

Strength in Unity: A Sustainable US-Led Regional Security Construct in the Middle East

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Cover: Gen. Joseph Votel (center), then commander of US Central Command, standing with senior US and Egyptian officers during a visit to Exercise Bright Star 2018 at Mohamed Naguib Military Base, Egypt, on September 9, 2018. (US Army photo by Staff Sgt. Matthew Keeler)

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

China and Russia are exploiting US indifference toward the Middle East and efforts to integrate Iran into the region, threatening regional stability, Israel's security, and global markets.

The convergence of threats encompasses an Iranian nuclear threshold state controlling a constellation of terrorist groups, resurgent non-state terrorist groups including ISIS and al-Qaeda, and Russian and Chinese exploitation of receding American presence. We are reaching an inflection point at which the United States risks the irrevocable loss of a favorable balance of both trade and forces, resulting in instability that will threaten our vital interests and the global economy. This constitutes an unprecedented range of challenges beyond our capacity, and the capacity of our partners and allies, to address threats to global energy and trade as we struggle to recover from a global pandemic. *We have not faced a similar period of risk in the Middle East since the turmoil following the Iranian Revolution, Soviet*

invasion of Afghanistan, and storming of the Grand Mosque in 1979.

The US shares vital national security interests with longtime partners in the region and, as a result, they prefer US leadership in both the economic and security domains.

A sustainable US-led regional security construct in the Middle East that includes effective partners based on convergent interests is the most efficient way to address the unacceptable risk, which results from the disconnect between the vital national interests of the US and its partners and the resources both have committed. A constellation of mutually beneficial trade relation-

Photo Caption: Several US Air Force F-16 Fighting Falcons participate in an exercise with the Royal Bahraini Air Force in Bahrain in December 2020. (US Air Force photo by Tech. Sgt. Wes Wright)

ships providing both the resources and rationale for a regional security construct would strengthen such an arrangement.¹

Establishing a US-led enduring regional security architecture comprised of more capable partners and allies is the most effective way for the United States to safeguard our vital national security interests in the Middle East. This architecture would provide five key benefits:

- 1. Secure our vital interests.** The US and global economies depend on the uninterrupted flow of energy from and trade through the Middle East, which remains a vital national security interest.
- 2. Compete with China.** China depends on the Middle East for energy to sustain its economy and military. Beijing is exploiting the vacuum created by US indifference to securing the Middle East.
- 3. Manage risk and uncertainty.** Threats in the region are approaching a quantitative military advantage over America's partners, which creates unacceptable risk to US interests.
- 4. Leverage our relationships.** We retain advantages in the long-term diplomatic, economic, and security relationships that we have derived from convergent interests with partners.
- 5. Build on a sound foundation.** Historic efforts to build collective security constructs, many of which have occurred within the Middle East, provide valuable lessons.



STRENGTH IN UNITY

Vital US National Security Interests in the Middle East

America's vital national security interests in the Middle East² endure but have evolved beyond 1981,³ when we were dependent upon its oil.⁴ By 2018, the United States imported only 11 percent of its oil,⁵ the lowest amount since 1957.⁶

The Middle East is a critical component of the global economy. It accounts for 31 percent of global oil production, 18 percent of gas production, 48 percent of proven oil reserves, and 40 percent of proven gas reserves.⁷ Approximately 12 percent of global trade and 30 percent of global container traffic traverses the Suez Canal,⁸ transporting over \$1 trillion worth of goods each year. In 2018, the Middle East's daily oil flow constituted some 21 percent of global petroleum consumption.⁹ But the region's significance is not limited to energy. Sixteen of the submarine cables that connect Asia

and Europe pass through the Red Sea.¹⁰ While the United States may no longer be dependent on the region's petrochemical resources, the global economy is. As the Ukraine war continues to demonstrate, energy prices directly impact the domestic politics of many US partners and allies, and these domestic concerns constrain and shape their leaders' foreign policy decisions. *It would be a grave strategic error to abandon the Middle East and its petrochemical resources, which sustain the global economy, to Xi Jinping and the Chinese Communist Party.*

Photo Caption: US Air Force Lt. Gen. Alexis G. Grynkeiwich, Ninth Air Force (Air Forces Central) commander, is greeted by Royal Saudi Air Force Major General Pilot Eid bin Barak Al-Otaibi, commander of King Abdulaziz Air Base, and members of the RSAF, at King Abdulaziz, Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, on February 4, 2023. (US Air Force photo by Staff Sgt. Micah Coate)

The Middle East lies at the convergence of global trade, communications, and energy supply. As a result, world powers have continually sought to preserve the uninterrupted flow of vital resources to sustain the global economy, of which the US has been the chief architect and beneficiary. It is also an area of unprecedented instability as adversaries threaten our regional partners and leave our allies isolated, vulnerable, and uncertain about US commitment.¹¹ US interests in the Middle East are myriad, but four are vital and serve as the foundation for sound policy:¹²

1. **Energy.** Support the unimpeded flow of the region's energy resources to global markets to protect economic growth and preserve US economic power.
2. **Trade.** Preserve the integrity and viability of global trade and communication routes to maintain global stability and project US economic influence.
3. **Counterterrorism.** Disrupt terrorist threats to the US, as well as to our partners and allies, to protect the homeland and America's interests abroad.
4. **Nonproliferation.** Prevent the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction to negate their use or possession by an adversary that would disrupt the regional balance of power.

The pursuit of these interests has required US resources, which has led to a significant burden that has become economically and politically unsustainable. The question is, How can the US preserve and advance our vital interests in a manner that can endure diverse geopolitical demands such as great-power competition with China, as well as internal political debate about sustaining our international presence?

Threats to US Interests

Iran represents the greatest threat to US interests in the Middle East. Tehran judges it is in an existential conflict with the United States and US regional allies, and the Islamic Republic seeks to export its ideology to preserve its regime.¹³ Iran's pri-

mary method has been to employ a constellation of surrogates and proxies in an active in-depth defense, exploiting the vulnerabilities of its neighbors and aggressively sowing instability.¹⁴ Funding, weapons, training, and cadres of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC, typically from the Qods Force and Aerospace Forces) support Iran's "axis of resistance" to provide control and direction.¹⁵ Tehran has prioritized the development of its missile and drone capabilities to create an asymmetric advantage over its competitors, who maintain a conventional overmatch. Iran will remain a source of instability across the region by backing the militias that pose the primary threat to US personnel in the region and abroad.¹⁶

Iran's ballistic missile programs boast the largest inventory in the region and continue to pose a threat as far as Europe. Iran has prioritized the accuracy, lethality, and reliability of its missiles, often exploiting US and Western technology it has illicitly obtained.¹⁷ Iran's progress in developing space launch vehicles (SLVs) shortens its timeline to an intercontinental ballistic missile (ICBM) as the programs share many technologies.¹⁸ It is impossible to argue that Iran genuinely requires solid-propellant road-mobile SLVs, which only the US and China employ, to reconstitute its satellite constellations following an attack.

Iran's terrorist networks and missile programs are not the only threats to stability and US interests in the region. Since 2021, Iran has accelerated the expansion of its nuclear program and undertaken advanced research and development activities, bringing it closer to producing the fissile material necessary for a nuclear device. For example, in 2021, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) verified that Iran had conducted research on uranium metal production and produced small quantities enriched up to 20 percent. Iran has been enriching and accumulating uranium hexafluoride (UF₆) to up to 60 percent U-235 since April 2021 and continues to accumulate UF₆ enriched to 20 percent. IAEA inspectors also found uranium particles enriched up to 83.7 percent in Iran's underground nuclear facility at Fordow.¹⁹

Further, Iran has not limited its efforts to international terrorism, ballistic missiles, and nuclear weapons development. Its growing capacity and employment of cyber operations make it a major threat to the security of US and allied networks and data.²⁰

Al-Qaeda, the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL or Daesh), and other affiliated groups also continue to threaten the region and exploit lingering instability in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. As conditions decline, the groups' appeal grows. The ISIL population detained in camps in Iraq and Syria, if released, could rapidly replenish their ranks. As Iran's influence grows, Sunni terrorist groups will gain leverage to appeal to recruits and financial supporters to restore the indigenous balance. Al-Qaeda's new leader, Sayf al-Adl, remains in the Islamic Republic of Iran following the death of Ayman al-Zawahiri in a kinetic strike on July 31, 2022.²¹ The response that led to the formation of a global coalition to defeat ISIS is instructive.

The threat from Iran and transnational terrorism exploits a variety of factors that continue to fuel discontent and enable these Sunni terror groups to replenish their ranks. There is reason to believe that food insecurity is among the factors that caused the Arab Spring and associated unrest in 2009–11.²² The pattern bears a strong resemblance to the combination of food and water insecurity following the global pandemic, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, and rising commodity prices.²³ Thus, resource insecurity presents a serious risk to regional stability and to our interests and partners in the region.²⁴

Options

Historically, the US has pursued three different courses based on our perception of our interests: isolation, intervention, and integration.

Isolation

Those who argue the US does not have vital national interests in the Middle East have advocated for the commitment of minimal resources and lower priority to our partners and allies in the

region. If this were correct, isolation would be a defensible position. But the facts do not support the conclusion. Our interests in the region have evolved but endure, and the commitment of our instruments of national power have transcended administrations and have often followed periods of neglect, which may have contributed to the crises that necessitated a response.

Intervention

Threats to America's vital interests since the end of World War II have resulted in a commitment of US resources and active efforts to secure the support of partners and allies with whom we share convergent interests (see figure 2). As America's expenditure in terms of blood and treasure has been significant, this has proven difficult to sustain domestically, regionally, and internationally. It is worth noting that the US vacillated between these first two approaches in Europe until a few prescient thinkers realized that the costs of this approach were unsustainable moving forward and that the US could achieve enduring peace, stability, and growth—and avoid catastrophic war—only through US political and economic investment in regional architectures, which led to the longest sustained period of peace in Europe's history.

Thankfully, we did not follow the path of General Lucius Clay, US military governor of Germany, who concluded in March 1949, "We have lost Germany politically . . . [there's] no gesture we can make to draw Germany westward, so why do we spend money on Germany? Thank God I will be out of it soon."²⁵ Yet many apply this logic to the Middle East today.

Integration

Though we have labored to assemble coalitions to address shared threats, they have been narrowing in scope and scale, lacked well-defined purpose and duration, and often fallen short of addressing the disparity between the correlation of allied and opposing forces in the region. The resulting gap between the resources committed to the preservation of convergent interests and the forces threatening them requires an enduring ap-

proach which fulfills the promise of past efforts, draws on lessons learned from successful endeavors, and results in a new and sustainable regional security architecture. The foundation of this architecture remains the convergence of US vital national interests with those of our partners and allies.²⁶

The convergence of interests among the US and our regional partners provides a foundation on which to establish collective security. Iran's nuclear program, its advanced missiles and drones, its varied territorial disputes, its promulgation of instability in neighboring countries, its persistent threats to maritime security, and its growing cyber capabilities are all shared threats that require closer coordination. The enduring threat of non-state-sponsored terrorism, arms smuggling, drug trafficking, illegal migration, and human trafficking also provide a basis for expanded international cooperation to counter Iran's activities.²⁷ Our partners are also concerned about the interdependent challenges associated with droughts, increasing desertification, dwindling water supplies and food security, and the potential for new pandemics.

