



Is Leaving the Middle East a Viable Option?

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Foreword

Dr. Thomas H. Henriksen in this publication provides a perspective on the challenging question, “Is leaving the Middle East a Viable Option?” He lays out a convincing argument that historical involvement within the region based on commercial ties, the need to secure stable international oil supplies (for the U.S. as well as its allies), and engagement in the internecine Israeli-Arab conflict all remain critical security issues for the United States. He captures in a few pages volumes of information on the Middle East as he crafts and weaves the history of United States’ involvement from 1783 to the present, highlighting the key policy-making decisions concerning the Middle East. The historical review provides the novice reader new understanding of the Middle East and the knowledgeable reader an excellent overview.

No discussion of the Middle East could or should take place without the issue of oil—the world’s primary energy resource. Dr. Henriksen goes into great detail on the strategic importance this region has to America’s and the world’s economy with reference to the implication of a continued tightness in oil supplies. Until the world develops an alternate energy source, the Middle East will remain a critical world region. How the United States and other interested nations work to maintain this region’s stability is open for discussion and one that will continue for many years to come.

As conventional forces are reduced in the region, U.S. Special Operations Command personnel will be expected to continue to be a critical element in any United States security engagement with the Middle East. Therefore, regional understanding and the role America and its allies play is important to the Special Operations Forces (SOF) community as the fight for Middle East stability continues and the role of SOF becomes even more pivotal. However, it is important to note that, ultimately, it is up to the region’s governments and their people to solve the challenging security issues facing them. The United States and SOF can only help them achieve the level of security the region’s citizens deserve.

Michael C. McMahon, Lt Col, USAF
Director, JSOU Strategic Studies Department

About the Author

Dr. Tom Henriksen is a senior fellow at the Hoover Institution. Until September 2003, he was the Hoover Institution associate director for program development. His other administrative duties included serving as executive secretary of the National Fellows and National Security Affairs Fellows programs, as well as director of the Media Fellows Program. Dr. Henriksen also serves as a senior fellow with the JSOU Strategic Studies Department.

His current research focuses on American foreign policy in the post-Cold War world, international political affairs, and national defense. He specializes in the study of U.S. diplomatic and military courses of action toward terrorist havens, such as Afghanistan, and the so-called rogue states, including North Korea, Iraq, and Iran. He also concentrates on armed and covert interventions abroad.

Dr. Henriksen's most recent volume is entitled *American Power after the Berlin Wall*, published by Palgrave Macmillan in 2007. JSOU has published two of his monographs, *The Israeli Approach to Internal Warfare and Implications for the United States* (February 2007) and *Dividing Our Enemies* (November 2005). A prior published book is an edited volume on competing visions for U.S. foreign policy, *Foreign Policy for America in the 21st Century: Alternative Perspectives* (Hoover Institution Press, 2001). Other works include *Using Power and Diplomacy to Deal with Rogue States* (Hoover Essays in Public Policy, 1999) and the edited collection *North Korea after Kim Il Sung* (Hoover Institution Press, 1999).

He also authored or edited the following books and monographs: *One Korea? Challenges and Prospects for Reunification* (Hoover Institution Press, 1994); *The New World Order: War, Peace, and Military Preparedness* (Hoover Institution Press, 1992); *Revolution and Counterrevolution: Mozambique's War of Independence* (Greenwood Press, 1983); *The Struggle for Zimbabwe: Battle in the Bush* (Praeger, 1981); *Soviet and Chinese Aid to African Nations* (Praeger, 1980); and *Mozambique: A History* (Rex Collings, 1978).

Additionally, he has written numerous journal articles and newspaper essays concerning international politics and security as well as U.S. policy toward rogue states in the post-Cold War era. Dr. Henriksen has also received research grants from the American Philosophical

Society, State University of New York, National Endowment for the Humanities, and National Defense Foreign Language Fellowship Program. His book *Mozambique: A History* was chosen for the Outstanding Book Award for African History by Choice. During 1982, he traveled to the former Soviet Union as a member of the forum for the U.S.-Soviet dialogue.

Dr. Henriksen's education and public service developed in the 1960s, specifically earning his B.A. in History from Virginia Military Institute (1962) and the M.A. and Ph.D. in History from Michigan State University (1966 and 1969). He was selected for membership in Phi Alpha Theta—the history honorary society—as a graduate student. During 1963-1965, Dr. Henriksen served as an infantry officer in the U.S. Army. He taught history at the State University of New York from 1969, leaving in 1979 as a full professor. During the 1979-1980 academic year, he was the Susan Louise Dyer Peace Fellow at the Hoover Institution.

Dr. Henriksen's national public service includes participation as a member of the U.S. Army Science Board (1984-1990) and the President's Commission on White House Fellowships (1987-1993). He also received a Certificate of Appreciation for Patriotic Civilian Service from the U.S. Department of the Army in 1990. He is a member of the Board of Trustees for two organizations, the George C. Marshall Foundation and the International Conference Group on Portugal.

Is Leaving the Middle East a Viable Option?

The American public, pundits, and policy makers are understandably frustrated with developments in the Middle East.¹ For the last several decades, that region has been a fountainhead of problems felt by ordinary citizens as well as by U.S. governments. Oil shortages, steep prices at the pump, militant Islam, terrorism, and now conflicts in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Somalia emanate along an azimuth extending from the Rock of Gibraltar to Rawalpindi in eastern Pakistan. Moreover, there appears to be no end in sight to the consequences of political and sectarian strife that find their way onto our shores and those of our allies. Many, therefore, muse how satisfying it might be simply to walk away from the entire mess. One commentary writer bluntly asked: "Might we not be better off just leaving the region alone?"² Another pundit advised that "backward societies [like the Middle East] must be left alone, as the French now wisely leave Corsica to its own devices, as the Italians quietly learned to do in Sicily."³ And at least one congressional representative, an opponent of the Iraq War, advised that it is time for the military to start leaving the Middle East.⁴

Leaving the Middle East and returning to a more trouble-free life is an exceedingly appealing notion. After all, American troops vacated Vietnam in 1973 after an eight-year bloody and unrewarding conflict, and no calamity befell the United States when the North Vietnamese overran the South. The plight of the South Vietnamese boat people, the Cambodian killing fields, or the fall of eleven countries to communist forces in the half decade after 1975 did not materially affect the United States. Less than two decades later, in fact, the United States won the Cold War and the Soviet Union collapsed. Won't history repeat itself following a pullout from the politically chaotic and violence-prone Near East?

Americans are also tempted by the prospect of a silver-bullet solution to problems. The 1945 atomic bombing is a prime example of an action that in one fell swoop ended the Pacific war and precluded a bloody invasion of the Japanese home islands. The current construction of a missile shield to protect our country from a long-range rocket

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attack offers another purported technological panacea to a threat. But a deeper reflection alters these rosy scenarios. Japan's atomic defeat opened a horrific Pandora's Box to a nuclear age of annihilation. And as for U.S. missile defense, its security extends only to the lone accidental or rogue state intercontinental ballistic missile, not salvos from Russia or China, which would overwhelm its capabilities.

The prospect of a total withdrawal from the Middle East is another such desperate silver-bullet answer to the complex challenge this region presents to the United States. It is intriguing to imagine walking away from the "clash of civilizations," suicide bombers, and seething hatred of the United States. The prospect looks appealing—washing our hands of intractable problems—and deserves a serious review.

Any carefully reasoned argument for or against American disengagement from the Middle East must consider a variety of factors including historical involvement, energy supplies, psychological consequences, strategic implications, American ideals, and, of course, the current conflict with Islamicist terrorists. It is natural to begin an analysis with an historical account of our interaction with the Middle East to provide a context and foundation for discussion. Our interchange with lands stretching from Casablanca to the Caspian Sea is historically longer and more politically convoluted than sometimes realized.

Historical Overview of the United States in the Middle East

America's commercial, political, and military involvement in the Muslim world began over 200 years ago. Despite this lengthy engagement, it pales in comparison with European contact with the Muslim Arab world, which stretches back millennia and recalls a host of major episodes. These significant epochs can only be recalled briefly here despite their impact on contemporary events. They included the sweep of Islamic conquests over the Roman and Phoenician enclaves in North Africa during the seventh century; the 700-year Muslim occupation of two-thirds of the Iberian Peninsula, the fall of the Byzantium Empire and afterwards the subjugation of the Balkans by Muslim armies, and the expulsion of the Crusaders who sought to recover the Holy Land's Christian shrines from Muslim seizure. Even this summary points up the tremendous level of conflict in the early East-West struggle, although it must be emphasized that the two spheres also interacted peacefully in the exchange of commercial goods, culture, and learning. Thus, American contact with the Muslim Arab world began more

recently than Europe's, but is built on the same foundation of mutual hostility broken by spells of trade and peaceful coexistence.

