

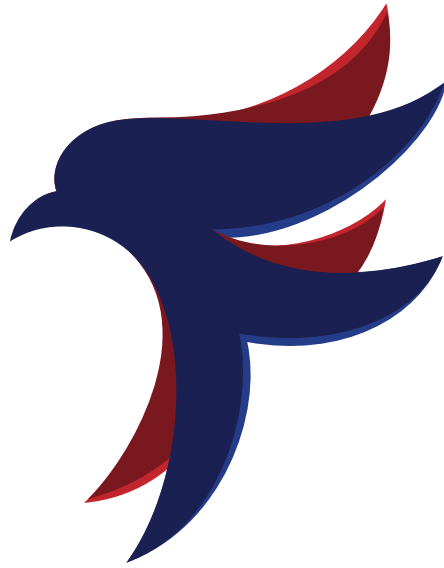


# NARROWING INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST

PLANNING FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

Aaron Stein





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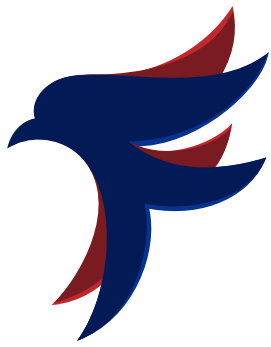
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January 2020

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# NARROWING INTERESTS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: PLANNING FOR GREAT POWER COMPETITION

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The United States dramatically increased the commitment of troops and military equipment to a string of permanent bases in the Middle East after the collapse of the Soviet Union and the defeat of the Iraqi army after its 1991 invasion of Kuwait. In the nearly two decades since the Al Qaeda-linked attacks on September 11, 2001, the United States has deepened its military and political commitment to the region, following the decisions to invade Afghanistan and Iraq, and then to intervene militarily in Syria. The Barack Obama and Donald Trump administrations have sought to focus more on Asia, but have failed to disentangle the United States from conflicts in the Middle East. This report assumes that the United States will retain an overwhelming interest in ensuring close alliances and partnerships with America's transatlantic allies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and close partners and allies in the Indo-Pacific even if President Trump is re-elected in 2020. It also assumes that the United States will begin to focus primarily on Asia, with the Russian Federation being considered of secondary importance to the rise of the People's Republic of China. Given these twin assumptions, the role of American forces and Washington's policy priorities in the Middle East require new thinking about how to wind down wars that are draining American resources and to re-allocate finite, high-demand assets that could be leveraged for operations in Europe or the Indo-Pacific. This report proposes an interlinked political and military policy that would allow for the United States to retain a robust presence in the Middle East, but in a way that would de-escalate tensions with the Islamic Republic of Iran, and alter how U.S. forces are deployed around the world.



# KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

**A**s the United States grapples with managing tensions in the Persian Gulf and taking steps to be better prepared for potential conflict with Russia or China, the reality is that Washington will have to sort out how best to realize its interests in the Middle East, without over committing finite military resources in the region. This paper proposes an interlinked political and military policy that would allow for the United States to retain a robust presence in the Middle East, but do so in a way that de-escalates tensions with Iran. This policy could result in a drawdown of certain forces from the region thus enabling the reallocation of these forces to other locations, or to build in more training time to improve military readiness and reduce the strain on soldiers and equipment, in order to prepare for conflict with a great power. This is important because the strains of deployments to the Middle East have undermined the readiness of the military and are detracting from the broader, overarching American policy of competing effectively with large state powers.

To do so, the United States must consider how to de-escalate tensions with Iran, while retaining capabilities to ensure that the United States can achieve its core regional interests. This new status quo would allow for the United States to focus more on its interests in Europe and Asia, while retaining capabilities in the Middle East. It would require rethinking U.S. priorities and interests, both in the Middle East and around the world. However, it is necessary if the United States seeks to implement and pursue a broader strategy that prioritizes planning for conflict with a great power, rather than skirmishing in wars of choice with non-state actors and weak states in the Middle East.

**As part of this effort, the United States should focus on three core regional interests:**

1. Maintain unimpeded energy exports via the Strait of Hormuz.
2. Deny safe haven to terrorist groups plotting

external attacks.

3. Prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

**To achieve detente with Iran, in support of the three objectives above, the United States should focus narrowly on Iran's nuclear and missiles programs and consider following proposals to manage them:**

1. Consider trading sanctions relief for Iran's return to complete compliance with the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), or reach a similar agreement in the spirit of the JCPOA that imposes excess inspections on Iran's nuclear program.
2. Open discussions about securing a region-wide pledge to cap missile ranges to 2,000 kilometers or less.
3. Encourage the region's countries to adhere to the International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation to lessen the chance of accidental launch and to make regional missile policy more transparent for all parties.
4. Encourage Iranian work on liquid-fueled, low energetic propellant space launchers.

**To de-escalate regional tensions, the United States should contribute to a resolution of the conflicts in Yemen and Syria. On Yemen:**

1. Pursue a freeze on missile launches and secure a pledge from Iran and its allies in Yemen, the Houthis, to cease the proliferation of ballistic and cruise missiles, as part of a broader effort to negotiate a ceasefire to the conflict.
2. Support de-escalation dialogue, using U.S. diplomatic leverage with allied combatants, the United Arab Emirates and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, to make compromises necessary

for dialogue.

**On Syria, the United States should consider how to pair a workable political end to the conflict that also forces Moscow to act in astrategic ways. This effort should:**

1. Saddle Russia with the cost of victory in Syria and signal to Moscow that the United States will not support post-conflict reconstruction, with the intent of forcing Russia to shoulder a larger burden of the regime victory than it may have planned.
2. Simultaneously, engage with Russia in talks about a shared proposal to end the war, which includes some guarantees for American partner forces and includes a pathway for the Syrian regime to disarm itself of weapons of mass destruction completely.
3. Include in any such agreement guarantees for American counter-terrorism operations, including an agreement for the United States to be able to pursue ISIS leadership targets in Syria from U.S. bases in the region.
4. Impose a cost on the regime for its violation of the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC) and impose a cost on Russia for supplying the Bashar al Assad regime with the spare parts and tools for these weapons' delivery via fixed and rotary wing aircraft. These sanctions could be removed if Assad verifiably disarms.

**To improve readiness and prepare militarily for great power competition, the United States has to consider how to most effectively use its legacy equipment and reverse the attrition that years of non-stop combat has had on the United States armed forces. The U.S. Air Force should:**

1. Reduce the number of non A-10 fighter squadrons that rotate through the Middle East, which would increase the amount of training

time for higher-end skills and lessen the strain on other aging fighting jets, designed to fight against higher-end adversary aircraft.

2. Scale back the rotation of bombers through the Middle East, choosing instead to retain bombers inside the United States; they only would be sent to the region on a contingency basis.
3. Re-allocate scheduled rotations for in-demand military assets to maintain a healthy training schedule to build skills and prepare the U.S. military to fight against a high-end adversary.
4. Harden U.S. bases to better defend against missile attack and consider using bases outside the region with improved infrastructure for certain deployments because its distance from Iran remains an asset for U.S. forces.
5. Consider investing in low-cost ground attack platforms, in addition to higher-end aircraft to counter more advanced state-level threats.<sup>1</sup>

**The U.S. Navy should:**

1. Alter the aircraft carrier requirement in the Middle East,<sup>2</sup> deploying finite carriers to the Indian Ocean, but ensure that they can sail to the Persian Gulf within 14 days of being needed to support contingency operations or ongoing counter-terrorism missions.

**The Army should:**

1. Consider force transparency on Special Operations Forces deployments.
2. Use general purpose forces where applicable, including for training missions in the Middle East and for missions now assigned to Special Operations Forces.

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<sup>1</sup> Heather Venable, "The Light Airplane that Couldn't: The Air Force's Light Attack Message," *War on the Rocks*, March 4, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/03/the-little-airplane-that-couldnt-the-air-forces-light-attack-message/>.

<sup>2</sup> For thirty years, U.S. Navy policy created a standing requirement to have at least one carrier in the Middle East and second carrier in the western Pacific. See: David B. Larer, "What if the US stopped sending aircraft carriers to the Arabian Gulf?," *Defense News*, May 2, 2018, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2018/05/02/what-if-the-us-stopped-sending-aircraft-carriers-to-the-arabian-gulf/>.

# “RIGHT-SIZING” THE U.S. PRESENCE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The Middle East has been the focal point of American foreign policy since Al Qaeda’s terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001 and the start of the Global War on Terror.<sup>1</sup> The attacks on Washington, D.C. and New York City prompted the American-led invasion of Afghanistan in October 2001 and the invasion of Iraq in March 2003. For most Americans, the wars in the Middle East suggest that the region long has been a focal point for American diplomats and military officials.<sup>2</sup> However, the region was, for almost all of the Cold War, a strategic backwater, subordinate to more pressing concerns in Europe. This dynamic stemmed from the American prioritization of Europe and the Pacific during this time period and the decision to allocate resources to counter great powers, rather than become enmeshed in regional politics, and to devote considerable assets to ensuring the free flow of oil.

It was only in the late 1980s, following the toppling of the American-aligned Shah of Iran in 1979, the subsequent Iran-Iraq War between 1980-1988, the U.S. decision to intervene on behalf of Kuwait in support of energy exports during that war, and then Iraq’s ill-fated invasion of Kuwait in 1990 that solidified the American presence in the Middle East. These interests have grown in the absence of a large, near-peer competitor. As the United States plans again to confront large states, it is necessary to think through how to prioritize American interests in the Middle East, as compared to threats around the world, and how best to prioritize where and how the U.S. should use and deploy military resources.

After almost two decades of combat in the Middle East and Central Asia, the United States is debating the future of national security strategy and how to “right-size” military commitments around the world.<sup>3</sup> The Donald Trump administration has prioritized deploying the armed forces to prepare for a potential conflict with a great power competitor. The focus on the Russian Federation and the People’s Republic of China has raised questions about the prioritization of the Middle East, and whether the United States should commit such a large percentage of its finite military and diplomatic resources to a region where there are no great powers or existential threats to the United States. This study examines the origins of American policy in the Middle East, the interests that underpinned the U.S. military’s presence there, and whether the current threat environment requires such a large military footprint.<sup>4</sup>

As a result, the United States must rebalance how it deploys its military assets, but has yet to make a political choice to follow through on this endeavor. In two ideologically opposed administrations, Presidents Donald Trump and Barack Obama both indicated that the future of American military planning and diplomatic outreach should be tilted towards Asia. With the Russian annexation of Crimea in 2014, invasion of the Donbas, and follow-on interference in European and American electoral politics, transatlantic planning to counter a hostile Moscow has emerged as a key priority. These two priorities are certain to require a greater military and political response. It also requires that the United States accept that Russia

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1 Robert Malley, “The Long Shadow of 9/11: How Counterterrorism Warps U.S. Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2018-06-14/long-shadow-911>.

2 Hal Brands, “Why American Can’t Quit the Middle East,” Hoover Institution, March 21, 2019, <https://www.hoover.org/research/why-america-cant-quit-middle-east>.

3 “The US Military Under Strain: Under Strain and at Risk,” National Security Advisory Group, The Harvard Belfer Center, January 2006, [https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/nsag\\_us\\_military\\_under\\_strain\\_january2006.pdf](https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/nsag_us_military_under_strain_january2006.pdf).

4 Micah Zenko, “US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal,” US and the Americas Programme, Chatham House, October 2018, <https://reader.chathamhouse.org/us-military-policy-middle-east-appraisal>.





Spc. Clara Zurita, motor transport operator, and Spc. Godswill Orzabal, petroleum supply specialist, 574th Composite Supply Company, fuel up an NH90 helicopter at Erbil, Iraq, Oct. 15, 2019. (CENTCOM)

will challenge American interests in weak states, where it determines that its interests are being threatened. The Syrian case, for example, signals a greater Russian commitment to protect force outside its borders. The United States has limited options to respond militarily in these scenarios, given that few policymakers would accept the risk of escalation with Moscow for primacy in a state such as Syria. This reality does not point to the end of American primacy in the Middle East, but it does signal that Washington can no longer assume it can pick and chose how and when to intervene, without any third-party pushback. Washington must now grapple with how to manage Russia's return to the region, rather than endlessly debate whether it was possible to have stopped it in the first place.

A future military posture, premised on great power competition, is certain to see the relative strategic importance of both the United States European Command (EUCOM) and Indo-Pacific

Command (INDO-PACOM) increase. Often times, the needs of one combatant command compete with one another, forcing planners to choose how to allocate resources. For the past two decades, the demands of the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan have resulted in the prioritization of the Middle East over other places around the world. Looking forward, the Department of Defense has indicated that "long-term strategic competition with China and Russia are the principal priorities" for defense planners and will shape how the United States thinks about national defense.<sup>5</sup> This emphasis gives a clear indication that military planners are keen to disentangle from regional contingencies in the Middle East and focus, again, on training and equipping a force for combat with a great power.

This directive raises natural questions about the future of the American role in the Middle East, which is not the backyard of any great power, but instead a further afield playground for

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5 Summary of the National Defense Strategy: Sharpening the American Military Edge, U.S. Department of Defense, 2018, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.

great powers. But in the Middle East, America's regional allies have grown accustomed to a large U.S. presence and remain actively engaged in ensuring that a large American military presence protects regime security from internal and external attack. The United States and the Arab Gulf States have developed a symbiotic relationship, whereby Washington is granted favorable basing and overflight access to respond to regional contingencies linked to national security priorities, which the Gulf States have leveraged to win American support for niche regional priorities and security guarantees—often to the detriment of U.S. interests elsewhere around the world. This current pact dates back to the Jimmy Carter Doctrine in 1980, which was later formalized following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990, and then codified with the entrenchment of American forces in the Persian Gulf at a number of military bases.

The post-1990 posture is unique in that it began when the United States faced no great power competitor. The Soviet Union had imploded, and China had yet to begin investing heavily in capabilities to defeat the American military in a battle for primacy in Asia. The security landscape began to shift noticeably with growing Chinese capabilities in the mid-2000s<sup>6</sup> and then, again, with Russia's annexation of Crimea in 2014, follow-on invasion of the Donbas, and interference in the American presidential election in 2016.<sup>7</sup> These twin moves represent a return to a pre-1990 status quo, wherein the United States has to compete with hostile powers willing to challenge it for primacy and influence around the world. This "new normal" requires new thinking about what exactly to do and how to achieve American foreign policy goals, given the global nature of U.S. interests.

This paper assumes that the United States will retain an overwhelming interest in ensuring close alliances and partnerships with America's transatlantic allies (North Atlantic Treaty Organization) and close partners and allies in

Asia even if President Trump is re-elected in 2020. It also assumes that the United States will begin to focus primarily on Asia, with Russia being considered of secondary importance to the rise of and long-term threat posed by China. Given these twin assumptions, the role of American forces and Washington's policy priorities in the Middle East require new thinking about how to wind down wars that are draining American resources and to re-allocate finite, high-demand assets that could be leveraged for operations in Europe or the Indo-Pacific. It also requires thinking about how to manage and exact a cost on Russia's presence in Syria, with the overarching aim of forcing Moscow to spend resources in astrategic ways that are, ultimately, advantageous to the United States. However, a precipitous drawdown, or departure from the region, could risk upending an enduring interest by creating a security vacuum, perhaps to the advantage of Russia and to the detriment of American interests in the Middle East.

Looking forward, the United States will retain an interest in ensuring the freedom of navigation for the export of oil (and the concurrent benefit of norm-setting for other global contingencies, particularly in the South China Sea), retaining capabilities to strike terrorist groups, and working to ensure that weapons of mass destruction (WMD) do not spread further. The United States would be wise to pursue these foreign policy goals in consultation with its European and Asian allies, work to shape a collective response to lessen the burden on America, and to enlist wider support for what should be shared, global priorities. This effort will require challenging assumptions about how best to secure American interests and, critically, how to address the Iranian regime and its support for destabilizing actors throughout the region.

