Beyond Forever Wars and Great Power Competition
Rethinking the U.S. Military Role in the Middle East

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In outlining its approach toward the Middle East, the Biden administration has declared that it will lead with diplomacy, right-size the U.S. military presence, and end America's involvement in costly "forever wars."[1] A Department of Defense global posture review will likely endorse the rebalancing of U.S. military forces away from the Middle East to counter the threat posed by a rising China and a resurgent Russia.[2] Although the right-sizing effort makes sense, the United States will have to address the critical challenge of using a less robust presence to deter and contain threats and advance U.S. interests in the Middle East—a conflict-prone, resource-rich region situated at the crossroads of Europe, Asia, and Africa and the intersection of vital sea, air, and land lines of communication.[3]

Images: Shutterstock, U.S. Army photo by Sgt. Torrance Saunders, U.S. Navy, Global Education Project

Avoiding the Middle East altogether may be tempting for some, although previous presidents who tried to do so were repeatedly drawn back in. Indeed, the recent Hamas-Israel conflict in Gaza has shown once again that the United States cannot ignore the region, and that "if you don't visit the Middle East, the Middle East will visit you." Yet, given the emerging global security environment, the United States is unlikely to devote as much attention and resources to this part of the world as it has in recent decades. Moreover, the region's fundamental problems are not amenable to military solutions. The challenge, then, is to develop new strategies and operational approaches that employ the military and other instruments of national power in different, more economical, and more effective ways to manage the region's conflicts and to secure American interests, as the attention of policymakers and U.S. force deployments increasingly shift to the Indo-Pacific region and elsewhere.

As the United States considers how to right-size its military presence in the Middle East, it should be recalled that after World War II, American diplomacy—often backed by the threat or use of force against adversaries, and the transfer of arms and the dispatch of military advisors to allies and partners—helped contain Soviet influence in the region, end the interstate dimension of the Arab-Israel conflict, and manage the conflict between the Israelis and Palestinians. The U.S. military likewise helped contain the Iran-Iraq War and prevented Iraq, and then Iran, from becoming regional hegemons—while ensuring the supply of Gulf oil at reasonable prices. The threat or use of force by the United States (and by allies such as Israel) also helped eliminate, contain, or delay weapons of mass destruction programs in Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Iran. Finally, the U.S. military disrupted attempts by al-Qaeda and its affiliates to launch transnational terrorist attacks, and destroyed the territorial "caliphate" of the so-called Islamic State (IS).

Yet it is hard not to conclude that the benefits of America's post-9/11 wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were greatly exceeded by their costs. Its military involvement in Libya and Syria likewise produced mixed, largely unfavorable outcomes. And the United States still struggles to counter Iran's gray zone activities.[4] When the U.S. military has squared off in the Middle East against regular armies in pursuit of well-defined military objectives, as when it expelled Iraqi forces from Kuwait in 1991, it has fared well—although major conventional wars have been the exception rather than the rule in the region since then. By contrast, efforts to use the military to deter or compel adversaries, fight insurgencies, counter gray zone activities, or achieve broad political objectives have generally produced uneven results at best. And sometimes they have catalyzed violence and exacerbated the region's political dysfunction, as occurred, for instance, in the wake of the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. These experiences must be studied and their lessons learned if the United States is to do better with less in the Middle East.

From Geopolitical Confusion to Clarity

Rethinking the U.S. military role in the Middle East first requires reassessing several narratives that now dominate public discourse about U.S. interests in the region, but which prevent clear-headed analysis.

No longer important or not as important?
Some claim that in an era of American energy independence and renewed Great Power competition, the Middle East is no longer important.[5] But as will be explained below, the Middle East remains important—it's just that managing a rising China and a resurgent Russia is more important. That said, the dynamics shaping the emerging global security environment cannot be reduced to a single organizing principle such as "Great Power competition."

More restraint—but also more realism and rigor. Others assert that the United States needs to be more restrained in the use of its military power—and to do less, with less, in the Middle East.[6] To be sure, the United States has too often pursued unattainable goals in the greater Middle East. So while greater restraint is necessary, it is not sufficient. What is also needed is a reassessment of how Washington thinks, organizes, and acts—since many of America's recent policy setbacks in the region derive from an inability to get the basics of statecraft and strategy right: to formulate realistic and attainable policies, to devise effective strategies, and to keep the ways, means, and ends of these strategies aligned.

Forever wars, endless confusion. The "forever wars" meme has only a tenuous basis in fact.[7] The Middle East is indeed a conflict-prone region, though hardly the only one in the world: Africa has long been afflicted by civil wars, Latin America by extraordinary criminal violence. While the Middle East comprised less than 2.5 percent of the world's population in 1946 and more than 4.5 percent in 2019, it generally accounted for a disproportionate share of the world's conflicts (20–33 percent) and battle deaths during this period (see figures 1, 2, and 3). Yet the region's conflicts cannot be blamed on "ancient hatreds" that have existed since "time immemorial." The proximate causes for most of the region's conflicts can be traced to events that occurred in the wake of the twentieth century's two world wars. Patterns of violence in the Middle East have, moreover, tended to reflect larger global trends. Thus, while interstate conflicts have receded throughout the world (including in the Middle East) since the end of the Cold War, intrastate (i.e., internal) conflicts declined, then rebounded—though nowhere as much as in the Middle East, following the 2010–11 Arab Spring uprisings and the establishment of the IS caliphate in 2014 (see figures 1 and 2). The involvement of violent extremist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda (or its affiliates) in these recent intrastate struggles and the regionalization and internationalization of these conflicts also tended to compound their lethality. While the wave of intrastate violence set loose by these events peaked in 2014, it has diminished significantly since then (see figure 3).[8] The forever wars meme obviates the need to consider such trends, analyze drivers of violence, and assess how these conflicts affect U.S. interests. It thus precludes effective policy analysis and prescription. America's disengagement from the region would not end these conflicts, but would have adverse consequences for the peoples of the region and for U.S. interests in the Middle East and beyond.[9]

Powder keg or simmering cauldron? Some believe that the proliferation of crosscutting conflicts in the Middle East increases the risk that a local clash could spark a regional war.[10] But as mentioned above, interstate wars are increasingly rare; the 1991 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait was the last major war between regional states, the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq the last interstate war involving an external power.[11] Indeed, the growing reliance of regional states on proxy warfare, covert action, and gray zone strategies indicates a strong desire to avoid risky and costly wars of this type. The Middle East will remain a cauldron of roiling low-intensity and irregular conflicts involving state and nonstate actors for years to come (though an Israel-Hezbollah war, for instance, could involve Iran's proxies and partners in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, and Israeli actions against Iran). Interstate wars will remain infrequent events, however, though possible interstate clashes (e.g., an Israeli preventive strike on Iran's nuclear program) are likely to morph quickly into irregular or gray zone conflicts.

