

The Middle East's "1919" Moment

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Articles & Testimony

If the Iranian threat to the Middle East is brought to an end, the loose alliance of actors who have long sought this outcome must manage their differences to avoid the regional mistakes made after World War I.

The Middle East today is at a juncture seen only twice in the last fifty plus years, after the Yom Kippur and Kuwait wars, with the region now possibly on the cusp of enduring peace, stability, and growth. While the specific outcome of the current U.S./Israeli campaign against Iran cannot be as yet ascertained, no likely outcome would negate the preceding conclusion about the state of the region, but rather possibly strengthen it.

The two primary recent threats to regional security, Islamic Sunni radicals, particularly the Islamic State, and Iran and its regional proxies, have been decisively beaten. Russia, at times a serious outside destabilizing factor, has been weakened significantly in the region and preoccupied with Ukraine.

None are finished, and their leaders are seeking comebacks, but their positions are dramatically weaker, and the rest of the region, minus some serious interstate and domestic turbulence, is relatively united and stable. But consolidation of this turn of events into long term success requires an understanding of the moment and the mission.

For the last decade the U.S. and its various partners and allies focused on “the other”—those hostile Sunni and Shia religious and state challenges to the regional order, and to a lesser degree on Russia in Syria.

Now with the 2025 decisive victory over the Iranian regional threat, the task is to forge permanent stabilization working through that victorious alliance, the U.S., Israel, Arab states, Turkey, and a supporting cast of European, international organization and UN actors. The obstacles today do not rest so much with those foes of yesterday, but rather differences within this victorious alliance. The moment thus resembles 1919, when the World War I victors

maneuvered to advance individual goals, often at the expense of others. The result was a gradual breakdown of the 1919 order, and a turn within twenty years to renewed world war. The most important task today for the region and these victorious states is to avoid a repeat.

An Amazing Victory

While much of the global public and media attention since the October 7, 2023, Hamas attack on Israel has focused on the legitimate plight of Gaza civilians and illegitimate accusations of Israeli war crimes, the big story in the Middle East has been the destruction of the Iranian regional proxy and asymmetrical warfare threat. For twenty-five years, beginning with Iran's secret nuclear weapons program, Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon, and the defeat of Iran's most feared rival, Saddam Hussein by the U.S. in 2003, the Islamic Republic had expanded its march through the region, mainly through proxies in Iraq, Lebanon, Yemen, and Gaza and through Iran's allied state, Syria. This "Shia Crescent" policy, as Jordan's King Abdullah called it, was complemented by Iran's asymmetric warfare tool kit: terrorism, disinformation, diplomacy as a ruse for aggression, ballistic missile buildup, and most important, clandestine nuclear weapons development. With temporary or minor exceptions (the JCPOA, and defeat of Iranian proxies in Basrah in 2008), Iran succeeded brilliantly in expanding its power and influence, as the U.S., Israel, Arab states and Turkey initially focused on other security and diplomatic priorities.

The cost to the region of this lack of attention was severe. Direct or indirect Iranian involvement in the region's wars over the period 2003-2025 in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Gaza resulted in roughly a million deaths, mainly civilians, and in the Syrian and Yemen wars alone some fifteen million people displaced or refugees.

From October 2023 on, "the empire struck back." Hamas was largely defeated in Gaza, as was Hezbollah in Lebanon. The Houthis were forced to a compromise ceasefire with the Trump administration in early 2025, and the pro-Iranian Iraqi militias, seeing the fate of their allies, remained largely quiescent. Meanwhile, Iran's two ballistic missile assaults on Israel were defeated by the Israeli and U.S. militaries, with assistance from certain Arab states. And in December 2024 the Syrian opposition led by Hayat Tahrir al Sham leader al Sharaa (al Joulani) and supported by Turkey overthrew the Assad regime and forced remaining Iranian and proxy forces out.

Israel then decimated both Iran's ballistic missile capabilities and nuclear program during the "Twelve Day War" in 2025, with the U.S. bombing the key underground enrichment center at Fordow.

This dramatic turn of events has deeply changed the Middle East. Along with the defeat earlier of the ISIS territorial state, it represents the first time in decades that the region has been largely cleansed of serious internal or external threats, and with potential disruptive actors, Iranian and Sunni Jihadist elements, seriously weakened. But the region has seen similar moments in the last several generations—the post Yom Kippur period and the post-Kuwait liberation moment. In each case, an American-led coalition defeated a major threat to the region. The U.S. and partners then built on those victories with steps after 1973 such as the Egyptian-Israeli peace and greater Gulf military presence, and after 1991 with the Madrid conference, Oslo Accords, Israeli-Jordanian relations, and the Clinton Camp David Israeli-Palestinian initiative.

