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# **United States Interests and Policy Choices in the Middle East:**

*We didn't start the fire...*

Michael S. Bell

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*We didn't start the fire...*

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Cover image: US Soldiers operating a UH-60 Black Hawk helicopter conduct aviation operations around the Middle East in support of Operation Inherent Resolve, Oct. 15, 2020. Source: US Army photo by CWO2 Matthew Bean <https://tinyurl.com/yxqm874l>

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## Executive Summary

Any consideration of US policy choices in the Middle East should be grounded in national interests, an understanding of the contemporary security environment, and an appraisal of current policies and operations. The United States has enduring national security interests in the Middle East that will persist beyond the current pandemic. They include

- protection of the American homeland from terrorist attack;
- peace between countries in the region;
- nonproliferation of nuclear weapons; and
- the free flow of energy and commerce to the global economy.

Prioritization of those interests supports subsequent analysis that guides policy approaches and choices. Having identified the appropriate national interests at stake, the next strategic requirement is to understand and prioritize the threats, challenges, and opportunities associated with those interests.

When the Trump administration came into office in January 2017, the Middle East posed myriad challenges that, to a large degree, continue to confound United States policy makers, defy discrete solution, and highlight the limits of American power and statecraft. Those included the continuation of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen and their potential expansion into a regional conflict, the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the transregional impact of Kurdish national aspirations, the shifting orientation of

Turkish policies and their tension with NATO, Russia's return to the region, and growing Chinese commercial inroads. In addition, it is critical to acknowledge the continued weakness of Arab states and the exploitation of the conditions in those states by violent extremist groups, whether in Iraq after the 2003 invasion; Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Jordan after the Arab Spring; or in Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq today. Currently, mistrust among the Gulf States, their lingering dispute with Qatar, the lack of full inclusion of Shia populations, and toxic, ill-conceived actions such as the Saudi murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, render continued or deeper US commitment increasingly difficult with partners that are less than ideal. Furthermore, it seems clear that the coronavirus pandemic will place significantly greater pressures on regional states already plagued by weak governance. The impact of its strategic shock is impossible to predict with any certainty.

Among the myriad challenges in the Middle East, two threats, in particular, demand sustained attention, and how the United States chooses to address them will shape any potential American response to the range of other challenges. The two threats are

- the resilience of Salafist-jihadist extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda and Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and
- Iran's aggressive revolutionary expansionism, which includes its hostile and destabilizing regional activities and its nuclear program.



President Trump delivers remarks at the meeting of the Ministers of the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS. Source: Flickr/Ninian Reid



Then-US Ambassador to the United Nations Nikki Haley briefing the media in front of remains of an Iranian "Qiam" ballistic missile at Joint Base Anacostia-Bolling in Washington, DC, on December 14, 2017. Source: DoD photo by EJ Hersom



Both threaten American interests and exacerbate the persistent challenges in the region from weak or failed states, religious and ethnic sectarianism, and intraregional rivalries. Because recent US policies for dealing with ISIS and Iran provide an important context, an understanding of those is essential to inform the range of future policy choices. US government choices in addressing these two threats influence, and are influenced by, its relations with allies and partners and how it perceives all power competitions throughout the Middle East.

Looking ahead, it also is important to consider where the United States has seen policy achievements over the previous four years and to assess changes in the strategic environment. Working with local partners, the US-led Global Coalition has liberated the territory and the millions of people in Iraq and Syria that had been under the control of ISIS. Although hoping to reconstitute and still dangerous, ISIS has reverted to a terrorist organization and no longer poses the magnitude of threat it did in 2016 and 2017. In addition, in the area of counterterrorism successes, the threat posed by al-Qaeda has been reduced by pressure on all levels of the organization by the United States and its allies. The leadership vacuum resulting from the death of al-Qaeda's most senior leaders in 2019 and 2020 can be expected to have a disruptive effect on the plans and activities of the group, which has served as a source of inspiration for extremists globally.

Seeking to address the totality of Iran's destabilizing and malign behavior, the administration mounted a campaign called Maximum Pressure with the goal of denying "the regime the resources to conduct its destructive foreign policy."<sup>1</sup> Although the campaign has not compelled Iran to negotiate a new deal, in January 2020, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo reported that US sanctions already had, in the space of little more than a year, denied Iran 80 percent of its oil export revenue and prevented it from accessing "roughly 90 percent of its foreign currency reserves" that could have otherwise gone to fund its destabilizing activities.<sup>2</sup> Validating Pompeo's claim,

the Iranian president announced in September 2020 that oil revenues had dropped from \$120 billion to around \$20 billion a year due to US sanctions; other officials placed regime revenues even lower.<sup>3</sup> Although Iran continues to prioritize the use of coercion and military force as its most effective strategic tools, the pressure campaign has significantly reduced the resources the Iranian regime has available to fund, arm, and equip its proxies or develop missiles. IRGC senior leaders have publicly signaled that despite the significant economic problems caused by the US pressure campaign and the coronavirus, the Iranian regime will continue to prioritize its substantial support to proxies.<sup>4</sup>

Although not united about what to do about Iranian activities, the international community has acknowledged Iran to be in open violation of the provisions of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).<sup>5</sup> Meanwhile, although the administration's stance on the JCPOA alienated European allies, those allies increasingly also acknowledge the threat posed by Iranian destabilizing actions, missile programs, and the proliferation of conventional weapons and advanced components. In the Middle East, on the other hand, US policies have reassured allies and many partners, and the common threat posed by Iran has created new opportunities. The common threat from Iran has given impetus to the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states under the Abraham Accords, which, in turn, could help dissuade Iranian aggression and provide a foundation for a more peaceful region.

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, US strategic aims in the Middle East should be to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, stymie Iran's violent and hegemonic ambition, bolster the advancement and development of our partners and allies in the region, champion the human rights of the Iranian people, and pursue and maintain a peace that allows trade and commerce to flourish and that gives social, political, and economic reforms an opportunity to succeed. Ending Iran's aggression must include blocking all paths

1 Remarks by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, "Press Briefing by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin on Iran Sanctions," White House, January 10, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-secretary-state-mike-pompeo-secretary-treasury-steven-mnuchin-iran-sanctions/>.

2 Remarks by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, White House.

3 See Scott Lucas, "President Rouhani Admits Iran Oil Revenue Down More Than 80%," EA Worldview, September 15, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://eaworldview.com/2020/09/president-rouhani-admits-iran-oil-revenue-down-more-than-80/> and "Rouhani: Oil revenues decreased by \$100bn in 8 years," Middle East Monitor, September 14, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200914-rouhani-oil-revenues-decreased-by-100bn-in-8-years/>.

4 Golnaz Esfandiari, "Revolutionary Guards Commander Gives Rare Estimate of Money Iran Spent on Proxies, Military Aid in Region," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, September 30, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/iran-commander-rare-estimate-money-spent-proxies-military-aid-region/30866922.html>.

5 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is the formal name of the 2015 nuclear deal concluded by China, France, Germany, the Russian Federation, the United Kingdom, the United States, the High Representative of the European Union, and the Islamic Republic of Iran. On the latest acknowledgement of Iran violating the JCPOA, see, for example, IAEA Director General report to the Board of Governors: "Verification and monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015)," GOV/2020/51, November 11, 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/11/gov2020-51.pdf>; "Germany, France and Britain to discuss Iran nuclear deal on Monday – Germany," Reuters, November 23, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/germany-iran-meeting-int-idUSKBN28316A>; "E3 responds to latest IAEA verification of Iran," World Nuclear News, November 19, 2020, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/E3-responds-to-latest-IAEA-iran-verification>.

to a nuclear weapon, denying the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) the funding it uses to empower proxies and export violence, addressing Iranian asymmetric capabilities such as cyber and missile attacks, and supporting the Iranian people and their aspirations for inclusion in a peaceful, prosperous global order under a government that serves them. None of these can be accomplished in isolation. All are difficult and will require willing allies and partners who are assured of American commitment and resolve. The United States, furthermore, must clearly assess which, if any, of these it is prepared to go to war over. There is a substantial risk of war, whether out of miscalculation or from Iran responding to crippling economic measures with force. Open war, however, is not a foregone conclusion, and it will be possible to advance American interests without resorting to the use of military force.

Armed with an understanding of US interests and the challenges to those in the Middle East, it is useful to consider some of the most salient policy choices beyond 2020. Concerning the threat posed by the resilient Salafist-jihadist enterprise, US policies should:

- sustain the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and prevent the reconstitution of ISIS in Iraq and Syria;
- continue US support and assistance for Iraqi security-sector reforms and institutional capacity building while also supporting the economic, political, and territorial viability of the Iraqi Kurdish region;
- rebuild the training and advisory capacity of NATO Mission Iraq;
- maintain support for US partners in eastern and northeastern Syria (such as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) until the political transition to a legitimate constitutional government, as called for in United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 2254, takes place;<sup>6</sup>
- enforce and expand sanctions of the Assad regime for human rights violations, and withhold US and allied resources to rebuild Assad's Syria until the regime cooperates with UNSCR 2254; and
- maintain pressure on al-Qaeda senior leadership and keep a watchful eye on the capability and intentions of al-Qaeda's Middle East affiliates in Yemen

and Syria, particularly to the extent they could pose a threat to US citizens and interests.

To address and neutralize Iran's violent and destabilizing regional agenda, the United States should pursue policies to:

- broaden and strengthen enforcement of national and multinational sanctions on the Iranian regime's ability to import or export arms and missile components;
- interdict IRGC funding to and lethal facilitation of terrorist proxies and militia in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, and Yemen;
- expose and publicly release attributable evidence of Iranian malign activities, illicit proliferation of weapons and components, and support to violent, non-state actors;
- support the implementation of UNSCR 2254 for the political transition to a legitimate constitutional government in Syria and prevent the establishment of Iranian bases and military facilities in Syria;
- enforce and strengthen the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force for Lebanon under UNSCR 1701, to include access to areas under the control of Hezbollah;<sup>7</sup> and
- maintain and enforce the UN's targeted embargo on arms and weapons to the Houthis in Yemen, which are prohibited under UNSCR 2216.<sup>8</sup>

To strengthen and enhance deterrence in the face of Iranian aggression and to protect US allies and interests, US policies should:

- build upon the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relationships between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and other Arab states;
- affirm the United States commitment to the defense of Israel;
- fully integrate all air and missile defense capabilities on the Arabian Peninsula;

6 UN Security Council, Resolution 2254, Endorsing Road Map for Peace Process in Syria, S/RES/2254, S/RES/2222, (December 18, 2015), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2015/sc12171.doc.htm>.

7 UN Security Council, Resolution 1701, S/RES/1701, (August 11, 2006), <https://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8808.doc.htm>.

8 UN Security Council, Resolution 2216, S/RES/2216 (April 14, 2015), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/doc/2216>.



UAE Minister of Foreign Affairs Abdullah bin Zayed Al Nahyan, Bahraini Minister of Foreign Affairs Dr. Abdullatif bin Rashid Al-Zayani, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu, and US President Donald Trump on Tuesday, September 15, 2020, along the Colonnade of the White House on their way to sign the Abraham Accords on the South Lawn of the White House. *Source: Official White House Photo by Tia Dufour*

- formalize the International Maritime Security Construct in the Gulf in order to maintain freedom of navigation and safeguard maritime commerce;
  - work with the states of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Jordan, and Egypt to form a collective, regional security framework suited to deter and dissuade Iranian aggression against them, strengthen their resilience and defensive capacities, and create a secure environment in which economic, social, and political reforms can prosper;
  - implement a strategic and consistent approach toward foreign military sales in the Middle East that increases partner capability, joint interoperability, and mitigates the sense of insecurity that drives them to buy from Russia and China (or capitulate to Iran), including modifications to the Missile Technology Control Regime to remove restrictions on technologies such as drones that are clearly not “missiles” nor have unique weapons of mass destruction (WMD) applications;
  - implement the strategic framework agreement with Iraq and prioritize US support and assistance for Iraqi sovereignty and legitimate institutions;
  - pursue closer US-GCC collaboration to stabilize Iraq and build on that country’s Arab heritage instead of sectarianism;
  - educate European allies about the invalid assumptions that underlie the JCPOA and Iranian violations of its provisions in order to generate support for a more comprehensive accord to supersede the JCPOA; and
  - develop options such as a regional bank of nuclear fuel that could restore an effective nuclear nonproliferation regime in the Gulf.
- To demonstrate US support for the long-suffering people of Iran and to pressure the Iranian regime to change its malign policies, or pay a diplomatic and economic price, the United States should pursue and sustain policies to:
- voice support for the people of Iran and enable their uncensored access to international media and information;
  - demand that the Iranian regime respect the human rights of its citizens by exposing and sanctioning Iranian regime leaders, security officials, and judges responsible for human rights abuses;



- work with European allies to emphasize and address areas of common concern about the grave human rights abuses of the Iranian regime including its continued illegal detention of foreign citizens and its persecution of activists and religious minorities;
- urge comprehensive international enforcement of UN sanctions reimposed on Iran after the United States evoked the snapback mechanism of the JCPOA in UNSCR 2231,<sup>9</sup> which restored sanctions prohibiting the export of certain conventional arms to Iran (UNSCR 1929) and procurement of arms from Iran (UNSCR 1747);<sup>10</sup>
- strengthen international condemnation of Iranian missile testing and proliferation, to include the space launch activities of the IRGC;
- urge the UN Security Council to take action to address the Iranian regime's denial of immediate International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) access to sites contrary to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty;
- emphasize to US allies the importance of following through with the IAEA's dispute resolution mechanism, which was triggered in January 2020 as a result of Iranian violations of the nuclear provisions of the JCPOA;
- maintain the pressure of US sanctions against the Iranian regime until it consents to negotiations, and refuse to lift sanctions as a precondition for future negotiations; and
- prepare for negotiations to replace the JCPOA with a more comprehensive deal, as the precursor

for the normalization of relations and the lifting of sanctions, which would include restrictions on the Iranian regime's uranium enrichment, missile development, and malign regional activities.

Constructively engaging and working with Congress to advance US goals and policy choices will be essential for enduring results. It should be pointed out that pursuit of these policies is not irrelevant to the return of competition between the major powers, and tangible signals of US commitment to partners in the Middle East have the potential to counter the allure of Russian and Chinese promises and influence campaigns. US policy makers must remain cognizant that while there may be some opportunities to work with Russia and China, those powers do not share US interests and objectives in the Middle East, and they do not seek the preservation of the US-led international order. If the United States wants to neutralize Russian and Chinese efforts to undermine US pressure on the Iranian regime and to counter US-led regional security activities, it must prioritize, focus, and resource its diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with Middle East partners.

Although difficult, it is possible to advance US interests in the Middle East. Doing so will require consistent and calculated engagement rather than complete withdrawal or major military combat intervention. The brokering of the 2020 Abraham Accords represents such an achievement that furthers US interests. Policy choices and objectives should derive from an understanding of US interests and the threats, challenges, and opportunities related to those. In order to succeed, American leaders will have to pursue their objectives in a sustainable and transparent way, sharing the costs and burdens with capable allies and partners, and ensuring that US service members, diplomats, and development experts have what they need to prevail.

9 UN Security Council, Resolution 2231, Endorsing the JCPOA, S/RES/2231, (July 20, 2015), <https://www.un.org/securitycouncil/content/2231/background>.

10 UN Security Council, Resolution 1929, S/RES/1929, June 9, 2010, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1929%20\(2010\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1929%20(2010)); UN Security Council Resolution 1747, March 24, 2007, [https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1747%20\(2007\)](https://www.undocs.org/S/RES/1747%20(2007)). It should be noted that the US action evoking the snapback of previous United Nations sanctions was taken without the public support of European allies in the UN Security Council: the United Kingdom, France, or Germany. The administration's subsequent imposition of US sanctions on Iran can be seen as a commitment to follow through and implement sanctions consistent with what was triggered at the UN. This continuation of sanction activity signals US intentions and, in the meantime, may generate a degree of international compliance in the absence of a clear stance by the UN Security Council. See, for example, Barak Ravid, "Trump Administration Plans 'Flood' of Sanctions on Iran by Jan. 20," *Axios*, November 8, 2020, <https://www.axios.com/trump-administration-iran-sanctions-january-3951f776-09c9-4e55-b0f5-4a9c80e9e974.html>.

# Introduction

While US foreign policy is set by the administration of the president in office, the Congress, history, and precedent also influence its direction. No administration enters office with a blank slate, often having to accommodate ongoing activities, strategies and policies in implementation, established alliance and coalition commitments, and preexisting law and policies to meet evolving threats and challenges. US policy in the Middle East is no exception. Despite changes in administrations, the understanding of US national interests there has remained remarkably consistent since the 1950s.<sup>11</sup>

On occasion, pundits have urged limiting US involvement in the Middle East by taking a narrow view of interests or by questioning the cost and effectiveness of previous US

efforts. Those critiques, however, have tended to serve as excursions from broad acceptance of US national security interests in the region. Consequently, in Washington, policy and strategy disagreements about the Middle East typically concern ways, not ends, or they have somewhat conflicting impulses. For example, senior US diplomat Martin Indyk argues that while Americans “cannot afford to turn our backs on the Middle East,” the United States requires “a sustainable Middle East strategy based on a more realistic assessment of our interests.” While urging the United States to remain engaged in the chaotic region, he also concludes that “after the sacrifice of so many American lives, the waste of so much energy and money in quixotic efforts that ended up doing more harm than good, it is time for the [United States] to find a way to escape the costly,



The USS *Sterett* (DDG 104) passes underneath the Friendship Bridge while transiting the Suez Canal. *Sterett* is deployed to the US 5th Fleet Area of Operation supporting Coalition Task Force Sentinel, the British-led operational arm of the International Maritime Security Construct, which promotes maritime security and ensures freedom of navigation and the free flow of commerce throughout key waterways in the Arabian Gulf, Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb Strait and the Gulf of Oman. Source: US Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist Seaman Drace Wilson

<sup>11</sup> In the US government there is little precision as to what constitutes the Middle East. While the purviews of the State Department's Bureau of Near Eastern Affairs and the US Central Command include North Africa and Central and South Asia, respectively, they both cover an area that, for the purposes of this paper, is characterized as the Middle East. The region includes the countries of the Arabian Peninsula and Egypt, Israel, the Palestinian territories, Jordan, Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Iran. It also includes the strategically important waters of the Suez, Red Sea, Bab al Mandeb, Arabian Sea, Strait of Hormuz, and the Persian Gulf.

demoralizing cycle of crusades and retreats.”<sup>12</sup> Clearly, the outbreak of the novel coronavirus pandemic will necessitate a strategic reassessment and provide an opportunity to validate or adjust US international and domestic policy priorities, costs, and resources.

For the United States, there are several important policy considerations and strategic choices in the Middle East for 2021 and beyond. Since the danger of conflict escalation remains significant, the first consideration must be an acknowledgment or validation of what have been enduring US security interests there. Those interests are likely to remain after the current pandemic and will include protection of the United States from terrorist attack, peace between countries in the region, nonproliferation of nuclear weapons, and the free flow of energy and commerce in the global economy.<sup>13</sup> How those interests are prioritized requires a subsequent analysis to guide policy approaches and choices.

The next strategic requirement is to understand and prioritize the threats, challenges, and opportunities associated with those interests. US interests are threatened by resilient terrorist and extremist groups and by destabilizing Iranian activities, both of which exacerbate the persistent challenges in the region from weak or failed states, religious and ethnic sectarianism, and intraregional rivalries that must be understood politically, that is, their origins lie in disputes over power and its attendant dynamics. US policy makers err when they ascribe Middle Eastern threats, challenges, and crises to latent, intractable characteristics of the region's peoples and governments. If vital interests are at stake, they require strategic attention, regardless of the allure inherent in avoiding strategic risk by withdrawal or disengagement. This article begins with interests, examines

the most significant threats and challenges to those, and then offers some considerations for protecting or advancing US interests in the face of those challenges.

In US foreign affairs, policy makers responsible for formulation and implementation are typically members of the executive branch, both in the White House and in departments and agencies. Their thinking, however, is subject to a range of influencers on Capitol Hill, in the media, in academia, and in the broader American public. In recent decades, the formal policy process has coalesced at three levels. Currently, the Principals Committee (PC) serves as “the Cabinet-level interagency forum for considering policy issues that affect the national security interests of the United States.” When chaired by the president, the PC is designated as the National Security Council (NSC). In addition, another decision-making body, the Deputies Committee (DC), is “the senior sub-Cabinet interagency forum for consideration of, and where appropriate, decision-making on policy issues” relating to national security interests. Supporting the deliberations and decisions of the NSC, PC, and DC meetings are a series of regional and issue-related policy coordinating committees, PCCs, chaired by the staff of the National Security Council, part of the Executive Office of the President. The PCCs are responsible for “the development and implementation of national security policies by multiple executive departments and agencies.” On a daily basis, PCCs provide the formal venue for interagency coordination and support the higher-level decision-making bodies with policy analysis, strategy and plan development, and identification of issues requiring resolution. In practice, however, the current process is not so rigid; it is shaped by personalities and their styles and is susceptible to outside influences and bureaucratic politics.<sup>14</sup>

12 Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, accessed January 17, 2020, [https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317?mod=hp\\_lead\\_pos8](https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317?mod=hp_lead_pos8).

13 Rather than “peace,” American formulations of interests typically substitute regional “stability,” an acknowledgement that achieving peaceful relations between countries in the Middle East has been elusive for the past seventy years. Peace, however, should be the underlying interest of the United States. Concerning access to Middle East energy, it is important to note that this interest has remained important despite changes in the geostrategic environment since the end of the Cold War. While the United States has achieved energy independence as the largest oil-producing country, US trading partners and the global economy still rely on access to Middle East oil and gas and are likely to for the near future, despite the rising demand for renewable, nonfossil energy sources. On the subject of conflict escalation, it should be noted the risk that additional sanctions and economic pressures have the potential to escalate tensions and perhaps prompt lethal reaction from the Iranian regime. An illustration of such a military response to economic pressure is the decision by the military leaders of Japan to attack the United States in 1941 in response to crippling US embargoes.

14 See Donald J. Trump, National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM), “Organization of the National Security Council, the Homeland Security Council, and Subcommittees,” White House website, April 4, 2017, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/national-security-presidential-memorandum-4/>. This memo, referred to as NSPM-4, superseded NSPM-2 of January 28, 2017. In practice, each of these processes could be carried out through in-person attendance, sometimes limited to the principal or the principal and a “plus one,” with broader participation via secure video teleconference, or with attendance restricted to those with special access or limited to a “small group” of the most relevant departments and agencies. In lieu of actual deliberations, the process can also be run as a formal “paper” process. In addition, all of these processes can be complemented, or in some cases supplanted, by informal policy small-group meetings, but those meetings typically lack a formal mechanism to capture and approve tasking and decisions.



# Interests and Approaches

The only sound foundation for a sustainable American foreign policy is a clear sense of America's national interests. Only a foreign policy grounded in America's national interests can identify priorities for American engagement in the world. Only such a policy will allow America's leaders to explain persuasively how and why American citizens should support expenditures of American treasure or blood.

*Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*<sup>15</sup>

In the final year of World War II, with an eye toward the postwar geostrategic order, President Franklin D. Roosevelt placed great importance on the independence of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, US access to Saudi oil reserves, and the prospect of a Jewish homeland in the Middle East. On the heels of the United Nations (UN) partition of Palestine in 1947, President Harry S. Truman recognized the independence of Israel, and Israel has since become a long-standing ally of the United States.<sup>16</sup> While not supporting British and French intervention in the Suez Crisis, President Dwight D. Eisenhower envisioned a more proactive US role in the Middle East and in 1957 called for economic and military cooperation with friendly countries to counter communist influence and regional aggression. In 1958, consistent with the Eisenhower Doctrine, the United States deployed more than 14,000 army and marine personnel to Lebanon to help quell domestic unrest and forestall a Syrian intervention.<sup>17</sup>

Since the Eisenhower administration, the United States consistently has viewed the security and stability of the

Middle East as a vital national interest. As such, the United States has sought to safeguard Israel and ensure that the resources and wealth of the Middle East are not under the control or at the disposal of a hostile power. That was the case during the Cold War, when the region also factored in the grand strategy of containment, which included military plans and preparations to counter the Soviet Union.<sup>18</sup> At the height of the Cold War and conscious of the Soviet threat on Iran's border, the United States provided security assistance to Iran consisting of weapons sales, training, and advisers.<sup>19</sup> For Israel, rather than direct military intervention, US assistance was predominately through logistics and diplomacy. The Nixon administration airlifted materiel and ammunition to Israel during the 1973 Yom Kippur War, and the Carter administration brokered the 1978 Camp David Accords that led to the Egypt-Israel peace treaty the following year.

Up until the late 1970s, however, the US strategic approach did not require large, long-term commitments of US forces to the region. It relied instead on distant support to regional powers—the waning British Empire in the 1950s and 60s, and Iran up until the revolution in 1979—as the preferred means to secure American interests. The loss of Iran as a friendly regional power, followed by the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, compelled President Jimmy Carter to modify Eisenhower's policy by stating that any attempts “by an outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf Region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force.”<sup>20</sup>

The tenets of the Carter Doctrine endured beyond the superpower confrontation. Toward the end of the Cold War,

15 Graham T. Allison and Robert Blackwill (lead authors), *America's National Interests*, a report of the Commission on America's Interests, with support from Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, the Nixon Center, and the RAND Corp., 2000, 2.

16 Bruce Riedel, *Kings and Presidents: Saudi Arabia and the United States since FDR* (Washington: Brookings Institution Press, 2018), 1-12, 24-6.

17 Lesley Kennedy, “How FDR Charmed a Saudi King and Won US Access to Oil,” History Stories website of History, a division of A&E Television Networks, <https://www.history.com/news/fdr-saudi-arabia-king-oil>; “President Eisenhower Proposes New Middle East Policy,” This Day in History website of History, <https://www.history.com/this-day-in-history/eisenhower-proposes-new-middle-east-policy>; and “The Lebanon Operation (15 July–25 October 1958),” Airborne Operations [2-3.7 AC.F]-TAB D, accessed January 31, 2020, <https://history.army.mil/documents/AbnOps/TABD.htm>.

18 In 1957, in what has become known as the Eisenhower Doctrine, President Dwight D. Eisenhower proposed a policy with three features. First, it would “authorize the United States to cooperate with and assist any nation or group of nations in the general area of the Middle East in the development of economic strength dedicated to the maintenance of national independence.” Second, it would authorize the president to undertake “military assistance and cooperation programs with any nation or group of nations which desires such aid.” Third, it would “authorize such assistance and cooperation to include the employment of the armed forces of the United States to secure and protect the territorial integrity and political independence of such nations” in the face of “overt armed aggression from any nation controlled by International Communism.”

19 “Visit of the Shah of Iran, August 22-24, 1967, US Military Assistance to Iran,” ed. Nina D. Howland, vol. XXII (Iran) of *Foreign Relations of the United States, 1964–1968*, (Washington: US Government Printing Office, 1999), accessed January 31, 2020, <https://history.state.gov/historicaldocuments/frus1964-68v22/d220>.

20 Jimmy Carter, “The Carter Doctrine,” contained in the State of the Union address, January 23, 1980. The goals and objectives of the Carter Doctrine were laid out and approved in Presidential Directive/NSC-63, “Persian Gulf Security Framework,” January 15, 1981, Jimmy Carter Library website, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://web.archive.org/web/20120915113622/http://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/pddirectives/pd63.pdf>.



Egyptian President Anwar Sadat, US President Jimmy Carter, and Israeli Prime Minister Menachem Begin shake hands at the conclusion of the Camp David Peace Accords signing ceremony in the East Room of the White House on September 17, 1978. Source: Jimmy Carter Library

President George H. W. Bush expressed US commitment “to defend its vital interests in the region . . . against the Soviet Union or any other regional power with interests inimical to our own.”<sup>21</sup> With the collapse of the Soviet Union, the Bush administration came to view the threat as “any power with interests inimical to our own.”<sup>22</sup> Consequently, the United States interpreted the invasion of friendly Kuwait by Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein as a threat to US vital interests and an affront to the rule of law.<sup>23</sup>

After a yearlong study, the 2000 report by the Commission on America’s National Interests concluded that the United

States had multiple, interconnected “national interests at stake in the Middle East.” The commission, chaired by Robert Ellsworth, Andrew Goodpaster, and Rita Hauser, included distinguished academics and practitioners—Graham T. Allison, Robert Blackwill, Paul Krugman, Sam Nunn, Pat Roberts, Richard Armitage, David Gergen, John McCain, Condoleezza Rice, and Brent Scowcroft—and concluded that US interests in the Middle East were challenged by: “The fate of Israel and the peace process; the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction; the complex geopolitics of the Persian Gulf, especially involving Iraq and Iran; access to Middle East petroleum for the US and world markets;

21 George H. W. Bush, National Security Directive 26, NSD 26, “US Policy Toward the Persian Gulf,” October 2, 1989, National Security Directives, George H. W. Bush Library and Museum website, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/nsd>.

22 George H. W. Bush, National Security Directive 45, NSD 45, “US Policy in Response to the Iraqi Invasion of Kuwait,” August 20, 1990, National Security Directives, George H. W. Bush Library and Museum, accessed February 21, 2020, <https://bush41library.tamu.edu/archives/nsd>.

23 David Rothkopf, *Running the World: The Inside Story of the National Security Council and the Architects of American Power* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2005), 298. Clearly, the reflagging of Kuwaiti oil tankers during the Iran-Iraq War as part of Operation Earnest Will reinforced the image of a sovereign and prosperous Kuwait as integral to American interests in the region. It is noteworthy that while Afghanistan is normally considered as part of South Asia (the State Department places it in the Bureau of South and Central Asian Affairs), the interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq were executed by the same military combatant command, US Central Command.



and terrorism.” Concerning regional terrorism’s threat to US national interests, they observed (in an assessment now overcome by events), “Currently, the greatest threat of anti-American terrorism comes from the renegade Saudi millionaire Osama bin Laden, now hiding in Afghanistan,” but recognized that regional problems “could unleash further terrorism.” Concerning the threats posed by nuclear weapons proliferation and Iran, they observed that Iran posed “the most serious and complex” nonproliferation problem because of its continuing buildup of weapons of mass destruction. That condition would be made worse if (an assessment *not* overcome by events) “hardline elements remain in power in Teheran.”<sup>24</sup>

The 9/11 terrorist attacks caused a further expansion of US interventionist thinking, raising the importance of terrorism in the strategic calculus. In the aftermath of those attacks, amid concerns over the danger of state-sponsored terrorist organizations being empowered with weapons of mass destruction, the Joint Staff issued planning guidance to the US Central Command for forcible entry contingencies for five countries including Iraq.<sup>25</sup> At its most extreme, interventionist thinking promoted external regime change as the US policy of choice in Afghanistan and Iraq after 9/11, with resultant major commitments of US combat forces. More recently, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS or, as it is commonly known in the region, Daesh) joined the Islamic Republic of Iran in threatening US interests in the region. Despite those added threats, the formulation of US national security interests in the Middle East has remained remarkably consistent.

Nonetheless—and in response to the, at best, mixed results of direct military intervention over nearly two decades—the United States has signaled a desire to limit its involvement in and commitment to its Middle East interests. Across the political spectrum, voices have called for reducing US regional commitments, if not for outright withdrawal. During

the Obama administration, the pivot to Asia and the withdrawal from Iraq signaled US political weariness with the violence and instability in the Middle East and the desire for a reduction in American commitment.<sup>26</sup> As a presidential candidate, Donald Trump labeled the region a “quagmire” and decried the costliness of US military involvement in its “endless wars.” During his term in office, he has been reluctant to intervene in ways that might entail sustained, large-scale deployments.<sup>27</sup>

US Secretary of Defense James Mattis’s 2018 National Defense Strategy signaled a further shift in the American strategic perspective. The National Defense Strategy prioritized what it called great power competition with Russia and China over terrorism, irregular conflicts, and existing Middle East security commitments.<sup>28</sup> Following suit, Defense Department officials sought to make no new US commitments in the Middle East and instead aimed to downsize US presence and withdraw from the region in order to focus on what they asserted were higher priorities elsewhere in the world.

Proponents of disengagement, withdrawal, or offshore balancing, however, have tended to adopt a narrow formulation of US national interests, by primarily focusing, for instance, on disrupting terrorist threats to the homeland. Advocates of a strategy of offshore balancing urge greater restraint in US policy, tend to be somewhat pessimistic about the utility of US military intervention, and seek to coalesce policy around the core interests of the safety of the United States, its territorial integrity, and sovereignty. Concerned about US overextension, they would shift responsibilities for military intervention, particularly involving ground forces, to regional powers. This approach would eliminate the cost of maintaining significant forces in the Middle East, while reserving the option for larger forces to intervene in the future, if necessary. Instead of deploying significant ground forces, US air and naval troops would be

24 Allison and Blackwill, *America's National Interests*, 33-34.

25 Joel D. Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds., volume 1 of *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War: Invasion, Insurgency, Civil War: 2003-2006* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Department of the Army, Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2019), 31.

26 Stephen P. Cohen and Robert Ward, “Asia Pivot: Obama’s Ticket out of the Middle East?” Brookings Institution online op-ed, August 21, 2013, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/asia-pivot-obamas-ticket-out-of-middle-east/>.

27 Eric Edelman, “The US Role in the Middle East in an Era of Renewed Great Power Competition,” the Caravan online symposium, Hoover Institution, no. 1921, April 2, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.hoover.org/publications/caravan>; Nahal Toosi, “Trump Gambles Voters Will Reward His To-Hell-with-This Syria Moves,” Politico, October 15, 2019, accessed November 22, 2019, <https://www.politico.com/news/2019/10/15/trump-middle-east-gamble-046778>.

28 On the National Defense Strategy, see, for example, William Gallo, “Prioritizing ‘Great Power Competition,’ Mattis Heads to Asia,” VOA News, Voice of America, January 20, 2018, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/east-asia/new-us-defense-strategy-prioritizing-great-power-competition-mattis-heads-asia>. Frank Hoffman, the primary author of the National Defense Strategy, observed that while the document prioritized interstate conflict, it did “not overlook the various forms that warfare may take in the future. Peacetime competition, ‘gray zone’ tactics, Small War or hybrid combinations are not dismissed.” Hoffman, “Sharpening Our Military Edge: The NDS and the Full Continuum of Conflict,” *Small Wars Journal*, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://smallwarsjournal.com/jrnl/art/sharpening-our-military-edge-nds-and-full-continuum-conflict>. This, however, is not the manner in which the document has been generally interpreted, least of all by the military, which has sought urgently to turn both instruction and forces deployment away from what is generically deemed irregular warfare to focus upon peer or near-peer competition (or, as critics would put it, regular warfare).

the force of last resort with US intervention largely confined to discrete missions or limited presence.<sup>29</sup> At the same time, there is some merit in the argument that traditional US national interests in the Middle East also may be changing as a result of ostensible US energy independence (a status since overcome by events) and the sense that Israel is able to defend itself (a problematic assertion). Still, for the immediate future, those remain important interests.

Notwithstanding the seductiveness of arguments in favor of withdrawal, neither a shift in priorities nor a change in global power dynamics obviates US national interests in the Middle East. Global strategy does not permit simple this-instead-of-that shifts in priorities. The notion, for example, that a “pivot to Asia” necessitates or enables a withdrawal from Middle Eastern commitments is not only an error in strategic logic but in systems thinking, particularly in light of the ever-growing demand for Middle Eastern oil to fuel expanding Asian economies. In concept, the shift prioritized East Asia and the Pacific Rim and effectively did not consider as a part of Asia either Iraq or Afghanistan, scenes of the two largest sustained US military commitments since the end of the Cold War, and minimized their influence on power dynamics elsewhere on the Asian continent.<sup>30</sup> The notion that the United States can disengage from the Middle East because of a shift in focus to great power conflict further exacerbates the error. It seems likely that any candidates for great power competition with the United States must engage within the same nuclear-deterrent context that shaped the Cold War competition. The resultant strategic standoff and shift to irregular, proxy warfare in other nations during that prolonged and dangerous confrontation should inform thinking with regard to where and how so-called traditional powers may attempt to obtain advantage over the United States.<sup>31</sup>

What, in any case, does withdrawal from the Middle East mean? The notion that, absent active US engagement to advance and protect its interests in the region, protracted, difficult, and inconclusive wars will end, that new, unstable nuclear powers will not emerge, that terrorist organizations will not find sanctuary and support there, or that oil and gas will continue to flow without constraint, is at best wishful thinking. Such thinking is no basis for sound national strategy. The most useful focus for any discussion of withdrawal should be grounded in ways appropriate to achieve the desired ends. Heavy reliance on unilateral US military capabilities and endless expenditure to execute policy, rather than calibrated commitments grounded in

facts or realistic assumptions, has contributed to the current impasse. Frustration and defeatism are not strategic tools or paths to insight. Tailored advisory and assistance efforts aimed at building and enhancing critical partner capacities, for instance, could allow the United States to maintain significant influence with a modest commitment of troops. Policy makers also must recognize that persistent signaling of US exhaustion, retrenchment, or withdrawal from the region have left partners confused about the reliability of the United States, and those signals are subject to diplomatic, military, and commercial exploitation by Russia and China globally, including in the Middle East, and by state and non-state threats from within the Middle East.

When the Trump administration came into office in January 2017, the Middle East posed myriad challenges that, to a large degree, continue to confound United States policy makers, defy discrete solution, and highlight the limits of US power and statecraft. Those included the continuation of the civil wars in Syria and Yemen and their potential expansion into a regional conflict, the stalled Israeli-Palestinian peace process, the transregional impact of Kurdish national aspirations, the shifting orientation of Turkish policies and resulting tension with NATO, Russia's return to the region, and growing Chinese commercial inroads. In addition, it is critical to acknowledge the continued weakness of Arab states and the exploitation of the conditions in those states by violent extremist groups, whether in Iraq after the 2003 invasion; Syria, Libya, Egypt, and Jordan after the Arab Spring; or in Yemen, Lebanon, and Iraq today. Currently, mistrust among the Gulf States, their lingering dispute with Qatar, the lack of full inclusion of Shia populations, and toxic, ill-conceived actions such as the Saudi murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, render continued or deeper US commitment increasingly difficult with partners that are less than ideal. Furthermore, it seems clear that the continuation of the coronavirus pandemic will place significantly greater pressures on regional states already plagued by weak governance. The subsequent oil price war and the loss of expected revenues could undermine Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 social reform plan, leave the United Arab Emirates (UAE) without much of a backstop in the next financial crisis, and push Bahrain, Oman, and others off a fiscal cliff. The full impact of its strategic shock is impossible to predict with any certainty.

Against the backdrop of those challenges, two threats, in particular, demand sustained attention, and how the United States chooses to address those two threats will shape any

29 Jasen J. Castillo, “Passing the Torch: Criteria for Implementing a Grand Strategy of Offshore Balancing,” *New Voices in Grand Strategy: Michael J. Zak Lecture Series*, Center for a New American Security, 2019, 23-35.

30 Rather than considering the continent of Asia as a single geographic entity, the distinctions made between the Middle East and Asia, particularly within the US Department of Defense, typically have conformed with the areas of responsibility of the geographic combatant commands.

31 The haste with which the US Department of Defense appears to be dismantling many of its strategic and influence tools in irregular warfare is disconcerting given the “gray area” approaches being pursued by all present major adversaries.

potential US response to the range of other challenges in the Middle East. One is the resilience of Salafist-jihadist extremist groups, such as al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the other is Iran's aggressive revolutionary expansionism. Because recent US policies for dealing with ISIS and Iran provide an important context, an understanding of those is essential to inform the range of future policy choices. US choices in

addressing these two threats influence, and are influenced by, its relations with allies and partners and how it perceives all power competitions throughout the Middle East.<sup>32</sup> At the same time, it is important to note that regional threats also can foster new opportunities to advance US interests, as the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, and Sudan attest.

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32 In this article, an attempt is made to maintain a clear delineation between allies and partners, with the term "ally" reserved for alliance members of NATO and to those countries currently designated as major non-NATO allies in accordance with the Foreign Assistance Act of 1961 and subsequent legislation or presidential designation. Seventeen countries currently have such status, the most recent addition being Brazil (July 2019). Despite the depth of US security relations with countries such as Saudi Arabia or sub-state actors such as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), they are referred to as partners.

# The Resilient Salafist-Jihadist Enterprise, ISIS, and Syria

Do you think, O America, that victory is achieved by the killing of one commander or more? It is then a false victory . . . victory is when the enemy is defeated. Do you think, O America, that defeat is the loss of a city or a land? Were we defeated when we lost cities in Iraq and were left in the desert without a city or a territory? Will we be defeated and you will be victorious if you took Mosul or Sirte or Raqqa or all the cities, and we returned where we were in the first stage? No, defeat is the loss of willpower and desire to fight.

*Then-ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani*<sup>33</sup>

While Salafism and fundamentalist Islam are not inherently violent, their tenets have been used to inspire and condone terrorism and insurgencies as ways to achieve religious and political ends. In the 1990s, Osama bin Laden envisioned a global Salafist-jihadist enterprise of violent extremist groups, with al-Qaeda as the vanguard and inspiration. Such affiliated groups are often referred to as *takfir* by Arab allies and partners of the United States, referencing the practice by al-Qaeda and other Sunni jihadist groups of declaring Muslims who do not follow their violent views to be nonbelievers or apostates and calling for their excommunication from Islam. Despite there being little or no legitimacy for such groups to make these claims, the so-called takfirists have taken wide latitude in using violence against Arab governments and other Muslims, as well as against non-Muslim groups. Over nearly two decades, the takfirist enterprise envisioned by bin Laden has remained

remarkably resilient, adaptive, and defiant.<sup>34</sup> Although disrupted, after bin Laden's death in 2011, al-Qaeda remained a source of inspiration for a worldwide network of affiliated extremist groups, and periodically al-Qaeda's new leader, Ayman al-Zawahiri, renewed public calls for jihad against the United States and other countries.<sup>35</sup>

The enduring global network aside, the case of ISIS in the Middle East, particularly in Iraq and Syria, demonstrates these qualities. Jihadists capitalized on the situation in Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein, and, in 2004, members of the Iraq insurgency swore allegiance to al-Qaeda and branded themselves al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI). By 2006, to broaden their appeal to Iraqi nationalists, and while suffering significant pressure from US and coalition forces, AQI became the Islamic State of Iraq, or ISI. Although heavily degraded, ISI was emboldened by the US withdrawal in 2011, which presented a new opportunity. In 2013 the leadership of ISI formed ISIS, and, under Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, ISIS quickly evolved into an insurgent network with the allegiance of global affiliates, albeit a network privileging terrorism.<sup>36</sup> In Iraq and Syria, it transitioned successfully to a proto-state self-described as the "caliphate."<sup>37</sup>

From the start of its term, the Trump administration prioritized the elimination of the so-called caliphate. On his first full day in office, President Trump visited the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) headquarters, and then-Director Michael R. Pompeo recalled that the president "pledged his support for whatever the agency needed to take out Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and the entire caliphate."<sup>38</sup> Within a week, the administration directed

33 ISIS spokesman Abu Muhammad al-Adnani, who died in 2016, was quoted by Hassan Hassan, "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition in the Syria-Iraq Border Region and Beyond," *CTC Sentinel* (independent publication at the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point) 10, no. 11 (December 2017), 5, accessed January 17, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/insurgents-again-the-islamic-states-calculated-reversion-to-attribution-in-the-syria-iraq-border-region-and-beyond/>.

34 Daniel Byman, "Eighteen Years On: The War on Terror Comes of Age," *CTC Sentinel* 12, no. 8 (September 2019), 1-7, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/app/uploads/2019/09/CTC-SENTINEL-082019.pdf>.

35 Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2019*, US Government Printing Office, 2020, 291-292, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2019-2.pdf>.

36 Such a formulation is integral to US doctrine and is used, in particular, for instruction at the College of International Security Affairs of the National Defense University in Washington. Analytical details may be found in David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, "Violence in Context: Mapping the Strategies and Operational Art of Irregular Warfare," *Contemporary Security Policy* 39, no. 2 (2018), 206-233, with a summary of the approach in David H. Ucko and Thomas A. Marks, "Warfare as Violent Politics: An Integrated Framework for Analyzing Armed Threats," *War on the Rocks*, May 2, 2018, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2018/05/warfare-as-violent-politics-an-integrated-framework-for-analyzing-armed-threats/>.

37 Soukaina Rachidi, "Who Is Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi and How Did ISIS Come to Be?" *Inside Arabia*, February 22, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://insidearabia.com/who-abu-bakr-al-baghdadi-isis/>. See also: Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2018*, US Government Printing Office, 2019, 290-292, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2019/11/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2018-FINAL.pdf>. On Iraq's slip back into what essentially was a civil war in 2012-14, the governance failures of Baghdad, and the regeneration of ISI and emergence of ISIS, see: Joel D. Rayburn and Frank Sobchak, eds., volume 2 of *The U.S. Army in the Iraq War, Surge and Withdrawal: 2007-2011* (Carlisle Barracks, Pennsylvania: Department of the Army, Army War College, Strategic Studies Institute, 2019), 569-598.

38 Remarks of Secretary Michael R. Pompeo at the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Small Group Ministerial, November 14, 2019, Department of State, Washington, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/secretary-michael-r-pompeo-at-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-small-group-ministerial/>.





Militant Islamist fighters take part in a military parade along the streets of northern Raqqa province on June 30, 2014, to celebrate the declaration of an Islamic “caliphate” after the group captured territory in neighboring Iraq. *Source: Reuters/Stringer*

development of a strategy and interagency plans to defeat ISIS. This included recommending policy changes to the existing rules of engagement that exceeded “the requirements of international law regarding the use of force against ISIS.” Envisioning a comprehensive effort that used all instruments of US power and statecraft in addition to military force, the resultant presidential memorandum also directed “public diplomacy, information operations, and cyber strategies to isolate and delegitimize ISIS and its radical Islamist ideology.” In the area of financial and legal tools, the president directed “mechanisms to cut off or seize ISIS’s financial support, including financial transfers, money laundering, oil revenue, human trafficking, sales of looted art and historical artifacts, and other revenue sources.” Seeking greater burden sharing in the effort to defeat ISIS, the president called for the “identification of new coalition partners” and also “policies to empower coalition partners to fight ISIS and its affiliates.”<sup>39</sup>

The Department of Defense had the lead in developing the plan in collaboration with the Departments of State and

Treasury, the Office of the Director of National Intelligence, the chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, and in the White House, the national security advisor and the homeland security and counterterrorism advisor.<sup>40</sup> Coming as it did at the very start of the administration, before the new administration’s policy processes had been defined or matured and before political appointees were in key positions, the approach for defeating ISIS had a great deal of continuity with ongoing activities, particularly within the Departments of Defense and State. While there were new initiatives and priorities in the resulting strategic approach, the ensuing campaign also lacked a degree of comprehensiveness, since administration strategies and policies for Syria, Iraq, Iran, and the Gulf States did not yet exist, and primarily focused on defeating ISIS by taking away its territorial caliphate in the Middle East.

