

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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U.S. engagement in the Middle East began as a strategic move against the Soviet Union during the Cold War. The region was perceived as crucial for U.S. and European security, with its vast energy resources and location at the commercial intersection of three continents.

Geopolitical forces have shifted since the Cold War. Although Russia is still a military power and a dangerous aggressor, it does not pose the same threat to the U.S. as it once did. China has risen as the U.S.'s chief economic, political, and military rival for global influence. And the Middle East seems, on the surface, to have diminished in strategic importance.

The Middle East also has a long history of political turmoil and violence, which has ensnared many world powers—Great Britain, France, Russia, and the U.S. While the U.S. has achieved some notable diplomatic and military successes in the region, it has also spent a great amount of blood and treasure for what some say are dubious outcomes.

For these and other reasons, some voices don't believe that the Middle East should remain among the top strategic priorities for the U.S. These voices want to reduce America's military footprint, investment, and engagement in the region and focus U.S. resources primarily on Europe, to stem Russia's aggression, and Asia, to counter China's ambitions.

To the contrary, for the many reasons discussed below, the Middle East must remain among America's highest strategic priorities for managing global risks and opportunities. For the U.S., the region should continue to be an integral part of a strategic global integration of diplomacy, military deterrence, and economic investment.

Middle East's Long History of Volatility

The Middle East has long been an arena of conflict and intrigue, driven by tribal feuds, religion, and an autocratic culture. The area's strategic geography and abundance of oil have also made it a battleground for empires, local monarchs, nation states, and non-state actors. Since 1902, some 20 countries and foreign powers in the Middle East have engaged in over 100 conflicts, at the cost of approximately ten million lives.

Since 1948, the Israel-Palestinian conflict has received a disproportionate share of the world's attention, but about 80% of the region's conflicts in that period have involved only Islamic combatants. Among the bloodiest clashes: the Iran-Iraq War of the 1980s, the Syrian Civil War of the 2010s, the Yemeni Civil War of the past decade, the longstanding conflict between the Turks and the Kurds, and the present Sudan crisis.

One cause of the Middle East's volatility is a large, marginalized populace that is trapped in poverty, barred from political influence, surrounded by religious divisiveness, ravaged by wars that have displaced large populations, and steeped in discontent. This environment has bred extreme ideology, militancy, and terrorism that has spread across the world.

Although powerful nations have failed to impose their own cultures, values, and religions in the Middle East, this difficult neighborhood continues to demand the strategic attention of the world. And as history makes clear, when one great power leaves the region, another steps in to exert its influence.

The Argument to Diminish the U.S. Presence in the Middle East

Some in the U.S. want to reduce or even eliminate America's ongoing presence in the Middle East. Although they admit that the U.S. cannot pull out in the short term, due to the aggression of Iran and its proxies, as well as the Gaza war, they believe that the time will soon come for the U.S. to disengage. They think that the roughly 30,000 U.S. troops and other military assets in the Middle East would be better reallocated elsewhere, where these assets are needed more.

Those who take this view argue, first, that the U.S. cannot be everywhere at once in the world, and America's priorities abroad must now be Russia's aggression in Europe and China's threat to Taiwan and the Pacific Rim. Further, a U.S. exit from the Middle East would not create a vacuum for China and Russia to fill, as those powers are too busy elsewhere.

Second, they note that the U.S. no longer relies as heavily on Middle Eastern oil as it once did, and Western economies are starting to wean away from fossil fuels.

Third, they claim that the Middle East's vital trade routes would not be threatened by a U.S. withdrawal. America's allies would keep the trade routes open, and Iran would not close the Strait of Hormuz, as that would hurt its own trade, especially with China.

Fourth, they suggest that Iran's threat to the region would not increase in America's absence. Israel would keep Iran's nuclear ambitions in check, and other Middle Eastern nations, without a "free ride" from the U.S., would form security partnerships to counter Iran.

Indeed, their argument goes, withdrawing U.S. assets from the region might actually *reduce* Iran's threat. America's withdrawal would lessen the perception of American provocation, reduce the number of U.S. targets to attack, and take wind out of the sails of anti-Americanism. They also argue that maintaining a large U.S. presence in the Middle East would increase the risk of unintended escalation and another major U.S. war.

Finally, those who believe in drawing down the U.S. presence in the Middle East claim that the Islamic State is decimated, and any remnants can be subdued without U.S. resources.

