

MAY 2022

CSIS | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES



# U.S. DEFENSE POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Authors

Seth G. Jones | Seamus P. Daniels

A Report of the

CSIS Transnational Threats Project

MAY 2022

---

# U.S. DEFENSE POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

AUTHORS

Seth G. Jones

Seamus P. Daniels

A Report of the CSIS Transnational Threats Project

**CSIS** | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

ROWMAN &  
LITTLEFIELD

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London



---

## ABOUT CSIS

The Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) is a bipartisan, nonprofit policy research organization dedicated to advancing practical ideas to address the world's greatest challenges.

Thomas J. Pritzker was named chairman of the CSIS Board of Trustees in 2015, succeeding former U.S. senator Sam Nunn (D-GA). Founded in 1962, CSIS is led by John J. Hamre, who has served as president and chief executive officer since 2000.

CSIS's purpose is to define the future of national security. We are guided by a distinct set of values—nonpartisanship, independent thought, innovative thinking, cross-disciplinary scholarship, integrity and professionalism, and talent development. CSIS's values work in concert toward the goal of making real-world impact.

CSIS scholars bring their policy expertise, judgment, and robust networks to their research, analysis, and recommendations. We organize conferences, publish, lecture, and make media appearances that aim to increase the knowledge, awareness, and salience of policy issues with relevant stakeholders and the interested public.

CSIS has impact when our research helps to inform the decisionmaking of key policymakers and the thinking of key influencers. We work toward a vision of a safer and more prosperous world.

CSIS does not take specific policy positions; accordingly, all views expressed herein should be understood to be solely those of the author(s).

**© 2022 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies. All rights reserved.**

ISBN: 978-1-5381-7049-6 (pb); 978-1-5381-7050-2 (eBook)

Center for Strategic and International Studies  
1616 Rhode Island Avenue, NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
202-887-0200 | [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)

Rowman & Littlefield  
4501 Forbes Boulevard  
Lanham, MD 20706  
301-459-3366 | [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com)

---

## ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

We would like to thank numerous individuals for their assistance during the research, writing, revision, and publication phases of this report. We interviewed and discussed our preliminary findings with individuals in the Office of the Secretary of Defense, Joint Staff, U.S. Central Command, U.S. Special Operations Command, U.S. intelligence community, and allied and partner governments in the Middle East and Europe. While most of these individuals did not want to be named, we thank them nonetheless for their time and insights.

Thanks to Michael McNerney and Mark Cancian for their outstanding reviews of an early draft. We asked them to be critical and blunt in pointing out errors in the logic of the argument and evidence—and they delivered. Their comments were extraordinarily helpful. Several others provided valuable comments and critiques along the way, including Jon Alterman, Chris Bernotavicius, John Hamre, Todd Harrison, Benjamin Jensen, Tom Karako, Michelle Macander, Brian McSorley, Danielle Ngo, Christopher Reid, Normal Roule, and Matt Strohmeier.

Thanks also to Nicholas Harrington, Catrina Doxsee, Jared Thompson, Grace Hwang, James Suber, and Kateryna Halstead for their valuable research assistance. Joseph Bermudez and Jennifer Jun helped identify and analyze satellite imagery of Russian and Chinese activity in the Middle East. Finally, we would like to thank CSIS's iLab team for their outstanding job in editing, formatting, and publishing the document.

This report is made possible by generous support from the Smith Richardson Foundation.

---

## CONTENTS

Executive Summary .....	VI
01   Introduction .....	1
02   Historical Trends .....	6
03   Alternative U.S. Force Postures .....	19
04   Scenarios .....	38
05   Recommendations .....	51
Appendix: Middle East Scenarios .....	62
About the Authors .....	68
Endnotes .....	69

---

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are growing calls for a decrease in the U.S. military presence in the Middle East. According to one assessment, since “few vital interests of the U.S. continue to be at stake in the Middle East,” the United States needs to draw down its forces and pursue “more limited goals that can be achieved with more modest means.”<sup>1</sup> The United States has between 40,000 and 60,000 military personnel deployed to the Middle East, depending on rotational deployments. Proponents of a major reduction of forces argue that it is necessary because of growing competition with China in the Indo-Pacific and Russia in Europe; a declining U.S. reliance on Gulf oil and gas; a reduced threat from terrorist groups, such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda; and a need to focus on diplomacy rather than military force. However, others contend that the United States needs to keep a robust presence in the Middle East to deter and respond to a complex mix of adversaries active in the region—from China and Russia to Iran and terrorist groups.

To better analyze the benefits and risks of posture options, this report asks three main questions. First, what are U.S. force posture options in the Middle East, based on a range of U.S. interests and other factors? Second, what are the risks and benefits of these options? Third, based on the analysis, what are the optimal interests and posture for the United States in the Middle East?

In answering these questions, this report assesses three posture options. One is *restraint*, which includes the withdrawal of almost all U.S. forces from the Middle East, except for a stay-behind force of fewer than 5,000 soldiers and capabilities primarily to protect the U.S. homeland. Another option, *limited engagement*, involves a larger U.S. military presence of 10,000 to 20,000 soldiers and capabilities to deal with a set of U.S. interests tied primarily to monitoring and countering states operating in the region, such as China, Russia, and Iran. A final option is *robust engagement*, which includes a sizable U.S. presence in the region of 40,000 to 50,000 soldiers to deter and potentially respond to Iran and terrorist threats, monitor and counter Russian and Chinese activity, and ensure freedom of navigation.

After assessing the benefits and risks of these options, the report comes to three main conclusions.

First, while U.S. interests in the Middle East are not as significant as a decade ago, the United States still

has several core interests. They include maintaining a favorable balance of power in the region, reducing the threat from terrorist organizations to the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas, protecting freedom of navigation and access to oil, and preventing nuclear proliferation. Based on these interests, this report recommends several main objectives for the U.S. military in the Middle East:

- Monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity.
- Deter and assist partners in responding to Iranian aggression.
- Disrupt and degrade terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and its regional interests.
- Protect freedom of navigation and access to oil.

These objectives should be nested in a broader U.S. security strategy that aims to contain the further expansion of Chinese and Russian military power and to check the actions of Iran and terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and its allies and partners. U.S. military posture in the Middle East needs to be situated in the context of U.S. global posture. The Indo-Pacific is an important region because of China’s rise, and the United States needs to have a robust posture to balance against China politically, economically, and militarily. The United States should also continue to have a robust posture in Europe to ensure a favorable regional balance of power and to hedge against Russian revanchism, particularly given Russia’s invasion of Ukraine and threat to U.S. allies and partners in Europe. Nevertheless, the United States still has important interests in the Middle East.

Second, the report finds that the United States should keep a notable but tailored presence in the Middle East for the moment, which lies between limited and robust engagement. Allies and partners will be critical. These forces would total between 20,000 and 30,000 personnel, depending on rotational deployments.

For land forces, the United States needs to retain a robust special operations presence in the Middle East to engage in foreign internal defense, direct action, and other missions against terrorist groups, Iranian proxies, and Russian irregular forces in the region. The United States should also keep its roughly 2,500 military forces in Iraq under Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, which are primar-



---

ily involved in air support and training, advising, and assisting Iraqi forces. The U.S. presence in Iraq—and a small presence in Syria—is also important to counter growing Iranian influence in the region and maintain a favorable regional balance of power.

For air forces, the United States should maintain a range of capabilities across the region to deter and respond to aggression from Iran and its partners as well as to monitor and counter China and Russia. The United States should retain some of its current expeditionary air wings at Ali al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. But the United States could consolidate some of its bases and scale back some aircraft within range of Iranian missiles. In addition, the United States should deploy a growing number of remotely crewed platforms for intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) and strike capabilities that can operate for longer periods of time, such as the MQ-9A Reaper, Mojave, MQ-1C Gray Eagle-Extended Range, and MQ-9B SkyGuardian. The United States should also deploy air and missile defense to bases where U.S. personnel are located and provide military assistance in the form of some air and missile defense capabilities to some countries—such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE)—threatened by Iranian-linked ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, drones, and other stand-off weapons.

For maritime forces, the United States should tailor its maritime posture to several key missions: helping protect freedom of navigation of strategic chokepoints, deterring Iranian asymmetric naval activity, conducting offshore strike, and aiding ground forces. The United States does not need to maintain a consistent carrier strike group presence in the region. Other key naval systems would include Navy patrol boats and Coast Guard cutters as well as independent deployments of destroyers with anti-ship and land attack capabilities. The United States should also continue to deploy an amphibious ready group and marine expeditionary unit to the Middle East to conduct security cooperation, provide a ready force to immediately respond to emergent crises, and perform other relevant missions.

The United States should continue to rely on robust cyber and space capabilities that are integrated with partners and allies. China and Russia possess significant cyber, space, and counterspace capabilities that can be used in the Middle East against the United States and its partners. Iran has improved its offensive cyber

---

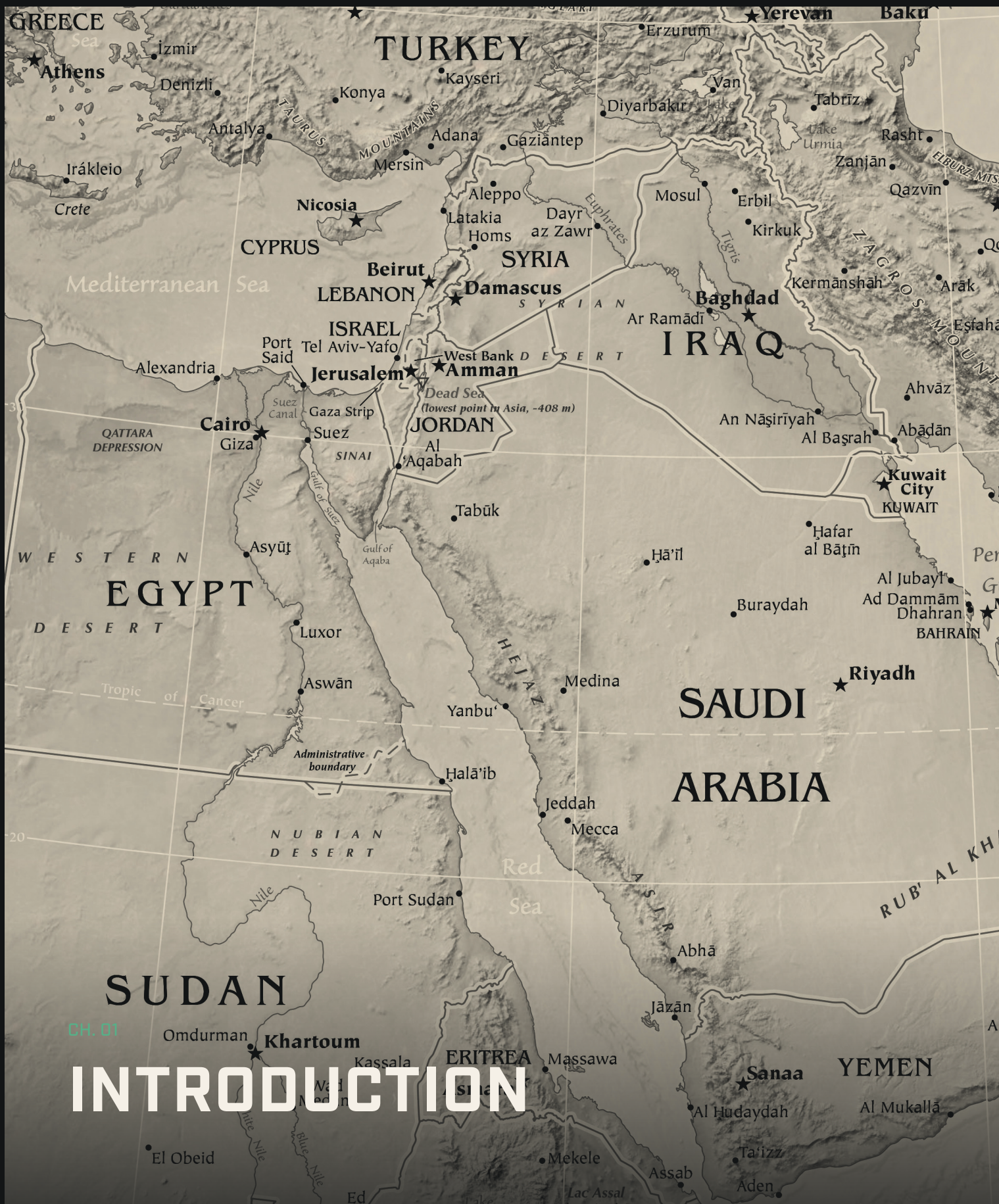
capabilities and possesses some space and counterspace capabilities led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force.

Third, there are serious risks of a major reduction of U.S. defense posture in the near term, which could decrease U.S. influence, benefit competitors, and weaken deterrence. China is expanding its presence in the Middle East, Russia has growing power projection capabilities in the region, and Iranian influence continues in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other countries. There are also continuing questions about the prospect for a viable, long-term nuclear deal with Iran, in part because of Iranian concerns about the United States' enduring commitment to a deal over multiple administrations. A major U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East would likely increase security competition—including between Iran and such countries as Israel and Saudi Arabia—and could increase the possibility of nuclear proliferation if Iran continues down the nuclear path.

A major reduction in the U.S. presence would also weaken the United States' ability to protect key economic chokepoints in the region and the free flow of oil and gas to global markets. The United States is largely energy independent. But allies and partners could be severely impacted by a fuel and broader supply chain crisis, particularly those—such as Japan, India, South Korea, and some European Union countries—which rely on oil and natural gas imports from the Gulf. U.S. allies and partners are unlikely to fill this vacuum, at least for the foreseeable future. A significant reduction also risks a resurgence of terrorism, which is concerning following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan and continued instability in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries.

Over the long term, the U.S. posture in the Middle East should not be static. Several developments—such as a nuclear deal with Iran, a flat-lining or decrease of Chinese and Russian power projection capabilities in the Middle East, a further weakening of terrorist groups, or growing tension or conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, or other regions—could lead the United States to withdraw more of its forces from the region. While U.S. global and regional interests may change, so will U.S. adversaries. Aristotle reminds us that nature abhors a vacuum—a warning of the risks of a significant U.S. withdrawal.<sup>2</sup> Keeping a notable posture in the Middle East is the most sensible way to protect U.S. national security interests in a complex and increasingly volatile international landscape.









**Physical map of the Middle East region.**

SOURCE CIA, The World Factbook

There is a significant ongoing debate about the future of U.S. defense posture in the Middle East in the context of evolving U.S. interests around the globe. Currently, U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) estimates that between 40,000 and 60,000 military personnel are deployed to the region, depending on rotational deployments.<sup>1</sup> U.S. president Joe Biden has argued that the United States should reduce its military presence in the Middle East, explaining that “it is past time to end the forever wars, which have cost the United States untold blood and treasure.”<sup>2</sup> Some individuals, including National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan, have pushed strongly for prioritizing diplomacy in the Middle East, including an approach that is “less ambitious in terms of the military ends the United States seeks” and “more ambitious in using U.S. leverage and diplomacy.”<sup>3</sup> These efforts are not new. Other U.S. presidents—such as Donald Trump and Barack Obama—advocated for a reduction of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East, though their attempts to implement these goals were complicated by the resurgence of terrorism, Iranian activism, and other challenges in the region.<sup>4</sup>

As used here, *force posture* refers to the military capabilities, personnel, footprint (including bases, facilities, and support infrastructure), and agreements that support defense operations and plans.<sup>5</sup> U.S. posture in the Middle East is significantly influenced by agreements with host countries, which provide access to foreign facilities, airspace, and territory. In addition, the number of U.S. military personnel in the Middle East is based on the deployment of U.S. forces into

---

and out of the region, which increase as assets, such as carrier strike groups or bomber task forces, flown into the Middle East, and decrease as they depart. While this report focuses on U.S. posture in the Middle East, the United States' regional posture is impacted by its global posture.

Supporters of a reduced U.S. military posture make several arguments. Among the most significant is a desire to shift the United States' strategic focus and posture away from counterterrorism and toward competition with countries such as China and Russia—especially to the Indo-Pacific region and Europe.<sup>6</sup> Some also argue that U.S. economic interests in the Middle East today are not what they were in previous periods when the U.S. economy was more reliant on imported petroleum from the region. Fracking has turned the United States into a net oil and natural gas exporter.<sup>7</sup> Others have argued that the collapse of the Islamic State's caliphate and the weakness of al-Qaeda have decreased the strategic importance of the Middle East.<sup>8</sup>

Yet there are also arguments in favor of preserving a robust U.S. military posture in the Middle East. For some, a substantial U.S. presence can help deter adversaries and assure partners.<sup>9</sup> U.S. competitors such as Iran, Russia, and China have a growing military and economic presence in the Middle East. Russia's military presence in Syria is one of its largest in the world, with Russian forces, platforms, and systems stationed at such locations as the naval facility at Tartus and Hmeimim Air Base.<sup>10</sup> Russia has also deployed irregular units—such as those associated with the Main Intelligence Directorate (GRU), Foreign Intelligence Service (SVR), special operations forces, and private military companies, including the Wagner Group. In addition, Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) has provided assistance to partner forces in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, Palestinian territory, Afghanistan, and other countries in the region.

General Frank McKenzie argued that the Middle East “is growing increasingly crowded with external nation-states, such as a resurgent Russia and expansionist China, pursuing their own interests and attempting to shift historical alliances.”<sup>11</sup> Advocates for a strong U.S. presence contend that a significant reduction of U.S. forces could allow these adversaries to expand their influence, undermine deterrence, and weaken assurance to U.S. partners in the region. In addition, the global economy—including the U.S. economy—could

---

be impacted by a major disruption of oil and other supplies from the Persian Gulf.

Simultaneously, terrorist groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and Lebanese Hezbollah continue to operate in the Middle East and surrounding regions despite counterterrorism efforts by the United States and its partners. The U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the Taliban overthrow of the Afghan government, and the Taliban's strong relationship with groups such as al-Qaeda have increased the near-term possibility of a terrorist resurgence. As the U.S. chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff remarked in September 2021, “A reconstituted al-Qaeda or ISIS with aspirations to attack the United States is a very real possibility and those conditions to include activities in ungoverned spaces could present themselves in the next 12 to 36 months.”<sup>12</sup>

The policy implications regarding U.S. force posture in the Middle East are significant and immediate. However, there has been limited systematic analysis of the United States' main interests and objectives in the region; the military forces, capabilities, and missions necessary to achieve those objectives; and how those objectives and military requirements should be communicated to the U.S. public.<sup>13</sup>

---

## RESEARCH DESIGN

This report asks three main questions. First, what are U.S. force posture options in the Middle East, based on a range of U.S. interests and other factors? Second, what are the risks and benefits of these options? Third, based on the analysis, what are the optimal interests and posture for the United States in the Middle East?

The report adopts a broad definition of the Middle East to include the area that is currently in the CENTCOM area of responsibility, which stretches from northeast Africa (specifically Egypt) across the Persian Gulf and into Central and South Asia. In addition, the report focuses on military posture, force employment, and other ways in which countries use military power and capabilities to achieve political goals.<sup>14</sup> Finally, this report briefly mentions such strategic and operational concepts as the use of “warm” instead of “hot” bases, dynamic force employment, agile combat employment, and distributed maritime operations.



The United States' overseas posture offers several advantages, such as preparing for military operations, deterring adversaries, assuring allies and partners, and conducting security cooperation. Yet it can also incur risks by increasing the vulnerability of forces to attack from hostile states, stressing the readiness of the force, encouraging free riding by allies and partners, and potentially dragging forces into unwanted wars.<sup>15</sup>

To answer the research questions noted above, this report pursues a mixed-methods approach. First, it outlines and analyzes the logic and evidence of the main arguments for—and against—a reduction of U.S. forces in the Middle East. This step involves a qualitative and quantitative review of the logic and evidence of the arguments and data, such as terrorist attacks and U.S. net imports of crude oil.

Second, the report constructs three posture options. In building these posture options, the report utilizes primary and secondary source documents from relevant organizations (such as CENTCOM, the Joint Staff, Office of the Secretary of Defense, and U.S. Department of State), open-source materials, and interviews with officials from these organizations. The report examines information on related aspects of U.S. posture, such as partner capabilities; air defense (including missile defense); air assets (such as fighter squadrons and aerial ISR assets); land assets (such as brigade combat teams and missile defense assets); naval assets (such as aircraft carriers, destroyers, cruisers, carrier air wings, and amphibious ships); special operations and counterterrorism capabilities; and logistics, command and control, intelligence, and other enablers. This analysis also discusses recent rotations of missile defense, maritime, and ground force personnel for the Defeat-ISIS campaign, Iran deterrence, and force protection missions.

Third, the report assesses the implications of the three postures—including risks and benefits—by examining four scenarios: a conflict with Iran, a resurgence of terrorism in the Levant, a proxy war with Russia, and a revival of al-Qaeda and the Islamic State in Afghanistan. CSIS organized a panel of subject matter experts to run each of the scenarios. The analysis of each scenario is structured the same way. Each begins with an overview of the context and then outlines adversary strategy and capabilities, U.S. objectives, assessment of alternative postures, and implications for U.S. posture.

## CAVEATS

There are several caveats about what this analysis does—and does not—attempt to do. First, the report does not conduct a systematic cost and budget analysis of U.S. force posture in the Middle East, though it does briefly discuss the cost implications associated with overseas posture. Nevertheless, this report does not build a model that includes the cost of the current condition of overseas and U.S. installations (including a need to modernize installations or restore facilities and capabilities), host-nation support that the Department of Defense receives when it stations forces in a foreign country, or the incremental costs beyond U.S. stationing and maintaining overseas bases and forces (including the cost difference in permanent and rotational presence options).<sup>16</sup>

Instead, this report focuses predominantly on strategic and operational U.S. interests, objectives, and force postures in the Middle East. A detailed cost analysis will eventually be important and should be a component of any final U.S. decision on force posture in the Middle East and elsewhere around the globe. But the most important determinants of U.S. force posture in the region are likely to be the relative benefits and risks of U.S. strategic objectives and interests—not costs. Additionally, the cost differential in the event of a reduction in U.S. presence in the region would be relatively minor if those forces were deployed elsewhere overseas or returned to the United States. Significant savings would only be generated if the units and force structure elements were deactivated.

Second, the report does not conduct a systematic analysis of U.S. force posture around the globe. The focus is squarely on the Middle East. Nevertheless, as highlighted in every chapter of this report, the analysis and conclusions were informed by U.S. global posture considerations. Any decision of U.S. force posture in the Middle East needs to be understood in the context of U.S. national security interests and U.S. posture in other regions—especially the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

Third, the report focuses on U.S. *military* posture in the region. It does not conduct a systematic analysis of all U.S. activity in the Middle East, including diplomatic activity conducted by the U.S. State Department; intelligence activity conducted by the Central Intelligence Agency, National Security Agency, and other organizations within the U.S. intelligence community;

---

development activity by the U.S. Agency for International Development and non-governmental organizations; and financial, law enforcement, and other activity conducted by such organizations as the U.S. Treasury Department, Federal Bureau of Investigation, and Department of Homeland Security. These non-military actions are critical, and military force should not be viewed as the principal tool to deal with the region's challenges. The report also does not include contractor operations—including contracted aerial ISR—in the Middle East as part of U.S. force posture.

However, while the report focuses predominantly on U.S. military posture, it does highlight other U.S. government actions where appropriate and acknowledges the importance of diplomacy, development, information operations, and other activities. The restraint option in Chapter 3, for example, highlights the importance of focusing on diplomacy—rather than military force—in the Middle East. In addition, the report compiles some data on diplomatic activity, foreign assistance, and other non-military activity.

---

## ORGANIZATION OF THE REPORT

The rest of this report is divided into the following chapters. Chapter 2 examines the recent history of the U.S. military presence in the Middle East and assesses the logic and evidence of arguments for—and against—a U.S. military withdrawal from the region. Chapter 3 outlines three force posture options: restraint, limited engagement, and robust engagement. Chapter 4 conducts stress tests by examining four scenarios: a conflict with Iran in the Gulf; a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist activity; a proxy conflict with Russia in the Levant; and a resurgence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. Chapter 5 provides a series of policy implications. It recommends a set of U.S. objectives in the Middle East in the context of U.S. global interests and a viable defense posture for the region.





CH. 02

# HISTORICAL TRENDS



**U.S. soldiers arrive at a burning oil refinery in Al-Khafji, Saudi Arabia after Iraqi bombardment during the Gulf War.**

SOURCE Patrick Durant/Sygma/GettyImages



The Middle East has held strategic significance for the United States since World War II. Yet U.S. military force posture in the region has evolved over time. For much of the Cold War, most U.S. overseas active-duty forces were stationed in Europe and Asia—not the Middle East. But U.S. posture in the region increased during the 1991 Gulf War and, in particular, after the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001. In light of the current debate, this chapter poses the following question: what are the main arguments in favor of—and opposed to—a U.S. military drawdown in the Middle East?

To answer this, the chapter conducts a qualitative and quantitative analysis of data on U.S. active-duty military personnel overseas, U.S. foreign assistance, and U.S. petroleum net imports. Based on the analysis, the chapter concludes that the primary arguments in favor of a significant U.S. downsizing from the Middle East—a need to shift to the Indo-Pacific region to compete with China, declining reliance on oil from the Middle East, decreasing threats from terrorist groups, and economic challenges—are not as clear cut in favor of a major U.S. withdrawal. China and Russia are increasing their presence in the Middle East; U.S. allies are heavily reliant on Persian Gulf oil; disruptions to regional trade would create significant supply chain risks; and terrorism from Salafi-jihadist and Iranian-backed groups present an enduring threat. These realities make it important to think carefully about force posture and capabilities as well as the United States' ability to deter the actions of its adversaries in the region.



The rest of this chapter is organized into three sections. It begins by providing a brief historical overview of U.S. military posture in the Middle East since World War II, including a summary of active-duty U.S. military personnel overseas. It then examines the logic and evidence of arguments in favor of a U.S. withdrawal. The chapter ends by providing a brief conclusion.

## TRENDS IN U.S. POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

U.S. military posture in the Middle East has varied considerably since World War II, beginning with the Cold War competition between the United States and the Soviet Union. This section details the changing policies that have shaped U.S. posture in the region from the Cold War to present.

### Cold War

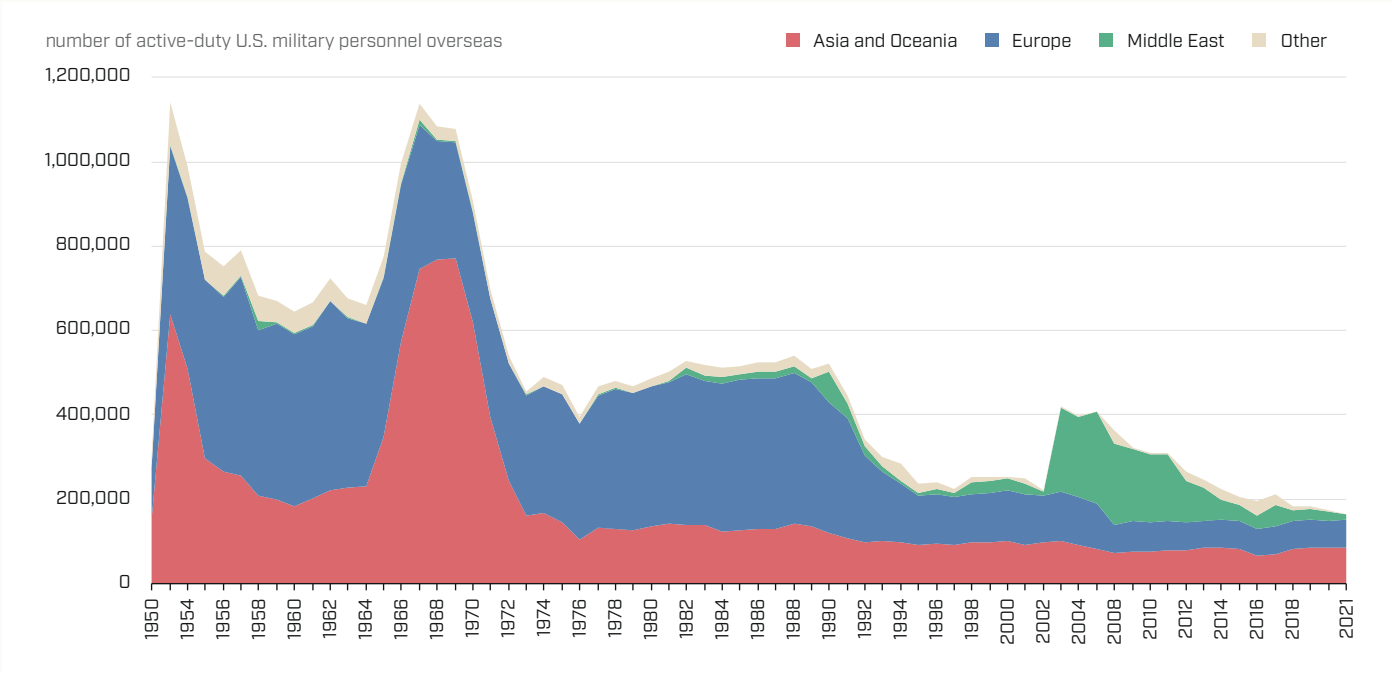
During the Cold War, the United States focused on balance-of-power competition with the Soviet Union. The United States stationed most of its active-duty forces in Europe and Asia, not the Middle East.<sup>1</sup> As Figure 2.1 highlights, the number of U.S. military personnel in the Middle East was comparatively low for much of the Cold War. U.S. officials assessed that few of their

desired bases were close enough to the Soviet Union to support offensive strikes, given the limited range of U.S. bombers. Consequently, they began to seek airfields along the USSR's southern rim and in the United Kingdom. Throughout the Cold War, the United States developed a containment strategy against the Soviet Union that involved positioning large numbers of U.S. ground, air, and naval forces in garrisons at strategic strongpoints in Europe and Asia. The U.S. Army had as many as five divisions based in Europe, while the U.S. Air Force had as many as 2,100 aircraft stationed at over 40 bases in Europe.<sup>2</sup>

Nevertheless, the United States maintained some force structure elements in the Middle East. The Navy created Task Force 126 in January 1948, which operated out of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia and was eventually redesignated as the Middle East Force (MEF) in August 1949.<sup>3</sup> This marked the beginning of a permanent naval presence in the Persian Gulf, with MEF ships making port visits, managing tanker traffic, and deploying during regional crises.<sup>4</sup> The first aircraft carrier deployed to the Gulf in March 1948.<sup>5</sup>

Despite the low number of U.S. forces in the region, various U.S. administrations still considered the

**FIGURE 2.1** U.S. Active-Duty Military Personnel Overseas, 1950–2021<sup>6</sup>  
**SOURCE** See “Chapter 2: Historical Trends” endnote 6.



Middle East strategically important. During the Nixon administration (1969–1974), for example, Henry Kissinger argued that the Middle East was a key area of competition with the Soviet Union. The administration adopted a “Twin Pillar” approach in the Middle East, which utilized Iran and, to a lesser extent, Saudi Arabia to establish a regional balance of power and counter Soviet activity.<sup>7</sup> This approach was consistent with the Nixon Doctrine’s call for U.S. partners and allies to take the “primary responsibility of providing the manpower for [their] defense,” while the United States would “furnish military and economic assistance when requested in accordance with our treaty commitments.”<sup>8</sup> Accordingly, an arms agreement reached during President Nixon’s May 1972 visit to Iran provided Iran with such weapons and systems as laser-guided bombs and F-14 and F-15 aircraft.<sup>9</sup> Arms sales to Iran increased dramatically following the agreement.<sup>10</sup> Under the Nixon administration, the United States also reached an agreement with Bahrain in 1971 to take over part of the naval base at Juffair, where it had first leased office space from the British navy, following Britain’s withdrawal from the country.<sup>11</sup>

U.S. support for Israel also drove involvement in the region. The United States recognized Israel in 1948 and became its major arms supplier after the 1967 Six-Day War when France withdrew from that role. U.S. involvement increased in 1973 when the United States mounted an emergency resupply for the Israeli military during the 1973 Yom Kippur War and threatened the Soviet Union to stay out of the conflict.

