

Declining American Influence in the Middle East: Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya

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American influence in the Middle East is declining due to a shifting global balance of power and an ambivalent US foreign policy toward key issues in the region. From Syria to Yemen, North Africa, and elsewhere, the United States has struggled to find a clear strategy, even while the government's much-touted pivot to East Asia has yet to take shape, let alone yield tangible diplomatic results. US withdrawals from Afghanistan and Iraq have not yet been replaced with robust diplomacy in an increasingly complicated region that has been crowded and clouded by multiple foreign interventions. Just as problematic is the American role in Libya after its uprising in 2011, which saw the United States take a largely hands-off approach that continues to this day.

The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1991, and with it the Warsaw Pact, is one of those historic shifts that take a decade or so to fully unfold. During the Cold War, two global powers competed for influence; the lines were clearly drawn and there was a stable balance of power. Only once, and very briefly, was there a danger of another world war, during the fitful 13 days of the Cuban Missile Crisis, when the United States

and the Soviet Union got their signals crossed and almost stumbled into nuclear war.¹

The world witnessed a moment of American ascendancy in the 1990s, which some confused as evidence of the balance of power shifting to a unipolar system. China, however, had been preparing itself to step from economic growth to military build-up, and finally to become a global power in every sense of the word. This recently became fully apparent with China having brokered a rapprochement between Iran and Saudi Arabia, thereby taking a clear diplomatic step in the Middle East while also moving closer to Russian President Vladimir Putin in his hour of need during the war in Ukraine.² This rise in Chinese power and influence coincided with a reduced US footprint under the Obama administration, which talked up its proposed pivot to the Pacific, but did very little to move resources or diplomatic energy from one region to the other. At a recent G-7 summit in Tokyo, US Secretary of State Antony Blinken signaled an affinity of views among these allies vis-à-vis China, but announced no new action, diplomatic or economic, to try to influence Chinese policy.³

The changing balance of power and the consequent decline in American influence was nowhere more clearly demonstrated than in the Middle East. Under the Obama administration, the fate of Syria was decided by Russia, Turkey, Iran, and Israel. More recently, the United Arab Emirates and Saudi Arabia, after staying away for almost a decade, have reentered the Syrian fray and, in the process of rehabilitating Bashar al-Assad's regime, are now players and influencers in that game of nations.⁴ The United States, on the other hand, has remained at best a marginal player. Nevertheless, President Obama's desire to avoid another Iraq debacle led

1 "The Cuban Missile Crisis, October 1962," U.S. State Department Office of the Historian, <https://history.state.gov/milestones/1961-1968/cuban-missile-crisis>.

2 Yasmine Farouk, "Riyadh's Motivations Behind the Saudi-Iran Deal," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, March 30, 2023, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2023/03/30/riyadh-s-motivations-behind-saudi-iran-deal-pub-89421>.; Karl Ritter and David Keyton, "China and Russia Are Increasing Their Military Collaboration, Japan's Foreign Minister Warns," *Associated Press*, May 13, 2023, <https://apnews.com/article/japan-china-ukraine-war-russia-taiwan-c11b5c5ad28f438574643d9dcb28ccc2>.

3 Edward Wong, "Blinken and Top Diplomats Stress Unity on Russia and China," *New York Times*, April 18, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/04/18/world/asia/blinken-g7-russia-china.html?smid=url-share>.

4 Kali Robinson, "Syria Is Normalizing Relations With Arab Countries. Who Will Benefit?," Council on Foreign Relations, May 11, 2023, <https://www.cfr.org/in-brief/syria-normalizing-relations-arab-countries-who-will-benefit>.

to a declining role in Syria and lay the groundwork for the pull-out from Afghanistan, fully implemented by the Biden administration—sometimes labeled as “Obama part two.”

The Carter Doctrine, as laid out in former President Jimmy Carter’s 1980 State of the Union Address, emphasized that, “An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.” That message was a response to the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan that took place in the same momentous year. However, after a decade of struggle, the Soviets withdrew from Afghanistan and the USSR collapsed, thus ending the Cold War. Bolstered by the Soviet defeat and prompted into action by the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States, the George W. Bush administration invaded Afghanistan, launching a two-decade occupation that ended without much to show for the international effort that it led in the country.

