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The Myth of Authoritarian Stability in the Middle East

BY JON HOFFMAN

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

American foreign policy in the Middle East is based on a myth. For decades, policymakers have worked to prop up Middle Eastern autocracies out of the belief that they serve as the only bulwark against chaos and threats to American interests in the region. This approach gets things backward. Rather than being the solution to the region's various problems, these actors are responsible for producing and exacerbating the greatest underlying problems in the region, and a blank check from Washington allows them to act with impunity both at home and abroad. Accordingly, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is in desperate need of an overhaul.

The Biden administration has presented a new logic to justify these partnerships: competition with Russia and China. The argument holds that the Middle East is a critical theater for great power competition, and partnerships with Arab dictatorships are an advantage in that competition. But this and all other arguments often cited to justify U.S. support for these actors are unsound. Instead of representing essential partners needed to counterbalance Russia or China or advance other perceived interests, these governments best embody a sunk investment at a time when the United States is already strapped for resources. The United States should end its overly militarized approach to the Middle East, abandoning its failed partnerships with regional autocrats.



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INTRODUCTION

U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East is built on a myth. For decades, policymakers have put faith in the belief that authoritarian governments are the only viable upholders of stability and order in the Middle East. This account gets things backward. These regimes' own policies produce and reinforce many of the region's most important problems, tensions, and grievances. Crediting the myth of authoritarian stability has led the United States to shower select autocratic actors in the region with tremendous amounts of military aid, advanced weaponry, diplomatic cover, intelligence assistance, and more. Indeed, the Middle East—specifically U.S. partners—receives more military aid and weapons sales than any other region on Earth.¹

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The strategic justifications for these partnerships—and the massive amounts of monetary, military, and diplomatic support spent by the United States—have traditionally included the importance of the region's oil supplies and maritime routes, countering transnational terrorism, and preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon that is hostile to America.² This traditional reasoning has been challenged by a number of recent analyses questioning America's expansive regional footprint and whether it is needed to advance these objectives.³ In recent policy debates, including those inside the Biden administration, the driving rationale for remaining at the center of Middle East politics and security has been the return of great power competition. Proponents of this view argue that the United States must maintain close relations with regional autocracies in order to stave off instability and keep Middle Eastern states from turning to Moscow or Beijing.

This paper challenges the myth of authoritarian stability and the idea that these partnerships are advantageous for the United States. The first section examines the evolution of American support for Middle Eastern autocracies from the

20th century through the Biden administration. The second section shows the logic underpinning the U.S. alignment with autocratic regimes in the region. The third section shows the flaws in such a strategy, including competition with Russia or China, or both. The final section suggests changes that policymakers could make to move away from empowering autocracies in the region.

THE LOGIC OF SUPPORTING AUTHORITARIAN REGIMES

Arguments in favor of supporting authoritarian regimes in the Middle East have taken many forms, but the underlying logic has remained relatively constant: that autocrats are the only actors capable of imposing order, working with Washington, and upholding American primacy in a region that is inherently unstable. During the Cold War, cooperation with such autocrats was deemed necessary in order to prevent Soviet encroachment and sustain the free flow of oil out of the region. After the 9/11 terrorist attacks and collapse of Iraq due to the U.S. invasion in 2003, support for these autocrats was viewed as essential in order to combat global terrorism. After the 2011 Arab uprisings, surviving autocrats were depicted as the only forces capable of reestablishing order following the rise of ISIS and state disintegration in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Now continued support for these autocracies is portrayed as a way to maintain geopolitical dominance in a region being tested by a resurgent Russia and rising China. Although they may not share our values, so the thinking goes, Middle East autocrats are the actors most capable of advancing Washington's strategic interests in a “complicated” region.

