



# **When Less Is More**

## **Rethinking U.S. Military Strategy and Posture in the Middle East**

Ilan Goldenberg, Becca Wasser, Elisa Catalano Ewers, and Lilly Blumenthal

## About the Authors



**Ilan Goldenberg** is a senior fellow and director of the Middle East Security Program at CNAS. Prior to CNAS, he served as the chief of staff to the Special Envoy for Israeli-Palestinian Negotiations at the U.S. Department of State. From 2012 to 2013, Goldenberg served as a senior professional staff member on

the Senate Foreign Relations Committee covering Middle East issues. From 2009 to 2012, he served first as a special advisor on the Middle East and then as the Iran team chief in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.



**Becca Wasser** is a fellow with the Defense Program at CNAS. Her research areas include wargaming, force posture and management, and U.S. defense strategy. Prior to joining CNAS, Wasser was a senior policy analyst at the RAND Corporation. In this role, she designed and

led wargames for the U.S. Department of Defense and U.S. Army and led research projects exploring critical national security and defense issues for the Department of Defense, the Army, U.S. Air Force, and the U.S. Department of State. She also served as a liaison to U.S. Army HQDA G-3/5/7.



**Elisa Catalano Ewers** is an adjunct senior fellow with the Middle East Security Program at CNAS, as well as on the adjunct faculty at the Johns Hopkins University School of Advanced International Studies. She served in both the Barack Obama and George W.

Bush administrations, in positions including director for the Middle East and North Africa on the National Security Council; senior policy advisor for the Middle East to the U.S. Ambassador to the United Nations; advisor on the Middle East and counterterrorism to the Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs; chief of staff to the Secretary of State's Special Representatives for Iraq and for South West Asia; and senior advisor embedded with the Department of Defense in Iraq.



**Lilly Blumenthal** was the Joseph S. Nye Jr. intern for the Middle East Security Program at CNAS. She previously interned at the Brookings Institution Center for Middle East Policy, as well as the United Nations Foundation. Additionally, she worked part-time as a research assistant

at the Fletcher School on the Iran-Iraq War Project. She also has conducted independent quantitative and qualitative research as a Tufts Summer Scholar on rentier states in Africa. Blumenthal recently graduated summa cum laude from Tufts University, majoring in international relations and minoring in Hebrew.

## About the Middle East Security Program

The Middle East Security Program conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in the turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability there, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security Program draws on a team with deep government and nongovernment experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.

## About the CNAS Defense Program

Over the past 10 years, CNAS has defined the future of U.S. defense strategy. Building on this legacy, the CNAS Defense team continues to develop high-level concepts and concrete recommendations to ensure U.S. military preeminence into the future and to reverse the erosion of U.S. military advantages vis-à-vis China and, to a lesser extent, Russia. Specific areas of study include concentrating on great-power competition, developing a force structure and innovative operational concepts adapted for this more challenging era, and making hard choices to effect necessary change.

## Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Stacie Pettyjohn, Grant Rumley, and Aaron Stein for their review of this report and the helpful comments they offered. They also would like to thank participants of the two workshops convened for this project. At CNAS, Kaleigh Thomas, Jennie Matuschak, and Sydney Scarlata provided valuable research assistance and contributed initial drafts of parts of the report. Finally, this report would not be possible without the work of Melody Cook, Maura McCarthy, and Emma Swislow, who assisted with the production of this paper. This report was made possible with general support to CNAS.

As a research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity, CNAS maintains strict intellectual independence and sole editorial direction and control over its ideas, projects, publications, events, and other research activities. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues and the content of CNAS publications reflects the views of their authors alone. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. CNAS will not engage in any representational activities or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from non-U.S. sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. The Center publicly acknowledges on its [website](#) annually all donors who contribute.

# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>01</b>	<b>Executive Summary</b>
<b>04</b>	<b>Preface</b>
<b>05</b>	<b>Introduction</b>
<b>06</b>	<b>A Framework for Rethinking U.S. Military Posture in the Middle East</b>
<b>07</b>	<b>U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East</b>
<b>14</b>	<b>U.S. Interests and Objectives in the Middle East</b>
<b>17</b>	<b>Necessary U.S. Military Activities in the Middle East</b>
<b>22</b>	<b>Necessary U.S. Military Forces, Capabilities, and Posture in the Middle East</b>
<b>30</b>	<b>Conclusion</b>

**The United States still has vital interests in the Middle East that require a level of military investment in the region. However, those interests are more limited, and the United States must be willing to accept more risk in the Middle East while also prioritizing non-military tools.**

## **Executive Summary**

**F**or the past 20 years, the U.S. military has invested heavily in the Middle East. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump both attempted to shift assets out of the region and put a greater focus on the Indo-Pacific, but both were drawn back into the Middle East. Now, President Joe Biden again has put an emphasis on the Indo-Pacific, and Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin has emphasized the importance of China as the Department of Defense’s “pacing challenge.” Effectively realizing the new administration’s shift in priority—and avoiding the cycle of drawing forces out of the Middle East only to have new crises pull them back in—requires an assessment of how the United States can continue to protect its core interests in the Middle East with a smaller and smarter footprint.

This paper is the beginning of an effort to answer this question. It methodically outlines what key U.S. interests and objectives should be in the Middle East to develop the appropriate U.S. force posture to meet the security challenges of today and tomorrow. It then describes the key military activities necessary to protect those interests and achieve those objectives, in some cases breaking old assumptions and identifying areas where the United States can afford to accept more risk. Finally, it begins to outline the associated military assets necessary to pursue those activities and ends by identifying areas where the United States can look to alter its presence and activities in the region.

The conclusion of this analysis is that the United States still has vital interests in the Middle East that require a level of military investment in the region. However, those interests are more limited, and the United States must be willing to accept more risk in the Middle East while also prioritizing non-military tools. Given challenges and strategic interests elsewhere in the world and at home, it is time to consider how the United States might approach force posture in the region differently than in the past.

The United States should pursue three central interests in the Middle East:

- Defend and protect the U.S. homeland, American citizens, and U.S. allies from terrorist attacks.
- Stop the proliferation of nuclear weapons.
- Preserve freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce.

From these three interests, the authors derive six objectives for U.S. policy in the Middle East. Four of these objectives have a significant military component:

1. Disrupt and degrade the capabilities of terror networks that have the potential to threaten the United States and its allies.
2. Limit costly military engagement in the Middle East.
3. Prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.
4. Secure key waterways in the region that are essential crossroads for international commerce.

The other two equally important objectives should be achieved through economic and diplomatic means rather than military force. However, these objectives should not be undermined by U.S. military activities:

5. Contain and reduce the level of state-on-state security competition.
6. Encourage and support governance models that are more responsive to the people of the region and provide for greater long-term stability.

Based on these objectives, the United States should revise its activities and posture in the Middle East, move away from a sprawling base network, and instead support lighter-footprint operations more in line with U.S. national interests. Specifically, the United States should:

- Pursue a slimmed-down U.S. ground presence focused on supporting direct counterterrorism operations, logistics, maintenance, and security cooperation, while still ensuring the United States retains the ability to surge in the event of a major conflict with Iran or a non-state actor.
- Shift toward a distributed basing network to reduce risks to U.S. forces and capabilities from missile strikes. This would involve consolidating outdated bases and reducing the footprint at larger bases, while developing new bases or access to host-nation bases outside of missile ranges.

- Reallocate conventional strike and bomber aircraft from the Middle East to other priority regions, while keeping a mix of light Special Operations Forces (SOF) aircraft, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), a small number of fixed-wing aircraft, and aerial refueling capabilities. This would require leveraging opportunities to base assets outside of the Middle East and working across combatant-command seams.
- Narrowly focus U.S. security cooperation efforts to train and professionalize elite partner counterterrorism forces capable of countering Salafi-jihadist extremist groups and Iranian proxies instead of trying to build national militaries.
- Deprioritize the sale or provision of high-end conventional military capabilities requested by partner forces that have little application for counterterrorism operations, or other prioritized operations such as naval monitoring or defensive priorities.
- Increase burden-sharing with allies and partners to monitor and maintain safe passage around sensitive choke points such as the Bab el-Mandeb and the Strait of Hormuz to reduce a reliance on persistent U.S. naval presence.
- Avoid large conventional deployments as tools to deter Iranian proxy attacks except in the case of a major contingency.

Importantly, this paper focuses almost entirely on the Middle East and not nearby Central Asia. That being said, the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan will have implications for U.S. posture in the Middle East and the over-the-horizon requirements that forces based in the region may have to support in Afghanistan. None of those requirements fundamentally alter the basic recommendations of this report, since the activities and capabilities required to fulfill the counterterrorism mission in Afghanistan will be similar to those necessary in the Middle East. What they may alter is the precise number of troops and locations of U.S. military forces that should be based in the region. The scope of this report does not offer that level of detail; rather, it provides a first-order set of recommendations to alter U.S. posture in the Middle East, shown in Table 1. Further examination is needed to inform more detailed recommendations as to the right mix and locations of U.S. military forces and capabilities.

TABLE 1: U.S. MIDDLE EAST POSTURE DOS AND DON'TS

Do	Don't
 Maintain a slimmed-down U.S. presence that emphasizes forces and capabilities required to achieve U.S. objectives while retaining the ability to surge in case of a major contingency with Iran or a non-state actor.	 Maintain an outdated posture emphasizing a large basing network that reflects previous operations or high-end contingencies that may be unlikely to occur.
 Revise the basing architecture to transition some bases to host nations and consolidate the U.S. footprint while distributing assets outside of threatened geography.	 Keep the current large network of bases that are more vulnerable to missile strikes.
 Maintain a smaller mix of aircraft emphasizing SOF assets, UAVs, and some conventional strike aircraft for counterterrorism operations and deterring Iran's pursuit of nuclear weapons in the region, while leveraging assets located in other combatant commands.	 Position strike aircraft, bombers, and UAVs required for a range of scenarios in the Middle East in theater.
 Focus security cooperation with Middle Eastern partners on training elite counterterrorism forces.	 Focus security cooperation with Middle Eastern partners on arms sales and building national militaries in America's image.
 Counter and deter Iranian proxies with a combination of security cooperation for high-end counterterrorism forces and some capacity to conduct U.S. strikes targeted at these groups.	 Attempt to deter Iranian proxy attacks through large conventional demonstrations of force.
 Conduct maritime patrols with European, Asian, and Middle Eastern partners, especially around sensitive choke points in the Middle East.	 Continue to maintain a near-perpetual carrier strike group presence in the CENTCOM area of responsibility.



## Preface

In a CNAS commentary titled “Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East” published in July 2020, Ilan Goldenberg and Kaleigh Thomas laid out a framework for a sustainable, limited, steady state approach to the Middle East that manages America’s limited interests in the region.<sup>1</sup> This approach proposes that core U.S. interests in the Middle East are preventing terror attacks on the U.S. homeland or key U.S. allies and preventing the spread of nuclear weapons across the region. It also acknowledges other traditional U.S. interests, such as protecting and securing global oil supplies and defending Israel, but argues that they are less significant than in the past, given the nature of today’s global oil market and Israel’s increasing military strength.

This framework highlights the changing dynamics of the region’s civil wars over the past 15 years. These conflicts originated, in part, from the lack of political and economic opportunities in this poorly governed region. External actors intervened in these conflicts in an effort to advance their own interests and to compete vis-à-vis their regional competitors. Proxy wars have exacerbated the threat of terrorism by creating new safe havens for extremist groups but also further fueling state-on-state competition. These conditions, in turn, develop a dangerous environment for potential nuclear proliferation.

To address these concerns, CNAS recommended that the United States pursue a new U.S. approach to the Middle East based on three central and mutually reinforcing pillars:

- Pursue pragmatic diplomacy based on de-escalation, not on regime change or overly militarized solutions.
- Rethink U.S. security and economic assistance, investing more in people rather than in governments.
- Reduce U.S. conventional military presence in the region and pursue a realistic and more cost-efficient “by, with, and through” approach to counter irregular warfare.

CNAS has since authored a series of papers outlining in greater detail each of these lines of effort. In August 2020, the Middle East Security Program released “Reengaging Iran,” which outlined an alternative diplomatic strategy for mitigating tensions in the region.<sup>2</sup> In June 2021, CNAS released “A People First U.S. Assistance Strategy for the Middle East” outlining the second pillar of the recommended strategy.<sup>3</sup> This paper examines in greater detail the third pillar of the approach described above and centers on concrete recommendations for realigning U.S. military presence in the Middle East while maintaining the force necessary to protect U.S. core interests.

### ADDITIONAL READING MATERIALS

July 2020 | *Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East*

August 2020 | *Reengaging Iran*

June 2021 | *A People First U.S. Assistance Strategy for the Middle East*

## Introduction

**F**or the past 20 years, U.S. policy has been militarily overinvested in conflicts in the Middle East. Presidents Barack Obama and Donald Trump both attempted but ultimately failed to adjust this approach in the region, and now President Joe Biden, like his predecessors, has committed to shifting focus to the Indo-Pacific region and other new challenges of the 21st century.<sup>4</sup> But actualizing shifts in strategic focus—particularly from one region to another—requires plans not just for withdrawing forces and prioritizing challenges in the Indo-Pacific, but also coherent alternative strategies for how to manage the challenges of the Middle East and protect U.S. interests with a smaller U.S. military investment in the region. Both President Obama and President Trump, for different reasons, were confronted with policy decisions that prevented a change in approach to the region—Obama after the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq and the rise of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS); Trump because of his decision to leave the Iran nuclear agreement and escalate tensions with Iran.<sup>5</sup>

### **Both President Obama and President Trump, for different reasons, were confronted with policy decisions that prevented a change in approach to the region.**

Today, the Biden administration has emphasized that an increasingly aggressive and autocratic China is the main challenge to current and future U.S. security. At the same time, the administration acknowledges the threats posed by other nation-states, such as a revanchist Russia and regional aggressors like Iran and North Korea, as well as violent extremist and terrorist organizations. Issues that traditionally have fallen outside of the domain of “hard” security, such as climate change and biothreats, also have taken on new importance.<sup>6</sup> But in an era of constrained resources, the administration will be unable to meet this expanded array of challenges without making hard choices about the prioritization of threats—and the forces and resources required to meet those challenges.<sup>7</sup>

The Biden administration has made it clear that it seeks to “right-size” U.S. military presence in the Middle East and shift focus away from a region that has tied up U.S. military bandwidth to better meet domestic and global security challenges.<sup>8</sup> It also has called for a global force posture review, which is currently

### **How will the Biden administration actually “right-size” U.S. posture in the Middle East in practical terms?**

under way and will strongly consider revisions to U.S. force posture in the Middle East.<sup>9</sup> In the administration’s current logic, U.S. defense activities and posture in the Middle East are the bill payer to fund the renewed shift to the Indo-Pacific to focus on the China challenge.<sup>10</sup> In theory, altering U.S. presence in the Middle East would free up forces and capabilities, making them available for use in the Indo-Pacific. Additional cost savings born from changing U.S. posture in the region—if any—could be reallocated to fund activities related to the Biden administration’s new definition of security. More so, reductions in military activities in the Middle East translate into bandwidth to make investments in military readiness and modernization intended to improve the efficacy of the force for future fights. Already, the administration has withdrawn the U.S. military from Afghanistan, effectively ending the twenty-year conflict, in the hopes of producing some cost and readiness savings.

While this logic appears sound, several questions arise: How will the Biden administration actually “right-size” U.S. posture in the Middle East in practical terms? How can the administration ensure it does not fall to the same patterns that plagued predecessors’ attempts to change U.S. military presence in the region? What should a new U.S. presence in the Middle East look like? And how will an altered U.S. military presence ensure U.S. security and interests and meet security commitments?