U.S. involvement in the region further escalated under the Carter administration (1977–1981). In his 1980 State of the Union Address, President Jimmy Carter more explicitly outlined the strategic significance of the Middle East in what would come to be known as the Carter Doctrine. In the aftermath of the Iranian revolution and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, Carter warned Moscow, “Let our position be absolutely clear: An 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 such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>12</sup> According to Secretary of Defense Harold Brown, several steps would be required to realize this new strategic framework. Examples included enhancing the United States’ peacetime presence in the region, particularly

that of the Navy; pre-positioning equipment on both land and sea; improving mobility, specifically air and sealift capabilities; negotiating access and transit rights; and increasing regional deployments and exercises.<sup>13</sup> Accordingly, the United States enhanced its posture and took a more direct role in the region by acquiring access to regional facilities, conducting exercises, and pre-positioning equipment.<sup>14</sup> The Carter administration also stood up a joint task force for the region, the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force, in March 1980 under U.S. Readiness Command, which would eventually become CENTCOM in January 1983.<sup>15</sup>

The Reagan administration (1981–1989) continued previous initiatives from its predecessor in improving access and building facilities, enlarging airstrips, and pre-positioning military resources.<sup>16</sup> CENTCOM also developed strategic mobility capabilities and plans to transport U.S. personnel to the region.<sup>17</sup> Additionally, in a “corollary” to the Carter Doctrine, President Reagan announced that the United States would not “permit [Saudi Arabia] to be an Iran” and would take measures to prevent the disruption of oil exports from the region.<sup>18</sup> Consequently, his administration sold airborne warning and control system (AWACS), tanker aircraft, and missiles to Saudi Arabia and “destroyed much of the Iranian navy” following Iran’s attack on oil tankers and their U.S. Navy escorts in 1987.<sup>19</sup>

In the 1990s, as the United States reduced its global posture with the end of the Cold War, the U.S. posture in the Middle East increased dramatically—though briefly—following Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Kuwait and the onset of the First Gulf War. Following the war, the United States reduced its forces, but the Middle East retained strategic significance following the Clinton administration’s (1993–2001) Bottom-Up Review. The review required the military to fight two “major regional conflicts” (later “major theater wars”) likely in Northeast Asia or the Middle East.<sup>20</sup> Still, the United States attempted to establish a less visible presence in the Middle East because of the political sensitivities of governments in the region. The U.S. military rotated units to facilities run by local countries rather than stationing them at large U.S. bases. For example, CENTCOM emphasized maritime forces, pre-positioned equipment, and contingency access to partner facilities for ground and air forces. In 1995, the U.S. Navy reactivated the Fifth Fleet and stationed its headquarters at Manama, Bahrain.<sup>21</sup> In

addition, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, the UAE, and Qatar gave the United States access to bases and stored pre-positioned equipment.<sup>22</sup>

## The War on Terrorism

Following the terrorist attacks on September 11, 2001, the U.S. military posture in the Middle East dramatically increased—both in aggregate numbers and as a percentage of U.S. forces overseas—as the United States engaged in wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. The George W. Bush administration (2001–2009) initiated a global defense posture review in an effort to make the U.S. overseas military presence more agile and expeditionary.<sup>23</sup> The Bush administration believed that the existing U.S. posture was too static and poorly suited to dealing with an evolving security environment that was characterized by uncertainty and the proliferation of unconventional threats such as terrorism and the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.<sup>24</sup> The 2005 *National Defense Strategy* focused on responding

to unconventional challenges and strategic uncertainty, particularly in such areas as the Middle East.<sup>25</sup>

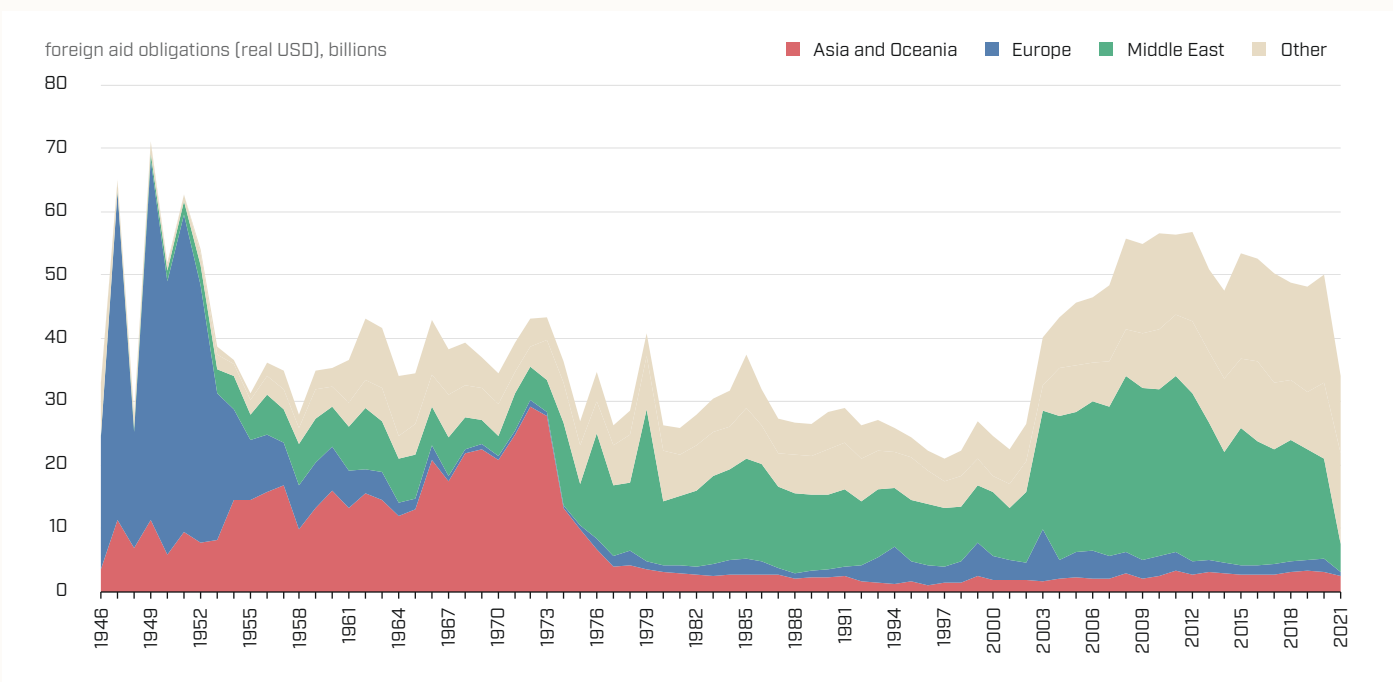
U.S. foreign assistance to the Middle East also significantly increased during this time, as highlighted in Figure 2.2. U.S. aid initially rose in aggregate terms and as a percentage of foreign aid in the late 1970s, as the Carter administration dedicated significant time and resources to Middle East peace—exemplified by the 1978 Camp David Accords. It then decreased by the 1990s and rose again after 2001. In 2011, U.S. aid to the Middle East had risen to \$28 billion and was 50 percent of total U.S. foreign assistance.<sup>26</sup>

By 2008, the United States had over 190,000 active-duty forces in the Middle East due to the surge in Iraq, which comprised 52 percent of total U.S. forces overseas. By comparison, the United States also had over 66,000 activity-duty forces in Europe, nearly 74,000 in Asia, and almost 34,000 forces in other regions of the world such as Africa and Latin America. This marked a dramatic increase from a decade earlier in 1998, when the United States had just over 27,000 active-duty forces in the Middle East, or roughly 11 percent of total U.S. forces overseas. In 1978, the United States had only 2,578 forces in the Middle East, which constituted a paltry 0.5 percent of total U.S. forces overseas.<sup>27</sup> As the Bush administration’s posture review concluded, the Middle East was a critical area for the U.S. military:

**FIGURE 2.2** U.S. Foreign Assistance Obligations, 1946–2021

**SOURCE** ForeignAssistance.gov (December 17, 2021), distributed by U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Department of State, <https://foreignassistance.gov/data>.

**NOTE** Data from FY 1976 include obligations from the 1976 transitional quarter, the accounting device used in 1976 to facilitate the change in government fiscal year start date from July 1 to October 1.



Cooperation and access provided by host nations during Operations Enduring Freedom and Iraqi Freedom provide us with a solid basis for long-term, cooperative relationships in this region. We seek to maintain or upgrade, and in some cases establish, forward operating sites and cooperative security locations for rotational and contingency purposes, along with strategically placed prepositioned equipment and forward command and control elements.<sup>28</sup>

This posture continued into the early part of the Obama administration (2009–2017). In addition to maintaining capabilities to counter terrorists and uphold commitments to partner states in the region, the United States focused on countering Iranian activity there as well. The United States preserved a network of air bases, maritime presence, and pre-positioned equipment in the Middle East. In addition, the U.S. military presence in the region was predominantly rotational.

Over time, however, senior officials in the Obama administration began to rethink overall U.S. military posture (including in the Middle East) with an eye toward pivoting—or rebalancing—to Asia. The 2012 *Defense Strategic Guidance* outlined that shift, stating “while the U.S. military will continue to contribute to security globally, we will of necessity rebalance toward the Asia-Pacific region.”<sup>29</sup> The strategy noted that the United States’ “defense efforts in the Middle East will be aimed at countering violent extremists and destabilizing threats, as well as upholding our commitment to allies and partner states.”<sup>30</sup> Based on these efforts, U.S. strategic guidance vowed to “place a premium on U.S. and allied military presence in—and support of—partner nations in and around [the Middle East].”<sup>31</sup> To support this rebalance, President Obama withdrew U.S. combat forces from Iraq in 2011. The United States also withdrew most forces from Afghanistan, leaving behind roughly 9,800 servicemembers in Afghanistan from a peak of over 100,000 personnel during the surge.<sup>32</sup> As President Obama explained in a speech in Canberra, Australia, the future of U.S. national security was in Asia, not the Middle East:

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.<sup>33</sup>

Yet the reduction of U.S. forces in the Middle East was short-lived. In 2015, following the Islamic State’s seizure of territory in Iraq and Syria, the Obama administration increased the U.S. footprint in the Middle East, although the total presence was still a fraction of that during the peak of the Iraq and Afghanistan wars. In Iraq, the number of U.S. armed forces rose from zero in 2014 to 3,100 in 2015, 4,000 in 2016, and 5,200 in 2017.<sup>34</sup>

## Shift to Strategic Competition

The Trump administration (2017–2021) continued to shift the United States’ strategic focus from counterterrorism to strategic competition with China and Russia—and, to a lesser degree, Iran and North Korea. As the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* noted, “Inter-state strategic competition, not terrorism, is now the primary concern in U.S. national security.”<sup>35</sup> The change in strategic priorities highlighted a shift in the U.S. focus to Russian activities in Europe and Chinese actions in the Indo-Pacific. As the 2017 *National Security Strategy* highlighted, “Changes in a regional balance of power can have global consequences and threaten U.S. interests. . . . China and Russia aspire to project power worldwide, but they interact most with their neighbors.”<sup>36</sup>

Still, the *National Defense Strategy* (NDS) concluded that the Middle East was important, noting that “Iran continues to sow violence and remains the most significant challenge to Middle East stability.”<sup>37</sup> In addition, some U.S. Department of Defense posture statements contended that the United States had core interests in the Middle East, including deterring Iran, achieving a negotiated resolution of the conflict in Afghanistan, maintaining the campaign to defeat the Islamic State and other jihadists in Syria and Iraq, countering the threat from unmanned aircraft systems, and preventing the weaponization of internally displaced persons and refugees.<sup>38</sup> For example, General Frank McKenzie couched U.S. interests in the Middle East in the language of strategic competition: “Readiness and capabilities allocated toward this mission are supportive of the NDS not only with regard to Iran, but also in the context



of supporting great power competition as it manifests itself in the Middle East.”<sup>39</sup> The Trump administration’s Middle East strategy also involved helping implement the Abraham Accords, which included the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco.

The Biden administration’s strategic focus appeared to follow the trend of the two previous administrations in shifting away from the Middle East. President Biden’s *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* argued that the United States needs to “prevail in strategic competition with China or any other nation.”<sup>40</sup> The administration’s *Global Posture Review* identified the Indo-Pacific as the most important region for U.S. national security to “advance initiatives that contribute to regional stability and deter potential Chinese military aggression and threats from North Korea.”<sup>41</sup> With a shift

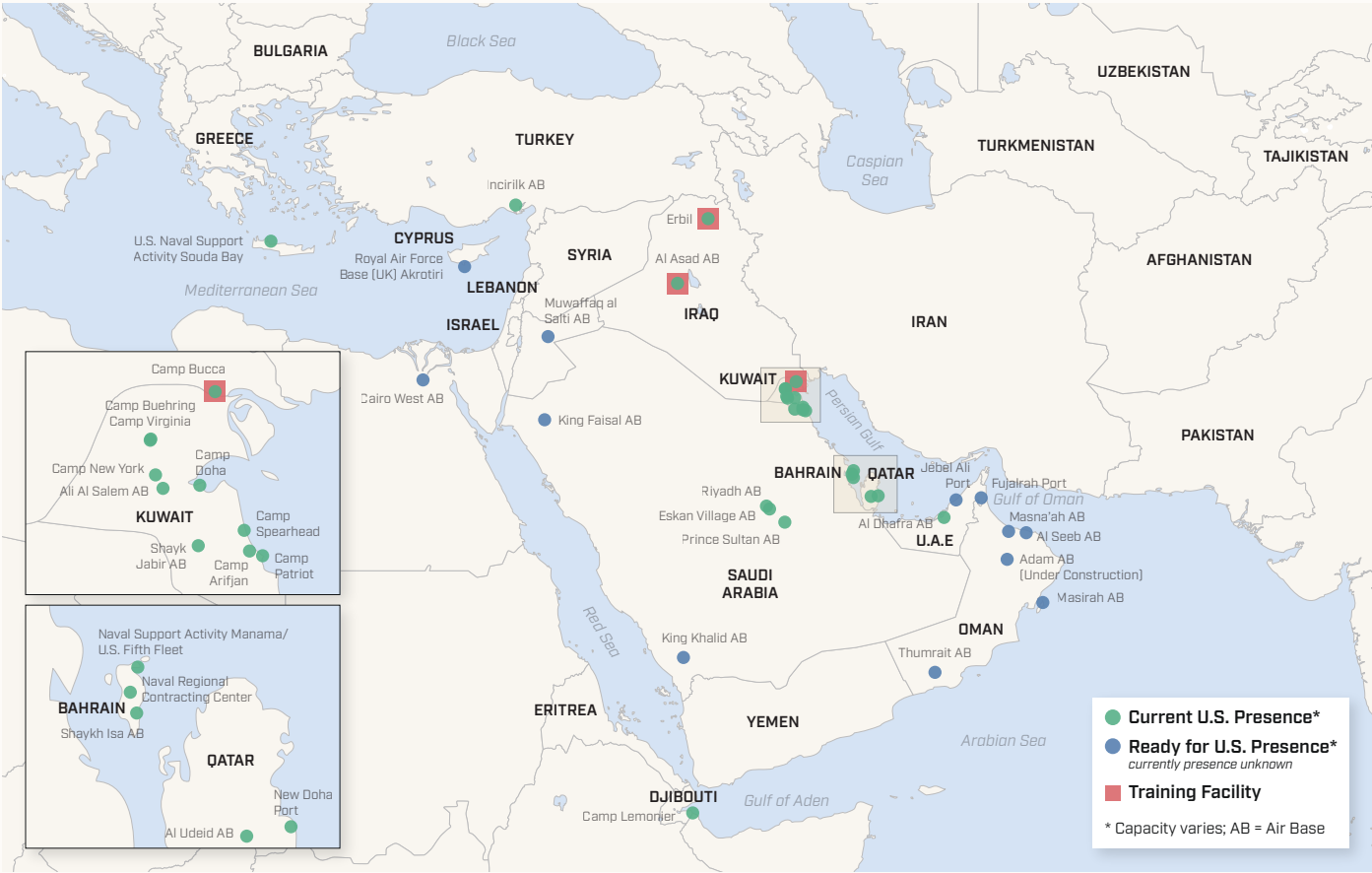
in U.S. attention to the Indo-Pacific and secondarily to Europe, a vigorous debate emerged about reducing the United States’ presence in the Middle East.

By 2022, there were between 40,000 and 60,000 U.S. military personnel deployed to the Middle East, depending on rotational and contingency-related deployments.<sup>42</sup> Figure 2.3 shows the location of U.S. and partner military installations where personnel are deployed in 2022.

Units often deploy on a rotational basis to the Middle East in support of ongoing operations. For example, 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team deployed to Iraq to take over the mission from the 256th Infantry Brigade Combat Team of the Louisiana National Guard.<sup>43</sup> In January 2022, Task Force Phoenix, the 40th Combat Aviation Brigade, ended a nine-month deployment executing air-ground operations across the region in support of Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR) to defeat the Islamic State and Operational Spartan Shield—with the mission to “strengthen . . . defense partnerships and build partner capacity”—before being replaced by Task Force Eagle, the 11th Expeditionary Combat Brigade.<sup>44</sup> Other deployments may be less rotational,

**FIGURE 2.3** U.S. Military Deployments/Installations in the Middle East, 2021

**SOURCE** Kathleen J. McInnis and Brendan W. McGarry, “United States Central Command,” Congressional Research Service, March 30, 2022, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11428.pdf>.



such as the deployment of a bomber task force mission in response to a contingency.<sup>45</sup>

Naval deployments of carrier strike groups to the region may not be as regular and may be more dependent on how policymakers and the CENTCOM commander view the utility of those deployments. In 2020, the Navy operated two carriers in the Middle East, which degraded the readiness of a carrier fleet already facing high operational demands.<sup>46</sup> Yet in 2015 and 2017, there were monthlong gaps in carrier presence in the region.<sup>47</sup> The deployment of amphibious ready groups often with a Marine expeditionary unit may occur on a more regular, rotational basis.

In terms of posture on a country-by-country basis, Kuwait hosts the greatest number of U.S. personnel (approximately 13,500) at several installations across the country, most notably at Camp Arifjan, Camp Buehring, and Ali Al Salem Air Base (AB). U.S. Army Central has its forward headquarters in Kuwait, while Ali Al Salem AB serves as the headquarters for the 386th Air Expeditionary Wing. The 386th Wing provides airlift support operating C-17 and C-130 aircraft and also operates MQ-9A Reapers for ISR.<sup>48</sup> Additionally, Camp Arifjan serves as the operational command post for the 1st Theater Sustainment Command.<sup>49</sup>

Qatar hosts approximately 8,000 U.S. military personnel, predominantly at Al Udeid AB (AUAB), the forward headquarters of U.S. Air Forces Central Command (AFCENT, also Ninth Air Force).<sup>50</sup> The air base is also home to the Combined Air Operations Center to provide command and control of airpower across the region as well as the 379th Air Expeditionary Wing, the largest expeditionary wing in the world.<sup>51</sup> The 379th Wing supports bomber, airlift, refueling, aeromedical evacuation, and ISR missions and operates C-130J, C-17, C-21A, E-8C, KC-135, P-3, and RC-135V/W aircraft.<sup>52</sup> The Air Force's 1st Expeditionary Civil Engineer Group also operates out of AUAB. In addition to AFCENT units, AUAB hosts the forward headquarters of U.S. Special Operations Command Central, which coordinates special operations in the region.<sup>53</sup> In January 2022, the Biden administration designated Qatar to be a "major non-NATO ally," which means the country can host U.S. war reserve stockpiles, enter into training agreements, and allow its companies to bid on maintenance contracts for U.S. equipment.<sup>54</sup> Other major non-North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies in the region include Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, and Bahrain.

Bahrain hosts Naval Support Activity Bahrain, the headquarters of U.S. Naval Central Command (NAVCENT) and the Fifth Fleet. Approximately, 5,000 U.S. military personnel are stationed in the country. Ships that operate out of Bahrain include 10 Cyclone-class patrol boats; 6 Coast Guard patrol vessels (the Island-class patrol boats are being replaced by Sentinel-class fast response cutters); 4 Avenger-class mine countermeasures ships; and 1 expeditionary sea base. Bahrain is also home to the headquarters of Combined Maritime Forces (CMF), a multinational naval partnership of 34 countries headed by the NAVCENT commander designed to conduct maritime security operations both within and outside the Persian Gulf.<sup>55</sup> In addition to the ships that operate out of Naval Support Activity Bahrain, other vessels that may deploy to the region include carrier strike groups or amphibious ready groups.

Several other countries host significant numbers of U.S. personnel. The UAE is the home of Al Dhafra AB (ADAB) and the 380th Air Expeditionary Wing, which provides ISR, command and control, and aerial refueling missions, with AWACS, EC-130, RQ-4, E-11, and KC-10 aircraft.<sup>56</sup> Between 2019 and 2021, F-35A fighter squadrons from the 388th Fighter Wing deployed to ADAB on a rotational basis.<sup>57</sup> Approximately 3,500 personnel are in the UAE. Jordan hosts almost 3,000 personnel in support of the counter-Islamic State mission and to promote regional stability.<sup>58</sup> As of June 2021, there were 2,742 U.S. personnel in Saudi Arabia where the 378th Air Expeditionary Wing is stationed at Prince Sultan AB; however, that figure may have fallen with the removal of some units since that time (see the following section).<sup>59</sup>

Roughly 2,500 U.S. personnel are deployed to bases in Iraq, including Erbil AB, Al-Asad AB, and the JOC-I (Union III) base in Baghdad. That includes 1,800 servicemembers from the 1st Stryker Brigade Combat Team to provide base support and force protection operations as part of OIR.<sup>60</sup> As of June 2021, there were approximately 900 U.S. personnel in Syria in support of OIR, according to a September 2021 inspector general report for the operation.<sup>61</sup>

Other forces of note in the region include the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, which conducts operations across the Levant from an undisclosed location in the region.<sup>62</sup> The wing consists of 3,000 personnel operating F-15E, F-16C, HC-130P, MQ-9, A-10C, and KC-135R aircraft as well as HH-60G helicopters.<sup>63</sup> The 3rd Security Force Assistance Brigade also deployed to

---

CENTCOM over the course of 2021, sending 20 small adviser teams to 10 countries to build partner capacity in support of Operation Spartan Shield.<sup>64</sup>

---

## DEBATING U.S. POSTURE IN THE MIDDLE EAST

The argument to draw down U.S. forces in the Middle East has been occurring for several years. In a major foreign policy speech in April 2016, for example, President Trump argued that “our resources are totally over extended” and “we’re rebuilding other countries while weakening our own.”<sup>65</sup> In October 2019, President Trump asked, “How many Americans must die in the Middle East in the midst of these ancient sectarian and tribal conflicts?” He then outlined a withdrawal of U.S. forces from Syria and argued more broadly: “Let someone else fight over this long-bloodstained sand.”<sup>66</sup> On February 29, 2020, the United States and the Taliban signed an agreement in which the United States committed to withdraw all U.S. and foreign troops from Afghanistan, with an immediate decision to decrease the number of U.S. forces from 14,000 to 8,600 soldiers.<sup>67</sup> In May 2020, the Pentagon acknowledged that it was removing Patriot anti-missile batteries from Saudi Arabia, considering pulling U.S. forces out of the Sinai Peninsula in Egypt, and weighing other U.S. withdrawals from the Middle East.<sup>68</sup> In 2020, then-candidate Biden noted, “As I have long argued, we should bring the vast majority of our troops home from wars in Afghanistan and the Middle East.”<sup>69</sup> Once in office, his administration continued the removal of Patriot batteries from the region, reportedly pulling eight from Iraq, Kuwait, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia in addition to a Terminal High Altitude Aerial Defense system from Saudi Arabia.<sup>70</sup> Following the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, the rotations of the Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force ended in October 2021.<sup>71</sup>

A number of prominent current and former officials and scholars also called for a decrease in the U.S. footprint. In January 2020, former U.S. ambassador to Israel and assistant secretary of state for Near Eastern affairs Martin Indyk argued that “few vital interests of the U.S. continue to be at stake in the Middle East.”<sup>72</sup> Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes contended that “although the Middle East still matters to the

United States, it matters markedly less than it used to.” Consequently, they advocated that “a less engaged United States will have to leave more of the business of Middle Eastern security to partners in the region.”<sup>73</sup>

Overall, proponents of a U.S. drawdown in the Middle East generally make one or more of the following arguments: competition with China means that regions such as Asia should be the main U.S. priority, followed by Europe because of concerns with Russia; the United States does not rely as much on oil from the Middle East; and the United States and its partners have considerably weakened terrorist groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. The following section examines each of these arguments.

## Shift to Strategic Competition with China

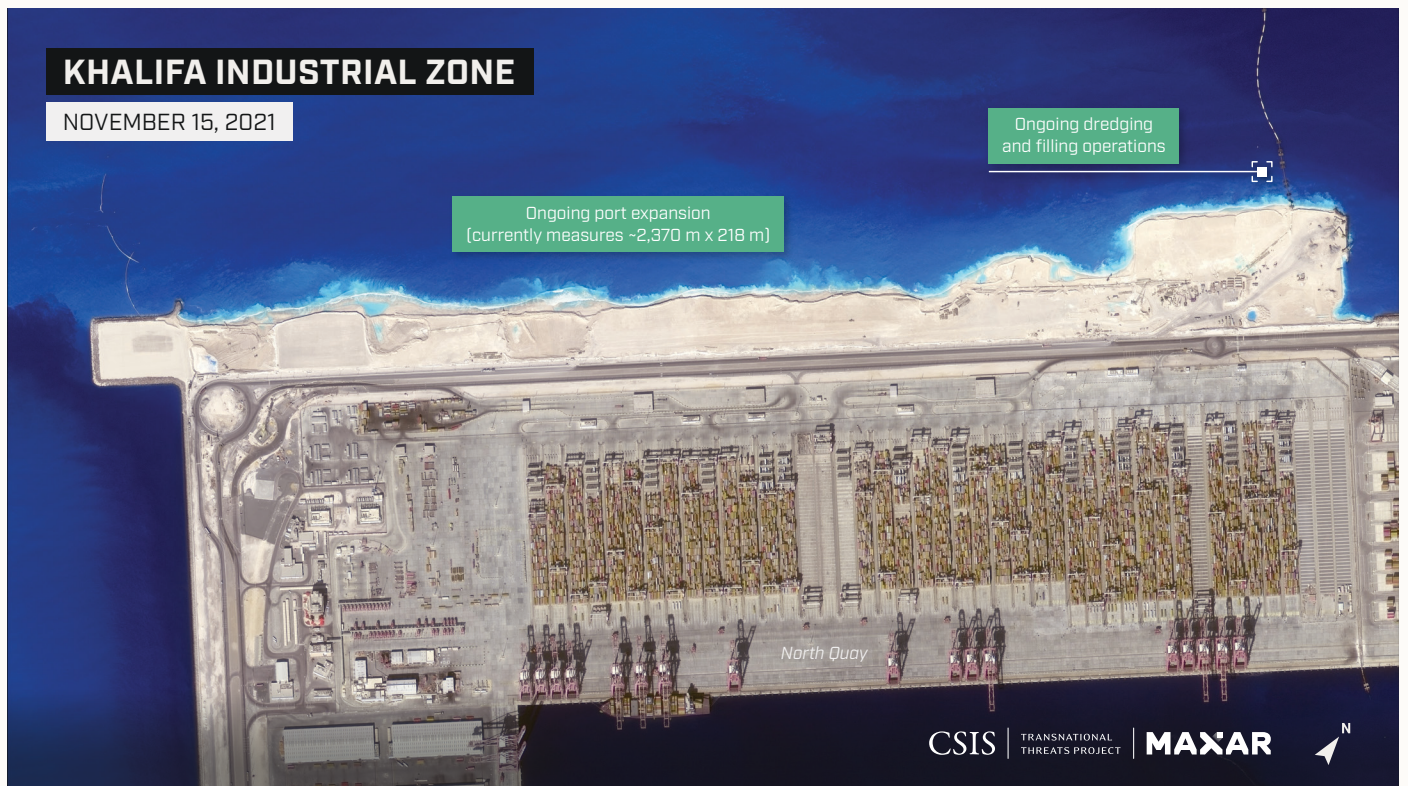
Many strategists contend that the United States needs to withdraw forces from the Middle East to focus more resources, forces, and capabilities on competing with China in the Indo-Pacific and, secondarily, with Russia in Europe. Indeed, the 2018 *National Defense Strategy* noted the need to shift away from counterterrorism efforts to strategic competition. As one assessment concluded, the current U.S. posture in the Middle East “diverts resources that could otherwise be devoted to confronting a rising China and a revanchist Russia.”<sup>74</sup> This focus on Europe and Asia is similar to U.S. posture priorities during the Cold War. In response to a bipolar international system, the United States positioned most of its ground, air, and naval forces in garrisons in Europe and Asia to balance against the Soviet Union. In today’s multipolar system, proponents argue that the United States should once again deploy most of its military forces and capabilities to bases in Asia and, to a lesser degree, Europe.<sup>75</sup>

In addition, some argue that a decreased U.S. presence in the Middle East would not lead Beijing or Moscow to shift the balance of power in their favor in the region. As one assessment concluded: “A clear-eyed approach also requires accepting that China or Russia (or both) will likely gain more of a footing in the Middle East as the United States pulls back. The good news is that neither power is likely to make a real bid for regional hegemony.”<sup>76</sup> According to this view, the United States should still be able to retain influence in the Middle East even after pulling back, since China





**FIGURE 2.4A** Satellite Imagery of Khalifa Port, Industrial Zone  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



**FIGURE 2.4B** Satellite Imagery of North Quay, Khalifa Port  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

and Russia likely have limited ambitions in the region. Some also question China and Russia's willingness to dedicate enough forces to create and sustain a new security order in the Middle East.<sup>77</sup>

Yet this conclusion is debatable. For example, Moscow has used its battlefield successes in Syria to revive its great power ambitions in the Middle East and nearby regions, including Africa. Russia has constructed and revitalized bases in Syria, established a naval base in Sudan, and used bases in such countries as Egypt, including the Sidi Barrani airfield in northwestern Egypt. China also has expanded its military footprint in the Middle East and South Asia, including in Djibouti and Pakistan. In 2021, for example, U.S. intelligence assessments concluded that China was building a military installation at Khalifa Port in the UAE, highlighted in Figures 2.4a and 2.4b.<sup>78</sup> U.S. diplomatic and military lobbying temporarily halted China's plans. In short, both Moscow and Beijing are attempting to increase their influence and footprint in the Middle East.

## Declining Reliance on Middle East Oil and Trade Flows

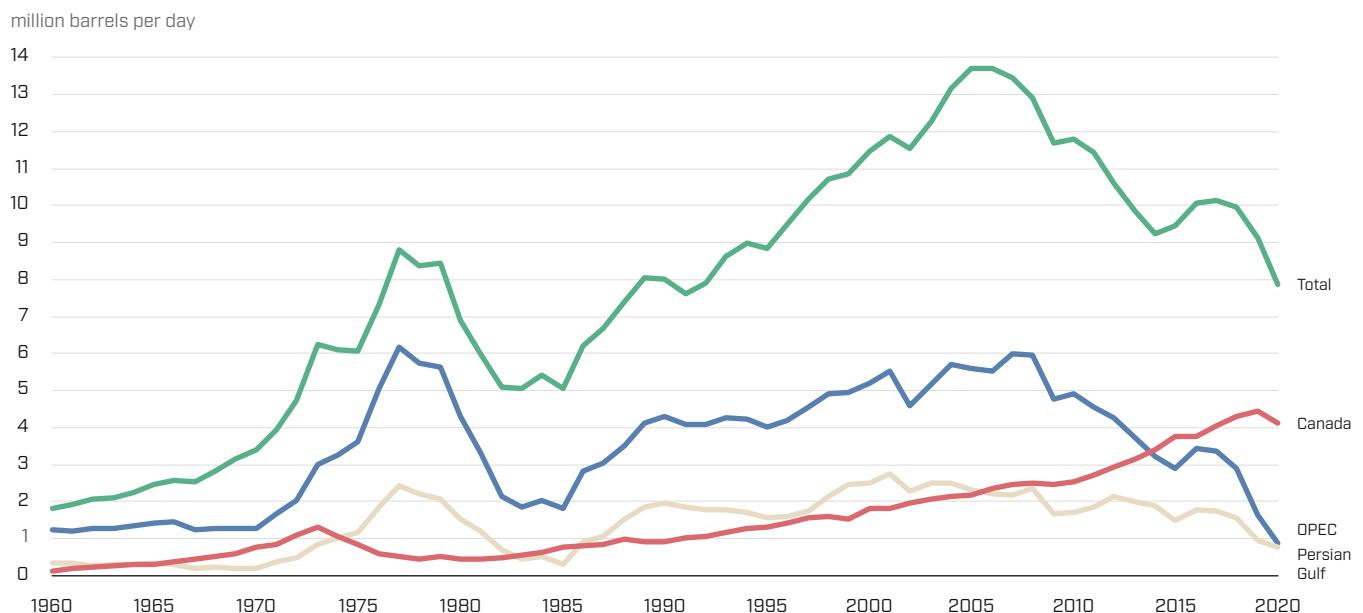
In 2020, U.S. petroleum imports were the lowest since 1991, and the United States became a net annual petroleum exporter.<sup>79</sup> Of particular note has been the U.S. focus on hydraulic fracturing, or fracking, of shale

deposits in the Permian Basin in the southwestern United States and the Bakken formation in Montana and North Dakota. Fracking has turned the United States into a net exporter of oil and natural gas. As Figure 2.5 highlights, U.S. petroleum imports from the Persian Gulf have also fallen significantly. Gulf sources accounted for approximately 20.4 percent of petroleum imports in 2013 but only accounted for 9.8 percent in 2020.<sup>80</sup> Perhaps contrary to popular belief, Persian Gulf imports never constituted the majority of total U.S. petroleum imports, peaking at 27.8 percent in 1977. Since the U.S. economy no longer relies as much on imported crude oil and petroleum products from the Middle East, some argue that the United States should decrease its posture in the region.<sup>81</sup>

Demand for Persian Gulf oil now predominantly comes from the Indo-Pacific region. In 2019, 44 percent of China's crude oil imports came from the Middle East.<sup>82</sup> U.S. partners and allies are also heavily dependent on the Middle East, India receives over half of its crude oil imports from the region, while Japan, South Korea, the Philippines, Singapore, and Taiwan receive more

**FIGURE 2.5** U.S. Petroleum Imports

**SOURCE** U.S. Energy Information Administration, *February 2022 Monthly Energy Review* (Washington, DC: U.S. Energy Information Administration, February 2022), Tables 3.3a and 3.3d, <https://www.eia.gov/totalenergy/data/monthly/archive/00352202.pdf>.





than three-fourths of their imports from Middle East exporters as well.<sup>83</sup> This Asian reliance on Gulf oil has led some such as Martin Indyk to argue, “Difficult as it might be to get our heads around the idea, China and India need to be protecting the sea lanes between the Gulf and their ports, not the U.S. Navy.”<sup>84</sup> While there has been a significant reduction in U.S. petroleum imports, the global economy—and potentially the U.S. economy—would still be hurt by a major disruption in oil and natural gas supplies from the Middle East. U.S. allies and partners which are heavily reliant on oil and natural gas imports from the Persian Gulf could be severely impacted. Some have also suggested that China’s reliance on crude oil from the Middle East provides the United States with strategic leverage.<sup>85</sup>

In addition, a major disruption in trade through the Middle East could have an adverse impact on the U.S. and broader global economy by creating a supply chain crisis. On March 23, 2021, for example, the cargo ship *Ever Given* ran aground in the Suez Canal and created a massive backlog of over 400 vessels, significantly disrupting global supply chains, delaying goods from reaching their destinations, and holding up an estimated \$9.6 billion of trade each day.<sup>86</sup> Consequently, some argue that the United States still has a major interest in securing the free flow of oil, natural gas, and other goods from the Persian Gulf to global markets.<sup>87</sup>

## Weakening of Terrorist Groups

Another argument for withdrawing U.S. forces from the Middle East is the collapse of the Islamic State’s caliphate and the relative weakness of al-Qaeda. Proponents of withdrawal note that the final counterterrorism “mopping up operation can be achieved by small numbers of U.S. troops, combined with close cooperation and support for local partners, including the Kurds, Iraq and our associates in the anti-Islamic State coalition.”<sup>88</sup> These proponents argue that the United States does not need a large footprint in the Middle East to conduct counterterrorism operations, and there is little appetite among Americans to pursue state building in the region. As Karlin and Wittes write: “The United States cannot fundamentally alter this permissive environment for terrorism and chaos without investing in state building at a level far beyond what either the American public or broader foreign policy considerations would allow. And so it simply cannot hope to do much to counter the Middle East’s violence or instability.”<sup>89</sup>

But while U.S. and partner counterterrorism efforts temporarily weakened the Islamic State and al-Qaeda, the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan set the stage for a terrorist resurgence. The Taliban released thousands of al-Qaeda operatives and other fighters from prisons in Bagram, Kabul, and Kandahar. The Taliban then appointed Sirajuddin Haqqani as its first minister of interior. Haqqani, a U.S.-designated terrorist with close links to al-Qaeda, became the Afghan equivalent of director of the FBI and secretary of the Department of Homeland Security. U.S. intelligence agencies assess that both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State could conduct attacks outside of Afghanistan in 2022.<sup>90</sup>

As highlighted in the next chapter, Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups associated with al-Qaeda and the Islamic State continue to conduct attacks and present a threat in Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and other countries—including in nearby regions such as North and East Africa. Iranian-backed groups that receive support from the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force also present a significant threat, such as Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Hashd al-Shaabi (Popular Mobilization Forces) in Iraq, Houthis in Yemen, Shia militias in Syria, and non-state forces in Afghanistan, Palestinian territory, and other countries.

