



JULY 2020, QUINCY PAPER NO. 2

A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East: Ending America's Misguided Policy of Domination

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STATECRAFT

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Table of contents

I.	Executive Summary	pg. 3
II.	About the Authors	pg. 6
III.	Acknowledgements	pg. 7
IV.	Introduction: America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East	pg. 8
V.	Why the Present Approach Has Failed	pg. 11
VI.	Toward a New Regional Security Architecture	pg. 17
VII.	Conclusion	pg. 28
VIII.	Endnotes	pg. 30
IX.	About the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft	pg. 33

I. Executive Summary

Conventional wisdom holds that the presence of United States forces in the Middle East makes America and the region more secure. To the contrary, the U.S. military's large footprint in the region, combined with voluminous U.S. arms sales and support for repressive regimes, drives instability and exacerbates grievances and conditions that threaten the United States. This presence has made Americans less safe and undermined U.S. standing abroad; it also leaves America less prepared to address more dangerous nonmilitary challenges such as pandemics and climate change, as the Covid-19 crisis makes clear.

Given the manifest failure of the current strategy, growing calls for a demilitarized approach to the region should come as no surprise. However, translating concepts of military restraint into practical policy requires sustained effort. This paper is intended to move the debate forward by operationalizing a holistic approach to the region based on a narrow definition of vital U.S. interests, in accordance with a foreign policy centered on military restraint and responsible statecraft.

U.S. policy toward the Middle East should be guided by two core interests: Protect the United States from attack; and facilitate the free flow of global commerce.

While these objectives require the U.S. to prevent hostile states from establishing hegemony in the region, they are best served by enhancing peace and security within a framework of international law. Neither warrants a major U.S. military presence in the Middle East, let alone regional military dominance.

A basic reorientation of U.S. policy is long overdue. Rather than allowing bilateral friends and adversaries define regional policy, the U.S. should center policy decisions across the region on their direct implications for U.S. interests, rigorously defined. Bilateral relations should be adjusted to this regionwide policy, not the other way around. A new approach based on responsible statecraft would not disengage from the Middle East, but would instead prioritize diplomatic and economic involvement over military domination, military interventions, and arms sales. This paper explains what such a shift would entail in practice and makes the following recommendations:

- **Time to come home**

To preserve Americans' physical and economic well-being more effectively, the U.S. should significantly draw down its military presence in the region over a period of five to ten years. Preventing hostile hegemony in the Middle East does not mean the United States must play the role of hegemon itself, nor does it require the current level of U.S. arms sales in the region. Instead, Washington should recognize multipolarity as a reality, appreciate that it precludes regional domination by any other state, and exploit it to protect U.S. interests.

- **A deliberative drawdown...**

The United States should immediately begin discussions with regional powers currently hosting U.S. troops to allow them to prepare for the U.S. drawdown. This decision may not be popular among some U.S. partners, but it is the course that best serves U.S. interests and regional stability.

'Preventing hostile hegemony in the Middle East does not mean the United States must play the role of hegemon itself.'

- **...regardless of stability milestones**
The United States should convincingly signal that rightsizing its military presence will proceed regardless of any potential stability milestones. If the drawdown is made contingent upon regional stability first being achieved, the United States will risk giving countries that enjoy U.S. protection an incentive to destabilize the Middle East to prevent American troops from ever going home.
- **Support a new security architecture...**
The United States should instead encourage the development of a new regional security architecture for the Persian Gulf based on the models of the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, while maintaining an offshore military presence that allows for intervention if necessary to protect the United States. Consequently, the U.S. must cease its maintenance of an artificial power balance predicated on a permanent U.S. military presence, military assistance, and massive arms sales.
- **...but don't lead it**
For such a security architecture to be successful and durable, it needs regional buy-in and ownership. Regional states should lead and drive this process themselves. They cannot own the process if the U.S. controls it.
- **Talk to everyone**
The United States has isolated itself from important players in the Middle East. It has become a belligerent in many conflicts and lacks relations with key states and actors, effectively ceding diplomatic maneuverability to Russia and others. U.S. policy toward the Middle East must entail active engagement with all players in the region—friends and foes alike. The United States should abandon the objective of regime change due to its immorality, counterproductivity, and destabilizing effect.
- **Normalize relations with Iran**
The prevailing policy of isolating Iran lacks a strategic rationale and has failed on all fronts. It fuels tensions in the Middle East and leaves the United States and Iran unnecessarily close to military confrontation. To maximize U.S. diplomatic maneuverability, the United States should seek to normalize relations with Iran and find constructive ways to manage differences, beginning with a return to full compliance, on both sides, with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action.
- **Do not make Iraq into a battlefield with Iran**
Iraq should not be turned into one more front in an obsessive campaign to isolate and weaken Iran. While the U.S. should continue to provide security assistance to Iraq, Washington should draw down its military presence, as the Iraqi government has requested.
- **Participate in diplomatic efforts to end the wars in Syria and Yemen**
America should be part of the solution in Syria and Yemen by taking part in efforts to find political settlements to these two civil wars. In Syria, the U.S. should withdraw all troops, given that the original reason for their dispatch—to defeat ISIS—is now obsolete. The U.S. should declare a moratorium on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE until they cut off all support to parties to the Yemen conflict.

- **No more cartes blanches for partners**

Unconditional U.S. support for regional security partners has tended to disincentivize them from diplomatic efforts to peacefully resolve tensions with neighbors. For instance, overt U.S. backing of the Saudi regime has often encouraged greater belligerence than when the Saudis have been less sure that the U.S. would intervene on their behalf. Unquestioned U.S. support for Israel has facilitated its continued occupation of Palestinian territory and reduced incentives to pursue a peaceful resolution of the conflict. A significant reduction of U.S. troops in the Middle East will help instill greater restraint and reduce the tendency toward destabilizing behavior among partner governments.

- **On human rights, lead by example**

U.S. policy should reflect strong commitments to human and political rights in the Middle East while recognizing that intervention cannot be the principal means of achieving respect for those rights. U.S. policy must apply standards consistently to all parties in the region and must be based on the U.S. itself demonstrating respect for human rights at home and abroad, for multilateral cooperation, and for international law.

II. About the Authors

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III. Acknowledgements

This paper would not have been possible without the expertise, assistance, thoughtful contributions, and critique of numerous scholars and experts. Particular thanks are owed to Daniel Levy, Lara Friedman, Ilan Goldenberg, Rob Malley, Steve Walt, Dylan Williams, Lora Lumpe, Suzanne DiMaggio, Jessica Rosenblum, Stephen Wertheim, Peter Richards, and Adam Wunische.

IV. Introduction: America's Failed Strategy in the Middle East

Covid-19 now demonstrates the necessity of reorienting the priorities of the U.S. government. The coronavirus pandemic and subsequent economic crisis underscore the folly of the post-9/11 national security agenda, which has focused primarily on foreign threats, many of which originated in the Middle East, while insufficiently addressing hazards to the health and well-being of people in the United States. Indeed, much of America's overseas expenditure and military action during the past 20 years has been concentrated in this region, following the 9/11 attacks and subsequent declaration of the war on terror. Unfortunately, the vast sums the U.S. has spent in the region have had the opposite of their intended effect: They have made Americans less safe, undermined U.S. standing abroad, and rendered the country less prepared to respond to domestic threats to Americans' well-being. The region has been the epicenter of the overreach of U.S. power, the unwarranted taking of sides in local and regional conflicts, and the loss of vision as to where U.S. interests lie. This is not a phenomenon limited to any specific administration; it has been a systemic problem in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East since at least the end of the Cold War.



Burial procession in U.S. military cemetery. Shutterstock / Sergey Novikov

To date, the U.S. has spent \$6.4 trillion on military operations designated as part of the war on terror.¹ The single costliest instance of U.S. overreach in the region—the war in Iraq that began in 2003—incurred hundreds of thousands of Iraqi casualties, thousands of American casualties, and trillions of dollars in expenditures, to say nothing of the political harm the invasion caused.² This intervention and its associated costs did not produce even remotely comparable benefits. The lauded military “surge” in Iraq in 2007–8 contributed to a short-term reduction in violence but failed to give Iraqi political factions space to make necessary accommodations for longer-term peace and stability. The negative longer-term consequences of the U.S.–led invasion include triggering an extended civil war, stimulating sectarian conflict inside and outside Iraq, and producing the conditions for the emergence of the so-called Islamic State.³

The invasion of Iraq underscored how U.S. foreign policy undermines U.S. national security as well as stability across the region, and yet developments since then indicate that appropriate lessons have not been learned.⁴ The military intervention, with U.S. support and involvement, that led to the overthrow of Muammar al-Gaddafi in 2011 has left Libya in chaos. The continuing civil war has had a destabilizing effect beyond Libya’s borders, including a notable increase in terrorist groups operating in the Sahel and West and Central Africa.⁵ Furthermore, the involvement of Turkey and European governments in support of opposed Libyan factions has deepened rifts within the E.U. and NATO. U.S. support for the Saudi-led war in Yemen has resulted in the world’s worst ongoing humanitarian catastrophe. U.S. policy toward Iran, especially the assassination of Qassem Soleimani on Iraqi soil in January 2020, effectively favors military confrontation over diplomacy. U.S. military engagement in the region has routinely raised tensions, heightened the risk of wider war, and entrapped the U.S. in a region that is no longer vital to U.S. national security.

