

MIDDLE EAST

Reality or Misperception: The US withdrawal from the Middle East

MARCH 14, 2022

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The United States remains the most powerful actor in the Middle East. Even from a broader historical perspective, contemporary US involvement continues at its [highest](#) levels, apart from an exceptional period after 9/11. For example, the United States has nine to 10 times [more](#) troops in the region than it did in the late 1990s. Although the United States has paid increased attention to the Asia-Pacific region (or at least has aimed to do so), a reduction in U.S. military troops deployed in the Middle East does not seem likely, [argues](#) Dalia Dassa Kaye. The regional countries continue to purchase US defense technology products. Most importantly, most of the regional issues still need attention and resources from and the involvement of policymakers in Washington.

Scholars such as Gregory Gause III and Kaye argue that the United States is not withdrawing from the region, however, the [perception](#) among other scholars and [policy-makers](#) is that the United States is indeed reducing its presence in and attention to the region. The United States' poor record in various regional issues has nourished this perception. President Barak Obama's failure to adhere to his self-designated 'red lines' in Syria in 2013 contributed substantially to that perception. Likewise, the sluggish U.S. reaction to drone and ballistic missile attacks against the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia has raised questions about the United States' commitment to Gulf security. All these could have been attributed to the leadership styles of Obama and Trump. Biden administration's messy withdrawal from Afghanistan, however, has dashed the expectations that the US will be back again.

What lies ahead is further transformation of U.S. policy in the Middle East from activism to pragmatism. Three major dynamics have pushed Washington in this new direction. First, although the United States remains dedicated to the Middle East both militarily and politically, the scale of instability in the region has overwhelmed U.S. resources. Challenges in the region have dwarfed what the United States can offer, which in turn has created the illusion of U.S. disengagement or withdrawal from the Middle East.

Indirect U.S. interventionism, via regional partnerships, has emerged as an alternative strategy; however, Washington's conflicting policies and priorities with its regional allies have made this strategy difficult to implement and sustain. In response to the region's challenges, the United States appears to have abandoned policies that prioritize nation-building or establishing regional/domestic order and embraced a much more [pragmatic strategy](#) that aims to secure U.S. interests.

For U.S. policymakers, it will be necessary to determine how best to reconfigure American strategy in the Middle East in an age of new hegemonic struggles. From the U.S. perspective, withdrawal or retreat from the region does not necessarily reflect the true nature of the policy change. Regional actors, however, are likely to have the opposite perspective—that the United States is much less interested in Middle Eastern regional issues than it has been in the past.

The Black Holes of Failed States

The Middle East has experienced radical transformations throughout the 2010s. The region has been through four civil wars—in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq—that have ruined or undermined the political infrastructure, forced the relocation of populations, transformed the demography, and weakened the central authority, thereby providing a favorable environment for terrorist organizations, militia groups, and proxy wars in those four countries. Lebanese and Iraqi political systems have been beset with sectarian politics, economic crises, and public demonstrations. To make matters worse, socioeconomic problems in relatively more powerful countries such as Turkey, Iran, and Egypt pose new threats to future stability in the region.

Failed states, civil wars, lack of effective governance, corruption (among other ills) pose a greater challenge that necessitates nation-building policies. Since the end of Iraq War, the United States has shown obvious disdain for such ambitious projects. As Kaye [reminds](#), however, the growing scale of instability in the region will sustain an already high demand for US intervention in the region. To illustrate, Ankara for years put political pressure on Washington to convince the White House to overthrow the Assad regime. Later, Turkey sought US support against Russia in Idlib. The Gulf countries expected the United States to stop Iranian influence in the region. Saudi Arabia and the UAE [hoped](#) for more active US support in Yemen. Kurds expected more reliable guarantees from Washington against the Turkish, Iranian, Iraqi, and Syrian onslaught. Meeting all these demands means thousands of US troops, more military spending, political attention, and the risk of conflict with great power, namely Russia, or with one of the two regional actors, Turkey or Iran.

Rivalries among regional actors are another source of instability that have complicated U.S. policies in the Middle East. Any US initiative in cooperation with one regional actor may be seen as a threat by its rival which, most likely, would try to undermine the US initiative. To illustrate, because Ankara sees relations between the United States and Syria's Democratic Union Party (a branch of the Kurdistan Workers Party) as a [threat](#) in eastern Syria, the Turkish government has tried to dynamite one of the most successful U.S. initiatives in the region: the fight against ISIS.