What early interest America did evince toward Muslim polities was both episodic and yet portentous for our own times. The newly independent American colonies encountered unconventional and ruthless foes, who flourished by plunder, piracy, and tribute. Official Washington's attention to the lands east of Gibraltar came soon after the Republic's birth, when Barbary Corsairs in the name of religion assaulted American merchant vessels, imprisoned their crews, and demanded ransom for their freedom. Located along the North African coast, the renegade states of Tripoli, Tunis, Morocco, and Algiers (the Barbary Coast) had disrupted Mediterranean commerce for centuries with their mercenary jihads. The Ottoman sultan ostensibly ruled over the regencies in Algiers, Tripoli, and Tunis from his imperial seat in today's Istanbul (then called Constantinople) in Turkey; but his writ never extended to Morocco. The Barbary States' single-masted feluccas or xebecs also ventured into the Atlantic to waylay American merchantmen. They captured and enslaved European Christians, who secured their freedom only when ransomed. Until released by payment or death, Christian men toiled in galleys or mines, while the women found themselves in Mideast harems.

Sailing in small craft from al-Maghreb ("the West"), the Arabic-speaking pirates styled themselves *mujahideen*, or warriors in an Islamic holy war, as they preyed on Western sailing craft from the twelfth century. Before the American collision, the Barbary (from the Latin *bararus*) powers' piracy turned into a bleeding ulcer for Western Europe.

After securing their independence from Britain in 1783, the American colonies were no longer protected by the Royal Navy. The newly independent country confronted the choice of paying tribute or fighting the piratical ships cruising from Muslim North Africa. Early on, the new Republic's Congress appropriated \$80,000, some 20 percent of its budget, to pay tribute, a practice fully recognized at the time as serving to only whet the appetite of the Barbary hostage-takers for more payments. As his country's ambassador to France and later its secretary of state, Thomas Jefferson echoed the admonition by Rudyard Kipling when writing about the Viking raids and their demand of bribes for security—if you pay the Danegeld (tribute), you never get rid of the Dane. The Virginian realized that the easy money stimulated the extortionists to press for repeated payoffs. In the years

afterwards, however, the infant country initially chose cash transfers over war as the cheaper alternative. When it ransomed 115 sailors in 1795, Washington paid almost a million dollars in cash, supplies, and a frigate to the *dey* (ruler) of Algiers.⁵

From his Paris embassy, Jefferson tried to fashion an alliance among such maritime states as Denmark, France, Naples, Portugal, Spain, and Sweden for an allied naval police force along the North African coast. Despite a positive interest in a cooperative venture, the kingdoms flinched at actually providing ships and crews for a joint defense pact. Paying tribute was seen as less expensive, except for the United States whose anemic government under the Articles of Confederation had difficulty in raising the funds for “gifts” intended for the Barbary Corsairs. Indeed, the shameful spectacle of American frailty helped spur the Founding Fathers to draft the U.S. Constitution, begetting a stronger central government able to defend itself.⁶

This appeasement policy of ransom and tribute payments again came in for a hostile review when Thomas Jefferson settled into the White House in 1801. President Jefferson rejected Tripoli’s extortion for \$250,000 immediately and \$25,000 per annum indefinitely. The new administration thus embarked on a course of action that led to America’s first overseas conflict after its independence struggle with King George III, and to its first war on terror. Its belligerent posture led to a protracted Cold War-style standoff against the piratical Barbary States that was punctuated by two hot wars. This confrontation centered on economic advantage instead of any clash of civilization or religion.

The First Barbary War (or Tripolitan War) began in 1801 when the pasha of Tripoli in effect declared war on the United States by cutting down the American flag at the U.S. consulate because Washington had spurned his demands for tribute. The nearby states of Algiers, Morocco, and Tunis initially joined with Tripoli. In response, the U.S. Senate passed a “state of war” preamble to the House of Representatives bill that authorized the commander in chief to attack and seize Tripolitan ships. Congress’s delegation of war powers to President Jefferson prompted several naval engagements and a blockade of Tripoli’s harbor.⁷

The delegation of war powers also resulted in a covert plan for America’s first-ever regime-change operation, hatched by men-on-the-spot James L. Cathcart and William Eaton. Cathcart, the

U.S. consul in Tripoli, orchestrated a plot to replace the pasha with his brother, who pledged to his American backers a benign policy toward U.S. shipping in the Mediterranean. The Jefferson administration approved the operation and allocated \$20,000 for its execution. Cathcart contacted his counterpart in Tunis, William Eaton, to organize an overland expedition to oust the pasha. In time, Eaton and Commodore Samuel Barron, the commander of a new Mediterranean expedition, launched the operation with a land force comprised of a handful of American officers, Greek mercenaries, and 2,000 Bedouin irregulars. This motley band marched 500 miles from a staging area in Egypt and managed to capture the seaside town of Derne en route to Tripoli. Thus threatened by imminent attack, the pasha decided to negotiate so as to preserve his rule. On 3 June 1805, the United States signed a treaty with Tripoli that secured the release of American prisoners and trading privileges while withdrawing U.S. military forces.⁸

Like the contemporary Middle East, a single success brought neither lasting peace nor decisive victory. In the years ahead, Thomas Jefferson faced similar problems with Morocco, and subsequent presidential administrations encountered a recurrence of plundering, pirating, and snatching sailors

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from American commercial vessels in the western Mediterranean Sea. But at least the Jefferson government won the Barbary Powers' fleet-ing respect for the Stars and Stripes. Its policy also set a precedent for subsequent Washington governments.

The War of 1812 interrupted the young Republic's campaign to halt Barbary depredation on American shipping. The North African piratical states took full advantage of the U.S. preoccupation with America's second war against Britain. They resumed their bushwhacking of U.S. vessels, impounding the ships and imprisoning the crews. With America's victory over Britain in 1814, Washington turned again to confronting the Mediterranean menace. Slow to anger, Americans had grown tired of losing ships, seamen, and money to the Middle East predators in what had become a national humiliation.

James Madison went to Congress, asked for a declaration of war, and quickly obtained it. Next, the president dispatched a powerful naval flotilla under the command of Stephen Decatur, a national hero from earlier engagements on the Maghreb's littoral. His instructions

were to the point—inflict “serious disasters” on the Middle Eastern renegades and secure “a just and lasting peace.”⁹ The U.S. warships first took two Algiers’s ships out of commission off the Spanish coast, then dropped anchor in the port of Algiers, and readied to bombard the *dey*’s harbor and city in late June 1815. The ruler capitulated to the American demands for the freedom of all American captives and payment of a \$10,000 indemnity. Next Decatur sailed his squadron to Tunis and Tripoli where he repeated his non-negotiable terms to stunned adversaries who promptly accepted them to escape annihilation.

Before the Barbary Wars came to an end, the conflict had lasted three decades. The North African states had seized thirty-five American ships and abducted 700 sailors. The captives suffered appalling conditions from meager rations to floggings and even tortured deaths. By prevailing over the Barbary Corsairs, the episode left the United States a respected maritime power with a small but aggressive Navy and Marine Corps. The conflicts witnessed American ships and fighting men doing battle on foreign soil for the first time. Some of the enterprises—“operating from bases, making short-term alliances and using insurgents and local troops”—foreshadowed operations in future wars.¹⁰ Moreover, the Barbary victory restored American pride after years of military and political embarrassments. No greater foreign threat menaced American seaborne commerce until Imperial Germany launched unrestricted submarine warfare against America’s trans-Atlantic trade in the course of World War I. The cessation of Barbary raids brought the United States a century of freedom from equivalent sea attacks.

American involvement in the Middle East of a different sort followed the Barbary Wars. While U.S. Navy frigates cruised off the North African coast for many years, the United States pursued pacific relations to the east, particularly in the territories near the seat of the Ottoman Empire in Anatolia (contemporary Turkey) such as Lebanon, Syria, Palestine, and Egypt. The United States militarily intervened only three times before the start of World War I, by sending Marines ashore on Middle Eastern soil to protect American lives and property from rampaging anti-Western mobs. But these were discrete foreign operations, entailing no extended occupations, regime changes, or democracy-transferring missions.