Persistent U.S. support for governments sometimes given to violent and abusive methods elevates, rather than diminishes, the threat of violent extremism. U.S. military assistance—most prominently to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan, but also to armed proxy groups in Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya—exacerbates abuses that contribute to instability.⁶ Coupled with massive arms sales in the region, especially to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, these military relationships have entangled and implicated the U.S. in a variety of regional conflicts. Unconditional U.S. military support for Israel has facilitated its continued occupation of Palestinian territory (potentially culminating in the annexation of the West Bank) and reduced incentives to pursue a peaceful resolution to the conflict. In Egypt, aid has tied the U.S. to a government that is notorious for its abuse of human rights and due process.

The 2011 uprisings that eventually led to the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen reflected the absence of economic opportunities and political freedoms for the majority of the region’s inhabitants. Such factors have grown only more acute over the subsequent decade, and massive unrest could break out again, threatening even greater violence and forced displacement. Yet the U.S. did not alter its approach to the region in the wake of the 2011 uprisings.

A new approach based on responsible statecraft would not require the U.S. to abandon the Middle East but would prioritize diplomatic and economic involvement over military assistance, arms sales, and intervention. All policies toward the region should derive from a careful and measured articulation of expectations and the application of means to ends. The means should consist of multiple tools, with military force the tool of last resort. The ends should derive directly from U.S. interests, rigorously defined.

U.S. interests in the Middle East are not as extensive as existing policy implies.⁷ True U.S. interests in this region, as in any other region abroad, ultimately derive from the core national principles of preserving and advancing the security and well-being of the American people. Few developments in the Middle East genuinely threaten these interests. Moving forward, U.S. policy toward the Middle East should be guided by two core objectives: protect people in the United States from attack and facilitate the free flow of global commerce. Given the Middle East’s importance to the global economy, this latter objective has a direct impact on the welfare of the American people. Both of these objectives are best served by enhancing regional peace and security and preventing a hostile power from taking control of the region’s resources or blocking the flow of commerce.⁸

The need for stability also generates second-order interests. The first is respect for human rights, both because it is a central value espoused by most Americans and because massive human rights abuses by authoritarian states can be destabilizing and a source of extremism. Second, the U.S. has a second-order interest in containing destabilizing refugee flows and terrorism arising from the region's many conflicts. This objective requires greater humanitarian and diplomatic engagement; we note that many of these conflicts were borne out of foreign military interventions in the first place.

'Few developments in the Middle East genuinely threaten America's core interests.'

The first section of this report addresses the core interests of the United States in greater detail, arguing for the need to define U.S. interests in narrow terms to avoid inflating perceived threats to national security. To truly safeguard the security of the United States, any proposed use of military force must be carefully assessed to determine the anticipated costs and benefits. Too frequently, U.S. military actions are undertaken in the region without a clear justification for their relevance to Americans' safety and economic well-being, or without an assessment of anticipated costs and consequences, such as creating fronts for further confrontation and provoking more attacks. A threat to a U.S. security partner is not equivalent to an attack on American soil.

The U.S. should adopt a holistic approach toward the Middle East. Rather than allowing bilateral relations to define regional policy, the U.S. should adopt a regionwide policy that prioritizes the safety of the U.S. homeland and the free flow of commerce. Bilateral relations should be adjusted to that regional policy, not the other way around. The current approach of treating some countries as perpetual adversaries and others as perpetual friends, regardless of these countries' policies and conduct, does not afford Washington the flexibility necessary for policymakers to pursue America's best interests.

U.S. policy in the Middle East is often justified by the need to protect the status quo to preserve stability, but current policies clearly undermine regional stability and U.S. security.⁹ The second section of this report explains how the U.S. has relied too heavily on its military to address the threat of terrorism and protect the free flow of oil, while neither of these interests requires the current U.S. military commitment to the region. The third and final section reimagines the U.S. role in the Middle East, specifically by accepting the emergence of a regional balance of power that reflects local realities and by encouraging regional states to negotiate a new security architecture for the Persian Gulf—and by extension the rest of the region. The U.S. should significantly reduce its military footprint while retaining the readiness to redeploy if its core interests are threatened and pursuing diplomatic and commercial engagement with all states in the region. By no longer attempting to play the role of regional hegemon, the U.S. could instead rely on core American interests to determine policy. With greater diplomatic flexibility, the U.S. would no longer feel compelled to support abusive regimes. A forthcoming report from the Quincy Institute will provide specifics on the scope of the recommended drawdown of troops; this paper makes the broader case for why such a reduction is necessary to protect U.S. interests. As such, it is focused solely on how U.S. policy should be crafted rather than the policies of other states.

V. Why the Present Approach Has Failed

Neither of the two core U.S. interests in the region—protecting people in the U.S. from attack and facilitating the free flow of global commerce—requires the levels of military force currently deployed in the region.¹⁰ The military means used to pursue these two objectives, especially during the past three decades, have made the region less stable and more violent, exacerbating the conditions that can make terrorism more likely while also endangering global commerce.¹¹ The existing approach to the Middle East is driven by flawed assumptions about the utility of coercive power in two arenas long considered central to U.S. interests: countering terrorism and protecting oil markets.

Countering terrorism

The core objective of protecting people in the U.S. does not warrant the current global counterterror campaign, although common rhetoric tends to conflate the two. Protecting U.S. residents requires neither the prevention of all acts of terrorism nor the elimination of all groups identified as “terrorists.” The years since the 2001 attacks in New York and Washington have demonstrated that such a goal is neither imperative nor achievable.

Terrorism is an extreme tactic that can be used to pursue any political objective; it is not a fixed set of groups or people.¹² It is thus a mistake to consider counterterrorism in terms of eradicating some named, known list of bad actors. Reducing the risk and incidence of terrorist violence requires addressing the circumstances and issues that tend to motivate people to resort to the tactic and that will provide the impetus for future terrorist groups to form. The current war on terror leaves these considerations unaddressed and consequently rests on several false assumptions:

False Assumption 1: Terrorism is an existential threat.

Terrorism is a serious security issue worthy of concentrated policy attention. Yet in the Middle East as elsewhere, it should be kept in perspective within a larger picture of risks, resources, and priorities. Terrorism globally has been declining, not increasing, over the last few years.¹³ Decreases in terrorism since 9/11, especially as far as attacks on Americans are concerned, reflect greatly enhanced domestic security measures. Political leaders still emphasize the problem of terrorism because of the fear it elicits in the public, but the human and material costs of terrorism have been far less than those of many avoidable sources of death and destruction. Most relevant to policymaking, the costs and harm of actions the United States has taken in the name of counterterrorism have far exceeded the costs of the terrorism being countered. Even the 9/11 attacks, which had an unusually high death toll and have had a huge impact on two decades of U.S. national security policy, were long ago surpassed by the costs of what the United States has done in response.¹⁴ The September 11th attacks left 2,977 Americans dead and inflicted direct economic damages of up to \$178 billion. (The economic cost of 9/11 runs to trillions of dollars only if one includes accounts for the misguided policy response to 9/11, such as the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq).

‘As long as extraregional powers further distort the region’s natural balance by flooding it with weaponry, the Middle East will remain fraught with instability.’

In addition, the coronavirus pandemic has underscored the disproportionate weight given to jihadist terrorism compared with nonmilitary challenges such as disease and climate change. In total, 3,277 Americans have been killed in terrorist acts on U.S. soil from 1995 to 2016. The Covid-19 virus, on the other hand, killed more than 125,000 Americans in the first half of 2020. According to the Congressional Budget Office, the pandemic is projected to cost the U.S. economy \$7.9 trillion over the next decade.¹⁵



A man runs down a street warning people to flee shortly after a twin car bomb attack at Shorja market in Baghdad February 12, 2007. Three bomb attacks at markets in Baghdad killed at least 64 people and wounded 150 as Iraqis marked the first anniversary of a Shi'ite shrine bombing that pitched the country to the brink of civil war. REUTERS/Ceerwan Aziz

False Assumption 2: Terrorists need territory.

Despite frequent references to terrorist “safe havens,” control of even small pieces of territory is not essential to terrorist operations.¹⁶ September 11th is an illustrative example: Most of the preparations for the attacks took place in apartments in Hamburg, Germany, resort towns in Spain, and flight schools in the United States.¹⁷ The Middle East has seen the largest-ever seizure of territory by a terrorist group—the Islamic State’s “caliphate” in eastern Syria and western Iraq—but administering that territory appears to have been more of a burden than an asset for the group’s international terrorism operations. Its focus on such operations tended to vary inversely with the fortunes of its ministate. After the establishment of the caliphate, ISIS’s message to would-be followers abroad was to come join it.¹⁸ It was only as the enclave was collapsing that the dominant message shifted to encouraging mayhem overseas.

