The Middle East Abhors a Vacuum

America's Exit and the Coming Contest for Military Supremacy

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It seems fantastical, but observers may soon look back on the late twentieth century as a period of relative stability in the Middle East. Although there was no shortage of conflict and mayhem, the violence rarely led to dramatic change. No states were conquered and eliminated outright. Dictators came and went, but borders and even regimes changed little. After 1973, most of the major countries in the region stopped fighting one another directly, opting for terrorism and insurgency—strategies of the weak—over conventional attacks. Iraqi President Saddam Hussein and the Libyan leader Muammar al-Qaddafi took longer to learn. Indeed, Saddam never really learned at all. But they were the exceptions that proved the rule.

What underlay this overlooked stability was a skewed military balance that proved nearly impervious to change. There might have been chaos on the upper floors, but the foundation of Middle Eastern security remained rock solid. At one end of the spectrum, the United States was all-powerful, able to defeat any foe if it was willing to apply sufficient strength. Close behind was Israel, whose astonishing military competence and access to U.S. weaponry gave it a similar ability to use force with great latitude. At the other end of the spectrum were the Arab states, incapable of waging modern war effectively even against one another. Iran and Turkey fell in between, but far closer to the weaker than the stronger.

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Given these disparities, only the United States and Israel used force regularly against external foes. Since both were staunch defenders of the status quo, they tended to act to preserve the existing order rather than remake it. Here, too, the exceptions proved the rule. Israel used force to try to transform Lebanon in 1982 and paid for it with 18 years of fruitless guerrilla warfare. The United States did the same in Iraq in 2003 and earned a similar fate.

As a result, the Middle East has not seen a major conventional interstate war in over 30 years. The one partial aberration was the 2006 Lebanon war, in which Israel fought Hezbollah, the de facto governing entity of Lebanon. Yet that, too, was an exception proving the rule. Neither side wanted war. Both stumbled into it and were so traumatized by the results that they have not repeated their mistakes since.

All of that has begun to change. In recent years, the rigid chrysalis of the Middle Eastern military balance has started to crack, releasing a swarm of twenty-first-century Furies that threaten to remake the region's landscape. As new military and civilian technologies emerge, and as the United States contemplates a smaller role in the region's internal affairs, Middle Eastern states are finding it increasingly difficult to know who holds the strategic upper hand. By convincing governments that they might triumph with the aid of new and untested weapons, the emergence of information-age warfare is threatening to rend the geopolitical laws that have ruled the Middle East for nearly half a century.

THE WAVE OF THE FUTURE

Warfare is ever changing. Humanity eagerly and endlessly seeks new ways to kill itself, and no war is just like its predecessors. But at times, the changes can be profound. Typically, they are greatest in the wake of a vast economic transformation, because the most important military technological changes flow largely from nonmilitary technological developments. Railroads, the telegraph, radio, airplanes, internal combustion engines, the secrets of the atom—all were initially pursued for civilian purposes. Once discovered or invented, they were then quickly applied to war-making, and the changes they wrought were transformative.

Just as the Industrial Revolution utterly reshaped warfighting in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries, so the information revolution is doing so today. And just as it took nearly a century for militaries around the world to understand what mature industrial-age warfare looked like—how to fight it properly and therefore how to accurately

Military imbalance: security forces in Mecca, Saudi Arabia, August 2018

forecast relative military capabilities—so, too, are militaries today trying to figure out how wars will be fought in the information age. There are new technologies emerging, but no one yet knows which will become dominant in warfare and which will prove marginal.

In war, profound technological changes often follow a similar three-stage path, as the military expert Jay Mischo and I have surmised. A new technology starts out as little more than a novelty. Think of the first aircraft employed in World War I. Early planes were essentially flimsy oddities flown for reconnaissance. But then pilots started bringing guns with them to shoot at enemy aviators and, soon, bombs to drop on enemy troops. Although none of this had a decisive impact on the fighting on the ground, many saw the potential.

