

Steven Cook

*The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future  
in the Middle East*

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What happens when ambition in foreign policy turns into a quagmire of failures and unmet expectations? Steven A. Cook tackles this provocative question head-on in his insightful book, *The End of Ambition: America's Past, Present, and Future in the Middle East*, offering a critical examination of US foreign policy's evolution in the region. Cook, a senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, contends that America's ambitious attempts to reshape the Middle East often led to notable achievements and significant failures amid shifting geopolitical landscapes.

The book begins with a provocative question (4): "How was it that American foreign policy had arrived at the intersection of fantasy and failure in the Middle East, especially after previous years of success in the region?" Cook proposes a future approach—a vision for the US government and its future Middle Eastern policy.

US foreign strategy in the Middle East, as stated by Cook, has transitioned through two distinct eras. The first era during the Cold War was marked by a realist approach aimed at preventing disruptions of oil supplies, ensuring the security of Israel, and containing Soviet influence. According to Cook, this was a time of relative prosperity because American goals were well-defined and attainable. The Clinton administration marked the start of the second era, which lasted through the Bush and Obama administrations that followed. It was characterized by ambitious attempts to bring democracy and regime change to the Middle East, which ultimately led to the disastrous Iraq War and the unmet expectations of the Arab Spring. This ambitious approach, as claimed by Cook, led to significant failures and unintended consequences, demonstrating the limitations of American power and the flawed assumptions underpinning US policy. The Trump administration, lacking a coherent strategy, further complicated US involvement in the region with inconsistent policies and mixed signals, while the Biden administration has struggled to balance retrenchment with diplomatic engagement, often reflecting ongoing contradictions in US Middle East policy. In the end, Cook calls for a so-called prudential conservatism to be pursued. "Prudential conservatism," according to Cook (126), "is about keeping the world as it is, preventing transformational impulses, and enabling policies that do as little harm as possible to U.S. interests in the Middle East."

Steven Cook's narrative is structured thematically, covering historical context, key policies, and pivotal events across different administrations. His thematic approach allows for a comprehensive examination of US foreign policy's evolution, yet it also introduces a level of subjectivity as Cook often interjects his personal reflections and experiences. This subjective lens can be both illuminating and polarizing. On one hand, Cook's firsthand accounts and insights from his extensive career provide a vivid and engaging perspective that brings the complexities of US–Middle East relations to life. His personal anecdotes, such as his observations during travels in the region, add depth and a human element to the historical and political analysis. On the other hand, this subjectivity sometimes leads to a more opinionated narrative, where Cook's interpretations and biases are evident. He utilizes a variety of evidence, including historical records, policy documents, and interviews with officials, to support his arguments. However, his personal views occasionally color the presentation of these facts, making it essential for readers to discern between objective analysis and Cook's subjective commentary.

In 157 pages, the book covers various theaters from Iran to Yemen, and from Egypt to Algeria. This is where the first issue arises: What is the Middle East? Cook fails to define the region. Many experts do not include Libya, Morocco, and, above all, Sudan in the Middle East. It is also questionable whether Pakistan or Afghanistan, let alone Turkey, can be counted as part of it. More problematic than the lack of definition is Cook's attempt to pack so many countries into so few pages. This raises the question of who the book is intended for. For academics, it lacks detail and instead tries to present a big picture. For laypeople or those interested in the region, it is too broad, requiring prior knowledge.

Cook devotes a large part of the book to Israel–Palestine. This is certainly a very important conflict in the region, but while Cook mentions Israel 296 times, Syria, for example, is only mentioned 41 times; Afghanistan 15 times, and Libya 17 times. Cook goes into great detail about the conflict between Israel and Palestine, but the latest war in Gaza is dealt with in just a bit more than four pages. While Cook had to conclude his writing at some point, given the book's valuable insights and important implications for America's future in the region, it would have been beneficial to provide more detail about the current situation, which presents significant challenges for US policymakers.

