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Fight or Flight

America's Choice in the Middle East

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The modern Middle East <sup>[1]</sup> has rarely been tranquil, but it has never been this bad. Full-blown civil wars rage in Iraq <sup>[2]</sup>, Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Nascent conflicts simmer in Egypt, South Sudan, and Turkey. Various forms of spillover from these civil wars threaten the stability of Algeria, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and Tunisia. Tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia <sup>[3]</sup> have risen to new heights, raising the specter of a regionwide religious war. Israel and the Palestinians have experienced a resurgence of low-level violence. Kuwait, Morocco, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates have weathered the storm so far, but even they are terrified of what is going on around them. Not since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century has the Middle East seen so much chaos.

Moreover, it is unlikely to abate anytime soon. No matter how many times Americans insist that the people of the Middle East will come to their senses and resolve their differences if left to their own devices, they never do. Absent external involvement, the region's leaders consistently opt for strategies that exacerbate conflict and feed perpetual instability. Civil wars are particularly stubborn problems, and without decisive outside intervention, they usually last decades. The Congolese civil war is entering its 22nd year, the Peruvian its 36th, and the Afghan its 37th. There is no reason to expect the Middle East's conflicts to burn out on their own either.

As a consequence, the next U.S. president is going to face a choice in the Middle East: do much more to stabilize it, or disengage from it <sup>[4]</sup> much more. But given how tempestuous the region has become, both options—stepping up and stepping back—will cost the United States far more than is typically imagined. Stabilizing the region would almost certainly require more resources, energy, attention, and political capital than most advocates of a forward-leaning U.S. posture recognize. Similarly, giving up more control and abandoning more commitments in the region would require accepting much greater risks than most in this camp acknowledge. The costs of stepping up are more manageable than the risks of stepping back, but either option would be better than muddling through.

## MAN, THE STATE, AND CIVIL WAR

Grasping the real choices that the United States faces in the Middle East requires an honest understanding of what is going on there. Although it is fashionable to blame the region's travails on ancient hatreds or the poor cartography of Mr. Sykes and Monsieur Picot, the real problems began with the modern Arab state system. After World War II, the Arab states came into their own. Most shed their European colonial masters, and all adopted more modern political systems, whether secular republics (read: dictatorships) or new monarchies.

None of these states worked very well. For one thing, their economies depended heavily on oil, either directly, by pumping it themselves, or indirectly, via trade, aid, and worker remittances. These rentier economies produced too few jobs and too much wealth that their civilian populations neither controlled nor generated, encouraging the ruling elites to treat their citizenries as (mostly unwanted) dependents. The oil money bred massive corruption, along with bloated public sectors uninterested in the needs or aspirations of the wider populace. To make matters worse, the Arab states had emerged from Ottoman and European colonialism with their traditional sociocultural systems intact, which oil wealth and autocracy made it possible to preserve and even indulge.

This model clunked along for several decades, before it started falling apart in the late twentieth century. The oil market became more volatile, with long periods of low prices, which created economic hardship even in oil-rich states such as Algeria, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Globalization brought to the region new ideas about the relationship between government and the governed, as well as foreign cultural influences. Arabs (and Iranians, for that matter) increasingly demanded that their governments help fix their problems. But all they got in response was malign neglect.

By the 1990s, popular discontent had risen throughout the Middle East. The Muslim Brotherhood and its many franchises grew quickly as a political opposition to the regimes. Others turned to violence—rioters in the Nejd region of Saudi Arabia, Islamist insurgents in Egypt, and various terrorist groups elsewhere—all seeking to overthrow their governments. Eventually, some of these groups would decide that they first had to drive away the foreign backers of those governments, starting with the United States.

The pent-up frustrations and desire for political change finally exploded in the Arab Spring of 2011, with large-scale protests breaking out in nearly all Arab countries and the toppling or crippling of the regime in five of them. But revolutions are always tricky things to get right. That has proved especially true in the Arab world, where the autocrats in each country had done a superb job of eliminating any charismatic opposition leader who might have unified the country after the fall of the regime and where there were no popular alternative ideas about how to organize a new Arab state. And so in Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the result has been state failure, a security vacuum, and civil war.