Commerce, faith, and fantasy—all drew Americans to the eastern Mediterranean. Throughout the nineteenth century, American explorers,

businessmen, tourists, diplomats, missionaries, mercenaries, and writers in search of inspiration journeyed eastward to the exotic lands as their interest was quickened by the *Bible* or *A Thousand and One Arabian Nights*. They were dazzled by its splendor, variety, and decadence. Philanthropic, educational, and religious motives spurred ministers, churchmen, and teachers to journey to the Levant to save souls, educate minds, preserve Christian shrines in Jerusalem, and care for despised populations. These secular and religious evangelists beseeched their audiences to embrace American values of democracy, freedom, hard work, and tolerance. Ninety-five years before Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice traveled to Cairo and exhorted Egypt to become more democratic, former President Theodore Roosevelt preceded her to the Egyptian capital in 1910 and told his listeners to emulate America's traditions of democracy, hard work, and free enterprise.¹¹

But the keen sense of strategic interest, so prevalent in America's Manifest Destiny across the continent or in the Monroe Doctrine's warnings to Europeans about their designs on Latin America, was absent in the Middle East. This detachment contrasted with European fears of Russian and later German expansion into the sprawling and declining Ottoman Empire. As official Washington stayed on the sidelines of the Middle East except for missionary ventures and trade, the high tide of European imperialism and colonialism washed over the region.

World War I and the Middle East

The United States gazed almost disinterestedly while the European great powers circled, like vultures, the dying carcass of the Ottoman Empire at the beginning of the twentieth century. They were eager to carve out colonies or spheres of influence. Germany, the newest predator in the imperial bevy, searched for its place in the colonizing sun by aligning itself with the sultan's decrepit government. German machinations worried the Entente Powers—Britain, France, and Russia—all of which had their own designs on Ottoman lands. American policy was narrowly focused on maintaining free-trade and commercial relations (much as in China during the same period), and in keeping unrestricted contact with missionaries running hospitals and schools to ensure their safety from anti-Christian pogroms and rioting populaces. Despite their traditional anti-colonial sentiments, Americans prior to 1914 favored dismantlement of Ottoman suzerainty

and imposition of British and French colonization on the region to eliminate its slavery, polygamy, segregation of women, and explosive violence. They believed that European colonizers could civilize the local populations and bring them into the modern world.

Even the immense exertions of World War I failed to alter Washington's virtual disengagement from the Middle East. True, various groups lobbied the Woodrow Wilson administration for American involvement in their causes, whether American Zionists or Christian humanitarian groups, which opposed the slaughter of their brethren or the Turkish genocide of the Armenians. Yet, the United States stayed clear of conflict in the Eastern Mediterranean. When the U.S. Congress declared war against Germany and later its ally Austro-Hungary, it did not likewise enter into a state of belligerency with Turkey. America rejected the international pattern and diplomatic custom calling for it to declare war on its adversary's allies. President Wilson remained unpersuaded of the legal grounds for a Turkish war without aggressive acts, worried about the ill-preparedness of American forces for any major conflict, and concerned about the practicality of fighting a war in the Middle East with overextended supply and communications lines.

Thus, the major combat operations in the Middle East during the 1914-1918 war were undertaken by America's allies, chiefly the British, who took Iraq and with the aid of irregular Arab forces (advised by Lawrence of Arabia) captured Arabia and sections of Syria. For its part, France concentrated on what today is Lebanon and segments of Syria.

At the conclusion of World War I, America was devoid of a military presence in the Near East, unlike its British and French allies. Nor did it possess grand imperial goals or exclusive economic ambitions for the region. This freed the United States from being bound by vested interests in former Ottoman domains.

President Wilson pushed for the adoption of his principles of self-determination for the populations freed of Turkish rule by British and French forces. London and Paris objected to independence for Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, Palestine, and Transjordan (later Jordan), whereas the indigenous peoples demanded their own sovereignty. The interlocutors convening at the Paris peace conference in 1919 came up with a compromise in the mandate system whereby the League of Nations bestowed conditional territorial control to Britain and France, mandating them to prepare the populations for future independence. British

and French leaders tried to entice the United States into the mandate system by having Washington assume administration of Armenia, Constantinople, and the Dardanelles—the strategic international waterway that along with the Bosphorus links the Black and Mediterranean seas. President Wilson warmly entertained the idea especially of an Armenia mandate but realized that Congress would object to what amounted to a de facto American colony in the Caucasus.

In the end, America walked away from all the mandate schemes and, more profoundly, any involvement in the Middle East. Indeed, the U.S. Senate rejected membership in the League of Nations itself, crushing Woodrow Wilson's internationalist dream. The U.S. withdrawal from Middle Eastern responsibilities angered London and Paris because

In the end, America walked away from all the mandate schemes and, more profoundly, any involvement in the Middle East.

they had only agreed to mandates at Washington's insistence. They accommodated President Wilson's wishes and assumed "novel responsibilities" in the Middle East by occupying the turbulent lands. At this stage of minimal political engagement in the Middle East, the United States could afford to turn its back on the region's predicament without experiencing negative unintended consequences.

Subsequently, American policy in the Near East reverted to its commerce-only pattern. President Warren Harding, Wilson's successor, revamped U.S. policy almost exclusively toward protection of American commercial interests, which were beginning to focus on access to oil. President Harding did not share his predecessors' concerns about American college and missionary endeavors in the Mideast.¹² Harding's successors in the White House—Calvin Coolidge and Herbert Hoover—hewed to similar insular views. Washington governments sought to avoid foreign entanglements and international commitments anywhere in the world, not just in the Middle East.

Between the two world wars, American attention to the Middle East concentrated on two main enterprises—oil and the ripening problem in Palestine. The West's industrialization by the early 1920s necessitated adequate petroleum stocks to keep pace with the motorization of U.S. drivers. American and European firms prospected for, contracted, and produced oil from Mideast fields. American oilmen and their European counterparts struck pay dirt in Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Bahrain, initiating a flow of crude and a dependency on foreign energy that persists

undiminished today. The intervening years witnessed the expansion both of oil exports and reliance on fossil fuels from the Middle East, which was transformed from a romantic haze of sun-seared sands and impoverished camel caravans to gold-leaf opulence within a generation. As the world's thirst for energy accelerated, the Middle East assumed a geostrategic pivot point in global affairs. In time, it drew official Washington deeply into its affairs.

The second, and unofficial, link to the Middle East grew from planting of Zionism in Palestine. Like other nationalistic communities that awoke in the nineteenth century, Jews desired their own independent existence in their own homeland. European Jews yearned to rejoin their brethren living in Palestine. Even after the Diaspora saw the Roman Empire's expulsion of Jews from their ancestral home in the Holy Land, other Jews remained. In the late nineteenth century, Jews made up a majority around Jerusalem, if not the entire Palestinian coastal strip. Fresh waves of anti-Semitism and pogroms convinced Jewish thinkers and activists in Europe and the United States to advocate a return to their ancestral homeland. Thus, Jews from Russia, Ukraine, and Poland moved in large numbers during the 1920s to the eastern Mediterranean enclave. The rise of the Nazis and their genocidal policies during the 1930s and 1940s increased the flow of Jews into the tiny Levantine land. Tensions with the local Arab inhabitants soon flared into violent conflicts. In spite of calls for U.S. assistance to protect Jewish settlers from Arab attacks, the United States held firm to the policy that Palestine was a British responsibility.

During the interwar period, official Washington clung to a policy of neutrality, while some Jews and their Christian supporters looked to the reestablishment of Jewish sovereignty in the Holy Land. They strove to facilitate the establishment of a vibrant Jewish homeland. The Holocaust dramatically served to strengthen their resolve for a sovereign Jewish state. Three years after the conclusion of World War II, in 1948, the Jewish immigrants and their native brethren in Palestine declared statehood.¹³

World War II, the Cold War, and the Middle East

The United States dropped its standoffish posture toward the Middle East during the 1939-1945 global conflict. It could no longer remain indifferent to the prospect of losing access to Middle East oil or East-West communications through the Suez Canal. When German and

Italian forces overran Yugoslavia, Greece, and Crete and drove the British troops to within sixty miles of the Egyptian city of Alexandria, North Africa and the Mediterranean basin loomed large on strategists' maps in Washington. Oil, waterways, and supply routes to southern Russia stood imperiled by the Axis victories. The Franklin Delano Roosevelt presidency swung first toward land warfare not in Europe proper but in North Africa. It had been over a hundred years since Washington sent unseasoned armed forces to the former Barbary Coast in what was now designated as Operation Torch and the intervention into North Africa. Freedom of the seas was once more at stake, and control of North Africa's littoral became crucial in Washington's calculations. Other foundations of American interest in the region were laid during the war. America's oil ambitions were entrenched in Saudi Arabia, where the U.S. military started construction of an airbase close to an American petroleum entrepôt in Dhahran.

