The US and the Middle East

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Locating the Region

- The term “Middle East” is an English phrase popularized in the early 1900s by American strategist Alfred Thayer Mahan to describe the region closer than the “Far” East (e.g., India and China)
  - In Arabic, this phrase – *al-sharq al-awsat* (شرق الأوسط) – is not indigenous, and appears only after the 1950s

- Dispelling misconceptions
  - Studies show that the most prevalent images invoked by news headlines about the Middle East are violent or biased, and do not reflect actual social realities
  - For instance: there are 1.5 billion Muslims in the world, and most do not live in the Middle East
Why the Middle East and North Africa (MENA)?

- **Historically**, American strategic interests did not extend into the MENA until after World War Two, when containing Soviet communism became the impulse for global domination.

- **Three** specific interests coalesced by the late twentieth century, and still exist today:
  - **Oil**: keeping the oil fields of Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and other allies productive, so that cheap energy reaches Western markets.
  - **Israel**: keep a strategic ally stable and secure, while keeping peace between Israel and other Arab states (including Palestine).
  - **Stability**: keep the MENA region safe and predictable under American hegemony, given “radical” threats confronting such as Soviet communism, revolutionary states, terrorist organizations, and subversive ideologies.
Crude Oil Reserves in Billion Barrels (Gbbl)

Canada 169.7 Gbbl
U.S. 36.5 Gbbl
Mexico 7.6 Gbbl
Venezuela 300.9 Gbbl
UAE 97.8 Gbbl
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Note: For visualization purposes we are showing only countries with 100,000,000 bbl (0.1 Gbbl) of crude oil reserves or more.

How to read this map: Countries appear bigger as their crude oil reserves are bigger, e.g. Venezuela. Conversely, countries that have smaller reserves of crude oil appear smaller, e.g. Côte d'Ivoire.

Article & Sources: https://howmuch.net/articles/worlds-biggest-crude-oil-reserves-by-country
Central Intelligence Agency - https://www.cia.gov/library
# Declared US Military Interventions since the 1980s

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Target</th>
<th>Declared Military Operations</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Lebanon</td>
<td>1982-1984</td>
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<tr>
<td>Libya</td>
<td>1986 (air strikes only), 2011</td>
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<td>Saudi Arabia</td>
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<td>Sudan</td>
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<td>Afghanistan</td>
<td>1998 (air strikes only), 2001-present</td>
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US Spending in the Middle East by Figures

- 1946-2019: US spent $324 billion in economic aid and military assistance to its allies in the Middle East, including Israel and Turkey
  - This ranks higher than every single other region in the world.

- Over the same time period, US provided $1.15 trillion in economic aid and military assistance to the entire world.
  - In essence, nearly 1 out of every 3 dollars America has spent on supporting foreign countries since World War Two was spent in the MENA.
Countertrend: America is Withdrawing

- Under Obama and Trump, American policymakers began echoing a subversive new idea: after decades of hegemony, can America afford to remain so dominant?
  - The US no longer imports much Arabian oil due to cheaper energy from closer allies (like Canada)
  - The payoffs of costly conflicts involving American lives, such as the 2003 Iraq War and 2011 Libyan intervention, are not apparent
  - Drone technology allows America to militarily strike targets and fight wars with less loss of life

- Under the Trump administration, a new set of ideas has also informed foreign policy:
  - Suspicion of international alliances
  - Populism + protectionism (“America First”)
  - Neutrality on promoting democracy
Sustained US involvement in strategic regions require an *existential* threat against the American homeland

- **Existential** means the capacity to destroy the American republic and our national economy
- **Soviet Union** disappeared after 1980s, removing the ideological danger of communism
- **Arabian oil and gas fields** are less integral to US economy, as domestic production set to make America energy exporter by 2022
- We are told global terror and ISIS are *existential* threats... but if this is true, why is there no national mobilizational effort to destroy them, as in past wars like Vietnam?
- If Iran poses civilizational peril, why has the US focused on *containing* rather than *conquering* Tehran?
The US is no longer perceived as an all-mighty regional policeman, expected to regulate every crisis and conflict through brute force.

The American public will not support another major war or costly conflict; this is a hard constraint.

The only factor that could tip popular opinion would be a direct assault on either the US homeland, or on American military bases that result in many lives lost.
Is This Good or Bad for the MENA?

- **Regional problems** that require a third-party mediator and global leadership, like the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, will be resolved simply in favor of the strongest party (Israel), as we see today.

- There may be **new threats** to stability, such as terrorist organizations or competing states (e.g., Russia, Iran) – but we must not overstate their ability to *dominate*… there is no real existential danger anymore.

- The **promotion of democracy**, which became a key US foreign policy goal during the Bush administration, will disappear, unless a new president rejuvenates it.

- Since future **military interventions** will be small-scale and emphasize drone technology, regional conflicts could remain relatively contained and small-scale.