The US intervention in Afghanistan became much more problematic one year on, when it turned into a full-fledged occupation. The twenty-year occupation was often described as an experiment in nation-building and the establishment of US dominance in the region—an experiment that failed on both counts. When it ended, the chaos of a sudden total pull-out while the Taliban were closing in on Kabul left the American public and the world stunned by the futility of it all.⁵ Turned upside-down, Bush’s “shock and awe” phrase exposed a superpower clearly ill-disposed to steer the region toward a more democratic path. Middle East media outlets have since reflected a prevailing conclusion in the region that the US withdrawal from Afghanistan was first and foremost a defeat and a manifestation of declining US commitment to its friends and allies.⁶ For the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the UAE, the Afghan withdrawal enhanced planning that was already underway in the waning years of the US occupation, and that was focused on balancing these two Gulf powerhouses’ dependence on the United States with stronger relations with Russia and China.

5 Karoun Demirjian, “G.O.P. Inquiry on Afghan Withdrawal Opens With Searing Witness Accounts,” *New York Times*, March 8, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/08/us/politics/afghanistan-withdrawal-house-hearing.html>.

6 Omar al-Sharif, “The US Withdrawal from Afghanistan,” *Arab News*, April 20, 2021, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1846041>.

US Power after Afghanistan

When the end to the United States' involvement in Afghanistan came, it came quickly. The Ashraf Ghani government folded without a fight, mercifully choosing to avoid further bloodshed in the capital, in what would have been in any case a losing battle.⁷ After twenty years of occupation, thousands of American deaths, tens of thousands of Afghan deaths, and over a trillion dollars spent by the Department of Defense alone, the US failed to secure its friends in power and left them at the mercy (or lack thereof) of the Taliban, with whom US diplomats had negotiated for more than a decade regarding the transition.⁸ Worse still, when the US embassy closed and all the troops pulled out, over 100,000 Afghan allies and former employees were left with incomplete special immigrant visas (SIV) and could not be evacuated in time.⁹

To be fair, US/NATO military intervention dealt a serious blow to al-Qaeda's terror capabilities in the first year of the invasion. However, the 19 years that followed were mostly dedicated to nation-building, an attempt to shore-up anti-Qaeda and Taliban forces in the country and to support the building of political and academic institutions that would, if properly supported, defend against the return of extremism to the country.¹⁰ Well before the actual withdrawal of troops from Afghanistan, however, both the United States and its NATO allies concluded that their goal was unachievable, though the speed with which the pro-West government fell was a surprise to most.¹¹ The haste and chaos of the withdrawal took a toll on Afghans who had for years loyally served with US and NATO forces.¹²

7 "Afghan President Ghani Relinquishes Power, Taliban Form Interim Gov't," *Daily Sabah*, August 15, 2021, <https://www.dailysabah.com/world/asia-pacific/afghan-president-ghani-relinquishes-power-taliban-form-interim-govt>.

8 "Human and Budgetary Costs of the U.S. War in Afghanistan, 2001-2022," Watson Institute for International and Public Affairs, August 2021, <https://watson.brown.edu/costsofwar/figures/2021/human-and-budgetary-costs-date-us-war-afghanistan-2001-2022>.

9 Loren Voss, "How to Save Thousands of Afghan Allies," *Lawfare*, January 30, 2023, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/how-save-thousands-afghan-allies>.

10 Jessica T. Mathews, "American Power After Afghanistan: How to Rightsize the Country's Global Role," *Foreign Affairs*, September 17, 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2021-09-17/american-power-after-afghanistan>.

11 "NATO and Afghanistan," North Atlantic Treaty Organization, August 31, 2022, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/topics_8189.htm.

12 Franco Ordoñez, "For Biden, the Chaotic Withdrawal from Kabul Was a Turning Point in His Presidency," *National Public Radio*, August 15, 2022, <https://www.npr.org/2022/08/15/1117037318/for-biden-the-chaotic-withdrawal-from-kabul-was-a-turning-point-in-his-presidenc>.

More fundamentally, the delay in realizing that the occupation itself was flawed is inexcusable. Simply put, the enterprise of recreating the country in the image of its occupiers was too costly, especially when compared to the meagre results it produced.

