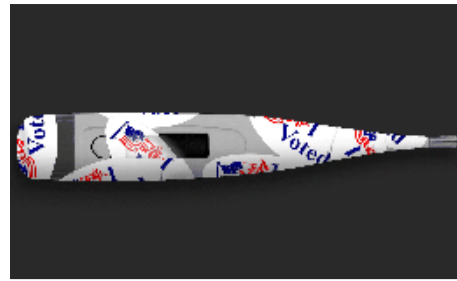




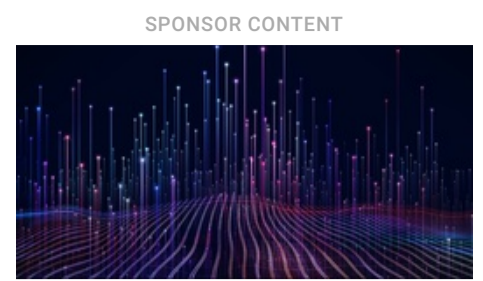
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## Defense One



In this June 16, 2014 file photo, demonstrators chant pro-Islamic State group, slogans as they carry the group's flags in front of the provincial government headquarters in Mosul, Iraq. AP PHOTO/MANU BRABO, FILE

### IDEAS

# The Current US Approach to Terror Is a Recipe for Forever War

Defusing terrorist groups requires helping the communities they exploit, not just shooting their leaders.

[KATHERINE ZIMMERMAN](#) | OCTOBER 30, 2019

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Without minimizing the bravery and tradecraft that went into killing Abu Bakr al Baghdadi, chasing down terrorist leaders without helping the communities they prey on is a recipe for prolonging, not ending, the war on terror.

Salafi-jihadi groups such as Baghdadi's Islamic State insinuate their way into communities made vulnerable by local conditions: bad governance, grievances, or external threats. The success of these groups is driven far less by some figurehead who releases occasional exhortations than by their ability to provide physical security, governance, and sustenance. Across the Middle East, North Africa, and Asia, there are people who take what the Salafi-jihadis have to offer because they have no choice.

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In Iraq, al Qaeda reconstituted from the remnants of its organization to form what would later become the Islamic State. The very Iraqi communities that had fought hard with the U.S. against al Qaeda accepted demonstrators waving the black flag

at their protests in early 2013. Sunni Iraqis from Anbar province were calling for the removal of then Prime Minister Nouri al Maliki, a Shia who strengthened his own power by sidelining Sunni rivals. The marginalization of Iraqi Sunni drove some to support—or at least tolerate—what would become the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria.

In Syria, al Qaeda-linked Salafi-jihadi groups defended communities opposed to the Assad regime from brutal oppression and attacks. Unlike Western countries, these groups came to the aid of the Syrian opposition. They fought on the frontlines and brought fighting experience and operational organization. They helped to protect and maintain critical infrastructure, sought to meet the basic survival needs of the population, and provided governance through local courts and councils. The groups grew stronger as the communities began to depend on them.

When some members of Syrian Salafi-jihadi groups began training for attacks on the United States, U.S. military forces struck. But killing that band of plotters only removes one immediate threat. The local conditions endure, providing fertile ground for Salafi-jihadi groups. Eventually, some group is going to evade detection long enough to gather and deploy enough resources to outdo the 9/11 attackers.

The U.S. strategy against the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and similar groups emphasizes the terror threats these groups pose and leaders and networks behind those threats. Big kills of prominent leaders reinforce a false narrative that the likes of Baghdadi and Osama bin Laden are the source of the threat. Their groups—and the Salafi-jihadi movement of which those groups are part—are more than the individual on top or the external attack cells. All groups have survived the death of a leader—and some, such as the predecessor of the Islamic State, thrived under the new personality.

