



“The New Europe?”

European Diplomatic History and the Future of the Middle East

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On September 10, 2023, Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) told a group of investors his ultimate ambition: that “the Middle East will be *the new Europe*.” He continued: “*This is the Saudi war. Before I die, I want to see the Middle East at the forefront of the world.*” Less than a month later, the Middle East was indeed at the forefront of global headlines, but for all the wrong reasons. The new Europe? MbS almost certainly meant to invoke Europe’s era of economic leadership, technological prowess, cultural influence, and perhaps also its tourist attractions. When historians hear “Europe,” however, they tend to think of war.

Much of history everywhere in the world is a history of war, but Europe’s history of conflict was exceptional. The Europe of the seventeenth century saw the apocalyptic Thirty Years’ War, which killed almost a third of the German population. In the eighteenth century, the Seven Years’ War was followed by the French Revolutionary Wars. The nineteenth century began with the Napoleonic Wars, which killed at least four million people. The twentieth century saw two of the deadliest wars in human history, both European in origin, which together killed more than a hundred million around the world. The recent wars in the former Yugoslavia remind us that history had not ended with the end of Europe’s Cold War division in 1989–90. And, of course, the twenty-first century did not reach the end of its first quarter without another bloodbath, this time occasioned by Russia’s invasion of Ukraine, a war that has resulted in an estimated million casualties in under three years.

You can see why so many members of the Arab elite like Europe. Its great cities remain classier locations for conspicuous consumption than Dubai. But London and Paris are magnificent precisely because they were once imperial capitals. At the start of the twentieth century, Europe and its empires controlled over 60 percent of the world’s GDP, over 70 percent of the world’s population, and more than 80 percent of the earth’s landmass. It was no accident that the zenith of European power coincided with a century of relative peace, between 1815 and 1914, when only a few short and limited conflicts

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pitted members of the great power “pentarchy” against one another. By the end of the twentieth century, by contrast, its catastrophic internecine wars had reduced Europe to a mere museum, covering 7 percent of the world’s surface, containing barely 12 percent of the world’s population, and just a quarter of the world’s GDP.

Perhaps the Middle East can emulate Europe’s magnificence without enduring its centuries of conflict. In Israel and the Arab Gulf states, Western technology is widespread, the high-tech and financial services sectors are thriving, and a serious effort is being made to design globally significant buildings and to create truly global cultural hubs in the region. But the real challenge for the Middle East is one that Europeans managed to achieve only between the defeat of Napoleon at Waterloo and the assassination of Franz Ferdinand at Sarajevo: to create a legitimate political order and a stable balance of power. More than a year after the horrors of October 7, 2023, the Middle East may be close to such geopolitical equipoise for the first time in the modern era.

PART ONE: A HISTORY OF THE PRESENT

CLASH AT TWILIGHT

In September, we wrote in *The Spectator* that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu shares striking similarities with Otto von Bismarck, Germany’s “Iron Chancellor.” The two have numerous traits in common: a survivalist instinct, a cynicism and ruthlessness that draws the ire of their opponents, and an uncanny ability to seize political opportunities during times of upheaval. The most intriguing parallel between them, though, is that they are both navigating an international system in profound flux.

Bismarck operated during the breakdown of the Congress System—a framework that had held Europe together since the Vienna Congress of 1815. That system barely survived the 1830 and 1848 Revolutions, failed to avert the Crimean War in 1853, and was shattered entirely by the Italian and German wars of unification. Netanyahu’s Middle East, by contrast, has never had anything resembling the balance of power of post-1815 Europe. Rather, there has only been the *pax americana*, with the United States serving as the essential arbiter. That system is now in turmoil.

The last two decades have exposed the fragility of the US-led system, with regional states still dependent on international, particularly American, mediation rather than developing their own robust foreign policies. Unlike Europe, which developed alliances and diplomacy during its prewar and interwar periods, the Middle East’s interregional alliances have failed to establish a military and political equilibrium. Even the new groupings that emerged during the Arab Spring failed to rein in the chaos. Substate actors—tribes, militias, and insurgent groups—constantly undermine the possibility of a stable regional order. The resurgence of the Syrian Civil War and the fall of Bashar al-Assad in December 2024 demonstrates this.

