



Twenty Years after 9/11: Implications for US Policy in the Middle East

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The September 11 attacks represented a major strategic shock to US foreign policy in the Middle East. Whereas much of US foreign policy during the Cold War understandably focused on the global threats posed by the Soviet Union and China, these attacks orchestrated by Osama bin Laden from a hideout in Afghanistan propelled both the Middle East and terrorism to the center stage of US foreign policy making. The subsequent Afghanistan War and Iraq War were some of the longest (and least satisfying) military campaigns in US history. After 20 years of military and economic investment in the region, US politicians, strategists, and citizens alike are now questioning the return on that investment and calling for a reorientation of US foreign policy away from terrorism in the Middle East and toward great-power competition with Russia and China.¹

So what are the implications of this shift for US policy in the Middle East? What lessons are we to learn from this 20-year counterterrorism battle?

First and foremost, the case for a reduced emphasis on the Middle East is compelling. The Middle East simply matters less to the United States today than it has in the past.

The United States is no longer dependent on the region's vast oil and natural gas reserves. Today the United States—not Saudi Arabia—leads global oil production.² Indeed, the United States can satisfy its energy demands with only a minor reliance on energy imports from the Western hemisphere.³ Today, China—not the United States—is most vulnerable to a disruption in oil supplies from the Middle East.⁴

The United States' Middle East policy has also long been concerned with preventing the region from being dominated by any powerful, external or internal, state actor. Indeed, President Jimmy Carter first designated the Middle East as a vital US interest in response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979.⁵ The first major introduction of US troops to the Middle East was in response to Saddam Hussein's Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990.⁶ But the situation

today is quite different because, whether inside or outside the region, no state's military is capable of dominating it. Russia has little military capacity beyond maintaining support to its traditional client in Bashar al-Assad's Syria.⁷ Chinese policy in the Middle East emphasizes building infrastructure projects as part of its Belt and Road Initiative and has made few serious military investments beyond maintaining a small naval port facility in Djibouti.⁸ Meanwhile, the traditionally strong Arab states of concern to US policymakers are divided; weak; consumed by domestic economic, social, and political challenges; and incapable of mounting a serious challenge to Western interests. Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya are consumed by internal civil wars. From within the region, only Iran remains as a serious concern for American policymakers. Although decades of sanctions have significantly degraded Iranian conventional military capabilities, Iran does retain an ability to conduct limited strikes against US partners through its network of regional militias and by employing its increasingly sophisticated missile and drone forces, as demonstrated by Iranian strikes on Saudi oil facilities in September 2020.⁹ Of course, preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon will also remain a preeminent concern going forward.

Another major historical preoccupation of US policy in the Middle East has been the defense of Israel. But, thanks largely to over \$146 billion in US assistance over the years, Israel today possesses the region's most powerful and capable military forces.¹⁰ Israel no longer faces any serious, conventional military threat in the region aside from Iranian missiles. On that narrow score, Israel alone in the region possesses a nuclear deterrent that should continue to prove sufficient.¹¹ A team of scholars from the Brookings Institution recently concluded because of these and other factors, "Israel has never been safer."¹²

Given the realities of reduced US interests in the Middle East, a US military drawdown is both inevitable and a necessary enabler of a desired US strategic rebalance to Asia.¹³ The United States can no longer afford to place the Middle East and terrorism at the center of its foreign policy. Instead, US policy making must concentrate on the pressing threats from China and Russia while prioritizing other security challenges, including climate change, infectious disease, cyber warfare, and artificial intelligence.

These pressing issues elsewhere do not mean, however, the United States can simply ignore developments in the Middle East. The United States certainly retains a continued, strategic interest in degrading the terrorist threat emanating from the region. Consequently, assessing where prior counterterrorism policies and strategies have fallen short is a worthy task.

One of most obvious conclusions from the 20-year war on terrorism is the terrorist threat will continue to evolve. The aim of defeating terrorism altogether was never realistic.¹⁴ As a result, US objectives will have to be modest. A more realistic goal is to degrade and disrupt the terrorist organizations that have global reach. Terrorism is a threat that will have to be continuously managed. The extended Afghanistan War and Iraq War may well have disrupted the ability of terrorist groups to plan and conduct large-scale attacks. But al-Qaeda and the

Islamic State continue to draw supporters from around the globe and have established numerous affiliates throughout the region and beyond.¹⁵ These terrorist groups and their future incarnations will likely continue to pose at least a marginal threat to US and Western interests.

Given the persistence of the terrorist threat, coordinating counterterrorism operations and conducting a robust intelligence exchange will remain essential components of US policies dealing with the Middle East. Nonetheless, the scope and range of US foreign policies will need to broaden beyond this narrow 9/11 focus on terrorism. The Arab uprisings, which began in late 2010 and consumed the region, demonstrated the genuine threat to stability in the Middle East resides in the tremendous economic, social, and political challenges confronting these countries.¹⁶ The Arab uprisings also highlighted the paper-thin legitimacy of many of the authoritarian regimes in the region. The United States' military might alone can do little to address these basic societal demands for more effective governance, better jobs and education, and social justice.

