Middle East

Strategically situated at the intersection of Europe, Asia, and Africa, the Middle East has long been an important focus of United States foreign policy. U.S. security relationships in the region are built on pragmatism, shared security concerns, and economic interests, including large sales of U.S. arms to countries in the region that are seeking to defend themselves. The U.S. also maintains a long-term interest in the Middle East that is related to the region's economic importance as the world's primary source of oil and gas.

The region is home to a wide array of cultures, religions, and ethnic groups, including Arabs, Jews, Kurds, Persians, and Turks, among others. It also is home to the three Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity, and Islam, in addition to many smaller religions like the Bahá'í, Druze, Yazidi, and Zoroastrian faiths. The region contains many predominantly Muslim countries as well as the world's only Jewish state.

The Middle East is deeply sectarian, and these long-standing divisions, exacerbated by religious extremists that are constantly vying for power, are central to many of the challenges that the region faces today. In some cases, these sectarian divides go back centuries. Contemporary conflicts, however, have less to do with these histories than they do with modern extremist ideologies and the fact that modern-day borders often do not reflect the region's cultural, ethnic, or religious realities. Today's borders are often the results of decisions taken by the British, French, and other powers during and soon after World War I as they dismantled the Ottoman Empire.[1]

In a way not understood by many in the West, religion remains a prominent fact of daily life in the modern Middle East. At the heart of many of the region's conflicts is the friction within Islam between Sunnis and Shias. This friction dates back to the death of the Prophet Muhammad in 632 AD.[2] Sunni Muslims, who form the majority of the world's Muslim population, hold power in most of the Arab countries in the Middle East.

Viewing the Middle East's current instability through the lens of a Sunni–Shia conflict, however, does not show the full picture. The cultural and historical division between Arabs and Persians has reinforced the Sunni–Shia split. The mutual distrust of many Arab/Sunni powers and the Persian/Shia power (Iran), compounded by clashing national and ideological interests, has fueled instability, including in Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. Sunni extremist organizations such as al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have exploited sectarian and ethnic tensions to gain support by posing as champions of Sunni Arabs, Syria's Alawite-dominated regime, and other non-Sunni governments and movements.

Current regional demographic trends also are destabilizing factors. The Middle East contains one of the world's youngest and fastest-growing populations. In most of the West, this would be viewed as an advantage, but not in the Middle East. Known as "youth bulges," these demographic tsunamis have overwhelmed the inadequate political, economic, and educational infrastructures in many countries, and the lack of access to education, jobs, and meaningful political participation fuels

discontent. Because more than 60 percent of the region's inhabitants are less than 25 years old, this demographic bulge will continue to have a substantial effect on political stability across the region.

The Middle East contains more than half of the world's oil reserves and is the world's chief oil-exporting region. As the world's biggest oil consumer, the U.S. has a vested interest in maintaining the free flow of oil and gas from the region, even though the U.S. actually imports relatively little of its oil from the Middle East.[3] Oil is a fungible commodity, and the U.S. economy remains vulnerable to sudden spikes in world oil prices.

Because many U.S. allies depend on Middle East oil and gas, there is also a second-order effect for the U.S. if supply from the Middle East is reduced or compromised. For example, Japan (the world's third largest economy) is the world's largest liquefied natural gas (LNG) importer, accounting for 32 percent of the global market share of LNG demand.[4] The U.S. itself might not be dependent on Middle East oil or LNG, but the economic consequences arising from a major disruption of supplies would ripple across the globe.

Financial and logistics hubs are also growing along some of the world's busiest transcontinental trade routes. One of the region's economic bright spots in terms of trade and commerce is found in the Persian Gulf. The emirates of Dubai and Abu Dhabi in the United Arab Emirates (UAE), along with Qatar, are competing to become the region's top financial center. Although many oil-exporting countries recovered from the 2008 financial crisis and subsequent recession, they have since experienced the deepest economic downturn since the 1990s as a result of falling oil prices.[5] Various factors such as weak demand, infighting within the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC), and increased U.S. domestic oil production have contributed to these plunging oil prices.[6]

The economic situation in the Middle East is part of what drives the political environment. The lack of economic freedom was an important factor leading to the 2011 Arab Spring uprisings, which disrupted economic activity, depressed foreign and domestic investment, and slowed economic growth.