An overview of the region's wars underscores this fragility. Since the Iranian Revolution, the only significant interstate war in the region was the Iran-Iraq War—a brutal, protracted conflict that left both protagonists weakened. The next largest interstate conflicts—the Iraq and Gulf wars—were spearheaded by the United States. Three earlier wars—1948, 1967, and 1973—were fought between Israel and Arab nationalist coalitions. The first ended under international pressure, while the others became subplots in the Cold War between Washington and Moscow. This underscores a key difference: Europe's descent into the mid-twentieth-century maelstrom stemmed from the breakdown of its own system, while the Middle East's crises have unfolded in a vacuum where no such system ever existed.

Charles Tilly's aphorism, "War made the state, and the state made war," underscores another key difference: Europe's wars built strong states, while the Middle East's internal wars have torn the region's postimperial states apart. In the twenty-first century, most Middle Eastern wars have been civil: Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen. The main beneficiary of this has been the Islamic Republic of Iran, which derives its legitimacy not from a claim to represent the interests of the Iranian people, but from an elaborate political theory that puts the Supreme Leader of Iran at the head of the Shi'a and, more broadly, the Islamic world. The collapse of Lebanon, then Iraq, then Syria has allowed Iran to position itself at the head of a so-called Axis of Resistance. Where war in Europe was *centrifugal*—forcing nations to centralize power and forge national identities—war in the Middle East has been *centripetal*, preventing the emergence of national interest, national identity, and national citizenship.

In Henry Kissinger's conception, the great threat to a balance of power is posed by a revolutionary element that challenges the very legitimacy of the balance. Since the Islamic Revolution, the Middle East has been divided between a bloc of essentially conservative states—the United States, Israel, and its Gulf partners—and revolutionary forces, led by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Until 2003, Iraq was also a revisionist power, although the ambitions of Saddam Hussein were twice thwarted by overwhelming American force. Since then, the Islamic Republic has been the only committed revisionist in the Middle East, consistently seeking the withdrawal of the United States from the Middle East and the dissolution of the State of Israel. Those improbable demands are rooted in a complex ideological blend of Islamist and postcolonial thought. If they were achieved, however, Iran would be a huge geopolitical as well as ideological beneficiary. It would dominate the Middle East by virtue of geography and size and would probably become the most influential player in the Islamic world. Nevertheless, in the eyes of the regime in Tehran, the theological gloss is more than a veneer.

For some scholars, that has suggested an alternative European analogy. The Peace of Westphalia—the name given to two treaties signed in Münster and Osnabrück in 1648—ended the Thirty Years' War, an orgy of religiously inspired violence that cost the lives of a third of the population of Germany. That settlement is commonly said to have the foundations of the modern European state system by proscribing the right of intervention, making an indispensable contribution to the development of the idea of sovereignty. In 2018, the Cambridge

historians Brendan Simms, Patrick Milton, and Michael Axworthy drew the comparison between Europe on the cusp of Westphalia and the Middle East in their book *Towards a Westphalia for the Middle East*. Before October 7, 2023, this historical framework felt compelling. After October 7, however, the problem they addressed seems very different.

The Middle East's conflicts now look to have more in common with those of Europe in the nineteenth century. Early modern European history was defined by the struggle for universal monarchy—hegemony in modern terms. The true significance of the Wars of Religion was that they made such a universal monarchy impossible. The system that slowly emerged after 1648 was centered around the balance of power: avoiding dominance of the European continent by any single power. The most drastic bid for hegemony, that of Napoleon, was defeated by a coalition of continental powers. What emerged was a system of collective security; subversive movements were combated through intervention, and disputes were resolved at congresses. In its early years, this system feared radicalism more than great-power dominance, because radicals sought to redraw borders as well as to topple monarchs, threatening the “concert” of Europe.

Before the Arab Spring, the *pax americana* revolved around containing Iran militarily—in effect, avoiding the universal monarchy. But the contestation of sovereignty in close to a third of the region completely transformed this dynamic.¹ The region's crisis of statehood enabled Iran to assemble a motley coalition of substate actors, indirectly waging war against the United States and its partners. This fragmentation frustrated the traditional containment strategy in which deterrence was achieved through a blend of instruments, particularly sanctions and the threat of the “big stick.” Iran also gained a pretext to integrate its proxies. From 2012, Hezbollah became pivotal in Iran's Syrian strategy, commanding division-sized units and, within years, leading the Syrian army into battle. The Yemeni Civil War offered Iran another outlet to pressure Saudi Arabia. With ISIS's rise, Iranian proxies in Iraq were absorbed into quasi-official forces and paid state salaries, deepening Tehran's influence in Baghdad. The war against ISIS allowed Iran to further refine its proxy operations under General Qassem Soleimani, who coordinated sophisticated theater-level campaigns until his assassination by the United States in 2020. The current conflict across the Middle East reflects the enduring legacy of his work.

