



## Time for the US To Stop Worrying About the Persian Gulf

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One of Washington's most dubious military commitments is the Persian Gulf. Concerned about the West's heavy reliance on oil and Israel's security, successive administrations turned the Middle East into a potential American war zone beginning in the 1970s.

A half century later the case for U.S. involvement has dissipated. Rather than make Americans safe and secure, contends a recent study from the Quincy Institute: "the US military's large footprint in the region, combined with voluminous US arms sales and support for repressive regimes, drives instability and exacerbates grievances and conditions that threaten the United States."

One of the Trump administration's few foreign policy achievements was the so-called Abrahamic Accords. However, the US push to win Arab recognition of Israel was designed primarily to improve the electoral prospects of Israel's Benjamin Netanyahu, not advance American interests. The agreements also solidified a regional coalition against Iran. Although the Pentagon refused to name a specific country, the meaning was clear when it explained: "The easing of tensions between Israel and its Arab neighbors subsequent to the Abraham Accords has provided a strategic opportunity for the United States to align key partners against shared threats in the Middle East."

The long Neoconservative fixation on Iran, a weak power surrounded by adversaries, never had much to do with American security. Now the Trump administration has conveniently eliminated any remaining justification for Washington's continued fixation on Tehran. Iran does not threaten the US. The former's neighbors – especially the Saudis, Emiratis, and Israelis, aggressive, well-armed powers all – have demonstrated their ability to make common cause and defend themselves. Washington should end its combat commitments, bring home its troops, trade bases for emergency access, and shift defense burdens onto countries in the region.

For nearly two centuries the Middle East and nearby lands had little value to the US other than as a historical and religious backdrop. After the discovery of oil, resources flowed freely; after all, the region's poor and backward lands had an incentive to sell all they could. However, the region became substantially more contentious in the late 1960s after the Six-Day War between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

In 1973 came the Yom Kippur War, greater American support for Israel, and the subsequent Arab oil embargo. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan sparked fear of a drive to conquer the Gulf and sever the West's energy lifeline. In January 1980 President Jimmy Carter propounded the Carter Doctrine, that Washington would go to war in the Middle East to defend its interests. His successor, Ronald Reagan, backed Iraq in its aggressive and murderous war against Iran, provided lethal assistance to the Afghan Mujahedeen against Moscow, and intervened disastrously in the Lebanese civil war.

The region was divided along at least four major fault lines: Washington vs. Moscow, Arab vs. Israel, Shia vs. Sunni, and revolutionary vs. monarchy. America ended up ever more deeply involved, as successive administrations provided military as well as diplomatic backing against the Moscow and for Israel, Sunnis, and monarchies. These basic conflicts continue to shape American involvement today.

Over the last half century or so the US confronted Moscow three times (over Israel, Afghanistan, and Syria); intervened in five civil wars (Afghanistan, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, Yemen); sanctioned four nations with which America was formally at peace (Iran, Iraq, Sudan, Syria); countered one invasion (Iraq, 1991); launched one invasion (Iraq, 2003); battled one transnational insurgency (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria); initiated three drone wars (Pakistan, Somalia, Yemen), supported four nations in their battles (Iraq, Israel, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates); established a permanent maritime presence (in the Persian Gulf); undertook three occupations (Lebanon, Iraq, Syria); and armed a dozen states (Bahrain, Egypt, Iran, Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and UAE).

Indeed, weapons sales were truly ubiquitous. Even lightly armed Lebanon has imported some American weapons. Although Washington now supplies Saudi Arabia and the UAE against Tehran, the latter once was a major American arms client. "The Iranian military sales program" was "the largest in the world," according to a 1976 Senate committee report. That ended with the Iranian Revolution.

This frenetic activity proved to be of dubious value – much of it was ostentatiously wasteful, even counterproductive. Argued Trita Parsi of the Quincy Institute in a new study: "By all metrics, Pax Americana in the Middle East has failed. The region has become progressively more unstable and violent under US military hegemony. In 1998, it suffered from five armed conflicts. By 2019, 22 violent struggles had engulfed the area."

