

Research Article

# Middle East and the Decline of Orientalist Hegemony: A Sociopolitical Examination Beyond War

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## Abstract

For decades, U.S. involvement in the Middle East has been justified through narratives of security, modernization, democracy, and regional stability. Despite repeated policy failures, American influence maintained legitimacy through broader ideological frameworks rooted in cultural hegemony and Orientalist representations of the region. This paper argues that the aftermath of the U.S.-Iran War signifies not merely another foreign policy setback but a historical turning point marking the decline of both American hegemony and Orientalism. Employing a qualitative historical-sociological and theoretical analysis, the study draws upon the works of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Gramsci, and Edward Said to interpret recent developments in the Middle East. The analysis suggests that growing regional skepticism toward U.S. leadership reflects an erosion of the ideological assumptions that long presented the West as the primary source of progress, democracy, and political legitimacy. Simultaneously, populations throughout the region increasingly challenge Orientalist narratives that portray the Middle East as incapable of autonomous political development. The paper concludes that the most significant consequence of recent events is ideological rather than military: the emergence of a new regional consciousness grounded in local agency, self-determination, and resistance to external models of governance and social change. With the decline of such hegemony, we are facing a new Middle East, especially within the political culture.

## Keywords

Middle East, U.S.-Iran War, Hegemony, Orientalism, American Foreign Policy, Political Sociology

## 1. Introduction

In the words of Hannah Arendt, “...as long as its beginning was alive, it could save all things and bring them into harmony. By the same token, it became destructive as it came to its end—to say nothing of the aftermath of confusion and helplessness which came after the tradition ended and in which we live today.” [1] For more than seven decades, the Middle East has occupied a central place in American foreign policy. Successive U.S. administrations have justified political intervention, economic sanctions, military deployments, and direct

warfare as necessary measures to preserve regional stability, promote democracy, counter extremism, and protect international security. Despite the persistence of these objectives, the contemporary Middle East remains characterized by recurring conflict, political fragmentation, authoritarian governance, and unresolved social tensions. Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and most recently Iran have all served as arenas in which American power has been exercised

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in pursuit of order and modernization, often with consequences that diverged significantly from their stated intentions. Rather than producing stability, these interventions frequently deepened existing contradictions, creating conditions that justified continued external involvement, especially American involvement.

The durability of American influence in the region cannot be explained solely through military superiority or economic power. Equally important was the existence of a broader ideological framework through which both Western societies and many populations in the Middle East understood political reality. This framework was sustained through what Antonio Gramsci conceptualized as hegemony and what Edward Said later identified as Orientalism. Through these interrelated processes, the United States and the broader West came to be viewed not merely as powerful actors but as legitimate harbingers and arbiters of progress, democracy, rationality, and modernization. The region itself was frequently imagined as dependent upon outside guidance, intervention, and expertise. Consequently, political failures often strengthened rather than weakened the perceived necessity of external involvement.

Recent developments, particularly the United States-Iran War and its aftermath, compel a reassessment of these assumptions. This conflict represents more than another chapter in a long history of geopolitical confrontation. It has exposed profound limitations in America's ability to shape political outcomes in the region while simultaneously accelerating a broader crisis of legitimacy. What is increasingly visible is not simply the failure of a particular administration, military strategy, or diplomatic initiative, but the exhaustion of a historical paradigm, hegemonic Orientalism, through which the Middle East has been governed, interpreted, and understood.

This paper argues that the contemporary Middle East is witnessing the conclusion of two interconnected historical phenomena: American hegemony and Orientalism. The decline of U.S. influence is not merely a geopolitical shift but a sociological transformation in which populations across the region are increasingly rejecting the assumption that progress, democracy, and social change must emerge through Western intervention. Drawing on the theoretical contributions of Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Gramsci, and Said, this study conceptualizes the recent U.S.-Iran conflict as a dialectical moment that reveals the end of a hegemonic era and the emergence of new forms of political consciousness. The paper contends that the most significant consequence of the conflict is neither military nor diplomatic, but ideological: the erosion of faith in the West as the natural savior of the Middle East and the growing assertion of regional agency independent of Western narratives and authority.

Decades ago, in the 1940s, when the US first became involved in the Middle East, the plan was to create and sustain a distorted image of the region and its history to prevent any progress and to gain control. As Edward Said argued, Western powers use cultural, political, and academic frameworks to

manufacture a distorted image of the Middle East as inherently backward, irrational, and chaotic in order to justify imperial domination and management. By framing the diverse population of the Middle East as incapable of managing its own progress, the West, in general, and the United States in particular, after World War II, created an ideological rationale for constant political and military interventions. The central thesis of the paper is that the U.S.-Iran war revealed and accelerated the collapse of both American hegemony and Orientalist assumptions in the Middle East, creating conditions for a new regional political consciousness grounded in local agency rather than dependence on Western power.

## 2. Literature

A significant body of literature has questioned the effectiveness of American foreign policy throughout the Middle East. Scholars have highlighted recurring patterns in which intervention is justified by appeals to democracy, security, humanitarianism, or regional stability, yet produces outcomes that are inconsistent with those objectives. Studies examining Iran, Iraq, Afghanistan, Libya, Israel, and Palestine have frequently emphasized the inconsistency between stated intentions and political results [2].

Other scholars have explored the relationship between military engagement and economic interests [3]. Particular attention has been devoted to defense industries, security partnerships, arms sales, and strategic alliances. Critics argue that these relationships create incentives for the persistence of conflict and militarization. The expansion of military infrastructure throughout the region has likewise been interpreted as evidence of a long-term commitment to preserving influence rather than resolving underlying political problems. This is established despite outsiders continuing to play their balance-of-power games within the borders of weak Arab states, the Iranian-Israeli conflict endures, the Palestinian question remains unresolved, and the US lacks the capacity or the will to impose even a semblance of an order but is still too involved in the region to leave [4].

