

Unbalanced: Rethinking America's Commitment to the Middle East

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Abstract

The challenges facing the United States in the Middle East require a return to a strategy of offshore balancing. Historical interests in the region—anticommunism and energy security—have been rendered largely irrelevant by geopolitical and technological changes. The regional strategic environment has shifted, and the current US approach to the region carries increasing risks: it enables dangerous behaviors by US allies, engenders moral hazard in local nondemocratic states, and ignores the regional interests of other great powers. American attempts to reshape the region have too rarely achieved stated goals. A more restrained approach has the potential to bring American commitments and interests in the region back into balance.

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There is no better illustration of the scope and duration of America's commitment to the Middle East than the fact that the US has bombed Iraq in every year of the last quarter century. From the Gulf War to 9/11, the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, the Arab Spring, and even today's fight against ISIS, the United States has been an integral player in the region. The Middle East has itself dominated American foreign policy during this time. As Andrew Bacevich notes, "From the end of World War II to 1980, virtually no American soldiers were killed in action while serving in that region. . . . Since 1990, virtually no American soldiers have been killed in action anywhere *except* in the Greater Middle East."¹ This level of commitment has produced consistently high US troop levels in the region and is the result of a grand strategy that argues for regional

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presence that can help prevent conflict. Yet too often, it is unclear what goals this military presence is intended to achieve, other than to satisfy vague invocations of the need for “engagement.” Worse, this presence is reinforced by an all-encompassing approach predicated on the idea that the United States can (and should) seek to shape all aspects of the regional security environment, from regional alliances to domestic capacity and nation building via military, political, or economic development.

This article explores the strategic context and challenges facing the United States in the Middle East and argues for a return to a strategy of offshore balancing. It argues that two of America’s most important Cold War–era interests in the region—anticommunism and energy security—have been rendered largely irrelevant by geopolitical and technological changes. Meanwhile, large-scale military force has consistently proven ineffectual at tackling modern interests like counterterrorism. As the regional strategic environment shifts, today’s comprehensive approach to the region also carries increasing risks: it enables dangerous behaviors by US allies, engenders moral hazard in local nondemocratic states, and ignores the regional interests of other great powers like China.

The United States remains deeply involved in Middle Eastern affairs. Even the Obama administration, which came into office eager to complete a “pivot” toward Asia, failed to completely extricate America from Middle Eastern wars. In reality, the post–Cold War period has proved to be a costly lesson in the folly of trying to shape this region through military force. Despite the deaths of over 6,500 US service members (and an estimated 300,000 civilians) in Iraq and Afghanistan, as well as costs of more than \$3.4 trillion, the Middle East is no more stable, democratic, or prosperous than it was two decades ago.² In fact, it is hard to argue that well-intentioned US involvement in the Middle East has not worsened regional outcomes. The war in Iraq destabilized that country, creating a decade-long insurgency that provided fertile ground for the rise of ISIS. It also fundamentally altered the regional balance of power. America’s intervention in Libya, initially hailed as a humanitarian triumph, spiraled into a lengthy civil war. Not all of today’s turmoil in the Middle East is the fault of US policy makers, but American attempts to reshape the region have too rarely achieved stated goals. A more restrained approach has the potential to bring American commitments and interests in the region back into balance after a long period of overcommitment.

America's Middle East Approach in Historical Perspective

Today's high force posture in the Middle East is a historical anomaly. In fact, US presence in the region was traditionally light; from 1972–79, both Britain and the United States were largely absent from the region, while from 1980–90 the United States kept an extremely light force presence.³ It is in some ways ironic that this period of low troop presence coincided with America's most important historical interest in the region: the prevention of Soviet domination. Yet Cold War dynamics themselves played a role, as the Soviet Union would have resisted American deployments to the region.

Regardless, it is notable that the United States successfully managed its Cold War–era interests in the Middle East without a substantial military presence, pushing back against Soviet dominance by partnering with and funding local states. During this era, the US generally employed an effective strategy of offshore balancing, first relying on the “twin pillars” of Iran and Saudi Arabia as its regional partners, and then “tilting” towards Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. Sometimes, this produced poor results: policy makers' overly broad interpretation of US interests and fear of Soviet influence resulted in the overthrow of the Shah, the arming of the mujahideen, and blowback from both choices. Nor were policy makers always content to remain offshore. In key cases where US interests were at stake, such as Operation Earnest Will during the so-called tanker war, and even when they were not, such as Pres. Ronald Reagan's choice to send Marines into the Lebanese civil war, leaders sometimes committed US troops to the region.⁴ Yet US foreign policy during this period did not seek to end all strife and did not rely on sustained military presence. Instead, it focused on maintaining the regional balance of power and ensuring key US interests during the Cold War, a task at which it largely succeeded. As one scholar noted in 1996, the “defense of the Middle East has succeeded, and America has achieved hegemony.”⁵

Despite the disappearance of Soviet pressure following the Cold War, US military involvement in the Middle East has grown.⁶ The initial impetus for this shift was the Gulf War. Though Saddam Hussein's motives for invading and occupying Kuwait remain unclear,⁷ the outcome was the rapid deployment of a massive United Nations–backed military force to first defend Saudi Arabia and then push Iraqi troops out of Kuwait. American policy makers, fearful of the consequences of allowing Iraqi aggression to go unanswered and of the risks to Saudi Arabia's

oil fields, responded with a massive influx of men and material. As part of operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, over 500,000 US troops, 700 tanks, two carrier battle groups, and various air and associated forces poured into the region for a short and successful campaign.⁸