As the ISIS case indicates, focusing unduly on terrorist “safe havens” can divert resources and attention from more effective means to combat the majority of terrorists, who live and operate in societies around the world. Clearly one should not wish for terrorist groups to hold any territory for prolonged periods of time, but preventing that is more achievable if conducted by local actors and partners.

False Assumption 3: Military interventions can contain terrorist threats.

The foremost driver of anti-U.S. terrorism has been the U.S. military presence and military operations abroad.¹⁹ This finding is consistent with research on terrorism worldwide that has shown the chief purpose for suicide terrorism to be resistance to military occupation.²⁰ Responses to the U.S. military in the Middle East provide numerous examples. Hezbollah’s anti-U.S. actions in the 1980s, including the April 1983 bombings of the Marine barracks and the U.S.

embassy in Beirut, were a direct response to U.S. military intervention in Lebanon, which, in turn, was an attempt to deal with the consequences of the Israeli invasion of Lebanon a year earlier. The last time Hezbollah or its ally Iran was involved in a terrorist attack aimed at U.S. interests was the bombing in 1996 of the military barracks at Khobar Towers in eastern Saudi Arabia—an attack aimed directly at the U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf area.²¹

The origins of al-Qaeda lie primarily in similar resentments over the U.S. military presence. It was the U.S. military buildup in Saudi Arabia following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990 that, more than any other single development, radicalized Osama bin Laden.²² He saw this expedition as Western boots polluting the soil on which the Prophet had walked. This was when bin Laden broke with the Saudi regime and embarked on the violent course that would define al-Qaeda. It follows that the single most important step the United States could take to reduce anti-U.S. terrorism is to draw down its military presence overseas, especially in the Middle East.

False Assumption 4: Counterterrorism centers on war.

Military force is one of several counterterrorism tools. As with others, it has advantages and drawbacks. However, among the available options, militaries are not particularly effective against terrorist groups. Most terrorist organizations are defeated not by military operations but by police and intelligence actions and cooperation.²³ Military action can occasionally be useful in assisting host countries in striking a terrorist group, a mission best performed using offshore capabilities, as these do not involve the physical vulnerabilities and resentments among local populations that an on-the-ground military presence often entails. The main limitation is that terrorism presents few good military targets—think of apartments in Germany and flight schools in the United States. The tool's main harm is that the military's use inevitably inflicts collateral damage on innocent civilians. This, of course, becomes another source of anger and resentment that feeds extremism and still more terrorism.

'The foremost driver of anti-U.S. terrorism has been the U.S. military presence abroad.'

Counterterrorism should not be considered primarily as war, despite the unfortunate implications of President Bush's "war on terror" metaphor immediately after the September 11th events.²⁴ Addressing violent extremism emanating from the Middle East in the years ahead will require full use of the other available counterterrorism tools. These include law enforcement and criminal investigative capabilities, intelligence, the tracking and blocking of financial flows used by terrorist groups, and diplomacy to secure the cooperation of governments in the region.²⁵

Counterterrorism strategies

Liaison and cooperation with foreign governments is of paramount importance in fighting terrorism. They have significant advantages over the United States. They know the issues and grievances that feed extremism in their midst, they have the language and cultural grasp needed to penetrate terrorist groups, and they hold the authority to conduct raids, arrests, and other necessary measures. The United States should offer training and technical assistance to the intelligence and internal security apparatuses of governments in the region to enhance local capabilities and the cooperative habits and trust on which such liaison relationships rest.

Simultaneously, the U.S. must exhibit greater awareness of the extent to which authoritarian governments in the Middle East have used the war on terror as a pretext to target domestic political opposition movements. Nonviolent Islamist groups have too frequently been equated with terrorist groups in American discourse and in the counterterror activities of regional governments. As a result, the U.S. ends up contributing to the repression of movements that seek greater political accountability and democratic representation: The absence of peaceful means of political expression, and the violence their members experience in the prisons of authoritarian systems, exacerbate frustrations that can make violent extremism more likely among vulnerable populations. By internalizing

the demonization of nonviolent Islamist groups by many Middle Eastern governments, the U.S. actually undermines its own efforts to reduce the likelihood of terrorist violence. The U.S. must provide oversight to ensure that governments in the region use counterterrorist resources against groups committed to violence—and not groups trying to hold their leaders accountable.

Counterterrorism is an issue on which parallel interests can underlie cooperation even with states usually considered adversaries. An example from the recent past is Libya, where Muammar al-Gaddafi, who shared U.S. concerns about some of the same violent Sunni Islamist groups, became part of the solution when he reached a many-sided accord with the United States and United Kingdom in 2003. That cooperative relationship ended when the United States and European powers used the first opportunity to employ military force to help oust Gaddafi. Iran's important role in assisting Iraq in combating ISIS, though not widely acknowledged, points to other opportunities, even for those who are adversaries on other issues, to play a constructive role in counterterrorism.

Reducing the risk of terrorism will require a more fundamental shift than adjusting policies that bear the counterterrorist label. Anything the United States does, and any stance the United States takes involving issues that arouse passions among people in the region, can affect the likelihood that some of those passions will evolve into political violence or support for such violence. The Israel–Palestine conflict has been an especially salient example of such an issue, as underscored by how Palestinians opposing the Israeli occupation were in the forefront of the wave of international terrorism that began in the late 1960s. International terrorism sponsored by Palestinian organizations abated once the U.S. and Israel began engaging the Palestinians in the late 1980s.²⁶ The statements of groups claiming responsibility for attacks in the ensuing years, and of many captured terrorists under interrogation, have repeatedly cited U.S. backing of the occupation as a rationale for directing violence against American interests.²⁷

Mindful of how its lingering presence in Saudi Arabia after the 1991 Gulf War became a mobilizing tool for bin Laden, the U.S. must also reduce its military presence once a given threat has been addressed, as in Iraq and Syria. Warfare in both countries was instrumental to the rise of ISIS. The group began, under a different name and different leadership, as a direct result of the chaos and communal strife unleashed by the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003, marking one of the many harmful consequences of that mistaken military expedition.²⁸ The outbreak of civil conflict in Syria in 2011 gave ISIS new opportunities to exploit and led to its dramatic territorial gains by 2014. Today, with the caliphate erased as a geographic entity, even as ISIS remains a terrorist threat, U.S. policy needs to adjust to new and separate circumstances in Syria and Iraq, bearing in mind the limitations to what U.S. power can accomplish in each country.

The U.S. should remove its troops from both countries, given the principal rationale for this presence was the military fight against ISIS. The United States needs to take a long view, with attention to what truly impacts the security of people in the U.S. It is a detrimental error simply to apply new rationales to policies that continue merely through inertia.

Finally, reasserting congressional authority over the power to declare war is a crucial policy response. Immediately after 9/11, Congress gave the president the power to use military force to respond to the attacks when it passed the Authorization for Use of Military Force (AUMF) resolution. The following year, Congress signed another AUMF specifically to provide for the use of force in Iraq. Both authorizations have been interpreted as permitting broad presidential authority to wage war as part of the global war on terror. Congress should repeal the 2002 AUMF and replace the 2001 AUMF with a narrower authorization. Furthermore, Congress should pass a reformed War Powers Act that would preserve the nation's ability to respond rapidly in a crisis while fulfilling Congress' constitutionally mandated responsibility for the declaration of war, a power reserved for the legislative and not the executive branch.²⁹