Despite twenty years of occupation and ambitious (perhaps overly ambitious) development goals, western powers and international institutions consistently failed to implement their grandiose designs for economic and political development. This was partly due to short-term budgeting processes and complacency toward their lack of success; but it was mostly due to the corrupt warlords and drug lords who remained empowered, either directly by the occupying powers or indirectly via the lackluster leadership installed in Kabul.¹³

The story on the military side of things is even worse, and was riddled with failures in achieving stability in most of Afghanistan's provinces. The US military could not be everywhere at once in such a geographically large and difficult terrain and the local armed forces were never able to hold cities and villages for long after international forces cleared them of the Taliban. Kunduz is one example of a large city liberated from the Taliban on more than one occasion, only to be lost again once NATO forces left it in the hands of the Afghan military.¹⁴ Smaller cities and villages suffered the same fate, especially in the southern Helmand Province. In short, once the al-Qaeda fighters left and the battle turned into an undeclared war with the Taliban, US/NATO forces had at best a tenuous hold on most provinces in the country. No one was more aware of this fact early on than then Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld, whose harsh words to US generals (mostly conveyed in secret documents) clearly expressed his frustrations.¹⁵

The twin invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan were supposed to transform the Middle East, making it a safer environment for all democracy-loving people and for American interests in the region. Former US Secretary

13 Dipali Mukhopadhyay, "Warlords As Bureaucrats: The Afghan Experience," *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace Middle East Program*, no. 101 (August 2009), https://carnegieendowment.org/files/warlords_as_bureaucrats.pdf.

14 Craig Whitlock, "The Grand Illusion: Hiding the Truth about the Afghanistan War's 'Conclusion,'" *Washington Post*, August 12, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/investigations/2021/08/12/obama-afghan-war-ending-afghanistan-papers-book-excerpt/>.

15 Craig Whitlock, "At War with the Truth," *Washington Post*, December 9, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/graphics/2019/investigations/afghanistan-papers/afghanistan-war-confidential-documents/>.

of State Condoleezza Rice, confounding Israel's war against Hezbollah in 2006 with the American war against al-Qaeda in Afghanistan and conflating the forces fighting against the US occupation in Iraq with terrorists everywhere, labeled the whole US endeavor a struggle for "a new Middle East."¹⁶ Misunderstanding the origins of conflict in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Lebanon is, to a large degree, responsible for the results: Israel ended its Lebanon war with Hezbollah's power still intact and the US left Afghanistan and Iraq with its influence in both countries significantly diminished.

Invading Iraq

The 2003 US invasion of Iraq, perhaps more than any other American adventure in the Middle East, demonstrated the hubris and the ignorance that drive such interventions. State Department reports warned of resistance to invasion and the potential human rights abuses that might ensue.¹⁷ Regardless of the antipathy to former Iraqi President Saddam Hussein that existed in many corners of the Arab world, the fall of a city like Baghdad to foreign forces had a deep and disturbing impact. The popular reaction in the Arab street during and after the invasion manifested itself in demonstrations, newspaper articles, and live coverage on major media outlets throughout the region.¹⁸ The ascendancy of satellite TV and the prominence that year of the *Al Jazeera* network in particular, splashed a blow-by-blow description of the violence and chaos unleashed by the Iraq War across screens and newspapers in the region, which prompted many in the Bush administration to question not their own motives and methods but rather those of the media organizations that they saw as attacking them. This author, present in Baghdad as a State Department spokesperson in 2003, included *Al Jazeera* reporters in press conferences and briefings and was once told by a nonplussed administration official that, "The *Al Jazeera* cameras might as well be guns pointed at us."

The bureaucratic reality in Baghdad, especially during the early years of the occupation, reflected the ascendancy of the Department of Defense over career foreign service diplomats, sending a clear message that the

16 Jeremy Bransten, "Middle East: Rice Calls For A 'New Middle East,'" Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty, July 25, 2006, <https://www.rferl.org/a/1070088.html>.

17 "State Department Experts Warned CENTCOM Before Iraq War about Lack of Plans For Post-war Iraq Security," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 163, August 17, 2005, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB163/index.htm>.

18 "Arab Reactions to War on Iraq," Amnesty International Norway, July 4, 2003, <https://amnesty.no/arab-reactions-war-iraq>.

military was the driving force behind the occupation. Nation-building, both in the political and economic sense, was driven by what political appointees conceived as the needs of the US national interest and not those of the people of Iraq. From the early trust placed in corrupt and sectarian Iraqi politicians like Ahmad Chalabi to twice supporting Nouri al-Maliki for prime minister, the US demonstrated short-sighted self interest in its decisions and policies in Iraq.¹⁹