There are those who are well aware of American foreign policy in the Middle East vis-à-vis Israel and the weakening of other nations to promote and enhance the role of Israel in the region. Mujbil argues that the American objective was to create a framework in the Middle East that would enhance "Israel's influence while marginalizing the Arab role and depleting the sources of power in Arab states by dismantling several of them." It would impose specific policies on these nations, "enforcing sanctions and blockades to neutralize and contain them." [5] Further, the Third Wave of International Hegemony Studies, according to Nexon, has a new outlook on hegemonic powers in the region [6]. Nexon remains hopeful and contends that "true hegemony is maintained through institutional dependencies and sponsorship of global networks, rather than by raw material dominance alone."

Although these studies provide important insights, most focus on policy outcomes, strategic calculations, or international relations frameworks. Less attention has been given to how repeated failures reshape collective perceptions among populations directly affected by intervention. The present study seeks to address this gap by examining how recent events have transformed the sociopolitical legitimacy of American power itself. The notable gap in the literature on US hegemony is not due to a lack of scholarly interest or rigorous research. On the contrary, the fields of Middle Eastern political economy and sociopolitical studies contain a substantial body of high-quality scholarship. Rather, the gap stems primarily from the nascent nature of the conflicts and geopolitical developments over the last two to three years. The existing literature has thoroughly examined American power, cultural hegemony, Orientalism, and Middle Eastern geopolitics. However, these themes are rarely integrated into a single sociological explanation of contemporary regional transformation. Scholarship has documented the shortcomings of U.S. foreign policy and analyzed critiques of Orientalism, but few studies have considered whether recent conflicts signify not merely policy failure but the collapse of the ideological foundations that sustained American legitimacy in the region.

This study contributes to the literature by synthesizing theories of hegemony, ideology, and historical transformation to argue that the U.S.-Iran War represents a critical turning point. The contention is that contemporary events demonstrate both the decline of American hegemony and the growing rejection of Orientalist assumptions among Middle Eastern populations. In doing so, the paper shifts attention from questions of military success or strategic effectiveness to the broader sociological process through which hegemonic belief systems lose legitimacy and are ultimately replaced by new forms of political consciousness.

### 3. Methodology

The author's methodology is based on a theoretical-conceptual sociological analysis combined with historical and critical discourse analysis, rather than an empirical study based on surveys, interviews, experiments, or quantitative data. The methodological approach seeks to explain the end of U.S. hegemony by applying several major theoretical traditions, including Hegel, Marx, Nietzsche, Hobbes, Gramsci, and Edward Said. The author uses these thinkers as analytical frameworks for interpreting contemporary developments in the Middle East, particularly the U.S.-Iran War and its aftermath.

More specifically, the methodology involves a theoretical interpretation approach, through which the author employs classical and contemporary social theory to explain historical change and ideological transformation. Hegel's dialectics, Marx's critique of social formations, Nietzsche's analysis of value collapse, Hobbes's theory of authority, Gramsci's concept of hegemony, and Said's theory of Orientalism are used

as interpretive tools rather than variables to be tested empirically. Through a Historical-Sociological Analysis, this paper examines U.S. involvement in the Middle East over several decades and places recent events within a broader historical trajectory. The argument is developed by linking contemporary conflicts to long-term patterns of intervention, political legitimacy, and ideological domination. Furthermore, the author demonstrates through a Critical Discourse Analysis that a substantial portion of the manuscript examines how ideas about the Middle East have been produced and maintained through Orientalist narratives. The author investigates representations of the region in political rhetoric, academic discourse, media, and foreign policy frameworks, drawing heavily from Said and Gramsci.

### 4. Theoretical Framework

To demonstrate and explain the basic contention of this paper, the end of US hegemony, the author will review a few applicable thinkers whose ideas will be constructive in facilitating this endeavor. These thinkers include Georg Hegel, Karl Marx, Friedrich Nietzsche, Thomas Hobbes, Antonio Gramsci, and Edward Said. Hegel and his triadic movement, thesis, antithesis, and synthesis, as a movement toward progress. Hegel famously calls history the recollection of these past forms of consciousness. This means the limited, separate phenomena of our past do not merely wash away; they are dialectically overcome and preserved at a higher level of truth. Think of how US involvement is understood as a legitimate means to achieve peace, which will possibly lead to democracy in the consciousness of people in the Middle East; to today's fundamental questioning of that very notion, and in fact, the opposite of that idea. People in the region were initially astonished by the US decision to go to war against Iran and ultimately acknowledged the failure. The failure was not merely an inability to take Iran "back to the stone age, where they belong..."; rather, it was a failure to accomplish anything in the Middle East, thereby reinforcing their belief in a hegemonic power.

Furthermore, the Marxian idea is useful in that social, political, and economic phenomena endure only as long as the necessity of their existence endures. His well-known statement, "all that is solid melts into air", is relevant to this day. Contemporaneously, the prevailing mode of American foreign policy and its 'savior' perception in the Middle East is crumbling before our eyes. Through its policies, the US has created an inherently self-serving mechanism. Feeding the population's fear, which turns into an economy for defense contractors. Simultaneously, states in the region have become no more than trusted, long-standing clients of defense contractors.

Long ago, when Nietzsche proposed that there had been a downfall of values that centered on the collapse of objective truth in Western civilization, he had in mind the collapse of traditional Christian morality and absolute metaphysical truths, a crisis in values of a culture that had come to an end in its belief about what truth was. Analogous to the collapse of

American hegemony and its longtime proclaimed values for humanity and progress. Nietzsche diagnosed the collapse not as a sudden event, but as the inevitable result of centuries of sociocultural decay. In the case of American decline, the story may have been twofold. To begin with, there have been decades of protracted foreign policy based on failure and promises that never came to fruition. What ended the hegemony started with a) US support for Israel, despite accusations of war crimes and genocide; Moreover, b) the war with Iran, especially intensified by the United States refusing to be held accountable for causing political and economic crisis not just in the Middle East, but globally, with international ramifications.

