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# America's Middle East Purgatory

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## The Case for Doing Less

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*Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes*

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**W**hen U.S. President Donald Trump talks about the Middle East, he typically pairs bellicose threats against Iran and the Islamic State (or ISIS) with fulsome pledges of support for the United States' regional partners, such as Israel and Saudi Arabia. But the tough talk is misleading: there is little reason to think that Trump actually wants the United States to get more involved in the region.

He pulled the United States out of the Iran nuclear deal but has shown no eagerness for a conflict with the Islamic Republic. He has continued U.S. President Barack Obama's support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen but resisted calls for deeper military engagement there. Despite his promise of a "deal of the century," a U.S. proposal on Arab-Israeli peace remains on the shelf. His support for an "Arab NATO," a security alliance among Egypt, Jordan, and six Gulf states, has been stymied by deepening rifts among the Gulf countries. His vacillating approach toward Syria has led to confusion over the U.S. military's mission there. The Defense Department has scaled back U.S. military capabilities in the Middle East in order to redirect resources to the increasing threats posed by China and Russia, leaving partners in the region wondering about Washington's commitment to their security. For all the aggressive rhetoric, Trump's Middle East policies have proved remarkably reserved.

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*Leaving on a jet plane: an F-18 on its way to the Persian Gulf, March 2017*

In that regard, Trump is strikingly like his predecessor. Trump may talk about the Middle East differently than Obama did. But the two seem to share the view that the United States is too involved in the region and should devote fewer resources and less time to it. And there is every reason to believe that the next president will agree. The reduced appetite for U.S. engagement in the region reflects not an ideological predilection or an idiosyncrasy of these two presidents but a deeper change in both regional dynamics and broader U.S. interests. Although the Middle East still matters to the United States, it matters markedly less than it used to.

U.S. strategy toward the Middle East, however, has yet to catch up with these changes. The United States thus exists in a kind of Middle Eastern purgatory—too distracted by regional crises to pivot to other global priorities but not invested enough to move the region in a better direction. This worst-of-both-worlds approach exacts a heavy price. It sows uncertainty among Washington's Middle Eastern partners, which encourages them to act in risky and aggressive ways. (Just look at Saudi Arabia's brazen assassination of the journalist Jamal Khashoggi or its bloody campaign in Yemen.) It deepens the American public's frustration with the region's endless turmoil, as well as with U.S. efforts to address it. It diverts resources that could otherwise be devoted to confronting a rising China and a revanchist Russia. And all the while,

by remaining unclear about the limits of its commitments, the United States risks getting dragged into yet another Middle Eastern conflict.

To say that the Middle East matters less to the United States does not mean that decreased U.S. involvement will necessarily be good for the region. The Middle East is in the midst of its greatest upheaval in half a century, generating an all-out battle for power among its major players. The region's governments, worried about what Washington's growing disregard for the Middle East means for their own stability, are working hard to draw the hegemon back in. But it is time for Washington to put an end to wishful thinking about its ability to establish order on its own terms or to transform self-interested and shortsighted regional partners into reliable allies—at least without incurring enormous costs and long-term commitments. That means making some ugly choices to craft a strategy that will protect the most important U.S. interests in the region, without sending the United States back into purgatory.

### **A LESS RELEVANT REGION**

In response to the Iraq war, the United States has aimed to reduce its role in the Middle East. Three factors have made that course both more alluring and more possible. First, interstate conflicts that directly threatened U.S. interests in the past have largely been replaced by substate security threats. Second, other rising regions, especially Asia, have taken on more importance to U.S. global strategy. And third, the diversification of global energy markets has weakened oil as a driver of U.S. policy.

During the Cold War, traditional state-based threats pushed the United States to play a major role in the Middle East. That role involved not only ensuring the stable supply of energy to Western markets but also working to prevent the spread of communist influence and tamping down the Arab-Israeli conflict so as to help stabilize friendly states. These efforts were largely successful. Beginning in the 1970s, the United States nudged Egypt out of the pro-Soviet camp, oversaw the first Arab-Israeli peace treaty, and solidified its hegemony in the region. Despite challenges from Iran after its 1979 revolution and from Saddam Hussein's Iraq throughout the 1990s, U.S. dominance was never seriously in question. The United States contained the Arab-Israeli conflict, countered Saddam's bid to gain territory through force in the 1990–91 Gulf War, and built a seemingly permanent

military presence in the Gulf that deterred Iran and muffled disputes among the Gulf Arab states. Thanks to all these efforts, the chances of deliberate interstate war in the Middle East are perhaps lower now than at any time in the past 50 years.