The United States' mistaken support for al-Maliki as prime minister in 2006 was, incredibly, repeated after the 2010 parliamentary elections (which his coalition lost by a small margin), despite his obvious sectarian tendencies and his engagement in corruption. It was exactly those characteristics that were responsible for his vindictiveness against Iraq's Sunni communities and the artificially inflated ranks of the Iraqi Army under his leadership. It was only in 2014, and after the Iraqi military's disastrous failures against the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS)—now the Islamic State (IS)—that the Obama administration finally lost faith in its ally, and this only after he had decided to reject the continued presence of US military trainers and advisors in the country.²⁰

The brutality of occupation, any occupation, can in principle be ameliorated by a genuine concern for its impact on the occupied population at large and by taking responsibility for a full reconstruction and development effort afterward. And indeed, the State Department's Future of Iraq Project warned that neglect of this responsibility could have serious consequences.²¹ *New York Times* columnist Thomas Friedman (as well as others in the US media) also emphasized this important matter (however crudely), once telling a crowd at a speaking event, "If you break Iraq, you

19 Sewell Chan, "Ahmad Chalabi, Iraqi Politician Who Pushed for U.S. Invasion, Dies at 71," *New York Times*, November 3, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/11/04/world/middleeast/ahmad-chalabi-iraq-dead.html>; David Rohde et al., "Our Man in Baghdad: How America Empowered Nouri al-Maliki—and Then Failed to Keep That Power in Check," *The Atlantic*, July 1, 2014, <https://www.theatlantic.com/international/archive/2014/07/nouri-maliki-united-states-iraq/373799/>.

20 Martin Chulov and Spencer Ackerman, "How Nouri al-Maliki Fell Out of Favour with the US," *The Guardian*, June 19, 2014, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/19/how-nouri-al-maliki-fell-out-favour-with-us-iraq>.

21 "New State Department Releases on the 'Future of Iraq' Project," National Security Archive Electronic Briefing Book No. 198, September 1, 2006, <https://nsarchive2.gwu.edu/NSAEBB/NSAEBB198/index.htm>.

own Iraq.”²² In spite of such warnings, however, mistakes accumulated, from the early dismissal of the Iraqi military to the empowerment of opposition leaders who had long detached themselves from conditions on the ground, and, perhaps most importantly, to the lack of attention paid to the broken infrastructure that frustrated the lives of average Iraqis. Fixing the electric grid is but one example of trying to do reconstruction on the cheap, leading Iraqi journalists and citizens to question whether chaos in the streets and darkness at home was quite the democracy that the US had promised. The frustrations felt on the street certainly contributed to the building of resentment and the strengthening of opposition to the United States—opposition that, in turn, helped build up the ranks of al-Qaeda in Iraq and fueled the rise of IS.

The US invasion certainly removed the despot at the top, thereby opening the possibility for Iraqis to rebuild their own state once the occupation ended in 2011. Twenty years after the invasion of Iraq, however, the population remains rebellious against what they perceive as an inept and corrupt state that has failed to lay the foundations of a modern nation that can provide its citizens with the basic services they need.²³ Nor has the United States’ involvement in Iraq brought long-term benefits to the US, as evidenced by the controversial status of the 2,500 American soldiers who remain as trainers and advisors in the country.²⁴ Although current Iraqi Prime Minister Mohammed Shia’ al-Sudani is much more positively disposed toward the US than al-Maliki ever was, he supports this limited number of US troops mainly to balance Iran’s military presence and influence. Culturally and politically, Iraq’s majority Shia population is much closer to Iran than it is to the United States, which is evident in the prevalent pro-Iran sentiment found among the country’s numerous armed militias.

In the end, the cost of the war in Iraq has to be calculated not only in the billions spent on fighting, the thousands of American deaths, and the hundreds of thousands of Iraqi deaths but also in the spread of the

22 Jim Romenesko, “Friedman: Break Iraq, You Own Iraq—Like at Pottery Barn,” Poynter, February 24, 2003, <https://www.poynter.org/reporting-editing/2003/friedman-break-iraq-you-own-iraq-like-at-pottery-barn/>.

23 Anthony H. Cordesman, “Iraq as a Failed State,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, November 12, 2019, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iraq-failed-state>.

24 Jack Detsch, “‘They Have to Balance’: New Iraqi Leader Tilts the Scales Toward U.S.,” *Foreign Policy*, January 24, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/01/24/iraq-new-prime-minister-sudani-us-troops/>.

resentment toward the United States and the rise of Jihadism throughout the region.²⁵ It is this cost, more than any rational decision to pivot eastward that precipitated the withdrawal of US forces in 2011 and the limited scope of military operations afterward in what has often been described as the global war on terror.