The pro-authoritarian approach in the Middle East also has its roots in essentialist assumptions regarding the compatibility between Arabs, Islam, and democracy. Assertions that Arabs in the Middle East are “not ready for democracy” have been repeated throughout Western academic and policy circles for decades.⁴ For example, following the eruption of the 2011 Arab uprisings, the late influential scholar Bernard Lewis stated that democracy is “a political concept that has no history, no record whatever in the Arab, Islamic world . . . they are simply not ready for free and fair elections.”⁵ Not surprisingly, autocratic governments in the Middle East advance similar narratives to the West in order to present themselves

as the only ones capable of governance and to justify their absolute control.⁶ Western misunderstandings of Islam and Islamism also play a critical role here. A common justification for authoritarianism in the Middle East is that if citizens were to have the right to vote, they would immediately elect anti-Western Islamists to power and, once in power, those Islamists would eliminate democratic processes via what the U.S. government famously referred to as “one person, one vote, one time.”⁷ Therefore, according to this perspective, in order to best preserve American interests Washington should remain committed to purportedly pro-Western autocrats who will prevent such forces from rising to power.

According to this logic, although these autocrats may not be ideal partners, they represent the only actors capable of maintaining order in the Middle East and advancing policies consistent with the interests of the United States. For decades, these assumptions have been reproduced by commentary and lobbying designed to sustain status quo policies.⁸

U.S. SUPPORT FOR MIDDLE EASTERN AUTOCRACIES: FROM THE COLD WAR TO TODAY

Western support for autocracy in the Middle East is not new. Imperial and colonial powers drew the map of the modern Middle East, fragmenting the region and keeping its governments dependent on external support.⁹ European colonialists—especially following World War I and the dissolution of the Ottoman Empire—imposed largely artificial territorial boundaries. At the same time, they also created and buttressed authoritarian regimes and institutions that “persisted in the post-dependence period and were used to maintain control over populations, such as the military and bureaucracy.”¹⁰ Following World War II, European dominance in the Middle East gave way to elites from a rising America who, as one leading scholar put it, “saw themselves as successors to the Pax Britannica” and began “rearranging the remnants of the old European empires into an American-styled world order.”¹¹

As the Cold War accelerated, Washington and Moscow competed for regional influence and client states, worsening regional conflicts and undermining attempts at democracy.¹² During this period, the United States focused on opposing communism, securing the region’s oil supplies and trade

routes, and protecting Israel. In pursuit of these objectives, Washington built strong relationships with various autocratic actors in the Middle East, whom they increasingly perceived as the best guarantors of their interests. Although the objective of combatting communism disappeared following the collapse of the Soviet Union, the United States continued to foster divisions in the region, and the other two objectives—oil and Israel—remained essentially the same.

“As the threat of transnational terrorism overwhelmed other objectives, Arab autocracies seized the opportunity to present themselves as the only forces capable of countering threats from the region.”

After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Washington embarked on a grand strategy rooted in primacy, and the Middle East became ground zero for the broader liberal hegemonic project.¹³ In attempting to preserve the status quo, the United States has co-opted regional authoritarian states through a series of patron-client networks.¹⁴

The United States dramatically increased its military involvement in the region when it undertook two wars in Iraq (1991 and 2003) and the Global War on Terror following the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks. Beyond its unparalleled military dominance in the Middle East, American planners provided substantial amounts of advanced weaponry, intelligence support, and diplomatic cover to partner governments in the region.

As the threat of transnational terrorism overwhelmed other objectives, these governments seized the opportunity to present themselves as the only forces capable of countering threats from the region, exploiting American misconceptions of Islam and neglecting how the policies pursued by these governments served to manufacture many of the region’s grievances.¹⁵ When the Arab uprisings erupted in 2011 and threatened to dislodge the autocrats upon which the United States had rooted its regional policy, Washington viewed the prospect of political change—specifically in contexts where its partners were threatened—as a threat to

American interests. The U.S. government has sought a return to the status quo ever since, using both direct and indirect means of counterrevolution.¹⁶

Postwar state collapse in places such as Syria, Yemen, and Libya—coupled with the emergence of ISIS—further solidified America’s autocracy-centered approach to the Middle East. When former president Donald Trump took office in 2017, he doubled down on the two foundational pillars of Middle East policy and sought to more formally merge them via the so-called “Abraham Accords.”¹⁷ The Biden administration’s approach to the region has likewise been one of continuity as opposed to change.

