Israel, fighting terrorism, and preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction no longer make the Middle East a priority for American foreign policy or justify a significant U.S. military presence there, then what does? The answer is that, when managed properly, the U.S. presence in the region offers a degree of stability in a part of the world wracked by violence, collapsing states, and resurgent authoritarians. A Middle East shaped by a high degree of U.S. involvement is hardly a bastion of liberal democracy and prosperity. But a truly post-American Middle East would be even worse.

Start with Iran. The United States has been unable to coerce or cajole the Islamic Republic into abandoning its quest for nuclear weapons, ceasing its support for terrorist groups, or ending its brutal repression of its own citizens. At this point, Washington should dispense with those goals. Instead, it should pursue a more efficient and less dangerous policy: containment. This would mean taking regime change off the table but limiting the exercise of Iranian power around the region by establishing implicit rules about acceptable Iranian behavior. Containment is not just an exercise in diplo-

matic hardball, however; it requires the presence of military forces and the credible threat of their use.

Many in the U.S. foreign policy community hope that under a different presidential administration, the United States will reenter the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, in which Iran agreed to verifiably limit its nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, or negotiate a new agreement. But the regional dynamics do not lend themselves to such an outcome. No matter how well crafted a new deal might be, it would raise hackles in Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Those countries would do everything they could to undermine any new agreement, no matter how much military hardware the United States offered them in return for their assent. And even if they did play along, all that hardware would make it a lot easier for them to try to undermine the deal by using those weapons against Iran or its proxies. In that way, an effort to stabilize the region through negotiations could very well have the opposite effect.

Containment, however, would hardly mean simply allowing the Iranians to develop nuclear weapons; the strategy would not preclude dialogue, sanctions, or the use of force to prevent that outcome. In fact, it would involve a mix of all three. Containment wouldn't be pretty, and no one who pursues it would win a Nobel Peace Prize. But it promises something that is at least achievable: a reduction of tensions in the Persian Gulf.

Iran is hardly the only source of such tensions. Although diminished, jihadi groups such as al Qaeda and ISIS still pose a serious threat. Those who advocate some form of withdrawal often argue that reducing the U.S. military presence in the Middle East might mitigate that danger. Yet it is wishful thinking to believe that jihadi terrorism would wither away after the last U.S. soldier departed; the ideologies that drive extremism are firmly entrenched in the region, and they call for violence against heretics regardless of whether they occupy any particular territory.

To combat this persistent threat, what Washington needs is not a "war on terror" built on visions of regime change, democracy promotion, and "winning hearts and minds" but a realistic approach focused on intelligence gathering, police work, multilateral cooperation, and the judicious application of violence when required. Setting aside its bombastic "America first" rhetoric, the Trump

administration's 2018 National Strategy for Counterterrorism offers a fairly good road map, dispensing with the false hope that Washington can fix the politics of the region while laying out an approach to counterterrorism that has a chance of reducing the problem to a manageable level.

Meanwhile, even in the age of fracking, Middle Eastern oil will remain important to the United States. But protecting the sea-lanes through which a significant percentage of the global oil supply travels requires a far smaller military footprint than the one Washington has established in the last two decades. A small group of U.S. Navy ships with a complement of fighter jets stationed on air bases in the region or on an aircraft carrier would suffice. Realigning U.S. resources in that way would have the added benefit of reducing the risk that future U.S. policymakers would be tempted to pursue projects that have little, if any, relationship to freedom of navigation, thus making overreach less likely.

Perhaps the greatest change to Washington's approach to the region should be in its relations with Israel. The United States should no longer be Israel's patron. This is not because Washington ought to punish Israel for its conduct in the Gaza Strip and the West Bank, which has made a two-state solution impossible. Rather, it is a reflection of the success of U.S. policy, which has sought to ensure Israeli security and sovereignty. Both have now been established beyond any doubt.

American leaders should want good relations with a strong and secure Israel. But the United States no longer needs to provide Israel with aid. Toward that end, the two countries should mutually agree to phase out U.S. military assistance over the next decade. Owing to demographic and political shifts in the United States, an end to such aid is likely to come in the not-too-distant future anyway. An agreement to phase it out in a planned and predictable way would give the Israelis some say in how the process unfolds and avoid an alternative scenario in which U.S. aid becomes conditional—a form of behavioral modification. Even without military aid, the U.S.-Israeli partnership would remain strong. The two countries would still mutually benefit from continued cooperation in the defense, security, and technology sectors. Israel's adversaries would struggle to put any daylight between Washington and Jerusalem.