Most of these troops departed after the end of the war. Yet in a marked change from America's Cold War posture, a sizeable cohort remained permanently based in the region as part of the Clinton administration's new strategy of "dual containment." This strategy called for military operations (such as Provide Comfort, Southern Watch, or Desert Fox) to contain Iraq; it thus required the continued presence of a substantial number of US personnel. Naval and aerial patrols, bombing raids, and the management of a no-fly zone inside Iraq were deemed necessary to prevent Saddam Hussein from again trying to dominate the region. As a result, between 1991 and 2003, the United States maintained around 5,000 ground troops, more than 5,000 Airmen, and more than 10,000 naval personnel in the region, stationed at naval regional headquarters in Manama, Bahrain, and on various naval vessels.⁹

Yet this policy of dual containment—and the effective abandonment of offshore balancing—was at best weakly justified. Iraq's armed forces had been crushed during the Gulf War. The other target, Iran, was still suffering the horrendous costs of the eight-year Iran-Iraq war. There was little reason to expect that either state could muster a strong enough force to dominate the region or that other regional powers could not resist such a move. Nor was there any good explanation for why dealing with these two militarily crippled states now required substantial US forward deployments in the region when they had been effectively dealt with from 1970 to the 1990s through adroit balancing of aid and a swift military response to Iraqi aggression.

Indeed, a point often overlooked by critics is that the Gulf War itself was not a failure of offshore balancing.¹⁰ A strategy of offshore balancing does not imply intervention will never be necessary, rather that it will be rare and restricted to specific scenarios. Saddam's invasion of Kuwait easily met this criterion, featuring an aggressive state which threatened to dominate the region and disrupt global energy supplies.¹¹ Once the threat was dealt with, the United States should have returned to its role as an offshore balancer. Unfortunately, this did not happen. Perhaps, as some scholars have noted, the domestic political benefits of increasing US commitments in the Middle East were simply too strong for the Clinton

administration. Certainly, it provided the “U.S. military a needed and not-too-costly new mission” in the aftermath of the Cold War.¹²

Whatever the cause, both US presence and the scope of our declared interests in the region increased substantially. Though Soviet hegemony was no longer a concern, two Cold War–era interests remained: energy security and counterterrorism. To these, policy makers added human rights, nonproliferation, and even democracy promotion, substantially broadening America’s regional goals. These mirrored the broader shift of US foreign policy towards what Barry Posen describes as primacy.¹³ With a new focus on values and the threats emanating from weak states, US policy makers were primed to respond to the 9/11 attacks with massively expanded military presence and foreign policy goals.

As a result, deployments swelled in 2002 on Middle Eastern bases supporting the US campaign against the Taliban in Afghanistan and more substantially in 2003 with the George W. Bush administration’s invasion of Iraq. The Iraqi occupation was particularly troop-intensive: while only 15,200 US troops were committed to the campaign in Afghanistan in 2004, there were 130,600 boots on the ground in Iraq in the same year.¹⁴ US troop numbers in Iraq and Afghanistan peaked in 2008 at 187,900, a total that does not include support staff on other Middle Eastern bases (which raised that total to 294,355) or US contractors (as high as 45,000 during that year).¹⁵

The Obama administration drew down these troop levels from the peak of the so-called surge; US forces in Iraq declined by more than an order of magnitude between 2009 and 2011. Yet regionally, the United States continues to maintain a substantial force presence. In 2015, there were still over 12,000 troops between Iraq and Afghanistan.¹⁶ By 2016, anti-ISIS campaign Operation Inherent Resolve had again begun to increase these numbers; though comprehensive figures are difficult to come by, the International Institute for Strategic Studies estimates that there are around 7,000 US service members in Afghanistan, 5,000 in Iraq, 2,000 in Jordan, 13,000 in Kuwait, 5,000 in Bahrain, 8,000 in Qatar and 5,000 in the United Arab Emirates.¹⁷

Though the Department of Defense often withholds information at the request of host governments, information is publically available about a variety of permanent military installations, ranging from small radar bases in Turkey and Israel to major installations such as Al Udeid air base in Qatar, home to thousands of US personnel and to CENTCOM’s

forward headquarters. The Fifth Fleet is headquartered in Bahrain; the Air Force maintains facilities at bases in Kuwait (including Al Salem Air Base, Camp Buehring, and Camp Arifjan), Turkey (Incirlik Air Base), and the United Arab Emirates (Al Dhafra Air Base). Service members at these facilities are engaged in a variety of endeavors, including support for the campaigns against ISIS (and al-Qaeda), training allied militaries, and the protection of trade routes.

Mismatch between Strategy and Interests

Proponents of this heavy American presence in the Middle East often point to a variety of US interests in the region to justify it. Yet policy makers' conceptualizations of those interests have broadened in recent years; it is worth understanding how the goalposts have shifted. The end of the Cold War pushed US policy makers towards a new liberal hegemonic consensus on foreign policy. Democracy promotion, stability, and even economic development became key interests for policy makers, most notably in George W. Bush's "Freedom Agenda." Even Barack Obama, who took a less expansive view than his predecessors, included the protection of allies and partner states alongside counterterrorism, nonproliferation, and energy security as core US security interests in the region.¹⁸ The result has been an emphasis on military solutions, an attempt to shape the internal politics of regional states, and increasing tension between US security needs and prodemocracy goals.¹⁹

A strategy of offshore balancing would resolve many of these tensions by returning to a substantially narrower conception of core US interests: primarily preventing the rise of a regional hegemon that could threaten the United States. Under offshore balancing, the US would refrain from sustained or permanent basing of troops in the region. In effect, the US would stay "offshore" unless absolutely necessary, only coming "onshore" to prevent any one state from dominating the region. And while offshore balancing could include some scope for other key US security interests such as energy security or counterterrorism, it would also acknowledge the reality that some of these interests are far less pressing today than in previous decades,²⁰ that proliferation and terrorism are likely to decline in the absence of US presence, and that a large, forward-deployed military is rarely helpful in seeking to achieve US goals.