Biden’s New Rationale: Great Power Competition

As Washington has settled on competition with Russia and China as the new organizing principle of its foreign policy, that logic is now one of the most commonly cited reasons for continued deep U.S. engagement in the Middle East. The Pentagon has raised concern over the expanding regional presence of both countries,¹⁸ and Washington has increasingly pressured its regional partners regarding their engagements with Moscow and Beijing, albeit to little avail.¹⁹

Senior officials, such as General Kenneth McKenzie Jr., former head of U.S. Central Command, have stressed that ongoing and increased arms sales to regional partners are necessary to keep these governments from turning to other great powers.²⁰ Brett McGurk, the current White House Coordinator for the Middle East and North Africa, argues that partnerships with Arab autocracies provide the United States with a “unique comparative advantage” over U.S. competitors in the region.²¹ The messaging of these officials strikes a common theme: the more the United States pulls away from the Middle East and our regional partners, the more Russia and China will seek to fill the void. America’s regional partners have expressed the logic of a hostage-taker, emphasizing that without continued strong support from the United States, they may need to turn elsewhere.²²

Without a doubt, both Russia and China have considerably expanded their presence in the Middle East during the past decade.²³ Yet neither Russia nor China is capable of filling an American “void” in the Middle East, nor do they

desire to. As I have argued elsewhere, “Moscow and Beijing have not outright challenged the U.S.-led security order in the region, because they benefit from it: it has provided the security umbrella for them to become more involved in the region without having to assume the costs of physically protecting their interests.”²⁴

Russia and China are opportunists in the Middle East, and neither of them is able or willing to build a new political and security order in the region. As the American experience in the Middle East has shown, an external hegemon attempting to maintain a regional order requires an enormous amount of political, economic, and military resources, and still runs a high risk of failure. Both Russia and China are facing considerable economic troubles at home, particularly Moscow after its disastrous invasion of neighboring Ukraine.²⁵ Moscow and Beijing are also undermined by the authoritarian nature of their own governments, needing to dedicate vast amounts of resources to police the state internally to maintain their own authority.

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Moreover, many of the advances Russia and China have made in the Middle East are due to their limited, compartmentalized foreign policies in the region. These countries have profited from their ability to refrain from taking sides in the region’s many geopolitical competitions. That privilege would likely end if the region’s security guarantor, the United States, abdicated. In short, Russia and China are probably too constrained and too prudent to attempt to replace the United States in the Middle East.

Given that neither Russia nor China has the capability or will to uphold a particular political or security order in the Middle East, Moscow and Beijing would have little choice but to continue their relatively passive approach to the region in the absence of direct American presence. Because they are likely both unable and unwilling to devote substantial resources to the Middle East, Russia and China would remain

wary of being dragged into the region's various troubles, in a manner the United States has for more than two decades, which has proven to be very costly and counterproductive. Moscow and Beijing are far more concerned with domestic issues and political developments in their own regions, and would have to forgo regional ventures that either required the dedication of significant resources or risked entrapping themselves in Middle East geopolitics.

“The defiance of U.S. requests regarding oil production illustrates the limited benefits that accrue to Washington in return for its defense of Arab autocracies. OPEC+ should rethink its approach.”

