

US MILITARY FORCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

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ISSUES

- The Middle East is home to deep underlying issues that directly threaten U.S. security interests: poor governance, disenfranchisement, humanitarian strife, endemic corruption, toxic sectarian narratives, and now, the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Proliferating terrorist organizations are present and continue to harbor designs to attack Americans. Weapons of mass destruction (actual and desired) provide the opportunity for further proliferation.
- Freedom of navigation and commerce (30-40% of daily global trade; 50% of proven oil and gas reserves) is threatened by Iran and its proxies and surrogates. Critical land routes through the region are used to facilitate movement of weapons and fighters that threaten Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.
- U.S. influence is challenged by the increasing Russian and Chinese military, diplomatic, and economic presence. China uses the “One Belt, One Road” initiative to secure basing, increase military presence, and create economic leverage on regional partners. Russia is focused on securing access and supplanting U.S. influence. Both are filling the void created by decreased and delayed U.S. equipment sales. NATO partner Turkey is increasingly at odds with U.S. Middle East policy, as well as its European partners, and is moving away from constructive cooperation to pursue unilateral objectives.
- Recent tensions with Iran as a result of the “maximum pressure” campaign and our strike on Qassem Soleimani and its subsequent response have highlighted the need for a reliable diplomatic channel that will allow for de-escalation and discussion of the pertinent issues. It has also brought a realization by Gulf Arab countries of the impact of a war with Iran and the devastating effects it would have on the region.
- Counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Prevent instability in this region from affecting our interests in other areas.
- Maintain freedom of navigation and commerce.
- Maintain a balance of power in the region that is favorable to U.S. interests and objectives.

POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nest regional strategy for the Middle East into a broader U.S. national strategy for maintaining our competitive advantage. This is an area where we must compete. We should be careful to ensure that the military element of power does not eclipse the other elements of U.S. power. We must also prioritize restoring and building relationships with partners and allies as a cornerstone to this strategy.
- Focus on security cooperation as the long-term military effort in this region. Long-term relationships and partner self-reliance are the best way to protect our interests and maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. Foreign military financing/foreign military sales should be aimed at contributing to deterrence; encouraging self-reliance and mutual support; protecting sovereignty; prevailing in the commons; and shutting down illicit lines of communication.
- Maintain a sustainable counter-terrorism capability in the region to disrupt terror organizations with external ambitions and support regional partners to address local terror threats.
- Retain a sustainable level of other military capabilities in the region that directly support our interests.
- Establish diplomatic and military communication channels with Iran to reduce chances of miscalculation and increased tensions.

US INTERESTS

- Prevent the region from being a platform for terrorist attacks on our country and our allies.