Hegel argues that there exists a dialectic of the end of each epoch/phenomenon. Every phenomenon has an end, but it gives rise to another phenomenon with new contradictions. In Hegel's philosophy, phenomena do not simply fade away passively. Instead, they undergo a process called *Aufhebung* or sublation. Hegel's view of how phenomena develop and transform operates on several core principles in what is called the Triadic Movement. Thesis (Abstract): the initial ideas, state, or phenomenon; Antithesis (Negative): the phenomenon inherently produces its own internal contradiction or opposite; and finally, Synthesis (Concrete): when conflict is resolved, absorbing the core of both thesis and antithesis into a higher level of reality.

Hannah Arendt discusses this Hegelian concept of the end and truth quite succinctly in the context of history and philosophy. For Hegel, she argues, the meaning of a story can only emerge when it has come to an end, suggesting that end and truth have become identical. Truth appears when everything is at an end, suggesting that we can learn it only when the end is near [1]. This perspective argues that the living impulse of the US hegemonic era in the Middle East has now given way to truth, which is revealed at the conclusion of this historical process.

Through the formation of this fundamental ethical sense of order, Hegel believes that coercive law may be rendered increasingly 'superfluous'; that is, precisely, the role Gramsci sees 'ethical political hegemony' play in the transition from the 'nightwatchman' to the 'ethical' state. Yet, in contrast to Hegel's normative claims, at a certain level of civil society, these ethical mediating institutions fall short of their intended goal. Rather than 'reconcile' individual interest with public utility, they serve to strengthen asymmetrical distributions of power that inhibit the resolution of social conflicts in a mutually beneficial manner. Hegel's conception of the Ethical, therefore, functions here in a way similar to hegemony to the extent that it molds a sense of order that solidifies relations of subordination [7].

What the world is witnessing today in the Middle East, and especially as a result of the recent war, is that those contradictions have created a new phenomenon: the end of US hegemony in every sociocultural and sociopolitical realm. Although the economic aspect of such hegemonic failure

has played a major role in the end of an epoch; it is not the intention, nor the context of this paper. Through Hegel's approach, the Middle East, both state and population, has gone through the hegemonic era of US domination in the region, the downfall and negation of that perceived hegemony, and the final stage of the US as increasingly irrelevant in the region. For many observers, it is too soon to effectively decide the future of American involvement in the Middle East [8]. However, a serious assessment of current political culture in the Middle East suggests that this long-lasting hegemony has reached an end; the epochal end of US involvement in the region.

The phrase "all that is solid melts into air" is often associated with Marx's writings and appears to relate to the argument made here about a new Middle East, without American hegemony. In this context, the phrase suggests that the established, traditional institutions, relationships, and social hierarchies that characterized feudal societies were rapidly being dissolved by the forces of industrial capitalism. The idea of the melting away of existing relationships would include a few social and political criteria. The solidity and stability of traditional social, economic, and political structures, as believed by so many of the population, were eroded by the sociopolitical and sociocultural dynamic forces in the Middle East. The fixed, fast, and frozen relations refer to the rigid hierarchies and relationships imposed by the hegemon, usually benefiting it first and foremost. People in the region are facing a new reality that old ideas and goals have dissolved. They are now forced to confront the reality of the absence of hegemonic power in the Middle East. This disruption of established norms creates an opportunity for people and, of course, regional states to see their social and economic relationships with greater clarity. As the old structures dissolve, individuals are forced to confront the true conditions of their lives.

At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, Friedrich Nietzsche declared the downfall of values and the hegemony of prevailing ideas. His critique of the decline of values and the hegemony of prevailing ideas centers on the claim that Western morality—heavily rooted in Christianity and Enlightenment rationalism—is in terminal decline. He argued that these prevailing ideas are life-denying constructs meant to suppress individual greatness and enforce conformity [9]. The life-denying and self-denying concept is essentially what hegemony looks like. Despite American foreign policy failing repeatedly in the region, people still saw their salvation in American involvement. An example of this phenomenon is how women in Iran have struggled and gained their social and legal rights, yet believe that during the Pahlavi Dynasty, women had it better. Since 1979, women in Iran risked their lives, faced beatings and imprisonments, and yet continued their struggle. They gained rights under their own terms and conditions, made the government in Iran submit to many of their concessions, yet found the life of an Iranian woman more liberated and independent during the Shah's regime. To this day, some Iranian women

believe that women were more liberated under Pahlavi's rule, mainly because women in Iran had the same freedoms as Western women.

The creative way Nietzsche announced the historical shift toward secularism and scientific rationalism by declaring the death of God applies to the end of American hegemony. This means that the hegemonic foundation of all American values, and the US, propagated as the pioneer of democracy and liberation, has been shattered into pieces, leaving behind a vacuum in the Middle East. There are currently two basic alternatives given such circumstances of the power vacuum. Either the population decides to fill the void with their own sociopolitical and sociocultural values in the long term, or heavy-handed, at times despotic regimes and states will prevail.