Unsurprisingly, our partners in the region are the first to recognize the shared challenges and take the initiative to address them. They are also acutely aware of the disparity in the capabilities employed by Iran and its proxies and of the capabilities they employ to defend themselves. As a result, US partners in the region have recently indicated a desire to build on existing cooperation. In May, Bahrain hosted a meeting between its Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) partners and the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) to discuss closer cooperation, and the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (ICI) Policy Advisory Group convened its fifth meeting since its establishment in 2018.²⁸ The US Central Command (CENTCOM) convened chiefs of defense from Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Egypt, Jordan, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Israel in March 2022 in Sharm al-Sheikh, Egypt, to discuss the Iranian air threat.²⁹ In June 2022, Israeli Minister of Defense Benny Gantz claimed that since August 2019, there had been roughly 150 meetings between Israeli defense personnel and

their counterparts in regional countries, reflecting expanded coordination following the Abraham Accords. Jordan's King Abdullah recently announced that he "would be one of the first people that would endorse a Middle East NATO."³⁰

This has not escaped the attention of the current US administration, which has expressed a desire to pursue but has not yet resolved the divergence within its own policy priorities.³¹ Regional policymakers universally see efforts to integrate Iran into the region as a direct threat to stability and security that complicates efforts to integrate Israel into the region via normalization with its neighbors as the Abraham Accords intend.

Historically our cooperation has yielded significant results. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia provided invaluable support to the US in constraining the Soviet Union's influence over global energy markets, contributing to Soviet decline, and supported US efforts to challenge the export of Soviet influence in Latin America, Africa, and Central Asia.³² Bahrain has long hosted the US Fifth Fleet, preserving the vital flow of trade and energy.³³ Qatar has provided our largest regional airbase, which has supported our operations and logistical sustainment in the region. Jordan has been a vital partner in the campaign to defeat ISIS and hosts one of the region's premier special operations training centers. Kuwait has provided inestimable value in sustaining our regional presence. Egypt and Morocco have hosted the region's largest training exercises and are vital partners in our counterterrorism efforts. Oman has provided valuable support for our response to crises.³⁴ The United Arab Emirates has deployed its troops to serve alongside ours on nearly every battlefield in the Middle East,³⁵ and Israel remains our largest investment in the region since its founding.³⁶

Convergent security interests can benefit from a corresponding economic interest producing relationships worth defending. Shared economic interest also provides the resources the US needs. It is worth recalling that US interests have changed but are ultimately economic, as are those of our partners and allies.

This drives no small part of the progress toward improving Israel's relationship with its neighbors, all essential partners of the US. The Abraham Accords constitute the first agreements between Israel and its neighbors in over a generation and reflect a historic breakthrough. Unlike previous agreements, the accords did not require the US to pay off some of the parties because political context had evolved; additionally, the shared economic and security interests were abundant and clear. The accords refer collectively to the agreements of peace, diplomatic relations, and full normalization between Israel and partner countries, including the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan.³⁷

The accords mark a historic step toward moving beyond the Arab-Israeli conflict that has inhibited progress in the Middle East since the founding of the State of Israel in 1948. The alignment of our regional partners and allies in both economic and security domains serves to ensure that the agreement endures by pooling critical capacities to advance and defend mutual interests. This transformation also serves to constrain Iran, challenge the malign influence and predatory practices of China and Russia, and provide a foundation upon which a sustainable regional security architecture could be built.³⁸

Our interests are and have always been chiefly economic. So it stands to reason that a mutually beneficial constellation of trade agreements under the leadership of the world's largest market—the US—would lay the foundation for an alliance designed to protect and defend America's Middle Eastern allies and provide a basis for a more sustainable regional security collective. We would defend a mutually beneficial relationship.

In fact, there is a strong logical basis for the defense of a more integrated region and improved connections between regional markets. Improving the efficiency and security of trade, communications, and energy between and within Asian, European, and American markets via the Middle East both supports and benefits from a more sustainable regional security architecture.³⁹

Competition and Divergent Interests

Convergent interests between the US and our regional partners and allies remain the foundation of cooperation. But it is important to recognize the challenge from our competitors and adversaries and the dilemma facing those in the region who have long felt they must choose between competing powers with attendant risks.

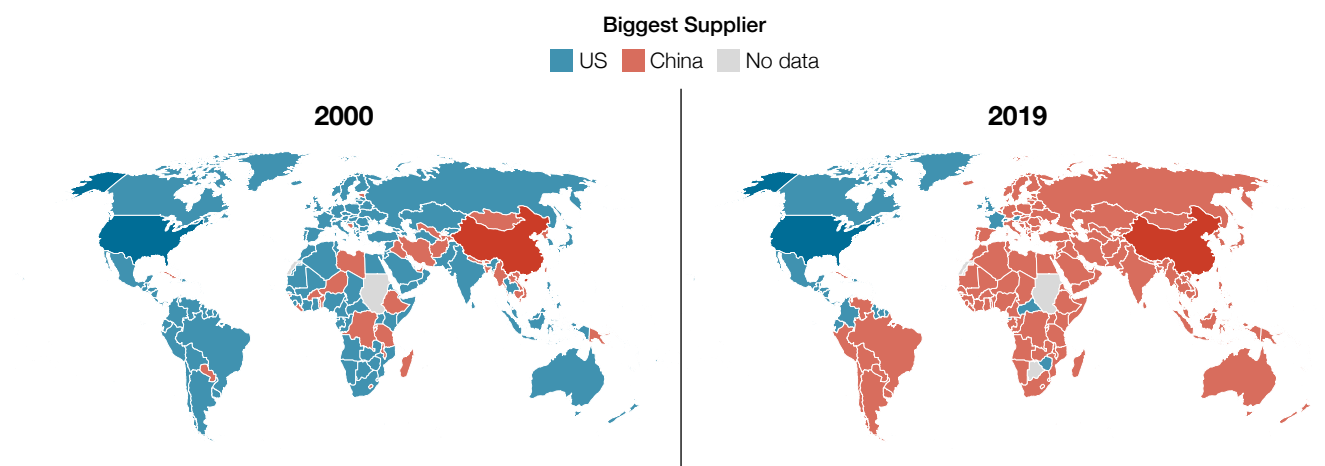
Imports currently constitute nearly 70 percent of China's overall oil consumption.⁴⁰ Of these, 43 percent come from the Gulf region,⁴¹ and China's oil imports will continue to grow to an estimated 80 percent of its total consumption by 2030.⁴²

The United States engaged in \$215 billion in total goods trade with Middle East and North African (MENA) countries in 2008.⁴³ Goods exports totaled \$67 billion; imports totaled \$139 billion. The US goods trade deficit with the MENA countries was \$72 billion.⁴⁴

In 2021, China's imports from the Middle East were \$130 billion versus \$34 billion for the US, while China's exports to the region were \$129 billion versus \$48 billion for the US.⁴⁵

In World War II, the US and its allies explored a variety of strategic vulnerabilities among the Axis powers. The birth of strategic targeting resulted in an evolution of thought and remains instructive. In the European theater, the Army Air Corps created the Air War Plans Division in June 1941 to build a plan to defeat Germany. This primarily focused the application of air power on the lines of communication (transportation infrastructure) that provided the German Army the ability to conduct successful maneuvers. In the spring of 1942, the Office of Strategic Services (OSS) established a branch office in London called the Economic Warfare Division (EWD) to assess Germany's systemic vulnerabilities.⁴⁶ The EWD in turn created the Enemy Objectives Unit to provide specific targeting information to the Eighth Air Force.⁴⁷ By this time, the Allies had shifted to target Germany's industrial capacity, recognizing that we had greatly

Figure 1: Shift in Trade from the US to China from 2000–2019



Source: *Financial Times* graphic depicting shift in trade between the United States and China globally from 2000–2019.⁵⁰

dispersed our transportation infrastructure and risked diluting the capacity of available air assets, and that we would require this same infrastructure following an invasion after successful termination of the conflict. General Henry Arnold created the Committee of Operations Analysts on December 9, 1942. Allied leaders still viewed efforts to destroy German industrial capacity as important, but an increasingly influential element within the Army Air Corps, chiefly General Carl A. Spaatz, favored a shift to the source of fuel that fed Germany's industry and its tanks, trucks, and planes. Without fuel, the production and possession of equipment was meaningless. The air corps judged oil and gas as the main strategic vulnerability.⁴⁸ We should consider this logic as we evaluate how best to counter China.

Beijing knows the Middle East is a vital source of energy fueling its economic growth and military; we cannot afford to ignore this critical vulnerability. Its economy and military are exogenic, and this dependency resulted in its development of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) to obtain the resources it requires and to sustain the routes connecting China to its sources. Unless the US proffers an alternative, our partners and allies in the Middle

East and elsewhere will increasingly find themselves with little choice but to join organizations like BRICS and the BRI.⁴⁹

The Pendulum of US Presence

Vital interests require a commitment to safeguard them. America's commitment in the Middle East has resulted in a routine deployment of military forces and corresponding infrastructure to protect and defend our interests (see figure 2). Following the attacks of September 11, 2001, and the resulting operations in Afghanistan and Iraq, our military presence and activity expanded significantly. Following the withdrawal from Iraq beginning in 2008, our presence began to decline steadily, notwithstanding the "surge" in Afghanistan in 2011–12.⁵¹ Our withdrawal from Afghanistan in 2021 was the low water mark, resembling pre 9/11 levels (see figure 3). For those in the region who had grown accustomed to the presence of US forces, the decline has been precipitous, encouraging our adversaries and unnerving our partners equally.⁵² While not unprecedented, it now corresponds to a decline in US economic influence and rising challenges from Iran, Russia, and China. For perspective, the US military includes some 1.4 million active-duty personnel

