



THE INFLECTION POINT

Reduced American focus on the Middle East going forward is just one of many changes with which Arab leaders will have to grapple in the coming years, and it is disorienting

By Jon B. Alterman

In 1967, the Middle East was transformed, but the impending drama wasn't clear when the year began. In fact, at the beginning of 1967, the political climate seemed sustainable and unlikely to change. Cold War tensions that divided the Middle East were nothing new, and monarchies and republics continued their quiet sparring to seize the region's future. As part of that struggle, Egypt's president, Gamal Abdel Nasser, had become mired in a war in Yemen that was depleting his military and draining his treasury.

Undeterred by events in Yemen, Nasser led the Arabs into a war against Israel, which resulted in Israel's swift capture of the Sinai Peninsula, the West Bank, and the Golan Heights. With his defeat in the June 1967 war, Nasser's Arab socialism died, and so did the dream of revolutionary republics leading the Arab World out from the shadow of colonialism and onto the world's center stage. Nasser had been a rising star in the Middle East for more than a decade. He succeeded in pushing the British out of Egypt and resisting the Tripartite Aggression of 1956. His Voice of the Arabs radio station had become the soundtrack for news and culture throughout the Arab World. However, suddenly, Nasser was no longer the harbinger of the future. After 1967, Arab monarchies steadied, political Islam gained steam, and the Soviet Union began to lose its Arab footholds. The events of 1967 created a new reality and a new dynamic, and this reality persisted for a half-century.

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The rulers of today's Middle East see the region at a similar tipping point, and they see the stakes are as high as they were in 1967. The fact that Arab leaders see their world changing before their eyes is the only explanation for a series of actions, especially from the Gulf, that would be utterly confounding in any other context. The future of the Middle East hinges in part on these leaders' ability to accurately diagnose their countries' challenges, on the adequacy of their actions, and on the degree of partnership they can build with the

◀ President Donald Trump and his delegation at the Royal Court in Riyadh, May 20, 2017. *Jonathan Ernst/Reuters*

United States. It also depends in significant measure on their citizens' responses. All of these variables are presently uncertain.

Breaking with the Past

The region is at a tipping point for several reasons. The most obvious is that it is currently enmeshed in three active civil wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen. These conflicts and their resultant refugee flows evoke an enduring sense of crisis in the region and heighten feelings of vulnerability on the part of regional states. They are a steady reminder that even the most authoritarian Arab government is susceptible to an insurrection that could smolder for years. The billions of dollars that these governments have poured into their domestic intelligence services proved inadequate to tamp down rebellion, and the fate of the *ancien regimes* there—and also in places like Iraq, which remains shattered fifteen years after the United States deposed Saddam Hussein—continues to be uncertain and often dire.

These ongoing wars have also heightened fears of Iranian aggression and expansion. Iran has supported its own allies throughout the region, and sustained instability provides it with opportunities to expand its influence at a low cost. The region's wars appear to have embedded Iranian-supported groups more deeply in local politics, and it is hard to expunge this influence once it is established, as Lebanon has demonstrated.

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previously restive populations throughout the Arab World that an unhappy present is preferable to a catastrophically unstable future. Even brutal dictatorships have a certain predictability, and they tend to provide security for most people who abide by their rules. The lasting turmoil in the region's warzones has engendered acquiescence

(or perhaps even grudging public support) for existing governments, because many find misrule preferable to chaos.

Nonetheless, three constants of the past suddenly seem in flux, provoking anxiety for regional governments. The first is that rulers understand that their economic future must be different from their past. State-centered economies and vast public sectors—in republics and monarchies alike—worked when populations were smaller and revenues were growing. Now, the math is catching up to them. States cannot create government jobs nearly fast enough, and their private sectors are much too weak to create adequate jobs for the citizens who flood the job market every year. The prospect of a world in which Middle Eastern oil and gas are less central to the global economy is distressing for

countries that export hydrocarbons as well as for countries that export workers for hydrocarbon-driven economies. That encompasses most of the Arab World.

Second, the United States appears less committed to Arab countries' security than at any time in three-quarters of a century. Alienated by the events of September 11, 2001, fatigued by seemingly endless wars in the Middle East, and excited by the prospect of domestic oil and gas freeing the United States from the region, the American public is increasingly skeptical of U.S. commitments in the Middle East. The Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations' approaches to Syria are clear signs that restraint will characterize U.S. engagement with the Middle East going forward. President Trump's 2017 National Security Strategy said little about supporting vulnerable allies, and the National Defense Strategy clearly signaled a pivot away from Middle Eastern commitments and toward "great power" competition. Yet, virtually every Arab state has a national security strategy that relies on a strong U.S. security commitment. That commitment is less certain now than at any time in the last seventy years.

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Finally, the events of 2011 continued to unnerve Arab leaders who once thought they understood their publics and how to manage them. There is no consensus on what caused the Arab uprisings of that year, and therefore no consensus exists on how to prevent them from recurring. Several of the wealthier Arab states concluded that the uprisings were about material deprivation, but constrained budgets make it hard to continue down the path of increased subsidies. The information and communications revolution certainly played a role, but exactly what role remains unclear. Governments struggle internally to decide what combination of liberty and control, mobilization and repression, largesse and austerity, will secure their future. Too little or too much of any could backfire.