Leading with diplomacy will not suffice. The Biden administration has promised to lead with diplomacy.[12] But successful diplomacy often requires the threat or use of force to create leverage, and sometimes there is no substitute for military action. The challenge posed by Salafi-jihadist terrorist groups like IS and al-Qaeda will require military-centric approaches—that is, until adequate nonmilitary approaches enable the "enduring

Figure 1. Number of Conflicts: Middle East, 1946–2019

Legend:
- Regionalized/internationalized civil wars
- Civil wars
- Interstate wars/armed conflicts
- Colonial wars of independence
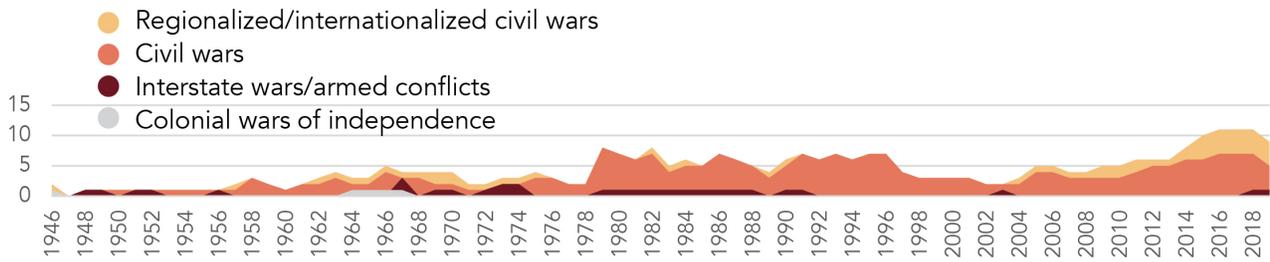
Figure 2. Number of Conflicts: Rest of World, 1946–2019

Legend:
- Regionalized/internationalized civil wars
- Civil wars
- Interstate wars/armed conflicts
- Colonial wars of independence
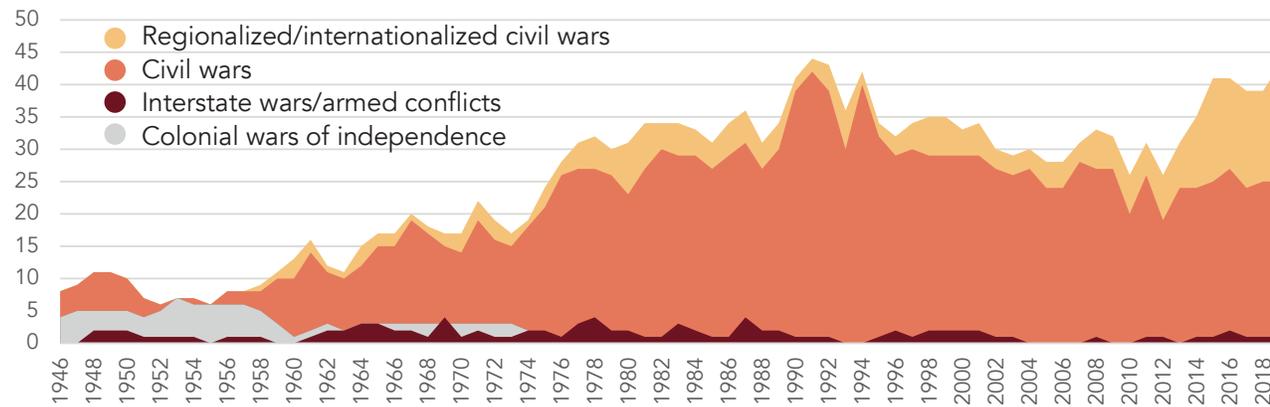
Figure 3. Battle-Related Deaths: Middle East and Rest of World, 1946–2019
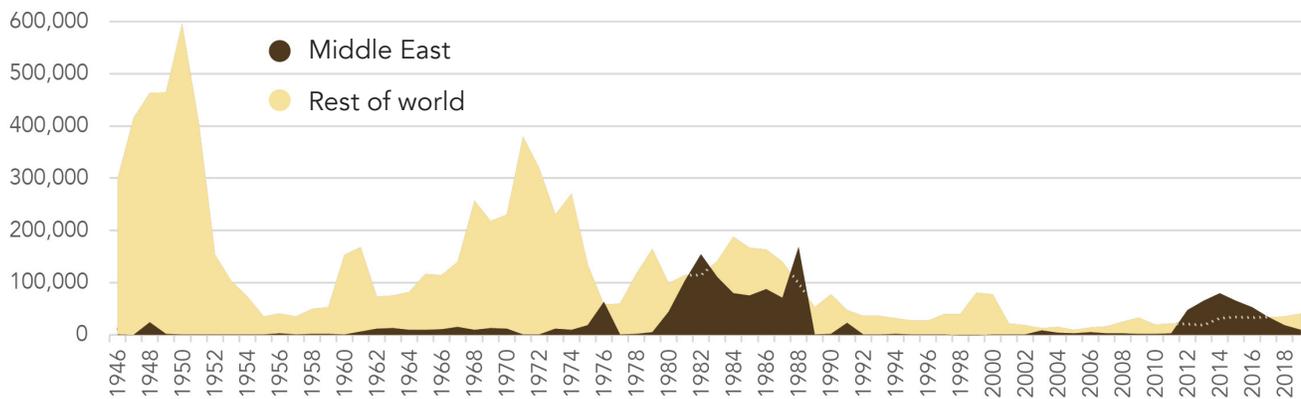
Legend:
- Middle East
- Rest of world

Notes: (1) The Middle East is defined here as Egypt, Israel, Lebanon, Syria, Jordan, Iraq, the states of the Arabian Peninsula, and Iran. (2) From 1946 to 2019, the Middle East grew from less than 2.5 percent to more than 4.5 percent of the world's population, yet for much of this period it accounted for 20–33 percent of the world's conflicts and a considerable portion of the world's battle deaths. (3) In figures 1–2, the trend line for regionalized/internationalized civil wars uses the civil war trend line as its baseline, while trend lines for all other types of conflict (civil wars, interstate wars, colonial wars of independence) use the x-axis as the baseline. The y-axes in figures 1 and 2, moreover, are drawn to the same scale to permit direct comparison. (4) The number of conflicts and battle-related deaths tallied in figures 1–3 pertain to armed conflicts and wars in which at least one belligerent was a state. (5) Only general guesstimates of battle-related deaths are possible for many armed conflicts and wars depicted in figure 3; trend lines should therefore be treated with utmost caution, as they depict only general trends/relationships.

defeat" of such groups, or at least the more effective management of the threats they pose.[13] And Iran's continued reliance on gray zone proxy attacks may sometimes require the United States to respond with force.

Beyond force and diplomacy. Many of the region's most vexing long-term challenges cannot be solved by diplomatic or military means. These challenges are structural and cultural: large youth bulges, extreme gender hierarchies, destructive governance models, conflict-prone honor cultures, and strong ethno-sectarian or tribal solidarities. To address such complex, deep-seated problems, the United States will need to employ various means that are not part of the traditional national security toolkit, and to craft new approaches to development and conflict management.

Enduring and Emerging U.S. Interests

The United States retains a number of vital and critical interests in the Middle East: oil and commerce, nonproliferation, containing regional instability, and mitigating the impact of climate change and other stressors. The region is also likely to be an arena of contention in an era of renewed Great Power competition. The United States will need the support of its traditional regional allies and partners—Israel, Jordan, the Gulf Arab states, and Egypt, among others—if it is to secure these interests.

