

## The New Middle East

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Summary: The age of U.S. dominance in the Middle East has ended and a new era in the modern history of the region has begun. It will be shaped by new actors and new forces competing for influence, and to master it, Washington will have to rely more on diplomacy than on military might.

### THE END OF AN ERA

Just over two centuries since Napoleon's arrival in Egypt heralded the advent of the modern Middle East — some 80 years after the demise of the Ottoman Empire, 50 years after the end of colonialism, and less than 20 years after the end of the Cold War — the American era in the Middle East, the fourth in the region's modern history, has ended. Visions of a new, Europe-like region — peaceful, prosperous, democratic — will not be realized. Much more likely is the emergence of a new Middle East that will cause great harm to itself, the United States, and the world.

All the eras have been defined by the interplay of contending forces, both internal and external to the region. What has varied is the balance between these influences. The Middle East's next era promises to be one in which outside actors have a relatively modest impact and local forces enjoy the upper hand — and in which the local actors gaining power are radicals committed to changing the status quo. Shaping the new Middle East from the outside will be exceedingly difficult, but it — along with managing a dynamic Asia — will be the primary challenge of U.S. foreign policy for decades to come.

The modern Middle East was born in the late eighteenth century. For some historians, the signal event was the 1774 signing of the treaty that ended the war between the Ottoman Empire and Russia; a stronger case can be made for the importance of Napoleon's relatively easy entry into Egypt in 1798, which showed Europeans that the region was ripe for conquest and prompted Arab and Muslim intellectuals to ask — as many continue to do today — why their civilization had fallen so far behind that of Christian Europe. Ottoman decline combined with European penetration into the region gave rise to the "Eastern Question," regarding how to deal with the effects of the decline of the Ottoman Empire, which various parties have tried to answer to their own advantage ever since.

The first era ended with World War I, the demise of the Ottoman Empire, the rise of the Turkish republic, and the division of the spoils of war among the European victors. What ensued was an age of colonial rule, dominated by France and the United Kingdom. This second era ended some four decades later, after another world war had drained the Europeans of much of their strength, Arab nationalism had risen, and the two superpowers had begun to lock horns. "[He] who rules the Near East rules the world; and he who has interests in the world is bound to concern himself with the Near East," wrote the historian Albert Hourani, who correctly saw the 1956 Suez crisis as marking the end of the colonial era and the beginning of the Cold War era in the region.

During the Cold War, as had been the case previously, outside forces played a dominant role in the Middle East. But the very nature of U.S.-Soviet competition gave local states considerable room to maneuver. The high-water mark of the era was the October 1973 war, which the United States and the Soviet Union essentially stopped at a stalemate, paving the way for ambitious diplomacy, including the Egyptian-Israeli peace accord.

Yet it would be a mistake to see this third era simply as a time of well-managed great-power competition. The June 1967 war forever changed the balance of power in the Middle East. The use of oil as an economic and political weapon in 1973 highlighted U.S. and international vulnerability to supply shortages and price hikes. And the Cold War's balancing act created a context in which local forces in the Middle East had significant autonomy to pursue their own agendas. The 1979 revolution in Iran, which brought down one of the pillars of U.S. policy in the region, showed that outsiders could not control local events. Arab states resisted U.S. attempts to persuade them to join anti-Soviet projects. Israel's 1982 occupation of Lebanon spawned Hezbollah. And the Iran-Iraq War consumed those two countries for a decade.

## AMERICAN PASTORAL

The end of the Cold War and the demise of the Soviet Union brought about a fourth era in the region's history, during which the United States enjoyed unprecedented influence and freedom to act. Dominant features of this American era were the U.S.-led liberation of Kuwait, the long-term stationing of U.S. ground and air forces on the Arabian Peninsula, and an active diplomatic interest in trying to solve the Arab-Israeli conflict once and for all (which culminated in the Clinton administration's intense but ultimately unsuccessful effort at Camp David). More than any other, this period exemplified what is now thought of as the "old Middle East." The region was defined by an aggressive but frustrated Iraq, a radical but divided and relatively weak Iran, Israel as the region's most powerful state and sole nuclear power, fluctuating oil prices, top-heavy Arab regimes that repressed their peoples, uneasy coexistence between Israel and both the Palestinians and the Arabs, and, more generally, American primacy.