The campaign against ISIS was accelerated by restoring authorities to departments and agencies to prosecute the air and ground campaign in Iraq and Syria. In Iraq, the

39 Donald J. Trump, National Security Presidential Memorandum (NSPM) 3, “Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” January 28, 2017, accessed March 10, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/presidential-actions/presidential-memorandum-plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq-syria/>.

40 Trump, NSPM 3, “Presidential Memorandum Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria.”



seventy-five member-state Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS enabled the Iraqi government to regain control of all its territory.<sup>41</sup> Meanwhile, US special operations forces, with small contingents of select allies, continued to operate in Syria by assisting, training, and equipping local Kurd and Arab forces known as the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). There was little consideration for reinforcing the campaign through a major infusion of US ground combat troops since the Department of Defense preferred to continue its approach of relying on local forces and providing them assistance.<sup>42</sup> At the same time, the removal of the Assad regime, an original policy objective for US involvement in the Syrian civil war, was given less emphasis. In mid-2017, media reporting indicated that the Trump administration had halted CIA programs to overthrow Bashar al-Assad and redirected some remaining programs against ISIS.<sup>43</sup>

Continuing to work with the SDF posed a challenge for the US-led coalition, since its primary component was the Kurdish group in Syria known as the People's Protection Unit or YPG. The YPG was the military wing of the Democratic Union Party (PYD) and an offshoot of Turkey's Kurdistan Workers Party or PKK.<sup>44</sup> The PKK has been designated a terrorist organization by Turkey, a long-standing and formal NATO ally, and also by the US State Department.<sup>45</sup> Historically, the PKK has had a base of support in northern Syria, and over 20 percent of the PKK's fighters have been Syrian Kurds.<sup>46</sup> Nonetheless, starting in 2014 and over Turkish protests, the Obama administration sought a quick fix to the ISIS siege of Kobani and began US reliance upon the YPG in Syria. By all accounts, the YPG have been excellent fighters, which has in return generated more support in some US policy circles for the organization.<sup>47</sup> In northeastern Syria, the Trump administration

attempted to generate confidence between Turkey and the YPG while mending ties with Turkey and ensuring Turkey's security. Acknowledging Turkey's security concerns to be legitimate, US policy makers envisioned that the YPG could be persuaded to formally cut its ties to the PKK, and confidence-building measures could be put in place with the Turkish military such as joint patrols as well as assurances and verification measures so that the Turks would know that US aid and arms provided to the SDF would not be transferred to the PKK to conduct attacks in Turkey.<sup>48</sup>

When the Trump administration entered office, there was broad agreement among national security professionals, as well as newly appointed officials, on the importance of taking away the physical territory, oil fields, and resources controlled by ISIS and liberating the millions of people under the domination of its so-called "caliphate" in Syria and Iraq. The United States still faces the challenge of consolidating hard-fought gains and restoring legitimate governance and services to the reclaimed area to ensure that ISIS is not able to reconstitute. Under coalition pressure, the weakened ISIS began to rely increasingly on the tool of terrorism.<sup>49</sup>

Although both al-Qaeda and ISIS have been degraded, they retain sufficient capability to plan, organize, and conduct terrorist attacks against the United States, allies, and regional partners. Al-Qaeda has proven adaptive and resilient since its formation. In addition, ISIS has already taken steps to reconstitute itself, potentially having learned lessons in Iraq and Syria that will make it more dangerous. The challenge now is the most appropriate way to deal with this degraded but dangerous enemy and secure gains. To do so, and to also maintain significant pressure to hinder the enemy's reconstitution, the United States needs to work

41 Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2017*, US Government Printing Office, 2018, 228, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/country-reports-on-terrorism-2/>.

42 Phil Stewart, "Trump's Call for Deadlier Islamic State Push May Hit Limits," Reuters, January 28, 2017, accessed March 3, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-trump-isis-idUSKBN15C0UK>.

43 Gregg Jaffe and Adam Entous, "Trump Ends Covert CIA Program to Arm Anti-Assad Rebels in Syria, a Move Sought by Moscow," *Washington Post*, July 19, 2017, accessed November 20, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/trump-ends-covert-cia-program-to-arm-anti-assad-rebels-in-syria-a-move-sought-by-moscow/2017/07/19/b6821a62-6beb-11e7-96ab-5f38140b38cc_story.html). On the Obama administration's goals in Syria, to include President Obama's explicit calls for the Syrian president to step down, see Jason Ukman and Liz Sly, "Obama: Syrian President Assad Must Step Down," *Washington Post*, August 18, 2011, accessed November 20, 2019, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/obama-syrian-president-assad-must-step-down/2011/08/18/gIQA75UNJ\\_blog.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/checkpoint-washington/post/obama-syrian-president-assad-must-step-down/2011/08/18/gIQA75UNJ_blog.html).

44 Soner Cagaptay, "US Safe Zone Deal Can Help Turkey Come to Terms with the PKK and YPG," Washington Institute, August 7, 2019, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>.

45 Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2018*, 113-115, 305-306.

46 Soner Cagaptay, "Syria and Turkey: The PKK Dimension," Washington Institute, April 5, 2012, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/syria-and-turkey-the-pkk-dimension>.

47 Cagaptay, "US Safe Zone Deal." See also Michael Doran, "How Obama's Team Set Up Trump's Syrian Dilemma," *New York Post*, October 8, 2019, accessed November 20, 2019, <https://nypost.com/2019/10/08/how-obamas-team-set-up-trumps-syrian-dilemma/>.

48 Cagaptay, "US Safe Zone Deal."

49 Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2017*, 121. See also the excellent work of the Combating Terrorism Center at West Point such as Hassan Hassan's "Insurgents Again: The Islamic State's Calculated Reversion to Attrition." While ISIS is typically labeled a terrorist organization, it is an insurgency, though it has "fallen on hard times." That it may choose to emphasize the weapons available to it is logical, but its current privileging of terrorism is not the key factor in defining or characterizing the organization and determining the appropriate strategic response. ISIS has sought to deal with territorial loss in one theater by emphasizing growth in others (e.g., Africa). The extent to which this "franchise" system allows for actual command and control or simply inspiration is a subject of much ongoing study.



Iraqi youth watch the news of Islamic State leader Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi death, in Najaf, Iraq October 27, 2019. REUTERS/Alaa al-Marjani TPX IMAGES OF THE DAY

with and rely upon regional partners, optimize scarce resources, employ US power deftly, and recognize and carefully balance competing priorities. This will prove especially difficult given the extent to which the administration has taken unilateral steps that have vexed these same partners.

Ambassador Nathan Sales, as coordinator for counterterrorism and acting under secretary of state, characterized US policy on Syria and ISIS as having three major elements, of which the defeat of ISIS was one. In a statement on November 14, 2019, he observed: “Our Syria policy has been consistent over the years. It is to bring about an enduring defeat of ISIS, to reduce and eliminate Iranian malign presence, and to bring about a peaceful political resolution to the conflict in line with UN Security Council resolutions.”<sup>50</sup> Sustaining those interrelated efforts remains a significant challenge.

The case of Syria also illustrates how difficult it can be to increase allied and partner contributions to advance or defend common interests. As a result, the United States continues to bear a disproportionate share of the cost of campaigns, both in money and troops. An apparent frustration for President Trump and his team was the reluctance of allies and partners to either put boots on the ground in more substantial numbers or to defray the substantial costs associated with maintaining the campaign. From the US administration’s perspective, France, Belgium, and the Arab states arguably face a greater direct threat from ISIS than does the United States. The inevitable tension among allies of disproportionate strength, where the weaker aim to have the stronger act in their interests at the latter’s expense, helps to shape an ongoing realism about any US action in the Middle East or any region, and also has become an argument for US withdrawal.

<sup>50</sup> Nathan Sales, Department of State Special Briefing, “Special Representative for Syria Engagement and Special Envoy for the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS Ambassador James Jeffrey and Coordinator for Counterterrorism Ambassador Nathan Sales,” November 14, 2019, Washington, online record accessed February 8, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/special-representative-for-syria-engagement-and-special-envoy-for-the-global-coalition-to-defeat-isis-ambassador-james-jeffrey-and-coordinator-for-counterterrorism-ambassador-nathan-sales/>.

Nonetheless, the United States continues necessary work with stabilization and recovery efforts in northern Syria and in Iraq, and those efforts must be sustained and incentivized. By late 2019, the United States and its coalition partners had provided more than \$1.2 billion to fund more than thirty-one liberated towns and districts across Iraq. Since 2015, the US-led coalition has helped facilitate the return of more than 4.5 million displaced Iraqi civilians. The United States has urged coalition members to fund the UN Displaced Persons Funding Facility for Stabilization, which is designed to restore essential services and refurbish critical infrastructure in Syria.<sup>51</sup> In the area of Syria under the control of the SDF, a de facto government known as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria (AANES) has emerged for a multiethnic community of four million people, holding out the promise of some degree of self-determination for that area during Syria's eventual political transition.<sup>52</sup>

Another significant challenge is the need to deal with foreign fighters who have been detained, particularly those in SDF detention facilities. The US view is that countries have obligations to take back their citizens and prosecute them for crimes they have committed, as well as to rehabilitate and reintegrate those who have not committed crimes, particularly children. The US government has taken the position that all countries have a shared responsibility to deal with the foreign fighter phenomenon, rather than force regional countries to incarcerate them or to rely on international tribunals.<sup>53</sup> General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., the commander of US Central Command, testified that in the near term, the United States can mitigate some of the risks “by facilitating repatriations, training and equipping guard forces, and providing the funding required to improve prison infrastructure.” Because the population of refugees and ISIS detainees came from more than sixty countries, McKenzie observed that “full resolution requires a comprehensive diplomatic and international effort” in which the international community accepts “its shared responsibilities.” The longer-term problem of repatriation and deradicalization defy “military solutions,” McKenzie told the listening US senators, and “will not go away by ignoring it.”<sup>54</sup>

US government officials were not happy with Turkey's decision in October 2019 to launch an incursion into northeast

Syria, and then-Secretary of Defense Mark Esper characterized Ankara's actions as “unwarranted.”<sup>55</sup> Having previously acknowledged Turkey's legitimate security concerns, the United States hoped that joint US, Turkish, and SDF patrols would generate confidence among Turkish leaders. Faced with Turkey's fait accompli when it seized the thirty-two kilometer-deep safe zone, the US government took action to keep American forces from being targeted by a NATO ally and to secure a cease-fire agreement. The former step was seen as an essential goal, in order to preserve NATO integrity and avoid American casualties, but it was poorly explained and prompted considerable criticism both within and without the system. A disconcerting aspect of the Turkish incursion was the introduction of Syria forces and Russian troops into northeastern Syria, threatening the success achieved to date against ISIS.<sup>56</sup> In the future and in the face of difficulties, policy priority should be given to mending relations with Turkey, bolstering NATO, and encouraging Turkey to play a constructive role in northern Syria.

The Trump administration's withdrawal of the bulk of American combat troops from northeastern Syria resulted in the majority being redeployed to western Iraq, while maintaining control over Syrian airspace in the area east of the Euphrates. Further south, several hundred troops continued to occupy al-Tanf base in southeastern Syria, along the Syria, Iraq, and Jordan border. This deployment blocked a major route for Iranian lethal aid along its “land bridge” to Lebanon and Syria, which Teheran described as part of an “axis of resistance.” In addition to contractors from private military firms, US troops continued to operate in bases close to Iraq's border to protect oil facilities under SDF control and to hinder Syrian regime advances before the political settlement stipulated by UN Security Council Resolution 2254. US troops also provided protection for SDF-run facilities for ISIS detainees. Meanwhile, Esper called on NATO allies to strengthen the partnership with Turkey, with the goal of moving that nation away from its alignment with Russia and back to being a strong, reliable, and responsible NATO ally.<sup>57</sup> Such confidence-building measures will take time and require consistency.

The recently appointed chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Mark Milley, announced on November 10, 2019,

51 James Jeffrey, Department of State Special Briefing, November 14, 2019.

52 Ralph Abraham and Nadine Maenza, “Why Northeast Syria Matters,” *The Hill*, March 3, 2020, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://thehill.com/blogs/congress-blog/foreign-policy/486682-why-northeast-syria-matters>.

53 Sales, Department of State Special Briefing, November 14, 2019.

54 Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement of General Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., Commander, United States Central Command before the Senate Armed Services Committee 12 March 2020,” 10, accessed March 12, 2020, [https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/McKenzie\\_03-12-20.pdf](https://www.armed-services.senate.gov/imo/media/doc/McKenzie_03-12-20.pdf).

55 Lolita C. Baldor, “US's Esper Has Sharp Words for Turkey over Syria Invasion,” Associated Press, October 24, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://apnews.com/da0687d1880f4a088872afdab5de7052>.

56 Jeffrey, Department of State Special Briefing, November 14, 2019.

57 “Esper Details Moves in Syria—Discusses NATO Meetings,” *Defense.gov*, October 25, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/explore/story/Article/1999021/esper-details-moves-in-syria-discusses-nato-meetings/>; UN Security Council, Resolution 2254, (December 18, 2015), <http://unscr.com/en/resolutions/2254>.



that fewer than one thousand (likely about five hundred) US troops would remain in Syria indefinitely. General Milley noted that “the footprint will be small but the objective will remain the same, the enduring defeat of ISIS,” and will include partnering with local Kurdish and Syrian-Arab forces and protecting the resources they will need to remain viable.<sup>58</sup> At the end of January 2020, Ambassador Jim Jeffrey reported, “We had a setback temporarily in Syria back in October with the Turkish incursion, but we’re back doing full operations with our local partner, the Syrian Democratic Forces.” Although he placed the strength of ISIS and its affiliates as “some fourteen- to eighteen-thousand terrorists between Syria and Iraq,” he noted that the United States was working with “the Iraqi government and the local authorities in Syria to combat this scourge.”<sup>59</sup> Reportedly, to help sustain the US effort, countries such as Saudi Arabia were considering financing Arab forces in the SDF.<sup>60</sup> Unfortunately, the onset of the coronavirus pandemic and the resulting economic downturn limited such burden-sharing initiatives. General McKenzie reported that “ISIS has the potential to reconstitute in short order” and that stopping that from occurring is “beyond the current capabilities of the [United States] unless it has a capable, partnered ground force.”<sup>61</sup> Continued US military presence, while discrete, brings with it a larger degree of access, influence, and intelligence than if the United States withdrew completely. While each of these will have limits, they serve to reduce the strategic and operational risks associated with complete US disengagement. In addition, the United States continues to pursue international diplomatic efforts to resolve the Syrian conflict and demands adherence to the processes for a cease-fire, elections, and the political transition called for in UNSCR 2254. In pursuit of those goals, in 2020, the United States began initiating sanctions on members of the Assad regime

under the Caesar Act to signal American support for the Syrian people, hold the regime accountable for its atrocities, and discourage international economic assistance to the regime until it complies with UNSCR 2254.<sup>62</sup>

Beyond ISIS in Iraq and Syria, other violent extremists pose persistent threats across the region. Bin Laden’s Salafist-jihadist enterprise, to include al-Qaeda itself, has survived, adapted, and displayed remarkable resiliency. Operating on inspiration rather than central direction, these groups have often been overlooked or relegated to a lower priority by US analysts and policy makers.<sup>63</sup> Nonetheless, US and allied counterterrorism actions against all levels of al-Qaeda’s organization have had a disruptive effect. In 2019, US counterterrorism operations were responsible for the death of Osama bin Laden’s son, Hamza, seen by many as the future leader of al-Qaeda. Meanwhile, the killing in Tehran in mid-2020 of al-Qaeda’s number two, Abu Muhammad al-Masri, eliminated an adept operator who had been with the terrorist organization since its inception and had been instrumental in its previous adaptations. The impact of their deaths was compounded by the apparent passing of al-Qaeda’s senior leader, al-Zawahiri, in Afghanistan’s Ghazni province in late 2020. The deaths of al-Qaeda’s most senior leaders has produced a leadership vacuum at the highest levels and intensified the pressure on the remnants of the organization, but, given the group’s resilience, it seems likely al-Qaeda will adapt and endure, and the danger it and its affiliates pose should not be discounted.<sup>64</sup>

Of further concern, signs of local cooperation between ISIS and al-Qaeda affiliates suggest that their reunification should not be ruled out. Known for its external attack planning, al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), with

58 Richard Sisk, “Up to 600 Troops Now Set to Remain in Syria Indefinitely, Top General Says,” *Military.com*, November 10, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/11/10/600-troops-now-set-remain-syria-indefinitely-top-general-says.html>.

59 James Jeffrey, “Live at State Briefing with Ambassador James Jeffrey,” January 30, 2020, accessed February 3, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/live-at-state-briefing-with-ambassador-james-jeffrey/>.

60 “Saudi Arabia, US to Back Formation of SDF-affiliated Arab Forces,” *Middle East Monitor*, February 4, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200204-saudi-arabia-us-to-back-formation-of-sdf-affiliated-arab-forces/>.

61 McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement,” 7.

62 Department of State, fact sheet, “Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act,” June 17, 2020, accessed October 27, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/caesar-syria-civilian-protection-act/#:~:text=The%20President%20signed%20into%20law%20the%20%E2%80%99Caesar%20Syria,way%20to%20promote%20accountability%20for%20the%20regime%E2%80%99s%20atrocities.>

63 Critics note that US civilian, military, and intelligence officials have tended to downplay al-Qaeda’s strength for well over a decade. As such, they assert that al-Qaeda’s clandestine operational patterns render accurate assessments difficult, and the fact that operatives are sometimes members of various jihadist groups at the same time further complicates strength estimates. Bill Roggio, “Analysis: Don’t Trust Estimates of al-Qaeda’s strength in Afghanistan,” *Long War Journal*, September 22, 2020, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.longwarjournal.org/archives/2020/09/analysis-dont-trust-estimates-of-al-qaedas-strength-in-afghanistan.php>. As an example of the inspirational impact of these groups, it is noteworthy that prior to the attack by a Royal Saudi Air Force officer at Naval Air Station Pensacola in December 2019, the officer contacted members of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, and afterwards the group took credit for the attack. Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism, 2019, US Government Printing Office, 2020, 2, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/06/Country-Reports-on-Terrorism-2019-2.pdf>.

64 Recently, social media reported the death Al-Zawahiri who apparently had been ill. Baker Atyani and Sayed Salahuddin, “Al-Qaeda chief Zawahiri has died in Afghanistan — sources,” *Arab News Pakistan*, November 20, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.pk/node/1765746/world>. On the deaths of the other two leaders, see: Tim Lister, Paul Cruickshank, and Ghazi Balkiz, “Al Qaeda loses one of its most experienced leaders in mysterious murder in Tehran,” *CNN*, November 16, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2020/11/14/middleeast/al-qaeda-mohammed-al-masri-murder-intl/index.html>, and Sarah Westwood, Evan Perez and Ryan Browne, “Trump confirms Osama bin Laden’s son Hamza killed in US counterterrorism operation,” *CNN*, September 14, 2019, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.cnn.com/2019/09/14/politics/hamza-bin-laden-al-qaeda-dead/index.html>.



Soldiers in Syria supporting the Combined Joint Task Force-Operation Inherent Resolve mission on October 27, 2020. Source: U.S. Army photo/Spc. Jensen Guillory

six thousand fighters, illustrates well the bare minimum a transnational organization requires—in sanctuary, money, training, and tactics—to threaten US interests. Among the various jihadist factions in Syria, al-Qaeda in Syria boasts as many as twenty-thousand fighters, and in affiliation with Nusra Front and its successors, it seeks to establish an emirate in Syria's Idlib province, bordering Turkey, from which to pursue its broader objectives. ISIS adherents in the Sinai and Libya pose significant challenges to Egyptian security forces and to stabilization in Libya. Likewise, Yemen's ISIS branch exploits the security vacuum there.<sup>65</sup> As is the case in Iraq and Syria, effectively disrupting and degrading ISIS and these groups will require the support and sustained assistance of capable local partners. Local partners, in turn, require local US engagement.

Having lost their territorial caliphate, ISIS has reverted to being an insurgency with terrorism as one of its strongest tools. Troubling is the fact that core grievances upon which ISIS capitalized in its rise to power remain and likely have intensified. Those grievances emanated from the failure of the governments in Baghdad and Damascus to serve and protect their Sunni Arab populations. The 2003 toppling of Saddam removed a counterbalance to Iranian expansionist ambitions and malign influence, while the 2011 US withdrawal from Iraq left Iran, with its hegemonic aspirations, as the beneficiary. Following the adoption in 2015 of the Iran nuclear deal, the US government reduced its institutional focus on malign Iranian activities in the region, and in execution, the subsequent campaign against ISIS tended to compartmentalize the challenges posed by ISIS from those generated by Iran. With the elimination of the ISIS caliphate,

<sup>65</sup> Department of State, *Country Reports on Terrorism, 2018*, 118-119, 312, 316-319; Bruce Hoffman and Jacob Ware, "Al-Qaeda: Threat or Anachronism?" *War on the Rocks*, March 12, 2020, <https://warontherocks.com/2020/03/al-qaeda-threat-or-anachronism/>. Arguably, the split between al-Qaeda and ISIS was a bureaucratic disagreement rather than an ideological one. The first several years of relations between the two groups in Yemen bear out that line of reasoning, even though they have fought more recently. Both groups subscribe to the global jihadist and Salafi-jihadist ideology, but they also are influenced by relationships and networks. They do not agree on who should be in charge of the global jihad and how that should be pursued. As an example of the importance of ideology and relationships over bureaucratic structure, it is noteworthy that Khalid Sheikh Mohammed resisted swearing allegiance to Osama bin Laden until after the 9/11 attacks. See Terry McDermott, "The Mastermind: Khalid Sheikh Mohammed and the Making of 9/11," *New Yorker*, September 6, 2010, <https://www.newyorker.com/magazine/2010/09/13/the-mastermind>.



the failure of governance in Baghdad and Damascus has yet to be rectified, and malign Iranian influence threatens the Sunni Arab, Kurdish, and minority populations in Iraq and in Syria. It will fuel the reemergence of another adaptation of ISIS, and sustained pressure will be required to prevent the reconstitution of ISIS in short order.<sup>66</sup> Efforts by the United States and the international community to consolidate gains and establish legitimate government services in the territory once under ISIS, such as the AANES, will be essential. At the same time, there should be efforts to harness the oil fields and other resources in the liberated areas to help fund reconstruction, provide local Arabs and Kurds with a degree of political influence, and resist calls to rebuild Assad's Syria as long as he fails to accept the United Nations transition process in UNSCR 2254.<sup>67</sup>

The Iraqi political situation and the degree of Iranian influence among Iraq's Shia political parties and Popular Mobilization Force militia pose a challenge for continued US military presence in Iraq. General McKenzie has assessed that Iraq is "a strategic partner in the fight against ISIS," but there are "rogue elements of the Popular Mobilization Forces more beholden to Iran's regime" who are smuggling "advanced weapons into Iraq from Iran" to "threaten US and coalition forces" and thereby undermine the mission to defeat ISIS.<sup>68</sup> While popular protests have raised voices against Iranian influence, Shia politicians have attempted to pursue measures to expel US troops. Iraqi militia leaders were prominent among those who assaulted the American embassy in Baghdad. The strike that killed IRGC Quds Force (IRGC-QF) Major-General Qassem Soleimani, as well as a prominent Iraqi militia leader meeting with him, fueled Shia political demands for US withdrawal, an action that could effectively end the coalition it leads against ISIS. The departure of US forces from Iraq would pose a challenge for the continuation of the campaign against ISIS in Syria, as well.