That potential leads to the next stage, when the new military technology is often seen as a silver bullet for an existing problem. As World War I ground on, for instance, airpower began to promise ways to strike directly at the enemy's homeland, its industrial base, its population, and even its government. After the war, the Italian general and military theorist Giulio Douhet took this concept to its logical (if impractical) conclusion. He proposed that airpower could entirely bypass the carnage of ground warfare, enabling quick and decisive victories with minimal bloodshed—at least for the side with the biggest and best air force.

Ultimately, some new technologies prove to be so valuable that they lead to their own realms of combat, typically with military services specifically dedicated to their prosecution. Airplanes, submarines, and mechanized vehicles all reached this third stage during the industrial age. States needed dedicated air forces (even when attached to ground or naval surface forces) to wage constant aerial operations. Air warfare became its own realm of combat, but it also interacted routinely with ground and naval warfare, intelligence collection, logistical capabilities, production power, and command and control. An advantage in the air could translate into advantages in other aspects of warfare—but other aspects of combat could also threaten a military's ability to prosecute air operations. By the early days of World War II, airpower was simultaneously critical in its own right and vulnerable to operations in all the other fields.

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Right now, no one knows which innovations of the information revolution might scale all three stages and lead to the development of new critical fields of warfare. Cybertechnology seems to be the most likely candidate, despite the limited benefits that Russia derived from it during the initial stages of its invasion of Ukraine. It is easy to imagine mature information warfare involving a constant battle among cyberwarriors as they seek to smash their counterparts and protect themselves, vying for dominance in cyberspace. Simultaneously, cyber-soldiers would look to attack enemy kinetic forces, logistics, production, transportation, and command and control. They would likely be vulnerable to attack by kinetic units, as well. Just as air warfare did, moreover, cyberwarfare might render certain older aspects of conflict less effective or even obsolete. Just as airpower eventually killed off the great men-of-war that had ruled the waves for millennia, so cyberweapons might strip other weapons or tactics of their utility. As with air warfare, all of this would take place simultaneously and continuously and interact with all the other elements of military power. Although this seems to be a likely scenario for cyberwarfare, it is still too soon to say for sure.

The advent of cyberwarfare is not the only technological change threatening to revolutionize warfare. During the industrial age,

conflict was defined by mechanical platforms: tanks, warships, aircraft, and so on. That conception persists. Whenever analysts want to assess the military strength of a state or size up two sides in a war, they immediately count their platforms. How many tanks do they have, and what kind? How many planes? How many of each type of ship? As the political scientist Barry Posen once put it during a class session decades ago, after the Industrial Revolution, armies went from arming the man to manning the arms. So it was that the arms came to matter more than the men.

But industrial-age military platforms were difficult to employ, difficult to integrate into joint operations, difficult to repair and maintain, and difficult to produce. Personnel had to be extremely proficient with the machines of war and the complex tactics that emerged to use these weapons to greatest effect. The difficulties in employing such tools and conducting optimal military operations created significant divergences in the effectiveness of various armed forces. Some militaries—such as Germany's in the early twentieth century and the United States' and Israel's in its latter half—were superb at it. Plenty of other militaries could never get it right: those of the Arab states least of all, for a variety of political, economic, and cultural reasons. By the twilight of that era, most sides understood those differences well.

Today, new munitions are increasingly compromising the importance of military platforms themselves. During the industrial age, most machines of war spat inert projectiles—bullets, bombs, shrapnel—the dumbest of dumb weapons. Even torpedoes and missiles were barely guided for most of this period. Such unsophisticated technology placed a premium on employing the platforms themselves to the greatest effect, since it was the platforms that maneuvered, cooperated, and aimed, in effect doing 99 percent of the work. More and more, smart munitions—and, increasingly, AI-enhanced brilliant munitions—are doing all of that themselves. The world has now had smart munitions for nearly five decades, and they are increasingly becoming the dominant machines on any battlefield.