Counterterrorism operations do nothing to fill the gaps in security and governance that drive vulnerable communities into the arms of Salafi-jihadists. The Obama administration's prioritization of the counter-ISIS fight in Syria over the resolution of the Syrian Civil War enabled al Qaeda's and other Salafi-jihadi groups' expansion. The Trump administration's reduction of U.S. engagement in Syria to counterterrorism and a token force in defense of the oil sets conditions for groups like ISIS to re-expand.

The global war on terror has become an endless war because the U.S. has yet to adopt an approach that will defeat the Salafi-jihadi groups at the heart of this terror threat. The cycle of military deployments—costly in both American blood and treasure—will not end so long as the conditions remain.

If the United States really wants to take the fight to the Islamic State or al Qaeda, it or its partners must out-compete them to fill the needs of their “constituents.” Providing communities with a viable alternative to the Salafi-jihadi groups reduces the groups' influence and weakens its ability to operate. This will no doubt require some military force — to provide security, for example — but the U.S. military will be one of the first to ask for a broader strategy with the Defense Department in support, not in the lead.

The U.S. must shift to a civilian-led strategic approach that uses foreign assistance and other elements of soft power to strengthen communities at risk of or under Salafi-jihadi penetration. Such an approach seeks to restore the ability of communities to reject Salafi-jihadi overtures, and relegate them to the fringes where defeating them will be a more straightforward counterterrorism mission.

Paying once to improve conditions by strengthening local communities' resilience will yield dividends in the future. Killing terrorist leaders feels great, but if that's all there is, it means we'll be back again, and again. And that is a true forever war. **D**

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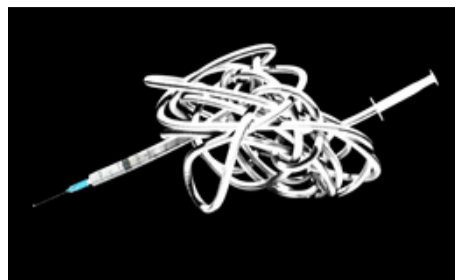
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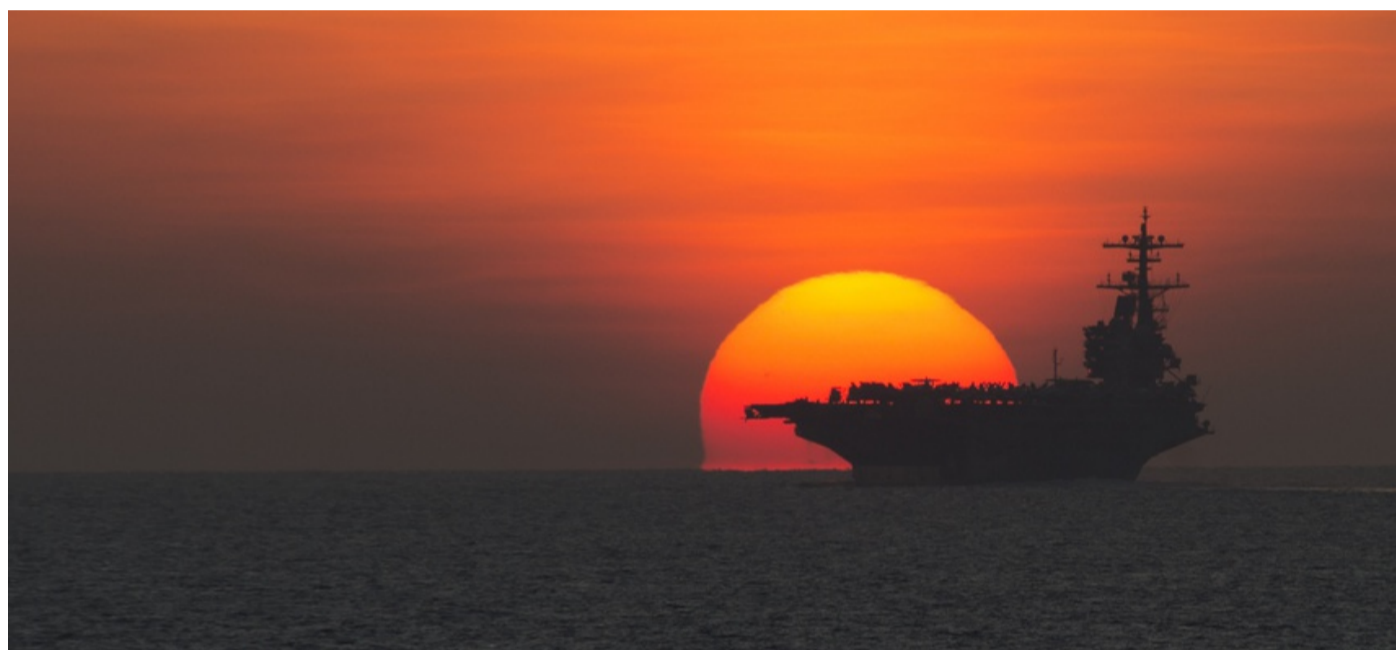
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The aircraft carrier USS George H.W. Bush (CVN 77) transits the Gulf of Aden. U.S. NAVY / MASS COMMUNICATION SPECIALIST 2ND CLASS ABE MCNATT