One case study worth mentioning is Cook's analysis of the Iraq War. He delves into the motivations behind the US invasion, the flawed intelligence regarding weapons of mass destruction, and the subsequent insurgency that plunged the country into chaos. This case exemplifies the perils of overreaching in foreign policy and underscores Cook's argument for prudential

conservatism. Another illustrative example is the US response to the Arab Spring, particularly in Egypt. Cook explores how initial support for democratic movements gave way to a more cautious approach as the region descended into turmoil, reflecting the complexities and unintended consequences of interventionist policies.

Cook's previous work on the post-Arab Spring system, particularly his book *False Dawn: Protest, Democracy and Violence in the New Middle East* (2017), offers valuable context for understanding his current analysis. In *False Dawn*, Cook delves into the aftermath of the Arab Spring, examining why the democratic aspirations of the uprisings quickly dissolved into violence and the resurgence of authoritarian regimes. One notable case is Turkey, where Cook explores how initial optimism gave way to a return to autocratic governance, highlighting the challenges of sustaining democratic movements in the region. He delves into the complexities of Turkey's political landscape, discussing Erdoğan's consolidation of power, the crackdown on dissent, and the erosion of democratic institutions. This case study is instrumental in illustrating the broader patterns of democratic backsliding and the resurgence of authoritarianism that Cook identifies across the Middle East. Turkey's experience as one of the initial proponents of the Arab Spring, followed by its rapid reversion to authoritarianism, exemplifies the challenges faced by democratic movements in the region. This case study sheds light on the difficulties of maintaining democratic momentum, a theme that resonates in "The End of Ambition" as Cook critiques the ambitious and often unrealistic goals of US foreign policy. By juxtaposing the rise and fall of democratic hopes in Turkey with the broader failures of US policy in the Middle East, Cook effectively illustrates the need for a more grounded and cautious approach.

In his newest book, *The End of Ambition*, more information on the relationship between Saudi Arabia and the United States would have been beneficial, especially since the relationship between Mohammed bin Salman (MbS) and Joe Biden is very different from that of the previous term with Donald Trump. Under Trump's administration, the US maintained a close and supportive stance toward Saudi Arabia, prioritizing arms sales and strategic alliances against common adversaries like Iran. Trump's administration was notably silent on Saudi Arabia's human rights abuses, including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, which many international observers and intelligence agencies linked to MbS. In contrast, Biden's administration has attempted to recalibrate this relationship by emphasizing human rights and reducing direct support for Saudi-led operations in Yemen. However, Biden's need to stabilize oil markets and manage regional security concerns has necessitated a more pragmatic approach, leading to some continuation of arms deals and strategic cooperation despite initial rhetoric suggesting a harsher stance against Riyadh.

In a short paragraph, Cook discusses the maritime boundary deal between Israel and Lebanon, describing it as a de facto flagship project (146). However, Cook misses the crucial role of Hezbollah in this deal. Hezbollah is a powerful political and militant group in Lebanon. By engaging in negotiations that affect Hezbollah's strategic interests, the US government inadvertently acknowledges the group's significant influence, despite it being labeled a terrorist organization by the United States. This acknowledgment complicates US policy, as it strives to balance diplomatic progress with Israel and Lebanon while maintaining a firm stance against terrorist organizations. The delicate nature of this maritime boundary deal underscores the complexities of Middle Eastern geopolitics and the unintended consequences of US foreign policy decisions in the region.

Cook lends additional strength to his main argument, that the American Middle East strategy is very inconsistent, by mentioning it several times and backing it up with important arguments at various points. The book urges readers to reevaluate the tenets and objectives of American foreign policy and argues in favor of a more measured and pragmatic strategy that recognizes the limits of American power. It contributes to the ongoing debate about the role of the United States in the world and how to best handle the complex and frequently volatile politics of the Middle East.

*The End of Ambition* offers an engaging and perceptive analysis of American foreign policy in the Middle East. It presents a careful historical background, a critical evaluation of previous mistakes, and a well-reasoned case for a more pragmatic future. Anyone looking to comprehend the complex interactions between ambition, power, and pragmatism in US foreign policy ought to examine Cook's work.

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*In the Shade of the Sunna: Salafi Piety  
in the Twentieth-Century Middle East*

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In the past half-century, the assurgent salafi movement has visibly changed the face of large swathes of the Sunni Muslim world. Academic study of the phenomenon has been relatively slow to engage with the phenomenon, and