## CONCLUSION

As the discussion in this chapter has illustrated, the debate over the benefits and risks associated with reductions to U.S. posture in the Middle East are complex. U.S. posture in the region has varied considerably since World War II. U.S. presence was largely limited during most of the Cold War but increased modestly in line with the Carter Doctrine and again under the “two major theater war” construct of the Clinton administration. The 2001 terrorist attacks in the United States led to a significant increase in presence with the onset of operations in Afghanistan and then Iraq, although weariness over the duration of those wars and a shifting strategic focus to competition with China and Russia has prompted calls for a reduced U.S. posture in the region.

That debate is complicated by growing Russian and Chinese involvement in the Middle East. Russia’s military posture in the region increased in 2015 following its direct involvement in the Syrian war. Chi-



---

na's military presence is small—but growing—in the Middle East, and Beijing established its first overseas military base in Djibouti in 2017.<sup>91</sup> Iran's presence has also increased, particularly through non-state partner organizations in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and other countries. Based on these developments, any debate about withdrawing U.S. forces from the region needs to consider how Moscow, Beijing, and Tehran would respond. The persistence of groups such as the Islamic State and al-Qaeda also raises questions about how the United States would counter a resurgence of terrorism that undermines U.S. interests.

These factors necessitate a systematic analysis of U.S. posture options in the Middle East. An informed debate needs to include a detailed analysis of U.S. interests in the region and corresponding military objectives; the operational concepts to inform operations; and the U.S. and partner capabilities required to perform these functions. The following chapter conducts a detailed assessment of three options for the future of U.S. posture in the Middle East according to different sets of interests and objectives.





CH. 03

# ALTERNATIVE U.S. FORCE POSTURES





A U.S. Marine shakes hands and exchanges a patch with a Jordanian marine after the final exercise of Intrepid Maven (IM) 22-1 aboard Camp Titin.

SOURCE U.S. Marine Corps photo by Cpl. James Stanfield

This chapter presents three posture options for U.S. forces in the Middle East, which are nested in broader grand strategies.<sup>1</sup>

The first, *restraint*, is the smallest posture and includes the withdrawal of virtually all U.S. forces from the Middle East, except for a stand-behind force of fewer than 5,000 personnel to deter and prevent threats to the U.S. homeland. The second option, *limited engagement*, involves a larger U.S. military presence of 10,000 to 20,000 personnel to deal with a set of U.S. interests tied primarily to monitoring and countering competitors operating in the region, such as China, Russia, and Iran, in addition to preventing threats to the homeland. The third option is *robust engagement*, which includes a sizable U.S. presence in the region of 40,000 to 50,000 personnel to deter and respond to Iran and terrorist threats, monitor and counter Russian and Chinese activity, and ensure freedom of navigation. Robust engagement relies on an operational concept of deterrence by denial, while the other two options rely on deterrence by punishment and the ability to surge units to the region when required.

The analysis of each option is structured in the same way. Each section provides an overview of the option, describes U.S. interests and defense objectives in the context of broader U.S. strategic considerations, outlines primary contingencies and missions, explores operational concepts, outlines the force posture (including in such areas as land, air, maritime, and space and cyber), and assesses the benefits and risks of each. Figure 3.1 summarizes the defense objectives and land, air, and naval forces for each option.

STRATEGY	RESTRAINT	LIMITED ENGAGEMENT	ROBUST ENGAGEMENT
<b>Defense Objectives</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Prevent attacks on the U.S. homeland and personnel.</li> <li>Maintain a regional balance of power.</li> <li>Prevent long-term disruptions to oil flows that could adversely impact the U.S. economy.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deter and prevent attacks on U.S. homeland and personnel as well as partners and allies.</li> <li>Monitor and counter some Chinese and Russian activity in the region.</li> <li>Assist partners in deterring Iranian aggression and respond if U.S. personnel are threatened.</li> <li>Maintain a regional balance of power and prevent disruption to oil flows.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Deter and respond to Iranian aggression and prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.</li> <li>Monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity.</li> <li>Disrupt and degrade terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and its regional interests.</li> <li>Guarantee freedom of navigation and access to oil.</li> </ul>
<b>Land Forces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Withdraw all land forces, with possible exceptions of security force assistance brigades (SFABs) and a small number of special operations forces.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Reduce land force presence to minimize risk to U.S. personnel and manage escalation control.</li> <li>Maintain rotational combat brigade team presence to reassure allies, but at minimal risk.</li> <li>Deploy SFAB to region and maintain limited special operations presence.</li> <li>Minimize sustainment presence.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Largely maintain current U.S. land presence, including Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force as crisis response force.</li> <li>Deploy SFABs to region to support and develop partner capabilities.</li> </ul>
<b>Air Forces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing for strike option against terrorist threats to homeland and U.S. personnel.</li> <li>Withdraw fourth- and fifth-generation fighters and enablers from Gulf.</li> <li>Operate intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) from Jordan or Djibouti.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing for strike option against terrorist threats to homeland and U.S. personnel.</li> <li>Maintain 378th Air Expeditionary Wing at Prince Sultan Air Base.</li> <li>Withdraw most fourth- and fifth-generation fighters and enablers from Gulf.</li> <li>Deploy ISR assets, including to monitor Iranian activity.</li> <li>Conduct strategic bomber task force missions to region only during heightened tensions or contingencies.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain 332nd, 378th, 379th, 380th, and 386th air wings.</li> <li>Maintain F-22 squadron at AUAB (Qatar).</li> <li>Maintain fourth-generation fighter squadron rotations throughout region.</li> <li>Rotate F-35 squadron periodically for deterrence missions when not needed in other unified combatant command areas of responsibility.</li> <li>Conduct strategic bomber task force missions to region during heightened tensions or contingencies.</li> <li>Deploy ISR assets from regional air bases.</li> </ul>
<b>Naval Forces</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End continual U.S. carrier strike group (CSG) or amphibious ready group (ARG) presence.</li> <li>Maintain U.S. Navy (USN) and Coast Guard (USCG) patrol boat and cutter presence in Gulf.</li> <li>Reduce U.S. operations in support of Combined Maritime Forces (CMF).</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>End continuous CSG presence; remain deployed to Indian Ocean on standby for contingencies.</li> <li>Utilize rotational ARG presence, which largely remains in Arabian Sea.</li> <li>Retain USN and USCG patrol boats, but prioritize new cutters for Pacific pending expanded uncrewed capability of Task Force 59.</li> <li>Reduce U.S. operations in support of CMF and cede command to allied leader.</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Maintain consistent CSG presence in region to reinforce deterrence mission.</li> <li>Maintain rotational ARG presence.</li> <li>Maintain USN and USCG patrol boats and cutters for current mission.</li> <li>Continue U.S. command of CMF.</li> </ul>

**FIGURE 3.1** Summary of Objectives, Primary Missions, and Operational Concepts

**SOURCE** Authors' own research and analysis.

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. The first three outline the strategic assumptions and force composition behind each of the force posture options. The final section summarizes the main conclusions.

## RESTRAINT

A strategy of restraint—which is sometimes referred to as “offshore balancing”—assumes that the United States has few, if any, core strategic interests in the Middle East.<sup>2</sup> It involves decreasing the U.S. presence to fewer than 5,000 personnel, which could fluctuate depending on periodic exercises and flow of forces through the theater. This section expands on the strategic assumptions underpinning a restrained force posture in the Middle East and the makeup of such a posture.

Restraint is grounded in realist theories of international relations.<sup>3</sup> It argues that the United States—including the U.S. homeland—is fundamentally secure from existential threats thanks to its geography, nuclear arsenal, and military power. Advocates of strategic restraint argue that Washington has distracted itself with costly overseas commitments and interventions that trigger nationalism, breed resentment, and encourage free riding.<sup>4</sup> Accordingly, they believe the U.S. military has overextended itself in countries that have little bearing on its national interest. Restraint asserts that U.S. strategy should focus on such limited interests as preventing a powerful rival from upending the global or regional balance of power.

Consequently, this argument envisions a withdrawal of virtually all U.S. ground forces from the Middle East, a focus on limited air and maritime forces, and a shift to local allies and partners that bear the burden of defending their own countries. As one assessment concludes, “In the Gulf, the United States should return to the offshore balancing strategy that served it so well until the advent of dual containment. No local power is now in a position to dominate the region, so the United States can move most of its forces back over the horizon.”<sup>5</sup> One proponent goes further to argue that “U.S. soldiers no longer need to live onshore in Gulf countries, where they incite anti-Americanism and tie the U.S. government to autocratic regimes of dubious legitimacy.”<sup>6</sup> Another assessment concludes that “the United States should turn to regional forces as the first line of defense, letting them uphold the

balance of power in their own neighborhood.”<sup>7</sup> For example, proponents contend that the United States largely stayed offshore during the Cold War and let other countries—such as the United Kingdom—take the lead in preventing any state from dominating the region.<sup>8</sup> They argue that other strategies—such as robust engagement—waste U.S. money by subsidizing the defense of well-off partners. Significantly decreasing the U.S. presence would end free riding and decrease anti-American sentiment.<sup>9</sup>

Accordingly, the “aim [of offshore balancing] is to remain offshore as long as possible, while recognizing that it is sometimes necessary to come onshore.”<sup>10</sup> The advocates of this view argue that the instances in which the United States would need to take action in the Middle East are limited. Most agree that the United States should prevent the rise of a regional hegemon, particularly one that dominates oil production and threatens to manipulate the supply or price of oil or close the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el-Mandeb Strait.<sup>11</sup> However, some object to the United States continuing to utilize significant defense resources to protect access to oil and freedom of navigation. According to this view, the United States does not depend on imported oil anymore, thanks in part to the “shale revolution.”<sup>12</sup> In addition, there is a new post-OPEC (Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries) reality with the availability of Canadian oil sands, Brazil’s deep-water reserves, imports from Mexico, and other changes.<sup>13</sup>

Some proponents of offshore balancing support preserving a small U.S. counterterrorism capability in the Middle East, though counterterrorism is not a major priority. As one advocate concludes, “Washington should keep the threat in perspective. Terrorists are too weak to threaten the country’s sovereignty, territorial integrity, or power position.”<sup>14</sup> Others support preventing the spread of nuclear weapons but prefer to rely on non-military tools, such as diplomacy and economic sanctions.<sup>15</sup>

In addition to the realist view of offshore balancing, a second logic is tied to progressive views of U.S. foreign policy.<sup>16</sup> Progressive arguments focus on supporting democracy, democratic alliances, economic equality, and human rights overseas—though not primarily through the use of military tools. Progressives are generally skeptical about the use of military force abroad and the value of large defense budgets, in part because many believe that the threats to U.S. national security



are not existential. Instead, they prefer non-military instruments of power, such as diplomacy, development, and trade.<sup>17</sup> Many progressives are also skeptical of partners who are not democratic, though some are willing to cooperate with authoritarian regimes if they demonstrate behavior that accords with international rules and norms.<sup>18</sup> Some progressives may additionally prefer to focus resources on domestic issues.

Consequently, a progressive strategy in the Middle East would involve a significant U.S. military withdrawal similar to what advocates of restraint propose, since progressives generally believe that the United States has focused far too much on using military tools in the region and supporting undemocratic countries such as Saudi Arabia. For many progressives, a substantial military presence in the Middle East would likely be counterproductive and wasteful. As one progressive assessment concludes, “There are serious and persistent questions about America’s ability to have a positive effect in the Middle East and whether the benefits of counterterrorism operations have outweighed their tendency to exacerbate the problem.”<sup>19</sup> In addition, progressives generally prefer decreasing U.S. arms sales to the Middle East and instead strengthening diplomatic, economic, intelligence, and other tools.

Beyond the realist and progressive arguments, there are several other justifications for strategic restraint that envision a significant decline—or the total elimination, in some cases—of U.S. posture in the Middle East in favor of local allies and partners.<sup>20</sup> These range from approaches seeking to build a smaller, more innovative, and cost effective force to approaches more isolationist in nature.<sup>21</sup> Many of these points of view argue that U.S. partners are capable of defending themselves and should no longer be subsidized.

Overall, different strains of strategic restraint may not be in uniform agreement on their preferred force posture for the Middle East, including U.S. objectives, operational concepts, and land, air, and naval capabilities.<sup>22</sup> The military force posture articulated below is most closely aligned with the interests and objectives defined by advocates of offshore balancing.

## U.S. Interests and Defense Objectives

A strategy of restraint for the United States includes several primary objectives. At the global level, it seeks

to reduce U.S. military obligations abroad. This is both to limit costs and to reduce the risk of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts. The primary objective of this strategy is to defend the U.S. homeland, although U.S. forces may be used to deter the rise of a regional hegemon that threatens U.S. interests.<sup>23</sup>

Under such a strategy, the United States’ defense objectives in the Middle East are relatively few. They include the following:

- Prevent attacks on the U.S. homeland and personnel.
- Maintain a regional balance of power.
- Prevent long-term disruptions to oil flows that could adversely impact the U.S. economy.

## Primary Contingencies and Missions

The primary mission for U.S. forces in the Middle East is to prevent any attack—conventional, cyber, space, or otherwise—on U.S. personnel and territory. When the homeland or U.S. assets and personnel are directly threatened, U.S. forces may conduct limited counterterrorism operations. Partners and allies in the region are primarily responsible for deterring Iranian aggression under this strategy, although U.S. forces could respond if Iran threatens to disrupt the regional balance of power. While a regional objective is to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon, that should primarily be achieved through diplomatic and economic means. U.S. forces may similarly conduct ISR missions to monitor any activity from Chinese or Russian forces in the region that threatens to disrupt the balance of power.

U.S. forces may similarly take action to ensure the flow of oil from the region in the event of a contingency or adversarial action that closes access to the Strait of Hormuz or Bab el-Mandeb Strait. However, given the lack of U.S. reliance on Gulf oil, the United States is primarily concerned with long-term disruptions that threaten to adversely impact the economy and is willing to initially rely on diplomatic and economic tools while partners and allies lead.

## Operational Concepts

Given the emphasis on minimizing U.S. forces and missions in the region, a restraint strategy relies on an operational concept of deterrence through punishment. It assumes



that the United States will surge superior forces to the region in the event of an attack on U.S. personnel or the homeland. However, given the reluctance to spend resources and risk personnel under this strategic approach, escalation control is essential to ensure that U.S. forces are not drawn into unnecessary conflicts. U.S. personnel in the Middle East will provide limited support to partner and allied forces by sharing intelligence and information collected by ISR assets, but those partner forces are primarily responsible for deterring Iranian aggression.

## Force Posture

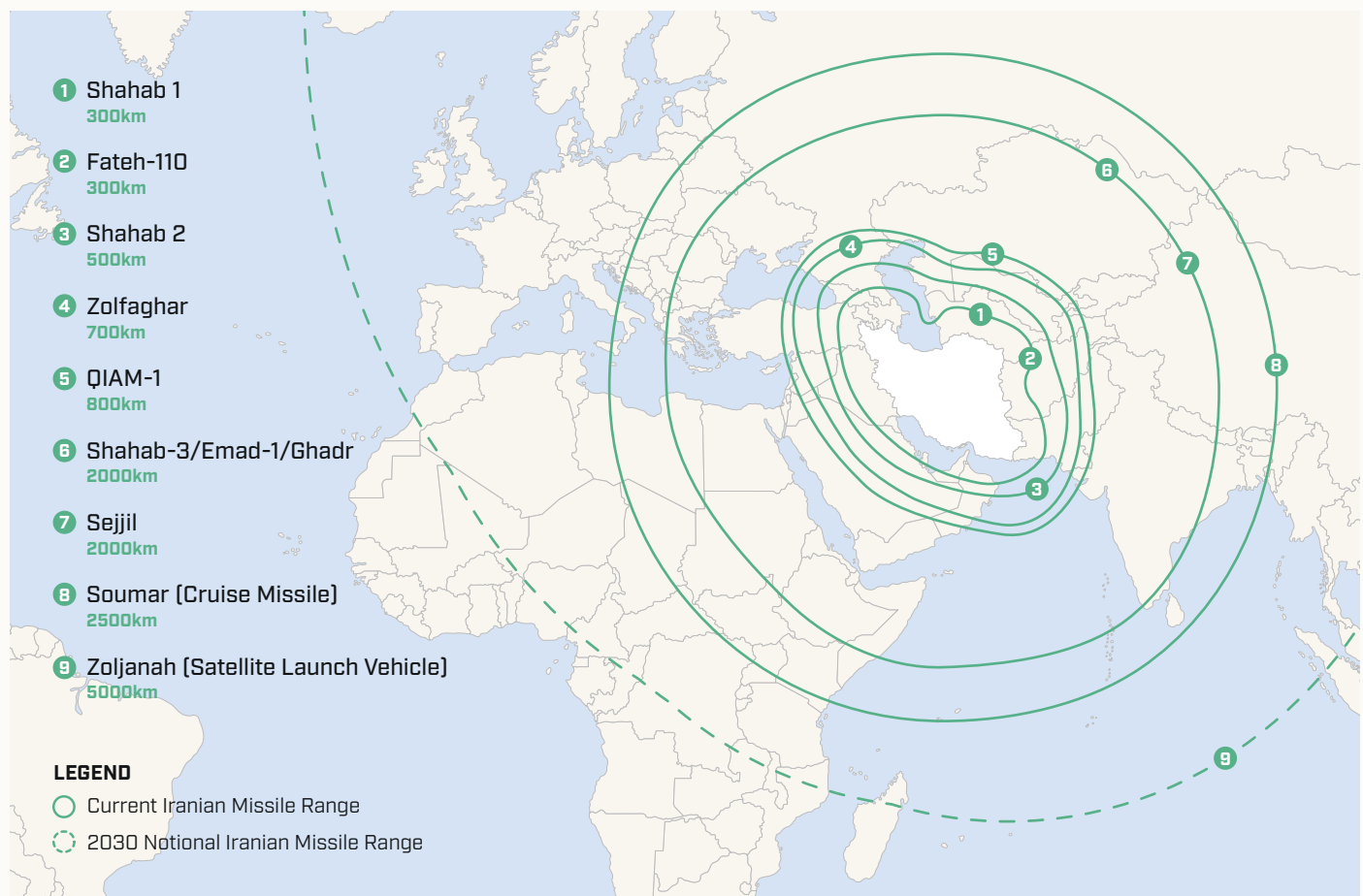
Based on these objectives, restraint would involve a significant reduction of the U.S. military footprint in the Middle East. The United States would reduce its forward military presence in the form of bases, large airfields, ports, and pre-positioned equipment and other military supplies, particularly those that are in range of Iranian offensive capabilities such as short-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and UAVs.<sup>24</sup> Figure 3.2 highlights Iran's projected ballistic and cruise missile ranges through 2030. This closure of U.S. bases would

mitigate risk to U.S. personnel in the region as well as reduce the likelihood of conflict requiring U.S. intervention. This approach might also involve deploying a mix of "over-the-horizon" capabilities to the surrounding region beyond the Persian Gulf, reducing vulnerability to Iran's asymmetric capabilities, and giving allies and partners a greater role in deterring Iran. The United States' regional partners would be forced to accept more responsibility for their own security, with U.S. enabling support in limited circumstances.

However, in order to effectively respond to a possible crisis in the Middle East, the United States would have to develop contingency plans to surge forces into the region. As such, the United States would have to reach

**FIGURE 3.2** Iran's Ballistic and Cruise Missile Ranges through 2030

**SOURCE** Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of Iran," *Missile Threat*, CSIS, June 14, 2018, Last modified July 17, 2020, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>; "Identical letters dated 7 April 2021 from the Permanent Representative of Israel to the United Nations addressed to the Secretary-General and the President of the Security Council," United Nations Digital Library, April 8, 2021, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3907877>.



---

access agreements with regional partners to pre-position equipment and to enhance local bases and airfields in the event of a U.S. deployment. Defense planners would also have to consider the logistics of surging U.S. personnel into the region from other theaters and maintain requisite transportation.

### *Land*

The United States would withdraw almost all of its land forces deployed to countries such as Kuwait, which are vulnerable to Iranian precision missile attacks.<sup>25</sup> Limited U.S. ground force capabilities could include a security force assistance brigade (SFAB) to assist in building partner capacity. Patriot missile defense batteries would be deployed to bases with U.S. personnel to minimize vulnerability to Iranian attacks. Access and basing agreements with partners would need to be updated to reflect this construct. In addition, the United States could keep a scaled-back number of special operations forces and counterterrorism platforms to support partner-led operations and deter activity by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, Russian GRU, and other organizations that threaten U.S. personnel.

### *Air*

Given that the primary deterrence mission is conducted by partners and allies in the region, the United States would withdraw much of its air assets, including rotational fourth-generation aircraft deployed to vulnerable bases such as al-Dafra, the UAE, and Bahrain. Bomber task force deployments to the region would similarly end. However, the United States could maintain air capabilities such as the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing or Saudi Arabia's Prince Sultan Air Base, pending updated access and basing agreements, to support counterterror missions against threats to U.S. personnel in the region or the U.S. homeland, or in the event of an attack that threatens to disrupt the regional balance of power.<sup>26</sup> The United States could also deploy long-range cruise and ballistic missiles.<sup>27</sup>

ISR assets, such as remotely piloted aircraft, would operate out of bases potentially less vulnerable to Iranian offensive actions, such as Jordan or Djibouti. However, the increased distance to travel to the region would also limit loiter and surveillance time. These assets would serve to monitor Chinese and Russian activity in the region in addition to ISR missions to monitor terrorist and Iranian-linked groups.

While the United States would remove theater missile defense assets that are not directly defending U.S. personnel, it could also encourage regional partners to better integrate their air and missile defense capabilities. Whether a Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) missile defense could be effectively established rests, in part, on the political will of member states to purchase complementary rather than redundant capabilities and to establish institutional arrangements. Rifts and competition among GCC members have made—and will likely continue to make—such cooperation difficult.<sup>28</sup> But the United States could press partners to take steps in six areas: information sharing, including sharing tactical ISR with allies and partners; investing in radar capabilities and other sensors deployed across all domains, including space; acquiring robust interceptors, including an exportable version of the U.S. Army's Lower Tier Air and Missile Defense Sensor; establishing procedures and regulations about which country shoots an incoming missile and how the operation is synchronized across interceptors; countering missiles left-of-launch; and training for a "fight tonight" capability through virtual and live combined exercises. The United States could also leverage existing efforts to cooperate, such as the training and interoperability exercises at the UAE's International Air and Missile Defense Centre at Al Bateen Air Base in Abu Dhabi.<sup>29</sup>

### *Maritime*

Restraint would include a significantly scaled-back maritime presence. Headquarters and support staff and functions at Naval Support Activity Bahrain would be drastically reduced or closed. Rotational deployments of carrier strike groups and amphibious ready groups would end given their lack of utility for the missions required by a strategy of restraint. The carrier strike group presence in the Indo-Pacific region could flex to respond should it be required. The United States could maintain its presence of Navy Cyclone-class patrol boats and Coast Guard Island-class boats and Sentinel-class cutters under NAVCENT Task Force 55 in the Persian Gulf to oversee the regular transport of oil through the Gulf and to deter Iranian asymmetric tactics such as swarming fast boats.<sup>30</sup>

Some demining capabilities could also be maintained, and uncrewed capabilities under Task Force 59 could be expanded to ultimately reduce the U.S.

Navy's crewed presence in the Gulf. However, under a restraint approach, the United States could push its Gulf and Indo-Pacific partners, particularly those states with a greater reliance on oil imports from the Middle East, to expand their role in managing security in the Gulf.<sup>31</sup> The United States would reduce its operations in support of Combined Maritime Forces and cede command to an allied leader. If the Strait of Hormuz was closed, partners and allies would be expected to act in the short term to open access. But in the event of a long-term closure of the strait that has major economic implications for the United States, U.S. naval assets could be deployed to the region.

### *Cyber and Space*

U.S. space and cyber capabilities are inherently global in nature. With reductions to direct posture in the region, the United States would rely more on intelligence, cyber, and space capabilities, integrating with allies and partners, including manned and unmanned sensors and networks. While a restraint posture would not want to burden government satellites with additional taskings for the Middle East that could be focused elsewhere, CENTCOM could leverage commercial satellite imagery to track terrorist movement and Chinese, Russian, and Iranian activity. Space and cyber liaison units would not physically remain in the region, but these functions would be performed remotely from the continental United States.

### Benefits and Risks

A reduced force posture in the Middle East based on a strategy of restraint could yield several benefits for the United States. It would allow the United States to shift forces elsewhere in the world for higher-priority missions, such as in Asia, Europe, or back to the United States. Similarly, reducing the U.S. presence in the region—including military personnel, bases, and other materiel—could decrease U.S. vulnerabilities to terrorist attacks in the region and Iranian stand-off attacks and reduce the likelihood of being drawn into unnecessary conflicts.

Restraint could also improve the readiness of U.S. forces, which, by nearly all measures, have fallen in size significantly since the peak of the buildup under the Reagan administration.<sup>32</sup> Those smaller forces have operated at a high operational tempo given the high demand signal from combatant commands and have

consequently degraded their operational readiness.<sup>33</sup> Reducing the missions the military undertakes in the Middle East could reduce the high operational tempo and, subsequently, the strain placed on the force, provided it does not have to undertake additional missions elsewhere.

Reducing the U.S. presence in the Middle East could yield some savings in the defense budget, with lower operation and sustainment costs associated with a much smaller footprint. While one assessment concludes that “withdrawals from Europe and the Persian Gulf would free up billions of dollars, as would reductions in counterterrorism spending,” transitioning these or other U.S. forces from the Middle East to Asia, Europe, or the United States would not necessarily save money.<sup>34</sup> While some funding spent on operations in the region may be reallocated, policymakers would only see major savings if the associated force structure withdrawn from the Middle East was eliminated. Keeping U.S. forces stationed overseas is often cheaper than moving them back to the United States, where they are not subsidized by foreign governments.<sup>35</sup>

Despite the potential benefits of a posture based on restraint, there are several significant risks. First, restraint could significantly reduce U.S. influence in the Middle East and shift the balance of power in favor of U.S. adversaries. From a political standpoint, a reduction in U.S. military presence would be of concern to partners and allies in the region, particularly those wary of Iranian aggression. U.S. diplomatic efforts in the Middle East may be negatively impacted if regional partners perceive a major withdrawal from the region as a lack of support. The United States may also struggle to secure updated access and basing agreements to secure the necessary capacity should it need to surge forces to the region.

Indeed, a significant U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East could shift the balance of power over time in favor of U.S. competitors—such as Russia, Iran, and China—in ways that undermine U.S. interests and exacerbate security competition. Iranian leaders would likely be emboldened with a declining U.S. presence. As one Israeli general argued, “The United States is the main brakes in the region and its withdrawal would lead to an escalation, since the Iranians will continue to apply gas” to their desire for regional hegemony. “Eventually . . . we will have to go to war.”<sup>36</sup> Reducing the U.S. presence in the region

---

could embolden Iran to expand its influence in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and elsewhere.

Russia has substantial power projection capabilities in the region, China is expanding its presence in countries such as Djibouti, and Iranian influence continues in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other countries. As Henry Kissinger noted, “Russian forces in the region—and their participation in combat operations—produce a challenge that American Middle East policy has not encountered in at least four decades.”<sup>37</sup> A declining U.S. role and posture in the region would likely compound this problem. After all, Moscow has used its battlefield successes in Syria to revive its great power ambitions in the Middle East and nearby regions, including North Africa. Russian military posture in the region has significantly increased over the last decade, especially in Syria. On air bases such as Hmeimim, the Russian military has parked aircraft, including Su-24M, Su-24M2, and Su-30SM frontline bombers; Su-25SM and Su-25UBM ground-attack aircraft; Su-30SM multirole fighters; Il-20M1 signals intelligence aircraft; and Mi-24P attack helicopters. Russian diplomats led negotiations on regional issues, including a Syrian peace deal and refugee returns. Every major country in the region—including Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon, and Iran—now works with Moscow’s diplomats, military commanders, and intelligence officials on regional security issues.<sup>38</sup> Russia has also expanded its arms sales in the region with weapons and systems tested in the Syrian war.<sup>39</sup>

Second, restraint would likely increase security competition in the region between states and could increase the possibility of nuclear proliferation as countries such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Turkey seek nuclear arsenals.<sup>40</sup> A scaled back U.S. presence could lead to increased conflict between Iranian proxy groups and other states. By managing regional relations, the United States dampens security competition.

Third, restraint risks a resurgence of terrorism and would make it difficult for the United States to respond quickly to terrorist threats. The Obama administration withdrew U.S. military forces from Iraq in 2011, only to send forces back to Iraq in 2014 after the Islamic State seized territory in Iraq and Syria. Similarly, the 2021 U.S. withdrawal of military forces from Afghanistan could contribute to a resurgence of terrorism and undermine U.S. security as groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State attempt to fill the vacuum. More

---

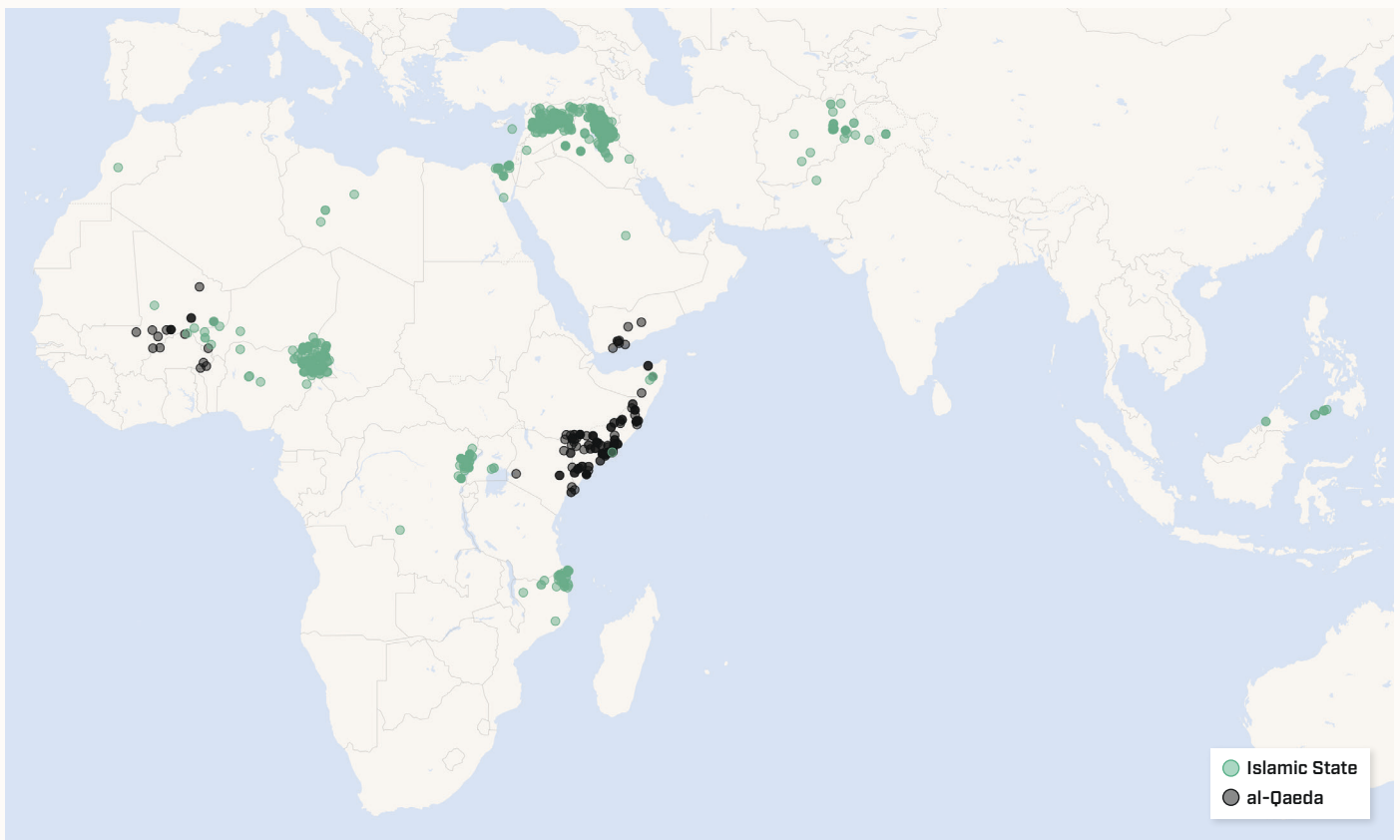
broadly, terrorism remains pervasive across the Middle East. As Figure 3.3 highlights, the Islamic State and al-Qaeda continued to conduct attacks in 2021 across Africa, the Middle East, Asia, and other regions.

Examples of Sunni groups include al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula in Yemen; the Islamic State, Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham, Tanzim Hurras al-Din, and other groups in Syria; the Islamic State in Iraq; and the Islamic State Khorasan Province and al-Qaeda in Afghanistan. The Islamic State retains an estimated 10,000 fighters in Iraq and Syria, which are mostly dispersed into small cells.<sup>41</sup> The group continues to plot and inspire attacks against the United States and other countries around the globe, conduct an aggressive information campaign on digital platforms, and fundraise.<sup>42</sup> Western states have also struggled to reintegrate Islamic State fighters and their families into their countries of origin. Al-Qaeda remains involved in numerous conflicts, including in Syria, where Hay’at Tahrir al-Sham has between 8,000 and 10,000 fighters.<sup>43</sup> As a United Nations assessment concluded, “Islamic State in Iraq and the Levant (ISIL) remains resilient; and Al-Qaeda has ingrained itself in local communities and conflicts.”<sup>44</sup>

In addition to Sunni groups such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, terrorism persists throughout the region from Shia groups such as Lebanese Hezbollah. Thanks in part to Iran’s paramilitary organization, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force, the size and capabilities of Shia and other paramilitary groups across the region have grown, including Lebanese Hezbollah in Lebanon; Houthis (or Ansar Allah) in Yemen; Badr Organization, Asaib Ahl al-Haq, and Kata’ib Hezbollah in Iraq; Lebanese Hezbollah and a number of non-state militias in Syria; and other fighters in Afghanistan (such as the Fatemiyoun Brigade), Pakistan (such as the Zainebiyoun Brigade), and Palestinian territory (such as Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas).<sup>45</sup> In short, since terrorism remains a problem in the Middle East and neighboring regions, restraint would make it difficult for the United States to respond quickly.