Six of the seven fronts in Israel's war are with lands that now lack a single sovereign: Gaza, the West Bank, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Lebanon. Soleimani did not confront the old system directly but instead dug under it, marshaling substate forces to undermine a security system premised on deterring Iran as if it were a strong state like Saddam's Ba'athist juggernaut. After the defeat of ISIS, Iran turned its regional machine against Israel. In the Palestinian Territories, too, the crisis of the state provided an outlet for Iran to extend its influence further. Already last year, the Palestinian Authority lost its ability to govern key parts of the West Bank's Areas A and B. This allowed Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and even criminal gangs to seize control over entire towns and cities. Likewise in Gaza, in the absence of any alternative or any mechanism to force it to respond to the material needs of the population under its control, Hamas created a vast military encampment. These conditions allowed Hamas and its partners to provoke Israel repeatedly, culminating in last October's onslaught.

PART TWO: SYSTEM FAILURE

THE UNRAVELING OF *PAX AMERICANA*

Debating when a political regime ends is one of the things historians like to do. When did the Congress System, created in the aftermath of the French Revolutionary Wars, end? The outbreak of World War I in 1914 was clearly the end of the European balance of power as Leopold von Ranke conceived of it. But the beginning of the end can be traced all the way back to 1821, when the great powers failed to quell the Greek challenge to Ottoman rule. Others still point to the Crimean War in 1853, the first instance since 1815 of a war between two of Europe's great powers, or the Franco-Prussian War of 1870–71, the final stage of German unification.

In the modern Middle East, there are plenty of candidates for the beginning of the end of the *pax americana*. Was it the invasion of Iraq in 2003, which shattered the region's system of containment and turned its second-biggest country into a power vacuum? Or the Arab Spring in 2011, which tore Syria and Yemen apart, threw Egypt into chaos, and brought Iran and Saudi Arabia to the brink of war? Was it the failure of the West to punish Bashar al-Assad for gassing his own people in 2013, the first sign of its diminishing appetite to preserve the regional order? Was it the attempt to appease Tehran in 2015, or Russia's intervention in Syria—its boldest move in the region since the Yom Kippur War—in the same year? Regardless of where we begin, what is clear is that there has been a palpable shift in the coherence and capability of the US-led system in the Middle East. How did this happen?

In explaining the collapse of the Middle East's *pax americana*, a future historian might suggest something like this: The collapse was made possible by Iran and its Axis testing—and finding—the precise limits of American power, patience, and attention. Those limits have been broadcast at regular intervals by successive American administrations, although by none more than Joe Biden's in the two years preceding October 7. The problem was not a lack of military capacity, but rather a lack of resolve and imagination. The withdrawal from Kabul in 2021—arguably the greatest American foreign policy debacle since the Iran hostage crisis—was an unmistakable signal of disinterest in what had once been referred to as “the Greater Middle East.” This was followed in quick succession by the abandonment of the Trump administration's “maximum pressure” campaign in Iran and an unrequited attempt to reach some sort of *modus vivendi* with Tehran. The UAE and Saudi Arabia were pushed to end their fight against Iran-backed Houthi rebels in Yemen and to accept the presence of an Iranian proxy on their southern border, ultimately pushing them toward accommodation of Tehran.

The original goal of American Middle East policy was to keep the Iranians down, the Russians out, and the Americans in. This goal was exchanged by the Biden administration for the rather vague goal of “quiet.” Eight days before October 7, the US National Security Advisor wrote that the White House had kept the peace in Yemen, ended Iran-backed attacks against US forces across the region, and “stabilized” its presence in the Middle East. In reality, it had pursued a policy that led to the Saudis effectively paying the Houthis hush money, required the Pentagon to absorb attacks by Iranian proxies rather than respond to them, and weakened

ties to Riyadh and Abu Dhabi so much so that the Gulf states normalized ties with Tehran after more than a decade of cold war. This avoidable outcome was a direct product of American policy. The decisions in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi—which have ample precedents in European diplomatic history—was a reaction to a change in the balance of power due to strictly political rather than material conditions.

Now Washington is faced with a dilemma that Kissinger described in his first book, on the European Congress System: the dilemma of a conservative policy faced with a revolutionary era when the traditional balance of power is in extreme flux. The “quiet” that Jake Sullivan discerned in September 2023 was in fact a ruse, a deception. At present, the Middle East enjoys neither quiet nor stability. Instead, there is a race to draw the contours of a new political order. Israel and Iran—and not the United States or the Gulf states—are the runners in that race.

