Slow and Steady
Improving U.S.-Arab Cooperation to Counter Irregular Warfare

Ilan Goldenberg, Nicholas A. Heras and Kaleigh Thomas
About the Authors

ILAN GOLDENBERG is a Senior Fellow and Director of the Middle East Security Program at the Center for a New American Security (CNAS). He previously served at the State Department as a chief of staff for the small team supporting then-Secretary of State John Kerry’s initiative to conduct permanent-status negotiations between Israelis and Palestinians. He was formerly a senior professional staff member on the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, where he focused on the Middle East. Prior to that, he served as a special advisor on the Middle East and then as the Iran team chief in the Office of the Under Secretary of Defense for Policy.

NICHOLAS A. HERAS is a Fellow in the Middle East Security Program at CNAS. He is also a Senior Analyst at the Jamestown Foundation, where he provides analysis of complex conflicts and security issues in the greater Middle East and North Africa and Sahara-Sahel regions. A former National Security Education Program David L. Boren Fellow, he has extensive in-field research experience in all regions of Syria, Lebanon, and Jordan, with significant experience in Turkey’s border regions with Syria and Iraq. Before CNAS, Heras was a research associate at the National Defense University, where he worked on a project that comprehensively analyzed the impact of the Syrian and Iraqi conflict on the Middle East.

KALEIGH THOMAS is a Research Associate in the Middle East Security Program at CNAS. Previously, she was a program coordinator for both the Middle East Security and Energy, Economics, and Security programs at CNAS. She earned her M.A. in International Peace and Conflict Resolution from American University, and her B.S. in Business Administration with majors in International Business and Marketing from the University of South Carolina.

Acknowledgments

The authors would like to thank Brian Katz, Elisa Catalano Ewers, Ted Karasik, and Loren DeJonge Schulman for their review of this report and their helpful comments. They would also like to acknowledge Melody Cook and Maura McCarthy for their assistance with the production of this report.

About the Middle East Security Program

The Middle East Security Program conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in this turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability in the region, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security Program draws on a team with deep government and nongovernment experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.

Cover Photo

U.S. Marines deployed in support of Combined Joint Task Force Operation Inherent Resolve pose with Iraqi service members in Iraq, Nov. 27, 2017. (Marine Corps photo by Capt. Christian Lopez)
Executive Summary

Since 9/11 the United States has struggled with how to respond to the challenges posed by ungoverned spaces in the Middle East, from which terrorist attacks and destabilizing mass refugee flows emanate. The collapse of state authority in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya has created security vacuums that extremist groups such as the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and al Qaeda have used to develop local presence, to organize, and eventually to conduct attacks both inside these countries as well as in Europe and the United States. Meanwhile, the refugee flows that have resulted from these conflicts have put tremendous pressure on neighboring countries and also caused a massive wave of refugees into Europe. The question facing the United States and other Western allies is how to deal with these challenges without getting sucked into complex and costly civil wars that the United States has little ability to end on its own.

The question facing the United States and other Western allies is how to deal with challenges in the Middle East without getting sucked into complex and costly civil wars.

Full-scale American-led counterinsurgency, stabilization campaigns, or other resource-intensive nation-shaping interventions attempted in Afghanistan and Iraq have proven to be unsustainable models given the high costs, indecisive outcomes, and lack of political support at home. However, completely withdrawing U.S. forces and counting purely on intelligence collection to monitor threats and local partners to address them has been ineffective, as this approach leaves the United States vulnerable to attacks. The most successful effort the United States has launched to deal with these challenges in recent years has been the counter-ISIS campaign in Iraq and Syria, where it has succeeded in protecting U.S. interests at a reasonable cost by working “By, With, and Through” local actors. In this model the United States generally: (1) uses a comparatively small number of troops to train, equip, advise, assist, or accompany local forces with legitimacy on the ground; (2) provides airpower and some enablers and logistics; (3) uses its limited military investment as leverage for a broader diplomatic effort; or (4) invests in building local governance and providing aid on the ground.

This model could be improved if America’s Middle Eastern partners also became more adept at cooperatively countering the challenges posed by irregular warfare – especially those posed by Iran’s support for proxies in the region and Salafi-jihadist extremists. But initiatives designed to improve the capabilities of Arab militaries and regional cooperation among them have consistently failed. They do not trust one another. They also lack many of the necessary capabilities to counter irregular warfare individually or separately, and they focus their security investments too heavily on purchasing expensive weaponry designed for conventional threats. Further, there is mutual frustration between the United States and many of its Arab partners. They fear that the United States is leaving the region. And the United States is uncomfortable with some of the strategies the Arab states pursue, the most recent example of which is in Yemen, that come with a high civilian cost.

Given these challenges, a multinational force to address the threats posed by terrorism – for example the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition proposed by Saudi Arabia in 2015 – is unlikely to be effective. Even a comprehensive agreement such as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), proposed by the current administration, is not a viable option.

Instead, this study proposes an incremental approach that over time allows the United States and its Arab partners to come to multiple common understandings on the irregular warfare challenges in the Middle East and to flexibly develop common tools that can be used to address them.

This can be achieved through the creation of two layers of cooperation. At the policy and strategic level, the United States should work with the relevant Middle Eastern partners to create less formal, tailored working groups for various irregular warfare challenges. These groups should focus on: (1) producing common threat assessments; (2) developing joint strategies and campaign plans in response to these threats; (3) agreeing on a division of labor; (4) discussing ethical approaches to managing irregular warfare consistent with the laws of war; and (5) developing a common intelligence picture.

Not all of the United States’ Arab partners need to be involved in every working group. Membership should be based on the threat prioritization of each country and limited to those that can realistically work closely with the United States as well as with each other on these problems. The first two working groups should address Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Qods Force and Salafi-jihadist groups. In time, additional working groups, using this approach, can be added to address other challenges, such as those in North Africa and the Sahel.

At the operational level, U.S. efforts should focus on individually working with these countries and helping
Though the program the authors recommend in this report is designed to put more responsibility on U.S. Arab partners, it must be clear from the start that it will involve a meaningful and sustained American commitment. Though the program the authors recommend in this report is designed to put more responsibility on these partners, it must be clear from the start that it will involve a meaningful and sustained American commitment. This must include consistent high-level engagement from the civilian leadership at the Pentagon, State Department, and Intelligence Community; long-term commitment of a discrete number of American trainers and special operators to the mission; a sustained air and naval presence in the region, though one that may be smaller than in recent years; and continued commitments by the U.S. government to support aid programs that can improve governance and stability in ungoverned spaces in the Middle East.

U.S. policymakers must also acknowledge that results will be uneven, and therefore the success of this strategy should be consistently evaluated along three criteria. First, how much success is the program having in lining up the strategies and approaches of U.S. partners with...
one other and with the United States? This will be a years-long effort, where progress will be incremental. Second, is the approach improving the capabilities of small groups of elite forces in these countries? Here progress can be achieved relatively quickly, and should be discernible in a couple of years. Finally, is the effort reducing the overall burden on the United States in tackling these challenges? Again, it may take a number of years to see meaningful progress on this question, and it may be difficult to measure. Moreover, it will never mean getting to a point where U.S. interests are so aligned with those of Arab partners and their capabilities are so good that the United States can eliminate its investment in countering the problem. But discernible progress within three to five years should be possible.

If this approach can be pursued effectively, it could improve the United States’ partners’ ability to respond to the asymmetric threats they face in the Middle East, while also getting the United States more on the same page strategically with its partners. Ultimately, it could reduce the burden on the United States in countering asymmetric threats in the Middle East.

A Note on Methodology

This project started with a simple proposition – the United States and its Arab partners share a common problem in addressing the asymmetric threats posed by Iran’s support for proxies in the Middle East and Salafi-jihadist extremist organizations. But despite billions of dollars in arms sales and close cooperation between the United States and its Arab partners, the countries of the region were largely ineffective at countering these irregular warfare threats on their own. Given the Iranian Qods Force’s effective support of proxies engaging in irregular warfare in the Middle East, the authors originally considered whether creating an “Arab Qods Force” could be the proper response. However, exploration of this model quickly presented its infeasibility due to the existing challenges to cooperation among Arab partners along two main tracks: a lack of shared strategic approach to common threats on one hand, and on the other insufficient capabilities. Those two distinct obstacles – strategy and capability – became the two levels on which the team looked for a mechanism to improve the efforts of Arab partners to address threats they share with the United States.

The changes in U.S. policy in the Middle East throughout the duration of this project, most notably the clear trajectory presented by the release of the National Defense Strategy and the refocus on great power competition and reduction of investment in the Middle East, also impacted the authors’ thinking. Indeed, it became clear that any proposal to improve cooperation between the United States and its partners on the question of countering irregular warfare also had to address the overall question of what the future U.S. role would be in the Middle East – especially the military dimension.

To determine what such a mechanism would look like, the project team engaged with representatives from key Arab partner militaries. Throughout 2018, the team traveled to the Middle East to interview military and government officials as well as American military and diplomatic officials at the U.S. embassies in country. The team also engaged in discussions with officials from Arab partners in Washington, D.C., and with American policymakers and military officials in Washington and Tampa, Florida, at U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) and U.S. Special Operations Command (SOCOM). As the team developed initial concepts, it also sought feedback from relevant U.S. experts and government officials on their feasibility. The resulting insights from these discussions greatly informed the final concept presented within this report and led the project team to conclude that any plan on Arab partner cooperation needed to include a focus on the overall strategic approach to countering regional threats as well as operational capabilities.
Chapter 1: A Sustainable “By, With, and Through” Strategy for the Middle East

America’s Yo-Yo Diet in the Middle East

For the past 20 years, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has resembled a yo-yo diet. American leaders declare that the United States has gotten too heavily invested in the region and needs to spend more time on what really matters, whether it be pivoting to Asia or to the broader framework of great power competition. The United States announces it is lessening its commitments in the Middle East and starts to reduce U.S. military presence and shift senior leaders away from the region. This strategic decision is incentivized and reinforced by domestic politics. The American public is sick of fighting resource-intensive wars in the Middle East that make no sense, cost a lot of money, and, by all appearances, have little to do with their daily lives.

