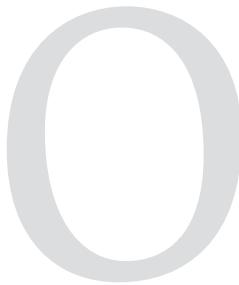


# Benign Neglect

By Jon B. Alterman



## FIRE SALE

A dentist in Sana'a, Yemen had to repeatedly forbid his neighbor from cutting down a tree on his property. The brewing dispute wasn't about overhanging branches or a blocked view, however. It was about wood. In Yemen's capital city, thousands of people are chopping down trees from streets and gardens and taking the wood home for fuel.

In late September 2017, Houthi rebels tripled the price of cooking gas in areas under their control, citing critical supply shortages. Because generous government subsidies over decades had cultivated a dependence on cheap gas for heating and cooking, the price surge hit hard, and it pushed poor Yemenis to look for cheap wood.

Now, savvy vendors hawk bundles of firewood at a fifth of the price of a gas cylinder. Sales are booming, but they are exploiting a shrinking asset. Between 2001 and 2012, NASA recorded a 78.5 percent reduction in Yemen's tree-covered area. That was long before the current conflict. Demand for firewood has increased sharply in Houthi-controlled territory, further accelerating the disappearance of Yemen's woodland resources.

Currently, 60 percent of Yemenis are food insecure, and 67 percent lack access to clean water. Deforestation makes these problems worse. It increases soil degradation, causes the desertification of agricultural land, and leads to floods and muddied runoff. Chopping down trees helps a family eat a hot meal for a day, but the impact on Yemen's ecology is long-lasting. The disappearance of Yemen's trees will only add to the country's growing humanitarian crisis. ■ BW

In March 1, 1970, the front page of the *New York Times* reported that then-Nixon administration adviser Daniel Patrick Moynihan had advised that the issue of race in the United States "could benefit from a period of 'benign neglect.'" Years of racially inspired violence and polemics had "created opportunities for martyrdom, heroics, histrionics, or whatever," and Moynihan advised that the U.S. government's focus on racial problems actually helped stoke them.

While Gulf Arab governments seem deeply relieved that they enjoy the support of the Trump administration after eight years of coolness under President Obama, the Trump strategy toward the Gulf is less different from Obama's than they would like. In fact, it's not so different from Moynihan's approach to race. Despite the perception that President Trump is doubling down on relationships in the Gulf, it is more accurate to see his strategy as disentangling the United States from intimate relationships that he believes have outlived their utility. While the tenor of conversations has changed, the Trump administration represents a continuation of a growing U.S. distance from the Gulf, and not a reversal of it.

In the view of many Americans, diminishing U.S. ties to the Middle East are part of an "America First" strategy, and are long overdue. Not only did war in Iraq cost more than a trillion dollars and more than 4,400 U.S. combat deaths, but it also yielded inconclusive results. It seems to have fanned the flames of extremism, given Iran an upper hand in the neighborhood, and yielded a weak Iraqi government that, almost 15 years after the war, U.S. officials must still visit on unannounced trips.

The Levant provides little relief. The Syria war has devolved into an endless blood feud, inviting expeditionary forces from Iran and Russia to buck up a dictator. The Palestinian-Israeli conflict has defied solution for seven decades, and many Americans see it as an unsolvable religious conflict. The Egyptian revolution of 2011 failed to meet the high hopes Americans had for it, Lebanon has been limping for all of recent memory, and so on.

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## SAUDI SHAKEUP

CSIS Middle East Program Director Jon Alterman has weighed in on the situation unfolding in Saudi Arabia, assessing the drivers and implications of the Kingdom's recent domestic and regional actions. In a Critical Questions analysis on November 6, Alterman discussed the drivers of Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman's campaign of high-profile arrests, and teased out potential impacts on the country's domestic political and economic environment. He noted that while the full scope of implications remains to be seen, recent actions indicate a departure from how Saudi Arabia has previously been ruled. Joining CSIS's weekly podcast on November 10, Alterman situated the crown prince's moves within a broader strategic shift in Saudi Arabia, and assessed how a changing Saudi calculus will influence its behavior at home and abroad. ■

## IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

The CSIS Middle East Program [hosted](#) a Maghreb roundtable discussion on the Maghreb as a migration source, transit point, and destination, 9/27/17.