Fourth, restraint could weaken the United States’ ability to directly protect the free flow of oil and gas to global markets from the Gulf and to mitigate threats to the global supply chain from trade moving through such strategic chokepoints as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Suez Canal. While there has been a significant reduction in U.S. petroleum





**FIGURE 3.3** Islamic State and Al-Qaeda Attacks, 2021

**SOURCE** Map and data from CSIS.

imports, the global economy—and potentially the U.S. economy—could still be hurt by a major disruption in oil, natural gas, and other goods that flow from or through the Middle East. U.S. partners and allies that rely on Gulf energy could also suffer. Consequently, the United States still has a significant interest in securing the free flow of trade through the region.<sup>46</sup>

## LIMITED ENGAGEMENT

A Middle East force posture predicated on limited engagement involves the reduction of forces in the region and a focus on building the capacity of regional allies and partners. The primary role of the remaining U.S. forces in the Middle East is to prevent the rise of a regional hegemon and thwart a major power, such as China or Russia, from shifting the balance of power in its favor in the region.<sup>47</sup> It would require between 10,000 and 20,000 U.S. forces in the region based on periodic exercises and the flow of rotational units.

Much like restraint, limited engagement would include shifting greater responsibility to partners in the region through integrated planning, intelligence,

and operational frameworks and platforms, including for maritime security and counterterrorism. Force structure and units that have greater utility for competition in the Indo-Pacific region would be redeployed from the Middle East. Limited engagement might also involve periodic rotations and exercises of different mixes of forces—in combination with partners—to improve readiness for surging forces to the region for potential crises and contingencies. Limited engagement prioritizes non-military tools such as diplomacy, much like restraint. It includes enabling regional partners to address long-term challenges of governance, reverse the fraying of social contracts, and consolidate counterterrorism and territorial gains into stabilization. Such initiatives require sustained and accountable funding for the U.S. Department of State and U.S. Agency for International Development.<sup>48</sup>

Similar to restraint, the United States might conduct limited counterterrorism operations, particularly against groups and networks plotting attacks

against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests in the region. The United States would rely on partners and allies to take the lead in ensuring regional security and stability while assisting in building partner capacity. Additionally, while a U.S. objective is to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear power, limited engagement prioritizes diplomatic and economic means of doing so.

One of the primary differences from restraint is that the United States is willing to devote more resources to maintaining U.S. interests in the region. Consequently, the United States could monitor and counter some Chinese and Russian activity as well as support partners in deterring Iranian aggression and respond if U.S. personnel or assets are threatened. Russian power projection in the Middle East has increased over the past decade, requiring U.S. and partner forces to monitor Moscow's activities in the region. Figures 3.4a and 3.4b highlight Russian platforms and systems at the navy facility at Tartus, Syria, located on the eastern Mediterranean coast. CSIS satellite imagery analysis shows a range of Russian naval vessels utilizing the naval facility, including frigates, destroyers, and submarines.

## U.S. Interests and Defense Objectives

Limited engagement on a global level envisions shifting U.S. defense resources from the Middle East to higher-priority regions to deter China in strategic competition. While the United States has some interests in the Middle East, they can be maintained primarily by supporting partner and allied-led efforts with a smaller military footprint in the region. However, it is important to monitor and potentially respond to activity by major powers in the region to maintain U.S. influence. From a regional perspective, the main defense objectives include:

- Deter and prevent attacks on U.S. homeland and personnel as well as partners and allies.
- Monitor and counter some Chinese and Russian activity in the region.
- Assist partners in deterring Iranian aggression and respond if U.S. personnel are threatened.
- Maintain a regional balance of power and prevent disruption to oil flows.

## Primary Contingencies and Missions

Under limited engagement, the U.S. military would deter and respond to attacks on U.S. territory and personnel as well as major threats to allies and partners in the region. U.S. forces and assets would also serve to monitor Chinese and Russian activity in the region and counter it if threatening to U.S. interests. Another primary mission is to assist partners in deterring Iranian aggression and responding in the event of an attack on U.S. personnel or if the regional balance of power is threatened. Support for partners in deterring Iran could come in the form of military exercises, intelligence sharing, and building partner capacity. Finally, U.S. forces may conduct limited counterterrorism missions when U.S. personnel, the homeland, or partners are directly threatened.

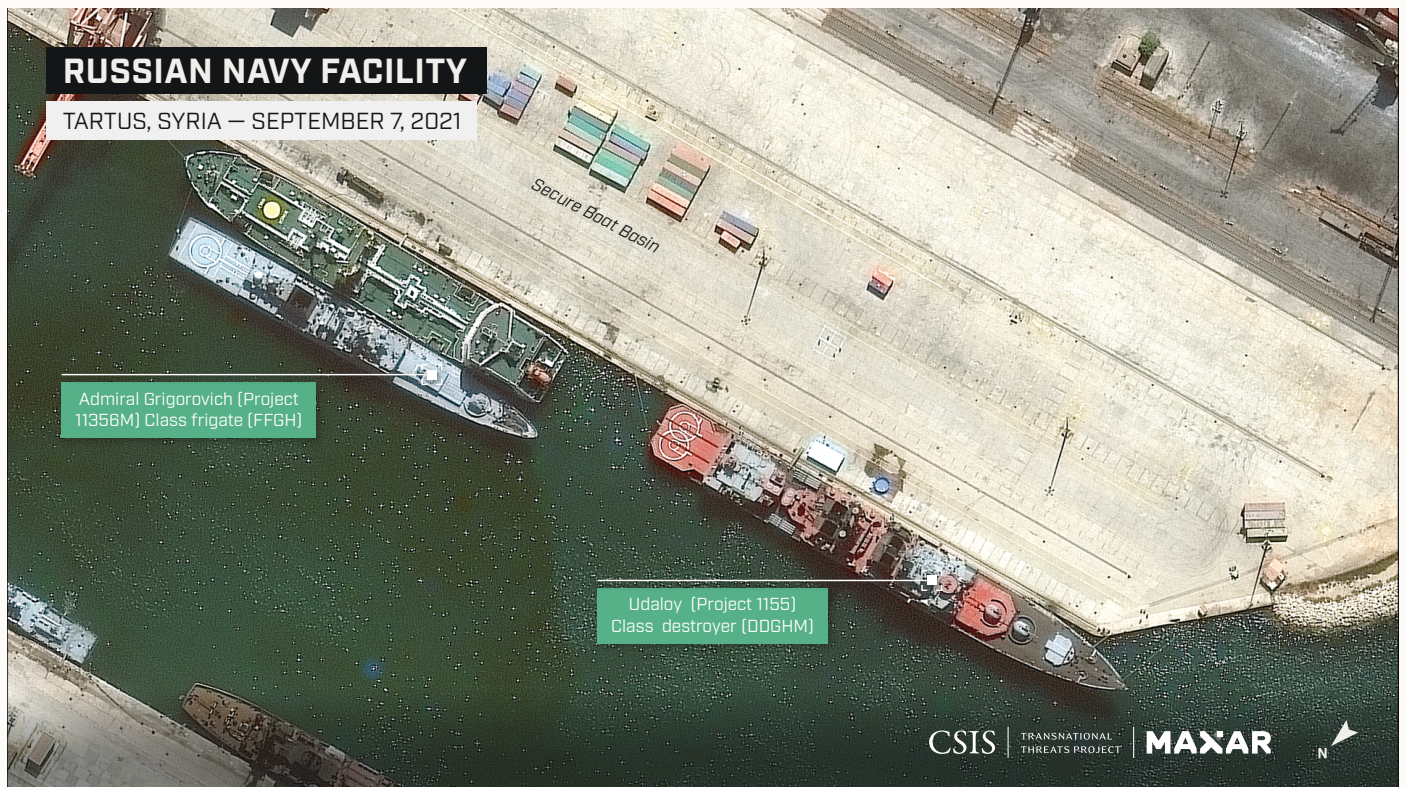
## Operational Concepts

Similar to restraint, U.S. forces under limited engagement would rely on deterrence through punishment and the ability to surge superior forces to the region when necessary. Escalation control remains essential as the military prioritizes competition in the Indo-Pacific region; it looks to avoid dedicating resources elsewhere. To minimize risk to forward-deployed personnel, the military would pursue a distributed posture and consider alternative entry points into the region to transport personnel and equipment. To reassure and encourage partners and allies to take the lead in maintaining regional security and deterring Iran, U.S. forces will assist in building partner capacity and encourage cooperation. The United States could also utilize the concept of dynamic force employment, which involves deploying U.S. forces in ways that are strategically predictable for allies and operationally unpredictable for competitors.<sup>49</sup> Examples might include deploying fifth-generation fighters to countries in the Middle East for snap exercises with Marine squadrons and allied forces or deploying U.S. Army and Marine forces for snap exercises with allies and partners in the region.<sup>50</sup>

## Force Posture

Under limited engagement, the United States would withdraw the majority of its ground forces and decrease strike and maritime assets in the region in favor of partners as it shifts forces to the Indo-Pacific region. An important





**FIGURE 3.4A** Satellite Imagery of Russian Frigate and Destroyer at Tartus Naval Facility  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



**FIGURE 3.4B** Satellite Imagery of Russian Frigate and Submarines at Tartus Naval Facility  
**SOURCE** CSIS.



part of limited engagement would be restructuring U.S. military basing in the region. As one assessment of U.S. overseas posture noted, “the presence of large permanent bases does not increase the likelihood of securing contingency access.”<sup>51</sup> The array of U.S. bases, primarily situated in the Gulf and which have been sustained and built upon since the 1991 Gulf War, were useful to conduct successive wars in Iraq, counterterrorism campaigns, and deterrence against Iran. Over time, the United States might scale back some “hot” bases on continuous force rotations to a “warm” commitment of periodic rotations, in coordination with allies and partners.<sup>52</sup> Hot bases are continuously populated, operated, and maintained by the primary force user—in this case, the United States—and the host nation.<sup>53</sup> Warm bases, by contrast, are primarily operated and maintained by the host country rather than by U.S. military personnel under an agreement that permits U.S. forces to surge when needed and, if desired, to pre-position equipment.<sup>54</sup> These changes would entail the review of basing agreements necessary for a new posture.<sup>55</sup>

The criteria for determining which bases should be hot and warm could be focused on the type of capabilities needed in certain parts of the region and calculations of where the United States could assume some risk. One example is Kuwait, where the U.S. military’s long and deep relationship could allow for a transition to warm bases and where a heavy ground-based posture is less relevant for the region’s contemporary and future security challenges. Such transitions could be offset by further security cooperation investments to assure critical Gulf partners of U.S. commitment.<sup>56</sup>

To further minimize risk to incoming U.S. personnel and assets deployed to the region, the United States could explore options for transporting troops through western Saudi Arabia, out of the range of most Iranian missiles. The United States and Saudi Arabia have discussed improving infrastructure at the port of Yanbu on the Red Sea, as well as air bases at Tabuk and Taif, to increase capacity for U.S. access.<sup>57</sup> The United States might also periodically deploy ground and aviation components to the theater for multilateral exercises to demonstrate these conventional capabilities.

Much like restraint, the United States would need to design a series of mitigation measures to absorb any risks of decreasing its current force posture. These steps might include increasing pre-positioned equipment stocks in the region and deepening security

partnerships through tailored and targeted advising; institution building; training, exercises, exchanges, and equipping to enable partners to address common security objectives; and a concerted effort to manage partner perceptions. For example, exercises with several regional militaries are useful both strategically—for deterring Iran, reassuring Gulf partners, and facilitating cooperation among them—and operationally in ensuring the U.S. military maintains readiness for future Middle East conflicts, particularly as it focuses increasingly on other regions such as Asia. Working with allies such as the United Kingdom and France to pool resources and basing as well as synchronize carrier deployments as allied capabilities and regional bases come online could offset some changes in U.S. posture.<sup>58</sup>

## *Land*

The United States would withdraw the majority of ground forces, including from Kuwait and Bahrain.<sup>59</sup> In addition, the United States could reduce service and unified command headquarters in the Gulf region through delayering and reducing staff numbers.<sup>60</sup>

To assist in building partner capacity, the United States could deploy a security force assistance brigade to the region. U.S. forces could also plan for the rotational deployment of an Army brigade combat team to reassure regional partners and allies. The brigade combat team would be deployed outside of the range of most Iranian missiles, pending basing agreements. U.S. forces may also include personnel focused on sustainment and logistics, although the number deployed would be small. Similar to the restraint posture, theater missile defense assets would be limited to bases with U.S. personnel to minimize risk and prioritize the protection of U.S. forces.

In addition, the United States could also keep some special operations capabilities to conduct limited counterterrorism activities. The United States might also use some of these special operations forces to build the irregular warfare capabilities of partners in the region to counter Iran, Russia, or China. The United States might adapt its counterterrorism platforms to strengthen allied and partner roles in leading and providing the backbone for operations. It would examine areas where allies could provide platforms for operations, with U.S. enabling support in such areas as intelligence, logistics, and lift. This might look more like the French model in the Sahel. Limited engagement could also glean regional lessons from

the Combined Maritime Force model that could be used for a counterterrorism platform. It would create combined allied funding models, as have been used for stabilization funds in Syria to support combined funding for counterterrorism operations.<sup>61</sup>

### *Air*

Limited engagement would involve decreasing the number of strike assets from the UAE and Qatar.<sup>62</sup> The majority of fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft as well as enabling capabilities would be withdrawn. However, the United States would maintain the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing to provide strike options against terrorist threats to U.S. and partner assets as well as the 378th Air Expeditionary Wing at Prince Sultan Air Base to serve as a credible deterrent for the Gulf. Similar to the restraint approach, ISR assets could be deployed from bases at less risk of attack, such as those in Jordan and Djibouti. Under limited engagement, there would be no regular bomber task force rotations to the region, except in periods of heightened tensions or operations when their deterrent and strike value is needed.

### *Maritime*

Under limited engagement, the United States would loosen its requirement for a continuously present carrier strike group due to their limited deterrent value to missions in the Middle East and their greater utility in the Indo-Pacific region. The Navy could deploy a carrier strike group to the Indian Ocean should it ever be needed in the Middle East for a contingency. The main thrust of naval support to the region would come in the form of a rotational amphibious ready group presence deployed to the Arabian Sea. The group would only deploy into the Persian Gulf during major contingencies or heightened tensions but remain in the Arabian Sea to minimize risk to U.S. ships and personnel. The United States could also develop adaptable naval configurations that provide littoral, amphibious, lift, strike, maritime domain awareness, and maritime security capabilities.<sup>63</sup>

Similar to the maritime posture under restraint, the United States would maintain Task Force 55 Navy and Coast Guard patrol boats in the Gulf. To bolster the U.S. presence in the Gulf, the Navy could expand NAVCENT Task Force 59, which consists of uncrewed surface and subsurface vehicles, as more of those

capabilities come online.<sup>64</sup> If Task Force 59 provides enough capability to fully replace that of crewed vessels, current Coast Guard fast response cutters in the Gulf could be redeployed to the Indo-Pacific region, where they have greater utility.<sup>65</sup>

This posture would include updating the maritime security architecture in the region to bolster the role of U.S. partners. Via diplomatic and military coordination, the United States and its allies and partners could create a new, combined construct for command, control, communications, computers, and intelligence (C4I) for maritime security that builds on the existing 33-member nation Combined Maritime Force, comprised of Combined Task Force 150, 151, and 152 in the Gulf and Red Sea and the International Maritime Security Construct. The United States could initiate combined planning with the United Kingdom, France, Australia, Japan, South Korea, and India to sequence maritime deployments and exercises in the Indian Ocean, Gulf, Red Sea, and Mediterranean. The coalition would rotate the Combined Maritime Force commander and vice commander among allied nations rather than keeping it among U.S. Navy leaders (currently, the commander is usually a U.S. officer, dual-hatted as the NAVCENT commander, and the vice commander is a UK officer). Combined Task Force commanders already rotate among allies and partners. Allies and partners would pool resourcing for the C4I backbone in Bahrain so it is not dependent on U.S. resources alone.

### *Cyber and Space*

Chinese and Russian advances in cyber, space, and counterspace weapons and capabilities pose a growing challenge to the United States, including in the Middle East.<sup>66</sup> Under limited engagement, the United States would dedicate more resources to space and cyber than under restraint. The Middle East would receive higher priority from government satellite ISR and receive more taskings and availability. This would similarly be supplemented by commercial taskings. Space and cyber liaison units would remain in theater to ensure cyber and space capabilities are integrated with partners. In this role, the United States could seek to form combined space and cyber task forces.

## Benefits and Risks

The main benefit of a limited engagement approach is that it would allow the United States to prioritize

---

competition with China by freeing up personnel and assets that could then be deployed to Asia. Reducing operational demands in the Middle East would also provide U.S. forces an opportunity to rebuild readiness as well as refocus planning and training efforts for missions in the Indo-Pacific region.

Similar to restraint, a smaller U.S. presence kept largely out of the effective range of Iranian missiles also minimizes the likelihood of being targeted by Tehran. It would also require regional and other allies and partners to take on a larger role to maintain stability and secure the flow of oil and trade. However, the larger presence associated with limited engagement relative to restraint yields some advantages. Support to partners in the form of intelligence sharing, joint exercises, and missions to build partner capacity—in addition to rotational deployments of air and maritime assets to the region—would reinforce deterrence efforts against Iranian aggression. The United States would also be able to monitor Chinese and Russian activity in the region more closely and counter these activities as required.

Maintaining warm bases with pre-positioned equipment, as opposed to outright closing U.S. facilities, would allow U.S. forces to surge into the region more easily in the event of a contingency. The larger presence and warm bases would also reassure partners and allies more than under a strategy of restraint. But there would likely be several risks.

First, limited engagement arguments tend to overstate the ability and interest of partners to conduct actions independently. Much like restraint, limited engagement assumes that U.S. partners will want—or be able—to assume the burden of deterring or countering Iran, China, and Russia. But GCC countries are unlikely to improve collaboration following a U.S. departure, and it is unlikely that European states—including their populations—will want to increase military deployments to the Middle East to make up for the U.S. withdrawal. Russia or China may partially fill the vacuum, which is not in the U.S. interest, but that is less likely under limited engagement than restraint given the larger U.S. presence.

Second, while the U.S. presence in the region would be larger than that associated with restraint, a smaller force may still be perceived by partners as reflecting U.S. abandonment of the region. Some might argue that alleviating these fears will require active engagement

by the U.S. Department of Defense to outline how, why, and where posture is changing, particularly underscoring that the new posture will be appropriately tailored to future likely threats, which may be appropriately conveyed via wargames or simulations.<sup>67</sup> The United States would also still need to secure updated access and basing agreements with regional partners to maintain warm bases in country. But it is unclear—and perhaps unlikely—that allies and adversaries will see the U.S. withdrawal this way. In fact, withdrawing from the Middle East might produce an uptick in the threats to the United States—including from an expansion of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian forces operating in the Middle East.<sup>68</sup>

Third, under limited engagement the United States has fewer assets to target terrorist organizations. As already noted for restraint, the terrorist threat in the region is likely to worsen with the U.S. withdrawal from Afghanistan, and more limited U.S. counterterrorism capabilities will make it harder to deal with these growing threats.

---

## ROBUST ENGAGEMENT

Robust engagement assumes that the United States still has notable interests in the Middle East which require a greater force presence than either restraint or limited engagement provide.<sup>69</sup> According to robust engagement, U.S. interests include countering great powers, targeting terrorist organizations that threaten the United States, and protecting freedom of navigation and access to oil. Robust engagement is a forward-defense strategy and, in the Middle East, prescribes the retention of America's core partners and the basing of U.S. troops to keep these partnerships strong.<sup>70</sup> Robust engagement would station roughly 40,000 to 50,000 U.S. forces in the region, though the number would fluctuate depending on periodic exercises and the consequent flow of forces through the theater.

### U.S. Interests and Defense Objectives

On a global scale, robust engagement seeks to contest adversary attempts to establish regional dominance and undermine U.S. influence. The United States is willing to robustly support partners and allies while encouraging



them to invest in their own security. Protecting freedom of navigation is another major objective. On the regional level, the United States has a more expansive set of objectives than the other two strategies:

- Monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity.
- Deter and respond to Iranian aggression and prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon.
- Disrupt and degrade terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and its regional interests.
- Guarantee freedom of navigation and access to oil.

The goals include ensuring the region is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, is not a safe haven for terrorists, and contributes to a stable global energy market. Even with a decline in U.S. reliance on oil, this assumes that it is important for the United States to maintain a stable global economy and to support partners and allies that rely on oil from the Gulf. As one assessment concludes, “Security in supply and stability in price are important in order to avoid severe disruptions to the U.S. and the world economies.”<sup>71</sup> The logic is that most industrialized and industrializing states are still heavily reliant on oil and oil imports, the Persian Gulf still contains a significant share of the world’s proven oil and natural gas reserves, and the United States is still impacted by what happens to Persian Gulf oil.

## Primary Contingencies and Missions

Under robust engagement, the United States will deter and respond to attacks on U.S. and partner personnel, assets, and territory from Iran or other state or non-state actors. While all posture options seek to prevent Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon through diplomatic and economic means, robust engagement is prepared to leverage other capabilities—including cyber—to do so. A final mission under robust engagement is to degrade and defeat terrorist organizations in the region rather than simply responding to threats.

## Operational Concepts

Unlike restraint and limited engagement, U.S. forces under robust engagement operate under a deterrence

by denial framework. Consequently, the United States seeks to maintain superior forces in terms of capability to deter Iranian aggression and prevent Chinese and Russian actions that undermine U.S. influence. Under this strategy, the United States would work directly with partners and allies while encouraging them to bolster their own capabilities.

## Force Posture

Under robust engagement, the United States would largely maintain its current force posture in the Middle East and employ a mix of offensive and defensive capabilities to achieve its objectives. Unlike restraint and limited engagement, the United States is less concerned about risk to forward-deployed personnel in the Gulf given its sizeable posture and deterrent capability. Ground and air strike capabilities serve as a deterrent to regional aggression by state actors, while the latter also provides support to operations against terrorist organizations such as the Islamic State. Robust maritime capabilities ensure freedom of navigation in the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and through the Suez Canal for global commerce. Special operations forces would focus on pressuring Sunni extremist groups and Iranian proxies and partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, Yemen, and other countries.<sup>72</sup> Command, control, communications, and intelligence support in the region would provide the backbone for U.S., allied, and partner operations in Syria, Iraq, and in other counterterrorism and Iran deterrence efforts.<sup>73</sup>

## Land

Under robust engagement, U.S. ground forces in the region would be principally oriented toward deterrence, contingency missions, and counterterrorism. Regarding counterterrorism, U.S. forces could engage in light footprint interventions, such as special operations raids, or the deployment of trainers and advisers to partner security forces. There would also be a need for quick reaction forces, advise-and-assist brigades, and military police for counterterrorism operations. Their presence is also intended to provide conventional deterrence to regional aggression. Units might include a brigade combat team, security force assistance brigade, or combat aviation brigade in support of ongoing operations in the region, including Operation Inherent Resolve, Operation Freedom Sentinel, and Operation Spartan

---

Shield. The Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force would be reactivated to operate as the primary crisis response force in the region. The United States would also maintain heavy ground equipment, including artillery, armored personnel carriers, and main battle tanks at pre-positioned stocks (such as Army Prepositioned Stocks-5 in Kuwait) in the event of contingency or rapid response operations.

In addition, the United States would preserve substantial special operations capabilities in the region. The special operations community has developed an intelligence-driven mode of operations enabled by niche technologies, a decentralized command-and-control structure, and a unique budgeting process. Special operations forces would conduct light footprint missions, such as special reconnaissance, direct action missions, foreign internal defense, and unconventional warfare.

## *Air*

The United States would maintain air dominance across the Middle East. U.S. air forces would conduct such missions as air and space superiority; command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; global strike; and rapid mobility. Under this posture, the United States would maintain its current expeditionary air wings at Ali al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia, and Al Dhafra Air Base in the UAE, in addition to the 332nd Air Expeditionary Wing, which is currently deployed at an undisclosed location. While most squadrons in these wings consist of fourth-generation fighters, the U.S. Air Force could also deploy an F-22 squadron capable of evading Iranian air defenses at Al Udeid to provide a strike capability against Iran. The Air Force could also occasionally rotate F-35 squadrons for deterrence missions in the region when not needed in other areas of responsibility. When necessary to establish a credible deterrent, the United States could also deploy bomber task force missions.

The United States would continue to provide key partners with air and missile defense, necessitating forward ground and maritime forces to provide these capabilities. U.S. deployments of air and missile defense systems might include Pac-2 and Pac-3 air defense batteries in Bahrain, Iraq, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE. These and other air defense batteries—including Terminal High-Altitude Aerial Defense systems deployed to Israel and Saudi Arabia—could

---

be redistributed to deter emerging threat vectors. U.S. forces could also deploy point-range air defense systems such as the Army C-RAM system and Avenger air defense system to counter rockets, mortars, and low-flying missiles and aircraft. Finally, the Navy could provide a regular presence of deployed Aegis Ballistic Missile Defense destroyers and cruisers not assigned to the carrier strike group for air and missile defense.

The United States would use numerous tactical data link networks for real-time data transmission within its own force and for data sharing with partners in the region, including the Link-16 system and other planning and direction, collection, processing and exploitation, analysis, and dissemination systems, such as the Air Force Distributed Common Ground System. Forces such as the 379th Expeditionary Communications Squadron at Al Udeid provide distributed command-and-control capabilities for rapid contingency operations.

## *Maritime*

Under robust engagement, the United States could tailor its maritime posture to three key missions: aiding ground forces; deterring Iranian asymmetric naval activity; and offshore strike. The Fifth Fleet would operate multiple naval minesweeping vessels and anti-mine helicopters, such as Poseidon aircraft, to deter and counter Iranian mining activities in the Strait of Hormuz. The United States would maintain a consistent carrier presence in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility and make rotational deployments of an amphibious ready group/marine expeditionary unit. The Ticonderoga-class guided-missile cruisers and Arleigh Burke-class guided-missile destroyers could also be deployed to the Middle East under robust engagement.

Other key naval systems might include several cruisers and destroyers stationed at Bahrain with anti-ship and land attack capabilities. A robust U.S. posture would be important to balance against China's maritime power projection capabilities. Figure 3.5 highlights the Chinese military presence in Karachi, Pakistan, including the deployment of a patrol submarine and a People's Liberation Army Navy Dalao-class submarine support ship. China's posture in South Asia is well within reach of the Persian Gulf.

## *Space and Cyber*

Under robust engagement, the United States would further build out space and cyber capabilities. Task-



**FIGURE 3.5** Satellite Imagery of PLA Activity in Karachi

**SOURCE** CSIS.

ing government satellites to capture imagery in the Middle East would be prioritized over other regions and supplemented where necessary with commercial capabilities. Similar to limited engagement, the United States would also seek to establish combined task forces for space and cyber operations with partners. Additionally, if diplomatic and economic means of preventing Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon fail, the United States could also leverage its offensive cyber capabilities as well as those of regional partners to degrade the Iranian nuclear program.

## Benefits and Risks

Robust engagement would have several benefits. Unlike restraint or limited engagement, greater capabilities in the Middle East would allow the United States to better monitor Chinese and Russian activity, deter and respond to Iranian aggression, disrupt and degrade terrorist groups and networks, and ensure freedom of navigation and access to oil. The United States would also not be as reliant on partners in the region, who may—or may not—conduct actions in the U.S. national security interest. Nevertheless, there are several risks.

First, maintaining a posture of 40,000 to 50,000 U.S. military personnel in the Middle East could undermine

U.S. interests in the Indo-Pacific region and Europe to counter Chinese and Russian activity—particularly in the event of a conflict with either power. Maintaining a sizeable presence in the Middle East comes directly at the expense of missions in other areas of responsibility. Under current force generation models, it would be difficult to expand U.S. posture in the Indo-Pacific region while deploying 40,000 to 50,000 personnel and assets, including surface warfare vessels and fighter squadrons, to the Middle East. There would also be a trade-off of keeping assets such as theater missile defense units and carrier strike groups in the Middle East rather than the Indo-Pacific or Europe.

Second, pursuing a wide range of objectives in the Middle East would require U.S. forces to maintain a high operational tempo. Given the small size of the U.S. military relative to historic norms, conducting significant missions in the region on top of other global requirements could impact the operational readiness of the force. For example, the current operational tempo of theater missile defense units poses serious concerns for their readiness amid significant demands for their



---

capabilities in CENTCOM and INDOPACOM.<sup>74</sup> A senior DoD official recently noted the need to create additional Patriot force structure to alleviate this burden, although that would take time.<sup>75</sup> Multiple deployments of carrier strike groups to the region over recent years have similarly impacted the readiness of the carrier force.<sup>76</sup>

Third, a larger number of U.S. objectives in the region could place personnel stationed there at risk. Maintaining a robust force posture and existing U.S. bases puts U.S. personnel at risk of attack from missiles and UAVs from Iran and Iranian proxies. As Figure 3.2 previously showed, the wider Middle East is well within range of Iranian ballistic and cruise missile capabilities, and recent attacks on U.S. bases and partner infrastructure in Saudi Arabia and the UAE illustrate that threat.

Fourth, robust engagement is likely the costliest of the three options over the long run—at least in the Middle East—though opponents of robust engagement generally overstate its costs. If the U.S. military withdraws forces from the Middle East and deploys a similarly sized force in the United States, the expected savings are likely to be modest because host governments frequently cover many of the infrastructure costs of U.S. forces and bases.<sup>77</sup>

---

## CONCLUSION

This chapter has outlined posture options associated with three strategic approaches: restraint, limited engagement, and robust engagement. The options examined the different objectives, operational concepts, and force postures associated with each strategy. Each posture option presents different benefits and risks.

Restraint asserts that the United States has few interests in the Middle East and should reduce its presence significantly. This would allow the United States to redeploy forces to other areas of the world, including the Indo-Pacific, and afford units the opportunity to regain operational readiness. But it has serious risks. It may shift the balance of power in the Middle East to U.S. competitors—including Russia, Iran, and China—and increase security competition. In addition, restraint risks a resurgence of terrorism and limits the U.S. ability to guarantee the free movement of oil, gas, and other goods through key chokepoints in the region. U.S. partners and allies may also view a

withdrawal as a lack of support and limit access rights.

Limited engagement would similarly allow the United States to redeploy forces to other regions, such as the Indo-Pacific, while still maintaining some interests in the Middle East. But it likely overstates the ability and interest of U.S. partners and allies to cooperate and conduct actions in the U.S. interest, and it also risks an expansion of Russian, Chinese, and Iranian influence at the United States' expense. Similar to restraint, a reduction in U.S. forces could raise concerns among some partners—such as Israel and Saudi Arabia—and cause problems in ensuring access to the region.

Robust engagement builds on the United States' current force posture by maintaining a consistent carrier presence and some units removed under the Trump and Biden administrations. It would allow the United States to better counter Iranian, Russian, Chinese, and terrorist activities in the Middle East, as well as ensure freedom of navigation. But it is likely the costliest of the three options, could put a strain on U.S. readiness, and could come at the expense of deploying U.S. forces elsewhere.

To provide an additional assessment of the options, the next chapter examines four scenarios.



CH. 04

# SCENARIOS



A convoy of Russian military vehicles drive toward the northeastern Syrian city of Kobane.

SOURCE -/AFP/GettyImages



This chapter analyzes the force posture options outlined in Chapter 3 using a scenario-based assessment. Scenario planning has a long history in the U.S. and other militaries, going back at least to the early twentieth century. The Joint Planning Committee, the predecessor organization of the Department of Defense's Joint Staff, developed a set of color-coded war plans to explore potential conflicts with such countries as Japan (War Plan Orange) and Germany (War Plan Black).<sup>1</sup> In the early Cold War, Herman Kahn established scenario planning methods for studying nuclear war.<sup>2</sup> Scenario analysis informed defense planning throughout the Cold War, generally with a focus on fighting Soviet and Warsaw Pact forces. Following the end of the Cold War, the Office of the Secretary of Defense established planning scenarios as appendices to its *Defense Planning Guidance* documents. In 2002, the Department of Defense created a more formal joint scenario planning process to inform U.S. military planning.<sup>3</sup>

But scenarios are more of an art than a science.<sup>4</sup> They can be helpful in examining force posture options because they allow analysts and policymakers to test how different force postures might perform during different types of conflicts.<sup>5</sup> In using scenarios, this chapter does not intend to offer a definitive conclusion about which Middle East force posture is best suited for the United States. Instead, the scenarios help draw out important strengths and weaknesses of the alternative postures.

The rest of this chapter is divided into six sections. The first provides an overview of the methodology for



---

separate scenarios: a conflict with Iran in the Gulf; a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist activity; a proxy conflict with Russia in the Levant; and a resurgence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. The final section provides a summary of how the four force postures fared.

---

## METHODOLOGY

This section begins by providing an overview of scenario-based analysis and then outlines the rationale for the choice of scenarios.