For close to five decades, Iran has guided much of America's policy in the Middle East, beginning with the decision to politically and militarily support the Shah, and then to invest in alternative regional governments after a hostile Iranian regime took

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6 "China Military Power: Modernizing a Force to Fight and Win," Defense Intelligence Agency, 2019, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China\\_Military\\_Power\\_FINAL\\_5MB\\_20190103.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/China_Military_Power_FINAL_5MB_20190103.pdf).

7 "Ukraine: Background, Conflict with Russia, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, September 19, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/row/R45008.pdf>.





Two U.S. Navy Sikorsky RH-53D Sea Stallion helicopters are brought to the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Nimitz (CVN-68) during Operation Eagle Claw in the Arabian Sea on 24 April 1980.

power in 1979. Following the rise of the Islamic Republic, the United States has deployed forces to balance against Iranian aggression, betting that a policy of coercion could force the Iranian regime to capitulate and accept U.S. primacy. This policy was enabled by the collapse of the Soviet Union and the expansion of American bases in the Persian Gulf and concurrent political and military agreements reached with much of the Arab world following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait in 1990. As the United States, again, contemplates how to counterbalance great powers, it makes strategic sense to draw down certain capabilities in the Middle East and deploy them elsewhere.

To do so, the United States has an incentive to try and reach a state of detente with Iran, while ensuring that its political agreements with the Arab states in the region remain intact, and the capabilities that remain in the region are robust enough to meet a narrower set of U.S. interests. A regional detente, grounded in a narrower set of priorities for the United States to manage, would enable this broader strategic realignment. The United States has the capabilities to manage any

future drawdown and ensure that it retain the assets and materiel to respond quickly to any regional contingency. However, a political choice must be made and resources allocated to match America's global priorities in Europe and Asia. This requires a change in how the United States views the Middle East and how it then prepares to achieve its goals. This paper makes a series of proposals to achieve this outcome and explains the current regional status quo and how Iran is at the center of much of U.S. deployments and strategy in the Middle East.

## THE BUILDUP:

# THE LOSS OF IRAN AND THE THREAT OF TERRORISM

The buildup of American forces in the Middle East stemmed from the failure of the broader effort to develop a pro-Western force to patrol the Persian Gulf in support of the U.S. objective of ensuring the free flow of oil. This approach stemmed from the very basic fact that the bulk of U.S. forces were devoted to countering the Soviet Union, and were deployed in Europe and the Pacific to do so. This situation left few resources for the Middle East and required thinking through how to maximize American interests without having to devote a large percentage of finite resources because the region was deemed less important to U.S. interests. The United States is unlikely to ever return to the pre-Cold War status quo. However, the same basic policy conundrum that American planners faced during the Cold War has, again, become salient: How does the United States confront global competitors, while ensuring its interests in less important regions, such as the Middle East, are pursued appropriately?

During the 1970s, the United States sought to empower regional allies to act as force multipliers and to work through regional militaries to project American power and deter Soviet-allied actors from gaining influence. However, once the United States lost its preferred ally, the Shah of Iran, its position was weakened, resulting in a buildup of U.S. capabilities in the region and deepening of the American alliance with Saudi Arabia.

The Persian Gulf and broader Middle East region was a strategic backwater for much of the Cold

War. It proved to be a testing ground for Western-origin aircraft against Soviet-origin air defenses, most notably during the Arab-Israeli wars of 1967, 1973, and 1979.<sup>8</sup> The American entrenchment in the Persian Gulf began in 1968, following the United Kingdom's decision to withdraw from territories east of Suez, which was completed in 1971.<sup>9</sup> The British drawdown risked creating a security vacuum in the Gulf, which the United States feared the Soviet Union could exploit. America's initial instinct was to replicate Great Britain's approach and its emphasis on creating a regional duopoly, led by Saudi Arabia and Iran. London had sought to maintain a political and military balance between the two states, which would prevent either power from dominating the Gulf and destabilizing<sup>10</sup> the small Arab littoral states.

During the Lyndon B. Johnson administration, the status of the Persian Gulf was hardly a policy priority, given the ongoing war in Vietnam and concurrent concerns about the security of Europe. For this reason, the administration favored a policy of working through London to secure American interests and, critically, refraining from the export of large volumes of weapons. This policy changed in 1969 following the election of Richard Nixon and his articulation of the "Nixon Doctrine," a policy designed to assuage allies about concerns of an American withdrawal from Southeast Asia and premised on the notion that the U.S. would provide materiel support for allied governments

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<sup>8</sup> For a primer on the American and Soviet experiences during the 1973 Arab-Israeli war, see: John L. Scherer, "Soviet and American Behavior During the Yom Kippur War," *World Affairs*, vol. 141, no. 1 (Summary 1978), pp. 3-23; "The Development of Soviet Air Defense Doctrine and Tactics," A Report for Sandia National Laboratories, Historical Evaluation and Research Organization, July 1981, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a166753.pdf>; and William B. Quandt, "Soviet Policy in the October 1973 War," A Report Prepared for the Office of the Assistant Secretary of Defense/International Security Affairs. RAND Corp., May 1976, <https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/reports/2006/R1864.pdf>.

<sup>9</sup> Roger Louis, "The British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967-71," *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History*, vol. 31, no. 1 (January 2003), pp. 83-108.

<sup>10</sup> Roham Alvandi, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf," *Diplomatic History*, vol. 36, no. 2 (April 2012), pp. 338-339.





The Shah of Iran and President Nixon, 1969.

to enable them to fight their own internal conflicts and contain Soviet expansionism.<sup>11</sup> This policy decision enabled the Shah of Iran to convince Nixon and Henry Kissinger of Iran's ability to replace the British as the guarantor of American interests in the Persian Gulf and as the only power suitable to prevent Soviet expansion in the contested waterway. By 1970, the Shah of Iran and the Nixon administration had reached an understanding about strategy in the Persian Gulf, leading to the decision to export considerable amounts of weaponry from the United States

to Iran and to support Tehran's foreign policy ambitions in Iraq and Pakistan quietly, while also engaging with Saudi Arabia to establish a dual-pronged policy in the Middle East.<sup>12</sup>

The U.S.-Iranian entente continued during the Jimmy Carter administration although disagreements over human rights and questions about the amount of weaponry being exported to Iran undermined the cordial leader-to-leader dynamic between the two countries.<sup>13</sup> However, by 1978, the United States had come to terms with the notion that severe political and economic distress could result in the Shah being toppled. Publicly, Washington remained supportive, while privately efforts were underway to chart a post-Shah policy and to better understand who would rule Iran after Reza Pahlavi abdicated. The United States, however, was not prepared for the hostage situation in the American embassy, and the U.S. military's poor performance during Operation Eagle Claw in 1980 led to changes that shifted how the American military operated, broadly, and positioned itself in the Middle East to respond to regional contingencies.<sup>14</sup>

Ayatollah Rulloah Khomeini's decision to extend the detention of American diplomats inflamed relations with Washington.<sup>15</sup> The crisis prompted the Carter administration to implement sanctions, a historical first for the American presidency; sanctions now have become a common method to implement American policy.<sup>16</sup> It also touched off a change in U.S. policy and a shift away from the basic tenets of the Nixon Doctrine to the Carter Doctrine, which announced that "any attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and

<sup>11</sup> Ibid, p. 346.

<sup>12</sup> Alvandi, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah," pp. 54-55; National Security Decision Memorandum 92, U.S. Policy Toward the Persian Gulf, November 7, 1970, <https://fas.org/irp/offdocs/nsdm-nixon/nsdm-92.pdf>.

<sup>13</sup> Stephen McGlinchey and Robert W. Murray, "Jimmy Carter and the Sale of the AWACS to Iran in 1977," *Diplomacy & Statecraft*, vol. 28. no. 2 (June 2017), pp. 254-276.

<sup>14</sup> See: "[Iran Hostage] Rescue Mission Report," August 1980, Naval History and Heritage Command, <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/iran-hostage-rescue-mission-report.html>.

<sup>15</sup> For background, see: "The Hostage Crisis in Iran," The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed on August 27, 2019, [https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/hostage\\_crisis\\_in\\_iran](https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/research/hostage_crisis_in_iran).

<sup>16</sup> Kate Hewitt and Richard Nephew, "How the Iran Hostage Crisis Shaped the US Approach to Sanctions," The Brookings Institution, March 12, 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/order-from-chaos/2019/03/12/how-the-iran-hostage-crisis-shaped-the-us-approach-to-sanctions/>.



such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>17</sup>

As early as 1977, the Carter administration had proposed creating a rapid reaction force that could deploy to places in the developing world or the Persian Gulf to respond to regional contingencies.<sup>18</sup> This proposal gained new urgency after the hostage crisis began and following the failure of Operation Eagle Claw, a complex, two-day operation that required C-130 aircraft to covertly land inside Iran, where they would meet up with Navy helicopters, and then fly to Tehran. The mission was an absolute disaster, and, after being aborted due to helicopter troubles, a helicopter crashed into a fully fueled, troop-carrying C-130, killing eight servicepeople.<sup>19</sup> This failure prompted Congressional pressure to make the U.S. military more interoperable and to encourage joint planning between the services.

In 1979, Carter pushed ahead and established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, which established its base at an old Strategic Air Command base at MacDill Air Force Base in Tampa, Florida, and designed to be a highly mobile reservoir of forces that could deploy and respond to regional contingencies without taking forces away from existing deployments.<sup>20</sup> The

administration paired this effort with a decision to export to Saudi Arabia the F-15 Strike Eagle, deployed in January 1979 to maintain a robust U.S. presence after the overthrow of the Shah, and then to base four U.S.-operated Airborne Warning and Control Systems (AWACS) and three KC-135 refuelers to aid Saudi Arabia with a crisis in Yemen. The United States then expanded its support for the Kingdom during the Iran-Iraq War, including the deployment of F-15s at Dhahran Airfield.<sup>21</sup> The U.S. priority was to provide early warning and surveillance for the Saudi government and, eventually, was the nucleus for all American surveillance capabilities in the Middle East.<sup>22</sup> Despite the attention given to Saudi Arabia to contain Iran, the Navy remained skeptical about maintaining a large presence in the Gulf, assigning responsibility for operations to the Seventh Fleet, which was (and is) responsible for the entirety of the Pacific. The concern was that the expanded regional presence would detract from operations in a more geographically important area. For operations in the Middle East, a smaller, four-ship contingent dubbed a Middle East Force (MEF) backed up by a larger deployment was based in the Indian Ocean at Diego Garcia.<sup>23</sup>

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17 State of the Union Address 1980, President Jimmy Carter, The Jimmy Carter Presidential Library and Museum, accessed on October 21, 2019, available at: <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.

18 Joe Stork and Martha Wenger, “From Rapid Deployment to Massive Deployment: The US in the Persian Gulf,” *Middle East Report*, January-February 1991, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/3012664>.

19 Sean Naylor, *Relentless Strike: The Secret History of Joint Special Operations Command* (St. Martin’s Press: New York, 2015), pp. 3-8; and [Iran Hostage] Rescue Mission Report, August, 1980, available at: <https://www.history.navy.mil/research/library/online-reading-room/title-list-alphabetically/i/iran-hostage-rescue-mission-report.html>.

20 David Crist, “Operation Earnest Will: The United States in the Persian Gulf, 1986-1989,” PhD Dissertation. The Florida State University, 1998, pp. 33-34.

21 The United States built Dhahran Air Base in 1945 and maintained a presence at the facility until 1962, but let the agreement “expire” in 1962. The Saudi decision stemmed from the Kingdom’s concern that openly siding with the United States spurred Arab nationalist backlash. See: Stacie L. Pettyjohn, Jennifer Kavanagh, “Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945–2014,” RAND Corp., 2016, pp. 35-36, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1339.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1339.html). The U.S. code name for the Dharan deployment was Elf-1. See: Crist, “Operation Earnest Will,” p. 35.

22 “U.S. AWACS aircraft are rotated in and of Saudi Arabia at least every 90 days and then flown out to the United States for maintenance and reassignment. About 500 U.S. Air Force personnel are assigned to Saudi Arabia for tours of 30 to 60 days to support this operation.” See: “The Proposed Sale of E-3A Airborne Warning and Controlling System Aircraft to Saudi Arabia,” Statement for the Record by the U.S. Government Accounting Office submitted to the Senate Armed Services Committee, Washington, D.C., October 1981, <https://www.gao.gov/assets/100/99945.pdf>.

23 As of 1987, “In addition to the ship of the Middle East Force, the United States Pacific Fleet has 14 warships, including the aircraft carrier Kitty Hawk, in the northern Arabian Sea within striking distance of Iran.” See: Bernard A. Trainor, “Soviet Ship Attacked by Iran in Gulf,” *New York Times*, May 9, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/05/09/world/soviet-ship-attacked-by-iran-in-gulf-us-says.html>.

# ARMED INTERVENTION: AMERICA'S REGIONAL EXPANSIONISM

Things changed considerably in December 1986. In response to attacks on international shipping transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the Kuwaiti government made two near-simultaneous requests to the Soviet Union and the United States for a naval escort of its tankers.<sup>24</sup> The Soviet Union was at a strategic disadvantage, given its small number of bases in the region.<sup>25</sup> However, Moscow did respond positively to a request to lease Soviet-flagged tankers and was prepared to provide an escort for the Kuwaiti ships.<sup>26</sup> The Kuwaiti government's near-simultaneous request was indicative of the leadership's concern about taking a side in the Cold War, and a broader symptom of Arab suspicion about Washington's growing role in the region. These concerns stemmed, in part, from Washington's sincerity in its support for the Arab cause in the Iraq war. In particular, the 1986 revelation of the Iran-Contra affair, which revealed clandestine American contact with the Islamic Republic, including the supply of weapons and spare parts, to support the Ronald Reagan administration's war in Nicaragua.<sup>27</sup>

In the end, a wary United States agreed to the

Kuwaiti request to reflag tankers and to provide a naval escort only after Moscow agreed to do the same. The potential encroachment of the Soviet Union in an area deemed of importance to the United States prompted rapid action to respond affirmatively to the Kuwaiti government, so long as Moscow was prevented from gaining a foothold in the Persian Gulf.<sup>28</sup> This mission, dubbed Earnest Will, was the first joint operation for United States Central Command, an entity established in 1983 from the recently established Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force at MacDill and the first test for the Carter Doctrine.

Operation Earnest Will created a need for the United States to reach agreements with the region's monarchs to support combat operations. The United States secured from Saudi Arabia access to Dhahran and permission to fly unarmed aircraft (AWACS and KC-135 aircraft) from the Kingdom. In Bahrain, the Navy had retained a small presence at a British-run pier just outside Manama to monitor U.S.-flagged ships exporting oil, and gained access to this port to support elements of Earnest Will.<sup>29</sup> The U.S. operation also helped secure American overflight rights from the

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24 Stephen Engelberg and Bernard Trainor, "Behind the Gulf Buildup: The Unforeseen Occurs," *The New York Times*, August 23, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/08/23/world/behind-the-gulf-buildup-the-unforeseen-occurs.html>.

25 As of 1977, The Soviets now normally maintain eight major surface combatants and ten submarines in the Mediterranean. Surface ships can be quickly reinforced from the Black Sea, however, and submarines sent from the Northern Fleet in about two weeks. Before the loss of Egypt in 1973, "the Soviet NAVY operated nearly unrestrained from naval bases at Mersa Matruh and Alexandria." See: Soviet Role in the Middle East, Central Intelligence Agency, June 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1977-06-01.pdf>. "The Soviet Role in the Middle East," Central Intelligence Agency, President Carter and the Role of Intelligence in the Camp David Accords, June 1977, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/1977-06-01.pdf>; and "Impact of Soviet Naval Presence in Third World Countries," Central Intelligence Agency, General CIA Records, January 1983, <https://www.cia.gov/library/readingroom/docs/CIA-RDP84T00658R000100020002-8.pdf>.

