



## **U.S. Strategy and Presence in the Middle East Amid Great Power Competition**

*A Response from Morgan Ortagus*

A successful U.S. strategy toward the Middle East will focus on three aspects: preserving the stability of friendly governments and their ability to perform counterterrorism operations advanced over the past 20 years at the lowest financial, military, and diplomatic cost to the United States; deterring and containing Iranian aggression; and expanding on the diplomatic and social progress made by the Abraham Accords. As tempting as it is to withdraw more forces from the Middle East, if we remain at current levels without increasing, we can continue to take actions necessary to ensure that the balance of power and regional dynamics do not destabilize to the point that a more significant U.S. intervention is required.

Ten years ago, the United States tested the premise that we could withdraw forces from unstable conditions in the Middle East when we withdrew from Iraq. The emergence of ISIS sent us back in only three years later. We will see an early taste of how this tactic works again when the final U.S. forces leave Afghanistan in September.

It is perhaps an attractive geopolitical prospect to relocate nearly all our troops out of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) theater in order to prepare for potential attacks from China and Russia, the more critical foes in the era of great-power competition. However, we should consider the possible ramifications of such a move:

- A disintegration of the Iraqi state, with Iran and its proxies gaining considerable influence

- A reconstitution of al-Qaeda across Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, the Arabian Peninsula, and the Sahel
- Deposition and replacement of friendly (even if not liberal democratic) governments in the Gulf and Levant by Sunni or Shi'a extremists, transforming the regional power dynamic

As a democracy, we must also recognize the reality of the political will of the American people. There is simply no appetite across either major political party for an increase of American troop presence in the Middle East. Thus, the United States must focus on a small, counterterrorism footprint in CENTCOM dedicated to disrupting terror operations and keeping critical intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities in place. We do not need to move aircraft carriers in the Persian Gulf whenever Saudi Arabia is attacked, but we should not invite a scenario where the Middle East's security degrades to the point that we are compelled to return large numbers of forces back into the region in a repeat of the 2014 anti-ISIS campaign. Instead, we should maintain a light footprint—intelligence operations and ISR assets, counterterror strike brigades, and rapid response units—in Iraq and Afghanistan as long as conditions require our presence.

Continuing to stabilize the Middle East is an important investment that will pay significant dividends. Congress should invest in a revitalized diplomatic corps (accompanied by major reforms in the Foreign Service) to push the region's autocratic and near-failed states toward more consistent and ongoing transparency, reforms, and accountability to their populations. While Americans understandably do not want to see large deployments of troops in the Middle East, a substantial increase in diplomatic presence, including in Iraq where most diplomats have been withdrawn, will be essential to push forward genuine democratic reforms. Progress may take decades, but shifting the burden toward the diplomacy and development side of the budget will be a more realistic long-term solution for a region where America's military has been hyper focused for far too long.

America cannot achieve any of its goals in the region without containing Iran. It is the linchpin to securing fragile nation-states and preventing the worst-case scenarios from occurring. Today, the regime is the last major impediment to widespread peace in the Middle East. We must remember that Iran remains the world's last revolutionary regime, ideologically committed at the most senior levels to regional and eventually world domination. The United States has two main strategic interests toward Iran: curbing their support and funding of terror operations and preventing them from acquiring a nuclear weapon. Since 2012, Iran has provided more than \$16 billion in

financial support to the Assad regime, Iraqi militias, and other terror proxies, including Hezbollah, Hamas, and the Houthis. They continue to harbor senior al-Qaeda leadership and have provided them with an operational headquarters and logistical support to fundraise, communicate, and organize attacks. Unfortunately, the deal that the Biden administration is close to sealing would provide the Iranian regime with \$90 billion in sanctions relief along with an additional \$50 billion in oil revenue annually. This will undo much of the progress made over the past four years to stabilize the Middle East.

The United States, along with Israel, is still quite capable of preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon, and the past five U.S. presidents have all pledged to do so. This should remain a top priority for all U.S. administrations, as an Iranian regime equipped with a nuclear weapon would wield enormous leverage over its rivals, spark an arms race in the region, and be a dangerous proliferation risk. The regime has already transferred significant missile technology to Hamas and Hezbollah, which Hamas used in May to fire long-range missiles at Israeli cities for the first time. Long-range ballistic missiles paired with a nuclear weapon would threaten Israel as well as NATO allies in Europe. Unfortunately, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) permits Iran to pursue a rapid nuclear breakout in 2031. In the absence of a permanently denuclearized Iran, the United States should continue to provide Israel with all the assets and support to eliminate a nascent Iranian nuclear weapons program. A firm military deterrent has been sufficient to prevent Iran from pursuing a nuclear breakout during the three years that the United States has been withdrawn from the JCPOA. As recently as April 2021, the intelligence community has continued to assess that Iran has decided against pursuing a nuclear weaponization capability.