PART THREE: BEGINNING, MIDDLE, END

Three episodes—the French Revolution, the Crimean War, and the Unification of Germany—stand out as a beginning, middle, and end of a distinct period in history. The French Revolution is widely considered to be the end not only of France’s *ancien régime* but also of a chapter in European political history. It shattered the eighteenth-century European order with continentwide wars and introduced ideas of republicanism, nationalism, and democracy that posed a threat to the restored order after 1815. The Crimean War marked the first major break in the Congress System, as three of Europe’s five great powers clashed, signaling its failure. Germany’s wars of unification, led by Bismarck, remade the European order to accommodate a new German state. These historical episodes reveal the recurring pattern of formation, collapse, and renewal that shapes international systems. The Middle East is following a somewhat similar trajectory in our time.

THE FRENCH REVOLUTION

The Middle Eastern *pax americana* was born when Secretary of State Henry Kissinger exploited a growing rift between Egypt and the Soviet Union to “expel” the Soviets from the region. In the aftermath of the Yom Kippur War, the Middle East shifted from a regional system characterized by two spheres of influence into an order visibly dominated by the United States. While Moscow was confined to its Syrian bases in Tartus and Latakia, the United States steadily expanded its presence across the region. The Iranian Revolution, though initially a blow to American regional primacy, enhanced its presence further.

At first glance, the Iranian Revolution and the French Revolution appear starkly different. The former sought to rein in freedoms it deemed excessive, dramatically curtailing political freedoms and women’s rights, while the latter championed liberty, equality, and fraternity. Yet both revolutions made sweeping universal claims, supported transnational revolutionary movements, and waged ideological wars that ultimately backfired, triggering massive shifts of power.

Initially, opposition to the French Revolution was mild: the 1791 Declaration of Pillnitz by Austria and Prussia was a cautious, conditional effort to safeguard King Louis XVI. By 1792, however, revolutionary fervor drove France to declare war on Austria, generating a coalition of nearly all European powers. The Iranian Revolution was at first also underestimated. US officials misjudged the Ayatollah Khomeini, with Ambassador William Sullivan likening him to Gandhi and UN Ambassador Andrew Young predicting that he would be hailed as a saint. Even Saddam Hussein welcomed the revolution, viewing it as a reprieve from the Shah. Yet Khomeini's ideological fervor quickly disabused his neighbors of these illusions. He called for revolution in Shi'a-majority Iraq, Saudi Arabia, and Bahrain, blamed the United States for Iran's woes, and demanded the destruction of Israel, which he claimed was a Western colony. Though Iran avoided revolutionary France's misstep of declaring war on all its neighbors, its actions provoked Iraq's 1980 invasion. While Iraq bore most of the conflict's burden, it was supported tacitly by over thirty countries, including its adversaries—Israel and the US, and the Gulf states.

Saddam's Iraq is gone, but the remaining members of that "first coalition" still view Iran's revolutionary ambitions as an existential threat. It was on this basis that the *pax americana* was extended further. The US had already replaced Britain in the Gulf by 1971, but after the Iranian Revolution its security guarantees became indispensable. By 1994, the US maintained permanent bases in Bahrain, Kuwait, and Qatar. Its dominance in arms sales grew similarly: from 20 percent of Middle Eastern imports in 1971 to 55 percent today, with France, the second-largest supplier, far behind at 12 percent. Initially, revolutionary Iran could do little to challenge this system; in fact, it had inadvertently strengthened it. Unable to confront US dominance directly, Iran developed a "ground-up" strategy, bypassing traditional power structures with asymmetric and political warfare. This laid the foundation for the "second coalition" against Iran.

This coalition emerged after the Arab Spring as Iran's influence spread across Syria, Yemen, and Iraq, aiming to counter Iran without aspiring to regime change, just as the "Second Coalition" against France was fragmented and focused on localized goals rather than dismantling the Revolution. By the Biden years, the opposition to Iran had fractured. The Yemeni Civil War, exacerbated by a lack of US support, led the Gulf states to normalize ties with Iran. Israel has since adopted Britain's historical role, pushing for international financial sanctions to strangle Iran's economy while unsuccessfully attempting to build a new coalition. Saudi Arabia parallels Austria, fervent in its early antirevolutionary efforts but then retreating, deeming victory unattainable.