Dr. Kristian Coates Ulrichsen [discussed](#) “The Fight in the GCC” at a CSIS Middle East Program Gulf Roundtable, 10/26/17.

Jon Alterman [assessed](#) U.S. and Chinese approaches to the Middle East in a new Georgetown University CIRS report, 11/1/17.

## IN THE MEDIA

Saudi Arabia will have to be careful that its “military ambitions don’t get ahead of [its] military capabilities.” Jon Alterman on [NPR](#) discussing shifts underway in Saudi Arabia, 11/8/17.

“It’s too early to tell” whether Crown Prince Salman’s moves represent “a brilliant gambit, an impulsive mistake, or something in between.” Jon Alterman in [U.S. News & World Report](#), 11/7/17.

“Envoy can only be effective if they speak for their leadership...[if] the envoy can’t speak for the secretary and the secretary can’t speak for the president, it’s extraordinarily difficult to be an effective envoy.” Jon Alterman in [Washington Diplomat](#) on President Trump’s sidelining of the State Department, 10/31/17.

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## CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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The Obama administration drew the Middle East’s ire—and especially that of the leadership—by seeking to nudge the region more firmly toward reform. The administration’s self-confidence in both the morality and inevitability of its vision struck many Arab leaders as smug and naïve. Further, they read President Obama’s lack of emotional connection with his regional counterparts as condescension.

President Trump has sought to reverse those feelings. In contrast to President Obama, he has eagerly sought to build emotional ties with regional leaders. Many in the region read his exuberant visit to Saudi Arabia in May 2017, and his supportive tweets toward the Saudi leadership since, as signs that the U.S.-Gulf relationship has been restored to the status quo ante. In this telling, President Obama was an aberration, and President Trump is an affirmation of American steadfastness.

That reading is inaccurate on several levels. First, President Trump’s effusive warmth does not indicate a strategic U.S. recalculation. As is becoming increasingly apparent, he returns warmth to all who show it to him. In addition, however, President Trump’s warmth is not a good predictor of administration policy. For example, President Trump has been outwardly quite warm to President Abdel Fattah al-Sisi of Egypt, yet in August the U.S. government quietly cut aid to Egypt by more than 95 million dollars and decided to hold another 195 million dollars in escrow until U.S. human rights and democratization concerns in Egypt were addressed. He has been warm to Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, but he has done little to reverse Iran entrenching itself more deeply on Israel’s northern border.

Second, the Trump administration has taken itself out of resolving some of the most important conflicts in the Middle East. For example, Americans continue to be marginalized in discussions over the future of Syria, there is little active mediation of the war in Yemen, and U.S. diplomacy over Qatar’s fight with its neighbors has been ineffectual. If the administration argues that it is focused on Iran—which one could argue—one must admit that all of these conflicts advance Iranian interests at the expense of U.S. interests. If one argues instead that the administration is focused on a Palestinian-Israeli settlement, one would need to think about what the essential components of a successful agreement would be. Is the United States considered powerful and committed guarantor of an agreement? Has the president timed his effort well? It is hard to see how either point is a source of much encouragement.

Robust arms sales are certainly occurring, and they will likely continue. But there is no collection of arms that will genuinely deter Iran or any other enemy in the Gulf. Much of the Iranian arsenal still dates from the time of the Shah, and the Gulf Arab states have stocked up on the latest and greatest munitions for decades. The pattern has led to what we see in Yemen: The Gulf Arab states spending billions of dollars a year to fight a war on which Iran is spending perhaps 100 million dollars per year, and in which the Gulf Arab states feel threatened and the Iranians feel secure.

Many in the Middle East are mistakenly taking proxies of U.S. commitment for actual commitment, and they represent nothing of the kind. Regional governments seem to feel that they have a freer hand to act, and the United States will back them as it always has.

In truth, something subtler is happening. An “America First” mantra has prompted a reduced U.S. focus on the Middle East, and increased the willingness to delegate responsibility for outcomes, even if they are unsatisfactory. If the states there want to fight, the United States will sell them weapons.

But the region’s problems are only solved by negotiation, and many of the most successful negotiations have had a strong U.S. role. That requires a strong U.S. commitment, and not a free hand. It requires a U.S. conviction that the region matters. Despite the warmth, neither that commitment nor that conviction have been evident. ■ 11/27/2017