A policy of long-term containment and military deterrence against Iran, coupled with strong economic pressure, can turn off the spigot of terror financing and give governments embattled by Shi'a fighters a chance to catch their breath and regain sovereign control over their territory. An underfunded and poorly equipped Iranian military would give the regime more pause about pursuing a nuclear weapon if it cannot parry an Israeli or U.S. strike. And as long as Iran's economy plateaus, the other nations of the Middle East will grow while Iran stagnates. According to World Bank data, Iran's GDP was 31.5 percent of the combined GDPs of Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) in 2016. However, this ratio fell to 28.2 percent at the end of 2019—after just 18 months of U.S. economic pressure.

Efforts to promote democratization and support the flourishing of liberal society did not seem to show much progress over the past 20 years. Beginning in 2020, however, long-term changes in Middle

Eastern society bore fruit through the Abraham Accords that brought diplomatic and economic progress between Israel and Arab nations. We must continue to promote these agreements and encourage more Arab states to normalize their relationship with Israel. The impact of the Abraham Accords cannot be overstated. The accords bring stability to the region and enable coalitions of U.S. partners to work in the open with each other on combatting Iranian and extremist threats. The worst decision that the Biden administration could pursue would be to abandon relationships with Gulf nations and push them further into Russian and Chinese influence. President Joe Biden risks this today with his policies toward Israel, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia.

### **Consolidating Diplomatic Bureaucracy**

Not only does the Middle East continually draw in military assets, but the constant crises also suck up enormous diplomatic and bureaucratic bandwidth from the Department of State and National Security Council. Our senior diplomats, such as the secretary of state, deputy secretary of state, and national security advisor, should focus more of their attention on bolstering economic and diplomatic ties with allies in Latin America, Southeast and East Asia, and Europe. As Paul Miller notes in his piece, we need to court India far more than we have to date because their importance as an economic partner and buttress against China is paramount. This will admittedly be difficult, as Middle East issues (particularly those involving Iran and Israel) are often ones that seep into the U.S. news cycle.

The Trump administration had separate senior diplomats in charge of Iran, Syria, and Afghanistan. The assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs and under secretary for policy had carved out parts of the Levant and North Africa for themselves, while Presidential Senior Advisor Jared Kushner was at the top of the chain for most issues involving Israel and the Gulf. Along with the regional ambassadors, each were reporting directly to the secretary of state or the president, creating a massive bureaucratic jumble. The Biden administration has made this worse by separating Libya and Yemen away from the existing bureaucracy by giving them their own special representatives who also report to the secretary of state. As a result, the secretary of state is spending considerable time and effort micromanaging nearly every decision made in the Middle East since each of these officials effectively only reports to the secretary.

To solve this problem and enable senior leadership to focus on other parts of the world, the State Department should create a disciplined, hierarchical structure to consolidate diplomatic responsibilities for the Middle East. The president should empower the secretary of state to ensure that decision-making on diplomatic matters remains at

the State Department rather than proliferating authority across the government. The State Department should install an experienced and senior assistant secretary for Near Eastern affairs who can coordinate with each of the special representatives assigned to each crisis area. However, those special representatives—if they are even needed—should report to that NEA assistant secretary. The assistant secretary would be the main interlocutor with the secretary, deputy secretary, and under secretary of state for policy and serve as the counterpart to the deputy national security advisor at the White House and the CENTCOM commander at the Pentagon. As a result, that official would be trusted by Middle Eastern governments to speak authoritatively on behalf of the U.S. government and could speed along diplomatic discussions without requiring the secretary of state's constant input.

A change in bureaucratic structure surely will not solve the problem of American foreign policy's overzealous focus on the Middle East that often comes at the expense of priorities in Europe and Asia. However, relocating more of these special envoy roles (and their accompanying political experience and clout) to Asia will at least serve to focus the secretary of state on the more important theaters. As we wind down special representatives to the Middle East, America should focus on where special representatives are needed in Asia. It is crucial for senior diplomats to focus on bolstering the Quad (the United States, Australia, India, and Japan), which the Trump administration revived after it went dormant for years during the Obama administration. Also in the near term, the United States and allies in Asia should begin laying the groundwork for an Asian version of NATO. Finally, the U.S. government, and especially the State Department, must continue to focus on public diplomacy messages to the populations of our Asian allies that will counter the propaganda spread throughout the region by the Chinese Communist Party.