The F-35 fifth-generation fighter jet is one example of this trend. The F-35 is a pig of a dogfighter. But criticizing the F-35 for its poor dogfighting skills is like criticizing the M-16 rifle because it is terrible with a bayonet. Anyone who plans to mount a bayonet charge with M-16s has no business commanding infantry in the modern era. It would

be wasting the remarkable capabilities of that rifle in an old-fashioned manner of fighting, just as dogfighting would waste the remarkable capabilities of the F-35 in an old-fashioned manner of fighting. Instead, the F-35 is a mobile delivery and guidance system for its munitions. The jet has an array of sophisticated sensors, communications systems capable of linking up with a bewildering array of other sensors (and shooters), and the stealth and electronic warfare capabilities needed to penetrate current air defenses. But it is not an industrial-age fighter designed for complex maneuvering to deliver lethal ordnance. Instead, the aircraft's munitions can largely find their own way to a target once the F-35 gets them in range.

The F-35's combination of capabilities represents another wave of future war: brilliant sensors wedded to equally brilliant long-range munitions operated through brilliant battle-management programs, all boosted by artificial intelligence. In such a world, the platforms will do very little. The munitions will do all the maneuvering and killing, guided by information straight from the sensors and ultimately directed by battle-management programs able to keep track of far more information than any human could. Together, these tools might soon instantly identify targets and threats, assign weapons to destroy them, and launch the weapons: rinse and repeat.

DRONE WARS

The F-35 and similarly complex weapons are extremely expensive. Some Middle Eastern countries are wealthy enough, committed enough to their own defense, and friendly enough with the United States to acquire them. Israel's F-35s are already operational. The United Arab Emirates will get them next, and the Saudis will probably get them eventually. Egypt, Iraq, and Jordan, however, are much less likely to obtain them at all. But these less wealthy and well-connected states can still get drones.

Drones are fast emerging as a vital component of information-age warfare. Many are cheap: souped-up children's toys wielding death in perverse ways. Because they are unmanned, drones are attractive to countries reluctant to sacrifice their citizens in war. Moreover, drones are themselves the ultimate information-warfare munition. Many possess considerable range, built-in sensors, stealth capabilities, and the ability to conduct precision strikes. Many cheap drones can evade detection by vastly more expensive technologies, including traditional

early warning and air defense radars. They are also difficult to destroy by similarly costly air defense weapons and are precise enough to inflict painful damage on vulnerable targets.

Although drones are hardly omnipotent, there is tremendous potential to improve their autonomous capabilities to match and perhaps outpace future countermeasures, possibly indefinitely. Many countries are working on microdrones that can more easily evade detection, drone swarms designed to overpower defenses, and swarms of microdrones that could do both. Countries are also working hard at overcoming one key vulnerability of drones, their need for some form of guidance from an operator on the ground. Sophisticated command-and-control systems and autonomous drones guided by artificial intelligence could eliminate that liability, albeit at the risk of algorithms wreaking unintended havoc. Fears of collateral damage might constrain a state committed to public morality or a status quo power looking to avoid unintentional escalation. But such concerns could just as easily be meaningless to nihilistic terrorist groups or to a state engaged in an existential struggle or fighting for worthwhile gains.

For 75 years, the Middle East has been the world's great weapons laboratory. All the major arms-makers have tested their latest killing machines in the region's wars, from the Soviets in Egypt to the Americans in Iraq to the Russians in Syria. Drones are no different. From the shockingly cheap to the wildly expensive, they increasingly dominate Middle Eastern wars—and they are upending the region's military balance.

Turkey, for instance, used to have a military that experts considered to be something of a joke. Although Ankara liked to brag about its military's prowess, in recent years, its forces had demonstrated little real capability against Kurdish rebels or Islamic State (or ISIS) fighters. Then the Turks discovered drones. Today, as a result, they have regained much of their Ottoman glory. In 2020, the Libyan renegade strongman Khalifa Haftar besieged Tripoli, the capital of Libya, and it seemed only a matter of time before he would take the city. Then, Ankara deployed an army of advisers and drones that enabled Libya's central government to smash his forces and force him into political negotiations. That same year, the Syrian regime launched a major offensive against the opposition stronghold of Idlib, employing an armored force rebuilt with Iranian and Russian assistance. Here, too, a flock of Turkish drones descended on Syrian columns as they rolled north—shattering them like rickety antiques. Finally, later in

2020, another fleet of Turkish drones enabled Azerbaijan to rout Armenian ground forces in their latest round of fighting over the disputed territory of Nagorno-Karabakh.

