



REIMAGINING U.S. STRATEGY IN THE MIDDLE EAST

Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini,
Nathan Vest, Ashley L. Rhoades

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Preface

U.S. policy in the Middle East across successive administrations on balance has not produced positive results for American interests or for the region. Despite aspirations across the political spectrum to pivot away from the Middle East after decades of costly interventions, challenges emanating from a region mired in instability will continue to affect U.S. interests. The question, however, is whether maintaining long-standing U.S. policies—which are heavily reliant on threat-based paradigms and military instruments of power—will produce better outcomes in the future. Or is it time to rethink some of the fundamental premises underlying U.S. policymaking in this region?

The report on which this summary is based assesses the advantages and trade-offs of an alternative regional strategy in which strategic goals link to a broader understanding of stability that prioritizes reduced conflict, better governance, and greater growth and development.¹ We consider how a U.S. strategy in the Middle East might look if the approach shifted from an emphasis on what we call *threatism*—focusing on the threat of the day, and particularly the Iranian threat—to a positive vision of a region supported by increased diplomatic and economic investments, one in which the sources of extremism and interstate competition are reduced to manageable levels. Reimagining U.S. strategy in the Middle East with a positive, but not idealized, vision of outcomes (rather than focusing on only the threats we are trying to contain) could lead to a new set of policy options for future decisionmakers to consider.

This research analyzes how key instruments of U.S. policy—political, security, economic, diplomatic, and informational—would need to adjust to more effectively address current regional challenges in ways that are mindful of limited resources at home. Given pandemics, climate change, and disruption in oil markets—combined with the region’s multiple conflicts and governance failures—U.S. strategy can no longer afford to focus on the state and leadership level while neglecting societal ills and the region’s people. Nor can the United States pursue its regional interests alone. Our strategic reassessment of U.S. policies in the Middle East takes these consider-

¹ Dalia Dassa Kaye, Linda Robinson, Jeffrey Martini, Nathan Vest, and Ashley L. Rhoades, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments*, Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, RR-A958-1, 2021. As of February 23, 2021: https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RRA958-1.html

ations seriously, leading to a critical examination of how we deal with both partners and adversaries, both in and outside the region, and the policy tools we might better leverage to advance our strategic goals to the benefit of both the United States and the region.

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About the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy

This research was conducted within the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy, a center within International Programs at the RAND Corporation. The center brings together analytic excellence and regional expertise from across RAND to address the most critical political, social, and economic challenges facing the Middle East today. For more information about the RAND Center for Middle East Public Policy, visit www.rand.org/international/cmpepp or contact the director (contact information is provided on the webpage).

Executive Summary

With the start of a new administration in the United States, the coming months might offer an opportune moment for Washington to rethink some of the fundamental premises underlying American policymaking in the Middle East and review how the United States engages the Middle East and—perhaps more fundamentally—for what purpose.

Such a review is long overdue. Past U.S. engagement in the Middle East has predominantly focused on opposing threats, from the Soviet Union during the Cold War to terrorist networks after September 11, 2001. For the past 40 years, countering Iranian influence has been among the more enduring tenets of U.S. policy. But what might a U.S. regional strategy look like if confronting such threats as Iran were no longer the primary organizing principle? What if our policies were devised to advance a long-term vision of what we are for, not just what we are against?

This summary, and the report on which it is based, addresses that question by analyzing long-standing American interests and relationships with central partners and then considering an alternative framework in which the Iranian challenge is just one among several factors the United States should take into account. The research, produced by a team of RAND Corporation subject-matter experts, assesses the advantages and trade-offs of a reimagined regional strategy where strategic goals link to a broader understanding of stability that prioritizes reduced conflict, better governance, and greater growth and development.

The Case for an Alternative Policy Lens

Although Americans might be tiring of the Middle East after decades of war, the authors of the main report, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East*, argue for continued U.S. engagement. The conflicts and instability that emanate from this region can directly harm Americans and close allies. These conflicts produce negative spill-over regionally and globally by fueling radicalization, violent extremism, arms proliferation, economic disruption, and refugee flows that have sparked political crises and dire humanitarian conditions. Washington cannot pretend that the effects of Middle

East conflicts stop at the region's edge. At the same time, the region has untapped potential for economic growth and innovation. The challenge is thus not whether to stay in the region but rather how we engage with it, and what realistic goals we might help advance with smarter policies.

