

The End of the Middle East

How an Old Map Distorts a New Reality

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In early December 2021, the Ethiopian government pulled off a dramatic reversal in its yearlong civil war with rebels from the Tigray region. Armed with a new arsenal of drones and other forms of military support from Iran, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Ethiopian forces were able to push back an offensive by the Tigrayan People’s Liberation Front, which itself was supported by Somali fighters, who were in turn backed by Qatar.

Many American observers were surprised by the direct involvement of no fewer than four Middle Eastern countries in what appeared to be an African conflict. But such interest is hardly unusual. In recent years, Turkey has established more than 40 consulates in Africa and a major military base in Somalia. Israel has announced a “return to Africa,” in part to find new alliances as it faces growing international pressure over its occupation of the West Bank. Saudi Arabia has bought wide swaths of agricultural land in Ethiopia and Sudan in pursuit of food security, and

the UAE has built naval bases across the Horn of Africa. Egypt has been embroiled in a conflict with Ethiopia over its plans for a dam at the head of the Nile River.

Nor are these entanglements limited to Africa. Oman has traditionally seen itself as an Indian Ocean nation and maintains strong economic ties with India, Iran, and Pakistan. Saudi Arabia and other Gulf countries have long meddled deeply in the affairs of Afghanistan and Pakistan. Turkey has become increasingly involved in Central Asia, including with a military intervention in Azerbaijan. Almost every Gulf state has recently upgraded its partnerships with China and other Asian countries.

Amid these continual and growing transregional connections, however, U.S. foreign policy remains wedded to a far narrower mental map of the Middle East. Since the early years of the Cold War, the Washington establishment has viewed the Middle East as the Arab world—broadly conceived as the member states of the Arab League (with the exception of the geographic outliers Comoros, Mauritania, and Somalia)—plus Iran, Israel, and Turkey. These parameters feel natural to many. Based on geographic continuity, common-sense understandings of the region, and twentieth-century history, this is the Middle East of American university departments and think tanks, as well as of the U.S. State Department.

But such a map is increasingly outdated. Leading regional powers operate outside the traditional Middle East in much the same way as they operate inside it, and many of the rivalries most important to the region now play out beyond those assumed borders. The Pentagon has long known this: until the creation of U.S. Africa Command in 2007, the region covered by U.S. Central Command, the combatant command that handles the Middle East, included not only Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and the Gulf states but also Afghanistan, Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Pakistan, Somalia, and Sudan—a grouping that was directly at odds with the State Department's Middle East.

Such a dramatic misalignment of the U.S. policymaking and military establishments points to the dangers of clinging to the old model of the region. Not only is the concept out of step with current politics and military practice; it also hampers attempts to confront many of the biggest challenges of the day, from serial refugee crises to Islamist insurgencies to entrenched authoritarianism. Continuing to build scholarship and policy on a legacy definition of the Middle East threatens to blind U.S. strategy to the actual dynamics shaping the region—and, worse, makes Washington all too likely to continue making disastrous blunders there.

COLD WAR CARTOGRAPHY

As set in stone as it now seems, the American concept of the Middle East has little grounding in premodern history. For centuries, the Arab provinces of North Africa and the Levant were part of the vast, multinational Ottoman Empire. The coastal communities of the Gulf were organically linked to the Horn of Africa across the Red Sea. Islamic networks connected Egypt and the rest of North Africa to areas deep in sub-Saharan Africa. But instead of looking back that far, the United States adopted its version of the region from a more recent source: the colonialism and great-power politics of late-nineteenth- and early-twentieth-century Europe.

In the nineteenth century, British and French imperial projects gave rise to the idea of a distinct region defined by North Africa and the Levant. In 1830, France occupied Algeria; in 1881, it captured Tunisia; and by 1912, it also controlled Morocco. French colonial legacies of racial classification, and not the natural barrier of the Sahara, informed the distinction between Black French Africa and a French Maghreb of lighter-skinned Arabs and Berbers. That same racism drew a hard barrier between culturally similar populations of the Mediterranean basin, with white southern Europe forcibly distinguished from the Near Eastern peoples across the sea in North Africa and the Arabian Peninsula.

The British, for their part, called the region “the Near East” because of its role as a transit point along the way to their primary colonial interests in India and “the Far East,” or Asia. Following the opening of the Suez Canal in 1869, the region took on new importance. British imperial interests now connected the Arabian Peninsula to Egypt and the Levant, while distinguishing those areas from points north, east, and south. And a string of protectorates along the Arabian Peninsula remained under British control all the way until 1971, reinforcing the old colonial boundaries long after other forces had begun to reshape the region. A set of ideological assumptions about the supposed exoticism of Arabs, Persians, and Turks, an outlook that was famously termed “Orientalism” by the late Palestinian American scholar Edward Said, helped give shape to the idea that this vast region shared a common, backward culture.