26 Bill Keller, "Kuwait to Lease Soviet Tankers; Moscow Weighing Naval Escorts," *New York Times*, April 15, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/04/15/world/kuwait-to-lease-soviet-tankers-moscow-weighing-naval-escorts.html>.

27 "Iran-Contra Report: Arms, Hostages and Contras: How a Secret Foreign Policy Unraveled," *New York Times*, November 19, 1987, <https://www.nytimes.com/1987/11/19/world/iran-contra-report-arms-hostages-contras-secret-foreign-policy-unraveled.html>.

28 Dan Oberdorfer, "Soviet Deal With Kuwait Spurred U.S. Ship Role," *The Washington Post*, May 24, 1987, <https://www.washingtonpost.com>.

29 Robert J. Schneller Jr., "Anchor of Resolve: A History of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet," Naval Historical Center, Department of the Navy, 2007, <https://www.history.navy.mil/content/dam/nhhc/research/publications/Publication-PDF/AnchorOfResolve.pdf>.



U.S. Air Force Special Tactics Operators conduct a military free fall jump with coalition forces onto a Zarqa drop zone during Eager Lion 2019 in the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan, Aug. 26, 2019. (CENTCOM)

United Arab Emirates and created a mechanism to begin discussions for an air defense dialogue. Oman, too, concluded an agreement with the United States for overflight, but the island of Masairah, Oman, had already hosted U.S. forces.<sup>30</sup>

From the outset of Earnest Will, officials underestimated Iran's willingness to attack U.S.-flagged ships and Kuwait's oil terminal with missiles based in Iraq's Iranian-occupied Al-Faw Peninsula. The Islamic Republic mined the Strait of Hormuz and attacked U.S. ships with anti-ship cruise missiles, and American helicopters patrolling north of the 27-30 parallel, just south of Farsi Island, frequently skirmished with Iranian patrol boats laying mines.<sup>31</sup> The skirmishes escalated in 1988, leading to Operation Praying

Mantis, the codename given to the U.S. plan to destroy two oil platforms and sink an Iranian naval combatant, in response to the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp. nearly sinking the USS Samuel B. Roberts.<sup>32</sup> During the operation, the United States sunk the Iranian missile frigate Joshan, while A-6 aircraft destroyed three small fast attack boats and sunk two Iranian Navy ships, the Sahand and Sabalan.<sup>33</sup>

Before the end of the U.S. operation in the Gulf, tragedy struck, after the USS Vincennes shot down an Iranian passenger jet, killing 290.<sup>34</sup> The tragedy came just one month before the Iranian acceptance of a United Nations-sponsored ceasefire,<sup>35</sup> and the subsequent American decision to decrease its military presence in

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30 Geoffrey F. Gresh, *Gulf Security and the U.S. Military: Regime Survival and the Politics of Basing* (Palo Alto: Stanford University Press, 2015), pp. 134-139.

31 Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," pp. 188-197.

32 J.B Perkins III, "The Surface View: Operation Praying Mantis," U.S. Naval Institute, May 1989, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1989/may/surface-view-operation-praying-mantis>.

33 Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," pp. 217-231.

34 David Evans, "Vincennes: A Case Study," U.S. Naval Institute, August 1993, <https://www.usni.org/magazines/proceedings/1993/august/vincennes-case-study>.

35 Alan Cowell, "Cease-Fire Takes Effect in 8-Year Iran-Iraq War," *New York Times*, August 21, 1988, <https://www.nytimes.com/1988/08/21/world/cease-fire-takes-effect-in-8-year-iran-iraq-war.html>.



the Gulf. Operation Earnest Will ended in 1989, and created the template and bureaucratic and international infrastructure to support U.S. operations in the Persian Gulf. However, even in the waning days of the Cold War, the importance of the Middle East remained a low-tier priority. The Navy was eager to return valuable ships to the Pacific, leaving policymakers to debate how best to protect Arab regimes that the United States had indirectly supported (and had won concessions from for military overflight and logistics), while also removing assets that were deployed to escort tankers.

In October 1989, President George H.W. Bush signed National Security Directive 26 (NSD-26), which endorsed the military's effort to withdraw forces from the Persian Gulf and pledged to support to governments in the region with U.S. arms sales. It also reaffirmed that "access to Persian Gulf oil and the security of key friendly states are vital to U.S. national security."<sup>36</sup> Pursuant to NSD-26, the United States began to withdraw—leaving five warships in the area to signal to the Arab governments a nominal and enduring presence beyond the four ships that operated in the area before Earnest Will.<sup>37</sup> The U.S. completed the withdrawal in June 1989, just three months before they would be sent back, following the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait.<sup>38</sup>

The end of Earnest Will signaled a shift in the American approach to the region and concluded a decade of force planning and decision making to ensure that the United States would intervene in the region. This policy resulted in concessions from Arab governments to allow overt and large military deployments throughout the Middle East.

Things changed further in August 1990 and is the reason for current U.S. policy in the Middle East. The Iraqi invasion prompted joint Soviet-American condemnation. In a press conference in Moscow with his Soviet counterpart, Minister of Foreign Affairs Eduard Shevardnadze, U.S. Secretary of State James Baker, read a statement saying, "We take the unusual step of jointly calling upon the rest of the international community to join with us in an international cutoff of all arms supplies to Iraq."<sup>39</sup> Writing in retrospect in 2014, Baker referred to this joint statement as the "the time and place when I knew that the Cold War had ended."<sup>40</sup> The Soviet Union, by this time, was destined to collapse, which resulted in a temporary Russian retreat from the Middle East. It would not last, but for close to a quarter-century, the United States was the unopposed power in the region.<sup>41</sup>

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36 National Security Direct 26, George H.W. Bush Presidential Library and Museum, October 2, 1989, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd26.pdf>.

37 Crist, "Operation Earnest Will," pp. 260-263.

38 Ibid; In NSD-68, the Bush administration indicated that "normal relations with Iraq would serve U.S. long term interests and promote stability in the Gulf and the Middle East" and proposed offering "economic and political incentives" for Iraq to moderate its behavior, while also underscoring continued U.S. concerns about Iraqi weapons of mass destruction. National Security Direct 26, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/files/nsd/nsd26.pdf>.

39 Bill Keller, "The Iraqi Invasion; Moscow Joins U.S. in Criticizing Iraq," *New York Times*, August 4, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/04/world/the-iraqi-invasion-moscow-joins-us-in-criticizing-iraq.html>.

40 James A. Baker III, "My friend, Eduard Shevardnadze," *Washington Post*, July 8, 2014, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/james-baker-my-friend-eduard-shevardnadze/2014/07/08/ed730d1c-06ca-11e4-bbf1-cc51275e7f8f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/james-baker-my-friend-eduard-shevardnadze/2014/07/08/ed730d1c-06ca-11e4-bbf1-cc51275e7f8f_story.html).

41 Benjamin S. Lambeth, "Desert Storm and its Meaning: The View from Moscow," Rand Corp., 1992, <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R4164.html>.

# AMERICAN PRIMACY: GULF WAR AND REGIONAL ENTRENCHMENT

The end of the Cold War coincided with the buildup of American forces in the Persian Gulf to protect Kuwait and Saudi Arabia from Iraqi attack. Following the success of Earnest Will and Praying Mantis, U.S. forces that had departed the Middle East were sent back to begin preparations for war. This effort had Soviet support, signaling a pause in the competition for influence in region and, with follow-on political arrangements with the Arab states, cemented the United States as the dominant actor in the Middle East.

The war pitted American and Western offensive air power against Soviet-origin equipment. It represented an important diplomatic shift. For the entirety of the Cold War, the Gulf Arab states were wary of outwardly allying with the United States. With the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, Saudi Arabia altered this policy, and invited American troops to the country for protection on August 8, 1990, just days after the Iraqi invasion.<sup>42</sup> By December, the number of U.S. troops in Saudi Arabia had grown to close to 300,000,<sup>43</sup> and Prince Sultan Air Base (PSAB) had been identified and expanded to host

the Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC), which oversaw and coordinated the air war.<sup>44</sup> The United States quickly drew down from the base after the war concluded, transferring aircraft left behind to patrol a no-fly-zone over southern Iraq to the 4404<sup>th</sup> Provisional Wing at Dhahran, only for operations to move back to Prince Sultan Air Base following a terrorist attack at Khobar Towers in June 1996.<sup>45</sup>

The second no-fly-zone flew from Incirlik Air Force Base in Turkey over northern Iraq.<sup>46</sup> In both cases, Ankara and Riyadh welcomed U.S. aircraft, but were not supportive of American requests to use aircraft based in country for strikes on Iraqi targets throughout the 1990s.<sup>47</sup> Nevertheless, the Gulf War catalyzed the American military buildup in the region, beginning with Kuwait's signing of a formal Defense Cooperation Agreement (DCA) with the United States in September 1991.<sup>48</sup> In October 1991, Bahrain reached a similar agreement, resulting in the eventual decision to base the Fifth Fleet at Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain.<sup>49</sup> The United States formalized a

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42 Michael R. Gordon, "Bush Sends U.S. Force to Saudi Arabia as Kingdom Agreed to Confront Iraq," *New York Times*, August 8, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/08/08/world/bush-sends-us-force-saudi-arabia-kingdom-agrees-confront-iraq-bush-s-aim-s-de-ter.html>.

43 Philip Shenon, "Standoff in the Gulf; Out of Saudi View, U.S. Force Allows their Religious Rites," *New York Times*, December 22, 1990, <https://www.nytimes.com/1990/12/22/world/standoff-in-the-gulf-out-of-saudi-view-us-force-allows-religious-their-rites.html>.

44 Rebecca Grant, "The Short, Strange Life of PSAB," *Air Force Magazine*, July 2012, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2012/July%202012/0712PSAB.aspx>.

45 Ibid.

46 John T. Correll, "Northern Watch," *Air Force Magazine*, February 2000, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2000/February%202000/0200northern.aspx>.

47 Pettyjohn and Kavanagh, "Access Granted," [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1339.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1339.html).

48 According to the Congressional Research Service, "The [Defense Cooperation Agreement] text is classified, but reportedly provides for mutual discussions in the event of a crisis; joint military exercises; U.S. evaluation of, advice to, and training of Kuwaiti forces; U.S. arms sales; prepositioning of U.S. military equipment; and U.S. access to a range of Kuwaiti facilities." See: "Kuwait: Governance, Security, and U.S. Policy," Congressional Research Service, updated July 31, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS21513.pdf>.

49 According to the Congressional Research Service, "The cornerstone of U.S.-Bahrain defense relations is U.S. access to Bahrain's naval facilities. The United States has had a U.S. naval command presence in Bahrain since 1948: MIDEASTFOR (U.S. Middle East Force); its successor, NAVCENT (naval component of U.S. Central Command); and the U.S. Fifth Fleet (reconstituted in June 1995), have been headquartered at a sprawling facility called 'Naval Support Activity (NSA)-Bahrain.'" It is also home to U.S. Marine



U.S. Marine Corps Gen. Kenneth F. McKenzie Jr., the commander of U.S. Central Command, left, talks with His Excellency Mohammed Al Rasbi, Secretary General of the Ministry of Defense of Oman, on Muaskar Al Murtafa Base, July 17, 2019. (CENTCOM)

DCA with the UAE in July 1994<sup>50</sup> with construction beginning on Dharfa Air Base beginning in 1990. The United States and Qatar reached a similar agreement in 1992, which resulted in Doha agreeing to provide \$1 billion to construct Al Udeid Air Base.<sup>51</sup> The Qataris took advantage of Saudi hesitance to renew an agreement for the United States to use Prince Sultan Air Base to house the CAOC, following Saudi resistance to loosening restrictions imposed on American forces operating in the country.<sup>52</sup>

The formalization of these security arrangements, and the decision to allow the American troops to operate in country, represented a considerable shift in Arab policy. The American policy after the Gulf War used this territory to pursue a policy

of “dual containment,” which hinged on using coercive economic and military power to pressure Iran and Iraq to modify their foreign policy.<sup>53</sup> The United States also sought to ensure that WMDs did not proliferate. In Iraq, this task was left to the post-war, United Nations-led inspection regime to monitor the destruction of Saddam Hussein’s WMD infrastructure.<sup>54</sup> These bases have also been critical for American combat operations in the Middle East and in the wars that began after the September 11, 2001 attacks. For Iran, American policy was aimed at preventing Iran’s development of nuclear weapons through a policy of denying access to dual-use equipment and economic pressure to try to coerce the Iranian leadership to make policy changes or, in certain cases, to bring about government collapse.

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Forces Central Command, Destroyer Squadron Fifty, and three Combined Maritime Forces. The “on-shore” U.S. command presence in Bahrain was established after the 1991 U.S.-led war against Iraq; prior to that, the U.S. naval headquarters in Bahrain was on a command ship docked and technically “off shore. See: “Bahrain: Unrest, Security, and U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, updated August 20, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/95-1013.pdf>.

50 The “1994 U.S.-UAE defense cooperation agreement (DCA) provides for U.S. military use of several UAE facilities, and about 5,000 U.S. military personnel are in the UAE at those facilities. The UAE was the first Gulf state to order the most sophisticated missile defense system sold by the United States, demonstrating its support for U.S. efforts to assemble a regional missile defense network against Iran’s missile force.” See: Kenneth Katzman, “The United Arab Emirates (UAE): Issues for U.S. Policy,” Congressional Research Service, February 24, 2014, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20140224\\_RS21852\\_aed645af85536091da36368888108ac-cf26ad1ce.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20140224_RS21852_aed645af85536091da36368888108ac-cf26ad1ce.pdf).

51 Christopher M. Blanchard, “Qatar: Background and U.S. Relations,” Congressional Research Service, January 30, 2014, [https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20140130\\_RL31718\\_2c08bc9177bbcafb7d25816b88b7319d4551c675.pdf](https://www.everycrsreport.com/files/20140130_RL31718_2c08bc9177bbcafb7d25816b88b7319d4551c675.pdf).

52 Michael R. Gordon and Eric Schmitt, “U.S. Will Move Air Operations To Qatar Base,” *New York Times*, April 28, 2003, <https://www.nytimes.com/2003/04/28/world/aftereffects-bases-us-will-move-air-operations-to-qatar-base.html>; and Rebecca Grant, “The Short, Strange Life of PSAB,” *Air Force Magazine*, July 2012, <http://www.airforcemag.com/MagazineArchive/Pages/2012/July%202012/0712PSAB.aspx>.

53 Martin Indyk, “The Clinton Administration’s Approach to the Middle East,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1993, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/the-clinton-administrations-approach-to-the-middle-east>.

54 For a thorough overview of Iraq’s nuclear program, see: Malfrid Braut-Hegghammer, *Unclear Physics: Why Iraq and Libya Failed to Build Nuclear Weapons* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2016).



# INVADING IRAQ:

## THE ROLE OF WMDs AND THE IMPACT ON IRAN POLICY

Iran's nuclear weapons program most likely began in 1984, but only began to accelerate noticeably in the late 1990s.<sup>55</sup> It became a central foreign policy issue for the United States in August 2002, just before the March 2003 invasion of Iraq. Throughout the 1990s, the spread of WMDs played a critical role in shaping American foreign policy. Iran's clandestine effort to acquire nuclear weapons prompted broader, multilateral U.S. efforts to deny Tehran's effort to procure equipment from foreign countries to manufacture dual-use nuclear equipment. The issue grew in importance during the George W. Bush administration, which used the pretext of an Iraqi nuclear weapons program to justify an invasion of the country, and continued to pressure Iran for its nuclear weapons work.

