

SCUSA 71 Roundtable: Middle East

Since 2001, the United States has provided tens of billions of dollars in military and economic aid to its allies throughout the Middle East. In the years immediately following the 9/11 terrorist attacks, US planners saw this money as funding counterinsurgency (COIN) and counter terrorism (CT) efforts—primarily in the combat zones of Iraq and Afghanistan. As the situation has developed over the past two decades however, the US has shifted some of its security cooperation and security assistance efforts to other Middle East allies – among them Egypt, Jordan, and Lebanon – facing their own COIN or CT threats. Much 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 in Iraq during the mid-2000s are no longer the norm, the US will likely remain committed to certain Middle Eastern allies through security partnerships. However, 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.

The 2018 National Defense Strategy is explicit that efforts at building these long-term security partnerships will remain a priority. From the NDS:

***Form enduring coalitions in the Middle East.** We will foster a stable and secure Middle East that denies safe havens for terrorists, is not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to stable global energy markets and secure trade routes. We will develop enduring coalitions to consolidate gains we have made in Afghanistan, Iraq, Syria, and elsewhere, to support the lasting defeat of terrorists as we sever their sources of strength and counterbalance Iran.¹*

However, in a break from previous administrations the 2018 NDS views retaining the US strategic competitive edge relative to China and Russia as a higher priority than countering violent extremist organizations (VEOs).² It also contends that, unlike most of the period since the end of the Cold War, the US military must now operate in an environment contested by technologically advanced competitors where freedom of access and maneuver is no longer assured.

In other words, the United States is still the most powerful military in the world - but its near-peer competitors now operate in conflict zones where the US has historically been the hegemon. How does the United States confront this reality? How does it limit Russia and China's influence in the Middle East while still maintaining the relationships necessary to confront Al-Qaeda, Islamic State, and other offshoots and affiliates? How does it isolate and deter Iran in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen? How does it ensure safety in the Strait of Hormuz in the face of increasing Iranian aggression? Can it do these things without broad European support? How do we sustain the coalitions necessary to consolidate the gains made against Islamist insurgencies in Afghanistan, Syria, and Iraq?

The Saudi-Iran “Cold War” and Arab Priorities

Arguably the biggest problem facing the US in the Middle East is not Sunni Islamist terrorism, but the Sunni-Shia rivalry. On its face, this may not seem intuitive. The United States has spent nearly two decades fighting Al-Qaeda and its Sunni affiliates and continues to do so through a mixture of combat and advisory missions in Iraq, Syria, Jordan, Lebanon, and elsewhere. But regional dynamics have allowed Iran to spread its own theocratic vision, exploiting gaps throughout the region with the help of friendly governments such as Syria or Iraq or powerful non-state actors such as Hezbollah or Ansar Allah.

Take Syria and Hezbollah as examples. Iran has provided Syria significant technical, financial, and military aid during the whole of its eight-year civil war. At the same time, Iran provides significant aid to Lebanese Hezbollah, which has 7,000 of its own fighters in Syria. Hezbollah is reported to have lost up to 2,500 fighters with 7,000 more injured in the conflict. It has gained valuable combat experience and is beginning to operate more as a conventional force, which could threaten both the US-backed Lebanese Armed Forces and the Israel Defense Forces (IDF) when its fighters return from Syria. It is likely to stay in Syria for the long term and will participate in any effort to secure Eastern Syria in order to ensure the survival of its arms pipeline from Iran to Beirut.³ For Iran, this two-pronged support has a major benefit: control over a logistically-sustainable, conventional military force positioned on Israel's northern border.

Yet, most of Iran's actions in the region seem aimed at a single target: the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA). This may be perception rather than reality. As the Custodian of the Two Holy Mosques, KSA sees itself as the center of the Muslim - particularly Sunni Muslim - world, responsible for the preservation and image of Islam. Domestic politics also factor into it. KSA's rulers must use divisive rhetoric to appease radical Wahhabi clerics who view Iran's theocracy as an apocalyptic threat to the Sunni world.⁴ Whether Iran's ultimate goal is to seize Mecca and Medina is almost immaterial; what matters is what Saudi leaders perceive. As Saudi Crown Prince Muhammad bin Salman (MbS) put it in May of 2017, "We know that we are a main goal for the Iranian regime. We will not wait until the battle (comes to) Saudi Arabia, but we will work to have the battle in Iran rather than in Saudi Arabia."⁵

To a lay person, KSA and Iran share at least one major common interest: counterterrorism. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State threaten both countries' governing regimes, and attacks against either nation's oil and natural gas infrastructure would jeopardize the stability of global energy markets.⁶ But Iran itself exports its own brand of Shi'a terrorism. It is routinely referred to by US officials as "the leading state sponsor of terrorism."⁷ Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has engaged in an aggressive campaign to expand its influence through the region.