The political environment has a direct bearing on how easily the U.S. military can operate in a region. In many Middle Eastern countries, the political situation remains fraught with uncertainty. The Arab Spring uprisings that began in early 2011 formed a regional sandstorm that eroded the foundations of many authoritarian regimes, erased borders, and destabilized many countries in the region. Even so, the popular uprisings in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, Bahrain, Syria, and Yemen did not usher in a new era of democracy and liberal rule, as many in the West were hoping. At best, these uprisings made slow progress toward democratic reform. At worst, they added to political instability, exacerbated economic problems, and contributed to the rise of Islamist extremists. Six years later, the economic and political outlooks remain bleak.[7]

There is no shortage of security challenges for the U.S. and its allies in this region. Using the breathing space and funding afforded to it by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran has exacerbated Shia–Sunni tensions to increase its influence on embattled regimes and undermine adversaries in Sunni-led states. In May 2018, the Trump Administration left the JCPOA after European allies failed to address many of the serious flaws in the deal like the sunset clauses. U.S. economic sanctions have been restored to pre-JCPOA levels and in some cases have been expanded. While many of America's European allies publicly denounced the Administration's decision to withdraw, privately, most officials agree that the JCPOA was flawed and needs to be fixed. America's allies in the Middle East, including Israel and most Gulf Arab states, supported the U.S. decision and welcomed a harder line against the Iranian regime.

Tehran attempts to run an unconventional empire by exerting great influence on sub-state entities like Hamas (Palestinian territories); Hezbollah (Lebanon); the Mahdi movement

(Iraq); and the Houthi insurgents (Yemen). In Afghanistan, Tehran's influence on some Shiite groups is such that thousands have volunteered to fight for Bashar al-Assad in Syria.[8] Iran also provided arms to the Taliban after it was ousted from power by a U.S.-led coalition[9] and has long considered the Afghan city of Herat, near the Afghan–Iranian border, to be within its sphere of influence.

Iran already looms large over weak and divided Arab rivals. Iraq and Syria have been destabilized by insurgencies and civil war and may never fully recover. Egypt is distracted by its own internal problems, economic imbalances, and the Islamist extremist insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula. Jordan has been inundated by a flood of Syrian refugees and is threatened by the spillover of Islamist extremist groups from Syria. Meanwhile, Tehran has continued to build up its missile arsenal (now the largest in the Middle East) and has intervened to prop up the Assad regime in Syria and reinforced Shiite Islamist revolutionaries in Yemen and Bahrain.[10]

In Syria, the Assad regime's brutal repression of peaceful demonstrations in early 2011 ignited a fierce civil war that has led to the deaths of more than half a million people[11] and displaced more than 5 million refugees in Turkey, Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Egypt. Around 6.1 million people are internally displaced within Syria, which is down slightly from 6.3 million last year.[12] Among the destabilizing spillover effects of this civil war is the creation of large refugee populations that could become a reservoir of potential recruits for extremist groups. Thanks to the power vacuum created by the ongoing civil war in Syria, Islamist extremist groups, including the Islamists Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham (formally known as the al-Qaeda–affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and before that as al-Nusra Front) and the self-styled Islamic State, formerly known as ISIS or ISIL and before that as al-Qaeda in Iraq, carved out extensive sanctuaries where they built proto-states and trained militants from a wide variety of other Arab countries, Central Asia, Russia, Europe, Australia, and the United States. At the height of its power, with a sophisticated Internet and social media presence and by capitalizing on the civil war in Syria and sectarian divisions in Iraq, the IS was able to recruit over 25,000 fighters from outside the region to join its ranks in Iraq and Syria. These foreign fighters included over 4,500 citizens from Western nations, including approximately 250 U.S. citizens.[13]

On September 10, 2014, the U.S. announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat the Islamic State. Since then, the IS has been substantially reduced. The self-proclaimed caliphate lost its final major redoubt in Iraq's second largest city, Mosul, in July 2017 and then lost its so-called capital city located in Raqqa, Syria, in October. Today, thanks to the international coalition led by the U.S., the IS controls less than 2 percent of the territory it once dominated.

Arab–Israeli tensions are another source of instability in the region. The repeated breakdown of Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations has created an even more antagonistic situation. Hamas, the Palestinian branch of the Muslim Brotherhood that has controlled Gaza since 2007, seeks to transform the conflict from a national struggle over sovereignty and territory into a religious conflict in which compromise is denounced as blasphemy. Hamas invokes jihad in its struggle against Israel and seeks to destroy the Jewish state and replace it with an Islamic state.

Important Alliances and Bilateral Relations in the Middle East

The U.S. has strong military, security, intelligence, and diplomatic ties with several Middle Eastern nations, including Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).[14] Since the historical and political circumstances that led to the creation of NATO have largely been absent in the Middle East, the region lacks a similarly strong collective security organization. Middle Eastern countries traditionally have preferred to maintain bilateral relationships with the U.S. and generally have shunned

multilateral arrangements because of the lack of trust among Arab states.