In 2003, the National Council of Resistance of Iran, an Iranian dissident group and front organization for The Mujahedeen-e-Khalq that was formerly designated as a terror organization by the United States, released information about an undeclared nuclear program.<sup>56</sup> The revelations raised the prospect of American preventive strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities. However, these concerns were deemed of secondary importance to the then-ongoing plan to invade

Iraq, ostensibly over continued WMD work. The Bush administration, chastened over the costs of the invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan, sought to address Iran's weapons work through a mixture of sanctions and diplomacy.<sup>57</sup> However, Iran's political leadership, then under the direction of hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, chose to absorb U.S. sanctions and continue to expand the number of centrifuges at two different sites: Iran's main enrichment facility, which was under international inspection, Natanz, and a second, clandestine, facility the international community dubbed, the Qom enrichment facility. The mixture of U.S. sanctions and tepid support for European negotiations failed. It was only after the election of a new government in Iran, under the leadership of Hassan Rouhani, and the Obama administration's commitment to reach agreement with Iran on the nuclear issue, did American concerns about Iran's WMD program get resolved.<sup>58</sup>

The Bush administration chose to focus on Iraq and a disproven claim that Saddam Hussein retained a WMD program and could use that program to coerce U.S. allies and threaten the continental United States. This decision proved disastrous, but was tethered to a critical change in American foreign policy. Following the 9/11 attacks,

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55 The best statement inferring a lack of faith in the nonproliferation regime came during Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani's speech in 1988, where he said: "It was also made clear that the moral teachings of the world are not very effective when war reaches a serious stage and the world does not respect its resolutions and closes its eyes to the violations and all the aggressions which are committed in the battlefield. We should fully equip ourselves both in an offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological, and radiological weapons. From now on you should make use of the opportunity and perform this task." See: "Hashemi-Rafsanjani Speaks on Future of IRGC," Tehran Domestic Service, Daily Report, Near East & South Asia, FBIS-NES-88-195, October 6, 1988

56 The list of facilities included: The uranium enrichment facility at Natanz; the address of the Kalaye electric company, where undeclared centrifuge research took place; a heavy water production plant under construction at Arak; and the names of various individuals and front companies involved with the nuclear program. See: "Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran," Report by the Director General, GOV/2004/83. International Atomic Energy Agency.

57 Helene Cooper, "In Bush Speech, Signs of Split on Iran Policy," *The New York Times*, September 16, 2007, <https://www.nytimes.com/2007/09/16/washington/16diplo.html>.

58 Michael R. Gordon and David E. Sanger, "Deal Reached on Iran Nuclear Program; Limits on Fuel Would Lessen With Time," *The New York Times*, July 14, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/15/world/middleeast/iran-nuclear-deal-is-reached-after-long-negotiations.html>.





Sgt. 1st Class Jeremiah Velez, left, and Capt. David Zak, center, both advisors with the 1st Security Force Assistance Brigade's 3rd Squadron, speak with their Afghan National Army counterparts during a routine fly-to-advise mission at Forward Operating Base Altimur, Afghanistan, Sept. 19, 2018. (CENTCOM)



the Bush administration ascribed to a policy of regime change that necessitated the elevation of transnational terrorism and the elimination of WMDs as the drivers of American action in the region. The result of American interventionism has reduced sharply the public appetite's for wars of choice in the Middle East, and has helped to popularize the current policy in Syria, which seeks to minimize U.S. forces deployed to fight terrorism, and is intended to empower local forces to do the brunt of the ground fighting.

The March 2003 invasion of Iraq shifted American attention from the war in Afghanistan, which began in October 2001, and was intended to deny safe haven to Al Qaeda through the toppling of its sponsor, the Taliban. The Iraq war was staged from the large network of bases in the Middle East and also resulted in a shift of the CAOC from Saudi Arabia to Qatar because of growing Saudi restrictions on U.S. activities in the Kingdom.<sup>59</sup>

The October 2001 invasion of Afghanistan and March 2003 start of Operation Iraq Freedom created clear tensions in U.S. policy in the Middle East. The invasions bolstered regional elements that had positive relations with the Islamic Republic, beginning with American support for the Northern Alliance<sup>60</sup> in Afghanistan and, then, the Iraqi exile groups that would form the nucleus of the post-Saddam government. The rationale for each American war, however, differed although, in each case, Iran indirectly benefited from U.S. military action. In the case of Afghanistan, the United States and Iran chose to cooperate, with Iran giving support for the Northern Alliance.

During the military preparations for the war in Iraq, and then, again, after the invasion, the United States also met with Iranian leaders to deconflict air operations and then to discuss post-conflict governance.<sup>61</sup>

These areas of mutual interest, however, were superseded by concerns about Iran's nuclear program. Changes in Iran's government also ushered in a period of extreme tensions over the nuclear file and Iranian support for Shi'ite militia groups in Iraq, some of which were supplied with weapons that killed American troops.<sup>62</sup> The American experience in Iraq forced military planners to grapple with two distinct insurgent groups. One grouping, linked to Al Qaeda and dubbed Al Qaeda in Iraq, predominantly was made up of Iraqi Sunnis (the predecessor organization to Islamic State). The other paramilitary groups were comprised mostly of Iraqi Shia, linked to Iran or Iranian-sympathetic Iraqi politicians. The United States dedicated the bulk of its resources to combat Sunni-majority extremists largely because of their role in undermining Iraqi security and because political sensitivities in Iraq prevented the killing and/or arrest of certain Shi'i leaders.<sup>63</sup>

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59 Jim Garamone. "Saudi Base to Close, Ops Center Moves to Qatar," U.S. Department of Defense, April 29, 2003, <https://archive.defense.gov/news/newsarticle.aspx?id=29047>

60 "After the Taliban's relatively rapid victory in 1996, Iran backed what came to be known as the Northern Alliance (or Northern Front): an Afghan opposition movement composed of militias centered on Tajik, Uzbek, and Hazara strongmen from northern Afghanistan." See: Alireza Nader, et. al., "Iran's Influence in Afghanistan: Implications for the U.S. Drawdown," 2014, Rand Corp. p. 8, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research\\_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND\\_RR616.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/research_reports/RR600/RR616/RAND_RR616.pdf).

61 Michael R. Gordon, "U.S. Conferred With Iran Before Iraq Invasion, Book Says," *New York Times*, March 6, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/03/07/world/middleeast/us-conferred-with-iran-before-iraq-invasion-book-says.html>.

62 "According to the *Military Times*, 'The Pentagon is upping the official estimate on the number of U.S. troops in Iraq who were killed by Iranian-backed militias [during the U.S. led war in Iraq], now putting that number at at least 603.' As of 2015, 'Officials previously said that Iran was linked to the deaths of roughly 500 troops.' See: Kyle Rempfer, "Iran killed more US troops in Iraq than previously known, Pentagon says," *Military Times*, April 4, 2019, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/your-military/2019/04/04/iran-killed-more-us-troops-in-iraq-than-previously-known-pentagon-says/>.

63 For a full recounting of the political and operational challenges Joint Special Operations Command faced in Iraq, particularly over which threat to prioritize, and then how to pressure Shi'a groups, see: Naylor, *Relentless Strike*, pp. 295-310.

# OBAMA AND ARMED INTERVENTION: LIBYA, SYRIA, AND THE ARAB SPRING

The American experiences in Iraq and Afghanistan shifted again how U.S. policy in the Middle East was made. Following the election of Barack Obama, the Iranian nuclear issue became more politically acute, and required a decision about how best to address the Islamic Republic's expanding nuclear capabilities. The Obama administration also made the decision to withdraw American combat troops from Iraq in 2011, ostensibly as part of a "pivot to Asia," and a reappraisal of U.S. global interests. In a speech at the Australian parliament, President Obama made clear his priorities:

After a decade in which we fought two wars that cost us dearly, in blood and treasure, the United States is turning our attention to the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region. In just a few weeks, after nearly nine years, the last American troops will leave Iraq and our war there will be over. In Afghanistan, we've begun a transition—a responsible transition—so Afghans can take responsibility for their future and so coalition forces can begin to draw down. And with partners like Australia, we've struck major blows against al Qaeda and put that terrorist organization on the path to defeat, including delivering justice to Osama bin Laden. So make no

mistake, the tide of war is receding, and America is looking ahead to the future that we must build.<sup>64</sup>

Events in the Middle East, however, prevented proper resourcing for a policy that focused on Asia and the rise of China. The Arab Spring began in December 2010, but only truly began to impact American interests when it spread to Egypt.<sup>65</sup> However, it was not until events in Libya that the United States was forced to consider using military force. The U.S. intervention in Libya is worth studying in depth because, in retrospect, it shaped how the Obama administration viewed military options in Syria and hastened Russia's return to the Middle East.

The first signs of civil unrest in Libya began in February 2011. For European states, the specter of a Libyan state assault on protests, most prominently in the cities of Benghazi and Bayda, raised the prospect of mass migration, and prompted planning for military action.<sup>66</sup> The first collective international action came shortly thereafter, when in late February, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed Resolution 1970. This action imposed an arms embargo and travel ban on regime officials, froze the regime's assets, and referred Muammar Qaddafi to the International Criminal Court (ICC).<sup>67</sup> By March, France and Britain were pressuring the United States to pursue military action,<sup>68</sup> which the Arab League endorsed shortly after. The American debate about intervention focused on

64 "Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament," The White House, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

65 Steven Cook, *The Struggle for Egypt: From Nasser to Tahrir Square* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2011).

66 Anthony Shadid, "Clashes in Libya Worsen as Army Crushes Dissent," *The New York Times*, February 18, 2011, <https://www.nytimes.com/2011/02/19/world/africa/19libya.html>.

67 United Nations Security Council Resolution 1970, S/RES/1970, February 26, 2011, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1970%20\(2011\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1970%20(2011)).

68 For a recounting of the debate inside the Obama administration, see: Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of a Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), pp. 510-523.





Protests in Benghazi, 2011. (Bernd Bricken/Wikimedia Commons)

the likelihood of having to provide airstrikes in support of the anti-Qaddafi opposition because, in the words of former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates, a narrow “no-fly-zone likely would have little effect on the movement of ground forces or in protecting innocent civilians.”<sup>69</sup>

On March 17, the UNSC passed Resolution 1973, which authorized the establishment of a no-fly-zone and, importantly, include language that allowed “all necessary measures” to be taken to protect civilians.<sup>70</sup> The no-fly-zone was established within 72 hours of the start of air operations, but the capital, Tripoli, did not fall to Western-backed forces until late August. Qaddafi was captured and killed in October, which gave NATO the opportunity to end the aerial campaign.<sup>71</sup>

The campaign was noteworthy for the relatively small, but still critical role the United States

played.<sup>72</sup> It also represented a serious breach of trust with Moscow. At the outset of the NATO intervention, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov criticized strikes on Qaddafi forces, arguing Russia “consider[s] that intervention by the coalition in what is essentially an internal civil war is not sanctioned by the U.N. Security Council resolution.”<sup>73</sup> Russia’s acquiescence to Resolution 1970 allowed for the passage of Resolution 1973. Moscow’s criticism thereafter, according to former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton, was disingenuous because, according to her recounting of events, “[Russia] knew as well as anyone what ‘all necessary measures’ meant.”<sup>74</sup> Russian irritation would matter, considerably, during the debates about Syria and shaped American thinking about the merits of intervention. In Syria, this included a decision to intervene directly in 2015, following the collapse of Assad regime forces in Idlib during an opposition-led offensive that included

<sup>69</sup> Ibid, p. 518.

<sup>70</sup> United Nations Security Council Resolution 1973, S/RES/1973, March 17, 2011, [https://www.nato.int/nato\\_static/assets/pdf/pdf\\_2011\\_03/20110927\\_110311-UNSCR-1973.pdf](https://www.nato.int/nato_static/assets/pdf/pdf_2011_03/20110927_110311-UNSCR-1973.pdf).

<sup>71</sup> For a full history of the air campaign, see: *Precision and Purpose: Airpower in the Libyan Civil War*, ed. Karl Mueller, (Santa Monica: Rand Corp, 2015).

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Steve Gutterman, “No UN mandate to attack Gaddafi forces: Russia,” *Reuters*, March 28, 2011, <https://af.reuters.com/article/topNews/idAFJOE72R0EL20110328?sp=true>.

<sup>74</sup> As cited in Dexter Filkins, “The Moral Logic of Humanitarian Intervention,” *New Yorker*, September 16, 2019, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2019/09/16/the-moral-logic-of-humanitarian-intervention>.

elements linked to Al Qaeda, working alongside U.S.-backed groups. The Russian intervention in Syria gave a direct security guarantee to Assad and enabled the regime to retake much of the country. It has enmeshed Moscow in a limited, but open-ended, military deployment that remains domestically unpopular,<sup>75</sup> but has nevertheless resulted in a permanent military deployment in Syria.<sup>76</sup>

The air war over Libya was short and effective, but the chaos that ensued after Qaddafi's death has had a profound effect on American and European thinking about armed interventions in the Middle East. The Libyan state has remained mired in a state of conflict with rival warlords competing for power from different power centers inside the country. The state of crisis has invited foreign intervention, including the commitment of troops and weapons from the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, France, Italy, and Russia, along with Turkey and Qatar. These countries have different militias they support, contributing to the political unrest.

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President Obama, for example, was wary of using forces in Libya, only to be persuaded to act against his own instincts. In the wake of an effective post-war settlements, President Obama deemed his decision to intervene as the "biggest mistake" he made during his time in office.<sup>78</sup> The repercussions of Libya were not truly felt until Syria collapsed, amidst Assad's violent response to peaceful protests. In the post-Libya environment, Russia hardened its opposition

to any external intervention before it ultimately made the decision to intercede on behalf of an allied government.

The Syrian uprising has defined recent American policy in the region since it created the conditions for Islamic State to take control of territory and reconquer Mosul in neighboring Iraq, which prompted the United States to use military force. The American experience in Syria has challenged its alliance with Turkey, a NATO member, and coincided with Moscow's return to armed intervention in the Middle East. The Syrian uprising began in March 2011, prompting President Obama to declare that the Assad regime "must go" in August.<sup>79</sup> The United States, and much of the world, assumed in late 2011 that the opposition would overthrow Assad without external help. However, as this assumption proved to be wrong, the Obama administration directed the military to sketch out options for intervention and to think about how to secure chemical weapons sites that may have fallen out of regime control.<sup>80</sup>

In marked contrast to the debates over Libya, President Obama remained firm on pursuing a policy of non-intervention. However, as the conflict grew more dire in 2012, and America's regional allies and adversaries began to arm elements of the anti-Assad opposition, the United States reversed course and covertly began to arm elements of the opposition. The Central Intelligence Agency dubbed this effort "Timber Sycamore." The covert program was proposed in 2012 and ramped up in early 2013.<sup>81</sup> The arming program moved along

75 "Fewer Than Half of Russians Support Syria Campaign, Poll Says," *The Moscow Times*, May 6, 2019, <https://www.themoscow-times.com/2019/05/06/fewer-than-half-of-russians-support-syria-campaign-poll-says-a65494>.

76 "Russia Extends Syrian Airbase Lease by 49 Years," *The Moscow Times*, July 27, 2017, <https://www.themoscowtimes.com/2017/07/27/russia-extends-syrian-airbase-lease-by-49-year-a58512>.

77 Frederic M. Wehrey, *The Burning Shores: Inside the Battle for the New Libya* (New York: Farrar, Straus, and Giroux, 2018).

78 "President Obama: Libya aftermath 'worst mistake' of presidency," *BBC News*, April 11, 2016, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-36013703>.

79 Scott Wilson and Joby Warick, "Assad must go, Obama says," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/assad-must-go-obama-says/2011/08/18/gIQAelheOJ_story.html).

80 Author Interview, Former Senior Obama Administration Official, August 2019; and Jeffrey Smith, "Suiting Up: What the United States is doing to prepare for chemical war in Syria," *Foreign Policy*, January 17, 2013, <https://vip-go.foreignpolicy.com/2013/01/17/suiting-up/>.