Figure 2: Worldwide US Military Deployments, 1951–2021

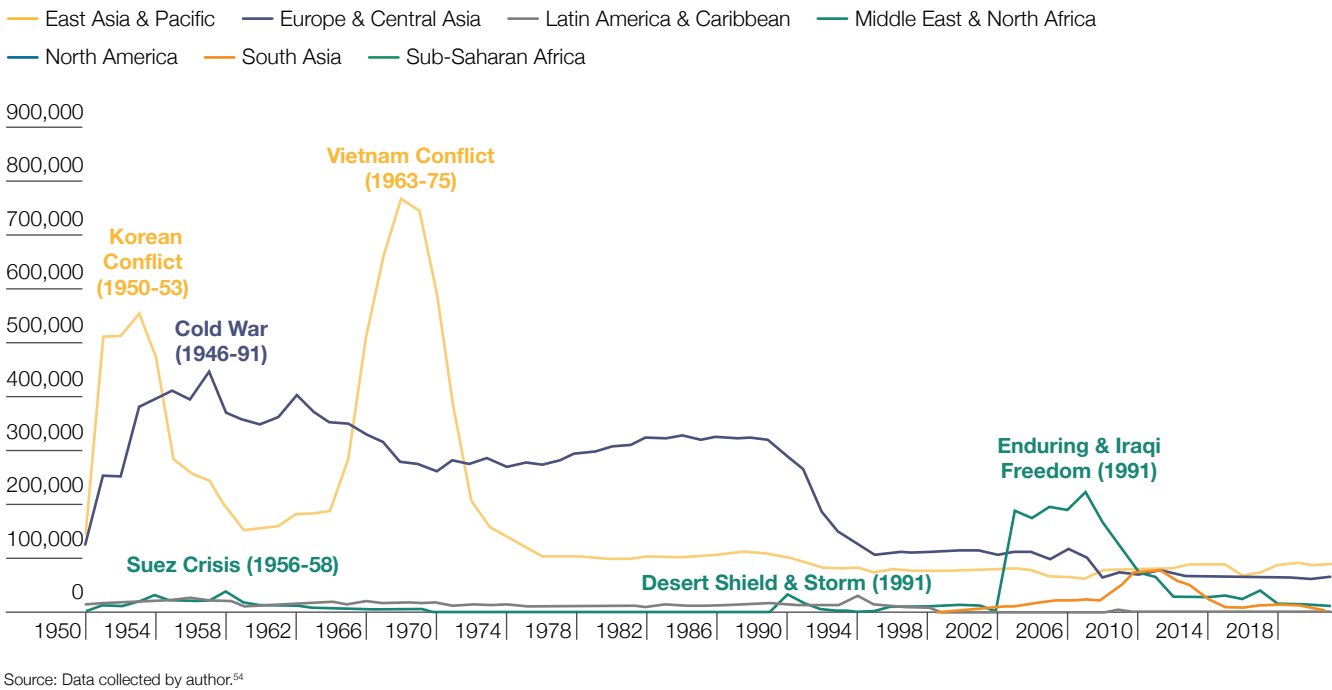
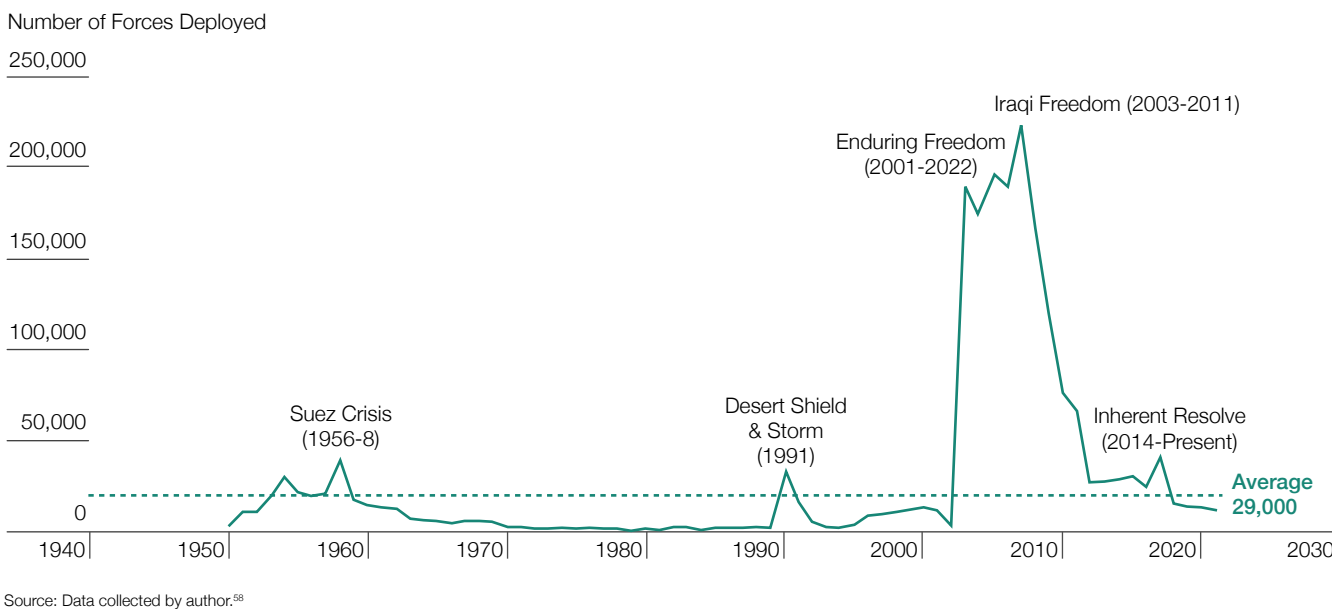


Figure 3: US Military Deployments to the Middle East (CENTCOM Area of Responsibility), 1950-2021



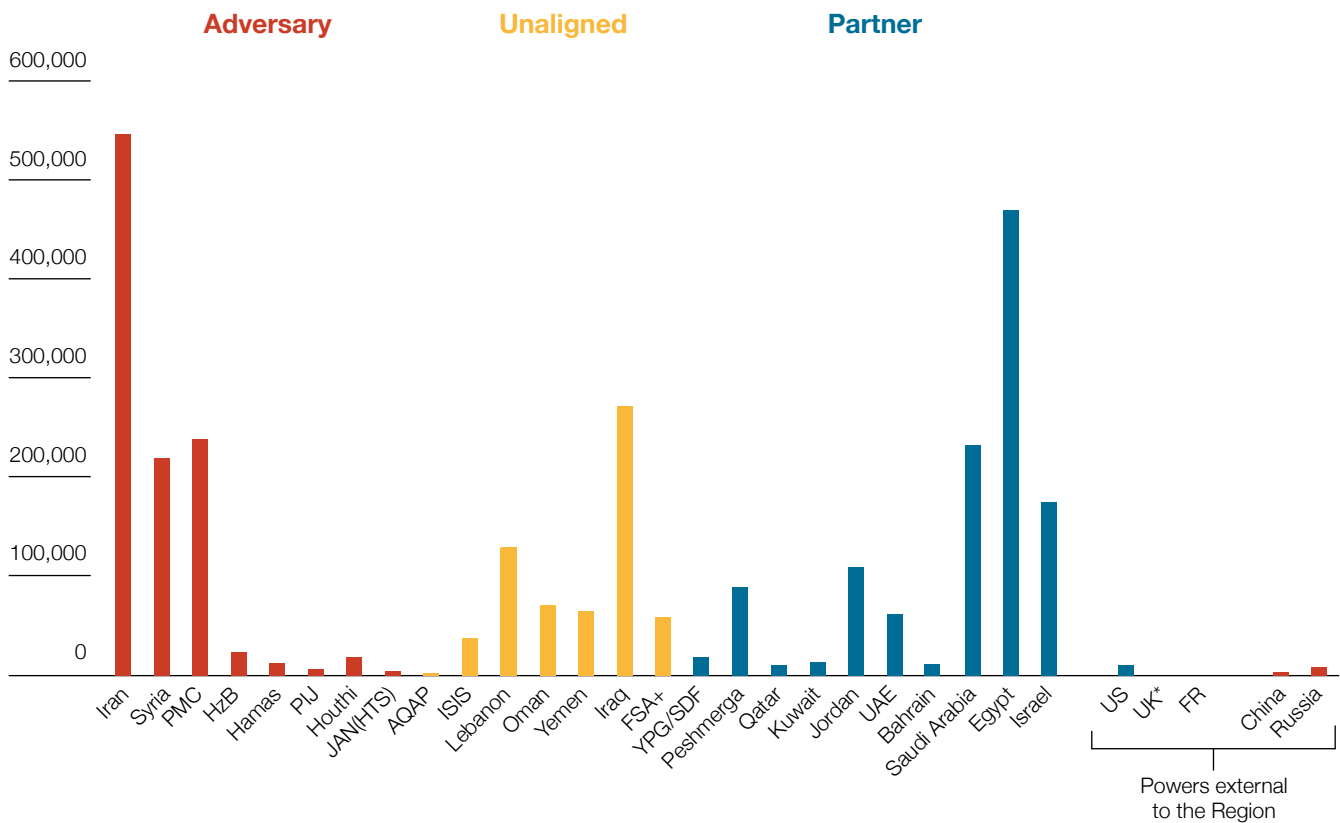
and another 850,000 reservists, for a total of about 2.25 million personnel.⁵³

Closer examination of the Middle East (the CENTCOM Area of Responsibility, to be specific)⁵⁵ reveals the average US military presence of approximately 29,000 troops in the years following the attacks of September 11, 2001 (see figure 3). But this significant presence is now abating, and friend and foe alike are interpreting this abatement as withdrawal and even indifference.⁵⁶ Naturally, our presence in the region must be correlated to our adversaries and anchored in our interests, while encompassing the strength of our partners. Regardless of the perception, it

is clear the US is well below our average presence. Acknowledging that a significant percentage is likely naval forces in transit—a carrier strike group alone can constitute some 6,000 personnel—the decline is striking.⁵⁷

Our efforts to develop partners to offset our requirements have proven inconsistent at best and a failure at worst.⁵⁹ The reasons are myriad, but the results have been costly. The decision to reduce our own commitment of resources and to distribute the responsibility to partners who share the same goals and a desire to establish an enduring solution indigenous to the area are valid. I argue that the reasons remain justifiable, while our commitment

Figure 4: Quantitative Middle East Military Correlation of Forces



Source: Data collected by author.⁶⁵

and approach have proven flawed.⁶⁰ We cannot ignore the trend in the regional imbalance of forces (both military and paramilitary).⁶¹

Further, we have relied on our incomparable ability to project power in response to crises, and many of our operations and contingency plans depend on the time-phased force deployment from the continental US to operations theaters. This requires secure air and sea lanes of communication as well as secure air and sea bases of debarkation. Neither are assured in a theater conflict as Iran now possesses the ability to threaten three of the region's strategic choke points (the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal)⁶² as well as our bases and ports along the Arabian Sea within range of a growing and increasingly accurate Iranian ballistic missile inventory.⁶³ Amir Ali Hajizadeh, commander of the IRGC's Aerospace Force, stated as recently as 2019 that "everybody should know that all American bases and their vessels in a distance of up to two thousand kilometers are within the range of our missiles."⁶⁴

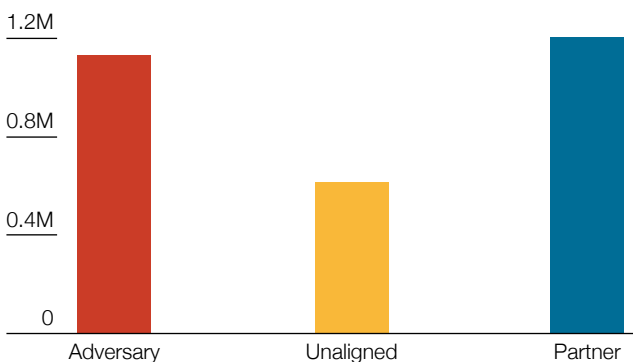
The disconnect between our interests and the corresponding allocation of resources to safeguard and secure them is producing a measurable imbalance that constitutes significant risk. Absent mitigation or redress, this disconnect is increasingly intolerable to the US and our partners and allies. Our com-

petitors and adversaries alike are also aggressively exploiting it. While current quantitative measures appear balanced, the trend is bending toward our adversaries, and unaligned forces are increasingly under pressure to remain so or to support our enemies as they exploit the receding US military presence. Iraqi and Lebanese armed forces cannot compete with their Iran-controlled rivals and are increasingly unable or unwilling to confront the challenge despite continued US investment. We are approaching an inflection point and may be past it when we consider asymmetric capabilities.

Ballistic Missiles and Unmanned Aerial Vehicles

While the quantitative correlation of forces reflects near parity, the qualitative implies an adversary advantage. It's worth noting that the US presence had provided a significant advantage from 2001–2018. Perhaps as a result, our adversaries sought an asymmetric advantage to overcome the gap. Nowhere is this more evident than in the development and proliferation of ballistic missiles and drones. Former CENTCOM Commander General (Retired) Frank McKenzie observed in October 2022 that "over the past five to seven years, Iranian capabilities in these three domains have risen to such a degree that they now possess what I would call effective 'overmatch' against their neighbors"⁶⁷

Figure 5: Middle East Correlation of Forces



Source: Data collected by author.⁶⁶

Ballistic Missiles

Iran possesses the largest missile arsenal in the Middle East, encompassing thousands of ballistic and cruise missiles, many capable of striking as far as Israel and Europe. Iran has invested significantly in the last 20 years to improve its weapons' precision and lethality. Iran possesses some 13,525 missiles as of 2022; its proxy Hizballah has over 70,000. Numbers for other Middle East nations are difficult to obtain, but no one doubts that Iran has eclipsed them all.⁶⁸ As a result, Iran's missile forces constitute a significant component of their power projection and represent a credible threat to US and its partners in the region. Iran is actively developing missiles capable of striking the United States under the auspices of its space-launch program.⁶⁹

Iran's ballistic missile arsenal continues to grow in both size and quality. Improvements in its ballistic missile precision, range, mobility, lethality, and survivability constitute an increasingly deadly long-range strike capability in the hands of the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism.⁷⁰

Drones

Iran has developed and exports an arsenal of locally produced drones, increasing its ability to threaten the US and its allies. Iran has continuously advanced its military unmanned aerial vehicle (UAV) program seeking to improve its intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities and to deploy drones capable of precision strikes. Iran has unveiled several new drones since 2010, employing many in combat and demonstrating the progress. Iran now boasts drones capable of delivering precision-guided missiles beyond 2000 km. According to the US Defense Intelligence Agency's November 2019 assessment of Iran's military strength, "UAVs are Iran's most rapidly advancing air capability."⁷¹

There are now less than a dozen Patriot missile batteries and one Theater High Altitude Area Defense (THAAD) battery in theater defending U.S. personnel and facilities and those of our allies. Because our theater air defense systems are configured to intercept either high or low altitude threats and typically address high altitude ballistic missiles with larger payloads, our vulnerabilities have been exploited by low-flying drones and cruise missiles.