This lack of trust manifested itself in June 2017 when the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Egypt, and several other Muslim-majority countries cut or downgraded diplomatic ties with Qatar. All commercial land, air, and sea travel between Qatar and these nations has been severed, and Qatari diplomats and citizens have been evicted.

This is the best example of how regional tensions can transcend the Arab–Iranian or Israeli–Palestinian debate. Qatar has long supported Muslim Brotherhood groups, as well as questionable Islamist factions in Syria and Libya, and has often been seen as being too close to Iran, a major adversary of Sunni Arab states in the Gulf.

This is not the first time that something like this has happened, albeit on a much smaller scale. In 2014, a number of Arab states recalled their ambassadors to Qatar to protest Doha's support for Egypt's Muslim Brotherhood movement. It took eight months to resolve this dispute before relations could be fully restored.

Bilateral and multilateral relations in the region, especially with the U.S. and other Western countries, are often made more difficult by their secretive nature. The opaqueness of these relationships sometimes creates problems for the U.S. when it tries to coordinate defense and security cooperation with European allies (mainly the U.K. and France) that are active in the region.

Military training is an important part of these relationships. The principal motivation behind these exercises is to ensure close and effective coordination with key regional partners, demonstrate an enduring U.S. security commitment to regional allies, and train Arab armed forces so that they can assume a larger share of responsibility for regional security. In 2017, the U.S. Naval Forces Central Command launched the largest maritime exercise ever launched across the Middle East to demonstrate global resolve in maintaining freedom of navigation and the free flow of maritime commerce.[15] This has been followed by subsequent, smaller, maritime exercises.

Kuwait, Bahrain, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar have participated in, and in some cases have commanded, Combined Task Force-152, formed in 2004 to maintain maritime security in the Persian Gulf. The commander of the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) noted that Middle Eastern partners have begun to take the threat from transnational Islamist extremist groups more seriously, especially as ISIS has gained momentum, increased in strength, and expanded its international influence.[16] Middle Eastern countries have also participated further afield in Afghanistan; since 2001, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE have supplied troops to the U.S.-led mission there. During the 2011 NATO-led operation in Libya, U.S. allies Qatar, Jordan, and the UAE participated to varying degrees.

Israel. America's most important bilateral relationship in the Middle East is with Israel. Both countries are democracies, value free-market economies, and believe in human rights at a time when many Middle Eastern countries reject those values. Israel has been designated as a Major Non-NATO ally (MNNA)[17] because of its close ties to the U.S. With support from the United States, it has developed one of the world's most sophisticated air and missile defense networks.[18] No significant progress on peace negotiations with the Palestinians or on stabilizing Israel's volatile neighborhood is possible without a strong and effective Israeli–American partnership.[19]

After years of strained relations during the Obama Administration, ties between the U.S. and Israel have improved significantly since President Donald Trump took office. In May 2018, the U.S. moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to a location in western Jerusalem.

Saudi Arabia. After Israel, the U.S. military relationship is deepest with the Gulf States, including Saudi Arabia, which serves as de facto leader of the GCC. America's relationship with Saudi Arabia is based on pragmatism and is important for both security and economic reasons. The Saudis enjoy huge influence across the

Muslim world, and roughly 2 million Muslims participate in the annual Hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Riyadh has been a key partner in efforts to counterbalance Iran. The U.S. is also the largest provider of arms to Saudi Arabia and regularly, if not controversially, sells munitions needed to resupply stockpiles expended in the Saudi-led campaign against the Houthis in Yemen. President Trump recently approved a $110 billion arms sale to the Saudis.

Gulf Cooperation Council. The countries of the GCC (Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE) are located close to the Arab–Persian fault line, making them strategically important to the U.S.[20] The root of the Arab–Iranian tensions in the Gulf is Tehran's ideological drive to export its Islamist revolution and overthrow the traditional rulers of the Arab kingdoms. This ideological clash has further amplified long-standing sectarian tensions between Shia Islam and Sunni Islam. Tehran has sought to radicalize Shia Arab minority groups to undermine Sunni Arab regimes in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Bahrain. It also sought to incite revolts by the Shia majorities in Iraq against Saddam Hussein's regime and in Bahrain against the Sunni al-Khalifa dynasty. Culturally, many Iranians look down on the Gulf States, many of which they see as artificial entities carved out of the former Persian Empire and propped up by Western powers.

The GCC often has difficulty agreeing on a common policy on matters of security. This reflects both the organization's intergovernmental nature and its members' desire to place national interests above those of the GCC. The recent dispute regarding Qatar illustrates this difficulty. Another source of disagreement involves the question of how best to deal with Iran. On one end of the spectrum, Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE take a hawkish view of the threat from Iran. Oman and Qatar, both of which share natural gas fields with Iran, view Iran's activities in the region as less of a threat and maintain cordial relations with Tehran. Kuwait tends to fall somewhere in the middle. Inter-GCC relations also can be problematic.