To answer these questions, the authors built a framework to analyze U.S. military presence and activities in the Middle East with the aim of determining how the Biden administration should revise its regional force posture to ensure U.S. interests. This framework builds off earlier research advocating for a sustainable approach to the Middle East that manages America’s evolving and more limited interests in the region.<sup>11</sup>



## A Framework for Rethinking U.S. Military Posture in the Middle East

**A**merica's military presence and posture in the Middle East has not always advanced U.S. strategy or served to support its core interests. Indeed, successive conflicts in the Middle East and subsequent stabilization operations have been viewed in hindsight by many as a distraction to U.S. defense strategy and the goals of individual administrations. For instance, despite the Trump administration's insistence on withdrawing U.S. forces from the Middle East, forces and capabilities were augmented significantly during tensions with Iran as part of the maximum pressure campaign.<sup>12</sup> More recently, the Biden administration has undertaken limited strikes against Iranian proxy groups in Iraq and Syria, testing the White House's discipline to remain focused on its stated strategy that prioritizes domestic issues and the China challenge.<sup>13</sup> This suggests that there is a disconnect between stated U.S. strategic interests, and the means the country uses to implement its strategy to support those interests. Military posture is one reflection of that implementation.

This report defines posture broadly, referring to the size, location, types, and capabilities of forward military forces; the actions and activities these forces undertake; and the facilities, legal arrangements, and relationships that undergird them.<sup>14</sup> Conversely, it defines the Middle East more narrowly to encompass the 14 countries located in the Levant and the Gulf region, stretching from Egypt in the west to Iran in the east. It

purposefully excludes North Africa (with the exception of Egypt) since it is not a region that has been a major driver of U.S. posture and military operations. We also excluded other countries that fall within the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR), such as Afghanistan and Central Asia, because that would entail a broader discussion of U.S. operations in Afghanistan that is outside the scope of this paper. That does not mean that basing options outside of this definition, such as bases in the Horn of Africa or the Eastern Mediterranean, are ignored; rather, we treat these in our discussion of how Washington may revise posture in the Middle East to be more commensurate with its strategic value in light of U.S. interests. It also does not mean ignoring the reality that some capabilities may be postured in the Middle East to support operations in those arenas (e.g., Libya and Afghanistan).

To rethink the connection between strategy and posture, the authors developed a framework to better identify the linkages between strategy, activities, and capabilities. This reflects a "strategies-to-task" approach that links means to ends.<sup>15</sup> The framework was informed by the stated objective of the ongoing U.S. global force posture review, which seeks to better link U.S. national interests to its global military footprint, and by earlier CNAS research.<sup>16</sup> It seeks to identify U.S. interests and link these to particular military activities that, in turn, would help identify the forces and capabilities required to achieve these specific tasks.<sup>17</sup> Figure 1 illustrates this framework.

**FIGURE 1: A FRAMEWORK FOR DEVELOPING A BETTER U.S. FORCE POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST**



The report begins with the position that the U.S. interests that have long undergirded U.S. presence and activities in the Middle East are outdated. This has created a status quo in which U.S. presence and activities no longer are linked directly to higher objectives; when they are linked to objectives and interests, they are often interests that no longer hold the same relevance in the current operating environment. There are some interests that are still salient and there are specific military activities that could better help ensure these interests. But these represent a small portion of current posture. With a better understanding of the activities that buttress core U.S. interests and objectives, we can better identify the U.S. military forces and capabilities required to achieve these missions.

The end state for U.S. military posture should not be a complete withdrawal of U.S. presence in the Middle East, which is an unreasonable and unsound approach. Rather, a significant revision to the current U.S. military footprint is needed. This posture will support fewer

**The end state for U.S. military posture should not be a complete withdrawal of U.S. presence in the Middle East, which is an unreasonable and unsound approach. Rather, a significant revision to the current U.S. military footprint is needed.**

activities and aim to tie up less resources, all with the goal of more directly tying U.S. military posture to supporting U.S. interests commensurate with the region's strategic importance.

This report first describes the historical landscape of U.S. posture in the Middle East to explain how it has evolved over time, and highlights the disconnect between U.S. force presence and strategy. Next, it rethinks the link between strategy and posture. It examines the core U.S. interests in the Middle East that have undergirded U.S. presence to determine how these have changed over time and identifies the U.S. interests that are still of relevance today. It identifies specific military activities that are needed to ensure these interests, and maps military forces and capabilities to these activities. The report concludes with concrete recommendations for reducing U.S. military presence in the Middle East while maintaining the force necessary to protect core U.S. interests.

## U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

The genesis of today's U.S. military presence in the Middle East arguably emerged during World War II. Allied military operations and new technology increased the need for new sources of oil, leading to the development of a quid pro quo between Middle Eastern states and the United States that would drive U.S. involvement in the region for decades to come. This quid pro quo was U.S. security assurances in return for access to oil.<sup>18</sup> A minimal initial presence was required to fulfill this deal, and U.S. military presence in the region remained small throughout much of the Cold War. But the U.S. military footprint began to grow after the 1980 Carter Doctrine, which articulated a U.S. security commitment to the Gulf states in response to the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and in the wake of attacks on oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq War in the mid-1980s.<sup>19</sup> The need to contain Iraqi aggression following the first Gulf War was predicated on a larger continuous presence located at bases in the Gulf, which formed the roots of the current U.S. posture in the region. Some of these permanent bases were then expanded significantly in the years after the attacks of September 11, 2001.

The Middle East has featured heavily in major U.S. military campaigns and operations over the past 20 years. U.S. forces have engaged in several active military campaigns that have taken place in or comprised operations launched from the Middle East, including Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan (2001–2021), Operation Iraqi Freedom (2003–2011), and Operation Inherent Resolve to counter ISIS (2014 to the present). The expansive constellation of a variety of bases in the Middle East—not all of which are solely U.S. bases, but rather joint bases or bases under host-nation control—have swelled in size as these campaigns have reinforced the need for operational hubs. These campaigns have required a large degree of U.S. military bandwidth and policy focus, as well as financial investments. Since 9/11, Congress has appropriated approximately \$1.55 trillion in overseas contingency operations discretionary funding alone to fund military operations within the CENTCOM AOR. This figure does not account for the true cost of U.S. military operations in the Middle East, as operations and maintenance costs and other costs that cover U.S. military installations and personnel abroad are found in the Defense Department's base budget. The actual costs of U.S. posture in the Middle East, therefore, are unknown.

There are other ways to measure and understand posture. Posture encompasses many elements, ranging from the size and type of forces to type and location of facilities to legal arrangement and permissions that dictate how these forces may operate. However, the physical manifestations of posture—chiefly the bases and facilities, and the size of U.S. forces—are the most commonly appreciated elements of posture. Both elements have evolved and varied over time, making shifts in basing and deployments critical to understanding the current U.S. posture in the Middle East.

Identifying a comprehensive number of forces in the region is almost impossible. Therefore, the report aggregates data from a number of sources to get as close to a full picture as is available publicly. Throughout this section, we rely mainly on Defense Manpower Data Center information provided by the U.S. government. This data is not a true representation of U.S. military presence as it does not count military forces on temporary deployment orders, nor does it detail the number of U.S. contractors, in addition to other issues in compilation.

The Gulf War provided the imprimatur for a buildup of U.S. presence and associated infrastructure in the Gulf region, the legacy of which impacts U.S. posture and

basing architecture today. Following the conflict, several Gulf states entered into cooperative agreements with the United States to retain U.S. forces on their territory as a tripwire intended to deter further Iraqi aggression.<sup>20</sup> New bases, such as al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, were established during this period, while access to and expansion of existing U.S. and host bases were granted in places such as Bahrain and Saudi Arabia. Several of these bases also served as hubs for post-Gulf War military activities related to Operations Northern and Southern Watch.<sup>21</sup> As a result, U.S. military presence became more visible in the region, despite considerable public opposition to U.S. presence throughout the Middle East. In June 2001, preceding the 9/11 attacks, the United States had approximately 26,000 troops in the CENTCOM region, the majority of whom were stationed in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia.<sup>22</sup>

Prior to the 9/11 attacks, President Bush campaigned on avoiding small unnecessary wars, but the 9/11 attacks, the subsequent decision to launch the “Global War on Terror,” and the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan upended this promise.<sup>23</sup> At the onset of the Iraq War in 2003, U.S. forces expanded forward basing and deployment of military personnel in the region. The United



*A U.S. soldier provides rear security during a civil affairs mission during Operation Iraqi Freedom. For the past 20 years, the United States has maintained a large military presence in the Middle East. (Stocktrek Images via Getty Images)*



States withdrew from the Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia and shifted its Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC) to al-Udeid Air Base in Qatar, which became the center of U.S. air operations in the region, including Afghanistan.<sup>24</sup> Unsurprisingly, U.S. military presence in the Middle East steadily rose during this period. In April 2003, the United States deployed approximately 285,000 troops to serve in Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF), an estimated 149,000 of whom actually invaded Iraq.<sup>25</sup> The U.S. naval operations for OIF were coordinated from Bahrain, increasing the wartime footprint there.<sup>26</sup> Kuwait served as CENTCOM's "major logistics base for the U.S. and Coalition operations in Iraq . . . providing up to 60 percent of its territory for coalition use."<sup>27</sup> By the end of the Bush presidency in December 2008, approximately 294,000 U.S. military personnel were deployed to the region, most supporting the conflict in Iraq.<sup>28</sup> When considering contractor and other support personnel during this period, the numbers increase exponentially. For instance, in December 2008, the Department of Defense employed approximately 148,000 national, foreign, and host country contractors in Iraq and around 72,000 in Afghanistan.<sup>29</sup>

President Obama campaigned on ending the Iraq War and therefore sought to reduce U.S. military troop presence in the region. This included a reduction of U.S. troops in Iraq, as well as amending the U.S. military footprint both in Iraq and elsewhere in the region. By the end of 2011, nearly all U.S. combat forces had withdrawn from Iraq and the United States had closed a number of forward operating bases and smaller facilities in the country.<sup>30</sup> Yet the constellations of bases largely clustered in the Gulf remained active, despite the United States no longer supporting ongoing operations in Iraq (although air operations for Afghanistan continued to be coordinated from al-Udeid.) In 2013, the U.S. military footprint consisted of more than 35,000 military personnel "in and immediately around" the Gulf,<sup>31</sup> including 10,000 forward-deployed ground forces.<sup>32</sup>

The rise of ISIS, as well as the far-reaching videos of ISIS personnel executing U.S. citizens, led the United States to reengage militarily in the summer of 2014 with eventually 5,000 U.S. forces being deployed to Iraq and 500 to Syria.<sup>33</sup> In the fight against ISIS, U.S. forces relied predominantly on airpower and adopted a "by, with, and through" approach to the conflict, whereby local partners and proxies fronted the lines instead of U.S. forces.<sup>34</sup> While this kept the number of U.S. boots on the ground low, it required a fair number of support personnel and assets spread throughout Bahrain, Iraq, Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

The decision to use airpower and limit U.S. ground forces in the fight against ISIS also had implications for U.S. basing and access. While the United States leveraged existing airbases like al-Udeid and al-Dhafra in the UAE, it also reestablished its presence in Iraq and expanded its presence at Muwaffaq Salti Air Base (MSAB) in Jordan.<sup>35</sup> Once U.S. special operations forces began operating in Syria, the United States established garrisons such as al-Tanf on the border between Iraq and Syria.<sup>36</sup> Though the administration succeeded in lowering troop levels in the Middle East, the campaign against ISIS dominated the administration's national security agenda and required disproportionate amounts of time, capital, and continued military focus.

Like Presidents Bush and Obama, President Trump took office with an expressed desire to shift away from the Middle East. The 2018 National Defense Strategy elevated "strategic competition" with Beijing and Moscow over other objectives—including the Middle East. As such, the Trump administration sought to reallocate capabilities and associated forces from the CENTCOM AOR.<sup>37</sup> As operations against ISIS wore on, the Trump administration further altered basing architecture and troop levels in Syria, standing at approximately 1,700 in December of 2017<sup>38</sup> and dropping to 800 in early 2020.<sup>39</sup> The United States continued to expand al-Udeid with Qatar underwriting the construction costs of expansion.<sup>40</sup>

Growing tensions with Iran from the spring of 2019 to early 2020 complicated plans to further reduce U.S. military posture in the Middle East.<sup>41</sup> In the spring of 2019, the United States significantly increased the



On July 6, 2015, U.S. President Barack Obama (right) and Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter (center) sit with members of the president's national security team at a meeting concerning ISIS. Senior leaders spend a disproportionate amount of time dealing with terrorist threats. (Drew Angerer/Pool/Getty Images)



Following the drone strike on General Qasem Soleimani on January 5, 2020, people hold Soleimani's portrait while protesting outside of the U.S. Consulate in Istanbul. Escalation with Iran in 2019 and 2020 caused the Trump administration to reverse course and expand the U.S. force presence in the Middle East after drawing down U.S. forces in an effort to focus on great-power competition. (Chris McGrath/Getty Images)

deployment of assets and personnel to the Middle East, a year after it withdrew from the Iran nuclear agreement and adopted a “maximum pressure” campaign on Iran. Between May and October 2019, the Defense Department deployed about 14,000 additional troops and associated military capabilities to the Gulf region.<sup>42</sup> In the same year, the United States expanded MSAB in Jordan, out of range of the Iranian missile threat that surrounds U.S. bases in the Gulf.<sup>43</sup> The Trump administration attempted to consolidate U.S. facilities by closing Qatari structures deemed operationally irrelevant and moving the assets to Jordan.<sup>44</sup> Additionally, the United States returned to Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia amid tensions with Iran, with Saudi Arabia agreeing to pay for some associated construction costs.<sup>45</sup> In January 2020, tensions further escalated with the killing of Iranian Quds Force Commander General Qasem Soleimani. The Department of Defense responded by deploying an additional 3,500 troops to the region, reportedly raising U.S. military presence in the region to approximately 60,000–80,000.<sup>46</sup>

