

US GENERAL MIDDLE EAST INTERESTS & POLICY PRIORITIES

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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. And many of today's fault lines 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 four fully or partially failed states (Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan), several very fragile states (Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan), 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. 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 until recently 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 repercussions in the wider Arab and Muslim worlds.
- This last dynamic has been transformed by the breakthrough normalization agreements between Israel and each of the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Saudi Arabia must be counted among the shadow partners in this new normalization, as it had to approve the direct approaches from Bahrain and, to some degree, the UAE, although Riyadh is not ready to move as openly at this stage. These new alignments should

release pent-up potential in terms of economic, technological, infrastructure, and trade cooperation among these regional economies. The Israel-Gulf partnership will provide additional deterrence vis-à-vis Iran, but could also escalate mistrust and tensions across the Persian Gulf.

US INTERESTS

- The U.S. has five main interests in the Middle East:
 1. Maintaining the free flow of energy and trade to world markets.
 2. Countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
 3. Countering or preempting terrorist groups.
 4. Standing with partners and allies.
 5. 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 and global issues like fighting the pandemic, rebuilding global institutions, and slowing climate change.
- They must also be seen within the context of U.S. fatigue — at the level of the public, as well as that 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 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (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 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 normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states by working to revive Israel-Palestine talks toward a two-state solution in the context of a more friendly Arab environment.
- The last-minute rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is a welcome development. The U.S. should work with partners to reduce tensions between Turkey and other major Sunni players and encourage confidence-building measures and increasing cooperation.
- In the throes of the pandemic, the U.S. should display a leadership role in helping coordinate vaccine provision to lower-income countries in the region, encourage the IMF and other financial players to help low-income countries manage the fiscal and economic pressures caused by the pandemic, and help the health sector in the region recover and rebuild resilience to be prepared for future pandemics.

- The Biden administration itself passed through an attempted authoritarian coup in Washington. It should be true to itself and to core American values by bringing back an insistence on human rights, civil liberties, rule of law, and accountable government as part of America's stance in the region.
- 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.