





WHAT SHOULD THE MIDDLE EAST EXPECT FROM THE UNITED STATES AND ITS ALLIES?

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Western influence in the Middle East has many drivers: the strong economies of Western states, strong trade with the region, and diplomatic clout around the world. Underlying all of those factors, however, is Western states' willingness to go to war to defend friends and interests in the Middle East. In many ways, the archetypal demonstration of this commitment was the 1991 Gulf War, in which more than a dozen Western armies, led by the United States, reversed Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait and defended Saudi Arabia.

When Western leaders sought to go to war last August to punish Bashar al-Assad for chemical weapons use, the publics in three states—the United States, the United Kingdom, and France—were so skeptical, they arrested their governments' desires to fight a limited war.

One could blame this refusal on these governments' poor political skills, Syria's lack of coveted natural resources, or simply fatigue after a decade of war in Afghanistan and Iraq. If true, the publics' reluctance to endorse war in Syria doesn't tell us anything about the future of the Western role in the Middle East. Yet, looking more closely, it does appear that we have arrived at an inflection point, and that Western military commitment to the region—and therefore the relationships based on that commitment—are shifting in important ways.

There are at least five reasons that support the idea that a new and durable attitude is emerging. First, the results of previous interventions have been mixed at best. Western countries sought to further avowedly political goals through military means, and they came up short. The complexity of local politics and the high stakes felt by local actors mean it would take more resources to shape politics from afar than Western countries are willing to sustain.

Second, the energy trade is changing. The growth in North American production, the flattening of European demand, and the rise of Asia all suggest a different set of interests to defend. Notably, the growing trade ties of Asian consumers to the Middle East have not increased Asia's commitment to the region's security to match, or even really supplement, the efforts of Western states. Western publics are noticing.

Third, defense budgets in Western states are likely to remain constrained for decades, as demographic shifts and entitlements consume ever-larger amounts of national budgets. In this environment, publics are more likely to see overseas commitments as a luxury.

Fourth, the rising threat of non-state actors changes the security equation. Large Western armies not only do not deter these threats, but they sometimes encourage them. Further, Western governments differ markedly from Middle Eastern allies about how to confront these threats, with Western governments favoring broad political inclusion, and Middle Eastern governments often opting for a blend of cooptation and coercion. Security, in this way, becomes an area of friction rather than the bedrock of cooperation.

Fifth, sustained Western engagement has engendered neither warmth nor gratitude from most Middle Eastern publics, and in some cases, it has aroused just the opposite. While mere popularity was never the goal of Western efforts, sustained hostility diminishes Western publics' willingness to keep investing in the region.

What these five points suggest is a more lasting Western effort to impose distance between the West and the Middle East. To be sure, Western governments will not cut off ties, and they will continue to sell weapons and train forces against security threats. Yet, it seems likely that Western states will focus on a narrower set of security threats going forward, focusing on trade through key waterways and with less attention to conditions within and between countries.

For the United States, a more distant set of relationships in the Middle East will make it harder to operate globally. In particular, a different relationship with Egypt will probably entail more difficulties moving between Europe and the Mediterranean on the one hand, and Asia and the Gulf on the other. Hedging against instability in Bahrain will likely involve a lighter U.S. military footprint in the broader Gulf region.

Accompanying a decline in military ties, U.S. trade with the region is likely to slump as well. Governments have made strategic investments in U.S. goods and services in part to keep the focus and attention of the U.S. government. Should the focus wander, so too will the dollars.

Among some of Iran's neighbors, a diminished U.S. presence, combined with a more conciliatory Iranian leadership, may prompt a limited rapprochement across the Gulf. In

Israel, a more uncertain U.S. military commitment is likely to have an opposite effect, persuading Israelis that they are more isolated and therefore act more aggressively to deter their enemies.

Overall, however, the shift suggests a U.S. willingness to accept more volatility in the Middle East, out of a conviction that it will not add to greater volatility in the United States itself. Such an approach would represent a repudiation of the Bush administration's approach since September 11, 2001, which placed the Middle East at the fulcrum of U.S. security.

For the last several years, conservative Gulf states have noted the Obama administration's rebalancing toward Asia and complained of abandonment. For the United States and other Western powers, however, the changes described here have less to do with Asia than with the Middle East itself. The region is changing, and the U.S. relationship with it is changing, too. ►

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