Shortage of Reliable Partners

Given the futility and cost of direct interventions, some argue that the United States should not simply walk away from the region but instead give more weight to [diplomacy](#), [capacity building](#), and cooperation. Accordingly, such advocates contend the United States should use its '[unique ability to forge partnerships](#)' for the sake of the region's and its own interests.

Diplomacy and partnerships were popular ideas during the Obama and Donald Trump administrations. With the motto of '[leading from behind](#),' Obama planned to support democratization movements, not directly, but through regional allies, particularly Turkey. The Obama administration [acted](#) in close coordination with Ankara at the onset of the Arab Spring.

Likewise, the Trump administration [considered](#) countering Iranian influence by solidifying a regional alliance led by the Gulf Cooperation Council. Both policies, however, have failed. Discrepancies in the priorities, limitations of regional actors, and an insatiable hunger for power among these regional actors have thwarted US efforts to establish working partnerships that could remake the Middle East.

Widespread disorder and the ineffectiveness of US and European policies, unfortunately, have forced and seduced some regional [actors](#) to take bold initiatives. Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar, for example, have tried to shape the region according to their interests and ideological orientations. They have provided arms, military training, and financial aid to various proxy groups and, in some cases, deployed their own troops and carried out military operations.

As regional actors have become more assertive and expansionist in the region, the disparity between U.S. priorities and local allies' policies has widened. For instance, Washington's and Ankara's [conflicting](#) priorities in Syria have not only complicated their Syria policies but also triggered crises in bilateral relations. Such differences in priorities help to explain why the [Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS](#) used the al-Udeid base in Qatar to launch air attacks on targets in Kobane, Syria, rather than a much closer base in Incirlik, Turkey. This rather inefficient arrangement continued from September 2014 to July 2015. Similarly, the international coalition carried out the Raqqa operation in Syria with the People's Protection Units (YPG) militia, rather than with Turkey, which has NATO's second-largest military.

Nevertheless, even if the United States did have a working partnership with countries in the region, the regional actors do not have enough military, political, and economic capacity to fill the power vacuum in the region. Battleground stalemates in Syria-Idlib, Libya, and Yemen are evidence of this lack of capacity. Widespread and systematic human rights violations, corruption, misgovernment, and militia rule in areas controlled by Turkey in Syria and Iraq, by Gulf countries in Yemen and Libya, or by Iran in Iraq and Lebanon prove that regional actors do not have necessary the political, economic, and military capacity needed to fill the power vacuums and thus ensure stability. The governance crisis is acute in almost every Middle Eastern country- to the extent that even if a regional actor tried to fill the power vacuum,

another regional actor would counter the effort, leading to flare-ups between the regional rivalries.

Overconfidence and an insatiable hunger for power, both of which encourage regional actors to act recklessly and irresponsible, diminish the possibility of forging partnerships. Democratic governance has never been a distinctive feature of the Middle East, while authoritarianism has never been so brazen, fearless, and uncontrolled.

The murder of Saudi journalist [Jamal Khashoggi](#) after he entered the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in October 2018 and the incarceration of former Lebanese Prime Minister [Saad Hariri](#) by Saudi authorities in November 2017 are just two examples of the recklessness of regional actors. The degree to which U.S.-Saudi relations were undermined by these events is unprecedented. Similarly, the government in Turkey, led by President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, incarcerated several U.S. citizens—including U.S. consulate employees—and then blackmailed its NATO ally.

Undoubtedly, the United States has been able to maintain the diplomatic capacity needed to engage with Middle Eastern countries. That capacity is strong but likely not strong enough to enable the United States to reorder the region or share the burden of keeping the peace among regional actors who not only have different priorities but also lack the power to and have a history of being reckless and repressive.

‘Ruthless Pragmatism’

In apparent recognition of the United States’ diminishing capacity to reorder the Middle East, the Biden administration has chosen to pursue a [strategy](#) that [Steven Cook](#) refers to as “[ruthless pragmatism](#).” Ruthless pragmatism, says Cook, focuses more on U.S. interests and less on the promotion of democracy in the region. Guaranteeing the free flow of oil and selling more [weapons](#) seems to be major US interests in the region for now. Biden’s decision to not [penalize](#) Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman for Khashoggi investigation was the first indication of Biden’s pragmatism. Biden’s approach to Yemen and Syria could be the clearest example of a pragmatic approach to conflicts in the Middle East, according to [Cook](#).

