

# The Yemen Model

By Jon B. Alterman

## KILLER CONGESTION

Israel may be rocketing ahead in high tech, but commuters are increasingly stuck in traffic gridlock. With three-and-a-half times more vehicles per kilometer than the average OECD country, Israeli roads are among the most congested in the developed world. And the problem is only getting worse. Car ownership is rising far quicker than new roads are being built and, each year, Israelis' reliance on private automobiles for transportation is increasing.

Congestion is a huge economic drain, costing the Israeli economy nearly \$10 billion a year. But traffic jams can also prove fatal. Average ambulance response times in almost every Israeli city exceed the government's 10-minute target, and in some towns, residents have to wait more than double that. The wait can mean the difference between life and death.

Some hope electronic "e-bikes" could be the solution. In early 2017, Israel's leading emergency response service became the first in the world to deploy a fleet of a thousand e-bikes to congested urban areas. Weaving through traffic, bike-riding first responders can quickly negotiate sidewalks, cobbled backstreets, and busy markets to reach accidents faster than medics in any other kind of emergency vehicle. The motors even allow riders to scale Jerusalem's steepest hills with ease.

While e-bikes can save lives, they are no panacea. Only so much medical equipment can be carried on a bike, and a bike cannot carry a wounded patient.

Ironically, the proliferation of e-bikes in Israel creates its own challenges. With almost a quarter-million now on Israeli streets, drunk and distracted e-bike riders are getting into more accidents. ■ BW

Judging from Syria, the United States is still putting down stakes in the Middle East. At least two thousand U.S. troops have an open-ended commitment to secure areas liberated from Islamic State group (ISG) rule. In Syria, senior U.S. officials put tremendous time into cooperating with allies, and alternately coordinating with and countering adversaries.

At first glance, Yemen's conflict is not so different. Surrounding U.S. allies feel vulnerable, terrorists are multiplying, and the Iranians are meddling. Syria's refugees affect Europe, which also relies heavily on shipping that passes by the Yemeni coast. The human suffering generated by both conflicts is immense, and while Syria's death toll is significantly steeper and its level of displacement is higher, Yemen has one million cholera cases and counting, as well as more than eight million people suffering from severe food insecurity.

But those looking to see where U.S. Middle East policy is heading should look to Yemen, not Syria. In Yemen, the U.S. government has treated the conflict at arm's length. It refuels allies' warplanes, sells them armaments, and doesn't do much else. The U.S. military carries out strikes on al Qaeda and ISG affiliates with Arab allies' cooperation. The intensity of diplomacy one sees around Syria is absent, and it has been so since a flurry of U.S. engagement in the final months of the Obama administration. The governing assumptions seem to be that the United States shouldn't second-guess its allies, the overall problem is intractable anyway, and the combatants need to work it out on their own. There is a new model for the United States in the Middle East, and that is it.

Allies seem slow to appreciate this, but the signs are clear. One can see them in the White House's approach to the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, which continues to stress that whatever the parties agree to on their own will be agreeable to the United States. One can see them as well in President Donald Trump's repetition of the idea that the United States has poured \$7 trillion into the Middle East since 2001 with little to show for it. Neither politicians, policymakers, nor the public have challenged that view. Leaving aside the accuracy of the figure, the growing consensus

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## MAKING SENSE OF THE STATE OF THE UNION

Jon Alterman joined other CSIS experts in reacting to President Donald Trump's State of the Union address. The experts wrote commentaries and recorded a special edition of The CSIS Podcast. President Trump's comments on U.S. adversaries and partners bear particular attention, Jon Alterman argued. "Deterring China requires a completely different set of capabilities than deterring ISIS, and a war against China would be completely different from a war against ISIS," he noted. Meanwhile, the speech's treatment of foreign aid "supposes that only American politicians have to worry about domestic politics, and it assumes that what other countries want from us exceeds what we want from them. For more than three-quarters of a century, we have given foreign assistance because doing so serves our interests." Catch the full podcast and expert comments [HERE](#). ■

## IN CASE YOU MISSED IT

Admiral James G. Foggo, III, commander, Allied Joint Force Command Naples; commander, U.S. Naval Forces Europe; and commander, U.S. Naval Forces Africa joined the CSIS Europe and Middle East Programs for a [discussion](#) of the Eastern Mediterranean as a geostrategic flashpoint on February 12, 2018.

