

FOREWORD: STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

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Introduction

As Joe Biden enters office his administration faces an overwhelming domestic agenda and myriad foreign policy challenges. Reinforcing relations with our European allies and developing effective strategies for countering China will likely crowd out the Middle East for the attention of the new administration.

Moreover, doubts about U.S. commitment to this vital but turbulent region and the steadiness of U.S. policy have grown among U.S. allies and adversaries alike. The Biden administration will encounter lingering concerns about the reputation of the United States as a reliable partner. Such concerns will be accentuated by Russia and China's expanded presence in the region and their image as steady partners.

The Biden administration will face another important and evolving reality: The Middle East, which for the past century at least was shaped by global powers, is now in the midst of an internal transformation that makes it more resistant to attempts by those outside the region to determine political outcomes. This reality is most evident today with regional powers, caught in the throes of a Middle East in turmoil, having grown more confident and increasingly assertive in pressing their own policy preferences, even when these clash with U.S. interests.

President Biden will confront a Middle East far different than the one he left at the end of the Obama administration. The region is now grappling with the political, economic, and human costs of a global pandemic; the effects of climate change and economic degradation; the needs of a burgeoning youth population; and a tidal wave of refugees and migration — issues that cry out for constructive engagement by the international community. How the region as a whole, both U.S. allies and adversaries alike, responds to these challenges will influence U.S. national security and foreign policy interests for decades to come.

Aside from the challenges, the Middle East has also seen some positive developments that, if deftly managed, can benefit U.S. interests. Chief among these is the normalization agreements between Israel and key Gulf and North African states. These breakthroughs present opportunities for the U.S. to consolidate cooperation among partners in the region, and boost economic and technological synergies. But it is imperative that the agreements not spell the end of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations but rather ultimately become an impetus for reviving them and finding new pathways to move toward a two-state solution. It is also key that the agreements are not used as a platform for stoking further escalation of regional conflict.

There has been much discussion over the past several years that the U.S. intends to step back from the Middle East and re-focus its efforts on strengthening its position in Asia. Yet the reality remains that the United States has enduring interests in the Middle East that will demand the new administration's attention. These interests require that the United States develop an integrated strategy that rebuilds relations with partners, engages with adversaries, and acts within the long-term goal of reducing regional conflict and instability, and putting the region on a more stable and cooperative trajectory for the future.

In the following set of policy briefs, Middle East Institute scholars tackle a large number of country-specific and region-wide issue areas; they lay out both the abiding U.S. interests and specific recommendations for Biden administration policies that can further U.S. interests amid a region in turmoil.

The U.S. Retains Enduring Interests in the Middle East

U.S. political, economic, diplomatic, and military investments in the region need to reflect the breadth of the interests for the United States represented there:

Energy Security: The U.S. is part of the global trade in energy even as it has become a net energy exporter. Moreover, U.S. allies in Europe and Asia remain dependent on the oil and gas flowing out of the Middle East region. Thus, even as the world seeks to transition away from fossil fuels to renewable green energy sources, Middle East energy resources will, nevertheless, remain essential to global economic security for decades to come. The U.S. has an interest in keeping those resources flowing and in preventing adversaries, like Iran or China, from controlling that flow.

Defending Sea Lanes: Critical international trade routes linking East to West transit by or through the Middle East region. The Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal are potential chokepoints that can cripple the global economy if free passage of international commerce is blocked. The U.S. has an interest in keeping those lanes open and secure, and in not ceding control of them to regional or global competitors.

Countering Violent Extremism: The U.S. security establishment continues to assess the threat to U.S. global interests and the homeland from terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda as real and ongoing. Working with regional and international powers to deter, disrupt, defeat, and destroy these groups will remain a core U.S. security interest into the future.

Promoting Good Governance and Democracy: A decade after the Arab Spring, serious questions remain about the viability of state institutions across the Middle East region. There are also concerns about the rise of autocracy and the narrowing of respect for human rights and civil liberties. U.S. relations in the region are best preserved by ensuring that governments there move away from these troubling trends. It will be important for the Biden administration to double down on the U.S. commitment to human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, and democratic values, all of which are critically important to the populations of the region and differentiate the U.S. from global rivals.