81 According to C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "The airlift [of weapons for the opposition], which began on a small scale in early 2012 and continued intermittently through last fall, expanded into a steady and much heavier flow" in late 2012. C.J. Chivers and Eric Schmitt, "Arms Airlift to Syria Rebels Expands, With Aid From C.I.A.," *New York Times*, March 24, 2013, [https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2013/03/25/world/middleeast/arms-airlift-to-syrian-rebels-expands-with-cia-aid.html?pagewanted=all&_r=0); and Mark Mazetti, Adam Goldman, and Michael S. Schmitt, "Behind the Sudden Death of a \$1 Billion Secret C.I.A. War in Syria," *New York Times*,



with American assessments about the emergence of Al Qaeda-linked elements operating within the broader anti-Assad insurgency. As early as 2012, there were reports about the emergence of Al Qaeda elements in Syria, embedding into the broader Syrian opposition and enabling offensives with their use of suicide bombers.<sup>82</sup> These two movements eventually split, leading to two different and competing groups, dubbed the Nusra Front and the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.<sup>83</sup> These two actors pursued radically divergent approaches to winning over the anti-Assad insurgency and came into conflict—with ISIS defeating Nusra in many of its strongholds along the Turkish-Syrian border.

The Islamic State's rise forced American action. In June 2014, in a surprising offensive from strongholds in rural Iraq, the group seized Mosul and began to push south along the main highway towards Baghdad. ISIS moved north to the outskirts of Erbil, the Kurdish-majority city in the Kurdistan Region of Iraq that, since the 2003 invasion, has remained safe and stable. At the outset of the American intervention, the Obama administration sought to make changes to Iraq's governance, forcing the maligned (though once American-backed) Iraqi Prime Minister Nuri Al Maliki to resign in favor of Haider Al Abadi.<sup>84</sup> The American intent was to replace Maliki because he had become overtly sectarian in his approach

to governance and consolidated power in his position; these twin factors contributed to ethnic grievances, enabling the rise of a Sunni terrorist group like ISIS.<sup>85</sup>

In a speech delivered in early August 2014, President Obama authorized airstrikes against the Islamic State.<sup>86</sup> These airstrikes were, at first, narrowly aimed at stopping the assault on Erbil; relieving the siege of Sinjar, a mountain enclave where the local Yazidi religious minority had fled from certain genocide; and at building a coalition to expand the strikes into Syria.<sup>87</sup> From the outset of the U.S.-led war, the legal rationale for combat operations against ISIS was—and remains—grounded in the 2001 Authorization to Use Military Force (AUMF), which, originally passed in September 2001, gave the executive sweeping authorities to target Al Qaeda.<sup>88</sup>

To support the air war, the United States relied, again, on its bases in the Middle East. The first strike missions against Islamic State relied on U.S. Navy fighters flying from the Gulf and eventually included U.S. and allied aircraft flying from bases in Jordan, Kuwait, Qatar, Turkey, and the United Arab Emirates.<sup>89</sup> American ground forces worked from bases in Iraq and Jordan, where they were tasked with supporting and training the Iraqi Security Forces. In Syria, American and allied forces worked alongside local partner forces, and

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August 2, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/08/02/world/middleeast/cia-syria-rebel-arm-trump.html>.

82 Tim Arango, Anne Barnard, and Hwaida Saad, "Syrian Rebels Tied to Al Qaeda Play Key Role in War," *New York Times*, December 8, 2012, <https://www.nytimes.com/2012/12/09/world/middleeast/syrian-rebels-tied-to-al-qaeda-play-key-role-in-war.html>.

83 Cole Bunzel, "From Paper State Caliphate: The Ideology of Islamic State," The Brookings Institution, March 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/wp-content/uploads/2016/06/The-ideology-of-the-Islamic-State.pdf>.

84 Tim Arango, "Maliki Agrees to Relinquish Power in Iraq," *New York Times*, August 14, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/08/15/world/middleeast/iraq-prime-minister-.html>

85 For a full recounting of Maliki's poor handling of Sunni majority protests, see: Kirk Sowell, "Maliki's Anbar Blunder," *Foreign Policy*, January 15, 2015, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2014/01/15/malikis-anbar-blunder/>; For more information on Maliki's consolidation of power in the prime minister position, particularly control over Iraq's counter terrorism force, see: David Witty, "The Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service," The Brookings Institution, March 16, 2015, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-iraqi-counter-terrorism-service/>.

86 "President Obama Makes a Statement on the Crisis in Iraq," The White House, August 7, 2014, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/blog/2014/08/07/president-obama-makes-statement-iraq>.

87 For an in-depth treatment of the Yazidi issue, see: Jenna Krajeski, "The Daring Plan to Save a Religious Minority From ISIS," *New Yorker*, February 19, 2018, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2018/02/26/the-daring-plan-to-save-a-religious-minority-from-isis>.

88 Public Law 107-40, to authorize the use of United States Armed Forces against those responsible for the recent attacks launched against the United States, 107th Congress, September 18, 2001, <https://www.congress.gov/107/plaws/publ40/PLAW-107publ40.pdf>.

89 Kathleen J. McInnis, "Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State," Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2016, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/natsec/R44135.pdf>.





A U.S. F-15 Strike Eagle breaks away after being refueled by a KC-135 Stratotanker from the 28th Expeditionary Air Refueling Squadron Feb. 11, 2019, while flying over Syria. (CENTCOM)



built a number of small bases to support these operations.<sup>90</sup> The operations in Syria, much of the U.S. military contingent operated under Title 10 Authorities, which refers to the legal code that enumerates the legally defined role of each military branch and Department of Defense.<sup>91</sup> For the ground campaign in Syria, the Title 10 military forces were placed under the control of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve and beholden to certain legal restrictions listed in the National Defense Authorization Act, fiscal year 2015, Section 1209, which gives the “authority to provide assistance to the vetted Syrian opposition,” which the U.S. sought to empower to fight the Assad regime.<sup>92</sup> This intervention resulted in a close American partnership with the Kurdish-majority Democratic Union Party (PYD) and its associated militia, the Peoples’ Protection Units (YPG). The YPG is the Syrian branch of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK), an organization that the United States, Turkey, and the European Union all have designated as a terror group.<sup>93</sup>

The Syrian Kurds have emerged as the United States’ most reliable and effective partner in Syria and have spearheaded ground operations against the Islamic State, with ample American Special Operations Forces and Air Force support. This partnership has devastated the Islamic State, but upended relations with Turkey. In Iraq, the United States worked through the Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) and other elements of the Iraqi security services.<sup>94</sup> The Obama administration relied heavily on Special Operations Forces to keep the number of troops in both countries

low; they were part of a broader effort to advise and assist the Iraqi forces and to train and equip forces in Syria.

The American intervention in Syria was walled off from the Obama administration’s talks with Iran about resolving long-standing issues about a frozen atomic weapons program, and ostensible developments to support a civilian nuclear energy program that could be leveraged for nefarious intent. President Obama, as a candidate, favored negotiations with Iran,<sup>95</sup> and, following the election of Iranian moderates with a history of compromise on the nuclear issue, Washington began to increase its effort to find a solution to the nuclear issue. The American-Iranian track began in Oman and eventually grew to include the permanent members of the Security Council, along with Germany (dubbed the P5+1).<sup>96</sup> The P5+1 mechanism was designed to elicit concessions from Iran on the verification of a pledge not to develop nuclear weapons.

The two sides reached an interim agreement, dubbed the Joint Plan of Action, in November 2013. This agreement presaged even more difficult discussions about verification protocols not agreed to until July 2015. The negotiations succeeded in allowing for greater inspections of Iran’s nuclear program although these provisions would expire intermittently over a period of 25 years. The intent was to reward Iran for “good behavior,” and theoretically create a mechanism for the world to be reassured of Iran’s intent to use nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, while

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90 Aaron Stein, “Partner Operations in Syria: Lessons Learned and the way Forward,” The Atlantic Council, July 10, 2017, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/in-depth-research-reports/report/partner-operations-in-syria/>.

91 Michael E. DeVine, “Covert Action and Clandestine Activities of the Intelligence Community: Selected Definitions in Brief,” Congressional Research Service, June 14, 2019, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/intel/R45175.pdf>.

92 See: H.R.3979 - Carl Levin and Howard P. “Buck” McKeon National Defense Authorization Act for Fiscal Year 2015, <https://www.congress.gov/113/plaws/publ291/PLAW-113publ291.pdf>; and “ARCENT Transition to Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve: Lessons and Best Practices,” The Center for Army Lessons Learned, Initial Impressions Report, No. 16-10, March 2016, <http://usacac.army.mil/sites/default/files/publications/16-10.pdf>.

93 “US Department of State places PKK on terror list for one more year,” *Hurriyet Daily News*, May 31, 2013, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/us-department-of-state-places-pkk-on-terror-list-for-one-more-year-47941>.

94 David M. Witty, “Iraq’s Post-2014 Counter Terrorism Service,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, October 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyFocus157-Witty-2.pdf>.

95 Jim Rutenberg and Jeff Zeleny, “Obama Seeks to Clarify His Disputed Comments on Diplomacy,” *The New York Times*, May 29, 2008, <https://www.nytimes.com/2008/05/29/us/politics/29obama.html>

96 Laura Rozen, “Inside the secret US-Iran diplomacy that sealed nuke deal,” *Al Monitor*, August 11, 2015, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/08/iran-us-nuclear-khamenei-salehi-jcpoa-diplomacy.html#ixzz66yhVGkhP>.



U.S. Army Soldiers with Battery C, 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, Task Force Strike, execute a fire mission to support the Iraqi security forces during the Mosul counter offensive, Dec. 24, 2016, in northern Iraq. (CENTCOM)

also creating a pathway for Tehran to be treated as a “normal nuclear state.” The agreement proved controversial for American conservatives, many of whom argued against the removal of excess inspection protocols. There was also broad-based criticism of President Obama’s focus on Iran at the expense of the civil war in Syria, where Iranian forces are deployed in support of the Assad regime. This criticism suggested that the United States was acquiescing to Iranian support for clients and allies in Syria and Yemen, specifically, while pursuing an agreement that lessened economic pressure.

The Obama administration failed to finish the territorial war against the Islamic State, but left behind the blueprint that President Trump would use to territorially defeat the terror group. The end of the ground war against the Islamic State, however, has not enabled the United States to focus more on great power rivals. However, the signing of the JCPOA did provide, at least temporarily, a template to manage the Iranian nuclear issue, but also indicated that the Islamic Republic would continue to support clients and proxies throughout the region in ways that are detrimental to American and its regional partners’

interests. The Trump administration also had to grapple with Russia’s entry into the Syrian civil war, which underscored critical changes to how the United States and its European allies viewed threats in Europe—an area that long had been neglected in U.S. strategic thinking following the Cold War.

As President Trump took office, the focus on great power threats had increased, while enthusiasm for military action abroad had dropped. Yet, despite the Trump administration continuing to signal that it would focus on reprioritizing American military deployments and focus more on Russia and China, events in the Middle East have undermined these ambitions. Further, as has been the case since 1979, Iran has driven U.S. force deployments, following Trump’s decision to withdraw from the nuclear deal, and then reimpose sanctions. These actions prompted an Iranian response, which have undermined the U.S. effort to end regional conflicts and focus again on large state actors and to plan accordingly.



# THE TRUMP ERA: THE RUSSIA CONUNDRUM

As President Trump took office, the United States was poised to launch the final assault on Raqqa, the Islamic State's stronghold in Syria, and to hasten the capture of Mosul in Iraq.<sup>97</sup> The challenge in Syria was that a final decision required the president to decide on how to try and mollify Turkey, while also increasing the amount of lethal aid and support given to the Syrian Kurds. In March 2017, the Trump administration essentially approved the assault plan the Obama administration had left behind, issuing a waiver to satisfy legal restrictions on the arming of the Syrian Kurds and inviting Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdogan to Washington to reassure him that Turkey was an ally and that the arming of the YPG was "temporary and transactional."<sup>98</sup> At the same time, President Trump pledged to end American support for the JCPOA, calling the Obama-era nuclear agreement a terrible "deal" for the United States.

These twin decisions have driven post-2016 American policy in the Middle East, capping off a remarkable four decades of increased U.S. presence in a region that once was considered

a backwater. President Trump also has retained a long-standing interest in decreasing American involvement in the Middle East, or for regional allies to pay the United States for military protection. The Trump administration focused, first, in building the case to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal, which President Trump announced in May 2018.<sup>99</sup> The subsequent increase in American sanctions placed on Iran and threats to third countries to face secondary sanctions if they import Iranian energy have increased U.S.-Iranian tensions dramatically ever since.

In Syria, the Trump administration focused on finishing the fight against the Islamic State. To do so, the administration continued to implement the Obama administration plan of working through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) to take and hold territory.<sup>100</sup> However, on two occasions, the Trump administration authorized the use of force against the Syrian regime, following the use of chemical weapons.<sup>101</sup> The strikes were described as "one off"<sup>102</sup> and have not altered the trajectory of the war. They do, however, represent a change in policy from the Obama administration,

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<sup>97</sup> According to the *Washington Post*, "On Jan. 17, just three days before the transfer of power, Obama directed his national security adviser to hand over to the Trump team a paper detailing the plan to arm the Kurds, including talking points that President Trump could use to explain the move to Turkey's president, who officials knew would be furious. The Turks viewed the Kurdish fighters as terrorists and their No. 1 enemy. . . . Instead of running with the plan, Trump's national security team deemed it wholly insufficient and swiftly tossed it." Adam Entous, Greg Jaffe, and Missy Ryan, "Obama's White House worked for months on a plan to seize Raqqa. Trump's team took a brief look and decided not to pull the trigger," *Washington Post*, February 2, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-white-house-worked-for-months-on-a-plan-to-seize-raqqa-trumps-team-deemed-it-hopelessly-inadequate/2017/02/02/116310fa-e71a-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/obamas-white-house-worked-for-months-on-a-plan-to-seize-raqqa-trumps-team-deemed-it-hopelessly-inadequate/2017/02/02/116310fa-e71a-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html).

<sup>98</sup> Julie Hirschfield Davis and Mark Landler, "Trump Praises Erdogan as Ally in Terrorism Fight, Brushing Aside Tensions" *New York Times*, May 16, 2017, <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/05/16/world/middleeast/erdogan-turkey-trump.html>.

<sup>99</sup> Mark Landler, "Trump Abandons Iran Nuclear Deal He Long Scorned," *New York Times*, May 8, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/08/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

<sup>100</sup> Blake Hounshell and Daniel Lippman, "Trump follows Obama's political blueprint," *Politico*, December 8, 2016, <https://www.politico.eu/article/donald-trump-follows-barack-obamas-political-blueprint/>.

<sup>101</sup> Helene Cooper, Thomas Gibbons-Neff, and Ben Hubbard, "U.S., Britain and France Strike Syria Over Suspected Chemical Weapons Attack," *The New York Times*, April 13, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/04/13/world/middleeast/trump-strikes-syria-attack.html>.

<sup>102</sup> Everett Rosenfeld, "Trump launches attack on Syria with 59 Tomahawk missiles," *CNBC*, April 7, 2017, <https://www.cnn.com/2017/04/06/us-military-has-launched-more-50-than-missiles-aimed-at-syria-nbc-news.html>.