But inevitably this policy goes too far. The United States “diets” too heavily and too quickly in a way that is not sustainable. The country thus leaves itself vulnerable, most notably to extremist organizations getting the space and opportunity to project threats against its interests, but also to other problems that jump to the front page of the news and generate a political outcry at home to act. And so the U.S. government responds by again bingeing on the Middle East until it is time to try another extreme diet.

President George W. Bush ran in 2000 on a foreign policy platform of focusing on great power competition and rogue regimes instead of insignificant failed states and terrorism. His administration famously did not hold a Principals Committee meeting on terrorism in its early months. The 9/11 attacks reshaped the entire Bush presidency. The United States toppled the Taliban and Saddam Hussein and spent the next eight years mired in Iraq and Afghanistan spending trillions of dollars, losing thousands of American troops, and crowding out most other priorities.

President Barack Obama campaigned on ending the Iraq War and promoted the 2011 pivot, or rebalance, to Asia. But withdrawing fully from Iraq, a conflicted response to the Arab Spring, and not getting militarily involved in the early years of the Syrian civil war, created an opening for ISIS. YouTube videos of Americans being brutally slaughtered by ISIS, combined with the takeover of Mosul, generated irresistible pressure for a significant U.S. response. The United States put troops back on the ground in Iraq and became more active in Syria in a range of activities, because of both the very real security threat and the overwhelming political pressure at home to respond, especially in Congress and Washington.

President Donald Trump has repeated the same pattern. His administration’s National Defense Strategy and National Security Strategy both emphasize the importance of focusing on great power competition – again arguing for less focus on the Middle East. And

The last U.S. military convoy to depart Iraq on December 18, 2011, crosses the border into Kuwait at Khabari Al Awazeem. While President Obama fulfilled his campaign promise to withdraw all troops, U.S. military personnel returned only a few years later, in 2014, to counter the Islamic State. (Mario Tama/Getty Images)
he has been promising to finish ISIS and get out of the Middle East since his 2016 campaign. After announcing in December 2018 a full withdrawal of the roughly 2,000 U.S. troops stationed in eastern Syria, he seems to have reversed course and may leave a few hundred troops. But the trajectory in Syria is clearly toward withdrawal, which is most likely to leave pockets of instability that eventually draw the United States back in. It is the latest American crash diet in the Middle East.

A U.S. withdrawal from the Middle East is not likely to end well. ISIS, al Qaeda, and other extremist groups maintain capabilities and presences in the region. This could potentially result in a return to the days of ISIS terror attacks in Paris or Brussels, with a deeply negative impact on European politics. Such attacks were at least part of the reason for the rise of nativist right-wing parties and phenomena such as Brexit. Another major war would also lead to new human suffering and refugee flows that, once again, would pose significant challenges for Europe. In the face of these negative consequences, especially high-profile terrorist attacks, is President Trump or the next U.S. president just going to sit back? Of course not, even if that is the strategically best thing to do. Politically, though, it will be impossible. And so the United States will go on another binge in the Middle East.

Thus, the biggest challenge for U.S. policy in the region is how to stop the pattern of this yo-yo diet and find a healthy, consistent way to stay in the area without being overcommitted. How does the United States right-size its approach to the Middle East and develop a sustainable model for American engagement?

The most challenging issue the United States has struggled with in the Middle East during the past 20 years has been managing the instability, security vacuums, and civil wars that have emerged since the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003 and the Arab Uprisings of 2011 that have resulted in civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya, and in general political instability. These conflicts created an environment in which extremist groups can thrive, destabilize neighboring countries, and plan or otherwise instigate terrorist attacks on the United States and its European allies. They have also generated massive flows of displaced persons and refugees that have put tremendous pressure on partners such as Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey, but also on many of the United States’ closest European allies. What the nation has struggled with is how to contain and manage these conflicts such that U.S. interests are protected without getting bogged down and over-invested. Too often the United States has fallen into the trap of aiming for an end-state that pursues unrealistic objectives of achieving a liberal, stable democracy instead of just seeking a modicum of stability and ending these conflicts.

The ongoing instability in the region has created opportunities for two actors in particular to significantly increase their influence: jihadist organizations and Iran. Both have, in different ways, used this period of intense transition in the Middle East – and the resulting governance vacuums and instability – to create new social, political, and security realities that will benefit them at the expense of the United States and its Arab partners. The U.S. government has recently placed a particular emphasis on addressing the ISIS threat. In the greater Middle East region, most of the United States’ closest security partners are concerned with the threat from ISIS; ISIS-led insurgencies are currently the most pressing counterterrorism threat to Egypt, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq. Although ISIS has suffered the loss of nearly all of its territory, the group still seeks to wage attacks against the United States and the West. It also targets Saudi Arabia and seeks to spread its influence in Yemen and Somalia, although it is at a disadvantage on the Arabian Peninsula and Horn of Africa as compared to the local affiliates of al Qaeda.
The threat from a resurgent al Qaeda that takes advantage of the vacuums caused by the civil wars in the Middle East is a current, looming challenge to the United States and its close regional partners. In Idlib Province in northwestern Syria, U.S. officials assess that al Qaeda has created its largest and most important safe haven since the fall of Taliban-controlled Afghanistan in 2002, and that al Qaeda affiliates in Libya, Yemen, and Somalia are a threat to the United States and its regional partners.13

The biggest problem for the United States is that safe havens make it significantly easier for such groups to train, inspire followers, and ultimately plan and execute terrorist attacks in the West. The most salient example of this was al Qaeda’s use of its safe haven in Afghanistan to plan the 9/11 attacks. But ISIS also used its safe haven in eastern Syria and western Iraq to plan, direct, enable, and/or inspire attacks in Paris, Brussels, and elsewhere—a capability that has been dramatically reduced as it has lost territory. The perpetrators of the 2015 attack on the French magazine Charlie Hebdo trained in Yemen with al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).14 In 2009 the Federal Bureau of Investigation arrested Najibullah Zazi, who had planned to bomb several targets in New York and later admitted to having received training from al Qaeda in Pakistan.15 Even when law enforcement agents are able to thwart planned attacks, safe havens allow these organizations to train and equip fighters and to build global networks of devotees—sustaining the groups’ existence and the potential for future successful attacks. For example, U.S. citizen Anwar al-Awlaki is thought to have become a senior recruiter for al Qaeda after traveling to Yemen in 2004 and to have directed attempted attacks on the United States.16

Iran presents another challenge. Since its 1979 revolution, it has been highly effective in moving opportunistically and gradually into the security vacuums created by regime change efforts and civil wars, and in shaping socio-politics of the region wherever possible.18 In the three decades since the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the IRGC Qods Force has gained the most experience and arguably developed the most competent, irregular warfare doctrine of any Middle Eastern actor.19 Iran has used this capability defensively to ensure it maintains influence in countries such as Iraq, where it feared that the U.S. intervention in 2003 would next lead to an effort to overthrow the Islamic Republic. But it also uses these tools offensively to increase its influence and further its role as a regional leader. And, problematically for the United States, it has often defined its interests in direct opposition to the United States and the American-led order in the Middle East. Iran has, thus, purposefully chosen to target American allies and sought to weaken U.S. influence in the region. This would of course negatively impact the interests previously outlined that U.S. policymakers have tried to protect.

Lebanese Hezbollah set a template for how the IRGC seeks to gain direct influence over local actors in the Arab world. This template is to develop local proxy...
organizations, generally from the local Shia populations, that are loyal to the ideals of the Islamic Revolution; organized holistically as social, political, and militant groups; and depend financially on the IRGC. As a unifying goal of resistance, these organizations are also often focused on resisting an enemy (Israel, the United States, Saudi Arabia, for example) perceived to be trying to oppress the Shia specifically and the Muslim community generally. Critically, the IRGC invests in its Hezbollah groups over the long term, viewing them as precious tools to not only pressure Iran’s enemies but also spread the Islamic Revolution. During the Lebanese civil war, IRGC operatives saw how the social vacuum caused by that conflict, the fractious nature of Lebanese Shia socio-politics, and the reality of an Israeli invasion and occupation of a large part of Lebanon could provide the opportunity to develop a Hezbollah organization. The IRGC began to engage with, train militarily, and indoctrinate a splinter faction of the preexisting Amal organization that was sympathetic to the doctrine of wilayat faqih. This faction was expanded by recruiting Lebanese Shia fighters who were attracted to the IRGC’s ability to regularly pay fighters, and who wanted to join what they viewed as a less corrupt organization that was ready to fight Israel. Despite Syria’s sometimes hostile stance toward Hezbollah (which also led to massacres of Hezbollah fighters), the IRGC’s willingness to remain engaged with its nascent proxy group and to support and protect it was decisive in maintaining Hezbollah at a time when its survival was in question. This situation had resulted from warfare against Israel and the antipathy of Syria. The IRGC learned from Lebanon and repeated the Hezbollah template in Iraq. It is now seeking to do the same in Syria.

More recently, Iran’s engagement in the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen has been built around working through proxy forces. In Syria, Iran has trained a militia...
force of likely tens of thousands of Shia fighters from Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, and increasingly local Syrians. In Iraq, it has cultivated powerful factions within that nation’s Popular Mobilization Units – Shia militia forces outside of Iraqi government structures, for example the Badr organization, Kata’ib Hezbollah, and Asai’ib Ahl al-Haq. And in Yemen, these proxy forces have aligned with the Houthis, providing them with weaponry and support to put pressure on Saudi Arabia.