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THE COSTS OF INACTION

This is what a realistic U.S. Middle East policy looks like: containing Iran, retooling the fight against terrorism to reduce its counterproductive side effects, reorganizing military deployments to emphasize the protection of sea-lanes, and downscaling the U.S.-Israeli relationship to reflect Israel's relative strength. Such an approach would leave unfulfilled the grand ambitions that Americans have pursued: the spread of democracy, the overthrow of Iran's theocracy, the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. But it would also avoid the disasters that would ensue if the United States were to depart. To see what the region might look like in that scenario, one need only look at recent episodes in which U.S. inaction contributed to catastrophic outcomes.

Take, for example, the Saudi-led military intervention in Yemen, which began in March 2015. The costs of this misadventure have been high, especially for Yemeni civilians: untold numbers have been injured, and some 13,500 have died, according to some estimates, many owing to an outbreak of cholera made possible by the intense devastation caused by the Saudi bombardment. The war has also destabilized the Arabian Peninsula, making it harder for Washington to counter extremism and protect the free flow of energy. None of these outcomes was preordained, and some of them might have been mitigated or avoided altogether had the United States not signaled its desire to leave the Middle East.

The Saudis undertook the intervention after U.S. actions signaling a pullback bumped up against a crisis in the region. First, they watched as the United States withdrew from Iraq, paving the way for Iran to become the dominant force in Iraqi politics; allowed the Assad regime in Syria to squash a broad-based uprising, with help from its patrons in Tehran and Moscow; and negotiated a nuclear deal with Iran. This was deeply unsettling to the Saudis, fueling their fears that they were being left at the mercy of the Iranian regime and its drive for regional hegemony. Then, in 2014, a group called Ansar Allah (commonly known as the Houthis) overthrew the Yemeni government in Sanaa. The Saudis—faced with what they perceived to be Tehran's support for the Houthis and American indifference to Iran's growing power—felt compelled to go to war.

The Saudis' fears that they could no longer rely on their American protectors grew stronger after the Trump administration declined to

respond with force to a series of Iranian provocations in the summer of 2019, including the attack on Saudi oil facilities. Should Riyadh come to feel that Washington has truly cut it loose, it might take measures to protect itself that once seemed unthinkable, including developing its own nuclear weapons. If Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman is as impetuous, strong-willed, and arrogant as is widely believed, he might decide that only a nuclear arsenal can provide Saudi Arabia with the security it needs and the room for maneuver it craves in its conflict with Iran. If the Saudis went down that path, the results would be disastrous.

There would be benefits to leaving the region, but they would be far outweighed by the costs.

Iraq is another place where a U.S. exit would do far more harm than good—even though, for withdrawal advocates, Iraq represents the original sin of Washington’s flawed Middle East policy of the last two decades and is thus one of the first places in the region from which the United States must withdraw. Today, Iraq is in terminal collapse and saddled with layers of complex political, economic, and social problems. The country’s political class and institutions are thoroughly corrupt. Even so, it would be a mistake to leave now. The 2003 invasion was a strategic blunder—but so would be leaving Iraqis to the predations of terrorists and the regime next door.

U.S. counterterrorism missions in Iraq offer a relatively inexpensive way to help the Iraqis keep ISIS and other extremists at bay and, in the process, to contribute to the development of military and security institutions that can bolster Iraq’s independence. Iraq will probably never be free of Iranian influence, but it need not be left so weak that Tehran can continue to use the country to advance its malign regional interests. To withdrawal advocates, this will sound like a slippery slope to an endless mission in Iraq. But past experience suggests that declaring victory and going home can have serious and negative consequences for Iraq and the region. Just consider what happened the last time Washington decided to do that, in 2011: one result was the rise of ISIS, which eventually dragged the United States back into Iraq anyway.

A final, and less familiar, area in which a U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East would make matters worse is the eastern Mediterranean, where tensions over the status of Cyprus, maritime boundaries,

and access to natural gas deposits pit a dizzying array of countries, including multiple NATO allies and various U.S. strategic partners, against one another. Not only have these complex and related disputes created a dangerous situation at sea, but they threaten to make worse the already grim situation in nearby Libya, where a civil war continues to rage and has drawn in a number of countries, including Egypt and Turkey, which nearly came to blows in recent months. The United States has been conspicuously absent from the scene except for a number of well-timed naval deployments over the summer, which seemed to cool tensions momentarily. But a lack of U.S. involvement in these brewing conflicts would increase the chances that they would spin out of control.

WHAT REALLY MATTERS

It would be a blessing if the United States could simply end its “endless wars” and walk away from the Middle East. But doing so would be no way to conduct foreign policy. There would be benefits to leaving the region, but they would be far outweighed by the costs.

Washington got bogged down in the Middle East because it lost sight of what really matters in the region. The first two decades of this century were an era in which almost everything and anything was justified in terms of U.S. interests. The goal now should be to clarify what is important and match national resources to protecting those things. Declaring defeat and going home will solve nothing. 🌐