Commitment Issues

Where Should the U.S. Withdrawal From the Middle East Stop?

Don't Pull Back

Robert Satloff

Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes ("America's Middle East Purgatory," January/February 2019) argue that because the Middle East matters less to the United States than it did 20 years ago, the region should receive less attention and fewer resources. "Heavy U.S. involvement in the Middle East over the past two decades has been painful and ugly," they conclude. "But it is the devil we know," they continue, "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."

In fact, pulling back is a devil we know all too well. As Karlin and Wittes acknowledge, U.S. President Donald Trump and his predecessor, Barack Obama, "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."

Washington's declining enthusiasm for the Middle East is reflected most clearly in the shrinking U.S. troop presence there. Today, there are only 35,000 American soldiers in the entire region—a fraction of the approximately 500,000 that U.S. President George H. W. Bush sent to the Gulf in 1991 or the nearly 285,000 that U.S. President George W. Bush sent to the Middle East in 2003. The size of the troop presence is inversely proportional to the political turmoil it is triggering. Trump's decision to withdraw about 2,000 troops from Syria reportedly led U.S. Secretary of Defense James Mattis to resign from his position, the first resignation on principle by a senior member of the cabinet in 40 years. And unlike the exponentially larger numbers of troops deployed for the two wars against Iraq, the U.S. troops in the region today are charged with defeating a terrorist group that has actually killed U.S. citizens.

Indeed, the United States is already well into executing the pullback that Karlin and Wittes fear American leaders will resist. This should be cause for concern, because the authors are wrong about something else, too: that the Middle East matters so much less than it once did that the United States can be indifferent about what happens there. In fact, contrary to what Karlin and Wittes claim, the potential for state-on-state conflict in the Middle East is higher today than at any point in the last two decades. Israel's attacks against the Iranian forward presence in Syria, for example, are ominous signs of a potential war between Israel and Iran. And in the event of a conflict between Hezbollah and Israel, if Hezbollah inflicted mass casualties on Israel, there is a good chance that Israel would extend its retaliation beyond Lebanon to the terrorist group's masters in Tehran. Karlin and Wittes also

argue that because the United States is now the world's top oil producer, energy security has decreased as a driver of U.S. policy. But Washington still has an interest in a stable global oil market, given its allies' reliance on Gulf energy, and in the security of the energy-producing countries.

Moreover, the argument that the United States should shift some of the resources it currently expends in the Middle East toward Asia fails to account for the fact that the Middle East has always been a theater for great-power competition. It would be naive to think that Washington can insist that China and Russia compete with the United States only where it wants (in Asia and Europe) and to believe that these countries will not try to fill the vacuum that a U.S. departure from the Middle East would create—especially when Russia has already reemerged as a power broker in the heart of the region for the first time in 50 years. Nor can one assume that the United States would be able to easily reestablish its dominance in the region once it pulled out. Regaining physical access to abandoned ports, bases, and airfields would be difficult; regaining the trust and confidence of Washington's forsaken partners, even more so.

But the biggest mistake Karlin and Wittes make is that they ignore the Middle East's tendency to export insecurity. They suggest that Washington should treat the Middle East with the same insouciance it displayed toward Africa during the Cold War: a policy they say may have had terrible consequences for Africans but was tolerable for U.S. interests. But Africa never excelled in exporting its insecurity the way the Middle East does. From jihadists flying airplanes into American buildings and decapitating American prisoners to refugees streaming across the borders of the United States' European allies, the Middle East has been a persistent source of threats to vital U.S. interests. Such insecurity can be met with only one of two responses: either Washington can work with local partners to mitigate problems before they leave the Middle East, or it can try to wall itself off from these problems. I vote for trying to do the former, using many of the tools that Karlin and Wittes reject as "the Goldilocks approach," such as a balanced mix of military engagement and vigorous diplomacy.

A close inspection of their argument reveals that Karlin and Wittes seem to want it that way, too. Look at their long list of what still matters in the region—those interests for which the United States should be willing to continue investing blood and treasure. It includes "sustaining freedom of navigation" through the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el Mandeb Strait, and the Suez Canal; fighting terrorism and preventing new threats from emerging; limiting the spread of the Middle East's problems to other regions; and countering Iran's "bad behavior." Flesh out what it would take to achieve those objectives—the attention from the U.S. administration, the military deployments, the diplomatic effort—and one is left with a rather substantial agenda. And that's before accounting for the United States' heavy commitments to Israel, which the authors largely omit from their analysis.

"The Middle East is obviously an issue that has plagued the region for centuries," Obama once said. In this mangled

response to a question about Egypt's and Israel's human rights records, the president inadvertently captured the frustration he and many other American leaders have felt toward the region. By urging the United States to leave its Middle East purgatory, Karlin and Wittes have elevated that misspoken line to policy prescription. But in reality, the Middle East is just another part of the world where the United States has flawed allies, vicious adversaries, and enduring interests. It will not be able to escape from that reality anytime soon, as appealing as that prospect may be.

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We Need to Talk About Israel

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Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes argue that the United States' tendency to overcommit to Middle Eastern partners has created "a moral hazard," prompting them "to act in risky and aggressive ways" while feeling "safe in the knowledge that the United States is invested in the stability of their regimes." As evidence of their claim that much of the chaos in the Middle East can be traced to this effect, Karlin and Wittes cite the perverse incentives that caused leaders in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates to adopt destabilizing policies toward Libya, Qatar, Yemen, and the Palestinian territories. But they neglect to mention the best example of this dynamic: Israel.

The economic and military aid the United States has provided to Israel, and the political and diplomatic protections it affords that country, have, by any measure, far exceeded anything it has given to the Arab states mentioned in the article. The United States has delivered more than $134 billion in direct economic and military aid to Israel, and it recently pledged another $38 billion to be delivered over the next decade—immense sums, especially considering Israel's relatively small population and high standard of living. And since 1967, the United States has vetoed 41 UN Security Council resolutions criticizing Israel (accounting for 77 percent of all its vetoes during that period).

These policies have emboldened Israeli governments to engage in undesirable behavior in just the way Karlin and Wittes describe Arab states acting in response to overly generous, no-strings-attached support from the United States. The consequences of the cocoon of immunity that successive U.S. administrations have spun around Israeli governments include Israel's defiant nuclear posture, its ruthless and violent policies toward the two million inhabitants of the Gaza Strip, its refusal to negotiate constructively with the Palestinians or respond to the decades-old Arab peace initiative, its support for Jewish settlements in the West Bank, and its efforts to drag the United States into a war with Iran. What is more fundamental, by reducing the incentives for restraint, Washington's virtually unconditional support has undermined moderate Israeli politicians and empowered belligerent ones. Why vote for moderates when their willingness to compromise never seems to be required, and when their predictions of a confrontation between the United States and Israel never come true?