What has brought this era to an end after less than two decades is a number of factors, some structural, some self-created. The most significant has been the Bush administration's decision to attack Iraq in 2003 and its conduct of the operation and resulting occupation. One casualty of the war has been a Sunni-dominated Iraq, which was strong enough and motivated enough to balance Shiite Iran. Sunni-Shiite tensions, dormant for a while, have come to the surface in Iraq and throughout the region. Terrorists have gained a base in Iraq and developed there a new set of techniques to export. Throughout much of the region, democracy has become associated with the loss of public order and the end of Sunni primacy. Anti-American sentiment, already considerable, has been reinforced. And by tying down a huge portion of the U.S. military, the war has reduced U.S. leverage worldwide. It is one of history's ironies that the first war in Iraq, a war of necessity, marked the beginning of the American era in the Middle East and the second Iraq war, a war of choice, has precipitated its end.

Other factors have also been relevant. One is the demise of the Middle East peace process. The United States had traditionally enjoyed a unique capacity to work with both the Arabs and the Israelis. But the limits of that capacity were exposed at Camp David in 2000. Since then, the weakness of Yasir Arafat's successors, the rise of Hamas, and the Israeli embrace of unilateralism have all helped sideline the United States, a shift reinforced by the disinclination of the current Bush administration to undertake active diplomacy.

Another factor that has helped bring about the end of the American era has been the failure of traditional Arab regimes to counter the appeal of radical Islamism. Faced with a choice between what they perceived as distant and corrupt political leaders and vibrant religious ones, many in the region have opted for the latter. It took 9/11 for U.S. leaders to draw the connection between closed societies and the incubation of radicals. But their response — often a hasty push for elections regardless of the local political context — has provided terrorists and their supporters with more opportunities for advancement than they had before.

Finally, globalization has changed the region. It is now less difficult for radicals to acquire funding, arms, ideas, and recruits. The rise of new media, and above all of satellite television, has turned the Arab world into a “regional village” and politicized it. Much of the content shown — scenes of violence and destruction in Iraq; images of mistreated Iraqi and Muslim prisoners; suffering in Gaza, the West Bank, and now Lebanon — has further alienated many people in the Middle East from the United States. As a result, governments in the Middle East now have a more difficult time working openly with the United States, and U.S. influence in the region has waned.

## WHAT LIES AHEAD

The outlines of the Middle East’s fifth era are still taking shape, but they follow naturally from the end of the American era. A dozen features will form the context for daily events.

First, the United States will continue to enjoy more influence in the region than any other outside power, but its influence will be reduced from what it once was. This reflects the growing impact of an array of internal and external forces, the inherent limits of U.S. power, and the results of U.S. policy choices.

Second, the United States will increasingly be challenged by the foreign policies of other outsiders. The European Union will offer little help in Iraq and is likely to push for a different approach to the Palestinian problem. China will resist pressuring Iran and will seek to guarantee the availability of energy supplies. Russia, too, will resist calls to sanction Iran and will look for opportunities to demonstrate its independence from the United States. Both China and Russia (as well as many European states) will distance themselves from U.S. efforts to promote political reform in nondemocratic states in the Middle East.

Third, Iran will be one of the two most powerful states in the region. Those who have seen Iran as being on the cusp of dramatic internal change have been wrong. Iran enjoys great wealth, is the most powerful external influence in Iraq, and holds considerable sway over both Hamas and Hezbollah. It is a classic imperial power, with ambitions to remake the region in its image and the potential to translate its objectives into reality.

Fourth, Israel will be the other powerful state in the region and the one country with a modern economy able to compete globally. The only state in the Middle East with a nuclear arsenal, it also possesses the region’s most capable conventional military force. But it still has to bear the costs of its occupation of the West Bank and deal with a multifront, multidimensional security challenge. Strategically speaking, Israel is in a weaker position today than it was before this summer’s crisis in Lebanon. And its situation will further deteriorate — as will that of the United States — if Iran develops nuclear weapons.

Fifth, anything resembling a viable peace process is unlikely for the foreseeable future. In the aftermath of Israel’s controversial operation in Lebanon, the Kadima-led government will almost certainly be too weak to command domestic support for any policy perceived as risky or as rewarding aggression. Unilateral disengagement has been discredited now that attacks have followed Israel’s withdrawal from Lebanon and Gaza. There is no obvious partner on the Palestinian side who is both able and willing to compromise, further hindering the chances of a negotiated approach. The United States has lost much of its standing as a credible and honest broker, at least for the time being. Meanwhile, Israel’s settlement expansion and road building will continue apace, further complicating diplomacy.

Sixth, Iraq, traditionally a center of Arab power, will remain messy for years to come, with a weak central government, a divided society, and regular sectarian violence. At worst, it will become a failed state wracked by an all-out civil war that will draw in its neighbors.