Many Americans now assume growing domestic shale production has reduced American reliance on Middle Eastern oil and gas.²¹ This

is an oversimplification. Fracking has certainly helped to diversify supply and reduce vulnerability, but it cannot insulate us entirely from oil price shocks.²² In effect, though only around 15 percent of American oil imports come from the Persian Gulf, the status of oil as a globally traded commodity means that supply shortages can create price shocks for everyone, potentially harming the global economy, including the economies of the United States and its allies.²³ Yet even this is not as problematic as typically asserted. Global oil markets adapt well to oil shocks, typically replacing lost supply within three to six months while the infrastructure innovations put in place after the oil shocks of the 1970s, such as the Strategic Petroleum Reserve, mitigate and minimize economic damage during the adjustment period.²⁴

Today, only a few scenarios have the potential to actually undermine American energy security: conquest of Middle Eastern oil fields by one country, the closure of key transit routes, or a civil war inside the world's largest oil-producing state, Saudi Arabia. The first of these is extremely improbable, particularly given the conventional military weakness of most regional states. The second and third scenarios are also unlikely, but more to the point, neither could be prevented easily by large-scale US military presence. In the case of transit routes, analysts generally agree that while Iran possesses the capacity to impede shipping in the Strait of Hormuz, a small residual force would be sufficient to prevent this.²⁵ In the case of Saudi civil strife, substantial US military presence is more likely to incite domestic unrest among the Kingdom's religious conservatives than it is to prevent it. History also suggests that substantial US forces in the region are largely independent of energy security; the energy shocks of the 1970s were politically motivated, and even during the so-called tanker war the oil supply remained relatively secure throughout the light force posture period of the 1980s.²⁶

Surprisingly, this observation—that military presence may not be helpful in achieving US policy goals—is true for a wide variety of issues. The US commitment to Israel and policy makers' long-running attempts to resolve the Israel-Palestine conflict, for example, have by necessity always focused more on diplomacy and arms sales than on military force. Policy makers have also tended to rely on diplomacy and economic statecraft in their attempts to prevent nuclear proliferation in the region. While the threat or application of force is sometimes necessary, it does not require large deployments or that forces be based in the region. This is also

the case with counterterrorism, whether we focus on nonstate terrorist groups or on state sponsors of terror. The 1986 US bombing of Libya, for example, was undertaken by American air forces from bases in the United Kingdom and from aircraft carriers rather than from any Middle Eastern base.²⁷

More generally, it is clear that even when military action is required, there is simply no need for the large forward-deployed forces that characterize America's commitment to the Middle East today. The lessons of Iraq and Afghanistan highlight that large-scale ground campaigns are of limited utility in responding to terrorist campaigns.²⁸ Indeed, the Obama administration mostly shifted to a "light footprint" approach for counterterrorism, combining small numbers of special operations forces with standoff strike capabilities, a move that mirrors the shifting consensus on counterterrorism tactics. The light footprint approach has its own problems but is far more useful and less costly than large-scale military conflicts.²⁹

Perhaps for this reason, most arguments in favor of a forward presence tend to rely on vaguer rationales. Some warn that the withdrawal of US forces could create a security spiral, while others argue that regional leaders will tend to pick strategies that exacerbate conflicts and instability.³⁰ Yet there are key problems with these assertions. First, proponents of primacy rely on the ability of the United States to credibly commit to defend other states, always a problematic assumption. Second, they assume that in the absence of the American military, states would not simply balance against one another to find a stable regional equilibrium.³¹ Finally, there is little evidence that US presence actually serves to prevent regional states from making destabilizing choices. The region-wide free-for-all that characterized the latter stages of the Arab Spring suggests that such choices can occur even with substantial US involvement. It is possible that the regional security environment *might* be worse if the United States drew down its regional military presence, but it is a contention based on shaky assumptions.

Ultimately, primacists argue that no regional state or combination of states can act as a guarantor of regional stability in the way the US can, a view widely held among top officials. Former US director of National Intelligence James Clapper, for example, recently acknowledged that the US cannot "fix" the Middle East but argued that it is necessary for the United States to be present in the region nonetheless.³² One top think

tank report recently argued that “only the United States can secure the shipping lanes of the Persian Gulf, contain or rollback Iran’s nuclear program . . . bring Israelis and Arabs to the negotiating table, and effectively coordinate responses to regional issues like counterterrorism and counter-proliferation.”³³ This may be true. But in playing such a role, we conflate military presence with diplomatic influence and allow regional allies to free ride on American military spending. Many of America’s regional allies are among the world’s richest states, with access to vast oil wealth. As Marc Lynch points out, even under George W. Bush, Arab states opposed a regional drawdown: “For all their complaints about Bush, the regimes had found his eagerness to use military force and expend massive financial resources on their behalf quite congenial.”³⁴

Helping or Hindering?

Proponents of American primacy in the Middle East often point to what they term the past failures of offshore balancing, in particular the need for US intervention in the region during the 1991 Gulf War and the 2003 Iraq War. If the strategy had been successful, they argue, such interventions would have been unnecessary.³⁵ Yet in addition to mischaracterizing the 2003 invasion of Iraq as a necessary intervention rather than a war of choice, they ignore the more numerous failures of American regional policy since 1991. In contrast to the relative stability of the immediate post-Cold War period, today’s Middle East is highly complex and conflictual. US foreign policy choices, though not entirely to blame, have substantially contributed to that chaos.