The Turks are not the only ones taking advantage of drones. Iran has also embraced them, providing them—along with advisers, training, and guidance—to its various allies and proxies across the Middle East. In September 2019, Iran struck the vast Saudi oil processing center at Abqaiq with roughly two dozen drones and three cruise missiles. The drones evaded the extensive air defenses around the site and managed to take nearly half of Saudi Arabia's oil production offline for several weeks.

Since then, Iran's allies and proxies have repeatedly struck U.S. forces in Iraq and Syria with drones and waged a constant air campaign against Saudi Arabia, mostly (but not entirely) carried out by the Houthis from Yemen. Such attacks have been remarkably effective. To understand why the Saudis grudgingly agreed to direct talks with the Iranians in Baghdad in May 2021, after years of diplomatic stonewalling, remember that in April 2021, the kingdom was attacked 84 times by drones, ballistic missiles, and cruise missiles launched by the Houthis and other Iranian proxies. It is also worth noting that the Saudis agreed to the talks only after first trying and failing to buy Turkish drones. Beginning in January and February 2022, the United Arab Emirates has been subject to its own periodic hail of drone and missile attacks, launched by the Houthis in Yemen and the Hashd al-Shaabi, a collection of militias, in Iraq—groups linked only by their mutual dependence on Iran.

Twenty years ago, Iran and Turkey were too weak to use force against their neighbors. They could barely fight their own internal Baluchi and Kurdish oppositionists. Today, they are projecting power across the Middle East to great effect. Turkey has stalemated the Libyan and Syrian civil wars. Iran has waged perhaps the first truly effective coercive air campaign in history against Saudi Arabia, forcing Riyadh to a bargaining table it never meant to sit at. The Emiratis have faced the same situation and are not only making preemptive concessions to the Iranians in the short term but also doing everything they can to build a drone army of their own for the long term.

EXIT AMERICA

Changes in military technology aren't the only factor reshaping the military balance in the Middle East. For nearly five centuries, an ex-

ternal great power has always functioned as the region's hegemon and ultimate security guarantor. The Ottoman Turks conquered much of the Middle East in the mid-sixteenth century and ruled over it for nearly 400 years. When the Ottomans fell in World War I, the British took over and played the same role for roughly the next 50 years, until they abandoned their imperial commitments east of Suez in 1968. Reluctantly but eventually, the United States took over and shouldered the burden for the next half century.

The rise of new technology and a retreating hegemon are a combustible combination.

Starting under U.S. President Barack Obama, the United States began to shirk this role, steadily disengaging from the region even as his administration insisted it was doing no such thing. Under President Donald Trump, the United States' exit became both more blatant and more shambolic, as the country abandoned some regional allies and egged on others—often flip-flopping from one to the other indiscriminately. President Joe Biden's team, for its part, keeps telling the United States' friends in the Middle East that the president does not want to disengage any further and would even like to reengage in some ways. Nevertheless, the thousand other demands on Washington's time, energy, and resources are making all of that moot. Biden might like to reengage, but he has little ability to do so.

The American exit from the Middle East has created a security vacuum. The most violent, aggressive, disruptive forces are all rushing to fill the void—led by Iran and its allies. From their low points in 2010 and 2015, following the American troop surge in Iraq and the near collapse of their Syrian ally, Tehran and its rogues' gallery of friends—the Assad regime in Syria, the Houthis in Yemen, Hezbollah in Lebanon, Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad in the Gaza Strip, and a murder of Shiite militias from Afghanistan, Iraq, Pakistan, and Syria—have built themselves back up by exploiting the region's civil wars and their own skills in unconventional warfare. This strategy was straight out of the Iranian general Qasem Soleimani's brilliant playbook—send in the militias in lieu of the regulars—and it has expanded Iranian influence throughout Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

