

**External Powers in the Middle East:
A Question of Stability or A Desire for more Power?**

More than any other region in the world, the Middle East is defined not by commercial ties, diplomatic interaction, or regional organizations, but by hard power and military might. This has been the case for the region's modern history and will remain so for the foreseeable future. But not since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire a century ago has the Middle East been so convulsed by regional turbulence and internal conflict. Amid this crumbling regional order, the ongoing civil wars, especially in Syria and Yemen but also in Libya and Iraq, have become apparently intractable. Regional power struggles, such as the rivalry between Saudi Arabia and Iran, are widely understood to be complicating factors. But while such rivalries are indeed consequential, broader dynamics have also made these conflicts particularly long and ugly.

Among the casualties of the turbulence following the 2011 Arab Spring was the *status quo* regional power distribution. Countries formerly seen as regional authoritarian anchors, such as Zine el-Abidine Ben Ali's Tunisia, Hosni Mubarak's Egypt, Bashar al-Assad's Syria, and Muammar Qaddafi's Libya proved to be brittle shells that succumbed to domestic turmoil or conflict.

Scarred by its Middle East forays since the September 11 terrorist attacks, Washington has been unable—or unwilling—to sustain the prevailing regional order. The successive U.S. presidential administrations of Barack Obama and Donald Trump have played a less vigorous role than their predecessors in attempting to mediate conflicts; they have also pursued policies toward Iran and Israel, respectively, that Arab states have found alarming in various ways.

It has been the actions of two global powers—the United States and Russia—that have solidified these nascent alignments into something resembling regional blocs. Russia’s September 2015 military intervention on behalf of the Assad government brought it into a military partnership with Iran, Syria, and Hezbollah. The Obama administration had sought to straddle this regional division—continuing security cooperation with Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates while leading negotiations on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) for Iran’s nuclear program. But the administration’s inability to translate the JCPOA into a new *modus vivendi* with Iran on its regional activities coupled with the more hawkish Trump administration—including its May 2018 exit from the JCPOA—have further solidified the anti-Iran bloc.

Despite its partnership with Iran in Syria, Russia has maintained serviceable relations with most regional states, including U.S. security partners. Turkey remains a North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) member and a member of the U.S.-led coalition to combat the self-proclaimed Islamic State.

When it comes to the USA, one of the most persistent myths about U.S. foreign policy is the idea that America desires—due to greed, messianic ideological impulses, or simple imperial presumptions—to dominate the Middle East.



In reality, American policy has long been torn by two conflicting imperatives: the need to protect enduring U.S. interests, on the one hand, and the desire to stay clear of the region's unending headaches, on the other. Paul Wolfowitz [remarked](#) once that his shift from focusing on the Middle East to working on East Asia was like “walking out of some oppressive, stuffy room into sunlight and fresh air.” To borrow the metaphor, American officials have long desired to walk toward the sunlight—while understanding that they cannot fully escape the darkness.

Today, calls for the United States to disengage militarily from the Middle East are commonplace. Those calls reflect deep frustration with the travails of American interventions over the past two decades, as well as the belief—entirely correct—that the United States faces greater challenges elsewhere. Yet U.S. interests in the region have not disappeared, and the prospect that Middle Eastern troubles will impact America if left unattended is as high as ever. If the United States rushes for the exits, it may find that it is pulled back under worse circumstances, and at higher costs, in the future. President Trump is giving voice to a powerful and understandable urge to cut cleanly and get out of the Middle East. The best approach, however, may be one that reflects America's longstanding ambivalence about the region.

So here one can ask himself to what extent these intervenes of the external powers affect the middle east. It's a question of their own stability or the desire of more power!