The selection of Mustafa al-Kadhimi, the former intelligence chief, as prime minister in May 2020, and the subsequent US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue have been hopeful signs following a protracted crisis of governance in Iraq. While the

strategic dialogue included discussions about security and counterterrorism, economics and energy, political issues, and cultural relations between the two countries, it is significant that there was no demand for US withdrawal. The United States and Iraq, instead, agreed that "over the coming months the United States would continue reducing forces from Iraq and discuss with the Government of Iraq the status of remaining forces as both countries turn their focus towards developing a bilateral security relationship based on strong mutual interests."<sup>69</sup>

Over the course of 2020, Iranian-backed Shia militia conducted an increasing number of rocket attacks on bases with US troops and on US supply convoys in Iraq. In response, the United States issued an ultimatum to the Iraqi government on September 20.<sup>70</sup> Secretary of State Pompeo informed Prime Minister Kadhimi and Iraqi President Barham Salih that if their government did not take action, the United States would withdraw its diplomatic presence, an action that would weaken the coalition against ISIS.<sup>71</sup>

Looking forward, the United States will need deft diplomacy to convince Iraqi politicians under continued Iranian pressure to take action against Iranian-backed militia, extend any US mandate in Iraq, and continue the US-led Global Coalition against ISIS. Over time, emphasizing the international aspect of the coalition and the international legitimacy that it has could moderate Iraqi withdrawal demands in their turbulent political system. The United States should strive to ensure its European allies in the coalition understand the detrimental impact of Iranian-backed militia on the continuation of the campaign and on regional security. Meantime, there could be an opportunity for some expansion of the mandate and scope of the advisory NATO Mission Iraq to include police training or broader stabilization and institution-building tasks. At the same time, US leaders should strive to ensure their European and Arab counterparts understand the extent to which the enduring defeat of ISIS and the prevention of another mass refugee flow from the region are vital interests for US allies and partners.

66 McKenzie, Jr., "Posture Statement," 7-8.

67 Abraham and Maenza, "Why Northeast Syria Matters."

68 McKenzie, Jr., "Posture Statement," 8-9.

69 Department of State, "Joint Statement on the US-Iraq Strategic Dialogue," media note of June 11, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/joint-statement-on-the-u-s-iraq-strategic-dialogue/>.

70 Michael Knights, "Pushing Back on Iraqi Militias: Weighing US Options," Washington Institute, September 25, 2020, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/pushing-back-on-iraqi-militias-weighing-u.s.-options>.

71 Edward Wong, Lara Jakes, and Eric Schmitt, "Pompeo Threatens to Close US Embassy in Iraq Unless Militias Halt Attacks," *New York Times*, September 29, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/29/us/politics/pompeo-embassy-baghdad-iraq.html>.

# Hostile Iranian Activities

The day when IRGC's missiles demolished the US military base in Iraq is also one of Allah's days. A nation having the spirit to slap a global, harassing, Arrogant Power in this way shows God's power and is one of Allah's Days.

The Quds Force is an entity with lofty, human goals. . . . They are combatants without borders who go wherever they are needed to protect the dignity of the oppressed.

*Supreme Leader Khamenei, 2020*<sup>72</sup>

Beyond the re-emergence of ISIS or a similar phenomenon, policy makers must take a comprehensive or systemic view of the threats in the region, resisting the temptation to address threats individually and distinctly without regard to context and interrelationships. The opposing forces of ISIS and malign Iranian activities require mutual consideration in support of a common strategic purpose for US policy. Both must be addressed, and one cannot be emphasized to the benefit of the other.<sup>73</sup> The traditional bureaucratic structures within departments and agencies, marked, for example, by distinct functional offices such as counterterrorism and by country-specific desks (such as those for Iran, Iraq, and Syria), further complicate integration and regional approaches.<sup>74</sup> The Syrian conflict reveals the extent to which the takfirists and Iran's Shia militia proxies fed off each other and exploited local conditions, thereby strengthening their grip on local communities. As the war continued, both threat groups took on a greater regional presence. Iranian malign influence in the governments in Damascus and Baghdad fueled the emergence of ISIS, and, in turn, Iranian-backed militia capitalized on the cycle of violence and havoc that ISIS caused. Under intense pressure from ISIS, vulnerable Shia and Alawi populations welcomed the security provided by

Shia militia groups. As a consequence, the abuses of Shia militia also convinced beleaguered Sunni communities that the protection of the ISIS banner was their only recourse. Ultimately, Iran worked to exploit the fight against ISIS and the elimination of the ISIS territorial caliphate by deepening its influence to advance its aggressive, hegemonic aims.<sup>75</sup>

The result has been a significant escalation of violence fueled by hostile Iranian activities across the region. Since the 1979 revolution, Iran has aggressively sought to export its politics by proxy or covert means. Following the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime has sought to build a coalition across the Middle East to secure its hold on power in Iran, drive the United States from the region and overthrow American allies, and become the regional hegemon. Through a policy proclaimed as the "axis of resistance," the Iranian regime initially sought to pursue its destabilizing goals through terrorist funding and collusion, intelligence sharing, and covert support to Lebanese Hezbollah and the Syrian regime.<sup>76</sup> In 1984, the US State Department characterized Tehran as a state-sponsor of terrorism, and that designation has remained in effect.<sup>77</sup>

In recent years, however, Iranian hostile activities have increased substantially. The US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the Arab Spring provided new opportunities for Iranian aggression. Those violent activities continued during Iran's nuclear negotiations with the United States and other major powers. Under the cover of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), the regime's increasingly malign activities also included overt force deployments and joint military operations, economic and military assistance, and diplomatic solidarity with non-state partners and terrorist proxies such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Syria, Hamas in Gaza, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, the Houthis in Yemen, and militia in Iraq.<sup>78</sup> Iranian security forces, particularly the

72 Supreme Leader Khamenei's sermon during the Friday prayer in Tehran, January 17, 2020, accessed the same day, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7307/Imam-Khamenei-s-sermon-during-the-Friday-Prayer-in-Tehran>.

73 For a brief discussion of polarity thinking, see Richard L. Hughes, Katherine Colarelli Beatty, and David L. Dinwoodie, *Becoming a Strategic Leader* (San Francisco, California: Wiley's Jossey-Bass, 2014, 2nd edition), 44-46.

74 To address this problem, Secretary of State Pompeo created an Iran Action Group which, he stated, "will be responsible for directing, reviewing, and coordinating all aspects of the State Department's Iran-related activity, and it will report directly to me." He also gave the group the task of ensuring the Department of State efforts with respect to Iran were closely coordinated and integrated with the efforts of other departments and agencies. Michael R. Pompeo, Remarks to the Press, "Remarks on the Creation of the Iran Action Group," August 16, 2018, online record accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/remarks-on-the-creation-of-the-iran-action-group/>.

75 State Department, Iran Action Group, "Outlaw Regime: A Chronicle of Iran's Destructive Activities," September 19, 2020, 14-15, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/09/Outlaw-Regime-2020-A-Chronicle-of-Irans-Destabilizing-Activity.pdf>.

76 The Atlantic Council style guide prefers the spelling of Hezbollah, the transliterated version, to Hizballah, for the "Party of Allah." Kenneth Pollack, The Evolution of the Revolution: The Changing Nature of Iran's Axis of Resistance, American Enterprise Institute, March 26, 2020, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.aei.org/research-products/report/the-evolution-of-the-revolution-the-changing-nature-of-irans-axis-of-resistance/>.

77 Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism, 2018, 311. The late 2019 demonstrations in Lebanon and Iraq suggest that the Iranian regime may have overplayed its hand in those countries, and the violent crackdown on dissent in Iran is likely to generate further discontent against Iran's ruling elite.

78 Pollack, The Evolution of the Revolution.



Forces loyal to Syria's President Bashar al-Assad walk in al-Mallah Farms after regaining control of areas north of Aleppo, pictured on December 15, 2014. Source: Reuters/George Ourfalian

IRGC Qods Force (QF), further capitalized on the infusion of cash and resources provided under the JCPOA adopted in 2015 and implemented in January 2016.<sup>79</sup> Arguably, the economic benefits of the Iran nuclear deal increased the regime's lethality and fueled its recklessness.

Under Soleimani, the IRGC-QF pursued regional hegemony through a blend of state power, malign influence, and violence. In the past decade and particularly during the negotiation and implementation of the JCPOA, the IRGC-QF armed and trained Shia militia in Iraq and Syria; deployed Lebanese Hezbollah into Syria; trained Bahraini terrorist groups; and armed the Houthis in Yemen and provisioned them with advisers from Hezbollah and from the IRGC Missile Command

to help conduct missile attacks against Saudi Arabia. In Iraq, Iranian-backed militias exerted significant political influence but operated outside the control of the central government in Baghdad.<sup>80</sup> The number of indirect fire attacks on Iraqi bases with US military presence continued to increase. In the Levant, the situation escalated to the point that the IRGC units, not proxies such as Lebanese Hezbollah, began flying armed drones and firing missiles directly into Israel from Syria; indeed, Iran's rejection of Israeli legitimacy has posed what many considered an existential threat to Israel. Arguably, Iran's heavy-handed influence operations and use of armed proxies have tipped the regional balance, from the Levant to Yemen, in Iran's favor.<sup>81</sup> For example, in response to expanding Iranian influence, Saudi Arabia and its partners in the GCC reached

<sup>79</sup> Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power: Ensuring Regime Survival and Securing Regional Dominance*, Department of Defense, 2019, 18, accessed April 10, 2020, [https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran\\_Military\\_Power\\_LR.pdf](https://www.dia.mil/Portals/27/Documents/News/Military%20Power%20Publications/Iran_Military_Power_LR.pdf).

<sup>80</sup> The Combating Terrorism Center at West Point has documented the expansion of violent Iranian influence and support to proxies. See, for example, Ali Soufan, "Qassem Soleimani and Iran's Unique Regional Strategy," CTC Sentinel 11, no. 10 (November 2018), 1-12; Colin Clarke and Phillip Smith, "The Implications of Iran's Expanding Shi'a Foreign Fighter Network," CTC Sentinel 10, no. 10, (November 2017), 14-18; Michael Knights and Matthew Levitt, "The Evolution of Shi'a Insurgency in Bahrain," CTC Sentinel 11, no. 1 (January 2018), 18-25; accessed January 17, 2020, <https://ctc.usma.edu/ctc-sentinel/>.

<sup>81</sup> Frank Gardner, "Iran's Network of Influence in Mid-East 'Growing,'" BBC News, November 7, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-50324912>; Iran's Networks of Influence in the Middle East, International Institute for Strategic Studies, 2019, 7-37.



out to the Iraqi Shia community, and others, to try to emphasize Arab and tribal identities over sectarian ones.<sup>82</sup>

Concerned with Iranian breaches of the JCPOA and other destabilizing activities, the US Congress acted. In December 2015 Congress passed the Iran Nuclear Agreement Review Act (INARA), amending the Atomic Energy Act of 1954, to oversee US implementation of the JCPOA and monitor Iranian activities. The law required periodic reports from the president on Iranian compliance with the provisions of the JCPOA and also with respect to delays of a week or more in providing access to IAEA inspectors, unauthorized procurement activities, missile and centrifuge research and development, human rights abuses by the regime against the Iranian people, Iranian money laundering, whether any covert nuclear weapons activities were being conducted, and funding, planning, or supporting “acts of terrorism.” Congress also required the president to certify that the JCPOA was “vital to the national security interests of the United States” and that the deal “in no way compromises the commitment of the United States to Israel’s security.”<sup>83</sup>

In mid-2017, Congress sent another strong message of concern about Iranian destabilizing activities with the passage of the Iran provisions in the Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA). The law required reports to Congress on Iranian conventional capabilities, including acquisition and development of drones, cruise and ballistic missiles, and anti-access or area denial capabilities, or any plans related to weapons of mass destruction (WMD). Congress also required an assessment of the activities of the IRGC, Iranian support and funding to proxies throughout the region, propaganda and disinformation, interference with international shipping, subversion against countries in the region, and support to the Assad regime in Syria. It required the president to impose sanctions on Iranian ballistic missile and WMD programs, any activities related to their manufacture, acquisition, development, transfer, or use, and on the IRGC and any of its foreign agents or affiliates. It also mandated US sanctions to enforce arms embargoes on Iran to prevent it from receiving or transferring conventional weapons such as main battle tanks, armored vehicles, artillery, attack helicopters, combat aircraft, warships, and missiles, or activities related to the maintenance and supply of such equipment. Beyond those mandatory sanctions, CAATSA authorized

the president to impose sanctions of those responsible for human rights abuses against individuals in Iran.<sup>84</sup> President Trump signed CAATSA into law on August 2, 2017, noting that it addressed Russian interference and the “dangerous and destabilizing behavior” of North Korea and Iran. He assessed that he favored “tough measures to punish and deter bad behavior by the rogue regimes in Tehran and Pyongyang.” Complaining of Congressional requirements that provided little flexibility to him or the executive branch, however, he observed that, among other things, CAATSA “improperly encroaches on Executive power.”<sup>85</sup>

The high bar of Congressional reporting, certification under INARA, and mandatory CAATSA sanctions concerning the full range of Iranian behavior, coupled with the reluctance of European leaders to amend the JCPOA in any way, gave President Trump few options concerning what was already viewed by many as a bad deal. Further complicating matters, in late April, the Israelis publicly revealed the existence of an undeclared Iranian nuclear weapon research archive, raising concerns about the lack of Iranian transparency permitted under the JCPOA and the potential for covert nuclear weapons research and development activities, which were among the criteria Congress required the president to certify.<sup>86</sup> In May 2018, unable to provide the INARA certification required by US law, President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA.

Secretary Pompeo asserted that the nuclear deal “failed to restrain Iran’s nuclear progress or its campaigns of violence abroad.” Pompeo noted that in place of the deal, the United States had initiated “a campaign of pressure, deterrence, and solidarity with the long-suffering Iranian people.”<sup>87</sup> Putting financial pressure on Iran, in order to deny the Iranian regime the resources for its destabilizing activities and at the same time generate leverage for a new deal, became a foundation of the Trump administration’s Iran policy. The aim of the Maximum Pressure campaign was a new deal with Iran that comprehensively addressed Iran’s destabilizing behavior, not just its nuclear program, but also its ballistic missile program, support for armed partners and proxies in the Middle East, and detainment of US citizens. Rather than resorting to military force, the campaign prioritized the use of diplomatic and financial instruments, building upon the deterrence maintained by US forces in the region.

82 “Iraqi Shi’ite Leader Sadr Makes Rare Visit to Saudi Arabia,” Reuters, July 30, 2017, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-iraq-cleric/iraqi-shiite-leader-sadr-makes-rare-visit-to-saudi-arabia-idUSKBN1AFOUN>.

83 Iran Nuclear Review Act of 2015, Pub. L. No. 114-17, 129 Stat. 201 (2015).

84 Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act of 2017, Pub. L. No. 115-44, 131 Stat. 886 (2017).

85 Statement by President Donald J. Trump on Signing the “Countering America’s Adversaries Through Sanctions Act,” White House website, August 2, 2017, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-donald-j-trump-signing-countering-americas-adversaries-sanctions-act/>.

86 David E. Sanger and Ronen Bergman, “How Israel, in Dark of Night, Torched Its Way to Iran’s Nuclear Secrets,” New York Times, July 15, 2018, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/15/us/politics/iran-israel-mossad-nuclear.html>.

87 Michael R. Pompeo, “Remarks on the Creation of the Iran Action Group,” Remarks to the Press, Washington, August 16, 2018.

Pompeo assessed that the administration gave the Iranian regime the choice: “Either negotiate a new, comprehensive deal or face unprecedented US sanctions and manage economic collapse.” The Iranian regime, Pompeo observed, chose “rejecting diplomacy and doubling down on its revolutionary agenda.”<sup>88</sup> As a result, in November 2018, after a wind-down period, the majority of US sanctions that had been lifted or waived pursuant to the JCPOA were reimposed, including those related to Iran’s energy and shipping. At the time, Secretary Pompeo provided additional 180-day reduction exceptions to China, Greece, Italy, India, Japan, South Korea, Taiwan, and Turkey, and those exemptions expired in May 2019, bringing Iranian oil exports to historic lows. Also in May 2019, the administration expanded its sanctions authorities and targeted Iran’s metals and petrochemical sectors.<sup>89</sup> Leveling sanctions on well over a thousand Iranian individuals and entities, the campaign resulted in the significant devaluation of the Iranian rial.<sup>90</sup> As part of the pressure campaign, in April 2019 the administration also designated the IRGC-QF as a terrorist organization, signaling the risks of “doing business with the IRGC” until the regime “abandons its malign and outlaw behavior.”<sup>91</sup>

Iran responded to the intensifying economic and diplomatic pressure with an increase in violent attacks and an abrogation of its nuclear commitments. In mid-2019, Iranian forces conducted a series of violent actions throughout the region, including the May and June mining of six commercial tankers in the Gulf, the June downing of a US drone near the Strait of Hormuz, and on September 14, the precision attack by drones and a cruise-missile attack on processing

facilities of Saudi Aramco, the state oil company, at Abqaiq and Khurais in eastern Saudi Arabia. While there were no reported casualties in those incidents, the regional security situation appeared to be escalating toward wider war, with Iranian leaders emboldened and increasingly reckless.<sup>92</sup>

In the Gulf, the fall 2019 establishment of the US-led International Maritime Security Construct served to deter and counter Iranian threats to maritime trade.<sup>93</sup> At the same time, aggressive Israeli strikes on Iranian weapons depots in Syria raised the costs of open Iranian involvement.<sup>94</sup> Nonetheless, Iran seemed to be committed to a policy of armed extortion in a strategic environment across the Middle East where deterrence was dangerously eroded. Following the Abqaiq attack, Iranian aggression primarily continued through proxies in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. There was a sense that Iranian regime provocations were intended to ratchet up the pressure on European countries for greater economic benefits under the JCPOA and to provoke a kinetic response by the United States, which Iran would use to portray itself as the victim. On November 10, 2019, General Milley observed, “Our government has chosen not to react militarily at this time” to provocations by Iran, adding, “but we have the capability to, and we’ve added some capability just as recently as last month, and we’ll see.” He emphasized that “we place our faith in diplomatic efforts” while maintaining “appropriate levels of military capabilities in the region to defend American interests if required.”<sup>95</sup>

In retrospect, it seems clear the lack of a kinetic US military response to the escalating violence signaled to the

88 Pompeo Preface, “Outlaw Regime,” State Department report, p. 4.

89 US Department of the Treasury, Office of Foreign Assets Control, “Publication of New Iran-related Frequently Asked Questions; Amendments to Existing Iran-related Frequently Asked Questions; Updates to OFAC’s Specially Designated Nationals and Blocked Persons List and 13599 List Removals,” November 5, 2018, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20181105>; “Issuance of Executive Order of May 8, 2019, ‘Imposing Sanctions with Respect to the Iron, Steel, Aluminum, and Copper Sectors of Iran,’” May 8, 2019, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://home.treasury.gov/policy-issues/financial-sanctions/recent-actions/20190508>.

90 “Iran’s Economy Hits a New Low against Dollar as Economy Reels,” Reuters, September 15, 2020, accessed November 16, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-economy-rial-idUSKBN2630VK>.

91 White House, “Statement from the President on the Designation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps as a Foreign Terrorist Organization,” April 8, 2019, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/statement-president-designation-islamic-revolutionary-guard-corps-foreign-terrorist-organization/>. In February 2020, the international Financial Action Task Force returned Iran to its blacklist after it failed to cooperate with respect to anti-terrorist funding measures. “Iran on FATF Blacklist,” Financial Times, February 21, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://financialtribune.com/articles/business-and-markets/102273/iran-on-fatf-blacklist>.

92 A detailed threat assessment, which identified possible Iranian attack as the most urgent matter confronting Saudi oil facilities, was published in November 2013. See Ali Al-Ahmed, Andrew Bond, and Daniel Morillo, Security Threats to Saudi Arabia’s Oil Infrastructure, Institute for Gulf Affairs, 2013, accessed April 10, 2020, [http://www.gulfinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Threats\\_to\\_the\\_Saudi\\_Oil\\_Infrastructure.pdf](http://www.gulfinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/11/Threats_to_the_Saudi_Oil_Infrastructure.pdf). For an earlier detailed assessment of the strategic issues, see Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Miranda Priebe, “A Crude Threat: The Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign against Saudi Arabia,” International Security 36, no. 1 (summer 2011), 167–201, accessed April 10, 2020, <https://dspace.mit.edu/bitstream/handle/1721.1/66242/Itzkowitz-2011-A%20Crude%20Threat%20The%20Limits%20of%20an%20Iranian%20Missile%20Campaign.pdf?sequence=1&isAllowed=y>.

93 “Maritime Coalition Launched to Protect Gulf Shipping after Iran Attacks,” Arab News, November 7, 2019, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.arabnews.com/node/1580576/middle-east>. On the achievements of the IMSC, see comments from the change of command ceremony between two British officers, International Maritime Security Construct Public Affairs, “IMSC Holds Virtual Change of Command Ceremony,” New Articles, US Central Command, April 30, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/NEWS-ARTICLES/News-Article-View/Article/2176451/imsc-holds-virtual-change-of-command-ceremony/>.

94 Will Christou, “How Many Airstrikes Has Israel Carried Out on Syria in 2020?” Syria Direct, September 16, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://syriadirect.org/news/israel-conducts-16-airstrikes-in-syria-in-2020-interactive-map/>.