Iran is playing a careful game in Syria and Iraq, emphasizing its role as one of a legitimate, above-board security partner of these nations, building the capacity of Damascus and Baghdad to respond to threats presented by transnational jihadist organizations. In effect, the Islamic Republic is making the argument that it is performing a service for the international community, aggressively working to address a global security threat by actively combating ISIS, al Qaeda, and others that have conducted strikes outside the Middle East.

Iran’s steady entrenchment in western Syria over the course of the conflict has provided the IRGC and its proxy networks with the new ability to threaten Tel Aviv with missile strikes from western Syria, supplementing existing capability to do this from Lebanon. Israel has responded with air strikes targeting Iranian facilities in Syria intended to degrade Iran’s capabilities and deter strikes on Israel. Thus far, neither side has escalated beyond tit-for-tat strikes, but there is a risk that an accident or miscalculation could spark a larger-scale conflict.

The Yemeni civil war also provides Iran with the opportunity to build a proxy force from the Zaydi Shia Houthi movement to apply strategic pressure on Saudi Arabia along its vulnerable southwestern border region. According to Iranian national security thinkers, the IRGC Qods Force’s engagement with the Houthi movement is long-standing and has intensified over the past decade. In particular, Saudi Arabia sees as a threat Iran’s strategy to cultivate the Houthi movement to become a Yemeni Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia perceives efforts to inspire, organize, and direct militant separatist movements in its southwestern provinces of Najran and ‘Asir, both of which have significant populations of Ismaili and Zaydi Shi’a. The IRGC Qods Force is also providing to the Houthis sophisticated weapons, which are used to conduct strikes deeper and deeper into Saudi Arabia and to threaten the free flow of international shipping and trade in the Bab al-Mandab.
Failed American Responses

In the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, the United States tried a number of different approaches to deal with the challenges posed by terrorism and failed states in the Middle East. The lessons learned from these mostly unsuccessful strategies are critical to developing a sustainable approach that is aligned with U.S. national interests and can endure for decades to come.

Under the administration of George W. Bush, the United States conducted a successful irregular warfare campaign using intelligence, special operations advisors, and airpower to enable its partner Afghan military to oust the Taliban and al Qaeda from Afghanistan. But a diversion of U.S. resources to the war in Iraq and subsequent Taliban resurgence compelled the Bush and subsequently the Obama administrations to adopt a traditional counterinsurgency (COIN) strategy where American troops took responsibility for providing local population security. The COIN approach in Afghanistan was lifted from Iraq, where U.S. forces similarly embarked on a population security strategy to arrest Iraq’s descent into civil war.

This method never had sufficient domestic support, and the costs in both capital and American lives were too high to be in line with U.S. interests. Public support for both of these wars was unsustainable – decreasing as the wars waged on.31 Direct costs for the Iraq and Afghanistan wars as of 2014, while the counter-ISIS campaign was getting under way, stood at $1.6 trillion and today total around $2 trillion for the conflicts waged in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Syria since 9/11.32 Additionally, if veterans’ medical and disability costs are factored in, along with the fact that this money was borrowed with interest, estimates start to rise into the multiple trillions of dollars.33 While there are differing cost estimates, the bottom line is that this approach was extremely expensive. From the start of the Iraq War to the withdrawal at the end of 2011, 3,528 American troops and Department of Defense (DoD) civilian personnel were killed in action, and 31,958 were wounded.34 In the Afghanistan War, from 2001 to 2014, U.S. military personnel killed in action totaled 1,833, and 20,055 were wounded in action.35 In addition to U.S. military casualties and wounded, both wars saw the deaths of U.S. contractors and thousands of Afghan and Iraqi civilians. While tabulating these deaths is more difficult, U.S. contractor casualties are estimated to number in the thousands.36 Additionally, estimations of civilian casualties range from 200,000 to 600,000 for the war in Iraq alone.37 Further, residents of Iraq and Afghanistan were also displaced by this violence. At the end of the Iraq War in 2011, United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR) reported that an estimated 1.3 million persons had been internally displaced, and that hundreds of thousands of refugees had fled the country.38 In Afghanistan, UNHCR reported an estimated 2.5 million people of concern in 2017, including refugees, internally displaced persons, and returnees. This figure represents a 4 percent increase over the

New York Police Department officers prepare for patrol as the city increases its security following a series of November 2015 terrorist attacks in Paris by the Islamic State. More than 120 people were killed in Paris, and more than 200 were injured. (Andrew Renneisen/Getty Images)
Smoke billows after an airstrike by U.S.-led coalition aircraft in Kobani, Syria, during fighting between Syrian Kurds and the Islamic State in October 2014. In the fight against ISIS, the United States has provided airpower, logistical support, and medevac capabilities to support and assist local forces. (Gokhan Sahin/Getty Images)

Previous year. Overall, both wars had a large impact on the lives of U.S. citizens, as well as the residents of Iraq and Afghanistan.

While the burden and costs of this initial model of 21st century involvement in the Middle East may be unsustainable, the second model the United States tried was unsuccessful as well. After a foray into full-scale counterinsurgency in Afghanistan in 2009 and 2012, President Obama largely pursued a strategy of pulling back U.S. military presence in the region. At the same time, the new strategy relied on drones and special forces to conduct counterterrorism operations, and on U.S. advisors to train, advise, and assist Afghan forces against the Taliban. This shift also occurred in Iraq where at the end of 2011, the United States withdrew from altogether while leaving in place an over the horizon force in other parts of the region.

While the rise of the Islamic State cannot be blamed solely on the withdrawal of U.S. troops, Iraq did become a place for ISIS to grow in the absence of a U.S. presence that could support and drive Iraqi security strategy. After the departure of American troops, the United States had little leverage to restrain the Shia majority leadership of Nuri al-Maliki, who increasingly isolated and marginalized the Sunni minority. This treatment contributed to ISIS’s ability to find supporters among the disenfranchised and the desperate, and also led to the hollowing out of the Iraqi security forces, which became increasingly sectarian. The Iraqi military and security forces also suffered in the absence of U.S. training and on-the-ground support. The Iraqi government stopped spending money on military training and equipment maintenance, and its force deteriorated quickly, leaving it unprepared to address the threat ISIS soon posed. Further, without any U.S. military presence, U.S. intelligence and understanding of the on-the-ground dynamics decreased substantially, leading the Obama administration to miss ISIS’s early emergence and to underestimate its foe until the threat was quite high.

By, With, and Through – A Sustainable Approach for the United States in the Middle East

After trying the two failed models previously described, the United States finally stumbled into a more viable option in 2014 through its counter-ISIS campaign. This approach, which has long been a part of Special Operations Forces doctrine and tried in the past, including in the initial invasion of Afghanistan to topple the Taliban, was reenergized under President Obama and continued in the early years of the Trump administration, notably leading to the dramatic territorial rollback of ISIS in both Iraq and Syria.

A key element to this success is that the United States found local effective partners who had legitimacy on the ground. In Syria, this effort began with support for local Kurdish fighters in the north through the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and eventually also expanded to Sunni fighters in eastern Syria. In Iraq, the United States worked through that nation’s security forces, especially counterterrorism forces, and maintained a strong relationship with them even after withdrawing.

The United States provided training and support for these local actors. It also provided airpower, logistical support, and medical evacuation (medevac) capabilities. And for certain highly sensitive and difficult counterterrorism missions, American Special Operations Forces took the lead. Compared with earlier U.S. military interventions in the region, the level of American troops was dramatically reduced, as was the cost. The fight against ISIS had incurred a total price tag of $23.5 billion by the end of March 2018; by midyear, U.S.-led forces had taken back nearly all of the territory ISIS controlled as part of its self-declared caliphate. By December 2018, there had been only 67 U.S. military casualties.
The United States also used its limited military investment to provide diplomatic heft. The coalition it assembled to counter the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) included 79 countries and acted as a force multiplier by providing additional forces from all over the world as well increasing coordination, especially among nations bordering the ISIS caliphate. It also used this coalition to plan for post-conflict reconstruction and investment in governance, aid, and humanitarian projects on the ground.

By, With, and Through is not a revolutionary military concept, even if this particular term has reemerged in the past decade. The phrase describes a way that for decades the United States pursued to empower local forces. It evolved from U.S. military efforts during the Cold War era. General Joseph Votel, the former Commander of U.S Central Command, sees this approach extending beyond the military. For him, it puts the onus on partners to develop local solutions to largely local problems, while leveraging U.S. expertise and capabilities including airpower, intelligence, and extensive experience with development and diplomacy.