Osama bin Laden was among the earliest critics of America’s regional presence, justifying his barbaric terrorist attacks with a narrative of resistance to occupation. He accused the United States of “occupying the lands of Islam in the holiest of places, the Arabian Peninsula” and called for every Muslim to kill Americans until US troops withdrew from Saudi Arabia.³⁶ It is a terrible irony that while bin Laden’s words were widely abhorred by Muslims,³⁷ US military involvement in the region since 9/11 has helped to popularize this narrative. Polls show a steady decline in favorability towards the United States in almost every Middle Eastern country over the last decade: in Turkey, for example, favorability declined from 52 percent to 19 percent between 2000 and 2014, while in Egypt it has dropped from 30 percent to 10 percent since 2006.³⁸

In part, this is the result of America's high-profile military failures, the most visible of which was the invasion of Iraq in 2003. Apparently anticipating a rapid transition to flourishing liberal democracy, the Bush administration largely assumed a new Iraqi government would align with the United States. Unfortunately, they neglected to consider even the most predictable consequences of failing in their quest and largely ignored Iraq's sectarian divides. The key consequence of the invasion was to upend the regional balance of power, destroying an uneasy Iran-Iraq-Saudi Arabia triangle. In particular, by enfranchising Iraq's oppressed Shi'a majority, the US invasion inevitably pushed Iraq closer to Iran.³⁹

Yet while sectarian politics played a role, it was the weakness of Iraqi governance in the aftermath of intervention that provided an opening for Iranian influence. It is ironic given the animosity of many neo-conservatives within the Bush administration toward Iran that their main accomplishment has been to strengthen Iran's position in the region. Yet it should have been easy to predict: Middle Eastern states have often sought to resolve their disputes by intervening in weak neighboring states. One only has to look at Lebanon's tumultuous history or the 1960s struggle between Nasser and conservative monarchies in Syria and Iraq to see this dynamic at work.⁴⁰ The US invasion of Iraq transformed one of the Middle East's most populous states into a weakly institutionalized battleground for regional power struggles.

Another high-profile failure was the 2011 US intervention in Libya. Though the rationale was different, the results were similar. In the context of the Arab Spring and growing violence by the region's embattled regimes, the intervention was described as a humanitarian necessity. This narrative undoubtedly helped Britain and France to convince the intervention-skeptical President Obama but also helped secure Russian and Chinese UN Security Council abstentions. Yet the narrowly construed NATO humanitarian mission quickly morphed into air support for the rebel campaign to overthrow Gadhafi. As Alan Kuperman illustrates, interventions and subsequent civil wars may result in a substantially higher death toll than the potential humanitarian costs of nonintervention.⁴¹ Such interventions can also produce moral hazard, fostering rebellion among groups who cannot defend themselves but who believe that the international community will intervene to protect them instead.⁴² As the revolutions of the Arab Spring unfolded across the region in 2011, events in one country influenced domestic political movements

in other states. The twisted incentives created by international intervention in Libya contributed to the decision of groups elsewhere, notably in Syria, to take up arms against their repressive governments.⁴³ This in turn placed pressure on the United States to overthrow the Assad regime for humanitarian reasons. Thanks to moral hazard, “humanitarian” intervention can easily beget future interventions.

Proponents of heavy US involvement in the Middle East also largely ignore the questions raised by the growing regional interests of other states. Indeed, though the United States has been the undisputed regional hegemon since 1991, the expanding interests of other major powers are gradually altering the regional strategic picture. The most obvious of these is Russia, whose 2015 intervention in Syria took many observers by surprise. Russia has long had a naval presence inside Syria, based at Tartus, and sought to protect this strategically valuable port as well as the Assad regime.⁴⁴ Russia has been able to use its brief military intervention to become a key player in Syria’s peace talks, a role that boosts Russia’s international standing and bolsters Pres. Vladimir Putin’s domestic legitimacy.

In contrast to Russia, China has shown little interest in military involvement in the Middle East, but its economic and resource interests in the region are growing rapidly. Today, over half of Chinese oil imports come from the Persian Gulf. As China’s energy needs grow, it is shifting from its historical alignment with Iran and moving closer to Saudi Arabia, recently signing a deal with the Kingdom to provide nuclear reactors as well as various weapons systems. Sino-Saudi trade is also growing, rising from \$24.5 billion in 2007 to \$64.32 billion in 2011. It remains unclear whether these growing ties pose a strategic problem for the United States. Some regional states might well prefer a more robust Chinese presence in the region; Chinese leaders often speak of “energy interdependence” with the Gulf and are unlikely to push for democratic or economic reforms. Yet China remains reluctant to play a military role in the Middle East.⁴⁵

Even close US allies have shown interest expanding their regional role. The United Kingdom has returned to Bahrain, opening a new naval base at Mina Salman; France now has troops in Djibouti and the United Arab Emirates.⁴⁶ Whether allies or adversaries, it is clear that the future of the Middle East is pluralistic, not hegemonic. Unfortunately, proponents of greater engagement in the region rarely consider either the

benefits or risks posed by the growing number of states with a stake in the region. If this develops at the same time as increasing US presence, it has the potential to raise the risk of conflict, particularly in situations like Russia's Syrian campaign.

Yet perhaps the biggest problem is the fact that American predominance in the region prevents states from balancing or bandwagoning in the face of threats, as they would do in the absence of US presence. As many scholars have noted, the Middle East has typically exhibited "underbalancing," meaning that states that might be expected to form alliances have rarely done so. The most obvious example is the anti-Iranian axis of Turkey, Israel, and Saudi Arabia, but the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has also repeatedly failed to build joint military infrastructure. The recent GCC crisis between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates likewise suggests that these states prioritize ideological factors over security concerns. As long as the United States continues to act as a regional security guarantor, theory suggests that ideological factors will continue to inhibit alliances.⁴⁷

In fact, though the Obama administration's pivot away from the Middle East was more rhetoric than reality, it did encourage tentative attempts to build better regional alliances. Private rapprochement and cooperation between Saudi Arabia and Israel on the issue of Iran has been growing. The two countries disagree on a variety of issues, the most problematic of which is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Yet when retired top Saudi and Israeli officials spoke about the issue at a 2016 forum in Washington, DC, they were keen to highlight that cooperation is possible even if these issues go unresolved.⁴⁸ The two states regularly hold informal meetings on security issues. Even the relative lack of criticism expressed by the Gulf States during the 2006 Israeli war against Hezbollah may be indicative of shifting opinion within the region.⁴⁹ In providing security guarantees and by acting as a third party cutout, US involvement inhibits these developing ties.