Then CENTCOM commander Gen. Kenneth McKenzie warned the US Senate Armed Services Committee that UAVs represent *"the most concerning tactical development in the CENTCOM area of operations since the rise of the improvised explosive device."* In recent years Iran has employed a variety of drones to harass commercial and naval ships and threaten freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and provide its surrogates in Lebanon, Syria, Yemen, and Iraq a decisive advantage. In September 2019 Iran launched a series

of missile and drone strikes against Saudi Aramco's Abqaiq oil processing facility and Khurais oil field.⁷²

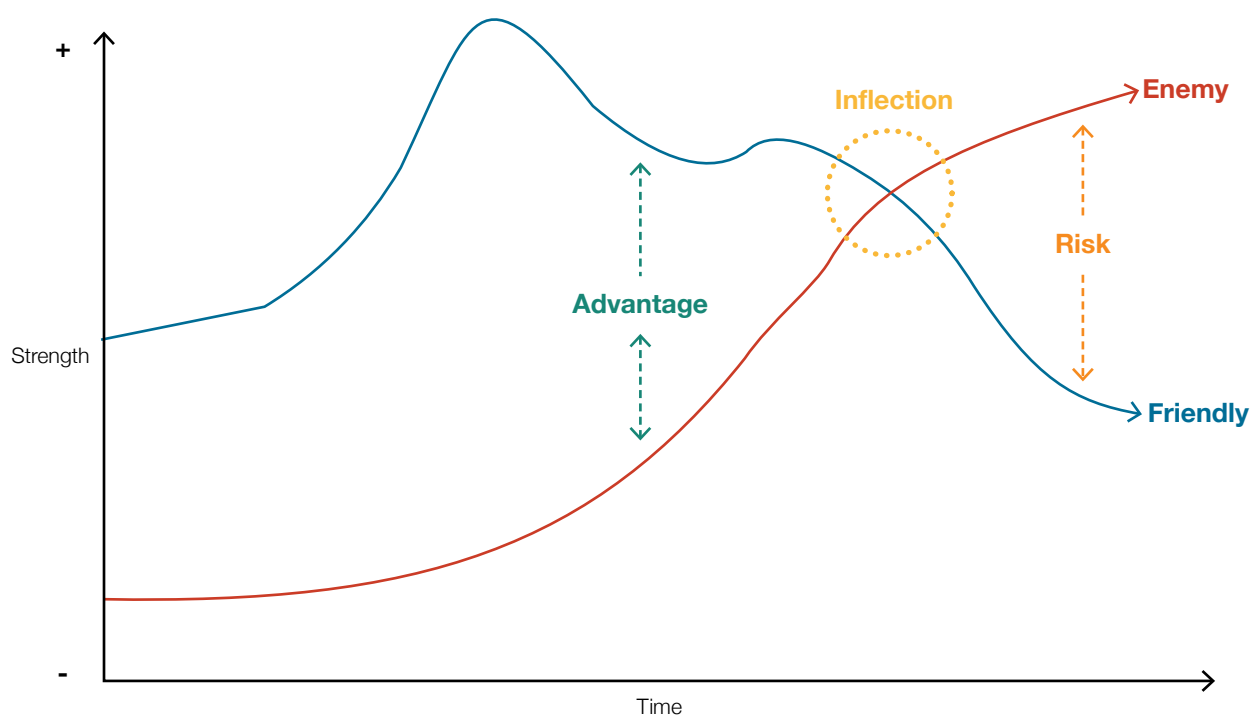
Since at least August 2022 Iran has supplied lethal drones Russia has employed in Ukraine. Iran supplied more than 1,700 drones by December 2022 and has reportedly developed plans to produce some 6,000 Iranian models at a new facility in Russia.⁷³

As a result of the cooperation between Tehran and Moscow (but surprisingly not as a result of the attacks against our partners in the Middle East) Senators Jim Risch (R-ID) and Bob Menendez (D-NJ), ranking member and chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee, sponsored the Stop Iranian Drones Act (H.R. 6089) on June 9, 2022. The act seeks to prevent Iran and any proxies aligned with Iran from acquiring lethal drones. In addition, the Department of Commerce, the Department of Justice, the Department of State, and the Department of the Treasury have issued advisories to alert persons and businesses of the threat of Iran's UAV-related activities and the need to take appropriate steps to avoid or prevent any activities that would support the further development of Iran's UAV program.⁷⁴

It would have been preferable to address the growing threat from Iran's missile and drone programs before they were employed against Ukrainian targets. It is disconcerting to see Iranian drones strike civilian targets in Europe, and the drones' impact on US and allied forces and facilities in the Middle East is no less of a threat. Russia's payment for Iranian asymmetric capabilities may even include additional ballistic missile and nuclear cooperation. Allowing the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 provisions to lapse in October 2023 is indefensible in light of this.⁷⁵

The pursuit of our vital interests and the correlation of forces responsible for their pursuit leave four options: accept the risk of imbalance, increase our commitment, degrade the capabilities of our adversaries, or improve the quantity and quality of our partners. Any effort to degrade adversary capability would likely

Figure 6. Illustrative Impact of the Correlation of Forces



Source: Data collected by author.⁷⁶

entail a sustained or increased commitment to deter escalation while denying adversaries the resources necessary to respond. As figure 6 depicts, a favorable balance provides advantage and an unfavorable balance yields risk. As the correlation of regional forces supports the conclusion that we are approaching an inflection point, it is vital to address the risk and mitigate it accordingly while we explore all options to redress, maintain, and preserve an advantage that we can sustain both economically and politically.

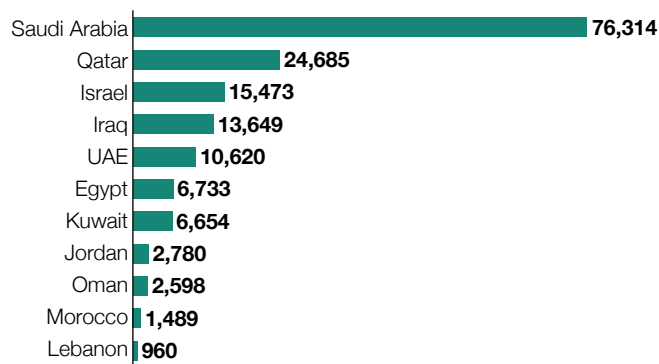
Regional Trends in Arms Sales

We may understand the arc governing the development of regional militaries and the impact of geopolitical choices by examining the trends in security assistance and arms sales. Stockholm

International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) data shows that, while the global arms trade flattened from 2016–20, arms trade to the Middle East grew by 25 percent.⁷⁷ Compared to the previous five-year period, the region's market share increased from 26 to 33 percent, while all other regions saw their shares decline.⁷⁸

Buyers are sourcing much of this volume from the United States.⁷⁹ Today, the region receives over 47 percent of US global arms exports, and Saudi Arabia alone accounts for 24 percent of total US arms shipments.⁸⁰ Since 2011, Saudi Arabia (+61 percent), Egypt (+136 percent), and Qatar (+361 percent) have led the rapid growth in arms imports. From 2016–2020, four of the top ten arms-importing states in the world were in the Middle East (Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Qatar, and the UAE), with

Figure 7: Value of Total US Arms Agreements in the Middle East and North Africa, 2009–17, by Country (in Millions of USD)



Source: Statista.

Saudi Arabia as the world's leading importer (11 percent of global imports).⁸¹

According to the World Bank, average military spending as a share of gross domestic product was 5.8 percent in the Middle East, or twice the world's average of 2.4 percent in 2020. SIPRI data also shows that out of the top ten military spenders in share of GDP, seven are in the MENA region. Among the top ten states in terms of military expenditure per capita, six are from the Middle East.⁸³

In addition to cementing ties between the US and our regional partners, arms sales enhances interoperability and provides significant advantages to sustain and expand our defense industrial base.

For example, in July 2020, the US Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security found that \$15.5 billion in defense export sales contracts "would create or sustain 127,328 employment opportunities"—a rate of 8,215 jobs per billion dollars of exports.⁸⁴ The largest Emirati order, \$10.4 billion for F-35 joint strike fighters and related equipment, would create about

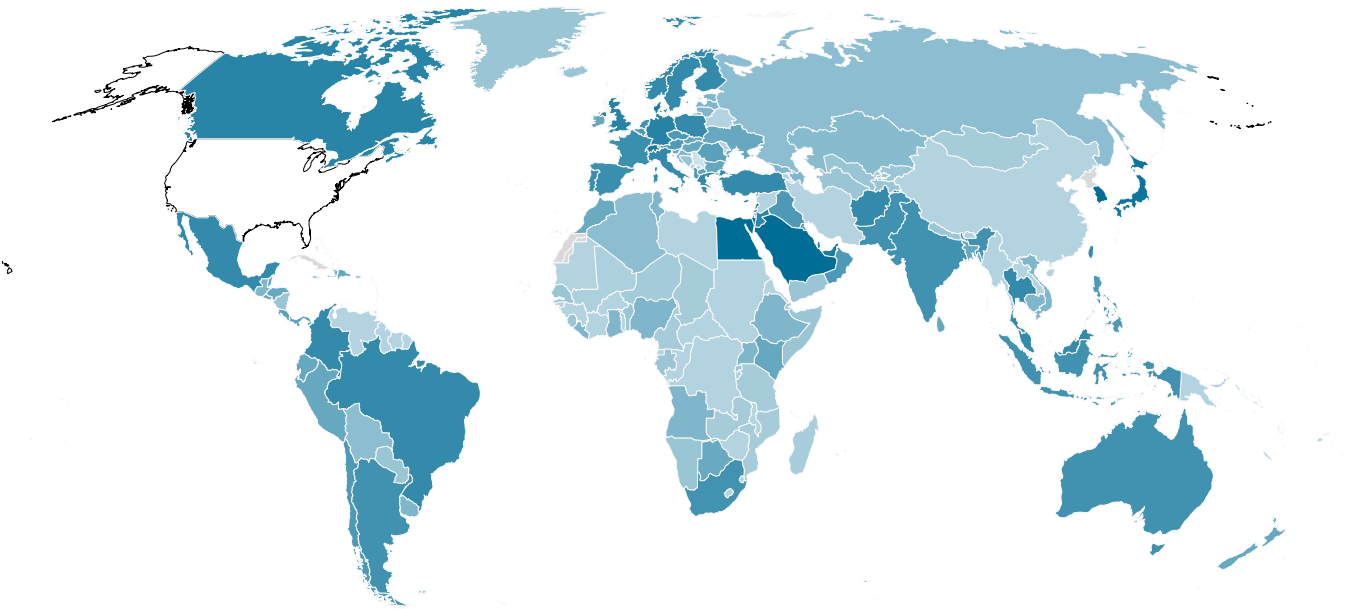
24,000 jobs. The combination of 14,000 missiles and bombs in the UAE's \$10 billion order for munitions, sustainment, and support would create roughly 25,000 jobs, and the \$2.97 billion included for MQ-9B remotely piloted aircraft and related equipment would create another 7,000 jobs.

