



Middle East and North Africa: A Triade of Interests

SCUSA 71 POLICY PAPER

Background

Since 2001, the United States has provided tens of billions of dollars in military and economic aid to its allies throughout the Middle East. Recently, focus has also been placed on containing Iran, which seeks to gain influence in the Sunni Arab world through its proxies. Although major combat operations as seen during the mid-2000s are no longer the norm, the US will likely remain committed to certain Middle Eastern allies through security partnerships. The rise of the Islamic State in the wake of the US's December 2011 withdrawal from Iraq and the persistence of the Taliban in Afghanistan have arguably exhausted American public support for continued large-scale engagement. This history, combined with an international shift to great power politics, requires the US to rethink its strategy in the MENA region.

Executive Summary

There are three primary US interests in the MENA region today. First, secure the global energy market because the flow oil is directly tied to jobs, the price of gas, and the economies of our partners. Second, strengthen the stability and governance to address extremism and corruption. Third, contain the competing spheres of influence in the region to mitigate conflict. In the following subheadings, this policy paper will analyze these US interests, identify challenges, and provide potential solutions.

Securing the Global Energy Market

Background. It is in the core interest of the United States to secure the global energy market for our allies and for the global order. This is important to the United States because the flow oil is directly tied to jobs, the price of gas, and the economies of our partners and allies in Europe and the Middle East.

Challenges. The problems directly impeding our core national interest are two fold: immediate and potential. The immediate threats are state threats like Iran, non-state threats like ISIS and Al-Qaeda, and interstate conflict between major oil producing states in the Middle East. The potential threats are strategic partnerships changing such as Saudi Arabia relying heavily on Russia due to American reliability, and the uncertainty of Gulf oil supply in medium term.

Solutions. The United States will accomplish its goals by building naval coalition with allies to secure sea lanes such as The Strait of Hormoz, continuing to support U.S Navy and allies operations and bases in the region particularly Persian Gulf Arab States. Working with existing international security forces in the region, pipelines will be secure from attacks from radical terrorism. Encouraging Saudi Arabia to develop conversations with Iran to avoid interstate conflict. In an ever changing multipolar international system dependent on hard assets, America has to compete for its allies. America will have to extend its diplomatic and military show its support for its allies. Seeing as oil is a finite natural resource, it is likely that countries acting in their own interest will seek to mitigate risk and reallocate resources. To maintain Middle Eastern energy markets, the U.S and its allies will invest in other sources of energy (AOC-GND).

Stability and Governance

Background. Individuals in the Middle East often feel disrespected and lack security. These factors in states lacking proper infrastructure and governance contribute largely to a rise in violent extremism that threatens the U.S. national security interest. Maintaining the status quo of targeting critical personnel and limiting military occupation in countering violent extremism is crucial, however addressing the root causes of radicalization is in the United States' national security and economic interests. America's failures over the years in the Middle East have led to a lack of public support for large, costly ventures into the region. The United States can assist in fighting terrorism through less costly options

such as working to prevent government corruption, providing technical infrastructure, and leveraging current allies within the region.

Corruption and Soft Power. Corruption renders aid ineffective and generates feelings of resentment among the population - two factors that lead to instability and extremism. Corruption must be mitigated through soft power bureaucratic exchanges. As well as U.S. led training to improve internal foreign government infrastructure and policy. Cooperation and compliance will be tied to incentives for aid.

Provide Technical Infrastructure. Improvements to technical infrastructure requires that relationships with local experts and tribal leaders be established and fostered. By establishing a dialogue with these community leaders, they will be enabled to provide feelings of significance, security, and interdependence for their communities. This can be accomplished through providing resources to develop a logistically functional infrastructure to include operational instruction and technical training.

Leverage. Utilizing relationships with allied powers, such as Saudi Arabian and Israeli influence, will allow the U.S. to avoid indefinite commitment in the region. Our partners must use their capital to aid in building physical infrastructures in other states while promoting internal self-sufficiency within these nations. Assisting these countries by providing limited resources and stressing the benefits of this symbiotic relationship, will create sustainable systems of support in the region without the need for significant U.S. oversight or intervention.

Influence in the Region

Background: In the context of increasing Russian aggression and influence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA), it is imperative to strengthen U.S. relationships with allies in the region and cultivate relationships with those powers that, with Russian support, could pose a threat to the U.S. The growing tensions between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and the Islamic Republic of Iran are exemplary of this issue and must be addressed in order to protect American interests and influence in the region.

Challenges: There are several challenges that the U.S. faces in maintaining its influence in the MENA region in the midst of rising tensions between KSA and Iran. First, pursuing rapprochement with Iran could lead the Saudis to perceive a U.S. abandonment of its allies in the region. Second, anti-U.S. sentiments within the Iranian government are due in part to perceptions of historic U.S. discontinuity in Middle Eastern policy (such as with the JCPOA, Syria and Kurds). Third, the strong and growing Russian interest and influence in the MENA region places the Russians in a position to fill power vacuums in the potential absence of the U.S. Finally, domestic criticism of U.S.-KSA relations and of prolonged U.S. military involvement in MENA could hinder U.S. ability to counter Russian influence in the region.

Solutions: The solution to this problem lies in a two-pronged approach: rapprochement with Iran and strengthened relations with the KSA. To achieve reengagement with Iran, the U.S. must gradually relieve sanctions on the country, rollback the travel ban, increase US-Iranian exchange opportunities and rekindle negotiations with Iran on non-proliferation. Such policy measures should be contingent upon Iranian efforts to improve relations with the KSA. This must be coupled with a strengthening of U.S. relations with the KSA, which can be achieved through the continuation of arms sales, increases in public diplomacy initiatives, and an expansion of foreign exchange programs.