After World War II, as the United States plunged headlong into Cold War competition with the Soviet Union, the U.S. State Department adapted the Anglo-French concept of the region for its own purposes. The definition of what the United States was now calling “the Middle East” (not quite as near to Washington as to London) was informed by policymakers’ goals: maintain access to oil in the Arabian Peninsula, protect Israel, and keep former British and French possessions in North Africa out of the Soviet sphere of influence.

During the 1950s and 1960s, U.S. economic and political priorities helped institutionalize this map in academic and policymaking circles. The 1958 National Defense Education Act channeled federal resources toward area studies in support of Cold War priorities, and big nonprofits, such as the Ford Foundation, joined the effort. The new approach divided the world into distinct regions, one of which was the Middle East. As a result, scholars of the Middle East developed deep expertise about the cultures, languages, history, and politics of the countries in that tightly defined area. But they were not expected to know much of anything about sub-Saharan Africa or Afghanistan and Pakistan, no matter how important those places might be to the issues they were studying.

In those early years of the Cold War, the pan-Arabism of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser reinforced the notion of the Middle East as a cultural-political unity rather than an artificial construct. The Palestinian issue and struggles for decolonization energized and unified the Arab world, with heads of state defining themselves through their positions on Israel and Arab unification. And in Egypt and other North African countries, racist attitudes about the populations of sub-Saharan Africa contributed to the idea of the Middle East as ethnically and culturally distinct from surrounding areas. The incorporation of much of Central Asia into the Soviet Union, meanwhile, justified the exclusion of states such as Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan from a region defined by Cold War competition.

This concept of the Middle East provided the foundation for a series of U.S. foreign policy doctrines and security alliances, relationships that, despite upheavals such as the Iranian Revolution, for many decades served to keep the oil flowing and maintain stability. There were costs, however. Trained to think according to this map, and often informed by Orientalist views inherited from the colonial era, academics and policymakers tended to draw conclusions about the region without taking into account the many social and political forces that transcended its boundaries. For instance, the 9/11 attacks quickly produced a consensus that they had been driven by the specific pathologies of the Arab Middle East. The mountains of analysis explaining jihadism through Arab culture often simply ignored the parallel rise of Islamist and other forms of religious extremism in Africa, South Asia, and many other parts of the world.

Similarly, the long-held idea that Muslim countries are somehow uniquely resistant to democracy ignores the real drivers of autocratic resilience in the Middle East: Western-backed oil monarchies and Arab strongmen with little accountability to their poorly governed citizens. It also overlooks the regular participation of Muslims in many democracies outside the Middle East—from India and Indonesia to the United States itself. The assumption that Muslims would inevitably choose radical Islamist governments if they had the chance has been used to justify decades of American failure to support real political reform there.

In all these ways, the American concept of the Middle East has more often been a limitation than an asset, yet for decades, it has proved remarkably sticky. Even after 9/11 forcefully exposed the global connections of a group such as al Qaeda, which had roots in Afghanistan, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Sudan, U.S. policy continued to be driven by the old paradigm. The invasion of Iraq was justified in part by a determination to remake the Middle East, with the George W. Bush administration’s “freedom agenda” pushing a war of ideas aimed at an Arab world that was supposedly uniquely prone to authoritarianism and sectarian violence. More recently, similar assumptions led the United States to fail to anticipate—or react effectively to—the wave of popular revolts that engulfed the Arab world in 2010–11.

POLITICS OUT OF BOUNDS

For U.S. policymakers, the Arab uprisings provided a deceptive lesson. At first, the rapid spread of protests from Tunisia and Egypt to much of the rest of the region seemed to show the renewed coherence of the Middle East. Further underscoring the idea of a single geopolitical arena was the jockeying that followed: Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE intervened in wars in Libya, Syria, and Yemen and meddled in the transitions occurring in Egypt and Tunisia. Yet the countries in the region whose influence grew the most—Iran, Israel, and Turkey—were not part of the Arab world at all. Moreover, Arab autocrats quickly came to view the interconnectedness of their populations as a threat to their own survival, and many sought to crack down on pan-Arab political movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and liberal activist networks alike. The hopes of regionwide political change were instead quashed by a new fracturing, with Libya and Syria descending into chaos and many of the Arab monarchs looking for new sources of legitimacy that had little to do with the broader Arab public.

Today, if anything, political developments in many Middle Eastern countries have made the region’s traditional boundaries increasingly meaningless. Sudan’s 2018 revolution—and its more

recent military coup, which was backed by Egypt, a leading Middle East power, but opposed by the African Union, an international body representing 55 African states—showed the extent to which the country straddles two regions. Elsewhere in Africa, migration and the growth of Islamist insurgencies across the Sahel have shifted the political, security, and economic interests of the Maghreb states southward. Libya’s civil war has fueled flows of migrants, weapons, drugs, and radicalism across central Africa, further blurring the line between North Africa and the rest of the continent. Many of the migrants arriving in Europe from the Middle East originate in countries south of the Sahara. In response to the growing strategic importance of the Sahel, Morocco has focused on spreading its religious authority in West Africa, and Algeria has been involved in security operations in Mali.