Allies and partners. U.S. support for Israel is based on both shared values and interests. Israel makes an outsize contribution to U.S. national security, and can significantly strengthen efforts to revitalize the American economy and build a coalition of high-tech democracies to counter attempts by China, Russia, Iran, and other autocracies to undermine U.S. power and influence.[14] U.S. support for Jordan,

Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, the other Gulf states, and Egypt is based on shared interests in ensuring the supply of oil at reasonable prices, containing Iranian influence, countering violent Islamist extremism, and in some cases building climate change resilience. Preserving access, basing, and overflight rights in many of these countries will also remain key to projecting U.S. power and influence in the Middle East and neighboring regions. These relationships, however, have become increasingly fraught in recent years, as the United States has tried to disengage from the region and concluded a nuclear deal with Iran that Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE in particular viewed as a threat to their vital interests. Meanwhile, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar engaged in military misadventures in Syria, Libya, and Yemen and in debilitating internecine squabbles. Managing these strained relationships will be both increasingly difficult and increasingly important for the United States in the coming years.[15]

Oil and commerce. While the U.S. economy is no longer heavily dependent on Middle East oil, those of its allies and major trade partners still are. Any disruption of the supply of Middle East oil would harm the economies of those countries and therefore indirectly affect the United States. Three of the four most important maritime chokepoints for the international oil trade are located in the Middle East: the Strait of Hormuz, the Bab al-Mandab Strait, and the Suez Canal (the fourth is the Strait of Malacca). Every day, 30 percent of the world's internationally traded oil passes through the Strait of Hormuz, and close to 10 percent passes through the Bab al-Mandab. Moreover, 90 percent of all global trade (by volume) is shipped by sea; 12 percent passes through the Suez Canal daily. This includes more than 15 percent of global rice and wheat and more than 30 percent of potassium-based fertilizer shipments.[16] The temporary blockage of the canal in March 2021 by a grounded container ship demonstrated the sensitivity of the global economy to disruptions in maritime traffic. Freedom of navigation in the region therefore remains a vital American interest.

Figure 4. Global Distribution of ISIL-Related Terrorism Deaths, 2013–2019
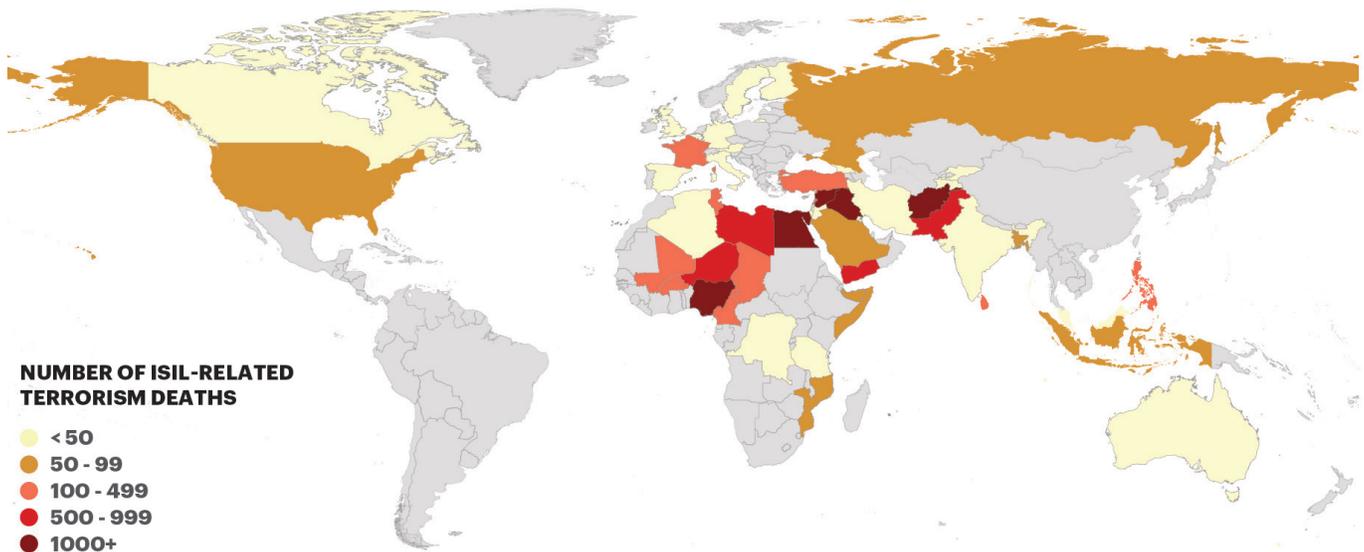
Source: *Global Terrorism Index 2020: Measuring the Impact of Terrorism* (Sydney: Institute for Economics & Peace, 2019), available at https://www.visionofhumanity.org/wp-content/uploads/2020/11/GTI-2020-web-1.pdf. Note that ISIL is an acronym for the Islamic State.

Proliferation. Many of the world's most dynamic proliferation challenges are in the Middle East. Iran's nuclear program remains a concern, and could trigger a nuclear proliferation cascade involving Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and maybe Egypt. Chemical weapons have been used by Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Libya, and probably Iran, contributing to the erosion of international norms against their use. And several countries in the region are assessed to have active chemical and biological warfare programs.

Exporting instability and violent extremism. After oil and gas, people and violent extremism are the region's main exports. Because of the location of the Middle East, developments there can have spillover effects in Europe, Asia, and Africa. Thus, the Syrian civil war created a massive refugee crisis in Europe that strengthened the continent's right-wing populist parties—many of which are pro-Russian. Moreover, intellectual and

ideological trends in Arab Islam have a profound effect on the world's 1.8 billion Muslims. The Muslim Brotherhood has inspired nonviolent and violent Islamist movements around the world, and both al-Qaeda and IS started as Arab Salafi-jihadist groups, eventually establishing franchises throughout Africa and Asia—while IS has inspired attacks in Asia, Europe, and the United States (see figure 4).

The Islamic State and Iran are the two greatest threats to the regional state system and are thus major drivers of instability. IS seeks to replace the existing state system with a jihadist caliphate. Its effort to do so in Syria and Iraq during the past decade left a swath of destruction in its wake, and the group remains a threat. By contrast, Iran projects influence by creating proxies and parallel state structures that are subject to its direction in weak or failing states, ensuring the continued frailty of these polities. Iran's efforts to expand its influence

and dominate the region have also catalyzed violent extremist groups like IS and al-Qaeda, and led to conflicts with the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia.

Building resilience against climate change and other stressors and shocks. The Middle East has been called the "canary in the coal mine" of climate change, as it is the part of the world that has been hit first and is likely to be hit hardest.[17] Climate change is expected to make parts of the region uninhabitable for humans in several decades, exacerbating conflicts and creating tens of millions of climate refugees.[18] Moreover, the Covid-19 pandemic will have long-term effects on the economies of the Middle East (as it will elsewhere), and may sharpen the legitimacy crisis that afflicts many governments in the region. And the end of the oil era—as oil reserves are depleted and the world economy shifts to renewables—will have a disastrous impact on those oil-producing states that do not diversify their economies in time.[19] Helping the region build climate change resilience and better weather other potential stressors and shocks will be a critical U.S. interest in the coming decades.