*America's oil
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Saudi Arabia ...*

Unlike World War I, the second global conflict left the United States with a large military presence in North Africa. It also marked the beginning of a permanent U.S. interest in the vast region between Tangier and Tehran. The Allied defeat of Germany's Afrika Korps resulted over time in the displacement of European colonial rule in the Middle East as well as North Africa. American anti-colonialist sentiments collided with British, French, and Italian imperial rule. U.S. officials mentored nationalist movements, and America proclaimed the colonies' right to independence. As a consequence, the Middle East broke free of European rule in World War II's aftermath.

The advent of the Cold War and the adoption of the containment doctrine necessitated that American governments manage local political turbulence to deny the Soviets an opportunity to acquire warm water ports in the Mediterranean Sea and the Indian Ocean. For example, when Libya demanded independence at the war's end, the fledgling Harry Truman administration brushed aside demands by France, Egypt, and the Soviet Union for Libyan territory, which would have jeopardized American predominance in the Mediterranean by bowing to the colonial powers' aspirations and by allowing the Red Navy a warm water port or Moscow access to Wheelus airbase, near Tripoli. Next, the United States and Britain faced down Soviet troops advancing southward from their bases in northern Iran, bent on latching onto

the Iranian oil reserves, securing a harbor window on the Persian Gulf, and threatening Anglo-American concessions over the petroleum fields in Saudi Arabia and the Gulf. Only the Allied determination blocked Moscow's ambitions.

In the eastern Mediterranean, Washington also grew apprehensive about Soviet pressure on Greece and Turkey. To preserve their territorial integrity, the White House resorted to several defensive measures such as stationing what became known as the Sixth Fleet in the eastern waters of the Aegean Sea, gaining congressional support for military and civilian assistance for Greece and Turkey in the Truman Doctrine, and rallying the American people to the preservation of order in the Middle East. While Americans more readily recall the U.S. defensive measures to the north in establishment of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO), Berlin Airlift, and Marshall Plan, the events in the Middle East in the mid-1940s were no less dramatic and far-reaching expansions of American power.

In addition to its defensive steps, the United States as well as individual American citizens played a crucial role in the founding of the modern state of Israel in 1948. Holocaust survivors and Jewish refugees flocked into Palestine, reinforcing the demands of the long-resident Jewish community for a small political state of its own. Some Jews took up arms against the British colonial troops and the Arab residents who fought to hang onto their orchards and villages against what they viewed as a foreign invasion. Wearied from its exertions during the war and its mandate responsibilities in the volatile Levantine country, London announced its decision to turn over the Palestine imbroglio to the United Nations. The UN, in turn, chose to partition the land into Jewish and Palestinian mini-states. When Israel claimed statehood, the United States followed the Soviet Union in recognition of its independence. Rather than peace, however, Israeli and Arab hostility has produced sixty years of almost incessant conflict, either low-intensity fighting or major wars.

The protracted Soviet-American global confrontation played out in the Middle East, where abundant oil reserves, emerging independent states, and superpower interests converged in a near-perfect "political storm." Rather than being left to its own devices, as the Arab feudal sheikhs, Bedouin tribes, and caravan traders had been for centuries, the Middle East became one of the epicenters of competition among oil prospectors, arms suppliers, and diplomats who pursued resources

and geostrategic advantage. These political and economic forces tended to reinforce authoritarian inclinations in the newly sovereign states, which lacked democratic traditions.

America pursued three main objectives in the greater Middle East during the Cold War era. It resolved to block Soviet penetration, back anticommunist leaders, and mediate peace between Arabs and Israelis as the best way to guarantee stability and the flow of oil upon which the West grew evermore reliant. These incompatible ends on occasion tossed U.S. policymakers into agonizing dilemmas:

- a. How to reconcile containment of Moscow's aggression by backing less-than-democratic rulers with American idealism for promoting democracy, which was open to Soviet subversion
- b. How to stand with Britain and France to safeguard the Middle East from Kremlin machinations, while avowedly declaring that America stood against colonialism and for national independence
- c. How to reconcile support for Israel while desiring to cultivate goodwill with Arab governments.

The crosscurrents of Middle Eastern violence, religious feuds, and differing aspirations for independence often whipsawed U.S. policies.

Washington's approaches, therefore, sometimes appeared contradictory to outsiders and critics. For example, the United States helped Iranian conspirators to oust Mohammad Mossadegh as prime minister in 1953 because of his reliance on the communist Tudeh Party. Yet, it pressed for the restoration of Morocco's King Muhammad V to the throne and the return of Tunisia's national leader Habib Bourguiba to power against French rule. But America's actions were based on anti-communist realism and anti-colonial principles. The clash between ideals and realpolitik resounded strikingly in the 1956 Suez crisis.

When Egyptian strongman Gamal Abdul Nasser announced the nationalization of the Suez Canal, the British, who had stationed troops in Egypt for seventy-five years, resolved to act. London brought along Paris, which detested Nasser for funding the Algerian resistance to French rule, and the Israelis, who feared Cairo's Soviet-equipped army posed a mortal peril to the Jewish state's existence. Thus, Britain, France, and Israel launched a coordinated attack in 1956 against Egyptian military forces. It is here that Washington embraced its anti-colonial creed and reversed its anti-Nasser policies. The Dwight

Eisenhower government joined with the Soviet Union in condemning the invasion, and diplomatically blocked and economically sanctioned its European friends from ousting Nasser, ensuring the Egyptian dictator's survival. Nasser repaid America for its regime-saving intervention by denouncing the United States as the new imperialist power in the Middle East. The Anglo-French-Israeli operation fizzled out, humiliating the perpetrators. In its wake, the Soviet Union made headway in the Middle East as Arab states looked to Moscow for massive arms packages and diplomatic clout against Washington.

While the Cold War in the Middle East played out directly between the superpowers, it also fell to their proxies. American military assistance to Israel grew, especially after the Jewish state crushed its Arab neighbors in the 1967 war. Successive American administrations recognized that Israel represented "the most effective stopper of the Mideast power of the Soviet Union," as President Richard Nixon phrased it.¹⁴ For its part, the Kremlin channeled weapons and Red Army trainers to Egypt, Libya, Iraq, Syria, and South Yemen. Throughout the turbulent 1960s and 1970s the United States tried to contain Soviet advances, promote reconciliation between Israelis and Arabs, and maintain a steady flow of oil. In fact, petroleum as a weapon came into its own during this period.

After the Arab states' defeat in the 1973 Yom Kippur War (or October War as the Arabs designate it), Saudi Arabia and the other oil-exporting countries jacked up the price of their crude exports to the West by curtailing and regulating output. The result was lengthy gas lines at American filling stations, nation-wide inflation, and stagnant economies. Even more pivotal was the realization of American and Western (including Japanese) reliance on Middle East oil for their economic survival and prosperity. The growth in demand for energy in the West was aggravated by the huge economic expansion created by the industrial modernization in China and India. Consequently, American and world dependence on Middle East oil has mushroomed in intervening years, which vastly deepened the strategic significance of the Persian Gulf. But international reliance on the region's energy reserves was not the only variable that changed.

Iran's revolution sharply redrew the Persian Gulf's political map. Before the overthrow of Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlavi in 1979, Iran promoted Washington's interests in the Gulf arena by serving as

the regional “policeman” within the Nixon Doctrine. After the shah’s dethronement, the Islamic Republic developed into an implacable American adversary. First it violated the diplomatic sanctity of the U.S. embassy in Tehran (an act of war), imprisoned 52 staff members, and held them for 444 days. The abortive rescue

... the Islamic Republic developed into an implacable American adversary.

mission, Operation Eagle Claw, wounded American pride at home and standing in the Middle East when it failed to liberate the hostages.¹⁵ The failed rescue operation and the kidnapping of Americans in the embassy recalled events nearly 200 years earlier off the Barbary Coast, when U.S. frigates tried to save imprisoned sailors in the *dey*’s jails. It underscored how intractable Middle Eastern politics could be.

Next, Iran sponsored terrorism against American and Israeli targets in the Middle East and Europe through its Hezbollah (the “Party of God”) auxiliaries. And it embarked on a secret nuclear program during the mid-1980s that today confronts the United States and the United Nations with the prospect of uranium weapons for its mid-range missile fleet. Since the Islamic Republic’s ascendancy to power, the United States has had to cast a wary eye toward an unpredictable and dangerous regime perched on the Persian Gulf.