Other political dynamics have also revealed the limited value of defining the Middle East as a single geographic area. The Iranian-Saudi rivalry, for example, has little relevance in North Africa. The political battle among Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE after the 2017 blockade of Qatar by several states in the region played out in a competition for support not only in neighboring Arab countries but also across the African continent and even in Washington. The appeal of the Islamic State (also known as ISIS), even more than that of al Qaeda, was more global than regional, as manifested by the flow of foreign fighters to Syria and the spread of the movement across Africa and Asia. It is difficult to sustain counterterrorism models based on problems said to be uniquely Arab when some of the most active jihadi insurgencies unfold in Mali, Nigeria, and Somalia.

Meanwhile, some of the largest recent conflicts have defied the region’s assumed geography. Libya’s civil war destabilized Mali and other African neighbors. When Saudi Arabia built a coalition to back its intervention against Yemen’s Houthi rebels in 2015, it not only sought help from like-minded Arab states; it also solicited support from Eritrea, Pakistan, and Sudan, which contributed bases and troops. At the same time, the UAE’s enforcement of a naval blockade against the Houthis has led it to build up a military presence across the Horn of Africa and to fortify the strategically located island of Socotra, which is closer to Africa than the Arabian Peninsula. Although it is often seen as a paradigmatic Middle Eastern war, the conflict in Yemen has played out in ways that call into question the supposed borders of the region.

MARKETS MOVING EAST

Just as recent political dynamics have rendered the old map of the Middle East obsolete, so have large-scale social changes. From the 1950s through the 1980s, the mass migration of laborers from poorer Arab countries to the rapidly developing Gulf states created powerful connections within the region. Remittances played a key role in the informal economies of Egypt and most of the states in the Levant, and workers’ extended stays in Gulf countries enabled the spread of conservative Islamist ideas that had not previously found much purchase outside Saudi Arabia. But after the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, during which Palestinian and Yemeni workers were often seen as disloyal, Arab migrant laborers were increasingly replaced in the country by politically safer South Asian workers. That trend has greatly weakened the economic and social ties between the Gulf and the rest of the Middle East, while correspondingly strengthening those ties between the Gulf and countries across the Indian Ocean.

Similarly, Arab media have lost much of their thematic coherence. Until 2011, Arab satellite television did much to shape a common culture at a popular level, including during the Arab uprisings. But in the decade since, the media landscape has become Balkanized, mirroring the region's political polarization. Thus, where Al Jazeera served as a common platform for Arab public politics in the 1990s and early years of this century, after 2011, it became just one among many partisan media platforms, including the Saudi-based Rotana Media Group, the Emirati-based Al Arabiya, and [Iran](#)'s Arabic-language Al-Alam. Such stations reinforce political polarization, with each one's narrative embraced by those within its political ambit and scorned by those outside it. Social media, once a force for the Arab public's integration, has been weaponized by regimes such as those in [Egypt](#) and Saudi Arabia through the widespread use of bot armies and censorship and has fragmented into hostile silos.

Over the past two decades, global financial markets have themselves reshaped the orientation of some of the wealthiest Middle Eastern countries, including Kuwait, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Given their deep investments in Western real estate and sports clubs, their growing economic ties to Asia, and their large populations of non-Arab service workers and Western expatriates, it increasingly makes more sense to view these places as centers of global capitalism than as Middle Eastern states; Dubai has more in common with Singapore or Hong Kong than with Beirut or Baghdad. Similarly, Saudi Arabia's and the UAE's use of Israeli-made digital surveillance tools mirrors China's model as much as it does those of other Arab regimes. Such global ties in economics and technology may soon come to play as much of a role in these states' foreign policies as any traditional regional priorities do—pushing them closer to Asia, say, or providing new incentives for them to manipulate elections in Western democracies.

In turn, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which once served as a unifying force in the Arab world, has dramatically faded in importance. The Boycott, Divest, and Sanctions movement, which is aimed at Israel's escalating settlements in the West Bank, has attracted more interest on American college campuses and in the halls of Congress than in the Middle East. Europe, the United Nations, and the International Criminal Court are more central battlefields for Israeli-Palestinian disputes than any Arab capital. The Palestinian cause today, while gaining unprecedented support in the West, has rarely enjoyed less sympathy from the states of the Arab region, as demonstrated by the decision of Bahrain and the UAE to normalize relations with [Israel](#) in the 2020 Abraham Accords. Despite the limited tangible implications of that agreement, Israelis have seemed to embrace it with a sense of catharsis, in part because it signaled the passing of the Middle East as a primary arena of security or political concerns—for Arabs as well as for Israelis.