Great Power competition. As during the Cold War, the Middle East will likely be a central arena of renewed "Great Power competition" due to its resource endowments (oil and gas), business opportunities, and location at the crossroads of three continents and of vital sea, air, and land lines of communication. Russia has in recent years reestablished a military presence in Syria, Libya, and Sudan, enabling it to threaten NATO's soft underbelly, and China is playing a growing economic role in the region.

As a result of its decades-long involvement in the Middle East, the United States enjoys a significant positional advantage vis-à-vis its Great Power rivals with its political ties, military-to-military relationships, and network of bases and facilities throughout the region. These assets give the United States a significant edge over adversaries such as

China, which gets nearly 50 percent of its oil from the Middle East. In the event of a crisis with China in East Asia, the United States is positioned to exert significant countervailing pressure against its oil supplies. Washington, however, will probably not be able to maintain this advantage without some kind of residual steady-state presence, augmented from time to time with additional deployments for military exercises, to assure allies and partners and safeguard access, basing, and overflight rights.

In sum, the United States continues to have important interests in the Middle East that justify an ongoing, if less robust, military presence. And while these interests are overshadowed by the larger geopolitical imperatives of managing the rise of China and countering a resurgent Russia, the United States will neglect its abiding interests in the Middle East at its peril.

An Increasingly Complex and Challenging Operational Environment

The Middle East has always posed particular challenges for policymakers and strategists, with its ever-changing, kaleidoscopic political alignments; pendulum-like swings in the balance of power; and frequent Great Power interventions. This dynamic ensures that the benefits conferred by even decisive military victories are often short-lived, and that success in translating victories into enduring political achievements is often elusive. As a result, one round of fighting often leads to another. In addition, the existence among most of the peoples of the region of a shared Arab-Islamic identity that transcends the "artificial" boundaries created by former colonial powers has often been used as a pretext by ambitious Middle East politicians to justify their meddling in the affairs of neighboring

states.[20] Several additional factors, moreover, must figure into this discussion:

Intractable conflicts. During the Cold War, the arsenals of warring regional powers were often replenished by their Great Power patrons so that they could join battle anew even after devastating defeats (as happened after the 1967 and 1973 Arab-Israel wars). The result was often the prolongation of costly conflicts. More recently, both Sunni jihadist groups and Iran have made extensive use of foreign fighters, enabling them to sustain military operations far longer than their manpower base or politics would have otherwise allowed. This has also ensured that the impact of these conflicts is felt outside the region, as returning Sunni foreign fighters have sometimes radicalized acquaintances or engaged in terrorism. Regional states have likewise shown great ingenuity in devising gray zone strategies that have enabled them to engage in long-term competitions with much stronger adversaries by managing risk and avoiding "all out" war. And the prevalence of honor cultures and ideologies of "jihad, martyrdom, and resistance" has often complicated the resolution of conflicts— by engendering, respectively, an aversion to compromise (in order to save face) and an unshakable belief in ultimate victory.[21] The tendency of jihadists to engage in self-destructive internecine struggles, as well as their willingness to incur great costs in the pursuit of often quixotic objectives, has also frequently undermined their popularity among erstwhile supporters and jeopardized the viability of the polities they have tried to establish.[22] This dynamic has played out repeatedly in areas controlled by IS and al-Qaeda, as well as with Hamas in Gaza, with Hezbollah in Lebanon, and with the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Failed states and civil wars. The Arab Spring uprisings of the 2010s led to a series of failed states and civil wars that have had regional and global spillover effects. These failed states are likely to remain broken for many years to come, as states that have experienced civil war run a heightened risk of relapse.[23] Indeed, nearly all of the region's weak, failing, or failed states—Libya, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen—endured civil war previously. Several recent developments have further complicated this picture: (1) the growing independence and assertiveness of America's traditional partners in response to the latter's post-2011 disengagement from the region; (2) the rise of regional powers such as Turkey and Iran from the ashes of the old regional order; and (3) the growing Russian military role in the region. These developments have led to the regionalization and internationalization of the region's civil wars, thereby prolonging them and increasing their human toll. The United States and its traditional allies have sometimes found themselves on opposite sides of these conflicts, resulting in tensions that have required deft diplomacy to manage.

Enduring terrorist threats. Nearly two decades after 9/11, al-Qaeda has splintered into local franchises, while the Islamic State's physical caliphate has been destroyed; neither group is capable of launching terrorist spectaculars overseas. Yet their affiliates are active in more places on more continents than ever before, and have adopted a strategy of embedding themselves in local societies and conflicts that will make these groups much more difficult to expunge.[24] Moreover, the current generation of Sunni and Shia jihadists are in their twenties and thirties and will therefore be around for decades to come. And because the U.S. military seeks the "enduring defeat" of groups like IS by eliminating ungoverned spaces and restoring the very state system that contributed to the development of these groups in the first place, it is likely that at least some of them will rise again in the future.[25] To address this ongoing threat, the U.S. counterterrorism toolkit will need to be enlarged to include a range of nonmilitary tools and approaches.[26]

Increasing low- and high-end military threats. The United States will also face a more complex military threat environment in the Middle East,

consisting of both low- and high-end threats. The government labs of the Great Powers no longer enjoy a monopoly over state-of-the-art research and development, which increasingly occurs in private-sector labs in a growing number of states worldwide. As a result, the diffusion of radical leveling technologies and capabilities will enable some developing countries to close the qualitative gap with the United States in a number of critical areas. For instance, Iran demonstrated an advanced long-range precision-strike capability when it launched a combined drone and cruise missile attack on Saudi oil facilities in September 2019. The Houthis of Yemen have demonstrated a similar capability (courtesy of Iran) on several occasions since then.

Iran is also already experimenting with combat drones and drone swarms enabled by artificial intelligence (AI), and it won't be long before other state and nonstate actors do so as well. These could be used to conduct targeted killings, to inflict catastrophic rapid attrition on the battlefield, and as potential weapons of mass disruption and destruction targeting civilian and military infrastructure.[27] Likewise, the biotech and genomic revolutions may facilitate the development of more potent and advanced chemical and biological agents. And the 3D printing revolution may eventually aid the proliferation of advanced conventional arms and weapons of mass destruction by facilitating the production of key components using clandestinely obtained digital build files.[28]

Finally, the cyber revolution has arrived. Just as those who perpetrated the 9/11 attacks used America's civil aviation system to attack it, America's enemies around the world (including jihadist groups and state actors like Iran) are exploiting the openness of the U.S. social media ecosystem and the vulnerability of its information technology backbone to (1) recruit terrorists and inspire terror attacks; (2) steal America's industrial secrets; and (3) foment tensions in American politics and society. State actors like Iran also see their

cyber capabilities as a means to deter U.S. cyber activities, conduct strategically significant attacks, and gain strategic advantage over the United States without resorting to force or going to war.[29]