95 Sisk, “Up to 600 Troops Now Set to Remain in Syria Indefinitely, Top General Says.”





During a protest in Baghdad on October 17, 2020, a supporter of the Popular Mobilization Forces holds a picture of late IRGC-QF Major-General Qassem Soleimani and Iraqi militia commander Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who were killed in a US airstrike in January 2020. Source: Reuters/Thaier Al-Sudani

IRGC's Soleimani and other Iranian regime leaders that they had deterred the United States and that it was possible to generate attacks that would erode American domestic support and bring about a US withdrawal from the region. In late 2019, US military officials in Iraq perceived a shift from "episodic harassing fire" to more systematic attacks against the US and coalition presence in Iraq. In November and December, the character of Iraqi militia attacks had changed from what coalition forces had "become used to" and seemed to be dangerously escalating "in frequency and potential lethality." The pace of attacks intensified, as did the number and calibers of rockets fired against bases with US and coalition service members on them, in some cases with militia salvos of more than thirty rockets, initially by 107-millimeter, then 122-mm, and ultimately 240-mm rockets. In response, US officials reiterated that the death or injury of an American would spark retaliation. In December, US military officers expressed their concerns

that, if the Iraqi government "is not willing to take action" against the Iranian-backed militia attacks, at some point, the United States is "going to be backed into a corner."<sup>96</sup>

With the continued Iranian escalation and the subsequent death of a US contractor and wounding of four service members in a rocket attack on an Iraqi base at Kirkuk on December 27, 2019, the Trump administration felt compelled to act. According to the Department of Defense, not only had Soleimani directed the attack at Kirkuk, he had also approved the subsequent demonstrations and militia attack against the US embassy in Baghdad.<sup>97</sup> Despite being under a UN Security Council travel ban, Soleimani was traveling between Beirut, Damascus, and Baghdad to coordinate further attacks, and according to militia commanders in Iraq, he instructed Iraqi militia leader Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis and others "to step up attacks on US targets in the country using sophisticated new weapons provided

96 Jane Arraf, "US Military Official Warns of Dangerous Escalation in Iran-Backed Attacks in Iraq," National Public Radio, December 12, 2019, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.npr.org/2019/12/12/787377987/u-s-military-official-warns-of-dangerous-escalation-in-iran-backed-attacks-on-ir>.

97 Department of Defense, "Department of Defense Statement on Soleimani Killing," Washington, January 2, 2020, accessed October 28, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y968s4q7>.

by Iran.”<sup>98</sup> On the night of January 2, 2020, citing its inherent right of self-defense under the UN Charter, the United States conducted a targeted killing of Soleimani outside of Baghdad International Airport.<sup>99</sup> Muhandis was also killed in the strike.

The targeted killing of Soleimani by the United States shocked Iranian leaders and served as an initial step to restore deterrence in the contested environment. In retaliation, Iran struck bases in Iraq with a barrage of ballistic missiles on January 8. While the Iranian government signaled the subsequent missile attack was its proportional response to the killing of Soleimani, Iraqi militia groups have vowed further revenge, as has the leadership of the IRGC. The scale of the Iranian ballistic missile attacks and the subsequent panicked downing of a Ukrainian civilian airliner, killing all aboard, raised concerns internationally and within Iran about regime policy, not least whether such a regime should be trusted with nuclear weapons.

Given the contested security environment, maintaining a credible deterrent will be a demanding task for the United States. General McKenzie assessed that Iran “seeks to undermine international and regional support for US policies with attacks and threats against US interests and those of our partners and allies.” He argued that the presence of US forces in the region helped stabilize it and served “as a counterbalance against the Iranian regime’s overt and covert military responses.” While in the near term, Iran appears to be deterred from further direct assault, its proxies in Iraq have continued rocket attacks against bases with US and coalition presence, and the threshold for Iranian direct action has been lowered.<sup>100</sup> With the coronavirus pandemic likely to continue well into 2021, maintaining a credible US deterrent will be difficult, even if US domestic politics and the concerns of allies and partners about American commitment can be assuaged. The United States must convince allies that it is reliable and adversaries that it is serious. The

onus is on the United States to maintain a credible deterrent, check Iranian aggression, and avoid giving a green light to Russian steps to assume a role as the regional balancer—all of which would be quite detrimental to America’s role in the world and the global economy vital for continued US prosperity. Russia is already promising regional security guarantees in a framework that includes Iran but not the United States.<sup>101</sup> McKenzie observed that “a resurgent Russia and an expansionist China” are “attempting to shift historical alliances,” to the detriment of the US military presence in the Middle East and American interests.<sup>102</sup>

At the same time, the United States must also strive to appreciate the perspectives, interests, and challenges of working with countries in the region. Traditional US partners can be divided in their thinking. The Gulf States perceive a threat from Iran, yet fear the consequences of conflict escalation and need assurances of continued and sustained US commitment. At the same time, the continued US presence in Arab states not only could invite retaliation by Iran and its proxies but could provoke takfirists, as well. Certainly, many in the Middle East recall bin Laden’s anger over the US military presence in Saudi Arabia after the Gulf War and al-Qaeda’s 1998 announcement that it was the duty of all Muslims to kill Americans and their allies everywhere.<sup>103</sup>

Saudi Arabia’s leaders see Iran as a major threat, but for the United States, the kingdom remains a partner with significant flaws. Ambassador Blackwill, a retired diplomat and senior fellow at the Council on Foreign Relations, observed, “Saudi Arabia is America’s longest-standing ally in the Middle East, even though the kingdom is not a partner made in heaven for the United States.”<sup>104</sup> The consolidation of power under Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, the Qatar dispute, the humanitarian crisis in Yemen (and a Saudi war effort initially focused on bombing farms and bridges), the funding of Salafist madrassas around the world, and the killing of *Washington Post* columnist Khashoggi, all present real dilemmas for US

98 Reuters staff, “Inside the Plot by Iran’s Soleimani to Attack US Forces in Iraq,” Reuters, January 3, 2020, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iraq-security-soleimani-insight/inside-the-plot-by-irans-soleimani-to-attack-u-s-forces-in-iraq-idUSKBN1Z301Z>.

99 Concerning the legality of the US strike against Soleimani under international law, see Charles J. Dunlap, Jr., “The Killing of General Soleimani Was Lawful Self-defense, Not ‘Assassination,’” Lawfare website, Center on Law, Ethics and National Security, Duke University Law School, January 3, 2020, <https://sites.duke.edu/lawfare/2020/01/03/the-killing-of-general-soleimani-was-lawful-self-defense-not-assassination/>. For the domestic legal authority, see Scott R. Anderson, “Did the President Have the Domestic Legal Authority to Kill Qassem Soleimani?” Lawfare blog, Lawfare Institute in cooperation with the Brookings Institution, January 3, 2020, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.lawfareblog.com/did-president-have-domestic-legal-authority-kill-qassem-soleimani>. Both Dunlap and Anderson are lawyers with extensive experience in national security policy. Major General Dunlap, USAF (retired), was the former deputy judge advocate general of the US Air Force. Anderson previously served as an attorney-adviser in the Office of the Legal Adviser at the Department of State and as the legal adviser for the US embassy in Baghdad, Iraq.

100 McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement,” 3-5.

101 Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov’s remarks and answers to questions during the Valdai International Discussion Club’s panel on Russia’s policy in the Middle East, Sochi, Russia, October 2, 2019, accessed on January 17, 2020, [https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign\\_policy/news/-/asset\\_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3826083](https://www.mid.ru/en/foreign_policy/news/-/asset_publisher/cKNonkJE02Bw/content/id/3826083).

102 McKenzie, Jr., “Posture Statement,” 11.

103 Department of State, Country Reports on Terrorism, 2018, 316.

104 Robert D. Blackwill, Trump’s Foreign Policies Are Better Than They Seem, Council Special Report no. 84, Council on Foreign Relations, 2019, 44.

policy makers hoping to engage Saudi Arabia as a partner in containing or countering Iran.<sup>105</sup> In terms of the Saudi human rights record, although some reforms are underway, Blackwill notes, “Its human rights practices are often deplorable, and occasionally medieval.”<sup>106</sup> The US State Department detailed a series of significant human rights abuses in the kingdom and concluded that the Khashoggi incident suggests an environment of impunity with respect to human rights.<sup>107</sup> Internationally, the results of the Khashoggi investigation and judicial proceedings have fueled intense criticism and condemnation of Saudi leaders.<sup>108</sup>

At the same time, some Saudi leaders clearly see the imperative for change, and achievement of the social, political, and economic reforms envisioned in Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 is in America's interest. In his review of the Trump administration's foreign policies, Blackwill recognized that the United States needs Saudi Arabia, and he argued that there is a mutual dependence between Saudi Arabia and the United States that “should not be damaged because of Riyadh's sometimes problematic policies.”<sup>109</sup> Arguably, the success of Vision 2030 would constitute a significant blow against the global Salafist-jihadist enterprise envisioned by bin Laden and reduce the threat to the United States posed by transnational terrorist networks. Nonetheless, without a secure environment and committed leadership, the success of Vision 2030 is not assured. Only by engaging with the Saudi government and working to increase the professionalism of their military and security institutions can the United States hope to shape Riyadh's decisions, keep focus on necessary reforms, and potentially avoid disastrous policy choices by the kingdom. Arguably, continued, frank engagement remains the only way to achieve such results. Impactful results, however, are possible. The sharp reduction in civilian casualties in Yemen as a result of Saudi-coalition operations provides an example of the tangible impact of tailored US staff and planning assistance, training,

and military education classes. The result of US engagement was dramatic improvement in Saudi targeting and a corresponding reduction in civilian casualties by more than 80 percent. In June 2020, the UN Secretary General removed the Saudis from the UN's blacklist list of countries responsible for harming children in conflict.<sup>110</sup> Still, success should not be considered a foregone conclusion and will require persistence and tenacity.

In its bid to displace the United States from the region, to advance the Islamic Revolution, and ostensibly to protect vulnerable Shia populations, Iran poses a threat to the Arab states. The presence of US military bases in Bahrain, the UAE, Kuwait, Jordan, and Qatar make those countries and bases susceptible to Iranian proxy attacks. While Iran seeks to disavow responsibility of the violent actions of its proxies and partners in the gray zone, attribution and exposure are essential and contribute to effective deterrence. As McKenzie observed, “They do not do so well in the spotlight or daylight of full exposure and accountability.”<sup>111</sup> Meanwhile, Iran continues to try to exploit the legitimate grievances of Shia populations in Arab countries, interfering in the internal affairs of neighboring countries. In the process, Iran seeks to portray its actions as defensive and works to ensure its malign actions cannot be authoritatively attributed to Tehran.

In addition to many Arab states, Israel faces a growing threat from Iran, reflecting both intent and increasing capability. Iran's leaders frequently have threatened to wipe out Israel, a goal its military leaders declare to be achievable, while supporting terrorist groups along Israel's borders that share Iran's aim. Although US support for Israel has been a consistent aspect of American foreign policy for six decades, during the Obama administration, Israeli leaders became increasingly concerned about any future US commitment to Israel's security. Those concerns were

105 Two recent contributions to this discussion are worth examining: Kim Ghattas, *Black Wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the Forty-Year Rivalry That Unraveled Culture, Religion, and Collective Memory in the Middle East* (New York: Henry Holt, 2020); and Ben Hubbard, *MBS: The Rise to Power of Mohammed bin Salman* (New York: Tim Duggan Books/Random House, 2020).

106 Blackwill, *Trump's Foreign Policies*, 44.

107 See “Saudi Arabia 2019 Human Rights Report,” in *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019*, Department of State, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>.

108 The United Nations special rapporteur on extrajudicial, summary or arbitrary executions, Agnes Callamard, an independent expert appointed by the Human Rights Council in Geneva, has been particularly critical, finding at least six violations of international human rights law in the case. See “Khashoggi Murder an ‘International Crime,’ Says UN-appointed Rights Investigator: Special In-depth UN News Interview,” UN News website, United Nations, June 20, 2019, <https://news.un.org/en/story/2019/06/1040951>; Agnes Callamard, “The Khashoggi Verdict Is Exactly What Impunity Looks Like. It Must be Denounced,” *Washington Post*, December 23, 2019, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/y4fuqoab>. Callamard also has been critical of the strike against Soleimani, claiming that it violated international norms. She followed up that view in her report to the UN Human Rights Council in July 2020. “Callamard: Soleimani Killing Breached International Norms,” *BBC News*, February 18, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yym9v6n>; “The Killing of Qassem Soleimani Was Unlawful, Says UN Expert,” *Seattle Times*, July 9, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://tinyurl.com/yxmytmew>.

109 Blackwill, *Trump's Foreign Policies*, 46.

110 Edith M. Lederer, “UN Chief Takes Saudis Off Blacklist for Harming Yemen's Kids,” *ABC News*, June 15, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://abcnews.go.com/US/wireStory/chief-takes-saudis-off-blacklist-harming-yemens-kids-71264167>.

111 Kenneth F. McKenzie, Jr., “Transcript of Gen McKenzie's Remarks at the Manama Dialogue,” US Central Command, Defense Department transcripts, November 26, 2019, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.centcom.mil/MEDIA/Transcripts/Article/2027273/transcript-of-gen-mckenzie-remarks-at-the-manama-dialogue/>.





IDF troops operate along Israel's Northern border during Operation Northern Shield. Source: Flickr/Israel Defense Forces

exacerbated by the conclusion of the JCPOA without their input being taken into consideration. Since the 2011-16 time-frame, the pace and scale of Iran's continued malign activities have posed greater threats to Israel. In addition, the magnitude of the Iranian threat will make the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian issue incredibly difficult, even though the Trump administration has given significant attention to crafting and announcing on January 28, 2020, what it envisioned to be a framework for direct negotiations in pursuit of a comprehensive and sustainable peace deal. Israel will not be inclined to compromise if under a direct threat of Iranian attack. The success of this US peace proposal is not in the interest of Iran or its proxies, and Iran should be expected to act as a spoiler throughout the already difficult

process.<sup>112</sup> Unilateral Israeli annexations of areas of the West Bank likely would provoke a violent response from Iranian-supported extremist groups.

It should be noted that the persistent Iranian threat also has begun to generate positive geo-political changes in the Middle East crafted to further peace, security, and prosperity. In September 2020, the White House brokered the Abraham Accords between Israel and two Arab states. Offering "a vision of peace, security, and prosperity in the Middle East and around the world," the agreement called for the establishment of diplomatic relations and the full normalization of relations between Israel and the UAE and Israel and Bahrain.<sup>113</sup> As a result of the Abraham Accords,

112 For the framework, see the White House's "Peace to Prosperity: A Vision to Improve the Lives of the Palestinian and Israeli People," January 28, 2020, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/wp-content/uploads/2020/01/Peace-to-Prosperity-0120.pdf>. Although generally dismissed, the document has its strengths and is a serious and detailed proposal for a two-state solution within two years. See Tom Rogan, "Trump's Surprisingly Reasonable Israeli-Palestinian Peace Deal," opinion article, *Washington Examiner*, January 28, 2020, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.washingtonexaminer.com/opinion/trumps-surprisingly-reasonable-israeli-palestinian-peace-deal>.

113 Department of State, "The Abraham Accords Declaration," September 15, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-abraham-accords/>.

Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu put further West Bank annexations on hold.<sup>114</sup> A follow-on agreement began the normalization of Israeli relations with Sudan, and there was an impression that Bahrain could only have acted with the approval of Saudi leadership. For its part, Iran denounced the agreements and threatened that the Arab states would regret their actions.<sup>115</sup>

Not only has Iran continued its efforts to arm affiliates and proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Gaza, the IRGC has in recent years conducted overt missile and drone attacks on Israel, no longer content to work solely through proxies such as the militant group and political party, Lebanese Hezbollah. Not fully appreciated is the extent to which Iranian support to proxies such as Hezbollah has significantly enhanced their capabilities and lethality. Hezbollah, for example, has grown from a ramshackle group that bombed the US embassy and Marine Corps barracks in Beirut in the 1980s to what most analysts now consider to be the most powerful non-state actor in the world, a position solidified by the end of the ISIS territorial caliphate. It now possesses robust conventional and unconventional military capabilities. According to a study 2018 by the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS), it had around fifteen-thousand rockets and missiles on the eve of the 2006 war with Israel and fired but four thousand over the course of the thirty-four day conflict. By 2018, Hezbollah's arsenal was estimated at some 130,000 missiles, and growing.<sup>116</sup> In addition, the group possesses thousands of anti-ship and anti-tank missiles. Complicating matters further is the fact that Hezbollah has cached precision missiles in civilian areas with dozens of weapon depots in Beirut, the Beqaa Valley, and southern Lebanon, using the population as de facto human shields.<sup>117</sup> All this has taken place under the eye of international peacekeepers in the UN Interim Force for Lebanon, operating in southern Lebanon under a weak mandate, who have not appreciably constrained Hezbollah's efforts.

Currently, Hezbollah and IRGC advisers work with Houthis forces in Yemen to enhance their rocket development and launch capabilities, and increasingly accurate missiles have

been fired against key Saudi targets and infrastructure. In addition, Hezbollah cadre work with Shia militia in Syria and Iraq to enhance their lethality and further disseminate missile technology and knowledge. Hezbollah's substantial deployment in Syria has given the group significant operational experience in conventional combined arms operations. Its light infantry fought in Syria with weaponized drones, as well as drones for reconnaissance and artillery spotting. The group possesses sophisticated air defense and missile systems and has conducted combat operations in Syria with its own tanks, armored personnel carriers, and anti-tank missiles, benefiting from working with Russian special operations forces on the battlefield.<sup>118</sup>

Simultaneously, Hezbollah's substantial rocket arsenal is going through a transformation, making it more precise and lethal. Since 2018, analysts had been concerned about Iranian precision upgrades and the conversion of Hezbollah's arsenal with global positioning systems, coupled with Hezbollah's declaration to conduct pinpoint strikes on critical Israeli infrastructure to counter an Israeli invasion of Lebanon.<sup>119</sup> *Jane's Defence Weekly* reported in October 2019 that "Iran publicly unveiled upgrade kits designed to convert artillery rockets, including the Zeizal 610-mm diameter heavy rocket, into steerable, surface-to-surface, precision missiles."<sup>120</sup> In July 2020, the IRGC stated that their experts also had transformed the 122-mm rocket into "a weapon with pinpoint accuracy" that could hit "targets with an accuracy of seven meters."<sup>121</sup> The Iranian disclosures suggest that such precision conversions already were taking place as part of Iran's consolidation of its role in Syria. The resulting increase in accuracy, when coupled with the numbers of rockets and missiles on hand, constitutes a significant threat to Israel, and the region, that demands clear thinking.

It has been obvious for some time that precision-guided, medium-range missiles (i.e., those with a range of up to 1,500 kilometers) are proliferating across the Middle East. When these precision weapons function as designed, they can deliver half a ton of high explosive within as little as

114 "Netanyahu Heralds New Era but Says Annexation Hold Is Temporary," National, September 14, 2020, accessed October 15, 2020, <https://www.thenationalnews.com/world/gcc/netanyahu-heralds-new-era-but-says-annexation-hold-is-temporary-11063440>.

115 Maysam Behraves and Hamidreza Azizi, "Israel's Peace Deals Are a Strategic Nightmare for Iran," *Foreign Policy*, September 14, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/09/14/israels-peace-deals-are-a-strategic-nightmare-for-iran/>.

116 Shaan Shaikh and Ian Williams, "Hezbollah's Missiles and Rockets," CSIS Briefs website, the Center for Strategic and International Studies, July 2018, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.csis.org/analysis/hezbollahs-missiles-and-rockets>.

117 Tal Beeri, "28 Missile Launching Sites in Beirut Hezbollah's Use of Civilians as HUMAN SHIELD," Alma Research and Education Center, July 14, 2020, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://israel-alma.org/2020/07/14/expose-28-missile-launching-sites-in-beirut-hezbollahs-use-of-civilians-as-human-shield/>.

118 Marissa Sullivan, Middle East Security Report 19: Hezbollah in Syria, Institute for the Study of War, 2014, accessed March 20, 2020, [http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah\\_Sullivan\\_FINAL.pdf](http://www.understandingwar.org/sites/default/files/Hezbollah_Sullivan_FINAL.pdf).

119 Katherine Bauer, Hanin Ghaddar, and Assaf Orion, "Iran's Precision Missile Project Moves to Lebanon," Policy Notes brief, Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2018, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/uploads/Documents/pubs/PolicyNote56-BauerGhaddarOrion.pdf>.

120 Jeremy Binnie, "Iran Displays Guidance Upgrade for Artillery Rockets," *Jane's Defence Weekly*, October 4, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.janes.com/article/91703/iran-displays-guidance-upgrade-for-artillery-rockets>; Douglas Barrie, "Trends in Missile Technologies," International Institute for Strategic Studies (IISS) blog, March 11, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.iiiss.org/blogs/analysis/2019/03/trends-in-missile-technologies>.

121 "IRGC Improves Accuracy of Homegrown Rocket," Tasnim News Agency, July 10, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.tasnimnews.com/en/news/2020/07/10/2303544/irgc-improves-accuracy-of-homegrown-rocket>.





The Iranian Khorramshahr missile, a new ballistic missile unveiled during a military parade in Tehran in September 2017. Source: *Tasnim News Agency/Hossein Zohrevand*

tens of meters of the intended target. Enhanced lethality is substantial. Intermediate range ballistic missiles, such as the Scud, were capable of attacks only against area targets (e.g., cities). As such, deterrence rested largely on the threat and potential pain of a retaliatory attack. Currently, technological change driven by the computer revolution allows precision not from the missile launch but through the ability to guide the warhead onto a target (i.e., terminal guidance). These converted precision weapons threaten decisive damage against an adversary using a small number of nonnuclear weapons. Individual facilities and ships at sea can be targeted. In-flight changes also make missile defense more difficult than engaging a rocket or missile on a set trajectory. Similar decisive results typically have been associated with nuclear weapons alone, and thinking about the advantage of precision missiles as a first-strike weapon seems to be shifting toward favoring their usage.<sup>122</sup> To a great extent, it is important to consider the implications of the Iranian precision strike on Abqaiq and Khurais within the context of the dangerous shift of missile forces away

from their more traditional roles for deterrence and counterstrike to weapons for preemptive attack. In a similar manner, the line between Hezbollah's Iranian-supplied arsenal deterring Israel or serving as a first-strike force increasingly is blurred.

A potential scenario in another Israel-Hezbollah war is worth considering. Unlike the 2006 war, which resulted in the deaths of fifty-three Israelis, including forty-four civilians, the next war could result in thousands of Israeli civilian casualties and feature the destruction of Israel's main electric plants, water plants and desalination capabilities, international airport, and other critical infrastructure. About two-thirds of Israel's electricity is generated by half a dozen power plants, and while the conventional war-fighting capabilities and air defense of the Israeli Defense Forces are substantial, they may not be sufficient to prevent fatal damage to the country and dislocation of the population. Even if only a small percentage of precision missiles, say twenty to thirty, succeed in hitting their targets amid salvos of missiles and rockets, the result could

<sup>122</sup> Max Singer, "The New Threat of Very Accurate Missiles," Hudson Institute, August 9, 2016; Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 31.



be significant casualties and economic dislocation for Israel.<sup>123</sup> Rather than fixate solely on the threat from Iranian nuclear weapon development, the precision strike capabilities being amassed today may well pose an existential threat to the prosperity and existence of the state of Israel. A similar scenario applied to the Gulf forecasts the potential for a large-scale humanitarian disaster in a region where the handful of desalination plants provide water for millions throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Those facilities are similarly vulnerable to precision attacks, with few options for timely reconstitution.

