

A Case for the U.S. to Stay Strong in the Middle East

Integrating with Partners on a New, Joint Architecture for Security and Prosperity

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Photo of jet fighter by Raphael Benaroya

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Some in the U.S. believe that America should disengage from the Middle East, especially militarily. They argue, first, that U.S. priorities abroad must be China's threat to the Pacific Rim and Russia's aggression in Europe. Second, they argue that the U.S. no longer relies as heavily on Middle Eastern oil as it once did. Third, they claim that the region's vital trade routes could be secured by states in the region. Fourth, they suggest that Iran's threat would not increase—and might even decrease—in America's absence. Finally, they claim that the Islamic State is decimated, and any remnants can be subdued without U.S. resources.

But there are more convincing arguments that the Middle East must remain among the U.S.'s most important strategic focal points for managing global risk. The region is *vital* to U.S. interests in three primary areas: economics, security, and power competition with China and Russia. A detailed review of each area follows.

Economic Factors

1. Uninterrupted energy supply. Middle Eastern countries produce one-third of the world's oil and possess 40% of known petroleum reserves. America's Indo-Pacific allies and parts of Europe rely heavily on this energy, and even the U.S. imports 10% of its oil needs from the Middle East. An adequate supply of petroleum is still vital for a stable world economy.
2. Flow of trade. The Middle East's air and sea routes connect Asia, Europe, and Africa. In response to the Israel-Hamas war, Iran's proxy, the Yemeni Houthis, launched scores of attacks on shipping in the region. During a recent visit to the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, it was noted that the economic effects of these attacks included:
 - Ship traffic decreased by 50% in the Bab-al-Mandeb (BAM) Strait and Suez Canal (a major source of revenue—and therefore political stability—for Egypt).
 - The cost of shipping a container through the Middle East to North America increased almost three-fold and cargo insurance increased five-fold.
 - The top ten ocean cargo carriers ceased transport through the Suez Canal.
 - Rerouting ships around the Africa's Cape of Good Hope adds 3,500 nautical miles and 10-14 days per trip between Singapore and Rotterdam.
3. Flow of data. Undersea cables through the Suez Canal, Red Sea, and BAM carry 90% of all financial and other communications between Europe and Asia. In early 2024, after a Houthi missile attack, the anchor of a damaged freighter cut part of a cable. And sabotage by Iran (or Russia) is easy to imagine.
4. Investment opportunities. With the world trending toward renewable energy, Middle Eastern governments are diversifying their economies away from hydrocarbons by investing internally in infrastructure, communications, tourism, education, technology, and industry, and also investing capital overseas. This represents a major U.S. investment opportunity. If the U.S. reduces its engagement in the region, others will surely benefit from the U.S.'s absence.
5. Defense of the U.S. dollar. China aspires to make its yuan the world's reserve and trade currency, taking advantage of the U.S.'s domestic challenges with inflation, interest rates, and national debt. To that end, China has agreed to buy billions of cubic meters of Siberian oil from Russia in yuan and negotiated deals (pending) to purchase Saudi oil in yuan. By maintaining the dollar as the world's reserve and trade currency, the U.S. gains significant influence over international trade and the global economy—a critical advantage over China that the U.S. cannot afford to lose.

Security Factors

1. Persistent threat of terrorism. What happens in the Middle East does *not* stay in the Middle East. Militant and terrorist organizations originating in the region continue to pose a risk to the U.S. and its allies—at home and abroad. Hamas, of course, triggered a cascade of violent conflicts in the region with its terrorist attack on Israel on 10/7/23. ISIS offshoots remain active, including ISIS K, which perpetrated the March 2024 massacre in Moscow. And morphed versions of Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and ISIS are almost certain to emerge in the Middle East and strike the West. For the security

of America and its allies and partners, the U.S. must continue to engage fully in the early detection, action denial, and elimination of these terrorist actors.

2. Iranian threat. Iran's aspirations include hegemony in the Middle East, the undermining of U.S. interests throughout the world, and the destruction of Israel.