The transactional nature of U.S.-Turkish relations is in line with the Biden's pragmatist approach to the Middle East. For example, although the Biden administration has displayed its disdain for Turkey's policies, the administration was not categorically against cooperating with Turkey in Afghanistan. The war in Ukraine could become another example of Biden's willingness to work with Turkey while still disagreeing with its policies in the Middle East. In any case, it is not likely that U.S.-Turkish relations can return to a time when the two countries had similar worldviews.

Biden's turn toward a pragmatic strategy is a genuine disappointment for democratic groups and actors who had been heartened by the President Biden's idealistic [statements](#) during the election campaign. Pragmatism also discredits the idea of giving weight to [economic and development assistance](#) to struggling populations in the Middle East because such assistance could be viewed as political interventionism.

The United States' authoritarian partners in the region may indeed welcome in Biden's embrace of pragmatism. However, ruthless pragmatism' could also mean that the United States is less interested in reordering the region and restraining revisionist actors such as Iran and Turkey as long as these revisionist actors do not cross the line drawn by U.S. interests in the region. It should also be noted that as tensions have de-escalated in the last year and a half, Biden's pragmatism has not been faced with challenges in the Middle East that Obama encountered during his terms in office.

Adjusting the U.S. Presence in the Middle East

The United States' over-involvement into the Middle East during the post-Cold War era and especially after 9/11, has resulted in confusion about its historical role and influence in the region. In the Middle East during the Cold War, the United States competed with the Soviet Union for its interests and had to shift regional alliances. In the 2000s, the United States has deployed hundreds of thousands of troops in the region and allocated a significant amount of resources and its attention. Some scholars argue that it was "[an exceptional period](#)" that created the perception of US withdrawal from the region. Thus, the post 9/11 period might be a misleading benchmark for assessing the current state of US influence in the region.

The return to a U.S.-Middle East policy reminiscent of the Cold War years may be appealing to some, but it would not be as easy as it may seem. The region has undergone a radical transformation since the end of the Cold War. Today, civil wars, failed states, socio-economic problems, and regional rivalries wreak havoc on the Middle East. Fortunately, the de-escalation and reinvigorated regional diplomatic efforts have alleviated some of these problems.

A more restrained posture and pragmatic U.S. strategy for the Middle East which is not unprecedented in U.S. history, is another option. It would require significant policy changes of uncertain scope and no guarantee of sustainability. U.S. pragmatism is visible in the broader picture, though its limits, criteria, and conditions are ambiguous. The region hosts thousands of U.S. troops, military bases, and oil resources, the existence of which will challenge Biden's pragmatism. The economic crisis stemming from the COVID-19 pandemic led to the de-escalation of tensions in the region and gave Biden a chance to pursue a [pragmatist strategy](#) in the Middle East. Just how long such an approach can be sustained is an open question. If the positive trend of de-escalation were to reverse itself, every new shock or crisis will be a test to see whether the United States responds with restraint or activism. Thus, it is possible to conclude that the limits of US pragmatism are still unknown in the region.

These ambiguous limits also pose challenges for regional actors, too, who must adapt to a new post-U.S. reality and decide whether they can trust U.S. leadership in the Middle East. In the Turkish [oscillation](#) between the great powers, for instance, this dilemma has been influential alongside the Turkish mismanagement of foreign policy. Yet, Turkey is not an [exception](#) in this drift as Chinese and Russian activism show. The crisis in Ukraine after the Russian invasion of that country is a case in point. Most states in the region, including Israel, have [embraced](#) a neutral position avoiding to side with the US against Russia. The UAE, another regional actor and a temporary member of the U.N. Security Council, [abstained](#) on a UN resolution condemning Russia for its invasion of Ukraine.

The Biden administration, in response to regional actors who may be wary of the President's pragmatic approach to foreign policy in the Middle East, is to [reassure](#) its Gulf partners that the United States is dedicated to their security. After Trump's inaction during the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil tankers, the Gulf States have reason to be suspicious about the credibility of Biden's

reassurance. As Emile Hokayem puts it, the United States can be more [precise](#) about limits and conditions about its assurances while giving more emphasis on dialogue with regional actors.

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