



Forum for American Leadership

U.S. Strategic Interests in the Middle East and North Africa in Great Power Competition

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While the U.S. shifts more attention toward great power competition with China and Russia, the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region will continue to present its own set of serious national security challenges. The U.S. continues to have significant national interests in the region directly related to great power competition, despite the Biden Administration's desire to pivot elsewhere. In addition, the Middle East offers significant opportunities for the U.S. to build on historic relationships and investments to bolster our own security and prosperity. We outline four vital national security interest areas, several policy priority areas, and an assessment on the current state of the region and our related interests that serve as a guide for the U.S.' continued engagement in the region as the Biden Administration attempts to withdraw.

The U.S.' Vital National Security Interests for the MENA:

1. Support the unimpeded flow of the region's vital energy resources to global markets to protect economic growth and preserve U.S. economic power.
2. Preserve the integrity and viability of global trade & communication routes (and associated strategic chokepoints and critical infrastructure) to maintain global stability and project U.S. economic influence.
3. Disrupt terrorist threats to the U.S., as well as our partners and allies, in order to protect and defend the homeland and our forces responsible for detecting and responding to them.
4. Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to negate their use or possession by an adversary disrupting the regional balance of power.

Policy Priorities for the MENA:

- A. Counter Chinese and Russian malign influence to preserve the regional balance of power and U.S. economic influence.
- B. Sustain and strengthen U.S. investment in Israel and [expand the Abraham Accords](#) to reduce the threats to – *and costs associated with defending* – Israel and our regional partners and allies.
- C. Prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon and from destabilizing the region.
- D. Establish a new and enduring regional security architecture to align U.S. partners and allies in the region as an effective deterrent against mutual threats and reduce the commitment of U.S. resources required.
- E. Counter violent Islamic extremism, emphasizing Iran's proxies and surrogates and preventing a resurgence of ISIS and al Qaeda including in Afghanistan to defend the U.S. homeland, our vital interests, and our partners and allies.

Regional Assessment – a Growing Convergence of Threats and Instability:

The MENA region lies at the convergence of global trade, communications, and energy supply as well as the resulting competition among world powers seeking to preserve the uninterrupted flow of vital resources as the world recovers from the global pandemic or challenge the status quo to obtain economic advantage threatening its stability and security. It is also an area of unprecedented instability as emboldened adversaries threaten our regional partners and allies, who feel [isolated, vulnerable, and uncertain](#) about U.S. resolve and commitment. We have not seen a more pronounced convergence of threats to U.S. interests in the region since the watershed year of 1979 when the Islamic revolution in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan forced the surprised and ill-prepared President Jimmy Carter to re-engage in the Middle East.

MENA is currently home to wide-spread instability verging on collapse in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. Libya, Algeria, and Tunisia are approaching or have already entered transitions whose outcome is far from certain. The Taliban and its cadre of foreign fighters now control Afghanistan following the abrupt U.S. withdrawal. ISIS has been defeated but endures, and al Qaeda's central leadership and regional affiliates remain viable; both are prepared to reemerge if provided the opportunity instability affords. Taken as a whole, the region faces a radicalized and violent sectarian environment interacting with humanitarian disasters, regional conflict, governance challenges, ever-greater connectivity, urbanization, population growth and youth bulge, and migration generating disillusionment over the lack of essential services and poor quality of life.

The region is beset by conflicts where complex and reinforcing interactions between tribal, sectarian and ethnic factors are energized by larger ideological and religious factors impacting the broader Islamic world. Iran, the world's largest state sponsor of terror, remains the greatest threat to regional peace and stability. As Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei prepares for succession, the regime is both fragile and dangerous. Khamenei selected Ebrahim Raisi to replace Hassan Rouhani as President as a part of a larger effort to consolidate power to guard against instability resulting from decades of corruption and mismanagement. These issues have been exacerbated by unprecedented economic stress following the Trump administration's maximum economic pressure campaign. The Islamic Republic is now [flagrantly violating](#) both the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) by retaining the capability to enrich uranium without consequence, is actively pursuing advanced conventional weapons following the lifting of the U.N. conventional weapons ban in 2020 and is threatening its neighbors with increasingly lethal indigenous ballistic missile and UAV capabilities. At the same time, it continues to destabilize Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza while supporting proxies and surrogates via the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) and is being rewarded for doing so by the current administration in an attempt to return to the fatally-flawed JCPOA whose provisions [have already begun to expire](#).