If the first-order problem of the Middle East is the failure of the postwar Arab state system, the outbreak of civil wars has become an equally important second-order problem. These conflicts have taken on lives of their own, becoming engines of instability that now pose the greatest immediate threat to both the people of the region and the rest of the world.

For one thing, civil wars have a bad habit of spilling over into their neighbors. Vast numbers of refugees <sup>[5]</sup> cross borders, as do smaller, but no less problematic, numbers of terrorists and other armed combatants. So do ideas promoting militancy, revolution, and secession. In this way, neighboring states can themselves succumb to instability or even internal conflict. Indeed, scholars have found that the strongest predictor that a state will experience a civil war is whether it borders a country already embroiled in one.

Civil wars also have a bad habit of sucking in neighboring countries. Seeking to protect their interests and prevent spillover, states typically choose particular combatants to back. But that brings them into conflict with other neighboring states that have picked their own favorites. Even if this competition remains a proxy fight, it can still be economically and politically draining, even ruinous. At worst, the conflict can lead to a regional war, when a state, convinced its proxy is not doing the job, sends in its own armed forces. For evidence of this dynamic, one need look no further than the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen, or Iranian and Russian military operations in Iraq and Syria.

## WITHDRAWAL SYMPTOMS

As if the failure of the postwar Arab state system and the outbreak of four civil wars weren't bad enough, in the midst of all of this, the United States has distanced itself from the region. The Middle East has not been without a great-power overseer of one kind or another since the Ottoman conquests of the sixteenth century. This is not to suggest that the external hegemon was always an unalloyed good; it wasn't. But it often played the constructive role of mitigating conflict. Good or bad, the states of the region have grown accustomed to interacting with one another with a dominating third party in the room, figuratively and often literally.

Disengagement has been most damaging in Iraq. The U.S. withdrawal from the country was the most important of a range of factors that pulled it back into civil war. Scholars have long recognized that shepherding a nation out of a civil war requires some internal or external peacekeeper to guarantee the terms of a new power-sharing arrangement among the warring parties. Over time, that role can become increasingly symbolic, as was the case with NATO in Bosnia. The alliance's presence there dwindled to a militarily insignificant force within about five years, but it still played a crucial political and psychological role in reassuring the rival factions that none of them would return to violence. In the case of Iraq, the United States played that role, and its disengagement in 2010 and 2011 led to exactly what history predicted.

This phenomenon has played out more broadly across the Middle East. The withdrawal of the United States has forced governments there to interact in a novel way, without the hope that Washington will provide a cooperative path out of the security dilemmas that litter the region. U.S. disengagement has made many states fear that others will become more aggressive without the United States to restrain them. That fear has caused them to act more aggressively themselves, which in turn has sparked more severe countermoves, again in the expectation that the United States will not check either the original move or the riposte. This dynamic has grown most acute between Iran and Saudi Arabia, whose tit-for-tat exchange is growing ever more vituperative and violent. The Saudis have taken the stunning step of directly intervening in Yemen's civil war against the country's Houthi minority, which they consider to be an Iranian proxy that threatens their southern flank.

Even as the Middle East careens out of control, help is not on the way. The Obama administration's policies toward the region are not designed to mitigate, let alone end, its real problems. That is why the region has gotten worse since President Barack Obama entered office, and why there is no reason to believe that it will get any better before he leaves office.

In his [2009 speech in Cairo](#) <sup>[6]</sup>, Obama did claim that the United States would try to help the region shift to a new Arab state system, but he never backed his speech up with an actual policy, let alone resources. Then, in 2011, the administration failed to put in place a coherent strategy to deal with the Arab Spring, one that might have assisted a transition to more stable, pluralistic systems of government. Having missed its best opportunities, Washington now barely pays lip service to the need for gradual, long-term reform.

As for the civil wars, the administration has focused on addressing only their symptoms—trying to contain the spillover—by attacking the Islamic State, or ISIS; accepting some refugees; and working to prevent terrorist attacks back home. But the history of civil wars demonstrates that it is extremely hard to contain the spillover, and the Middle East today is proving no exception. Spillover from Syria helped push Iraq back into civil war. In turn, spillover from the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars has generated a low-level civil war in Turkey and threatens to do the same in Jordan and Lebanon. Spillover from Libya is destabilizing Egypt, Mali, and Tunisia. The Iraqi, Syrian, and Yemeni civil wars have sucked Iran and the Gulf

states into a vicious proxy war fought across all three battlefields. And refugees, terrorists, and radicalization spilling over from all these wars have created new dilemmas for Europe and North America.