Moreover, these military operations have had unintended, negative consequences that should sound cautionary alarms for US strategists as they signal the need to prepare more effectively for potentially damaging second- and third-order effects. For instance, the overthrow of the Taliban in Afghanistan and Saddam Hussein in Iraq removed two key obstacles to the expansion of Iranian influence in the region. Iran has taken full advantage of these missteps to increase its reach through a regional network of primarily Shia militias. Additionally, the election of Shia politicians in Iraq led to a sense of Sunni disenfranchisement that, along with the US decision to dismember the Sunni-led Iraqi military, fostered conditions for the rise of al-Qaeda in Iraq and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS).¹⁷

Another of the key weaknesses of US counterterrorism strategy has been its reliance on ineffective and problematic partners. In both Iraq and Afghanistan, the US ability to train and equip conventional, state-based military forces has had disappointing results. Despite spending \$25 billion to train and equip Iraqi security forces, entire Iraqi divisions abandoned their posts and fled when confronted with ISIS militia members in 2014, eventually allowing the terrorist group to solidify control over some 10 million people and vast swaths of Iraqi and Syrian territory roughly the size of Great Britain.¹⁸

In Afghanistan, the failure of the US training mission despite decades of equipping and training security forces and billions invested in military and economic programs alike became painfully clear with the Taliban's remarkably rapid conquest of the country in mid-August 2021.¹⁹ The Afghan security forces trained and equipped by the United States and numbering some 300,000 people simply folded and collapsed within days without offering much beyond token resistance.²⁰

Similarly, even the states that have been more effective counterterrorism partners have proved to be problematic and acted in ways that have been counterproductive and damaging.

For instance, Saudi Arabia has been both arsonist and firefighter in the war on terrorism.²¹ An exclusionary and virulent form of conservative Saudi Wahhabi theology continues to provide the theological foundation exploited by many of these terrorist groups to justify their operations and fuel recruitment, even as the Saudi government provides cooperation and intelligence critical to disrupting at least some terrorist plans. Meanwhile, the United Arab Emirates has emerged as an important counterterrorism partner, but, at the same time, it was an essential partner in Saudi Arabia's disastrous military campaign in Yemen.²²

The United States' partnerships with nonstate actors have been similarly problematic. The nation's military and political support to Syrian Kurdish militia played an essential role in providing the ground troops needed to roll back ISIS advances in Syria.²³ Nonetheless, this same partnership was also perhaps the single greatest irritant in US-Turkish relations, leading Turkey to purchase advanced Russian air defense missile systems that threaten the viability of an integrated NATO on its eastern front.²⁴ Furthermore, Iraqi Shia militia—several of which were supported by Iran—also proved critical to ousting ISIS from strongholds in Iraq.²⁵ These same militia groups today, however, often operate independently of the central Iraqi government, are attacking US military and diplomatic facilities, and represent a serious threat to Iraqi stability.²⁶

Unfortunately, finding more effective or less problematic partners for US counterterrorism operations is not likely. Nonetheless, US leaders will need to acknowledge openly both the limitations and drawbacks of these partners while they develop future US policies, plans, and strategies.

Looking forward, two emerging issues are likely to require creative and critical thinking by US policymakers. The first is the problem of repatriating and prosecuting ISIS detainees and deradicalizing these former fighters and their families.²⁷ The numbers are staggering. According to some estimates, some 10,000 ISIS fighters are detained in Syria by US-backed Kurdish militia, and some 65,000 ISIS family members are being detained in Syria and Iraq.²⁸ The majority of these detainees are Syrian or Iraqi, but thousands more come from some 50 other countries from across the Middle East, Europe, and Central Asia.²⁹ Riots have broken out in the detention facilities in Syria, and US officials are concerned about the risk of a mass breakout that could replenish ISIS ranks.³⁰ Evidence suggests these desperate conditions are only further radicalizing fighters and families alike.³¹ Meanwhile, Syria and Iraq lack the resources and will to detain these fighters properly, put them on trial, and imprison them, let alone establish the programs necessary to deradicalize and reintegrate the families back into society. Additionally, other governments are refusing to repatriate their detained citizens suspected of joining ISIS, viewing them as a costly security risk.

Failing to address this emerging problem would increase the prospect for growth of radical, violent terrorism. Though this problem is not the United States' alone, US leadership and funding will be critical to garnering action by regional governments and other international partners, as argued in a recent report by the Middle East Institute.

The United States' policy will also need to be sensitive to growing divisions and tensions within the region toward counterterrorism—particularly as they involve political Islamist groups like the Muslim Brotherhood. Two axes are emerging within the region: one viewing virtually any political Islamic group as an existential threat to its rule, and the other considering these groups as a natural political expression reflecting the Islamic nature of its societies. Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt lead the former axis and are directly opposed by Turkey and Qatar. These two camps are backing competing political groups on the ground throughout the Middle East. In Libya, for instance, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Cairo are backing anti-Islamist militia leader General Khalifah Haftar, who is directly challenging the internationally backed government in Tripoli that is in turn being staunchly defended by Istanbul and Doha.³² Navigating these internal tensions and pressures will require smart US engagement with parties on both sides of this intraregional divide.

In summary, the post-9/11 US emphasis on terrorism understandably placed the Middle East as a top foreign policy priority for US policymakers. But global power is shifting eastward, which compels a strategic shift to confront a rising China in Asia and a resurgent Russia in Europe.³³ In this larger, strategic context, the Middle East must occupy a less prominent position in US foreign policies. This shift would not, however, mean abandoning the region entirely. Policymakers in the United States will still need to confront the continued yet evolving threat from terrorist groups in the Middle East.³⁴ In doing so, policymakers will need to consider the shortfalls of the post-9/11 policies, recognize the limitations and weaknesses of existing US partners, and find a way to address the emerging challenges associated with detained ISIS fighters and their families. Lastly, US policymakers will need to abandon an unhealthy reliance on the military instrument of power; broaden the substantive scope of US foreign policies beyond counterterrorism; and find creative ways to employ diplomatic, economic, and developmental assistance to improve the prospects for a stable region.

ENDNOTES

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