In contrast to Iran, the 2020 Abraham Accords between Israel and UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan present a historic opportunity to expand regional peace and prosperity under U.S. leadership. While the U.S. has for decades supported a unique security partnership with the Jewish state that in turn fostered Israel's extraordinary economic development, that success was not translated to the broader region due to the assumption that such cooperation would have to follow a deal with the Palestinians that was acceptable to the Arab world. But the combination of the ongoing intransigence and greed of the Palestinian Authority and the unprecedented support for Israel from the Trump administration, this assumption proved unfounded. The Abraham Accords, unlike the 1979 and 1994 treaties between Israel and Egypt and Jordan, are based not only on security but also on economic and cultural exchange, and so represent a new opportunity for Israel to lead the region in development across a range of sectors. As such, the Abraham Accords can become the [foundation of a larger network](#) of stability that can provide the key counterpoint to Iran.

U.S. Interests in the MENA Region:

Energy: MENA has for decades been the world's largest producer of petroleum, resources that have defined the energy-producing nations' relationship with the rest of the world, including the U.S. In 2020, however, countries in the Americas [produced about the same amount of oil as countries in the Middle East](#) according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration; some 22.4 million barrels of oil per day compared to 24.5 million, creating the possibility for a wholesale reset of these relationships as the U.S. transitions from being a customer to being a (friendly) competitor in the energy market. While America no longer imports significant supply from the Middle East, the People's Republic of China has taken additional market share as the world's largest energy importer. Given our competition with China and their acute energy vulnerability, U.S. coordination with regional producers can be a significant strategic advantage.

Even as America continues to lead and invest in alternative and renewable energy sources, to be responsible stewards of our energy strategy we will need to maintain our domestic petroleum sector, but this should not be taken for granted. The timing and likelihood of the currently fashionable "peak oil demand" narratives are as controversial as they are uncertain. Even if global oil demand peaked in a decade or two, the global oil industry still needs to invest in new production to offset declining output in mature fields. Failure to invest sufficiently will cause economically damaging oil price spikes. And because they have far lower oil production costs, even after global production begins to decline, the OPEC countries in general – and its Middle East members in particular – will take growing market share. The U.S., with relatively high production costs, could be forced out of the market, especially if we do not define our resources as a national security asset. Saudi Arabia remains the world's swing leading producer, with enormous influence on global markets. This was recently demonstrated in 2020 when an oil

production [dispute](#) broke out between Saudi Arabia and Russia at the outset of the COVID-19 crisis, sending prices into unprecedented negative territory. The world's ongoing need for oil demands continued U.S. interest in maintaining and preserving relative stability in the region.

Trade: Of the world's eight primary maritime choke points impacting global energy, trade, and communications flow, three are in the Middle East. While the Suez Canal remains secure, the vast majority of the region's vital energy resources – some 21% of global oil consumption – has to move through the increasingly vulnerable Strait of Hormuz or the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. It is all too easy to disrupt the movement of vessels through these narrow corridors, and Iran has continued to demonstrate its willingness to do so. A recent accident in the Suez Canal disrupted trade for less than a week, but the impact was felt globally. A protracted conflict could keep these choke points closed for a significant period of time, degrading the world's recovery from the global pandemic.

Iran's attack on Saudi Arabia's oil infrastructure at Abqaiq and Khurays in September 2019 reflects additional risk to global energy stability and highlights Tehran's reckless actions taken beyond the maritime domain. The U.S. has taken steps to restore freedom of navigation (the [International Maritime Security Construct](#), or Operation Sentinel), but more is required, and others have attempted to supplant this effort. China's recent engagement with Iran has demonstrated the importance Beijing places on its energy security and consequently the region which holds 30% of China's overall energy needs. More than a customer, China seeks competition in the market to lower prices, but this can also foster instability and conflict.