In fact, it is effectively impossible to eradicate the symptoms of civil wars without treating the underlying maladies. No matter how many thousands of refugees the West accepts, as long as the civil wars grind on, millions more will flee. And no matter how many terrorists the United States kills, without an end to the civil wars, more young men will keep turning to terrorism. Over the past 15 years, the threat from Salafi jihadism has grown by orders of magnitude despite the damage that the United States has inflicted on al Qaeda's core in Afghanistan. In places racked by civil war, the group's offshoots, including ISIS, are finding new recruits, new sanctuaries, and new fields of jihad. But where order prevails, they dissipate. Neither al Qaeda nor ISIS has found much purchase in any of the remaining strong states of the region. And when the United States brought stability to Iraq beginning in 2007, al Qaeda's franchise there was pushed to the brink of extinction, only to find salvation in 2011, when civil war broke out next door in Syria.

Contrary to the conventional wisdom, moreover, it is possible for a third party to settle a civil war long before it might end on its own. Scholars of civil wars have found that in about 20 percent of the cases since 1945, and roughly 40 percent of the cases since 1995, an external actor was able to engineer just such an outcome. Doing so is not easy, of course, but it need not be as ruinously expensive as the United States' painful experience in Iraq.

Ending a civil war requires the intervening power to accomplish three objectives. First, it must change the military dynamics such that none of the warring parties believes that it can win a military victory and none fears that its fighters will be slaughtered once they lay down their arms. Second, it must forge a power-sharing agreement among the various groups so that they all have an equitable stake in a new government. And third, it must put in place institutions that reassure all the parties that the first two conditions will endure. To some extent unknowingly, that is precisely the path NATO followed in Bosnia in 1994–95 and the United States followed in Iraq in 2007–10.

History also shows that when outside powers stray from this approach or commit inadequate resources to it, their interventions inevitably fail and typically make the conflicts bloodier, longer, and less contained. No wonder U.S. policy toward Iraq and Syria (let alone Libya and Yemen) has failed since 2011 <sup>[7]</sup>. And as long as the United States continues to avoid pursuing the one approach that can work, there is no reason to expect anything else. At most, the U.S. military's current campaign against ISIS in Iraq and Syria will engineer the same outcome as its earlier one against al Qaeda in Afghanistan: the United States may badly damage ISIS, but unless it ends the conflicts that sustain it, the group will morph and spread and eventually be succeeded by the son of ISIS, just as ISIS is the son of al Qaeda.

## STEPPING UP

Stabilizing the Middle East will require a new approach—one that attacks the root causes of the region's troubles and is backed up by adequate resources. The first priority should be to shut down the current civil wars. In every case, that will require first changing the battlefield dynamics to convince all the warring factions that military victory is impossible. In an ideal world, that would entail sending at least small numbers of U.S. combat forces <sup>[8]</sup> to Iraq (perhaps 10,000) and potentially Syria. But if the political will for even a modest commitment of forces does not exist, then more advisers, airpower, intelligence sharing, and logistical support could suffice, albeit with a lower likelihood of success.

Regardless, the United States and its allies will also have to build new indigenous militaries

able to first defeat the terrorists, militias, and extremists and then serve as the foundation for a new state. In Iraq, that means retraining and reforming the Iraqi security forces to a much greater degree than current U.S. policy envisions. In Libya, Syria, and Yemen, it would mean creating new indigenous, conventional militaries that (with considerable American support) would be able to defeat any potential rival, secure the civilian populaces, and enforce the terms of permanent cease-fires.