Iran is close to possessing a nuclear weapon and has improved the range and precision of its missiles. These developments could trigger a regional nuclear arms race with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Egypt, Turkey, and Israel, posing a significant threat to global security and stability.

Iran is willing to initiate direct confrontation, as made clear by its April 2024 missile attack on Israel (in blatant defiance of the U.S. President's warning).

Iran's shadow war through proxies (Hamas, the Houthis, Hezbollah, and militias in Iraq and Syria) also threatens regional security. Iran shares its growing missile arsenal with these proxies, and since October 2023, Iran-backed militias have initiated 170 attacks on U.S. military bases in the region.

Iran also plays an important role in the war in Ukraine, supplying Russia with attack drones. Indeed, Iran is an integral part of a new axis of U.S. adversaries—along with Russia, China, and North Korea.

1. Complex U.S. security challenges. The U.S. military is asked to build regional relationships and security partnerships, deter Iran's aggression, disrupt Houthi attacks on shipping, collect intelligence, and hold the line against Russian and Chinese influence—all in the context of budget limitations and a U.S. policy to avoid directly confronting Iran. These constraints limit the U.S. military's deterrent power and serve to prolong the regional conflict.
2. Illicit trade. The Middle East is awash with illicit drugs, and regional bad actors play a growing role in the international drug trade, human trafficking, and piracy. These problems clearly affect U.S. society and security, and the U.S. Navy has famously thwarted acts of maritime piracy.

Power Competition with Russia and China

To erode U.S. influence in the Middle East, Russia relies primarily on buying and selling military platforms, while China pulls economic and diplomatic levers.

Russia has four military bases in Syria, which enable it to influence that country, confront the U.S. Sixth Fleet, and access the Mediterranean and beyond. In addition to using Iran as a drone supplier, Russia is also developing relationships with the KSA to influence the price of oil, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to establish trade, Qatar to protect mutual gas interests, Egypt to supply arms, Turkey to supply air defense systems, and even Israel to deconflict the use of Syrian airspace.

China is the world's largest buyer of Middle Eastern energy, promotes Chinese goods and services in the region, and invests in large regional infrastructure projects. China is playing a long game, using time and patience to leverage economic incentives in the Middle East to advance its global political interests.

Together, China and Russia have surpassed the U.S. economically in the Middle East. The voices who call for U.S. withdrawal from the region are already encouraging Russia and China to push harder and present themselves to Middle Eastern countries as their new partner of choice.

U.S. Needs to Form a New Architecture for a Sustainable Presence in the Middle East

The Pacific Rim and Europe clearly demand significant U.S. attention, but not to the exclusion of the Middle East. The U.S. must *wisely* deal with all three, not choose two at the expense of one. Neglecting the Middle East would undermine U.S. credibility with allies, further embolden adversaries, and heighten America's global challenges.

The U.S. military does not need to approach a war footing in the Middle East, but the pendulum should not swing too far in the other direction. The choice is not binary—stay or leave—as was (falsely) presented in Afghanistan. The Middle East is on fire, but the U.S. military there is stretched, and if only 80% of the fire emanating from the Gaza conflict is extinguished, the embers will easily reignite.

Israel can dismantle Hamas's military infrastructure, so the U.S. should provide Israel with the material and time to do so. Israel can then turn its attention to Hezbollah, while the U.S. deals decisively with the Houthis.

Accordingly, the situation merits a modest increase in the U.S. defense budget for the Middle East. The U.S. military can be trusted to deliver a return on that investment. Based on recent discussions with U.S. military officers and diplomats and Middle Eastern leaders, five principles should guide the U.S. presence in the region going forward:

- Shift the U.S. role to be an integrator, not guarantor, of regional security
- Expand deterrence methods
- Optimize U.S. military footprint and force effectiveness through innovation
- Expand economic engagement
- Promote American values pragmatically

Shift the U.S. Role to Be an Integrator, Not Guarantor, of Regional Security

To address the Iran threat, the U.S. should consider an all-of-government effort to coalesce Middle Eastern states in an integrated regional defense architecture, to provide effective deterrence against Iran and counter regional Jihadist movements and terrorism.