Iranian support to Ansar Allah, the Houthi rebels fighting the Saudi military for control of Yemen, is one way in which Iran continues to expand its influence that directly challenges KSA's regional hegemony. However, the Yemen conflict may also be an example of how the perception of a threat exceeds its reality, and how the Saudi reaction may be creating a self-fulfilling prophecy.

In order to counter the well-armed Saudis (who fight with the help of US advisors), Houthi rebels increasingly rely upon Tehran for arms and training.⁸ This has become obvious in recent years, as the Houthis deploy advanced Iranian missile technology such as the Qiam-1 and Burkan 2-H, capable of striking Riyadh from Northern Yemen. Other weapons and technologies, such as UAVs and EFPs, are being locally-produced in Yemen in makeshift factories with significant technical and materiel support from Iran.⁹

Yet the alternative - Iranian control over an area directly adjacent to KSA - is not acceptable to anyone: KSA, the United Arab Emirates (UAE), the United States, or Israel. Leaders are already worried about the Houthi ability to target key Saudi facilities with its missiles and drones, as well as its capacity to target US and Gulf countries' oil tankers transiting the Bab al-Mandab.¹⁰ Consequently, some advisors are urging KSA to engage in dialogue with the Houthis. They feel that it will separate the Houthis' interests from the Iranians, allowing Houthis to purge its ranks of militants who care only about continued fighting. Most importantly, it would simultaneously deny Iran "a low-cost, high-yield opportunity to bleed its regional rival,"¹¹ as the International Crisis Group puts it. However, KSA has shown no interest in pursuing peace, likely fearing that any cessation in the fighting will allow Iran to expand its influence.

This “Cold War” between KSA and its allies and Iran (and its allies) is unlikely to end anytime soon. Despite occasionally dangerous rhetoric, both sides understand that a hot war would have disastrous economic consequences for the entire region. The presence of the United States and Russia means that it may be easier to arbitrate disputes, as both sides are less likely to see themselves in a Hobbesian Trap in which they have no choice but to strike.

How Russia and China Gain Influence

Russia has geostrategic interests in the Middle East. Above all, they view an increase in their regional influence as supporting their efforts to recover their former status as a global superpower. They are partnered with the Shi’a faction for the time being: Iran, Iraq, and Syria. Yet this is a short-term, expedient strategy that seeks to ingratiate Russia with a bloc that is generally unfriendly to US interests. At the same time, Russia maintains close relations with Turkey, KSA, UAE, and Egypt. By doing so, it affects these countries’ relations with the U.S [e.g. the recent sale of the Russian S-400 anti-aircraft system to Turkey jeopardizes Turkey’s status as a NATO ally] while also playing the role of mediator in the Sunni-Shi’a rivalry. If it can secure airbase or port rights in Egypt, Libya or Lebanon, it can further expand its influence into the Mediterranean and deflect NATO’s anti-Russia efforts further away from its borders.¹²

China’s geostrategic interests are more economic. China is focused mostly on ensuring its energy security through hydrocarbon investment. In its 2016 Arab Policy Paper, Beijing listed “infrastructure construction, trade and investment facilitation, nuclear power, space, new energy, agriculture, and finance as key areas of focus for Beijing in the region.”¹³ It wants to make the Middle East a centerpiece of its Belt and Road Initiative (BRI), designed to “create a logistical and financial trading network stretching from China across to Western Europe that will open up and link foreign markets to excess Chinese capital and capacity across a range of industries.”¹⁴ The BRI means that China is expanding its influence beyond just KSA and UAE (its two largest Middle East trade partners). It wants to influence Egypt, which controls the vital Suez Canal through which flows sixty percent of China’s European exports, and Jordan and Israel, which provide key land access to the Mediterranean. Unlike Russia, China’s efforts in the Middle East do not exacerbate regional tensions. However, Washington increasingly takes note of the ability of China to influence in its favor the policy decisions of US allies in region.

Where Does the US Go from Here?

During a May 2017 visit to Riyadh, President Trump signed a Letter of Intent to sell more than \$350 billion in arms to KSA in the coming decade [this amount does not include the previous \$90 billion in arms sales since 1950].¹⁵ Analysts estimate that these sales provide for hundreds of thousands of American jobs. In addition, KSA’s sovereign wealth fund and individual members of the wealthy elite pour tens of billions of dollars into America’s economy, including in the critical technology, banking, and infrastructure sectors.¹⁶

Given the controversy surrounding MbS and his role in the October 2018 murder of Washington Post journalist Jamal Khashoggi and the ongoing humanitarian crisis as a result of KSA’s war in Yemen, it is difficult for some to conceive how the US-Saudi strategic relationship supersedes legitimate moral concerns. But given the political realities of the region, many practitioners argue that the US cannot pull away from KSA. Even if the United States shifted its focus to other Sunni allies, they do not have the political, economic, and religious clout required to act as a counterweight to Iran’s growing influence. Compounding this dilemma is the Saudi-Qatar rift, which has forced Qatar into a closer relationship with Iran.¹⁷ The US is doing what it can to achieve rapprochement, but the US can only

take the situation as far as the two nations are willing to go amidst the deep antagonism the two-year economic blockade has created.