Hobbes's idea of a society void of authority will lead to the creation of a monarch, which sounds somewhat rational, but not to those who seek both safety and freedom. His ideas have been critiqued plenty, and there is no need to delve into that critique any further. However, given the end of the Pax Americana in the Middle East and the resulting power vacuum in politics, the economy, and, at times, culture, people's despair may contribute to the rise of authoritarian leaders across the region. An example is how a portion of the Iranian people perceive Reza Pahlavi, the late Shah's son, as a viable political alternative. During the uprising in January and February of 2026, a large number of protestors chanted the names of Reza Shah, founder of the Pahlavi Dynasty, the Shah himself, and his son, Reza Pahlavi, who is currently living in exile, demanding his return to Iran. A Hobbesian example of a population that seeks guidance from one despot to another. Consistent with Hobbes, who argued that without a supreme ruling power, human life is a brutal "war of all against all" driven by self-interest, leading to a life that is "solitary, poor, nasty, brutish, and short" [10].

To escape the chaotic conditions of feeling unsafe and insecure, Hobbes argued that individuals must mutually agree to surrender their personal freedoms to a ruling authority he called the Leviathan. The Hobbesian social contract is based on the idea that to survive, individuals form a hierarchical social contract among themselves. They authorize a leader, a monarch, giving up their natural right to self-governance in exchange for physical protection and social order. The monarch is sovereign, not a party to the contract, meaning its power is absolute and unquestionable. The sovereign's will is essentially law, necessary to enforce compliance and prevent the collapse of civil society back into a social order. Often, when Reza Pahlavi's supporters face questions such as "how will he establish such order?", their response is, "he is the only one who can." For his supporters, he represents a Leviathan whose authority would surpass all impediments. In the face of despair, authority is the only viable alternative. A power vacuum and the feelings of uncertainty in the Hobbesian sense are possibly the underlying reasons for a few other nations in the

Middle East to choose heavy-handed leaders, namely, Turkey's Erdogan, Syria's Ahmad al-Sharaa, Afghanistan's Taliban, Israel's Netanyahu, Saudi Arabia's bin Salman, and his father.

## 5. Hegemony and Orientalism

Ultimately, two very prominent thinkers whose ideas are undoubtedly relevant to us are Edward Said and Antonio Gramsci, whose conceptualizations of prevailing ideas as false consciousness prove exceptionally viable in explaining what occurs when a culture, and hence the population by and large, believes in ideas that work against their own interests without any cognizance or discernment. The Gramscian proposal on hegemony maintains that membership in culture and social institutions is voluntary, and affiliation with prevailing ideas and institutions is by consent, not by force, domination, or coercion [11]. Culture operates within civil society, and the cultural leadership that emerges from some cultures dominating others is what Gramsci calls hegemony. Finally, most importantly, and uncontested, is Edward Said's notion of Orientalism; the concept that the West has constituted the reality that the West (Occident) needs to dominate the East (Orient) through every socio-political institution available to it. Through this methodology, the Occident needed to produce and reproduce the Orient to create and establish itself as a superior power [12].

### 5.1. Orientalism

Orientalism begins in the late eighteenth century, with a very roughly defined starting point, mainly by the French linguist Silvestre de Sacy (1758-1838). Edward Said identifies Sacy as the figure who first articulated the concept of studying the Orient. Sacy created modern textbooks, translated primary texts, and established the formal pedagogy that taught nearly every major 19th-century European Orientalist scholar. By doing this, he claimed the authority to select which parts of Eastern culture were worth knowing. Which parts can be discussed and analyzed as the corporate institution for dealing with the Orient - dealing with it by making statements about it, authorizing views of it, describing it, by teaching it, settling it, ruling over it: in short, Orientalism as a Western style for dominating, restructuring, and having authority over the Orient [12].

Orientalism's main feature is that the West constitutes it, and it deals with the domination of the Orient through every socio-political institution at its disposal. To structure the field of Orientalism, Said uses Foucault's notion of discourse, that is, the formation of a discursive field that can unite disparate materials into an area of study. Through a deeper study of Orientalism as a systematic discipline, and not scattered knowledge, it is possible to understand that Western culture has not just managed but also produced the Orient "politically,

sociologically, militarily, ideologically, scientifically, and imaginatively" [12]. Orientalism argues that someone undertook this immense project because Europe "gained in strength and identity by setting itself off against the Orient as a sort of surrogate and even underground self." [12]. That is, the Occident needed to produce the Orient as a means of creating and establishing itself as a superior power.

Interested scholars, intellectuals, and political activists have committed to examining how multiple disciplines, interests, practices, and power groups function together harmoniously and tacitly under Orientalism without a written contract. How does a set of ideas become so hegemonic in many cultures of the East, despite its condescending and patronizing nature? [13-15].

## 5.2. Hegemony

Edward Said uses Gramsci's concept of cultural hegemony to explain how Orientalism functions effectively. Antonio Gramsci's analysis of society distinguished between civil and political society. In Gramscian thought, civil society is made up of voluntary associations, which he listed as schools, families, and unions. Membership in these social institutions is voluntary, and affiliation with prevailing ideas and institutions is by consent, not by force, domination, or coercion. Culture operates within civil society, and the cultural leadership that emerges through the process of some cultures does. A few mechanisms help accomplish this. This hegemony manifests through conspicuous consumption and cultural emulation, including the widespread appeal of Hollywood films and digital streaming platforms, the prestige associated with English-language proficiency and American educational institutions, and consumer practices centered on global brands, fast-food chains, and fashionable commodities that signify status, modernity, and social advancement [16]. In the contemporary era, digital platforms work as central mechanisms of cultural production and dissemination, truly shaping public discourse, facilitating cultural exchange, and loosely determining the social experiences of younger generations.