The final comparison is political. Like revolutionary France, the Islamic Republic remains ideologically driven and resistant to reconciliation. Its bureaucracies for ideological self-reproduction are highly sophisticated. But unlike revolutionary France, which relied on committees, Iran's revolution has always been a one-man show. That figure—Ali Khamenei, now eighty-five and in ill health—holds the future of the revolution in his succession plan. Iran's trajectory echoes revolutionary France: it could yet produce a strongman to temper revolutionary impulses but revive the state's military power. The predominance of the military, particularly the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), suggests the potential emergence

of a Bonaparte-like figure. Qassem Soleimani, the late IRGC Quds Force commander, was a likely candidate for such a role, blending as he did doctrinaire zeal with military acumen.

The unraveling of American leadership raises the specter of defection within the coalition. Saudi Arabia, once a key ally, has turned to denounce Israel, with MbS joining the chorus that accuses Jerusalem of genocide against the Palestinians. This recalls Napoleon's former partners, such as Russia under Tsar Alexander I in 1802 and 1809 or Austria after the marriage of Archduchess Marie Louise in 1810, who pursued their own ambitions when the Continental System became untenable.

Saudi Arabia exploits US eagerness to delegate greater responsibility to regional partners, using its flirtation with Tehran and the prospect of normalization with Israel to push for a favorable security arrangement. Meanwhile, Israel and the United States undertake actions Riyadh cannot pursue alone, such as targeting Iran's proxies and weakening the Houthis in Yemen. However, if Israel achieves its objectives against Iran without Saudi cooperation, Riyadh's leverage in future negotiations—including its nuclear ambitions—will diminish.

History suggests that coalitions against revolutionary states require not just military victories but sustained political and economic pressure. Without American convening power, the risk grows that the Middle East's version of the Treaty of Chaumont—the framework for a collective peace consummated at Vienna in 1814—will remain elusive. Instead, the region may spiral further into fragmentation, with powers pursuing self-serving alignments, much as Napoleon's Europe devolved into opportunistic rivalries and prolonged conflict.

THE CRIMEAN WAR

The Crimean War is often remembered as a tragic and poorly executed conflict, but its true significance lies in its disruption of a stable European order that had endured since 1815. For nearly forty years, extending beyond the Congress System, the balance of power had defused crises that could have led to war. Events such as the Belgian Revolution of 1830, Russia's suppression of the Polish Revolution in 1831, and the Egyptian assault on the Ottoman Empire in 1839 tested the system but were contained through diplomacy. Even during the revolutionary year of 1848, the international mechanism held. The Crimean War shattered this stability, marking the beginning of a more fragmented and volatile European order. This offers an analogy for understanding the Middle East's current crisis. Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's role in this unfolding drama parallels that of Lord Palmerston, the British statesman who sought not only to contain Russian ambitions but also to reshape fundamentally the European balance of power and Britain's role within it.

Palmerston's view of Russian expansionism—"to push forward its encroachments as fast and as far as the apathy of other governments would allow it to go, but always to stop and reduce when it was met with decided resistance"—applies equally to Iran's regional strategy. Through proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, Iran has exploited fragmented statehood to expand its influence. Netanyahu, like Palmerston, must navigate a landscape where former allies—Saudi Arabia and the UAE—lean toward cautious neutrality. In an ironic inversion,

Iran, once a revolutionary force, now seeks to avoid direct confrontation. Israel, forced to act alone, assumes the role of a reluctant revolutionary. Palmerston fought his rival Lord Aberdeen, who sought to avoid a war in the first instance and pressed for a rollback of Russian power. Winning in Crimea was not enough: his “beau ideal” was literally to redraw the map of Europe, expanding the borders of Prussia, Austria, Piedmont, Turkey, and Sweden and creating a Polish state, all at Russia’s expense. Netanyahu is not content with a hostage deal in Gaza. He instead seeks “total victory” in the form of a rollback of Iranian power in Syria, Lebanon, Gaza, and the West Bank.

Palmerston’s vision of a “Western confederacy of free states” to counter Russia was premised on unity among liberal powers—a unity that has no parallel in the Middle East. The region’s alliances, once anchored in US leadership, have fragmented. Israel, once a status quo power, now finds itself compelled to reshape the region. The Abraham Accords initially provided a unifying framework, aligning Israel, the Gulf states, and the United States around containing Iran. However, Saudi Arabia, much like Austria during the Crimean War, has shifted toward neutrality, prioritizing survival over collective action. The considerations are strikingly similar to those of Austria in 1853. Like Austria, Saudi Arabia bears the brunt of the conflict’s geography: just as Austria bordered Russia, Saudi Arabia has Iran-backed militias to its north and the Iran-backed Houthis to its south. Short of total victory—in this case regime change in Tehran—Saudi Arabia risks a renewed conflict that would threaten the grandiose economic projects on which MbS has bet its economic and political future.