But today, the chief threat in the Middle East is not a state-on-state conflict but the growing substate violence spilling across borders—a challenge that is harder to solve from the outside. The terrorism and civil war plaguing the Middle East have spread easily in a permissive environment of state weakness. This environment was fostered by the U.S. invasion of Iraq and then, more generally, by the dysfunctional governance that led to the Arab uprisings of 2010–12 and the subsequent repressive responses. The region's most violent hot spots are those where dictators met demands from their citizens with force and drove them to take up arms. The United States cannot fundamentally alter this permissive environment for terrorism and chaos without investing in state building at a level far beyond what either the American public or broader foreign policy considerations would allow. And so it simply cannot hope to do much to counter the Middle East's violence or instability.

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Some of the chaos directly threatens U.S. partners. Jordan's vulnerability skyrocketed in 2014 as hundreds of thousands of Syrian refugees fled there (which is the reason the United States ramped up its aid to the country). Saudi Arabia's critical infrastructure has proved dangerously exposed (which is why the United States deepened its support there, as well). But today, the primary threats to these partners are internal. In Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and elsewhere, dysfunctional state-led economic systems and unaccountable governments are failing to meet the needs or aspirations of a large, young, reasonably healthy, and globally connected generation. Change will have to come from the Arab states themselves, and although the United States can support reformers within Arab societies, it cannot drive this kind of transformation from the outside.

Some argue that these problems still matter a lot to the United States and that there is still much it could do to solve them if it were willing to go all in. Proponents of this maximalist approach believe that with sufficient resources, the United States could decisively defeat

ISIS and other extremists, stabilize and reconstruct liberated communities, and lay the foundations for a lasting peace by pushing states to overhaul the social contract between rulers and ruled. This outcome is not impossible to imagine. But the experience of the United States in Iraq, Libya, and Syria suggests that this path would be rockier than it might first appear and that it would be extremely challenging to sustain domestic political support for the large, long-term investments that these goals would require.

Even as the Middle East's problems have become less susceptible to constructive outside influence, the United States' global interests have also changed—most of all when it comes to Asia. For decades, U.S. policymakers debated whether China could rise peacefully, but the country's destabilizing behavior, especially its insistence that its neighbors accept its territorial claims in the South China Sea and over Taiwan, have led many to worry that it will not. Both Obama and Trump recognized that Asia has become more important to U.S. grand strategy. As the former put it when announcing what became known as the “rebalance” to Asia, “After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia-Pacific region.” Russia, meanwhile, has generated growing concern ever since its invasion of Crimea in 2014, and fears about European security and stability have pushed the Middle East even further down the list of U.S. priorities.

Then there is oil—the fuel that first drew the United States into the Middle East after World War II. Middle Eastern oil remains an important commodity in the global economy, but it is weakening as a driver of U.S. policy. One reason is the more abundant global supply, including new domestic sources aided by technologies such as fracking. Another is a widely anticipated stall in global demand, as technological advances and concerns about greenhouse gas emissions cause countries to shift away from fossil fuels. The result is a Middle East that is less central to global energy markets and less able to control pricing—and a United States that can afford to worry less about protecting the flow of oil from the region.

Many of the things that mattered to the United States when it first became involved in the Middle East still matter today. The United States should still care about protecting freedom of navigation in the region's major maritime passages, preventing oil producers or trouble-

makers from suddenly turning off the flow, and containing would-be regional hegemons and other actors hostile to Washington. The question is how crucial these priorities are relative to other ones, and how much the United States should invest in them. The answer is that the United States should probably be less involved in shaping the trajectory of the region than it is.

## **LOST ILLUSIONS**

For a long time, policymakers have been tempted by the notion that there is some kind of golden mean for U.S. engagement in the Middle East. Somehow, the argument runs, the United States can develop a strategy that keeps it involved in the most critical issues but avoids allowing it to be drawn into the region's more internecine battles. In this scenario, the United States could reduce its military presence while retaining a “surge” capacity, relying more on local partners to deter threats and using aid and trade incentives to build coalitions among local actors to advance stabilizing policies, such as conflict resolution.

But this Goldilocks approach rests on the false assumption that there is such a thing as a purely operational U.S. military presence in the Middle East. In reality, U.S. military bases across the Gulf countries have strategic implications because they create a moral hazard: they encourage the region's leaders to act in ways they otherwise might not, safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes. In 2011, for example, the Bahrainis and the Saudis clearly understood the message of support sent by the U.S. naval base in Bahrain when they ignored Obama's disapproval and crushed Shiite protests there. In Yemen, U.S. support for the Emirati and Saudi military campaign shows how offering help can put the United States in profound dilemmas: the United States is implicated in air strikes that kill civilians, but any proposal to halt its supplies of its precision-guided missiles is met with the charge that denying Saudi Arabia smarter munitions might only increase collateral civilian casualties. U.S. efforts to train, equip, and advise the Syrian Democratic Forces in the fight against ISIS are yet another reminder that none of Washington's partnerships has purely operational consequences: U.S. support of the SDF, seen by Ankara as a sister to the Kurdistan Workers' Party, has made the United States' relationship with Turkey knottier than ever.

