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GENERIC BRIEF: Middle East Intervention – unnecessary & bad

By Vance Trefethen

**This brief argues against cases that all U.S. intervention in the Middle East is unnecessary or bad.**

NEGATIVE PHILOSOPHY / OVERVIEW

Every U.S. project in the Middle East fails

Dr. Stephen M. Walt 2014. (Ph.D. in Political Science; [professor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor) of [international affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_relations) at [Harvard University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_University)'s [John F. Kennedy School of Government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F._Kennedy_School_of_Government) ) 7 Aug 2014 “Do No (More) Harm” FOREIGN POLICY, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/07/do-no-more-harm/>

A far more convincing perspective comes from former [Ambassador Chas Freeman](http://chasfreeman.net/obamas-foreign-policy-and-the-future-of-the-middle-east/) who surveys several decades of America’s meddling in the region and comes to a depressing conclusion: "It’s hard to think of any American project in the Middle East that is not now at or near a dead end."

“We must do something” – Response: Every time we “did something” in the past, it has failed

Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter 2014. (PhD in diplomatic history; senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.) 22 Sept 2014 “Will America Ever Learn from Its Middle East Mistakes?“ <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/will-america-ever-learn-its-middle-east-mistakes>

That depressing track record needs to be kept firmly in mind as the usual suspects hype the ISIS threat and insist that the United States “cannot stand by and do nothing.” Washington has been “doing something” in the Middle East for decades—with appalling results. It is a triumph of hope over experience to expect that this time the outcome will be different. The American people should demand that hawkish proponents of a new military crusade defend the record of the previous applications of that strategy. Otherwise, we face the prospect of expending even more blood and treasure while further destabilizing the region and creating more enemies.

HARMS / SIGNIFICANCE

Middle East events don’t affect America – unless we foolishly decide to get involved

Dr. Stephen M. Walt 2014. (Ph.D. in Political Science; [professor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor) of [international affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_relations) at [Harvard University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_University)'s [John F. Kennedy School of Government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F._Kennedy_School_of_Government) ) 7 Aug 2014 “Do No (More) Harm” FOREIGN POLICY, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/07/do-no-more-harm/>

In fact, most of the disputes and divisions that are currently roiling the region do not pose direct and mortal threats to vital U.S. interests. It is admittedly wrenching to watch what is happening in Syria or Gaza, or to Israel’s democracy, but these events affect the lives of very few Americans directly. Unless, of course, we are foolish enough to throw ourselves back into the middle of the maelstrom.

Oil is the only U.S. interest in the Middle East, and our objective will be met whether we intervene or not

Dr. Stephen M. Walt 2014. (Ph.D. in Political Science; [professor](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Professor) of [international affairs](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/International_relations) at [Harvard University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Harvard_University)'s [John F. Kennedy School of Government](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/John_F._Kennedy_School_of_Government) ) 7 Aug 2014 “Do No (More) Harm” FOREIGN POLICY, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/08/07/do-no-more-harm/>

In terms of its strategic interests, the central U.S. goal since World War II has been to prevent any single power from dominating the oil rich Persian Gulf. However troubled we may be by all the divisions and quarrels in the region, those conflicts also make the possibility that one power will dominate the region more remote than ever. Does anyone seriously think Iran, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, the Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS), the Kurds, Russia, Turkey, China or anyone else is going to take over and manage this vast and turbulent area, and smooth out all these rifts and feuds? Of course not. And if that is the case, then America’s primary strategic goal will be met whether Washington lifts a finger or not.

Oil doesn’t justify intervention: Oil markets themselves solve for price changes or supply disruptions

Justin Logan 2014. ( master’s degree in international relations from the University of Chicago; director of foreign policy studies at Cato Institute ) Why the Middle East Still Doesn’t Matter 9 Oct 2014 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-middle-east-still-doesnt-matter>

Oil is a fungible commodity sold on world markets. When the price of oil in one country rises, it rises in all countries—even those that have achieved the Shangri-La of “[energy independence](http://www.marketplace.org/topics/economy/energy-independence-wont-help-us" \t "_blank).” On the supply side, when supply decreases, price goes up and producers have an incentive to produce more oil to reap the higher profits. Combine the self-interest of producers with financial innovations like sophisticated spot and futures markets that allow consumers to hedge risks and it’s easy to see why, historically, supply disruptions have had limited and ephemeral effects on price.