Austrian Foreign Minister Karl Ferdinand von Buol described his country’s approach as an effort “to pacify on every side and above all to avoid a European complication,” but this strategy ultimately left Austria isolated and vulnerable. Similarly, Saudi Arabia’s calls to avoid “regional escalation” risk reducing its relevance and increasing its vulnerability.

Palmerston’s attempts to rebuild a coalition—including outreach to Austria, Prussia, and other German states—largely failed, yielding only Sweden as an ally. For Israel, avoiding the unraveling of the Abraham Accords coalition poses a significant challenge. Agreements once celebrated as milestones for normalization and regional stability now appear increasingly tenuous. Saudi Arabia’s pivot toward normalizing relations with Iran and its violent criticism of Israel’s actions in Gaza echo Austria’s wavering loyalties during the Crimean War. Israel, like Britain, finds itself striving to prevent the collapse of a system it no longer fully controls.

NEW ORDER

The Crimean War marked the end of Europe’s long peace, ushering in a period of recurrent conflict. It revealed the fragility of alliances built on convenience rather than shared objectives. Similarly, the fracturing of the Abraham Accords coalition reflects the limitations of alliances that lack a unifying leader. The United States, once the lynchpin of Middle Eastern stability, has stepped back, leaving its allies to navigate an increasingly chaotic landscape. Netanyahu’s challenge, much like Palmerston’s, is to maintain Israel’s position as a dynamic force while forging new alliances—or at least preventing outright defections. Yet some of Israel’s former partners may now turn against it.

Palmerston's observation that alliances must tip the scales in favor of stability resonates today. Israel's military actions, its efforts to counter Iranian proxies, and its broader strategy to reshape the region all aim to regain the initiative in a collapsing order. Whether this leads to a new balance of power or a descent into prolonged chaos depends on Israel's ability to adapt—and the willingness of its partners to re-engage. The Crimean War ended a long peace and marked the beginning of Europe's tumultuous transformation. The Middle East, too, may be on the cusp of a similar shift.

BIBI AS BISMARCK?

One of the striking lessons from Bismarck's career is the clarity of his vision and the coherence of his strategy. Bismarck's goal was not merely to unify Germany but to do so in a way that preserved the Prussian monarchy by fundamentally reshaping the European balance of power. His success lay in crafting a series of short, decisive wars that methodically addressed obstacles: the Schleswig-Holstein question established Prussia's dominance over Denmark; the Austro-Prussian War established Prussian primacy within the German Confederation; and the Franco-Prussian War vanquished France, Germany's perennial antagonist. Each war was strategically planned, executed with precision, and designed to avoid unnecessary overreach.

Netanyahu faces a yet more daunting challenge: ensuring Israel's survival in a Middle East devoid of a stable system or balance of power. Unlike Bismarck, whose adversaries and objectives were clearly defined within the established framework of European diplomacy, Netanyahu navigates a Middle East devoid of an agreed-upon system or balance of power. Israel's objective is not merely to defeat Iran as Bismarck defeated France but to dismantle the Iranian-backed networks of influence and proxy power that threaten Israel's existence. The difference is stark: where Bismarck's wars were offensive, designed to shape the future of Europe, Netanyahu's actions are fundamentally defensive. Like Bismarck, Netanyahu is a conservative who has been forced to become a revolutionary. They have in common a certain pragmatism, recognizing that inaction is not an option when the status quo becomes untenable. Netanyahu is not merely reacting to immediate threats; he is attempting to reshape the regional balance of power.

STRATEGY AND RESTRAINT

Bismarck conducted his wars with a keen awareness of Europe's broader diplomatic landscape. He understood that unification required addressing the concerns of rival powers. For example, after the Austro-Prussian War, he restrained Prussia's gains at the Peace of Nikolsburg, knowing that moderation would prevent intervention by France or Russia. Similarly, Netanyahu must advance Israel's security objectives without alienating potential partners or provoking widespread instability. However, in the post-October 7 landscape, the coalition he might have once relied on—the United States, the Gulf states, and Europe—is fragmented, forcing Israel to shoulder the weight of regional transformation.