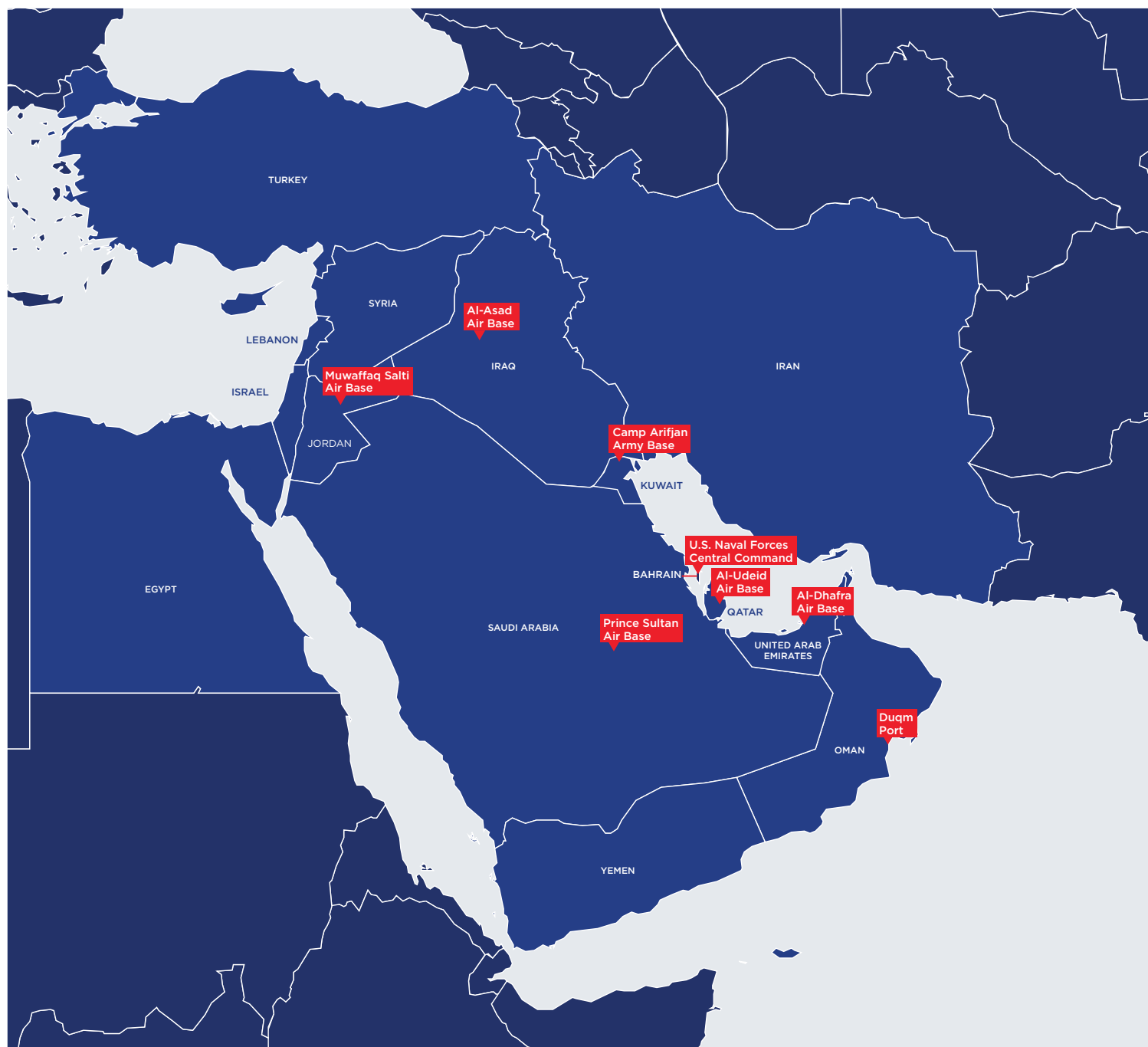
U.S. military presence in the Middle East also is buttressed by other bases located in proximity to the region, such as those in Turkey and Djibouti. For instance, Incirlik Air Base in Turkey played a key role in the fight against

ISIS, and in 2019, the United States announced an expansion of the base.<sup>47</sup> Meanwhile, Camp Lemonnier in Djibouti has been a hub for drone campaigns that target terrorist organizations such as al Qaeda.<sup>48</sup> Given their locations outside the Middle East, these bases are not a key component of our analysis, but they are essential to understanding how U.S. interests can be supported after a strategic alignment of U.S. force posture in the region.

U.S. posture currently is changing under the Biden administration. U.S. troops have been withdrawn from Afghanistan, which will have knock-on effects for the U.S. forces located in the Gulf that support this operation or could be called on as an “over-the-horizon” force.<sup>49</sup> Additionally, the administration recently shuttered Area Support Group-Qatar as well as three U.S. installations in Qatar: Camp As Sayliyah-Main, Camp As Sayliyah-South, and ammunition supply point Falcon.<sup>50</sup> As of June 2021, U.S. troop presence was approximately 40,000.<sup>51</sup> These forces and facilities aim to fulfill peacetime and operational requirements, ranging from security cooperation activities to active military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. More so, these bases, and the U.S. personnel who serve on them, act as a constant reminder of the long-standing U.S. security guarantee necessary to reassure regional partners.

## SUMMARY OF U.S. POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST<sup>52</sup>

These select U.S. bases in the Middle East do not represent the full U.S. basing network in the region, but rather key facilities discussed within this report.





### Saudi Arabia

*Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB).* The United States had access to PSAB during the first Gulf War, and from 1996 to 2003, where it served as the hub for Operation Southern Watch and hosted the Combined Air Operations Center. The United States regained access to PSAB in 2019 amid tension with Iran and has expanded its footprint since then.

### United Arab Emirates

*Al-Dhafra Air Base.* This base serves as the headquarters of the Emirati Western Air Command. It currently hosts the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing and previously hosted Kingpin, U.S. Air Forces Central, and CENTCOM's command and control squadron. Al-Dhafra also hosts French air force presence.

### Kuwait

*Camp Arifjan.* Kuwait hosts the U.S. Army's forward headquarters in the Middle East, which serves as a training ground, staging hub, and logistical support for regional operations. It houses Army pre-position stock, or critical equipment needed for a high-end ground contingency in the Middle East. Camp Arifjan was an essential base during the Iraq War.

### Oman

*Duqm Port.* Oman grants the United States access to Duqm Port, 500 kilometers from the Strait of Hormuz. The access arrangement for the port and associated facilities was brokered in 2019.

### Bahrain

*Naval Support Activity Bahrain.* Bahrain hosts the headquarters of the U.S. 5th Fleet and U.S. Naval Forces Central Command. The 5th Fleet is responsible for U.S. naval forces in the Arabian Sea, the Red Sea, and the Persian Gulf. It also hosts the Combined Maritime Forces, a multinational maritime partnership involving regional and extra-regional participating nations.

### Qatar

*Al-Udeid Air Base.* Qatar hosts the largest U.S. military base in the Middle East, includes the forward headquarters of CENTCOM and the CAOC, which shifted to al-Udeid from PSAB in 2003. Al-Udeid has expanded significantly over the past few years to more comfortably accommodate U.S. forces.

### Jordan

*Muwaffaq Salti Air Base (MSAB).* This is a Jordanian air base that hosts U.S., Belgian, and Dutch forces. U.S. operations at MSAB increased during the fight against ISIS, and the base has expanded significantly as it has become a hub for U.S. air operations in the region.

### Iraq

*Al-Asad Air Base.* Since the end of Operation Iraqi Freedom, the United States has not had permanent facilities in Iraq. Today, the United States is primarily located at al-Asad Air Base, where troops support the Iraqi government's fight against ISIS through training programs.

## THE CASE FOR AND AGAINST U.S. PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The robust U.S. military posture over the past 20 years has come with a number of strategic and operational benefits. There are three primary reasons for U.S. overseas bases. First, bases and U.S. military presence have helped build and maintain relationships with key global partners. This presence helps provide reassurance and has been essential to deterring adversaries from pursuing large-scale or conventional attacks. Second, overseas bases provide the United States the ability to conduct operations well beyond its borders. This also includes responding to emerging crises. For the past 30 years, a significant number of U.S. military operations have been in the Middle East. Lastly, U.S. overseas bases provide critical mobility hubs that enable the United States to project power globally.<sup>53</sup> The Middle East has served as a power projection hub for U.S. operations in Afghanistan and is likely poised to continue this role for “over-the-horizon” operations after the withdrawal of U.S. forces. This report primarily focuses on the second rationale for U.S. overseas presence—the ability to conduct operations in the Middle East—and examines a revised U.S. military posture that retains the ability to operate and surge, if needed.

However, U.S. military presence also has come with a number of downsides that must be considered when weighing America’s long-term military posture in the region. These include:

**Financial and diversionary costs:** Any major posture investment and deployment made to the Middle East comes with the opportunity cost of not deploying it to other critical theaters such as Europe or the Indo-Pacific. This is exacerbated by the fact that most U.S. forces in the region are on temporary rotations rather than permanently stationed there. Thus, for each unit overseas, the service needs approximately two more in the United States that are at various states of readiness tying up a larger percentage of the total force. Moreover, rotating forces multiple times a year drives up the actual dollar cost because of the high costs associated with each unit moving its own equipment back and forth between the United States and the Middle East.

**Rallying cry for extremists:** Another downside of U.S. military presence and intervention is that it has acted at times as a motivating factor for extremist groups to target the United States. The most famous example is how the U.S. intervention to remove Saddam Hussein from Kuwait and the subsequent long-term U.S. military presence in Saudi Arabia was a rallying cry for al Qaeda and one of the reasons Osama Bin Laden targeted the United States.<sup>54</sup> U.S. presence also can trigger a backlash from local populations who sometimes oppose such a presence, creating a more fertile ground for extremists and higher levels of anti-Americanism.

**Creating targets for adversaries:** A third downside associated with a large visible presence is the number of potential targets it creates for adversaries. U.S. military bases have long been bases for proxy and terrorist attacks including the Marine barracks attack in Lebanon in 1983, the Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996, and more recently attacks by Iranian-supported proxy groups in Iraq on U.S. bases and forces. Moreover, the improved accuracy that Iran’s ballistic missile program has demonstrated in recent years, including the 2019 attacks on Saudi oil facilities and the attack on al-Asad air base in retaliation for the killing of Qasem Soleimani, demonstrate how a significant U.S. military presence in large bases within the range of highly accurate Iranian missiles creates a vulnerability for the United States in both peacetime and in crisis.

**Creating dependency and leverage for host countries:** Increased U.S. presence indeed does result in greater U.S. influence and operational flexibility. However, it often becomes an end unto itself creating a U.S. dependency on the host nation and providing that host nation with greater leverage in its bilateral relationship with the United States outside of the narrower military aspect of the relationship. For example, U.S. dependence on its military bases in the Gulf States certainly has played a role in the United States deprioritizing good governance and human rights in the bilateral relationship for fear of losing access.

## U.S. Interests and Objectives in the Middle East

**T**he fluctuating U.S. force levels in the Middle East, coupled with the ballooning military architecture in the region, have not been linked to broader U.S. strategic objectives over the past decade or more. The near-constant pace of operations in the region since the Iraq War has tied up strategic attention and resources, resulting in policymakers and defense leaders adhering to a status quo that may be based on outdated assumptions. The disproportionate attention has commandeered resources that should be targeted toward more strategic, high-priority areas.<sup>55</sup>

There is a growing consensus among foreign policy experts and politicians in Washington that the United States needs to redefine its strategic interests in the Middle East.<sup>56</sup> U.S. leaders need to look at what the most critical and salient U.S. interests in the region are today, as opposed to the interests of yesterday, because the global strategic and operating environment has changed drastically since these interests were last seriously reevaluated in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks. Some of these changes have occurred because the prosecution of the counterterrorism mission over the past 20 years has changed the threat landscape; others have shifted out of priority because more pressing strategic interests outside the region have displaced them. Without this reassessment a mismatch between strategy and posture will continue to exist, and the Middle East will draw inordinate attention and resources, impeding America's ability both to reduce defense spending and achieve other strategic objectives.

This report next identifies the key U.S. interests in the Middle East that are relevant today and links interests to objectives, which define how to protect those interests.

### Key U.S. Interests in the Middle East

U.S. policy in the Middle East should be based on three primary interests: (1) protecting the homeland from terrorist attacks; (2) preventing the spread of nuclear weapons; and (3) preserving freedom of navigation and free flow of commerce. These are not the only interests the United States has in the Middle East, but they are the most important.

#### DEFEND AND PROTECT THE U.S. HOMELAND, AMERICAN CITIZENS, AND U.S. ALLIES FROM TERRORIST ATTACKS

While the United States has not had a major terrorist attack on its soil since the 9/11 attacks, and the number of

people who die every year from terrorism is objectively small, the protection of the U.S. homeland from terrorist or foreign attack remains the top U.S. interest.<sup>57</sup> The psychological trauma and political impact of major attacks on the U.S. homeland have had a massive effect in American society and U.S. policy responses. Indeed, 9/11 ultimately resulted in the United States investing more than a trillion dollars into prolonged conflicts in the Middle East.<sup>58</sup> Terrorism emanating from the Middle East is not unique; rather, we recognize that terrorism is a domestic and global issue.<sup>59</sup> However, as compared with some other parts of the world, historically the Middle East has had conditions that have resulted in more terrorist networks interested in attacking the United States.<sup>60</sup>

Preventing terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland is the most effective way to strengthen U.S. security and deal with this problem. Second on the list of priorities should be working with and protecting America's treaty allies from terrorist attacks. And third on the list of priorities should be stopping attacks on U.S. partners in the region and across the globe who are not treaty allies. Importantly, this interest should not be misinterpreted as pursuit of the elimination of all terrorist groups; its focus is developing an enduring effort to contain and manage the threat and recognizing that the factors that contribute to the rise and risk of terrorism are complicated, long-term issues that cannot easily be addressed by military means alone.

#### STOP THE PROLIFERATION OF NUCLEAR WEAPONS

Halting the proliferation of nuclear weapons has long been a global U.S. strategic interest. Indeed, the Biden administration's interim national security strategic guidance describes global nuclear weapons proliferation as an "existential" threat due to their destructive capacity.<sup>61</sup> As the number of new nuclear states rises and non-state actors' access to these weapons grows, the likelihood of miscalculation or intensified use also increases. The most likely new nuclear state in the Middle East is Iran. Thus far, it has chosen not to build a nuclear weapon even as it has conducted research to give itself the option in the future. If Iran were to make the political decision to obtain nuclear weapons and take the steps necessary to obtain a bomb, it could lead to a highly unstable nuclear balance with Israel, increasing the possibility of nuclear exchange.<sup>62</sup> It also could destabilize the security balance in the region and lead other countries, such as Saudi Arabia, to pursue their own nuclear weapons. In a region with an abundance of armed non-state actors, weak governments,

and tense relations, proliferation becomes an increased risk. Moreover, there is the possibility that the security of Iran's own nuclear umbrella could embolden Tehran to significantly increase its destabilizing strategies in the region, to include providing more advanced support for various proxy groups in places like Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen.

#### **PRESERVE FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION AND THE FREE FLOW OF COMMERCE**

Since the Carter Doctrine, the U.S. emphasis on the free flow of commerce in the Middle East was synonymous with getting energy resources out of the region. However, while these resources have become less critical globally (as will be discussed below), the region is still critical for the free flow of commerce because of its location connecting Europe and the Indo-Pacific. The United States should continue to prioritize preserving freedom of navigation in the Middle East, especially through key choke points that are crucial to global commerce, including the Suez Canal, Bab el-Mandeb, the Arabian Sea, and the Strait of Hormuz. Peaceful waters are critical for facilitating global trade, especially between Europe and the Indo-Pacific, with roughly 12 percent of global trade moving through the Suez Canal alone.<sup>63</sup> As detailed in the Biden administration's interim National Security Strategy, "[The United States] will continue to defend access to the global commons, including freedom of navigation and overflight rights, under international law."<sup>64</sup> Indeed, freedom of navigation is paramount to preserving the system of commerce that has been essential to the global economic order that the United States has long supported.

#### **Secondary or Decreasing U.S. Interests in the Middle East**

Other interests, such as ensuring the security of Israel, securing global oil supplies, and countering China and Russia in the region, still matter. However, these are secondary interests, and should be prioritized as such by the United States as it allocates finite resources to achieve its objectives.

#### **ENSURE ISRAEL'S SECURITY**

Israel's security has long been a primary U.S. interest. Israel remains a critical partner for the United States in the Middle East given common U.S. and Israeli interests as well as Israeli intelligence and military capabilities, which are highly beneficial to the United States. Given Israel's increasing military and economic prowess today, it is far more capable of defending itself and benefits far

less from a large U.S. military presence in the Middle East than it may have in the past. Along with its large Fiscal Year 2020 military budget of \$22 billion,<sup>65</sup> Israel's military consists of approximately 743,000 personnel—all of whom can mobilize within 96 hours. Moreover, the IDF has one of the world's most capable national air defense systems, a highly capable air force, and a small yet advanced navy.<sup>66</sup>

#### **SECURE THE FREE FLOW OF OIL**

It is important also to recognize that the free flow of oil is less critical to U.S. interests today than it was in the past and is no longer a primary driver of U.S. interests in the Middle East. Today, the United States is less dependent on oil given the rise in its own production, while China and other countries in the Indo-Pacific are increasingly dependent on Middle Eastern oil.<sup>67</sup> Additionally, the global oil market is relatively resilient, with oil prices less impacted by events in the Middle East. Indeed, the 2019 Iranian missile attack on Abqaiq and Khurais, Saudi Arabia's single most important oil facility, only resulted in a small temporary bump in oil prices as opposed to an expected massive spike.<sup>68</sup> This single data point suggests the assumptions about the energy markets have changed as tensions and dynamics in the region have also changed. In addition, most major oil producers have greater interest in continuing to sell oil, rather than use oil as an economic weapon.