States within the region are well aware of the limitations facing Russia and China and do not view them as viable alternatives to Washington. Instead, they have sought to manipulate the great power competition concept in order to advance their own strategic objectives.²⁶ Indeed, America's autocratic partners in the region have cultivated Washington's anxiety about losing its position relative to Russia or China, resulting in a type of “reverse leverage.”²⁷ Although this approach is not new, the behavior of several U.S. partners following Russia's invasion of Ukraine have been telling.²⁸

First was the decision by the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to abstain—alongside China and India—from a UN Security Council draft resolution condemning Moscow's invasion of Ukraine.²⁹ Anwar Gargash, former minister of state for foreign affairs and current adviser to Emirati leadership, explained that the UAE will not take sides in the conflict, stating that it would “only lead to more violence.” Abdulkhaleq Abdulla, an Emirati academic, stated that this is evidence that the UAE should not be “projected as a puppet of the United States anymore.”³⁰ In return for their abstention, Russia joined with the UAE in a UN Security Council vote to designate Yemen's Houthi movement as a terrorist organization.³¹ Shortly following Abu Dhabi's abstention, Russia's ministry of foreign affairs highlighted its strong relationship with the UAE.³²

The UAE did an about-face shortly thereafter and voted in the UN General Assembly to condemn Russia's invasion, but

that was likely due to the outpouring of global support for Ukraine and the realization that this would not be a quick military victory for Moscow.³³ In a March visit to Moscow, the UAE's foreign minister expressed his desire to continue cooperation with Russia on energy-related matters, which has continued unabated.³⁴

America's Middle East partners have also balked at Washington's requests for them to increase oil output as prices skyrocket globally. Saudi and Emirati leaders reportedly declined calls with President Biden earlier in the year, signaling that they will not help with rising oil prices unless Washington grants them concessions, such as more support for their military campaign in Yemen.³⁵ In fact, Saudi Arabia has more than doubled its imports of discounted and sanctioned Russian oil in the second quarter of this year so that it can use this fuel domestically while selling its own oil at higher prices internationally.³⁶ The oil conglomerate OPEC+ did recently increase oil output by a minuscule amount after Dhahran-based producer Saudi Aramco reported a massive profit of 90 percent, but this increase in production only represents 0.1 percent of global demand.³⁷ However, OPEC+ has now announced that it intends to dramatically slash oil production by 2 million barrels per day, resulting in a congressional outcry against Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the OPEC+ oil cartel.³⁸ This defiance of U.S. requests illustrates the limited benefits that accrue to Washington in return for its defense of Arab autocracies. It should rethink its approach.

Amid tensions with Washington, Saudi Arabia invited Chinese president Xi Jinping to visit Riyadh shortly after it was rumored that the kingdom had been in talks with Beijing to accept Chinese yuan instead of U.S. dollars for oil sales, despite the practical unlikelihood of such a move.³⁹ President Xi is expected to visit Saudi Arabia soon, which was announced shortly after Saudi Aramco signed an agreement with Chinese oil giant Sinopec, which charted plans for further cooperation and for the construction of a new manufacturing hub in eastern Saudi Arabia.⁴⁰ Additionally, as Russia's many oligarchs are facing waves of sanctions coming from the West, they have increasingly attempted to shift their money and assets to the UAE in order to avoid such sanctions.⁴¹ Russian officials and businessmen close to Vladimir Putin already maintain considerable assets in the UAE, which has so far refused to enforce sanctions.⁴²

The blank checks given to these Middle East autocrats by the United States have been predicated on the false notion that these partnerships are inherently necessary for the advancement of American interests. However, for all of the resources the United States has pumped into the Middle East under the assumption that its partners provide something of value in return, recent events suggest policymakers have instead been exacerbating the sources of instability across the region while undermining our strategic interests.