The most obvious American busts were Iraq, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. The first had catastrophic consequences for the US and the region; the others caused death and destruction in the afflicted countries and spread instability beyond. Although active combat involving America has ebbed, little has been done to resolve the underlying causes of conflict. Indeed, Washington's promise to defend its clients continues to reduce their incentive to settle disputes. As former defense secretary Robert Gates once noted, the Saudis will "fight the Iranians to the last American." That goes for Washington's other nominal friends as well. Moreover, intervention – droning, bombing, invading, and occupying nations – has done more to create enemies and foster terrorism than pacify nations and the region.

Washington's aid also helped cement tyranny in Bahrain, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and UAE. In fact, Bahrain and Saudi Arabia treat their citizens *worse* than the Islamic Republic of Iran, America's bete noire, handles its people; Abu Dhabi is rated equally bad as Tehran by the group Freedom House, while Egypt comes in only slightly better. Moreover, US support for Israel's survival underwrote the latter's imperial expansion, effectively annexing Palestinian lands and turning an entire people into the equivalent of Spartan helots.

What benefits accrued to the US? In the early years Washington's backing for Israel substantially aided the latter's defense and may have saved it from defeat in 1973. Kuwait would have remained the 18<sup>th</sup> province of Iraq without US intervention. Perhaps America's presence prevented other military actions.

However, Washington's involvement caused more problems than it solved. US military intervention changed the region and how countries related. Certainty of American support made Israel more aggressive to its neighbors and repressive to conquered Palestinians. Washington's backing against Iran led Saddam Hussein to mistakenly expect acquiescence to the invasion of Kuwait. Persistent US subservience to the Saudi royals encouraged Riyadh's brutal, destabilizing behavior in Egypt, Lebanon, Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Moreover, US military intervention was the greatest trigger for terrorism, used by peoples and nations which lacked conventional military assets to fight back. American support for Israel's occupation over Palestinians and force deployments in Saudi Arabia became major grievances against the US. The invasion of Iraq spawned al-Qaeda in Iraq, which loosed a barrage of suicide attacks across Iraq, and ultimately morphed into the Islamic State. As a result, Arab allies suffered even more than the US.

Targeting the Islamic State sped its demise, but allowed other states to shift their resources elsewhere, including the Saudi/Emirati invasion of Yemen. As noted earlier, Washington's military backing against Iran (and subsequent comments from the US ambassador) convinced Hussein that he could safely attack Kuwait. Overthrowing Khadafy wrecked that country and unsettled the region. America's only meaningful profit came from arms sales, though those benefits were concentrated in a few US companies. Overall, Washington squandered thousands of lives and trillions of dollars – and caused the deaths of hundreds of thousands of people – for no good reason.

There is good news, however. The Mideast no longer requires America's too often malign attention.

First, there is no hostile hegemonic power capable of conquering the region and denying oil to America or other industrial states. Carter presumed, without much evidence, the USSR's desire and ability to act. Neither China nor Russia is capable of doing so today. If other nations, most notably Japan and in Europe, are concerned about such a possibility, they should cooperate to patrol the Gulf. Moreover, the best way to assure petroleum transit would be for Washington to stop inflaming the Saudi/Emirati-Iran cold war.

Second, Israel, a regional superpower with nuclear weapons, is capable of defending itself. Neither Syria nor Iran prevent or retaliate for Israeli strikes against military targets in the former. Indeed, Damascus did not even respond after Israel destroyed a suspected nuclear reactor in 2007. Moreover, Israel now has peaceful if limited relations with all its important neighbors other than Iran.

Third, the Middle East matters much less as an energy supplier. The market has been glutted with the drop in demand amid the COVID-19 pandemic. Moreover, new supply sources have diversified the market; shale oil production has made the US the world's leading energy power. If the US returned to the nuclear deal with Iran, abandoning sanctions, and dropped its forlorn campaign for regime change in Venezuela, additional oil supplies would flood the market.

Fourth, the Abrahamic accords have more closely tied militarily-capable Israel to the anemic royal militaries which are long on hardware – Riyadh's military outlays, which hit \$90 billion in 2017 and ran nearly as much in succeeding years, are 3<sup>rd</sup> in the world – and short on competence. The new relationship makes a regional balance between the Sunni Gulf states and Iran more plausible. Despite fevered claims of a burgeoning Iranian empire, Tehran long has lacked conventional military power to conquer its neighbors, though its missile force offered significant deterrent capability. Now the Gulf states can look to support from Israel, which has pushed a strongly anti-Iran policy in recent years.