By 1871, Bismarck had achieved unmatched strategic flexibility. His statecraft allowed him to pivot between war and peace, with Prussia's army prepared to act decisively

when needed. Yet Bismarck understood that perception was as critical as action: Prussia must never appear the aggressor. This reflects a nuanced understanding of politics as the orchestration of events, when the state acts decisively but only when conditions are favorable. Netanyahu faces a similar challenge. While engaged in immediate military struggles, his broader goal is to reshape the Middle East's balance of power—a task requiring deft maneuvering to secure legitimacy and avoid the appearance of overreach.

Bismarck's real genius lay in giving the new Germany *Bündnisfähigkeit*—the ability to forge and sustain alliances. After 1871, his focus shifted to preserving peace among Europe's great empires: Germany, Austria-Hungary, and Russia. His ambiguous relationships with the other two empires stabilized Central Europe while containing nationalist movements that threatened to disrupt the balance of power.

For Netanyahu, forging alliances is even more complex. The Middle East's fractured landscape, fluid alliances, and substate actors make building durable partnerships extraordinarily challenging. Saudi Arabia represents both a potential ally and a profound risk. While normalization with Riyadh could bolster Israel's strategic position, the kingdom's fluctuating loyalties, economic priorities, and cautious diplomacy make it an unreliable partner.

Netanyahu's efforts to normalize relations with Arab states, exemplified by the Abraham Accords, initially sought to secure Israel's position in the region through coalition-building. However, the events of October 7 forced a pivot, focusing Israel's strategy on countering Iran and its proxies. This shift reflects the necessity of pragmatic adjustments to evolving power dynamics, much as Bismarck adapted his strategies to shifting European alliances. Netanyahu now faces a dual challenge: responding to immediate security threats while continuing the longer-term task of defining a new regional order.

A LACK OF STRUCTURE

The starkest difference between Bismarck's era and Netanyahu's is that the former had a state system within which to work. He was a revolutionary, to be sure, but one with a conservative purpose, who aspired to adjust the balance of power to Prussia's advantage, not to overthrow it. The Middle East, by contrast, lacks such a framework. The unraveling of the *pax americana* has created a vacuum. This complicates Israeli strategy. Domestically, Israel must sustain military dominance and economic stability under constant political strain. Regionally, it faces the dual challenge of countering Iran's proxy network and avoiding alienation of key players such as Saudi Arabia. Globally, Israel must contend with a changeable and unreliable United States.

One of Bismarck's greatest strengths was his ability to recognize the limits of power. He understood when to escalate, when to negotiate, and when to stop. After unifying Germany, he resisted further expansion, knowing that peace was essential for Central European stability. For Netanyahu, defining such limits is equally vital. How far can Israel go in reshaping the regional order without overextending itself? Unlike nineteenth-century Germany, it operates in a region where statehood itself is fragile, and the lines between states and nonstate

actors are porous. Every action risks escalation—not only with Iran but also with its proxies, Hezbollah and Hamas.

Like Bismarck, Netanyahu is a pragmatist who recognizes the necessity of shaping the geopolitical landscape rather than merely reacting to it. Both men had a keen Machiavellian understanding of the relationship between power at home and power abroad. Yet the contrasts between the context in which they operate are profound. Bismarck worked within a frayed but still functional system of great powers, while Netanyahu confronts a Middle East devoid of structure since the passing of the *pax americana*. The lessons of Bismarck's career—building alliances, recognizing the limits of intervention, and maintaining strategic vision—remain deeply relevant. How far Netanyahu can adapt these lessons to the unique challenges of his time will shape not only Israel's future but the fate of the entire region.

CONCLUSION

On October 7, 2023, the old Middle Eastern system collapsed, exposing the perils of a region long devoid of a functioning state framework. The decline of US leadership—materially and psychologically—has left regional powers such as Israel, Iran, and Saudi Arabia navigating a complex landscape of shifting alliances, proxy wars, and unresolved ideological conflicts. Unlike post-Congress of Vienna Europe, which retained some semblance of balance even after the Crimean War, the Middle East operates without any discernible structure. Far from becoming the “new Europe” envisioned by MbS, the region recalls Europe's most chaotic historical periods—the Thirty Years' War, Napoleonic Wars, even the World Wars. To avoid a descent into much worse conflict, the Middle East needs a new balance of power.