#### **MAINTAIN INFLUENCE AND COUNTER COMPETITORS**

Maintaining U.S. influence in the Middle East to counter other great powers dates back to U.S. efforts to contain the spread of communism and Soviet influence during the Cold War. Now, as the United States refocuses its attention to strategic competition with near-peer adversaries China and Russia, some argue the United States must stay in the Middle East to perpetuate U.S. hegemony in the region and to counter these competitors.<sup>69</sup> Assuming U.S. military presence is the most significant factor in this competition may be misaligned with the realities of the region today. Simply maintaining U.S. military dominance in the Middle East should not be an interest unto itself, given resource limitations and other interests. Great-power competition should not serve as the sole driver for U.S. overinvestment in the Middle East.

It is important to caveat that there are some Chinese and Russian actions and investments in the Middle East that may threaten a key U.S. interest and therefore may merit a U.S. response. For example, Russia's intervention in Syria provides it with the capacity to sow instability

that could lead to terror attacks on the United States and its European allies. Similarly, Chinese investment in the Israeli or other regional technology sectors, which could lead to China extracting such technology for its purposes or exporting its authoritarian model of governance in parts of the Middle East, is also an issue that requires U.S. attention. Also at issue are examples of China selling arms to U.S. partners and gaining access to U.S. military technology, or purchasing sole ports rights to deep-water ports ostensibly for commercial means, but that could be used in a potential future conflict. These examples represent real challenges to U.S. interests. However, not all Chinese and Russian activities and investments require a U.S. response, particularly a military response, and indeed none of these examples necessarily requires a major U.S. military investment. Overall, the United States will need to evaluate these issues on a case-by-case basis.

### U.S. Objectives

Based on the interests outlined above, this report outlines six objectives for U.S. policy. The first four objectives have a significant military component. The final two objectives, which focus on better governance and regional de-escalation, are achieved almost entirely through diplomacy, assistance, and economic statecraft.<sup>70</sup> However, these objectives still need to be taken into account when devising a U.S. military strategy for the region to ensure that military activities do not inadvertently undermine them.

*Objective 1: Disrupt and degrade the capabilities of terror networks that have the potential to threaten the United States and its allies.*

Given the importance of preventing terrorist attacks on the United States and its allies, one immediate objective is to simply disrupt and degrade these networks where they already exist, either unilaterally or preferably in cooperation with allied or regional partners.

*Objective 2: Limit costly military engagement in the Middle East.*

While the United States certainly has important interests in the Middle East, none of those interests are existential enough to supersede U.S. interests elsewhere. They are not as vital as preserving the international global system in the face of near-peer competitor China pursuing an authoritarian form of

**A top U.S. objective in the region must be to use military power in the Middle East only when necessary and to avoid costly and lengthy military entanglements that stretch U.S. resources that could be more strategically deployed elsewhere.**

governance. They also may not be as vital as some of the long-term global transnational challenges the United States faces, such as climate change and global health. Therefore, a top U.S. objective in the region must be to use military power in the Middle East only when necessary and to avoid costly and lengthy military entanglements that stretch U.S. resources that could be more strategically deployed elsewhere. This objective must be accounted for when making any decision about U.S. military deployments and posture in the Middle East.

*Objective 3: Prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.*

A nuclear Iran presents significant challenges for U.S. interests in the Middle East. The United States thus far has primarily used diplomatic engagement and economic pressure to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon. However, military deterrence also has been part of this equation, and the United States must maintain the capacity to destroy as much of Iran's nuclear capability as possible, both to create a credible deterrent and to have that option available in a future contingency.

*Objective 4: Secure key waterways in the region that are essential crossroads for international commerce.*

Preserving this objective, especially with regards to facilitating global trade, requires managing a number of challenges in the Middle East. These include the challenge posed by Iran's naval capabilities, particularly as they pertain to the Strait of Hormuz, and offensive mining by Iran and its proxy groups in the Persian Gulf, the Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb, and the Arabian Sea. These waterways are part of the global commons, so this objective should not fall to the United States alone or even primarily, as many U.S. allies and partners also have an interest in preserving freedom of navigation in and the free flow of commerce through the Middle East.

*Objective 5: Encourage and support governance models that are more responsive to the people of the region and that also provide greater long-term stability.*

According to Freedom House, the Middle East is the least free region in the world.<sup>71</sup> This should not drive the United States to pursue a democratization-and-reform agenda in the Middle East, nor should it fuel interventions. However, this lack of freedom, widespread corruption, and scarcity of economic opportunity create conditions that have knock-on effects, which can threaten many of the key U.S. interests in the region to include protecting the homeland and allies from terrorist attacks. The subsequent regional interventions and competition have exacerbated tensions, and spurred proxy wars by various actors, bringing proliferation risks to the forefront.

Encouraging more stable and responsive governance must continue to be a key objective for the United States in the Middle East. But this objective cannot be achieved primarily through military means, requires economic and diplomatic tools, and also must recognize that the United States has limited capacity to actualize this objective on its own. However, what is critical when developing a U.S. military strategy for the region is that the United States attempts to the extent possible to avoid military approaches that actively undermine this objective.

*Objective 6: Contain and reduce the level of state-on-state security competition, especially when it manifests itself in destabilizing expeditionary military interventions by the region's key actors.*

Another source of instability in the Middle East has been intense state-on-state competition with numerous countries including Iran, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, and Israel, as well as outside actors like Russia, intervening in various conflicts. This competition has dramatically exacerbated the region's civil wars as multiple state and non-state interventions have turned small conflicts into proxy wars and created gaps that have sometimes been filled by terrorist groups. Such rivalries have threatened commercial shipping, freedom of navigation, and global trade. Moreover, this intensified regional competition also has spilled into the nuclear arena. Given the risks state competition poses to U.S. interests, this objective must be factored in as U.S. force presence can act both as an effective deterrent and reassurance mechanism but also sometimes can exacerbate regional competition.<sup>72</sup>

## Necessary U.S. Military Activities in the Middle East

American interests and concomitant objectives in the Middle East must translate into military activities. U.S. troops are currently deployed in support of ongoing military operations against ISIS in Iraq and Syria. They also are deployed under the banner of lesser-known operations such as Operation Spartan Shield.<sup>73</sup> U.S. forces also undertake a range of peacetime activities, ranging from force protection to security cooperation. Many of these activities—in particular security cooperation activities—are intended to build relations with and reassure regional partners. They also serve as a rationale for U.S. presence, which is intended to deter Iran and other actors.

In recent years, the U.S. peacetime footprint in the region has grown. U.S. presence at its own major operating bases remains high based on an expanded range of activities and rate of military exercises. Such presence often has been demanded by partner nations nervous about what they view as fickle U.S. commitments to their security. This raises the question of whether such presence and activities are tied to operational objectives, or merely an unclear strategic goal of reassurance. Instead, U.S. military activities in the Middle East should be more clearly linked to strategic and operational objectives that protect U.S. interests. In turn, understanding the key activities the U.S. military may be called on to execute helps identify the forces and capabilities required to carry out these missions. This is key to right-sizing U.S. force presence and activities and creating a smarter posture in the region that can meet strategic objectives. In this section we outline the key military activities that the United States should continue to conduct in the Middle East.

### Countering Terrorism

Since 9/11, the United States has justified broad and often expensive activities under the auspices of countering terrorism. These efforts have included the deployment of technologically advanced weapons that are not necessarily the most effective tools for countering a low intensity threat. They also have included conducting extensive counterinsurgency operations with large deployments of U.S. personnel or attempting to rebuild and train large militaries in places such as Iraq.<sup>74</sup> Security cooperation efforts intended to build partner capabilities in places such as Saudi Arabia or Egypt often have focused on building general purpose forces and conventional capabilities as opposed to low intensity



warfare, particularly as counterterrorism responsibilities often reside with state security services and other parallel and overlapping praetorian forces. Most of the broad-based security cooperation efforts have emphasized building partner militaries in the U.S. military's likeness, and have failed to produce effective militaries, let alone forces with sufficient counterterrorism capabilities. All, however, have required intense U.S. attention and bandwidth, as well as personnel.

Given the more limited objectives defined under this interest in the previous chapter, U.S. military activities should focus more narrowly on training, advising, and assisting capable partner forces to conduct counterterrorism missions while also maintaining the ability to unilaterally eliminate high value terrorist targets when necessary.

Part of this effort also requires narrowing how to prioritize both foreign military sales and foreign military financing. In many instances, such as in Jordan and Egypt, the United States has provided significant conventional capabilities such as strike aircraft or tanks that are costly, but less relevant to the counterterrorism mission set. These efforts need to be more narrowly scoped and prioritized. In the case of other partners who do not receive security assistance, developing effective counterterrorism capabilities should still remain a priority for U.S. military engagement. As such, the United States may focus on training elite forces within larger partner militaries. These focused efforts to train and equip elite forces already have a track record of success and are critical to countering challenges the United States cares most about.<sup>75</sup>

For example, in Iraq the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), which received direct U.S. support and training from its very inception, remains an effective partner in the fight against the Islamic State, even as other local security agencies are significantly less effective.<sup>76</sup> The CTS was established and nurtured by the United States after the 2003 fall of Saddam Hussein's government and the subsequent U.S. occupation of Iraq. It is considered to be the most able Iraqi military unit and was relied on heavily to counter the ISIS threat, both independently and in conjunction with the U.S.-led coalition.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the Lebanese Maghawir, an elite special forces unit of the Lebanese Armed Forces, has benefited from U.S. training and assistance beginning in 2008. It gained valuable operational experience as part of U.S. efforts to counter ISIS in 2017 and has continued successfully to operate against terrorist threats in Lebanon.<sup>78</sup>



*A U.S. Army trainer watches an Iraqi recruit fire at a military base on April 12, 2015, in Taji, Iraq. Training elite counterterrorism and special operations forces should remain part of the limited mission set the United States pursues in the Middle East. (John Moore/Getty Images)*

There are several important caveats to this approach. First, such efforts will be successful only if a force already has demonstrated a certain level of proficiency and legitimacy on the ground. What this cannot be is an artificial effort to try to create a large army from scratch where little political legitimacy exists—as the United States has tried before in Afghanistan and Iraq. Second, these efforts—like all security cooperation efforts—require long-term American commitment to improving battlefield and high-end capabilities. Third, because the U.S. definition of counterterrorism is often quite different from that of its regional partners, the United States must try, to the greatest extent possible, to prevent the counterterrorism capabilities being developed from being used as a tool of repression. Finally, especially in the case of working with local non-state actors, the aftermath of these conflicts has led to political stasis and the near de facto division of some of these states. However, at the time, those outcomes came at a relatively low cost for the United States, and they may have been better than the alternative of continuing to allow adversaries such as ISIS to hold significant territory from which they could plan and organize attacks.

While U.S. and partner counterterrorism efforts are often focused on non-state threats, state-sponsored terrorism also is a significant challenge. Iran's support for its proxies in the Middle East and its willingness to support terrorism, including in past plots directed at the U.S. homeland, also may require counterterrorism efforts. However, as past plots such as the failed attempt to assassinate the Saudi ambassador at a Washington restaurant have shown, these threats need not be inflated. Iran possesses limited capabilities to conduct such attacks, suggesting that the risk of a significant successful Iranian supported terrorist attack against the U.S. homeland remains low.

Where Iran is much more effective is in conducting proxy attacks on U.S. forces deployed to the Middle East. Low level attacks, particularly with rockets and commercial drones, are easy to pull off and relatively low cost for proxy groups. Such attacks not only threaten the security of U.S. service members, but they also are cost imposing as they require more force protection measures. Given the low cost, high reward nature of such attacks, they are difficult to deter and cannot be countered with major conventional force presence, nor most conventional capabilities. Demonstrations of force such

as carrier strike group or bomber task force deployments are ineffective in deterring proxy attacks.<sup>79</sup> Instead, a more effective tool for countering such attacks is to build up effective partner military forces that will impinge on proxy groups' ability to operate freely. Indeed, the same capability that is required to counter terrorism from non-state extremists in the region—through the training of elite partner forces, as described earlier—is the tool that can be most effective in countering Iran-supported proxy attacks.

### Preventing Iran from Acquiring Nuclear Weapons

Iran's pursuit of a nuclear weapon poses a significant security risk to the United States. Therefore, the United States must be ready to delay, disrupt, and, if necessary, destroy much of Iran's nuclear program.<sup>80</sup> Iran may try to build a nuclear weapon covertly using the knowledge it has accumulated from its known program, which will likely take several years.<sup>81</sup> If detected—and there is a strong likelihood that the United States or one of its allies would detect an Iranian decision to “sneak” to a bomb given the track record of detecting previous covert facilities at Natanz and Fordow—the



On March 30, 2005, Iranian President Mohammad Khatami (center) visits a uranium conversion facility just outside the city of Isfahan. Preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon remains a U.S. priority in the Middle East. (Getty Images)

United States would need to be prepared to act with surgical strikes to destroy much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure. Another possibility is that Iran would use its known existing nuclear scenarios to "dash" to a nuclear weapon. However, this scenario is less likely than a covert move to a nuclear bomb, because the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) and Western intelligence agencies monitoring of Iran's known nuclear facilities act as a deterrent for Iran to not use these facilities to "dash" to a nuclear weapon.

In both of these facilities, there is no way to completely eradicate Iran's nuclear program unless the United States were to eliminate all nuclear know-how and scientists in the country. Any strike on Iran's nuclear program would provide only a temporary delay in the program and may require further strikes, especially as a U.S. attack may harden Iranian resolve to take the program deeper underground and more aggressively pursue nuclear weapons.

### **Holding Iran's nuclear program at risk also creates a credible deterrent today, which may dissuade Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon in the future or give the United States greater leverage in negotiations on Iran's nuclear program.**

However, the purpose of a military capability targeted to the objective of preventing an Iranian nuclear bomb is not just to be able to act in the case Iran chooses to develop to a nuclear weapon. Holding Iran's nuclear program at risk also creates a credible deterrent today, which may dissuade Iran from pursuing a nuclear weapon in the future or give the United States greater leverage in negotiations on Iran's nuclear program. Iran's physical nuclear program is made up of a relatively discrete number of targets and does not require a significant U.S. force posture in the Middle East. Indeed, some elements of such an operation can be stationed in other theaters and be prepared to move quickly into the region in the event of a contingency.

A challenge directly related to Iran's nuclear program is its missile capabilities. In recent years, Iran has sufficiently built up its arsenal of short-, medium-, and long-range ballistic missiles more capable of hitting U.S. bases in the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> Tehran demonstrated

the improvement of these missiles' accuracy during the attack on al-Asad Air Base in January 2020, and the attack on Abqaiq and Khurais in September 2019.<sup>83</sup> Iran could respond to an attack on its nuclear program or another escalatory situation with the United States with a barrage aimed at U.S. personnel and bases in the region as well as Gulf infrastructure, as it did after the killing of Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. Iran was certainly willing to risk killing American forces when launching the missiles at Balad, Iraq, in 2020,<sup>84</sup> but it also took some steps to signal and warn the United States, limiting the possibility of U.S. casualties and avoiding further escalation.<sup>85</sup> As ballistic missile defense systems are low density, high demand assets, they are finite and already overstretched, making it unlikely that the United States could sufficiently cover all its current bases and facilities. This problem is likely to remain, suggesting a rethink of the U.S. basing architecture to reduce the number of potential targets and ensure the survivability of U.S. forces.