A Challenging Regional Environment

Acknowledging the failures and successes of past US policy towards the Middle East is the key to a robust debate on future involvement in the region. It will help policy makers understand the risks and benefits of continuing with today's strategy. Though this debate began under the Obama administration, it remains unresolved. During his presidential

campaign, Donald Trump challenged the status quo but has largely embraced it since his inauguration. Many of Washington's foreign policy elites continue to endorse either a status quo approach to the region or even an increase in military engagement. In addition to past US successes and failures, however, the regional political context is also important. The tensions in today's Middle East pose unique challenges for American policy makers. Taken as a whole, they raise a key question: Is it even possible to reshape the region in line with American interests? Or, as one observer notes, perhaps it is simply time for US policy makers to accept that "Washington no longer holds most of the cards in the region"?⁵⁰

The most visible regional challenge is ISIS, which emerged from the wreckage of al-Qaeda in Iraq, seized major cities in both Iraq and Syria, and declared itself a caliphate. Following the barbaric slaughter of several Americans in August 2014, the Obama administration authorized an open-ended military campaign against the group. Though a nominal anti-ISIS coalition now includes more than 60 states, the United States has borne the brunt of the military effort, launching over 21,000 airstrikes, at a cost of more than \$12.5 billion. The United States now has over 5,000 troops on the ground in Iraq and around 1,000 special operations forces and Marines in Syria, providing artillery support and training for local anti-ISIS forces. Three years on, ISIS is shrinking, but progress is slowed by the lack of effective fighting forces on the ground and by internal domestic political and ethnic struggles.

ISIS is certainly a relatively new phenomenon for US policy makers to grapple with. The group's choice to hold territory, providing social services and other state-like functions, is unusual among jihadi groups. During its peak period of 2014–15, this choice led ISIS to resemble a proto-state more than a traditional terror group. Various scholars speculated that ISIS itself could develop into a weak state if given time, though its revolutionary ideology presented enough of a threat to nearby states that this was unlikely.⁵¹ Yet the extent to which ISIS actually threatens the United States has always been questionable. Despite its unusual structure, rapid growth, and effective publicity, ISIS is no more threatening to the United States than other terrorist groups: it is potentially capable of carrying out tragic attacks against soft targets as it did in Brussels and Paris but unable to fundamentally damage the United States.⁵² The regional spread of ISIS is also somewhat of a mirage: though the group claims affiliates in various countries, the majority already existed as local

terrorist groups. The ISIS affiliate credited with bringing down a Russian airliner in Egypt began life as the separatist group Province of Sinai, while Nigeria's Boko Haram was active more than a decade before it swore allegiance to ISIS. In Libya and Yemen, as in Syria, the group's survival is dependent on the outcome of the ongoing civil war.

Indeed, the US campaign against ISIS is nested within the context of the Syrian civil war, itself a product of the broader regional turmoil that began in 2010. Initially described as the "Arab Spring" or "Arab Awakening," the democratic promise of these movements largely foundered on a wave of repression and war. The Syrian conflict is notable for its extreme violence but is otherwise a garden-variety civil war, worsened by the interference of neighboring states. In Syria, Iran and Russia have primarily backed the Assad government, while Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have funneled weapons and arms to opposing insurgent groups. As a result, Syria has become a proxy battlefield; much of the early fragmentation and extremism among anti-Assad rebels was the result of contradictory funding streams from the Gulf States and Turkey, as each state attempted to ensure that their own proxies would come out on top after the overthrow of Assad.⁵³ ISIS is the only major player in the Syrian civil war with no external backer. Yet animosity, fragmentation, and regional rivalries—such as the ongoing Turkish-Kurdish struggle in Northern Syria—make cooperation against the group challenging.

Despite the prominence of ISIS, broader regional concerns pose a bigger challenge in formulating long-term US policy towards the Middle East. Regional dynamics are often framed in sectarian terms, pitting Sunni states (led by Saudi Arabia) against Shi'a ones (led by Iran), and relying on ancient hatreds to explain tensions. This is inaccurate; though both Iranian and Saudi leaders often resort to nakedly sectarian language, sectarian narratives largely mask a more traditional balance-of-power struggle.⁵⁴ Casual observers often lump widely dissimilar sects, such as Alawites or Houthis, together to fit a convenient narrative. In reality, the Arab Spring raised distinct fears for different states: the specter of Iranian influence for Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, concerns about the Muslim Brotherhood for the UAE and Jordan, worry about Salafist influence for Jordan, and fears of the loss of regional influence for Iran.⁵⁵

Indeed, domestic political outcomes, regime stability, and foreign policy are intrinsically linked for most regional states. Throughout the

Arab uprisings, foreign interventions shaped domestic outcomes: in Egypt, for example, Qatari money helped to support Mohamed Morsi's Muslim Brotherhood government, while Saudi and Emirati money has since helped to ensure the survival of the al-Sisi regime. At the same time, foreign policy choices were frequently based on states' domestic fears about instability, such as the 2011 GCC military intervention in Bahrain. The brutal repression of peaceful Bahraini protests was motivated primarily by the regime stability fears of the neighboring Al Saud monarchy. Regional elite networks tie many countries together in ways that are not always obvious. Jordan, for example, is heavily dependent on financial aid from the Gulf States, making domestic stability in those states a security concern for Jordan. Such incestuous ties crisscross the region.

Another common narrative about today's regional tensions is that they pit a conservative monarchical block of states against more revolutionary states and movements. This idea effectively seeks to divide the region into status quo defenders and revisionist spoilers. There is some truth to this, particularly in the extent to which Saudi Arabia tried to prevent the destruction of ancien régime in Bahrain, Yemen, Egypt, and elsewhere. Yet it is also a substantial oversimplification. Since 2011, so-called status quo states have also acted in distinctly revolutionary ways, and traditionally revolutionary states have sought to defend the status quo where it meets their interests. This dynamic is perhaps most visible in Syria, where Iran was forced into the unlikely role of opposing a revolutionary uprising aimed at Bashar al Assad's government.