Iran's burgeoning sway and the United States' unseemly retreat have panicked U.S. allies in the region. It has driven some to band

together in previously unimaginable ways. Bahrain, Morocco, Sudan, and the United Arab Emirates, for instance, have joined Egypt and Jordan in burying the hatchet with Israel by signing the Abraham Accords. Saudi Arabia seems likely to follow, albeit perhaps not until King Salman passes. These countries' former hatred of the Jewish state has given way to a pragmatic appreciation for the country's military might and willingness to use it against Iran. Many have celebrated this newfound amity as the end of the Arab-Israeli conflict. Even setting aside the unresolved misery of the Palestinians, however, such a perspective overlooks the fact that this is a war coalition in the making, and its ultimate purpose is belligerent, not pacific. Meanwhile, Qatar, Turkey, and half of Libya have banded together out of mutual sympathy for the Muslim Brotherhood—a bizarre platypus of a military alliance with little to strategically bind them.

In the wake of the United States' long goodbye, the states of the region are brawling more often, and most expect that to become the new normal. The Saudis and the Emiratis, for instance, intervened in the Yemeni civil war in 2015 to prevent the expansion of Iranian influence. Although their intervention caused the very threat they sought to preclude, they took action explicitly because the United States was doing nothing about Iran's regional gains and did so only after repeatedly imploring the Obama administration to act instead of them. Israel has struck Iranian targets in Syria hundreds of times over the past decade and has recently turned its attention to Iranian-allied militias in Iraq. Iran and Israel are engaged in a cyberwar that has now escalated to include Iranian attacks on Israeli hospitals and Israeli attacks on Iranian gas stations. Turkish forces are fighting Russian and Emirati proxies in Libya and the Syrian regime and Iranian forces in Syria.

Terrorism, Washington's longtime preoccupation in the Middle East, is also gradually becoming a secondary problem. That's because terrorism is the strategy of the weak, and the transformation of warfare in the region has allowed states that were once weak to engage in more conventional military operations. That is a worrisome development for both the United States and the Middle East.

The United States' withdrawal, therefore, appears to be unleashing a predictable struggle among Middle Eastern states over which will take the United States' place at the region's head. Some are willing to fight hard to win that crown, and others are willing to fight just as hard to prevent someone else—or anyone—from claiming it. Even if

all fail, the process will be gory and destabilizing. It may also singe neighboring regions, if not burn them to the ground.

THE FOG OF WAR

The rise of new technology and a retreating hegemon are a combustible combination. Wars, after all, tend to be more common when people cannot accurately assess the military balance. Nowhere has this been more apparent than in the Middle East since World War II. For 25 years, from 1948 to 1973, the Arab states believed themselves to be stronger than they were. Five wars with Israel thoroughly disabused them of that notion. Afterward, none of them ever tried to directly challenge Israel again. Indeed, for most Arab states, their defeats were so crushing—and the political repercussions so threatening—that they largely stopped trying to use conventional military power as a tool of foreign policy altogether.

The Iran-Iraq War offers another example of this dynamic. During the conflict, the Iranians developed capabilities that allowed them to win a series of battles against Iraq in 1981–82. But Tehran misunderstood the limits of these capabilities and so tried for six more years to conquer Iraq itself, only to be defeated by a somewhat reformed Iraqi military on the ground and by U.S. naval power at sea. That taught the Iranians how weak they truly were. Iran then switched to gambits that minimized the likelihood of provoking a U.S. conventional military response. Although the country never gave up the ambition of its first supreme leader, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, to dominate the region, it did give up the notion it could do so with conventional military power. Instead, it shifted to subversion, guerrilla warfare, terrorism, and other indirect and unconventional means of attack.

In Iraq, Saddam, for his part, was the exception who proved the rule. Saddam attacked Kuwait in 1990 even though he thought that the United States might very well fight on its behalf. But as has become clear from the taped conversations and documents collected after the fall of Baghdad in 2003, Saddam was a deeply delusional leader who regularly distorted reality to suit his designs. Members of his inner circle warned him not to fight the United States, but he dismissed their warnings because he believed the Iraqi military to be stronger than the U.S. military. It required a leader as delusional as Saddam to think that an Arab state could take on the United States. No one else was that foolish.