Terrorism doesn’t justify US intervention in the Middle East

Justin Logan 2014. ( master’s degree in international relations from the University of Chicago; director of foreign policy studies at Cato Institute ) Why the Middle East Still Doesn’t Matter 9 Oct 2014 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-middle-east-still-doesnt-matter>

Finally, of course, are fears about terrorism. This explanation for why the Middle East supposedly matters is peculiar, in that the basic contours of U.S. policy in the region predate 9/11. It is tough to think that a concern that emerged after a policy began explains the policy. But there is [no evidence](http://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa755.pdf" \t "_blank) that terrorism is a threat that warrants an effort to micromanage the Middle East. The chance of an American being killed by terrorism outside a war zone from 1970-2012 was roughly [one in 4,000,000](http://object.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa755.pdf" \t "_blank). By any conventional risk analysis, this is an extraordinarily low risk. Perhaps this is why, as early as 2002, smart risk analysts were asking [questions about counterterrorism policy](http://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/10.1111/0272-4332.00057/abstract" \t "_blank) such as “How much should we be willing to pay for a small reduction in probabilities that are already extremely low?”

Islamic State doesn’t justify US intervention in the Middle East

Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter 2014. (PhD in diplomatic history; senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.) 22 Sept 2014 “Will America Ever Learn from Its Middle East Mistakes?“ <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/will-america-ever-learn-its-middle-east-mistakes>

Hawkish types across the political spectrum warn that ISIS poses a dire threat to the security of the United States and cannot be ignored—even though [U.S. intelligence agencies](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/us-intelligence-agencies-remain-uncertain-about-danger-posed-by-islamic-state/2014/09/13/23245e84-3aa6-11e4-bdfb-de4104544a37_story.html" \t "_blank) contend there is no evidence the organization has formulated plans to attack the American homeland. There is ample reason to wonder whether Congress and the American people are being stampeded into supporting a new war in the Middle East without considering the possible adverse consequences. Citing the admittedly odious behavior of ISIS is not sufficient reason to launch another military crusade. Without a doubt, ISIS commits horrific acts, exemplified by the publicized beheadings of two American journalists and a British humanitarian-aid worker. But if barbaric decapitations were an adequate casus belli, we would need to go to war against Saudi Arabia. That regime has [beheaded at least forty-six individuals in 2014](http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2014/9/5/beheadings-floggingsandamputationsjusticesaudistyle.html" \t "_blank) alone—many of them for nonviolent offenses.

Promoting democracy in the Middle East doesn’t justify US intervention: Arab movements that respect the people’s aspirations will oppose U.S. interests

Dr. Leon Hadar 2011. (Ph.D. from the School of International Service at [American University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_University)) Obama on the Middle East: No Game Changer 19 May 2011 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/obama-middle-east-no-game-changer>

And while most Americans would probably applaud Obama’s call for protecting individual rights, freedom of religion, the emancipation of women, and the promotion of free markets in Egypt and other Arab countries, there are no indications that the majority of the people who are driving the change that supports these principles. If anything, considering the findings of several opinion polls conducted in the Middle East, Arab governments who will be more responsive to their people’s aspirations are probably going to be less inclined to move in the direction set by Obama and to embrace policies that will be less favorable to the interests of the U.S. and Israel.

“Supporting our allies” doesn’t justify intervention

Doug Bandow 2011. (J.D. from Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties; worked as special assistant to President Reagan ) 25 Feb 2011 Revolution in Middle East: Time for US to Step Back <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/revolution-middle-east-time-us-step-back>

At the same time, Washington fears losing key allies. Potential Republican presidential candidate Michael Huckabee even criticized the Obama administration for doing too little to support Mubarak. Although much ink has been spilled on the geopolitical importance of such authoritarian allies, they matter far less today than during the Cold War. Oil producers will want to sell their only valuable export in any case.

“Overthrowing dictators” doesn’t justify US intervention

Doug Bandow 2011. (J.D. from Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties; worked as special assistant to President Reagan ) 25 Feb 2011 Revolution in Middle East: Time for US to Step Back <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/revolution-middle-east-time-us-step-back>

Attempting to forcibly reform, or even overthrow, repressive regimes seems more satisfying morally. But the outcome is not necessarily more positive. It is far easier to blow up a society than put it back together. In Iraq at least 200,000 civilian likely have died after America’s ill-considered invasion. In 2006 the U.S. government pressed for elections in the Palestinian territories, which propelled Hamas to power in the Gaza Strip. Washington then refused to recognize the result, adding hypocrisy to stupidity. Abrupt changes of regime are more likely to result in violence and repression.