IDEAS

# The US Has One Last Chance to Halt Its Withdrawal from the Middle East

The next president must do what is wise, not what is easy.

**WILLIAM F. WECHSLER** | OCTOBER 30, 2019

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How do external powers withdraw from the Middle East? Just as Hemingway described going bankrupt: gradually then suddenly. That was true for the Ottomans, for France, for Britain, and now potentially for America as well. Not long ago this was unthinkable. Now it is not only possible but increasingly likely, and both friends and foes are already actively hedging against this future. The next U.S. president will be our last chance to halt this process.

Many Americans would undoubtedly welcome such a withdrawal. That's understandable for a nation still reeling from costly wars in Iraq and Afghanistan and the continuing chaos in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. For many who are interested in global affairs, the region seems cursed with innumerable, insurmountable conflicts which demand attention that might better be focused elsewhere, where the prospects for success appear better.

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To voters who want foreign policies that reflect American values, the Middle East is a region where even pro-American governments are often undemocratic and can be disdainful of fundamental human rights. To political partisans, it's a region whose leaders have appeared to take sides in domestic American debates. And to the far greater number of Americans who, polls show, don't really care about foreign-policy issues, the region is where billions of dollars are spent that would be better used at home. In all, good riddance to bad rubbish. Or as President Trump said last week, "Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand."

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The desire to withdraw from the Middle East is understandable. It is popular. It is openly advocated, more or less, by both our Republican president and several of the leading candidates in the Democratic polls. But it would be a terrible mistake and deeply harmful to the United States.

Ironically, the U.S. leadership role in the Middle East was until recently one of the most consistent components of American foreign policy, supported on a bipartisan basis across administrations. Beginning with President Franklin Roosevelt, U.S. national security interests were understood clearly and centered around the unique role this fundamentally unstable region plays in global oil markets – and the oversized role those markets play in both global security and the U.S. economy. American interests included ensuring that the region's vital energy resources would continue to be extracted and shipped safely around the world; supporting a delicate balance of power that promotes regional stability and protects our allies, including Israel; thwarting malign outside powers from interfering in the region and undermining our goals; disrupting terrorist threats to our homeland; preventing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; and encouraging bilateral trade.

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These interests have not changed. Despite U.S. "energy independence," sustained shifts in global energy prices still affect domestic economic growth and inflation. Oil remains the most important global energy source, representing over one-third of all energy consumption, and Saudi Arabia continues to be the global swing producer. We undoubtedly need to expand alternative energy use, but even under the more optimistic assumptions, oil is still very likely to persist as a crucial part of the American energy mix for at least the lifetime of anyone reading this.