Reality: U.S. Vital Interests Persist in the Middle East

But an analysis of the reality in the Middle East undermines these arguments.

To be sure, the region's volatile history, past and present, might suggest that the Middle East will forever remain a chaotic neighborhood that ensnares foreign powers. Memories of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars are still fresh in the U.S. consciousness. And Hamas's 10/7 attack on Israel, the war in Gaza, and the missile attacks by Iran and its proxies all might suggest that the violence will never end.

But there are indications of a new, better reality ahead. Most notably, the Abraham Accords reflect a new desire for regional cooperation, along with the recognition of Iran's threat to all. Many states in the region have also come to the pragmatic realization that they need economic transformation and cooperation to achieve greater collective prosperity, stability, and security.

These emerging changes, already underway, suggest that the future of the Middle East is not condemned to repeat the past. Which is why the region remains vital to U.S. interests in three primary areas: economy, security, and the power struggle with Russia and China.

Economic factors

1. Uninterrupted flow of energy. Middle Eastern countries produce one-third of the world's oil and possess 40% of known oil and gas reserves. America's Indo-Pacific allies (India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, Singapore, and Australia) and parts of Europe still rely heavily on this energy. And even the U.S. imports 10% of its oil needs from the Middle East. An adequate and continuous supply of oil to meet global demand is still vital for a stable world economy.

2. Free flow of trade. The Middle East's air and sea commerce routes remain vital to connect Asia, Europe, and Africa. These routes include overflights, the Red Sea, the Suez Canal, the Bab-al-Mandeb (BAM) Strait, which guards the approach to the Suez Canal, and the Strait of Hormuz (SOH), which links the Persian Gulf to the Gulf of Oman, the Arabian Sea, and beyond.

In response to the Israel-Hamas war, the Yemeni Houthis (Iran's proxy) have launched scores of drone and missile attacks on shipping in the region, which have severely impeded the flow of commerce. During a recent visit to the U.S. Fifth Fleet in Bahrain, it was noted that Houthi attacks have had dire economic effects, including:

- Ship traffic through the BAM and Suez Canal (a major source of revenue—and therefore political stability—for Egypt) has decreased by 50%.
- The cost of shipping a container through the Middle East to North America has increased almost three-fold (from \$1,800 in December 2023 to \$7,000 in March 2024).
- Cargo insurance has increased five-fold.
- The top ten ocean cargo carriers have 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. Continuous flow of data. Another serious economic vulnerability that adds to the challenges in the Middle East is the undersea cabling that stretches from Europe to the Suez Canal, then under the Red Sea, and through the tight 14-mile-wide BAM to Asia. These cables carry 90% of all financial and other communications between Europe and Asia.

The threat to these cables is very real. In early 2024, after a Houthi missile attack, the anchor of a damaged freighter cut part of a cable. And sabotage by Russia, which has long history of mapping undersea cable networks, or Iran is easy to imagine.

With today's dependence on high-speed interconnectivity, the integrity of the Europe-Asia communications link through the Middle East is a global security risk.

4. U.S. investment and trade opportunities. As global pressure mounts to adopt renewable energy, governments in the Middle East seek to diversify their economies away from hydrocarbons. This represents a major economic and sociopolitical opportunity for the U.S. to invest profitably in clean energy. If the U.S. reduces its engagement in the region, others will grab the opportunity, undercutting U.S. leadership in the fight against global warming.

Of course, the process of economic diversification goes much further than replacing one form of energy with another. Broad diversification in the Middle East requires major in-country investments—in infrastructure, communications, education, health, technology, and industry.

In addition, with large cash reserves, the energy-producing nations of the Middle East also seek to invest abroad, especially in the U.S. and Europe.

The U.S. should maintain lasting economic ties in the Middle East as these opportunities unfold.

5. Defending the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve and trade currency. China aspires to make its yuan (renminbi) 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 (still pending) to purchase Saudi oil in yuan. In March of 2023, for example, China spent, for the first time, the equivalent of \$550 billion in yuan on cross-border transactions, which was close to 50% of all such transactions.

With the dollar as the world's reserve currency, the U.S. gains significant influence over international trade and the global economy. The U.S. should not lose this advantage to China, particularly in the wealthy Middle East.