Seventh, the price of oil will stay high, the result of strong demand from China and India, limited success at curbing consumption in the United States, and the continued possibility of supply shortages. The price of a barrel of oil is far more likely to exceed \$100 than it is to fall below \$40. Iran, Saudi Arabia, and other large producers will benefit disproportionately.

Eighth, "militiazation" will continue apace. Private armies in Iraq, Lebanon, and Palestinian areas are already growing more powerful. Militias, both a product and a cause of weak states, will emerge wherever there is a perceived or an actual deficit of state authority and capacity. The recent fighting in Lebanon will exacerbate this trend, since Hezbollah has gained by not suffering a total defeat, while Israel has lost by not realizing a total victory — a result that will embolden Hezbollah and those who emulate it.

Ninth, terrorism, defined as the intentional use of force against civilians in the pursuit of political aims, will remain a feature of the region. It will occur in divided societies, such as Iraq, and in societies where radical groups seek to weaken and discredit the government, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt. Terrorism will grow in sophistication and remain a tool used against Israel and the presence of the United States and other nonindigenous powers.

Tenth, Islam will increasingly fill the political and intellectual vacuum in the Arab world and provide a foundation for the politics of a majority of the region's inhabitants. Arab nationalism and Arab socialism are things of the past, and democracy belongs in the distant future, at best. Arab unity is a slogan, not a reality. The influence of Iran and groups associated with it has been reinforced, and efforts to improve ties between Arab governments and Israel and the United States have been complicated. Meanwhile, tensions between Sunnis and Shiites will grow throughout the Middle East, causing problems in countries with divided societies, such as Bahrain, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia.

Eleventh, Arab regimes are likely to remain authoritarian and become more religiously intolerant and anti-American. Two bellwethers will be Egypt and Saudi Arabia. Egypt, which accounts for roughly one-third of the Arab world's population, has introduced some constructive economic reforms. But its politics have failed to keep up. On the contrary, the regime seems intent on repressing what few liberals the country has and presenting the Egyptian people with a choice between traditional authoritarians and the Muslim Brotherhood. The risk is that Egyptians will one day opt for the latter, less because they support it outright than because they have grown weary of the former. Alternatively, the regime might take on the colors of its Islamist opponents in an effort to co-opt their appeal, in the process distancing itself from the United States. In Saudi Arabia, the government and the royal elite rely on using large energy proceeds to placate domestic appeals for change. The problem is that most of the pressure they have responded to has come from the religious right rather than the liberal left, which has led them to embrace the agenda of religious authorities.

Finally, regional institutions will remain weak, lagging far behind those elsewhere. The Middle East's best-known organization, the Arab League, excludes the region's two most powerful states, Israel and Iran. The enduring Arab-Israeli rift will continue to preclude the participation of Israel in any sustained regional relationship. The tension between Iran and most Arab states will also frustrate the emergence of regionalism. Trade within the Middle East will remain modest because few countries offer goods and services that others want to buy on a large scale, and advanced manufactured goods will have to continue to come from elsewhere. Few of the advantages of global economic integration will come to this part of the world, despite the pressing need for them.

#### MISTAKES AND OPPORTUNITIES

Although the basic features of this fifth era of the modern Middle East are largely unattractive, this should not be a cause for fatalism. Much is a matter of degree. There is a fundamental difference between a Middle East lacking formal peace agreements and one defined by terrorism, interstate conflict, and civil war; between one housing a powerful Iran and one dominated by Iran; or between one that has an uneasy relationship with the United States and one filled with hatred of the country. Time also makes a difference. Eras in the Middle East can last for as long as a century or as little as a decade and a half. It is clearly in the interest of the United States and Europe that the emerging era be as brief as possible — and that it be followed by a more benign one.

To ensure this, U.S. policymakers need to avoid two mistakes, while seizing two opportunities. The first mistake would be an overreliance on military force. As the United States has learned to its great cost in Iraq — and Israel has in Lebanon — military force is no panacea. It is not terribly useful against loosely organized militias and terrorists who are well armed, accepted by the local population, and prepared to die for their cause. Nor would carrying out a preventive strike on Iranian nuclear installations accomplish much good. Not only might an attack fail to destroy all facilities, but it might also lead Tehran to reconstitute its program even more covertly, cause Iranians to rally around the regime, and persuade Iran to retaliate (most likely through proxies) against U.S. interests in Afghanistan and Iraq and maybe even directly against the United States. It would further radicalize the Arab and Muslim worlds and generate more terrorism and anti-American activity. Military action against Iran would also drive the price of oil to new heights, increasing the chances of an international economic crisis and a global recession. For all these reasons, military force should be considered only as a last resort.