Reconsidering How the United States Thinks, Organizes, and Acts Militarily

Many of America's recent setbacks in the Middle East and elsewhere have stemmed from a tendency to pursue unrealistic goals. American policymakers need to abandon their embrace of foreign policy "solutionism"—the belief that with sufficient time, resources, and effort, any problem can be solved (and if it can't, it isn't worthy of attention).[30] The Middle East's complex, deep-rooted problems cannot be "solved"—at least for now—but crises and conflicts will need to be "managed." Freezing conflicts or playing the role of spoiler may be the best way to advance U.S. interests in such circumstances. While these alternative policy approaches may lack appeal to American policymakers used to playing the role of regional peacemaker or hegemon, they could halt humanitarian disasters, deny victory to adversaries, and otherwise advance U.S. interests at a much lower cost in blood and treasure than pursuing transformational goals. In many cases, that will be good enough.[31]

The United States must also become more adept at the limited use of force in conflicts short of war and as part of long-term competitions with adversaries like Iran—in order to deter aggression, defend its interests, bolster diplomacy, and secure a position of advantage. To do so, American policymakers will need to put aside the vocabulary and mental models shaped by (1) the U.S. experience deterring nuclear-armed adversaries during the

Cold War; (2) conventional conflicts during the thirty-year "unipolar moment" that followed the end of the Cold War, in which the United States enjoyed dramatic conventional overmatch against its enemies; and (3) the Clausewitzian tradition of military victory through decisive battle, which is less relevant to the kind of conflicts that the United States now often finds itself involved in. These experiences and legacies have stunted America's military thinking and limited its strategic imagination.

American policymakers tend to look at conflict through a conventional warfare lens that emphasizes decisive force ("Go big or go home"), clear-cut outcomes or end-states ("Tell me how this ends"), and time-limited engagements ("What is our exit strategy?"), and that conceives of deterrence and the use of force in binary terms.[32] Thus, efforts to deter are often assessed in either/or terms, and military options too often come down to "all in" or "not in." Instead, policymakers need to (1) conceive of deterrence as a dynamic, messy, and "contested" process that often yields mixed results, rather than a state that can be "restored" by the episodic use of force; (2) become more comfortable with conflicts characterized by ambiguity, incrementalism, and open-endedness; and (3) think in terms of long-term competitions that are not won by "knockout blows" but whose central dynamic is the incessant pursuit of leverage and advantage.[33] They should likewise study how Russia (in Syria), Turkey (in Syria and Libya), and Israel (also in Syria) have used limited force to advance their interests without leading to further escalation or creating costly quagmires for themselves.

Getting Strategy "Right": Aligning Ways, Means, and Ends

Strategy is about choosing appropriate "ways" and adequate "means" to achieve realistic and attainable "ends"—while ensuring that all three elements remain aligned as the strategy is tested against

reality. For this reason, strategy, properly understood, is a learning process. The U.S. government, however, has failed to meet these prerequisites for success in nearly all its military interventions in the Middle East in the past twenty years:

- **Iraq, 2003–11:** The United States invaded Iraq in 2003 with sufficient forces to overthrow the regime but not to stabilize the country, and it withdrew in 2011 after finally stabilizing the country, but before achieving the national reconciliation among Iraqis that it claimed was necessary to ensure a sustainable political outcome.[34]

- **Syria, 2014–15:** The United States conditioned its support for Syrian rebels being trained by the U.S. military on their willingness to fight IS, whereas most wanted to fight the Assad regime. This mismatch in motivations (which resulted in the rebels being underresourced) ensured that many rebel recruits gravitated to IS—the very group that the United States wanted them to defeat.

- **Islamic State, 2015–present:** The U.S. military strategy for ensuring the "enduring defeat" of the Islamic State is predicated in part on the restoration of the very same state system whose autocratic, zero-sum, winner-takes-all approach to politics contributed to the rise of IS in the first place.

- **Iran, 2018–21:** By trying to cut Tehran's oil exports to zero, the U.S. "maximum pressure" policy effectively cornered Iran and incentivized its use of force in response. And because the United States did not respond militarily to Iran's initial attacks, Tehran became emboldened, resulting in the very escalation that Washington had hoped to avoid.

Recurrent U.S. failures to align ways, means, and ends while pursuing realistic objectives are also rooted, at least partly, in organizational

factors—particularly the tendency of the Washington-based "interagency" to break down complex geopolitical problems into discrete "issues" (e.g., terrorism, nonproliferation, deterrence, sanctions enforcement, human rights, climate change) that are dealt with within stovepiped bureaucracies, thereby hampering holistic policy approaches. Part of the solution lies in the creation of structures and processes—at the National Security Council and elsewhere—that facilitate, rather than hinder, a holistic understanding of the operational environment and an integrated approach to shaping and influencing it.

Rethinking Deterrence

The United States has repeatedly faced deterrence challenges from anti–status quo actors in the Middle East. These include (1) the Islamic Republic of Iran's reliance on proxies and covert or unac-knowledged activities as part of its gray zone strategy (1979–present); (2) Syria's use of chemical weapons during its civil war (2011–present); and (3) Iraq's challenges to United Nations weapons inspections and U.S. no-fly zones in the decade following the 1991 Gulf War. As the United States lightens its force footprint in the Middle East, internalizing the key lessons of past deterrence efforts will be essential if Washington is to avoid being sucked back into the region in response to challenges to critical interests there.

The most important lesson is that due to asymme-tries in motivation and focus, the United States—a Great Power with global commitments—cannot respond with "decisive force" to every low-level challenge by determined Middle East adversaries. As a result, deterrence is rarely if ever absolute. Success in such circumstances consists of deterring the most destabilizing activities, while forcing adversaries to act by less effective means. Moreover, experience shows that in most cases, deterrence effects are short-lived—and deterrence messages have to be constantly reinforced. That said, to more

effectively deter, policy should be guided by the following principles:

- **Capability *and* credibility:** Experience shows that it is not the size or capability of forward deployed forces that deters, but rather U.S. credibility. Thus, forward deployed carrier strike groups have frequently failed to deter attacks by Iran on U.S. interests, while putting the carriers at risk and overworking them through back-to-back deployments (see box, "Send in the Carriers!").[35] The United States can surge forces into the region when necessary, but it cannot surge credibility—which must be cultivated by consistent shows of commitment and resolve. In this way, a small, actively engaged force may more effectively deter than a larger, more robust force limited to conducting only presence patrols.

- **Respond more consistently, act more unpredictably:** To demonstrate commitment and resolve, the United States should respond more consistently to adversary tests and challenges, and act more unpredictably when it does respond—hitting assets that the adversary truly values in order to alter the latter's risk and cost-benefit calculus. Too often, however, U.S. policymakers have not responded to challenges, emboldening America's adversaries and resulting in the very escalation they were trying to avoid; or they have tended to respond predictably, thereby making it easier for the adversary to manage risk.