Stability in the Gulf: The United States has an enduring interest in lowering tensions in the Gulf. Tensions among regional powers there can draw in global powers, further escalating the conflict system in the Middle East. Moreover, tensions will likely fuel proxy competition in the civil war zones, rendering the entire region a conflict trap that draws in global actors and destabilizes the global community.

Israel and its Neighbors: Israel's security has been and will continue to be a core U.S. interest. But another is the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continues to generate tension throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

Ending the Forever Wars: Drawing down further major military deployments in the Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria theaters is another U.S. interest, although while doing so the U.S. will need to preserve critical security relationships and maintain smaller deployments of special operations forces (SOF) personnel to retain counterterrorism (CT) capabilities. Efforts to end ongoing civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, and stabilize Iraq, can aid the administration in reducing the U.S. military presence.

Non-Proliferation of WMD: Nuclear and chemical/biological weapons proliferation is at the forefront of U.S. concerns. The long-term interest is to negotiate a weapons of mass destruction-free Middle East, but in the short term the U.S. has an interest in preventing further proliferation, including but not limited to Iran.

The Pathway to Supporting These Interests is Strewn with Obstacles

As the Biden administration seeks to establish its policy direction for the Middle East, it will be confronting a playing field that is substantially less favorable to U.S. interests than was the case previously. Among other challenges the president will confront:

Great Power Competitors: Beyond their growing military presence in the region, both China and Russia have strengthened their political ties to major regional powers. China's Belt and Road Initiative includes a maritime link through the Red Sea with ties to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, as well as a land corridor running through Iran and Turkey en route to Europe. In addition, Beijing is now Abu Dhabi's leading trading partner. For its part, Russia works closely with Saudi Arabia in securing the OPEC+ agreement to stabilize oil prices. Both China and Russia are eager to break into the regional arms market, while 5G networks across the Middle East will be built around China's Huawei technology. Notwithstanding that neither Russia nor China currently have a diplomatic capacity rivaling the United States, Washington will need to work hard to preserve its leadership amid the challenges to its role as a regional powerbroker.

The Rise of Regional Powers and Competitors: As concerns grew among U.S. regional friends and partners over its will and capacity to remain engaged in the Middle East, alternative leadership developed within the region to fill the perceived vacuum. Some of the new assertiveness inevitably reflected the rise of a new, more confident generation of leaders in the region, determined to map their own paths to advance national interests, even in instances where their preferences conflicted with U.S. priorities. In many instances this assertiveness remains at the political, economic, and diplomatic levels, but it has also developed into direct and indirect armed interventions beyond borders. Iran has long pursued this path, building Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, and then expanding that model to proxy militia influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Recently other countries have followed this model as well, including Turkish interventions in Syria and Libya, Saudi intervention in Yemen, and UAE intervention in Yemen and Libya. The result is an increased complexity for U.S. leadership in dealing with regional partners and adversaries tangled in complex conflict dynamics.

A Region Facing Critical Challenges: Like the rest of the world, the Middle East has suffered serious political, economic, and social fallout from the global pandemic. While several of the region's governments have done reasonably well in managing the pandemic, this has come with shrinking fiscal space, higher levels of poverty and unemployment, and increasing levels of repression. Recovery will be prolonged and difficult. And the combination of dire social conditions and renewed mobility when the pandemic ebbs means that many countries in the region might face a new wave of protests and potential instability in the second half of 2021 and beyond.

For the Biden administration, it is important always to be mindful of national, regional, and global elements of the region's instability, and to fashion policy in a way that responds to particular interests or crises, while at the same time nudging the national, regional, and global dynamics in a more positive direction for the region and for U.S. interests in it.