President Donald J. Trump and President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan of Turkey at the United Nations General Assembly. (White House)

which sought to work with Russia to have Syria verifiably eliminate its stockpiles of chemical weapons and chemical precursors, under the auspices of the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons (OPCW). Assad had pledged to disarm, but quite obviously has not fulfilled his obligations. In any case, both the use of force and support for diplomacy has resulted in the same outcome: Assad retains chemical weapons and has demonstrated a willingness to continue to use them.<sup>103</sup>

The Syrian regime has been able to insulate itself from global criticism because it has steadfast Russian military and political support. The start of Moscow's overt war in Syria began in secret in August 2015 when the Syrian regime signed an agreement with Russia to begin deploying Russian aviation units to Khmeimim airbase to support combat operations throughout the

country.<sup>104</sup> In early September, engineering units began to deploy to prepare the airbase for the initial deployment of four Su-30SM fighter aircraft and 12 Su-25 ground attack aircraft to begin strikes in support of regime forces.<sup>105</sup> From the outset of the Russian deployment, the goal was to further fracture the Syrian opposition through the use of overwhelming force, and then force subsets of these anti-Assad groups to capitulate and accept regime rule.<sup>106</sup> Moscow has largely succeeded in this narrow effort, due in part to its pressure on Turkey and its military defeat of the opposition Ankara had backed for much of the war.

The penultimate battle, in this regard, was for control of Aleppo. For much of the civil war, Ankara had sought to use the opposition's partial control of the city to its advantage, and to simultaneously enable anti-Assad opposition elements in Idlib

103 Luke O'Brien and Aaron Stein, "The Military Logic Behind Assad's use of Chemical Weapons," *War on the Rocks*, June 15, 2018, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/06/the-military-logic-behind-assads-use-of-chemical-weapons/>.

104 Anton Lavrov, "The Russian Air Campaign in Syria: A Preliminary Analysis," Center for Naval Analysis, June 2018, [https://www.cna.org/CNA\\_files/PDF/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf](https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/COP-2018-U-017903-Final.pdf).

105 *Ibid.*

106 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, "What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?," *Military Review*, January 2018, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/>

to put extreme pressure on Assad so as to push him to step down from power. This strategy failed, following a near-confrontation in November 2015.<sup>107</sup> After the start of the Russian bombing campaign, the Turkish government directed the Air Force to shoot down jets that violated Turkish air space.<sup>108</sup> This resulted in the downing of a Russian Su-24 bomber in late November and Moscow's decision to augment its air defense systems in Syria<sup>109</sup> and then to sever Turkey's overland supply route to Aleppo.<sup>110</sup>

The Russian bombing campaign forced Ankara to recalibrate its policy, beginning with a tacit acknowledgment that Assad was unlikely to be forced from power and that the greater security threat to Turkish interests was the American relationship with the Syrian Kurds. This change in policy prompted a shift in Turkish-Russian ties, beginning with Ankara's decision to apologize to President Vladimir Putin for the Su-24 shootdown in June 2016,<sup>111</sup> and then to engage with Moscow in political talks for the future of Syria. This decision enabled two-Turkish cross border offensives, dubbed Operation Euphrates Shield and Operation Olive Branch. In both cases, Ankara worked with Russia to deconflict air operations and launched the operations independent of the United States. These twin military offensives eventually expanded to include a high-level political dialogue, dubbed the Astana Process, which was designed to bring together Iran, Turkey, and Russia to negotiate changes to

the Syrian constitution and to help end the war.<sup>112</sup> These twin efforts have moved in parallel, with Turkey and Russia collaborating closely over issues in Syria, reaching an agreement on major issues, and working towards a jointly negotiated solution to the civil conflict.

For the United States, upon taking office, the Trump administration reportedly sought to enlist Russia in a broader effort to curb Iranian influence in Syria.<sup>113</sup> This effort was part of a larger effort to try to cultivate stronger relations with Moscow, isolate Iran, and decrease U.S. military commitments in the Middle East. In Syria, Trump continued with the Obama era plan of using the SDF to assault Raqqa and secure territory along the Euphrates River. However, once the assault finished in October 2017, President Trump sought to offload the responsibility for future combat operations against the Islamic State to regional powers. The Turkish government long had sought to break the American and European partnership with the SDF and sought to use Trump's eagerness to withdraw to its political and military advantage.<sup>114</sup>

First, on a phone call between Presidents Trump and Erdogan in December 2018, ostensibly over a disagreement about governance in Manbij, Trump made a spur-of-the-moment decision and abruptly announced the total withdrawal of American forces from Syria.<sup>115</sup> In the wake of this call, President Trump's own team sought to walk back his decision, even as talks began with

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107 "Syria conflict: Russia and Turkey 'in first joint air strikes on IS'," *BBC News*, January 18, 2017, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-38667895>; Gulsen Solaker and Tuvan Gumrukcu, "Turkey seeks Russian approval for air campaign against Afrin," *Reuters*, January 18, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-mideast-crisis-syria-turkey-denial/turkey-seeks-russian-approval-for-air-campaign-against-afrin-idUSKBN1F70VN>.

108 Robin Emmot, "At NATO, Turkey remains defiant over Russian jet," *Reuters*, November 30, 2015, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-crisis-turkey-nato/at-nato-turkey-remains-defiant-over-russian-jet-idUSKBN0TJ14F20151130>.

109 Jonathan Marcus, "Russia S-400 Syria missile deployment sends robust signal," *BBC News*, December 1, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-europe-34976537>.

110 Lavrov, "The Russian Air Campaign in Syria," pp. 8-9.

111 Andrew Roth and Erin Cunningham, "Turkish president apologizes for downing of Russian warplane last year," *The Washington Post*, June 27, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-apologizes-for-shooting-down-russian-warplane-last-year/2016/06/27/d969e0ea-3c6d-11e6-9e16-4cf01a41decb\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/turkey-apologizes-for-shooting-down-russian-warplane-last-year/2016/06/27/d969e0ea-3c6d-11e6-9e16-4cf01a41decb_story.html).

112 Zena Tahhan and Dylan Collins, "Syria talks set to begin in Astana as ceasefire holds," *Al Jazeera*, January 22, 2017, <https://www.aljazeera.com/indepth/features/2017/01/syria-talks-set-astana-ceasefire-holds-170122053710819.html>.

113 Michael R. Gordon and Dion Nissenbaum, "Trump Expected to Seek Putin's Help to Curb Iran's Military in Syria," *The Wall Street Journal*, June 28, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/trump-to-meet-russias-putin-in-finland-on-july-16-1530187901>.

114 Aaron Stein, "Why Turkey Turned Its Back on the United States and Embraced Russia," *Foreign Affairs*, July 9, 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/turkey/2019-07-09/why-turkey-turned-its-back-united-states-and-embraced-russia>.

115 According to the *Washington Post*, "When he spoke to President Trump on the telephone a week ago Friday, Turkish President



Turkey about how to address Ankara's concerns about an open-ended American deployment in Syria and how that could legitimize Syrian Kurdish political demands. These efforts were linked to the broader, anti-Iran focus that the Trump administration has pursued since taking office. To appease Trump, the United States initially reduced its number of troops in Syria by half, but has pledged to remain in Syria to continue to train the SDF. The Trump administration also has sought to attach the American presence at a small garrison in Tanf, a base that the Trump administration has suggested is critical to pressure Iran,<sup>116</sup> but, in reality, serves very little strategic purpose.<sup>117</sup>

Between December 2018 and October 2019, the United States also sought to mollify Turkey. This tripartite strategy would have had the United States and Turkey find common agreement over the future of Syria, which would then allow for both to put pressure on Assad, and, in parallel, for the United States to reach an agreement with Russia to put pressure on Iran. To manage Turkey, the Trump administration proposed that the two sides work together on joint military patrols in Syria's northeast and create a mechanism to ensure that the Syrian Kurds disarmed along the border.<sup>118</sup> This mechanism failed and, in October

2019, President Erdogan, again, threatened an invasion of U.S.-held territory if the United States did not withdraw from positions it had established along the Turkish-Syrian border.<sup>119</sup> The Turkish-American tension could not be overcome and during another telephone call, Trump acquiesced to Turkey's invasion of Syria.<sup>120</sup> The Turkish invasion forced the American military to withdraw from the border, which then allowed for the regime to return to areas the U.S. vacated, and for Turkey to carve out a small pocket wedged between Tel Abyad and Ras al Ayn.<sup>121</sup> The American mission, in turn, shifted after the invasion. President Trump, at first, ordered a total withdrawal of forces, only to reverse himself and to endorse a policy of denying the regime access to oil facilities.<sup>122</sup>

The Trump administration has sought to downplay the negative impact the Turkish incursion has had on Syria policy. To date, the Trump administration remains intent on implementing a broader, Iran-focused effort to put pressure on the regime using the American presence in Syria and, more broadly, sanctions to coerce the Iranian leadership. However, this policy has prompted an Iranian response, linked to dissatisfaction with the reimposition of U.S. sanctions after the American withdrawal from the JCPOA, and through the use

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Recep Tayyip Erdogan's agenda had not changed from when they met two weeks earlier at the Group of 20 summit in Argentina. He repeated his inability to understand why the United States was still arming and supporting Syrian Kurdish fighters to conduct a ground war against the Islamic State. To Turkey, which shared a 500-mile long border with Syria, they were a national security threat, allied with Turkish Kurds that even the United States considered terrorists. The Islamic State, according to Trump himself, had been defeated, Erdogan said. Turkey's military was strong and could take on any remaining militant pockets. Why did some 2,000 U.S. troops still need to be there? 'You know what? It's yours,' Trump said of Syria. 'I'm leaving.'" Karen DeYoung, Missy Ryan, Josh Dawsey, and Gregg Jaffe, "A tumultuous week began with a phone call between Trump and the Turkish president," *Washington Post*, December 21, 2018, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-tumultuous-week-began-with-a-phone-call-between-trump-and-the-turkish-president/2018/12/21/8f49b562-0542-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/a-tumultuous-week-began-with-a-phone-call-between-trump-and-the-turkish-president/2018/12/21/8f49b562-0542-11e9-9122-82e98f91ee6f_story.html).

116 David Adesnik, Behnam Ben Taleblu, and H.R. McMaster, "Burning Bridge: The Iranian Land Corridor to the Mediterranean," Foundation for Defense of Democracies, June 18, 2019, <https://www.fdd.org/analysis/2019/06/18/burning-bridge/>.

117 Aaron Stein, "The Trouble with Tanf: Tactics Driving Strategy in Syria," *War on the Rocks*, June 12, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/06/the-trouble-with-tanf-tactics-driving-strategy-in-syria/>.

118 Murad Sezer and Rodi Said, "Turkish military enters Syria to begin joint U.S. 'safe zone' patrol," Reuters, September 8, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-syria-security-turkey/turkish-military-enters-syria-to-begin-joint-us-safe-zone-patrol-idUSKCN1VT05H>.

119 John Vandiver, "Joint US-Turkey patrols continue in Syria as Turkey threatens invasion," *Stars and Stripes*, October 4, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/joint-us-turkey-patrols-continue-in-syria-as-turkey-threatens-invasion-1.601720>

120 Eric Schmitt, Maggie Haberman, and Edward Wong, "President Endorses Turkish Military Operation in Syria, Shifting U.S. Policy," *The New York Times*, October 7, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/10/07/us/politics/trump-turkey-syria.html>.

121 Bethan McKernan, "Turkey's 'safe zone' in northern Syria unsafe for civilians, says report," *The Guardian*, November 27, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2019/nov/27/turkey-safe-zone-northern-syria-unsafe-civilians-human-rights-watch-report>.

122 Julian Borger, "Trump contradicts aides and says troops in Syria 'only for oil'," *The Guardian*, November 13, 2019, <https://www.theguardian.com/us-news/2019/nov/13/donald-trump-syria-oil-us-troops-isis-turkey>.



U.S. Army Capt. Mark G. Zwirgzdas discusses operations during the offensive to liberate West Mosul from ISIS with 9th Iraqi Army Division leaders near Al Tarab, Iraq, March 19, 2017. (CENTCOM)

of military force to signal that Iran can severely disrupt the global energy market.

To do so, Iran has relied on its presence in Yemen through its support for the Houthis, a group that first emerged in 2004 in Yemen's north, along the Saudi border and which espouses a specific Shi'a ideology.<sup>123</sup> The Houthi takeover of the capital city, Sana'a, prompted a Saudi and Emirati intervention on behalf of the ousted government. The Yemeni civil war, then, enmeshed the region in a broader proxy war, which deepened Iranian support for the Houthis, deepening the Gulf Arab support for the anti-Houthi forces in Yemen's south. The

war is a humanitarian disaster and resulted in Iran exporting ballistic missiles and allowing its client to fire at Saudi cities.<sup>124</sup>

Iran's policy has grown more aggressive, as the sanctions have decreased the amount of its oil exports. In a series of attacks outside of Yemen, the Islamic Republic has been linked to a mine attack on tankers anchored near Fujairah, UAE, the downing of an American RQ-4 Global Hawk drone (based in the UAE), and in the large-scale cruise missile attack on Saudi oil facilities.<sup>125</sup> The Iranian attacks directly have challenged the United States and its regional partners and signaled that

123 Adam Baron, "Mapping the Yemen Conflict," European Council on Foreign Relations, accessed on September 23, 2019, <https://www.ecfr.eu/mena/yemen#cap5>.

124 Michelle Nichols, "Exclusive: Yemen rebel missiles fired at Saudi Arabia appear Iranian - U.N.," *Reuters*, November 30, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-yemen-security-un-exclusive/exclusive-yemen-rebel-missiles-fired-at-saudi-arabia-appear-iranian-u-n-idUSKBN1DU36N>.

125 "UAE tanker attacks blamed on 'state actor,'" *BBC*, June 7, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48551125>; "Strait of Hormuz: US confirms drone shot down by Iran," *BBC*, June 20, 2019, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-48700965>; and Martha Raddatz, "Iran fired cruise missiles in attack on Saudi oil facility: Senior US official," *ABC News*, September 15, 2019, <https://abcnews.go.com/International/iran-fired-cruise-missiles-attack-saudi-oil-facility/story?id=65632653>.



the Islamic Republic can exact a cost on its foes for sanctions. This approach is reminiscent, if not identical in logic, to Iran's policy during Earnest Will when the Iranian government fired cruise missiles at Kuwaiti oil facilities and fired on oil tankers. The United States, faced with few good options to escalate, has mulled retaliatory strikes lifted directly from Operation Praying Mantis in 1988. According to the *New York Times*, the Department of Defense's preferred policy to respond to the downing of the U.S. drones was to attack one of the missile-laden Iranian boats that the United States had been tracking in the Gulf of Oman. "American forces would warn the Iranians to evacuate the vessel, videotape them doing so, then sink the boat with a bomb or missile strike."<sup>126</sup> Ultimately, President Trump endorsed this option, along with strikes on a single Iranian air defense site that the Pentagon estimated could kill up to 150 Iranians. After agreeing to the strike, President Trump called it off just a few minutes before the first elements of the operation would be set in motion, citing concerns about the expected death toll.<sup>127</sup>

However, perhaps because of the criticism he faced for military inaction, President Trump ordered the killing of Major General Qasim Soleimani. The strike came after an Iranian proxy killed an American in Iraq. Iran retaliated with ballistic missiles; although no Americans were killed in the strike, both Washington and Tehran have signaled that they will not take further overt military action.<sup>128</sup>

President Trump has vacillated publicly about the U.S. role in the region and his commitment to managing America's partnerships in the Middle East. The United States, chastened by failures in Iraq and Afghanistan, remains disinterested in pursuing large-scale military action in the Middle

East. Instead, the United States has sought to use the minimum means of force to challenge regional terrorist groups and to leverage economic coercion to pressure Iran. Despite this, the United States has deployed troops to Saudi Arabia to help defend the Kingdom from attack.<sup>129</sup> The deployment is at odds with Trump's pronouncements about Syria and suggests incoherence over American strategy in the Middle East.