In the past decade, all these strategic certainties began to crumble. They are crumbling in part because it is not clear who or what—if anything—the United States will actually defend in the Middle East. If the United States would not respond militarily to a blatant Iranian attack on Abqaiq, the beating heart of Gulf oil production and therefore of the global economy, what will it respond militarily to? That is a major new uncertainty in the Middle Eastern strategic situation.

The certainties of the old Middle Eastern military balance are also crumbling because of the transformations in military technology. Inevitably, as new tools of warfare take hold, some countries will be better able to employ them than others. At the moment, at least in the Middle East, Iran and Turkey have made the most of these changes—regaining military clout they lost centuries ago. But analysts and leaders simply don't know which countries will end up winning and which losing as these seminal changes redistribute power across the Middle East. It was not obvious, for instance, that Sweden would become a military force in the seventeenth century or Prussia in the eighteenth, or that both powers would decline so precipitously when they did.

In the early twentieth century, moreover, it seemed that the United Kingdom would be the great winner of the military transformation occasioned by the Industrial Revolution. It led the revolution and was responsible for most of its transformative innovations. It likewise invented many of the key war-making tools of the era: the steam engine, the submarine, the tank, the big-gun battleship, the locomotive, the machine gun, the aircraft carrier, radar, sonar, and the jet engine, to name only a few. Yet the United Kingdom fell from arguably the most powerful preindustrial military power to a middling power during the industrial age. Its fall was as much the result of an inability to employ those weapons effectively as it was from sheer economic decline.

The moral of that story is that outside observers simply do not know which countries (or nonstate actors) will prove most able to wage twenty-first-century war. Until analysts, commanders, and leaders have seen the audit of battle, they probably won't know. Peacetime drills, training, exercises, and even doctrine and education can reveal only so much. Until states fight, it is impossible to know whose prewar preparations were the most effective and who best understood what new technologies made possible. It is always important to keep in mind that in May 1940, virtually the entire global

expert military community believed that France had the better army—and had better learned the lessons of World War I—than Germany. Only the audit of battle revealed the reverse to be true.

That lesson is likely to be even more important today. In the industrial era, planners could count each side's tanks, planes, and warships—no matter how hard governments tried to hide them. It's virtually impossible to gauge militaries' capacities to wage information-age warfare. As the military analyst Rachel Kramer has observed, opacity is the sine qua non of cyberwar, making it nearly impossible to know either side's true strength until one has won and the other has lost. In cyberspace, if a state knows that its opponent has found a vulnerability, it patches the hole, and the opponent's edge is gone. Transparency is death, and stealth is all that matters. All of this makes it even harder to know who is weak, who is strong, and by how much.

VIOLENT UNCERTAINTY

From 1948 to 1973, the Arab states did not understand their own weakness, and the Israelis had not yet found their true strength. The Iranians developed some unexpected new capabilities during the early years of the Iran-Iraq War that frightened their neighbors (and the United States) but then overestimated just how capable their forces actually were. From beginning to end, Saddam exaggerated Iraq's military capabilities. In every case, these misunderstandings bred more, worse, and longer conflicts. By contrast, as the region's true military balance came into focus, the number and severity of the Middle East's wars receded. As the Athenians once warned the Melians, the strong do as they like, while the weak suffer what they must. Fair or not, it is an effective way to keep the peace.

Today, there are far more questions than answers about warfare. The lack of certainty will give heart to those hoping to use violence to change their circumstances. It may convince the weak that they are strong and may weaken the strong in ways that will invite unforeseen challenges. The more that the fog of war settles on a region, the more that region is likely to experience the horrors of war. The clear understanding of the Middle East's military balance that once underlay its relative stability is disintegrating before the winds of new technological and strategic change. And so everyone should brace themselves for a hurricane of future conflict in a region that needs no more.⊕