Supporters of the Goldilocks approach also suggest that the United States can substitute military engagement with vigorous diplomacy. But U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry's experience with the negotiations over the Syrian civil war, where his efforts were undercut by Obama's reluctance to involve the United States, demonstrated that diplomacy without teeth doesn't get you very far. Goldilocks proponents imagine that the United States can somehow escape the push-pull dynamic of Middle Eastern involvement, but all this approach ends up accomplishing is prolonging the time in purgatory.

Yet it is not enough to simply propose that the United States do less in the region without explaining what that would look like in practice. It is clear that Washington should reduce its role in the Middle East; how it scales back and to what end are the critical questions.

A new approach to the region should begin with accepting a painful tradeoff: that what is good for the United States may not be good for the Middle East. U.S. policymakers and the public already seem surprisingly comfortable watching repressive Arab rulers consolidate power in some countries, while brutal insurgents displace civilians and destroy cities in others. But a superpower must make tough choices, prioritizing the conflicts and issues that matter most for its global strategy. During the Cold War, for example, the United States took a relatively hands-off approach to most of Africa, backing anti-communist strongmen and proxies in a few places even at the cost of long-term stability. This had terrible consequences for the people of, say, Angola or what was then Zaire (now the Democratic Republic of the Congo), but it was a tolerable decision for U.S. interests. The same is likely to be true in the Middle East today.

It is not enough to just set limits on its commitments; the United States must also clearly communicate those limits to other countries. At a summit at Camp David in 2015, Obama alarmed Gulf partners when he told them that the United States would protect them from external threats but pointedly declined to mention internecine ones. Obama was right to put the onus on Gulf states to address their own internal challenges and to make clear that the United States had no dog in most of their regional fights. Today, likewise, the United States

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should put its regional partners on notice that it will not back some of their pet political projects, such as the United Arab Emirates' attempt to resuscitate the Palestinian politician Mohammad Dahlan in the Gaza Strip or its effort, along with Egypt, to back the military commander Khalifa Haftar in Libya. Washington must also set clear guidelines about when it will and won't use force. It should clarify, for example, that it will target terrorists who threaten the United States or its partners but will not intervene militarily in civil wars except to contain them (as opposed to resolving them through force).

Since a less engaged United States will have to leave more of the business of Middle Eastern security to partners in the region, it must rethink how it works with them. For example, the U.S. military is fond of talking about a "by, with, and through" approach to working with local partners—meaning military "operations are led by our partners, state or nonstate, with enabling support from the United States or U.S.-led coalitions, and through U.S. authorities and partner agreements," as General Joseph Votel, commander of U.S. Central Command, explained in an article in *Joint Force Quarterly* in 2018. But that model works only if the partners on the ground share Washington's priorities. Consider the Defense Department's doomed program to train and equip rebels in Syria. Rightly mistrustful of those partners, fearing they might drag the United States into a war with Bashar al-Assad, Washington was unwilling to provide sophisticated support. And although the fighters were instructed to prioritize attacking ISIS over regime forces that were shelling their hometowns, they changed course when Turkey invaded Afrin and began fighting the Turks instead, stalling the campaign against ISIS elsewhere. The United States has worked well with Kurdish militias in the fight against ISIS in northeastern Syria—but as soon as Trump expressed his desire to pull U.S. forces out, the rebels began to explore cutting a deal with Damascus.

It is also crucial that the United States accept the limitations of its partners and see them for what they truly are, warts and all. Sometimes, these partners won't be able to confront security challenges without direct help from the United States. In these cases, U.S. policy-makers will have to accept that if the effort is imperative for U.S. national security interests, Washington will have to do the work itself. For example, the United States has spent decades trying to build a security alliance among Gulf states. Even before the current Gulf rift began, this effort had started going off the rails, with many countries

allowing mutual hatreds to get in the way of a cooperative effort against Iran. Now that Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates are blockading Qatar, this alliance is looking even more like a pipe dream.