In all four civil wars, the United States and its allies will also have to undertake major political efforts aimed at forging equitable power-sharing arrangements. In Iraq, the United States should take the lead in defining both the minimal needs and the potential areas of agreement among the various Shiite and Sunni factions, just as Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq in 2007–9, and his team accomplished as part of the U.S. surge strategy. That, plus giving material resources to various moderate Iraqi political leaders and their constituencies among both the Shiites and the Sunnis, should allow the United States to hammer out a new power-sharing deal. Such an arrangement should end the alienation of the Sunni population, which lies at the heart of Iraq's current problems. This, in turn, would make it much easier for the Abadi government and the United States to stand up Sunni military formations to help liberate the Sunni-majority areas of the country from ISIS and help diminish the power of the Iranian-backed Shiite militias [9].

In Syria, the ongoing peace talks in Vienna provide a starting point for a political solution. But they offer little more than that, because the military conditions are not conducive to a real political compromise, let alone a permanent cessation of hostilities. Neither the Assad regime nor the Western-backed opposition believes that it can afford to stop fighting, and each of the three strongest rebel groups—Ahrar al-Sham, Jabhat al-Nusra, and ISIS—remains convinced that it can achieve total victory. So until the reality on the battlefield shifts, little can be achieved at the negotiating table. If the military situation changes, then Western diplomats should help Syria's communities fashion an arrangement that distributes political power and economic benefits equitably. The deal would have to include the Alawites, but not necessarily President Bashar al-Assad [10] himself, and it would need to assure each faction that the new government would not oppress it, the way the Alawite minority oppressed the Sunni majority in the past.

The turmoil in Libya mirrors that in Syria, except that it is receiving far less international attention. Thus, the first step there is for the United States to convince its partners to take on a more constructive role. If the United States should lead in Iraq and Syria, then Europe needs to lead in Libya. By dint of its economic ties and proximity to Europe, Libya threatens European interests far more directly than it does American ones, and NATO's role in the 2011 intervention in Libya can serve as a precedent for European leadership. Of course, the Europeans will not take on the challenge if they are not convinced that the United States intends to do its part to quell the Middle East's civil wars, further underscoring the importance of a coherent, properly resourced U.S. strategy. To aid Europe's fight in Libya, Washington will undoubtedly have to commit assistance related to logistics, command and control, and intelligence, and possibly even combat advisers.

In Yemen, the Gulf states' air campaign has achieved little, but the intervention by a small ground force led by the United Arab Emirates has set back the rebel coalition, creating a real opportunity to negotiate an end to the conflict. Unfortunately, the Gulf states seem unwilling to offer Yemen's opposition terms that would equitably divide political power and economic benefits, and they seem equally unwilling to offer security guarantees. To draw the conflict to a close, the United States and its allies will have to encourage their partners in the Gulf to make meaningful concessions. If that doesn't work, then the most useful thing they can do is try to convince the Gulf states to minimize their involvement in Yemen before the strain of

intervention threatens their own internal cohesion.

After ending the current civil wars, the next priority of a stepped-up U.S. strategy in the Middle East will be to shore up the states in the greatest danger of sliding into future civil wars [11]: Egypt, Jordan, Tunisia, and Turkey. It is state failure—not external attack by ISIS, al Qaeda, or Iranian proxies—that represents the true source of the conflicts roiling the Middle East today. These four at-risk countries are all badly in need of economic assistance and infrastructure development. But above all, they need political reform to avoid state failure. Consequently, the United States and its allies should offer a range of trade benefits, financial incentives, and economic aid in return for gradual but concrete steps toward political reform. Here, the aim need not be democratization per se (although Tunisia should be strongly encouraged to continue down that path), but it should be good governance, in the form of justice and the rule of law, transparency, and a fair distribution of public goods and services.

The final piece of the puzzle is to press for reform more broadly across the Middle East—economic, social, and political. Even if the United States and its allies succeed in resolving today's civil wars, unless a new state system takes the place of the failed postwar one, the same old problems will recur. Reform will be a hard sell for the region's leaders, who have long resisted it out of a fear that it would strip them of their power and positions. Paradoxically, however, the civil wars may furnish a solution to this conundrum. All the states of the region are terrified of the spillover from these conflicts, and they are desperate for U.S. help in eliminating the threat. In particular, many of the United States' Arab allies have grown frustrated by the gains that Iran has made by exploiting power vacuums. Just as the United States and its allies should offer the region's fragile states economic assistance in return for reform, so they should condition their efforts to end the civil wars on the willingness of the region's stronger states to embrace similar reforms.