The RAND research team finds that established U.S. policies in the Middle East—pursued across administrations and defined by a *threatism* mindset—have fallen short in advancing American interests and helping the region's people. U.S. policies also have failed to adapt to new regional and global conditions. Legacy aid packages and regional partnerships designed during the Cold War and the post-1990-1991 Gulf War eras, including massive arms packages to increasingly assertive Arab Gulf partners, are not advancing regional stability. They also are not responsive to populations demanding more-accountable governance to meet the challenges of the 21st century. Attempts to defeat adversaries and secure American primacy in the Middle East are also not feasible goals in a global and regional landscape with competing powers and other U.S. priorities. Moreover, the disproportionate focus on the Iranian threat has come at a cost for managing other regional challenges, including continued threats from nonstate extremist groups. And the heavy reliance on military instruments of power is only escalating regional conflict rather than reducing it.

The project team thus considers an alternative framework to guide U.S. strategy. This framework suggests that the U.S. strategic priority must center on reducing regional conflict and the drivers of conflict. Resolving—or at least de-escalating—current conflicts, preventing the emergence of future conflicts, and improving governance are essential to achieving genuine regional stability. These priorities are also necessary for advancing enduring U.S. interests in nonproliferation and countering violent extremism. This reimagined strategy thus puts a greater U.S. focus on addressing conflict and socioeconomic challenges that are creating both unsustainable pressures on the region's states and immense suffering among its people. In other words, the most fundamental aspects of the proposed strategy require restructuring our relationships to account for the needs of the region's people, not just its leaders, and reducing U.S. reliance on military tools in favor of economic and diplomatic investments in the region's future.

Moving Away from Threatism: Four Thematic Areas

To assess current policy and the proposed alternative framework, the RAND team reviewed and critiqued four aspects of U.S. engagement in the Middle East: (1) relations with **regional partners**; (2) the management of **adversarial threats**; (3) the role of **global competitors**, particularly China and Russia; and (4) **policy tools** to advance U.S. strategic objectives.

Regional Partners

The project team found that Washington has sought and continues to pursue regional partnerships based on a binary logic in which the United States cultivates one bloc of states to oppose another. This approach means that the United States can lose track of whether the partnership advances broader U.S. interests beyond confronting an extra-regional or regional power. The team further found that significant risks—for example, entrapment, free-riding, U.S. reputational exposure, and the potential loss of partners to internal unrest—do not appear to be fully priced into the partnerships. A large share of U.S. assistance to support partnerships is based on legacy thinking about the need for financial incentives to bolster Israel’s security against Arab state threats.

At the same time, the research team found too little attention paid to nonsecurity investments, such as improved governance, which might enhance regional stability. As Table S.1 shows, military-oriented peace and security grants dwarf other investments. For example, the United States devotes roughly an equivalent share of aid to Egypt’s military as it does to economic support for the entire region in a given year. Moreover, just three states (Israel, Egypt, and Jordan—the “Big 3”) consume the overwhelming share of the U.S. grant total. Of the slightly more than \$6 billion in foreign military financing (FMF) apportioned globally in 2019, 81 percent went to Israel, Egypt, and Jordan. This imbalance limits the depth of cooperation the United States can realize with other Middle Eastern countries outside the Big 3.

Adversarial Threats

In examining U.S. policies toward Iran, extremist nonstate actors—such as Shi’a militia groups, the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and Al Qaeda—and Syria, the research team found that Iran’s power is more limited than conventional wisdom suggests. The research team also found that current U.S. policies are not calibrated to Iran’s actual threat and that the U.S. policies of maximum pressure and unilateral sanctions have not significantly constrained Iran’s nuclear program or curbed its destabilizing regional activities. A new approach to Iran will require not only restraining its nuclear program through multilateral diplomacy but also leveraging U.S. support for regional reforms to reduce the susceptibility of the region to Iranian influence. The goal should be changing the environment in which Iran operates rather than trying to change the Iranian regime itself; containing and deflating Iran’s influence requires playing a long game.

Containing destabilization caused by Shi’a militia groups—which have been supported to varying degrees by Iran—requires bolstering the legitimate security forces in the areas in which they operate. Although the signature accomplishment of U.S. policy across administrations has been the destruction of ISIS’s physical caliphate, the enduring defeat of that group depends on strong governance and security in areas where ISIS took root. Preventing a reoccurrence of ISIS control crucially depends on stabilizing the eastern half of Syria and supporting reform in Iraq that increases the legitimacy of

the government and security forces in the eyes of all citizens—including the country’s Sunni-Arab minority. Relegating Iraq to a theater for countering Iranian influence will abet—not reduce—conflict.