By offering an affordable alternative, flexible financing, and confidence in delivery to the purchaser, China has cultivated customers across the developing world. Chinese manufacturers like Aviation Industry Corporation of China (AVIC), China Aerospace Science and Industry Corporation (CASIC), China State Shipbuilding Corporation (CSSC), and China North Industries Corporation (NORINCO) are emerging as significant players in the international arms market, fueling China's climb to top-tier global exporter.

As the data shows, the United States has a significant advantage but is not the only source of military technology and equipment. As our partners confront the reality of a declining US presence in the region, they are increasingly turning to alternatives. From 2000 to 2019, the United States maintained its position as the dominant arms exporter in the Middle East, accounting for over 45 percent of imported weapons. In contrast, China's share amounted to only around 2.5 percent of arms imports during that period. That is changing.

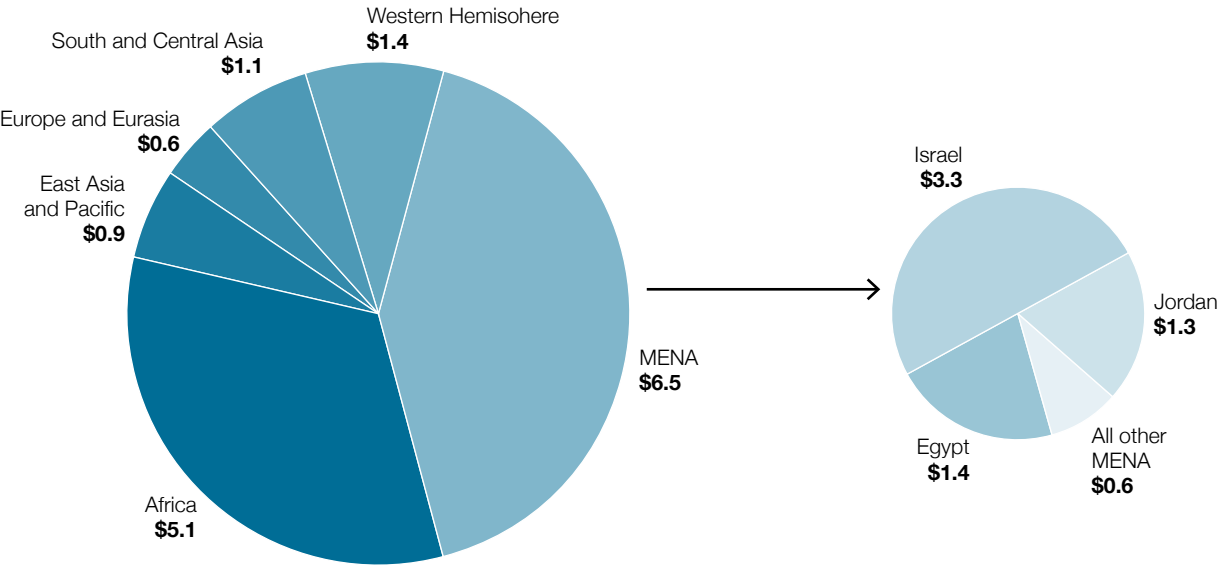
In March 2021, Beijing and Tehran entered a strategic accord calling for closer political, economic, and military ties. Although there have been no confirmed instances of bilateral arms purchases since the United Nations lifted its arms ban in 2020, Iran remains interested in acquiring Chinese weapons, including the J-10 fighter jet.⁸⁶ China is reportedly prepared to offer the J-10C as well as the less advanced FC-1 Xiaolong fighter to Iran. The estimated per-unit cost of the Chengdu J-10 is reportedly between \$40 million and \$65 million. But because Iran cannot easily pay in dollars or euros, Tehran has instead offered to barter oil and natural gas as payment.⁸⁷

Figure 8: US Security Assistance and Cooperation



Source: Security Assistance Monitor (SAM) at the Center for International Policy (CIP). Reflects security sector assistance, foreign military training, and arms sales. Accessed June 28, 2023.⁸²

Figure 9: FY2021 Request for Regional Bilateral Aid (in Billions of USD).



Source: Department of State, Foreign Operations and Related Programs Congressional Budget Justification FY2021.⁸⁵

Russia is also exploiting the market. The increasing cooperation between Iran and Russia is an alarming development of the Moscow-Tehran security relationship. Up to now, Moscow has carefully balanced its arms sales to Iran. The most recent transaction was Iran's acquisition of the Russian S-300 air defense system in 2016.⁸⁸ Russia previously supplied Iran with combat aircraft in the early 2000s including the Su-25. These transfers were a significant reduction from the Cold War, when the Soviet Union provided Iran with even greater quantities of military equipment.

Moscow has recently used hundreds of Iranian drones (often found to contain components made in China only months before) to attack Ukrainian cities and destroy civilian infrastructure,⁸⁹ while Tehran seeks Russia's advanced Su-35 fighter jet.⁹⁰ Additionally, Moscow has sent captured US weaponry to Tehran.⁹¹ The US has recognized that Moscow could provide Tehran with advanced military components and additional weapons, including advanced air defense systems that could increase the difficulty of any attempt to use force to disrupt or destroy its increasingly dangerous nuclear program.⁹²

Arc of Contemporary Collective Regional Security

Past efforts to build a collective regional security construct provide a wealth of insight that should serve to guide and inform efforts to establish a sustainable successor. Regional efforts to pursue shared security goals in the past century arose to reject rule by colonial powers like the Ottomans and respond to the creation of the state of Israel. It is increasingly evident that Israel and its Arab neighbors agree that the principal threat to their stability and security is Iran and that they have a common cause in confronting it. But the method to do so has thus far remained elusive.

It is remarkable that Arab countries have made far more progress in common defense and collective security—however flawed or abortive—than European countries have, despite the economic and political union of the latter. While there are

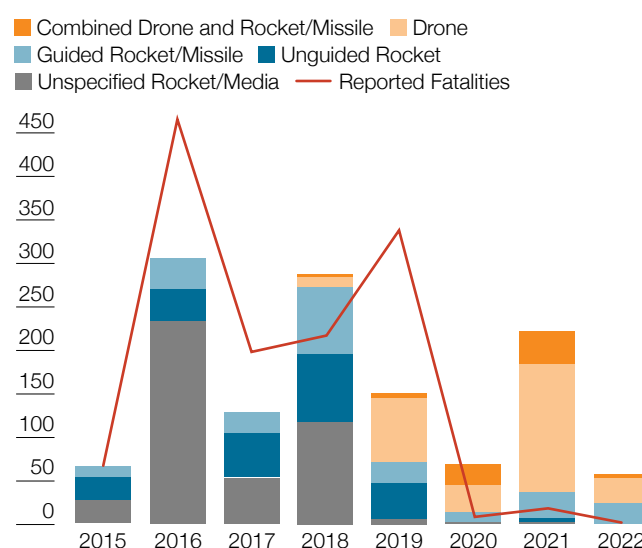
many reasons, Arab countries have often faced external threats they've perceived as existential, whereas Europe has not. Inversely, Arab countries have struggled to create a common economic zone, and trade within the Gulf Cooperation Council has never climbed above a meager 12 percent.⁹³

Recent Threats and US Response

Since 2015, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have experienced unprecedented drone and missile attacks from Iran and its surrogates in Yemen and Iraq, striking civilian targets, energy and transportation infrastructure, and commercial shipping (see figures 10 and 11).

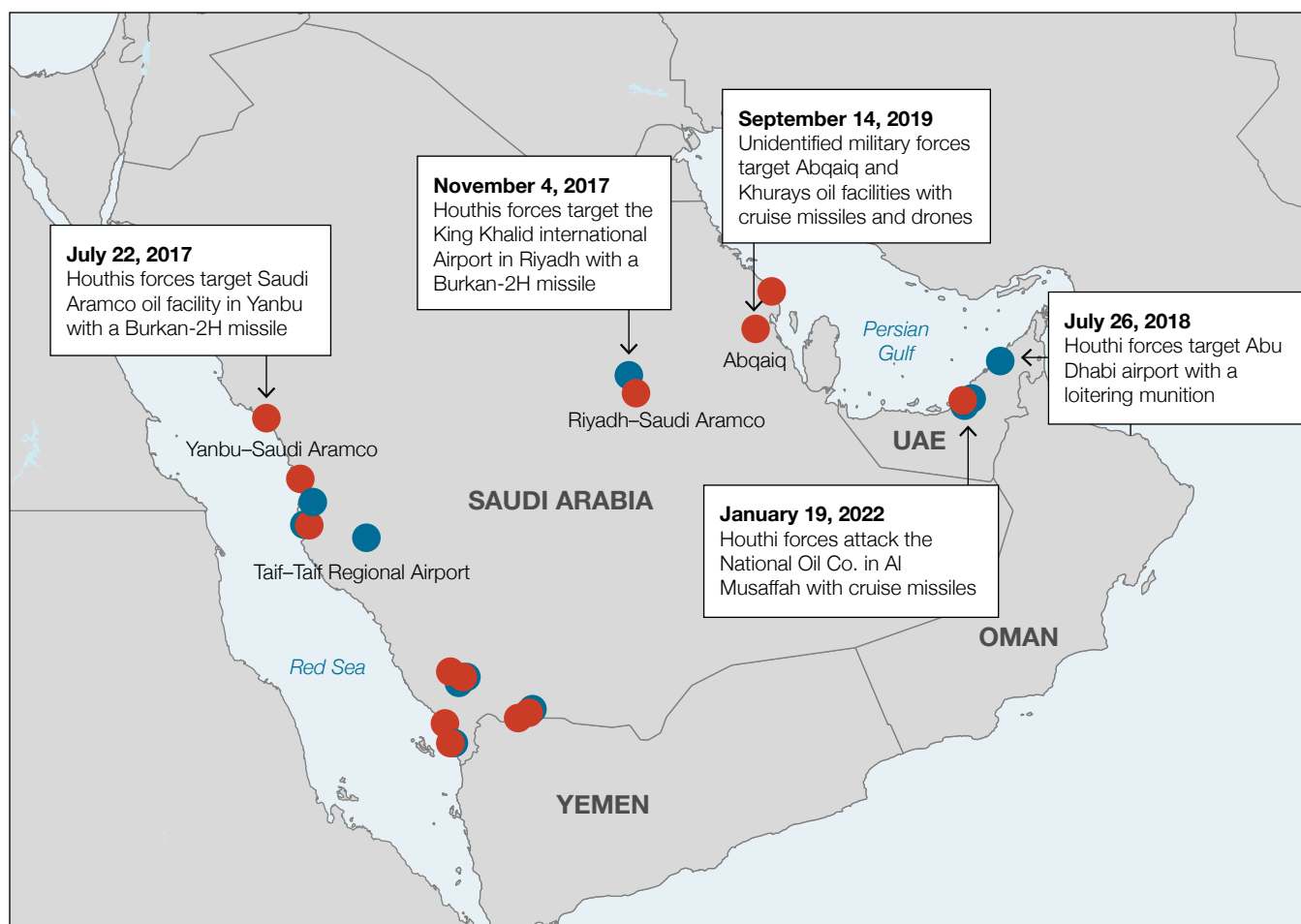
These attacks have highlighted vulnerabilities and compelled both countries to seek support from the US. Perceived American reluctance to acknowledge and retaliate to the September 2019 Iranian strike on Saudi oil infrastructure at Abqaiq and Khurais and to respond following the Houthi UAV strikes on UAE in January 2022 have caused two of our closest partners to question

Figure 10: Houthi cross-border rocket, missile, and drone events, May 2015–April 2022



Source: Luca Nevola, *Beyond Riyadh: Houthi Cross-Border Aerial Warfare 2015-2022*.⁹⁴

Figure 11: Houthi Rocket, Missile, and Drone Events Targeting Oil Facilities and Airports in Saudi Arabia and the UAE, October 2015–April 2022



Source: Nevola, *Beyond Riyadh*.⁹⁶

our commitment and the viability of dependence on the US for their security or the provision of required capabilities to defend themselves.⁹⁶ There is also profound frustration with policies that enable Iran and allow it to attack without consequence while constraining our partners' ability to defend and respond.