Security Factors

1. Persistent threat of terrorism. What happens in the Middle East does *not* stay in the Middle East. Militant and terrorist organizations in the region continue to pose a risk to the U.S.—at home and abroad—and to U.S. allies. Much of this extremism stems from the Muslim Brotherhood. This organization is outlawed in several Middle Eastern countries, but its tenets continue to provide the ideological underpinning for violent Sunni Islamist groups, including Al-Qaeda, Al Jihad, Hamas, ISIS, and other like groups in Africa and Asia.

Hamas, of course, triggered a cascade of violent conflicts in the Middle East with its terrorist attack on Israel on 10/7/23. ISIS offshoots also remain active, including ISIS Khorasan (ISIS K), which perpetrated the March 2024 massacre at a Moscow concert hall. In subsequent testimony before Congress, General Michael Kurilla, commander of CENTCOM, warned that ISIS K could execute “external operations against U.S. or Western interests abroad...with little warning.” And Christine Abizaid, Director of the National Counter Terrorism Center, told Congress that ISIS K was “the threat actor I am most concerned about.”

Extreme Islamic ideology is virtually impossible to suppress. Morphed versions of Al-Qaeda, Hamas, and ISIS are likely to emerge in the Middle East and strike the West. For its own security, as well as the security of 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. Iran’s continuous and significant threat. Iran’s aspirations include hegemony in the Middle East, the undermining of U.S. interests throughout the region, and the destruction of Israel.

Iran is close to possessing a nuclear weapon and has improved the range and precision of its cruise and ballistic missiles. These developments could trigger a regional nuclear arms race with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA), Egypt, Turkey, and Israel. Given the Middle East’s history of volatility and terrorism, the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the region is a significant threat to global security and stability.

Direct confrontation, initiated by Iran, is clearly possible. That threat became reality with Iran’s massive missile attack on Israel in April 2024—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 is sharing its growing missile arsenal with these proxies, extending the reach of Iranian power. Since October 2023, Iran-backed militias have initiated 170 attacks on U.S. military bases in Syria, Iraq, and Jordan, injuring U.S. service members. And the destroyer *USS Carney*, battling Houthi missiles and drones aimed at shipping in the Middle East, shattered a U.S. Navy record by conducting 51 enemy engagements in six months (the previous record of 23 dated to World War II).

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—who sustain each other with arms, oil, technology, and other goods and services.

The U.S. faces a dilemma in deterring and punishing Iran and its proxies. Warnings have had no effect, sanctions have had little effect (thanks mainly to Iran’s oil trade with China), and perceived U.S. weakness has invited even more Iranian provocations.

Accordingly, Iran continues its quest to undermine the U.S. through overt and covert operations—including state-sponsored terrorism—not only in the region but around the world. For example, Iran is now asserting a presence in South America.

3. Complex U.S. security challenges. The U.S. faces growing challenges in the Middle East without a commensurate increase in resources. The U.S. military must 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 activities—all in the context of a shrinking defense budget

(adjusted for inflation) and a U.S. policy to avoid confrontation with Iran and its proxies. These constraints on the U.S. military's ability to exert deterrent power in the region serve to prolong the regional conflict.

4. Illicit trade. The Middle East is awash with illicit drugs, like the highly addictive Captagon, and regional bad actors play a growing role in the international drug trade—and in human trafficking and piracy. While some of these problems are not military security missions, directly, they clearly affect U.S. society and security generally, and the U.S. Navy has famously thwarted acts of maritime piracy.

Russia-China Factors

The U.S. is engaged in a global strategic confrontation with Russia and China. To increase their sphere of influence in the Middle East, at the expense of the U.S., Russia relies primarily on buying and selling military platforms, while China pulls economic and diplomatic levers.

Russia has three air bases and one naval base in Syria, which enables Russia to exert direct influence in the country, confront the U.S. Sixth Fleet, and gain access to the Red Sea, the Mediterranean, and the Atlantic Ocean. In addition to its relationship with Iran as a drone supplier, Russia is also developing relationships with the KSA to influence the supply and price of oil through OPEC+, the United Arab Emirates (UAE) to establish trade, Qatar to protect mutual gas supply interests, Egypt to supply arms and conduct joint military exercises, Turkey (to supply air defense systems, and even Israel to deconflict the use of Syrian airspace by Russia and the Israel Defense Forces.

As the world's largest buyer of Arab energy, China focuses on economic influence in the Middle East. In addition to purchasing energy, China promotes Chinese goods and services, as well as investments in large, capital-intensive infrastructure projects, especially for logistics, transportation, and communication. China is playing a long game, using time and patience to promote economic incentives to advance greater geopolitical interests.