Preserving access to oil

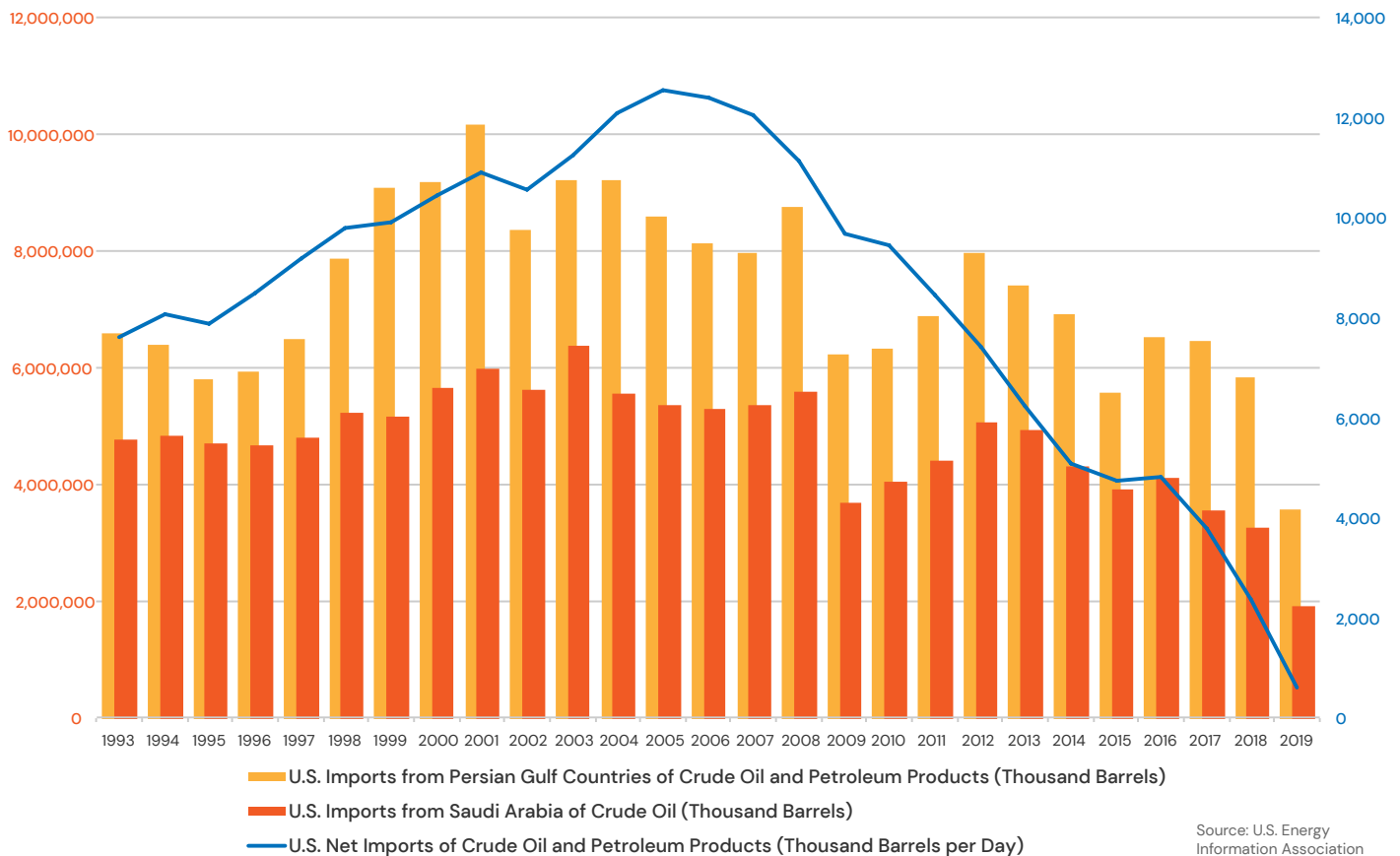
Oil has traditionally been a key U.S. interest in the Middle East. Protecting global supplies is often cited as justification for the U.S. military presence in and around the Persian Gulf, specifically guaranteeing the free flow of oil through the

Strait of Hormuz. Following the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan in 1979, President Carter declared in 1980 that the U.S. would use force to guarantee its interests in the Persian Gulf, a position later manifested by U.S. involvement in the first Gulf War and the subsequent revival in 1995 of the Navy’s Fifth Fleet, stationed in Bahrain. Following 9/11 and the Afghanistan and Iraq invasions, the U.S. expanded its military footprint in the region. Despite the end of the Iraq War, more than 55,000 American troops remain stationed in the region, a presence once again justified, in part, by the need to guarantee the free flow of oil through the Strait of Hormuz.³⁰

In 2018, the U.S. spent approximately \$81 billion protecting global oil supplies; this represented 13 percent of the Defense Department’s base budget for the year.³¹ Although disruption of the oil trade would have deleterious economic effects globally, including in the United States, it is not appropriate for American taxpayers to bear this much of the burden protecting oil that is largely consumed elsewhere.³² This is particularly the case given the diminishing importance of the region’s oil trade for the United States because of the fracking revolution in U.S. oil production and, over the longer term, reduced dependence on hydrocarbons for energy.

For most of the Cold War, the U.S. was a net importer of oil, but its dependence on Persian Gulf oil was small and its military footprint in the Middle East limited. During much of the post–Cold War period, the U.S. increased its oil imports and, even though its dependence on Persian Gulf oil remained generally stable, its military footprint in the region expanded extensively. In 2018, the U.S. became a net oil exporter while registering a declining dependence on hydrocarbons. (The U.S. was the world’s top producer of natural gas and oil between December 2018 and March 2020.)³³ Only 15 percent of the petroleum the U.S. did import in 2018 came from the Persian Gulf.³⁴ Given that the U.S. remains a net exporter, is still less dependent on Persian Gulf oil, and is no longer fighting a Cold War, protecting the region’s oil is not a compelling justification for retaining a strong military presence in the region.

U.S. Net Imports of Crude Oil vs. Oil Imports from Persian Gulf States



Certainly, the continued dependence of other nations on petroleum from the Persian Gulf means that any disruption of exports from the region would still negatively affect the world economy and thus the U.S. economy. But given the dependency of other great powers on Persian Gulf oil and their interest in a stable flow of hydrocarbons from the Middle East, the burden of securing oil flows should not fall solely on the U.S. We note, for instance, that 40 percent of China's oil imports are from the Middle East, while 76 percent of the oil shipped through the Strait of Hormuz in 2017 went to Asian markets more broadly.³⁵

'Paying the military costs of providing the rest of the world with oil is not in the interests of the U.S.'

The current U.S. approach to preserving access to oil relies primarily on the presence of the U.S. military. According to available figures, this includes 53 military bases and shared military installations in the Persian Gulf region and, as earlier noted, more than 55,000 troops deployed in the broader Middle East.³⁶ Yet it is not clear that the presence of the U.S. military has contributed to the stability of oil supplies. Neither has it contributed to the stability of oil markets. Indeed, war scares involving the possible use of U.S. forces in the region have sometimes roiled oil markets. Moreover, the U.S. military was of course in no position to prevent a price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia in spring 2020, which harmed American oil producers; U.S. forces also failed to deter multiple attacks on oil tankers in the Persian Gulf and oil facilities in Saudi Arabia,

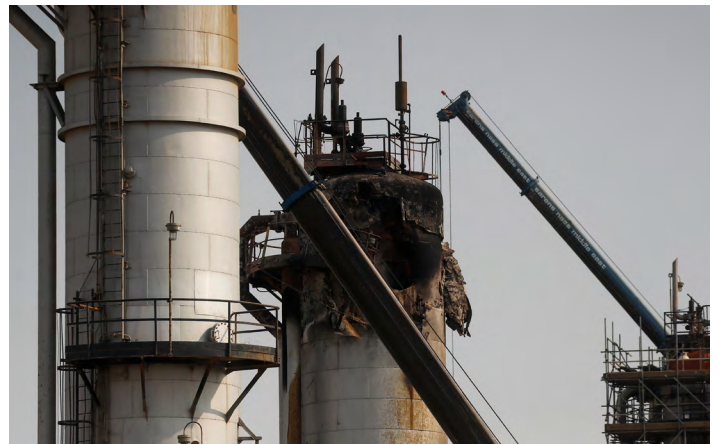
most likely by Iran or Iran-affiliated groups, in 2019. Given these realities, justifying the current U.S. force posture in the Persian Gulf on the basis of protecting oil supplies and keeping markets stable is precarious at best. Moving forward, the U.S. should cultivate multilateral efforts to protect shipping lanes in the Middle East. Asian and European countries have a particular interest in protecting oil routes; as the U.S. continues to shoulder the burden, it is effectively subsidizing their access to oil.

In the long term, U.S. interests are best served by reducing dependence on oil and instead relying on domestic sources of renewable energy. These would protect American energy markets from foreign threats while also curbing the American contribution to greenhouse gases and climate change. Reducing and eventually ending the combustion of fossil fuel is directly in the U.S. national interest, while continuing to pay the military costs of providing the rest of the world with oil is not.

VI. Toward A New Regional Security Architecture

A framework for America's long-term security relationship with the Middle East should be guided by the objective of making sure threats to the U.S. do not emerge from the region and that no single actor gains regional dominance. All of this is better achieved if the Middle East is more stable and less prone to conflict. Domination by any one state, if it came to pass, could threaten America's commercial and energy interests. A regional hegemon could also become part of a hostile global alliance and make future military intervention to defend U.S. interests more likely. Fortunately, no state is close to having the capability to achieve regional dominance.³⁷ Iran is often mentioned as a would-be hegemon, yet it is outclassed militarily by numerous rivals, represents a sectarian and ethnic minority amid more numerous Sunni Arabs, and has to compete for influence in a multipolar region. Global powers such as Russia and China have at times sought to expand their influence in the region, but in ways that fall far short of hegemony. Russia has expended significant resources in Syria to maintain its sole alliance in the Arab world, and China appears more interested in access to energy supplies and other commercial considerations.

Preventing a hostile hegemon does not require the United States to assume the role of regional hegemon itself. Instead, it should recognize multipolarity as a reality, appreciate it for precluding regional domination by any other state, and exploit it to protect U.S. interests. In the absence of any emerging regional hegemon, the United States has little stake in the ebb and flow of most conflicts among regional actors, apart from a permanent interest in avoiding the escalation of conflicts with wider destabilizing effects. There is no justification for rigidly dividing the region into ostensibly good actors and bad ones and tilting scales in favor of the former and against the latter. The United States is well served by a multipolar balance of power, in which any aggressive inclinations on the part of any regional actors are deterred or otherwise held in check by regional rivals. Security in the Middle East is inherently the responsibility of Middle Eastern states, with the United States serving as a balancer from a distance only when balancing is required.