The evolving threat demands greater attention, in both understanding and resources, about what is necessary to restore effective and credible deterrence and enhance resilience. Deterrence can follow from exposure of Iran's hand through more rapid attribution and by reducing the ability of Iranian enabled attacks to achieve their political or military objectives. Enhanced defensive capabilities will not dissuade all attacks but can render them less effective. It seems evident that if the United States does not sustain assistance to allies and partners with critical capabilities, particularly those for critical infrastructure protection and integrated air and missile defenses, those allies and partners will likely seek other sources of security. Saudi Arabia, for instance, could accept Russian President Vladimir Putin's offer of S-400 Triumf systems, designed to defeat NATO's most advanced aircraft; or Saudi Arabia and other Gulf States could acquire their own nuclear weapons. Given this scenario, it becomes clear why the Trump administration's concerns extend beyond merely preventing Iran from getting a nuclear weapon to include the IRGC's funding and technological assistance to proxies throughout the Middle East and Iran's development, use, and proliferation of dangerous and destabilizing capabilities (such as precision rocket conversions, land attack cruise missiles, and cyberattack) that threaten US interests, the safety and stability of American allies and partners, and the prosperity of a vibrant global economy.

The UN arms embargo on Iran, a major provision of the JCPOA, agreed to in 2015, was scheduled to expire or "sunset" in October 2020. While underappreciated, the risks of that being allowed to happen in the foreseeable future remain significant. It is important to note, UNSCR 2231, the vehicle for the formal agreement, did not impose a new arms embargo

against Iran; instead, the resolution offered Iran permanent relief from existing embargoes under UNSCRs 1747 and 1929. In 2015, late in the process of negotiations, Iran demanded relief from the UN arms embargoes, and Russia supported including this provision as a priority in 2231.<sup>124</sup> Although seen as a way to secure a nuclear deal that would open the way to other deals, at the time the JCPOA was negotiated, Iran was continuing to violate the arms embargoes imposed by UNSCR 2216 (Yemen) and UNSCR 1701 (Lebanon), but senior US administration officials revealed that at the same time the Obama administration had chosen not to pursue clear Iranian violations of the sanctions and relaxed further enforcement of them.<sup>125</sup> Iran has continued to violate those arms embargoes with impunity.

In August 2020, the United States pushed to have the UN Security Council extend the conventional arms embargo provisions of UNSCR 2231. With the potential for a Russian and Chinese veto, there was little support for the US proposal, and no action was taken. In response, the United States informed the UN Secretary General that Iran was in significant nonperformance of its commitments under the JCPOA, and, exercising a legal right enshrined in UNSCR 2231, in September the United States evoked the so called "snapback" mechanism which reinstated nearly all UN sanctions waived as part of the JCPOA.<sup>126</sup> The European Union (EU) publicly rejected the US snapback and, upon the scheduled expiration of the provisions in UNSCR 2231, declared that the JCPOA remained in effect and that lifting sanctions on Iran was an integral part of preserving the deal.<sup>127</sup> It remains to be seen whether those preexisting embargoes on Iran under UNSCRs 1747 and 1929 will be enforced fully by the international community.

To a certain extent, wishful thinking about Iranian behavior also has clouded analysis of future Iranian capabilities, a driver of the threat equation along with intention. To a certain extent, US unilateral sanctions serve as a stopgap measure to generate a degree of acquiescence about maintaining embargoes on Iran in the absence of UN Security Council support. Whether we wish it or not, Iran's potential to destabilize, intimidate, and even conduct conventional war, will increase after US sanctions and the UN embargo provisions contained in UNSCRs 1747, 1929, and

123 Singer, "The New Threat of Very Accurate Missiles."

124 "Russia Wants Arms Embargo on Iran Lifted after Deal," *Al Arabiya*, July 9, 2015, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/world/2015/07/09/Russia-says-iran-talks-at-their-most-difficult-phase>.

125 Yeganeh Torbati, "US Enforcement of Iran Arms Embargo Slipped during Nuclear Talks: Sources," *Reuters*, October 5, 2015 <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-sanctions-enforcement-insight/u-s-enforcement-of-iran-arms-embargo-slipped-during-nuclear-talks-sources-idUSKCN0RZ09O20151005>; John Meyer, "Obama's Hidden Iran Deal Giveaway: By Dropping Charges against Major Arms Targets, the Administration Infuriated Justice Department Officials—and Undermined Its Own Counterproliferation Task Forces," *Politico*, April 24, 2017, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/04/24/obama-iran-nuclear-deal-prisoner-release-236966>.

126 Michael R. Pompeo, Press Statement, "The Return of UN Sanctions on the Islamic Republic of Iran," September 19, 2020, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/the-return-of-un-sanctions-on-the-islamic-republic-of-iran/>.

127 "European Commission Reassures Iran of Commitment to Nuclear Deal," *World Nuclear News*, World Nuclear Association, October 23, 2020, accessed October 26, 2020, <https://www.world-nuclear-news.org/Articles/European-Commission-reassures-iran-of-commitment-t>.



Iran's Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif shakes hands with Russia's Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov after a news conference following their meeting in Moscow, Russia on December 30, 2019. Source: Reuters/Evgenia Novozhenina

2231 are lifted or allowed to go without enforcement. Two plausible conventional scenarios, and their attendant risks, are worthy of consideration.

The first post embargo scenario is one in which the Iranian regime continues the development and proliferation of the asymmetric capabilities it has used to its advantage, not just over the past decade and a half but openly, at Abqaiq in September 2019 and al-Asad air base in January 2020. Those capabilities include armed drones, land attack cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, and cyberattack, used in combination with militia proxies and covert action. Recently, IRGC senior leaders publicly signaled that despite the significant economic problems caused by the US pressure campaign and the coronavirus, they will continue to prioritize their substantial support to proxies, which in the case of Syria amounted to at least \$20 billion.<sup>128</sup>

In this scenario, enabled by importing dual-use, advanced technologies or components, Iran continues the development and fielding of those capabilities. The fact that Iran enabled a fivefold increase in Lebanese Hezbollah's rocket and missile arsenal after the 2006 war with Israel suggests how quickly Iran itself could field and employ an expanded arsenal of ballistic missiles. Furthermore, recent advances in computing and global positioning have changed the character of such an arsenal and its lethality

by enabling terminal guidance of a warhead onto its target. What traditionally has been a means of retaliation and harassment, as long ago as the Gulf War in 1991 and as recently as the onset of the Houthi war with Saudi Arabia, now has the potential for precision, crippling strikes. With more missiles able to target individual facilities or ships at sea, the Iranian regime arsenal will take on the characteristics, and temptations, of a first-strike force, rather than a missile force designed for deterrence and retaliation. In-flight changes also make missile defense more difficult than engaging a rocket or missile on a set trajectory. Similar decisive results typically have been associated with nuclear weapons alone, and the Abqaiq and al-Asad attacks indicate Iranian thinking about the advantage of precision missiles as a first-strike weapon seems to be shifting toward favoring their usage.

Along with more capable missiles would come the further proliferation to terrorist proxies of modification kits to convert large-caliber artillery rockets into precision weapons. In addition, as transfer regimens ease, we must expect their continued spread throughout the region by the Iran's IRGC-QF, its irregular warfare instrument.

Currently, the Quds Force supplies anti-air and anti-ship missiles, mines, and explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) to terrorists and Shia militia groups as part of the axis of

128 Esfandiari, "Revolutionary Guards Commander Gives Rare Estimate of Money Iran Spent."

resistance. According to declassified US military reports, Iran bears responsibility for the deaths of more than six hundred Americans in the Iraq War, many in EFP attacks.<sup>129</sup> Iranian regime leaders certainly appreciate the lethal effectiveness of their EFPs, because they have continued proliferating them and various electronic components in Yemen, Syria, Bahrain, and eastern Saudi Arabia. The proliferation of Iranian drones and components to armed groups presents a similar trajectory.<sup>130</sup> It seems clear that such proliferation will continue, but on a larger scale if the embargo is lifted. In this future scenario, we would not only see the lethal systems that were employed over the past year, but many more of them.

The second post embargo scenario involves Iranian procurement of the latest conventional offensive and anti-access weapon systems. Russia and, to a lesser extent, China, are poised for significant sales of conventional weapons to the Iranian regime with the lifting of UN restrictions. As the Defense Intelligence Agency noted in a 2019 report, *Iran Military Power*, modern conventional weapons will be available to Iran for the first time since its 1979 Islamic Revolution. Already in discussions with Russia for billions of dollars of advanced hardware, Iran will be able to modernize its aging equipment and purchase arms from Russia and China that it has not been able to produce for itself, such as fourth-generation SU-30 multirole combat aircraft and T-90 main battle tanks, both from Russia.<sup>131</sup> Attack aircraft, artillery, and third-generation tanks would give Iran an ability to project conventional forces beyond its borders, or, simply by constituting and maintaining them, coerce its neighbors.

Advanced conventional force capabilities characterized as defensive could be equally threatening. Newer submarines to supplement Iran's aging Kilo-class fleet and its midget submarine force, and advanced air and coastal defense systems such as the Russian S-400 Triumf<sup>132</sup> and K-300 Bastion would present complex threats to commercial shipping and the exercise of littoral rights. Indeed, sea-skimming, supersonic missiles fired by the Bastion system, designed to destroy a carrier battle group or convoy, could cover most of the Gulf and its approaches from mobile launchers on the Iranian coast.<sup>133</sup>

Although pundits will assert that the current state of the Iranian economy and the price of oil make such purchases unlikely,

we should not assume away the possibility, even likelihood, of rapid enhancements to Iran's conventional military power. In Syria, Russia shrewdly secured a basing concession, the long-term presence at Latakia, by providing military assistance to the Assad regime. The Syrian case, however, is hardly unprecedented, and it also is worth recalling that in 1940 the US government transferred fifty destroyers to Great Britain in return for basing rights in British possessions. While the Iranian people might not welcome a Russian base in their country, cooperative agreements allowing Russian military elements to challenge US interests and operate along the northern Gulf or the Strait of Hormuz should not be discounted too quickly, particularly if a Russian presence were to be accompanied by visible shipments of advanced weaponry. Along similar lines, the proposed military and trade partnership announced in July 2020 between Iran and China in return for twenty-five years of discounted Iranian oil would significantly expand Chinese presence in a number of Iranian sectors and reportedly will include "joint training and exercises, joint research and weapons development, and intelligence sharing."<sup>134</sup> The scenario is particularly worrying, given the relatively greater vulnerability of our European allies to Russian aggression, Chinese influence, and interruptions to Gulf energy supplies.

The first two scenarios posit that in addition to irregular warfare and covert action, the Iranian regime could also possess, in the not-so-distant future, enhanced military capabilities for precision strike, force projection, and anti-access and area denial. The scale and scope of those would pose substantial military challenges to the United States and our partners in the Middle East. Responding would require not only an expansion of existing military capabilities of the United States and its partners, but also enhancing partner resilience. In some cases, new capabilities would be required in order to protect vital US national interests. It is difficult to see how US approaches such as offshore balancing or reliance on global strike could effectively counter the potential new threats. The likelihood of emerging Russian and Chinese arms and basing interests in Iran raises the complicating, and escalatory, concern of any regional crisis threatening to become a great power conflict.

The geography and partnerships in the Middle East have made it a key venue for great power competition, not a

129 Department of State, press briefing, April 2, 2019, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/briefings/departments-press-briefing-april-2-2019/>.

130 See, for example, Conflict Armament Research reports: "Mines and IEDs Employed by Houthi Forces on Yemen's West Coast," September 2018; "The IED Threat in Bahrain," December 2019; and "Evolution of UAVs Employed by Houthi Forces in Yemen," February 2020. All are available online: <https://www.conflictarm.com/publications/>.

131 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 88.

132 "S-400 SA-21 Triumf-Missiles," SITREP: Military, Global Security.org, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/s-400-missiles.htm>.

133 "3K55 Bastion/K-300P Bastion-P/SS-C-5 Stoooge," SITREP: Military, Global Security.org, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/russia/ss-c-5.htm>.

134 Farnaz Fasshi and Steven Lee Myers, "China and Iran Draw Up Military and Trade Partnership in Defiance of Trump Administration: US Sanctions Could Lose Their Bite as Beijing Backs Tehran," *Independent*, July 13, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.independent.co.uk/news/world/politics/china-iran-military-trade-partnership-trump-us-sanctions-a9615581.html>.



distraction from it. Russian military intervention in Syria propped up an isolated Assad regime. Russian surrogates in Libya are transforming the war there into an emerging venue for competition. China also understands the importance of competing in the Middle East and, as a result, is expanding military and commercial basing in the region and in proximity to the US military presence. Chinese infrastructure loans grew tenfold from 2015 to 2016. Already, China has developed ports and potential naval bases on the Horn of Africa in Djibouti and on the Arabian Sea at Gwadar, a port in Pakistan. Although Oman and the UAE are viewed as traditional US security partners, a massive infusion of Chinese money has transformed Oman's port at Duqm and made Khalifa port in the UAE a major hub for Chinese trade and influence.<sup>135</sup> In US-ally Israel, China has made major investments in Israel's technology sector, where the lines between civil and military applications are blurred, and Israeli security officials have expressed concerns about Chinese spying. In December 2019, China won the deal to operate Haifa port, which maintains facilities for the US Sixth Fleet, resulting in a US threat to pull out of the Israeli port if the Chinese assume control in 2021.<sup>136</sup>

In addition to efforts to extend or roll over the UN arms embargo on Iran, the Trump administration has sought to reassure regional allies and partners (namely, the Gulf States, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Israel), enhance their defensive

capabilities, and deter Iranian aggression. In May 2017, during President Trump's first overseas trip, he committed the United States to strengthening its strategic partnership with regional allies and partners, and in a joint declaration with Saudi Arabia's King Salman, he announced, "A robust, integrated regional security architecture is critical to our cooperation."<sup>137</sup> As such, the United States seeks to strengthen deterrence and defensive capabilities, as well as enhance resilience, in order to maintain a secure environment conducive to trade and global commerce and for social, economic, and political reforms to succeed. The security pillar of the administration's proposed regional security framework would focus on inherently defensive areas such as integrated air and missile defense, maritime and border security, counterterrorism, cybersecurity, nuclear and energy security, and the protection of critical infrastructure to include that for electricity and water production. This tentative framework has become known as the Middle East Strategic Alliance.<sup>138</sup> At the same time, the US goal should be to ensure that in the event of a future war in the Middle East that threatens US interests, the US armed forces would be joined by more capable Arab partners, rather than having to shoulder a disproportionate share of combat risks and costs.<sup>139</sup> For its security cooperation efforts in the Middle East to succeed, however, the United States must implement a strategic and consistent approach toward foreign military sales that increases partner capability, joint interoperability, and mitigates the sense of insecurity that could drive them to buy weapons from Russia and China or capitulate to Iran.<sup>140</sup>

135 H. I. Sutton, "Satellite Images Show That Chinese Navy Is Expanding Overseas Base," *Forbes*, May 10, 2020 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/05/10/satellite-images-show-chinese-navy-is-expanding-overseas-base/#7645d06869f>; H. I. Sutton, "China's New High-Security Compound in Pakistan May Indicate Naval Plans," *Forbes*, June 2, 2020 <https://www.forbes.com/sites/hisutton/2020/06/02/chinas-new-high-security-compound-in-pakistan-may-indicate-naval-plans/#49d703c51020>; "Chinese Money Is Behind Some of the Arab World's Biggest Projects," *Economist*, April 20, 2019 <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/04/20/chinese-money-is-behind-some-of-the-arab-worlds-biggest-projects>; Sarah Townsend, "\$3.4bn UAE-China Deal Deepens Trade and Diplomatic Ties, Say Analysts," *National*, April 28, 2019, <https://www.thenational.ae/business/economy/3-4bn-uae-china-deal-deepens-trade-and-diplomatic-ties-say-analysts-1.854267>; Karen Gilchrist, "China's Cosco and Abu Dhabi Ports Develop Khalifa to Support Belt and Road Initiative," *CNBC*, December 9, 2018, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/12/10/belt-and-road-abu-dhabi-ports-sees-huge-trade-boost-from-cosco-deal.html>.

136 Yonah Jeremy Bob, "China Wins on Haifa Port, but Fights with US for the Future-Analysis," *Jerusalem Post*, December 12, 2019, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.jpost.com/israel-news/china-wins-on-haifa-port-but-fights-with-us-for-the-future-analysis-610510>.

137 White House, "Joint Strategic Vision Declaration for the United States of America and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia," statements and releases website, May 20, 2017, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/joint-strategic-vision-declaration-united-states-america-kingdom-saudi-arabia/>.

138 State Department, Media Note, "Middle East Strategic Alliance General Conference," November 13, 2019, Washington, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/middle-east-strategic-alliance-general-conference/>.

139 For a critique of the tradition US capacity building approach and recommendations for revising the US efforts to help build more capable Arab military forces, see Michael J. Eisenstadt and Kenneth M. Pollack, "Training Better Arab Armies," *Parameters* 50, no. 3 (2020), <https://press.armywarcollege.edu/parameters/vol50/iss3/10>, and Kenneth M. Pollack, "The U.S. Has Wasted Billions of Dollars on Failed Arab Armies: Military cooperation with Middle East allies can work—if Washington rethinks its premises," *Foreign Policy*, January 31, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/01/31/the-u-s-has-wasted-billions-of-dollars-on-failed-arab-armies/>.

140 In addition to a more strategic approach to foreign military sales, the Missile Technology Control Regime needs to be updated to reflect contemporary circumstances and technologies that were not envisioned when its provisions were drafted in 1987. One approach of modification is to remove restrictions on technologies such as drones that are clearly not "missiles" nor have unique WMD. This way, we could provide more capable intelligence surveillance and reconnaissance (ISR) platforms to traditional US partners in the region, and stunt unchecked Chinese encroachment in this sector. Tom Callahan, "Moving on from INF: Let's Harness the Potential of the Missile Technology Control Regime," *Defense News*, August 6, 2019, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://www.defensenews.com/digital-show-dailies/smd/2019/08/06/moving-on-from-inf-lets-harness-the-potential-of-the-missile-technology-control-regime/>. INF refers to the Intermediate-range Nuclear Forces Treaty.

# The Iranian Nuclear Program

Iran presents the most serious and complex WMD challenge in the region. Despite various arms control commitments, US intelligence agencies maintain that Iran is currently seeking to enhance its chemical and biological weapons capabilities, to extend the range and payload of its ballistic missile program, and to procure the necessary technologies and materials needed to produce nuclear weapons. A nuclear-armed Iran would fundamentally alter the balance of power in the region and would pose a major strategic challenge to the United States, particularly if hardline elements remain in power in Teheran.

*Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*<sup>141</sup>

There remains the question of what to do about Iran's potential quest for nuclear weapons. A hegemonic, nuclear-armed Iran and the proliferation of nuclear weapons on the Arabian Peninsula pose significant threats to American security interests. Concerning Iran's nuclear programs, there are essentially five major policy choices for the United States. Those are to: attempt to modify Iranian behavior through conciliation toward Iran; contain Iran through regional power balances; compel changes to Iranian policies by economic sanctions and cutting funds to the IRGC and proxies; conduct military strikes to disrupt key capabilities; or undertake military intervention and, by implication, seek to impose regime change. The Iran nuclear deal, adopted in 2015, sought to modify Iranian behavior through incentives, an approach that essentially amounted to appeasement. The deal was intended to prevent Iran from producing fissile material at its *declared* nuclear facilities for ten to fifteen years. It assumed inspections would detect activity at covert facilities. The JCPOA also sought to delay over the next decade the breakout timeline for Iran to produce enough highly enriched uranium for a single nuclear device, shifting it from a couple of months to roughly a year.<sup>142</sup> It did not, as many have come to assume, block Iran's path to a nuclear weapon, only delaying the timeline under which it could legally acquire one. The JCPOA was an executive agreement to limit enrichment activities by Iran over the medium term.

There were several aspects of the JCPOA that remain relevant for US policy makers. At the structural level, the JCPOA was an executive agreement, rather than a treaty approved by the US Senate. The agreement was made by what is referred to as the P5 plus 1, the permanent members of the UN Security Council (the United States, Britain, France, Russia, and China) plus Germany and, by extension, the EU. The agreement seems to have taken the ideas of arms control and disarmament theory intended to reduce tensions between the Cold War superpowers and applied those to the case of Iran, thereby actually empowering Iran in the process. Rather than address all Iranian aggression, the idea was that if it were possible to reassure Iran and focus on the nuclear weapons problem—or nuclear file, as it was termed—then Iran's behavior would change. Many thought that the nuclear deal would result in subsequent accords to address the full range of Iran's malign activities. The allure of new Iranian markets for Western companies and Iranian oil for China sweetened the deal. Unlike the nuclear accord with North Korea, regional states were not included and their concerns given little weight: Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, in particular.<sup>143</sup> Despite the aspirations associated with the deal by its advocates, it opened the door for greater Iranian power projection and influence in the region, as was immediately apparent in the Syrian conflict.<sup>144</sup> Approval of the JCPOA notwithstanding, Iranian malign activities continued and, in some cases, expanded with the infusion of cash from the deal. That the agreement would produce additional deals proved to be an incorrect assumption.

The JCPOA itself had three major flaws or areas of concern: inspections, sunset clauses, and ballistic missile provisions.

First, the JCPOA did not provide the IAEA with the authority to verify Iran's full compliance or its obligations under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty. The inspection regime was limited to declared facilities and required advance notification to the Iranian regime while also restricting IAEA access to military sites. Certainly, one place to hide a covert nuclear weapons program might be on a military base or in an undeclared facility. Given the historic shortcomings of US intelligence concerning nuclear weapons programs, the fact that Iran did not have to fully disclose its prior programs

<sup>141</sup> Allison and Blackwill, *America's National Interests*, 33-34.

<sup>142</sup> Gary Samore, ed., *The Iran Nuclear Deal: A Definitive Guide*, Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2015, 4-6, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/sites/default/files/legacy/files/IranDealDefinitiveGuide.pdf>.

<sup>143</sup> Samore, ed., *The Iran Nuclear Deal*, 4-6.

<sup>144</sup> Thomas Erdbrink, Sewell Chan, and David E. Sanger, "After a U.S. Shift, Iran Has a Seat at Talks on War in Syria" *New York Times*, October 28, 2015, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/29/world/middleeast/syria-talks-vienna-iran.html>.



Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu speaks during a news conference at the Ministry of Defence in Tel Aviv on April 30, 2018. Source: Reuters/Amir Cohen

as a basis for the JCPOA also should have been a cause for concern.

The release of information by the Israelis concerning the Iranian nuclear archive reinforced concerns about covert activities and the limitations of intelligence. Subsequent examination of portions of the nuclear archive by experts from Harvard University confirmed that Iran previously had been working unambiguously toward a nuclear weapons capability, that the earlier program was more extensive and advanced than the IAEA had assessed in 2015, and that under the JCPOA Iran remained in a strong position to reconstitute that nuclear weapons program. The Iranian regime, furthermore, did not stop all work in 2003 as most believed, and research continued for several years to fill in gaps. The experts concluded that Iran had completed weapons design and had preparations underway to manufacture, had completed the explosive design for the warhead, and had

continued to conduct computer modeling of an actual device based on foreign designs.<sup>145</sup>

Second, through sunset clauses, the deal effectively preserved multiple pathways to a nuclear weapon for Iran. To ease Iranian acceptance, not only were significant economic incentives provided up-front, but the JCPOA's restrictive provisions expired on schedule through a succession of clauses. The first of these in October 2020 was the provision of UNSCR 2231 prohibiting conventional arms transfers, and several years prior Iran already was eying the eventual delivery of significant numbers of Russian main battle tanks, artillery, and advanced attack aircraft.<sup>146</sup> Concerning nuclear activities, Senator Tom Cotton, a member of the Senate Armed Services Committee and the chair of the Subcommittee on Airland, assessed that the sunset clauses allowed "Iran to steadily industrialize its uranium enrichment program," enabling it to achieve "the brink of

145 Aaron Arnold, Matthew Bunn, Caitlin Chase, Steven E. Miller, Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, and William H. Tobey, *The Iran Nuclear Archive: Impressions and Implications*, Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2019, 4-5, 14-17, accessed October 13, 2020, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iran-nuclear-archive-impressions-and-implications>.

