

Reshaping U.S. Force Posture in the Middle East

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Brief Analysis

By adjusting carrier rotations, ISR capabilities, headquarters locations, and other key aspects of its posture, the Biden administration can contribute to regional security and self-sufficiency while still shifting toward great-power competition.

On February 4, Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin [announced](https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2494189/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-the-initiation-of-a-glo/) (<https://www.defense.gov/Newsroom/Releases/Release/Article/2494189/statement-by-secretary-of-defense-loyd-j-austin-iii-on-the-initiation-of-a-glo/>) that his department would start a global force posture review of America's military footprint, resources, strategy, and missions. Previously, the Trump administration's [2018 National Defense Strategy](https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf) (<https://dod.defense.gov/Portals/1/Documents/pubs/2018-National-Defense-Strategy-Summary.pdf>) (NDS) focused on competing with China and Russia as its top priority, and the Pentagon may finally be able to make good on that intention given the current Middle East framework and the Biden administration's desire to shift focus away from the region. The destruction of the Islamic State's caliphate, the enhanced Arab-Israel security cooperation set in motion by the Abraham Accords, the Saudi-Emirati effort to mend their rift with Qatar, and President Biden's desire to reduce tensions with Iran all provide an opportunity to rethink U.S. military posture in the Middle East.

The region's evolving threat landscape offers similar opportunities. Instead of keeping counterterrorism at the forefront of the U.S. force posture as it has been since the September 11 attacks, Washington must now prioritize other pressing tasks—namely, reassuring allies, deterring Iran, supporting democracy, minimizing exposure, and reducing costs, with the main goal of freeing resources for the administration's strategic shift to great-power competition. Efforts to increase Washington's nonmilitary options have already begun, such as strengthening the diplomatic corps, repairing ties with partners, and reasserting U.S. commitment to international organizations. But

the Pentagon still needs to consider how it can evolve its force posture in order to achieve all the other goals.

Below are several recommendations toward that end. Each of these ideas accepts inherent risks, some greater than others. Yet resource limitations demand that some risks be taken in order to align U.S. posture with U.S. strategic priorities.

Shift to Unpredictable Short-Term Carrier Rotations

The cost-benefit calculus of sustained carrier strike group deployments to the Persian Gulf needs to be reconsidered. Despite calls for reorienting toward Chinese and Russian threats, U.S. naval deployments to the Gulf region soared last year, with two carrier groups dispatched there simultaneously at certain points. These moves were a direct response to increased Iranian aggression (e.g., rocket attacks on U.S. targets in Iraq), but there is little evidence that such deployments actually deter Tehran. They do, however, place a huge strain on the Navy's readiness, while also relieving pressure on Beijing and Moscow by removing an unpredictable force presence from the European and Pacific theaters.

Accordingly, the Navy should replace its sustained carrier presence with shorter, more unpredictable deployments. Carriers stationed in the Pacific and Europe could out chop from these areas of operation and spend time in the Gulf as part of the dynamic force employment model laid out in the 2018 NDS. This unpredictability would likely complicate Iran's decisionmaking. Meanwhile, the Navy could still keep smaller surface combatants in the Gulf to maintain its presence there and provide maritime security. Additionally, by continuing to strengthen its bonds with partners, the United States can share these maritime responsibilities and further reduce its Gulf naval presence.

Move ISR Assets to Europe, Improve Regional Capabilities

To help refocus U.S. capabilities toward great-power competition, the Pentagon should shift intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) assets away from a permanent presence in the Middle East. Satellites and other national assets allow for the collection of substantial information on regional points of interest, and any intelligence they might miss could quickly be covered by U.S. forces based in Europe, where current ISR capabilities enable them to fly over and collect from any Middle Eastern theater. Permanently stationing these assets in Europe would also reduce the significant costs and footprint of U.S. support infrastructure and personnel in the Middle East.

At the same time, the Pentagon should help partner nations develop similar capabilities in order to ease their concerns about the shift and improve intelligence sharing and cooperation at the bilateral and multilateral levels. After announcing their landmark normalization accord last year, Israel and the United Arab Emirates proposed additional defense and military cooperation. Indeed, Israel already has sophisticated ISR capabilities and can work with Gulf states to develop even more robust regional capabilities. When coupled with U.S. assets in Europe and elsewhere, such R&D would allow regional assets to maintain near-continuous coverage over areas of interest and work together against shared threats.

For example, enhanced ISR assets could better counter Iranian weapons smuggling activity by identifying and interdicting shipments to proxy forces. They could also enable improved indications and warnings of Iranian missile activities prior to launch, which could in turn help these nations mitigate such threats within their borders.

For the United States, this investment would help on two key fronts: facilitating cost/burden sharing, and enhancing the Air Force's Joint All-Domain Command and Control (JADC2) construct, which is required for success in any future high-end fights. If this effort is to succeed, however, the Biden administration would need to take some calculated risks in allowing certain U.S. arms sales to the region to continue or even expand.