Moreover, geography still dictates that most of the region's energy resources have to move through one or both of two critical chokepoints: the Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. It is painfully easy to disrupt the movement of tankers through these chokepoints, as we have seen recently, and it doesn't require an especially powerful military to attempt to shut them down entirely, something that Iran has repeatedly threatened to do and would likely spark a wider war. And while we might prefer to be a free rider under a costless security regime enforced by someone else, no other benevolent nation has thus far emerged that might harmlessly replace the United States as the guarantor of stability and freedom of navigation.

Until relatively recently, therefore, when confronted with the Middle East crisis of the moment, American objectives were usually not much more than to preserve an inherently fragile balance of power. Threats were intended to be contained rather than eliminated, disputes were resolved only after difficult negotiations, and it was accepted that progress would need to be incremental not revolutionary. Especially

for the last three decades of the twentieth century, the United States was deeply engaged in the Middle East but generally limited its role to one of a classic *status quo* power.

During this period, the American military presence was relatively constant though its combat operations were typically brief. More generally, the U.S. sustained its traditional profile of “forward engagement” through routine exercises and arms sales, by working “by with and through” its partners and proxies, through a near-permanent allocation of at least one carrier strike group to the region, and by maintaining a series of military bases along the key shipping lanes, often with significant host nation subsidies.

This bipartisan tradition of American leadership worked. It was imperfect, time-consuming and often unsatisfying, but overall our vital interests in the region remained protected. The U.S. presence was sized to align with those interests, and we were not overextended.

But over the first two decades of the twenty-first century, consecutive presidents decided to upend this tradition. President George W. Bush launched an unnecessary war in Iraq intended to overturn the regional *status quo* rather than reinforce it, sharply breaking from his predecessors. His failures in execution deeply destabilized the region, fed the Salafi jihadist movement, and allowed Iran to expand its influence. This undermined regional confidence in the competence of American leadership.

President Obama refused to engage in Syria after calling for Assad’s departure, distanced the U.S. from its usual regional partners, withdrew American forces from Iraq, and stood aside as the Islamic State began building its caliphate. This allowed the terrorist threat to reignite, Iran to further expand its malign activities, and Russian power to return to the region – the latter an outcome that the U.S. had previously worked for decades to prevent. Regional leaders questioned our commitment to American leadership.

Only partway through a single term in office, President Trump has already far outdone them both in the damage done to U.S. regional interests. His recent decision to abandon our brothers-in-arms in Syria has further strengthened our adversaries in Moscow, Tehran, and Damascus; has encouraged Turkish neo-Ottoman aspirations; and will allow the Salafi Jihadists to rebound one again. Perhaps even more worrisome over the long run, he has broken from all American precedents by publicly questioning whether the United States should continue its fundamental role in protecting the freedom of navigation. Compounding this, he has also thus far failed to offer any meaningful response to Iranian attacks on tankers in the Gulf and oil processing facilities in Saudi Arabia. Notwithstanding our continued military presence, regional leaders who observe our increasingly polarized politics, erratic policies and inability to keep our promises are beginning to doubt the underlying capacity of American leadership.

It took many decades to build a *Pax Americana* in the Middle East. It has taken far less time to put its foundations at risk.