### **Ensuring Freedom of Navigation**

The United States should continue to prioritize preserving freedom of navigation in the Middle East, especially through key choke points that are crucial to global commerce. In the Middle East, the United States will need to work with international partners to monitor and secure the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb and access from there to the Indian Ocean, which are vital to global trade. The Strait of Hormuz also remains a key choke point but is less critical to the United States than it once was, as the U.S. reliance on Middle Eastern oil exports decreases and as oil becomes a lesser priority in the overall global economy. Achieving this mission requires working closely with partners and allies as freedom of navigation is a global interest affecting key states in Europe and Asia; the mission involves activities such as freedom-of-navigation operations (FONOPs), maritime patrols, counter-mine measures, and generally maintaining some form of naval presence. The recent Suez Canal blockage caused by the Ever Given highlights how easily such events can occur and the importance of this interest. The incident caused ripple effects in global supply chains for several weeks. While this occurrence was accidental, it illustrates the importance of protecting the free flow of regional waterways from being militarized.<sup>86</sup>

As the fastest maritime route connecting Europe to the Indian and Pacific oceans, the Suez accommodates approximately 12 percent of all goods transported via sea every year.<sup>87</sup> This amounted to 1.2 billion tons of



cargo and 19,000 ships in 2019. The Bab el-Mandeb, connecting the Red Sea with the Gulf of Aden and the Arabian Sea, is the other main choke point in the Middle East on this route. At its narrowest point, the Bab el-Mandeb is 18 miles wide, which limits traffic to two two-mile-wide channels for shipments.<sup>88</sup> The strait sees 50 million tons of agricultural products pass through each year, as well as 6.2 million barrels of oil a day.<sup>89</sup> The Bab el-Mandeb has been threatened in recent years with the ongoing conflict in Yemen, which has led to naval incidents between the Houthis—supported and armed by Iran—and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. In 2016, a U.S. navy ship was targeted with a failed missile strike by Houthi forces in Yemen, resulting in a U.S. retaliation that destroyed three coastal radar sites. At the same time, there have been a number of attacks by Israel on Iranian ships and Iranian responses on Israeli shipping both in the Red Sea and around the Gulf of Oman. Instability in the Horn of Africa also has implications for passage through the Red Sea. In the future, instability, civil war, and lawlessness in some of the countries surrounding the Bab el-Mandeb may continue to contribute to threats such as piracy or active attacks by some of the combatants in these conflicts such as the Houthis in Yemen.

A greater U.S. maritime presence is unlikely to stop such events from occurring. However, these events do require U.S. strategic attention and emphasis on working with global partners on multilateral FONOPs in and around the Red Sea and Bab el-Mandeb to ensure there is no major threat to global trade. In this vein, the United States may choose to focus not only on routine FONOPs, but also undertake security cooperation activities intended to promote interoperability and enhance burden sharing.

In addition to the Bab el Mandeb and Suez Canal, the United States still has an interest in the Strait of Hormuz, even though this choke point has become less important as U.S. dependence on oil has decreased. Iran has a suite of naval systems capable of limiting the flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz, including antiship cruise missiles, submarines, fast small boats, and mines.<sup>90</sup> It has tested some of these same approaches in the waterways around Yemen. The U.S. posture in the region should include assets to monitor the Gulf, deter Iranian naval provocations that interfere with international shipping, counter Iranian actions, and reassure regional partners. However, it is necessary to rethink assumptions about how Iran might choose to act in the maritime domain in response to a U.S. strike on its nuclear program or another escalatory situation in order to determine how much risk the United States can assume.



People watch as the container ship *Ever Given* is refloated, unblocking the Suez Canal on March 29, 2021, in Suez, Egypt. The incident impeded the free flow of commerce and had significant implications for international trade. (Mahmoud Khaled/Getty Images)

An extreme event is an Iranian attempt to shut down all flow of traffic in the Strait of Hormuz. However, as of this writing, Iran exports most of its oil and other goods through the strait, so such a move would inflict great economic self-harm—a decision the cost of which the Iranian regime would have to calculate. Moreover, shutting down the strait, which would broadly threaten Middle Eastern oil supplies so critical to Chinese interests, would be likely to unify almost the entire international community in opposition to Iranian actions. For these reasons, the closure of the strait should be viewed as a “high-impact, low likelihood” event and should not drive U.S. naval posture in the region.

**The U.S. posture in the region should include assets to monitor the Gulf, deter Iranian naval provocations that interfere with international shipping, counter Iranian actions, and reassure regional partners.**

Based on previous patterns of behavior, Iran instead may seek to mine or attack individual ships as a tool to gain leverage and apply pressure on the United States and the Gulf states. This was precisely the approach used in 2019 and 2020 when Iran responded to the Trump administration’s maximum pressure campaign with a series of mining attacks meant to signal to its neighbors and to the United States that if they insisted on targeting Iran’s oil exports with sanctions, then Iran had the capacity to interfere with Gulf oil shipping. Deterring these types of actions requires some level of persistent U.S. naval presence working closely with other international partners to monitor Iranian activities at sensitive choke points. But it also is important to remember that these actions by Iran had only a small and temporary impact on global oil prices.<sup>91</sup> Thus, the bottom line when it comes to dealing with Iranian naval threats is that the United States still needs to be prepared to monitor and respond, but it can afford to take on more risk than it has in the past.

## **Necessary U.S. Military Forces, Capabilities, and Posture in the Middle East**

**H**aving assessed the most pressing and important U.S. military activities in the Middle East—countering terrorism, preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and ensuring freedom of navigation—we now identify the military capabilities required to fulfill these missions as well as implications for U.S. force posture. This, in turn, provides a better understanding of the forces and capabilities genuinely required in the Middle East and enables us to make recommendations about how U.S. posture may be changed in the region.

This research focuses on a subset of military activities and capabilities, which almost always require enablers. Such enablers include logistics, maintenance, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets, and contribute to the U.S. footprint. Some of these enablers are included in the discussion of capabilities related to the key missions, but are not emphasized in each section.

Similarly, even with reductions in U.S. posture in the Middle East, the United States will maintain some form of presence. While this report identifies some areas in which Washington might reduce its forces and capabilities, and how it might choose to revise its posture, it also emphasizes that the United States will need to retain the ability to surge in case of a major contingency.<sup>92</sup> There are instances where revisions to the U.S. footprint require the retention of capabilities or infrastructure to support such a surge, but these are not central to each section.

### **Forces, Capabilities, and Posture Required to Counter Terrorism**

There are two essential military activities required to counter terrorism in and emanating from the Middle East, with the aim to protect the U.S. homeland. These activities are:

- Disrupt and degrade terror networks that threaten the U.S. homeland and allies.
- Build and maintain partner capacity to develop high-end counterterrorism forces.

#### **DISRUPT AND DEGRADE TERROR NETWORKS**

Perhaps most importantly, the United States needs to maintain the ability to directly disrupt and degrade terrorist networks that threaten the United States and its allies. However, this is not necessarily the domain of conventional military forces; rather, such activities are best left to special operations forces and other elements

of the intelligence enterprise. Intelligence activities may extend far beyond the security remit and focus on other instruments of power, such as finances and information operations.<sup>93</sup> The most common military tool to disrupt and degrade networks is strikes on nodes within terrorist networks, often referred to as high value targets.

There is a range of conventional military activities that buttress SOF strikes on high value targets. These include ISR assets for target development and authorization and aerial refueling by regionally based tanker aircraft to facilitate transit and strike operations. Under the security cooperation activities above, SOFs may work with partners on developing a robust intelligence network that enables the use of human intelligence that may originate from a partner network.

However, as operations against ISIS have demonstrated, regional strike assets may be called on to conduct airstrikes against terror networks. These too would require ISR and refueling. U.S. air operations against ISIS and other terrorist groups have long relied on air bases in the

Gulf and Levant to be able to conduct such strikes at a moment's notice. But this requirement does not mean necessarily keeping squadrons of fixed wing aircraft on

the ground. One option is to switch to a smaller armed overwatch mission relying on SOF aircraft. While this enables a lighter footprint, SOF aircraft marshal less firepower than conventional strike assets. Moreover, U.S. special forces are currently suffering from overstretch, and an additional mission may further exacerbate existing readiness problems. Another option is to rely more heavily on UAVs and other unmanned assets for overwatch and targeting, enabling a light footprint approach as the United States has piloted in the U.S. Africa Command AOR. This approach may prove to be a useful model, although the terrorism challenges in the Middle East may be higher and require more finite resources. Additionally, as the United States seeks to reduce its presence in the Middle East, it may consider how to better leverage military assets based elsewhere—particularly those that reside in other combatant command AORs. Depending on the location of the operations against the terror network, candidates for basing may include strike aircraft already forward deployed in Europe or in the Eastern Mediterranean, to include Greece, Cyprus, or Turkey.

**Instead of focusing on efforts to stand up and improve large national militaries in the U.S. military's likeness, the priority should be on training small elite forces, where the United States has been much more successful.**

#### BUILD PARTNER CAPACITY FOR ELITE COUNTERTERRORISM FORCES

Building partner capacity, particularly in the military domain, is a long-term endeavor and one that requires presence in some form.<sup>94</sup> However, that does not mean permanent presence, but rather persistent engagement. Building effective, high end counterterrorism forces in some Middle Eastern countries requires security cooperation activities like joint training and exercises. This necessitates a rotational presence of U.S. forces, particularly SOFs, and associated capabilities to fulfill these activities. Building an effective partner counterterrorism force also may require the development of a robust intelligence enterprise, which may involve U.S. military and civilian support and greater intelligence sharing by the United States. The United States should prioritize working with countries that already have capable counterterrorism forces to ensure they continue to maintain those capabilities or seek to improve them in places such as Iraq,

Jordan, Lebanon, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates. Critically, these activities must be narrowly scoped, instead of leveraging the objective of coun-

tering terrorism as the rationale for every building partnership capacity activity. Instead of focusing on efforts to stand up and improve large national militaries in the U.S. military's likeness, which has been the long-standing U.S. approach to security cooperation, the priority should be on training small elite forces, where the United States has been much more successful.

Importantly, these capabilities are also effective in defending against Iranian proxy attacks on U.S. forces deployed to the Middle East by disrupting the proxy networks. Such an approach is more effective in countering Iranian proxy groups than demonstrations of conventional military capability, which are the wrong tool to deter Iranian proxies. Because these groups rely on asymmetry of time lines, responses, and actions, the recent approach of sending a carrier strike group to the 5th Fleet AOR or deploying a bomber task force in response to proxy aggression is not well suited.<sup>95</sup> These actions actually run the risk of being cost imposing over time, particularly given the financial and readiness costs to deploy both.<sup>96</sup>



TABLE 2: FORCES, CAPABILITIES, AND POSTURE REQUIRED TO COUNTER TERRORISM

<b>Interest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Defend and protect the U.S. homeland, American citizens, and U.S. allies from terrorist attacks.</li> </ul>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disrupt and degrade the capabilities of terror networks that have the potential to threaten the United States and its allies.</li> </ul>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Disrupt and degrade Salafi-jihadist terror networks and Iranian proxy groups.</li> <li>Build and maintain partner capacity to develop high end counterterror forces.</li> </ul>
<b>Capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance</li> <li>Robust intelligence networks for targeting</li> <li>Primarily light special operations forces (SOF) aircraft or UAVs to support strike operations and conduct overwatch</li> <li>Small number of SOFs on a rotational basis</li> <li>Rotational deployments for security cooperation and training.</li> </ul>
<b>Implications for Posture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Close small ground force facilities that originally served to facilitate U.S. operations in Iraq.</li> <li>Maintain a smaller presence focused on logistics, maintenance, intelligence, and security cooperation.</li> <li>Reduce the requirements for strike aircraft in the region and leverage strike assets based in other combatant commands.</li> <li>Reduce U.S. ground presence by a brigade combat team.</li> </ul>

### IMPLICATIONS FOR U.S. POSTURE

For years, countering terrorist and insurgent groups has provided the rationale for a large U.S. ground force presence in the Middle East. The military activities laid out and the capabilities associated with them demonstrate that the United States could fulfill its top interest of protecting the U.S. homeland from terrorist attack with a smaller footprint. In light of this, there are significant reductions in U.S. posture—particularly its ground force posture—that can be pursued.

U.S. facilities across the region, which originally served to facilitate U.S. operations in Iraq, can be closed and their assets consolidated at other bases in or outside of the Middle East. These may include arms depots and logistics facilities, or small bases intended to house U.S. ground forces and supplies. Recent U.S. base closures in Qatar provide a useful example for the types of facilities that are no longer required, and how consolidation could occur.<sup>97</sup> The intent, however, is not to further bloat major operating bases.

With this in mind, presence at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait, which serves as the U.S. Army's largest base in the Middle East and the locus of its operations in Iraq, can be reduced. A smaller U.S. presence focused on logistics, maintenance, and the security cooperation activities detailed above

would be sufficient. To hedge against future contingencies that could require significant ground power, the U.S. could pre-position equipment that it could not swiftly bring into theater, aligned with the range of threats it could face. This would require an upgrade of the current U.S. Army pre-position stocks currently located in the Middle East, but should not require expanding those stocks.<sup>98</sup>

Moreover, the United States can think smartly about how to maximize its smaller force presence. For example, instead of Task Force Spartan—a rotational active Army and Army National Guard force earmarked for the Middle East—being viewed as extra combat boots on the ground as they have in places like Iraq and Syria, they could be assigned to conduct security cooperation activities that build partner counterterrorism forces. In doing so, this would change the types of units deployed as Task Force Spartan, as the United States would no longer require the task force to be a Brigade Combat Team (BCT), which comprises approximately 4,000 soldiers and has significant firepower. Thus, the United States would reduce its ground force presence in the region by a BCT.<sup>99</sup>

Additionally, the United States may be able to limit strike aircraft based in the region as it instead emphasizes SOF aircraft and unmanned assets. Should conventional strike aircraft be required to supplement these capabilities,



At al-Udeid's 379th Air Expeditionary Wing on December 30, 2002, U.S. personnel replace a 50,000-gallon fuel bladder in support of Operation Enduring Freedom. The requirement to support operations in Afghanistan and Iraq has led to a large U.S. base network across the Middle East. (Cherie A. Thurlby/USAF/Getty Images)

the United States may be able to leverage assets based outside the AOR. This may allow for reductions of capabilities and personnel at major U.S. air bases. Table 2 displays the forces, capabilities, and posture required to counter terrorism.

### **Forces, Capabilities, and Posture Required to Prevent Iran from Obtaining a Nuclear Weapon**

The essential military activity required to prevent Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon is the ability to conduct a strike on Iran's nuclear program if needed. This does not mean that the authors are advocating for a military strike, but rather for possession of the capacity to hold Iran's nuclear program at risk and use that capability to deter an Iranian decision to move toward a nuclear weapon. In addition, we also identified three other military activities associated with the challenges posed by Iran. These are to provide force protection for U.S. military forces in the region against Iranian missile capabilities, ensure freedom of navigation, which will be discussed in greater detail in the next section, and to counter Iranian terrorism, which was described in the previous section.

#### **STRIKING IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM**

The United States needs to retain the ability to hold Iran's nuclear program at risk in order to deter Iran

from building a nuclear weapon or be prepared to stop an Iranian move toward a nuclear weapon should it be detected. Should Iran either use its existing nuclear facilities to "dash" to a nuclear weapon or if the United States detects new clandestine nuclear facilities that Iran is using to "sneak" to a nuclear bomb, the United States must be prepared to destroy as much of Iran's nuclear infrastructure as possible—both immediately and in the future to continually degrade the Iranian nuclear program. To hold Iran's nuclear program at risk, the United States needs to maintain its intelligence networks, to include ISR assets as necessary—not just aircraft but also UAVs and satellites—to monitor Iran's nuclear facilities. It also requires the United States to make Iran aware of U.S. global strike capabilities at the ready, providing Washington with the ability to swiftly conduct a strike operation on Iranian facilities and thus deter an Iranian move toward a nuclear weapon in the first place.