A view shows the damaged site of Saudi Aramco oil facility in Abqaiq, Saudi Arabia October 12, 2019. REUTERS/Maxim Shemetov

However, multipolarity in the absence of a regional security architecture risks perpetuating instability. The region lacks a state or combination of states capable of establishing an inclusive security architecture. This partly explains why the region is so fraught with conflict and why efforts to achieve greater security by focusing solely on disruptive behavior by individual states, rather than the architecture as a whole, have been abject failures. While an inclusive security architecture would serve U.S. interests by helping stabilize the region, the United States must recognize that it cannot impose on others a regional security structure of its own devising. Other nations, inside and outside the region, will have their own ideas. The U.S. cannot take the lead on designing or enforcing a regional security architecture, which must have regional ownership and buy-in to be self-sustaining. Washington can and should, however, support and assist regional powers to establish this architecture and its attendant mechanisms.

A successful security arrangement should consist of more than military postures and the deployment of armaments: It should include arms controls as well as other diplomatic practices, and possibly institutions aimed at enhancing regional security. For the United States to contribute to its establishment and endurance, several adjustments in U.S. policy will be needed.

The U.S. should be a peacemaker, not a belligerent

A major U.S. military presence in the Middle East is not in the interest of the United States. Even a major use of force, as the 1991 Gulf War demonstrated, does not require a permanent, forward-deployed presence. Similarly, such a presence is not needed for deterrence that derives from the threat of a major U.S. military operation. A standing military presence becomes a target for asymmetric attacks and increases the chance of inadvertent clashes with foreign military forces. Such a presence also perpetuates what has become, fairly or unfairly, a despised symbol of U.S. domination that has tainted relations between the United States and the peoples of the region. The range and mobility of the U.S. armed forces are such that most essential military missions in the region can be accomplished at least as effectively with capabilities that are ordinarily kept offshore and even out-of-region.

America's heavy military presence has also caused the U.S. to ensnare itself or otherwise get dragged into the region's many quarrels and rivalries, even though these have no discernible impact on national security. The United States should shape its own participation in Middle Eastern security in ways that do not entangle it in conflicts that are not relevant to core U.S. interests. By becoming a party to the Middle East's conflicts, Washington has unnecessarily expanded its military presence in the region while progressively losing its diplomatic maneuverability.

Rather than establishing a balance, America's military presence has in many ways prevented the region from finding an indigenous balance and consequently contributed to its instability. For instance, U.S. support for its regional friends has tended to disincentivize them from pursuing diplomacy to resolve tensions with neighbors peacefully. Overt U.S. backing of the Saudi regime has often encouraged greater belligerence than when the Saudis have been less sure that the U.S. would intervene on their behalf. The comfort of not having to worry about U.S. opposition has probably made Saudi Arabia more likely to embark on such reckless behavior as its war in Yemen, its imposition of a blockade on Qatar in mid-2017, and its kidnapping of Saad Hariri, the Lebanese prime minister, later that year. When faced with the prospect of going to war alone, the Saudis tend to find ways of reducing the likelihood of conflict. When the attack on Saudi oil facilities at Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019 was followed by a muted response from the Trump administration, the Saudi government opened backchannels to communicate with Iran even though it had repeatedly rejected talks with Tehran on previous occasions.³⁸ The presumption of external support can inflate a country's sense of its own military capacity, skewing its calculation of the consequences of conflict. Moreover, the U.S. military's entanglement in regional disputes has a paralyzing effect, since any move by Washington risks being seen as taking sides among its regional partners.

The ongoing Saudi/UAE-Qatari conflict exemplifies this phenomenon. Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar is the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East. It reportedly houses more than 10,000 U.S. personnel and is capable of accommodating many more.³⁹ It is unclear what missions those 10,000 service members perform and whether they need to be on the ground in Qatar to perform them. The Saudi effort to isolate Qatar, culminating in the continuing blockade, was complicated by the presence of U.S. troops; any significant U.S. withdrawal would therefore risk being seen as an endorsement of Saudi policy. Conversely, the Qatari government has seen the growing U.S. presence on its territory as a sign of U.S. support against Saudi Arabia.

Involvement in internal Gulf quarrels of this kind does not serve U.S. interests. Some U.S. elements at Al Udeid—specifically, the forward headquarters of U.S. Central Command—were formerly at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, from which they exited in 2003 amid signs of how unpopular that presence was with the Saudi public. Yet, U.S. forces were again sent to that same base in Saudi Arabia in 2019 in order to deter Iran.

In other cases, U.S. support for a militarily superior partner has tended to reduce that country's incentives to resolve conflicts and instead opt to safeguard a status quo favorable to its interests but not to regional stability and U.S. interests. As the only state in the region with nuclear weapons and as a highly effective conventional military power in its own right—and with a qualitative edge conferred over many years by the U.S. and effective weapons development and manufacturing capacities—Israel no longer needs the U.S. to guarantee its security. Yet the U.S. sends Israel \$3.8

billion in military aid annually. As of 2019, Israel had received \$142.3 billion from the U.S. since 1949 —significantly more than any other nation.⁴⁰ American military aid is sent regardless of whether Israel tries to resolve the conflict with the Palestinians. By persistently bolstering Israel’s qualitative military edge no matter what direction Israeli policy takes, U.S. assistance as currently structured does not incentivize Israel to pursue compromise, whether with the Palestinians or other neighbors.

Finally, with the U.S. deliberately tipping the regional scale through its military presence, the security it may create for some states often translates into insecurity for others, resulting in less rather than more stability. For instance, persistent U.S. antipathy creates a security dilemma for Iran. U.S. military support for Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE causes Iran to perceive itself as under threat and to respond by trying to enhance its own security, partly by investing in paramilitary groups beyond its borders. Yet such actions are understandably seen as direct threats by regional governments and interpreted as a buildup to war, which prompts Iran’s Arab rivals and Israel further to arm themselves. A less aggressive U.S. military posture within the context of a new, inclusive security architecture can reduce Iran’s sense of insecurity and offset its incentives to engage in activities that its neighbors take to be threatening, which has fueled a cycle of weapons purchases. While such purchases benefit arms manufacturers, they undermine regional stability and American security.

An essential measure to get out of this vicious cycle is for the United States to clearly distinguish its own interests from the objectives—which are never identical with its own—of regional states commonly labeled as U.S. “partners.” Apart from Turkey, the United States has no mutual security treaties obliging it to side automatically with any one state that is party to a conflict in this region. Adopting such security treaties at this point would be a significant mistake that would not contribute to stability in the region, but rather risk further entangling the U.S. in unwinnable wars and associated reputational damage in the Middle East. The label “ally” (rather than “partner”) is often misapplied to Middle Eastern states and has tended to be a function of domestic U.S. politics and historical legacies rather than the existence of actual alliance treaties or realistic assessments of who is helping the United States today or legitimately needs its help. This has led to the tendency to regard sticking up for an “ally” as itself a U.S. interest, which it is not. Such an approach has the whole concept of interests and allies backwards.

‘A new security framework for the Middle East cannot be led by the United States... Middle East nations cannot treat it as theirs if others lead it.’

Even in the absence of mutual security treaties, de facto alliances can be a useful part of U.S. statecraft in the Middle East. However, alliances need to be defined not according to pre-affixed labels but instead in terms of whether they advance U.S. interests, above all our interest in a more peaceful Middle East. Therefore, the United States should continue to refrain from making any formal security commitments in the Middle East comparable with the North Atlantic Treaty or its security treaties with Japan and South Korea. The United States does not depend on Middle Eastern states to help defend our own vital security interests.

In rejecting the role of belligerent in the region, the United States should abandon efforts intended to effect regime change. Previous experience has demonstrated that the chaos that results from the fall of a regime, especially one orchestrated externally, serves neither U.S. interests nor the peoples of the region.

The United States should talk to all major actors in the Middle East

The United States has isolated itself in the Middle East. It has become a belligerent in numerous conflicts, it lacks relations with key states, and its preference for economic coercion and military operations has ceded diplomatic maneuverability to other states.

An effective U.S. policy toward the Middle East would entail active engagement with all players in the region, including those regarded as adversaries. Failure to engage inclusively in this way has been one of the principal drawbacks of existing policies and has amounted to exercising statecraft with one hand tied behind one's back. This has left current U.S. policy toward the Middle East less effective than Russia's, which has maximized its influence in the region by dealing freely with players on all sides of regional conflicts. Engagement with adversaries is essential for deescalating tension and resolving outstanding issues in dispute, as well as for expanding U.S. business, cultural, and social ties with countries throughout the region. Given that no bilateral relationship is entirely zero-sum, such engagement is also needed to find common ground for constructive action where interests run parallel.

Iran

Washington's biggest diplomatic blindspot over the past four decades has been toward Iran. With no diplomatic relations or exchanges of embassies, continuous dialogue between the U.S. and Iran was virtually nonexistent until nuclear negotiations commenced in earnest in late 2013. The constructive rapport that had developed between Secretary of State John Kerry and Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif during those talks was lost when Donald Trump entered the White House in 2017 and repudiated the multilateral nuclear accord in 2018. To maximize U.S. diplomatic maneuverability in the Middle East, the United States should seek to normalize relations with Iran.