Libya and the Aftermath of Qaddafi's Fall

For President Obama, 2011 was a tough year in the Middle East. The so-called Arab Spring produced popular uprisings against authoritarian rule, and Arab civil society responded warmly to Obama's speeches on democracy and the US pledge to be on "the right side of history." However, other strings were pulling at Obama, emanating from his pledge not to enter another quagmire like Iraq. That same year, the president announced that the Iraq War was over and that all US troops stationed there would come home.²⁶ The US pullout would be temporary, however, as US Special Forces returned to Iraq in 2015 to help liberate its cities from an IS surge.

As the war in Libya heated up, the US was pressed by its NATO partners to intervene, and an impending attack by former Libyan dictator Muammar Qaddafi's forces on Benghazi lent urgency to that call. NATO action in Libya was predicated on an international mandate to protect civilians, and Qaddafi's repeated threats to "cleanse Benghazi" of the opposition forces there certainly put tens of thousands of the city's inhabitants in harm's way.²⁷ However, NATO's military action also had the goal of tipping the balance in favor of the opposition—a goal that succeeded in ending the Qaddafi regime. President Obama, reluctant to get involved in Libya, was convinced nevertheless that the United States was obliged to not only support the NATO action but also to lead it. Consequently, Obama authorized military action, provided that no troops

25 Neta C. Crawford, "The Iraq War Has Cost the US Nearly \$2 Trillion," *Military Times*, February 6, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/opinion/commentary/2020/02/06/the-iraq-war-has-cost-the-us-nearly-2-trillion/>.

26 "Barack Obama Announces Total Withdrawal of US Troops from Iraq," *The Guardian*, October 21, 2011, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2011/oct/21/obama-us-troops-withdrawal-iraq>.

27 Matthew Green, "To What Extent Was the NATO Intervention in Libya a Humanitarian Intervention?," *E-International Relations*, February 6, 2019, <https://www.e-ir.info/2019/02/06/to-what-extent-was-the-nato-intervention-in-libya-a-humanitarian-intervention/>.

would be deployed on the ground—instead supplying only naval vessels offshore and intelligence officers on the ground, which resulted in the media-popularized phrase “leading from behind.”²⁸

The fall of Qaddafi was followed by fierce competition for power inside the country and a host of competing foreign interventions from Russia, Turkey, Egypt, and the UAE, in addition to the continued involvement of Europe.²⁹ The United Nations has been trying valiantly to help establish stability, but the political scene remains chaotic more than a decade after the Libyan uprising, as Turkish economic interests in Libya clash with those of Russia, Greece, and Israel, and compete politically and ideologically with the UAE and Egypt.³⁰ After briefly championing General Khalifa Haftar, the leader of the so-called Libyan National Army, the US role in the attempt to shape the future of Libya has been, at best, minimal. Sadly, this restraint did not protect the United States from the terrorist attack that took the life of US Ambassador Chris Stevens and three other embassy staff members in September 2012.³¹

Qaddafi, the longest serving Arab authoritarian leader, had governed the country with a minimum of modern state infrastructure, leaving the majority of Libyans directly dependent on him and his Green Book-inspired popular committees for salaries and services, without the mediation of political parties or civil society organizations. In the aftermath of the fall of the regime, the task of reconstruction was even more challenging than in the cases of Iraq and Afghanistan, where an occupying power could take action and succeed or fail accordingly. A plethora of military groups and militias thrived and competed in Libya instead, and claimed the right to speak for the Libyan people in national and international circles.³² The lack of national consensus was further exacerbated

28 Charles Krauthammer, “The Obama Doctrine: Leading from Behind,” *Washington Post*, April 28, 2011, https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/the-obama-doctrine-leading-from-behind/2011/04/28/AFBCy18E_story.html.

29 Patricia Karam, “Can Libya’s Stalemate Be Overcome?,” Arab Center Washington DC, April 4, 2023, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/can-libyas-stalemate-be-overcome/>.

30 Ezel Sahinkaya, “Why Is Turkey Involved in Libyan Conflict?,” *Voice of America*, June 4, 2020, https://www.voanews.com/a/extremism-watch_why-turkey-involved-libyan-conflict/6190551.html.

31 Luke Harding, Chris Stephen et al., “Chris Stevens, US Ambassador to Libya, Killed in Benghazi Attack,” *The Guardian*, September 12, 2012, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2012/sep/12/chris-stevens-us-ambassador-libya-killed>.