Said points to the Gramscian notion of the cultural hegemony of the industrial West to show how Orientalism is produced and maintained in a historical, socio-political context. The move from the last definition of Orientalism to Gramsci's formulation of cultural hegemony is a smooth one. Said locates the central idea that defines the culture of Europe as "the idea of European identity as a superior one in comparison with all the non-European peoples and cultures." [12]. Orientalism arises out of Europe's need to identify the Other over whom it can assert its superiority in a neat binary of "us" against "them". The binary of Self/ Other is not a static one; Orientalism's power and longevity are founded on what Said terms its strategy of "flexible positional superiority" (p. 7, original emphasis). As a result of this strategy, it is possible to have a series of relationships and circumstances between the West and the Orient in which the West always emerges superior.

Said points to the historical circumstances that facilitated this assertion of cultural superiority, namely, Europe's extraordinary ascendancy from the late Renaissance to the present. The economic and political situation of Europe and the Orient allowed diverse people to be present in the Orient and to speak about it - that is, to construct knowledge about it - with very little resistance from the Orient itself.

## 6. Analysis

The discourse surrounding political reform, social transformation, and the potential overthrow of the Islamic Republic has defined the Iranian narrative for several years. While political and social movements persisted for many years, the overthrow of the state is a relatively new phenomenon in Iran. Inch by inch, Iranians have gained social, religious, and especially legal rights for women through protests, hunger strikes, enduring imprisonment, torture, and executions. For the past year or so, challenging the state has remained the prevalent objective of the opposition within Iran. Though most opposition abroad focused on the revolutionary overthrow of the Islamic Republic, local opposition within Iran has had more sophisticated ideas that would, one way or another, ensure a different result. They fomented reform, and reform movements and political alternatives lined up to vote for whom they believed was the right choice to change things for the better, always to improve living conditions, advancing incrementally toward social and political progress. In the aftermath of the US-Iran war, however, there was a shift in the Iranian opposition's discourse. Four major phenomena made significant contributions to this new thinking:

- 1) American failure in all aspects of the war, especially in creating a new government.
- 2) The void in a real political alternative to replace the Islamic Republic government.
- 3) Strength of IRGC (Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps) vis-à-vis the US and repression of domestic protests.
- 4) Disingenuous and illusory political alternative of Reza Pahlavi (the late Shah's son).

### 6.1. US-Iran War: Hegemonic Failure and the End of an Illusory Era

In June 2025, Robert Kagan, a prominent foreign policy scholar, in an article titled "American Democracy Might Not Survive a War with Iran" [13], warned that engaging in a major regional war against Tehran would further weaken US democratic institutions and risk pushing the country toward a military dictatorship. Almost one year later, once the longer war against Iran had started, he wrote, in his May 2026 article, "Checkmate in Iran", that the US faces a total and irreversible strategic defeat. Despite a 37-day bombing campaign that degraded Iranian infrastructure and eliminated key leaders, Tehran refused to capitulate. According to Kagan, this leaves Iran with immense leverage, effectively giving it control of the

Strait of Hormuz and rendering the US unable to reverse the damage. He further contends this outcome accelerates global chaos, alienates Western allies, and isolates Israel [14]. Has the US failed in resolving yet another problem in the Middle East, this time, to eradicate the Islamic Republic of Iran? How have recent events influenced US foreign policy in the region?

US foreign policy in the Middle East is based on the principle of "failure that leads to success," the Pyrrhic Defeat Theory [15]. The explanation and support for this concept are unquestionably ample. As this author has previously argued, the US has never had a clear strategy in the Middle East. Policies differ minimally depending on the extant US Presidency but remain two-fold: 1) military sales under the rationale of national security threats, and 2) foment and provoke conflict and war where certain differences exist, e.g., Afghanistan, Iraq, Iran, Yemen, Israel, Palestine. This policy persists despite the history and political culture of any given Middle Eastern nation. The only clear strategy is to guide everything, every movement, every political alternative that leads to progress, improvement of life, minute steps toward democracy, and any notion of real development beneficial to the population toward failure.

Paradoxically, in 2009, Richard Haas and Martin Indyk wrote about the most persistent problems in the Middle East. They mentioned a few unresolved problems. In their *Foreign Affairs* article, Haas and Indyk weighed the challenges the new American administration faces in the Middle East. They were:

- 1) Iraq's violence and the straining US military.
- 2) Iran's nuclear program.
- 3) Israel/Palestine peace process.
- 4) Weakness in Lebanon and Palestine is challenged by strong militant fundamentalism.
- 5) US position weakened by years of failure and drift.

After 17 years, these conflicts not only remain unresolved but have also spread to other areas of the region, drawing many other nations into turmoil. Currently, all GCC (Gulf Cooperation Council), consisting of six member states, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, in addition to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Turkey, and Yemen, are involved.

First and more significantly than the epic US failure in the Middle East and the war against Iran is the rapid decline of a global hegemon, the withering away of Pax Americana, and the termination, and not just a temporary decline, of American hegemony [3]. The United States exacerbated all sociopolitical conflicts under the guise of diplomacy, negotiations, financial assistance, military involvement, or sales, through the image of a savior. However, had remained hegemonic for decades.

Do current affairs in the region depict and demonstrate the real US failures? Furthermore, does this failure still justify the US presence, or is it the end of America's hegemony in the region? The answers to those questions are especially imperative for people in the Middle East. People who have long believed in the American way of resolving conflict. They relied

on the US to come to the aid of nations in turmoil and their population.

Several years ago, this author put forth the idea that US foreign policy in the Middle East fundamentally revolves around a policy of failure. The failure justifies a greater US presence in politics, economics, and especially in arms sales to many nations in the region [15]. But this justification has come to an end with continuous turmoil and the American incapacity to resolve existing conflicts. Researchers have written about this decline in the Middle East, and the literature offers ample insight. According to the Arab Barometer, the United States faces a profound credibility deficit. It is widely perceived as the actor, from among 18 countries and entities, most aligned with Israel, and as having a negative influence in the region [17]. Jamal and Robins argue that, "People in the region have lost nearly all confidence in a U.S.-led regional order". Their research indicates that now, two months after the start of the US-Iran War, people ironically "regard China, Iran, and Russia more favorably than the United States and, often, Europe. More than ever, Washington and many of its key allies are seen as one-sided, morally compromised, and selectively committed to international law compared with this axis of autocracies." [2].