This coordinated integration process must start at home, led by the U.S. President. He alone can bring the Departments of Defense (DOD), State, and Treasury together with U.S. intelligence agencies. This team must define each department's views to determine common ground. The President must demand interagency cooperation to execute a joint strategy and plan of action.

The U.S. should then work with the corresponding departments of partner countries in the Middle East in a similar process to find common denominators, communicate effectively, and integrate a collective approach to defense and deterrence in the face of common risks.

The DOD, especially CENTCOM, already focuses on the need to collaborate. As Celeste Wallander, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, testified before the House Armed Services Committee: The DOD “applies principles of partnership, deterrence, diplomacy, integration, and values as it works to strengthen integrated deterrence, reduce conflict, and promote stability.” For the Middle East, Secretary Wallander added that “sustainable security relies on expanding regional security constructs, alliances, and partnerships and integrating our partners with one another, as well as the United States.”

In short, the U.S. needs to establish a new order of joint cooperation of allies in the Middle East where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As General Michael Kurilla, commander of CENTCOM, said before Congress, CENTCOM's role in the region is "shifting from security guarantor to security integrator, and many of our regional partners are increasingly willing to coordinate with their neighbors."

This idea is not new, but the effort faces many obstacles from regional leaders, including local political rivalries and distrust; relationships with Iran, China, and Russia; reluctance to undertake greater responsibility; some military skill deficiencies; the inclination of certain states to amass weapons for their own use; and, importantly, uncertainty about the U.S.'s long-term commitment to the region.

This uncertainty is based on statements by the U.S. about leaving the Middle East, inconsistent application of U.S. foreign policy, and questionable actions that the U.S. has taken—like the abrupt withdrawal from Afghanistan and delayed delivery of military sales to allies. These mixed signals diminish the trust that Middle Eastern countries have in America and lead these countries to hedge their positions by entertaining U.S. adversaries.

However, Iran's nuclear threat, the Houthi's disruption of maritime traffic, and Iran's April 2024 direct attack on Israel—which was thwarted in large part by successful regional cooperation—may finally serve as a wake-up call and a proof-of-concept for further regional cooperation.

CENTCOM is already convening successful gatherings of regional defense chiefs, including Israel's—an encouraging step. The immediate integration priorities included:

- Integrate missile and aerial defense systems (intelligence, detection, interception)
- Expand maritime security to include additional regional and European partners
- Build intelligence capabilities to deny arms shipments to malicious actors

Hardened joint defenses against Iran would position regional states to undertake greater responsibility for their own defenses and, with time, reduce America's military footprint and costs in the region.

Expand Deterrence Methods

Undoubtedly, Iran recognizes U.S. military superiority but has calculated correctly that America is unwilling to engage in direct confrontation. Unfortunately, U.S. attempts to contain Iran through non-military means have failed. Iran has ignored repeated warnings, and sanctions have fallen short of expectations.

So what's next?

First, the U.S. should expand its deterrence toolbox by bringing together the resources of the U.S. Strategic, Cyber, Space, and Special Operations Commands to complement CENTCOM's military muscle. If this effort has already started, the U.S. should expand the effort, directly and in cooperation with partners.

Next, the U.S. should intensify what Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has called "integrated deterrence" to address "gray zone competition." The gray zone means "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall [short of] traditional war." The idea is for the U.S. to exercise power to subvert adversaries' actions, deny adversaries any competitive advantage, and deter adversaries from

aggressive actions. But gray-zone efforts must start early—they cannot be turned on at a moment’s notice—and America should have focused on disrupting Iran’s proxy network *before* it grew into the threat it is today.

Today’s reality requires expanded and aggressive gray-zone tactics. For example, the U.S. should use the cultural insights of allies and partners in the Middle East to counter Iran’s subversion of regional populations. The U.S. should also conduct subversive information campaigns against Iran, inside and outside its territory (the way Hamas and its supporters turned public opinion in the U.S. against Israel).

Optimize U.S. Military Footprint and Force Effectiveness through Innovation

Under the leadership of General Kurilla, CENTCOM has established entrepreneurial task forces to build a culture of innovation “to leverage digital and unmanned technologies, creating dilemmas for our adversaries and new opportunities for collaboration with our partners.”