Together, China and Russia have surpassed the U.S. economically in the Middle East, and each power clearly aims to erode American influence. The voices who call for U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East only encourage Russia and China to push harder and present themselves to Middle Eastern countries as the new partner of choice if and when the U.S. leaves.

The Middle East does not stand alone in a vacuum, where the U.S. can ignore it without cost to America's global influence. The region is an integral part of a strategic continuum in the U.S.'s opposition to Russia and China.

U.S. Needs to Integrate with Partners to Form a New Architecture for an Effective, Sustainable Presence in the Middle East

Both the long and recent history of the Middle East has proven time and again that the region cannot be placed low on (or taken off) the list of U.S. global priorities. Presidents Biden, Trump, and Obama all tried to reduce the U.S. military footprint in the region in favor of a pivot to the Pacific. But all had to face the reality of a turbulent, demanding area that requires a strong American presence to protect U.S. economic interests, vie for global influence with China and Russia, and enhance security for the region, the U.S. homeland, and the rest of the world.

Certainly, the U.S. military presence in the Middle East does not need to approach a war footing, but the pendulum should not swing too far in the other direction. The choice is not binary—stay or leave—as was (falsely) presented for the U.S. presence in Afghanistan.

Russia and China clearly demand significant U.S. attention, but not to the exclusion of America's interests in the Middle East. The U.S. should not choose two at the expense of one; the U.S. must deal with all three—*wisely*. Neglecting any of these priorities would undermine U.S. power and credibility with allies, further embolden these adversaries, and heighten U.S. challenges across the world.

Today, the Middle East is on fire, at great cost to America, the world economy, and global stability. But the U.S. military there is stretched, and if only 80% of the fire in Gaza is extinguished, the embers will easily reignite.

Israel can and will dismantle Hamas's military infrastructure, without U.S. soldiers in harm's way, so the U.S. should provide Israel the material and time to do so. Israel can then turn its attention to Hezbollah, while the U.S. deals decisively with the Houthis. Neutralizing Iran's proxies will keep Iran at bay for a while and ease the pressure on U.S. forces.

Accordingly, the situation may require a modest increase in the defense budget for U.S. forces in the Middle East. The U.S. military can be trusted to deliver a sound return on that investment.

Based on recent discussions with U.S. military and embassy teams in the Middle East and state leaders in Qatar and Bahrain, five principles should guide the U.S. presence in the Middle East going forward, as the current fire is extinguished:

- U.S. to act as integrator, not guarantor, of regional security
- Deterrence expanded beyond military superiority
- Innovation and technology to optimize military costs and capabilities
- Economic engagement to expand
- American values promoted pragmatically

U.S. as 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 Department of Defense (DOD), Department of State, Department of the Treasury, and intelligence agencies together and break down communication silos. This team must define each department's unique view of issues, opportunities, and priorities to determine common ground. The President must demand the interagency cooperation required to integrate and execute a joint strategy and plan of action—pulling all military, diplomatic, and economic levers in one direction.

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 joint approach to collective defense and deterrence.

The DOD, especially CENTCOM, is already well focused on the need to work collaboratively on all fronts. As Celeste Wallander, the U.S. Assistant Secretary of Defense for International Security Affairs, recently 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 in the Middle East where the whole is greater than the sum of its parts. As General Kurilla 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; it has been discussed and attempted before. 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 skill deficiencies in operating sophisticated military equipment; the inclination of certain states to amass advanced weapons as their own private “security blanket”; 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 the delayed delivery of military sales to allies like the UAE and Egypt. These mixed signals from the U.S. serve to 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 Houthis' disruption of maritime traffic, and Iran's April 2024 direct attack on Israel—which was thwarted by successful regional cooperation—may finally serve as a wake-up call and a proof-of-concept to push hard on 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, and interception).
- Expand maritime security in the Gulf and Red Sea, to include additional regional and European partners.
- Build up intelligence and military capabilities to deny the transport of arms to malicious actors, and work with regional partners to interdict Iranian weapons shipments (as does Israel in Syria, in denying some Iranian support to Hezbollah).

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 Beyond Military Superiority

An influential 1974 book by Alexander George and Richard Smoke, "Deterrence in American Foreign Policy: Theory and Practice," states that, "deterrence is simply the persuasion of one's opponent that the cost and/or risk of a given course of action he might take outweighs its benefits."

