

## U.S. needs to reset its relationships in the Middle East

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President Joe Biden, joined by Vice President Kamala Harris, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin, U.S. Air Force Gen. Jacqueline Van Ovost, and U.S. Army Lt. Gen. Laura Richardson, delivers remarks during an event to announce the President's Combatant Commanders nominees Monday, March 8, 2021, in the East Room of the White House. (Photo: Courtesy of Wikimedia Commons/Official White House Photo by Adam Schultz)

By Raphael Benaroya

The Middle East has long been an arena of conflicts and intrigues, driven by tribal feuds, religion, and culture. The region's abundance of petroleum, and its strategic location at the intersection of three

continents and key commerce lanes, has further made it a battleground for empires, local monarchs, nation states, and non-state actors.

This difficult neighborhood has always demanded the world's attention and will continue to do so. The rest of the world cannot simply "wish it away." When one nation diverts its attention from the Middle East, another quickly steps in to fill the void.

The U.S.'s decision to pivot away from the Middle East to focus on Asia, in an effort to counter China's geopolitical ambitions, was prudent. But doing so without leaving behind an integrated regional security strategy in the Middle East was not.

To make matters worse, U.S. foreign policy missteps in recent years have hurt America's relationships in the Middle East. Arab allies have grown distrustful of the U.S. They feel abandoned by America's repeated signs of weakness and underwhelming commitment to security in the region. Following are a few examples.

In 2009, the Obama administration polarized Arab nations by reaching out to the Muslim Brotherhood, which is supported by Qatar and Turkey but considered to be a terrorist organization by Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), and Egypt, among others. (Equivocating, the U.S. calls the Muslim Brotherhood "a militant Islamist organization with affiliates in over 70 countries, including groups designated as terrorist organizations.")

In 2011, the U.S. turned its back on Egypt's Hosni Mubarak, a long-time ally. This surely made other Arab leaders question the U.S.'s loyalty to them.

In 2012, the U.S. supported Morsi as Egypt's president, despite the fact that he was leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. Never mind that Morsi promoted Islamic laws that curbed civil liberties. The U.S. also chastised the next president of Egypt, el-Sisi, over human rights, even though the U.S. State Department received a representative from the Muslim Brotherhood.

Then, the Obama administration ignored its own red line against Syria's use of chemical weapons. In the absence of a strong American response, Russia stepped in to actively assist Syrian president al-Assad in defeating U.S.-backed rebels to remain in power.

Next, the U.S. pushed through the flawed 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on Iran's development of nuclear power, over the objections of regional allies who better understood Iran. This appeasement of Iran was doubly ineffective: it severely frayed America's relationship with Saudi Arabia while barely denting Iran's nuclear ambitions.

The Trump administration was also criticized for its failure to respond to an Iran-supported missile and drone attack on Saudi oil processing facilities in 2019. Not until 2020 did the U.S. finally conduct its own drone strike against Iran, which killed General Suleimani, Iran's most powerful security chief and the architect of its expansionist aggression. Although Suleimani's killing has probably been a net positive, it also energized Iran to increase hostilities against its Persian Gulf neighbors and U.S. assets in the region.

The Biden administration's actions (and inactions) have made matters worse yet:

- The U.S. withdrew forces from Afghanistan haphazardly, leaving behind billions of dollars of weapons in Taliban hands and making the U.S. look inept and unreliable in Middle Eastern eyes.

- The U.S. ended support of Saudi Arabia against the Iran-backed Houthis in Yemen, encouraging further Iranian aggression
- The U.S. castigated Saudi Arabia publicly over human rights. Biden said that the kingdom should be treated like a pariah over its human rights record. Then he postponed a scheduled arms delivery to the Saudis, saying “it’s all about human rights.” So much for balancing moral idealism with the pragmatism of keeping a positive relationship with this important ally.
- The U.S. prioritized reinstatement of the toothless JCPOA, but has in fact lost ground on Iran’s ability to develop nuclear weapons.
- The U.S. failed to deter Russia from invading Ukraine, making Arab allies feel insecure about what the U.S. might or might not do as they face Iran’s continued aggression.
- The U.S. proclaimed a strategic move away from fossil fuels without viable energy alternatives, without having a self-sufficient supply of oil, and without considering the ramifications among Arab allies. This led to OPEC’s refusal (despite U.S. pleas) to increase oil production to ease U.S. inflation and help counter Russia’s energy weaponization. The fact is, oil isn’t going away any time soon and OPEC provides 80% of global oil production, with 50% coming from U.S. allies in the Middle East.
- Perhaps most significantly, the U.S. has not responded adequately to a tidal wave of hostile acts perpetrated by Iran and its proxies against the U.S. and its allies. These hostilities include:
  - Continued attacks on the assets and interests of the U.S. and its regional partners. Recent targets have included an oil refinery in Iraqi Kurdistan; Iraq’s Al Asad Airbase, where four U.S. personnel were injured; the Yemeni city of Hodeidah, in violation of the cease-fire with Saudi Arabia; and Abu Dhabi, UAE, where the U.S. has an airbase with some 2,000 personnel.
  - Hundreds of other drone and missile attacks on Saudi Arabia and the UAE.
  - Cyberattacks against Israel.
  - Plotting assassinations, including that of a U.S. general, according to Mossad, Israel’s intelligence service.
  - Voting against a resolution to suspend Russia from the United Nations Human Rights Council over its invasion of Ukraine, and reportedly smuggling weapons into Russia through Iraq.