32 Stephanie T. Williams, “Libya’s Hybrid Armed Groups Dilemma,” Brookings Institution, January 27, 2023, <https://www.brookings.edu/articles/libyas-hybrid-armed-groups-dilemma/>.

by the multiple regional and international powers pushing for their own interests in the country.

The chaos that is Libya today, and the lingering trauma over Stevens' murder, have much to do with why the United States has conducted a bare-bones diplomacy in the country since 2014.³³ Security concerns, however consequential, do not fully explain the minimal US role, which is based on Obama's reluctance after the 2011 Arab uprisings to fully invest in supporting democratic development in the Middle East. Simply put, both Obama and current President Joe Biden have failed to find a credible strategy that straddles both security concerns and a value-based foreign policy. Saudi Arabia is a case in point, where security and economic ties pull the US right back to its long-standing regional partner every time harsh words or actions over human rights abuses drive the two apart. In Libya, the US seems to be similarly pulled in opposing directions, struggling to balance between the abuses of General Haftar, who is supported by traditional US friends like Egypt and the United Arab Emirates, and the lack of both alternative forces to champion and a direct role to play using American diplomats on the ground. As a result, US influence has fallen behind that of Russia, which has adopted Haftar; behind Turkey, which supports its own friendly forces on the ground; and behind European countries intent on trying to stymie illegal immigration to their shores, coordinated by Libyan traffickers.

Toward a US Strategy

Biden has prioritized diplomacy and the withdrawal of forces from "forever wars"; but in an article published in 2020 in *Foreign Affairs* that very much resembled a mission statement for his presidency, he still insisted that America must lead.³⁴ And to the extent that he referred to building partnerships, he highlighted the need for a coalition of democracies aligned against fascism, something that he has since launched at democracy summits in 2021 and 2023. This obsession with leadership belies a lack of awareness that the challenge for the United States in the twenty-first century is to work well with a concert of powers, turning hostility and

33 Frederic Wehrey, "Why Isn't the U.S. in Libya?," *Foreign Policy*, April 6, 2023, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2023/04/06/libya-us-embassy-state-department-diplomacy-wagner-group/>.

34 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., "Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump," *Foreign Affairs*, January 23, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/usa/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.

competitiveness with other global powers into a better understanding of common interests and a collaborative approach to common threats.

In early 2023, US Special Presidential Envoy Brett McGurk laid out “the Biden Doctrine,” with several references to “threats from Iran” and to deterrence of an alleged preparation by Iran to attack Saudi Arabia.³⁵ In the midst of the US girding itself for hostilities rather than putting diplomacy first, Beijing made a diplomatic splash by brokering an Iran-Saudi Arabia agreement on March 10, 2023.³⁶ The Biden administration responded professionally and publicly welcomed the rapprochement. However, administration officials expressed some resentment and belittled the Chinese achievement through other channels.³⁷ The agreement, whether it holds and leads to concrete results or not, left an atypical image of China moving to center stage in a region that has for decades been dominated by the United States.

The United States’ nation-building and its nurturing of democracy via a foreign military force and occupation have clearly failed in the Middle East, in part because the occupying power was motivated by its own national interest and allied itself with corrupt and authoritarian figures. Reluctance to intervene and increased caution in the use of force by the United States, though fully understandable in this context, have not been replaced with a dramatic increase in creative diplomacy or in Marshall Plan-like planning that relies on development assistance rather than force to induce a desired change. The United States could have used the three cases discussed here—Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya—to show-case that it can achieve more during peace than it can during war. Thus far, this has not been the case. Meanwhile, Tunisia, once regarded as the Arab country most likely to succeed post-2011 in building a democracy without violence, has managed to avoid foreign military intervention but has descended into a harsh autocracy against the background of relative US neglect. Clearly, the search for a new and more creative American foreign policy in the Middle East continues.

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- 35 “Brett McGurk Sets Out the ‘Biden Doctrine’ for the Middle East,” Atlantic Council, February 15, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/brett-mcgurk-sets-out-the-biden-doctrine-for-the-middle-east/>.
- 36 Maria Fantappie and Vali Nasr, “A New Order in the Middle East?: Iran and Saudi Arabia’s Rapprochement Could Transform the Region,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 22, 2023, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/china/iran-saudi-arabia-middle-east-relations>.
- 37 Peter Baker, “Chinese-Brokered Deal Upends Mideast Diplomacy and Challenges U.S.,” *New York Times*, March 11, 2023, <https://www.nytimes.com/2023/03/11/us/politics/saudi-arabia-iran-china-biden.html>.