

# Great-Power Competition and Conflict in the Middle East

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## ISSUE

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For centuries, the Middle East has served as a theater of competition between the world's great powers. Today's most prominent competitors—the United States, China, and Russia—also view the Middle East as a critical region of the world where they can cultivate access and influence. Although the United States' competition with China is most evident in the Indo-Pacific and its competition with Russia is most evident in Europe, the Middle East has emerged as one of the most important arenas of competition beyond the competitors' respective backyards. This report—part of a four-volume series—explores the focal points of competition among the United States, China, and Russia in the Middle East, concentrating on areas—both geographical and functional—that have the potential to serve as flashpoints for a proxy conflict or limited war. In addition to identifying paths to potential conflict, the authors examine the specific forms that U.S., Chinese, or Russian involvement may take, which actors they may choose to support in various scenarios, and which capabilities they would bring to bear. Using that analysis, the authors identify what implications the findings have for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.



## APPROACH

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The project team employed a multi-method approach. First, it developed a unique data set of 16 variables to measure diplomatic, informational, military, and economic potential for great-power competition in secondary theaters. Second, it combined the assessment of competition potential with measures of conflict potential to identify cases with the greatest theoretical chances for future great-power involvement in conflicts in the Middle East. Finally, it used qualitative methods—including interviews with subject-matter experts and analysis of primary and secondary source materials—to explore what conflict in the Middle East might look like and what the implications might be for the U.S. government at large, the joint force, and the Department of the Air Force in particular.



## CONCLUSIONS

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The analysis yielded the following findings:

- Potential for great-power competition in the Middle East converges on regional centers of economic and political power and states with historical relationships to the United States, Russia, or China.

- The United States remains dominant in the military domain in the Middle East, but Russia and China are gaining ground.
- Great-power involvement in potential future Middle Eastern conflicts is unlikely to be driven primarily by concerns over competitors' expanding influence.
- Counterterrorism and great-power competition are interconnected in the Middle East.
- Shifts in the level of U.S. engagement in the Middle East might contribute to conditions that lead to great-power involvement in proxy conflict.
- The United States, China, and Russia have limited willingness for direct military engagement in the region unless there are direct threats to their core interests.
- Conflicts in the Middle East involving great powers may not resemble those of the Cold War.



## RECOMMENDATIONS

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### Recommendations for the U.S. Government

- Recognize that U.S. interests in the Middle East require a long-term vision for the region.
- Maintain or cultivate ties to friendly governments and non-state actors.
- Rethink arms sales to the Middle East through the lens of great-power competition.

### Recommendations for the Joint Force

- Maintain counterterrorism capabilities while cultivating capabilities relevant to other aspects of great-power competition.
- Consider maintaining force presence in the Middle East to maintain stability and protect U.S. interests.
- Maintain access agreements in the region, especially for overflight rights.

### Recommendations for the Department of the Air Force

- Prepare for continued demand for U.S. Air Force assets in the theater and invest accordingly.
- Prepare for multifaceted deconfliction challenges in future conflicts that may involve China and Russia.



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