This definition can be further refined. First, a potential aggressor must know or perceive that its target has the capability to retaliate. Second, the potential aggressor must believe that its target is readily prepared to use that capability to exact a decisive, painful punishment.

Undoubtedly, Iran recognizes the U.S. military's lethal superiority and clearly understands that in an armed confrontation, the U.S. is capable of exacting a heavy price, even a fatal one, on the Iranian regime. But Iran's actions indicate that, in their calculus, America, while capable, is unwilling or not prepared at this time to use its military power in direct confrontation. And they may be right! Political considerations, public sentiments, economic woes, and the upcoming election may all make the U.S. adopt an armed conflict avoidance policy and continue to absorb direct attacks and provocations from Iran on itself and its partners and allies.

However, attempts to contain Iran through non-military means have seemingly stalled. The current administration's constrained diplomatic and military responses have failed to rein in Iran's ambitions, as have repeated warnings to Iran to refrain from further hostile acts. Sanctions against Iran have also fallen short of expectations, as Iran has found energy customers among America's adversaries.

With diplomacy appearing to have run its course, and the U.S. military seemingly directed to deter but not confront Iran, what's next?

First, the U.S. should expand its deterrence toolbox by bringing together the resources of the U.S. Strategic Command, Cyber Command, Space Command, and Special Operations Command to complement CENTCOM's military muscle. And if the U.S. is already bringing these capabilities to bear to some extent, it should step up its efforts in this regard, both directly and in cooperation with partners.

Next, the U.S. should intensify what Defense Secretary Lloyd Austin has called "integrated deterrence" to address challenges and "gray zone competition."

Gray zone competition is defined by the U.S. Special Operations Command as "competitive interactions among and within state and non-state actors that fall between the traditional war and peace duality."

Some say that “a key element of operations within the gray zone is for it to remain below the threshold of an attack which could have a legitimate conventional military response.”

By any definition, the idea is for the U.S. to exercise coercive power to subvert its adversaries’ actions, deny any competitive advantage those adversaries might have, and deter those adversaries from further aggressive actions.

Gray-zone efforts must be started early—they cannot just be turned on at the moment they are needed. Accordingly, American policy, going back several administrations, should have been more focused on disrupting the development of Iran’s proxy network before it grew into the threat that it is today. Dealing with today’s reality requires a clear and cohesive strategy to expand gray-zone tactics more aggressively. For example, in the power struggle in Iran after the demise of President Ebrahim Raisi, and the U.S. should have helped the opposition inside Iran undercut the Islamic Revolution leadership. Additionally, the U.S. should consider an information war of deterrence, including:

- Leveraging the cultural insights of U.S. allies, partners, and NGOs in the Middle East to counter Iran’s attempts to subvert populations in the region.
- Conducting subversive information campaigns against Iran, inside and outside its territory. (In fact, the U.S.’s definition of warfare must expand to include information as an essential weapon. Just look at how effectively Hamas turned the tables on Israel in the battle for public opinion, with its resulting effect on U.S. policymakers at the highest level.)

For now, it seems that America’s information operations are underdeveloped. Investment in this area should be prioritized. To be clear, the object is not just the dissemination of misinformation and disinformation—truthful information can also be a powerful tool.

The current political situation in Iran presents the right opportunity for the information war to produce a desirable outcome for the U.S. and its allies.

Innovation and Technology to Optimize Costs and Capabilities

Innovative technologies are sure to speed the development of cost-effective capabilities, augment expensive platforms, and add “bionic muscle” to combatants.

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 and red tape, these teams experimented with innovative solutions—some based on off-the-shelf technology, others developed from scratch. The task forces were notable for their relatively small budgets and entrepreneurial, “garage start-up” spirit. Operating with a flat management structure, the teams tinkered, analyzed, and tested some fascinating capabilities.

Kudos to CENTCOM leadership for their “innovative approach to innovation.” Bureaucracy is the antithesis of innovation, and the U.S. should encourage and reward innovation that gets more “bang for the buck”—to enhance the quality and optimize the quantity of the instruments of war and the efficacy and safety of U.S. soldiers.

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

Expanded Economic Engagement

The U.S. dialog on Middle East policy centers on diplomacy and military presence. But the importance of the economic levers of power is understated.

As discussed, the economic factors that make the Middle East vital for U.S. interests include the free flow of energy and global commerce, competition with China and Russia for influence within the region, and the battle to prevent the Chinese yuan from making inroads against the U.S. dollar as the world's reserve and trade currency.