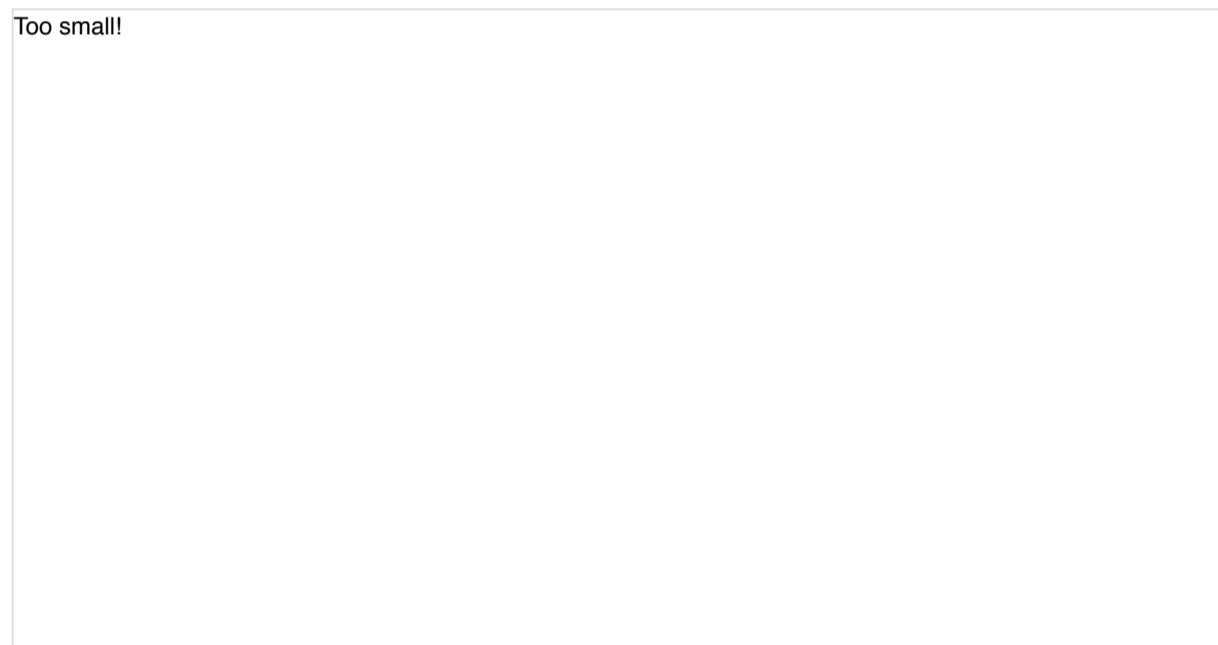
As campaign promises tend to become governing realities for American foreign policy, the prospect of a full U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East now stands before us. It’s not hard to imagine the implications of such a future. The region’s energy resources would be far less secure. Iran would feel free to be even more aggressive. Turkey would be increasingly tempted by revanchism. The relative influence of Russia and China would grow. Other regional state and nonstate actors – partners, competitors and adversaries alike – would feel unconstrained to advance their own objectives and come into increasing conflict with one another. U.S. national security interests would be threatened, and the U.S. economy would be more vulnerable to energy-related shocks.

Today, the only certainty regarding this scenario is that President Trump has proven to be both incapable of and unwilling to prevent it. Unfortunately, his departure from the White House alone will not be sufficient to reverse this course, though the sooner that happens the easier the task will be. Instead, it will be up to his successor to reestablish American leadership in the Middle East, restore deterrence with our adversaries, and begin renewing trust with our partners and allies.

The perception of this impending American withdrawal is already felt in the region; leaders there are already starting to take actions in response. These actions encourage American advocates for withdrawal, resulting in a self-reinforcing cycle. Our window of opportunity to break this cycle is beginning to close. Given the speed of these developments, and absent some catastrophe that involves the United States in another war in the region, the next president is likely to be last to have a real chance of doing so.

It's always convenient when the policies that are politically attractive also happen to be the ones that are wise. When it comes to the Middle East, this is no longer the case. The next commander in chief will require political fortitude to lead the United States back to its traditional role in the region, demonstrating what in previous generations was deemed a profile in courage. Otherwise we will continue inexorably along the current path that leads to American withdrawal, likely culminating sooner than we now expect.

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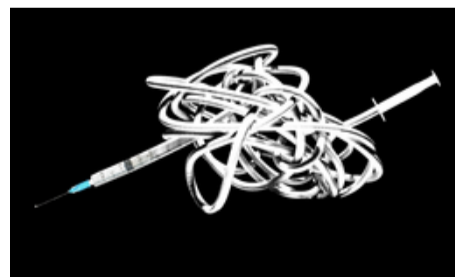
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