Middle East has little impact on world economy or military concerns

Justin Logan 2014. ( master’s degree in international relations from the University of Chicago; director of foreign policy studies at Cato Institute ) Why the Middle East Still Doesn’t Matter 9 Oct 2014 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-middle-east-still-doesnt-matter>

Otto von Bismarck, Nicholas Spykman or any of the other great strategists of centuries past would be puzzled at the degree of interest Western elites give to the Middle East. The region is an economic dwarf. Its combined GDP—even including oil—represents roughly 6 percent of world GDP. Its population is closer to 5 percent of world population, and its military forces are similarly unimpressive. As the iconoclastic scholar Edward Luttwak has [pointed out](http://www.prospectmagazine.co.uk/features/themiddleofnowhere" \t "_blank), America’s Middle East analysts frequently fall victim to the “Mussolini syndrome” when thinking about the region, attributing “real military strength to backward societies whose populations can sustain excellent insurgencies but not modern military forces.” No Middle Eastern state can project power outside the region—not Iran, which spends about $18 billion per year on defense, and not Saudi Arabia, despite its roughly $60 billion in annual military spending.

From military perspective, concern about the Middle East is a waste of time

Justin Logan 2014. ( master’s degree in international relations from the University of Chicago; director of foreign policy studies at Cato Institute ) Why the Middle East Still Doesn’t Matter 9 Oct 2014 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/why-middle-east-still-doesnt-matter>

Writing in 2007, Philip Auerswald presciently [argued](http://www.the-american-interest.com/articles/2007/05/01/the-irrelevance-of-the-middle-east/" \t "_blank) that “the first, most severe, and likely most enduring mistake made with regard to Iraq was believing that any country in the Middle East matters enough in the 21st century to justify starting a war.” We’re back at it in 2014, despite the fact that none of the reasons frequently offered for obsessing over the Middle East stands up to scrutiny. Meanwhile, we have created cadres of Middle East obsessives who argue that their region of study is vital, while America’s slighted Asia Pivoteers whinge from the sidelines, not daring to speak the heretical truth: The Middle East, from a military point of view, is little more than a waste of time.

SOLVENCY

Promoting elections and democracy in the Middle East won’t work

Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter 2007. (PhD in diplomatic history; senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.) 13 Aug 2007 “Democracy and Demagoguery in the Middle East” <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/democracy-demagoguery-middle-east>

Elections in such an environment will merely empower political demagogues and religious extremists. It is no accident that voters in Iraq spurned the more tolerant, secular parties who sought to reach across the Sunni-Shi’a-Kurdish divides and instead supported blatantly sectarian parties. The fallacy of assuming that democracy is a panacea for the Middle East was even more graphically confirmed by the elections in the Palestinian territories, when Hamas routed the more moderate (though hardly tolerant) Fatah. That is not to say that Middle Eastern societies will never be ready to implement Western-style liberal democracy. There is no anti-democracy gene in human DNA. Societies change over time, and the emergence of stable, liberal democratic systems in the Middle East might well occur at some point in the future. But it’s not likely to happen in the next generation or two, and for the president to base U.S. policy in the region on the expectation that it will is irresponsible.

“Freedom” or “Democracy” goals won’t work: Their ideas of freedom and democracy are radically different from ours

Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter 2007. (PhD in diplomatic history; senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.) 13 Aug 2007 “Democracy and Demagoguery in the Middle East” <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/democracy-demagoguery-middle-east>

Bush’s view is not merely simplistic, it is profoundly dangerous. The president assumes that when people in the Middle East and people in the West speak of freedom, they have the same concept in mind. There is virtually no evidence to support that belief. For all too many people in the Middle East, freedom means the ability to live the way the local mullah tells them that they ought to. The foundation of an effective democracy is not some subjective desire of a person to live in freedom (however defined)—it is the willingness to allow fellow citizens, who may have different values and lifestyles, to live in freedom. That crucial spirit of tolerance is tragically underdeveloped in Middle Eastern societies. So is a pervasive attitude that political, economic and religious disputes must be settled solely by peaceful means.

Based on past experience: U.S. intervention will lead to failure, which will lead to more intervention

Doug Bandow 2014. (J.D. from Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties; worked as special assistant to President Reagan ) 5 Nov 2014 Every Middle East Mistake Causes the United States to Intervene Again <http://www.cato.org/blog/gop-senate-likely-push-more-war-yet-every-mistake-causes-us-intervene-again>

Washington has reentered the Iraqi conflict. [As I warn on Forbes online](http://www.forbes.com/sites/dougbandow/2014/11/05/republicans-take-senate-likely-to-push-for-more-war-war-that-will-never-end/" \t "_blank):  “Experience suggests that U.S. authorities lack the knowledge, judgment, and competence to carry out almost any policy there without making the situation worse.” It is impossible to predict the exact outcome of Washington’s newest military intervention in the Middle East. But experience suggests that new problems created will generate pressure for new interventions in coming years.