Table S.1
U.S. Assistance by Objective (Five-Year Annual Average, FY 2015–FY 2019, \$U.S.)

Country	Peace and Security	Governing Justly and Democratically	Investing in People	Economic Growth	Humanitarian Assistance
Algeria	2,140,000	0	0	0	0
Bahrain	4,360,400	0	0	0	0
Egypt	1,292,140,000	12,700,000	55,360,000	58,040,000	0
Iraq	339,020,000	50,340,000	6,600,000	63,500,000	10,800,000
Israel	3,220,000,000	0	0	0	0
Jordan	534,780,000	62,020,000	213,520,000	519,880,000	0
Kuwait	0	0	0	0	0
Lebanon	112,060,000	17,260,000	58,220,000	27,560,000	0
Libya (GNA)	25,320,000	14,400,000	0	5,960,000	0
Morocco	18,580,000	8,260,000	5,880,000	4,460,000	0
Oman	4,679,400	0	0	0	0
Qatar	0	0	0	0	0
Saudi Arabia	7,400	0	0	0	0
Tunisia	82,820,000	30,540,000	0	39,660,000	0
Turkey	3,299,600	0	0	0	0
UAE	0	0	0	0	0
Yemen (ROYG)	16,460,000	9,880,000	17,620,000	3,120,000	243,620,000
Total	5,655,666,800	205,400,000	357,200,000	722,180,000	254,420,000

SOURCES: U.S. Agency for International Development, “Foreign Aid Explorer,” webpage, undated; Andrew Miller, Seth Binder, and Louisa Keeler, *President Trump’s FY21 Budget: Examining U.S. Assistance to the Middle East and North Africa in the Shadow of COVID-19*, Washington, D.C.: Project on Middle East Democracy, June 2020.

NOTES: Data show a five-year average, drawing on the Project on Middle East Democracy’s (POMED’s) reported data for fiscal year (FY) 2015–FY 2019 actual amount of foreign aid provided. FY 2020 data reflect only the requested amount; beginning in FY 2018, the U.S. Department of State recategorized “Governing Justly and Democratically” to “Democracy, Human Rights, and Governance;” for consistency of reporting, we and POMED have maintained the “Governing Justly and Democratically” title to categorize U.S. funding supporting democracy development and good governance. Additionally, there is a large discrepancy between the scope of U.S. humanitarian assistance as parsed by POMED, which reports only the bilateral top-line appropriations, and that reported in the U.S. Agency for International Development’s Foreign Aid Explorer, which comprises both bilateral and multilateral accounts. Foreign Aid Explorer reports more than \$2 billion in humanitarian relief to the region. GNA = Government of National Accord. ROYG = Republic of Yemen Government. UAE = United Arab Emirates.

Global Competitors

RAND researchers assessed the current postures of China and Russia in the region and the extent to which their policy aims might conflict with or support American strategic objectives. Russian interests in the Middle East tilt toward security and arms sales. It is using its involvement in the region, including military interventions, to rebuild its status as a great power; obtain economic advantages through trade, investment, and stable oil markets; and maintain the status quo. China prioritizes economic exchange and investment. The Middle East plays an important role in China's Belt and Road Initiative to increase land, sea, and digital connectivity across Eurasia, the Middle East, and parts of Africa into Europe. There is a risk that Chinese and Russian influence in the region could increase if the United States reorients its strategy toward the Middle East, as states in the region hedge their historical relationships with Washington and expand economic and security ties with U.S. competitors.

However, both competitors face limits in the region, and with Washington focused on great-power competition, there is a risk that seeing the region through this lens could preclude cooperation that might benefit American interests. Both China and Russia have shared interests with the United States in nonproliferation, for example, and support the Iran nuclear agreement. As a major source of global demand for energy, China has an interest in regional calm and stable energy prices, whereas the United States and Russia, as major energy producers, have an interest in stable prices that enable long-term investments in exploration and development. A region with less violent extremism, more prosperity, and stronger nonproliferation trends will benefit all three global powers. To be sure, Russia and China are competing with the United States in the Middle East, and growing Russian and Chinese engagement has led to actions that work against U.S. interests, such as Russia's military intervention in Syria or China's expansion of communication technology with concerning security components, including systems that can be used for surveillance and population control. But competition can be tempered by partially overlapping objectives that provide opportunities for cooperation in areas that do not infringe on U.S. interests.