In reality, even the Sunni-conservative and Shi'a-revolutionary blocs are not monolithic. In spite of Saudi efforts to act as a regional Sunni leader, other states have challenged this influence in various theatres. This "intra-Sunni" conflict primarily separates regimes friendly to Muslim Brotherhood-oriented groups from those favoring more Salafist groups and was most visible in Libya, where fighting between Qatari and Emirati proxies helped undermine a fragile post-conflict settlement. The defeat of Muslim Brotherhood-oriented factions in Egypt and elsewhere and the victory of various Salafi-jihadi-rebel groups have grave implications for the future of peaceful reform in the region but played out almost entirely among Sunni states. Still other states defy easy classification: tiny Oman has consistently avoided aligning with either bloc. The influence of smaller "swing states" in the region in the last few years

cannot be overstated; Qatari and Emirati influence and finance played a major role in conflicts from Libya to Syria.

Today, regional struggles for power and influence are not fought between states but within them, manifesting in a series of proxy wars for the soul of weaker states. In this, it bears a strong resemblance to the 1950s and 1960s, which saw a regional proxy struggle between Nasser's Egypt and various conservative monarchies. Noted historian Malcolm Kerr described that period as an "Arab Cold War" for its similarities to the proxy-driven conflicts of the US-Soviet rivalry.⁵⁶ Today, patronage of proxies is often more effective than military might, a fact clearly illustrated by the outsize influence of tiny, natural gas-rich Qatar during the last few years.⁵⁷ It is notable that in the limited cases where direct military power has been used—primarily in Syria and Yemen—it has been largely ineffectual in achieving the desired results.

Return to Offshore Balancing

Understanding the turmoil in the Middle East in addition to the past successes and failures of US policy is key to debating the future of American involvement in the region. As this article has highlighted, US policy makers since 1991 have effectively rejected America's Cold War approach to the Middle East. Instead of pursuing offshore balancing and astute diplomacy as their Cold War counterparts typically did, policy makers have embraced substantially broader goals and a heavy reliance on military means. Though US regional deployments have fallen from their global war on terrorism peak, they remain substantially higher than historic levels.

More worryingly, there appears to be little in the way of coherent strategy at play: some traditional regional interests are no longer relevant, some are less pressing than in prior years, and still others are not easily achievable with large-scale military presence. Discussions and analysis of American strategy in the region often focus on ideological factors such as the rise of political Islam, which may be key to shaping the internal dynamics of states but are not central to core US security interests. Indeed, the Middle East exemplifies a phenomenon described by the historian Mel Leffler, in which the growing prioritization of values in American foreign policy has done substantial damage to US interests.⁵⁸ It is increasingly clear that America's actions in the Middle East over the last two decades—though undertaken with the best of intentions—have ac-

tually contributed to regional instability. Maintaining the status quo or increasing US involvement in the region carries the potential to entrap the United States in conflict and to encourage destabilizing behavior by both US allies and adversaries.

Given these failures, it is time to try something different: a return to offshore balancing. As it did during the Cold War, a strategy of offshore balancing would define US interests much more narrowly. It would focus on key interests and on the potential for regional hegemons to arise. It assumes that other states can (and will) balance against each other, even without direct US involvement. By relying on over-the-horizon capabilities and local partners, rather than onshore military capabilities, offshore balancing will increase burden sharing and reduce blowback.⁵⁹ And while it cannot entirely negate the need for military involvement in certain scenarios, as the case of the first Gulf War shows, military action will be far less frequent than today's primacy-based approach requires. Certainly, offshore balancing during the Cold War was not perfect; the choice of policy makers to engage in the covert suppression of democracy in Iran and elsewhere contributed to today's regional crises. But a shift to offshore balancing today coupled with a rejection of attempts to shape regional states' domestic politics would allow the United States to take a more consistent approach to regional politics. This would alleviate US policy makers' need to "pick a side" in regional disputes; indeed, the most effective offshore balancing strategy today would see the US diminish its military support for the Gulf States and seek to improve long-term relations with Iran.

Under offshore balancing, the US force posture in the Middle East would look substantially different, resembling the Cold War era more than today. It would remove the need to maintain thousands of ground forces at bases across the region; such troops are primarily there to reassure small states like Kuwait.⁶⁰ It would not be a complete withdrawal. Small numbers of US troops will need to remain in region to serve advisory and cooperation functions, and groups of special operations forces will remain engaged in counterterrorism activities. Short-term deployments for unexpected emergencies like humanitarian relief operations will sometimes be necessary; the composition and goals of such forces could be decided on a case-by-case basis. However, the bulk of America's troop presence in the region would no longer be required; major bases like Al Udeid could be closed or downsized dramatically. Simply put,

there should be no large sustained or permanent US military presence in the region.

Certainly, it will be important to retain the ability to go back onshore if needed. As Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge note, there are benefits to leaving certain capabilities in the region, in particular aerial intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities as well as coastal patrol vessels. Retaining and maintaining the naval base at Manama and a US naval presence in the Indian Ocean as well as various stocks of pre-positioned materiel is a sensible strategic hedge against potential future conflict in the region.⁶¹ As Daryl Press and Eugene Gholz put it, the United States should “remain close enough to prevent major acts of military aggression but stay out of the daily fray of the region’s politics.”⁶² In short, offshore balancing would allow for US military presence in the region to be reduced dramatically. Yet it is important to note that this approach does not imply that the United States should disengage diplomatically or economically from the Middle East. Indeed, US policy makers may well find that our diplomatic influence on difficult issues is actually improved when it is less entangled with the need to keep local partners happy.

