

Power, Institutions, and Instability: Preventing Conflict in a Post-U.S. Middle East

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Introduction: Disciplined Instability and Its Impending Collapse

The contemporary Middle East exists in a condition best described as disciplined instability. Rivalries, ideological tensions, and unresolved historical conflicts persist, but their full expression is constrained by sustained U.S. military presence. American power functions as an external enforcer—deterring escalation, arbitrating crises, and imposing behavioral limits on both allies and adversaries. This form of stability is coercive rather than institutional. It suppresses conflict without resolving its causes. Consequently, a large-scale U.S. withdrawal would not generate instability *ex nihilo*; it would remove the discipline mechanism that currently prevents latent rivalries from escalating. Without replacement architecture, the region would revert to unmanaged power politics, with consequences likely to extend far beyond the Middle East itself. This essay argues that avoiding systemic collapse after U.S. withdrawal requires two complementary structures:

1. A Middle Eastern Union to manage political and economic rivalry, and
2. A Middle Eastern NATO-style collective defense organization to manage military escalation and deterrence.

Absent both, the probability of regional war—and global escalation—rises sharply.

International Relations Theory: Why Institutions Must Be Paired with Force

From a realist perspective, the Middle East is a classic anarchical system. States prioritize survival and relative power, especially in the absence of a credible hegemon. In such systems, rivalry is not pathological but expected. War becomes likely when deterrence fails or when power transitions are rapid and unregulated. However, realism alone does not explain postwar European stability. Europe remained realist in interests but became institutionalist in structure. NATO provided hard security guarantees, while the European Union embedded rivals in economic interdependence and rule-based political coordination. Crucially, these institutions worked together: economic integration without security would have collapsed under Soviet pressure; security without integration would have preserved

rivalry indefinitely. The Middle East today lacks both. Its restraint is hegemonic rather than institutional. The United States substitutes for NATO, escalation control, and crisis arbitration simultaneously. Once that substitute is removed, realism reasserts itself in its most dangerous form: multipolar rivalry without rules, norms, or credible collective deterrence.

Structural Reorganization After U.S. Withdrawal

In the absence of American enforcement, the Middle East would reorganize along predictable lines:

- Türkiye–Iran rivalry would form the primary axis of competition. Both are autonomous, historically imperial states with independent military capacity and regional ambition.
- Israel would emerge as a third pole—militarily advanced but strategically isolated—likely adopting more aggressive preemptive doctrines.
- Gulf states, long dependent on U.S. protection, would face abrupt strategic autonomy without institutional experience in balancing.
- Russia would exploit the vacuum opportunistically; Pakistan could enter indirectly through security and ideological networks.

Fragile states such as Iraq and Syria would become permanent battlegrounds rather than sovereign actors. Without institutional containment, these dynamics would not stabilize into balance-of-power equilibrium. They would spiral into proxy conflicts, arms races, and escalation traps.

Radical Islamism and the Warning from Afghanistan

State rivalry alone does not guarantee catastrophe. What transforms rivalry into systemic collapse is the re-emergence of radical Islamist non-state actors operating in power vacuums. Groups such as ISIS are not constrained by deterrence, legitimacy, or reciprocity; they thrive precisely where institutions fail. Notably, Iran—even under clerical governance—has behaved as a rational state actor, and an eventual transition toward IRGC-dominated governance would likely reinforce pragmatism rather than ideological extremism. Radical Islamism, not state Islamism, constitutes the existential threat to regional order, capable of provoking overreaction, internationalizing local conflicts, and drawing external powers into overlapping theaters of war. Afghanistan offers a concrete preview of the systemic risks posed by institutional absence. While full-scale regional escalation has not yet occurred there, clear warning signs are already evident: the collapse of central governance has led to sharp declines in productivity, disruptions in education, and erosion of human capital. These developments demonstrate that in today's interconnected world, educational attainment, infrastructure, and institutional capacity are essential components of societal resilience. Afghanistan shows that without coordinated frameworks for governance, security, and economic cooperation, the absence of enforcement mechanisms allows latent instability to degrade the foundations of civilizational development. This early indicator underscores the urgency for complementary regional institutions—such as a Middle Eastern Union to manage political and economic rivalry, and a NATO-style collective defense pact to deter military escalation—to prevent similar outcomes across the Middle East.

Why a Middle Eastern Union Is Necessary—but Insufficient

A Middle Eastern Union modeled loosely on the European Union would address non-military drivers of conflict:

- Economic interdependence to raise the cost of war
- Institutionalized dialogue and dispute resolution
- Rules governing trade, energy, water, and infrastructure
- Recognition of all major actors (Iran, Israel, Türkiye, Arab states) as legitimate participants

Such a union would help normalize rivalry and transform zero-sum competition into managed coexistence. However, economic and political institutions alone cannot deter military escalation in a region saturated with advanced weaponry and historical grievances. Europe's experience is instructive: the EU did not prevent war on its own. NATO did.

The Missing Pillar: A Middle Eastern NATO-Style Collective Defense Pact

A post-U.S. Middle East requires a regional collective defense organization—a Middle Eastern NATO—not to enforce ideological alignment, but to provide:

- Mutual defense guarantees against external aggression and non-state actors
- Escalation control mechanisms, including joint command structures and crisis hotlines
- Rules of engagement to prevent miscalculation
- Shared counterterrorism frameworks against radical non-state threats

Critically, such an organization must include all major military actors, including Iran and Israel. Exclusion would reproduce alliance blocs and arms races rather than prevent them. NATO succeeded in Europe because it created clear red lines and reduced uncertainty—not because it eliminated rivalry. A Middle Eastern NATO would replace the U.S. as the ultimate escalation manager, allowing American withdrawal without systemic collapse.

Escalation Pathways to World War III Without Collective Security

Without a Middle Eastern NATO, several escalation pathways become plausible:

1. **Proxy War Saturation:** Türkiye–Iran proxy conflicts draw in Israel and Russia, escalating beyond local containment.
2. **Direct State Confrontation:** Israeli preemptive action against Iranian assets triggers multi-front retaliation.
3. **Radical Islamist Mass-Casualty Attacks:** Non-state actors provoke disproportionate responses, internationalizing conflict.
4. **Great Power Collision:** Russian involvement intersects with NATO interests through secondary theaters.

5. **Nuclear Escalation Risk:** As deterrence erodes, nuclear-capable states face pressure to signal resolve.

These pathways do not require irrational leaders—only the absence of institutions capable of stopping momentum.

Conclusion: Institutions or Catastrophe

U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East is not inherently destabilizing. What is destabilizing is withdrawal without replacement architecture. The current order suppresses conflict through external enforcement. Once that enforcement ends, the region must choose between institutionalized self-management and reversion to unrestrained realism.

- A **Middle Eastern Union** can manage political and economic rivalry.
- A **Middle Eastern NATO** can manage military escalation and deterrence.

Neither is sufficient alone. Together, they offer the only credible alternative to systemic war. The choice is no longer between American dominance and regional autonomy. It is between institutionalized coexistence and escalatory anarchy with global consequences.