Policy Tools

RAND researchers explored the *means* by which the United States attempts to achieve its objectives; reviewed economic, diplomatic, and other instruments for American engagement; and made recommendations for recalibrating U.S. regional investments. They found that U.S. military assistance to the Middle East and North Africa region has far outpaced economic aid, with the Middle East receiving more than 50 percent of total U.S. military aid globally. U.S. force presence in the region (excluding Afghanistan) remains steady at just less than 50,000 deployed U.S. troops. Security cooperation and economic assistance programs also are not routinely or rigorously assessed for effectiveness in achieving intended outcomes and the avoidance of counterproductive effects.

Policy Recommendations: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments

The resources of the United States are not limitless, but there are more practical and cost-effective ways to stay engaged in the Middle East that would benefit both the United States and the region. Several pillars could guide U.S. policymakers should they choose to pursue the alternative strategy outlined in this summary and in the main report as they adapt to new regional, global, and domestic realities:

- The United States could *shift resources* from the current heavy reliance on military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic investments, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people. This will entail making hard policy decisions, such as reducing sales of high-end weaponry in favor of equipment that is tailored to defensive purposes and closing the gap between the Big 3 aid recipients and other regional partners. The resource shift away from military tools also will require a counterterrorism focus on nonmilitary programs to counter violent extremism; increased support for domestic reform efforts already underway and supported by leaders across the Arab world; and regular evaluations of all assistance programs based on data and proven measures of effectiveness. Resources would move to those countries and programs that produce desired outcomes in support of U.S. strategic goals.
- Regional initiatives and investments could *favor a long-term time horizon* to reduce conflict and support regional growth and development, even at the cost of short-term risks. This would involve increasing engagement with Middle Eastern publics on such issues as health, youth unemployment, and climate change; investing in human development programs; supporting civil-society capacity-building efforts in permissive environments; and maintaining a spotlight on human rights abuses at the highest levels of government, including consistent pressure for the release of political prisoners in both adversarial and partner countries.
- The United States could *work multilaterally* with regional and global partners, and at times even with global competitors, to address common challenges. This would include supporting de-escalation talks between Arab Gulf monarchies and Iran; a diplomatic effort with other international powers to establish a regional security forum in the Middle East similar to the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe; and the continuation of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS with an expanded focus on countering extremism.

Conclusion

Such a reimagined strategy requires a shift from a military to a nonmilitary mindset. It requires recalibrating U.S. military support and reducing arms sales while increas-

ing economic, trade, and financial investments. It calls for more diplomatic initiative to break out of the current cycle of conflict and escalation that is too costly for the United States and for the region's people. Our assessment suggests that working toward such a long-term agenda with partners, both regionally and globally, is an investment that will pay far higher dividends, and at far lower costs, than continuing on our present path. U.S. regional policies are largely making outmoded investments in the past, investments that have contributed to more regional conflict and violent extremism that put Americans in harm's way. Now is the time to break this cycle and consider strategically investing in a positive vision for the region that is oriented toward the future.



U.S. policy toward the Middle East has relied heavily on military instruments of power and has focused on regional threats—particularly the Iranian threat—with the goal of keeping partners on “our side.” These long-standing policies have largely fallen short of meeting core U.S. interests and adapting to new regional realities and strategic imperatives. RAND researchers offer an alternative framework, suggesting that the U.S. strategic priority must center on reducing regional conflict and the drivers of conflict. This revised strategic approach puts a greater focus on addressing conflict and socioeconomic challenges that are creating unsustainable pressures on the region’s states and immense suffering among its people. Researchers analyze how the tools of U.S. policy—political, security, economic, diplomatic, and informational instruments—would need to adjust to more effectively address such challenges in ways that are mindful of limited resources at home. Researchers also examine how the United States deals with both partners and adversaries in and outside the region and consider how to better leverage policies to the benefit of U.S. interests and the region.

The researchers recommend specific actions organized into the following three pillars: (1) shifting resources from the current heavy reliance on military tools to a more balanced approach that prioritizes economic investments, governance, diplomacy, and programs focused on people; (2) favoring a long-term time horizon to reduce regional conflict and support growth and development, even at the cost of short-term risks; and (3) working multilaterally with global and regional partners to address key challenges.