Still this By, With, and Through approach comes with real downsides that will need to be addressed in any current and future utilization. It is cheaper and less deadly for the United States, but also much slower to achieve progress, because U.S partners do not have commensurate capabilities. Moreover, because it is a slower strategy to implement, it means accepting a long-term U.S. force presence in the Middle East, though at a much smaller size than has been required by the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan. This approach to date has also drawn a disproportionate percentage of the U.S. military’s global intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. And the use of airpower has also been tremendously expensive, especially since U.S. air platforms and munitions that are being used are extraordinarily high tech and were built to tackle the challenges posed by peer competitors such as China. Finally, this approach puts tremendous pressure on U.S. Special Operations

Local partners – whether the host nation’s forces or non-state actors whose interests are aligned with the United States – can be extremely useful as ready-to-fight ground forces.
Forces, who are essential for such a strategy. They are already strained, and the high operational frequency this approach necessitates is wearing on them. Operating all around the world, United States Special Operations Command currently sustains an average deployed force of about 8,300 deployed across 90 countries. The Army’s effort to stand up Security Force Assistance Brigades is designed to partially address this challenge.47

Local partners – whether the host nation’s forces or non-state actors whose interests are aligned with the United States – can be extremely useful as ready-to-fight ground forces. Yet while working through local partner forces can alleviate much of the burden placed on U.S. personnel, U.S. policymakers must remain aware of the challenges this approach brings. It is important to remember that a will to fight a common enemy does not equate to identical visions of how to fight these wars, or to agreement on a political end-state.48 Local partners often operate under different norms and are more willing to undertake approaches that result in human rights abuses and high levels of civilian casualties that would not be tolerated by the United States.49 Melissa Dalton and a number of co-authors at the Center for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS) have developed recommendations for how to address this challenge; fundamentally these revolve around having greater clarity from the start about any By, With, and Through partnership, and putting in place checks to limit the possibility of negative consequences.50 Another challenge when working with non-state actors is militias’ often limited capacities to hold cleared territories due to a lack of legitimacy, the exacerbation of ethnic or sectarian tensions, or insufficient will or ability to engage in basic governance and daily security provision.51 If conducting operations by, with, and through local forces, U.S. policymakers still need to articulate a clear political strategy beyond the military objectives associated with the partnership in order to address the above challenges.

**The Importance of Working with Arab Partners**

If the United States is to pursue this approach of By, With, and Through going forward in the Middle East, one of the most effective things it can do is find a way to bring in more Arab partners to share the burden. This extends beyond the local mostly non-state actors the United States already works by, with, and through in Syria and Iraq; it must also include regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the United Arab Emirates, who can also work with state and non-state actors to counter the asymmetric threats in the region. To a varying degree, these actors do have overlapping interests with the United States in addressing the threats posed by civil wars, security vacuums, jihadist groups, and Iran. They are for the most part not as capable as the United States. However, they do have unique capabilities – most notably a better understanding of the local landscape that comes from understanding the language and the tribal, cultural, and religious elements of local society. Some have also had experience in conducting their own By, With, and Through campaigns in recent years. And to the extent the United States has sold some of these partners high-end weapon systems, they can also be used as substitutes for U.S. military investments to defray costs.

A By, With, and Through approach for managing the conflicts in the Middle East can work for the United States and can protect U.S. interests at a reasonable cost. However, the more the United States is able to work with other partner militaries in the region to achieve its objectives, the more effective and cheaper this approach can be. Therefore, the remainder of this report examines the challenges and factors that go into working more effectively with America’s Arab partners on a By, With, and Through strategy, and presents a recommended way forward for how to work more effectively with Arab partner militaries to address the asymmetric threats of the region.
Chapter 2: The Challenges and Experiences of Working with Arab Partners

For a generation, U.S. policymakers and military officials have tried to get America’s Arab partners to work more effectively together. For the most part these efforts have failed or made only marginal progress. Before making recommendations on how the United States should move forward with its Arab partners on countering irregular warfare strategies, it is vital to understand the obstacles that have hindered progress in the past, so that they can be mitigated in any policy going forward. This chapter explains some of the traditional challenges that have stood in the way of coordination, and then profiles some of the capabilities and calculations of U.S. partners in the region.

Challenges to Arab Partner Cooperation

The first and most pressing challenge in U.S. cooperation with Arab partners is that they fundamentally do not trust each other because of historic disagreements and conflicting interests. In the past, they have often been willing to work with the United States, but much more distrustful of sharing information and cooperating with each other – leaving the United States as the hub of cooperation with various Arab partners, while each of them represents a spoke. To take just one example, the United States has for years struggled to get all of its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners to develop one common missile defense system where they all share information that would benefit each. The current standoff between Qatar and the United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt that divides the GCC is the latest and most extreme example of this division. It pits the three most important Arab state military powers against one of the closest Arab state partners of the United States in the Middle East – a partner with the largest U.S. air base in the region. A divided GCC also increases the likelihood of different Arab states supporting different, competing local proxies in some of the region’s more vexing conflicts, such as in Libya or Yemen. Although it is not a prerequisite to improving cooperation on countering irregular warfare (IW) efforts, achieving GCC unity would be a great benefit to such efforts.

However, in the past few years, in Yemen and Libya some Arab partner states have worked together outside the command and control of the United States to confront threats to one or another partner state. In Yemen, Saudi Arabia assembled a coalition to confront the Houthis, and some members of that coalition, such as the United Arab Emirates, have taken a more active role to combat al Qaeda and ISIS. And Libya, Egypt, the United Arab Emirates, and to a lesser extent Saudi Arabia are actively engaged in combating ISIS, al Qaeda and, more controversially, political Islamist groups including those associated with the Muslim Brotherhood. Although there have been some deep flaws in these...
efforts, there has been a recent trend toward Arab states partnering together to meet regional challenges.

Another challenge is the different threat assessments that each Arab partner state has of the challenges identified. Although most have similar concerns regarding Salafi-jihadist organizations, they want to push back against Iran’s support for proxies, they do not feel willing to support.55

Moreover, these different countries cannot necessarily agree on how to define Sunni extremism. The United Arab Emirates takes a very wide view that considers the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Others – most notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have a more flexible perspective. And the United States also has its own definitions of who it can work with and who it considers a terrorist. These disagreements were quite apparent in Syria, where different countries took very different approaches to which proxies they would be willing to support.55

Beyond cooperation, Arab partners face a number of challenges in terms of capabilities.56 Similarly threatened by these actors and do not prioritize them in the same way. This has much to do with physical proximity and reflects the challenges each faces internally. Saudi Arabia prioritizes Iran as by far the most significant threat. Egypt and Jordan are much more concerned with Salafi-jihadist organizations. Moreover, these different countries cannot necessarily agree on how to define Sunni extremism. The United Arab Emirates takes a very wide view that considers the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization. Others – most notably Saudi Arabia and Qatar – have a more flexible perspective. And the United States also has its own definitions of who it can work with and who it considers a terrorist. These disagreements were quite apparent in Syria, where different countries took very different approaches to which proxies they would be willing to support.55

Beyond cooperation, Arab partners face a number of challenges in terms of capabilities. First, they all prioritize high-value conventional prestige purchases of U.S. weaponry over cheaper platforms that are more suited to dealing with asymmetric warfare. The United States enables this by selling its partners billions in expensive aircraft and tanks that are not necessarily best suited for fighting the threat. The United States continues this practice because of both the commercial benefits and the desire to maintain good relations with Arab partners. But the focus on high-end weaponry cannot substitute or crowd out the need to work to develop effective strategies for countering irregular warfare, and most of these strategies are inherently low tech.

Second, the prioritization of big-ticket, conventional assets is reflected in the training, organizing, equipping, and doctrine of these armies, leaving them ill-prepared to fight irregular enemies at the operational and tactical level. Poor or non-efficient IW training and tactics and widespread deficiencies in command and control, communication, intelligence, logistics, and maintenance have hindered Arab armies’ ability to deploy, execute, and sustain military operations. In turn, this lack of capability can reduce motivation and morale to fight, particularly in difficult, close-combat operations against insurgents and terrorists.56

Another challenge in terms of capabilities is that the most effective Arab militaries at conducting and countering irregular warfare are from some of the smallest countries with less political and economic influence. The United Arab Emirates, Jordan, and Lebanon are, for example, three of the more capable players in this space. However, they are all quite small, and even the United Arab Emirates is still in a journeyman phase of learning how to conduct expeditionary IW in Yemen and the Red Sea/Horn of Africa. In contrast, the two regional behemoths – Saudi Arabia and Egypt – are not nearly as sophisticated or effective at dealing with IW challenges, focusing instead on mostly conventional weapons and training.

Finally, there is a question of reliability on both sides that inhibits Arab partner cooperation with the United States. The United States has signaled over multiple administrations that it is seeking to reduce its engagement in the Middle East, and that is unlikely to change. Moreover, several recent policy actions have fed into this perception of an unreliable United States, including the U.S. withdrawal from Iraq in 2011, arguably contributing to a security vacuum that led to the rise of ISIS; the withdrawal of U.S. support to Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak, feeding Arab leaders’ fears of U.S. abandonment; U.S. support for the NATO mission to protect Libyan rebels, leading to the overthrow of Moammar Gadhafi and the seeming U.S. abandonment of Libya; American inaction in Syria, allowing Bashar al-Assad oversee the killing of hundreds of thousands of Syrian civilians; and the recent decision to abandon the Syrian Democratic Forces in eastern Syria, where they were a key partner in fighting ISIS. Moreover, America’s regional partners, especially Saudi Arabia, viewed the U.S. decision to come to a nuclear agreement with Iran and failure to effectively push back against Iranian proxy activities as neglecting their own concerns and interests.57 Although this impression overstates the extent to which the United States has and will withdraw from the Middle East, the perception is widely held among Arab partners, making it harder to work with them and to convince them to adopt recommended strategies, tactics, and training regimens.

Similarly, there are many concerns on the U.S. side about working with these Arab partners. The collective military action of several Arab states in Yemen is both an example of increasing cooperation and widely viewed
ASSESSING AMERICA’S ARAB PARTNERS

SAUDI ARABIA

**Political Considerations**
- Key player that can mobilize other partners.
- Most focused on Iran, but also faces significant challenge from Salafi-jihadists.

**Capabilities**
- Poor track record in Yemen and as part of global ISIS coalition.

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES

**Political Considerations**
- Prioritizes Salafi-jihadist groups and takes a very broad definition of this threat. Also focused on Iran.
- Small size limits its influence.

**Capabilities**
- Highly effective expeditionary forces that have achieved some success in Yemen.

EGYPT

**Political Considerations**
- Views Salafi-jihadist threat in the Sinai and Libya as greatest challenge.
- Large, historically influential player.