Outlines of a Strategy

The briefs that follow in this volume detail critical elements of U.S. policy toward the countries and issues of the region. They fall within a broader scope of a U.S. strategy that balances the need to preserve and promote U.S. interests while maintaining a smaller footprint

and not overburdening the administration's political and diplomatic bandwidth. Such a strategy should include the following elements:

Stay Focused on the Region as a Whole: The Biden administration will be overwhelmed with urgent policy decisions throughout the region, from Iran to Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Israel-Palestine, Yemen, and other issues. And the briefs that follow advance particular policies to address these myriad challenges. But the administration should also maintain a broader focus on the region as a whole and recognize that U.S. interests are best and most sustainably preserved in the context of a more stable, less conflictual, and more internally cooperative regional order. To advance toward this goal, the United States needs to encourage cooperation between major regional powers, such as the Arab states, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. The United States also needs to reinforce the norm that states remain behind their own borders, and pursue their interests through diplomacy, not proxy warfare. The U.S. needs to make clear its long-term vision for the region — to governments as well as their populations — and it needs to focus on defusing regional tensions and rebuilding respect for a state-based order. It should use its influence both with partners and adversaries to advance this long-term goal, and enlist support from Europe, China, and Russia, all of which would benefit from regional stability and a rules-abiding, state-based order.

Re-engaging Iran, including a potential U.S. return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Iran's recommitment to its terms, needs to be a priority in terms of defusing regional tensions. The administration also needs to be sensitive to the threat perceptions and security needs of our allies in the region. A resolution of the conflict in Yemen can potentially open the door to a new regional dialogue between Iran and the GCC states that addresses these issues.

The Biden administration should also be aware that most people in the region are not focused on geopolitical contests but rather have more urgent socio-economic concerns relating to poverty, unemployment, and health care, among other issues. In that vein, the U.S. should use its soft power to help mobilize international efforts aimed at pandemic relief, post-pandemic socio-economic recovery, economic integration, and growth. It should also coordinate with international financial institutions on providing aid and development and financial packages to war-weary communities, as well as restore aid to beleaguered Palestinian communities.

Work To End Civil Wars and Prevent New Ones: The wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya have been black holes that have drawn in regional and international intervention and have exported security threats, violent extremism, and refugees. To protect vital interests and for humanitarian reasons, the U.S. should use its diplomatic and political toolkit to de-escalate these civil/proxy wars across the board and negotiate them to an end where possible. In Yemen and Libya, a negotiated end is possible and should be pursued vigorously. In Syria, a negotiated outcome is hard to envisage with the Assad regime, but the U.S. should de-escalate conflict and find ways to bring socio-economic relief to a suffering population. As an act of prevention, the U.S. should support fragile states, such as Iraq and Lebanon, which risk falling back into state collapse and civil war. In Afghanistan, the Trump administration attempted to negotiate a way out for the U.S. and a way forward for the Afghans. The U.S. should continue efforts at mediation but be clear eyed about the limited policy options ahead.

Pursue Great Power Rivalry, but Look for Areas of Cooperation as well: While the U.S. views Chinese and Russian intervention in the region largely in the context of great power conflict, it should also look beyond rivalry. Unbridled competition is likely to cause a worsening of regional divisions and regional conflict, and multiply conditions conducive to failed states, persistent civil wars, and opportunities for armed non-state actors and terrorist groups to thrive. This is not in the U.S. interest; nor, incidentally, is it in the Chinese and Russian interest. In thorny regional crises, cooperation and agreement between the great powers can bring about solutions that otherwise might be hard to imagine locally. The example of the great power cooperation that led to international sanctions, then international agreement, with Iran on its nuclear program should be a model moving forward.

Look Beyond Geopolitics: The Middle East has suffered serious political, economic, and social fallout from the global pandemic. The U.S. can reinforce its soft power leadership by helping low-income countries to secure access to vaccines and facilitate their distribution. It should coordinate with international and regional institutions to help these countries recover from the fiscal deficits, economic contractions, and social costs that have been painfully incurred over the life of the pandemic, and help countries in the region build resilience not only for future pandemics but also for the accelerating impacts of climate change.

Conclusion

The U.S. has enduring interests in the Middle East and needs to maintain a sustainable level of American political, security, and economic engagement in the region to secure and promote them. The administration should also be aware that the general dysfunction and disintegration of the region directly impacts U.S. interests, and that using American leverage to encourage the states in the Middle East to move toward a more cooperative and integrated regional framework — as in other regions of the world — is a long-term American interest. In that vein, the United States must play a role in encouraging de-escalation and cooperation among regional players, making clear that a state-based regional order in which states abide by the basic rules of international relations, like in other regions of the world, is the ultimate goal.