### Scenario-Based Analysis

The purpose of scenarios is to provide decisionmakers with a way to produce objective, evidence-based insight for planning purposes, including for assessing force posture. Scenarios can be helpful in evaluating the risks of different options. In a resource-constrained environment, as is virtually always the case, it is important to help decisionmakers understand the advantages and disadvantages of different options. Scenarios can create challenging situations for the United States to test its force posture and capabilities. In this sense, scenarios help the research move from abstract thinking to tangible and grounded analysis. They can also illustrate potential adversaries, strategies, capabilities, allies, and partners by examining various contingencies.<sup>6</sup>

The plausibility of scenarios is critical to their utility and effectiveness. Scenarios generally require several components: outlining a credible future conflict (or alternative futures); understanding the context and need for military action; making assumptions about geography, intelligence, military operations, and other factors; outlining the possible role of partners; and delineating a desired end-state.<sup>7</sup> In looking at options for scenarios, there is a need to identify assumptions in each scenario and subject the assumptions to analysis and debate. The scenarios in this report focus on specific adversaries and conflicts, which placed the analysis in the broader category of threat-based planning. There are several advantages of threat-based planning. It encourages planners to conduct a detailed and rigorous analysis on specific adversaries, which ties U.S. posture and capabilities to possible wars it may have to fight. This analysis involved a close examination of possible future adversary capabilities and how the United States

and its partners might have to counter them.<sup>8</sup>

As with any methodology, however, there are challenges in using threat-based and other types of scenarios. First, no threat-based planning process can identify the full range of scenarios that a force may face in the future. Second, information on future capabilities of the United States, its adversaries, and their respective partners is always uncertain.<sup>9</sup> Third, the outcome of specific scenarios can depend on a range of exogenous factors that cannot be adequately addressed in the analysis, such as the military strategies adopted by opposing sides, leadership, and the specific configuration and capabilities of allies and partners.<sup>10</sup> Leaders make mistakes. They miscalculate and may fail to judge the capabilities and intentions of their adversaries. Nevertheless, this chapter attempted to minimize any errors and biases by creating a transparent and replicable process guided by the steps outlined in the next subsection.

### Selection of Scenarios

In choosing scenarios, this chapter focused on several factors. The scenarios had to be: (1) reasonable and based on plausible events that could occur over the next 5 to 10 years in the Middle East; (2) relevant to the needs of policymakers; (3) demanding and involving stressful circumstances that challenged the capabilities of U.S. and partner forces; (4) representative of—and responsive to—current and future U.S. and partner commitments and vital interests; and (5) reusable and repeatable over a variety of studies and analyses.<sup>11</sup> The scenarios were organized along the following lines.

- **Context:** What are the circumstances that led to the need for military intervention? This section sketches an evolution of the crisis, though it does not cover every detail. It also provides an overview of the environment and time frame.
- **Adversary Strategy and Capabilities:** What are the main strategies and capabilities employed by the adversary and its partners?
- **U.S. Objectives:** What are the main U.S. objectives in using military and other instruments of power?
- **Assessment of Alternative Postures:** What are the pros and cons of the alternative force postures in achieving U.S. objectives against

the adversary?

- **Implications for U.S. Force Posture:** What are the broader implications of the scenario for future U.S. posture in the Middle East?<sup>12</sup>

Where appropriate, this chapter identified assumptions about the future capabilities of the United States, U.S. adversaries, and their respective partners; constraints on military forces; and other issues. The scenarios focus on the period between 2025 and 2030. This time period was far enough out to be helpful to policymakers considering force posture and procurement decisions, which can take years to develop. It also was close enough to make reasonably accurate and plausible assumptions about the future.<sup>13</sup> The geography in the scenarios varied from open desert in parts of Iraq and Syria to littoral zones along the Persian Gulf.

Based on this methodology, this chapter focuses on four scenarios: a conflict with Iran in the Gulf; a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist activity; a proxy conflict with Russia in the Levant; and a resurgence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan. These were chosen because the authors assessed they were reasonable and based on plausible conflicts, relevant to the needs of policymakers dealing with the Middle East, demanding for the United States and its partners, representative of future commitments, and repeatable by others. Given the relatively low probability of any scenario happening at a particular time, the study assumed that the United States would face only one scenario at a time. The authors also did not examine multiple wars occurring across the globe at the same time, such as in Europe or Asia. Fighting more than one war at a time would involve levels of mobilization that go beyond the scope of this analysis.<sup>14</sup>

Additional scenarios were considered which others might want to test in more detail. Examples include: a limited U.S. conflict with China in the Middle East, including around Djibouti; a war involving Saudi Arabia and Iran, in which the United States provides some aid to Riyadh; and a regional Kurdish uprising that spans Turkey, Iraq, and Syria and involves a limited U.S. response. There were numerous other possibilities considered as well. However, the current scenarios offer a useful mix that allows for the testing of force posture options.

## WAR WITH IRAN IN THE GULF

This scenario envisions a limited U.S. war with Iran in the Persian Gulf. Following the accidental shootdown of a civilian airliner, Iran launches a small number of unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), land attack cruise missiles, and short-range ballistic missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Iran also conducts offensive cyberattacks against Saudi Arabia's electricity grid and supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems. After the U.S. Navy targets Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy vessels in the Gulf, Iran deploys high-speed boats from the Bandar-e Abbas naval facility to lay advanced naval mines (including contact and influence mines) in the Strait of Hormuz, threatening U.S. and allied naval vessels as well as commercial shipping. China and Russia provide diplomatic and limited military assistance to Iran. An Iranian decision to develop a breakout nuclear weapon capability and potential preventive measures taken by Israel or Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states would contribute to a sense of urgency. The appendix describes the scenario in more detail.

### U.S. Objectives

As tensions escalate, the United States and its partners face a serious threat from Iranian missiles and proxy forces in the region. In addition, Iranian mining capabilities, maritime swarming attacks, and offensive cyber operations present challenges. Any U.S.-led campaign should be informed by a sense of urgency, since large-scale aggression would likely interrupt commercial shipping into and out of the Gulf, with potentially serious consequences for the global economy. Key objectives for U.S. forces in this scenario might include the following:

- Protect U.S. forces and bases from land, air (especially rocket and missile), and naval attacks by Iranian forces and proxies.
- Establish and maintain air superiority by suppressing and dismantling Iran's air defense systems if necessary, especially its most capable surface-to-air missile systems.
- Establish and maintain maritime superiority by suppressing the freedom of movement of Iran's anti-ship cruise missiles, small craft, submarines, and surface combatants.

- Deter further Iranian escalation, including against civilian targets in the Gulf and around the globe.
- Enable the continued free flow of commerce through the Strait of Hormuz, the Gulf, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

## Adversary Strategy and Capabilities

By the time of the scenario, Iran has improved its missile capabilities, enhanced its irregular strategies and doctrine, strengthened the capabilities of its non-state partners in the region, and improved its cyber capabilities. Iran also has the ability to conduct terrorist attacks around the globe, including in the Western Hemisphere, raising the possibility that violence could expand outside of the Middle East. Iran's military capabilities are distinguished by two main areas.

First, Iran maintains the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East, with thousands of ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and other projectiles, thanks to Russia, China, North Korea, and Iran's own indigenous defense industry. The challenge for the United States and its partners is not just the range, payload, precision, and number of missiles but also the proliferation of these systems to partners and proxies in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries. Iran's investments in GPS and terminal guidance have improved the accuracy of most short- and medium-range missiles to within 10 meters. Iran can also use these missiles in salvo attacks to overwhelm opposition missile defenses. Iran's short- and medium-range ballistic missiles (SRBMs and MRBMs) have anti-radar homing capabilities and can be configured to attack ships or land targets. These ballistic missiles can feasibly target any military or civilian target in the region. For longer ranges, Iran has a liquid-propellant intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) based on the Simorgh space launch vehicle. Iran has also acquired several Chinese Dong Feng 5 ICBMs, which are silo-based with liquid propellant and have a range of 13,000 kilometers—capable of striking the continental United States.

Iran has precision land attack cruise missiles that can fly at low altitude and attack a target from multiple directions. To overwhelm defensive systems, Iran also uses a new suite of combat unmanned aerial vehicles (CUAVs), including long-range CUAVs. Iran's CUAVs have

a maximum range of more than 1,000 kilometers, have a maximum altitude of 25,000 to 40,000 feet, and can be armed with bombs or cruise missiles. Iran's CUAVs and missiles allow it to threaten navigation through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

In addition, Iran's anti-access/area denial strategy will likely involve preventing the United States and its partners from operating effectively—or at least limit their freedom of movement—around its perimeter. Iran's maritime exclusion systems include ship- and shore-based anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCMs), anti-ship ballistic missiles, fast attack craft, fast inshore attack craft, long-range radars, mines, and submarines. Iranian mobile coastal-defense cruise missile launchers can readily be deployed along the Iranian coast, on Iranian-claimed islands in the Persian Gulf, and even on oil platforms. Iran has expanded its inventory of coastal-defense cruise missiles from Chinese C802- and C700-series cruise missiles to domestically produced variants.<sup>15</sup> Iran's military has hundreds of ASCMs that can be used in salvo attacks, including Hoot supercavitating torpedoes and a supersonic ASCM. Iran also acquired the Russian SS-N-26 Yakhont coastal-defense cruise missile. Iran uses thousands of naval mines—including contact and influence mines—to deny access to the Strait of Hormuz through a combination of submarine-deployed advanced mines and less sophisticated surface contact mines. Rockets and small cruise missiles can be launched from agile fast boats. Iran has also procured additional Kilo-class submarines from Russia, that, with Iran's domestic midget submarines, regularly deploy to the Persian Gulf.

Iran has improved its air defense systems, deploying the Russian S-400 missile defense systems inside the country, which Moscow recently delivered to Tehran. Much like with Turkey a half decade before, U.S., Israeli, and other partner officials tried—and failed—to block Russia's sale of the S-400 to Iran. Iran has upgraded its legacy command-and-control systems to a modern, software-based system. Iran has also improved its domestically produced air defense systems, deploying its Bavar-373 surface-to-air missile (SAM), which has a range of 200 kilometers.

Second, Iran has improved its irregular naval strategies and doctrine. Iran employs fast attack craft that emphasize speed and mobility to fire on tankers, lay mines, and conduct "swarming" tactics to isolate and overwhelm targets. The IRGC Navy has trained



to conduct swarming tactics that involve light, mobile naval forces capable of fast-moving hit-and-run attacks on an opponent from multiple directions. Iran has also constructed a large number of missile boats and patrol craft.

Third, Iran has improved the capabilities of its partners in the region, including through the proliferation of missile and UAV capabilities. This proliferation gives Iran some measure of deniability, since Iran may conduct attacks by, with, and through local forces in the Middle East and around the globe. The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) has provided technological assistance to Lebanese Hezbollah; Houthis in Yemen; and various militias in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria. These proxies continue to demonstrate the capability to hold U.S. personnel across the region at risk. In particular, the IRGC-QF has provided these partners with more sophisticated and longer-range missiles (including land attack cruise and ballistic missiles), UAVs, unmanned surface vehicles, and improved explosive devices. With transfers from Iran's cache, Lebanese Hezbollah has a stock of at least 100,000 rockets and missiles, which include Iran's Fateh-110 missiles and variants, scud missiles, guided SAMs, and UAVs—each with improved strike capabilities to hit Israeli targets, including civilians and infrastructure, more accurately. Iran is also supporting the Houthis in the still ongoing Yemen civil war with UAVs, cruise missiles, anti-ship missiles, and SAMs.

Fourth, Iran has developed increasingly sophisticated offensive cyber capabilities, including the use of sophisticated malware to disrupt and paralyze critical infrastructure targets (e.g., electricity grids), SCADA systems, utility companies, and a wide range of businesses from drug manufacturers to shipping and oil companies. Iran's cyber capabilities threaten U.S. and partner commercial and government targets in the region. Iran can target some vulnerable systems in the United States, such as businesses and poorly defended critical infrastructure, but Iranian cyber capabilities likely remain more dangerous to U.S. partners in the Middle East.

## Assessment of Alternative Postures

Based on this scenario, robust engagement provides the United States with the ability to respond promptly

to further escalation by Iran and to deter additional Iranian actions. Robust engagement would allow the United States to maintain air dominance, and the United States could rapidly conduct such missions as air and space superiority; command, control, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance; and global strike. The United States would also be able to provide partners with air and missile defense, including Pac-2 and Pac-3 air defense batteries in the Middle East. The United States would also possess significant maritime capabilities in the region, with a consistent carrier presence in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility. Participants in the workshop believed that the United States would not be able to rely on deterrence by denial but would rather need to pursue deterrence by punishment. One drawback to robust engagement is the increased vulnerability of U.S. troops to Iranian attacks.

Limited engagement would give the United States fewer strike assets in theater, including fourth- and fifth-generation fighter aircraft. The U.S. Navy also would not have a continuously present aircraft carrier, which would likely be deployed to the Indo-Pacific theater. Limited engagement also risks dependence on partners in the region, at least initially. The United States would have to surge forces and equipment into the theater, which could be delayed. Compared to robust engagement, this posture provides the United States with fewer capabilities to deter additional Iranian aggression.

A restraint posture in this scenario would create greater risk to U.S. interests compared to the other postures. The United States would have limited air assets in the region, such as F-15E Strike Eagles and long-range cruise and ballistic missiles. The United States would have few theater missile defense assets since most U.S. ground forces were withdrawn. In addition, the United States would be significantly reliant on partners in the region. Rifts and competition among GCC members, for example, would likely make cooperation difficult. The United States would also have a limited ability to protect the free flow of oil and gas to global markets from the Gulf—including to U.S. allies and partners—as well as to protect major supply chain threats because of disrupted trade through such strategic locations as the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Strait.

## Implications for U.S. Posture

Assuming that Iran continues to pursue objectives at odds with those of the United States and its regional

partners, a primary U.S. objective in the region will be to establish—or perhaps to reestablish—deterrence and maintain a modicum of stability. Robust engagement gives the United States more capabilities to achieve its objectives in the region.

Forward base infrastructure could be an important component of regional posture. Assuming that Iran continues to build more and better long-range missiles, the United States and its GCC partners might want to invest in capabilities to reduce their vulnerability to these weapons. This means, among other steps, developing a network of air bases and command centers that are hardened against attack, dispersed, located beyond the range of Iran's most numerous attack systems, or have some combination of these factors. To the extent that future ballistic missile defense systems can be made more cost-effective than currently available ones, they may also become attractive investment options. Planners should ensure that adequate stocks of air-delivered munitions are stored in survivable ways in theater. A robust effort by the United States and its GCC allies to provide an effective active defense and counterforce capacity against the emerging Iranian long-range precision strike capability will require a major investment in command, control, communications, computers, intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance and advanced munitions, as well as rigorous training.<sup>16</sup>

Aside from the emerging threat posed by Iran's long-range missiles, U.S. and GCC partners will need capabilities to counter threats posed by Iran's irregular forces. The ISR and other assets mentioned earlier can contribute to this. However, U.S. special operations forces will play an important role in training and advising partner forces and helping to protect U.S. bases and personnel deployed to the region. Despite Iranian aggression, the United States should still maintain its credibility and establish an open channel of communication.

## SCENARIO 2

# A RESURGENT SALAFI-JIHADIST THREAT IN THE LEVANT

This scenario outlines a resurgence of terrorism from a Salafi-jihadist group that incorporates members of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda in the Levant. See

the appendix for additional information about the scenario. Named Tanzim al-Jihad, the new group unites members of both movements with a base of operations in war-torn Syria and sanctuaries in Turkey and Iraq.

## U.S. Objectives

Tanzim al-Jihad's control of territory and its establishment of external operations networks raise serious concerns among policymakers in the United States as well as in Russia, Europe, Turkey, Jordan, and other governments in the region. In addition, local Kurdish forces are hesitant to partner with U.S. forces. Key objectives for U.S. forces in this scenario might include the following:

- Protect U.S. forces, bases, persons, commercial interests, and embassies in the region from terrorist attacks.
- Target the external operations capability of Tanzim al-Jihad, eliminating or weakening its ability to conduct attacks in Europe, the United States, and other locations.
- Advise and assist state and non-state partner forces in conducting air and ground operations against Tanzim al-Jihad and its local partners.

## Adversary Strategies and Capabilities

Tanzim al-Jihad has taken advantage of increasingly advanced and accessible technology while building on its predecessors' social media techniques and widespread affiliated networks. Much like its predecessors, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Tanzim al-Jihad is committed to conducting external operations against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests and partners overseas.

For example, Tanzim al-Jihad has acquired advanced man-portable weapons and technologies, including SAMs, anti-tank guided missiles, encrypted communications systems, and CUAVs. It has also acquired weapons and materiel from successful offensives, ambushes, and raids against the Syrian and Iraqi militaries—including armored vehicles, rocket launchers, mortars, anti-tank guided weapons, 20mm to 57mm anti-aircraft guns, man-portable air-defense systems (e.g., SA-7, -14, -16, and -18), and radar-guided SAMs (e.g., SA-8).<sup>17</sup> Additionally, it has promoted online “how-to” guides on topics including bomb-making, 3D-printing weap-

ons, ricin production, and attack tactics using vehicles and firearms. These are intended to encourage inspired individuals to conduct attacks in their home countries. The group relies on UAVs for several purposes: ISR; swarming and close air support; and targeted killing by armed UAVs and explosive “suicide drones,” including swarms of UAVs. Tanzim al-Jihad has also developed limited GPS jamming capabilities.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Tanzim al-Jihad has developed some chemical and biological weapons capabilities. As it establishes territorial control in Syria, Tanzim al-Jihad captures several stores of chemical weapons, such as ricin, chlorine, sulfur mustard, and sarin. Its chemical weapons unit uses some of these during their initial expansion across Syria, and it transports the remaining weapons to other locations spread across its territory. The disjointed global response to Covid-19 several years before highlighted the potential impact of weapons of mass destruction and increased the group’s interest in pursuing biological weapons as well.

Tanzim al-Jihad has developed limited offensive cyber capabilities. Over the past five years, the group has transitioned from a focus on website defacement and distributed denial-of-service attacks to more sophisticated operations. One example is the use of hacking tools to steal security documents and intellectual property. Tanzim al-Jihad has conducted attacks with malware capable of deleting files and disabling devices on the targeted network. These attacks were modeled after the Shamoon virus—suggesting possible information sharing between Tanzim al-Jihad and Iranian hacker groups. The group also successfully hacks some Iraqi government networks, seizes sensitive emails and documents, and leaks them on public digital platforms that further delegitimize the Iraqi government.

Social media is a high priority and a valuable recruiting tool. Tanzim al-Jihad has built on the Islamic State’s social media expertise and developed chatbots and automated email communications to supplement the efforts of its media specialists and recruiters. It has also refined algorithm-manipulation techniques used by other extremist groups, such as white supremacist organizations in the United States and Europe. Despite coordinated efforts from governments and social media companies, the group’s influence on digital platforms remains strong. It relies on a decentralized structure of recruiters and influencers as well as redundancy in file storage.

As technology has become cheaper and more easily accessible, Tanzim al-Jihad has kept costs low while also building a resilient finance system. Their primary sources of income include donations from wealthy individuals in the Gulf; criminal activity (including ransoms, illicit car smuggling, and drug trafficking); control of natural resources, especially oil; and the taxation and exploitation of local populations. Once its core territory was established in Syria, Tanzim al-Jihad strengthened connections with its African and Asian affiliates, including the establishment of a decentralized financial network built on non-banking channels and cryptocurrency. Building on relationships developed by both al-Qaeda and the Islamic State, Tanzim al-Jihad established its loose affiliate network into more structured branches and focused its presence and influence in resource-rich regions. The group’s flexible structure and geographic spread enabled it to insert itself into local Islamist conflicts and take advantage of weak local governance, particularly early in the 2020s as responses to simultaneous public health crises and natural disasters strained government capacity and public trust.

Groups associated with Tanzim al-Jihad had received limited funds and weapons from Turkey—funneled through other local proxies—as part of a limited agreement regarding the removal of Kurdish fighters from the border regions of Syria and Iraq. But Turkey now cuts all ties with Tanzim al-Jihad.

## Assessment of Alternative Postures

Robust engagement provides the United States with the optimal ability to protect against possible attacks against the U.S. homeland, European allies, and partners in region. A rapid U.S. response time and U.S. intelligence gathering capabilities are likely crucial to mitigate the risk of a sophisticated terrorist group such as Tanzim al-Jihad. Under this posture, the United States can unify and lead a cohesive coalition and preserve its strategic influence relatively quickly.

Limited engagement would be riskier and rely on strong commitments from U.S. allies. Even with the involvement of allies and partners, the United States still has the most sophisticated targeting capabilities. The U.S. military would have to surge forces and enablers from other regions, as well as the continental



United States, and would require bases in Iraq and other countries. Limited engagement also involves decreased intelligence capabilities—including human intelligence (HUMINT) capabilities—in the region because of the U.S. withdrawal and would likely rely on substantial signals intelligence (SIGINT) capabilities.

It would be difficult to target Tanzim al-Jihad and its external operations capabilities with a restraint posture. It is unlikely that U.S. partners will be able to replace U.S. capabilities, particularly precision targeting of terrorists. If the United States wanted to surge forces into the region, it is unclear whether Gulf countries would allow U.S. forces back. With the potential expansion of Russian and Chinese military activity in the region, it may be difficult to renegotiate U.S. basing access under restraint.

## Implications for U.S. Posture

To achieve its main objectives, the United States would need to ensure that it maintains enduring bases in Iraq and other countries in the Middle East. These bases can house a U.S. special operations presence—at least on a rotational basis. Robust and limited engagement provide the United States with the most options to respond to a major increase in terrorism.

### SCENARIO 3

## U.S. PROXY WAR WITH RUSSIA IN THE LEVANT

This scenario involves an Israeli-Iranian war in which the United States and Russia become involved in supporting opposing sides. The scenario envisions a Middle East that is divided into a Russian sphere of influence that includes Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Syria, and Iran—with some cooperation from China based out of Djibouti and other areas of the Middle East. The United States retains close relations with Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and some other Gulf countries. China provides intelligence, diplomatic support, and materiel to Russia and Iran.

## U.S. Objectives

Any U.S. military involvement would likely be informed by a desire to quickly de-escalate the conflict and pre-

vent Russian expansion. Key objectives for U.S. forces in this scenario might include the following:

- Protect U.S. forces, bases, and embassies in the region from attacks by missiles, air strikes, naval vessels, and local militia forces.
- Help protect the Israeli government and its citizens from missile and other attacks.
- Deter further military escalation by all sides.
- Deter further Russian military expansion in the region.

## Adversary Strategies and Capabilities

In this scenario, Russia has developed significant capabilities it can utilize in the Middle East, including to support its partners across the region. One example is air defense capabilities, which make it difficult for Israel—and the United States—to gain and maintain air superiority across Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and other countries in the region. Indeed, the task of U.S. and Israeli officials is complicated by the presence of dense arrays of modern SAM defenses that Russia has brought to the theater. Russia has succeeded in building an integrated air defense system in the Middle East, including aspects of the Russian military integrated air defense system kill chain such as indications and warning (e.g., from HUMINT and SIGINT), detection (e.g., air surveillance radar and airborne early warning and control radar), identification (e.g., secondary surveillance radar), tracking (e.g., the integration of detection data into data processing and command-and-control elements), assignment (e.g., the assignment of target tracks to weapons platforms), engagement (e.g., the use of SAMs, air-to-air missiles, air defense artillery, and electronic warfare), and assessment (e.g., air surveillance radar). Russia has deployed a range of ground-based sensors and ground stations for aerial and spaced-based sensors, and it has provided the S-400 SAM system to Iran.<sup>19</sup> The Russians have also deployed the S-500 SAM system into the region, capable of intercepting and destroying ICBMs, hypersonic missiles, and aircraft as well as low-flying UAVs.

Russia prioritized the modernization of its intelligence, communications, navigation, space, and earth observation systems and has rebuilt its electronic intelligence and early warning system constellations. Russia has the ability to disable and destroy U.S. satellites in space. Russia has demonstrated anti-satellite (ASAT)

capabilities, including a sweeping range of kinetic physical counterspace capabilities, including ground- and air-launched direct-ascent ASAT missiles capable of targeting satellites in low earth orbit (LEO) and co-orbital ASAT weapons that could operate in any orbital regime.<sup>20</sup> As the conflict escalates, Russia leverages some of these capabilities and provides real-time information to Iran from its high-resolution imagery, communications, navigation, missile warning, electronic intelligence, and scientific observations. Moscow aggressively employs extensive electronic warfare capabilities to degrade Israeli and U.S. communications and sensors. Russia has also developed a closer relationship—through Iran—with some non-state groups in the region, including Lebanese Hezbollah and Shia militia groups.

In addition, Russia has significant cyber and information operations capabilities. It can conduct sophisticated offensive cyber operations against the United States and its partners across the Middle East, including Israel. Russia also utilizes extensive information operations, including bots and trolls on digital media platforms, television and radio channels such as RT and Sputnik, search engine optimization, and paid journalists. Among other tactics, Moscow conducts an aggressive disinformation campaign to sow discord between the United States and its partners.

Russia also retains significant naval and air power projection capabilities in the region from its bases in Syria and Iraq, as well as with deployed maritime vessels in the Mediterranean and Black Sea. Russia deploys several of its next-generation aircraft, including the Tupolev PAK DA stealth bomber, which is capable of subsonic speed, has a 12,000-kilometer operational range, and can remain in the air for up to 30 hours while carrying conventional (and even nuclear) payloads. While Moscow does not use the PAK DA for combat, it has flown several missions in the theater to deter escalation. Other key aircraft include the Su-57 Felon fifth-generation jet fighter, a greatly improved air superiority stealth fighter. Moscow uses the Su-57 and MiG variants to contest the airspace and distract U.S. and Israeli air defense systems, which are already strained tracking incoming missiles. Additionally, Russia maintains flexible, deniable presence on the ground in the region through its use of private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group. Following previous PMC activities in Syria, PMCs are available to assist with combat

tasks, training local forces, intelligence operations, and information campaigns.

Russian naval power in the Mediterranean allows for stand-off strike and strike support, from guided-missile cruisers, destroyers, Buyan-class corvettes, and submarines, along with logistical support and air defense via the S-300FM (sea-based) missile system. Russia's strike-capable presence at Tartus and offshore surge based on operational needs—drawing from the Black Sea and Northern Fleets. These surface and subsurface systems provide more platforms from which Russia can threaten U.S. and partner positions with Kalibr-type land-attack cruise missiles (LACMs).

With Russian and Chinese assistance, Iranian and partner missiles pose a particularly serious threat across the Levant, with thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles. When used in combined salvo attacks, this arsenal is intended to overwhelm opposition defenses. Iran's SRBMs have anti-radar homing capabilities, and its MRBMs allow Iran to strike targets anywhere in Israel. For longer ranges, Iran has a liquid-propellant ICBM based off of the Simorgh space launch vehicle, another based off the Russian Sarmat, a heavy, liquid-propellant ICBM, and several Chinese Dongfeng ICBMs. In addition, Iran has precision LACMs that can fly at low elevations and strike targets from several directions, with a maximum range of roughly 3,000 kilometers.<sup>21</sup>

With Russian aid—including following Russia's construction of a new Gonschik tactical and strategic UAV and Okhotnik-B/U medium-weight CUAV—Iran has more sophisticated UAVs capable of precision strikes. Iran's UAVs now have a maximum range of over 1,000 kilometers and a maximum altitude of 25,000 to 40,000 feet and can be armed with bombs or cruise missiles. Finally, Iran has improved the missile, UAV, and other capabilities of its proxies in the region.

## Assessment of Alternative Postures

Robust engagement would allow the United States to come to Israel's defense against Iranian aggression—even with Russian support to Tehran. More U.S. forces in the region, however, will increase vulnerability of U.S. troops, and numerous bases are already exposed to both Iranian missiles and Russian missiles in Syria.

For limited engagement, it is unlikely that the United States would be able to rely much on allies and partners

beyond token support. Still, the United States can provide intelligence and logistics support to Israel without maintaining a significant presence and while still committing to the protection of the Israeli government and its citizens. The United States could also maintain U.S. access to the region, particularly in the eastern Mediterranean.

Restraint would also allow the United States to support Israel without requiring a significant force presence. This posture, however, provides fewer available options in responding to any escalation by Iran or even Russia. The United States can rely on airlifts, SIGINT, and transportation infrastructure based outside the region, such as in Greece or Italy. Persistent surveillance can also be coordinated from maritime vessels. However, after a significant drawdown, it is unlikely that the United States would be able to surge if needed, and U.S. special operations forces might only have a limited effect once deployed.

## Implications for U.S. Posture

U.S. forces in the region would need to deter further Russian and Iranian military expansion in the region, support Israeli air and ground operations, and deter further attacks against U.S. forces, bases, and embassies. The United States would also have to calibrate its force presence throughout the region to signal, offset, compete, and manage potential escalation with Russia and Iran. Limited engagement—and perhaps even restraint—may be sufficient to achieve U.S. objectives, with Israel taking the lead against Iran and its proxies.

Nevertheless, the United States would likely need to support Israel with sophisticated intelligence, cyber, and space-based capabilities, particularly with improving Russian, Iranian, and even Chinese information warfare, cyberspace, and electronic warfare capabilities. In addition, growing Russian and Chinese relationships with traditional U.S. partners and allies in the region could reduce U.S. influence, particularly with a restraint posture.

### SCENARIO 4

## RESURGENCE OF TERRORISM IN AFGHANISTAN

This scenario involves a significant resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan under a Taliban government.

Supported by Taliban leaders such as Sirajuddin Haqqani, al-Qaeda increases its size and capabilities, threatening the United States and U.S. partners in the region, such as India. The Islamic State's local affiliate—Islamic State-Khorasan, or ISIS-K—also rebuilds its external operations capabilities and can conduct attacks in South Asia, Europe, and other regions, including against U.S. embassies. Other groups, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Lashkar-e-Taiba, and Jaish-e-Mohammad, have also taken advantage of the terrorist sanctuary in Afghanistan to increase their capabilities and threaten India and other governments in the region.

## U.S. Objectives

Any U.S. military involvement in Afghanistan would likely be informed by a desire to neutralize terrorist threats to the United States. Key objectives for U.S. forces in this scenario might include the following:

- Disrupt al-Qaeda, the Islamic State, and other terrorist groups from plotting attacks against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas, including U.S. embassies.
- Mitigate a humanitarian crisis, including refugee flows, civilian casualties, and the mistreatment of women.
- U.S. policymakers might also need to decide whether overthrowing the Taliban government should be a strategic objective.

## Adversary Strategy and Capabilities

Under this scenario, the Taliban and al-Qaeda continue to build on their nearly four-decade relationship.<sup>22</sup> The Taliban retain close relations with al-Qaeda, including its local affiliate al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). They share long-standing personal relationships, intermarriage, a shared history of struggle, and sympathetic ideologies.<sup>23</sup> Still, the Taliban and al-Qaeda have different ideologies, and Taliban leaders remain focused on establishing an “Islamic Emirate” in Afghanistan—not the creation of a pan-Islamic caliphate.<sup>24</sup> Under this scenario, there are between 2,000 and 4,000 estimated al-Qaeda fighters in Afghanistan and Pakistan. Al-Qaeda has particularly robust presence in the provinces of Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nuristan, Paktiya, and Zabul.<sup>25</sup>



In addition to al-Qaeda, the Taliban coordinates with other international and regional militant groups, such as the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba.<sup>26</sup> Most of the fighters from these groups are located in eastern provinces such as Kunar, Nangarhar, and Nuristan, where they cooperate with local Taliban commanders.<sup>27</sup> In addition, there are other militant group in the Afghanistan-Pakistan border region that cooperate with local Taliban commanders, such as some networks of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Lashkar-e-Islam.<sup>28</sup>

One of the militant groups not aligned with the Taliban is ISIS-K. There are roughly 3,000 ISIS-K fighters in Afghanistan, many of whom are in Kunar Province (especially Tsowkey District).<sup>29</sup> ISIS-K continues to conduct mass casualty attacks in Afghanistan and develops an increasingly dangerous external operations capability to strike in South Asia, Europe, and potentially the United States.

## Assessment of Alternative Postures

Based on this scenario, robust engagement has several strengths. This posture includes a significant number of special operations forces to conduct such missions as special reconnaissance, direct action, foreign internal defense, and unconventional warfare. There would also be quick reaction forces and other advise-and-assist forces in theater, such as a brigade combat team, a security force assistance brigade, and an infantry division combat aviation brigade. The Special Purpose Marine Air-Ground Task Force could operate out of the region as a primary crisis response force. In addition, the United States would also have substantial air capabilities in the Middle East, from strike aircraft to ISR assets.

A limited engagement posture would likely create challenges. The United States would still have some capabilities, such as a small number of special operations forces and a security force assistance brigade. It would also have some strike and air assets (though a decreasing number), many of which were moved to the Indo-Pacific theater. In addition, the United States would face challenges with a reduced number of bases—including none in South or Central Asia. Consequently, it would take the unmanned MQ-9A Reaper some 14 hours to fly round-trip from the Gulf

to Afghanistan over Pakistani territory, giving it only a few hours of flying time in Afghanistan to conduct intelligence and strike missions. There would likely not be sufficient forces and enablers in theater if U.S. policymakers decided to deploy a small contingent to Afghanistan to work with local partners, which would operate under either Title 10 or Title 50 authority.

Restraint is a suboptimal force posture to deal with the growing threats from Afghanistan outlined in this scenario. Under restraint, the United States has withdrawn most of its ground forces from the region, including most counterterrorism forces. In addition, the United States has withdrawn most of its air assets, from strike aircraft to MQ-9A Reapers. Consequently, the United States would have to take a significant risk by hoping that one or more countries—including adversaries such as China or Russia or partners such as India—could effectively achieve U.S. objectives in Afghanistan without significant U.S. involvement. If the United States wanted to surge forces back into the region, it might also be difficult to renegotiate the use of bases.

## Implications for U.S. Posture

The primary U.S. strategic interest is to prevent the expansion of a terrorist threat to the United States and its partners under a Taliban government. To deal with this scenario, the United States might need a small force—operating under either Title 10 or Title 50 authorities—to work with local partners on the ground in Afghanistan. In addition, the United States would likely need significant air assets and enablers, such as intelligence collection and medevac capabilities as well as basing. Successfully conducting such a campaign would be easiest to do with a robust engagement posture and hardest to achieve with restraint.

## CONCLUSION

This chapter examined four scenarios: a conflict with Iran in the Gulf, a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist terrorism in the Levant, a proxy conflict with Russia in the Levant, and a resurgence of terrorism in Afghanistan. These scenarios are meant to be illustrative. The United States and its allies and partners could face a wide range of threats in the Middle East from

---

Iran, resurgent terrorist groups, Russia, China, and other countries.

Nevertheless, the scenarios highlight several issues. First, a restraint posture would be too risky for the United States. The United States would have too few military land, air, and maritime capabilities in theater to respond quickly and competently. In addition, it is unclear whether the United States would be able to rapidly negotiate basing access, particularly if there is an expansion of Russian and Chinese influence in the region. Second, limited engagement is mixed. It offers sufficient capabilities to deal with some of these scenarios—such as an Israeli war with Iran that involves Russian support—since it would make little sense for the United States to become directly involved. But there would be challenges with a limited engagement posture in dealing with some of the scenarios, including war with Iran in the Gulf and a resurgence of terrorism in the Levant and Afghanistan. Third, robust engagement fares the best. It ensures that there are sufficient land, air, and maritime capabilities to deal with all the scenarios, even if they are not always necessary.