## STEPPING BACK

If the next U.S. president is unwilling to commit to stepping up to stabilize the Middle East, the only real alternative is to step back from it. Because civil wars do not lend themselves to anything but the right strategy with the right resources, trying the wrong one means throwing U.S. resources away on a lost cause. It probably also means making the situation worse, not better. Under a policy of real disengagement, the United States would abstain from involvement in the civil wars altogether. It would instead try to contain their spillover, difficult as that is, and if that were to fail, it would fall back on defending only core U.S. interests in the Middle East.

The Obama administration has done a creditable job of bolstering Jordan against chaos from Iraq and Syria so far, and stepping back from the region could still entail beefing up U.S. support to Jordan and other at-risk neighbors of the civil wars, such as Egypt, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey. All these countries want and need Western economic, diplomatic, technical, and military assistance. But because spillover has historically proved so difficult to contain, there is a high risk that one or more of them could still slide into civil war themselves, generating yet more spillover.

For that reason, stepping back would also require Washington to make a ruthless assessment of what is the least the United States can do to secure its vital interests in the Middle East. And although it may be a gross exaggeration to say so, in large part, U.S. interests in the region do ultimately come down to Israel, terrorism, and oil.

As poll after poll has found, a majority of Americans continue to see the safety of Israel as important to them and to the United States. Yet Israel today is as safe as the United States can make it. Israeli forces can defeat any conventional foe and deter any deterrable

unconventional threat. The United States has defended Israel diplomatically and militarily countless times, including implicitly threatening the Soviet Union with nuclear war during the 1973 Yom Kippur War. The United States has even taken an Iranian nuclear threat off the table for at least the next decade, thanks to the deal it brokered last year. The only threat the United States cannot save Israel from is its own chronic civil war with the Palestinians <sup>[12]</sup>, but the best solution to that conflict is a peace settlement that neither the Israelis nor the Palestinians have demonstrated much interest in. In short, there is little more that Israel needs from the United States for its own direct security, and what it does need (such as arms sales) the United States could easily provide even if it stepped back from the Middle East.

Perhaps the greatest advantage of a reduced U.S. presence in the Middle East is that it should mitigate the threat from terrorism. Terrorists from the region attack Americans largely because they feel aggrieved by U.S. policies, just as they attack France and the United Kingdom because those countries are staunch U.S. allies (and former colonial powers) and have started to attack Russia because it has intervened in Syria. The less the United States is involved in the Middle East, the less its people are likely to be attacked by terrorists from the region. It is no accident that Switzerland does not suffer from Middle Eastern terrorism.

Of course, even if Washington disengaged from the region as much as possible, Americans would not be entirely immune from Middle Eastern terrorism. The region's conspiracy-mongers endlessly blame the United States for things it didn't do, as well as for what it did, and so terrorists could still find reasons to target Americans. Besides, even under this minimalist approach, the United States would maintain its support for Israel and Saudi Arabia, both of which a range of terrorist groups detest.

If U.S. interests concerning Israel and terrorism would largely take care of themselves in the event that Washington further diminished its role in the Middle East, the same cannot be said for the flow of oil. The idea that fracking has granted the United States energy independence is a myth; as long as the global economy relies on fossil fuels, the United States will be vulnerable to major disruptions in the supply of oil, regardless of how much it produces. Since neither global dependence on oil nor the Middle East's contribution to the share of global production is expected to abate over the next 25 years, the United States will continue to have a critical interest in keeping Middle Eastern oil flowing.

Yet the United States need not defend every last barrel of oil in the region. The question is, how much is enough? This is where things get complicated. Many countries possess strategic reserves of oil that can mitigate a sudden, unexpected drop in production. And some, particularly Saudi Arabia, have enough excess capacity to pump and export more oil if need be. Fracking, likewise, allows North American producers of shale oil to partly compensate for shortfalls. Even though oil production in Libya has dropped by over 80 percent since 2011 as a result of its civil war, other producers have been able to make up for the loss.