The reality, even during the Trump administration, is that the United States has chosen not to decrease its involvement in the Middle East. To the contrary, even as the Department of Defense has sought to wind down the war against the Islamic State, and begin to redeploy in-demand assets, such as missile defense and aircraft, American diplomacy has not adapted to match end and means. The result in Syria is that the mission remains muddled and the United States is unable to influence the Turkish-Russian-Iranian negotiations over the future of the country. If anything, these three powers remain hostile to American involvement in the conflict and would welcome a total American withdrawal. More broadly, the outcome of this strategic disconnect is a push-pull effect, where the Department of Defense attempts to remove assets, but political choices made, such as the Trump administration decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear agreement, prompt predictable instability, requiring the return of military forces that had been withdrawn from the region.

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126 Peter Baker, Eric Schmitt, and Michael Crowley, "An Abrupt Move That Stunned Aides: Inside Trump's Aborted Attack on Iran," *New York Times*, September 21, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/09/21/us/politics/trump-iran-decision.html?smid=nyt-core-ios-share>.

127 Ibid.

128 Tamara Qiblawi, Arwa Damon and Brice Laine, "US troops sheltered in Saddam-era bunkers during Iran missile attack," CNN, January 13, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/01/13/middleeast/iran-strike-al-asad-base-iraq-exclusive-intl/index.html>; Peter Baker, Ronen Bergman, David D. Kirkpatrick, Julian E. Barnes and Alissa J. Rubin, "Seven Days in January: How Trump Pushed U.S. and Iran to the Brink of War," *The New York Times*, January 11, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/01/11/us/politics/iran-trump.html>.

129 Robert Burns, "Officials: US putting troops back in Saudi Arabia," *The Associated Press*, July 21, 2019, <https://www.military-times.com/news/your-military/2019/07/21/officials-us-putting-troops-back-in-saudi-arabia/>

## FULL CIRCLE:

# IRAN, THE UNITED STATES, AND THE POLICY OF ESCALATION

As the Trump administration considers how to define and pursue American interests in the Middle East, the U.S. position as a security guarantor with a large number of bases in the region has remained remarkably unchanged since the mid-1990s. The United States remains the dominant, and unchallenged, external actor in the Persian Gulf. However, what has changed is how Iran has developed technologies to challenge U.S. primacy and how the American invasion of Iraq has empowered the Islamic Republic. The buildup of American bases in the Middle East, as part of the post-1991 effort to protect interests in the region, prompted countermoves by American adversaries to offset U.S. military capabilities.

The lesson that Iran learned from the Gulf War was to attack American forces before they could amass and plan for attack, as was the case during the buildup to liberate Kuwait in 1990. To hold U.S. targets at risk, Iran relies on its ballistic and cruise missiles, which together are used to put American targets in the Gulf at risk and complicate potential combat operations. The United States, in turn, has come to rely heavily on the bases it has built in Qatar, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain to project power in the region. For example, the wars in Syria and Iraq, along with Afghanistan, are dependent on the Combined Air Operations Center in Qatar.<sup>130</sup> These bases are not hardened or sufficiently protected from ballistic missile attack, with U.S. aircraft stored wing-to-tip on exposed aprons.<sup>131</sup> This reality has provided Iran

with a certain amount of leverage over the United States, along with the capabilities to hold critical infrastructure targets at risk throughout the region.<sup>132</sup>

The changes to the regional security situation have moved in tandem with changes in Washington's espoused global ambitions. Neither the Obama administration nor the Trump administration has managed to match their broader ambitions to focus less on the Middle East, and base forces commensurate to this self-declared interest, with the broader intention to better posture the United States in Asia and Europe. The continuous American deployments in the Middle East—beginning with the invasion of Afghanistan, continuing with the invasion of Iraq, and including the war against ISIS—have strained and weakened the U.S. military. The Department of Defense has sought to address these challenges, particularly in the Middle East, through a concerted effort to reduce forces, as it rotates out high-end assets to other areas around the world.

This trend is likely to continue as the United States reassesses the amount of assets and time dedicated to the Middle East since 9/11 and how the legacy of the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan have produced unsatisfactory geopolitical gains. By comparison, the light-footprint approach used to fight the Islamic State is seen as a model for future combat operations. The strategy of enabling surrogates has proved to be less resource-intensive and does not

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<sup>130</sup> The United States has the option to use Shaw Air Force base in South Carolina as the CAOC. See: Adam Taylor, "Air Force shifts Middle East command center from Qatar to South Carolina," *Stars and Stripes*, September 29, 2019, <https://www.stripes.com/news/air-force/air-force-shifts-middle-east-command-center-from-qatar-to-south-carolina-1.601074>.

<sup>131</sup> For a discussion on the risk cruise and ballistic missiles pose to American bases, see: John Stillion and David T. Orletsky, *Airbase Vulnerability to Conventional Cruise-Missile and Ballistic-Missile Attacks* (Santa Monica: Rand Corp., 1999), available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1028.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1028.html).

<sup>132</sup> Mark Gunzinger and Cristopher Dougherty, "Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran's Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats," Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessment, January 17, 2012, <https://csbaonline.org/research/publications/outside-in-operating-from-range-to-defeat-irans-anti-access-and-area-denial>.



U.S. and Turkish military forces conduct a joint ground patrol inside the security mechanism area in northeast, Syria, Sept. 8, 2019. (EUCOM)

saddle the United States with the costs of post-conflict occupation and governance. The different branches of the armed services have warned about the deleterious effects on personnel and equipment from continued combat deployments and non-combat security assistance deployments in the Middle East.

During the Cold War, the United States retained a very small presence in the Gulf. This was a manifestation of the resource demands in Europe and the Pacific and a choice made to work through regional allies to ensure the free flow of oil and to prevent Soviet political and military encroachment. The resources the U.S. military has at its disposal has decreased considerably

after the fall of the Soviet Union, leaving the United States to maintain a global presence with fewer assets.



# MAKING A CHOICE:

## AMERICAN POLICY PRIORITIES AND OPTIONS

It is important to consider how the United States can achieve its interests in the Middle East, while acknowledging that it is prudent to reduce the deployment of high-end systems in the region. To do so, the United States first has to articulate clearly what those interests are, and then build a diplomatic and military policy around those goals. The core interests of the United States remain unchanged. They are:

1. Ensure unimpeded energy exports via the Strait of Hormuz.
2. Deny safe haven to terrorist groups plotting external attacks.
3. Prevent the spread of weapons of mass destruction.

These three core objectives each require the commitment of resources, but because of America's global commitments, they must be weighed against priorities elsewhere. To manage increased demands on American forces elsewhere, it is worth prioritizing a policy of de-escalation in the Middle East. This approach would retain American counter-terrorism options to deny safe haven to groups deemed a threat, but free up resources to be moved elsewhere to bolster capabilities in higher-priority areas. This approach would not abandon American commitments, but simply match U.S. resources to priorities. This would necessarily require the recommitment of some American forces from the region to support Europe or the Indo-Pacific region.

To facilitate a U.S. drawdown, a general diplomatic strategy rooted in ensuring that each of the three main American priorities are realized

is critical. For the United States, this approach would necessitate a change in the Trump administration's approach to Iran. In 2019, Iran has executed a coherent policy, rooted in its own effort to compel changes to American sanctions on energy exports. Iran has pursued this strategy through two-interrelated processes, linked by a coherent diplomatic strategy designed to undermine regional confidence in the United States and split Washington from its European allies.

Tehran has the advantage of working through its clients to conduct attacks in support of Iranian goals in Yemen and Iraq. The use of a third-party client gives Iran a modicum of deniability, complicating American policy and giving Tehran a useful tool to attack its regional rivals indirectly. This has been the case in Yemen, where Iran has given direct support to the Houthis, including the export of ballistic missiles that are fired at targets as far north as Riyadh.<sup>133</sup> In the Persian Gulf, Iran has been linked to attacks on international oil shipping and, more brazenly, on Saudi oil facilities with cruise missiles, purportedly fired from inside Iran.

On a second front, Iran gradually has breached elements of the nuclear deal. It has done so in a deliberate way, designed to increase pressure on France, Germany, and the United Kingdom for American actions—the levying of sanctions. Finally, at the political level, the Iranian government denies involvement in malign activities, leveraging the plausible deniability gained from its “war-by-client” approach.<sup>134</sup> Iran has not managed to achieve many of these goals: Europe has acquiesced to U.S. financial pressure, and Iranian attacks have backfired because the

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<sup>133</sup> “Houthi rebels fire missiles from Yemen into Saudi Arabia,” *Associated Press*, March 26, 2018, <https://www.nbcnews.com/news/world/houthi-rebels-fire-missiles-yemen-saudi-arabia-n859946>.

<sup>134</sup> Austin Carson, “Iran — and Saudi Arabia — might prefer to let responsibility for the attack remain unclear,” *Monkey Cage Blog*, *The Washington Post*, September 17, 2019, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/politics/2019/09/17/after-saudi-oil-attack-will-us-saudis-start-war-with-iran-here-are-things-know/>.



Iraqi federal police greet U.S. Army advisors before a key leader engagement near West Mosul, Iraq, March 2, 2017. (CENTCOM)

escalatory attacks on international shipping have hardened anti-Iranian opinions throughout Europe.<sup>135</sup>

Still, despite the Trump administration's efforts to pressure Iran to capitulate to American demands, the net result of American policy over the past two years has enabled Iran to attack regional partners and to flaunt the nuclear deal. The Trump administration has dubbed this approach "maximum pressure" and has attached to this policy a set of 12 demands<sup>136</sup> that Iran must meet to lessen U.S. financial pressure. These maximalist objectives have not covered Iran into complying with the United States, but instead have prompted Iranian counter-escalation—contributing to further regional instability and outcomes that are against America's three core interests.<sup>137</sup>

Iran's response to the maximum pressure policy is not a better situation by any measure than the one that the Trump administration inherited from its predecessor. It may seem counterintuitive, but to better prepare for war with a great power, a detente with Iran is necessary. Such a process requires articulating clear policy goals, pegged to the interrelated American efforts to ensure the export of oil, prevent the spread of WMDs, and pressure terror groups operating in the region. The three problems are interrelated, in that Iran's decision to challenge international shipping is linked to the U.S. withdrawal from the nuclear deal. The same is true for Iran's actions to breach the deal, which stem from the U.S. decision to withdraw and, related to that, impose sanctions that deprive the Iranians of the monetary benefit they were promised for adhering to the JCPOA.

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135 Benjamin Mueller, "U.K. Joins U.S.-Led Effort to Protect Ships in Strait of Hormuz," *New York Times*, August 5, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/08/05/world/middleeast/britain-iran-strait-of-hormuz.html>; and "Germany, UK, France blame Iran for Saudi oil attacks," *Al Jazeera*, September 24, 2019, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/09/france-germany-britain-leaders-iran-saudi-oil-attack-190923201421030.html>.

136 "Mike Pompeo speech: What are the 12 demands given to Iran?," *Al Jazeera English*, May 21, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2018/05/mike-pompeo-speech-12-demands-iran-180521151737787.html>.

137 Nicholas Miller, "Maximum Pressure is Failing: Fact-Checking Pompeo on Iran," *War on the Rocks*, August 15, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/08/maximum-pressure-is-failing-fact-checking-pompeo-on-iran/>.



# A ROADMAP FOR MISSILES: CAP AND FREEZE

The United States and Iran had managed to carve out a mutually hostile, but stable relationship, at the end of the Obama administration. In exchange for sanctions relief, Iran agreed to inspections in excess of those mandated for countries with a nuclear program. These inspections are to be removed in intervals, spaced over 25 years, leaving behind the safeguards placed upon state parties to the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) and the arrangement with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Given the damage the Trump administration has done to the JCPOA and the follow-on Iranian violations of its commitments, a clean and simple return to the pre-Trump administration status quo may not be tenable.<sup>138</sup> For this reason, the United States should consider endorsing a French proposal, which entails \$15 billion in sanctions relief in exchange for Iran's return to compliance with the JCPOA and follow-on talks on ballistic missiles and regional issues.<sup>139</sup>

This proposal would entail the United States

framing its demands of Iran on ballistic missiles. For almost four decades, Iran has worked to build medium-range cruise and ballistic missiles—and has succeeded in developing systems that can strike targets up to 2,000 kilometers.<sup>140</sup> Iran's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, has made a political choice to self-limit Iran's missile range.<sup>141</sup> The United States, working alongside its European allies, should focus on capping Iranian missiles ranges at 2,000km through a moratorium on missile tests in excess of this range. Beyond this, Iran's work on a Space Launch Vehicle should be addressed in a separate track and focused on reaching an agreement on limiting Iranian space launches to the liquid-fueled Simorgh Space Launch Vehicle. As researchers Fabian Hinz, Michael Ellemen, and Dave Schmerler all have noted, the Simorgh relies on Scud engines and uses low energetic fuel for thrust. For these reasons, it is not an ideal platform to repurpose as a long-range intercontinental ballistic missile.<sup>142</sup>

To build regional confidence in this agreement,

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138 Ariane Tabatabai and Elisa Catalano Ewers, "Those Who Think the United States Can Reenter the Iran Deal Are Fooling Themselves," *Foreign Policy*, June 20, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/06/20/democrats-who-think-the-united-states-can-reenter-the-iran-deal-are-fooling-themselves/>.

139 According to *Reuters*, "The idea is 'to exchange a credit line guaranteed by oil in return for, one, a return to the JCPOA (Iran nuclear deal). . . and two, security in the Gulf and the opening of negotiations on regional security and a post-2025 (nuclear program).'" [French Foreign Minister Jean-Yves]. See: John Irish and Parisa Hafezi, "France pushes \$15 billion credit line plan for Iran, if U.S. allows it," *Reuters*, September 3, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-france/france-pushes-15-billion-credit-line-plan-for-iran-if-us-allows-it-idUSKCN1VO1AF>.

140 Max Fisher, "Deep in the Desert, Iran Quietly Advances Missile Technology," *The New York Times*, May 23, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/05/23/world/middleeast/iran-missiles.html>.

141 "Iran's supreme leader has restricted the range of ballistic missiles manufactured in the country to 2,000 kilometers (1,240 miles), the head of the paramilitary Revolutionary Guard said Tuesday, which limits their reach to only regional Mideast targets. . . . Speaking on the sidelines of a conference in Tehran, Gen. Mohammad Ali Jafari told journalists that the capability of Iran's ballistic missiles is "'enough for now.'" The Guard runs Iran's missile program, answering only to Khamenei. "Today, the range of our missiles, as the policies of Iran's supreme leader dictate, are limited to 2,000 kilometers, even though we are capable of increasing this range," he said. "Americans, their forces and their interests are situated within a 2,000-kilometer radius around us and we are able to respond to any possible desperate attack by them." See: Jon Gambrel, "Iran says supreme leader limiting ballistic missile range," *Associated Press*, October 31, 2017, <https://apnews.com/a9b9ff80f4424ce5be3a4a81e04dc8dc>.

142 Fabian Hinz, "A Roadmap to Pragmatic Dialogue on the Iranian Missile Program," European Leadership Network, March 2019, <https://www.europeanleadershipnetwork.org/wp-content/uploads/2019/03/Fabian-Hinz-ELN-Iran-Missile-Policy-March-2019.pdf>; and David Schmerler, "Iran's Space Launch Vehicle: ICBM or Space Program Development," Foreign Policy Research Institute, January 22, 2019, <https://www.fpri.org/article/2019/01/irans-space-launch-icbm-or-space-program-development/>.



U.S. Soldiers assigned to Charlie Battery, 1st Battalion, 320th Field Artillery Regiment, 2nd Brigade Combat Team, 101st Airborne Division fire a M777 A2 Howitzer in support of Operation Inherent Resolve at Platoon Assembly Area 14, Iraq, Nov. 29, 2016. (CENTCOM)

the United States should encourage all states in the Middle East adhere to the International Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation. This code includes a number of transparency protocols, including an annual declaration of ballistic missile policy, publishing a missile test database every year, and adherence to a pre-launch notification mechanism. It includes protocols for a space launch program, including a declaration of policy, the publication of launch sites, and pre-launch notification with information about the planned direction of ascent.<sup>143</sup> These

voluntary protocols would provide Iran with a vehicle to make yearly declarations about its missile program (and for the Gulf Arab states to declare their own missile programs) and to give regional states a mechanism to exchange data before space launchers are tested or used to place satellites in orbit. This approach would necessitate American sanctions relief and acceptance of a small, regulated Iranian space program built around a liquid-fueled SLV with low energetic propellant.