146 Franz-Stefan Gady, "Iran and Russia Negotiating \$10 Billion Arms Deal: Iran Is Reportedly Interested in Purchasing Russian-made Aircraft, Artillery, and Tanks," *Diplomat*, November 15, 2016, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2016/11/iran-and-russia-negotiating-10-billion-arms-deal/>; *Defense Intelligence Agency, Iran Military Power*, 88.



nuclear breakout” within fifteen years of the deal and continue the development of advanced centrifuges to reduce “the time needed to produce a nuclear weapon.”<sup>147</sup> In 2023, provisions concerning ballistic missiles and the manufacture of centrifuges would expire, and in 2025 remaining UN sanctions would be lifted. In 2026, most nuclear restrictions would expire, and Iran would be able to replace its centrifuges with more advanced models. Limits on Iranian centrifuges and the amount of uranium and level of enrichment that could be stockpiled were to expire in 2031.

Third, Iranian missiles posed an unaddressed serious challenge. The Obama administration did not include intercontinental ballistic missiles (ICBMs) in the deal, despite the concerns of some European allies. Those concerns about ICBMs now seem to have been especially well founded. Since 1945, no country has developed ICBMs without also developing a nuclear weapon for them to carry. While the preamble of UNSCR 2231 prohibits ballistic missile development, Iran has argued that the preamble does not count. Iran continues its space launch program and the research and tests associated with it, with the IRGC taking a public role. Previous discussion has dealt with the rapidly expanding rocket and missile threat. Yet the deal largely ignored Iran’s medium-range missiles, which already are fully able to target capitals and economic centers throughout the Middle East.

At this point, it is useful to examine some of the implicit assumptions by Western proponents at the heart of the nuclear deal, recognizing that those assumptions continue to animate the debate and the consideration of policy choices. Essentially, the Iran nuclear deal presumed US policy was to blame for Iranian destabilizing behavior in the Middle East. In this line of reasoning, since Iranian actions were inherently defensive, Iranian destabilizing behavior would change if Tehran received reassurance and economic benefits, which would make Iran more conciliatory. Adherents of the deal, who think it made peace with Iran by changing US policy, incorrectly view President Trump’s decision to withdraw from the JCPOA as the reason for Iranian aggression.

The second implicit assumption was that new economic ties would create larger benefits for Iran and perhaps the region as Iran liberalized. The belief was that where the market went, not only would prosperity increase but liberal political

institutions would take hold. Given the cases of China and Russia, this logic would seem questionable, but those lessons seem to have been ignored. Moreover, hope as method allowed other governments to ignore intelligence about Iranian behavior, particularly evidence concerning direct IRGC involvement throughout the Iranian economy or clear Iranian violation of JCPOA provisions. Discounting those who predicted that the Iranian regime would take the immediate economic benefits of the JCPOA and funnel billions into “pernicious activities,” President Barack Obama asserted that it was more realistic that the Iranian regime would address the expectations of the Iranian people, and he commented that “our best analysts expect the bulk of this revenue to go into spending that improves the economy and benefits the lives of the Iranian people.”<sup>148</sup>

In spite of the positive predictions in 2015, the conditions facing the Iranian people did not improve substantially with the JCPOA. Instead the JCPOA’s economic benefits produced a significant increase in Iranian defense expenditures, which nearly doubled between 2015 and 2018. Noteworthy is the fact that, although smaller than Iran’s conventional forces (the Artesh), the IRGC claimed 29 percent of the official 2019 defense budget, compared to the 12 percent for the Artesh. The IRGC’s private companies, construction projects, and smuggling provided additional resources above and beyond those officially budgeted.<sup>149</sup> Given the priority the regime has dedicated to its security organizations, particularly the IRGC and the paramilitary Basij that often acts as its subordinate law enforcement unit, the Iranian people remain subject to repression and human rights abuses without government protections for peaceful assembly or expression. Together with Iran’s revolutionary judiciary, the regime’s security organizations have brutally repressed civil society and human rights activists, environmentalists, homosexuals, and labor protestors. The revolutionary courts have often failed to provide fair trials, allowing confessions apparently extracted by torture, and have arbitrarily imprisoned Iranian dual nationals and foreign citizens on vague charges. Iranian women and religious minorities such as Baha’i and Sunni Muslims face pervasive discrimination, and reportedly they often endure abuse and torture in detention.<sup>150</sup> Iran’s deplorable human rights record was on display in November 2019 during the brutal crackdown by the Iranian regime against protestors that, according to Amnesty International, left more than

147 Tom Cotton, “Fixing the Iran Deal: Background and Key Details,” accessed March 19, 2020, [http://cotton.senate.gov/files/documents/171013\\_INARA\\_Amendment\\_Fact\\_Sheet.pdf](http://cotton.senate.gov/files/documents/171013_INARA_Amendment_Fact_Sheet.pdf); “Cotton Calls for Decertifying the Iran Deal,” remarks at the Council on Foreign Relations, October 3, 2017, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.cotton.senate.gov/?p=speech&id=800>.

148 Barack Obama, “Remarks by the President on the Iran Nuclear Deal,” American University, Washington, August 5, 2015, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2015/08/05/remarks-president-iran-nuclear-deal>.

149 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 18-19.

150 On the Iranian regime’s human rights record, see Human Rights Watch, “Iran: Events of 2019,” in *World Report 2020*, <https://www.hrw.org/world-report/2020/country-chapters/iran#>; “Iran 2019 Human Rights Report,” in *Country Reports on Human Rights Practices for 2019*, an annual report of the US Department of State, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.state.gov/reports/2019-country-reports-on-human-rights-practices/>.

three hundred dead and many thousands of protestors and human rights activists arrested. Other sources, citing Iranian officials, placed the number killed during those protests at 1,500 people.<sup>151</sup>

Nonetheless, to push the deal, the Obama administration's "echo chamber" presented the public narrative that the choice was either the nuclear deal or major war. That dichotomy presented, and continues to present, a false choice.<sup>152</sup> Perhaps because the national and international media continues to assert American weariness over continuous or escalating wars in the region, many Americans accept that characterization, and the binary choice between stark alternatives. The Obama administration's framing fit well within that narrative, presenting the exclusive choice between conciliation of Iran, which was presented as "peace," and war, while ignoring the range of sound alternatives between those two extreme policy choices.<sup>153</sup>

While the United States seeks a comprehensive deal to replace the JCPOA, it would seem logical to identify ways to extend the sunset clauses to ensure that specific restrictions do not expire or to ensure that they are tied to other relevant UNSCR provisions in the event there is no subsequent agreement. Similarly, while it is unlikely that comprehensive agreement can be reached on reduction of Iranian ballistic missiles—given the importance Tehran attaches to these weapons in its strategic posture—an international agreement that freezes the current arsenal in terms of numbers and ranges of missiles would be worth pursuing. While strident voices continue to oppose any modifications to the JCPOA, it is useful to consider the record of strategic arms limitation agreements. To remain relevant, such treaties historically have had to be revised, modified, or supplemented to account for unforeseen circumstances, account for areas that were too difficult to address, or to fix flaws. Examples of this include the Strategic Arms Limitation Treaty (SALT), SALT 2, Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (START) 1, START

2, the new START, and the Anti-ballistic Missile (ABM) Treaty. Likewise, in late 2019, Russia proposed including a new class of weapons, hypersonic missiles, in a new START.<sup>154</sup> The same was true with the naval limitation treaties that followed World War I, which set or revealed the pattern that has prevailed since: Dissatisfied parties acted to push the limits of a treaty, then expected and received new negotiations in return for having advanced their positions.<sup>155</sup> The historical perspective, however, only matters if the provisions of the deal are central, rather than the idea of the deal itself. This does not appear to have been the case where the Obama administration was concerned.

At the most basic level, the deepest flaw was the implicit assumptions that the JCPOA would change Iranian behavior, and that it had been motivated by US actions—and not the drive to advance the Iranian Revolution, spread Shia hegemony, and ensure regime survival, while emphasizing a victim narrative to galvanize international support. Furthermore, the widespread assertion that current Iranian behavior is the result of US policy, and in particular President Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, mistakes correlation and causation. Rather than change Iranian behavior, the implementation of the JCPOA enabled significant increases in Iran's defense spending from 2015 to 2018.<sup>156</sup> Unfortunately, it has become convenient to criticize the Trump administration for leaving the Iran deal, rather than examining its central flaws. Such a critique presumably has provided a cover for international companies that went to Iran after 2015 envisioning significant benefits of the newly opened market but instead found Iran inhospitable to business due to its endemic lack of transparency, corruption, and the pervasive role of the IRGC and its front companies in the Iranian economy. President Trump's decision has allowed some global companies to downsize their commitments in Iran and avoid penalties.<sup>157</sup>

151 Mia Swart, "'Vicious Crackdown': Iran Protest Death Toll at 304, Amnesty Says," *Al Jazeera*, December 17, 2019, accessed March 15, 2020, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2019/12/crackdown-iran-protest-death-toll-304-amnesty-191216091026260.html>; Michael Lipin and Katherine Ahn, "US Confirms Report Citing Iran Officials as Saying 1,500 Killed in Protests," *Voice of America (VOA) News*, December 23, 2019, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.voanews.com/middle-east/voa-news-iran/us-confirms-report-citing-iran-officials-saying-1500-killed-protests>.

152 Eli Lake, "The Secret History of the Iran-Deal 'Echo Chamber': E-mails and Internal Documents Show How Advocates' Messages Synched up with the White House Campaign," *Bloomberg*, opinion piece, May 24, 2016, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://www.bloomberg.com/opinion/articles/2016-05-24/the-secret-history-of-the-iran-deal-echo-chamber>.

153 Whether with the nuclear deal or the decision to withdraw from Iraq in 2011, the Obama administration, like the Bush administration in its decision to invade Iraq in 2003, pursued the opportunity to obtain what was desired at the expense of what was vital. It is a tired trope to invoke the ignominy of Munich at every negotiation with an implacable enemy; in retrospect, it seems evident that appeasement and aggression can equally blind decision makers from recognizing their interests.

154 "Russia Ready to Include 'Super Weapons' in Arms Control Treaty-Ifax Cites Lavrov," *National Post*, December 22, 2019, accessed March 20, 2020, <https://nationalpost.com/pmnn/news-pmnn/politics-news-pmnn/russia-ready-to-include-super-weapons-in-arms-control-treaty-ifax-cites-lavrov>.

155 The open refusal of the Japanese government to continue participating in naval disarmament treaties after 1935 was as clear a signal as any that the treaty process had become ineffective. What is significant is that there was no accession to Japanese demands, all of which clearly would have enabled future aggression, simply for the sake of obtaining an agreement.

156 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 18.

157 Ellen R. Wald, "10 Companies Leaving Iran as Trump's Sanctions Close In," *Forbes*, June 6, 2018, accessed July 16, 2020, <https://www.forbes.com/sites/ellenwald/2018/06/06/10-companies-leaving-iran-as-trumps-sanctions-close-in/#16f2cdcc90ff>.



Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif shakes hands with High Representative of the EU for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy and Vice-President of European Commission Josep Borrell in Tehran, Iran on February 3, 2020. *Source: Tasnim News Agency/Handout via Reuters*

Leaders in Europe, encouraged by key figures from the Obama administration and likely hopeful of maintaining business with Iran, did not believe that Trump wanted to fix the flaws and preserve the deal, or saw the administration motivated by a desire for regime change. In the end, they would not agree on measures to address missiles, inspections, and the sunset clauses in the six-month time frame requested by President Trump in late 2017. As matters unfolded, they sought to preserve the JCPOA even after US withdrawal in May 2018—while turning a blind eye to Iranian violations.<sup>158</sup> The statements on Iran's nuclear program by Ambassador John Bolton, then the incoming national security advisor, seemed to confirm the worst to some European capitals.<sup>159</sup> European governments encouraged companies to keep investing, set up a special

purpose vehicle that could deal with Iran without using US dollars, and even passed an EU statute forbidding compliance with the extraterritorial effects of US sanctions. Iran hoped that the European deals would continue and undermine US pressures, and in July 2019, the IAEA confirmed that Iran had exceeded the size of the enriched uranium stockpile authorized by the JCPOA. Iran threatened more enrichment unless it had immediate sanctions relief.<sup>160</sup> In September 2019, Iran announced that it was no longer in compliance with the JCPOA on uranium enrichment.<sup>161</sup> From the EU side, that announcement should have either triggered the dispute resolution mechanism in the JCPOA or resulted in a snapback to previous EU sanctions on Iran, but it did not. Iran announced further breaches of JCPOA provisions over the following four months.

158 Nahal Toosi, "Obama Hands Scramble to Save Iran Deal: Democratic Insiders Try to Stop Trump from Risking 'War,' with Former President's Tacit Blessing," *Politico*, September 15, 2017, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.politico.com/story/2017/09/15/obama-aides-iran-nuclear-deal-242777>; Tom DiChristopher, "Trump Blasts John Kerry's 'Possibly Illegal' Iran Nuclear Deal 'Shadow Diplomacy,'" *CNBC*, May 7, 2018, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.cnbc.com/2018/05/07/trump-warns-john-kerry-to-butt-out-of-iran-nuclear-deal.html>.

159 See, for example, John Bolton, "How to Get Out of the Iran Nuclear Deal," *National Review*, August 28, 2017, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.nationalreview.com/2017/08/iran-nuclear-deal-exit-strategy-john-bolton-memo-trump/>.

160 Defense Intelligence Agency, *Iran Military Power*, 21.

161 Francois Murphy, "Iran Commits New Breach of Fraying Nuclear Deal, Expands Enrichment—IAEA," *Reuters*, September 26, 2019, accessed March 19, 2020, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-iaea-idUSKBN1WB237>.



There is little doubt that the EU refrain blaming Iranian actions on Trump's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA played a role in encouraging Iran's leaders and their escalations, even as the United States reimposed sanctions. Iran's behavior in the summer of 2019, particularly attacks in the Gulf on Norwegian, Saudi, Emirati, British, and Japanese oil tankers, and its overt breaches of the enrichment protocols, must be seen as an effort by Tehran to threaten greater violence and hence raise the stakes in order to strengthen its bargaining position and preserve economic benefits. The Iranian actions appear crafted to coerce the Europeans to continue to pursue the economic benefits associated with maintaining the JCPOA while not enforcing it. With its September 2019 attacks on Saudi Aramco facilities, using land attack cruise missiles and drones, however, Iran's escalatory actions seem to have gone too far to escape attribution.

Diplomatically, Iran tried to cast doubt on the origin of the Aramco attacks, noting the Houthi claim of responsibility and publicly repeating this claim at the United Nations in October 2019. Some US allies, such as Germany and Japan, initially accepted the Houthi claim even after Secretary Pompeo announced US certainty about the origins of the attack. Ultimately, the physical evidence from Saudi Arabia coupled with the distance from Yemen served to validate the US assessment. After conducting its own extensive examination of the evidence, a UN panel of experts concurred with the US assessment and published the details of its findings in a report on Yemen for the Security Council.<sup>162</sup>

Coming on the margins of the 2019 UN General Assembly, the public announcement by Britain, France, and Germany that assessed Iranian responsibility for the Saudi Aramco attack marked a significant shift. Arguably, for the first time since President Trump withdrew from the JCPOA, their announcement presented a tangible opportunity for the United States to work with its European allies and take more concerted diplomatic actions to address the totality of hostile Iranian actions across the Middle East. It is significant that in January 2020, continued Iranian breaches of the JCPOA finally led the three European countries to trigger the JCPOA's dispute resolution mechanism, and even though they did not push it and allowed Iran to delay, the action formally flagged Iranian violations. Reports from the IAEA to the UN Security Council acknowledged the rapid growth of Iran's stockpile of enriched uranium, to a level five

times that allowed in the JCPOA and equal to the level that the JCPOA would have allowed after the fifteen-year mark when those provisions expired, as well as Iran's refusal to allow IAEA inspectors immediate access to requested sites, contrary to the obligations in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty.<sup>163</sup> In June 2020, the UN Secretary General reported that since the previous July Iran had taken a series of five steps and had ceased performing its nuclear commitments under the JCPOA.<sup>164</sup>

The growing diplomatic isolation of Iran could be further reinforced by measures to enhance defensive measures in the region. Those include gathering a coalition to defend the Gulf States and to secure international shipping in the Gulf from Iranian attacks. Ultimately, rather than placing faith in conciliatory measures, it seems possible that concerted diplomatic and economic pressure can be used to induce Iran to back down, compromise, and accept fixes to the JCPOA and even to enter into a follow-on agreement. There will be pressures from Iran and some Europeans to return to the original JCPOA, but those will have to be resisted if the United States remains committed to preventing, not delaying, Iran from developing a nuclear weapon. Conceivably, a follow-on to the JCPOA could address the initial flaws and also include restrictions on missiles—to include the newly emerging threat from land attack cruise missiles—and IRGC support to violent extremist organizations, militias, and regional proxies. At the same time, the United States should explore opportunities for a more comprehensive deal that addresses the threat of proliferation more directly; for example, preserving Iranian nuclear power while eliminating Iran's authority to enrich and dispose of nuclear fuel, a standard that could be applied to other countries in the Gulf.

History suggests that Iranian leadership can respond to a combination of diplomatic, economic, and military pressure. Witness the ending of the Iran-Iraq War or the decision of Iran's leaders, in response to the sectoral sanctions, to enter negotiations that ultimately produced the JCPOA itself in 2015. In the past, the Iranian elite has responded to a mix of diplomatic isolation, economic pressure, and credible threat of military force. In the interim, though, policy makers cannot lose sight of significant challenges and hazards that come with any option. Under pressure, the Iranian regime likely will continue to see the utility of using force, particularly if

162 See Annexes 14, 15, and 16, "Letter Dated 27 January 2020 from the Panel of Experts on Yemen addressed to the President of the [UN] Security Council," S/2020/70, 81-99, accessed March 11, 2020, <https://digitallibrary.un.org/record/3850088?ln=en#record-files-collapse-header>.

163 IAEA Director General reports to the Board of Governors: "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015)," GOV/2020/5, March 3, 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/20/03/gov2020-5.pdf>; and "NPT Safeguards Agreement with the Islamic Republic of Iran," GOV/2020/15, March 3, 2020, [https://isis-online.org/uploads/iaea-reports/documents/IAEA\\_Iran\\_NPT\\_March\\_2020\\_report.pdf](https://isis-online.org/uploads/iaea-reports/documents/IAEA_Iran_NPT_March_2020_report.pdf). See also Nicole Jawerth, "IAEA Director General Calls on Iran to Cooperate Immediately and Fully," IAEA website, March 9, 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/news/iaea-director-general-calls-on-iran-to-cooperate-immediately-and-fully>, (all accessed March 20, 2020).

164 UN Secretary General, Implementation of Security Council Resolution 2231, S/2020/531, (June 11, 2020), [https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S\\_2020\\_531.pdf](https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/atf/cf/%7B65BFCF9B-6D27-4E9C-8CD3-CF6E4FF96FF9%7D/S_2020_531.pdf).

it can do so without authoritative attribution or exposure of its hand. While some believe that a transition in Iran could come from the pressure of US sanctions, it seems unlikely that this will mirror the relatively peaceful transition in the Soviet Union during the time of Mikhail Gorbachev.

Meanwhile, it seems evident Iran will seek to maximize its benefits from the vestiges of the JCPOA and take actions to prevent its diplomatic isolation. Regime leaders continue to hail the JCPOA as a seminal diplomatic achievement and proclaim the lifting of the UN arms embargo as a major victory over the United States. Russia and China have announced that they consider the JCPOA to still be in effect, and the European powers remain susceptible to Iranian threats and hope to maintain the JCPOA, at all costs and without modification. The fear is that extending the arms embargo will undermine the remainder of the JCPOA and any further Iranian compliance with IAEA inspectors. The idea of the deal, rather than its actual provisions, has taken on greater importance in European eyes. Along those lines, portraying the JCPOA as substantially more than an agreement that merely limited Iranian enrichment over the medium term, European Union High Representative Josep Borrell announced in 2020, “The JCPOA is an historic achievement for global nuclear nonproliferation contributing to regional and global security.”<sup>165</sup>

At the same time, it is not unreasonable to consider that Iran could covertly pursue a nuclear weapon capability. Ongoing research and development, and Iranian violations of the JCPOA, have allowed Iran to increase its stockpile of enriched uranium and reduce the amount of time required to produce enough fissile material for a bomb. Arguably, fire and explosions at enrichment facilities such as Natanz in July 2020 may delay attainment of such a stockpile.<sup>166</sup> Nonetheless, given the Iranian regime’s history and record of deception, it would be dangerous to assume that Iranian programs are only at declared sites.

While weaponization and delivery remain challenges for Iranian regime engineers, the covert character of Iran’s previous nuclear weapon program, and recent stalling of

the IAEA’s requests for access, should remain a cause for concern. Arguably, Iran’s failure to allow immediate access to IAEA inspectors to sites of concern and failing to fully declare its nuclear material, regardless of when the activities at those sites took place, constitute a major violation of its Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty obligations.<sup>167</sup> According to the Israelis, the Iranian nuclear archive seized in 2018 included designs for devices and delivery systems using existing missiles in the Iranian arsenal. It also is worth considering that some of the weapons the Iranian regime has acquired over the years were themselves previously capable of delivering a nuclear device. For instance, the Soumar cruise missile used in the Abqaiq attack apparently was derived from reverse engineering nuclear-capable, Soviet-era Kh-55 (air-launched) cruise missiles, which Ukraine illegally sold to Iran nearly two decades ago.<sup>168</sup>

While Iran could well seek to preserve the terms of the JCPOA, signaling that it will return to and comply with the previous provisions, the United States has several policy alternatives. First, US leaders could return to the JCPOA and hope for the best. Yet the 2020 sunset of the deal’s limitations on conventional weapons transfers, together with concerns about the hostility and human rights record of the regime, make returning to the agreement difficult to justify without some additional measures and positive actions by Iran. Along those lines, Tony Blinken, Democratic policy adviser and President-elect Joe Biden’s nomination for secretary of state, stated in late 2020 that, “all sanctions would remain in place” until Iran was in “full compliance” with the JCPOA.<sup>169</sup> The web of US sanctions would take dedicated effort to unwind, and, in any event, some US sanctions on Iran, such as those for counterterrorism, are likely to remain, given the fact that those actions derive from legislation stretching back decades. Although seldom acknowledged, it is important to note that Congressional mandates under INARA and CAATSA concerning Iranian compliance and regional activities would present a further challenge to simply returning to the JCPOA, and Congressional support will be essential to achieve enduring results. Another approach would be to develop fixes for the three major flaws in the provisions of the deal concerning inspections, sunset

165 European Union External Action Service, “JCPOA: Statement by the High Representative Josep Borrell as Coordinator of the Joint Commission of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action on the Dispute Resolution Mechanism,” Brussels, March 7, 2020, accessed July 25, 2020, [https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage\\_en/82059/JCPOA:%20Statement%20by%20the%20High%20Representative%20Josep%20Borrell%20as%20Coordinator%20of%20the%20Joint%20Commission%20of%20the%20Joint%20Comprehensive%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20the%20Dispute%20Resolution%20Mechanism](https://eeas.europa.eu/headquarters/headquarters-homepage_en/82059/JCPOA:%20Statement%20by%20the%20High%20Representative%20Josep%20Borrell%20as%20Coordinator%20of%20the%20Joint%20Commission%20of%20the%20Joint%20Comprehensive%20Plan%20of%20Action%20on%20the%20Dispute%20Resolution%20Mechanism).