Credibly threatening Iran's nuclear program requires the capability to strike heavily fortified facilities such as Fordow—an underground nuclear facility built into a mountain that Iran attempted to build secretly; it was publicly uncovered by Western intelligence agencies in 2009. If Iran were to build other covert facilities, they likely would be similarly fortified. To date, the Massive Ordnance Penetrator (MOP) remains the United States' most effective bomb that can potentially threaten

these types of facilities.<sup>100</sup> According to press reports, the MOP can be carried only by heavy bombers, specifically the B-2.<sup>101</sup> Bombers carrying the MOP would need to be accompanied by strike aircraft capable of suppressing Iranian air defenses to reduce risks to the bomber aircraft.<sup>102</sup>

In almost all potential scenarios, the United States likely would retain advance warning and thus have time to prepare for a strike. It likely would take Iran a few years to clandestinely build an alternative facility for producing highly enriched uranium and a nuclear weapon.<sup>103</sup> The United States and its allies likely would detect such an effort long before its completion, as it did in the case of Fordow and Natanz. If Iran were to use its known facilities at Natanz or Fordow to try to “dash” to a nuclear weapon, it likely would have to kick out IAEA inspectors and stop cooperation with nearly all monitoring of its nuclear program, setting off alarm bells that would give the United States weeks to respond. In a worst-case scenario, a nuclear weapon could be presented by Iran as a *fait accompli* as North Korea did when it went nuclear. Another worst-case but low probability scenario is one where a secret Iranian facility is discovered by the United States just days before Iran produces a nuclear weapon.

This provides flexibility to not necessarily base the assets required to conduct a strike on Iran’s nuclear program in the Middle East or even in nearby theaters. Indeed, there is no facility in the Middle East where a B-2 could even be deployed. Thus, the majority of a strike package that the United States would require to meaningfully set back Iran’s nuclear program would not need to be based in the Middle East itself. Instead, the United States should base minimal strike aircraft in the region in order to send a credible deterrent message to Iran and hold its nuclear program at risk, rather than a close-to-complete strike package.

#### PROVIDING FORCE PROTECTION AGAINST MISSILE ATTACK

While the threat from advancing missile technology in the region may come from additional sources in the future, the current and near-term threat originates with Iran’s missile capabilities and missile proliferation. To counter Iranian missile attacks, the United States may require ISR to monitor the threat and ballistic missile defense assets (BMD) in the region. However, BMD capabilities are high demand, low density assets, meaning they are finite assets that run the risk of global overstretch.<sup>104</sup> Given the risks to U.S. forces and diplomats, some BMD capabilities and their associated units should remain in the Middle East on a rotational basis. Such



*On February 4, 2003, at Camp Arifjan, Kuwait, U.S. Army Specialist Brandon Sapikowski checks a Patriot Missile Launch Station. The United States has deployed significant ballistic missile defense assets to the Middle East causing shortfalls elsewhere around the world. (Quinton T. Burris/USAF/Getty Images)*

assets and forces should be positioned at bases at greatest risk, and where there is the greatest mass. Where possible, such BMD assets should be drawn down—as is reportedly in progress—from areas where the threat is not currently high.<sup>105</sup> Additional base consolidations may make this plan more feasible and require less BMD coverage. Moreover, proxies have used low cost drones in attacks on U.S. bases. Countering those drones may require counter-unmanned aerial systems technologies that employ jamming, spoofing, and leverage to neutralize the threat.<sup>106</sup>

Force protection not only focuses on protecting U.S. personnel, but also capabilities and required infrastructure.<sup>107</sup> Currently, Iran’s arsenal of ballistic and cruise missiles, use of UAVs, and leveraging of forward-based proxy organizations pose a threat to U.S. capabilities located in the Middle East, as Iran could choose to destroy BMD or unsheltered air assets that the United States cannot quickly replace, or degrade critical infrastructure to render it unusable by, for example, cratering runways. This would impede the U.S. military’s ability to operate from regional bases in the case of a contingency. In particular, U.S. bases located in the Gulf, which comprise some of the largest bases with several critical capabilities, are within range of Iranian missiles, drones, and proxies.<sup>108</sup>

While BMD assets may help offset this threat, the finite number of assets are in high demand and constrained by competing global requirements—including in regions such as Europe and the Indo-Pacific. Therefore,

**TABLE 3: FORCES, CAPABILITIES, AND POSTURE REQUIRED TO COUNTER IRAN'S NUCLEAR PROGRAM AND MISSILE CAPABILITIES**

<b>Interest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prevent nuclear proliferation.</li> </ul>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Prevent Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons.</li> </ul>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Be prepared to deter, delay, disrupt, and if necessary, destroy much of Iran's nuclear program.</li> <li>▪ Build and maintain partner capacity to develop high end counterterror forces.</li> <li>▪ Provide force protection against missile attacks.</li> </ul>
<b>Capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Robust intelligence networks (space and human intelligence)</li> <li>▪ Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets</li> <li>▪ Strike aircraft</li> <li>▪ B-2s equipped with a Massive Ordnance Penetrator based outside theater</li> <li>▪ Ballistic missile defense</li> <li>▪ Counter-unmanned aerial systems technologies.</li> </ul>
<b>Implications for Posture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Maintain smaller footprint of strike aircraft to hold Iran's nuclear program at risk.</li> <li>▪ Base bombers outside the Middle East for a strike on the nuclear program or a larger contingency.</li> <li>▪ Reduce footprint at major air bases located within range of Iranian missiles.</li> <li>▪ Pursue access for regional dispersal operations, as well as dispersal bases outside CENTCOM.</li> <li>▪ Develop a distributed basing architecture, requiring access to and the development of infrastructure at smaller bases further away from Iran.</li> </ul>

other solutions to the Iranian threat to U.S. capabilities are required. Dispersal basing—where mobile aircraft and other capabilities move to bases located outside of Iranian missile range, gives the United States more time to take defensive countermeasures in case of attack. Such bases include Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan or Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. Alternative bases may include those located outside of the CENTCOM AOR, although dispersal to these locations may require additional aerial refueling capabilities.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTURE

For an Iran nuclear contingency, given that in most scenarios U.S. decision makers will be able to have a fair amount of control over when and if to strike, the bomber capabilities required to strike Iran's nuclear program likely will remain outside of the Middle East.<sup>109</sup> The viability of such plans are dependent on whether any countries are willing to provide the United States with permission to launch such strikes from their soil, or provide overflight depending on the flight path.<sup>110</sup>

The sensitivities surrounding access—to include fear of Iranian blowback for countries' facilitation of U.S. strikes—is an important consideration and further suggests that bombers and other elements of the strike package should be based outside of the Middle East. As previously discussed, some mix of strike aircraft should remain in the region as a credible deterrent.

There are more pronounced posture implications regarding Iran's missile capabilities, which have driven the need for greater force protection mechanisms. The military capabilities laid out are insufficient to deal with the threat posed by Iranian missiles to U.S. bases located in the Gulf, which are located well within range of Iran's worst threat rings. While BMD assets should remain at the most densely populated U.S. bases, there are insufficient amounts of BMD to cover every base and still meet global demands. Dispersal may provide a way to mitigate risks to key U.S. capabilities and involve dispersing mobile assets like aircraft to bases outside of Iranian missile range, including bases located in other COCOM AORs.



To produce a more lasting solution that not only reduces risks to U.S. capabilities but also forces, the United States should consider embracing a more distributed basing architecture.<sup>111</sup> This would involve either developing smaller, more austere facilities located farther away from Iranian missile range, or negotiating access to host nation bases that fit U.S. requirements.<sup>112</sup> The United States should continue to host U.S. forces at existing bases farther away from Iranian territory, such as Muwaffaq Salti Air Base in Jordan and Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. Such bases can provide strategic depth in case air assets located at more easily threatened bases in the Gulf, such as al-Udeid Air Base and al-Dhafra Air Base, need to disperse to mitigate the missile threat. Shifting to a more distributed basing structure—in addition to the reduction of conventional strike assets currently required to address a potential Iran contingency—suggests that the U.S. footprint at these two major operating bases can be reduced.

The development of a layered and distributed basing network would enhance the security of U.S. forces and the survivability of U.S. capabilities, while reducing the attractiveness of U.S. bases as targets. The answer to defending against Iranian missile strikes is not necessarily more assets, which just creates more targets. Instead, the smarter approach would be to rethink U.S. basing architecture and create a smaller, more diffuse network of bases in the region that limit the number of targets for Iran, while still allowing the U.S. to surge forces in the region if desired.<sup>113</sup> Though this may seem initially like increasing the U.S. footprint in the Middle East, it should be thought of instead as a redesign of the basing architecture that does not require more capabilities or presence. Distributed basing, when coupled with base consolidations, provides a reasonable approach to a slimmed down U.S. footprint. Table 3 illustrates the discussed forces, capabilities, and posture required to counter Iran's nuclear program and missile capabilities.

### **Forces, Capabilities, and Posture Required to Ensure Freedom of Navigation**

The report identified three essential military activities required to ensure freedom of navigation in the Middle East:

- Conduct air and sea patrols to keep maritime chokepoints open.
- Conduct countermine operations.
- Enhance security cooperation to promote burden-sharing in the naval arena.

### **CONDUCT AIR AND SEA PATROLS**

#### **TO KEEP MARITIME CHOKEPOINTS OPEN**

FONOPs are demonstrations of maritime capability to counter what the United States views as “excessive maritime claims” to restrict navigation and overflight.<sup>114</sup> FONOPs are pre-planned, routine demonstrations of U.S. naval power and safe transit that often take place in the 5th Fleet AOR. Outside of the deterrent value of legally declared FONOPs, the United States expends significant resources and efforts to patrol the air and sea in and around critical maritime choke points such as the Suez Canal, Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb, and the key waterways around them—several areas that are contested by Iran and its proxy groups.

Recent U.S. maritime activities in these choke points have relied on carrier strike groups (CSG), a formation comprised of a U.S. aircraft carrier and several accompanying ships and maritime patrol aircraft, or an amphibious ready group (ARG) to conduct these operations.<sup>115</sup> While perhaps the strongest demonstration of U.S. naval power, using a CSG or ARG for such activities appears excessive and has not sufficiently deterred Iran and its proxies from maritime attacks. Moreover, the use of large surface ships has only served to further degrade U.S. naval readiness.<sup>116</sup>

However, maritime presence is important to keeping these critical waterways open. As such, the United States can consider different configurations to conduct these operations, leveraging destroyers and frigates accompanied by maritime patrol aircraft and ISR. Such maritime patrols should occur in areas where Iran and its proxies are most flagrantly threatening the free flow of shipping and transit. While naval presence alone has not proven to be a sufficient deterrent, some form of presence in combination with “eyes on” through ISR will improve U.S. situational awareness and enable Washington to respond (if needed) to potential attacks. Additionally, Washington should consider cooperating with other high end naval partners who also have vested interest in ensuring the free flow of commerce to conduct joint maritime patrols, or back-to-back operations to provide greater coverage.<sup>117</sup> The aim would be to reduce the burden on the United States, therefore requiring less naval presence over time.

### **CONDUCT COUNTERMINE OPERATIONS**

Iranian proxies have used naval mines to attack oil tankers and other ships operating in the region. This, in conjunction with a low likelihood, high consequence scenario in which Iran seeks to close the Strait of Hormuz by using offensive naval mining, require countermeasure measures. The United States has a finite number

TABLE 4: FORCES, CAPABILITIES, AND POSTURE REQUIRED TO ENSURE FREEDOM OF NAVIGATION

<b>Interest</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Ensure the freedom of navigation.</li> </ul>
<b>Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Secure key waterways in the region that are essential crossroads for international commerce.</li> </ul>
<b>Activities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Conduct freedom-of-navigation operations.</li> <li>▪ Conduct countermine operations.</li> <li>▪ Enhance security cooperation to promote burden-sharing in the naval arena.</li> </ul>
<b>Capabilities</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ Destroyers</li> <li>▪ Frigates</li> <li>▪ Maritime patrol aircraft</li> <li>▪ Intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets</li> <li>▪ Minesweepers.</li> </ul>
<b>Implications for Posture</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>▪ End the unofficial policy of keeping a carrier strike group in the Middle East.</li> <li>▪ Emphasize joint and multilateral maritime patrols with smaller U.S. naval assets.</li> <li>▪ Put a greater focus on the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb than Strait of Hormuz.</li> </ul>

of aging minesweepers with limited capabilities and availability, given the global demands.<sup>118</sup> This suggests the need for the United States to look to its partners—in particular European nations with minesweepers—to take on this responsibility and use their countermine measures.<sup>119</sup> Washington can enable such operations by providing intelligence to such partners about potential mine threats, leveraging ISR assets.

#### ENHANCE SECURITY COOPERATION TO PROMOTE BURDEN SHARING

The United States has conducted sizable maritime security cooperation activities with regional states in the Middle East, to include cooperating on a number of task forces aimed at issues such as counterterrorism and counter-piracy. These have failed to bear fruit as no single Middle Eastern country has become a naval power capable of ensuring freedom of navigation in contested waters. However, the free flow of commerce and transit is a global good, meaning that there are external powers other than the United States with vested interests in ensuring freedom of navigation. The United States should look to enhance maritime security cooperation with these capable nations, particularly European and Asian countries, with an eye toward burden sharing.

There are preexisting forums for such cooperation, such as the multinational task forces addressing issues like maritime security in the region and counterpiracy

housed under the banner of the Combined Maritime Forces located in Bahrain. These should be leveraged appropriately, rather than creating redundant institutions. Indeed, previous efforts have resulted in partners working at cross purposes, rather than promoting burden sharing.<sup>120</sup> However, European partners in particular have taken an increased role in the maritime domain. With European and American policies toward Iran now more aligned under the Biden administration, it may be possible to bring these efforts together but also take advantage of the European initiative to have them take more of the lead. Moreover, given the greater reliance on Middle East energy by Asian partners, they possess motivation to ensure safe passage through critical waterways.

Over time, U.S. and partner joint or combined maritime patrols can transition to back-to-back patrols so the onus is not solely on the United States. Washington also should look to produce complementarity in tasks, so that high end partner nations can fulfill roles they are perhaps better suited to, such as countermine operations. Synchronizing activities and making better use of resources inevitably will improve regional security and reduce the operational burden on the United States.

#### IMPLICATIONS FOR POSTURE

The most significant implications for U.S. posture in the Middle East stemming from the reframing of U.S. maritime responsibilities is to end the unofficial



policy of retaining a carrier strike group in the Middle East. Doing so would have little overall impact on the balance of power in the Gulf and is not likely to affect Iran's calculations about trying to mine the Strait of Hormuz. Freeing up a U.S. carrier in the Middle East would enable other operations around the globe or allow the U.S. Navy to recoup readiness. Instead, routine FONOPs in the 5th Fleet AOR could be conducted with alternate combinations of ships, such as destroyers, and not require a carrier presence. Table 4 depicts the forces, capabilities, and posture required to ensure the freedom of navigation.

#### A NOTE ON CONTINGENCIES

While there are a number of ways that U.S. military operations and presence in the Middle East could change, the United States must retain the ability to surge in case of a major contingency. Retaining the capacity to surge has implications for capabilities, as quick reaction forces will need a suite of enablers including logistics, transportation, and pre-positioned equipment (as previously noted)—among other supporting elements. But more so, there are significant implications for U.S. revisions to posture.

In cases where the United States chooses to consolidate bases, it is imperative that Washington retains the ability to operate from the bases it seeks to divest of in the future. Such bases would transition to control of the host nation, thus becoming a “warm” base where the United States maintains contingency access. Washington needs to ensure that this contingency access remains, and that the host nation maintains upkeep of the base to facilitate future U.S. operations if needed.