THEIR MAP, NOT OURS

For 75 years, the Middle East as we know it has in large part been a construct of American primacy. For much of that time, the U.S. map made sense because Washington's priorities in the region could go a significant way toward influencing the region's politics. Washington's Cold War strategic doctrines shaped alliances and interventions from the time of the 1956 Suez crisis, when the United States displaced France and the United Kingdom as the primary Western power in the region, until the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. The 1990–91 Gulf War entrenched an American regional order, in which all roads seemed to lead to Washington. The United States

monopolized stewardship of the Arab-Israeli peace process, from the Madrid conference through the Oslo accords, and its dual containment of Iran and Iraq defined the geopolitics of the Gulf.

But the global position of the United States has rapidly declined, and so, too, has the coherence of a region largely organized around U.S. interests. Amid the fallout from the disastrous decision to invade Iraq in 2003, three successive U.S. presidents have sought to downgrade U.S. commitments in the Middle East and pivot toward Asia. And with the United States perceived to be in retreat, regional powers have asserted their own definitions of the region: an order centered on the Indian Ocean for the Gulf states, a trans-Sahel orientation for North African states. This does not mean that the traditional zones of conflict have vanished. Iran, for example, has spread its proxy networks and influence throughout the shattered states of Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen and is locked in a growing competition with Israel and Saudi Arabia. But like its regional rivals, Iran has also upped its activities in Africa and begun building partnerships with states in Asia, especially China.

For the United States, the rise of jihadi insurgencies in sub-Saharan Africa has rendered obsolete the Middle East–focused counterterrorism doctrine that emerged after 9/11. Although U.S. forces have withdrawn from Iraq and Syria, U.S. drone strikes and counterterrorism operations continue from Somalia through the Sahel. Confusingly, even as the United States signals that it is getting out of the Middle East, it is maintaining or expanding the same military architecture, to deal with many of the same security concerns, in the Sahel and East Africa.

And now, the United States must also contend with Beijing, which thinks differently about the Middle East than Washington does. China’s map of the region follows its own strategic interests, not Washington’s. Through its Belt and Road Initiative, Beijing has expanded its energy interests in the Gulf and its presence in Africa. It has signed a series of agreements with Gulf states, bridging the divide between Iran and the Arab Gulf states by downplaying politics and focusing on infrastructure and energy resources. China’s growing involvement has opened up new prospects for stabilizing oil production and other forms of regional cooperation, but it has also multiplied the opportunities for dangerous misunderstandings, as Washington seeks to balance its own regional interests with its growing rivalry with China.

If U.S. scholars, analysts, and policymakers were to begin to understand the Middle East less as a discrete geographic area and more as a fluid collection of states and populations through which broader social forces and shifting contests for power flow, many of these recent developments would seem far less surprising. Thinking beyond the traditional Middle East would also have direct analytic and strategic benefits for Washington, not only because it would entail the recovery of forgotten history but also because it would lead to a better understanding of the fast-changing realities on the ground.

But there are risks to a transregional approach. Simply adopting the Pentagon’s broader definition of the region may end up reproducing the security-driven focus that has characterized many of the failed U.S. policies in Afghanistan and the Middle East over the past two decades. This would be a tragedy. A transregional lens should allow academics and policymakers not only to move beyond the old paradigms but also to rethink how the United States promotes development and good governance abroad. It could help Washington generate a more effective

response to Africa's and Europe's migration crisis, better align world powers to respond to [Libya](#)'s and Yemen's catastrophic wars, and avoid unnecessary conflict with China in areas and on issues on which cooperation would make far more sense. Abandoning old cultural and political assumptions about the Middle East and viewing the region within a broader global context could also enable the United States and its allies to finally get serious about defending human rights and promoting real democratic change there.

By remaining locked in an outdated concept of the region, Washington risks truncating its understanding of the behavior and interests of the Middle East's main players; misunderstanding the actions there of other global powers, such as China; and overestimating the effects of an American retreat. It will be difficult to think beyond the Middle East: accumulated expertise, deeply internalized thought patterns, and entrenched bureaucratic structures all stand in the way. But the changing dynamics of global power and regional practice are rapidly reorienting many leading Middle Eastern states, and the map they are following is no longer Washington's; the map is their own. It is now up to Washington to learn to read it.

CORRECTION APPENDED (March 30, 2022)

An earlier version of this article mistakenly identified U.S. Central Command as responsible for Djibouti, Eritrea, Ethiopia, Kenya, Somali, and Sudan. Those countries were part of U.S. Central Command until 2007, when they became part of the newly-created U.S. Africa Command.

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