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We Must Reduce the American Role in the Middle East



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The U.S. preoccupation with the Middle East over the past six decades has been a costly endeavor with little benefit. The traditional twin pillars of U.S. policy in the region have been relations with Israel and Saudi Arabia. Relations with Israel have been complicated due to domestic pressures on U.S. administrations that prevent a forthright approach to dealing with Israel. As a result, the Israeli attack on the USS Liberty in the 1960s was handled duplicitously by the administration of Lyndon Johnson. Relations with Saudi Arabia are dependent on U.S. energy requirements, and Saudi influence in the OPEC arena. As a result, Saudi's responsibility for the killing of Saudi dissident journalist Jamal

Khashoggi, war crimes in Yemen, and the brutalization of Ethiopian migrants on the Saudi-Yemeni border have been ignored.

There has never been a significant foreign threat to U.S. national security interests throughout this period, and the United States could distance itself from the region without injury to U.S. national security policy. The Soviet Union lost its limited role in the region in the 1970s, when the United States dominated diplomacy after the October War of 1973. Russia has developed an important role with limited assets in Syria, but the Assad regime rules a failed state that shows no signs of revival. Russia's relations with Iran bear watching, but they are based for the most part on mutual weakness—Russia due to military setbacks in Ukraine, and Iran because of its political and economic backwardness. The failure of Vladimir Putin's grandiose schemes for Ukraine will have negative reverberations for Russia in the Middle East as elsewhere.

China has wisely avoided military investments in the Middle East, but still is in position to exercise influence in the region over the long term. China recently stole a march on the United States in shepherding a diplomatic reconciliation between Saudi Arabia and Iran, but there are limits to the accord between the hostile Gulf neighbors as well as limits to Beijing's influence due to its dependence on Gulf energy supplies. As long as the Gulf states, particularly Saudi Arabia, have significant control over the global price for oil, there will be a rivalry for influence among the United States, China, and Russia.

Unfortunately, the Biden administration's response to China's recent diplomatic success has been an awkward attempt to arrange a reconciliation between Benjamin Netanyahu's Israel and Mohammed bin Salman's Saudi Arabia, two difficult diplomatic partners for the United States. Netanyahu's actions have embarrassed many U.S. leaders, including President Barack Obama, Vice President Biden, and secretaries of state Hillary Clinton and John Kerry. Netanyahu did his best to block the signing of the Iranian nuclear accord in 2015, and currently is trying to block a resumption of the nuclear accord that Donald Trump abrogated. Only Ukraine receives greater American military weaponry without cost than Israel, which doesn't require and now doesn't deserve such largesse.

Saudi Arabia is the largest buyer of U.S. weaponry, and more than \$140 billion in sales remain on the books. Meanwhile, the Saudis have misused U.S. weaponry in Yemen, where they have committed war crimes, according to various human rights organizations. Saudi security units also have slaughtered and raped Ethiopian migrants and asylum seekers along the border with Yemen, according to Human Rights Watch. The U.S. Army has been training Saudi security forces for the past eight years. The Leahy Law prevents

the training of such forces if human rights are violated, but since the Saudis pay for the training, they are exempt from the law. (The U.S. embassy in Riyadh has been aware of these crimes for more than a year, but the State Department has claimed that it learned much later.)

Until George W. Bush's wretched and dishonest pursuit of war with Iraq in 2003, a series of U.S. administrations had wisely avoided military confrontation in the region. The 1948 Arab-Israeli War; the 1956 Suez War; the 1967 Six-Day War; the 1973 October War; and the 1980's Iran-Iraq War elicited no U.S. military involvement. Conversely, limited U.S. interventions in Lebanon in 1958 and in 1982 were colossal failures for the United States. U.S. containment of Iran, which included military threats, has also failed, and a significant opportunity to limit Iran's nuclear capability has been jeopardized.

The U.S. overreaction to the 9/11 terrorist attacks led to two decades of warfare in Afghanistan and Iraq with nothing to show for the costly military involvement. The major byproduct of U.S. military action in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf has been increased Islamic radicalization that includes Jihadist terrorism as well as a pan-Islamic identity that complicates U.S. diplomacy. The United States may spend as much on military power as the rest of the world combined, but al Qaeda forces have been strengthened by decentralization, and ISIS and its jihadist expeditionary forces in the Middle East and North Africa remain troublesome. U.S. efforts regarding counterinsurgency, which were in play in the Vietnam War six decades ago have not been effective overall.

Instead of pursuing ways to reduce U.S. exposure in the volatile Middle East, the Biden administration is shepherding sensitive and secret negotiations with Israel and Saudi Arabia for an agreement that would increase U.S. commitments in the region. The Saudi demands for entering a diplomatic agreement with Israel include a mutual security arrangement with the U.S.; advanced arms sales such as a high altitude defense missile system; and U.S. assistance for a civilian nuclear program that could enable the Saudis to enrich uranium. This would certainly contradict Biden's campaign commitment to make Saudi Arabia a "pariah" state.

Israel will demand what it traditionally demands: increased military assistance at no cost and U.S. acceptance of increased settlements on the West Bank. Once again, the Palestinians will be lost in the shuffle, and there will be no mention, let alone progress, toward a two-state solution. The long-term U.S. illusion of trading Israeli territorial concessions for Arab-Israeli peace is just that—an illusion. Twelve years ago, the Obama-

Biden administration declared that it would “pivot” from the Middle East to the Indo-Pacific region—another illusion.

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