CH. 05

# RECOMMENDATIONS





Airmen walk out to the flightline to support an airfield operations at Qayyarah West Airfield, Iraq.

SOURCE U.S. Air Force photo by Sr. Airman Jordan Castelan

U.S. military posture in the Middle East needs to be analyzed and understood in the context of global U.S. interests and posture. For example, the Indo-Pacific is an important region for the United States because of China, and the United States needs to remain engaged as a cornerstone balancer against a rising China. As the Biden administration's *Global Posture Review* concluded, "the Indo-Pacific is the priority region" because of the "focus on China as America's pacing challenge."<sup>1</sup> The importance of the Indo-Pacific requires the United States to have a robust posture across the region and to deepen relations with Australia, Japan, South Korea, India, and other countries such as the Philippines and Singapore.

The United States should also continue to have a significant posture in Europe to ensure a favorable regional balance of power and to hedge against Russian revanchism and activism. NATO should remain the foundation of U.S. posture in Europe. Russia's military invasion of Ukraine in 2022 and threat to the United States and its allies and partners in Europe illustrate the dangers of Russian revanchism. Other regions, such as Latin America and Africa, are less important in terms of military-economic power, and there are no countries in those regions that can establish regional hegemony.

Consequently, this chapter asks: What are the optimal interests and posture for the United States in the Middle East? To answer the question, this chapter examined the analysis in Chapter 3, including U.S. interests and defense objectives, primary contingencies and missions, operational concepts, posture approach,

and the benefits and risks of each option. It also leveraged the future scenarios in Chapter 4. This chapter also takes into consideration other factors, including U.S. global interests and posture; the evolution of Chinese, Russian, and Iranian activities and capabilities; and the impact of U.S. posture on readiness. Based on these considerations, this chapter comes to several conclusions.

First, the Middle East remains an important region for the United States, despite significant interests in the Indo-Pacific and Europe. The United States still has an interest in maintaining a favorable balance of power and access for U.S. forces, disrupting and degrading terrorist organizations, protecting freedom of navigation and access to oil, and preventing nuclear proliferation. To realize these interests, the United States should monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity as well as deter and support partners in responding to Iranian aggression. Allies and partner will remain critical in helping achieve U.S. interests and objectives.

Second, the United States should keep a notable but tailored military presence in the Middle East, including a force size that is between what is classified here as robust and limited engagement. As part of this defense posture, the United States should keep critical land, air, maritime, space, and cyber capabilities to achieve its primary objectives in the region. In examining options, this study assessed that the benefits of restraint and limited engagement were outweighed by the risks, and a posture of robust engagement was unnecessary and problematic based on U.S. priorities in other areas of the world, especially the Indo-Pacific and Europe.

The rest of this chapter is divided into four sections. First, it outlines U.S. interests in the Middle East over the next decade. Second, it summarizes key military posture recommendations. Third, it outlines the importance of the Middle East as an area of strategic competition. Fourth, it discusses key instruments of power.

## U.S. INTERESTS AND OBJECTIVES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

U.S. interests and objectives in the Middle East should be nested in a broader U.S. security strategy that aims to

contain the further expansion of Chinese and Russian military power and to check the actions of Iran, terrorist organizations, and others that threaten the United States and its allies and partners. While U.S. interests in the Middle East are not as significant as a decade or two ago, especially following the 9/11 attacks and the resurgence of the Islamic State, the Middle East is still a significant region for security competition. The United States has several core interests in the Middle East:

- **Maintain a favorable balance of power in the region.** While the United States need not dominate the Middle East, it has an interest in preventing any other country from doing so—including regional countries such as Iran or adversaries such as China or Russia. A regional power at odds with the United States could block economic, political, and military initiatives that are important to the United States.
- **Reduce the threat from terrorist organizations against the U.S. homeland and U.S. interests overseas.** While not all terrorism emanates from the Middle East, some of the most deadly mass-casualty terrorism does. Groups such as the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, Lebanese Hezbollah, and other Iranian-linked groups continue to plot and inspire attacks against the United States and its partners.
- **Protect freedom of navigation and access to oil.** While the United States is a net energy exporter, it is part of a global energy market and a global economy that responds to events inside and outside the United States. Its partners in the Indo-Pacific region and some in Europe rely on the Middle East for access to oil. The region holds two-thirds of the world's proven reserves of oil and has key maritime chokepoints for international trade, such as the Strait of Hormuz, Bab el-Mandeb Strait, and Suez Canal.
- **Prevent nuclear proliferation.** The United States has an enduring interest in preventing the further proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East, which could seriously undermine the security of the United States and its partners in the region and the world.

These interests need to be situated in the context of U.S. global interests. Yet security competition is

not likely to occur primarily in or around areas such as the Taiwan Strait, South China Sea, Baltic states, and Ukraine. Instead, it is likely to be global—including in the Middle East—for at least two reasons. First, major powers such as China and Russia need access to foreign markets for raw materials and other goods and services important to bolstering their military and economic power.<sup>2</sup> China imports over 70 percent of its total petroleum consumption—including nearly 50 percent of its imports from the Middle East, such as Saudi Arabia, Iraq, the UAE, and Iran.<sup>3</sup> More broadly, China's Belt and Road Initiative involves a vast network of railways, highways, energy pipelines, maritime trade routes, and ports to connect China with the rest of Asia, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa. The "belts" refer to the network of land routes that connect China to Central Asia, the Middle East, Russia, and Europe. The "roads" refer to the maritime routes, including ports, that connect Chinese seaports to countries in the South China Sea, Indian Ocean, South Pacific, Middle East, and Mediterranean Sea.

Second, great powers have historically attempted to expand their influence, particularly at the expense of other powers.<sup>4</sup> During the Cold War, for example, competition did not primarily occur in Europe but rather in the Middle East, Africa, Latin America, and Asia. As the political scientist Hans Morgenthau argued, the Cold War was fought across the globe "primarily in terms of competition between two rival political philosophies, economic systems, and ways of life."<sup>5</sup> Indeed, future competition will likely occur in numerous regions, including in the Middle East.

Consistent with its global and regional interests and in consideration of the current demands on the force, there are a defined set of objectives for the U.S. military in the Middle East:

- Monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity.
- Support partners in deterring and responding to Iranian aggression.
- Disrupt and degrade terrorist organizations that threaten the United States and its regional interests.
- Protect freedom of navigation and access to oil.

Some U.S. interests, such as preventing nuclear proliferation, are better handled by U.S. State Department diplomats, U.S. Treasury Department officials,

and U.S. intelligence officials—not military personnel. In addition, policymakers need to consider the implications of U.S. force posture on the readiness of the force itself. The U.S. military is near its smallest size in the post-World War II era, and current operational demands and deployments threaten to degrade the readiness of key assets such as missile defense units and aircraft carriers.<sup>6</sup> With limited resources and ability to grow the force in the short term, the United States must make trade-offs in its posture to avoid over-stressing units and platforms while still addressing global and regional challenges.

## Selective Engagement

To achieve these interests and objectives, the United States should keep a presence in the Middle East of roughly 20,000 to 30,000 forces, depending on rotational deployments. China and Russia have expanded their military and intelligence presence in and around the Middle East. There is no nuclear deal with Iran, and Tehran continues to expand its missile program and support to sub-state partners in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and other countries. Terrorism remains a serious concern with the Taliban victory in Afghanistan and the Islamic State and al-Qaeda active in the region. A reduction of U.S. forces that leads to growing Chinese and Russian military involvement in the region could undermine U.S. national security interests in several ways. It could involve an expansion of Russian and Chinese military posture (including bases), a rise in arms sales and weapons systems to Middle Eastern countries, an erosion of U.S. military freedom of movement in an increasingly contested environment, and a decline in U.S. political, economic, and military influence.

China, for example, is attempting to expand its posture in the Middle East. China's strategy appears to involve leveraging existing commercial ties to create an anchor for its military to build infrastructure. In the spring of 2021, U.S. intelligence agencies assessed that China was building a military installation at Khalifa Port in the UAE, where China's Cosco shipping conglomerate operates a commercial container terminal.<sup>7</sup> U.S. government diplomacy temporarily halted China's plans, and the United States' military presence in the UAE and cooperation on counterterrorism and other issues provided leverage during the negotiations.<sup>8</sup> However, further U.S. withdrawals from the region would likely decrease the United States' bargaining position and



---

bolster China and Russia's ability to build or utilize land, air, and naval bases in or near the Middle East. China has also expressed interest in expanding its power projection capabilities in other locations, such as Africa, including a naval base in Equatorial Guinea.<sup>9</sup>

In short, there are serious risks with a major reduction in U.S. forces in the near term, including along the lines of both restraint and limited engagement. Such a withdrawal would likely reduce U.S. influence at the expense of competitors and weaken deterrence. It would likely increase security competition and the possibility of nuclear proliferation. It also risks a resurgence of terrorism that could threaten the United States. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are increasingly active in Afghanistan following the U.S. withdrawal, and continued instability in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and several other countries has allowed terrorism to persist. Finally, a major reduction in U.S. forces could limit the United States' ability to ensure the free flow of oil and gas to global markets from the Gulf. U.S. allies and partners could be severely impacted by a fuel crisis, particularly countries which rely on oil and natural gas imports from the Gulf, such as Japan, India, South Korea, and some European Union countries. A major disruption in trade could also have an adverse impact on the U.S. and broader global economy by creating a supply chain crisis.

The United States should maintain the following capabilities across the land, air, maritime, space, and cyber domains—along with several key strategic and operational concepts.

### *Land*

The United States needs to retain a robust special operations presence in the Middle East to engage in foreign internal defense, direct action, and other missions against terrorist groups, Iranian proxies, and Russian irregular forces in the region. The United States should also keep its roughly 2,500 military forces in Iraq under Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve, which are primarily involved in air support and training, advising, and assisting Iraqi forces. A U.S. presence in Iraq—and a small footprint in Syria, including at the al-Tanf garrison—is important to counter Iranian influence. The United States could reduce some ground forces associated with Operation Spartan Shield. The Army component, Task Force Spartan, is currently led by 500 servicemembers of the 29th Infantry Virginia National Guard and includes a

regional response force and a combat aviation brigade. Headquarters and support staff at Camp Arifjan and sustainment personnel of 1st Theater Sustainment Command could also be reduced commensurate with reductions in other ground forces.

In addition, the United States should continue to provide security cooperation, professional military education, capacity building, intelligence sharing, and joint exercises with allies and partners across the region. This could be achieved in part with the deployment of a security force assistance brigade.

### *Air*

The United States should maintain a substantial portion of its air forces in the region to deter and respond to aggression from Iran and its partners as well as to monitor and counter Chinese and Russian activity as they continue to expand their power projection capabilities in the region. As Figures 5.1a, 5.1b, and 5.1c highlight, Russia has deployed significant military capabilities at Hmeimim Air Base in Syria, such as Russian transport aircraft, long-range strategic bombers, and S-400 surface-to-air (SAM) missile systems.

The United States should maintain some of its current expeditionary air wings, such as at Ali al Salem Air Base in Kuwait, Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar, and Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. But the United States could consolidate some of its bases and scale back some aircraft within range of Iranian missiles. The United States could also conduct rotational deployments of aircraft at times to supplement those based in the region. In addition, the United States should deploy a growing number of remotely crewed platforms for ISR and strike that can operate for longer periods of time, such as the MQ-9A Reaper, Mojave, MQ-1C Gray Eagle-Extended Range, and MQ-9B SkyGuardian.

The United States should also deploy air and missile defense (AMD) systems to mitigate risk to U.S. personnel from Iranian missiles and UAVs. U.S. deployments of AMD systems might include Pac-2 and Pac-3 air defense batteries in support of U.S. personnel deployed to Iraq, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Qatar, and the UAE.

In addition, the United States and its partners should provide additional defensive security assistance to Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia through Foreign Military Sales to defend themselves—including airports, oil and gas facilities, tankers, and other critical targets—against



**FIGURE 5.1A** Satellite Imagery Overview of Russian Air Assets at Hmeimim Air Base, Syria

**SOURCE** CSIS.



**FIGURE 5.1B** Satellite Imagery of Russian Air Assets at Hmeimim Air Base, Syria

**SOURCE** CSIS.





**FIGURE 5.1C** Satellite Imagery of Russian S-400 Surface-to-Air Missile Systems at Hmeimim Air Base, Syria

**SOURCE** CSIS.

Iranian-linked attacks. The number of Houthi attacks against civilian targets in Saudi Arabia doubled over the first nine months of 2021 compared to the same period in 2020, particularly from ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and UAVs, with assistance from Iran.<sup>10</sup> In November 2021, the United States authorized the sale of 280 AIM-120C-7/C-8 variant air-to-air missiles to Saudi Arabia, in addition to spare parts, support, and training.<sup>11</sup> Patriot anti-missile batteries remain critical, since Saudi SAMs have intercepted a significant number of attempted missile strikes on Saudi Arabia. The UAE has also faced missile and UAV attacks by Houthi forces.<sup>12</sup> During one attack, a Terminal High-Altitude Aerial Defense system destroyed a ballistic missile in its first operational use, while a Patriot system destroyed another missile at Al Dhafra Air Base.<sup>13</sup>

Iran and Iranian-linked groups pose a serious threat to the United States, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and other countries in the region. However, given the current operational tempo of AMD units and concerns for their readiness, the United States may not be able to

offer AMD support to all partners over the long term.<sup>14</sup> Still, the United States should encourage Gulf states to cooperate in the creation of a combined, layered missile defense. It should simultaneously encourage partners to purchase more missile defense systems from the United States and its partners and allies. The UAE, for example, recently purchased a midrange SAM system, the Cheongung II KM-SAM, from South Korea.<sup>15</sup>

The United States should also provide additional counter-UAV technology, since Patriot systems have limited utility against small UAVs. Examples might include Coyote UAVs, which can be used in counter-UAV campaigns; phaser high-power microwave systems; and high-energy laser systems to counter stand-off weapons. U.S. partners, such as Greece, the United Kingdom, and France, can also be helpful in boosting Saudi capabilities.

### *Maritime*

The United States should focus its maritime posture on several missions: aiding ground forces, deterring Iranian asymmetric naval activity, conducting off-shore strike, and helping ensure freedom of navigation through strategic chokepoints. The United States does not need to maintain a consistent aircraft car-



rier presence in the Fifth Fleet area of responsibility. Carriers are not a proven deterrent force against Iran, and multiple deployments of carrier strike groups to the region have reduced the readiness of the carrier force.<sup>16</sup> Rather, a carrier strike group can be deployed to the Indian Ocean as a force capable of surging to the region when necessary. The United States can rely on other naval assets, including U.S. Coast Guard patrol boats and fast response cutters, Navy patrol boats, and independent destroyer deployments with anti-ship and land attack capabilities. When technologies mature, the Navy should look to leverage uncrewed surface and subsurface vessels under NAVCENT Task Force 59 to take the place of some crewed ships, although that may not be feasible in the short term. The United States should also maintain a rotational amphibious ready group and marine expeditionary unit to the Arabian Sea to provide a ready force to immediately respond to emergent crises and other missions.

These capabilities are important since China and Russia continue to expand their maritime capabilities in the region. For example, China is developing its People's Liberation Army naval base in Djibouti. The PLA has been using Djibouti for several years, as highlighted in Figure 5.2a, including docking such ships as Changbaishan Type 071 (Yuzhao-class) amphibious

assault ships, Qiando Hu Type 903 (Fuchi-class) replenishment ships, and Type 054A (Jiangkai II-class) multi-role missile frigates.<sup>17</sup> As Figure 5.2b shows, the PLA expanded the naval base by constructing a new pier for aircraft carriers, a helicopter and UAV base with a 400-meter-long runway, and additional housing and administration structures.

### *Cyber and Space*

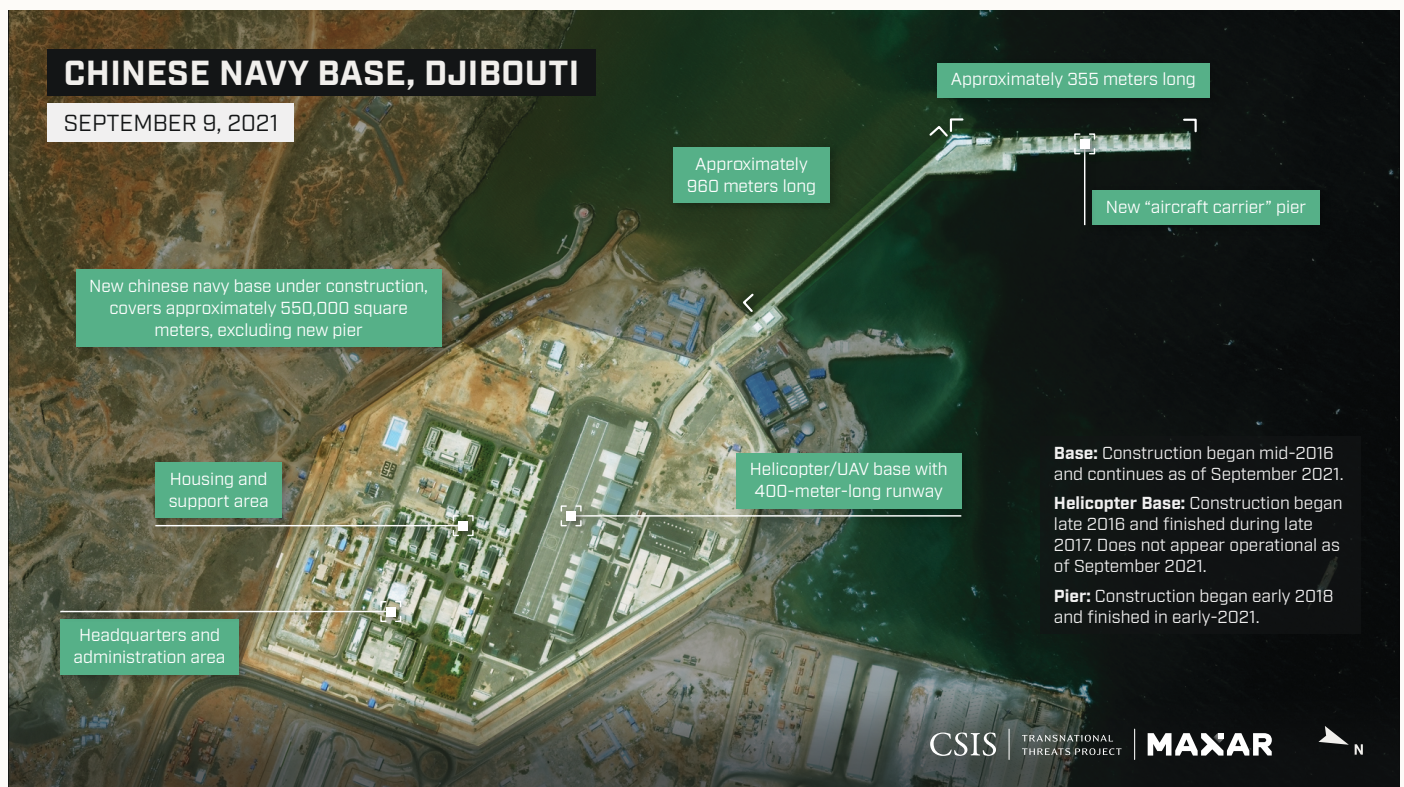
The United States should continue to rely on cyber and space capabilities that are integrated with partners. China and Russia possess significant cyber, space, and counterspace capabilities that can be used in the Middle East against the United States and its partners. China, for example, has a robust direct-ascent anti-satellite program and can threaten virtually any U.S. satellite in low earth orbit (LEO), medium earth orbit (MEO), and geostationary earth orbit (GEO). Russia continues to develop its counterspace capabilities and expand its space-based military infrastructure.<sup>18</sup>

In addition, Iran has improved its offensive cyber capabilities and possesses some space and counterspace

**FIGURE 5.2A** Chinese Naval Vessels Docked in Djibouti  
**SOURCE** CSIS.







**FIGURE 5.2B** Chinese Expansion of Navy Base, Djibouti  
**SOURCE** CSIS.

capabilities, led by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Aerospace Force. As one U.S. intelligence assessment summarized, “Iran uses increasingly sophisticated cyber techniques to conduct espionage; it is also attempting to deploy cyberattack capabilities that would enable attacks against critical infrastructure in the United States and allied countries.”<sup>19</sup> Iran has targeted U.S. casinos, dams, the power grid, and financial institutions such as Bank of America, JPMorgan Chase, and the New York Stock Exchange. It developed destructive malware through one of its state-sponsored hacking groups, Elfin. One example was Shamoon, a malware that deleted files from an infected computer and then wiped the computer’s master boot record, making it unusable. Iran has also conducted aggressive cyberattacks against foreign parliaments, government agencies, and companies—including Saudi Aramco, the national Saudi Arabian oil company.

Based on these threats, the United States needs to continue cooperating with partners in the region against cyber and space threats. Cyber and space liaison units would remain in the Middle East to ensure the integra-

tion of capabilities with partners and combined cyber and space task forces could be formed. Under selective engagement, government satellite ISR taskings and availability could be supplemented by commercial taskings, particularly during periods of heightened tensions.

This posture retains most of the benefits of robust engagement and fewer risks than limited engagement while similarly allowing the United States to redeploy some forces elsewhere. Unlike restraint, it is not likely to shift the balance of power in the region in favor of U.S. competitors, significantly increase regional security competition (including between Iran and such countries as Israel and Saudi Arabia), undermine the U.S. ability to respond to resurgent terrorism, and unnecessarily weaken the United States’ ability to protect the free flow of oil and other goods through economic chokepoints. Compared to limited engagement, this posture does not unduly rely on allies and partners that have demonstrated limited ability and willingness to conduct actions in the U.S. interest. It also does not signal a U.S. abandonment of the Middle East and critical partners—such as Israel, Jordan, and Saudi Arabia—so close on the heels of the problematic withdrawal from Afghanistan that led to the collapse of the Afghan government. Compared to robust engagement, this posture allows the United States to

redeploy some forces—including ground forces—to other regions, such as the Indo-Pacific. It is also less taxing on the operational readiness of the force.

The United States should continue to explore the utilization of several strategic and operational concepts, including dynamic force employment, which would involve periodic deployments of U.S. forces to regions such as the Middle East in ways that make these forces strategically predictable for allies but unpredictable for adversaries; agile combat employment, which involves the use of networks of well-established and austere air bases, pre-positioned equipment, and airlift to rapidly move combat capability throughout a theater; and distributed maritime operations, which include the use of small littoral detachments to threaten enemy airplanes and ships. While potentially promising, these concepts are unlikely to ameliorate the risks of a major U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East and may even weaken deterrence. Consequently, the United States should retain a notable presence in a highly contested Middle East for the moment.

## NON-MILITARY INSTRUMENTS OF POWER

There are several enduring diplomatic, economic, informational, and other instruments that are important to complement U.S. military capabilities and actions.

One is diplomatic. The United States should continue to support efforts to promote good governance and the peaceful resolution of conflicts in the region. The United States can play a helpful role in supporting peace negotiations in Yemen and between Israelis and Palestinians, as well as in healing rifts in the Gulf Cooperation Council. The United States can also play a leadership role in preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons and material to state and non-state actors in the region, including by supporting a nuclear deal with Iran. Preservation of the Abraham Accords—and perhaps expansion to additional countries in the Middle East—also remains important.

U.S. economic activities in the Middle East do not require significant financial resources but instead involve supporting programs and policies that improve free and open trade. U.S. activities should focus on such areas as supporting pro-growth and sound fiscal policies

that help promote business investment, encouraging investments in education and health that help improve the well-being and skills of the labor force, and strengthening the rule of law and anti-corruption efforts. In addition, the United States should continue working with its partners to disrupt the financing of terrorism. This includes identifying and blocking the sources of funding for terrorism, freezing the assets of terrorists and those who support them, denying terrorists access to the international financial system, and preventing the movement of terrorists' assets through alternative financial networks.

In cooperation with its partners, the United States also needs to use economic sanctions against countries such as Iran to punish their bad behavior, limit their access to military and dual-use components, and encourage diplomatic negotiations for a peace deal. The United States could also impose sanctions against other state-based entities in the region, including Russian private military companies (PMCs), such as the Wagner Group, that operate in Syria and elsewhere. PMCs are profit-based organizations that require revenue to exist, making them vulnerable to economic sanctions and other financial tools.

Key U.S. information activities in the Middle East, such as combating extremism and countering disinformation, do not necessarily require substantial government expenditures. Instead, they require renewed focus, attention, and support from partner governments and non-governmental organizations. The struggle against authoritarian competitors—such as China, Russia, and Iran—and terrorist groups is, to a great extent, a competition of ideas. U.S. state and non-state adversaries do not support democratic political norms or free market principles. The United States should support technological efforts to combat extremism (including encouraging more private sector involvement) and leverage public diplomacy to promote the free flow of information and ideas. The United States should also conduct activities in the information arena that encourage a process of change inside of countries such as Iran toward a more pluralistic political and economic system. Finally, the United States and its partners need to continue combating disinformation through the internet, social media, and other forums that undermine U.S. interests.

In addition, allies and partners are essential to helping secure the United States' enduring interests



---

in the Middle East, and they can help share the costs of diplomatic, economic, military, and other activities. U.S. partners include a range of countries in the Middle East; regional institutions, such as the Gulf Cooperation Council; international institutions, such as the United Nations, NATO, European Union, International Monetary Fund, and World Bank; and companies and non-governmental organizations that support democracy, human rights, and economic prosperity. Partners can play a critical role in building regional support to reject extremism, share intelligence, counter terrorists through military and financial means, and prevent lawless regions from becoming safe zones where terrorists can gain a sanctuary. Multilateral efforts are also important to protect energy security (including the unimpeded movement of oil and other goods); prevent the emergence of a regional hegemon such as Iran that can undermine U.S. security; encourage economic growth; prevent nuclear proliferation; and protect the stability of partners.

---

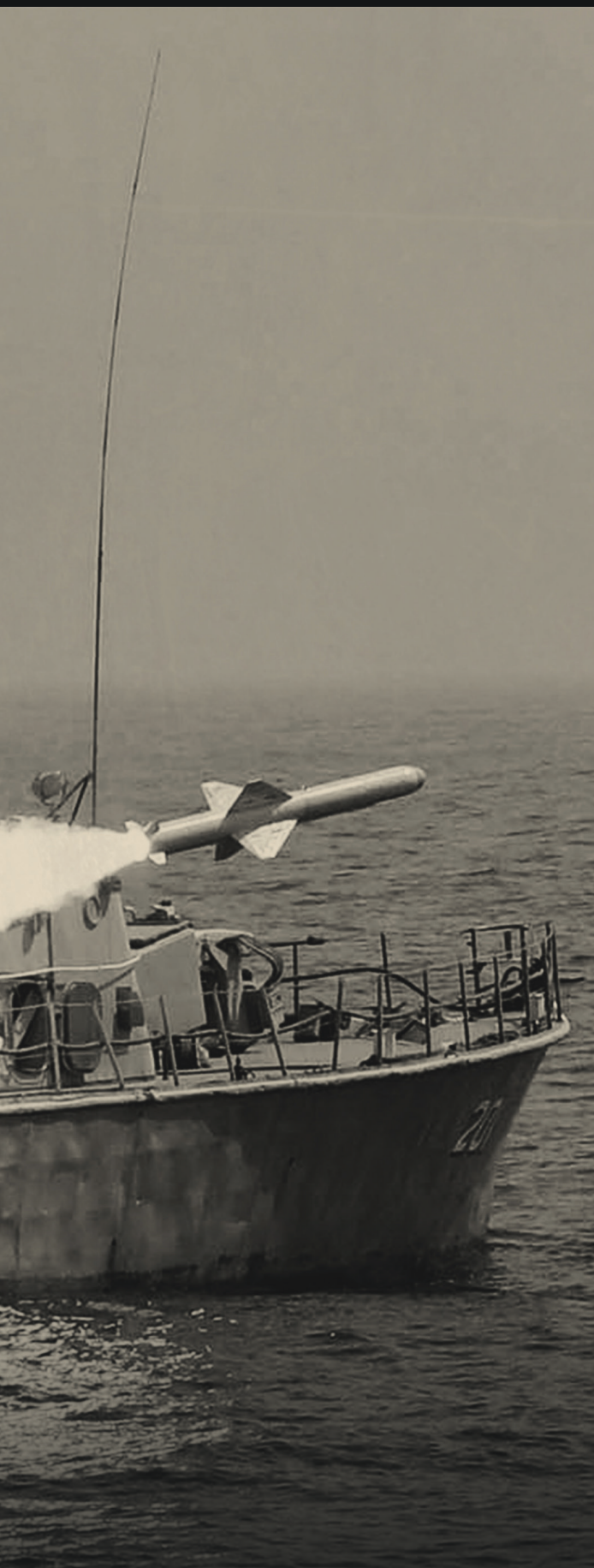
## CONCLUSION

Over the long run, the U.S. posture in the Middle East should not be static. Several developments—such as a nuclear deal with Iran, a flatlining or decrease of Chinese and Russian power projection capabilities in the Middle East, a further weakening of terrorist groups, or U.S. conflicts in the Indo-Pacific, Europe, or other regions that require additional U.S. forces—could lead the United States to further reduce its forces in the region. While U.S. global and regional interests will evolve, so will U.S. adversaries. Keeping a notable posture in the Middle East is the most sensible way to protect U.S. national security interests in a complex, competitive, and increasingly volatile international landscape.



APPENDIX

# MIDDLE EAST SCENARIOS



A handout picture shows an Iranian Nasr missile being fired from a navy warship during a military exercise in the Gulf.

SOURCE -/Iranian Army office/AFP/GettyImages

The appendix provides an overview of the scenarios considered in Chapter 4. These scenarios were meant to be illustrative and were selected according to the following criteria. Each had to be: (1) reasonable and based on plausible events that could occur over the next 5 to 10 years in the Middle East against potential adversaries; (2) relevant to the needs of policymakers and based on likely military missions; (3) demanding and involving stressful circumstances that could challenge the capabilities of U.S. and partner forces; (4) representative of—and responsive to—current and future U.S. and partner commitments and vital interests; and (5) reusable and repeatable over a variety of studies and analyses.

There were four scenarios: a conflict with Iran in the Gulf, a resurgence of Salafi-jihadist activity, a proxy conflict with Russia in the Levant, and a resurgence of terrorist groups in Afghanistan.

#### SCENARIO 1

### U.S. WAR WITH IRAN IN THE GULF

This scenario envisions a limited U.S. war with Iran in—and around—the Persian Gulf. In 2023, the United States, European Union, and United Nations finally ink a new nuclear deal after over two years of negotiations. Sanctions are reduced following Iran's commitment to comply with the nuclear-related provisions of an agreement, including in such areas as nuclear weapons research, weapons-grade



---

uranium enrichment, and plutonium reprocessing. But since Iran continues to support non-state partners and expand its missile program, the United States and its European partners maintain some economic sanctions on Iran. Examples include sanctions against weapons of mass destruction program components, missiles, and other conventional arms transfers to Iran; sanctions against other areas, such as foreign companies and other entities that engage in transactions with Iran's mineral and metal sectors, such as iron, steel, aluminum, and copper; sanctions against Iranian hydrocarbon exports; and sanctions against Iran's partners, such as Lebanese Hezbollah and Kata'ib Hezbollah.

The tipping point for war takes place in 2026 when an Iranian ship accidentally fires at a commercial U.S. airplane flying off the coast of Iran en route from Dubai, UAE, to Washington, D.C. The strike, which occurs just off the coast of Iran near Kish Island, destroys the airplane and kills all 416 passengers and crew aboard—including 300 Americans. Iran's supreme leader claims it was an accident, blaming intensified U.S. military aircraft activity in the area, and explains that Iranian officials assessed that it was a military reconnaissance aircraft violating Iranian airspace.

With growing bipartisan anger in the U.S. Senate and House of Representatives, the United States responds by targeting Iranian air defense sites near the Persian Gulf, killing a dozen Iranian soldiers. Russia and China swiftly condemn the United States for hostile actions and the violation of Iranian sovereignty, and their leaders pledge support to Iran if requested—though neither Moscow nor Beijing indicates a willingness to become directly involved in the conflict. China has increased its economic and political relationship with Iran over the previous five years, especially through investments in its energy sector, and has provided a growing amount of infrastructure and financial aid as well to Gulf countries as part of its Belt and Road Initiative. As U.S.-Iranian tension increases, China begins to pressure countries in the region—such as Djibouti, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE—to limit U.S. military activities from their territory, including possible port denial and restricted overflight and other basing.

Iran then launches a small number of UAVs, land-attack cruise missiles, and short-range ballistic missiles at targets in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including at the Ras Tanura Oil Terminal, Western companies, and U.S. troops stationed in the region. Iran also conducts

offensive cyberattacks against Saudi Arabia's electricity grid and broader supervisory control and data acquisition (SCADA) systems. After the U.S. Navy targets Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Navy vessels in the Gulf, Iran deploys high-speed boats from the Bandar-e Abbas naval facility in an attempt to rapidly lay advanced naval mines (including contact and influence mines) in the Strait of Hormuz, threatening U.S. and allied naval vessels as well as commercial shipping dependent on the transit route.

---

## SCENARIO 2

# A RESURGENT SALAFI-JIHADIST THREAT

The United States and its partners need to be prepared to act in case of a resurgence of terrorism in the Middle East that threatens U.S. security.<sup>1</sup> This scenario outlines a resurgence of terrorism from a new Salafi-jihadist group that incorporates members of both the Islamic State and al-Qaeda. Named Tanzim al-Jihad, the new group unites members of both movements, with a base of operations in war-torn Syria and sanctuaries in Turkey and Iraq.

In 2025, Syria experiences a return to civil war, triggering a governance crisis in an already shattered state with a feeble and unpopular Assad government still clinging to power. Syria has massive economic problems, with an estimated 80 percent of the population living below the poverty line. The conflict drives large refugee flows to evacuate to neighboring countries such as Iraq, Jordan, and Turkey. These nations, as well as the European Union, face growing pressure to expand refugee reception capacity as well as mounting opposition from their native populations. Still more Syrians are internally displaced persons, lacking the resources to safely leave the country. Many Syrians have been displaced for the fourth or fifth time, with many never having returned home after the early phases of the war over a decade earlier. By this point, Russia has roughly 5,000 soldiers in Syria, including an aviation group at Hmeimim Air Base and a naval group at Tartus, but Russia is not engaged in sustained counterterrorism operations. Pro-Iranian militias are prevalent throughout the east and south, and they have contributed to growing grievances—much like in neighboring Iraq.