The U.S. can mitigate the potentially high cost of these risks by expanding its economic engagement with the Middle East. The U.S. should promote U.S. products and services for the region's governments, infrastructure projects, industrial businesses, consumer goods manufacturers, technology companies, and tourism. Many countries in the region seek outside investments in these sectors—and most places in the Middle East, capital is both welcome and treated well.

Some countries in the region also have ambitious visions for a future where new economic engines replace hydrocarbons as a dominant source of national wealth. Their transformation emphasis is on globally competitive industries, economic stability, sound fiscal policy, and secure, efficient financial systems.

Qatar, for example, has defined four pillars of development—economic, human, social, and environmental—in a visionary document called “National Vision 2030.” This plan recognizes and details the need to develop society and human capital “capable of playing a significant role in global partnership for development.”

The KSA, under the leadership of Mohammed bin Salman (MBS), has also developed an impressive long-term plan for economic and societal transformation. For example, the kingdom is placing new emphasis on solar and wind power to stay at the leading edge of the rapidly changing energy industry. The KSA is now home to the world's largest single-site solar-power plant, with 3.3 million panels covering fourteen square miles. The KSA plans to export solar-generated electricity to Europe, through Greece.

The U.S.'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.

The wealthy nations of the Middle East are also major investors in global enterprises. To attract more of those funds, the U.S. should consider giving attractive, preferential treatment to stimulate economic growth at home.

Economic development is tightly linked to security, stability, and human development—all elevate societal contentment, civility, human rights, and prosperity. 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.

Pragmatic Promotion of American Values

The Middle East lacks many of the human rights and democratic values that Americans take for granted. America is not perfect, but the individual rights enshrined in the U.S. Constitution, etched in laws, and earnestly practiced in our judicial system are a beacon for the world.

People around the globe, including in the Middle East, dream of American life and values. The U.S. should always promote those values—carry the torch of democracy, freedom, and human rights—as a cornerstone of America's national interest.

But at times, balancing that idealistic mission with pragmatism should be considered, especially with allies. A moral agenda must be asserted carefully, through collaboration and quiet (but firm) diplomacy, not through self-righteous, unilateral, public proclamations.

The U.S. tends to apply its own values and culture when addressing foreign challenges, sometimes to the detriment of its national interests. The U.S. has made this error repeatedly in the Middle East, where American-style democracy does not come easily to the intricate mix of religious tenants, cultures, and values. This is a systemic, costly misunderstanding (or even failure) across U.S. political, diplomatic, and security institutions.

To make a business analogy, CEOs quickly learn that many of the resources they need, like banks and suppliers, do not report to them, and cannot be commanded at will. Carefully maintaining a positive, productive relationship with these parties, even in tough negotiations, is vital for business and building mutual trust over time. Similarly, in our interconnected world, no country, including the U.S., is entirely independent of other nations.

Even on the moral high ground, the U.S. cannot always force good will and cooperation from other nations as and when it chooses. And the U.S. cannot only do business with morally virtuous nations. In fact, the U.S. frequently does not (and has not, throughout its history). The tension between national values and other national interests requires skillful navigation, patience, and “low heat.”

Conclusion

To defend its global interests against challenges from China, Russia, Iran, non-state malign actors, and other adversaries, the U.S. should maintain a strong, sustainable presence in the Middle East, in jointly integrated capabilities with local partners. This shared architecture should integrate direct military capabilities, covert deterrence, diplomatic pressure, and expanded economic engagement for mutual security and economic prosperity.

In his testimony to Congress in March 2024, General Kurilla spoke of the 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 these beliefs simply drive a deeper analysis of what America’s real national security interests are in the Middle East, and how to best position the U.S. presence in the region. These doubts help articulate a better U.S. strategy and the just right military footprint.

The Middle East is an integral part U.S. global strategy. By mitigating the region’s risks and capitalizing on mutually beneficial opportunities for the U.S. and its regional allies and partners, the U.S. can better counter the powers that seek to undermine the U.S. globally. The evidence, detailed herein, makes a compelling case for the U.S.’s comprehensive commitment to the region.

With Iran poised to foment more turmoil (as manifested by their intense missile attack in April 2024), and with other Middle Eastern nations seeking economic transformation (away from carbon-based energy to a more diverse economy), 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.

This opportunity should not be lost.

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, on the way to regional security, stability, and prosperity.

About the Authors

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