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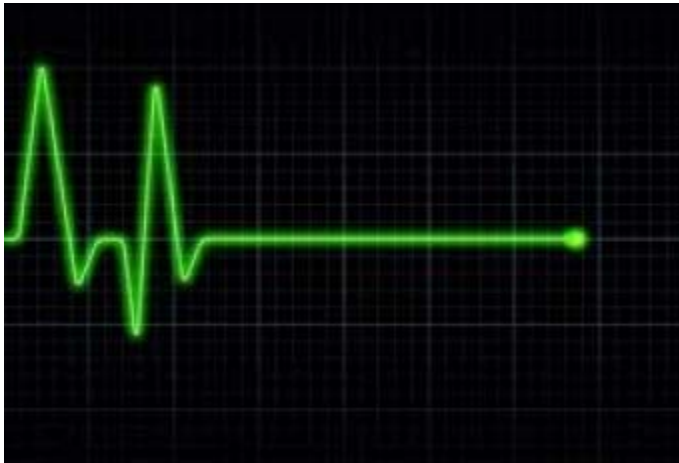
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Saving U.S. Mideast Policy

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You don't have to be a strategic analyst or a regional expert to figure out that U.S. policies in the Middle East and Central Asia—ranging from Afghanistan to Libya—are reaching a dead end.

In Afghanistan, more than 100,000 U.S. and NATO troops, a huge contingency of special operations forces and a bevy of private companies have failed to crush the Taliban-led insurgency and bring political stability and economic growth to the country. Instead, Washington has subsidized an ineffective and corrupt government in Kabul while the U.S. military presence has eroded U.S.-Pakistan relations.

The American public's patience for war is running thin. Disdain for the nation-building effort in Afghanistan was compounded by the military intervention in Libya—one that started as a "humanitarian" mission but has expanded into a campaign for regime change. The public is rightly worried about the military and economic costs of these policies. Congress is responding to this impatience, and both Democrats and Republicans have now called for accelerating the withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan and ending the

intervention in Libya.

At the same time, as the Obama administration is preparing to bring the remaining U.S. troops home from Iraq, there are signs of renewed tensions between the Shiite majority and the Sunni minority, as well as between Arabs and Kurds in the north. Similar ethnic, sectarian and tribal powder kegs could ignite in Syria, Bahrain and Yemen

The strategic mantra coming out of Washington is that U.S. interests—access to oil resources, thwarting Iran's nuclear program, the security of Israel and Saudi Arabia—could be affected by the outcome of these and other crises that are developing in the region. Thus, the argument goes, the United States needs to maintain a large military presence in the region in case it has to "do something" in response to the political upheaval.

Yet, a variety of factors—weak economic growth, a ballooning budget deficit, an overstretched military and public and congressional opposition to future crusades in the Muslim world—are constraining Washington's ability to have a major impact on events in the area.

Moreover, as the American experience in Iraq and Afghanistan has demonstrated, military intervention exacerbates existing problems while creating perverse incentives for local and regional players to continue to rely on U.S. support and refrain from using their own political and military resources to protect their interests. From that perspective, U.S. intervention amounts to a form of strategic moral hazard.

To some extent, the recognition that the United States has lost some of its ability to determine strategic outcomes in the Middle East has already encouraged regional powers to reassess the wisdom of free riding on American power. Saudi Arabia, together with its partners in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), has deployed troops to Bahrain to provide support to the regime and is heading the efforts to stabilize Yemen. Meanwhile, France, a major Mediterranean power, and Britain have played a leading role in the military operation in Libya to protect their interests in the region. Turkey has been asserting more forcefully its role as a regional power in multiple ways.

Indeed, contrary to the warning proponents of U.S. military intervention typically express, the withdrawal of American troops from Iraq and Afghanistan would not necessarily lead to more chaos and bloodshed in those countries. Russia, India and Iran—which supported the Northern Alliance that helped Washington topple the Taliban—and Pakistan (which once backed the Taliban) all have close ties to various ethnic and tribal groups in that country and now have a common interest in stabilizing Afghanistan and containing the rivalries.

A similar arrangement could be applied to Iraq where Turkey, Saudi Arabia and Iran share an interest in assisting their local allies and in restraining potential rivals—Shiites, Sunnis, Kurds and Turkmen—by preventing the sectarian tensions in Iraq from spilling into the rest of the region.

Hence, Turkey has already been quite successful in stabilizing and developing economic

ties with the autonomous Kurdish area of Iraq while containing irredentist Kurdish pressures in northern Iraq and southern Turkey and protecting the Turkmen minority. And Turkey, together with Saudi Arabia and Iran, has played a critical role toward forming a government in Baghdad that recognizes the interests of Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds.

The United States should take part in any negotiations leading to regional agreements on Afghanistan and Iraq, a process that could also become an opportunity to improve the relationship with Iran. Such an approach has the potential to demonstrate that regionalism, as opposed to American hegemonism, could be more beneficial to U.S. interests as well as to the governments and people of the Middle East and Central Asia.

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