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<sup>143</sup> The Hague Code of Conduct against Ballistic Missile Proliferation, Nuclear Threat Initiative, Last updated July 11, 2019, <https://www.nti.org/learn/treaties-and-regimes/hague-code-conduct-against-ballistic-missile-proliferation-hcoc/>.



## REGIONAL DETENTE: WINDING DOWN REGIONAL CONFLICT

The United States should also seek to engage Iran on de-escalating the conflict in Yemen, where Iranian clients have been able to fire missiles at Saudi Arabia, and articulate a clear strategy for U.S. forces deployed in Syria. The United States and its local partner, the SDF, have defeated the Islamic State territorially. With this task complete, the broader question now is how to hold territory against an expected Islamic State insurgency<sup>144</sup> in eastern Syria and what role the United States can and should play in solving the broader civil war. Finally, this approach must comport with resource demands and broader American ambitions to focus less on counter-terrorism operations and more on preparations for great power combat.

In Syria, the United States does not have the coercive tools to force significant concessions from the Syrian regime. Armed with Russia's open-ended commitment to regime security, alongside Iranian investments in supporting the regime's offensives throughout the country, Assad has the tools and capacity to resist American pressure to force him to step down. Faced with this reality, the United States actually may be able to saddle Russia with the cost of the civil war, forcing its adversary to spend money in ways that are advantageous to American interests—specifically, force Russia to spend finite rubles on the defense of Syria, rather than for offensive purposes in Europe. This approach will, first, entail formalizing a Russian-American working group to discuss Syria, focused on reaching a consensus on issues directly linked to U.S. interests. These interests include guarantees for the SDF so as to ensure that in the absence of American forces, the Syrian Kurds are afforded some guarantee of rights in a future, Moscow-backed Syrian state. It should

also be made clear to Moscow that the United States will not support reconstruction in Syria. The United States should engage its European allies and work to secure a similar pledge.

The talks would address Syria's possession of chemical weapons in contravention to Assad's commitments to disarm and destroy precursor chemicals used to make weapons. To pressure Russia and Assad, the United States should pair negotiations about minimal interests in Syria with a broader, overarching, and multilateral effort to impose a cost on Moscow for Assad's failings on chemical weapons. This approach should hold in reserve the option to use force in the event of future chemical weapons attacks, knowing that limited cruise missile strikes are not enough to shape regime behavior. Washington should, therefore, seek ways to sanction Russian entities for resupplying Assad's military, specifically focusing on the spare parts needed to keep Syria's Russian-origin aircraft flying. This approach should be grounded in the reality that Assad delivers chemical weapons by aircraft, and Washington should seek similar action by the European Union. If Russia were to secure the complete elimination of Syrian chemical weapons, then the sanctions would be lifted, so long as the OPCW could verify any such action.

On Yemen, the United States is a peripheral actor to a regional conflict. While American aircraft do support the Saudi-led coalition's air campaign and American personnel assist with targeting, the United States is not overly committed to the conflict and would welcome a resolution to the conflict. The United States should continue direct talks with the Houthis and Saudi Arabia to help

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144 See: Patrick B. Johnson et. al, *Return and Expand? The Finances and Prospects of the Islamic State After the Caliphate* (Santa Monica, Rand Corp., 2019), available at: [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR3046.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR3046.html).



A U.S. Marine observes as supplies are dropped in the De-confliction Zone (DCZ) near At-Tanf Garrison, Syria, Sept. 7, 2018. (CENTCOM)

facilitate a ceasefire.<sup>145</sup> These talks should support the United Nations-led effort to settle the conflict. To address core American interests, beyond the ending of the war, any U.S. effort should include securing a pledge to cease ballistic missile attacks from Yemen and to secure an Iranian guarantee to cease the export of ballistic and cruise missiles to its regional clients.

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145 Anuj Chopra, "Washington in Talks with Yemeni Rebels, US Official Says," *Associated Press*, September 5, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/09/05/washington-talks-yemeni-rebels-us-official-says.html>.



# MORE WHITE SPACE:

## EXPLOITING AMERICAN MILITARY ADVANTAGES

A regional detente with Iran and other troublesome actors would not signal the end of the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. However, it could be used to better balance global deployments and lessen the burden placed upon the Air Force, Navy, and Army to maintain such a robust presence in the region. Across the three services, a similar problem has emerged: the constant and lengthy deployments to the Middle East have degraded older U.S. aircraft and equipment more quickly than originally planned, driving up maintenance costs and forcing the premature retirement of equipment before their replacements can be fielded. Additionally, the large buildup of American forces in bases in Qatar and the UAE are not protected properly from Iranian ballistic and cruise missiles, making them vulnerable to a salvo attack and raising questions about whether they would be used in the initial phase of a war against Iran and vulnerable to attack throughout any notional conflict.

The United States has an interest in decreasing self-imposed requirements for its military presence in the region. For the Air Force, the demands of the post-9/11 wars have, according to journalist Oriana Pawlyk, “broken” the B-1 fleet.<sup>146</sup> The 365-day deployments have contributed to the Air Force’s enduring pilot retention problem, which contributes to the ongoing pilot shortage. Finally, an often-overlooked cost is in giving secrets away to great power competitors, particularly about the radar signatures of America’s newest aircraft, the F-22 and F-35. In these two cases, the plane’s use in the Middle East is in part driven by necessity and to give legacy platforms, the F-15, F-16, and

F-18, a break. However, when they are used for missions in Syria, as has been the case with the F-22, they allow for Russia and China to gain useful information about tracking the jets with the S-400 air defense system deployed in Latakia.<sup>147</sup> In conjunction with a policy that emphasizes decreased tensions, narrowly focused on American interests, the U.S. Air Force should:

1. Reduce the number of non A-10 fighter squadrons that rotate through the Middle East, which would increase the amount of training time for higher-end skills and lessen the strain on other aging fighting jets, designed to fight against higher-end adversary aircraft.
2. Scale back the rotation of bombers through the Middle East, choosing instead to retain bombers inside the United States; they only would be sent to the region on a contingency basis.
3. Re-allocate scheduled rotations for in-demand military assets to maintain a healthy training schedule to build skills and prepare the U.S. military to fight against a high-end adversary.
4. Harden U.S. bases to better defend against missile attack and consider using bases outside the region with improved infrastructure for certain deployments because its distance from Iran remains an asset for U.S. forces.
5. Consider investing in low-cost ground attack platforms, in addition to higher-end aircraft to counter more advanced state-level threats.

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<sup>146</sup> Oriana Pawlyk, “With B-1 Aging and B-21 Still Years Out, Air Force May Soon Have No Go-To Bomber,” *Military.com*, September 15, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/09/15/b-1-aging-and-b-21-still-years-out-air-force-may-soon-have-no-go-bomber.html>.

<sup>147</sup> James R. Chiles, “Raptor Uncaged,” *Air and Space Magazine*, February 2016, <https://www.airspacemag.com/military-aviation/raptor-strikes-180957782/>.



(Dec. 14, 2019) Boatswain's Mate 2nd Class Garner Jordan aims a M2 .50 Caliber machine gun at simulated enemy boats during Griffin Missile Exercise 19. (CENTCOM)

East, and for missions now assigned to Special Operations Forces.<sup>148</sup>

For air defense, the Army is also responsible for the deployment of Patriot air and missile defense assets to the Middle East. According to Becca Wasser, an analyst at Rand, “The US Army has fifteen Patriot battalions, four of which are permanently deployed in Europe and Asia.”<sup>149</sup> To reassure Saudi Arabia, the United States sent a Patriot missile battery to the region (after having removed Patriot batteries in September 2018<sup>150</sup>) to reinforce the Kingdom’s air defense. Saudi Arabia is more acutely vulnerable to aerial attack in the north of the country because its own Patriot missiles are deployed to intercept missiles fired from Yemen in the south. As Wasser notes, the U.S. Army is intent on achieving a 1:2 deployment-to-dwell ratio, which means that units are required to spend twice the length of their deployment at home, where they can train to improve readiness.<sup>151</sup> At any one time, only a third of U.S. Patriot forces are available to deploy without making sacrifices to readiness, which is the main focus of the broader effort to be better prepared to counter a great power adversary.

The Navy, too, could benefit from changes in how it deploys forces in the Middle East. One way to do this is to alter the aircraft carrier requirement in the Middle East, deploying finite aircraft carriers to the Indian Ocean to patrol in the Indo-Pacific area of operations. This would increase the U.S. presence in a more pressing part of the world, while also ensuring that they can sail to the Persian Gulf within 14 days of being needed.

The strains on the Army are similar to that of the Navy and Air Force. In Syria and Afghanistan, for example, the drawdown of U.S. forces from conflict zones is not distributed across the force equally. Instead, what has happened is that Special Operations Forces are shouldering much of the combat burden, which means that casualties are clustered inside SOF units, and these same units are being asked to deploy continually. The reason for this stems from the ability to deploy these forces quietly. To address this issue, and ease the burden on these forces, the Army should:

1. Consider force transparency on Special Operations Forces deployments.
2. Use general purpose forces where applicable, including for training missions in the Middle

148 For more concrete and in-depth recommendations on this point, see: Tim Ball, “Replaced? Security Force Assistance Brigades vs. Special Forces,” *War on the Rocks*, February 23, 2017, <https://warontherocks.com/2017/02/replaced-security-force-assistance-brigades-vs-special-forces/>.

149 Author Interview, Rebecca Wasser, Rand, Washington, DC, October 2019.

150 Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Pulling Some Missile-Defense Systems Out of Mideast,” *Wall Street Journal*, September 26, 2018, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-pulling-some-antiaircraft-and-missile-batteries-out-of-mideast-1537954204>.

151 Author Interview, Rebecca Wasser, Rand corp., Washington, DC, October 2019.



# CONCLUSION



A U.S. Marine with 2nd Battalion, 7th Marines, assigned to the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force-Crisis Response-Central Command stands post during the reinforcement of the Baghdad Embassy Compound in Iraq, Jan. 4, 2020. (CENTCOM)

**T**he American presence in the Middle East is the byproduct of an era when Washington had no strategic competitor, and tied to a determination made after the Cold War that a large military presence there was in the country's best interests. As the United States prepares, again, to compete with large adversaries in Europe and Asia, a reappraisal of U.S. interests in the Middle East is necessary.

To allow for a more sustainable presence in the region and to allow for necessary changes to how the U.S. deploys finite military hardware, the United States has an incentive to reach detente with Iran. The Islamic Republic of Iran is a regional irritant, but it should be managed with deft diplomacy that places a cap on Iran's missile development, accepts a small space program, and places the nuclear program under extended and intrusive inspections. This approach would, then, allow for the lessening of regional tensions, which would then allow for military deployments

to match the aspirations of declared U.S. national strategy.

As part of this effort, the United States has the tools to saddle Russia with the long-term costs of "victory" in Syria. This plan is premised on the idea of pushing Moscow towards defense expenditures that are the least threatening to American interests.<sup>152</sup> Simply put: A ruble spent in support of a failed state is one less to be spent elsewhere, perhaps on military equipment that could be more threatening to American interests in Europe. This approach would, therefore, welcome an increased Russian presence in Syria because it would require the deployment of finite Russian assets in a civil war that Moscow has been able to militarily impact, but has thus far failed to resolve. As part of this effort, the United States should consider making a concession on the security of Assad, in exchange for guarantees for the Syrian Kurds and possible concessions on American counter-terrorism operations in Syria's northeast. This approach would drop any linkage of the

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<sup>152</sup> The United States proposed such a strategy during the Cold War. See: A.W. Marshall, "Long Term Competition with the Soviets: A Framework for Strategic Analysis," Rand corp., April 1972, <https://divergentoptions.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/03/R862.pdf>

Syrian issue to Iran, which would be dealt with through the overarching focus on detente, so as to allow the deployment of U.S. assets elsewhere.

This strategy would also be independent of ensuring that Assad and his backers, Iran and Russia, are held accountable for the use of WMDs. The U.S. has the tools to impose a cost on the regime for its WMD use and to try to raise the indirect costs of Russian support for WMD use in ways that don't detract from resolving the conflict on terms the United States can live with. This approach would not secure every American goal in Syria, but would be "good enough" and potentially impose upon Russia a cost that could otherwise be used elsewhere to counter the United States in more strategically important areas. Finally, the winding down of tensions with Iran could be paired with an increased military presence elsewhere, a win-win outcome for a country striving to ramp-up operations outside of the Middle East.

This paper proposes making hard trade-offs and narrowing the scope of American interests in the Middle East, so as to be able to better prepare for great power competition. The policy options do not entail an American withdrawal from the region, or the "abandonment" of U.S. partners. Instead, it offers a pathway to de-escalate tensions, while holding in reserve the sprawling American presence in the region and using assets not deployed here to other parts of the world. This pathway would then increase the capabilities of U.S. forces deployed in Europe and Asia, so as to better implement the ongoing efforts to focus less on conflicts in the Middle East in favor of preparing for and preventing conflicts in more geopolitically salient areas around the world. As part of this effort, the United States must think creatively about how to impose costs on its competitors when it wades deeply into complex, third-party civil conflicts that it may struggle to manage. In essence, this is an argument for a return to elements of America's Cold War policy, albeit with the added advantage of U.S. infrastructure and the access it secured following the first Gulf War. The United States never truly will leave the Middle East, but it can deploy more smartly and

seek to realize policy goals through a coordinated strategy that accepts U.S. deployments are not cost-free. A proper strategy requires matching ends with means. The United States has ample means, but they are not infinite. To deploy them in line with a coherent national strategy, anchored to the sobering reality of rising competitors, intent on challenging America, requires making hard choices.







The Nimitz-class aircraft carrier USS Abraham Lincoln (CVN 72) transits the Suez Canal. (CENTCOM)

## ABOUT THE AUTHOR

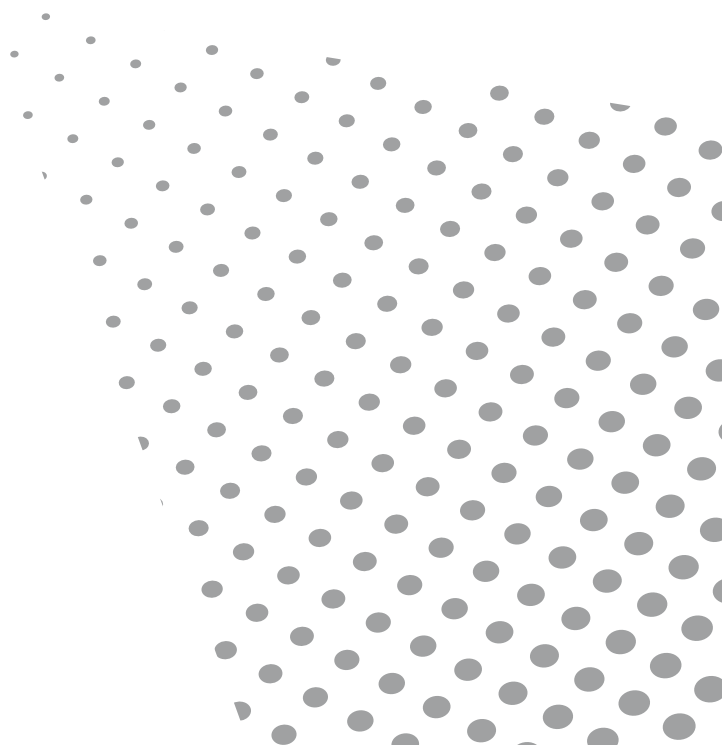


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