A change in America’s approach to the Middle East is long overdue. While major military involvement in the region may have seemed like the right answer in response to the tragic attacks of 11 September, subsequent years have proven that America simply cannot reshape the region through force. Neither US interventions nor substantial military deployments have increased the stability of the region or the security of the United States. Instead, far too often, American involvement in the Middle East has done exactly the opposite. Continuing our hegemonic approach to the region is unlikely to yield better results in the future. Instead, US strategic interests can be managed more effectively by taking a more hands-off approach. It is time for the US military to largely exit the Middle Eastern stage. **SSQ**

Notes

1. Andrew Bacevich, *America’s War for the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016), 11.

2. These figures are from 2014 and do not include either the financial or human costs of the current campaign against ISIS. See Neta Crawford, “War-Related Death, Injury, and Displacement in Afghanistan and Pakistan 2001–2014,” 22 May 2015; and “U.S. Costs of

Wars through 2014: \$4.4 Trillion and Counting,” accessed 25 June 2015, Watson Institute, Brown University, <http://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/costs>. As of June 30, 2017, the cost of the campaign against ISIS has been approximately \$14.3 billion; see Department of Defense, “Operation Inherent Resolve,” accessed 1 August 2017, https://www.defense.gov/News/Special-Reports/0814_Inherent-Resolve.

3. See Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Hegemony, Force Posture, and the Provision of Public Goods: The Once and Future Role of Outside Powers in Securing Persian Gulf Oil,” *Security Studies* 23: 3 (2014): 548–58, <http://doi.org/cgr8>; Jeffrey Macris, *The Politics and Security of the Gulf: Anglo-American Hegemony and the Shaping of a Region* (London: Routledge, 2010); and F. Gregory Gause, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010).

4. Interestingly, both of these cases were impulsive interventions that resulted in poor outcomes. On Lebanon, see Bacevich, *America's War*, 72–77. On the tanker war, see Janice Gross Stein, “The Wrong Strategy in the Right Place: The United States in the Gulf,” *International Security* 13, no. 3 (Winter, 1988–1989): 142–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2538739>.

5. Michael C. Hudson, “To Play the Hegemon: Fifty Years of US Policy toward the Middle East,” *Middle East Journal* 50, no. 3 (Summer 1996): 329–43, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/4328954>.

6. Various scholars have commented on this paradox. See Richard Haass, “The Irony of American Strategy: Putting the Middle East in Proper Perspective,” *Foreign Affairs* (May/June 2013), 57–67, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/23526836>.

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8. See Center of Military History, *War in the Persian Gulf: Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, August 1990–March 1991* (Washington, DC: United States Army, 2010), http://www.history.army.mil/html/books/070/70-117-1/cmh_70-117-1.pdf; and Joseph Englehardt, *Desert Shield and Desert Storm: A Chronology and Troop List for the 1990–1991 Persian Gulf Crisis* (Carlisle, PA: US Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, 1991), <http://www.dtic.mil/get-tr-doc/pdf?AD=ADA234743>.

9. Rovner and Talmadge, “Hegemony,” 572.

10. John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2016): 70–83, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.

11. Eugene Gholz, Daryl Press, and Harvey Sapolsky, “Come Home, America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (1997): 5–48, <http://doi.org/cgsc>.

12. Hudson, “To Play the Hegemon,” 340.

13. Barry Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014), 8–11.

14. Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001–FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2009), 9, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>.

15. Heidi Peters, Moshe Schwartz, and Lawrence Kapp, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Iraq and Afghanistan: 2007–2015* (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, 2017), 4–11, <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44116.pdf>.

16. Peters, Schwartz, and Kapp, *Contractor and Troop Levels*, 4–11.

17. International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance 2016* (New York: Routledge, 2016), 58–60.

18. Barack Obama, “Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly,” 24 September 2013, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>.

19. In a memo written shortly before the start of the Arab Spring, President Obama himself spoke of the difficulties in weighing US interests in the region against the desire to promote economic and political reform. Ryan Lizza, “The Consequentialist: How the Arab Spring Remade Obama’s Foreign Policy,” *New Yorker*, 2 May 2011, <http://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2011/05/02/the-consequentialist>.

20. Indeed, offshore balancing advocates typically do not include a counterterrorism or nonproliferation role for the US military, arguing that it is to a large extent US military presence that drives states to obtain nuclear weapons or groups to direct terror attacks at the United States. Nonetheless, there undoubtedly will remain some cases in which the United States has an interest in addressing such threats if and when they do emanate from the Middle East. See Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing.”

21. Elizabeth Rosenberg, *Energy Rush: Shale Production and U.S. National Security* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, February 2014), 11, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/energy-rush-shale-production-and-u-s-national-security>.

22. As Barry Posen notes, given the reduced reliance on Middle East oil (as a form of supply vulnerability), it is today questionable whether any potential economic impact of shortfalls in Middle Eastern oil supply on the US economy would be sufficient to justify a large-scale military intervention to reverse it. See Posen, *Restraint*.

23. “Petroleum and Other Liquids Dataset,” US Energy Information Administration, accessed 1 August 2017, <https://www.eia.gov/petroleum/>.

24. Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press, “Protecting ‘The Prize’: Oil and the U.S. National Interest,” *Security Studies* 19, no. 3 (2010): 453–85, <http://doi.org/frp6qg>.

25. See Omar Al-Ubaydli, “Iran’s Threat to Block Hormuz: A Game Theory Analysis,” Middle East Centre Blog, London School of Economics and Political Science, 16 May 2016, <http://blogs.lse.ac.uk/mec/2016/05/16/irans-threat-to-block-hormuz-a-game-theory-analysis>. Also see Joshua Rovner, “After America: the Flow of Persian Gulf Oil in the Absence of US Military Force,” in *Crude Strategy: Rethinking the US Military Commitment to Defend Persian Gulf Oil*, ed. Charles L. Glaser and Rosemary A. Kelanic (Washington, DC: Georgetown University Press, 2016), 141–65. Also see Caitlin Talmadge, “Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz,” *International Security* 33, no. 1 (2008): 82–117, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/40207102>.