A second dislocation in the U.S. stabilizing agenda for the Gulf took place across Iran’s border in Afghanistan. In late 1979, Moscow deployed the Red Army into Afghanistan. The Kremlin had grown apprehensive about the loss of its influence in the remote country where its allied Marxist regime tottered on the brink of collapse. Instead of rescuing the failing government in Kabul, the invasion touched off a fierce anti-Soviet resistance. The Afghan guerrilla movement gained fighters from throughout the Muslim world when it raised the jihad banner against the infidel occupation of the mountainous country. Ten years later, the Red Army withdrew across the Friendship Bridge but not before its presence triggered a worldwide Islamic reaction. As no other single event, the Soviet intervention lit the fuse to an Islamic powder keg that exploded into a global terrorist campaign, the end of which is still nowhere in sight. The consequences of this event and the organizational prowess of Osama bin Laden in harnessing Muslim grievances, real and apparent, led to bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, the U.S.S. *Cole* in Yemen, and the September 11,

2001 “planes operation” against the Pentagon and World Trade Center. This terrorism has sharpened America’s focus on the broader Middle East theater beyond its former commercial and petroleum pursuits.

Before this revelation dawned, Washington was preoccupied by the Soviet threat to the West’s oil lifeline and to the Persian Gulf’s warm water ports. As a result, President Jimmy Carter pledged to defend pro-Western governments in the Persian Gulf. The Carter Doctrine found operational expression in the standing up of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force. The task force developed into today’s United States Central Command (CENTCOM) during Ronald Reagan’s first administration. CENTCOM anchored the United States in the Gulf with a permanent basing of air, ground, and naval units. CENTCOM proved to be a vital forward headquarters in the prosecution of the Persian Gulf War and in the toppling of the Taliban regime in Afghanistan before it oversaw the invasion and occupation of Iraq in 2003.

America also found itself dragged into action on the Mediterranean coast of the Middle East through peace-making and war-making endeavors. President Carter, for example, helped broker peace between Egypt and Israel in what became known as the Camp David Accords in 1978. President Reagan, on the other hand, was forced by events to intervene militarily in Lebanon. When in 1982 the Israel Defense Force (IDF) struck back at terrorist incursions from the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO), it pushed the movement northward and surrounded it in Beirut. The IDF’s shelling of the seaside capital provoked an international outcry at the loss of civilian lives. Under pressure, the White House offered to defuse the conflict by presiding over the transport of the PLO to safety in Tunis. Assisted by Italian and French troops, U.S. Marines facilitated the evacuation of some 16,000 PLO fighters and their families.

Three weeks later, the Marines were back in Lebanon to defend democracy by propping up a minority Lebanese government in a multisided sectarian conflict among Shiite, Druze, Maronite, and pro-Syrian factions. It eerily foreshadowed the U.S. invasion and occupation of Iraq more than two decades afterwards. The Marines had to shoot their way into the city, where they had to be reinforced with U.S. Army soldiers and with Navy warships firing from the sea in the largest combat operation in the Middle East since World War II. In April 1983, a Hezbollah suicide bomber drove an explosive-filled truck into the U.S. Embassy in Beirut, killing 17 Americans. In October,

another Hezbollah truck bomber struck a Marine base, killing 241 servicemen, in the single deadliest assault on American troops since 1945. Initially, President Reagan ordered a counterstrike with carrier-based aircraft and the battleship *New Jersey's* sixteen-inch guns. Wary of being drawn into a quagmire, Reagan withdrew U.S. forces in February 1984.

The aftermath of this withdrawal from the Lebanese entanglements might offer a foretaste of what a large-scale leave-taking from the entire Middle East might bequeath to Washington and the Mideast neighborhood. America's pullback was interpreted in the region as a failure to restrain Syria and its allies, which consolidated their grip on Lebanon. Next, Lebanon revoked the Israeli-Lebanese peace treaty that the United States had brokered. More dramatically, a spate of terrorist attacks, most probably by Hezbollah agents, struck American targets in the Middle East. Two bombings of the U.S. embassy in Beirut occurred within a little over a year of the U.S. exfiltration. Hezbollah bombers also attempted to kill U.S. service members at a restaurant in Torrejon, Spain in April 1985, but instead murdered 18 Spaniards while wounding 15 American troops from the nearby U.S. Air Force base.¹⁶ In January 1985, the same network killed two American passengers aboard a hijacked Kuwaiti commercial jet, and six months later commandeered a TWA plane bound for Beirut in which the U.S. Navy diver Robert Dean Stethem was shot, his body dumped on the airport runway.

Lebanon remained Hezbollah's favorite haunt for kidnappings in the 1980s, during which nearly a dozen American journalists, academics, CIA officials, and others vanished, some never to be released. Other Lebanese factions joined in the abductions. And still other terrorist organizations, such as the Palestinian movement, the Abu Nidal Organization, and the PLO staged shootings at the Vienna and Rome airports and hijacked the *Achille Lauro*, an Italian cruise ship.

Additionally, the Libyan strongman Muammar Qadhafi, whose terrorist agents had for the past several years plagued Washington and other international capitals, finally stepped over a red line with the Reagan government. A bomb—later traced to Libyan operators—killed two U.S. servicemen in a Berlin nightclub. In reaction, the Reagan White House launched Operation El Dorado Canyon, in which U.S. Air Force and Navy warplanes hit targets in Tripoli and Benghazi. This counterattack compelled Qadhafi to hunker down, but not for long.

His hand was discerned in the mid-flight explosion of Pan Am flight 103 over Lockerbie, Scotland in late 1988, killing the 259 passengers and eleven villagers on the ground.

Terrorism and the Middle East

As bad as the 1980s were for terrorism directed at Americans, the next decade recorded even worse attacks. Not only did the scope of the bombings widen but their motivation shifted from the secular-political to more religious-political ends. The elevated peril faced from Islamic radicals developed greatly as a consequence of mujahideen resistance to the Kremlin's invasion of Afghanistan. The mighty Red Army—one-time victors over German panzer divisions—stumbled and finally marched out. Afterward, victorious jihadis were emboldened to take on the other infidel power in the Middle East—the United States—just as the American presence there dramatically expanded to stabilize threats from Iraq's strongman Saddam Hussein.

Rather than gaining a respite from Middle East troubles with the end of the Cold War, the United States found itself more diplomatically and militarily entrenched in the volatile theater. Iraq's conquest and rape of Kuwait riveted U.S. attention on the threat it posed to Western oil supplies and the precedent it set for settling other border disputes by the resort to armed force. In short, Hussein's 1990 invasion of what he termed Iraq's 19th province risked destabilizing the entire Middle East, for it set on edge other states and opened the door to forceful resolution of border disputes. Endorsed by the U.N. Security Council, the George Herbert Walker Bush administration organized a thirty-four-nation multinational force that evicted Hussein from Kuwaiti soil in early 1991.

In the course of deploying some 500,000 troops to the Persian Gulf theater, the United States enlarged its military presence in Saudi Arabia—the home of Islam's two most holy sites in Mecca and Medina. The ever-expanding footprint of infidel soldiers, airmen, and sailors on the Arabian Peninsula's sacred soil deeply aggrieved a still obscure Saudi millionaire, Osama bin Laden, who resolved to strike back. Fresh from the victory over the Soviet military in Afghanistan, bin Laden resolved to humble the United States as well.

The story of Osama bin Laden and his terrorism network, Al Qaeda, is so well known that only the briefest retelling is needed here. They both played a central role in attacks on American targets from

Saudi Arabia to the “black hawk down” incident in Somalia, and from the bombings of U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania to the 9/11 attacks on Pentagon and the World Trade Centers. Moreover, bin Laden, his deputy Ayman al-Zawahiri, and Al Qaeda inspired, instigated, and initiated a global spate of bombings and shootings from Afghanistan, Bali, Ankara, Madrid, London, Amman, Islamabad, and Algiers to Iraq. In this cavalcade of terrorism strikes, the American homeland was hit once before the 9/11 “planes operation.” In early 1993, Manhattan’s Twin Towers were struck by Abdul Rahman Yasin, an Iraqi who made the bomb, and Ramzi Yousef, a Kuwaiti who drove the explosive-laden truck into the under-ground parking lot. They carried out the instructions of Omar Abdul-Rahman, a blind Egyptian cleric, who headed an extremist group based in a Brooklyn mosque and linked to Al Qaeda. Prior to the ramming of commercial jets into the World Trade Centers and the western face of the Pentagon, the trajectory of terrorism ascended well beyond what should have served as wake-up calls.