- **Denial *and* punishment:** The United States has often preferred to deter by denial, which it considers less escalatory but which requires a large forward footprint (e.g., patrol boats, mine countermeasure vessels, air and missile defenses). But deterrence by denial also permits the adversary to calibrate risks and costs by wagering only those assets it is willing to lose. An approach that relies more on punishment would enable the United States to deter with a lighter footprint that can be reinforced if

"Send in the Carriers!"
Carrier Deployments and the Deterrence of Iranian "Malign" Activities

Since the 1991 Gulf War, the United States has kept a carrier strike group (CSG) and an amphibious ready group (ARG) in the Persian Gulf region throughout most of the year.[*] Especially in times of tension, the United States has tried to ensure that it had a CSG in the region, with its significant power projection capability (dozens of strike aircraft and potentially hundreds of Tomahawk cruise missiles) to deter adversaries like Iran from engaging in destabilizing activities. But forward-deployed CSGs have frequently failed to deter attacks by Iran on U.S. interests, while putting the carriers at risk and overworking them through back-to-back deployments. Indeed, some of Iran's most audacious "malign" activities have occurred when the United States had a CSG in the region.

The following incidents, for instance, all occurred during periods of heightened tension with Iran, when the United States had one or two CSGs in the Gulf region:

- In June 2011, fourteen U.S. troops were killed in a series of rocket attacks by pro-Iran proxies in Iraq as U.S. forces prepared to withdraw from the country.

- In October 2011, the United States publicized an Iranian plot to kill the Saudi ambassador to the United States that it had foiled.

- In November 2012 and possibly March 2013, Iran tried to shoot down a U.S. drone in the Gulf, in response to intensified U.S. reconnaissance activities around and over Iran.

- In May 2019, Iran launched a counterpressure campaign against the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy, including limpet mine attacks on six oil tankers in the Gulf region in May–June 2019, a proxy drone strike on the Saudi East-West oil pipeline in May 2019, and a drone/cruise missile strike on Saudi oil facilities in September of that year.

- In June 2019, Iran shot down a Global Hawk drone skirting Iranian airspace.

- In December 2019, pro-Iran proxies ramped up rocket attacks on U.S. forces in Iraq, killing an American civilian contractor.

- In January 2020, Iran retaliated for the killing of Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps–Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani by launching sixteen missiles at al-Asad Air Base in Iraq, causing traumatic brain injuries to more than a hundred U.S. airmen.

- In March 2020, pro-Iran proxies killed three coalition soldiers (two Americans, one British) in a rocket attack on Camp Taji in Iraq despite the presence of two carriers in the Gulf region.

At other times, however, the assertive use of a carrier strike group has deterred Iranian actions. Thus, an Iranian naval convoy attempting to deliver arms to Houthi forces in Yemen in April 2015 turned back after a CSG and an ARG converged on the convoy and their aircraft conducted routine daily flybys, to generate persistent pressure on the Iranians. Iran subsequently sent a "humanitarian" convoy in a show of defiance while it pursued alternative, less risky means to deliver arms to the Houthis.

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[*] Secretary of Defense William J. Perry, "Report to the President on the Protection of U.S. Forces Deployed Abroad," September 15, 1996, https://fas.org/irp/threat/downing/report_f.html. A carrier strike group usually consists of one aircraft carrier (with 36–48 strike fighters), one cruiser, 3–4 destroyers, and one attack submarine. An amphibious ready group usually consists of one large amphibious assault ship (with six strike fighters) and two smaller vessels: an amphibious transport dock and a dock landing ship.

necessary, though it will take time for U.S. commanders to become comfortable using a lighter footprint more assertively.[36]

Deterrence is a core national security competency; thus, restoring the U.S. government's conventional deterrence skills will be essential if the United States is to effectively manage future challenges in the Middle East and elsewhere—and to assure allies and partners. Concerns about the escalatory potential of a more assertive deterrence posture, moreover, can be mitigated by the adoption of a gray zone *deterrence* strategy.

Mastering the Gray Zone

Several of the world's foremost "gray zone" actors are in the Middle East: states such as Iran and Syria and nonstate actors such as Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraq's Kataib Hezbollah, and Yemen's Houthis. The gray zone modus operandi is based on three core principles: (1) incrementalism; (2) preserving a degree of deniability *via* proxy action or covert/unacknowledged unilateral activities; and (3) avoiding decisive engagement of the enemy. Its entire purpose is to defeat adversary deterrence efforts and enable the gray zone actor to advance its interests while avoiding escalation and war. The United States, however, has repeatedly struggled to respond effectively to this asymmetric "way of war."[37]

The United States should counter these gray zone actors by developing a gray zone deterrence strategy of its own. Such a strategy would employ *all* the instruments of national power to deter, and if deterrence fails, it would rely mainly on covert or unacknowledged U.S. activities to create uncertainty, pose dilemmas, and impose costs—in order to complicate the risk and cost-benefit calculations of its adversaries. Such an approach would pose for America's adversaries many of the policy dilemmas that their gray zone strategies have posed for Washington.

It would also enable Washington to push back against the destabilizing activities of adversaries in ways that are less likely to hinder diplomacy, roil a war-weary American public, or unsettle allies and partners. Indeed, such an approach would enable the United States to more effectively engage in long-term competitions that are won on points rather than "knockout" blows. And it would permit the United States to deter Iran and other adversaries with a light force footprint at modest costs (gray zone activities tend to be small, low-optempo operations). Yet the threat of escalating to de-escalate needs to remain part of the U.S. gray zone toolkit, as escalation dominance—embodied by America's unrivaled power-projection and precision-strike capabilities—constitutes one of its most potent asymmetric advantages vis-à-vis regional adversaries.

Finally, the deliberate pacing and spacing of activities (core features of gray zone operational art) can help address concerns that AI will result in future battles being fought at hyperspeed—causing military operations to spin out of the control of generals and politicians.[38] By carefully pacing gray zone activities and limiting most military engagements to deliberate set-piece actions of short duration, planners and strategists can mitigate the risk posed by AI, and ensure that military technology and operations remain the servants of strategy and policy.

Fighting "By, With, and Through"

In the past decade, the United States or U.S.-led coalitions have provided enabling support to several "by, with, and through" operations led by state and nonstate partners, in pursuit of shared objectives. These include Iraq's Counter Terrorism Service against IS (2014–present); the Syrian Democratic Forces (comprised of Kurdish and Arab fighters) against IS (2017–present); Emirati forces targeting al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and supporting local forces arrayed against that group in Yemen (2016–present);[39] and Israel's gray zone

campaign against Iran's military entrenchment in Syria (2017–present).[40] Yet failed efforts by the U.S. military to train and equip vetted rebel groups to fight IS during the Syrian civil war (2014–15) show that it is not always possible to find partners who are capable of leading such efforts and whose interests align with those of the United States.[41]

As the United States rebalances toward the Indo-Pacific region, it should continue to seek opportunities to work by, with, and through regional partners to counter transnational terrorist groups and Iran. Moreover, the recent normalization agreements between Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain and quiet security cooperation between Israel and Saudi Arabia may pave the way for multilateral by, with, and through efforts in the region. To this end, the United States should support the creation of a regional maritime surveillance architecture with allies and partners to monitor threats to sea lines of communication and interdict Iranian arms transfers to its proxies, and help establish a regional missile defense architecture involving Israel and its Arab security partners.