## Conclusion

**T**he current U.S. impulse to right-size its presence in the Middle East is not only sound, but viable.

This report lays out how the United States can actionably reduce its presence in the Middle East while still retaining the capabilities and posture required to preserve its interests, fulfill obligations to allies, and meet the pressing challenges it might face in years to come. The aim is for a smaller yet *smarter* U.S. presence in the Middle East more tied to important U.S. interests.

A number of possible solutions have emerged from this analysis. For physical infrastructure, consolidating bases while developing a smaller and leaner distributed basing architecture appears to net the United States greater operational flexibility while reducing its sizable presence at major operating bases. As it is essential to retain the ability to surge in case of a major contingency, the United States will need to work closely with host nations to negotiate contingency access. While exploring basing options outside of the Middle East—whether at preexisting bases in Europe, the Eastern Mediterranean, or the Horn of Africa—may provide additional operational leverage, these are likely to be insufficient to sustain major operations, should such a contingency occur, and bureaucratically difficult.

Some capabilities required to fulfill the pressing military activities needed to secure U.S. interests were ubiquitous, such as ISR, which is a finite asset. This is not to advocate for obtaining more ISR assets, but rather to emphasize how essential certain capabilities are and the need to maximize existing resources. As such, it is worth looking at how to pool existing resources across the combatant commands to maximize these in-demand capabilities. This also extends to strike aircraft and naval assets that could be based outside the Middle East but would be leveraged for regional operations. Indeed, in the aftermath of the withdrawal from Afghanistan, many of these assets also will be necessary to support the over the horizon counterterrorism mission there. The trick, however, is ensuring that U.S. presence and capabilities in nearby areas, such as the Eastern Mediterranean and Horn of Africa, do not expand to support operations in the Middle East, or that the requirements in Afghanistan do not become the excuse to maintain a large presence in the Middle East.

These proposed changes are notional at best. To gain a better sense of the force levels the United States should have, where forces and capabilities should be based, and the laydown of U.S. military power in the Middle East, further analysis—to include wargaming a

range of scenarios—is required. Moreover, the solutions suggested, such as basing outside the region or altering the physical basing architecture in the region, are cost agnostic and likely come with a heavy sunk cost—at least at the beginning. To that end, continued examination of how to produce a sustainable U.S. presence in the Middle East is needed.

Implementing such changes will be difficult and will not occur overnight. Swift and sudden changes to posture are more likely to produce instability and damage relationships, as the Trump administration found during its later reversed withdrawal for U.S. forces from Syria.

Bases are sunk costs, and altering posture is difficult and deeply expensive to change. Bureaucratic inertia, a preference for the status quo, and nervous partners all may militate against altering posture or embracing the solutions identified in this report. This speaks to the need for the United States to work closely with partners to properly message such changes, particularly in regard to base consolidations. Ultimately, it is U.S. regional partners who determine the depth of U.S. access and whether such revisions to posture—while still retaining surge capability—will be successful.<sup>121</sup> Reassuring nervous partners will involve other elements of U.S. power, namely diplomacy, further actualizing the Biden administration’s shift to put military power in support of diplomacy.

1. Ilan Goldenberg and Kaleigh Thomas, "Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East," CNAS, July 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/commentary/demilitarizing-u-s-policy-in-the-middle-east>.
2. Ilan Goldenberg, Elisa Catalano Ewers, and Kaleigh Thomas, "Reengaging Iran," CNAS, August 4, 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/reengaging-iran>.
3. Ilan Goldenberg, Daphne McCurdy, Kaleigh Thomas, Sydney Scarlata, "A People-First U.S. Assistance Strategy for the Middle East," CNAS, June 10, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/a-people-first-u-s-assistance-strategy-for-the-middle-east>.
4. Goldenberg et al., "A People-First U.S. Assistance Strategy for the Middle East."
5. Goldenberg et al., "A People-First U.S. Assistance Strategy for the Middle East."
6. President Joseph R. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," White House, March 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
7. Stacie Pettyjohn, Becca Wasser, and Jennie Matuschak, "Risky Business: Future Strategy and Force Options for the Defense Department," CNAS, July 20, 2021, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/risky-business-future-strategy-and-force-options-for-the-defense-department>.
8. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance," 15.
9. "Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Initiation of a Global Force Posture Review," U.S. Department of Defense, February 4, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2494189/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-on-the-initiation-of-a-glo/>.
10. Ely Ratner et al., "Rising to the China Challenge Renewing American Competitiveness in the Indo-Pacific," CNAS, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/rising-to-the-china-challenge>.
11. Goldenberg et al., "Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East."
12. Lolita C. Baldor, "U.S. general says troop surge in Middle East may not end soon," Associated Press, January 23, 2020, <https://apnews.com/article/2208d8645ac0437024ac71c06fcfb8e1>.
13. Phil Stewart, "U.S. warplanes strike Iran-backed militia in Iraq, Syria," Reuters, June 28, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/us-carries-out-air-strikes-against-iran-backed-militia-iraq-syria-2021-06-27/>.
14. "Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture," U.S. Department of Defense, September 2004, [https://www.airforce-mag.com/PDF/DocumentFile/Documents/2008/Global-DefPost\\_091704.pdf](https://www.airforce-mag.com/PDF/DocumentFile/Documents/2008/Global-DefPost_091704.pdf).
15. David Thaler, "Strategies to Tasks a Framework for Linking Means and Ends," Rand Corporation, 1993, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR300.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR300.html).
16. "Statement by Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III on the Initiation of the Global Force Posture Review"; Goldenberg et al., "Demilitarizing U.S. Policy in the Middle East."
17. Becca Wasser, "Drawing Down the U.S. Military Responsibly," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/drawing-down-u.s.-military-responsibly-pub-84527>.
18. Franklin D. Roosevelt, "President Roosevelt to the Lend-Lease Administrator," February 18, 1943, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1943v04/d893>.
19. Jimmy Carter, "State of the Union Address," January 23, 1980, <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.
20. Gordon Brown, *Gulf Cooperation Council Defense Agreement*, RS20831, Congressional Research Service, February 28, 2001, 2–3, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20010228\\_RS20831\\_ce8c1e382c270f1213a69e993f0ff98053bab84b.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20010228_RS20831_ce8c1e382c270f1213a69e993f0ff98053bab84b.pdf).
21. William Allen, "Crisis in Southern Iraq: Operation Southern Watch," 189–195, <https://media.defense.gov/2012/Aug/23/2001330107/-1/-1/0/Oper%20Southern%20Watch.pdf>.
22. Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, R40682, Congressional Research Service, July 2, 2009, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>.
23. Condoleezza Rice, "Campaign 2000: Promoting the National Interest," *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2000, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2000-01-01/campaign-2000-promoting-national-interest>.
24. Degang Sun, "The US Military Bases in the Gulf Cooperation Council States: Dynamics of Readjustment," *Journal of Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies*, 4 no. 4 (July 17, 2019), 44–63, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/pdf/10.1080/19370679.2010.12023167>.
25. Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars*.
26. *Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy*, 95-1013, Congressional Research Service, April 20, 2021, 13, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.
27. "U.S. Security Cooperation with Kuwait," U.S. Department of State, January 20, 2021, <https://www.state.gov/u-s-security-cooperation-with-kuwait/>.
28. Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars*, 4.
29. Moshe Schwartz and Joyprada Swain, *Department of Defense Contractors in Afghanistan and Iraq: Background and Analysis*, R40764, Congressional Research Service, May 13, 2011, 28–29, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R40764.pdf>.

30. Joseph Logan, “Last U.S. troops leave Iraq, ending war,” Reuters, December 17, 2011, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-withdrawal/last-u-s-troops-leave-iraq-ending-war-idUSTRE7BH03320111218>.
31. Secretary of Defense Chuck Wilson, “9th IISS Regional Security Summit: The Manama Dialogue,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, December 7, 2013, <https://www.dvidshub.net/video/311383/9th-iiss-regional-security-summit-manama-dialogue>.
32. Anthony Cordesman, “The United States, the Indian Ocean Region, and the Gulf,” Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 16, 2013, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/united-states-indian-ocean-region-and-gulf>.
33. “Counts of Active Duty and Reserve Service Members,” Defense Manpower Data Center, 2016, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.
34. Becca Wasser et al., “The Air War Against the Islamic State,” Rand Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA388-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA388-1.html).
35. Matthew Wallin, “U.S. Military Bases and Facilities in the Middle East,” American Security Project, June 2018, 6, <https://www.americansecurityproject.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/06/Ref-0213-US-Military-Bases-and-Facilities-Middle-East.pdf>.
36. “Al-Tanf, Syria,” International Crisis Group, August 9, 2021, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/trigger-list/iran-us-trigger-list/flashpoints/al-tanf-syria>.
37. Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Pulling Some Missile-Defense Systems Out of Mideast,” *The Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-pulling-some-antiaircraft-and-missile-batteries-out-of-mideast-1537954204>.
38. Greg Myre, “Under Trump, U.S. Troops in War Zones Are on the Rise,” NPR, December 1, 2017, <https://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2017/12/01/566798632/under-trump-u-s-troops-in-war-zones-are-on-the-rise>.
39. Miriam Berger, “Where U.S. troops are in the Middle East and Afghanistan, visualized,” *The Washington Post*, January 4, 2020, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/where-us-troops-are-in-the-middle-east-and-could-now-be-a-target-visualized/2020/01/04/1a6233ee-2f3c-11ea-9b60-817cc18cf173\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/where-us-troops-are-in-the-middle-east-and-could-now-be-a-target-visualized/2020/01/04/1a6233ee-2f3c-11ea-9b60-817cc18cf173_story.html).
40. “Qatar to expand air base hosting major U.S. military facility,” Reuters, August 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-qatar-airbase/qatar-to-expand-air-base-hosting-major-u-s-military-facility-idUSKCNILC1TJ>.
41. Matthew Lee, “Pompeo signs off on al-Udeid Air Base expansion, but says Qatar diplomatic crisis ‘has dragged on too long,’” *Military Times*, January 13, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/flashpoints/2019/01/13/pompeo-signs-off-on-al-udeid-air-base-expansion-but-says-qatar-diplomatic-crisis-has-dragged-on-too-long/>.
42. “DOD Statement on Deployment of Additional U.S. Forces and Equipment to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,” U.S. Department of Defense, October 11, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/1987575/dod-statement-on-deployment-of-additional-us-forces-and-equipment-to-the-kingdo/>.
43. Joseph Trevithick, “Docs Show US To Massively Expand Footprint At Jordanian Air Base Amid Spats With Turkey, Iraq,” *The Drive*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/25955/docs-show-us-to-massively-expand-footprint-at-jordanian-air-base-amid-spats-with-turkey-iraq>.
44. J. P. Lawrence, “US military shifts Army basing from Qatar to Jordan in move that could provide leverage against Iran,” *Stars and Stripes*, July 1, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2021-07-01/us-military-closes-qatar-camps-in-move-that-could-play-into-iran-policy-2009140.html>.
45. Courtney Kube, “U.S. military has begun reestablishing air base inside Saudi Arabia,” NBC News, July 20, 2019, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/mideast/u-s-military-has-begun-reestablishing-air-base-inside-saudi-n1031916>.
46. Carla Babb, “VOA Exclusive: CENTCOM Head Says US Will Not Support Afghan Forces with Airstrikes After Troop Withdrawal,” *Voice of America*, June 14, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/voa-exclusive-centcom-head-says-us-will-not-support-afghan-forces-airstrikes-after-troop>.
47. “Contracts for Dec. 23, 2019,” U.S. Department of Defense, December 23, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Contracts/Contract/Article/2046982/>.
48. Craig Whitlock, “Remote U.S. base at core of secret operations,” *The Washington Post*, October 25, 2012, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/remote-us-base-at-core-of-secret-operations/2012/10/25/a26a9392-197a-11e2-bd10-5ff056538b7c\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/remote-us-base-at-core-of-secret-operations/2012/10/25/a26a9392-197a-11e2-bd10-5ff056538b7c_story.html).
49. Rebecca Kheel, “Pentagon chief: Military has already started ‘over-the-horizon’ operations in Afghanistan,” *The Hill*, June 10, 2021, <https://thehill.com/policy/defense/557833-pentagon-chief-us-military-has-already-started-over-the-horizon-operations-in>.
50. Staff Sgt. Neil W. McCabe, “Curtain falls on ASG-Qatar after three decades supporting readiness, resilience,” U.S. Army Central, June 24, 2021, <https://www.usarcent.army.mil/News/Article/2678775/curtain-falls-on-asg-qatar-after-three-decades-supporting-readiness-resilience/>.



51. Carla Babb, "VOA Exclusive: CENTCOM Head Says US Will Not Support Afghan Forces with Airstrikes After Troop Withdrawal," Voice of America, June 14, 2021, <https://www.voanews.com/usa/voa-exclusive-centcom-head-says-us-will-not-support-afghan-forces-airstrikes-after-troop>.
52. Lolita Baldor, "US expands troops, fighter jet presence at Saudi base," *Military Times*, January 29, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/29/us-expands-troop-fighter-jet-presence-at-saudi-base/>; Miriam Berger, "Where U.S. troops are in the Middle East and Afghanistan, visualized"; "380th Air Expeditionary Wing," U.S. Air Forces Central, May 17, 2017, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/380th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/Fact-Sheets/Article/445043/380th-air-expeditionary-wing/>; "The UAE and the F-35: Frontline Defense for the UAE, US, and Partners," Embassy of the United Arab Emirates, May 2021, [https://www.uae-embassy.org/sites/default/files/f-35\\_white\\_paper\\_11-25-20.pdf](https://www.uae-embassy.org/sites/default/files/f-35_white_paper_11-25-20.pdf); "386th Air Expeditionary Wing," U.S. Air Forces Central, March 20, 2012, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/386th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/Fact-Sheet/Display/Article/423585/386th-air-expeditionary-wing/>; Sgt. Jeremy Miller, "Task Force Spartan changes hands," U.S. Army, July 13, 2017, [https://www.army.mil/article/190805/task\\_force\\_spartan\\_changes\\_hands](https://www.army.mil/article/190805/task_force_spartan_changes_hands); "Factbox: U.S. forces in Gulf region and Iraq," Reuters, January 8, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-usa-presence-factbox/factbox-u-s-forces-in-gulf-region-and-iraq-idUSKBN1Z72GF>; "NSA Bahrain," cnic.navy.mil, [https://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/cnneurafcent/installations/nsa\\_bahrain.html](https://www.cnic.navy.mil/regions/cnneurafcent/installations/nsa_bahrain.html); Joseph Trevithick, "Docs Show US To Massively Expand Footprint At Jordanian Air Base Amid Spats With Turkey, Iraq," The Drive, January 14, 2019, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/25955/docs-show-us-to-massively-expand-footprint-at-jordanian-air-base-amid-spats-with-turkey-iraq>; J.D. Simkins, "Whoops! Canadian senator accidentally revealed European locations of US nuclear weapons," *Air Force Times*, July 17, 2019, <https://www.airforcetimes.com/off-duty/military-culture/2019/07/17/whoops-canadian-senator-accidentally-revealed-location-of-us-nuclear-weapons-in-europe/>; Shawn Snow, "Public health emergency declared for US troops stationed across Djibouti base cluster," *Military Times*, April 23, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/coronavirus/2020/04/23/public-health-emergency-declared-for-us-troops-stationed-across-djibouti-base-cluster/>; 1st Lt. Dave Williams, "Ousting ISIS from Al Anbar: The Advise and Assist mission of Task Force Al Assad," U.S. Central Command, July 31, 2017, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/1263374/ousting-isis-from-al-anbar-the-advise-and-assist-mission-of-task-force-al-asad/>; and Rebecca Grant, "The Strange, Short Life of PSAB," *Air Force Magazine*, July 2012, <https://www.airforcemag.com/PDF/MagazineArchive/Documents/2012/July%202012/0712PSAB.pdf>.
53. Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Alan J. Vick, "The Posture Triangle a New Framework for U.S. Air Force Global Presence," Rand Corporation, 2013, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR402.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR402.html).
54. Nelly Lahoud, "Bin Laden's Catastrophic Success Al Qaeda Changed the World—but Not in the Way It Expected," *Foreign Affairs*, September/October 2021, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/afghanistan/2021-08-13/osa-ma-bin-ladens-911-catastrophic-success>.
55. John Glasser, "Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture Is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous," Cato Institute, July 18, 2017, <https://www.cato.org/policy-analysis/withdrawing-overseas-bases-why-forward-deployed-military-posture-unnecessary>; Adam Garfinkle, "Anti-Americanism U.S. Foreign Policy and the War on Terrorism," Hoover Press, [https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/0817945423\\_197.pdf](https://www.hoover.org/sites/default/files/uploads/documents/0817945423_197.pdf).
56. Tamara Cofman Wittes and Mara Karlin, "America's Middle East Purgatory," *Foreign Affairs*, January–February 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>.
57. Jennie Easterly and Joshua A. Geltzer, "More die in bathtubs than in terrorism. It's still worth spending billions to fight it," CNN, May 21, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/05/21/opinions/deadly-bathtub-compared-to-terrorism-opinion-geltzer-easterly/index.html>.
58. Amanda Macias, "America has spent \$6.4 trillion on wars in the Middle East and Asia since 2001, a new study says," CNBC, November 20, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/11/20/us-spent-6point4-trillion-on-middle-east-wars-since-2001-study.html>.
59. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance."
60. "Global Terrorism Index," Institute for Economics and Peace, 2016, 19, <http://economicsandpeace.org/wp-content/uploads/2016/11/Global-Terrorism-Index-2016.2.pdf>.
61. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance."
62. Colin H. Kahl, Matthew Irvine, and Melissa Dalton, "Risk and Rivalry: Iran, Israel, and the bomb," CNAS, June 2012, [https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS\\_RiskandRivalry\\_Kahl\\_0.pdf?mtime=20160906081924&focal=none](https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/CNAS_RiskandRivalry_Kahl_0.pdf?mtime=20160906081924&focal=none).
63. "The Importance of the Suez Canal to the Global Economy," *New Zealand Foreign Affairs and Trade*, April 18, 2021, <https://www.mfat.govt.nz/assets/Trade/MFAT-Market-reports/The-Importance-of-the-Suez-Canal-to-Global-Trade-18-April-2021.pdf>.
64. Biden, "Interim National Security Strategic Guidance."
65. SIPRI Military Expenditure Database, Data for all countries from 1988–2020 in constant (2019) USD, SIPRI, 2020, <https://www.sipri.org/databases/milex>.

