

# Breaking the Cycle: The Need for a Sustainable, Long-term Policy in the Middle East

*H.R. McMaster*

*It is not a fast part of the world.*—Fouad Ajami

In 2021, a new administration will face a confounding and wretched situation in the greater Middle East (the region spanning Morocco in the west to Iran in the east and encompassing the northern countries of Syria and Iraq to the southern countries of Sudan and Yemen). Over the past two decades, the inability of the United States to pursue a consistent policy in cooperation with like-minded nations contributed to the scale and duration of the catastrophe there and diminished American influence. The policies of the George W. Bush, Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations were consistent with America's tendency since World War II to engage the region episodically and pursue short-term solutions to long-term problems. Many Americans view the region as a mess to be avoided. But there are three reasons why disengagement would make a bad situation worse, with implications for Americans as well as the people of the region.

First, problems in the region do not remain confined there. Jihadist terrorist organizations are orders of magnitude larger than the mujahedeen alumni from the Soviet-Afghan War; their reach and destructive capabilities are growing.

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Second, the costs of inaction in the region are often higher than the costs of action. The George W. Bush administration's 2003 invasion of Iraq may have been ill-considered, but so was the Barack Obama administration's withdrawal from Iraq in 2011. Many disremember how the Obama administration's effort to avoid what it perceived as its predecessor's mistakes in Iraq surpassed them with a NATO campaign that contributed to Muammar Khadafy's demise, but did nothing to shape the political environment that followed. It is clear that the decision in 2013 not to enforce a previously announced "red line" in Syria (after the Assad regime used chemical weapons to murder nearly 1,400 people, including 426 children) removed remaining checks on the regime's brutality and emboldened the Assad regime's sponsors, Russia and Iran. The worst humanitarian crisis since World War II overburdened neighboring states of Lebanon, Jordan and Turkey and extended into Europe.

Third, the Middle East has always been and will remain an arena for competitions that have consequences far beyond its geographic expanse. Some argue that the United States should disengage to free up assets for great power competitions with Russia and China, but competitions with those countries are ongoing in the region. For example, Russia and Iran aid, abet, and sustain the murderous Assad regime in Syria. Tehran's strategy is to keep the Arab world enmeshed in sectarian conflict while its proxies extend Iranian influence to the Mediterranean Sea, Red Sea, and the borders of Israel.

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While recognizing the limits of its influence in the region, the United States should galvanize a long-term multinational diplomatic, military and development effort to arrest the cycle of sectarian violence that is strengthening terrorist organizations, extending Iran's influence, perpetuating state weakness, and inflicting human suffering on a colossal scale. Diplomatic efforts should pursue resolution of the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen consistent with the U.N. political process; curtail Iranian influence in the region; and galvanize assistance for refugees and international funding for reconstruction. Long-term diplomatic engagement is necessary to strengthen groups that can contribute to enduring political settlements; forge accommodations across sectarian, ethnic and tribal divides; combat extremist ideology; resist Iranian subversion; and undertake the range of intelligence, law enforcement, and military efforts necessary to prevent terrorists from threatening the United States and U.S. interests abroad. Diplomacy should encourage likeminded partners to impose costs on Tehran and Moscow for perpetuating violence and insecurity.

Military efforts should reduce the centripetal forces that are perpetuating violence and preventing political resolution of conflicts. Small U.S. forces enable partners

to combat terrorists and counter Iranian proxies. Beyond sustained efforts to deny jihadist terrorists bases of operation, U.S. forces, alongside partners in the region, must remain prepared to impose costs on Iran should its leaders intensify its four-decade-long proxy war to drive the United States out of the region, threaten Israel, and keep the Arab world in perpetual conflict.

Development efforts should encourage reforms that strengthen governance, rule of law, and democratic institutions and processes. The breakdown of order in the Middle East is, in large measure, the result of serial failures of colonial rule, post-colonial monarchies, Arab nationalism, socialist dictatorships, and Islamist extremism. Decades of conflict fragmented societies along ethnic, sectarian, and tribal lines. From Beirut to Baghdad to Tehran, people are demanding reform. Governments responsive to the demands of their people are able to counter corruption and remove significant barriers to the economic growth that is necessary to recover from the COVID-19 recession and to provide jobs in a region that has possessed the highest youth unemployment rate for the past 25 years.

There are no short-term solutions to the Middle East's long-term problems. Progress in breaking the cycle of sectarian violence and overcoming the region's problems will be slow and uneven. There will be setbacks. The halting progress and frequent disappointments in the Israeli-Palestinian peace process across the past three decades is a case in point. But U.S. disengagement from the Middle East would neither conciliate the region's violent passions nor insulate America from them. A long-term strategy that integrates diplomatic, military and development efforts to break the cycle of sectarian violence in the region and incentivize necessary reforms is the best way to improve security and promote prosperity for the people in the Middle East and the world.