

US General Middle East Interests & Policy Priorities

ISSUES

- The Middle East is going through one of the most unstable periods in its recent history. The instability goes well beyond the current triple crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the related economic contraction, and the collapse of energy prices. Looking deeper, part of the instability is due to domestic shocks, such as the Arab uprisings of 2011, and part to external shocks, such as the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. Many of today's faultlines date back to 1979, when the Islamic revolution in Iran mobilized and weaponized Shiite communities around the region, and when the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia mobilized and weaponized radical Sunni groups to fight the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan.
- Today the region includes five fully or partially failed states (Yemen, Libya, Syria, Afghanistan, and Iraq), several very fragile states (Lebanon, Sudan, and Jordan), dozens of armed non-state actors (Sunni and Shi'a; Arab, Kurdish, Pashtu, etc.), and a number of recognized terrorist groups.
- The Middle East suffers from several conflict axes. First, Iran is embroiled in the largest conflict system: it is in conflict with the U.S. and its regional partners, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. Iran pursues an aggressive asymmetric "forward defense" strategy in which it builds and positions militias in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen and threatens Israel and Saudi Arabia with drone and missile strikes. The second conflict axis is within the Sunni world, between the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) on the one hand, and Turkey and Qatar on the other. This exacerbates regional tensions over political Islam and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, and is partly fueling the civil war in Libya. The third conflict axis is over Israel-Palestine and its Arab-Israeli dynamics. Here, at least, we have some movement, represented by the UAE-Israel normalization agreement and the potential for other agreements to follow.

US INTERESTS

- The US has five main interests in the Middle East:
 - * Maintaining the free flow of energy and trade to world markets.
 - * Countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
 - * Combating terrorist groups.
 - * Standing with partners and allies.
 - * Competing and countering the influence of rival great powers.
- These interests must be seen within the context of a general downgrading of interest in the Middle East in favor of an intensified interest, or pivot, to Asia.

- They must also be seen within the context of U.S. fatigue — both at the level of public opinion, as well as at the level of military and foreign policy makers — with regard to costly engagements in the Middle East that have shown few positive returns.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Finding a breakthrough in the U.S.-Iran relationship is critical. Conflict involving Iran now fuels several civil wars, directly threatens world energy supplies, threatens U.S. partners and allies, and fuels sectarian radicalization that enables major terrorist groups. The Obama administration approach achieved progress on the nuclear file, but also led to greater Iranian intervention in the region and an expansion of its missile program. Trump administration policy has weakened the Iranian economy, but exacerbated regional and energy risks without getting closer to a resolution.
- There is an opportunity to lean on the leverage provided by the Trump administration to pursue wider negotiations with Iran that might include not only revisiting the JCPOA — perhaps with additional, stronger protocols — but also discussions about scaling back its regional interventions and limiting its missile program. None of this will be easy, but it is essential. The open-ended conflict with Iran impacts all five of the U.S.'s core interests in the Middle East.
- As civil wars are driving large-scale refugee flows, exacerbating human suffering, and enabling terrorist groups, ending them should also be a high U.S. priority. Ending the wars in Yemen and Libya is not out of reach, but requires more concerted diplomatic and political will. Ending the wars in Syria and Afghanistan will be much harder. In Syria, the best that can be hoped for is to stabilize an inconclusive situation without generating more human suffering or allowing a resurgence of ISIS. In Afghanistan, the best alternative is probably a continued commitment to the Afghan state, despite the inability to defeat the Taliban.
- The U.S. should build on the UAE-Israel normalization agreement by working to revive Israel-Palestine talks toward a two-state solution in the context of a more friendly Arab environment.
- The U.S. should work with partners to repair the division within the GCC, and to repair the division between Turkey and U.S. partners like Saudi Arabia.
- Overall, the U.S. should continue to maintain its presence and partnerships in the region, while providing humanitarian assistance; encouraging economic reform, development, and investment; and pressing for civic and political reform.

- Paul Salem