Some in America seem to believe that stepping back from the Middle East will make Iran less aggressive. But the nations of the Middle East clearly do not agree. They see America’s soft stance as encouraging Iran to ramp up its aggression. And those Persian Gulf states fear the further havoc that Iran would wreak if it succeeds in building nuclear weapons, not to mention the regional nuclear arms race that would be sure to follow.

To counter Iran’s threat, the Biden administration has also failed to capitalize and expand on Trump’s major success in the Middle East, the Abraham Accords, which forged unprecedented relationships between Israel, Bahrain, the UAE, Morocco, and the Sudan.

The consequences of U.S. weakness in the Middle East are apparent not just in Iran’s elevated hostility, but also in the actions of America’s “friends” in the region.

The UAE has not condemned Russia’s invasion of Ukraine; it has maintained an alliance with Russia on oil production; and it has declined to take phone calls from President Biden (presumably about pumping more oil to reduce oil prices and apply pressure on Russia).

Likewise, Saudi Arabia has maintained a petro-relationship with Russia, rebuffed U.S. requests to pump more oil, and refused Biden’s phone calls. The Saudis are also courting China for a petroleum deal that could potentially elevate the Yuan as a global currency. The Saudis have also concluded that they need to negotiate directly with Iran, without a U.S. presence (Saudi Arabia has entered a fifth round of talks with

Teheran). So it is good news that, finally, President Biden has reportedly planned a trip to Saudi Arabia to try to smooth over ruffled feathers.

Even Qatar—host of the U.S. Central Command’s regional headquarters, a significant buyer of U.S. weapons systems, and now officially a U.S. “Non-NATO Ally”—continues to cultivate a relationship with Russia and is in a natural gas partnership with Iran.

Many other Middle East countries, including Israel, Jordan, Turkey, and Egypt, are also expanding ties with American adversaries, particularly China and Russia. Egypt, for example, is looking for military equipment from Russia and elsewhere to supplant its heretofore U.S. supply of weapons systems.

America cannot afford to continue alienating its allies in the Middle East if it hopes to deter Iran, Russia, China, and other authoritarian regimes that aim to harm U.S. interests around the world.

To the contrary, the U.S. must renew and reprioritize its commitments to the Middle East with actions including:

1. Mend fences with the Saudis to combat high oil prices, help tame inflation, and contest Iran’s aggression. While the U.S. should remain committed to promoting human rights, rebuking allied leaders publicly and personally, and applying pressure on them inconsistently, has hurt U.S. national security interests. Quiet diplomacy and cultural sensitivity are preferable instead.
2. Develop a meaningful, unified, regional security strategy, driven by U.S. objectives. Then engage each state in the Middle East to define its integrated role, based on its individual capabilities.

This would require a fundamental change to the U.S.’s current approach. Now, the U.S. State Department, with the U.S. Department of Defense and National Security Council in support, produces a Theatre Security Cooperation Strategy (TSCS) for each country in the Middle East. But each TSCS seems to be mainly a shopping list of U.S. weapons requested by that particular country. The TSCS does not follow a cohesive regional plan to achieve U.S. strategic objectives. (Selling an air defense system to one ally, for example, falls short of a strategic, integrated air defense system for the entire region.) The U.S. must consider providing allies in the Persian Gulf with both defensive and offensive means to deter to Iran.

The lack of an integrated regional security strategy places greater stress on American assets and the U.S. Central Command. To secure its interests in the Middle East, the U.S. must develop a cohesive security plan that places more responsibilities with states in the region for their own collective defense.

1. Seize the opportunity presented by the Abraham Accords by encouraging its signatories and other Arab states, such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, to develop a shared security architecture to counter Iran’s aggression. Further, add Arab signatories to the Abraham Accords—especially Saudi Arabia—to reassert American leadership in the region and continue to realign Arab-Israeli relations. This will require a sustained, challenging engagement, but it could do more than any other act of diplomacy to create a coalition to promote stability and security in the Middle East.
2. Support stronger security cooperation among member states in the Gulf Cooperation Council: Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, Qatar, Bahrain, and Oman.

The Middle East needs U.S. actions like these to renew its confidence in America’s strength and resolve. The U.S. must be willing to lead a regional response to Iran that counters Iran’s aggression with a commensurate projection of power—though always backed by a resolute diplomatic option.

Mending fences between the U.S. and its allies in the Persian Gulf would also prevent China and Russia from stepping into the breach. And a stronger U.S.-Middle East regional alliance would help suppress festering non-state actors.

The Biden administration must reassert U.S. leadership in the Middle East. Only then can the U.S. truly pivot its strategic focus to Asia.

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