A few thinkers have addressed US hegemonic failure [18], and some have delved into American prevalence and the problems of extant hegemonic unipolarity [19]. Yet, some have even mentioned the actual end of US Dominance [20]. Yet none have really addressed the decline or, more seriously, the end of US hegemony from a sociological and sociopolitical perspective. The most significant consequence of this particular war is not so much the military inability to "obliterate" and take Iran "back to the stone ages", and the political embarrassment of the US in terms of pushing its interests and its regional allies' interests, and not the consequential global economic disaster, but the disappearance of a hegemon in the eyes of the people in the Middle East.

For decades, US hegemony represented something people in the Middle East aspired to. This idea resonated true to the people, not due to the actual achievements and success stories generated by the US, but rather as Orientalism as social unconsciousness at its best. Hegemonic Orientalism speaks to a prevailing idea that the West has the ultimate solution for the problems of the East. Hegemony has not so much to do with the practice of the hegemon, but rather with how firmly the oppressed believes, even metaphysically, that the extant hegemonic power will always have the remedy, the panacea. Orientalism is hegemonic because it is unwritten, tacit, invisible, but concrete and unyielding. US hegemony is the way American culture and its values maintain power not just through force, but through popular consent. The United States projected its own values, beliefs, and worldview onto the regional cultures of the Middle East, making them appear as common sense to everyone, including those whom they oppress. The oppressed perpetuated these ideas, aspired to their hopes, and endeavored to live up to the Western model.

Preceding the US-Iran war and despite American efforts failing to bring about stability in the Middle East, there were tremendous gains in rationalizing the American political and military presence. At the same time, this policy proved to be a lucrative business for defense contractors, American or otherwise. Consequently, the unresolved conflict between Palestine and Israel, the unsettled war of attrition in Iraq, the threat of Iran's nuclear program, the Taliban in Afghanistan, Islamic radicalism, fundamentalism, and extremism were all mere failures. In essence, it is the US failing in its mission to bring modernization and democracy to the Middle East. Policies to resolve these conflicts have failed, but the US was unwilling to give up militarism as a solution because it had gained so much politically and financially. The end of such justification is now at hand.

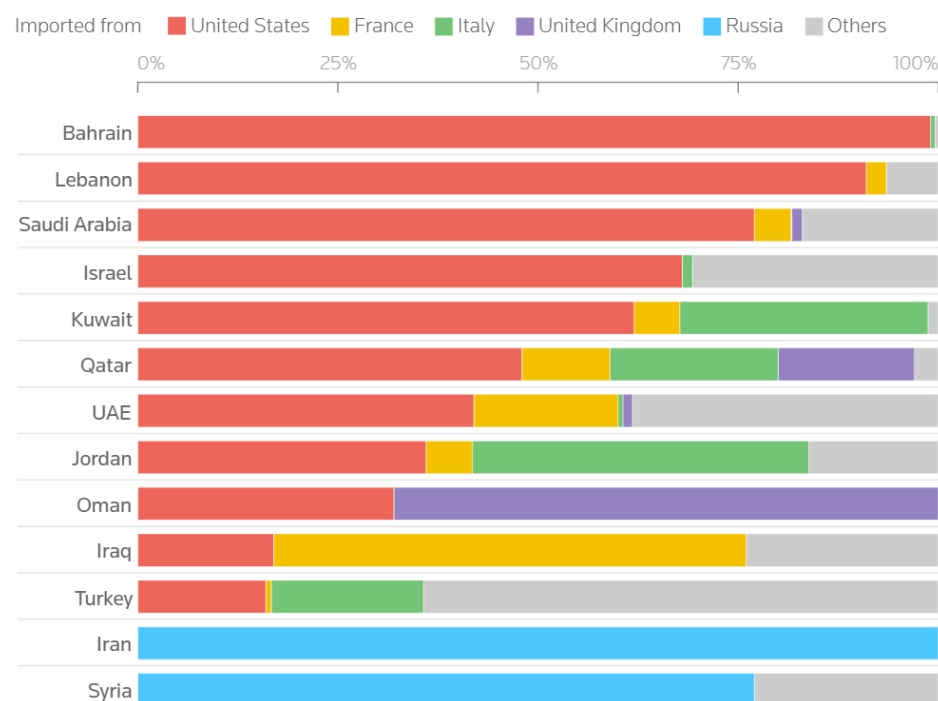
Furthermore, what is categorized as success is American military and political involvement, correlated with US control of politics and the arms market, which is one of the most lucrative, if not the most lucrative, businesses in the world. Seldom asked, the question was, what gives the United States the right to intervene in Middle Eastern affairs? Thus, through its failure to foster conditions for democratic progress, US foreign policy was a constant effort to justify its political and military involvement in the Middle East. It is not my contention that such a policy is practiced solely by the United States; Russia, China, England, and France have consistently pursued the

same policy. However, US foreign policy plays a major role in the Middle East. A simple comparison of the number of American military exports to the region and of military bases in the region, versus those of the Russians, Chinese, British, or French, would clarify any doubt as to which, in terms of military involvement, prevails.

## 6.2. Recent US Arms Sales and Military Presence

Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) provides the definitive global academic benchmark dataset for tracking conventional weapons transfers [21]. The diagram below depicts US arms exports to the region for 2021-2025. In addition, the US military operates a total network of approximately 40 to 60 installations across the Middle East. Accordingly, while the Department of Defense officially acknowledges 19 to 21 primary, enduring installations, independent tracking by academic centers and regional monitors confirms the total footprint is roughly double that number when accounting for unacknowledged radar installations, temporary contingency sites, and forward operating positions.