The U.S. response to the terrorist equivalent of “Pearl Harbor” consisted of first a counterattack against the Taliban regime in Afghanistan, then the Saddam Hussein dictatorship in Iraq. Washington mustered strong NATO participation for the invasion of Afghanistan and a thirty-nation “coalition of the willing” for the Iraq offensive. Both interventions resulted in violent occupations as the United States struggled to stand up democratic governments, new police and armed forces, and an array of community services in lands long deprived of responsible rulers. In the aftermath of the attacks, anti-American insurgencies intensified rapidly.

Despite the rapid routing of the Taliban in late 2001 by a combination of Special Operations Forces, airpower, and surrogate Afghan forces, the southern countryside of the Central Asian state saw a resurgence of terrorist bombings, assassinations, and fire-fights by mid-2006. These depredations against the local population cast in doubt the progress thus far measured in democracy, economic progress, and public works, like the expansion of roads, schooling, and clinics.

Within Iraq, the anti-coalition insurgency morphed into a kaleidoscopic sectarian civil war marked by an array of complex and shifting alliances among factions and tribes that entailed not just Shia-Sunni clashes but also Shiite-on-Shiite and Sunni-on-Sunni conflicts. America’s vast military, humanitarian, and economic commitments

to Iraq and Afghanistan were jeopardized by escalating violence and civil strife. The once sturdy multilateral coalition dwindled as allied governments withdrew their contingents due to domestic opposition to the vicious Iraqi insurgency.

Thus, the predicament sketched at the beginning of this essay—that many American citizens yearn for an outright departure from the Middle East—stems from the protracted and seemingly hopeless fratricide in Iraq and, to a lesser degree, in Afghanistan. The nostalgic urge to pull out and return to a 1990s world of apparent peace, economic growth, and hope for tomorrow is understandable. Jihadi terrorist capabilities have been degraded with the destruction of an Al Qaeda base in Afghanistan and verification that Iraq is devoid of nuclear weapons. America is safer. But the odds of a pre-9/11 restoration are virtually impossible, because the attacks of jihadi terrorists have continued apace. Even the 1990s saw anti-American terrorism

But the odds of a pre-9/11 restoration are virtually impossible...

brewing. As of this writing, Al Qaeda has reconstituted itself within the lawless frontier zone of northwest Pakistan, known as Waziristan. The latest U.S. invasions are not the cause of, nor will they be the ultimate solution to, the problem of Islamic terrorism.

During the intervening years since America's counterattacks into Afghanistan and Iraq, the world has witnessed a series of terrorism bombings and killings worldwide. These assaults have often been perpetrated by self-generating jihadi cells that drew inspiration from Al Qaeda, if not direct assistance from bin Laden's headquarters. During the past few years, intelligence agencies have confirmed a resurgence of the volume and effectiveness of Al Qaeda's proselytizing.¹⁷ Al Qaeda-minded terrorists have struck in Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, and the Gaza Strip, as well as beyond the Middle East.

Even Algeria, which had enjoyed a patch of relative tranquility after the florescence of terrorism in the 1990s, witnessed the recrudescence of bombings in early 2007. The military-dominated government had squelched political violence after it canceled elections in 1991 out of fear that the Islamic Salvation Front would sweep into office. The mid-April 2007 attacks also demonstrated the symbolic resurrection of Al Qaeda, (which seemed to hunker down in the face of the U.S. counterattack). For example, the local Algerian terrorist movement, Salafist Group for Preaching and Combat, subordinated itself officially

in September 2006 to bin Laden's Al Qaeda and renamed itself Al Qaeda in the Islamic Maghreb. Other groups from Morocco to Tunisia reportedly merged their efforts. This represented another clear sign that bin Laden's cause had overcome nationalistic divisions in the emerging radical Muslim movements. By subordinating themselves under his banner and by integrating themselves into Al Qaeda's global Salafi jihad, they give the appearance of more unity than is the reality. Still, the integration has had very real effects. By pooling resources and training in mobile camps in the Maghreb, however, the North African cells have attracted returning Iraqi jihad veterans.

The Maghrebi groups now fight with enhanced legitimacy under the Al Qaeda banner, posing threats to local governments and the West's access to oil produced in Algeria, Tunisia, and Libya. Since North Africa is regarded as Europe's "backyard," its besiegement rings alarm bells across the Mediterranean in Madrid, Paris, Amsterdam, and London. The Secret Organization Group of Al Qaeda of Jihad in Europe operates clandestinely. Along with other networks, it raises apprehensions about fresh outbreaks of bombings and murders that emanate from the greater Middle East. To the southeast, jihadis operate in Somalia, where the United States countered them indirectly by backing the Transitional Federal Government (TFG) and Ethiopian forces. Washington has lavished growing support on the TFG and Ethiopia.¹⁸

Additionally, a U.S. military base, with Special Operations Forces (SOF) has initiated an ambitious "hearts and minds" campaign for the Horn of Africa from its headquarters. Soon after the establishment of the Joint Task Force-Horn of Africa, American forces provided medical care, dug wells, and played soccer with local teams to build rapport with the surrounding communities and thereby preempt terrorists from gaining a foothold.¹⁹

The Mideast, therefore, serves as the incubator of much of the world's terrorism. Abandoning the region to its own devices would constitute a replay of the late 1990s. At that time the United States abdicated its duty to strike back forcefully at terrorism radiating from Afghanistan. Engagement in the Middle East need not—and most probably should not—mean U.S. occupations and democracy-building initiatives. To contain and arrest the spread of terrorism, however, the United States will need to operate in the Middle East. Confronting terrorist networks through an indirect approach, as SOF did in the Philippines, or winning over local peoples through civic-action

programs, as U.S. forces did in the Horn of Africa, constitutes a non-occupation means to thwart terrorism. But the United States must not contemplate a lock-stock-and-barrel withdrawal from the Near East. Washington cannot replicate its nineteenth-century disengagement from Barbary Coast today because no European colonial powers exist to do the policing of the Middle East in our place. Besides, America's long-historical interaction precludes an abrupt departure from a region so economically and strategically central to the nation's interests.

The Middle East, Energy, and the United States

Any proposed retrenchment from the Middle East must take account of the strategic impact this decision would have on America's economy and its population's well-being. The United States and its allies rely on Middle Eastern energy to power their economies, heat their homes, and light their businesses. Oil is *the* vital fuel of the early twenty-first century.

This over-reliance on fossil fuels may lessen as American scientific research and conservation efforts blossom. But in the foreseeable future neither wind-, solar- nor hydro-powers are expected to make an appreciable dent in the world's petroleum guzzling. Some technological breakthroughs look interesting. Photovoltaic cells, bio-fuels, ethanol, hybrid cars—all hold promise of reducing fossil energy expenditures; but to date none dangle much hope of eliminating entirely the world's dependence on crude oil to power its economy. If anything, the consumption trend lines point upwards, with no prospect even of leveling off in the years ahead.

Global oil utilization stood at 80 million barrels per day (mbpd) in 2003. Consumption is expected to jump to 98 mbpd by 2015 and reach 118 mbpd by 2030. Asian countries, especially China and India, will account for much of this growth as their economies accelerate over the next two decades.²⁰ World energy consumption is estimated to increase by 57 percent from 2004 to 2030. The industrialized economies grouped together in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD, which does not include China, India, or Russia) are expected to increase their fuel demands by 24 percent in the same time span; while the non-OECD countries are projected to push up their usage 95 percent over the same period.²¹

America alone accounts for 25 percent of the world's daily oil consumption, while accounting for just 10 percent of global petroleum

production. Thus, it relies on foreign imports to power its economy. The United States obtains about 22 percent of all its imported oil from Persian Gulf nations. At the very least in the mid-term future, the United States must protect its and the West's access to energy in the Gulf arena. This strategic location holds over 65 percent of the world's proven (meaning quantities that are reasonably recoverable) reserves. War, terrorism, or other severe disruption of the flow of oil would dislocate the global economy. Uncertainty about the Mideast producing states already causes price increases. The increase of about 3 percent per annum in global demand also exercises upward pressure on oil prices.

As the world has little sustainable spare oil production capacity, the crude exporters would be hard-pressed to make up for a sudden dislocation elsewhere in supply from a serious terrorist attack or regional instability in the Persian Gulf. The gravity of America's oil dependence is aggravated by the sizzling growth in demand from China and India as their economies further industrialize. Indeed, China surpassed Japan as the second largest petroleum utilizer in 2004. In that year, it consumed 6.5 mbpd. Moreover, all estimates of Chinese energy consumption predict surging demand, which will deepen its dependence on Mideastern petroleum for the foreseeable future. Chinese oil ingestion is expected to triple by the end of the next decade.