**Capabilities**
- Mixed track record in Sinai and Libya.
- Military still overly focused on conventional threats.

IRAQ

**Political Considerations**
- Highly focused on ISIS. But strategic cooperation with neighbors is limited by close relationship with Iran and efforts to balance between United States and Iran.

**Capabilities**
- Highly effective Counter Terrorism Service forces with good relationship with the United States.

LEBANON

**Political Considerations**
- Strategic cooperation with neighbors is limited by influence of Hezbollah and Iran.

**Capabilities**
- Highly effective Maghawir forces with good relationship with the United States.

QATAR

**Political Considerations**
- Cooperation is limited by GCC split and bad relations with neighbors.

**Capabilities**
- Close U.S. partner with key U.S. base at al-Udeid and some intelligence capabilities.

JORDAN

**Political Considerations**
- Highly focused on Salafi-jihadist threat. Less concentrated on Iran, but also worried about its activity in Syria.
- Highly cooperative with United States.

**Capabilities**
- Special forces have served with U.S. military in Afghanistan, but influence of these forces and effectiveness are being cut back through internal reforms.
- Effective border security forces. Special forces training center at KASOTC.

by the United States as a failure and a humanitarian disaster. Moreover, beyond the Yemen war, Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy in particular has been erratic in recent years, including the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, the failed effort to oust Saad Hariri in Lebanon, an unnecessary diplomatic fight with Canada over human rights, and the Qatar split. All of these events have caused questioning in the United States about the viability of this partnership. Meanwhile, both Egypt and the United Arab Emirates continue to pursue highly authoritarian policies at home and use tactics that violate human rights in the conflicts they are involved in. Any U.S. effort to improve the IW capabilities of these countries comes with the danger that the capabilities may be used for purposes that conflict with American values.

**Saudi Arabia**

*Political Considerations:* Saudi Arabia is one of the most significant targets of both Salafi-jihadist organizations such as ISIS and al Qaeda and Iranian-backed proxy groups. The country prioritizes both challenges but is most focused on the threat posed by Iran, which it views as more extreme than any of its Arab partners. Saudi Arabia’s threat perception has the most impact on how other Arab partner states organize for collective action, which
was made evident with the Saudis’ 2015 creation of the multilateral coalition to combat the Houthis and their allies in Yemen. The kingdom has one of the largest security forces in the region, and with its extensive energy resources and the socio-cultural power that comes from being the site of Mecca and Medina, perhaps no other Arab partner can bring together a coalition like Saudi Arabia can.

The Saudi threat perception is shaped by the prospect of metastasizing organizations entering the kingdom from its neighbors, which is why Bahrain and Yemen have received so much attention in recent years. It is also likely that Saudi Arabia will continue to be drawn into the war in Yemen and be engaged in security developments in that country, because the Saudis are concerned about the Houthis becoming a Yemeni Hezbollah, able to continue cross-border attacks into the kingdom indefinitely and provide a military foothold for Iran. ISIS and al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, which includes a significant number of Saudi nationals, are also building safe havens in Yemen. Therefore, securing and stabilizing Saudi Arabia’s southern border with Yemen, and shaping the future of that country, will continue to be of the highest priority for the Saudis.

Capabilities: Over the past decade and a half, the Saudis have engaged their security forces internally and externally. Within the kingdom, they have been more effective. From 2003 to 2006, Saudi security forces engaged in action that defeated al Qaeda’s attempt to build a Salafi-jihadist insurgency. However, results outside the kingdom have been mostly negative. During the 2011 regional upheaval, the Saudis moved rapidly to intervene in Bahrain to squash an opposition movement against the Khalifa monarchy that they viewed as being driven by Iran. And since 2015, the Saudis have been involved in combat operations against the Houthis in Yemen, an Iranian partner, and to a lesser extent against al Qaeda and ISIS in Yemen. Saudi Arabia has primarily conducted an air war in Yemen, because ground operations have been repeatedly stymied by Houthi defenses in their northern Yemen mountainous redoubt. This operation has come with major humanitarian costs. The question is whether Saudi Arabia can fight the conflict more effectively, find ways to minimize the humanitarian costs, and ultimately get to a political solution with the Houthis. If it fails to do so, it will continue to be bogged down in Yemen and face increasing international isolation.

The Saudis are also actively involved in the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS, and despite political disagreement with Qatar, Saudi military officers remain stationed in the coalition’s coordinating center at al-Udeid air base, in Qatar. However, the Saudis have not contributed ground forces to the coalition efforts in Syria and Iraq, nor have they conducted ground-intensive infantry or special operations against a sophisticated insurgent army such as ISIS. This leaves them relatively untested for a significant fight. It is unclear whether Saudi Arabia has the capability or the will at this point for sustained ground operations – even if primarily in just a training and advisory role – be it against Sunni extremists like ISIS or al Qaeda or the IRGC Qods Force and Hezbollah.

United Arab Emirates

Political Considerations: Although the United Arab Emirates shares a similar concern as Saudi Arabia for Salafi-jihadist organizations and the Iranian proxy networks, the Emiratis also assess the threat from political Islamist organizations to be higher than the Saudis do. The United Arab Emirates, more so than Saudi Arabia, places a strong emphasis on combating the power of these organizations, most prominently the Muslim
Brotherhood and its offspring. Saudi Arabia has shown a willingness to engage with political Islamist organizations like the Muslim Brotherhood and its affiliates in conflict zones in the region while the Emiratis view them as implacable foes. While the United Arab Emirates takes a hardline on Iran, it is more nuanced about its concerns than Saudi Arabia especially because of the close trade relationship between Dubai and Iran even as Abu Dhabi continues to take a hard line.

Capabilities: The United Arab Emirates is the second most important Arab partner state because of the expeditionary capability that it has developed to intervene throughout the greater Middle East region, which includes the Horn of Africa and North Africa. It is the United Arab Emirates’ expeditionary capabilities, which it has been honing as part of its involvement in the Yemen war, and a string of bases that it has developed in the greater Middle East, that distinguishes it from other Arab partner states. As opposed to being able to project power only “one country over,” like most of its Arab partners, the United Arab Emirates can actually project force across the region. The Emiratis are also actively engaged in irregular warfare, particularly local partner force building, in Yemen, Syria, Libya, and reportedly in the Horn of Africa, and are developing important skills. They led efforts in the retaking of Aden from the Houthis in 2015 and in the seizure of Mukalla from AQAP in 2016, both recent exemplars of Arab military expeditionary warfare.

The United Arab Emirates is also challenged by the fact that it is quite small, with a population of 9.7 million, of which roughly 8 million are expatriates. This leaves only roughly a little more than 1 million UAE citizens. As a result, the country relies heavily on private military contractors to support its efforts. It is an open question whether the United Arab Emirates can transfer or share some of its unique capabilities with larger, less effective partners such as Saudi Arabia.

Egypt
Political Considerations: Egypt is highly focused on the threat posed by Salafi-jihadist organizations and much less concerned about Iran, which it sees as a distant threat. More than any other Arab partner state, Egypt is beset by active internal security threats, whether in Sinai or on the Egyptian mainland, that tie up resources and capabilities that could be used for expeditionary operations. Given the harsh 2013 crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, the Egyptians are similar to the Emiratis in taking a very narrow view of political Islamist groups, seeing them all as a danger. The Egyptians, like the Saudis, are also concerned with a one-country-over conflict in Libya that could negatively impact Egypt’s territorial integrity. In fact, the ISIS affiliate in the Sinai has been exacerbated due to the influence of veterans – both Egyptians and foreigners – that fought in the Libyan conflict.

Capabilities: Egypt is the largest Arab partner military force and has significant experience in countering irregular warfare, both internally and externally, but it still lacks an expeditionary capability and is too fixated on big-ticket conventional items. Egypt’s experience with
irregular warfare has not always been positive, as witnessed in the 1960s in Yemen and the current struggles that Egyptian security forces face in the Sinai. Egypt’s role in Yemen has been largely confined to providing maritime security support to interdict Iranian arms shipments to the Houthis and to keep open the global sea lines of communication and trade that flow around the Bab al-Mandab.\textsuperscript{72} A significant portion of its military procurement, training, and doctrine go toward managing scenarios around a conventional tank battle with Israel in the Sinai, even as Israel and Egypt are now working together in the Sinai to counter extremist organizations there.

\section*{Jordan}

\textbf{Political Considerations:} Jordan is most concerned with its border security and internal security threats. The two are separate as well as intertwined. Jordan’s internal security threats are complex, and usually driven by local actors responding to problems caused by the country’s economy and socio-economic system.\textsuperscript{73} A future insurgency in Jordan is more likely to be driven by a local militant group then by external organizations such as ISIS or al Qaeda. However, the country is still at risk from these organizations, which operate in neighboring Iraq and Syria, because it has been an active participant in the war against ISIS and al Qaeda, both of which are actively seeking to establish affiliates in Jordan.

\textbf{Capabilities:} Jordan has been recognized recently for its participation and success as part of the counter-ISIS campaign, particularly for its special forces’ internal operations focused on eradicating ISIS affiliates, as well as for its intelligence-gathering efforts and participation in limited airstrikes.\textsuperscript{74} A counterterrorism and maritime security partner of the United States, Jordanian special operations forces regularly train with the United States, including as part of joint exercises at the renowned King Abdullah II Special Operations Training Center (KASOTC) in Jordan. KASOTC is emerging as a key site for the Jordanians to demonstrate their skills as trainers who can build up the capacity of partners, for example Iraqi special forces trained for operations in the counter-ISIS campaign.\textsuperscript{75} In April 2018, participation in the annual exercise called Eager Lion totaled approximately 7,000 military personnel from the United States and Jordan.\textsuperscript{76} The successes of the Jordanian special operations forces are also due to the effective participation of Jordan’s General Intelligence Directorate in its counterterrorism efforts.