Taken together, this new reality should cause the US to end its military presence in the Gulf. In a new Quincy Institute paper Trita Parsi advocated a strategy that abandons military dominance, encourages regional dialogue led by Middle Eastern states, and includes other major powers.

Notably, this would be in no sense an abandonment of the Middle East. Observed Mike Sweeney of Defense Priorities: "it is worth emphasizing that even without its military forces, the United States will retain significant influence in the region – as indeed it did for most of the Cold War when it only maintained two primary bases in the region, at Manama, Bahrain, and Incirlik, Turkey. It will still have access to diplomatic and economic levers that have served it well in the past, to say nothing of maintaining security ties through maintenance and technical support to the various weapons systems sold in the region."

Of course, America's allies, so long beneficiaries of US defense welfare, are horrified by the prospect of having to take over responsibility for their own defense. And they don't look prepared. But Parsi pointed out that "this evident lack of readiness misses a more profound structural challenge: The United States' military dominance disincentivizes many regional states from demanding an inclusive security arrangement – or even preparing themselves for it."

Washington's security guarantee does more than discourage self-defense. It encourages irresponsibility, since the US bears the primary cost of aggressive behavior, such as in Yemen. Earlier this year Daniel Benaim, once an aide to Vice President Joe Biden, and Jake Sullivan, now President Biden's national security adviser, complained that Trump administration policies had offered "regional partners a blank check for destabilizing behavior and keeps the region on the brink of wider conflict."

In fact, the Trump administration's refusal to risk war with Iran over Saudi Arabia, most dramatically after the 2019 drone attack on two Saudi oil refineries generally attributed to Tehran, sparked greater Saudi and Emirati interest in initiating a dialogue with Iran. Abu Dhabi even returned \$700 million in frozen funds to Tehran. Last week Qatar, only recently freed from the Saudi/Emirati blockade, urged that the other Gulf states to talk with Iran. The Qatari foreign minister, Mohammed bin Abdulrahman al-Thani, said he also hoped for improved relations between Washington and Tehran: "We want the accomplishment, we want to see the deal happening."

Exactly how, how far, and how fast to get out of the Middle East remains a matter of dispute even among those pushing for a reduced American military presence. However, the essentials are clear.

The US should: 1) exit conflicts in which its vital interests are not threatened; 2) end security guarantees for countries able to protect themselves and cooperate in their own defense; 3) reduce forces throughout the region, while giving defense dependents time to adjust; 4) set a firm withdrawal schedule and successively exit individual Gulf states; 5) refuse to be drawn into regional disputes, especially what amounts to a Sunni-Shia civil war, that can only be resolved by the parties; 6) end economic war on Iran, normalizing relations; 7) observe the region as a distant balancer, relying on more distant facilities and temporary base rights should a crisis arise.

Washington could negotiate with affected states over details. However, the final objective of military disengagement should be fixed ahead of time. The US should emphasize that it will not come racing back the Gulf states' rescue, which makes it essential that they take responsibility for their own security, think seriously about alternative regional security arrangements, and address rather than demonize Iran. The US should encourage Europe's involvement as well, helping to shape a new security architecture capable of accommodating the many differences among the parties.

No matter how sensible this objective, removing troops from anywhere is politically difficult. Consider the cacophonous wailing and gnashing of teeth that greeted President Donald Trump's efforts to withdraw American forces from Iraq, Syria, and Germany. Nevertheless, Parsi offered some hope: "As the political will to uphold Pax Americana withers, new thinking has started to emerge in Washington," perhaps even among some of Biden's advisers.

Although only a fanatical Pollyanna would imagine Biden ordering large-scale withdrawals from the Mideast, he will face a daunting list of domestic and other international problems. Moreover, progressives, who long criticized America's imperialistic misadventures, have more influence on this administration than any before it. Finally, with rapidly rising indebtedness, the president will find it nearly impossible to enact his extensive list of progressive projects without cutting back on military expenditures, most especially for counterproductive social engineering abroad. This might lead the administration to take at least a couple steps back militarily from the Middle East.

Foreign policy should be based on circumstances. When they change, so should America's approach to the world. The Middle East no longer is an important, let alone vital interest to the US. Washington should begin disengaging from the region.

Donald Trump was disdained for advocating America first. However, if Biden is serious about addressing the many challenges facing America, he should set a similar objective, while implementing it with greater nuance and competence. It is time for America to come home from the Middle East.

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