On January 3, 2020, IRGC Quds Force Major General Qassem Soleimani and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis were killed by a US at-

tack drone near the Baghdad International Airport in Iraq while on the way to meet Iraqi Prime Minister Adil Abdul-Mahdi.⁹⁷ The United States asserted the strike was "in response to an escalating series of attacks . . . to protect United States personnel, to deter Iran from conducting or supporting further attacks . . . and to end Iran's strategic escalation of attacks."⁹⁸ Soleimani was directing an escalating pattern of threats against US forces and diplomatic facilities,⁹⁹ and the United States, United

Nations, and European Union had sanctioned him. This decisive action to address an imminent and growing threat both assuaged concern among partners and allies and contributed significantly to the restoration of deterrence.

Between 2017 and 2020, there were a total of 52 attacks, and between 2021 and 2023, there were a total of 59 attacks by Iran-backed Houthis against Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Such an increase in threats corresponded with an increase of Iranian or Iran-backed attacks on American ground forces stationed in the Middle East.¹⁰⁰

The withdrawal of critical air defense assets and the reluctance to acknowledge, let alone respond to, the January 2022 UAV attacks on the UAE fueled the existing perception that the US seeks to withdraw from the Middle East, leaving our partners to seek alternatives and our adversaries to exploit the vacuum.¹⁰¹

Recommendations

The US should consider the following steps to address the growing risk and imbalance in correlation of forces, leverage our partners and allies in the region, and establish a sustainable regional security construct:

- **Learn from the past.** Incorporate lessons learned from the efforts of international powers and those in the region to provide for collective defense. This includes the right balance of external support (particularly in the domains of ISR, sustainment, precision fires, and force projection) and regional strengths.
- **Leverage economic integration.** Any construct will be more effective if the US builds it on economic integration, which sustains the necessary resources, binds partners more closely together, and constrains competitors.
- **Mind the gap.** While the current correlation of forces reflects a quantitative parity, this belies the growing qualitative gap emerging because of Chinese and Russian inroads, Iranian progress enabled by record revenues, and an increasingly complacent US. It is likely that the US will have to bridge the gap in numbers and capability while building a collective security construct (as we did in both Europe and Asia following World War II). The faster we can do so, the shorter the bridge. It is worth noting that competition with China requires us to address Beijing's critical vulnerabilities, and its dependence on Middle Eastern energy is near the top of the list.
- **Make a common diagnosis.** Any endeavor to confront threats requires a shared assessment. The region is closely aligned internally but is at odds with the current US administration's stance, which seeks to integrate Iran into the region and thereby achieve equilibrium. It is vital we reconcile these views and at minimum accept that necessity dictates we address the risk should détente with Iran prove elusive. Consensus between the US and its Middle Eastern allies would also serve to restore deterrence and strengthen negotiations with Tehran.
- **Build strength in numbers.** The US and its Middle Eastern partners share convergent interests, as do many of our European and Asian allies. The support of cooperative international allies, including partner alliances NATO and the Southeast Asian Treaty Organization (SEATO), can play a vital role.
- **Consolidate.** We can consolidate the existing constellation of combined task forces, reducing redundancies in command and control and sustainment and pooling critical resources such as ISR. We have built most, if not all, task forces to face discrete threats that share a common origin and supporting infrastructure. A comprehensive approach would be more efficient and reduce dependency on ad hoc arrangements we've pursued for decades. A logical first step is to bring the International Maritime Security Construct under the Combined Maritime Forces and to combine the Red Sea Council and Project Red Sea under CTF 153, with Israel as a full participant encompassing all strategic maritime lines of communication.
- **Secure Hill support.** Congress will play a decisive role in demonstrating that a US-led regional security construct in

the Middle East is necessary, possible, and the most efficient use of our resources. In fact, placing a team on the field will be far more effective than doing the work ourselves or attempting to counter threats individually. An alliance (absent a *binding* mutual defense obligation) may be the end goal and may provide the necessary incentives and constraints to safeguard the investment. If so, Congress will need to fully engage at the beginning.

- **Equip our partners.** Security assistance broadly, and foreign military sales in particular, have earned criticism from multiple sectors. Both those who believe we should provide less and those who judge we should be selling more proffer solutions that can find common ground in providing our partners and allies in the Middle East with the tools they need to address common threats. Whatever our concerns, we can find few good reasons to support the proliferation of Russian and Chinese systems in the Middle East. It is important to recall that most of our partners in the region can and will happily pay for US systems and will seek alternatives only when we demur. There is also fertile ground to pursue new solutions that have succeeded in other venues. Joint development of systems eases export control restrictions; distributed manufacture can expand our capacity and replenish depleted stocks; distributed storage can support contingencies and crisis response; expanded competition can include small and medium-sized enterprises where innovation is paramount, reducing dependency on major arms conglomerates; establishing joint standards can ease interoperability and reduce logistical burdens; and increasing combined exercises can contribute to deterrence and provide valuable experience. Declaring participating nations as major non-NATO allies (that are not already so designated) would assist and encourage establishment.
- **Confront Iran.** It is essential that we recognize and accept the conclusion that our partners and allies share in the region: the principal threat to their security and stability is Iran and its surrogates and proxies. The development of a joint campaign plan to address this threat and a coordinated effort between partners will engender the necessary trust and confidence to work on collective security as well as the logic behind the range of activities the campaign would undertake. NATO would have been inconceivable without the Warsaw Pact and the Soviet Union, and it is likewise difficult to imagine a collective security construct in the Middle East without recognizing Iran as the main threat.
- **Establish centers of excellence.** Establishing multinational centers of excellence (for air, maritime, land, special operations, sustainment, etc.) as the US Department of Defense proposed for the Middle East Strategic Alliance, would be a welcome initiative leveraging the varied strengths of our partners. We should include our NATO partners.
- **Create a new basing constellation.** As the US largely located its bases to support operations before or after the 1991 conflict with Iraq, it would be helpful to consider establishing new infrastructure that is less vulnerable to Iranian missiles and drones and provides for a more efficient, layered defense.¹⁰² Our regional partners would welcome the initiative and can significantly defray costs. This effort can complement the centers of excellence and our existing array of installations.¹⁰³
- **Leverage Israel.** Israel should accelerate its growing relationships with regional partners.¹⁰⁴ Leveraging its capabilities and relationship with the US will strengthen any collective security construct and help preserve its unique position.¹⁰⁵ Joint development of critical capabilities, particularly in expanded intelligence sharing, ISR, air defense, precision strike, and maritime security, would accelerate delivery and fielding as well as Israel's integration into the region.
- **Adopt the stance “If it flies, it dies.”** Missiles and drones remain the most pressing threat. Establishing an integrated air defense network in the region has been a generational effort. The technology exists, but it has proven difficult to overcome impediments to fully connect systems. It has also been a challenge for the US to deploy or provide the systems necessary for area coverage. The US has made prog-

ress in sharing the national military intelligence (NMI) necessary to ensure all systems can see the threats supporting interdiction, but we will need to do more to connect and provide sufficient interceptors. If our partners judge that we are committed to this effort and willing to provide the tools they need, it will be a lot easier to accomplish.

- **Start now.** Existing fora can provide the optimal platform for initial conversations. The US can and should convene a GCC+ summit at the upcoming UN General Assembly in New York to discuss options and reset the relationships. Likewise the Manama and Munich Security Dialogues as well as the Negev Forum provide opportunities to chart a path forward. The US can also employ the NATO-ICI platform to expand the conversation and build connections between compatible constructs.

- **Engage in track two efforts.** Strategic conversations among our partners and allies in the Middle East should occur informed by convergent interests and a history of their pursuit. In some cases, like the NATO-ICI Dialogues, they should take place in public. During a recent visit to Riyadh, I had the pleasure to tour the remarkable UN Educational, Scientific, and Cultural Organization (UNESCO) project evolving around ad Dirriyah, the historic foundations of the city and kingdom.¹⁰⁶ Touring the fort, at its heart, reminded me of the ancient logic of Arabic dialogue. When the public *diwaniyah* or *majlis* is not conducive to candid exchange, the *mukhtasar*, or private chamber in Arabic tradition, may be more suitable. A track two process may complement efforts to achieve a more sustainable regional security construct.



SUMMARY

Arab forces once combined to oppose the Ottoman Empire and later the establishment of the State of Israel. Following the historic Abraham Accords in 2020, the region began to partner with Israel to safeguard convergent interests under US leadership, which could produce the sustainable regional stability and prosperity that have historically proven elusive.¹⁰⁷

The US and global economies depend on the uninterrupted flow of energy from and trade through the Middle East, which remains a vital national security interest. China is dependent on the Middle East for the energy it requires to sustain its economy and military and is exploiting the vacuum that our indifference to secure it creates. Threats to our interests and partners in the region are approaching a quantitative advantage, which has resulted in unacceptable risk to our interests. *The range of threats and corresponding risk in the Middle East resembles the fragility that followed the turmoil after the Iranian revolution, Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, and storming of the Grand Mosque*

in 1979. Yet, we retain advantages in the historic diplomatic, economic, and security relationships that we derive from convergent interests. Historic efforts to build a collective security construct, many of which we have initiated within the region, provide valuable lessons learned.

Establishing a US-led enduring regional security architecture comprising more capable partners and allies is the most effective way for the United States to safeguard our vital national security interests, effectively compete with Chinese ambitions, confront Iranian malign influence, and counter Russian aggression in the Middle East. As an ancient Arab proverb reminds us, one hand can't climb.

Photo Caption: An Israeli Air Force F-16 flies toward a US Air Force KC-10 Extender during in-flight refueling operations in support of exercise Juniper Oak 23.3 above the US Central Command area of responsibility on July 11, 2023. (US Air Force photo by Senior Airman Jacob Cabanero)

APPENDIX: THE EVOLUTION OF COLLECTIVE SECURITY IN THE MIDDLE EAST, 1950–PRESENT

The Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation (1950)

Egypt, Iraq, Jordan, Lebanon, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Yemen signed the Treaty of Joint Defense and Economic Cooperation between the States of the Arab League (JDEC) in 1950.¹⁰⁸ These nations created the JDEC as a cooperation pact to preserve security, defense, and peace in the region consistent with the Arab League Pact and the United Nations Charter. A military annex established a Permanent Military Commission that would serve to translate the intent into concrete form. The treaty included a provision for mutual defense in Article II that proscribed that all signatories to the agreement “consider any [act of] armed aggression made against any one or more of them or their armed forces, to be directed against them all.” It based this stipulation of collective defense on Article V of NATO’s Washington Treaty and committed its members to collective security.

The reality is more complicated, however. During the Iran-Iraq War, only five states in the Arab League provided material support to Iraq: Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates.