Understanding this context of uncertainty helps explain why Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are engaged in an unprecedented set of military operations in Yemen, intended to beat back Iranian adventurism. It also helps explain why those countries are leading a small Arab coalition against Qatar, which has sought opportunities to align with new regional political forces. It explains the broader Arab outreach to Israel, long a taboo but now seen as an important bulwark against Iran. And it explains increasingly aggressive efforts to control domestic politics.

Middle Eastern governments are commonly described as conservative and cautious, but conservatism and caution are unlikely to suffice in an era in which the stakes are so high and the future is so unclear. A younger generation of leaders, unscarred by the rivalries of the past and stung by the uncertainties of the present, is likely to continue to strike out in new ways. As they tell it

themselves, they cannot let up on their enemies because their enemies will not let up on them. These leaders foresee a fight to the finish. Volatility will increase.

Arab publics don't have many choices. For the most part, they can rise up or hunker down. While the potential costs of rising up are clear, many Arabs lack the patience to hunker down. An unprecedented number of Arab nationals are attempting to flee—to nearby countries, or to Europe. Many of them are not only among the most talented individuals in their countries, but also the beneficiaries of decades of government investment in their education and skills. Their departure relieves some immediate pressure, but it is a severe setback to longer-term prospects for stability and prosperity. Uncertainty over how governments will manage their publics, and how publics will seek to shape their governments, is what makes the current moment so unpredictable.

The U.S. Response, Past, and Future

The United States has more options before it. It can act directly, it can assist, or it can stand by while its friends take their chances—and learn new lessons. Since World War II, the United States has had a strong predilection for the first two options, and it has led international action in the region. From Eisenhower's efforts to beat back the aggressors in the 1956 Suez Canal Crisis, to Kissinger's "shuttle diplomacy" of the 1970s, to negotiations with Saddam Hussein after the invasion of Kuwait, to the Madrid Peace Conference and the Oslo Process in the 1990s, and continuing through the multilateral negotiations over the Iranian nuclear program in the mid-2010s, U.S. diplomacy has been at the center of regional politics.

Militarily, the United States has twice fought wars with Iraq, and deployed tens of thousands of U.S. soldiers and sailors to the region for decades. A network of U.S. facilities is scattered throughout the Middle East with the largest contingent in the Gulf. Especially since September 11, 2001, the U.S. government has worked closely with Arab partners on counterterrorism, sharing information and directly carrying out attacks on terrorist targets from bases in the region. While the outcomes have been mixed on matters of war and peace, the United States has been a central player trying to craft a regional order and protecting friendly states from all manner of threats from beyond their borders.

The United States has also sought to use assistance to protect allies against internal threats. The Middle East was a major front in the Cold War and the U.S. approach from the Harry Truman administration onward was to "inoculate" the region from the temptations of communism by fostering good government and economic justice. Long after the fear of communism faded from the scene, funding for activities that fall under the rubric of "democracy and governance" has been a consistent feature of U.S. aid.

On the human capital side, U.S. government scholarships have brought

thousands of Arab students and educators to the United States, and U.S. government funding—to say nothing of philanthropic efforts—has flowed to American universities in the region. USAID projects, especially in Egypt, have poured more than \$1 billion into creating more resilient public health systems, improving child and maternal health, and stamping out endemic disease. Tens of billions more dollars have flowed into economic support activities, infrastructure construction, and technical training. Thousands of military officers from the region have received advanced training in the United States, and thousands of U.S. military advisers have sought to build the skills of their Arab counterparts.

Skeptics in the Arab World argue that U.S. assistance has been in its own narrow self-interest, making Arabs pawns in U.S. adventures and recycling U.S. funds into U.S. businesses and institutions. Not only has the region not benefited, they argue, but sustained poverty and instability have also created the pretext for a sustained U.S. presence. Skeptics in the United States take a similarly dim view of what more than a half-century of assistance has yielded, pointing not only to widespread hostility to the United States in the region, but a record of violence and repression perpetrated by regional allies against their peoples.

Arguably, today's Arab leaders are fighting the biggest battle of their lives, as they seek to navigate through greater uncertainty than any time in the last half-century. Arguably, too, U.S. fatigue with the Middle East is higher than at any point in the past. In previous years, the U.S. public could be rallied against Soviet aggression or Iranian hostility, but today's public looks at more than a trillion dollars devoted to fighting wars in the Middle East since 9/11 and wonders what has been won.

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The United States has not turned its back on the Middle East. It is likely to engage selectively in the coming years, but the depth of that engagement will almost certainly be less than it has been in living memory. While not necessarily intended, the diminution of U.S. engagement will create vacuums, many of which will be filled by local actors, international powers, or both, and that will create new dynamics. The United States should be cautious.

For rulers facing greater uncertainty than they have known at any other time in their lives, the prospect of this new environment must be daunting. If their analysis is correct and the region is at an inflection point, how Arab leaders navigate the next five years will lay the groundwork for the next half-century, for better and for worse. (R)

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