Saudi Arabia, however, is in a category of its own. The country produces over ten percent of all the oil used in the world and contains the vast majority of excess capacity; even if every country emptied its strategic oil reserves and fracked like crazy, that would still not compensate for the loss of Saudi oil production. Thus, the United States will have to continue to protect its Saudi allies. But against what? No Middle Eastern state (even Iran) has the capacity to conquer Saudi Arabia, and the modest U.S. air and naval force currently in the Persian Gulf is more than adequate to defeat an Iranian attack on the country's oil infrastructure.

The kingdom's principal threats are internal. Although no one has ever made money betting

against the House of Saud, the monarchy rules over a quintessentially dysfunctional postwar Arab state, one that faces daunting political, economic, and social stresses. The Shiites who make up the majority of Saudi Arabia's oil-rich Eastern Province have rioted and resisted government oppression for decades, and their unhappiness has grown with the widening Shiite-Sunni rift across the region. The kingdom skated through the Arab Spring primarily thanks to the far-reaching (if gradual) reform program of King Abdullah, coupled with massive cash payoffs to the people. But Abdullah died in January 2015, and his successor, King Salman, has yet to demonstrate a similar commitment to reform. Even as oil prices remain low, Salman is spending profligately at home and abroad (including on the expensive intervention in Yemen), burning through the kingdom's sovereign wealth fund at \$12–\$14 billion per month. At that rate, the fund will be empty in about four years, but the king will probably face domestic challenges long before then.

How can the United States protect Saudi Arabia from itself? It is impossible to imagine any U.S. president deploying troops there to suppress a popular revolution or to hold together a failing monarchy. Moreover, the longer that civil wars burn on Saudi Arabia's northern border, in Iraq, and southern border, in Yemen, the more likely these conflicts will destabilize the kingdom—to say nothing of the possibility of a Jordanian civil war. But a strategy of stepping back from the region means the United States will not try to shut down the nearby civil wars, and Washington has little leverage it can use to convince the Saudis to reform. It would have especially little leverage if it swore off the only thing that the Saudis truly want: greater U.S. involvement to end the civil wars and prevent Iran from exploiting them. In these circumstances, the United States would have virtually no ability to save Saudi Arabia from itself if its rulers were to insist on following a ruinous path. Yet in the context of greater U.S. disengagement, that is the most likely course the Saudis would take.

## NO EXIT

Ultimately, the greatest challenge for the United States if it steps back from the Middle East is this: figuring out how to defend U.S. interests when they are threatened by problems the United States is ill equipped to solve. Because containing the spillover from civil wars is so difficult, stepping back means risking the near-term collapse of Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, Tunisia, and Turkey. Although none of these countries produces much oil itself, their instability could spread to the oil producers, too, over the longer term. The world might be able to survive the loss of Iranian, Iraqi, Kuwaiti, or Algerian oil production, but at a certain point, the instability would affect Saudi Arabia. And even if it never does, it is not clear that the world can afford to lose several lesser oil producers, either.

The great benefit of a policy of stepping back is that it would drastically reduce the burden that the United States would have to bear to stabilize the Middle East. The great danger, however, is that it would entail enormous risks. Once the United States started writing off countries—shortening the list of those it would defend against threats—it is unclear where it would be able to stop, and retreat could turn into rout. If Jordan or Kuwait slid into civil war, would the United States deploy 100,000 troops to occupy and stabilize either country to protect Saudi Arabia (and in the case of civil war in Jordan, to protect Israel)? Could the United States do so in time to prevent the spillover from destabilizing the kingdom? If not, are there other ways to keep the kingdom itself from falling? Given all these uncertainties, the most prudent course is for Americans to steel themselves against the costs and step up to stabilize the region.

That said, what the United States should certainly not do is refuse to choose between stepping up and stepping back and instead waffle somewhere in the middle, committing enough resources to enlarge its burden without increasing the likelihood that its moves will

make anything better. Civil wars do not lend themselves to half measures. An outside power has to do the right thing and pay the attendant costs, or else its intervention will only make the situation worse for everyone involved, including itself. The tragedy is that given the U.S. political system's tendency to avoid decisive moves, the next administration will almost inevitably opt to muddle through. Given the extent of the chaos in the Middle East today, refusing to choose would likely prove to be the worst choice of all.

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