DISADVANTAGES

1. We make things worse.

Experience in Iraq and Libya proves U.S. interventions only make things worse

Dr. Ted Galen Carpenter 2014. (PhD in diplomatic history; senior fellow for defense and foreign policy studies at the Cato Institute.) 22 Sept 2014 “Will America Ever Learn from Its Middle East Mistakes?“ <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/will-america-ever-learn-its-middle-east-mistakes>

The Bush administration’s crusade to transform Iraq into a united, pro-Western democracy instead produced a fractured, chaotic entity characterized by bloody Sunni-Shiite conflicts and the expulsion of one-third of Iraq’s once-vibrant Christian community. The rise of ISIS is only the latest plague to afflict Iraq after Washington’s helpful ministrations. It has become abundantly clear that U.S. policy makers learned little or nothing from the Iraq debacle. The Obama administration worked to overthrow Libya’s Muammar Qaddafi—once again with the goal of turning the country into a stable democracy. Instead, Libya became the playground for dozens of armed militias, many of whom appear to have decidedly radical Islamist leanings. [The place is now an anarchic mess](http://nationalinterest.org/feature/battlefield-libya-11291" \t "_blank).

Trying to influence Mid-East events, even for promoting democracy, ends up making things worse

Doug Bandow 2011. (J.D. from Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties; worked as special assistant to President Reagan ) 25 Feb 2011 Revolution in Middle East: Time for US to Step Back <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/revolution-middle-east-time-us-step-back>

Abrupt changes of regime are more likely to result in violence and repression. While Washington should not oppose democratic movements even if they seem less likely to promote its geopolitical interests, the U.S. government should not actively spur revolution. American policymakers simply don’t know how to get there or even where “there” is. The world in which Washington can simply tell everyone else what to do is illusory. Even in pushing for the liberal ideal American officials risk doing more harm than good. Better for the U.S. government to advocate respect for human rights and democracy and then shut up. The less said by Washington about what the U.S. government desires, the better.

2. We create new enemies.

Intervention creates new enemies and “blowback” – unexpected consequences

Doug Bandow 2014. (J.D. from Stanford Univ.; senior fellow at the Cato Institute, specializing in foreign policy and civil liberties; worked as special assistant to President Reagan ) 5 Nov 2014 Every Middle East Mistake Causes the United States to Intervene Again <http://www.cato.org/blog/gop-senate-likely-push-more-war-yet-every-mistake-causes-us-intervene-again>

But blowback is to be expected. In 1953, Washington helped oust Iran’s democratically elected prime minister. Eventually the authoritarian Shah was overthrown, with radical Islamists targeting America. The Reagan administration inserted the U.S. military into the middle of Lebanon’s bloody civil war. Attacks on the U.S. embassy and Marine Corps barracks followed. Fear of Iranian domination of the Persian Gulf caused Washington to back Saddam Hussein in his aggressive war against Tehran. That helped persuade Hussein that the United States would not block his conquest of Kuwait. The first Bush administration expelled Hussein’s forces without overthrowing his regime. But the Bush and Clinton administrations launched regular air strikes, while U.S-led sanctions harmed Iraqi civilians. American forces garrisoned Saudi Arabia, providing one of Osama bin-Laden’s grievances against America.

3. We lose focus on America’s real interests

Link: Middle East has little economic or military impact. Cross-Apply the Logan 2014 card above under Significance

Link: Trying to fix the Middle East distracts our foreign policy from where our core interests really are: East Asia

Dr. Leon Hadar 2011. (Ph.D. from the School of International Service at [American University](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/American_University)) Obama Turns Failure into Success in the Middle East 22 Mar 2011 <http://www.cato.org/publications/commentary/obama-turns-failure-success-middle-east>

Obama not only recognizes that the U.S. is constrained in its ability to determine outcomes in the Middle East. He also understands that the continuing U.S. preoccupation with that region doesn’t allow Washington to invest the required time and resources in maintaining its position in East Asia where core interests U.S. are at stake.

Impact: Net benefits. Pacific Asia focus will pay benefits many times over

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton 2011. [America’s Pacific Century](http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/) 11 Oct 2011 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2011/10/11/americas-pacific-century/>

 It is home to several of our key allies and important emerging powers like China, India, and Indonesia. At a time when the region is building a more mature security and economic architecture to promote stability and prosperity, U.S. commitment there is essential. It will help build that architecture and pay dividends for continued American leadership well into this century, just as our post-World War II commitment to building a comprehensive and lasting transatlantic network of institutions and relationships has paid off many times over — and continues to do so. The time has come for the United States to make similar investments as a Pacific power, a strategic course set by President Barack Obama from the outset of his administration and one that is already yielding benefits.