26. Rovner and Talmadge, *Hegemony*, 564.

27. Judy Endicott, “Raid on Libya: Operation ELDORADO CANYON,” in *Short of War: Major USAF Contingency Operations, 1947–1997*, ed. A. Timothy Warnock (Washington, DC: Air Force History and Museums Program, 2000), 145–56.

28. For discussion of this issue, see Paul Pillar and Christopher A. Preble, “Don’t You Know There’s A War On? Assessing the Military’s Role in Counterterrorism,” in *Terrorizing Ourselves: Why U.S. Counterterrorism Policy is Failing and How to Fix It*, 61–82, ed. Benjamin Friedman, Jim Harper, and Christopher Preble (Washington, DC: Cato Institute, 2010).

29. Brad Stapleton, “The Problem with the Light Footprint: Shifting Tactics in Lieu of Strategy,” Cato Institute Policy Analysis no. 792, 7 June 2016, <https://www.cato.org/publications/policy-analysis/problem-light-footprint-shifting-tactics-lieu-strategy>.

30. For a critique of US retrenchment in the Middle East, see Kenneth Pollack, "Fight or Flight: America's Choice in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* (March/April 2016), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2016-02-16/fight-or-flight>.

31. Christopher Layne, "From Preponderance to Offshore Balancing: America's Future Grand Strategy," *International Security* 22, no. 1 (July 1997): 86–124, <http://doi.org/dcx7w5>.

32. David Ignatius, "The U.S. Can't Fix It: James Clapper on America's Role in the Middle East," *Washington Post*, 10 May 2016, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-us-cant-fix-it-james-clapper-on-americas-role-in-the-middle-east/2016/05/10/377666a8-16ea-11e6-9e16-2e5a123aac62_story.html.

33. Steven Cook, Jacob Stokes, and Alexander J. Brock, *The Contest for Regional Leadership in the New Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, June 2014), 14, http://www.cnas.org/sites/default/files/publications-pdf/CNAS_RegionalLeadership_CookStokesBrock_0.pdf.

34. Marc Lynch, *The New Arab Wars: Uprisings and Anarchy in the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016), 20.

35. See Kenneth Pollack, "Securing the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs* (July/August 2003), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/issues/2003/82/4>.

36. Bacevich, *America's War*, 202.

37. A 2005–6 Gallup survey of Muslims in 10 major Islamic states found that vast majority of Muslims believed that the 9/11 attacks were wholly or partially unjustified. See John Esposito and Dalia Mogahed, *Who Speaks for Islam? What a Billion Muslims Really Think* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2008), 69–70.

38. Data from "Global Opposition to U.S. Surveillance and Drones, but Limited Harm to America's Image," *Pew Research Center* (2014), <http://www.pewglobal.org/2014/07/14/chapter-1-the-american-brand>.

39. See Lynch, *New Arab Wars*; and F. Gregory Gause, "Ideologies, Alliances and Underbalancing in the New Middle East Cold War" (paper, International Relations and a New Middle East Symposium, Aarhus, Denmark, 7–8 May 2015, <http://pomeps.org/2015/08/26/ideologies-alliances-and-underbalancing-in-the-new-middle-east-cold-war/>).

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42. See Alan Kuperman, "The Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from the Balkans," *International Studies Quarterly* 52, no. 1 (March 2008): 49–80, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29734224>; and Alan Kuperman, "Mitigating the Moral Hazard of Humanitarian Intervention: Lessons from Economics," *Global Governance* 14, no. 2 (2008): 219–40, <https://doi.org/10.5555/ggov.2008.14.2.219>.

43. Lynch, *New Arab Wars*; and Kuperman, "Model Humanitarian Intervention?"

44. See Ron Synovitz, "Explainer: Why Is Access to Syria's Port at Tartus So Important to Moscow?," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, 27 May 2016, <http://www.rferl.org/content/explainer-why-is-access-/24619441.html>; and Edward Delman, "The Link between Putin's Military Campaigns in Syria and Ukraine," *Atlantic Monthly*, 2 October 2015, <http://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2015/10/navy-base-syria-crimea-putin/408694>.

45. Jon Alterman, *China's Balancing Act in the Gulf*, Gulf Analysis Paper (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, August 2013), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/chinas-balancing-act-gulf>.

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48. See Todd Rosenblum, “Improving Saudi-Israeli Relations Offers an Opportunity for the US—and a Big Risk,” *Politico*, 18 May 2016, <http://www.politico.eu/article/middle-east-security-improving-saudi-israeli-relations-offers-an-opportunity-for-the-us-and-a-big-risk>; and “A Conversation on Security and Peace in the Middle East: Featuring HRH Prince Turki al-Faisal, Saudi Arabia, and Maj. Gen. (ret.) Yaakov Amidror, Israel,” transcript, Washington Institute, 5 May 2016, <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/other/alFaisal-Amidror-FINAL2.pdf>.

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56. Malcolm Kerr, *The Arab Cold War: 1958–1964* (Oxford University Press, 1971).

57. Gause, “Beyond Sectarianism,” 2.

58. Melvyn Leffler, “9/11 and American Foreign Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 29, no. 3 (2005): 412–13, <http://doi.org/bwv4x4>.

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60. Rovner and Talmadge, “Hegemony,” 562.

61. Rovner and Talmadge. It should be noted that in contrast to this article, Rovner and Talmadge also advocate that the United States should leave several thousand troops in the Middle East to reassure wary allies.

62. Daryl Press and Eugene Gholz, “Footprints in the Sand,” *The American Interest* (March/April 2010), <https://www.the-american-interest.com/2010/03/01/footprints-in-the-sand/>.

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