But in both cases, the demons inside regional politics and domestic structures were eventually again unleashed, to throw the region into violence and chaos beginning in 1979 and again after 2000. Today, the question for all players—the regional actors, their key outside sponsor, the U.S., Europe with significant secondary interests—is will this time be different.

The first step to a "yes" is to understand the nature of the challenge. In the past decade the U.S. and regional partners have focused on their foes—Iran, al Qaeda, and ISIS, with victory against ISIS in 2019, and Iran and its proxies by 2025. Now the focus of diplomacy and broader security and economic policy must be within the victorious coalition, to cement a longer, stable regime.

1919: What Went Wrong

The best possible analogy to this moment is 1919, when the victors of World War I—the U.S., UK, France, Italy, and Japan—gathered in Versailles to regulate the peace. The fact that they failed is the sobering reality to keep in mind today in analyzing possible ways forward.

While academics still debate what went wrong and led to an even more devastating world war within twenty years, one obvious factor was deep disunity among the victors. Each assumed the common threat had passed and thus the way was open to seize often just minor advantages at the expense of their partners, while the U.S. withdrew into isolationism. The result was that the main loser, Germany, was able to play off former foes, cooperating militarily with the USSR in the 1920's, and allying with Japan and Italy in the 1930's.

The Middle East Today

Signs of similar unraveling today are emerging, raising the specter of Iran and ISIS exploiting fractures to seize new regional footholds. The most serious competition among victors is between Israel and Turkey. While the proximate reason for the breakdown of previously friendly relations between these two countries has been Gaza and Hamas, the showplace of friction is Syria. There the two remaining serious regional military powers are for the first time in proximity, with differing views on issues from a Palestinian state to the role of the Muslim Brotherhood in the region. Increasingly, both of these traditional status quo states are seen by the other (and in the case of Israel, by some formerly friendly Arab states) as expansionist.

A second, unexpected military confrontation broke out in January in Yemen between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. While the two have long been competitors for Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) leadership, their similar dynastic political systems and powerful economies, along with partnership with the U.S. and common opposition to Iran, long limited any serious breakdown. But the UAE military support to a breakaway militia in southeast Yemen led to Saudi airstrikes and a harsh warning to Abu Dhabi, which then withdrew its forces. But the UAE remains active all around the horn of Africa and in Libya, with lineups of other Arab states, Turkey and more recently Israel in a kaleidoscope of shifting interests. Israeli-Qatari tensions and the Saudi-Pakistan security pact round out the regional fissures among the victors against Iran.

Meanwhile, the future role of the U.S. is not clear. The Trump administration's national security strategy does not, in contrast with its treatment of Europe, call for a significant shift of resources and attention away from the Middle East. Still, the emphasis is now on the western hemisphere and East Asia as diplomatic and security priorities. To be sure, significant forces have not yet been withdrawn from the Middle East, and the administration is hyper-active on Gaza, Syria, Iran, and region-wide commercial diplomacy. But inherently nervous regional partners worry about Washington either drifting away or getting bogged down in Iran, as it once did in Iraq and Afghanistan. Here also the analogy with 1919 is telling; while each of the World War I victors acted in a self-interested, short-sighted manner, the U.S. withdrawal was the death blow to the Versailles system.

History Doesn't Always Repeat Itself

To capitalize on the 2025 victory over the Iranian axis and avoid another post-World War I era scenario, Washington must stay in the game as the region's diplomatic and security lead. This does not require major American military presence but rather a reliance on globally-mobile air and naval strike forces and limited ground forces (primarily air defense), as well as regional partners' own significant military capabilities.

But it does require an overall strategy agreed with regional partners and sustained high level diplomatic engagement to execute it. The recent high level security guarantees the U.S. gave to Qatar show how to firm up a peace. But Washington must intervene decisively when disputes break out amongst its allies and partners. It has done so

between Turkey and Israel, but has not been active between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Yet any of these intra-allied frictions can risk overall stability. Washington should try harder.

In the end, however, it is the friendly states of the region who must take to heart the lesson of 1919: if states prioritize their own particular advantage over alliance solidarity and regional stability, they will wind up losing everything.

Ambassador James Jeffrey is the Philip Solondz Distinguished Fellow at The Washington Institute. This article was originally published on the Hoover Institution website (<http://www.hoover.org/research/middle-east-1919-moment>). ❖

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