While considered a highly capable force in the region, Jordan’s special forces teams have largely focused on protecting the country’s borders and have not generally been leveraged as an expeditionary force to counter external threats.\textsuperscript{77} In 2017, King Abdullah II introduced security sector reforms that included the downsizing and restructuring of Jordan’s Special Operations Command.\textsuperscript{78} Shrinking from a three-brigade Joint Special Operations Command down to a single army-specific group – known

These Iraqi Counter Terrorism Service (CTS) officers advance into the Mosul district of al-Mamoun in March 2017. Iraq’s elite CTS forces were heavily deployed during the campaign against ISIS, reportedly suffering more than 40 percent casualties over the course of the ISIS war, especially as a result of combat operations in and around the city of Mosul. (Martyn Aim/Getty Images)
as the King Abdullah II Royal Special Operations Forces Group – will include the removal of many support elements, including administration and logistics. These reforms likely limit the future potential for expanded Jordanian special operations in expeditionary operations, unless they are operating jointly with a force that has sufficient support elements.

Iraq

Political Considerations: Iraq presents a contradiction for the United States. On the one hand, its national security will continue to be threatened by ISIS, which continues to maintain a presence in Iraq and is seen as a key threat and a central reason for a continued close relationship between the United States and Iraq. On the other hand, Iraq also maintains a close relationship with its neighbor Iran, and is careful to balance between American and Iranian influence. The IRGC is using Iraq as the most important site to recruit, mobilize, and deploy fighters for its transnational fighter network, especially IRGC-backed groups that are technically part of Iraq’s Hashd Shaabi (Popular Mobilization) forces, which are a legal security entity nominally under the supervision of the prime minister. Iran’s deep influence over Iraq’s politics and security forces, and the integration of IRGC-backed Hashd Shaabi leaders into Iraq’s politics, will be a challenge for the United States and its Arab partners for years to come. As such, there is no chance that Iraq can play a central role in being a partner in a major trans-Arab initiative that is at least partially targeted toward Iran. However, that does not mean that there are not lessons to be taken from the U.S. experience working with Iraqi security forces, or that Iraqi special forces cannot participate in some joint exercises and training with other Arab partners.

Capabilities: The United States continues to maintain a powerful network of relationships within Iraq’s security organizations. The Counter Terrorism Service (CTS), also known as the Golden Division, which is connected to both Iraq’s Defense and Interior ministries, is the primary U.S. partner unit in Iraq for IW operations. The CTS was established and nurtured by the United States after the fall of Saddam Hussein’s government in 2003 and the subsequent U.S. occupation of Iraq. It is considered to be the one Iraqi military unit that maintained the best operational capabilities in the period preceding the ISIS campaign that seized large areas of Iraq in 2014. CTS forces were heavily deployed during the 2014–17 campaign against ISIS, and reportedly suffered more than 40 percent casualties over the course of the ISIS war, especially as a result of combat operations in and around the city of Mosul. Since the capture of Mosul from ISIS in January 2018, the CTS has continued to be actively deployed against ISIS cells throughout Iraq. The U.S. military has formally requested funding from Congress to continue support for the CTS, including to mobilize and train an elite “Ranger” brigade of approximately 2,000 soldiers to continue direct-action operations to disrupt, defeat, and destroy ISIS and its affiliates; funding is also requested to mobilize and train approximately 24,000 soldiers to rebuild the larger CTS force. U.S. military interviewees specifically mention the Iraqi CTS as one of the most capable and, importantly, largest, Arab partner units.

The important lesson taken from the CTS experience is that a long-term American commitment to a small elite Arab force can make a meaningful difference and improve battlefield capabilities. The CTS will continue to be focused on internal threats and to be limited in its cooperation with Arab partners and the United States because of Iraq’s close relations with Iran, but these forces are still a useful model for how the United States can help build Arab partner capabilities in combating irregular warfare.

Lebanon

Political Considerations: Lebanon faces challenges posed by Salafi-jihadists. Its armed forces have been quite effective at dealing with this inside the country, but Hezbollah’s deep involvement in Lebanon’s political and security structures presents a significant complication for the inclusion of the Lebanese military in larger Arab partner IW efforts. It could participate in joint exercises and training with other partners, but likely not in more sensitive strategic discussions or in intelligence-sharing. Still, the American experience in Lebanon, especially with the Maghawir (Ranger) regiment, represents a model that can be replicated in future American efforts.

The United States has a strong interest in building up the capabilities of the Lebanese military, especially in training and supporting its special operations forces that include the Maghawir, Air Assault, Maritime Assault, and several internal-intervention regiments. U.S. priorities regarding the Lebanese military are to make it a professional, national (i.e., multi-sectarian) force that is the sole legitimate force defending Lebanon’s territory. For all intents and purposes, the continued strong U.S. support for the Lebanese military is to prevent Salafi-jihadist organizations from creating safe havens in Lebanon, while in the long term seeking to reduce the influence and power of Hezbollah as an armed actor that can operate independently of the Lebanese state.
Capabilities: Since 2006, the United States has provided Lebanon with $1.5 billion in assistance to build up the capabilities of its military, which includes weapons systems, training, support for civil-military affairs outreach to vulnerable Lebanese communities, counter-narcotics activities, and operational support for Lebanese military activities, especially those focused on countering Salafi-jihadist organizations. The U.S. military is especially proud of its ability to nurture the Maghawir force, which according to U.S. military interviewees is one of the most capable – potentially the most capable – Arab partner unit in conducting direct action. The Maghawir led the Lebanese Armed Forces’ operations to retake the Syrian border town of Arsal from ISIS in 2017, and continually deployed and sustained forces in eastern Lebanon for effective operations – leveraging support from U.S. military advisors. U.S. assistance and support for Maghawir has reportedly made it the most confessionally balanced force within the Lebanese military. That has led to criticism from some powerful Lebanese actors, especially Hezbollah, which reportedly views the Maghawir as an “American militia” in Lebanon. The Lebanese military also continues to de-conflict with Hezbollah. In some circumstances, such as the August 2017 campaign to remove ISIS from Arsal, it also cooperates with Hezbollah in military operations.

Qatar
Political Considerations: The ongoing political dispute between Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (joined by Bahrain and Egypt) on one side and Qatar on the other has splintered Gulf Cooperation Council unity and put the United States in a difficult position to maintain the unity of its closest Arab partner states. Qatar’s primary national security concerns are related to the possibility of invasion by Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, and efforts by the Saudis and Emiratis to undermine the government of Sheikh Tamim al-Thani. Qatar remains concerned about Iran – its big neighbor across the Strait of Hormuz with

THE MIDDLE EAST STRATEGIC ALLIANCE (MESA)
The centerpiece of the Trump administration’s effort to bring America’s Arab partners together is the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), designed to cement cooperation between six Gulf Arab states – Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, Qatar, Oman, and Bahrain – as well as Egypt and Jordan on missile defense, military training, and counterterrorism. While it has been called an Arab NATO by outside experts, the arrangements will have no Article 5-like element of mutual defense, nor join elements of member forces under a single command structure. MESA will also strengthen economic and diplomatic ties between its members. Improving military capabilities will include standing up centers of excellence, to be called Regional Operations Centers (ROCs), within each member country for knowledge-sharing and training purposes. Bahrain has been named likely to host the center for maritime security. Other potential centers include one for border security in Jordan and one for common vulnerabilities and exposures in a yet-to-be-chosen location. Originally proposed as an alliance that would address terrorism and extremism in the region, MESA’s goals seem to be primarily focused on countering Iran. It is hoped that the economic and diplomatic benefits of the alliance will entice non-Iran motivated members. The concrete objectives and the structure of the security alliance have not yet been formally announced, though were scheduled to be at an October 2018 summit in Washington that was indefinitely postponed by the Trump administration.

A number of the traditional challenges that have stood in the way of U.S.-Arab multilateral cooperation have also been sticking points in setting up MESA. First, the distrust among the Arab states has been a huge barrier – especially the rift between Qatar and the other GCC countries. The United States has tried to paper over this problem by including Qatar, which is still deeply distrusted by many of the other players. This inclusion has led to suspicion that MESA is simply a backdoor U.S. effort to end the GCC crisis. Moreover, the emphasis on Iran has created significant skepticism among countries such as Jordan and Egypt, which view it as a secondary threat.

The broad nature and ambitious scope of the work has also created tensions. Some partners, such as the United Arab Emirates, would rather move quickly, deepen these ties, and get a firmer security commitment from the United States as part of such an effort. Others, for instance Egypt, have been much more skeptical and would want to pursue a much more gradual approach. Finally, with Arab partners questioning U.S. credibility and wondering if the United States is trying to pull out of the region, this initiative also has generated some suspicion that it is a tool for withdrawal and putting more onus on Arab states for their own security. Taken together, these different challenges have made a rapid move to such a deep and complex alliance unlikely to succeed in the near term.
whom it shares a major gas field. However, as opposed to Saudi Arabia or the United Arab Emirates, Qatar has taken a less confrontational approach to dealing with Iran. Qatar also is generally more sympathetic to political Islam and has a much narrower definition of Salafi-jihadism, which often puts it at odds with the United Arab Emirates. Because of these differences, it will be impossible to involve Qatar in any major trans-Arab initiative right now at the strategic level. However, it could still participate in training and exercises, and, if a breakthrough is made to end the split, it should be brought into broader regional efforts.