On a recent visit to U.S. military bases in Doha and Manama, a “peek behind the curtain” on two such task forces revealed small, motivated, empowered teams. Unencumbered by bureaucracy, these entrepreneurial teams experimented with innovative solutions to deliver some fascinating capabilities.

Kudos to CENTCOM leadership for this approach.

The U.S. military should also continue to work with close, technologically advanced allies to jointly invest in advanced defensive platforms, like the Iron Dome and Arrow missile defense systems. One promising avenue is laser technology to replace costly air-defense projectiles.

Expand Economic Engagement

U.S. policy on the Middle East centers on diplomacy and the military but understates the importance of economic levers. As noted, the economic risks that make the region vital for U.S. interests include the free flow of energy, commerce, and information; countering Chinese and Russian influence; and preventing the yuan from making inroads against the U.S. dollar. The U.S. can mitigate these risks by expanding economic engagement with the Middle East—promoting U.S. products and services and encouraging American business participation in regional infrastructure projects, manufacturing, technology, and tourism.

Many countries in the region seek outside investments in these sectors—and treat investment capital well. Qatar, for example, has defined four pillars of development—economic, human, social, and environmental. KSA has also developed a long-term plan for economic and societal transformation—placing new emphasis on solar and wind power, for instance. (KSA now has the world’s largest solar power plant and plans to export solar-generated electricity to Europe.)

U.S. investment opportunities in the Middle East are immense—far beyond the existing oil, gas, and defense markets—and more American business engagement in the region is imperative. Economic development is tightly linked to security, stability, and human development. Expanding economic engagement in the Middle East will help the U.S. achieve its strategic goals in the region—including imbuing American values alongside the region’s local cultures and traditions.

Promote American Values Pragmatically

America is not perfect, but the human rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, etched in laws, and practiced in our judiciary are a beacon for the world. The U.S. should always promote those values.

But at times, America must balance that idealistic mission with pragmatism. In the Middle East, with its intricate mix of religions, cultures, and values, American-style democracy does not come easily. The U.S. should encourage its values through collaboration and quiet (but firm) diplomacy, not through self-righteous, unilateral proclamations.

To make a business analogy: CEOs quickly learn that critical resources, like banks and suppliers, do not report to them and cannot be commanded. Positive, productive relationships with these parties, even in tough negotiations, are vital for trust and cooperation.

Conclusion

To defend its interests against China, Russia, Iran, and other adversaries, the U.S. should maintain a strong, sustainable presence in the Middle East by jointly integrating security with local partners. This shared architecture should include direct military capabilities, covert deterrence, diplomatic pressure, and expanded economic engagement for mutual security and prosperity.

In March 2024, General Kurilla told Congress what a difference a year can make in the Middle East: “As I sat here a just year ago, the region was on the verge of improbable, unprecedented, and transformative progress. Today, the region faces its most volatile security situation in the past half century.”

This volatility, and America’s reduced reliance on Middle Eastern energy, has led some to believe that continued U.S. investment and deep engagement in the Middle East has low, if any, payback.

But a deeper analysis of America’s national security interests leads to the opposite conclusion: the U.S. has many compelling reasons to make a comprehensive commitment to the Middle East as an integral part U.S. global strategy.

By mitigating risks and capitalizing on mutually beneficial opportunities, the U.S. and its regional partners can better counter the powers that seek to undermine the U.S. globally.

With Iran poised to foment more turmoil and other Middle Eastern nations seeking economic more diverse economies, our partners in the region have a strong incentive, as never before, to integrate security and economic cooperation with the U.S. and each other.

The U.S. should not lose this opportunity.

The U.S. is positioned to be the adhesive that binds our partners’ interests in mitigating risks and expanding mutually beneficial opportunities. To that end, CENTCOM’s focus on shifting the U.S.’s security posture—from guarantor to integrator—is commendable. The success of that shift, along with the U.S. military’s drive to innovate new solutions, will greatly enhance America’s footprint and capabilities in the Middle East, for greater regional security, stability, and prosperity.

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