Surely, the United States is still seen throughout the Middle East as the most powerful and reliable security partner. This reality is unlikely to change soon. However, the US cannot always deliver everything a partner wants. It has limited security assistance funds and must distribute them according to priorities laid out by Congress. Domestic politics often result in inconsistent budget outlays or significant delays, and the promises our military leaders make to our regional allies can only be made so far in advance.

Even in situations when budget outlays are guaranteed, problems can arise. Egypt is an example of this: the \$1.3 billion that Egypt receives from the US each year is part of the Israel-Egypt peace agreement signed at Camp David in 1979 and was initially meant to modernize Egypt's mostly Soviet military with US equipment.¹⁸ Egyptians have always viewed this money as an investment in their conventional force, which they market to the Egyptian public as being the protector of Egyptian sovereignty. However, in recent years Egypt has faced an increasingly stubborn Al-Qaeda insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula that threatens both Egyptian and Israeli security. Under pressure, Egypt is unhappily allocating an ever-increasing percentage of the \$1.3 billion to CT efforts against AQ-SP (Al-Qaeda Sinai Province). Even when the US provided a partner with this guaranteed money, it still has trouble influencing how the recipient nation's spending is prioritized.

These kinds of challenges are not new. Foreign policy realists generally view instability in the Middle East as a threat to US national security and are willing to forego progress in human rights or democratic reforms to achieve it. The clearest example of this in recent years is when the Obama administration halted pending arms sales to Egypt in October 2013, a few months after the Egyptian Army overthrew the democratically-elected Muslim Brotherhood candidate Muhammad Morsi - only to reinstate them in March 2015 after it became clear that attacks along Egypt's border with lawless Libya and continued insurgent violence in the Sinai Peninsula threatened Egypt's stability.¹⁹ This event also created a friction between Egypt and the US that Russia exploited by securing a \$3 billion arms deal with Saudi and Emirati backing.²⁰ This is not an isolated example. China, Russia, and other aspirants often step into these spaces with their own promises of arms sales or training.²¹

Most politicians understand this dynamic, but it is becoming increasingly difficult to justify some actions in the Middle East as being in the "national interest" when omnipresent media make the consequences of these actions increasingly visible to the global audience. Yemen is the obvious example. When the Trump Administration invoked the emergency authority provision of the Arms Export Control Act of 1976 in May 2019 to send an additional \$8 billion worth of weapons to aid KSA's efforts in Yemen without Congressional approval,²² public pressure compelled Congress to pass several resolutions in an effort to stop the sales. President Trump vetoed all of them, with Chairman of the Senate Foreign Relations Committee Senator Jim Risch (R-ID), who supported the veto, noting that KSA would simply turn to China or Russia for more arms.

Even while the US struggles to contain its allies' behavior, the Trump Administration's perceived antagonism towards the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) means that the US must face Iran only with the support of its divided Gulf allies. This is especially true in light of the US's withdrawal from the P5+1 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), known as "The Iran Nuclear Deal." Iran knows that the US is preparing to confront Iran without broad European support and is wagering that it can ramp up its attacks in the Strait of Hormuz knowing that the EU may not support any kind of military retaliation.²³

In fact, many countries continue to support the JCPOA and have been accused by Washington of setting up new mechanisms to facilitate trade with Iran. Further, some Asian countries rely on trade with Iran for their energy needs and have resisted US efforts to impose sanctions on oil transactions. A Joint Statement by the EU High Representative and the Foreign Ministers of France, Germany, and the United Kingdom in August 2018 stated “The JCPOA is working and delivering on its goal, namely to ensure that the Iranian programme remains exclusively peaceful, as confirmed by the International Atomic Energy Agency in 11 consecutive reports.”²⁴

In light of this European skepticism about the US stance toward Iran, it seems clear that the US should facilitate better interoperability between Arab allies using multilateral exercises or, over the long-term, the Middle East Strategic Alliance (MESA), a brainchild of the US that would establish a common security architecture between the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC), Egypt, Jordan, and the US.²⁵ Yet, can this be achieved when the US’s Gulf allies cannot seem to agree on how to prioritize – or even clearly define – the region’s threats? Furthermore, will domestic US concerns about the moral implication of deeper cooperation with the KSA lead Congress to stymie executive efforts at increased cooperation?

America has fought hard and expended enormous resources in Iraq, Afghanistan, and other countries throughout the Middle East. Should Washington allow malign actors in the region to advance their interests as it contemplates selective disengagement? Should Washington take a more aggressive posture in the Middle East without broad European support, or continue to work primarily through its allies with security cooperation and security assistance? Can the United States change some of its allies’ behavior with respect to human and civil rights without running the risk of their defection to Russia and China? Finally, does America risk losing sight of its struggle against Salafi jihadism by focusing too much of its attention on Iran? Washington must struggle with these questions while recognizing the region’s political realities and the constraints imposed by American domestic politics.

Endnotes

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