*'The United States
is well served by a
multipolar balance of
power.'*

Establishing diplomatic relations is neither a gift nor a capitulation to Tehran. Rather, it is a much-needed measure to maximize America's leverage. Washington should comply with U.N. Resolution 2231, which endorsed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, or JCPOA, as the nuclear agreement is formally known. This agreement blocked all possible paths to an Iranian nuclear weapon. It also demonstrated that Washington and Tehran can resolve differences diplomatically. The prevailing policy of isolating Iran lacks a strategic rationale, fuels tensions in the Middle East, and brings the United States and Iran closer to military confrontation. U.S. interests are better served by addressing its concerns with Iranian policies through diplomacy, blocking Iran's paths to a nuclear weapon through the JCPOA, and ending Iran's isolation while encouraging regional states to resolve their conflicts with Iran through dialogue, thereby facilitating a reduced American military footprint in the region.

Iraq

U.S.–Iran tensions and the lack of communication between Washington and Tehran have negatively impacted numerous other countries in the region, most significantly Iraq. The Trump administration has erred in pressuring Iraq to reject any relationship with Iran. It is a mistake to insist that Baghdad cut trade and commercial ties and to threaten it with sanctions. Were Iraq to follow such a course, it would weaken the Iraqi economy, result in an energy shortfall, and make it even harder for Baghdad to overcome the deficit in public services that led to prolonged street protests in 2019. It has been a further mistake to insist on the disbandment of Iranian-supported popular militia units, which were an important part of the fight against ISIS and which Baghdad continues to rely upon for internal security. Such demands by the United States, albeit these are supported by some Iraqi political factions, incur resentment in other parts of Iraq's political landscape and are likely to be counterproductive, as they cause Iraq to rely more on Iran as a counterweight to U.S. pressure.

Iraq should not be turned into one more front in an obsessive campaign to isolate and weaken Iran. In fact, under improved circumstances, Iraq could be one of the players acting as a mediator between the U.S. and Iran and between Iran and Saudi Arabia. The United States also should be a constructive partner in helping Iraq to extend what progress it has made toward prosperity and domestic peace. This should include economic development assistance and aid in the reconstruction of infrastructure. It also should include security assistance aimed at professionalizing Iraqi security forces and improving their ability to carry most of the burden of countering extremist threats, including what remains of ISIS.

Moreover, the U.S. must respect Iraq's preference, as expressed following the Soleimani assassination earlier this year, not to have a U.S. military presence in Iraq. Nor is it in America's interest to keep forces in Iraq indefinitely. This means withdrawing according to a schedule that is developed jointly with the government in Baghdad, is consistent with Iraqi abilities to contend with a possible resurgence of ISIS, and is unencumbered by any U.S. attempt to add other rationales for maintaining U.S. forces in Iraq. Rather than expanding Iranian influence in Iraq, the withdrawal of American troops will likely provide more room for Iraqi nationalism to unite Iraqi political factions against an outsized Iranian influence in the country. Currently, America's military presence tempers this natural desire for greater independence from Iran, as many political factions view Iran as a necessary partner to balance and contain America's military influence in Iraq.

Syria

The same is true for Syria. With extensive external involvement in the Syrian war, multilateral diplomacy must play a major role in reaching a final resolution to the conflict. Unfortunately, the United States has been largely missing in action in such diplomacy; the talks that matter most have so far been a trilateral affair involving Iran, Russia, and Turkey. The United States can contribute to bringing Syria closer to peace and stability through full diplomatic engagement with the other players. This can occur in multiple fora, including those convened under United Nations' auspices as well as the periodic talks among Turkey, Russia, and Iran.

The regime of Bashar al-Assad, with the help of its allies, has essentially won the long civil war. Despite Assad's abuse of his population, this central fact does not represent a new setback for core U.S. interests. The Assads have been in power in Damascus for half a century, since Bashar's father, Hafez, led a coup in 1970. Syria's neighbors and the United States have lived with this regime ever since. Bashar al-Assad's principal foreign allies, Russia and Iran, have significantly greater stakes in Syria than the United States does. For both Moscow and Tehran, Syria represents their longest and strongest relationship with an Arab state. These relationships have existed for decades, and therefore their continuation does not change the strategic landscape for the United States. Any effort to leverage a U.S. presence in Syria into inducing Russia or Iran to weaken their standing in Syria is bound to fail, simply because the stakes for each side are different. Neither Russia nor Iran wants to see the indefinite continuation of the war, which has been a drain on their resources. As competitors for influence in Damascus, these two also exert checks on each other, exemplifying the utility of multipolar dynamics in the Middle East.

The original reason for the dispatch of U.S. troops to Syria is obsolete. The Trump administration continuously cites new rationales to keep troops in Syria, from rolling back Iran to bogging down Russia to protecting Syrian oil fields from the Syrian state.⁴¹ This is mission creep. So is keeping U.S. troops in Syria indefinitely to aid Kurdish or other allies in the fight against ISIS long after that fight has ended. A few thousand U.S. troops will not be effective in reducing Iranian influence; even if they were, that is insufficient justification for maintaining U.S. soldiers open-endedly in a foreign war zone. Their presence sustains both the risk of direct combat between U.S. forces and other players in Syria—including Turkey, Iran, and Russia as well as the Syrian regime—and the resentment that has accompanied U.S. forces elsewhere in the Middle East and has heightened anti-U.S. extremism. The withdrawal of U.S. troops from Syria that President Trump announced in 2018 should be completed.



Admiral Ali Saeed Al Shehri speaks with soldiers during mixed maritime exercise with U.S. Navy and Saudi Royal Navy, at Saudi Military Port, Ras Al Ghar, Eastern Province, in Jubail, Saudi Arabia February 26, 2020. REUTERS/Hamad I Mohammed

Yemen

Yemen is another country where the U.S. is entangled in a conflict with little strategic bearing on U.S. national interests, unnecessarily making itself party to the conflict instead of using its diplomatic leverage to help end the bloodshed. The U.S. intervention in Yemen's civil war via its support for the Saudi air attacks reflects its outdated enmity with Iran, which also has prevented the United States from playing a constructive role in resolving the conflict. Moreover, Washington's instinctive inclination to side with Saudi Arabia has contributed to additional violence and instability. If the United States were to withdraw all material and rhetorical support for Saudi Arabia, the Saudi leadership would be compelled to end the war and opt for a political solution. By not withdrawing support, the U.S. is partly responsible for the devastation of the Yemeni people, currently suffering through war, a blockade, and rampant disease, including a growing outbreak of Covid-19.⁴² Ending support for the war is the will of Congress, as expressed in a joint resolution passed last year (but vetoed by President Trump).

As in other regional conflicts, such as those in Syria and Libya, the involvement of external actors exacerbates the war in Yemen by warping the incentives of local factions, enabling them to continue beyond the point at which their own resources and will to fight would be depleted. The internationally recognized government receives support from the Saudis, while the Southern Transitional Council is backed by the UAE (despite the UAE's decision to withdraw militarily from the conflict in fall 2019 in the face of reputational costs). The Houthis receive support from Iran, although the conflict predates Iranian involvement, and in general Iran has succeeded in bleeding Saudi Arabia without having to invest significant resources. Meanwhile, the chaos of war enables al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, AQAP, to operate freely.⁴³

A U.S. foreign policy grounded in diplomacy and empowered to engage all regional actors would allow the U.S. to help foster a multilateral settlement that would stop the flow of external military funding that perpetuates the war in Yemen. Without foreign backing, the domestic parties to the conflict would have greater incentives to reach a mutually agreeable political settlement. In the meantime, the U.S. should impose a moratorium on arms sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE until they cut off all support for parties to the Yemen conflict.

Nonstate actors

The United States' self-imposed limitations on its diplomatic prerogatives has not been restricted to states: It has also extended to American engagement or nonengagement with nonstate actors. The U.S. must engage with some relevant nonstate actors with significant followings, given the undemocratic nature of most Middle Eastern states. Islamist groups and movements in particular are powerful at the societal level, yet the U.S. has tended either to ignore these groups or sometimes to subscribe to the tendency of some Middle Eastern regimes to label such groups "extremists" or "terrorists." Given the long-term trajectory of many societies in the region, the governments with which the U.S. has long cultivated friendships are unlikely to survive forever. Establishing communication with influential opposition groups is not only common diplomatic practice and prudent from a forward-looking perspective; it also signals to authoritarian governments that they cannot continue to repress such movements with impunity.