Capabilities: Qatar is an important partner for the United States in the Middle East, as it is the host nation for al-Udeid air base, which is the largest U.S. military installation in the Middle East. Al-Udeid is a hub for supporting U.S. operations in the greater Middle East (including Afghanistan and the Horn of Africa), and it is the site of the Combined Air Operations Center for the Global Coalition to Counter ISIS. U.S. officials based in Qatar assess that the Qatari military has perhaps the strongest skills in conducting logistical air support operations (lift), and that the Qataris could make excellent trainers for other Arab partner states in this discipline."5 Qatar also has some limited special operations forces capabilities and a strong intelligence infrastructure.
Chapter 3: A Joint U.S.-Arab Strategy for Countering Irregular Warfare Threats in the Middle East

Given the challenges posed by division among Arab partners as well as their differing capabilities and conflicting priorities, what is not possible is one multinational force, or even a comprehensive agreement such as the Middle East Strategic Alliance proposed by the current administration. Instead, a much more viable option is to take an incremental approach that over time allows the United States and its Arab partners to come to a common understanding on the IW challenges in the Middle East and which common tools can be used to address these threats.

This can be achieved through the creation of two layers of cooperation, depicted in Figure 1. At the policy and strategic level, the United States should work with the relevant partners to create working groups that address various irregular warfare challenges. Not all Arab partners need to be involved in every working group. Membership should be based on the threat prioritization of the different countries. For example, Saudi Arabia would certainly be involved in any group focusing on Iranian activities, but Egypt may choose to not participate, instead focusing only on Salafi-jihadist challenges and North Africa. The effort can start with two working groups—one to deal with the IRGC Qods Force and the other with Salafi-jihadist groups. Both groups should focus primarily on the challenges these actors represent in the Middle East. The effort can also over time include working groups to address the Sahel and North Africa, or country-specific efforts such as Libya, Syria, or Yemen. Each working group should be supported by an intelligence fusion cell that brings together the relevant players to share information that informs planning and operations.

Even as these smaller working groups are pursued at the strategic level, at the operational level U.S. efforts should focus on improving capabilities. The United States should work bilaterally with Arab partners on developing small elite SOF as opposed to trying to institute this training through entire militaries. The Counter Terrorism Service in Iraq and the Maghawir in Lebanon serve as the best examples of the United States helping countries identify, train, and develop their best into small, elite units that they capably deploy to have greater impact. At the multilateral level, all members of the effort can come together with their relevant forces in one location or headquarters to improve joint capabilities through exercises and training. At the start, the focus should simply be on strategic cooperation and improving capabilities. The capacity to conduct joint operations may never be reached, but if at least the standards of all these forces can be raised and strategic coordination can lead to a proper division of tasks in a campaign, that alone would be major step forward.

Importantly, it must be clear that the United States is an equal partner in this venture. The objective of the effort is to get partners to be more effective at dealing with these problems and improve their capabilities at least in part, so that the United States can reduce the risks of overextending itself in the region. But it must be clear to partners that this is not a vehicle for the United States to walk away from the Middle East. If it is perceived as such, the undertaking will be met with deep skepticism and fail. Moreover, many of the partners have traditionally been much more interested and willing to work with the United States than with one other. Thus, an American commitment creates a significant incentive for all to buy in and invest. The bottom line is that without a meaningful and sustained U.S. commitment, the effort is doomed to fail. This commitment must be crystal clear from the outset.

The Initiative’s Membership

Trying to bring in all at once too many countries that distrust one another will lead to a breakdown of the effort. But over time, the more inclusive the process becomes, the more effective it can be, and the more unity it can generate among Arab partners. For this reason, initial membership can be tiered.

The core initial members should include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, and Kuwait. These players should be able to join any strategic working group that they prioritize, as well as participate in...
all operational elements of joint cooperation. While there are certainly tensions among them, there is enough overlap of interests and trust to allow them to work together.

A second category should include partners that have important capabilities or relationships with the United States, but, because of political limitations or different threat perceptions, can only join in operational cooperation that includes training and exercises but not strategic cooperation involving joint planning or intelligence-sharing. This category should include Iraq, Lebanon, Qatar, and Oman, all of which are important and capable partners, but, because of either disagreements with their neighbors or differing views of Iran, face limitations in cooperation.

If over time the effort were to expand to also tackle challenges posed in Libya and North Africa, the United States should also include Algeria, Morocco, and Tunisia. But there are tensions, especially between Algeria and Morocco, which would make this challenging. Beyond that, the United States might be better off first proving the effectiveness of the model and refining it with a small group of countries with more aligned and focused interests.

Finally, the United States should also engage with outside players – especially its European partners, Australia, and Canada, to bring them into this effort in a supporting role. This is especially true for countries such as France and the United Kingdom, which play a central role in North Africa, the Levant and the Gulf.

**Strategy and Policy Working Groups**

The focus on threats must include equal attention to both Iran and Salafi-jihadi groups. Most Arab partners have concerns regarding Iran and Salafi-jihadi extremists, but differ in their prioritization. Saudi Arabia, for example, is focused almost entirely on the threat posed by Iran, while Egypt is much more heavily focused on
At the policy and strategic level, the United States should work with the relevant partners to create working groups that address various irregular warfare challenges.

jihadist groups. If the United States focuses too heavily on one threat while ignoring the other, this effort is unlikely to get broad buy-in from all of its partners.

The best way to address the issue is by creating separate working groups that include subgroups of the overall membership. The core of the counter-IRGC working group would include Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and possibly Kuwait, all of which have deep concerns about Iran. This group could also include others such as Jordan and Egypt, if they wished to be part of it. The core of the counter Salafi-jihadism group would include Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Kuwait, and Bahrain; possibly also Oman, Iraq, and Lebanon. Over time, Morocco, Algeria, and Tunisia could be added to the Salafi-jihadism group. The working groups could be permanently based in one host country or meet regularly in different locations.

This starts with a high-level dialogue, including both the U.S. Department of Defense and Central Intelligence Agency, on how U.S. partners see common threats. Next, detailed military planning needs to take place for a strategy that plays out over a long time horizon. Broad political discussions should include civilians at the Assistant Secretary level, flag officers at the two- or three-star level, and intelligence officials of equivalent rank. Most of the work and joint planning should then be conducted by civilian and military officials led at the O6 level, with regular check-in meetings at higher levels to review the work.

Conduct Joint Threat Assessments: The discussions in these groups should start by defining the threats. This should be straightforward in the case of the Iran efforts, but will take more time in countering the Salafi-jihadist threat. The United Arab Emirates and Egypt, for example, take a highly limited view that classifies the Muslim Brotherhood as a terrorist organization, while some of America’s other Arab partners define the extremist threat much more narrowly. Coming to a complete understanding on these different challenges may be impossible, but some common baseline will be necessary.

Develop Joint Strategic Campaign Plans: After agreeing on the series of threats, the United States and the partners in each working group should develop a joint strategic campaign plan to deal with each challenge. Establishing a shared, unified theory of victory is critical before the United States and its partners can work together to address the problem. As part of this campaign plan, the members should look at their interests and capabilities. Based on that, they should determine a division of labor, and decide how each partner, with its unique capabilities, can best contribute to the plan. So that forces can move quickly throughout the region, the United States will need to provide logistical enablers and lift, along with some of the advanced air capabilities to provide targeted strikes. But many partners can help by contributing forces for on-the-ground training and work with local actors – especially since these partners have a better understanding of the local cultural and political environment and are native speakers of Arabic.

Avoid Joint Operations: The United States should be modest in its objectives. In the near term, the concept of Arab partners conducting joint irregular operations with one other is not very likely and too high of a bar. Executing joint operations requires the highest level of trust and coordination. For the most part, even when these countries have worked together, they have preferred to divide up zones of control. The clearest example is Yemen, where Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates divided up the country, with the latter focusing on the south and Saudi Arabia farther north. The United States already conducts kinetic, targeted counterterrorism operations either unilaterally or with partners across the region; partnered operations can certainly expand, and U.S. unilateral action can be deemphasized as part of this effort. Over time, as trust and effectiveness increase among the members, the possibility of their conducting joint operations with or without U.S. assistance can be revisited. Operations that involve exposing Iranian operatives and activities to the public and thus embarrassing them could be a relatively straightforward low-hanging fruit operation that could be done jointly. More aggressive interdictions of arms, especially in the maritime domain, also lends itself to multilateral action. This has already been done jointly and could be an area for further efforts.

Focus on Ethical Strategies: With its partners, the United States should focus on strategies that are effective and that meet U.S. ethical standards. The current approach employed by many Arab partners to deal with irregular warfare includes the indiscriminate use of airpower,
which leads to high civilian casualties. This is ineffective, as it simply turns more of the local population against them. But, more important, it is immoral and often illegal. As part of this effort, the United States and its partners can work together toward agreeing how to conduct this type of warfare in a way that is effective and that meets a high ethical standard in compliance with the laws of armed conflict. Right now, this common perspective does not exist. For example in Yemen, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates are using tactics and strategies that cause significant civilian harm and complicate efforts to counter the irregular warfare threat posed by Iran. 105 There are concerns that this model is taking root in their doctrine, especially since Russia has used the approach to great effect in Syria, further validating it. As part of the conversation on ethics, policymakers should follow a number of the recommendations developed by Melissa Dalton and her colleagues at CSIS. These focus on having greater clarity from the start about any By, With, and Through partnership, and on putting in place checks to limit the possibility of human rights violations and civilian harm.106

Intelligence Cooperation: This United States and its partners should also build out joint intelligence fusion centers for each common challenge. The United States already has strong relations with several regional intelligence services, including in Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt. While some of the Arab states are quite proficient in intelligence services, the challenge is oftentimes getting them to share information with one another and coordinate efforts. Because of the lack of trust, membership in this part of the effort would have to be quite small and should align with the membership of the strategy and policy working groups.