166 Farnaz Fassihi, Richard Pérez-Peña and Ronen Bergman, “Iran Admits Serious Damage to Natanz Nuclear Site, Setting Back Program,” New York Times, July 5, 2020, accessed July 14, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/07/05/world/middleeast/iran-Natanz-nuclear-damage.html>.

167 David Albright, Sarah Burkhard, Frank Pabian, and Andrea Stricker, “Iran Defies the International Atomic Energy Agency: The IAEA’s Latest Iran Safeguards Report,” Institute for Science and International Security, June 10, 2020, accessed July 25, 2020, <https://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/iran-defies-the-international-atomic-energy-agency/8>.

168 Center for Strategic and International Studies, “Soumar,” Missile Threat website, CSIS Missile Defense Project, accessed June 29, 2020, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/missile/soumar/>.

169 “Top Foreign-policy Adviser Says Biden Would Keep ‘All’ US Sanctions on Iran ‘in Place,’ ” Jewish News Syndicate, June 17, 2020, accessed November 15, 2020, <https://www.jns.org/top-foreign-policy-adviser-says-biden-would-keep-all-us-sanctions-on-iran-in-place/#:~:text=The%20United%20States%20withdrew%20from%20the%20nuclear%20deal,and%20the%2010-year%2C%20%2438%20billion%20memorandum%20of%20>.

clauses, and ICBMs, and to widen the participants in any new deal to include key regional states. Finally, the United States could pursue a more comprehensive replacement for the JCPOA that addresses the nuclear file and a range of malign activities and support to proxy forces. Such an approach should include restrictions on uranium enrichment

and consider options such as a regional bank of nuclear fuel, thereby restoring a nonproliferation regime in the Gulf. The comprehensive replacement, however, even if presented as a *fait accompli* to the Iranian regime, will require the support of allies and partners and the acquiescence of Russia and China, a difficult but not impossible undertaking.



## Concluding Thoughts and Policy Choices

Interests are the foundation and starting points for policy prescriptions. The first questions are: Why should we care, and how much? But once interests are identified, choices about preferred policies require complex analyses of threats and opportunities, options for action, costs and benefits, and capacities for implementation. An interest-based approach to American foreign policy does not provide a silver bullet for settling policy debates. But it does help focus debates on preeminent issues, which can then be debated with evidence or analysis.

*Commission on America's National Interests, 2000*<sup>170</sup>

In summary, any notion of a United States withdrawal from the Middle East must first address how US vital interests would be protected or advanced by such action when considered within Washington's larger strategic approach. Demonstrated US unwillingness to engage opponents such as the Assad regime (over chemical weapons), Iran (over proxy aggressions and JCPOA violations), and even, for a time, ISIS, have resulted not in greater comity, less terrorism, reduction of nuclear proliferation trends, or greater security in energy transit routes. The evidence seems plain that exactly the opposite has occurred and that regional unease, along with the risk of wider war in the Middle East, increased as a result of the diminished US engagement. Legitimate disputes over ways in which the United States might advance or protect its interests notwithstanding, its leaders must recognize that ceding the Middle East to the violent, hegemonic designs of the Iranian regime, let alone to the arbitrations of Putin's Russia or the predations of energy-hungry China, means ceding a global position which has operated to US advantage for more than seventy years. Despite the allure of offshore balancing concepts, US allies and partners are not poised to assume the American role. There is, on evidence, no absence of means nor unsuitability of ends to justify abandoning that US advantage to the enlargement of revanchist actors, who remain, despite all of the best wishes and sincerest hopes, inveterate adversaries of the United States and the post-World War II order it championed.

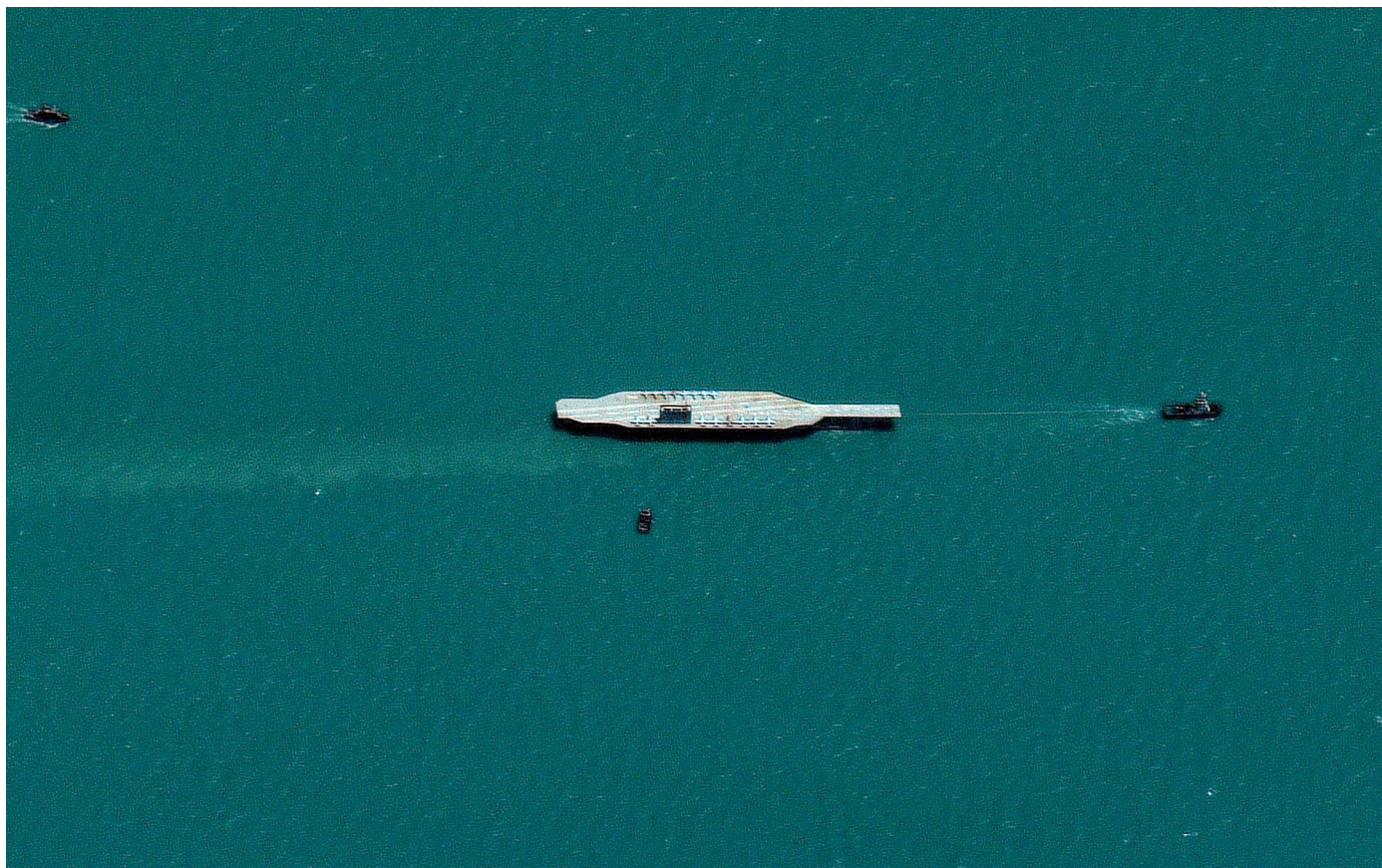
At the same time, the United States needs to discipline competing policy desires according to threats to American interests, rather than to pursue the most "delectable political carrot" to appear amid the swirl of events.<sup>171</sup> ISIS evolved from and capitalized on the Iranian-poisoned politics of Iraq and the apparent doom of the Assad regime. By weakening regional governments through overt interventions and calls for overthrow, US policy and its attendant strategic approaches placed at risk two of four vital interests (peace and counterterrorism) in the region, to little apparent strategic advantage. While facilitating US withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and overthrowing an Iranian ally like Assad may have been desirable policy goals in and of themselves, these aims arguably should have been placed in context and not pursued to the detriment of longstanding interests.

It is evident that external regime change, whether by military invasion or proxy war, is an inherently perilous approach to enabling peace, countering terrorism, countering nuclear proliferation, and ensuring the free flow of commerce and access to the region's energy resources. To the contrary, it is clear that resilient states committed to regional peace, able to effectively govern and provide services to their people, are far more likely to advance those interests than not. Capacity building and advisory efforts by the United States can provide effective tools to help foster and strengthen those characteristics in allies and partners. Governments communicate with governments, by diplomacy or by force, as allies, partners, or rivals. This is what traditional power competition means, if it means anything. When governments impose outside actors upon weaker states or treat non-state actors as states, they ennoble proxies at the expense of their own power and legitimacy.

US and allied policy makers also must acknowledge the potential for significant increases in Iranian lethality and power projection capabilities if the UN conventional arms embargo is not enforced. Plausible scenarios posit that in addition to irregular warfare and covert action, the Iranian regime could in the future also possess enhanced military capabilities for precision strike, force projection, and anti-access and area denial. The scale and scope of those would pose substantial military challenges to the United States and its partners in the Middle East. Responding would require not only an expansion of existing

170 Allison and Blackwill, *America's National Interests*, 15.

171 The term "delectable political carrot" originally described the British Conservative government's desire for a quick and easy humbling of Egyptian President Gamal Abdel Nasser after he nationalized the Suez Canal in 1956. The subsequent Suez Crisis had negative strategic consequences for the United Kingdom and its empire. Randolph S. Churchill, *The Rise and Fall of Sir Anthony Eden* (London: McGibbon and Kee, 1959), 279.



A satellite image shows an Iranian mock-up of US aircraft carrier, southeast of Bandar Abbas, Iran, on July 25, 2020. The mock-up aircraft carrier was used for missile and small boat attack targeting scenarios during the “Great Prophet 14” war games, held by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps at the Strait of Hormuz. Source: Satellite image ©2020 Maxar Technologies/Handout via Reuters

military capabilities of the United States and its partners, but also enhancing partner resilience. In some cases, new capabilities would be required, in order to protect vital American national interests. It is difficult to see how US approaches such as offshore balancing or reliance on global strike could effectively counter the potential new threats.

The impending increase in Iranian regime military capabilities, whether in greater lethality by proxies or in enhanced precision and destructiveness by missiles, will have a detrimental impact on the security situation in the Middle East and beyond. Because of the destabilizing and aggressive policies of the Iranian regime, increased offensive capabilities and anti-access systems will not produce strategic stability, as some might suggest and as the Iranian regime would like the world to believe. Those capabilities, instead, are likely to result in greater recklessness, coercion, and armed competition. The likelihood of emerging Russian and Chinese arms and basing interests in Iran raises the complicating, and escalatory, concern of any regional crisis threatening to become a great power conflict.

The implementation and oversight of US policies in the Middle East will compete with domestic priorities and attention—amid an acrimonious political atmosphere, the coronavirus and its impact on the nation will place a greater premium on time and resources across the US government bureaucracy. It is noteworthy that in Ambassador Blackwill’s review of President Trump’s foreign policies, to include those in the Middle East, he tended to give substantially higher marks than did the US public, media, or critics.<sup>172</sup> Even within the president’s base of political support, there does not seem to be a full appreciation for his Middle East policies or unflinching support for them. This is not likely to change, since pressing domestic concerns will limit the opportunities to rally support for Middle East policies or explain their strategic rationale.

Looking ahead, it also is important to consider where the United States has seen policy achievements over the previous four years and to assess changes in the strategic environment. Working with local partners, the US-led Global Coalition has liberated the territory and the millions

<sup>172</sup> Blackwill, *Trump’s Foreign Policies*, 4-7.



of people in Iraq and Syria that had been under the control of ISIS. Although hoping to reconstitute and still dangerous, ISIS has reverted to a terrorist organization and no longer poses the magnitude of threat it did in 2016 and 2017. In addition, in the area of counter-terrorism successes, the threat posed by al-Qaeda also has been reduced by pressure on all levels of the organization by the US and its allies. Certainly, the leadership vacuum resulting from the death of al-Qaeda's most senior leaders in 2019 and 2020 will have a disruptive effect on the plans and activities of the group that had been serving as a source of inspiration for extremists globally.

Seeking to address the totality of Iran's destabilizing and malign behavior, the administration launched its pressure campaign with the goal of denying "the regime the resources to conduct its destructive foreign policy." Although the campaign has not compelled Iran to negotiate a new deal, in January 2020, Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo reported that US sanctions already had, in the space of little more than a year, denied Iran 80 percent of its oil export revenue and prevented it from accessing "roughly 90 percent of its foreign currency reserves" that could have otherwise gone to fund its destabilizing activities.<sup>173</sup> Validating Pompeo's claim, the Iranian president announced in September 2020 that oil revenues had dropped from \$120 billion to around \$20 billion a year due to US sanctions; other officials placed regime revenues even lower.<sup>174</sup> Although Iran continues to prioritize the use of coercion and military force as its most effective strategic tools, the pressure campaign has significantly reduced the resources the Iranian regime has available to fund, arm, and equip its proxies or develop missiles. IRGC senior leaders have publicly signaled that despite the significant economic problems caused by the US pressure campaign and the coronavirus, the Iranian regime will continue to prioritize its substantial support to proxies.<sup>175</sup>

Although not united about what to do about Iranian activities, the international community has acknowledged Iran to be in open violation of the provisions of the JCPOA. Meanwhile, although the administration's stance on the JCPOA alienated European allies, those allies increasingly also acknowledge the threat posed by Iranian destabilizing actions, missile programs, and the proliferation of conventional weapons and advanced components. In the Middle East, on the other hand, US policies have reassured allies

and many partners, and the common threat posed by Iran has created new opportunities. The common threat from Iran has given impetus to the normalization of relations between Israel and several Arab states under the Abraham Accords, which, in turn, could help dissuade Iranian aggression and provide a foundation for a more peaceful region.

In the wake of the coronavirus pandemic, US strategic aims in the Middle East should be to prevent the resurgence of ISIS, stymie Iran's violent and hegemonic ambition, bolster the advancement and development of our partners and allies in the region, champion the human rights of the Iranian people, and pursue and maintain a peace that allows trade and commerce to flourish and that gives social, political, and economic reforms an opportunity to succeed. Ending Iran's aggression must include blocking all paths to a nuclear weapon, denying the IRGC the funding it uses to empower proxies and export violence, addressing Iranian asymmetric capabilities such as cyberattack and missile attacks, and supporting the Iranian people and their aspirations for inclusion in a peaceful, prosperous global order under a government that serves them. None of these can be accomplished in isolation. All are difficult and will require willing allies and partners who are assured of US commitment and resolve. The United States, furthermore, must clearly assess which, if any, of these it is prepared to go to war over. There is a substantial risk of war, whether out of miscalculation or from Iran responding to crippling economic measures with force. Open war, however, is not a foregone conclusion, and it will be possible to advance US interests without resorting to the use of force.

Armed with an understanding of US interests and the challenges to those in the Middle East, it is useful to consider some of the most salient policy choices beyond 2020. Concerning the threat posed by the resilient Salafist-jihadist enterprise, US policies should:

- sustain the Global Coalition to Defeat ISIS and prevent the reconstitution of ISIS in Iraq and Syria;
- continue US support and assistance for Iraqi security-sector reforms and institutional capacity building while also supporting the economic, political, and territorial viability of the Iraqi Kurdish region;

173 Remarks by Secretary of State Michael R. Pompeo, "Press Briefing by Secretary of State Mike Pompeo and Secretary of the Treasury Steven Mnuchin on Iran Sanctions," White House, January 10, 2020, accessed November 17, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/press-briefing-secretary-state-mike-pompeo-secretary-treasury-steven-mnuchin-iran-sanctions/>.

174 See Scott Lucas, "President Rouhani Admits Iran Oil Revenue Down More Than 80%," EA Worldview, September 15, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://eaworldview.com/2020/09/president-rouhani-admits-iran-oil-revenue-down-more-than-80/> and "Rouhani: Oil revenues decreased by \$100bn in 8 years," Middle East Monitor, September 14, 2020, accessed November 23, 2020, <https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200914-rouhani-oil-revenues-decreased-by-100bn-in-8-years/>.

175 Esfandiari, "Revolutionary Guards Commander Gives Rare Estimate of Money Iran Spent."



- rebuild the training and advisory capacity of NATO Mission Iraq;
- maintain support for US partners in eastern and northeastern Syria (such as the Autonomous Administration of North and East Syria) until the political transition to a legitimate constitutional government called for in UNSCR 2254 takes place;
- enforce and expand sanctions of the Assad regime for human rights violations, and withhold US and allied resources to rebuild Assad's Syria until the regime cooperates with UNSCR 2254; and
- maintain pressure on al-Qaeda senior leadership and keep a watchful eye on the capability and intentions of al-Qaeda's Middle East affiliates in Yemen and Syria, particularly to the extent they could pose a threat to American citizens and interests.

To address and neutralize Iran's violent and destabilizing regional agenda, the United States should pursue policies to:

- broaden and strengthen enforcement of national and multinational sanctions on the Iranian regime's ability to import or export arms and missile components;
  - interdict IRGC funding to and facilitation of terrorist proxies and militia in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, the Palestinian territories, Bahrain, and Yemen;
  - expose and publicly release attributable evidence of Iranian malign activities, illicit proliferation of weapons and components, and support to violent, non-state actors;
  - support the implementation of UNSCR 2254 for the political transition to a legitimate constitutional government in Syria and prevent the establishment of Iranian bases and military facilities in Syria;
  - enforce and strengthen the mandate of the United Nations Interim Force for Lebanon under UNSCR 1701, to include access to areas under the control of Hezbollah; and
  - maintain and enforce the UN's targeted embargo on arms and weapons to the Houthis in Yemen, which are prohibited under UNSCR 2216.
- build upon the Abraham Accords and the normalization of relationships between Israel and the Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and other Arab states;
  - affirm the United States commitment to the defense of Israel;
  - fully integrate all air and missile defense capabilities on the Arabian Peninsula;
  - formalize the International Maritime Security Construct in the Gulf in order to maintain freedom of navigation and safeguard maritime commerce;
  - work with the states of the GCC, Jordan, and Egypt to form a collective, regional security framework suited to deter and dissuade Iranian aggression against them, strengthen their resilience and defensive capacities, and create a secure environment in which economic, social, and political reforms can prosper;
  - implement a strategic and consistent approach toward foreign military sales in the Middle East that increases partner capability, joint interoperability, and mitigates the sense of insecurity that drives them to buy from Russia and China (or capitulate to Iran), including modifications to the Missile Technology Control Regime to remove restrictions on technologies such as drones that are clearly not "missiles" nor have unique WMD applications;
  - implement the strategic framework agreement with Iraq and prioritize US support and assistance for Iraqi sovereignty and legitimate institutions;
  - pursue closer US-GCC collaboration to stabilize Iraq and build on that country's Arab heritage instead of sectarianism;
  - educate European allies about the invalid assumptions that underlie the JCPOA and Iranian violations of its provisions in order to generate support for a more comprehensive accord to supersede the JCPOA; and
  - develop options such as a regional bank of nuclear fuel that could restore an effective nuclear nonproliferation regime in the Gulf.

In order to strengthen and enhance deterrence in the face of Iranian aggression and to protect US allies and interests, the US polices should:

To demonstrate United States support for the long-suffering people of Iran and to pressure the Iranian regime to change its malign policies, or pay a diplomatic and economic price, the United States should pursue and sustain policies to:

- voice support for the people of Iran and enable their uncensored access to international media and information;
- demand that the Iranian regime respect the human rights of its citizens by exposing and sanctioning Iranian regime leaders, security officials, and judges responsible for human rights abuses;
- work with European allies to emphasize and address areas of common concern about the grave human rights abuses of the Iranian regime including its continued illegal detention of foreign citizens, and its persecution of activists and religious minorities;
- urge comprehensive international enforcement of UN sanctions reimposed on Iran after the US evoked the snapback mechanism of the JCPOA in UNSCR 2231, which restored sanctions prohibiting the export of certain conventional arms to Iran (UNSCR 1929) and procurement of arms from Iran (UNSCR 1747);
- strengthen international condemnation of Iranian missile testing and proliferation, to include the space launch activities of the IRGC;
- urge the UN Security Council to take action to address the Iranian regime's denial of immediate IAEA access to sites contrary to the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty;
- emphasize to US allies the importance of following through with the IAEA's dispute resolution mechanism, which was triggered in January 2020 as a result of Iranian violations of the JCPOA;
- maintain the pressure of US sanctions against the Iranian regime until it consents to negotiations, and refuse to lift sanctions as a precondition for future negotiations; and
- prepare for negotiations to replace the JCPOA with a more comprehensive deal, as the precursor

for the normalization of relations and the lifting of sanctions, which would include restrictions on the Iranian regime's uranium enrichment, missile development, and malign regional activities.

To achieve its strategic goals, the United States will need to enhance resiliency and deterrence in Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and the Gulf, neutralize malign influences in Lebanon and Iraq in order to strengthen legitimate institutions, and safeguard the territorial integrity and economic and political viability of the Kurdish regional government. Constructively engaging and working with Congress to advance US goals and policy choices will be essential for enduring results. Pursuit of these, furthermore, is not irrelevant to the return of competition between the major powers, and tangible signals of US commitment to partners in the Middle East have the potential to counter the allure of Russian and Chinese promises and influence campaigns. US policy makers must remain cognizant that while there may be some opportunities to work with Russia and China, those powers do not share US interests and objectives in the Middle East, and they do not seek the preservation of the US-led international order. If the United States wants to neutralize Russian and Chinese efforts to undermine US pressure on the Iranian regime and to counter US-led regional security activities, it must prioritize, focus, and resource its diplomatic, economic, and military engagement with Middle East partners.

Although difficult, it is possible to advance US interests in the Middle East. Doing so will require consistent and calculated engagement rather than complete withdrawal or major military combat intervention. The administration's brokering the 2020 Abraham Accords represents such an achievement that furthers US interests. Policy choices and objectives should derive from an understanding of US interests and the threats, challenges, and opportunities related to those. In order to succeed, US leaders will have to pursue their objectives in a sustainable and transparent way, sharing the costs and burdens with capable allies and partners, and ensuring that US service members, diplomats, and development experts have what they need to prevail.

## About The Author

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