No more cartes blanches for partners

No less important is the effect that broader U.S. engagement would have on the incentives and behavior of states the U.S. regards as friends or partners. When such states learn to take U.S. support for granted and believe the United States will never withdraw its political support, they perceive a green light for whatever destructive actions they might be inclined to take, no matter how contrary to U.S. interests. The leadership of Saudi Arabia exhibited this attitude regarding the murder two years ago of Jamal Khashoggi, the dissident Saudi journalist, in Istanbul.⁴⁴ In Israel, where the well-reinforced assumption that unquestioning U.S. support will continue no matter what Israel does, it has long been evident that this has encouraged destructive Israeli practices such as the continued building of Israeli settlements in the Occupied Territories. A U.S. strategy that involves engagement with all sides would reproduce at the regional level the successful logic that Richard Nixon and Henry Kissinger employed at the great-power level in their triangular diplomacy with the Soviet Union and China. By dealing actively with one participant in a rivalry, Washington gains leverage in its dealings with the other rival.⁴⁵



Reda Mahrous, the mother of jailed Egyptian photojournalist Mahmoud Abu Zeid, also known as "Shawkan", poses with a photo in his room, ahead of his verdict, in Cairo, Egypt July 23, 2018. Mahmoud Abu Zeid was arrested during a 2013 sit-in of Muslim Brotherhood supporters. Picture taken July 23, 2018. REUTERS/Amr Abdallah Dalsh

Finally, in pursuit of greater stability, the U.S. should incentivize regional mediation rather than block it. Showing support for states that have historically served as mediators, such as Kuwait and Oman, can demonstrate the utility of working to lower or eliminate tensions. By the same token, reducing support for states like Saudi Arabia and the UAE when they pursue aggressive foreign policies will help discourage reckless action.

Protect human rights

U.S. policy should reflect strong concern for human and political rights in the Middle East, while recognizing that intervention cannot be the principal means of achieving respect for those rights. No domestic political model can be entirely transferred from one society to another, and the United States should long ago have learned from its own experience that liberal democracy cannot be conferred through the barrel of a gun.⁴⁶ The importance of human and political rights can be emphasized more productively in the course of managing bilateral relationships, as well as in public pronouncements regarding the region as a whole. As a starting point, the U.S. must model its own respect for human rights (at home and abroad), multilateral cooperation, and observance of international law treaties regulating human rights and armed conflict.

Such emphasis is not only right simply from a moral perspective; it is also in large measure congruent with U.S. interests. Denial of human rights has contributed to instability and violent extremism emanating from the Middle East. Research on the primary drivers of violent extremism often highlights the role of human rights abuses by state institutions.⁴⁷ To be effective, America's approach to human rights must be consistent and not selective. To condemn some states while giving others a pass demeans the concept of human rights, exposes the United States to charges of hypocrisy, and weakens America's moral voice both in the region and beyond.

'Unconditional U.S. support for regional security partners has tended to disincentivize them from diplomatic efforts to peacefully resolve tensions with neighbors.'

Such a rights-respecting policy would include making military assistance to Israel—for decades (and still) the largest recipient of such assistance—conditional on Israel ending its routine violation of human rights in the Occupied Palestinian Territories. These offenses include ongoing settlement expansion in the West Bank and East Jerusalem and attacks in Gaza that have failed to fulfill obligations to protect civilians. Israel is a nuclear and military superpower in the region that does not need American military aid to defend itself. As such, it should arguably not be a candidate for military aid in the first place. To the extent military aid should be provided to Middle Eastern states, priority should be given to those at risk of becoming failed states. If Washington decides to continue aid to Israel, it should be conditioned on changes to Israeli policies that advance stability and U.S. interests.

Similar conditionality should be applied to Egypt, the second-largest recipient of U.S. military assistance, where the Trump administration has routinely waived human rights requirements imposed by Congress, as it did again in September 2019, to maintain arms transfers despite Cairo's record of brutal domestic repression. As earlier noted, conditionality should also cover military sales to Saudi Arabia and the UAE until they end their laws-of-war violations in Yemen and systematic domestic abuses. And it should cover overt and covert arms transfers to armed groups in Syria or elsewhere that have been implicated in rights abuses. In general, the U.S. should significantly reduce its arms sales to the region, as an overabundance of weapons has had a demonstrably destabilizing effect and undermined U.S. interests, notwithstanding the considerable profits accruing to private arms manufacturers.

Partner nations that have long taken Washington's support for granted will complain about a more flexible U.S. policy that puts U.S. interests first. They may threaten to turn to China, Russia, or others for arms and support. But Middle East partners already play that game. Israel's relationship with Russia has deepened in recent years, for example, and Saudi Arabia purchases arms from China partly in an effort to leverage access to even more advanced military hardware from the United States.⁴⁸ The attractions of partnership with the United States will remain for such states, but the playing field between clients and patrons will no longer face the U.S. with such perils.

A consistent rights-respecting policy embedded in a broader approach to the region, one that emphasizes core U.S. interests, problem-solving diplomacy, and engagement with all relevant regional actors, would have consequences for how the U.S. has traditionally managed the Israel-Palestine conflict. The shortcomings of the U.S.-led peace process have become increasingly evident, all the more so as the Trump administration has abandoned any pretense of serving as an honest broker. It is a process that ill-serves U.S. interests as well as Israel's long-term well-being, let alone its failure to help the Palestinians. It is a process that has undermined rather than advanced the prospects of stability and of a rights-respecting outcome to that conflict.

In pursuit of U.S. interests and a consistent policy protecting human rights, and in conditioning U.S. military assistance to Israel and recalibrating elements of this bilateral relationship, the U.S. should make clear that in supporting diplomacy and peace it is neither insisting on a particular outcome to the conflict nor abandoning its interest. The U.S. would no longer provide international cover for Israeli human rights violations nor invest in a failed peace

process that provides such cover and that lacks reasonable parameters, backed by international law, to which both parties are committed. The U.S. should publicly state and actively demonstrate its support for solutions anchored in international norms and laws that guarantee security, dignity, freedom, and equality for both peoples—whether this is based on two sovereign independent states, a single political entity with full rights for all its inhabitants, or a confederation.

One primary advantage of an international-law standard is that it is not political or selective. Such an approach will also make justified criticism of Iranian or Syrian human rights abuses more effective and credible. To this end, Congress should expand the so-called Leahy Laws banning assistance to police, border, and military units credibly implicated in serious abuses to more broadly cover abusive actions by implicated governments. This would enhance American security by limiting U.S. exposure as a target for terrorists seeking revenge for abuses committed by American partner governments.⁴⁹

Situating human rights engagements within a multilateral process not dominated by the United States is also more likely to be effective and avoid the appearance of politicization. The decades-long U.S. approach of selective human rights interventions in the region has undermined its credibility and invites skepticism about even the most principled solo U.S. efforts to press for human rights reforms. Indeed, Washington's self-image as the global cop for democracy and humanity simply does not align with the reality of its conduct and how it is perceived in the region. For example, the U.S. record of aiding Saudi Arabia as it commits war crimes in Yemen, or assisting armed groups in Syria responsible for attacks on minority communities, kidnappings, and indiscriminate attacks, undermines the credibility of any U.S.-led process to bring the Syrian (and Russian and Iranian) governments to task for their alleged atrocities in Syria. Similarly, militarily supporting and politically shielding Israel and Egypt despite their deeply distressing rights records—including, e.g., killing hundreds of protesters in Gaza and Cairo respectively—opens the United States' current posture of support for Iranian protesters facing government brutality to disbelief if not outright mockery.⁵⁰

Targeted financial sanctions—travel bans and asset freezes—against officials implicated in human rights abuses, whether under the Magnitsky Act or by other legal means, could be a legitimate tool to distance the United States from association with abusers, but these must not appear to be political tools, such that they do not disproportionately focus on U.S. foes and ignore the offenses of friends.

More important, a multilateral approach to human rights questions avoids the costly disasters of Washington's ill-fated unilateral actions, for which there is scant evidence of any meaningful benefits. Joint efforts present a better opportunity for lasting improvements, with a better process for ongoing, mutual accountability. And engaging diplomatically in a multilateral process would in itself enhance international cooperation and strengthen global norms; it would also make the United States a more reliable, respected, and effective actor in the region.

The Middle East needs an OSCE, not a NATO

A durable regional order must rest upon a power balance that organically reflects Middle Eastern realities rather than an artificial balance created by the presence of extraregional militaries. The U.S. must cease its maintenance of a manufactured power balance predicated on a permanent U.S. military presence and the perception that it is

'The U.S. should center policy decisions across the region on their direct implications for U.S. interests, rigorously defined. Bilateral relations should be adjusted to this regionwide policy, not the other way around.'



German Foreign Minister Frank Walter Steinmeier, High Representative of the European Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy Federica Mogherini, Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif, British Foreign Secretary Philip Hammond and U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry (L-R) arrive for a family picture after the last plenary session at the United Nations building in Vienna, Austria July 14, 2015. Iran and six major world powers reached a nuclear deal, capping more than a decade of on-off negotiations with an agreement that could potentially transform the Middle East. REUTERS/Leonhard Foeger

always willing to intervene. As the past quarter-century of American military dominance in the Middle East has demonstrated, interference at this level is ultimately destabilizing. Absent this destabilizing effect, there would be greater space for advancing negotiated and diplomatic solutions to various conflicts in the region, notably in the Saudi–Iran and Israel–Palestine cases.