66. Kenneth Brower, "Israel Versus Anyone: A Military Net Assessment of the Middle East," Begin-Sadat Center for Strategic Studies, August 2, 2020, <https://besacenter.org/israel-versus-anyone/>.
67. "Factbox: Asia region is most dependent on Middle East crude oil, LNG supplies," Reuters, September 23, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/attacks-on-saudi-oil-why-didnt-prices-go-crazy-123823>.
68. Scott L. Montgomery, "Attacks on Saudi oil—why didn't prices go crazy" The Conversation, September 23, 2019, <https://theconversation.com/attacks-on-saudi-oil-why-didnt-prices-go-crazy-123823>.
69. General Frank McKenzie, Commander of the United States Central Command, testimony to the Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, March 13, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2111126/transcript-gen-mckenzie-sasc-testimony/>.
70. Goldenberg et al., "Reengaging Iran."
71. Sarah Repucci, "Freedom in The World 2020," Freedom House, 2020, 25, [https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW\\_2020\\_REPORT\\_BOOKLET\\_Final.pdf](https://freedomhouse.org/sites/default/files/2020-02/FIW_2020_REPORT_BOOKLET_Final.pdf).
72. Bryan Frederick et al., "Understanding the Deterrent Impact of U.S. Overseas Forces," Rand Corporation, 2020, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2533.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2533.html).
73. "A partnership story, the U.S. and the U.A.E.," U.S. Central Command, February 13, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2508363/a-partnership-story-the-us-and-the-uae/>.
74. James Quinlivan, "Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security*, 24 no. 2 (1999), 131–65, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/2539255>.
75. Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas Heras, and Kaleigh Thomas, "Slow and Steady: Improving U.S.-Arab Cooperation to Counter Irregular Warfare," CNAS, April 25, 2019, <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/slow-and-steady>.
76. David Witty, "The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service" Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, June 2016, [https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/david-witty-paper\\_final\\_web.pdf](https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/david-witty-paper_final_web.pdf).
77. Goldenberg et al., "Slow and Steady Improving U.S.-Arab Cooperation to Counter Irregular Warfare."
78. Casey L. Addis, *U.S. Security Assistance to Lebanon*, R40485, Congressional Research Service, January 19, 2011, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/R40485.pdf>; and Goldenberg et al., "Slow and Steady Improving U.S.-Arab Cooperation to Counter Irregular Warfare."
79. Kathryn Wheelbarger and Dustin Walker, "Iran Isn't Afraid of B-52s and Aircraft Carriers," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-isnt-afraid-of-b-52s-and-aircraft-carriers-11608593380>.
80. Austin Long and William Lures, "Weighing Benefits and Costs of Military Actions Against Iran," Iran Project, [https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/IranReport\\_091112\\_ExecutiveSummary.pdf](https://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/media/documents/event/IranReport_091112_ExecutiveSummary.pdf).
81. National Intelligence Estimate, "Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," November 2007, [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203\\_release.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203_release.pdf).
82. *Iran Military Power*, Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran\\_Military\\_Power\\_LR.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf).
83. David Wainer, "Missiles in 2019 Saudi Oil Attacks Came From Iran, UN Says," Bloomberg, June 12, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2020-06-12/missiles-used-in-saudi-attacks-last-year-came-from-iran-un-says>.
84. Geoff Brumfiel and David Welna, "Satellite Photos Reveal Extent of Damage from Iranian Strike on Air Base in Iraq," NPR, January 8, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2020/01/08/794517031/satellite-photos-reveal-extent-of-damage-at-al-assad-air-base>.
85. Qassem Abdul-Zahra, "4 Iraqi troops wounded by rocket attack at Balad air base," *Military Times*, January 13, 2020, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2020/01/13/4-iraqi-troops-wounded-by-rocket-attack-at-balad-air-base/>.
86. Yuliya Talmazan, "Suez Canal is open again, but impact of Ever Given saga will be felt for some time," NBC News, March 30, 2021, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/suez-canal-open-again-impact-ever-given-blockage-will-be-n1262453>.
87. Lori Ann LaRocco, "Suez Canal blockage is delaying an estimated \$400 million an hour in goods," CNBC, March 25, 2021, <https://www.cnbc.com/2021/03/25/suez-canal-blockage-is-delaying-an-estimated-400-million-an-hour-in-goods.html>.
88. "The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic route for oil and natural gas shipments," U.S. Energy Information Administration, August 27, 2019, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=41073>.
89. "Securing the Bab el-Mandeb: Can Threats to the Red Sea Drive Regional Cooperation?" Gulf International Forum, April 10, 2021, <https://gulffif.org/securing-the-bab-el-mandeb-can-threats-to-the-red-sea-drive-regional-cooperation/>.

90. Ilan Goldenberg, Jessica Schwed, and Kaleigh Thomas, "In Dire Straits? Implications of US-Iran Tensions for the Global Oil Market," CNAS, November 2019, <https://s3.us-east-1.amazonaws.com/files.cnas.org/documents/SOH-FINAL-11.19.19-min.pdf?mtime=20191120113905&focal=none>.
91. Samantha Gross, "Why aren't oil markets reacting to the attacks on tankers in the Persian Gulf?" Brookings Institution, June 19, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/06/19/why-arent-oil-markets-reacting-to-the-attacks-on-tankers-in-the-persian-gulf/>.
92. Stacie L. Pettyjohn, "The Demand for Responsiveness in Past U.S. Military Operations," Rand Corporation, 2021, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR4280.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR4280.html).
93. "Chapter 1: Emerging Threats in the AI Era," *Final Report National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence*, National Security Commission on Artificial Intelligence, 45, <https://www.nscai.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/Full-Report-Digital-1.pdf>.
94. "Security Cooperation," JP-320, Joint Chiefs of Staff, May 23, 2017, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3\\_20\\_20172305.pdf, II-2-II-3](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/jp3_20_20172305.pdf, II-2-II-3).
95. Kathryn Wheelbarger and Dustin Walker, "Iran Isn't Afraid of B-52s and Aircraft Carriers," *The Wall Street Journal*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/iran-isnt-afraid-of-b-52s-and-aircraft-carriers-11608593380>.
96. "Navy Readiness: Additional Efforts Are Needed to Manage Fatigue, Reduce Crewing Shortfalls, and Implement Training," U.S. Government Accountability Office, May 27, 2021, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-21-366>.
97. Lawrence, "US military shifts Army basing from Qatar to Jordan in move that could provide leverage against Iran."
98. "Army Prepositioned Stock—Fact Sheet," U.S. Army Central, <https://www.usarcent.army.mil/Portals/1/Documents/Fact-Sheets/Army-Prepositioned-Stock-Fact-Sheet.pdf?ver=2015-11-09-165910-140>.
99. "A partnership story, the U.S. and the U.A.E."
100. W. J. Hennigan, "U.S. stockpiles powerful bunker-buster bombs in case Iran nuclear talks fail," *Los Angeles Times*, July 3, 2015, <https://www.latimes.com/world/middleeast/la-fg-pentagon-iran-20150704-story.html>.
101. Joseph Trevithick, "The Air Force Wants Its B-52s To Carry Mysterious 20,000lb Weapons Under Their Wings," *The Drive*, June 22, 2018, <https://www.thedrive.com/the-war-zone/21700/the-air-force-wants-its-b-52s-to-carry-mysterious-20000lb-weapons-under-their-wings>.
102. Iran has previously deployed air defenses around Fordow and other sites; source cited below; "Iran Deploys Air Defense System Around Fordo Nuclear Site," *The New York Times*, August 29, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/30/world/middleeast/iran-missiles-for-do-s300.html>.
103. Valerie Lincy and Gary Milhollin, "Iran's Nuclear Timetable," *Iran Watch*, June 17, 2021, <https://www.iranwatch.org/our-publications/articles-reports/irans-nuclear-time-table-weapon-potential>.
104. Ballistic Missile Defense Review Report, U.S. Department of Defense, February 2010, [https://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630\\_for%20web.pdf](https://archive.defense.gov/bmdr/docs/BMDR%20as%20of%2026JAN10%200630_for%20web.pdf).
105. Gordon Lubold, Nancy Youssef, and Michael Gordon, "U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries From Middle East," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-to-withdraw-hundreds-of-troops-aircraft-anti-missile-batteries-from-middle-east-11624045575>.
106. Arthur Michael, "Counter-Drone Capabilities in the Middle East and Beyond: A Primer," Washington Institute, December 3, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/counter-drone-capabilities-middle-east-and-beyond-primer>.
107. Doctrine for the Armed Forces of the United States, *DOD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms*, August 2021, 85, <https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf>.
108. "Iran Military Power Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance," Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran\\_Military\\_Power\\_LR.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf).
109. Brian Everstine, "Iranian Ballistic Missile Launch Briefly Raises Alarm at Al Udeid, Al Dhafra," *Air Force Magazine*, July 28, 2020, <https://www.airforcemag.com/iranian-ballistic-missile-launch-briefly-raises-alarm-at-al-udeid-al-dhafra/>.
110. For more on U.S. access dilemmas, see Stacie Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanagh, *Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945–2014*, Rand Corporation, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research-reports/RR1300/RR1339/RAND\\_RR1339.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research-reports/RR1300/RR1339/RAND_RR1339.pdf).
111. Becca Wasser and Aaron Stein, "Small, Distributed, And Secure: A New Basing Architecture for the Middle East," *War on the Rocks*, December 16, 2020.

112. The U.S. Air Force has adopted such an approach with its Agile Combat Employment concept. For more information, see Rachel Cohen, “‘Have bombs, will travel’: How agile deployments are reshaping combat in the Middle East,” *Air Force Times*, May 3, 2017, <https://www.zsairforcetimes.com/news/your-air-force/2021/05/03/have-bombs-will-travel-how-agile-deployments-are-reshaping-combat-in-the-middle-east/>.
113. Wasser and Stein, “Small, Distributed, And Secure.”
114. *Annual Freedom of Navigation*, 7-C40800E, U.S. Department of Defense, 2019, <https://policy.defense.gov/Portals/11/Documents/FY19%20DoD%20FON%20Report%20FINAL.pdf?ver=2020-07-14-140514-643&timestamp=1594749943344>.
115. Idrees Ali, “U.S. aircraft carrier strike group sails through Strait of Hormuz,” Reuters, November 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-military-carrier-iran/u-s-aircraft-carrier-strike-group-sails-through-strait-of-hormuz-idUSKBN1XT2EG>.
116. David Larter, “After a grueling deployment, the carrier Eisenhower gets set for a dubious ‘double pump,’” *Defense News*, September 20, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/09/20/after-a-grueling-deployment-the-carrier-eisenhower-gets-set-for-a-dubious-double-pump/>.
117. “French, US Carrier Strike Groups’ Ballet For Persian Gulf Stability,” *Breaking Defense*, April 15, 2021, <https://breakingdefense.com/2021/04/french-us-carrier-strike-groups-ballet-for-persian-gulf-stability/>.
118. Robert Faturechi, Megan Rose, and Christian Miller, “Iran Has Hundreds of Naval Mines. U.S. Navy Minesweepers Find Old Dishwashers and Car Parts,” *ProPublica*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.propublica.org/article/iran-has-hundreds-of-naval-mines-us-navy-minesweepers-find-old-dishwashers-car-parts>.
119. Rory Jones and Max Colchester, “U.K. Navy Thwarts Iranian Attempt to Block BP Tanker,” *The Wall Street Journal*, July 11, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/three-iranian-vessels-tried-to-block-u-k-ship-from-passing-through-strait-of-hormuz-11562822874>.
120. For example, in 2019, in response to escalating tension with Iran, the United States and some of its Gulf and regional partners established the International Maritime Security Construct. However, because of concerns over the Trump administration’s broader Iran strategy, a number of European countries including France, Germany, and Italy instead established their own monitoring mission under the European Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz initiative. For more information, see Edgar Tam and Pierre Morcos, “Building Maritime Security Coalitions—Lessons Learned from the Strait of Hormuz,” *War on the Rocks*, June 14, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/06/building-maritime-security-coalitions-lessons-learned-from-the-strait-of-hormuz/>.
121. Renanah M. Joyce and Becca Wasser, “All About Access: Solving America’s Posture Puzzle,” *The Washington Quarterly*, 44 no. 3 (September 2021): <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2021.1970335?journalCode=rwaq20>.



## **About the Center for a New American Security**

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, DC, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy. CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan.

As a research and policy institution committed to the highest standards of organizational, intellectual, and personal integrity, CNAS maintains strict intellectual independence and sole editorial direction and control over its ideas, projects, publications, events, and other research activities. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues and the content of CNAS publications reflects the views of their authors alone. In keeping with its mission and values, CNAS does not engage in lobbying activity and complies fully with all applicable federal, state, and local laws. CNAS will not engage in any representational activities or advocacy on behalf of any entities or interests and, to the extent that the Center accepts funding from non-U.S. sources, its activities will be limited to bona fide scholastic, academic, and research-related activities, consistent with applicable federal law. The Center publicly acknowledges on its [website](#) annually all donors who contribute.

© 2021 by the Center for a New American Security.

All rights reserved.