These centers would coordinate intelligence collected by member states’ intelligence services, identify the most immediate threats to inform the security services, and create guidelines for the coordination of multilateral direct action. U.S. experts would need to play a prominent role in the vetting and validation of partner-sourced intelligence before it was actionable, as sourcing standards vary widely. The analysis provided by the joint intelligence fusion center would be an essential part of the planning process for possible operations in which the United States and its regional partners might engage. It would also inform high-level policy discussions on how to counter these threats, thus improving the ability of the United States and partners to more effectively align on the question of threat perceptions. 107

Improving Capabilities
Focus on Developing Elite Forces in a Bilateral Context: While the aligning of Arab partners strategically is the most challenging part of this enterprise, meaningful steps can be taken to improve capabilities. This needs to start at the bilateral level in how the United States works with Arab partner militaries. The United States cannot hope to restructure these militaries whose challenges are tied to political, economic, and cultural factors that make transforming the entire system a generational task. However, what the United States can do is concentrate on working with partners to build out small elite forces that can specifically deal with the problems caused by irregular warfare. The Iraqi CTS and the Lebanese Maghawir are only the most recent examples of a broader historical trend, in which Arab partner forces have succeeded when they have built small elite forces instead of larger regiments.108 Another benefit of this approach is that it is much easier to see fast results in a number of years when dealing with a small elite force, as opposed to reforming an entire military.

The United States cannot hope to restructure these militaries whose challenges are tied to political, economic, and cultural factors that make transforming the entire system a generational task.

Moreover, in the past this type of support has worked most effectively when the United States can become deeply involved in all elements of the partner military, including recruitment and structuring.109 This is much more difficult to accomplish when trying to restructure an entire military that is tied into the social and economic fabric and how the leaders rule. The effort is much easier if it involves only working with a small elite force, whose primary mission is to respond to irregular warfare challenges primarily outside the country.

This type of approach could be especially effective in Egypt and Saudi Arabia – the two most important players in the Arab world, both with a very mixed record. The United States should not stop all other forms of support for them, which would only cause major challenges in the relationships. However, the highest priority and emphasis should be focused on building out an elite capability among a small cadre of Egyptian and Saudi military officers. The importance of this project should be emphasized through high-level political engagements.
Multilateral Training and Exercises: Even while the primary effort is on bilateral support for partner militaries, multilateral cooperation is also possible. Indeed, here it should be more inclusive and easier to accomplish than the strategy working groups, because partners will have fewer sensitivities. Therefore, establishing a joint training and exercise center, perhaps using existing facilities in Jordan, should also be part of this effort.

Joint military exercises are an easy and early win for this effort, and are already being conducted. An important institutional function of the joint center should be to design and implement regular multilateral training exercises for member states that focus on countering Iranian asymmetric warfare capabilities and extremist organizations. Although the United States regularly implements large, multilateral military exercises with its regional partners, such exercises are traditionally more focused on conventional threats. Larger, more inclusive exercises would likely have to be geared at countering the Salafi-jihadist challenge. To teach and test the right tactics for the likely fight, it would also be critical to designate training centers that model the urban and rural environments where groups such ISIS and al Qaeda historically operate.

Smaller exercises with select countries could focus on the asymmetric challenges presented by Iran’s capabilities. This would increase partner capacity while also signaling to Iran that the United States is serious in countering its activities. Exercises of this type should emphasize coordinating responses to Iranian cyber assaults, countering the IRGC’s clandestine activities and terrorist network, and interdicting Iranian weapons shipments.

The effort should also include joint training sessions and sharing of best practices. Here one of the main focuses should be on transferring knowledge among Arab partners, especially those with significant recent experience, such as Iraq, Lebanon, and the United Arab Emirates.
Evaluation
To ensure that this entire enterprise makes a meaningful difference and does not go the way of many other failed U.S. efforts to work with Arab partner militaries, there should be from the start a clear system for judging whether the program is having the intended effects.\textsuperscript{112}

At the strategic working group level, this will be quite difficult to measure, and it could take a significant amount of time (years) to see meaningful progress. The first step is to hold an initial conversation with all Arab partners on precisely what they are trying to achieve: improve Arab partner capabilities to counter the challenges posed by irregular warfare threats unilaterally, in partnership with one other, and together with the United States. The success of the program should be measured regularly – perhaps annually or semiannually – and evaluation should be entirely based on the objectives agreed to by the United States and its partners. Key questions should include:

- Is the program improving the alignment of threat perceptions and allowing the United States and its partners to come to a better understanding of the common challenges they face?
- Is it resulting in the development of joint strategies and campaign plans that are actually being executed?
- Is it resulting in Arab partners countering irregular warfare strategies in a way that is more ethical and in lines with the laws of armed conflict?
- Has the program improved intelligence cooperation?

At the operational level, the focus should be on judging the capability of these partners’ elite forces in which the United States has chosen to invest. The programs should include sufficient funds for assessment, monitoring, and evaluation. The timeframe for judging progress should be relatively short. Improvements in capabilities should be seen in a matter of a year or less, and in a span of three to five years it should be possible to build out effective elite forces in these countries to deal with the challenge. The two most important questions evaluators must ask are:

- Is the partner’s capacity to counter irregular warfare meaningfully improving?
- Is the partner using these improved capabilities to achieve the objectives of the program, which are to counter irregular warfare threats posed by Salafi-jihadists and Iran?

Conclusion
Standing up this enterprise will not be easy. It will take substantial time and senior leadership effort, especially from the Department of Defense and the intelligence community. The barriers to cooperation among U.S. Arab partners are high, and some of their capabilities are lacking. But the program proposed within this report is realistic and incremental, and it tries to address many of the landmines that have derailed previous efforts. It may take time, but it has a reasonable likelihood of meaningfully improving the cooperation, coordination, and capabilities of Arab partners to deal with the most pressing security threat in the Middle East.
Endnotes

1. This study uses the use the Department of Defense’s Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms to define irregular warfare, foreign internal defense, unconventional warfare, counterinsurgency, and counterterrorism. Irregular warfare is defined as a violent struggle among state and non-state actors for legitimacy and influence over the relevant population(s). Foreign internal defense is defined as the participation by civilian and military agencies of a government in any of the action programs taken by another government or other designated organization to free and protect its society from subversion, lawlessness, insurgency, terrorism, and other threats to its security. Unconventional warfare is defined as activities conducted to enable a resistance movement or insurgency to coerce, disrupt, or overthrow a government or occupying power by operating through or with an underground, auxiliary, and guerrilla force in a denied area. Counterinsurgency is defined as comprehensive civilian and military efforts designed to simultaneously defeat and contain insurgency and address its root causes. Counterterrorism is defined as activities and operations taken to neutralize terrorists and their organizations and networks in order to render them incapable of using violence to install fear and coerce governments or societies to achieve their goals. See DoD Dictionary of Military and Associated Terms, January 2019, https://www.jcs.mil/Portals/36/Documents/Doctrine/pubs/dictionary.pdf. This study also uses the phrase “By, With, and Through,” understood as a non-doctrinal term used to describe an approach to achieve U.S. objectives via operations led by partners, both state and non-state; with U.S. enablers; and through a coordinated legal and diplomatic framework. See Diana Dalphonse, Chris Townsend, and Matthew Weaver, “Shifting Landscape: The Evolution of By, With, and Through,” RealClear Defense, August 1, 2018, https://www.realcleardefense.com/articles/2018/08/01/shifting_landscape_the_evolution_of_by_with_and_through_113676.html; and Joseph L. Votel and Eero R. Keravuori, “The By-Through Operational Approach,” Joint Force Quarterly, 89 no. 2 (April 2018). https://ndupress.ndu.edu/Portals/68/Documents/jfq/jfq-89/jfq-89.pdf?ver=2018-04-19-153711-177, 40–47.


4. For a more detailed discussion of how to measure the success of such programs, see Ilan Goldenberg, Alice Hunt Friend, Stephen Tankel, and Nicholas Heras, “Remodeling Partner Capacity” (Center for a New American Security [CNAS], November 14, 2016), https://www.cnas.org/publications/reports/remodeling-partner-capacity.


58. Terrill, “Arab Threat Perceptions.”


Authors’ interviews with U.S. embassy and military personnel stationed in Qatar, October 19–25, 2018.


82. Heras, “Iraq’s Fifth Column: Iran’s Proxy Network.”


88. Authors’ interviews with Americans working with the Lebanese military, in Beirut, Lebanon, May 9–15, 2018.


91. Authors’ interviews, Beirut, May 9–15, 2018; Williams, “U.S. Defends Role of Lebanon Army”;


94. Aram Nerguizian, “The Lebanese Armed Forces, Hezbollah and the Race to Defeat ISIS” (CSIS, July

94. Authors’ interviews with Qatari officials in Doha, Qatar, October 19–25, 2018.


97. Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go.”

98. Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go.”

99. Farouk, “The Middle East Strategic Alliance Has a Long Way to Go.”


102. Authors’ interview with Emirati embassy officials, November 29, 2018, Washington, D.C.

103. Authors’ interview with Egyptian embassy officials, October 4, 2018, Washington, D.C.


**About the Center for a New American Security**

The mission of the Center for a New American Security (CNAS) is to develop strong, pragmatic and principled national security and defense policies. Building on the expertise and experience of its staff and advisors, CNAS engages policymakers, experts and the public with innovative, fact-based research, ideas and analysis to shape and elevate the national security debate. A key part of our mission is to inform and prepare the national security leaders of today and tomorrow.

CNAS is located in Washington, and was established in February 2007 by co-founders Kurt M. Campbell and Michèle A. Flournoy.

CNAS is a 501(c)3 tax-exempt nonprofit organization. Its research is independent and non-partisan. CNAS does not take institutional positions on policy issues. Accordingly, all views, positions, and conclusions expressed in this publication should be understood to be solely those of the authors.


All rights reserved.