**Share of arms imports to Middle Eastern countries, 2021-2025**



Source: SIPRI

**Figure 1.** Share of Arms Imports to Middle Eastern Countries, 2021-2025.

As reported by SIPRI, the United States is the primary sup-

plier of major conventional weapons to the Middle East, ac-

counting for 54% of all arms imports to the region. Amid regional conflicts, Middle Eastern partners accounted for 81% of all potential US Foreign Military Sales (FMS) approved in early 2026, totaling over \$36.6 billion. Linda Bilmes, a leading Harvard economist, has predicted that the total cost of the war with Iran could amount to \$1 trillion [22].

The conditions of inevitable demand and the need for involvement of a superpower have come to an epochal end. The most critical question to answer is, does this excessive military spending sound like a true hegemon? Hegemonic powers do not use force, do not coerce; they step back and allow the oppressed to perpetuate their own oppression, believing it is in their interest. No violence, otherwise, is necessary, nor is it useful.

The world has come to witness America gain through violence in the region, which has seen a manifold increase since the Reagan administration. The militarization of the Middle East intensified during the Iran-Iraq War and continued through subsequent decades of extensive arms transfers, security partnerships, and military involvement, particularly by the United States [23].

Such arms sales peaked especially during the eight-year war between Iran and Iraq. In the past few years, US defense contractors have seen their most lucrative period in decades [24]. The main contractors are: Lockheed Martin, RTX, Northrop Grumman, and BAE Systems. Below is a summary chart reported by each contractor:

Summary of Major 2026 Defense Contractors & Mideast Allocations

| Contractor       | Primary Systems Involved                 | Main Middle East Recipients | Key Estimated Deal Values            |
|------------------|------------------------------------------|-----------------------------|--------------------------------------|
| RTX              | Patriot Interceptors, AMRAAM Missiles    | Qatar, UAE                  | \$4.01B (Qatar) / \$1.22B (UAE)      |
| Lockheed Martin  | PAC-3 MSE Missiles, THAAD Radar          | Saudi Arabia, UAE           | \$9.0B (Saudi Arabia) / \$4.5B (UAE) |
| Northrop Grumman | Integrated Battle Command Systems (IBCS) | Kuwait                      | \$2.5B (Kuwait)                      |
| BAE Systems      | APKWS Laser-Guided Rockets               | Israel, Qatar, UAE          | \$992M (Israel) / \$992M (Qatar)     |

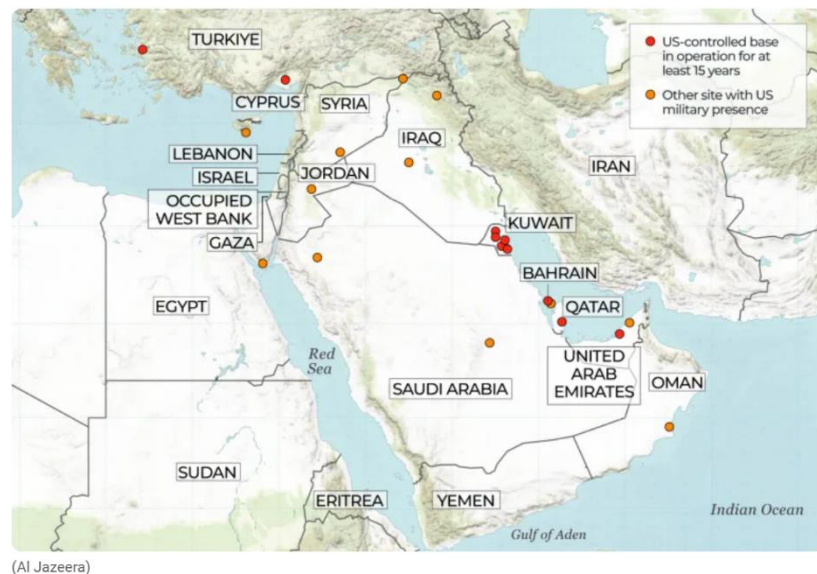
Figure 2. Major Defense Contractors and Middle East Allocations in 2026.

6.3. Military Bases in the Middle East

The US maintains an extensive military presence in the region. There are at least 19 military sites spread across the Middle East, containing 40,000 to 50,000 American personnel, according to the American Security Project. Most of these bases are managed largely by the US Central Command (CENT-COM) [25]. These bases and their infrastructure consist of major permanent air and naval bases, logistics hubs, and smaller forward outposts. During the war with Iran, these installations serve(d) as the primary staging grounds for American military operations. These military bases have existed in the Middle

East since 1948. According to ASP’s (American Security Project) Fact Sheet [25]. The gradual increase in the number of these bases is intended to control the region militarily, politically, and to some extent economically, ensuring trade routes are secure.

While the exact operational focus has drastically changed since the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Washington justifies its presence through mutual agreements negotiated with host states that view the US as a nation that can guarantee necessary security. The following map shows the number and extent of American military bases in a single region of the Middle East, between Iran and Egypt.



**Figure 3.** US Military Bases between Egypt and Iran, 2025.

## 7. Discussion

Before the US-Iran War of 2026, political and military intervention was justified as an ideological tool, and the core binary of Orientalism—the rational West versus the tumultuous and backward East—was continuously invoked through the media and social media. This view served to quickly justify foreign military presence, economic sanctions, or direct interventions by Western nations. In mainstream media, film, and political rhetoric, the Orientalist view endured as the default setting. Complex conflicts were still routinely compressed into simple, consumable narratives of barbarians vs. guardians of democracy, proving that while orientalist philosophy has failed the test of truth, it still succeeds at shaping public opinion.