This event comes as the Middle East Program and the Europe Program prepare to release a report taking stock of developments that have made the Eastern Mediterranean a strategic fulcrum for the United States, and calling for a specific regional strategy to rebuild U.S. regional influence and advance as well as protect U.S. interests.

## IN THE MEDIA

“The Emirati and Saudi view is, ‘We will wait the Qataris out. We can live this way for a very long time.’” Jon Alterman in [The New York Times](#) on the stalemate in the Gulf crisis, 2/9/18.

“I still think the president is struggling to articulate what American leadership means. The president’s big challenge has been how to lead in ways that people are eager to follow.” Jon Alterman in [Bloomberg](#) on the State of the Union address, 1/29/18.

### The Middle East Notes and Comment

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### CSIS MIDDLE EAST PROGRAM

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is unmistakable: The Middle East has been a remarkably bad investment for the United States for the last 15 years, and investor patience has been exhausted.

If we take Yemen as a harbinger for U.S. Middle East policy, a number of consequences aren’t hard to imagine. The first is that U.S. assistance is likely to be scarcer. The U.S. insistence that it is done with funding reconstruction in Iraq, and will not engage in reconstruction funding in Syria, is just a foretaste. For wealthy U.S. allies that receive no aid, this is largely irrelevant, and Israel’s direct aid is likely secure. Yet, Israel is likely to feel the impact indirectly. Neighbors such as Egypt and Jordan that have enjoyed strong U.S. security support are likely to find it harder to come by in future years, and longstanding U.S. support for the Palestinian Authority (PA) will likely diminish as well. For decades, the United States has supported both the PA government and international organizations such as the United Nations Relief and Works Agency (UNRWA), which have in turn helped support the Palestinian population. That relief, which also benefits Israeli security, seems imperiled.

Second, while the United States talks about countering Iranian efforts to spread its influence in the Middle East, it remains unwilling to engage directly in such efforts. In Syria in particular, it has been slow to address Iran’s military buildup and power projection capabilities. For many years, the United States has pushed to integrate regional defenses in the Gulf in order to deter Iran. Those efforts have slowed significantly, not least because Gulf Cooperation Council tensions have intruded, and the Trump administration has been unable to ease them.

Third, the United States seems to have diminishing interest in engaging in regional diplomacy, which has implications throughout the Middle East. This is not only a huge reversal in the Palestinian-Israeli conflict, where U.S. diplomacy has been a constant for more than a half-century. From Morocco to the Gulf, the United States has been an essential partner, a security guarantor, and a scold against squabbling states. The impulse to mediate and manage regional conflicts seems to have diminished significantly.

Several effects are likely to follow from these trends. One is that the United States will have less influence over the shape of conflicts in the Middle East. Through its deep engagement, the United States for decades could influence alliances, incentivize positive behavior, and dissuade irresponsible actions. While it wasn’t always a recipe for comity, it did help even out many of the bumps in regional relations and help ease the isolation of U.S. partners from the regional order.

Another effect is that other powers are likely to have more influence in the region than they currently do. Not only will Russia and China help fill the vacuum, but so will Iran and perhaps even countries such as France and India. They will pursue policies that further their own agendas, and they will at times undermine U.S. interests.

The U.S. global standing will likely suffer as well. Countries that rely on Middle East energy supplies also rely on the United States to secure their interests there. It’s true of potential adversaries such as China, and also of close allies such as Japan and South Korea. U.S. influence with these countries is in part a product of U.S. influence in the Middle East. If the United States walks away from the latter, it will have to relinquish some of the former as well.

None of this is either inevitable or irreversible, but it is folly to say it is unthinkable. The changes underway in the U.S. approach to the Middle East will have repercussions. They will not just affect the region, but they will affect the United States and its global allies as well. ■ 2/20/2018