A reignited war attracts fighters again to Syrian territory from across Europe, the Middle East, and South and Central Asia, though the number of fighters coming from the United States is relatively low. Governance challenges remain staggering. The Syrian regime does not control parts of the northwest such as Idlib, parts of the north that are occupied by Turkish and Kurdish militias, and parts of the east and south that are controlled by various Shia and Kurdish militias. According to the World Bank, Syria in 2025 ranks in the bottom 1 or 2 percent of countries in the world in government effectiveness, regulatory quality, political stability, and control of corruption. In short, Syria is now roughly akin to another Afghanistan: a weak state surrounded by states that meddle in its internal affairs.<sup>2</sup>

The situation in Iraq is somewhat better. However, Sunni Arab disenfranchisement remains high in such provinces as Al-Anbar and cities such as Fallujah and Ramadi. Economic conditions are dismal and unemployment rates are high. The presence of Iranian-linked militias is a significant source of anger among Sunnis.

Some Salafi-jihadists networks merge in an attempt to take advantage of the governance challenges, overthrow the Assad regime, and establish an Islamic emirate that governs through an extreme version of *sharia*, or Islamic law. A charismatic and ruthless former Islamic State leader, who uses the nom de guerre Abu Abdullah al-Shami, unites fighters from the Islamic State, al-Qaeda (including groups such as Hurras al-Din and Hayat Tahrir al-Sham), and other jihadist networks in the region. Some analysts had long predicted this cooperation.<sup>3</sup> Many Islamic State and al-Qaeda supporters adhere to the principles outlined by individuals such as Abdallah Azzam. For example, it is a duty for Muslims to defend their lands from a mix of infidels—such as Shia (or “*rafidah*”), the United States, other liberal democratic countries, and Middle East regimes.<sup>4</sup> The merged organization aims to overthrow successive regimes in the Middle East (the near enemy, or *al-Adou al-Qareeb*), as well as to fight the United States and its partners (the far enemy, or *al-Adou al-Baeed*) who support them.

This combined organization, called Tanzim al-Jihad, seizes territory in eastern Syria in 2026 and establishes an emirate in areas it controls. This territory includes sizable oil fields in eastern and northeastern Syria as well as a limited number of natural gas fields. Tanzim al-Jihad begins rebuilding and expanding infrastruc-

ture in these locations to reap the economic benefits of these natural resources.

Tanzim al-Jihad then moves forward on two fronts in 2027. First, Tanzim al-Jihad co-opts and coerces Sunni Arab groups and other disenfranchised networks in Turkey, Iraq, Jordan, and other parts of Syria in an effort to increase its territorial strength, or *tamkin*. Its fighters set up intelligence structures in cities and towns; establish sanctuaries in the Badiya desert, Anbar Province, and the Jazira region along the Iraqi-Syrian border; amass arms and materiel; and perpetrate guerrilla hit-and-run attacks against local forces. Second, Tanzim al-Jihad develops an external operations capability that merges Islamic State and al-Qaeda networks and begins to plan and inspire attacks in Europe, the United States, and other locations. It also plots attacks in neighboring countries, such as Jordan. Russia conducts limited strikes against Tanzim al-Jihad targets but fails to retake territory from the group.

### SCENARIO 3

## U.S. PROXY WAR WITH RUSSIA IN THE LEVANT

This scenario outlines an Israeli-Iranian war in which the United States and Russia become involved in supporting opposing sides. By 2025, Russia has slowly but steadily expanded its influence in the Middle East, expanding its presence at places such as Hmeimim, Tartus, and T-4 into all-purpose air, ground, and intelligence bases.

Moscow retains military power projection capabilities at bases such as Hmeimim Air Base and Tartus in Syria and provides military aid to Lebanon, Iraq, Libya, and Egypt. In addition to its air, naval, and ground capabilities, Russia has increasingly deployed irregular forces to expand its influence: special operations forces under Special Operations Forces Command; intelligence units working for the Foreign Intelligence Service and Main Intelligence Directorate; and private military companies (PMCs) such as the Wagner Group supported by the Russian military, intelligence agencies, and the Kremlin. Russian PMCs, for example, have maintained a presence at energy extraction sites in eastern Syria. In addition, Russia has developed increasingly close diplomatic, intelligence, and military partnerships with Beirut, Damascus, Baghdad, Tehran, Tripoli, Cairo, and

---

Ankara in an effort to compete with the United States as the dominant power in the Middle East.

In broad terms, the Middle East is divided into a Russian sphere of influence that extends from Libya, Egypt, Iraq, Lebanon, and to some degree Turkey on the Mediterranean Sea to Syria and Iran—with some cooperation from China based out of Djibouti. The United States retains close relations with Israel, Jordan, Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and other Gulf countries. Russia has improved its relations with Baghdad (with the support of Tehran) and deployed a small number of Russian forces to Al Asad Air Base.

In the years leading up to 2025, Israel and Iran conduct a series of tit-for-tat military and cyberattacks against each other, derailing potential renewals of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action agreement. Israel has become increasingly frustrated with Moscow for failing to curb Iranian expansion, causing a notable deterioration in relations between the two countries. With U.S. support, Israel conducts periodic strikes against Iranian and Iranian-linked militia forces and infrastructure in the region, including missiles, missile parts, radars, communications systems, command-and-control systems, UAV platforms, electronic warfare systems, and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities. Israel also conducts periodic assassinations of nuclear scientists inside Iran and orchestrates offensive cyberattacks against Iranian military and nuclear sites. With Russian support, Iran responds by periodically launching missiles and other projectiles at or near Israeli territory; conducting offensive cyber operations against Israeli critical infrastructure and commercial interests; expanding the size and capabilities of partners of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps-Quds Force (IRGC-QF) in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and other countries; and increasing the number of long-range missiles in the region directed against Israel.<sup>5</sup> With Russian acquiescence, Hezbollah plays an increased role in the Lebanese government, including with its representatives holding the positions of minister of industry, minister of interior, and most recently prime minister.

With tensions high between Israel and Iran, Lebanon's prime minister, who represents Hezbollah, is assassinated in 2026 in a covert operation. A car bomb detonates beside his convoy, killing the prime minister and his security detail. The Israeli prime minister publicly denies any Israeli involvement. But in the weeks and months before the attack, Israeli leaders had

warned that Hezbollah had effectively taken over the Lebanese government, which presented a grave threat to Israel's survival. In response, Lebanese Hezbollah and Iranian-assisted militias in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq shoot an initial foray of long- and short-range missiles at Israeli cities. Israel's upgraded all-weather air defense system, Iron Dome, fails to intercept all incoming missiles, and the strikes kill a half dozen civilians around Haifa, Netanya, and Tel Aviv and cause moderate structural damage. The Iranians also target U.S. military infrastructure in the region, including the AN/TPY-2 early-warning radar system deployed to Israel. Israel responds by conducting fixed-wing strikes against Iranian-linked positions in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and even Iran—including targeting the IRGC's headquarters near Tehran. These strikes heavily damage several Iranian military and militia-linked facilities and kill a dozen combatants.

In conducting attacks against targets in Syria, Israeli fighters destroy a Russian aircraft parked at Hmeimim Air Base, killing several Russian soldiers and wounding several others. Israeli leaders say it was an accident, though they nevertheless accuse Moscow of aiding Iran and encouraging Iranian activism. In response, Russia and Iran privately support a Syrian ground invasion of the Golan Heights. Russian and Iranian leaders both openly back Syria's claim to the Golan Heights, which they say was illegally seized by Israel during the 1967 Six-Day War. Russia also quietly encourages Iranian militias to conduct attacks against U.S. forces in Lebanon and Iraq in an effort to kick all U.S. forces out of Iraq and establish Russian military bases there. In addition, Russia deploys additional air and ground assets to Syria, as well as maritime vessels in the Mediterranean and Black Sea, preventing an Israeli blockade of Lebanon. China remains publicly neutral, but it provides intelligence and materiel to Russia and Iran. With increased Russian military involvement, Israel formally requests U.S. military assistance.

---

#### SCENARIO 4

### RESURGENCE OF TERRORISM IN AFGHANISTAN

This scenario outlines a notable resurgence of terrorism by al-Qaeda, the Islamic State-Khorasan (ISIS-K, the



Islamic State's local affiliate), and other regional terrorist groups in Afghanistan. In addition to inspiring numerous homegrown attacks and plots across Europe and the United States, both al-Qaeda and ISIS-K demonstrate the capability and intent to conduct external attacks, including attacks against U.S. allies, embassies, and the homeland.

The Taliban maintains a close relationship with al-Qaeda leadership and al-Qaeda in the Indian Subcontinent (AQIS). U.S. intelligence estimates that there are between 2,000 and 4,000 al-Qaeda fighters operating in Afghanistan and Pakistan, with the strongest presence in the provinces of Badakhshan, Ghazni, Helmand, Khost, Kunar, Kunduz, Logar, Nangarhar, Nimruz, Nuristan, Paktiya, and Zabul. Additionally, the Taliban coordinates with other regional and international militant groups that are primarily active in the eastern provinces, including the Tehreek-e-Taliban Pakistan, Jaish-e-Mohammed, and Lashkar-e-Taiba. Some networks of the Eastern Turkistan Islamic Movement, Islamic Movement of Uzbekistan, and Lashkar-e-Islam also cooperate with the Taliban in the Afghanistan-Pakistan region.

The Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), Pakistan's intelligence agency, has strengthened its relationship with the Taliban over the past five years. The ISI regularly supplies Taliban forces with weaponry, funds, and training and regularly participates in counter-ISIS activities. Due to the connections and some overlap between the Taliban and al-Qaeda, some of the materiel provided by Pakistan has been diverted to AQIS fighters.

While numerous al-Qaeda plots and regional attacks in recent years have been connected to individuals who sought training or safe haven in Afghanistan, there are two recent high-profile external attacks. In April 2024, a bombing at the U.S. embassy in New Delhi kills 9 U.S. civilians and 23 Indian civilians and injures 208 others. The perpetrators are identified as a small cell of AQIS fighters. U.S. and Indian intelligence also suspect that they received support from the ISI, filtered through Taliban and al-Qaeda connections. Then, in December 2024, a box truck plows through holiday crowds near Times Square in New York City. As first responders appear on the scene, the truck explodes. In total, 17 U.S. civilians are killed and 184 are injured. The two men operating the truck—both killed in the blast—are identified as al-Qaeda fighters who have been living in Afghanistan, and computer and phone records reveal

that the attack was planned in close coordination with senior al-Qaeda leadership.

The primary militant group unaligned with the Taliban in Afghanistan is ISIS-K. Following the Taliban takeover of Afghanistan in August 2021, the nascent government struggled to quickly consolidate power and quell dissent. Counterterrorism efforts against ISIS-K were deprioritized amid other economic and governance challenges. Regional partners provided minimal counterterrorism support as they struggled to contain increasing migrant flows from Afghanistan. Even China—which aimed to position itself as a key ally to the new administration—failed to mount significant counter-ISIS efforts, instead focusing on diplomatic and financial support to bolster the Taliban government. Partial economic collapse and rising poverty rates under Taliban rule drove recruits to ISIS-K, which promised a steady income. This alleviated the group's historic recruitment challenges in the region and allowed it to remain resilient amid the changing political and security environment.

ISIS-K maintains approximately 3,000 fighters in Afghanistan, primarily in Kunar province. ISIS-K conducts regular mass casualty attacks in Afghanistan—largely against civilian targets such as mosques, schools, and infrastructure—and its fighters frequently target or clash with Taliban forces in Kunar and Nangarhar provinces. ISIS-K has also developed its external capabilities. Since 2023, security forces have disrupted four large-scale ISIS-K plots against civilian and government targets in Tajikistan and Uzbekistan, and 13 civilians were killed in a pair of suicide bombings in a shopping district in Bokhtar, Tajikistan. In the summer of 2024, three ISIS-K fighters were apprehended in Paris after reportedly surveilling several government-linked targets and were discovered to have an arsenal of firearms and bomb-making materials. In its online propaganda, ISIS-K has increased rhetoric about attacks on the West.

---

## ABOUT THE AUTHORS

**Seth G. Jones** is senior vice president, Harold Brown Chair, and director of the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS). He also teaches at Johns Hopkins University's School of Advanced International Studies (SAIS) and the Center for Homeland Defense and Security (CHDS) at the U.S. Naval Postgraduate School. Prior to joining CSIS, Dr. Jones was the director of the International Security and Defense Policy Center at the RAND Corporation. He also served as representative for the commander, U.S. Special Operations Command, to the assistant secretary of defense for special operations. Before that, he was a plans officer and adviser to the commanding general, U.S. Special Operations Forces, in Afghanistan (Combined Forces Special Operations Component Command–Afghanistan). He is the author of *Three Dangerous Men: Russia, Iran, China and the Rise of Irregular Warfare* (W.W. Norton, 2021); *A Covert Action: Reagan, the CIA, and the Cold War Struggle in Poland* (W.W. Norton, 2018), *Waging Insurgent Warfare* (Oxford University Press, 2016), *Hunting in the Shadows: The Pursuit of al Qa'ida after 9/11* (W.W. Norton, 2012), and *In the Graveyard of Empires: America's War in Afghanistan* (W.W. Norton, 2009). Dr. Jones is a graduate of Bowdoin College and received his MA and PhD from the University of Chicago.

**Seamus P. Daniels** is an associate fellow and associate director for Defense Budget Analysis in the International Security Program at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), where he researches issues related to defense funding, force structure, and military readiness. He has authored publications on trends in the overall defense budget, the legislative process surrounding defense appropriations, defense strategy and force structure, Navy readiness funding, and NATO burden sharing. Prior to joining CSIS, Mr. Daniels worked for Government Executive Media Group. He holds an AB from Princeton University's School of Public and International Affairs with minors in Near Eastern studies and Arabic language and culture.

---

## ENDNOTES

### Executive Summary

- 1 Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317>.
- 2 See Aristotle, *Physics*, Book IV (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2014).

### Chapter 1: Introduction

- 1 J.P. Lawrence, “US Troop Level Reduction in Middle East Likely as Focus Shifts Elsewhere,” *Stars and Stripes*, January 14, 2022, [https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle\\_east/2022-01-14/centcom-central-command-draw-down-iraq-afghanistan-kuwait-saudi-arabia-4289137.html](https://www.stripes.com/theaters/middle_east/2022-01-14/centcom-central-command-draw-down-iraq-afghanistan-kuwait-saudi-arabia-4289137.html).
- 2 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>. Also see “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” White House, April 14, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/04/14/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-way-forward-in-afghanistan/>; and “Remarks by President Biden on the Drawdown of U.S. Forces in Afghanistan,” White House, July 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/speeches-remarks/2021/07/08/remarks-by-president-biden-on-the-drawdown-of-u-s-forces-in-afghanistan/>.
- 3 Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, “America’s Opportunity in the Middle East,” *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>.
- 4 On President Obama’s desire to withdraw U.S. forces from the Middle East, see “Remarks by the President on Ending the War in Iraq,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 21, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/10/21/remarks-president-ending-war-iraq>. Also see “President Donald J. Trump’s State of the Union Address,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, February 5, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/president-donald-j-trumps-state-union-address-2/>.
- 5 On posture see, for example, Michael J. Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2013), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR201.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR201.html); Stacy L. Pettyjohn, *U.S. Global Defense Posture, 1783-2011* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2012), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/monographs/MG1244.html>; and Richard L. Kugler, *U.S. Military Strategy and Force Posture for the 21st Century* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1994), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR328.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR328.html).
- 6 “Remarks by President Biden on the Way Forward in Afghanistan,” White House; and Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: 2018), 2, <https://dod.defense>.



- 
- gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf. Also see, for example, Ilan Goldenberg et al., *When Less Is More: Rethinking U.S. Military Strategy and Posture* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, November 2021), <https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/when-less-is-more>; and Becca Wasser, “Drawing Down the U.S. Military Responsibly” in *From Hardware to Holism: Rebalancing America’s Security Engagement With Arab States*, Frederic Wehrey and Michele Dunne, eds. (Washington, DC: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021), <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/drawing-down-u.s.-military-responsibly-pub-84527>.
- 7 Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317>.
- 8 See, for example, *ibid.*; Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>; Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (New York: Cornell University Press, 2014); John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New York: Yale University Press, 2018); Stephen M. Walt, *The Hell of Good Intentions: America’s Foreign Policy Elite and the Decline of U.S. Primacy* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2018); and Doug Bandow, “Why Trump Is Right to Withdraw Troops,” *National Interest*, December 20, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/skeptics/why-trump-right-withdraw-troops-39352>.
- 9 See, for example, Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces*.
- 10 See, for example, International Institute for Strategic Studies, *The Military Balance* (London, United Kingdom: Routledge, 2021), <https://www.iiss.org/publications/the-military-balance>; Michael Kofman, “Syria and the Russian Armed Forces: An Evaluation of Moscow’s Military Strategy and Operational Performance,” in *Russia’s War in Syria: Assessing Russian Military Capabilities and Lessons Learned*, Robert E. Hamilton, Chris Miller, and Aaron Stein, eds. (Philadelphia, PA: Foreign Policy Research Institute, 2020), <https://www.fpri.org/research/eurasia/russias-war-in-syria-assessing-russian-military-capabilities-and-lessons-learned/>; and Margarete Klein, *Russia’s Military Policy in the Post-Soviet Space: Aims, Instruments, and Perspectives* (Berlin, Germany: German Institute for International and Security Affairs, January 2019), [https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research\\_papers/2019RP01\\_kle.pdf](https://www.swp-berlin.org/publications/products/research_papers/2019RP01_kle.pdf).
- 11 “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command,” Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, March 10, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
- 12 “Statement of General Mark A. Milley, USA, 20th Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, Department of Defense Afghanistan Hearing,” Testimony Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, September 28, 2021, <https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/Printed%2028%20Sep%20SASC%20CJCS%20Written%20Statement.pdf>.
- 13 There have been some useful detailed studies and short reports on U.S. posture, such as Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces*; Stacie L.
-

- Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanaugh, *Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945-2014* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1339.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1339.html); Melissa G. Dalton and Mara E. Karlin, “Toward a Smaller, Smarter Force Posture in the Middle East,” *Defense One*, August 26, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/08/toward-smaller-smarter-force-posture-middle-east/150817/>; Dalton and Karlin, “How Should the Pentagon Reshape Its Mideast Posture? Four Indicators to Watch,” *Defense One*, January 20, 2018, <https://www.defenseone.com/ideas/2018/01/how-should-pentagon-reshape-its-mideast-posture-four-indicators-watch/145317/>; Micah Zenko, *U.S. Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal* (London: Chatham House, October 2018), <https://www.chathamhouse.org/2018/10/us-military-policy-middle-east>; and Goldenberg, *When Less Is More*.
- 14 See, for example, Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defeat in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2004).
- 15 Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces*, xix.
- 16 See, for example, *Ibid.*

## Chapter 2: Historical Trends

- 1 See, for example, Melvyn P. Leffler, *A Preponderance of Power: National Security, the Truman Administration, and the Cold War* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 1993).
- 2 William P. Mako, *U.S. Ground Forces and the Defense of Central Europe* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, 1983), 7; and Thomas S. Snyder and Daniel F. Harrington, *Historical Highlights: United States Air Forces in Europe 1942–1997* (Ramstein Air Base, Germany: USAFE Office of History, March 14, 1997).
- 3 Robert J. Schneller, Jr., *Anchor of Resolve: A History of U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/Fifth Fleet* (Washington, DC: Naval Historical Center, 2007), 4.
- 4 *Ibid.*, 4–5.
- 5 *Ibid.*, 4.
- 6 Most of the data come from the U.S. Department of Defense’s Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC). The figure’s regions align with the U.S. Combatant Command structure in 2020. The figure excludes U.S. military personnel in the United States and its territories, such as Puerto Rico and Guam. Since DMDC reports are not available for 1951, 1952, 2006, and 2007, these years are missing from the data. Since DMDC data do not include troop levels in Afghanistan for 2002, 2003, and 2004, the report used numbers from Amy Belasco, *Troop Levels in the Afghan and Iraq Wars, FY2001-FY2012: Cost and Other Potential Issues*, CRS Report No. R40682 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 2009), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/R40682.pdf>. In addition, since DMDC data do not include troop levels in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Syria for 2018, 2019, 2020, 2021, the report used numbers from various sources, including: various issues of *The Military Balance* published by the International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS); CSIS estimates; Mujib Mashal, “U.S. Troops in Afghanistan Reduced to 8,600, General Says,” *New York Times*, June 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/19/world/asia/afghanistan-us-troop-withdrawal.html>;

---

“ISIS Attacks Surge in Iraq Amid Debate on U.S. Troop Levels,” *New York Times*, June 10, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/06/10/world/middleeast/iraq-isis-strategic-dialogue-troops.html>; Carle E. Humud and Christopher M. Blanchard, *Armed Conflict in Syria: Overview and U.S. Response*, CRS Report No. RL33487 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, July 2020), <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33487.pdf>; Michael A. Allen, Carla M. Machain, and Michael E. Flynn, “After Afghanistan, U.S. Military Presence Abroad Faces Domestic and Foreign Opposition in 2022,” *The Conversation*, January 5, 2022, <https://theconversation.com/after-afghanistan-us-military-presence-abroad-faces-domestic-and-foreign-opposition-in-2022-172360>; and David Vine, “Lists of U.S. Military Bases Abroad, 1776-2021,” American University Digital Research Archive, 2021, doi:10.17606/7em4-hb13.

7 See, for example, Henry Kissinger, *White House Years* (Boston, MA: Little, Brown, 1979), 563. Kissinger’s view differed somewhat from Nixon’s view. The latter was more inclined to cooperate—rather than compete—with the Soviets in the Middle East. See Galen Jackson, “Who Killed Détente? The Superpowers and the Cold War in the Middle East, 1969-77,” *International Security* 44, no. 3 (Winter 2019/2020): 129–162, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/44/3/129/12281/Who-Killed-Detente-The-Superpowers-and-the-Cold?redirectedFrom=fulltext>; “National Security Decision Memorandum 92,” White House, November 7, 1970, [https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nsdm/nsdm\\_092.pdf](https://www.nixonlibrary.gov/sites/default/files/virtuallibrary/documents/nsdm/nsdm_092.pdf); and Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 87, <https://tnsr.org/2020/03/one-war-is-not-enough-strategy-and-force-planning-for-great-power-competition/?msclkid=c20c3113c4d811e-ca6db651df943f701>.

8 The Nixon Doctrine was first articulated in informal remarks to the press in Guam in July 1969 and more formally in an address to the nation in November of that year. For more, see: Richard Nixon, “Informal Remarks in Guam With Newsmen,” American Presidency Project, July 25, 1969, <https://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/documents/informal-remarks-guam-with-newsmen>; and Richard Nixon, “Address to the Nation on the War in Vietnam,” UVA Miller Center Presidential Speeches, November 3, 1969, <https://millercenter.org/the-presidency/presidential-speeches/november-3-1969-address-nation-war-vietnam>.

9 See Stephen McGlinchey, “Richard Nixon’s Road to Tehran: The Making of the U.S.–Iran Arms Agreement of May 1972,” *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4 (September 2013): 841–860, <https://academic.oup.com/dh/article-abstract/37/4/841/466096?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>; U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1972, Volume E-4, Iran and Iraq* (Washington, DC: n.d.), <https://2001-2009.state.gov/r/pa/ho/frus/nixon/e4/72108.htm>; and “Document 201. Memorandum of Conversation, Tehran, May 31, 1972,” in U.S. Department of State, *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1969-1976, Volume E-4, Documents on Iran and Iraq, 1969-1972* (Washington, DC: n.d.), <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1969-76ve04/d201>.



- 
- 11 Schneller, Jr., *Anchor of Resolve*, 4, 7.
  - 12 Jimmy Carter, “State of the Union Address,” (speech, January 23, 1980, Washington, DC), <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/assets/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.
  - 13 “What the Carter Doctrine Means to Me,” edited from a speech by Harold Brown to the Council on Foreign Relations on March 6, 1980, in *MERIP Reports*, no. 90, September 1980, 20–23, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/pdf/3011586.pdf>.
  - 14 Stephen L. Rearden and Kenneth R. Foulks, Jr., *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1977-1980* (Washington, DC: Office of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, 2015), 17–41, [https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Policy/Policy\\_V012.pdf](https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/History/Policy/Policy_V012.pdf); and Bruce R. Kuniholm, “The Carter Doctrine, the Reagan Corollary, and prospects for United States Policy in Southwest Asia,” *International Journal* 41, no. 2 (Spring 1986), 344, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/40202373>.
  - 15 Hal Brands, Steven A. Cook, and Kenneth M. Pollack, “RIP the Carter Doctrine, 1980-2019,” *Foreign Policy*, December 13, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/12/15/carter-doctrine-rip-donald-trump-mideast-oil-big-think/>; “U.S. Central Command History,” U.S. Central Command, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/>; and Rearden and Foulks, Jr., *The Joint Chiefs of Staff and National Policy, 1977-1980*, 28–34.
  - 16 Kuniholm, “The Carter Doctrine,” 345.
  - 17 *Ibid.*, 348.
  - 18 John M. Goshko, “Reagan Sends AWACS Package to Congress,” *Washington Post*, October 2, 1981, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/archive/politics/1981/10/02/reagan-sends-awacs-package-to-congress/91b4ebce-9e0f-473e-8250-87f6f-47c561a/>.
  - 19 Kuniholm, “The Carter Doctrine,” 345; and Brands, Cook, and Pollack, “RIP the Carter Doctrine.”
  - 20 Anthony H. Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East: Resources and Capabilities* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1997), 25.
  - 21 Michael J. Lostumbo et al., *Overseas Basing of U.S. Military Forces: An Assessment of Relative Costs and Strategic Benefits* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2013), 9, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR201.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR201.html).
  - 22 Cordesman, *U.S. Forces in the Middle East*, 69–81; Gregory Gause III, *The International Relations of the Persian Gulf* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2010), 127–128; Anthony Cordesman, *Saudi Arabia, the US, and the Structure of Gulf Alliances* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 1999), 57–62, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/saudi-arabia-us-and-structure-gulf-alliances>; and *ibid.*, 8–10.
  - 23 U.S. Department of Defense, *Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture* (Washington, DC: September 2004), [http://www.dmzhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/global\\_posture.pdf](http://www.dmzhawaii.org/wp-content/uploads/2008/12/global_posture.pdf).
  - 24 Ryan Henry, “Transforming the U.S. Global Defense Posture,” in *Reposturing the Force: U.S. Overseas Presence in the Twenty-First Century*, Carnes Lord, ed. (Newport, RI: Naval War College Press, 2006), 34–35, <https://digital-commons.usnwc.edu/cgi/viewcontent.cgi?article=1025&context=newport-papers>.
-

- 
- 25 U.S. Department of Defense, *The National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: March 2005), <https://www.hsdl.org/?abstract&did=452255>.
- 26 “Data Download,” ForeignAssistance.gov, distributed by U.S. Agency for International Development and U.S. Department of State, December 17, 2021, <https://foreignassistance.gov/data>.
- 27 The data come from “Military and Civilian Personnel by Service/Agency by State/Country,” Defense Manpower Data Center (DMDC), September 1998 and September 2008, <https://dwp.dmdc.osd.mil/dwp/app/dod-data-reports/workforce-reports>.
- 28 U.S. Department of Defense, *Strengthening U.S. Global Defense Posture*, 13.
- 29 U.S. Department of Defense, *Sustaining U.S. Global Leadership Priorities for 21st Century Defense* (Washington, DC: January 2012), 2, [https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/defense\\_guidance-201201.pdf](https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/library/policy/dod/defense_guidance-201201.pdf).
- 30 Ibid.
- 31 Ibid.
- 32 Heidi M. Peters and Sofia Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*, CRS Report No. R44116 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, May 2019), <https://crsreports.congress.gov/product/pdf/R/R44116/12>.
- 33 “Remarks by President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.
- 34 Peters and Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*.
- 35 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: January 2018), 1, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
- 36 White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: December 2017), 45, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.
- 37 U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy*, 1.
- 38 “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command,” Statement Before the Senate Armed Services Committee, April 22, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
- 39 “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command,” Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, March 10, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
- 40 President Joseph R. Biden, Jr., *Interim National Security Strategic Guidance* (Washington, DC: The White House, March 2021), 20, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/NSC-1v2.pdf>.
-

- 
- 41 “DoD Concludes 2021 Global Posture Review,” U.S. Department of Defense, November 29, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Releases/Release/Article/2855801/dod-concludes-2021-global-posture-review/>.
- 42 Peters and Plagakis, *Department of Defense Contractor and Troop Levels in Afghanistan and Iraq: 2007-2018*.
- 43 Leila Barghouty, “Stryker brigade takes over base support and force protection ops in Iraq, sans Strykers,” *Military Times*, September 22, 2021, <https://www.militarytimes.com/news/2021/09/22/stryker-brigade-takes-over-base-support-and-force-protection-ops-in-iraq-sans-strykers/>.
- 44 Jason Sweeney, “Mission complete. Task Force Phoenix heads home after 9-month mission in the Middle East,” U.S. Army, January 9, 2022, [https://www.army.mil/article/253147/mission\\_complete\\_task\\_force\\_phoenix\\_heads\\_home\\_after\\_9\\_month\\_mission\\_in\\_the\\_middle\\_east](https://www.army.mil/article/253147/mission_complete_task_force_phoenix_heads_home_after_9_month_mission_in_the_middle_east).
- 45 “Bomber Task Force mission to Middle East,” U.S. Central Command, press release, March 7, 2021, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/PRESS-RELEASES/Press-Release-View/Article/2527767/bomber-task-force-mission-to-middle-east/>.
- 46 David B. Larter, “With Iran tensions high, a US military command pushes a dubious carrier strategy,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/03/24/with-iran-tensions-high-centcom-pushes-a-dubious-carrier-strategy/>.
- 47 David B. Larter, “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/>.
- 48 “386th Expeditionary Air Wing,” U.S. Air Forces Central, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/386th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/>.
- 49 “1st Theater Sustainment Command,” U.S. Army, <https://www.1tsc.army.mil/About/>.
- 50 “Welcome to Qatar! A Resource Guide for Families at Al Udeid Air Base,” U.S. Air Forces Central, December 17, 2017, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Portals/82/CSP%20Portal/Tab%201.%20Families%20at%20AUAB%20Resource%20Guide%20-%20Rewritev3.pdf>.
- 51 “Combined Air Operations Center (CAOC),” U.S. Air Force Central, July 2017, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/217803/combined-air-operations-center-caoc/>; and “379th Air Expeditionary Wing Fact Sheet,” U.S. Air Forces Central, n.d., <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/379th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/501479/379th-air-expeditionary-wing-fact-sheet/>.
- 52 “Ninth Air Force (Air Forces Central),” U.S. Air Forces Central, October 2021, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/About/Fact-Sheets/Display/Article/217800/ninth-air-force-air-forces-central/>; and “379th Expeditionary Air Wing,” U.S. Air Forces Central, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/379th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/>.
- 53 Kathleen J. McInnis and Brendan W. McGarry, “United States Central Command,” Congressional Research Service, February 13, 2020, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF11428.pdf>.
-



- 
- 54 C. Todd Lopez, “Major Non-NATO Ally’ Designation Will Enhance U.S., Qatar Relationship,” Department of Defense, January 31, 2022, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2917336/major-non-nato-ally-designation-will-enhance-us-qatar-relationship>.
- 55 “Combined Maritime Forces,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Combined-Maritime-Forces/>; and “Combined Maritime Forces (CMF),” Combined Maritime Forces, <https://combinedmaritimeforces.com/>.
- 56 “380th Air Expeditionary Wing,” U.S. Air Forces Central, July 2021, <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/380th-Air-Expeditionary-Wing/Fact-Sheets/Article/445043/380th-air-expeditionary-wing/>.
- 57 Peter Suci, “The F-35 Is Proving Its Mettle in the Middle East,” *National Interest*, March 23, 2021, [https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/f-35-proving-its-mettle-middle-east-180838#google\\_vignette](https://nationalinterest.org/blog/reboot/f-35-proving-its-mettle-middle-east-180838#google_vignette); and Mitch Shaw, “Hill AFB’s F-35 fighter wing scales down overseas deployments this year, but still getting reps in,” *Standard-Examiner*, May 10, 2021, <https://www.standard.net/news/government/2021/may/10/hill-afbs-f-fighter-wing-scales-down-overseas-deployments-this-year-but-still-getting-reps-in/>.
- 58 “Letter to the Speaker of the House and President Pro Tempore of the Senate Regarding the War Powers Report,” White House, Statements and Releases, June 8, 2021, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefing-room/statements-releases/2021/06/08/letter-to-the-speaker-of-the-house-and-president-pro-tempore-of-the-senate-regarding-the-war-powers-report/>.
- 59 Ibid.
- 60 Rose L. Thayer, “Army brigades announce deployments to Iraq, Europe,” *Stars and Stripes*, July 6, 2021, <https://www.stripes.com/branches/army/2021-07-06/army-deployments-iraq-isis-europe-russia-2068550.html>; and Barghouty, “Stryker brigade takes over base support.”
- 61 OIG Office of Overseas Contingency Operations, *Operation Inherent Resolve* (Washington, DC: Department of Defense, 2021), [https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/q4fy2021\\_leadig\\_oir\\_508.pdf#page=21](https://www.stateoig.gov/system/files/q4fy2021_leadig_oir_508.pdf#page=21).
- 62 “332nd Air Expeditionary Wing Fact Sheet,” U.S. Air Forces Central, n.d., <https://www.afcent.af.mil/Units/407th-Air-Expeditionary-Group/Fact-Sheets/Article/1454946/332nd-air-expeditionary-wing-fact-sheet/>.
- 63 Ibid.
- 64 Brandy Cruz, “3rd SFAB battalion cases colors for unique assignment,” U.S. Army, June 10, 2021, [https://www.army.mil/article/247390/3rd\\_sfab\\_battalion\\_cases\\_colors\\_for\\_unique\\_assignment](https://www.army.mil/article/247390/3rd_sfab_battalion_cases_colors_for_unique_assignment).
- 65 “Read Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ Foreign Policy Speech,” *Time*, April 27, 2016, <https://time.com/4309786/read-donald-trumps-america-first-foreign-policy-speech/>.
- 66 “Remarks by President Trump on Situation in Northern Syria,” White House, Office of the Press Secretary, October 23, 2019, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-situation-northern-syria/>.
-

- 
- 67 “Agreement for Bringing Peace to Afghanistan between the Islamic Emirate of Afghanistan which is not recognized by the United States as a state and is known as the Taliban and the United States of America,” Department of State, February 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/02/Agreement-For-Bringing-Peace-to-Afghanistan-02.29.20.pdf>.
- 68 See, for example, Jared Malsin and Nancy A. Youssef, “U.S. Eyes Troop Drawdown in Egypt’s Restive Sinai,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-eyes-troop-drawdown-in-egypts-restive-sinai-11588867664>; and Gordon Lubold, “U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries From Middle East,” *Wall Street Journal*, May 8, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-to-withdraw-hundreds-of-troops-aircraft-antimissile-batteries-from-middle-east-11624045575>.
- 69 Joseph R. Biden, Jr., “Why America Must Lead Again: Rescuing U.S. Foreign Policy After Trump,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2020-01-23/why-america-must-lead-again>.
- 70 Gordon Lubold, Nancy A. Youssef, and Michael R. Gordan, “U.S. Military to Withdraw Hundreds of Troops, Aircraft, Antimissile Batteries From Middle East,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 18, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-military-to-withdraw-hundreds-of-troops-aircraft-antimissile-batteries-from-middle-east-11624045575>.
- 71 Barbara Salazar Torreon and Andrew Feickert, “Defense Primer: Organization of U.S. Ground Forces,” Congressional Research Service, November 22, 2021, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/natsec/IF10571.pdf>.
- 72 Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317>.
- 73 Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>.
- 74 Ibid.
- 75 Elbridge A. Colby, *The Strategy of Denial: American Defense in an Age of Great Power Conflict* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2021), 35–36.
- 76 Karlin and Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.”
- 77 Jon Hoffman, “Neither Russia nor China Could Fill a U.S. Void in the Middle East,” *Foreign Policy*, September 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/09/15/neither-russia-nor-china-could-fill-a-u-s-void-in-the-middle-east/>.
- 78 See, for example, Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, “Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With UAE,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>.
- 79 “Oil and petroleum products explained,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, April 13, 2021, <https://www.eia.gov/energyexplained/oil-and-petroleum-products/imports-and-exports.php>.
- 80 Ibid.
-

- 
- 81 See, for example, Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore”; Karlin and Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory”; and John Glaser, “Withdrawing from Overseas Bases: Why a Forward-Deployed Military Posture is Unnecessary, Outdated, and Dangerous,” Cato Institute, July 2017, [https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa\\_816.pdf](https://www.cato.org/sites/cato.org/files/pubs/pdf/pa_816.pdf).
- 82 “County Analysis Executive Summary: China,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, September 30, 2020, [https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries\\_long/China/china.pdf](https://www.eia.gov/international/content/analysis/countries_long/China/china.pdf).
- 83 Anand Toprani, “Oil and the Future of U.S. Strategy in the Persian Gulf,” War on the Rocks, May 15, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/05/oil-and-the-future-of-u-s-strategy-in-the-persian-gulf/>.
- 84 Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore”; and Karlin and Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.”
- 85 Anthony H. Cordesman, “China, Asia, and the Changing Strategic Importance of the Gulf and MENA Region,” CSIS, October 15, 2021, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-asia-and-changing-strategic-importance-gulf-and-mena-region>.
- 86 Mary-Ann Russon, “The Cost of the Suez Canal Blockage,” BBC, March 29, 2021, <https://www.bbc.com/news/business-56559073>.
- 87 Daniel Byman, “Beyond Counterterrorism: Washington Needs a Real Middle East Policy,” *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946535>; and Micah Zenko, *U.S. Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal* (London: Chatham House, October 2018), <https://www.chatham-house.org/2018/10/us-military-policy-middle-east>.
- 88 Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore”; and Karlin and Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.”
- 89 Karlin and Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.”
- 90 See, for example, Paul D. Shinkman, “ISIS in Afghanistan Could Attack U.S. Within 6 Months: U.S. Intelligence,” U.S. News and World Report, October 26, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/national-news/articles/2021-10-26/isis-in-afghanistan-could-attack-us-within-6-months-us-intelligence>; and “U.S. Says Worried About Increase in Attacks by ISIS-K in Afghanistan,” U.S. News and World Report, November 8, 2021, <https://www.usnews.com/news/world/articles/2021-11-08/us-says-worried-about-increase-in-attacks-by-isis-k-in-afghanistan>.
- 91 See, for example, Chinese power projection in Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power: Modernizing A Force to Fight and Win* (Washington: U.S. Department of Defense, 2019), 4, 29, 48, 103, <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/AD1066163>.