India's thirst for fossil fuels will also accelerate. In 2003, it burned on average 2.2 mbpd. But by 2010, India's consumption will surpass 2.67 mbpd, deepening its foreign dependence on petroleum imports because of its own limited oil-field capacity. Other regions of the world—Africa, Latin America, and the Middle East itself—also put pressure on oil production and export capacity as their economies grow.

America's own dependence on imported petroleum has dramatically escalated in the last three decades. In 1973, petroleum imports stood at 6.3 mbpd. By 2004, that figure more than doubled and rose to 12.9 mbpd. Of that amount, 2.4 mbpd, or about 17 percent, came from Persian Gulf sources to U.S. refineries in 2004.²²

Estimates of world crude oil consumption by the U.S. Energy Information Administration forecast that total global demand will skyrocket from 78.20 mbpd in 2002 to some 119.20 in 2025, if the output can be expanded to sustain this heightened demand.²³ As of now, global supplies of energy will come mainly from the Middle East

and North African producers. The United States, on the other hand, has relied not only on Saudi Arabian petroleum but also more heavily on Canadian, Mexican, and to a lesser degree, Venezuelan oil exports. The Middle East, nonetheless, meets the world's energy needs.

In fact, the largest growth in petroleum reserves in recent years has come from the Mideast and the Persian Gulf. The Middle East's proven reserves stood at some 367 billion barrels of oil in 1983. Two decades later that estimate

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doubled to 734 billion barrels of oil. Saudi Arabia remains the granddaddy of proven oil reserves at 262 billion barrels, representing 25 percent of global reserves. Iraq is currently ranked as second with some 11 percent of the world's oil. If the latest estimates are confirmed, Iraq will strengthen its standing as number two, because comprehensive independent studies since the 2003 U.S. invasion have identified the presence of an additional 100 billion barrels in Iraq's western desert. The finds, therefore, are located in the Sunni-dominated provinces. Oil deposits in Sunni lands might lessen the stubborn minority's resistance to Shiite and Kurdish areas, which currently benefit from fossil fuel production. It will, however, take at least a decade and an estimated \$25 billion in foreign investments to realize the full potential of the oil fields.²⁴

Nearby in North Africa and the Horn of Africa, oil reserves are likewise concentrated in certain countries while neighbors hold no oil or just barely appreciable amounts. Libya, for instance, weighs in with nearly 40 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. Algeria, on the other hand, possesses just 11 billion barrels, and Tunisia sits on a mere 600 million barrels. In the Sudan, one of the epicenters of terrorism instigation as well as a center for ethnic strife, knowledge of oil capacity and actual production capability has steadily advanced. It is currently estimated to have over 6 billion barrels of proven reserves. Thus the broader Muslim Middle East commands the lion's share of the world's oil wealth.

The country outside the Middle East with the largest oil reserves is Russia; it has 74 billion barrels of proven reserves. Its Siberian oil fields rank second only to Saudi Arabia in the largest undiscovered oil reserves. Russians report their production capacity as 11 mbpd in 2005, with plans to expand this flow to 17 mbpd by 2025. But

Vladimir Putin's encroachment of state monopoly in the energy sector, accompanied by crony corruption, has lessened foreign investment in oil production. While Russia's political stability is much surer than the Middle East's, Moscow's resort to heavy-handed tactics in threatening to withhold natural gas supplies to Ukraine and Belarus unless the two nations fell in political line disconcerted Western European governments in early 2007. Dependent on Russian energy, Europe took alarm at the Kremlin's wielding of natural gas supplies as a diplomatic weapon. European capitals criticized the ham-handedness of the Putin government and resolved to secure their energy needs by pursuing alternative sources and fuels. But pledges are unlikely to alter the dependency of Germany, France, Poland, and others any time soon.²⁵

Another very promising region for oil, which also has political question marks around it, is the Caspian Sea basin. It is speculated that Caspian Sea and its littoral might hold the second largest oil and natural gas reserves outside the Middle East. If true, it would outrank the Russian Federation in potential sources. Since the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union, the Caspian arena's oil production increased by some 70 percent, with the largest expansion occurring in the countries of Azerbaijan and Kazakhstan. Still, the Caspian fields lack adequate export infrastructure. The littoral states also dispute each other's boundaries. Moreover, the governments themselves are based on dictatorships rather than stabile democratic electorates.

Starting from a much smaller base, Latin America saw a tripling of known barrels of oil from 34 billion in 1983 to 101 billion barrels in the twenty-year span. During the same time period, Asia-Pacific oil reserves only marginally increased and North American decreased. Most estimates place the Asia-Pacific region with the lowest oil reserves of any region at this time. China has the largest known reserves at 48 billion barrels; and Indonesia, the only Asian country with OPEC membership, is second with 22 billion barrels of known reserves and 4.7 billion barrels of proven oil reserves. During the past decade, the largest oil discoveries have taken place in West Africa, specifically in Angola, Nigeria, and the Gulf of Guinea.

Despite its recent output growth, the Middle East production capacity is unlikely to keep pace with accelerating global energy demands. This mismatch between ever-escalating consumption and moderate or uneven export capacity, if anything, amplifies the strategic importance of

the Near East for the global economy. The West may be less dependent on Persian Gulf oil than in the 1970s because oil fields beyond the region have come online; but these crude deposits are more likely to be exhausted much sooner than those in the Gulf states, which today account for 62 percent of the world's proven reserves.

America's, and much of the world's, dependence on foreign oil presents a dilemma. Higher pump prices over the last two years have had the effect of stimulating the search for new oil sources, faster-paced output from existing sites, and alternative energy to satiate the mushrooming demand. Elevated costs for fossil fuels also motivate consumers and businesses to conserve. If conservation and alternative energies drive down the upward pressure on oil prices, then falling costs also lessen the stimulation to find new petroleum deposits and to develop alternative sources. Ergo, painful prices are a necessary factor in the quest for new forms of energy. Until new fuels come on line, it is simply not viable even to consider a withdrawal from the Middle East. Despite the political turmoil and terrorism emanating from the region, economic realities dictate America's continued engagement in the Middle East. Just as early nineteenth-century trade in the Mediterranean compelled Thomas Jefferson and James Madison to war against the Barbary Coast states, today's commercial interests force the United States to remain immersed in the lands east of Gibraltar.

Threats to Middle East Oil

Threats to Mideast oil production manifested themselves soon after the 9/11 attacks on the United States. Al Qaeda-influenced groups launched terrorism operations inside Saudi Arabia in May 2003. These attacks served as another wake-up call to the Kingdom that it too faced the type of internal threats which for so long plagued neighboring states. Once alerted, Riyadh ramped up its surveillance of potential individuals and groups suspected of terrorism, and it heightened security at the country's oil production facilities. The desert kingdom's Achilles heel lies in its Eastern Province, where most of its minority Shia population resides. The Shiite minority number about two million people and represent around 10 percent of the total Saudi population. Members of this community have participated in terrorist attacks on Americans and other Saudis from as early as the mid-1980s. Shiite-Sunni sectarian strife has erupted not only in Saudi Arabia but also

in Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, Kuwait, and Pakistan. It also threatens the peace in Bahrain, Yemen, and Iran.

The island of Bahrain in the Persian Gulf faces an even more potentially threatening fifth-column from its majority Shia who make up nearly 80 percent of the country's 750,000 inhabitants in this Sunni-ruled country. Like the Shi'ite populations elsewhere, the Bahraini Shias sensed a politico-religious revolution with the overthrow of Iran's shah and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's ascendancy to power in 1979. They grew restive about their subordinate status on the island kingdom. They protested their poverty and joblessness and engaged in attempted coups and street protests. Their revival, as elsewhere in the Middle East, was well underway by the time of the start of the Iraq War.²⁶ Events in Iraq, as they impact the political fortunes of the majority Shia there, will carry great weight on the Persian Gulf emirate. Bahrain's Shi'ite majority are part of what Jordan's king Abdullah called the Shi'ite crescent, which are also a concern to the neighboring Sunni populations.