Israel stands at the heart of this transformation, not merely defending itself but attempting to reshape the regional balance. While Iran is not Israel's “eternal nemesis,” as France was for Germany, its proxy networks and dangerously advanced nuclear weapons program represent a strategic threat that Israel cannot ignore. Israel's aim is not to annihilate Iran but to neutralize its destabilizing activities. Yet this transformation depends on American support—through missile defense, intelligence cooperation, and material aid—and requires broader regional buy-in. The problem is that the momentum of the Abraham Accords has slowed since 2020, and Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia, constrained by internal vulnerabilities and strategic limitations, have retreated into neutrality. Like Austria during the Crimean War, Riyadh's ambitious vision for economic transformation faces the harsh reality of the region's politics.

The Gulf states, once shielded by geography, wealth, and American military support, now face increasing vulnerability. Despite Iran's sudden loss of its Syrian ally Assad, its influence in Iraq and the looming threat to Jordan risk encircling Saudi Arabia and jeopardizing its grand ambitions. Without addressing this challenge directly, Riyadh's vision for economic transformation may falter—for investors and tourists will surely avoid a region threatened with worsening instability.

Unlike post-Congress Europe, where the balance of power persisted even as its shape shifted, the Middle East remains anchored in an older dynamic. Power resides with predatory, authoritarian elites who lack the legitimacy of mass-based institutions or the stability of institutionalized checks on their authority. Ibn Khaldun's theory of cyclical *asabiyyah*—the rise and fall of ruling elites through a combination of tribal loyalty and subsequent decadence—remains a more fitting lens than anything derived from European state-building.

MbS exemplifies this dynamic. He is no Charles X, whose reactionary policies presaged the July Monarchy. Nor is he Louis Philippe, a “bourgeois king.” Rather, MbS operates in a long tradition of Near Eastern rulers stretching back to pre-Islamic times—leaders who relied on centralization, personality cults, and coercion rather than durable state institutions. While his grand projects—notably Vision 2030—echo Peter the Great's ambition, he lacks the obsessive desire of Peter, Kemal Atatürk, or even Reza Shah, to emulate European systems. The limits of this tradition are becoming increasingly apparent as MbS grapples to sustain his grandiose designs amid the region's mounting instability.

One possibility is simply a return of the *pax americana*. Despite voters' waning appetite for foreign interventions, the United States retains unmatched military and strategic assets in the Middle East, including over forty thousand personnel, advanced fighter aircraft, a carrier strike group, and deployable resources from Europe and the American homeland. There is simply no substitute or match for American power in the region. But if the new Trump administration is to be effective, it must do more than intervene spasmodically. It must establish a system of balance that can withstand power shifts and address the region's ongoing crisis of statehood.

From Washington's perspective, Israel's struggle is not only for its own survival but also for the credibility of the US as an ally and leader. Iran's hostility toward the US has intensified, bolstered by its new partnerships with Moscow and Beijing, which share the goal of dismantling American global primacy. This makes Israel's actions significant beyond its borders. The Israel-Iran confrontation offers the US an opportunity to reassert its leadership—if it has the will.

The reason that Europe's balance of power was ultimately unsustainable was that after Bismarck, Germany's leaders could not resist taking diplomatic and military risks that he had eschewed. The Secret Reinsurance Treaty with Russia lapsed. Programs of naval construction and colonial expansion were embarked upon that were bound to antagonize Great Britain. At the same time, Britain's Continental Commitment was too hesitant and ineffectual to deter Bismarck's successors.

By analogy, in today's Middle East the greatest danger is that Israel's leaders pursue goals that are beyond their means, ensuring that they slip back into the isolation they found themselves in fifty years ago; while the United States, like Britain in the early 1900s, fails to pursue a consistent policy aimed at perpetuating regional balance.

Mohammed bin Salman is right to look to Europe for inspiration. But what he should see in European history are terrible warnings. It is doubtful that the Middle East will ever resemble the Europe of Kissinger's *A World Restored*. But it still has a chance to avoid the historical fates that lay on either side of the Age of Equipoise. The conflagrations of the mid-seventeenth and mid-twentieth centuries would take on even more catastrophic magnitudes if they were allowed to replay themselves in the modern Middle East.

NOTES

1. Yemen, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon have a combined landmass of 448,621 square miles. The total landmass of the Middle East excluding Iran, Turkey, and much of Egypt is around 1.5 million square miles.



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The Caravan Notebook is a platform for essays and podcasts that offer commentary on a variety of subjects, ranging from current events to cultural trends, and including topics that are too local or too specific from the larger questions addressed quarterly in *The Caravan*.

We draw on the membership of Hoover's Herbert and Jane Dwight Working Group on the Middle East and the Islamic World, and on colleagues elsewhere who work that same political and cultural landscape. Russell Berman chairs the project from which this effort originates.

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