If there is an organizational model suited to the Middle East, it is not NATO, as has occasionally been suggested, but rather the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe, the OSCE, or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations, ASEAN. Both of these structures embody the objectives of cooperation rather than confrontation, the building of mutual trust and confidence, and an expansive view of security that includes the rights of individuals as well as security between states. The United States has a direct role in the OSCE and a longtime relationship with ASEAN but is not expected to lead or drive their agendas. The establishment of an OSCE–like organization for the broader Middle East will take time. However, it is feasible to make measurable movement toward this goal, especially if at the outset it is limited to the Persian Gulf region. This would be particularly beneficial to the United States, mindful of the risk of war with Iran and tensions among Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, and Tehran. Most immediately, enhanced maritime confidence–building measures and greater efforts to avoid incidents at sea in the Persian Gulf are feasible and highly desirable. This could involve the formalization of procedures currently limited to ship–to–ship communications. The longer–term aspiration should be to expand such an organization to encompass the entire Middle East.

Various forms of arms control are also feasible and can be useful in calming specific fears and precluding arms races. They can also serve as building blocks in erecting the comprehensive security framework we advocate here. Regionwide arms control offers important advantages over narrower efforts, including requirements imposed on individual countries. The willingness of any one country to accept restrictions is greatly enhanced by the assurance that the same restrictions will apply to all its neighbors, including its adversaries.

A Middle East zone designated free of nuclear weapons has been discussed periodically in the past and is worthy of focused support from the United States. Israel has hitherto resisted this concept, as it would be required to relinquish its nuclear arsenal. Yet an agreement on such a zone would be a major advance in the cause of nonproliferation, would remove the most dangerous form of potential conflict escalation, and would improve the prospects for further regional arms control agreements.

Ballistic missiles constitute another possible area for fruitful arms control, one wherein a regionwide approach is critical, as demonstrated by the failure of unrealistic demands on Iran to give up missiles. Iran, which has been the target of ballistic missile attacks, will never agree to a unilateral disarmament measure so long as it faces regional rivals able to project power with missiles and with air power superior to its own. Missiles will not be eliminated altogether from the Middle East, but an agreement on range limitations would be a positive contribution to regional security while also serving U.S. and European interests in reducing any threat that missile batteries in the region can be aimed at targets outside it.

'A significant reduction of U.S. troops in the Middle East will help instill greater restraint and reduce the tendency toward destabilizing behavior among partner governments.'

It is important to recognize that a new regional security architecture is not likely to be achieved if the United States and other states continue to pour arms into the region. In 2018, Saudi Arabia was the world's largest importer of arms and second-highest spender on weapons purchases per capita, after Israel.⁵¹ Other top spenders included Kuwait and Oman. Saudi Arabia is estimated to have spent \$78.4 billion on military acquisitions in 2019, the third-highest after the U.S. and China.⁵² Seventy percent of Saudi weapons purchases were from the U.S., which remains the world's largest arms exporter. Weapons purchases across the Middle East increased by 87 percent between 2009–2013 and 2014–2018.⁵³ As long as extraregional powers further distort the region's natural balance by flooding it with weaponry, the Middle East will remain fraught with instability. For the United States, this means a significant reduction of arms sales, primarily to Saudi Arabia, Israel, and the UAE. No durable agreement will be reached if some states have to restrict their military capabilities while others enjoy near-unlimited access to advanced American weaponry.

As earlier asserted, a new security framework for the Middle East cannot be led by the United States. To achieve legitimacy and durability, buy-in and ownership by regional actors are imperatives. Middle East nations cannot treat it as theirs if others lead it. While the region's readiness for such a diplomatic endeavor is unclear, continued U.S. military domination of the Middle East will only further delay the needed readiness. The United States, in tandem with the permanent members of the U.N. Security Council as well as key stakeholders such as Germany, India, and Japan, can and should play crucial supporting roles. Moreover, the U.S. can play a positive role by accepting China and Russia in the diplomatic process—to ensure their buy-in and support and also to secure their commitment to reducing arms sales to the region and to prevent the Middle East from indefinitely being an area of security competition among global powers. Even if limitations on arms sales from Russia and China are not achieved, the region's reduced strategic significance means that such an outcome does not constitute a fundamental threat to core American interests. Certainly, the United States undermines its security if it remains militarily present in the region solely for arms manufacturers to profit.

VII. Conclusion

The U.S. military presence in the Middle East is now self-perpetuating. This is partly a matter of bureaucratic inertia. It is also politically difficult to defend drawdowns in the face of simplistic admonitions that the Middle East remains a troubled place requiring the United States to be there in force. To justify a U.S. military presence in terms of force protection, such that the safety of forces already deployed is a rationale for deploying still more forces, is a critically flawed dynamic. Indeed, much of the argument for keeping more rather than fewer U.S. forces in the Middle East has been circular in this fashion, in that the foreign threats that get highlighted are threats to U.S. forces themselves. Finally, there is the hammer-and-nail phenomenon, in which, as long as a powerful hammer in the form of a deployed U.S. military force is available, policymakers will always find nails in need of pounding. Implementing the best possible size and shape of any U.S. military presence in the Middle East will require a concerted effort to counter these tendencies, and not just as an expressed willingness to shift resources and attention to other regions and other problems.

America's military presence and its efforts to achieve domination in the Middle East no longer serve national interests for the simple reason that a major use of military force in that region is not in U.S. interests. The United States should shape its participation in Middle Eastern security in ways that do not entangle it in conflicts that are irrelevant to core U.S. priorities. Yet America's military presence has caused the U.S. either to involve itself unduly in the region or be drawn into many strategically insignificant feuds and disputes. This policy of military domination has made Americans less safe, undermined U.S. standing abroad, and rendered America less prepared to respond to threats at home and to nonmilitary challenges such as pandemics and climate change. Nor has it served the peoples of the region. Much of the instability in the Middle East is the result of foreign involvement—from Afghanistan to Iraq to Libya, Syria, and Yemen.

Military intervention has been extremely costly in terms of blood and treasure as well as strategic advantage. The majority of U.S. foreign spending and military action since 9/11 has been concentrated in the Middle East. As the United States has overextended itself in the Middle East, geopolitical rivals in Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran have reaped the benefits of America's strategic ineptitude. And even when the U.S. is not at war in the Middle East, Asian giants benefit from the American military protecting Middle East oil supplies on which the U.S. is ever less dependent. In summary, both security and economic concerns require a fundamental reorientation of U.S. policy in the Middle East, centered on a significant drawdown of America's military presence in the region.

Such an orientation must begin with a clearer definition of America's interests in the Middle East: protect people in the United States from attacks and facilitate the free flow of global commerce. These objectives are best served by working to enhance peace and security in the region. Neither warrants a major U.S. military presence, let alone American military domination. Instead, Washington should recognize multipolarity as a reality that serves U.S. priorities by precluding regional domination by any other state.

Once the U.S. begins to reduce its military footprint in the region, policymakers must avoid the urge to recommit troops if conflicts arise. The U.S. presence has skewed the balance of power in the Middle East, and it is possible that a reduced American military presence will initially appear destabilizing. However, given the current level of conflict in the region, removing one of the drivers of conflict will ultimately result in a more secure Middle East. Moreover, it is important for the United States to signal clearly its commitment to significantly reducing its military presence regardless of potential stability milestones. Otherwise, countries benefiting from the U.S. presence and protection will be incentivized to destabilize the region to prevent an American drawdown. For these reasons, the U.S. cannot wait for regional conflicts to be resolved before beginning to rightsize its military presence.

Instead, the U.S. must engage with partners in the Middle East to communicate its intention to reduce the scale of its military involvement. The U.S. should immediately begin discussions with regional powers currently hosting U.S. troops to determine a timeline for responsible withdrawal and the contours of continuing relationships that would still permit future U.S. military action, if needed, to stop an aggressor or would-be regional hegemon. The timeline should be five to ten years, allowing regional governments sufficient time to take what measures they consider necessary, including diplomatic engagements with neighbors for the establishment of a new regional security architecture.

A military drawdown from the Middle East does not amount to an abandonment of the region or an end to American engagement. On the contrary, the United States should increase its diplomatic presence and prioritize its role in reducing and/or resolving conflicts as a diplomatic peacemaker. This will not be a popular decision in some Middle Eastern capitals, but it is the course that best serves U.S. interests and regional stability.

VIII. Endnotes

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IX. About the Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft

America “goes not abroad in search of monsters to destroy.” — John Quincy Adams

The foreign policy of the United States has become detached from any defensible conception of U.S. interests and from a decent respect for the rights and dignity of humankind. Political leaders have increasingly deployed the military in a costly, counterproductive, and indiscriminate manner, normalizing war and treating armed dominance as an end in itself.

Moreover, much of the foreign policy community in Washington has succumbed to intellectual lethargy and dysfunction. It suppresses or avoids serious debate and fails to hold policymakers and commentators accountable for disastrous policies. It has forfeited the confidence of the American public. The result is a foreign policy that undermines American interests and tramples on American values while sacrificing the stores of influence that the United States had earned.

The Quincy Institute is an action-oriented think tank whose intent is to lay the foundation for a new foreign policy centered on diplomatic engagement and military restraint. The current, rare moment presents a once-in-a-generation opportunity to bring together like-minded progressives and conservatives and set U.S. foreign policy on a sensible and humane footing. Our intent is to seize this opportunity while it lies before us. Our country’s current circumstances demand it.



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