Rethinking Security Force Assistance

Although the United States has poured billions of dollars into security force assistance (SFA) efforts in the Middle East, most partner Arab militaries are incapable of working with their American counterparts to accomplish common objectives.[42] With U.S. focus shifting to the Indo-Pacific region, the United States needs competent Arab military partners capable of leading "by, with, and through" efforts more than ever before.

Many of the factors that prevent Arab partner militaries from becoming competent organizations are cultural and organizational, and can be fixed only by the partner nations.[43] (For instance, their tendency to rely on brute-force approaches to counterinsurgency—rooted in a zero-sum,

winner-takes-all political culture—often perpetuates the grievances that spawned the insurgency in the first place.[44]) But too often the U.S. military tries to remake Arab armed forces in its own image. U.S. trainers and advisors attempt to create strong noncommissioned officer corps and emphasize the need for initiative, improvisation, and the coordination of combined arms—ways of operating and a style of fighting that run counter to deeply rooted, culturally grounded habits in most Arab militaries. This is a formula for failure. Rather, U.S. forces should train these militaries to fight in a manner better suited to their cultural inclinations and operational requirements.

Doing so will require the U.S. military to approach the task in a very different way than it has in the past. Indeed, the United States must devote the same creativity, sustained focus, and seriousness of purpose to the SFA mission that it does to building up its own combat capabilities. The United States will need to experiment with new approaches to SFA and be willing to make mistakes. And it should learn from successful Arab efforts to rebuild militaries after defeat (e.g., the Egyptian military in the run-up to the 1973 war and the Iraqi military in the final phases of the Iran-Iraq War). These efforts show that heavily scripted set-piece operations can obviate the need for initiative, improvisation, or the coordination of combined arms, and can yield dramatic results without generational, transformational change.[45]

A Drone and Missile Defense "Manhattan Project"

Increasingly, the United States faces adversaries—such as Iran, China, North Korea, and Russia—that rely on drones and surface-to-surface missiles as the central pillar of their antiaccess/area-denial (A2AD) arrays and warfighting capabilities.[46] Everywhere, expensive U.S. and allied missile defenses risk being overwhelmed by much cheaper

and more numerous adversary drones and missiles. As these systems become more accurate, they will ensure that future wars are more costly and may even determine their outcome. The dependence of adversaries like Iran on drones and missiles could, however, become a liability if those capabilities could be neutralized.[47] Given flat or declining U.S. spending on missile defense, the United States and Israel—longtime collaborators in this area—should engage in a crash effort with high-tech allies (e.g., France, Germany, Britain, Japan, and South Korea), as well as deep-pocketed partners (e.g., the UAE and Saudi Arabia), to dramatically increase drone and missile defense R&D and to investigate promising cyber, directed energy (laser and microwave), and kinetic means of countering the threat.

Information Operations and Activities

Information operations and activities—the use of words, actions, and emotive appeals to sway foreign audiences—have been critical to the success of America's adversaries in the Middle East, and should be central to America's regional strategy. Violent extremist groups like IS, al-Qaeda, and Hezbollah and states like Iran engage in incessant efforts to undermine the image, credibility, and stature of their enemies, and their military activities are often undertaken as much to achieve an informational or psychological advantage—to enhance their stature, gain supporters, or intimidate and demoralize their enemies—as to achieve battle-field gains. Thus, whereas the United States gener-ally undertakes information operations to support its military activities, its adversaries frequently undertake military activities to advance their propaganda and information warfare aims.[48]

Even when the importance of information opera-tions and activities has been recognized, as in the struggle against IS and al-Qaeda, these activities have often been underresourced.[49] Because rhetorical and emotional appeals—as well as

rumormongering and conspiratorial thinking—are central to the practice of politics in much of the region, information operations are perhaps the greatest untapped source of U.S. leverage in the Middle East. Thus, U.S. military activities should always be conducted with an eye toward helping shape the psychological environment. Information operations and activities, moreover, should be much more heavily resourced and should play a central role in the ongoing campaigns against violent extremist groups such as IS and al-Qaeda, in America's long-term competition with Iran, and in countering other threats from the region.[50]

Regional Cooperative Security Frameworks

The idea of creating a regional security forum for dialogue or, more ambitiously, a regional cooperative security organization (perhaps modeled after the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe) to reduce tensions and create a venue for addressing the region's security challenges has been around for decades. Recently, the idea has been revived as a way to reduce rising regional tensions and mitigate the effects of an anticipated U.S. military drawdown in the Middle East.[51] Given that existing entities such as the Arab League and the Gulf Cooperation Council have failed—despite their relatively homogenous membership—to play effective roles as cooperative security organizations, it is hard to imagine a regional security forum or cooperative security organization with an even more diverse membership (e.g., the Arab states, Iran, and Israel) succeeding. Moreover, some regional states—such as Syria and Iran—have repeatedly rejected modest confidence- and security-building measures that they believe would consolidate an unfavorable status quo.

The Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe succeeded because it emerged against the

background of a relaxation of global tensions during the era of détente between the United States and the Soviet Union. Both Great Powers had abandoned hopes of altering the post–World War II status quo in Europe by force—a status quo bolstered by NATO's conventional and nuclear deterrent forces. In today's Middle East, by contrast, tensions are intensifying, as hegemonic aspirants like Iran and Turkey play a growing role in the politics of the region. That said, if such an idea were to gain traction, a residual U.S. military presence would be necessary to provide the confidence needed for a cooperative security forum or organization to succeed. Yet such an organization could provide a useful venue for addressing various shared soft security challenges—such as climate change, environmental degradation, public health, maritime piracy, and human trafficking.

Beyond "Forever Wars": Structural and Cultural Risk Factors and Climate Change Stressors

Individuals may resort to violence for all sorts of reasons. But as the ancient Greek historian Thucydides said, the sources of group conflict are the same everywhere: fear, honor, and interest.[52] And while some societies are relatively successful at regulating conflict, others are not, due to the presence of structural or cultural risk factors that make political conflict and violence more likely.[53]

These risk factors may include demographic pressures, extreme gender hierarchies, destructive governance models, and cultural factors—such as conflict-prone honor cultures and strong ethno-sectarian or tribal solidarities. They often differ from state to state and interact in subtle and complex ways. And they may be exacerbated by stressors such as climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, and economic shocks.