THE MYTH OF AUTHORITARIAN STABILITY

The pursuit of authoritarian stability has guided U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East since the earliest days of the Cold War, but its logic is flawed. It is a failed approach that has not served to make the region more secure. In fact, the opposite is true: autocracies are inherently unstable due to the illegitimate nature of their rule. Autocrats are loyal only to themselves and are accountable to no one. While from the outside they may appear stable due to fierce repressive tactics and strategies of cooptation designed to discourage dissent, such an illusion masks the widespread societal tensions and grievances until they burst to the forefront. Middle East autocrats present a distorted reality to Washington—and the West more generally—depicting themselves as the only viable upholders of “stability” and “order” in the Middle East despite their own policies producing and reinforcing many of the region’s underlying problems. This false dichotomy—either autocrats or chaos—is not consistent with the widespread support for democracy, freedoms, and positive change throughout the Middle East.⁴³

Authoritarian states are well known to build less reliable and durable alliances, and tend to have less professional and competent militaries due to these forces often being focused on policing the populace internally and undermined by the autocratic rulers themselves via various “coup proofing” strategies.⁴⁴ Washington’s autocratic partners often directly undermine American regional interests by pursuing policies that are directly at odds with those of the United States, such as supporting Salafi-jihadi organizations, sabotaging Washington’s diplomatic efforts in the region, and engaging in military interventions and proxy conflicts across the Middle East.⁴⁵ Moreover, these autocrats have increasingly

sought to advance their objectives within America by illegal means, including efforts by the UAE to illegally lobby the Trump administration, Saudi Arabia operating spies working for Twitter within the states, retired general and former Brookings Institution president John Allen being accused of illegally lobbying on behalf of Qatar, and the UAE courting former U.S. intelligence operatives to hack various computer networks within the United States.⁴⁶

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A regional order built around such autocratic actors—and that must be upheld via constant fierce repression—is bound to be unstable in the long term. Concerned solely with regime preservation and power projection (which is often used as a mechanism to buttress the former), the authoritarian governments in the Middle East are responsible for the region’s political, economic, and social underdevelopment. This is because they have built political and economic structures engineered solely to further the interests of a narrow elite, coupled with tactics designed to limit the freedom to express dissent, mobilize, and so on.⁴⁷ Policies are not directed toward advancing the welfare of citizens, but rather are crafted to buttress the authority and control of the regime while preventing the emergence of alternative power centers. With the backing of the world’s dominant power—the United States—these autocrats face no incentives to negotiate or reduce tensions with domestic opposition or foreign adversaries. Although these autocrats present themselves as solutions to the region’s various problems, they are the primary cause.

The prevailing order in the Middle East is artificial, upheld only via exclusion, intense repression, and security guarantees from the United States. Washington’s continuous support for such an order—and the autocrats who dominate it—has resulted in a vicious cycle: by committing itself to

the root of regional instability, the United States repeatedly finds itself having to confront challenges that are largely the product of its own presence and policies in the Middle East. A foreign policy in the Middle East that divorces itself from supporting these autocratic actors would be able to engage the region solely from a perspective of American interests.

America's autocratic partners in the Middle East are not only some of the worst human rights abusers,⁴⁸ but many of them are also aggressive outside their own borders.⁴⁹ Such actions fuel the grievances that lead to unrest and prolong ongoing conflicts in the region. Staunch support from the United States allows these governments to act with impunity both at home and abroad, fueling anti-Americanism among the people of the region who see Washington's embrace of these autocrats as support for their oppression. At home, these autocrats have been able to rely on ruthless tactics, having "little incentive to share power and resources with domestic enemies for peace when the most powerful hegemon in world history, the United States, all but guaranteed their existence through the provision of diplomatic, economic, and military assistance."⁵⁰ Abroad, these autocrats have been emboldened in their belligerence, confident that they will remain shielded by the United States from the consequences of such reckless behavior. Instead of stabilizing the region in a manner conducive to U.S. interests, America's overbearing presence and policies embracing these autocrats have done the opposite.

“Biden’s Middle East policies stand in direct opposition to his rhetoric: he is continuing the flawed strategies of his predecessors by embracing regional autocrats.”

So long as the United States continues indulging such actors, it will further exacerbate the region's greatest divide: that between these long-standing autocratic regimes and the people they rule over.⁵¹ This divide, which shook the region and world in 2011, has only intensified in the past decade as Middle East autocrats have sought to deepen their grasp on power by doubling down on repressive and exclusionary tactics while fueling the grievances that led to

the eruption of mass mobilization. The myth of authoritarian stability they present is a façade, sowing the seeds of regional unrest that continue to have widespread regional—and even global—implications.