But of all countries located on the Arabian Peninsula, Yemen is closest to a sort of Wild West land, with what Special Operators call "ungoverned spaces" along its joint borders with Saudi Arabia and Oman. This remote borderland, in fact, has ties to Osama bin Laden; it is the country from which his father emigrated to Saudi Arabia. Yemen is one of the poorest countries in the Middle East, with only small deposits of oil. Its Shi'ite minority represents 15 percent of the population, with the remainder made up of Sunni Arabs. Iran has been suspected of aiding a Shia group that conducts a guerrilla war in the north.²⁷

While an orderly unification between North and South Yemen (which melded the traditional northern territory with the Marxist-ruled southern lands) proceeded peaceably in 1990, its history since has been marked by periodic violence and even a civil war in 1994.²⁸ The resolution of the intra-Yemeni fighting failed to curb the country's border tensions characterized by smuggling and clashes against Saudi security forces.

This political turbulence lends itself to the brewing unstable conditions permitting terrorism to take root. Yemen has already been the scene of the boat-bombing attack on the U.S.S. *Cole* that killed seventeen sailors in 2000. Later, it saw an early application of America's use of preventive force. The CIA fired a lethal missile and killed an

alleged associate of Osama bin Laden and five suspected Al Qaeda operatives in the first days of November 2002. An unmanned Predator drone unloaded its deadly five-foot long Hellfire rocket straight into a four-wheel vehicle carrying Qaed Salem Sinan al-Harithi, a suspected Al Qaeda leader and an accessory in the U.S.S. *Cole* bombing, as he and his riding companions drove 100 miles east of Sanaa, the Yemeni capital.

Washington justified the threshold-crossing attack because the traveling party was considered a military target—combatants—under international law. Although the attack did not rank even remotely near the preemptive war doctrine, it did signal a resort to deadly force in a different kind of warfare. As a combatant on a broader battlefield, Harithi fell victim to the campaign against Islamic terrorism. According to administration officials, President Bush delegated operational authority over Predator strikes to intelligence and military personnel, thereby decreasing the response time to sensitive information about the whereabouts of terrorists.²⁹

While Yemen is bereft of major oil reserves or a vibrant economy, its geographical location lends strategic weight to the country. Its seacoasts and islands dot the Red Sea and Indian Ocean sea lanes to the Suez Canal. Even more significant, its coastal promontory juts into the Bab el Mandab, a narrow strait between the Horn of Africa and the Arabian Peninsula that serves as a thoroughfare for ships traveling from the Mediterranean via the Suez Canal to the Far East. With only 17 miles across the strait, the waterway is a strategic “choke point” in global shipping. Thus, Mideastern oil is not the only vital interest of the United States in that unsettled corner of the world.

Along with historical and energy connections to the Middle East, overriding political stakes prevent a large-scale withdrawal from the Middle East. It would betray the region to terrorism and abandon Israel, a long-term friend and vibrant democracy, to perilous fate.

Ideology and Demographics

The Middle East’s volatility is fueled by pervasive virulent ideologies and a demographic “time bomb.” Islamic states have long been hostile to infidel invasions and occupations that date from the medieval Crusades, some of which intermittently held territory in the Holy Land for decades before succumbing to Muslim counterattacks. Islamic populations deemed the Ottomans’ conquest centuries later more

acceptable than the Crusades, in part because the occupiers were fellow Muslims. When the Ottoman Empire collapsed at the time of World War I, its holdings fell into European hands. British and French colonial rule encountered quarrelsome subjects at best and anti-European conflicts at worst. As a consequence, most of the Mideastern countries achieved independence prior to World War II. But their hostility to an infidel presence remained strong. Osama bin Laden was spurred into action largely by the arrival of thousands of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia to defend the desert kingdom from Saddam Hussein's tanks when they first invaded Kuwait in 1990. Bin Laden discounted the American defense of Saudi Arabia, because the infidel presence, in his mind, defiled Islam's two most holy shrines in Mecca and Medina. He proposed to raise a defense against a possible attack on the desert kingdom by Iraqi tanks, but the monarchy spurned his offer.

... their hostility to an infidel presence remained strong.

The Islamic resistance to foreign incursions gained activist converts when the Red Army marched into Afghanistan in late 1979 to prop up a client government. Mujahideen from the Muslim world flocked to the mountainous battleground to defend Islamic soil from infidel conquest. Almost ten years later, when the Soviet forces limped out of Afghanistan, the militant Islamic reawakening was reinforced by the victory. Periodically through history, Islamic resurgences have been a reoccurring phenomenon. Born in the trackless deserts among nomadic tribes, Islam and its most fervent adherents have always viewed urban life as fraught with decadence and religious laxity. Like a hot desert wind, the Islamic pious and ascetic descended from remote and marginal regions upon their more lax and easygoing co-religious for adopting Western mores and beliefs.³⁰ These spiritual rebirths often bore a heavy secular component devoted to empowering political forces. Bin Ladenism, the outgrowth of the anti-Soviet campaign, conforms to this pattern of waging jihad (or holy war) for temporal as well as spiritual ends. The resistance to Soviet occupation and later terrorism were fused with militant Islam aimed at the West in general and the United States in particular.

Virulent strains within Islam such as Wahhabism stoked the fires of intolerance toward Christian, Jews, Hindus, and moderate Muslims, who are perceived as fostering an alien and infidel occupation of Islamic lands.³¹ The name of this reform movement was developed

from teachings of Muhammad ibn abd-al-Wahhab who lived some 200 years ago in the dry hinterlands of what is today Saudi Arabia. He, in turn, derived his inspiration from much earlier writings of Ibn Taymiyya and others. Practitioners of Wahhabism preferred to be identified as Salafist, which refers to the Salaf as-Salifh, or the “early generation” or “pious predecessors” who were companions or near contemporaries of Muhammad the Prophet in the seventh century.

The contemporary re-ascendancy of these puritanical creeds among Muslim subgroups predates the 9/11 terrorism. Yet, those attacks gave a fillip to the sagging extreme Islamic cause against a Western presence in the Middle East. America’s counterassaults first in Afghanistan and then in Iraq have likewise powered a backlash among Middle Eastern populations, exacerbated by the ticking demographic bomb. These pathologies fester among an especially receptive host—young males. Unemployed or alienated youths are the perfect target for extremist recruitment.

A demographic burden is manifesting itself across the Middle East and North Africa, where 50 percent of the population is under the age of 30 years. Female fertility is above three births per woman across the regions, except in Algeria, Iran, and Tunisia. Governments have been reluctant to address demographic problems because they fear offending the cultural norms of their citizens. Such demographic trends are not atypical of developing societies; but youth-senior imbalance in some Arab nations has reached critical proportions. In Saudi Arabia, for instance, women average five births and “unofficial data imply that at current rates some 60 percent of the population will be under the age of 17 by 2010.”³² Experts point out that population growth in of itself is not necessarily a cause for concern if societies can economically accommodate an expanding workforce with jobs and wealth-creation development to meet rising expectations of youthful workers. But the autocratic rulers have not put in place growth-generating policies to stimulate economic expansion and job-spawning industrial sectors.

Over three-quarters of the conflicts that have broken out in the three decades since the 1970s took place in countries where the “at least 60 percent of the population was under 30” years of age.³³ Poor countries with rapidly growing populations experience intense competition for jobs, productive land, or education. Rising discontent among the young facilitates terrorist or insurgent recruiters. Countries with birthrates averaging at least four children per woman, such as

Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan, are ripe for explosive social conflicts.

Tempting as it may appear, abandoning the entire Middle East to these cauldrons of religious rage and disgruntled youth is unlikely to bring security and peace to the United States. Globalization—with its exchange of goods, services, and people—has made it nearly impossible to raise the drawbridges that connect continents and countries. Even if such drawbridges could be raised, breaking off the flow of visitors or immigrants bent on terrorism would not halt the terrorist takeover of some states from the Mediterranean to the Aral seas. Once in control of government treasuries and armories, fanatical movements would be free to embark on aggressive acts. The fall of Pakistan's nuclear weapons or Saudi Arabia's vast wealth into extremist hands would bode ill for the security of America and its allies. Any total withdrawal from the Near East would also leave moderate Arab governments and Israel to an uncertain fate. The fall of Morocco, Tunisia, or Jordan to jihadis would destabilize the region. Leaving Israel—a long-term ally, thriving democracy, and first-world economy—to the potential clutches of violent fundamentalism would signal a catastrophic retreat, calling into question America's decades-long commitments to other democratic allies in Western Europe and East Asia. Moreover, it would buy the United States nothing, for Wahhabists such as Osama bin Laden aspire firstly to a caliphate stretching from the Iberian peninsula to Indonesia, then to a world Islamic theocracy. No compromise will assuage these megalomaniac designs. They must be defeated or contained until the fanaticism recedes like other historical religious floods. ↑

Endnotes

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