In other circumstances, the agreement has proven useful. The Arab League has deployed several peacekeeping and expeditionary forces since its inception. Notably, in 1976, it established the Arab Deterrent Force to help conclude the Lebanese Civil War. The force consisted mainly of Syrians with the support of Saudi, Sudanese, and Libyan troops and helped end the Syrian military occupation of Lebanon. The GCC contributed troops to the Peninsula Shield Force to counter Iranian subversion in 1982. Seven Arab states participated in some capacity in Operation Desert Storm (1991) as part of a US-led coalition of 35 states. In the aftermath of the Gulf War, the GCC agreed to build a regional military force including Egypt and Syria, but it never established the corps. Apart from a deployment to address civil disturbance in Bahrain in 2011, it has not used the force since.¹⁰⁹

Middle East Treaty Organization (1955–79)

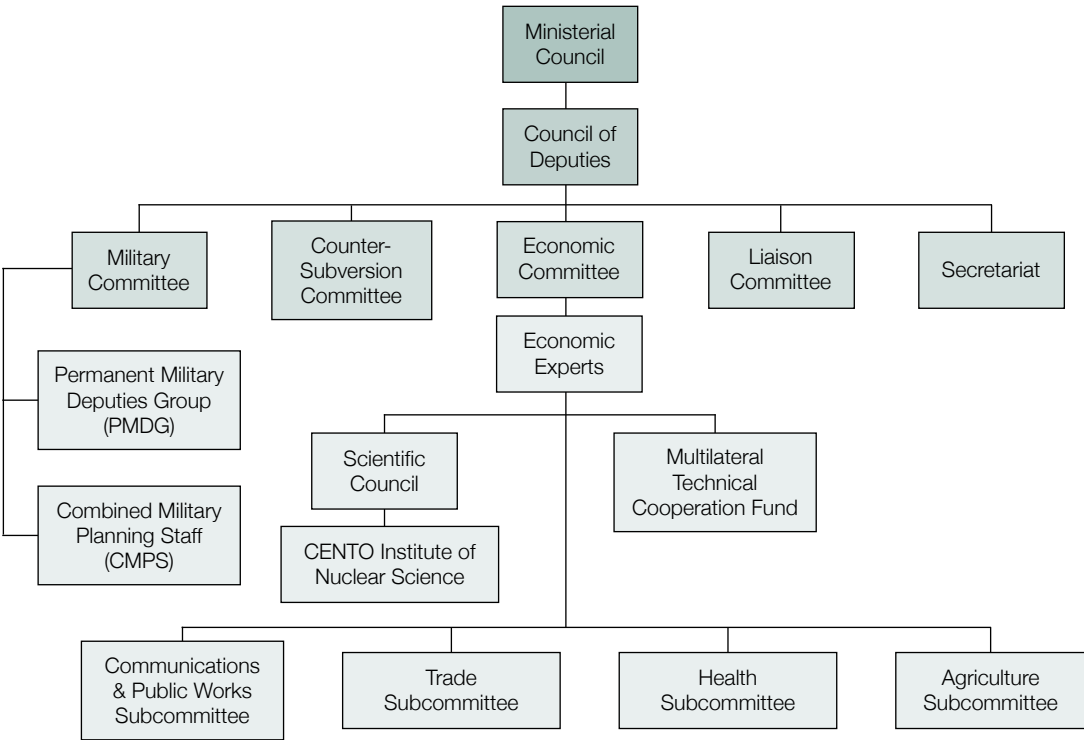
On February 24, 1955, Iran, Iraq, Pakistan, Turkey, and the United Kingdom established the Middle East Treaty Organization (METO), more commonly referred to as the Baghdad Pact and later rebranded as the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), to confront the threat from the Soviet Union. The US encouraged the formation with promises of military and economic aid and served a central role in the negotiations but was not among the signatories. The US ultimately joined the military committee of the alliance in 1958.

The organization’s headquarters was in Baghdad, Iraq, from 1955 until July 14, 1958, when a military coup overthrew the Iraqi monarchy. General Abdul Karim Qasim, who led the new government, withdrew Iraq from the Baghdad Pact and opened diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The organization thereafter dropped the name Baghdad Pact in favor of CENTO. The headquarters shifted to Ankara, Turkey, from 1958–1979.

CENTO had an elaborate organizational structure (see figure 12), including a council of ministers, a secretariat, and an economic committee, with subcommittees in the health, trade, and communications fields. The council of ministers, CENTO’s supreme source of authority, met annually at the prime ministers’ or foreign ministers’ level, alternatively in Tehran, Islamabad, Ankara, London, and Washington. A secretary general, appointed by the council of ministers for a renewable three years, oversaw CENTO activities. A council of deputies held regular meetings at the Ankara headquarters at the ambassadorial level. The secretariat, composed of approximately 200 individuals in the 1970s, including 50 military officers, maintained close ties with both NATO and SEATO.

The secretariat had four divisions that carried out nonmilitary tasks. The Political and Administrative Division prepared and serviced council meetings and implemented directives from the Secretariat. The Economic Division prepared and serviced meetings of the Economic Committee and administered the

Figure 12: Central Treaty Organization Structure



Source: Author.

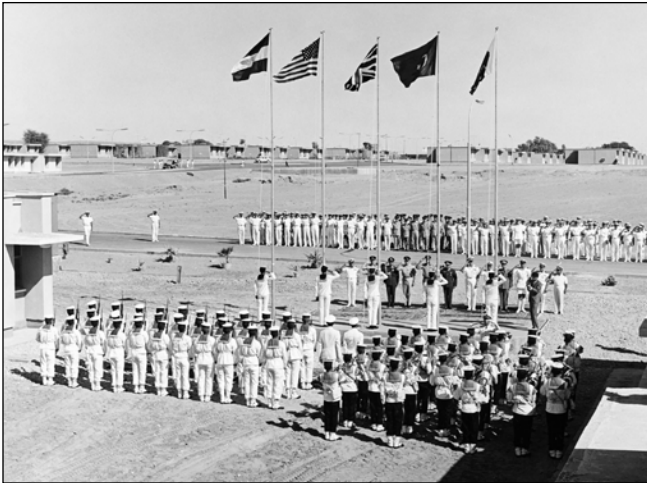
technical cooperation program, as well as the Multilateral Technical Cooperation Fund. It also acted as liaison for technical exchanges between member states, developed statistical materials, and worked in close cooperation with the Agricultural Machinery and Soil Conservation Training Center in Persia. The Public Relations Division promoted knowledge and understanding of CENTO purposes and activities by distributing press releases, reports, and technical papers. Finally, the Security Division oversaw the security of the Secretariat and its staff.

The United States established a special Development Loan Fund and financed, among other projects, the Turkey-Persia railway, a 7,925 km microwave telephone line linking Ankara, Tehran, and Karachi that was inaugurated in 1965 at a cost

\$30 million. In 1962 an industrial development wing was established within the secretariat to finance numerous industrial projects. The port of Trabzon was enlarged in 1963 and that of Iskenderun completely reconstructed with CENTO funds in 1972. Other projects included the 1,000-mile highway linking Pakistan, Persia, and Turkey, as well as the CENTO airway system, which introduced international standards for the control and surveillance of the air routes between Ankara, Tehran, and Karachi through air-navigational aids, radar-equipped air traffic control centers, and modern meteorological services.

CENTO did not limit itself to military endeavors but sought to approach the region holistically with a focus on infrastructure that had military and economic value. It sponsored a railway

Figure 13. CENTO Exercise Midlink 11, Persian Gulf, 1968



Source: Imperial War Museum.

line to enable a rail connection between London and Tehran. Rail and road projects have long been associated with the region. Analysts have recently suggested CENTO contribute to resolving the Israel-Palestinian conflict in the form of Tracks for Peace,¹¹⁰ as an initiative that the forum—including the US, Israel, India, and the UAE (I2U2)—considered.¹¹¹

Drawing on the experiences of its counterparts NATO and SEATO, CENTO expanded its scope to sponsor several cultural and scientific research institutions encompassing education,¹¹² healthcare,¹¹³ an Institute of Nuclear and Applied Science, a Scientific Coordinating Board, and rural development.¹¹⁴

From 1949 on, China was also funding and arming communists against the various Arab monarchs, especially the Popular Front for the Liberation of the Occupied Arabian Gulf (later renamed the Popular Front for the Liberation of Oman and the Arabian Gulf), through Yemen to overthrow the Sultan.¹¹⁵

The members dissolved the CENTO alliance on March 16, 1979, following the revolution in Iran, and while many consid-

ered it ineffective as an instrument contributing to the successful conclusion of the Cold War, it provides valuable insight regarding the formation of a potential successor. It is logical to encompass domains that lie outside the security sector but directly contribute to it.

The Peninsula Shield Force (1985)

The GCC agreed to conduct joint military exercises in response to the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait. This would evolve into the Peninsula Shield Force (PSF), comprising infantry, armor, artillery, and combat support elements from each of the GCC countries. Despite the challenges associated with maintaining a multinational combined arms team, the PSF has successfully established a permanent headquarters staff, conducts annual exercises, and conducted two deployments to Kuwait as a show of force during the Iran-Iraq War and in 1994 in response to an Iraqi troop buildup on the Iraq-Kuwait border. The force depends on external support for force projection and sustainment, which limits its potential, but nonetheless constitutes an important example of cooperation and commitment to collective security.¹¹⁶

United States Central Command (1989)

When the hostage crisis in Iran and the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan underlined the need to strengthen US interests in the region, President Jimmy Carter established the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF) in March 1980. To provide a stronger, more lasting solution in the region, President Ronald Reagan took steps to transform the RDJTF into a permanent unified command over a two-year period. The first step was to make the RDJTF independent of US Readiness Command, followed by the activation of CENTCOM in January 1983.

Responsibility for US forces in Israel was transferred from the US European Command (USEUCOM) to CENTCOM in September 2021 following its approval in the 2020 Unified Command Plan by President Donald J. Trump announced publicly on January 15, 2020.

Combined Maritime Forces (1990)

Threats to global commerce and energy in the maritime domain have also long been an area of concern. Iranian threats to freedom of navigation in the Arabian Gulf in the 1980s led the US and its regional partners to secure shipping lanes.¹¹⁷ They established the CMF as a multinational maritime partnership that “serves to ensure freedom of navigation by countering illicit non-state actors on the high seas and promoting security, stability, and prosperity across approximately 3.2 million square miles of international waters, which encompass some of the world’s most important shipping lanes.”¹¹⁸ The CMF currently has four combined or multinational task forces addressing threats from Iran, non-state terrorist groups, narco-traffickers, pirates, and arms smugglers.

Combined Task Force 150 (CTF-150) is a multinational coalition naval task force in Bahrain that the US established in 1990 to monitor, board, inspect, and stop suspect shipping in the Horn of Africa region, North Arabian Sea, and Indian Ocean. Countries presently contributing to CTF-150 include Australia, Canada, Denmark, France, Pakistan, Japan, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the United States. Italy, India, Malaysia, Netherlands, New Zealand, Portugal, Singapore, Spain, Thailand, and Turkey have also participated in combined operations.

After the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, the US reestablished the task force as a multinational coalition to undertake counterterrorism operations at sea as part of Operation Enduring Freedom. The coalition has grown and evolved beyond that operation’s scope to encompass and address wider maritime

Figure 14: Ships Assigned to CTF-150 Assemble in a Formation in the Gulf of Oman



Photo Caption: From front to back: Italian Navy *Maestrale*-class frigate *Scirocco*, German Navy *Bremen*-class frigate *Augsburg*, US Navy *Ticonderoga*-class cruiser USS *Leyte Gulf*, French *Georges Leygues*-class frigate *La Motte-Picquet*, and a Royal Navy Type 22 frigate.