The second mistake would be to count on the emergence of democracy to pacify the region. It is true that mature democracies tend not to wage war on one another. Unfortunately, creating mature democracies is no easy task, and even if the effort ultimately succeeds, it takes decades. In the interim, the U.S. government must continue to work with many nondemocratic governments. Democracy is not the answer to terrorism, either. It is plausible that young men and women coming of age would be less likely to become terrorists if they belonged to societies that offered them political and economic opportunities. But recent events suggest that even those who grow up in mature democracies, such as the United Kingdom, are not immune to the pull of radicalism. The fact that both Hamas and Hezbollah fared well in elections and then carried out violent attacks reinforces the point that democratic reform does not guarantee quiet. And democratization is of little use when dealing with radicals whose platforms have no hope of receiving majority support. More useful initiatives would be actions designed to reform educational systems, promote economic liberalization and open markets, encourage Arab and Muslim authorities to speak out in ways that delegitimize terrorism and shame its supporters, and address the grievances that motivate young men and women to take it up.

As for the opportunities to be seized, the first is to intervene more in the Middle East's affairs with nonmilitary tools. Regarding Iraq, in addition to any redeployment of U.S. troops and training of local military and police, the United States should establish a regional forum for Iraq's neighbors (Turkey and Saudi Arabia in particular) and other interested parties akin to that used to help manage events in Afghanistan following the intervention there in 2001. Doing so would necessarily require bringing in both Iran and Syria. Syria, which can affect the movement of fighters into Iraq and arms into Lebanon, should be persuaded to close its borders in exchange for economic benefits (from Arab governments, Europe, and the United States) and a commitment to restart talks on the status of the Golan Heights. In the new Middle East, there is a danger that Syria might be more interested in working with Tehran than with Washington. But it did join the U.S.-led coalition during the Persian Gulf War and attend the Madrid peace conference in 1991, two gestures that suggest it might be open to a deal with the United States in the future.

Iran is a more difficult case. But since regime change in Tehran is not a near-term prospect, military strikes against nuclear sites in Iran would be dangerous, and deterrence is uncertain, diplomacy is the best option available to Washington. The U.S. government should open, without preconditions, comprehensive talks that address Iran's nuclear program and its support of terrorism and foreign militias. Iran should be offered an array of economic, political, and security incentives. It could be allowed a highly limited uranium-enrichment pilot program so long as it accepted highly intrusive inspections. Such an offer would win broad international support, a prerequisite if the United States wants backing for imposing sanctions or escalating to other options should diplomacy fail. Making the terms of such an offer public would increase diplomacy's chances of success. The Iranian people should know the price they stand to pay for their government's radical foreign policy. With the government in Tehran concerned about an adverse public reaction, it would be more likely to accept the U.S. offer.

Diplomacy also needs to be revived in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which is still the issue that most shapes (and radicalizes) public opinion in the region. The goal at this point would be not to bring the parties to Camp David or anywhere else but to begin to create the conditions under which diplomacy could usefully be restarted. The United States should articulate those principles it believes ought to constitute the elements of a final settlement, including the creation of a Palestinian state based on the 1967 lines. (The lines would have to be adjusted to safeguard Israel's security and reflect demographic changes, and the Palestinians would have to be compensated for any losses resulting from the adjustments.) The more generous and detailed the plan, the harder it would be for Hamas to reject negotiation and favor confrontation. Consistent with this approach, U.S. officials ought to sit down with Hamas officials, much as they have with the leaders of Sinn Féin, some of whom also led the Irish Republican Army. Such exchanges should be viewed not as rewarding terrorist tactics but as instruments with the potential to bring behavior in line with U.S. policy.

The second opportunity involves the United States' insulating itself as much as possible from the region's instability. This would mean curbing U.S. oil consumption and U.S. dependence on the Middle East's energy resources, goals that could best be achieved by reducing demand (by, say, increasing taxes at the pump — offset by tax reductions elsewhere — and promoting policies that would accelerate the introduction of alternative sources of energy). Washington should also take additional steps to reduce its exposure to terrorism. Like vulnerability to disease, vulnerability to terrorism cannot be entirely eliminated. But more can and should be done to better protect the U.S. homeland and to better prepare for those inevitable occasions when terrorists will succeed.

Avoiding these mistakes and seizing these opportunities would help, but it is important to recognize that there are no quick or easy solutions to the problems the new era poses. The Middle East will remain a troubled and troubling part of the world for decades to come. It is all enough to make one nostalgic for the old Middle East.