## Chapter 3: Alternative U.S. Force Postures

- 1 This chapter does not offer an option for what is sometimes termed a strategy of “primacy” or “liberal hegemony,” which is based on such goals as retaining U.S. military preponderance, reassuring allies, integrating other states into U.S. designed institutions, spreading democracy, and inhibiting the spread of nuclear weapons. This strategy would likely translate into a much larger



- U.S. force posture in the Middle East. On a critique of primacy, see Patrick Porter, “Why America’s Grand Strategy Has Not Changed: Power, Habit, and the U.S. Foreign Policy Establishment,” *International Security* 42, no. 4 (Spring 2018): 9–46, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article/42/4/9/12188/Why-America-s-Grand-Strategy-Has-Not-Changed-Power?msclid=7458f756c4da11ecb-caf09586bd6cbd1>.
- 2 Variations of this strategy have included offshore balancing, over the horizon, or restraint. See, for example, John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing: A Superior U.S. Grand Strategy,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 2016, 70–83, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2016-06-13/case-offshore-balancing>.
- 3 Ibid., John J. Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion: Liberal Dreams and International Realities* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2018); Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2014); Christopher Layne, *The Peace of Illusions: American Grand Strategy from 1940 to the Present* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2006); Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home America: The Strategy of Restraint in the Face of Temptation,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997), 5–48, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/21/4/5/11558/Come-Home-America-The-Strategy-of-Restraint-in-the?redirectedFrom=full-text>; Christopher A. Preble, *The Power Problem: How American Military Dominance Makes Us Less Safe, Less Prosperous, and Less Free* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2009), 135–164; and Christopher Preble, Emma Ashford, and Travis Evans, eds., *Our Foreign Policy Choices: Rethinking America’s Global Role* (Washington, DC: CATO Institute, 2016), <https://www.cato.org/white-paper/our-foreign-policy-choices-rethinking-americas-global-role>.
- 4 Mearsheimer, *The Great Delusion*, 224–227.
- 5 Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 82.
- 6 Barry R. Posen, “Pull Back: The Case for a Less Activist Foreign Policy,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 1, January/February 2013, 127, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41721009>. However, some restraint arguments support keeping U.S. forces in the Persian Gulf—though not in other areas of the Middle East—because of oil. See John J. Mearsheimer, “Realism and Restraint,” *Horizons: Journal of International Relations and Sustainable Development* 14 (Summer 2019): 12–29, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/48573725>.
- 7 Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 73.
- 8 Ibid., 75.
- 9 See, for example, Christopher Layne, “The Unipolar Exit: Beyond the Pax Americana,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 24, no. 2 (June 2011): 149–164, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/09557571.2011.558491?msclid=b653703ec4da11ecaca902759b5cbcbd&journalCode=ccam20>.
- 10 Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 74.
- 11 Posen, *Restraint*, 108–113; Christopher Layne, “America’s Middle East Grand Strategy after Iraq: The Moment for Offshore Balancing Has Arrived,” *Review of International Studies* 35, no. 1 (January 2009), 13–15, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/review-of-international-studies/article/abs/americas-mid->

- 
- dle-east-grand-strategy-after-iraq-the-moment-for-offshore-balancing-has-arrived/99278C4F9EB3D3A5F23725B7851C8F77; and Posen, “Pull Back,” 126.
- 12 International Energy Agency, *The U.S. Shale Revolution Has Reshaped the Energy Landscape at Home and Abroad, According to Latest IEA Policy Review* (Paris: September 2019), <https://www.iea.org/news/the-us-shale-revolution-has-reshaped-the-energy-landscape-at-home-and-abroad-according-to-latest-iea-policy-review>; and David Wethe, “The Shale Revolution,” *Bloomberg*, December 27, 2019, <https://www.bloomberg.com/quicktake/fracking>.
- 13 Robert Manning and Peter A. Wilson, “On Off-Shore Balancing,” *National Interest*, March/April 2021, 27–40, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/off-shore-balancing-strategy-can-correct-america%E2%80%99s-middle-east-approach-178870>.
- 14 See, for example, Posen, “Pull Back,” 124.
- 15 Ibid., 124; and Layne, “America’s Middle East Grand Strategy after Iraq,” 15–16.
- 16 Van Jackson, “Wagering on a Progressive Versus Liberal Theory of National Security,” *Texas National Security Review* 2, no. 1 (December 2018), <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/wagering-on-a-progressive-versus-liberal-theory-of-national-security/>; Kathleen H. Hicks et al., *Getting to Less? The Progressive Values Strategy* (Washington, DC: CSIS, January 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/getting-less-progressive-values-strategy>; Heather Hurlburt, “Back to Basics: The Core Goals a ‘Progressive’ Foreign Policy Must Address,” *Texas National Security Review*, December 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>; Adam Mount, “Principles for a Progressive Defense Policy,” *Texas National Security Review*, December 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>; Loren DeJonge Schulman, “Progressives Should Embrace the Politics of Defense,” *Texas National Security Review*, December 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>; and Thomas Wright, “The Free-World Strategy Progressives Need,” *Texas National Security Review*, December 4, 2018, <https://tnsr.org/roundtable/policy-roundtable-the-future-of-progressive-foreign-policy/>.
- 17 On the overreliance on military tools, see Hicks et al., *Getting to Less?*; and Dalia Dassa Kaye et al., *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2021), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RRA958-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA958-1.html).
- 18 Hicks et al., *Getting to Less?*
- 19 Mount, “Principles for a Progressive Defense Policy.”
- 20 For more, see Hicks et al., *Getting to Less?*
- 21 Ibid.
- 22 For the purposes of this report, the force posture described in the following pages of this section is most closely associated with a theory of strategic restraint that is based on a realist offshore balancer justification.
- 23 Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 81–82.
- 24 Manning and Wilson, “On Off-Shore Balancing,” 27–40.
-

- 
- 25 Ibid., 27–40.
- 26 Eugene Gholz, Daryl G. Press, and Harvey M. Sapolsky, “Come Home, America,” *International Security* 21, no. 4 (Spring 1997), 29, <https://direct.mit.edu/isec/article-abstract/21/4/5/11558/Come-Home-America-The-Strategy-of-Restraint-in-the?redirectedFrom=fulltext>.
- 27 Manning and Wilson, “On Off-Shore Balancing,” 27–40.
- 28 Kevin Fashola, “Five Types of International Cooperation for Missile Defense,” CSIS, *CSIS Briefs*, December 2020, 6, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/five-types-international-cooperation-missile-defense>.
- 29 Ibid., 6–7.
- 30 “5th Fleet Bolstered by Arrival of Two Coast Guard Fast Response Cutters,” *Seapower Magazine*, May 26, 2021, <https://seapowermagazine.org/5th-fleet-bolstered-by-arrival-of-two-coast-guard-fast-response-cutters/>.
- 31 See Toprani, “Oil and the Future of U.S. Strategy in the Persian Gulf.”
- 32 Seamus P. Daniels, *Assessing Trends in Military Personnel Costs* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2021), 4–5, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-trends-military-personnel-costs>.
- 33 Mackenzie Eaglen, “Putting Combatant Commanders on a Demand Signal Diet,” *War on the Rocks*, November 9, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/11/putting-combatant-commanders-on-a-demand-signal-diet/>.
- 34 Mearsheimer and Walt, “The Case for Offshore Balancing,” 83.
- 35 Kathleen Hicks, “Getting to Less: The Truth About Defense Spending,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-02-10/getting-less>.
- 36 Quoted in Anna Ahronheim, “If U.S. Leaves the Region, Israel Will Eventually Go to War with Iran,” *Jerusalem Post*, January 8, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/if-us-leaves-from-the-region-israel-will-eventually-go-to-war-with-iran-613446>.
- 37 Henry A. Kissinger, “A Path Out of the Middle East Collapse,” *Wall Street Journal*, October 16, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/a-path-out-of-the-middle-east-collapse-1445037513>. Also see Thomas Wright, “The Folly of Retrenchment: Why America Can’t Withdrawal From the World,” *Foreign Affairs*, March/April 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2020-02-10/folly-retrenchment>.
- 38 Valery Gerasimov, “We Broke the Back of Terrorists,” interview by Victor Baranets, *Komsomolskaya Pravda*, December 26, 2017, <https://community.apan.org/wg/tradoc-g2/fmso/w/o-e-watch-mobile-edition-v1/22715/general-gerasimov-on-the-syrian-campaign/>.
- 39 Michael Kofman and Matthew Rojansky, “What Kind of Victory for Russia in Syria?,” *Military Review* 98, no. 2 (March–April 2018): 19, <https://www.armyupress.army.mil/Journals/Military-Review/Online-Exclusive/2018-OLE/Russia-in-Syria/>.
- 40 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Lean Forward: In Defense of American Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2013, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/united-states/2012-11-30/lean-forward>.
-



- 
- 41 United Nations Security Council (UNSC), *Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 1268 (2017)*, S/2020/717, July 16, 2020, 6.
- 42 On the Islamic State's strategy see, for example, "The Temporary Fall of Cities as a Working Method for the Mujahideen," *al-Naba'*, April 2019. Aymenn Jawad Al-Tamimi translated Parts I, II, III, and IV into English at <https://www.aymennjawad.org/2019/04/islamic-state-insurgent-tactics-translation>. Also see Michael Knights, "The Islamic State Inside Iraq: Losing Power or Preserving Strength?," *CTC Sentinel* 11, no. 11 (December 2018): 1–10, <https://ctc.usma.edu/islamic-state-inside-iraq-losing-power-preserving-strength/>; and Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 11 (December 2017): 1–8, <https://ctc.usma.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attrition-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond/>.
- 43 UNSC, *Twenty-Sixth Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 1268 (2017)*, 7.
- 44 *Ibid.*, 3.
- 45 Seth G. Jones, *Containing Tehran: Understanding Iran's Power and Exploiting Its Vulnerabilities* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2020), 12–17, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/containing-tehran-understanding-irans-power-and-exploiting-its-vulnerabilities>.
- 46 Daniel Byman, "Beyond Counterterrorism: Washington Needs a Real Middle East Policy," *Foreign Affairs* November/December 2015, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/43946535>; and Micah Zenko, *U.S. Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal* (London: Chatham House, October 2018), <https://www.chatham-house.org/2018/10/us-military-policy-middle-east>
- 47 Posen and Ross, "Competing Visions for U.S. Grand Strategy," 17. Also see, for example, Robert J. Art, "Geopolitics Updated: The Strategy of Selective Engagement," *International Security* 23, no. 3 (Winter 1998/1999): 79–113, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/i323324?msclkid=35ab5e9bc4dc11ec83ae177482debebe>.
- 48 Melissa Dalton and Mara Karlin, "Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities," in *Re-Engaging the Middle East: A New Vision for U.S. Policy*, Dafna H. Rand and Andrew P. Miller, eds. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 224–37.
- 49 Former Secretary of Defense James Mattis was a supporter of dynamic force deployment. See, for example, U.S. Department of Defense, *Summary of the 2018 National Defense Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: January 2018), 7, <https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>.
- 50 See, for example, Jerry Meyerle and Amelia Macsleyne, "What to Expect When You Don't Want Your Adversaries to Know What to Expect," *War on the Rocks*, April 7, 2021, <https://warontherocks.com/2021/04/what-to-expect-when-you-dont-want-your-adversaries-to-know-what-to-expect/>; and Conor Rodiham, Matthew Crouch, and Ron Fairbanks, *Predictable Strategy and Unpredictable Operations: The Implications of Agility in Northern Europe* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council, May 2021), <https://www.atlanticcouncil>.
-

- 
- org/in-depth-research-reports/predictable-strategy-and-unpredictable-operations-the-implications-of-agility-in-northern-europe/.
- 51 Stacie L. Pettyjohn and Jennifer Kavanaugh, *Access Granted: Political Challenges to the U.S. Overseas Military Presence, 1945-2014* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2016), xv, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1339.html?msclkid=588b5bd8c4dc11ec897ed97f39b34c22](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1339.html?msclkid=588b5bd8c4dc11ec897ed97f39b34c22).
- 52 Becca Wasser and Aaron Stein, “Small, Distributed, and Secure: A New Basing Architecture for the Middle East,” War on the Rocks, December 16, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/12/small-distributed-and-secure-a-new-basing-architecture-for-the-middle-east/>.
- 53 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 54 For example, the air base at Agadez, Niger, is a “warm site.”
- 55 Ibid.
- 56 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 57 Gordon Lubolb, “U.S. Forces Expand Reach in Saudi Arabia,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 25, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-forces-expand-reach-in-saudi-arabia-11611611393>.
- 58 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 59 Ibid., 224–237; and Hicks et al., *Getting to Less?* Also see Joshua Rovner and Caitlin Talmadge, “Less Is More: The Future of the U.S. Military in the Persian Gulf,” *Washington Quarterly* 37, no. 3 (Fall 2014), 47–60, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2014.978435?msclkid=7977fb23c4dc11ec9fdeef6413f6e19e>.
- 60 Dana Priest, *The Mission* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2004); and Ronan Farrow, *War on Peace: The End of Diplomacy and the Decline of American Influence* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2018).
- 61 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 62 Ibid., 224–37; and Hicks et al., *Getting to Less?*
- 63 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 64 MC1 Roland Franklin, “U.S. 5th Fleet Launches New Task Force to Integrate Unmanned Systems,” U.S. Naval Forces Central Command, September 9, 2021, <https://www.cusnc.navy.mil/Media/News/Display/Article/2768468/us-5th-fleet-launches-new-task-force-to-integrate-unmanned-systems/>.
- 65 Blake Herzinger, “Reorienting the Coast Guard: A Case for Patrol Forces Indo-Pacific,” War on the Rocks, November 5, 2019, <https://warontherocks.com/2019/11/reorienting-the-coast-guard-a-case-for-patrol-forces-indo-pacific/>.
- 66 Todd Harrison et al., *Space Threat Assessment 2021* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/space-threat-assessment-2021>.
-

- 
- 67 Dalton and Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” 224–37.
- 68 Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “The Myth of American Militarism,” *National Interest*, July/August 2021, 34–43, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/myth-american-militarism-188545>.
- 69 Stephen G. Brooks, G. John Ikenberry, and William C. Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home America: The Case Against Retrenchment,” *International Security* 37, no. 3 (Winter 2012/2013): 7–51, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/41804173>; Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, “Lean Forward”; Hal Brands, “Fools Rush Out? The Flawed Logic of Offshore Balancing,” *Washington Quarterly* 38, no. 2 (2015): 7–38, <https://www.tandfonline.com/doi/abs/10.1080/0163660X.2015.1064705?m-sckid=9b47ce05c4dc11ec974f50f974650fca&journalCode=rwaq20>; and Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “Should America Retrench? The Battle Over Offshore Balancing,” *Foreign Affairs*, November 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/should-america-retrench>. On deep engagement, also see Joseph S. Nye, Jr., “East Asian Security: The Case for Deep Engagement,” *Foreign Affairs*, July/August 1995, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/asia/1995-07-01/case-deep-engagement>.
- 70 Art, “Geopolitics Updated.”
- 71 Ibid., 92.
- 72 Mark T. Esper, “Remarks by Secretary of Defense Mark T. Esper at the House Armed Services Committee Hearing on Syria and Middle East Policy,” Department of Defense, December 12, 2019, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/STATEMENTS/Statements-View/Article/2038901/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-mark-t-esper-at-the-house-armed-services-commit/>.
- 73 “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command,” Statement before the House Armed Services Committee, March 10, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
- 74 Kyle Rempfer, “Army looks to ease burden on missile defense soldiers,” *Army Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/03/05/army-looks-to-ease-burden-on-missile-defense-soldiers/>.
- 75 Jason Sherman, “Senior DOD official: Additional Patriot force structure may be needed to meet demand,” *Inside Defense*, December 9, 2021, <https://insidedefense.com/daily-news/senior-dod-official-additional-patriot-force-structure-may-be-needed-meet-demand>.
- 76 David B. Larter, “With Iran Tensions High, a U.S. Military Command Pushes a Dubious Carrier strategy,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/03/24/with-iran-tensions-high-centcom-pushes-a-dubious-carrier-strategy/>.
- 77 Brooks, Ikenberry, and Wohlforth, “Don’t Come Home America,” 7–51.

## Chapter 4: Scenarios

- 1 See, for example, Mark E. Grotelueschen, “Joint Planning for Global Warfare: The Development of the Rainbow Plans in the United States, 1938–1941,”



- 
- Army History* 97 (Fall 2015): 8–27, <https://www.jstor.org/stable/26300432>; and Louis Morton, “War Plan ORANGE: Evolution of a Strategy,” *World Politics* 11, no. 2 (January 1959): 221–250, <https://www.cambridge.org/core/journals/world-politics/article/abs/war-plan-orange-evolution-of-a-strategy/B5658F25A0B-73CBF72C8A9942773A198?msckid=bf312a68c4dc11ec85a1aca1de6049fe>.
- 2 Herman Kahn, *On Escalation: Metaphors and Scenarios* (New York: Praeger, 1965); Herman Kahn and Irwin Mann, *Techniques of Systems Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, December 1956); and Herman Kahn, *On Thermonuclear War* (New York: The Free Press, 1960).
- 3 Michael Fitzsimmons, *Scenario Planning and Strategy in the Pentagon* (Carlisle, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, January 2019), 3, <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/monographs/385/>; and Paul K. Davis, *Capabilities for Joint Analysis in the Department of Defense: Rethinking Support for Strategic Analysis* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND 2016), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1469.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1469.html).
- 4 National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, DC: January 2017), 49, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.
- 5 See, for example, Michael J. Mazarr et al., *The U.S. Department of Defense’s Planning Process: Components and Challenges* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2173z2.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2173z2.html); Fitzsimmons, *Scenario Planning and Strategy in the Pentagon*; Eric V. Larson, *Force Planning Scenarios, 1945-2016: Their Origins and Use in Defense Strategic Planning* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2019), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2173z1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2173z1.html); Martin Neill, Wade P. Hinkle, and Gary Morgan, *Scenarios—International Best Practice: An Analysis of Their Use by the United States, United Kingdom, and Republic of Korea* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analyses, February 2016), <https://www.ida.org/-/media/feature/publications/s/sc/scenarios--international-best-practice-analysis-of-their-use-by-the-united-states-united-kingdom-and/d-5665.ashx>; Derek Bunn and Ahti Salo, “Forecasting with Scenarios,” *European Journal of Operational Research* 68 (1993): 291–303, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/pii/037722179390186Q>; Paul K. Davis, *Analytic Architecture for Capabilities-Based Planning, Mission-System Analysis, and Transformation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2002), [https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph\\_reports/MR1513.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1513.html); Peter DeLeon, *Scenario Designs: An Overview* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 1973), <https://www.rand.org/pubs/reports/R1218.html>; Wade P. Hinkle, Kongdan Oh Hassig, Gary Morgan, and Martin Neill, *Defense Planning Scenarios: Best Practice and International Comparisons* (Alexandria, VA: Institute for Defense Analysis, April 2015); and Andrew Krepinevich, *The Conflict Environment of 2016: A Scenario-Based Approach* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 1996).
- 6 Mazarr, *The U.S. Department of Defense’s Planning Process*, 12–14.
- 7 Neill, *Defense Planning Scenarios*, iii.
- 8 On advantages and disadvantages of threat-based planning see, for example, John F. Troxell, *Force Planning in an Era of Uncertainty: Two MRCs as a Force Sizing Framework* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War

- 
- College, 1997), <https://apps.dtic.mil/sti/citations/ADA333367>; and Mazarr, *The U.S. Department of Defense's Planning Process*, 12–14.
- 9 Mazarr, *The U.S. Department of Defense's Planning Process*, 13–14.
- 10 On military outcomes see, for example, Stephen Biddle, *Military Power: Explaining Victory and Defense in Modern Battle* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).
- 11 Neill, *Defense Planning Scenarios*, 6.
- 12 See, for example, *Ibid.*, 10–11.
- 13 See, for example, Raphael S. Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), 14, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2849z1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2849z1.html).
- 14 See, for example, Hal Brands and Evan Braden Montgomery, “One War Is Not Enough: Strategy and Force Planning for Great-Power Competition,” *Texas National Security Review* 3, no. 2 (Spring 2020), 87, <https://tnsr.org/2020/03/one-war-is-not-enough-strategy-and-force-planning-for-great-power-competition/>.
- 15 See, for example, Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance* (Washington, DC: 2019), 32, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military\\_Powers\\_Publications/Iran\\_Military\\_Power\\_LR.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf).
- 16 See, for example, David Ochmanek et al., *U.S. Military Capabilities and Forces for a Dangerous World* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2017), 72, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1782-1.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1782-1.html).
- 17 John Gordon IV et al., *Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), 53–54, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2124.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2124.html).
- 18 On future terrorist capabilities see, for example, National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, DC: January 2017), 217, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.
- 19 See, for example, Defense Intelligence Agency, *Russia Military Power: Building a Military to Support Great Power Aspirations* (Washington, DC: 2019), 63, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military\\_Powers\\_Publications/Russia\\_Military\\_Power\\_Report\\_2017.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/110/Images/News/Military_Powers_Publications/Russia_Military_Power_Report_2017.pdf).
- 20 See, for example, Cohen et al., *The Future of Warfare in 2030*, 22; and John Gordon IV et al., *Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), 143–455, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2124.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2124.html). See also: Todd Harrison et al., *Space Threat Assessment 2020* (Washington, DC: CSIS, March 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/space-threat-assessment-2020>.
- 21 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 30.
- 22 See, for example, such primary sources as “Letter to Mullah Muhammed ‘Umar from Bin Laden,” CTC Harmony Program, AFGP-2002-600321.
- 23 Antonio Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War* (Oxford, UK: Oxford University Press, 2019), 81–83; and “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions
-

- 
- Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” UNSC, May 27, 2020, 3, [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s\\_2020\\_415\\_e.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/s_2020_415_e.pdf). The Taliban denounced the United Nations’ assessment of close ties between al-Qaeda and the Taliban in “Response from a Spokesman for the Islamic Emirate on the Report Published by the UN Security Council,” Taliban Arabic Website, July 26, 2020. Available at “Afghan Taliban Says UNSC Report Based on Fabricated Intelligence, Denies Presence of AQ in Country and Is in North,” SITE Intelligence Group, July 27, 2020.
- 24 Thomas Ruttig, *How Tribal Are the Taliban?* (Kabul: Afghanistan Analysts Network, 2010), 18.
- 25 Ibid., 12.
- 26 “A View from the CT Foxhole: General John W. Nicholson, Commander, Resolute Support and U.S. Forces-Afghanistan,” *CTC Sentinel* 10, no. 2 (2017): 12–15, <https://ctc.usma.edu/a-view-from-the-ct-foxhole-general-john-w-nicholson-commander-resolute-support-and-u-s-forces-afghanistan/>; and U.S. Department of Defense, *Enhancing Security and Stability in Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: December 2020), 17, <https://media.defense.gov/2021/Apr/23/2002626546/-1/-1/0/ENHANCING-SECURITY-AND-STABILITY-IN-AFGHANISTAN.PDF>.
- 27 “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” UNSC, 20.
- 28 Terri Moon Cronk, “U.S. Forces Strike Taliban, East Turkestan Islamic Movement Training Sites,” U.S. Department of Defense News, February 7, 2018, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/1435247/us-forces-strike-taliban-east-turkestan-islamic-movement-training-sites/>; and Giustozzi, *The Taliban at War*, 96–98; and “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” UNSC, 21.
- 29 “Eleventh Report of the Analytical Support and Sanctions Monitoring Team Submitted Pursuant to Resolution 2501 (2019),” UNSC, 4.

## Chapter 5: Recommendations

- 1 Jim Garamone, “Biden Approves Global Posture Review Recommendations,” U.S. Department of Defense, November 29, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/News-Stories/Article/Article/2856053/biden-approves-global-posture-review-recommendations/>.
- 2 Hans Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations* (New York: McGraw Hill Education, 2005), 106–108.
- 3 “China’s Crude Oil Imports Surpassed 10 Million Barrels Per Day in 2019,” U.S. Energy Information Administration, March 23, 2020, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=43216>; and Anthony Cordesman, *China in the Gulf: A New Partnership with Iran?* (Washington, DC: CSIS, July 15, 2020), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/china-gulf-new-partnership-iran>.
- 4 John J. Mearsheimer, *Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, 2003), 18.



- 
- 5 Morgenthau, *Politics Among Nations*, 77.
- 6 Seamus P. Daniels, *Assessing Trends in Military Personnel Costs* (Washington, DC: CSIS, 2021), 1, 4–5, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/assessing-trends-military-personnel-costs>; Kyle Rempfer, “Army looks to ease burden on missile defense soldiers,” *Army Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/03/05/army-looks-to-ease-burden-on-missile-defense-soldiers/>; and David B. Larter, “With Iran tensions high, a US military command pushes a dubious carrier strategy,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/03/24/with-iran-tensions-high-centcom-pushes-a-dubious-carrier-strategy/>.
- 7 See, for example, Gordon Lubold and Warren P. Strobel, “Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With UAE,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 19, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/us-china-uae-military-11637274224>.
- 8 See, for example, Lubold and Strobel, “Secret Chinese Port Project in Persian Gulf Rattles U.S. Relations With UAE”; and Warren P. Strobel, “UAE Shut Down China Facility Under US Pressure, Emirates Says,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 9, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-a-e-confirms-it-halted-work-on-secret-chinese-port-project-after-pressure-from-u-s-11639070894>.
- 9 Michael M. Phillips, “China Seeks First Military Base on Africa’s Atlantic Coast, U.S. Intelligence Finds,” *Wall Street Journal*, December 5, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/china-seeks-first-military-base-on-africas-atlantic-coast-u-s-intelligence-finds-11638726327>.
- 10 Seth G. Jones, Jared Thompson, Danielle Ngo, Brian McSorley, and Joseph S. Bermudez Jr., *The Iranian and Houthi War Against Saudi Arabia* (Washington, DC: CSIS, December 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/iranian-and-houthi-war-against-saudi-arabia>.
- 11 Gareth Jennings, “Saudi Arabia Receives Clearance to Buy Follow-On AM-RAAM Missiles,” *Defence Weekly*, November 5, 2021, <https://www.janes.com/defence-news/news-detail/saudi-arabia-receives-clearance-to-buy-follow-on-amraam-missiles>.
- 12 Natasha Turak, “UAE Forces Say They Intercepted Houthi Missile Strike, the Third Attack This Month,” *CNBC*, January 31, 2022, <https://www.cnn.com/2022/01/31/uae-forces-say-they-intercepted-houthi-missile-strike.html>.
- 13 Jen Judson and Jo Gould, “THAAD, In First Operational Use, Destroys Midrange Ballistic Missile in Houthi Attacks,” *Defense News*, January 21, 2022, <https://www.defensenews.com/land/2022/01/21/thaad-in-first-operational-use-destroys-midrange-ballistic-missile-in-houthi-attack/>; and Paul Iddon, “The UAE is Bolstering Air Defenses,” *Forbes*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/01/30/the-uae-is-bolstering-its-formidable-air-defenses>.
- 14 Kyle Rempfer, “Army Looks to Ease Burden on Missile Defense Soldiers,” *Army Times*, March 5, 2020, <https://www.armytimes.com/news/your-army/2020/03/05/army-looks-to-ease-burden-on-missile-defense-soldiers/>.
- 15 Peter Iddon, “The UAE is Bolstering Its Formidable Air Defenses,” *Forbes*, January 30, 2022, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/pauliddon/2022/01/30/the-uae-is-bolstering-its-formidable-air-defenses>.
-

- 
- 16 David B. Larter, “With Iran Tensions High, a U.S. Military Command Pushes a Dubious Carrier Strategy,” *Defense News*, March 24, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/naval/2020/03/24/with-iran-tensions-high-centcom-pushes-a-dubious-carrier-strategy/>.
  - 17 See, for example, Chinese power projection in Defense Intelligence Agency, *China Military Power*, 4, 29, 48, 103.
  - 18 Todd Harrison et al., *Space Threat Assessment 2021* (Washington, DC: CSIS, April 2021), <https://www.csis.org/analysis/space-threat-assessment-2021>.
  - 19 Daniel R. Coats, *Worldwide Threat Assessment of the U.S. Intelligence Community* (Washington, DC: Office of the Director of National Intelligence, January 29, 2019), 6, <https://www.dni.gov/files/ODNI/documents/2019-ATA-SFR---SSCI.pdf>.

## Appendix: Middle East Scenarios

- 1 See, for example, John Gordon IV et al., *Army Fires Capabilities for 2025 and Beyond* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2020), 51–57, [https://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR2124.html](https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR2124.html); and Melissa Dalton and Mara Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” in *Re-Engaging the Middle East: A New Vision for U.S. Policy*, Dafna H. Rand and Andrew P. Miller, eds. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 224–38.
- 2 See, for example, regional projections in National Intelligence Council, *Global Trends: Paradox of Progress* (Washington, DC: January 2017), 109–111, <https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/nic/GT-Full-Report.pdf>.
- 3 See, for example, Bruce Hoffman, “The Coming ISIS-al Qaeda Merger,” *Foreign Affairs*, March 29, 2016, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2016-03-29/coming-isis-al-qaeda-merger>.
- 4 On Abdullah Azzam, see Thomas Hegghammer, *The Caravan: Abdallah Azzam and the Rise of Global Jihad* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2020).
- 5 On previous Iranian attacks on Israeli commercial infrastructure, see, for example: “6 Facilities Said Hit in Iran’s Cyberattack on Israel’s Water System in April,” *Times of Israel*, May 19, 2020, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/6-facilities-said-hit-in-irans-cyberattack-on-israels-water-system-in-april/>.

---

**COVER PHOTO (F-35A Lightning II)** U.S. AIR FORCE PHOTO BY ALEX R. LLOYD/RELEASED;  
**[Map]** LIBRARY OF CONGRESS, GEOGRAPHY AND MAP DIVISION

**CSIS** | CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

1616 Rhode Island Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20036  
202 887 0200 | [www.csis.org](http://www.csis.org)

**ROWMAN &  
LITTLEFIELD**

Lanham • Boulder • New York • London

4501 Forbes Boulevard  
Lanham, MD 20706  
301 459 3366 | [www.rowman.com](http://www.rowman.com)