MOVING FORWARD

While campaigning for the presidency in 2020, Joe Biden vowed to lead with diplomacy in the region as opposed to military force. He criticized Saudi Arabia for its abysmal human rights record and has stated that he believed Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (widely known as MBS) ordered the killing of journalist Jamal Khashoggi. He pledged that, if elected, he would end U.S. support for the Saudi-UAE campaign in Yemen, making sure that “America does not check its values at the door to sell arms or buy oil.” Biden called Turkey's President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan an “autocrat” and criticized his policies toward the Kurds. He also stated that there will be no more “blank checks” for Egypt's President Abdel Fattah el-Sisi.⁵²

After taking office, the Biden administration declared that Washington will place human rights and defense of democracy at the center of American diplomacy, challenge the global rise of authoritarianism, and adhere to a foreign policy that “unites our democratic values with our diplomatic leadership.”⁵³

Biden's Middle East policies stand in direct opposition to his rhetoric: he is continuing the flawed strategies of his predecessors by embracing regional autocrats. The Biden administration refused to hold MBS accountable for the murder of Khashoggi despite the released CIA report directly implicating MBS in his murder.⁵⁴ Biden has continued to support Saudi Arabia and the UAE amidst their brutal military campaign in Yemen that plunged the country into a humanitarian crisis.⁵⁵ He has refused to hold states such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, the UAE, and others responsible (either through diplomatic means or sanctions) for their prolific use of surveillance and hacking technology on their own populations as well as on dissidents, journalists, and politicians abroad.⁵⁶ His administration has also continued to pour military aid and advanced weaponry into the region, announcing that it intended to proceed with the \$23 billion weapons sale (including the F-35 fighter jet) to the UAE that was initially approved under the Trump

administration in return for Abu Dhabi normalizing relations with Israel; approving a \$650 million arms package to Saudi Arabia; transferring a significant number of Patriot anti-missile systems to Saudi Arabia; authorizing an additional \$2.5 billion in arms sales to Egypt; and approving a weapons package worth nearly \$5 billion to Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.⁵⁷ This is in addition to deploying F-22 fighter jets to the UAE following a missile attack launched by the Houthi movement in Yemen.⁵⁸

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These actions culminated in Biden’s visit to the Middle East in July, where he bent a knee to these autocrats without the latter having to alter any of their policies that were opposed by the United States. After Biden’s return to Washington, his administration went “back to basics,” in McGurk’s rhetoric, by approving a \$5.3 billion arms package to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi.⁵⁹ In the weeks following Biden’s return and the approval of these weapons sales, Saudi Arabia sentenced a number of activists and critics of the regime to lengthy prison sentences, and the UAE arbitrarily detained

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American lawyer Asim Ghafoor after convicting him in absentia of money laundering and tax evasion.⁶⁰ He was freed a month later, but only after paying a hefty fine. Such overtures make it clear: these regimes face no incentives to change their behavior as long as the United States continues to support them.

CONCLUSION

The tremendous levels of support given to Middle East autocracies have been predicated on the false notion that these partnerships are inherently necessary for the advancement of American interests. If U.S. interests are to be broadly perceived as the safety and prosperity of the American people, how do these partners—propped up by U.S. aid and weaponry—advance either of them? Support for Middle Eastern autocracies does violence to American interests, in addition to American values. In the Middle East, U.S. interests and values do not conflict. But bringing them into harmony will require dramatic change.

These autocrats are unreliable and a strategic liability. Washington should end its complicity in the crimes and atrocities committed by their governments and recognize the destructiveness of these partnerships by ending weapons sales to their regimes and removing the expansive U.S. military footprint in the region. The myth of authoritarian stability is inherently flawed. Washington should tear up the blank checks it has written to these autocrats, bringing support for their regimes to a decisive end.

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