Nuclear Proliferation: The threat to U.S. nonproliferation interests has never been more prominent than it is now, with increasing Iranian nuclear stockpiles threatening to encourage a regional nuclear arms race if left unchecked. Saudi Arabia has publicly stated it would develop a nuclear bomb if Iran does, and they are not alone, raising the specter of a regional arms race that we cannot control. This threat has been at the center of U.S. national security policy toward the region for four consecutive administrations, and its magnitude is increasing as the Biden Administration attempts to re-enter the defunct JCPOA as a means to disengage from the region.

Terrorism: Iran continues to train, equip, fund, and direct the region's largest constellation of terrorist groups which have sowed destruction, privation, economic collapse, and instability at unprecedented levels. It has recently been providing the Houthis in Yemen its most advanced long-range missile and drone capabilities which it routinely employs to threaten Saudi Arabia and the UAE. The Islamic Republic has been clear it seeks the withdrawal of all U.S. forces from the region. The regime is exploiting the perception that it is succeeding to coerce submission from those it seeks to encircle. Russia and Turkey have exploited this trend in pursuit of their own longstanding regional aspirations, and have successfully expanded their ability to project power in recent years. Al Qa'ida is alive and well throughout the region and is preparing to

reconstitute a more pronounced safe-haven in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region now that the U.S. has withdrawn. The fact is, al Qaeda was never purged from Afghanistan, but the residual threat was manageable as long as we had intelligence and strike capability inside the country. President Biden's surrender in Afghanistan leaves the U.S. [blind and ill-equipped to conduct precision counterterrorism strikes](#) when the need arises. Despite suffering crushing blows during the Trump administration, the emboldened remnants of the Islamic State (ISIS) are reconstituting in Iraq and Syria. Without a substantive U.S. military counterterrorism presence in the vicinity, ISIS and its various entities will continue to undermine U.S. national security interests in the region and plot attacks on U.S. interests abroad.

Force Posture:

Since the end of the Second World War, both Republican and Democratic administrations have been increasingly engaged in the region, diplomatically and militarily pursuing the maintenance of the balance of power and uninterrupted global commerce during the Cold War and beyond. When confronted with crisis, the U.S. worked with partners and allies to preserve an inherently fragile balance of power or to restore it. When necessary, threats were contained or managed, rather than eliminated, and disputes were resolved diplomatically when possible. Over the course of the last three U.S. administrations, the region has observed the U.S. repeatedly attempting to withdraw its attention and resources following the widespread perception that the U.S. overcorrected following the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq in 2001 and 2003. As a result, those who threaten U.S. interests have expanded their destabilizing activities, and those who support U.S. interests are hedging by exploring new relationships with competitors and customers, first and foremost China.

Our military includes some 1.4 million active-duty personnel and another 850,000 reservists, for a total of about 2.25 million personnel. While the exact number of U.S. military personnel based in MENA is typically sensitive and dynamic, it currently hovers around sixty thousand uniformed personnel, and likely three times that number in contractors and locally supporting staff. While it is perfectly appropriate to debate the size and scope of our deployed personnel, U.S. interests demand an enduring force structure aligned to confront not only adversaries indigenous to the region but great power competition as it plays out there. Our military strength afloat or residing on military bases that are subsidized by the host governments through in-kind support is entirely sustainable and proportionate to these interests.

Summary:

MENA lies at the convergence of global trade, communications, and energy flows as well as the resulting competition among world powers. The U.S. and its partners and allies seek to preserve the uninterrupted flow of vital resources while China and Russia challenge the status quo to

obtain economic advantage threatening its stability and security. MENA's unprecedented instability has emboldened regional adversaries to threaten our partners and allies left isolated, vulnerable and uncertain about U.S. commitment. The convergence of threats not witnessed since 1979 has resulted in unprecedented risk to U.S. national interests.

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