The philosophical collapse of Orientalism in the Middle East lies within its foundation. It begins with the assumption that the entire region, its culture, and its people possess static, monolithic, and unchangeable characteristics. By treating diverse cultures as ‘static others’, this worldview refuses to acknowledge Middle Eastern nations and their cultures the capacity for natural historical evolution, internal dissent, and human agency. Orientalism views the Middle East through a non-existent synthetic duality. The “West” (Occident) was defined as rational, dynamic, and secular, while the “East” (Orient) was characterized as irrational, anti-modernization, non-democratic, stagnant, and, by default, extremely religious. This outlook denied the region its internal plurality, ignoring discourse on social change, cultural dynamism, and, certainly, politics. It became a hegemonic rationalization for exploiting the Middle East and for justifying colonial governance, interventions, and the exploitation of its resources. Western powers, and by and large the people of the Middle East, viewed

the West as the supplier of civilization and modernity to supposedly passive and backward peoples. In most cases, it became the social unconscious of the population: seeking the Western model, emulating the West. A sociocultural examination could lead us to conclude that during, and because of, the recent US war on Iran, the Middle East, now the population, and not merely scholars, intellectuals, and activists, have, through a social unconscious, cast aside the superiority of the West; Western aspirations, culture, and certainly the savior of the East as a hegemonic view of the world. One might discern the end of this thinking system in the language used in President Trump’s communications: long-lasting hegemony gave way to a language of force and violence.

Following Edward Said’s foundational critique in 1978, academia thoroughly dismantled the field of Orientalism. Traditional Oriental Studies programs and departments at many universities became Middle Eastern Studies programs and departments. Varisco wrote back in 2009, “The term ‘Orientalism’ as the label for a distinct field of study was abandoned 36 years ago on the 100th anniversary of the First International Congress of Orientalists, as a majority of scholars in what had been called ‘Oriental Studies’ began to apply theoretical and methodological insights from their evolving disciplines.” [26] Seventeen years later, through the various uprisings, wars, and the continuous failures of Western and, more specifically, American, foreign policy, one can draw a distinct conclusion.

## 8. Conclusion

The decline and expiration of Orientalism have undoubtedly gone beyond the assertions of scholars and intellectuals, affecting academic change. The end is now part of the region’s political culture, which will begin to knowingly foment change without expecting the West to come to its rescue, in repudiation of the worldview that only the West monopolizes

progress, justice, and modernity. It is now the new ethos that the West hinders progress, justice, and modernity. By continually validating biases and ignoring human experience, Orientalism perpetuated harmful myths. It constrained how the West understood Middle Eastern political uprisings, social movements, and the diversity of religions and different denominations of Islam. In Western media, men in the Middle East were angry Kalashnikov-carrying terrorists, and women were depicted by the media as covering themselves in black Islamic garb and often screaming. Henceforth, because of continuous American aid to Israel vis-à-vis Palestine and Lebanon, particularly, and later Iran, and the US-Iran War, this narrative has changed, and a more dynamic Middle East is emerging, mainly in the realm of people's sociopolitical agency.

In no instance since 1948, when the United States began using its military and political power in many parts of the world, have democratic governments come about as a result, as Stephen Kinzer argued in his book, *Overthrow*, several years ago [27]. In many cases, democracy has developed in opposition to American interference. Kinzer argues that US regime-change operations have been self-defeating, myopic plans motivated by economic interests rather than ideas of democracy and progress. He sums up that these interventions most often produce "blowback," which creates power vacuums at best and leads to more dangerous and repressive regimes. Similarly, Chalmers Johnson cites many other examples of American intervention in his book, *Nemesis: The Last Days of the American Republic* [28].

Since the late 1940s, when the US first became involved in the Middle East, the plan has been to create and sustain a distorted image of the region and its history to prevent any progress and to gain control. As Edward Said argued, Western powers use cultural, political, and academic frameworks to manufacture a distorted image of the Middle East as inherently backward, irrational, and chaotic in order to justify imperial domination and management. By framing the diverse population of the Middle East as incapable of managing its own progress, the West, in general, and the United States in particular, after World War II, created an ideological rationale for constant political and military interventions.

On February 28, 2026, when President Trump first opined about the war in relation to the Iranian people and their discontent toward the Islamic Republic, he stated: "When we are finished, take over your government. It will be yours to take. America is backing you with overwhelming strength. Now is the time to seize control of your destiny and unleash the prosperous and glorious future that is close within your reach." Words that never materialized. Not just for Iranians in Iran, but for a large population in the Middle East, those words reverberate meaninglessly in a hollow echo chamber. Does the populace perceive those words as mere superficial proclamations that amount to nothing? Do people still hold Western values as the ultimate human values? Or is the world witnessing a new Middle Eastern renaissance, in which the population

is more independent, relying on their own agency and narratives?

## Abbreviations

|         |                                     |
|---------|-------------------------------------|
| IRGC    | Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps   |
| GCC     | Gulf Cooperation Council            |
| UAE     | United Arab Emirates                |
| SIPRI   | Stockholm International Peace Ins.  |
| FMS     | Foreign Military Sales              |
| ASP     | American Security Project           |
| CENTCOM | United States Central Command       |
| ICC     | International Criminal Court        |
| POMEPS  | Project on Middle East Pol. Science |
| MEI     | Middle East Institute               |

## Author Contributions

**Abdy Javadzadeh:** Conceptualization, Methodology, Formal Analysis, Investigation, Writing – original draft, Writing – review & editing

## Data Availability Statement

No new data were created or analyzed in this study. The study is based on theoretical, historical, and documentary sources.

## Conflicts of Interest

The author declares no conflict of interest.

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