A clear-eyed approach also requires accepting that China or Russia (or both) will likely gain more of a footing in the Middle East as the United States pulls back. The good news is that neither power is likely to make a real bid for regional hegemony. So far, China has established itself in the region by gingerly stepping around multiple conflicts, seeking friendships and trade relationships while carefully avoiding taking sides in any rivalries. The crass views of power and money evident in Russia's involvement in Syria, where Kremlin-linked mercenary firms have fought for Assad and gained lucrative oil profits, suggest that regional governments will face a strict quid pro quo from Moscow, not the kind of reliable partnerships the United States has traditionally provided. Setting Syria aside, Russia's role in the region has been similar to China's: free-riding on U.S. security guarantees while using diplomacy and commercial ties to make friends as widely as possible without offering unique guarantees to any one party. Given the relatively limited ambitions of China and Russia, and how well the United States has demonstrated the immense price of being the regional security manager, Washington should be able to retain the preponderance of power in the Middle East even after pulling back. Yet if one of its core partners or interests is threatened, it will need to be prepared to change course.

## **WHAT STILL MATTERS**

These recommendations all involve accepting what doesn't matter to U.S. interests. But there are issues in the Middle East that still greatly concern the United States. Those who prefer that Washington withdraw from the region entirely underestimate how dangerous the resulting power vacuum could be. The United States does have important interests in the region to protect.

One of them is sustaining freedom of navigation for the U.S. Navy and for global commercial traffic through the Middle East's major maritime passages—the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal. Fortunately, this is a global priority. Outside the Persian Gulf itself, the littoral states and other concerned parties across Asia and Europe share Washington's objective. Chinese naval forces have participated in antipiracy efforts in the Horn of Africa, and the Chinese navy

recently built its first overseas base to support that mission, in Djibouti. The United States could encourage China to participate in the 33-member Combined Maritime Forces and Combined Task Force 151, which fight piracy in the Gulf of Aden and off the eastern coast of Somalia, to ensure that China's activities are focused on shared maritime security. This would allow the United States to rely more on other concerned parties to address the piracy challenge. Still, doing so would come with its own costs—particularly as China has sought to rewrite the rules on freedom of navigation in its own region.

Fighting terrorism also remains a priority. To secure the American people, including U.S. forces stationed abroad, and the most important U.S. partners, the United States will have to prevent new threats from emerging in the Middle East. Like the Obama administration, the Trump administration has emphasized the need to lower the level of U.S. involvement in counterterrorism efforts. But this approach has its limits. Washington should recognize that its partners will inevitably permit or even encourage the activities of terrorist groups if doing so aligns with their short-term interests. Qatar, for example, has proved willing to work with extremist groups that, at a minimum, give aid to terrorist groups with international ambitions. The United States should recognize that it cannot control everything its partners do and focus its efforts on discouraging their relationships with terrorist groups that might pursue operations beyond their immediate neighborhood or acquire game-changing capabilities.

Finally, the United States still has an interest in seeing its main partners—however imperfect they are—stable and secure, and it should weigh its investments in security cooperation and economic aid accordingly. Washington also needs to ensure that problems in the Middle East don't spill over into neighboring regions (a lesson from the Bosnian war in the 1990s that policymakers forgot when confronted with the Syrian war). Preventing conflicts from spreading does not mean launching all-out military interventions. But it will sometimes require the United States to actively contain the fighting and engage in coercive diplomacy designed to bring civil wars to a swifter end.

### **THE DEVIL WE DON'T KNOW**

Ultimately, lasting stability and security for the Middle East will come only if the relationship between rulers and the ruled changes. That will require more transparent, responsive, accountable, and participatory

governments that give citizens a reason to buy into the system, instead of encouraging them to work around it through corruption, leave it behind through emigration, or try to tear it down through violence.

But that change cannot be driven by the United States without far more carrots and sticks than Washington is prepared to deploy. U.S. policymakers should instead support those who are proposing constructive solutions and work to shape the environment in which local actors will make their own choices about reordering the region. That work could involve others with a stake in Middle Eastern stability—Europe, for example. But for the foreseeable future, policymakers must accept that the Middle East will likely remain mired in dysfunction and that U.S. partners there will bow less and less to Washington's preferences. The United States will also have to abandon the fairy-dusted prospect of a negotiated agreement to end the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and settle for constraining the worst impulses of both sides as they reckon with recalcitrant domestic politics. The Iran nuclear deal did not put an end to Iran's destabilizing behavior or permanently box in its nuclear ambitions. But it did—and does—offer meaningful, verifiable constraints on Iranian nuclear activity for a significant period of time, better than can be expected from U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo's list of demands backed by "maximum pressure." The United States should return to the agreement and continue efforts to roll back Iran's bad behavior both alone and with partners.

Heavy U.S. involvement in the Middle East over the past two decades has been painful and ugly for the United States and for the region. But it is the devil we know, and so U.S. policymakers have grown accustomed to the costs associated with it. Pulling back, however, is the devil we don't know, and so everyone instinctively resists this position. It, too, will be painful and ugly for the Middle East, but compared with staying the course, it will be less so for the United States. It's time for the United States to begin the difficult work of getting out of purgatory.❶

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