Source: US Navy photo by Photographer's Mate 1st Class Bart Bauer.

security threats from mandated illicit non-state actors to member states. It currently includes four subordinate elements: CTF 151 (counter-piracy), CTF 152 (maritime security operations inside the Arabian Gulf), CTF 153 (Red Sea maritime security), and CTF 154 (maritime security training).

The GCC Joint Defense Agreement (2000)

The GCC convened a summit in Bahrain in 2000 and signed a mutual defense treaty that would formally commit the members of the organization to consider any external aggression against one member as an attack on all, reminiscent of the 1950 JDEC.

The December 2000 summit participants agreed to consider any outside aggression against one GCC member as aggression

against all members.¹¹⁹ The member governments still must ratify it before it goes into effect; so far, only Bahrain has done so, and there is currently no timetable to conclude the process. The agreement also called for expanding the existing Peninsula Shield Force stationed in Saudi Arabia near the Iraqi border from 5,000 troops to 22,000 and establishing a common secure communications network and early warning system.¹²⁰ In many ways, this provision resembles the GCC's 1997 Cooperation Belt project to connect the operation centers of its air forces and air defense networks, which began in 2001.¹²¹

The agreement calls for enhanced military cooperation, an increase in individual and collective capabilities, improved coordination, and continued development of the PSF encompassing

Figure 15: Jens Stoltenberg at the ICI Fifteenth Anniversary Ceremony



NATO Secretary General Jens Stoltenberg delivers remarks during the Istanbul Cooperation Initiative fifteen anniversary ceremony at the NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait in December 2019.

joint exercises. It also recognizes the need to establish a foundation for military industry and to encourage the private-sector investment necessary to sustain it.

Istanbul Cooperation Initiative (2004)

NATO established the ICI at the 2004 NATO summit in Istanbul to promote security cooperation on a bilateral basis between NATO and partner countries in the broader Middle East. It aims to contribute to long-term global and regional security by offering non-NATO countries in the region the opportunity to cooperate with NATO. Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates currently participate in the initiative, while Oman and Saudi Arabia participate in selected activities within the ICI framework. Its activities include defense planning and budgeting, counterterrorism, nonproliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and civil preparedness.

NATO established the NATO-ICI Regional Center in Kuwait City in 2017 to serve as a hub for practical cooperation between NATO, its ICI partners, and the GCC. It focuses on four pillars: politics, defense, internal security, and economic integration.

Arab Peace and Security Council (2008)

In addition to GCC efforts, the Arab League established the Arab Peace and Security Council (APSC) in 2008. It meets twice a year before the league's council meetings and serves to inform its members' discussions related to security and defense. In 2010, it recommended the establishment of the Arab Cooperation Framework on Early Warning and Crisis Response.¹²²

GCC Defense Strategy (2009)

The GCC developed a defense strategy that the Supreme Council (Thirtieth Session) approved in December 2009. The strategy reflects a significant achievement and an evolutionary step toward a collective joint defense system. It provides the member states' vision to coordinate and reinforce regional integration and develop their capacity to defend their sovereignty, stability, and interests collectively. It also provides strategic guidance informing force modernization and development, specifies

strategic goals, and provides overarching guidance to achieve them. Importantly, it provides for comprehensive and periodic strategic assessment of the regional security environment, threats, challenges, and risks.¹²³

GCC Unified Military Command (2013)

Building on the 2009 defense strategy, the GCC Supreme Council created a Unified Military Command in 2013, following a detailed study that the Joint Defense Council submitted. The command would exercise control of the PSF and a supporting Rapid Intervention Force.

Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant (2014)

On December 3, 2014, representatives from 59 countries established a global coalition to combat the Islamic State in the Levant (ISIL).¹²⁴ They gathered at NATO headquarters in Brussels to develop a comprehensive response to the threat of ISIL.¹²⁵

The Global Coalition to Counter the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant agreed to a strategy that called for exposing ISIL's true nature, cutting off ISIL's financing and funding, and conducting combined military operations.¹²⁶

Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (2015)

Saudi Arabian Defense Minister Mohammad bin Salman Al Saud announced the Islamic Military Counter Terrorism Coalition (IMCTC) on December 15, 2015, as a counterterrorist alliance of countries in the Muslim world within the framework of the 2014 Global Coalition.¹²⁷ At the time, there were 34 members, most of them members of the Organization of Islamic Cooperation (OIC). Additional countries joined, and the number of members reached 41 when Kenya joined on September 1, 2022.¹²⁸ On January 6, 2017, former Chief of Army Staff of Pakistan General Raheel Sharif was named the IMCTC's first commander in chief and the coalition had planned a joint operations center in Riyadh, Saudi Arabia.¹²⁹

Joint Arab Force (2015)

In 2007, the Arab League summit convened, agreed to revisit its joint defense,¹³⁰ and established a peacekeeping force capable of deploying to South Lebanon, the Republic of Iraq, South Sudan, the Federal Republic of Ethiopia, and other locations in crisis as directed.¹³¹

In 2015, the Arab League Secretariat proposed a joint Arab rapid intervention force within the rubric of the 1950 military defense pact to combat terrorism, resembling what the GCC had envisioned in 2013. Egyptian President Abdel Fattah El-Sisi declared that “the need for a unified Arab force is growing and becoming more pressing every day.”¹³² Bahrain’s King Hamad bin Isa Al Khalifa also supported the “historic development” of a Joint Arab Force (JAF), yet the Arab League never deployed it due to a combination of political constraints and lack of force projection and sustainment resources.¹³³

Middle East Strategic Alliance (2017)

President Trump announced the idea of a US-led regional security architecture in May 2017 during a visit to Riyadh. He outlined a security partnership between GCC nations including Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates, with the addition of Jordan and Egypt.¹³⁴ The Saudi-drafted declaration aimed to enhance the partnership among the Arab countries of the region and the US to “confront extremism, terrorism, achieving peace, stability and development, on regional as well as international stages.”¹³⁵

The United States and members of the GCC, in addition to Egypt and Jordan, held initial conversations based on political, security, economic, and energy cooperation to establish what would be referred to as the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA). Considering previous efforts to integrate the region and recognizing that an enduring relationship would require an underlying rationale for its defense and mechanisms to address disputes, they included four pillars encompassing cooperation beyond the security domain.

The alliance members held the inaugural MESA meeting focusing on economic cooperation in Muscat, Oman, on January 9, 2019.¹³⁶ The Gulf rift between Qatar and the Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) disrupted these early discussions, but the talks continued to provide a regional platform for security and economic cooperation for all parties.

Secretary of State Mike Pompeo hosted the Ministerial to Promote a Future of Peace and Security in the Middle East in Warsaw in February 2019,¹³⁷ which affirmed the consensus among the regions’ leaders that Iran was the principal threat to their stability and that addressing this threat required unprecedented cooperation. The event accelerated not only discussions regarding MESA but also normalization with Israel that resulted in the Abraham Accords. Unfortunately, the progress the alliance made in Poland suffered a setback in April 2019 when Egypt announced it was withdrawing its participation, unsure of benefits beyond the existing bilateral relationship. Saudi Arabia’s desire to exclude economic cooperation from its foundational “pillars,” which prevented US interagency consensus and delayed formalization of the alliance, compounded the setback.

Secretary Pompeo sought to refocus the effort during a US-GCC ministerial on the sidelines of the UN General Assembly in New York in September.¹³⁸ While the US Department of Defense held strong reservations and was actively seeking to reduce US military commitments in the Middle East, the ministerial developed a supporting concept encompassing the creation of distributed centers of excellence, which the US would establish with partners, drawing on their varied strengths.

Despite setbacks, the US and Jordan co-hosted the first Energy Pillar Working Group meeting under the MESA framework in November 2019 in Washington, DC. Delegations including representatives from the foreign, energy, petroleum, investment, development, and planning ministries of seven countries—Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates—and the GCC Secretariat participated. The

Figure 16: MESA Ministerial New York during UN General Assembly, September 2018



Source: US Department of State.¹³⁹

US delegation included representatives from the Department of State, the Department of Energy, the National Security Council, the Overseas Private Investment Corporation, and the Export-Import Bank.

Building on the momentum of the inaugural high-level MESA meeting in Muscat, Oman, Jordanian Ambassador Khalid Shawabkah stressed the strategic importance of the Middle East for global stability and the central role of energy cooperation and integration in promoting regional security and prosperity.¹⁴⁰

The US drafted a formal agreement, and the GCC nations and Jordan approved it. Principals ultimately approved it in late 2020 as well but never signed it.

Arab Shield 1 (2018)

In November 2018, forces from Bahrain, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) conducted war games in western Egypt with observers from Morocco and Lebanon. The combined arms military exercises are the first time the six Arab states have conducted joint war games.¹⁴¹

International Maritime Security Construct (2019)

Eight countries including the US formed the International Maritime Security Construct (IMSC) in July 2019 in response to Iranian threats to the freedom of navigation in the international waters of the Arabian Gulf and Indian Ocean. They established Coalition Task Force Sentinel, the operational arm of IMSC, on November 7, 2019, to deter Iranian malign activity and safeguard the merchant shipping industry.¹⁴²

Council of Arab and African States Bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (2020)

On January 6, 2020, Saudi Arabia launched the Council of Arab and African States bordering the Red Sea and Gulf of Aden (commonly referred to as the Red Sea Council) to cooperate on issues of security and enhance stability in the Red Sea region. Foreign ministers from countries including Saudi Arabia, Sudan, Djibouti, Somalia, Eritrea, Egypt, Yemen, and Jordan signed the charter of the council,¹⁴³ acknowledging their convergent interests and collective responsibility and providing a forum to discuss a multitude of shared interests on both sides of the Red Sea.¹⁴⁴

Project Red Sea (2021)

Disruptions to international trade along the Red Sea have also generated concern among nations whose markets depend on freedom of navigation. Expanding on the Regional Program for Maritime Security in the Red Sea, the project receives funding (EUR 6.1M between 2021-2024) from the European Union. INTERPOL, the International Maritime Organization (IMO), and the United Nations Office on Drugs and Crime (UNODC) lead the effort to develop the capacity of states bordering the Red Sea and enhance security and safety standards for maritime, port and land-based law enforcement authorities.¹⁴⁵

Israel within CENTCOM

On January 15, 2021, the Pentagon reported a change in the Unified Command Plan (UCP), shifting Israel from US European Command (EUCOM) to CENTCOM.¹⁴⁶ Though the announcement cited the Abraham Accords as part of the rationale, the US DoD made this decision in 2019 when the president provided written guidance for the UCP recognizing the necessity of operation integration to address the Iranian threat and to more effectively coordinate counterterrorism operations in Syria. It also reflected the elimination of historical barriers regarding regional cooperation between Arab states and Israel and recognition of the need to ultimately include Israel.

Israel has also expanded cooperation with its neighbors across multiple domains: cyber, maritime, intelligence, air defense, and arms exports sales, which hit an all-time high of \$12.5 billion in 2022.¹⁴⁷ The UAE, Bahrain, Morocco, and Sudan purchased 24 percent of the weapons.¹⁴⁸

Negev Forum (2022)

The Negev Summit took place on March 27–28, 2022, in Sde Boker, Israel. Israeli Foreign Minister Yair Lapid hosted the foreign ministers of Bahrain, Egypt, Morocco and the United Arab Emirates, as well as US Secretary of State Antony Blinken.

The Negev Forum Steering Committee also released the Negev Forum Regional Cooperation Framework, adopted November 10, 2022, which codified the structure and goals of the forum and recognized the potential to build networks of cooperation to advance common interests, regional stability, and prosperity in the Middle East.

As part of the Negev Forum, six multilateral working groups consisting of the member states were established to deal with the following issues: energy, health, regional security, tourism, water and food security, and education and tolerance.

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