Demographic Pressures

Rapid population growth, large youth bulges, and rapid urbanization have long been associated with conflict, violence, and political instability—especially when combined with inadequate job creation for a growing youth cohort.[54] Between 1945 and 2000, the Middle East was the fastest-growing region in the world (followed closely by Africa). However, since the turn of the century, most of the region has entered a period of demographic transition with dramatic declines in fertility rates—although Iraq, Yemen, and Gaza remain regional outliers in this regard. Yet relatively high population growth rates will continue for years to come due to demographic momentum.[55] While the relative youth of the region's population (in most countries, more than half of the population is below age thirty) allows for the possibility of a growth dividend should job creation catch up with population gains, there is a heightened potential for instability if that does not occur.[56]

Extreme Gender Hierarchies

Nearly all human societies are patriarchal and are characterized by some degree of gender hierarchy and gender violence.[57] But societies characterized by extreme gender hierarchies—as represented by low female workplace participation rates, high fertility rates, and high rates of intimate-partner violence—tend to be more prone to civil conflict and external aggression than others. This is because such societies are more likely to act on and to externalize the hierarchy and violence that underpin their domestic social arrangements.[58] The Arab Middle East has the lowest female workplace participation rates, some of the highest fertility rates (at least in

conflict zones like Iraq, Yemen, and the Gaza Strip), and some of the highest rates of intimate-partner violence in the world. For instance, female work-place participation rates in the Middle East range from 10 percent to 50 percent, with non-Arab Iran registering at around 17 percent, and most other countries in the region in the 20 percent range.[59]

Destructive Governance Models

Nearly all human societies were once organized tribally. Europe and China created strong states that largely supplanted kinship-based structures, but in the Middle East, tribal values—and often tribal structures—continue to shape, if not dominate, politics.[60] Thus, nearly all Arab governments in the region—whether so-called republics, monarchies, or consociational democracies—are rooted in patrimonial power structures based on strong ethno-sectarian or tribal solidarities and a zero-sum, winner-takes-all approach to politics. This political culture tends to produce repressive, authoritarian police (*mukhabarat*) states.[61]

The "republican" Arab regimes have proven least stable—perhaps due to a lack of legitimacy, as many are the result of coups or revolutions.[62] Consequently, these regimes often try to generate popular support and legitimacy through nationalist and religious appeals, and by conjuring up domestic and foreign enemies.[63] The Arab monarchies, by contrast, have by and large proven the most stable and resilient, perhaps because—as some have suggested—their political structures better reflect the ethos of their societies.[64]

For more than 2,500 years, Iran was ruled by absolutist kings, a legacy reflected today in a propensity for authoritarianism.[65] In the Islamic Republic, monarchy gave way to a resilient, hybrid system in which quasidemocratic processes are used to legitimize a militarized theocracy consisting of revolutionary institutions (the Supreme Leader,

Guardian Council, and Revolutionary Guard) that counterbalance traditional state institutions (the presidency, parliament, and regular military). Iran's efforts to export this model via its proxies have compounded the governance challenges that several weak or failing Arab states in the region now face.

In Israel, political fragmentation, rampant political tribalism (encouraged by both Jewish and Arab politicians), and Israeli-Palestinian violence have led to polarization, reinforcing the rightward turn of the Jewish electorate. The result has been a gridlocked political system that precludes decisions on critical issues, and a dynamic that hinders the emergence of an inclusive politics that could bridge divisions between secular and religious, left and right, as well as Jews and Arabs.

Cultural Factors

Honor cultures and powerful ethno-sectarian and tribal solidarities are among the most striking manifestations of the enduring influence of tribal values on politics in the region. But values and practices that may have once served as functional adaptations in pastoral or nomadic communities are now a drag on political development and a catalyst for conflict and violence.[66] Numerous studies suggest that honor cultures—which are found around the world, including parts of the United States and most of the Middle East—tend to set a lower bar for violence than other cultures. (This may help explain the particularly high rates of violent crime, by the standards of developed countries, in parts of the United States where honor cultures prevail.[67])

Moreover, the reliance on ethno-sectarian and tribal solidarities as a means of political mobilization in the Middle East tends to result in political tribalism and a zero-sum, winner-takes-all approach to politics. This often leads to authoritarian forms of governance, fuels conflict and violence at home and

abroad, and hinders postconflict reconciliation.[68] And in conflicts involving belligerents shaped by honor cultures, a preoccupation with "face" may influence the way they fight—resulting in the acceptance of greater risk and heavier casualties—and may complicate efforts to bring the fighting to an end.[69] In all these diverse ways, then, cultural beliefs and values shape and are embedded in structures, institutions, and processes.

In this discussion about honor cultures, politics, and conflict, Israel is something of a regional outlier.[70] Honor cultures do not define the Israeli political mainstream. But a strong ethos of assertive nationalism born of two millennia of persecution and powerlessness and, more recently, the hostility of its neighbors, combined with a small but growing and politically influential current of extreme nationalism, has sometimes exacerbated tensions and contributed to violence with its Arab neighbors.

Climate Change and Other Stressors

Climate change, environmental degradation, pandemics, and economic shocks (as a result, for example, of shifting trade routes or natural resource depletion) can exacerbate the aforementioned risk factors. Abundant research has shown how these stressors have, throughout history, contributed to the failure of states and to the collapse of empires and civilizations.[71] Here, the Middle East faces a number of acute challenges.

In the Middle East—the "canary in the coal mine" of climate change—drought contributed to the Syrian civil war and the rise of IS in Iraq. Water shortages—due to rapid population growth, overuse, mismanagement, and drought—have worsened the human impacts of the war in Yemen.[72] In just a few decades, climate change may make parts of the region uninhabitable by humans, resulting in tens of millions of climate refugees. The loss in

productivity caused by the Covid-19 pandemic will also likely have long-term effects on the economies of the region and further undermine the legitimacy of some of its governments. And the end of the oil era—as reserves are depleted in the coming decades and the world economy shifts to renewables—will likely jeopardize the economic future of those oil-producing states that do not diversify their economies.

These challenges cannot be dealt with by diplomatic or military means alone. Addressing them holistically will require long-term political and socioeconomic developmental approaches, employing means that transcend the traditional national security policy toolkit. To this end, the U.S. Agency for International Development should be better resourced to strengthen its partnerships with NGOs, international organizations, and foreign government agencies, with the aim of addressing demographic pressures, gender hierarchies, and destructive governance models, as well as building climate change resilience and diversifying regional economies.[73] These soft security challenges pose as much a threat to national security as do the hard security challenges of terrorism, proliferation, and renewed Great Power competition. The normalization agreements signed by Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain (as well as Morocco and Sudan) may, however, permit first steps toward the kind of regional and global partnerships necessary to address these looming issues.[74]

Conclusion

The Middle East remains important to the United States as an arena of current and future Great Power competition, and because developments there have potentially far-reaching consequences for the stability and security of Europe, Asia, and Africa

and for the global economy. The U.S. Defense Department's force posture review will have to make difficult tradeoffs to ensure that an over-stretched force is capable of securing enduring U.S. interests in the Middle East, while countering a rising China and a resurgent Russia.

Efforts to "right-size" the U.S. military presence in the Central Command region are a necessary step toward this end. But these need to be joined with parallel efforts to get back to the basics of statecraft and strategy, and to reconsider how the

U.S. national security enterprise thinks, organizes, and acts in the Middle East. Many of the challenges that the United States will confront there in the coming years (e.g., deterrence, gray zone activities, the growing drone and missile threat, and climate change–induced stresses) are challenges that it will confront in other parts of the world. And if the United States cannot meet the challenges posed by third-tier powers and nonstate actors in the Middle East, it is unlikely to fare much better against Great Power rivals in the Middle East, East Asia, or Europe. ❖

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