Move Forward Headquarters Back Home

Perhaps the most drastic adjustment to reduce America's military footprint would involve minimizing

P headquarters staff in the Middle East and consolidating them back in the United States over the next decade, while maintaining enough personnel for operational needs. Current improvements in technology and information exchange allow warfighters and support personnel to see operating pictures of the battlefield in near realtime regardless of their location. This capability leaves little reason to maintain substantial forward-deployed staff in Qatar, Kuwait, or Bahrain—especially when one considers that a large force presence in the Gulf is perpetually vulnerable to Iranian attack, and that potential existential threats to the United States loom elsewhere.

The likely benefits of this shift are numerous. The current headquarters posture involves stationing tens of thousands of troops and family members in the Gulf, so moving them back home would greatly dilute the Iranian threat to American lives. It would also remove redundant tasks accomplished at forward and rear headquarters, while consolidating analytical and watch centers would allow for a leaner and more effective force. Additionally, moving U.S. Naval Forces Central Command (NAVCENT) from Bahrain would mean that all **[component commands focused on the Middle East \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moving-israel-centcom-another-step-light\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/moving-israel-centcom-another-step-light)** would reside in the same time zone—a not insignificant factor when attempting to maintain efficiency and keep all forces on the same page during normal operations and potential crises alike.

Ideally, this approach would culminate with the Pentagon keeping a skeleton staff in the region that, in coordination with the U.S. diplomatic presence, liaises with local military and government organizations toward two goals: maintaining bilateral partnerships, and ensuring caretaker status over existing military infrastructure to permit rapid redeployment in times of crisis. To be sure, this shift may be seen as a significant blow to U.S. partnerships in the Middle East, even if done gradually. Yet it is the only feasible way to dedicate more resources to the U.S. priority of great-power competition. To reassure partners who do not share this priority, the Biden administration may need to tell them—and, more important, show them—that Washington is committed to preserving its rapid redeployment capabilities and helping them boost their own capabilities via arms sales and other tangible means, regardless of domestic political controversies over such measures.

Reduce Continuous Combat Deployments, Increase Exercises

The Pentagon should consider accepting additional risk by pulling some offensive combat capabilities away from permanent deployments in the Middle East and replacing them with recurring multilateral combat employment exercises. This would entail building partnership programs and conducting advise, train, and assist missions, primarily in Iraq and with the Syrian Democratic Forces in north Syria.

In addition to helping U.S. forces maintain proficiency within the area of operations and keeping warfighters prepared for today's problems, such exercises could free up combat units to shift paradigm and prepare for potential future fights in Europe and the Pacific—and, in the process, hone the dynamic force employment concept. For partners in the Middle East, new exercises would provide a recurrent forward U.S. presence that serves multiple interests: deterring aggression, deepening interoperability, increasing regional cooperation, reassuring local governments, and enhancing their ability to protect their own borders, thereby easing the U.S. burden.

Invest in Regional Missile Defense

Iran continues to **[expand its ballistic missile program \(https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flaunts-new-missile-and-jet-engine-technology\)](https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iran-flaunts-new-missile-and-jet-engine-technology)** in terms of numbers, range, and accuracy. In addition, the regime and its proxies have used weaponized drones to attack Saudi Arabia and the UAE. To deter these relatively low-cost capabilities, the United States should work with partners to improve their defenses against airstrikes and ballistic missiles.

The current approach of deploying Patriot surface-to-air missile systems in critical locations is not ideal. These missiles are only available in limited numbers, and each one costs \$2-4 million depending on variant—much more than Iran’s drones and missiles. The United States should therefore place top priority on research, development, and cooperation that enables Gulf states to obtain a **more available and affordable system** (<https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/missile-defense-manhattan-project-middle-east>) for countering Iran. In December, Israeli missile defense chief Moshe Patel signaled that his country would be open to working with the UAE and Bahrain on missile defense cooperation. Indeed, as Arab-Israel normalization expands, so should this cooperation.

Conclusion

The U.S. military posture in the Middle East has already decreased over the years as major combat operations have wound down. Yet given the new realities surrounding threats to the United States and the Biden administration’s priorities outside the Middle East, additional drawdowns are in order.

Such moves will create apprehension among partners and require measured risks from Washington. They will also require consistent and decisive U.S. responses to Iranian attacks during the transition to show that America’s reduced presence does not translate to reduced commitment, as well as a measured information operations campaign that highlights this point. Through these efforts, the administration can reassure allies that it will make good on its partnerships despite resource constraints and shifting priorities—while maintaining the capability to rapidly shift resources back to the Middle East should the need arise.

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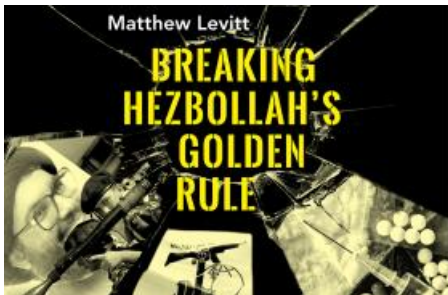
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