Egypt. Egypt is another important U.S. military ally. As one of only two Arab countries (the other being Jordan) that maintain diplomatic relations with Israel, Egypt is closely enmeshed in the Israeli–Palestinian conflict and remains a leading political, diplomatic, and military power in the region.

Relations between the U.S. and Egypt have been problematic since the 2011 downfall of President Hosni Mubarak after 30 years of rule. The Muslim Brotherhood's Mohamed Morsi was elected president in 2012 and used the Islamist-dominated parliament to pass a constitution that advanced an Islamist agenda. Morsi's authoritarian rule, combined with rising popular dissatisfaction with falling living standards, rampant crime, and high unemployment, led to a massive wave of protests in June 2013 that prompted a military coup in July. The leader of the coup, Field Marshal Abdel Fattah el-Sisi, pledged to restore democracy and was elected president in 2014 and again in 2018 in elections that many considered to be neither free nor fair.[21] His government faces major political, economic, and security challenges.

Quality of Armed Forces in the Middle East

The quality and capabilities of the region's armed forces are mixed. Some countries spend billions of dollars each year on advanced Western military hardware, and others spend very little. Due to the drop in global oil prices, defense spending decreased in 2017 for oil-producing countries in the region while increasing for the non–oil-producing countries. For example, Saudi Arabia was by far the region's largest military spender despite dropping from $81.9 billion in 2015 to $76.79 billion in 2016—a decrease of 7 percent. On the other side of the Persian Gulf, defense spending in Iran has increased by 40 percent since implementation of the JCPOA.[22]

Historically, figures on defense spending for the Middle East have been very unreliable, but the lack of data has worsened. For 2017, there were no available data for Kuwait, Qatar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen

according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.[23]

Different security factors drive the degree to which Middle Eastern countries fund, train, and arm their militaries. For Israel, which fought and defeated Arab coalitions in 1948, 1956, 1967, 1973, and 1982, the chief potential threats to its existence are now posed by an Iranian regime that has called for Israel to be "wiped from the map."[24] States and non-state actors in the region have responded to Israel's military dominance by investing in asymmetric and unconventional capabilities to offset its military superiority.[25] For the Gulf States, the main driver of defense policy is the Iranian military threat combined with internal security challenges. For Iraq, the internal threat posed by insurgents and terrorists drives defense policy. In many ways, the Obama Administration's engagement with Tehran united Israel and its Arab neighbors against the shared threat of Iran.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are widely considered the most capable military force in the Middle East. On a conventional level, the IDF consistently surpasses other regional military forces.[26] Other countries, such as Iran, have developed asymmetric tactics and have built up the military capabilities of proxy groups to close the gap in recent years, but the IDF's quality and effectiveness remain unparalleled with regard to both technical capacity and personnel. This was demonstrated by Israel's 2014 military operations against Hamas in the Gaza Strip: After weeks of conflict, the IDF mobilized over 80,000 reservists, demonstrating the depth and flexibility of the Israeli armed forces.[27]

Israel funds its military sector heavily and has a strong national industrial capacity supported by significant funding from the U.S. Combined, these factors give Israel a regional advantage despite limitations of manpower and size. In particular, the IDF has focused on maintaining its superiority in missile defense, intelligence collection, precision weapons, and cyber technologies.[28] The Israelis regard their cyber capabilities as especially important. Cyber technologies are used for a number of purposes, including defending Israeli cyberspace, gathering intelligence, and carrying out attacks.[29] Israel maintains its qualitative superiority in medium-range and long-range missile capabilities.[30] It also fields effective missile defense systems, including Iron Dome and Arrow, both of which the U.S. helped to finance.[31]

Israel also has a nuclear weapons capability (which it does not publicly acknowledge) that increases its strength relative to other powers in the region. Israel's nuclear weapons capability has helped to deter adversaries as the gap in conventional capabilities has been reduced.

After Israel, the most technologically advanced and best-equipped armed forces are found in the Gulf Cooperation Council. Previously, the export of oil and gas meant that there was no shortage of resources to devote to defense spending, but the collapse of crude oil prices may force oil-exporting countries to adjust their defense spending patterns. At present, however, GCC nations still have the best-funded, although not necessarily the most effective, Arab armed forces in the region.

All GCC members boast advanced defense hardware with a preference for U.S., U.K., and French equipment. Saudi Arabia maintains the most capable military force in the GCC. It has an army of 75,000 soldiers and a National Guard of 100,000 personnel reporting directly to the king. The army operates 900 main battle tanks including 370 U.S.-made M1A2s. Its air force is built around American and British-built aircraft and consists of more than 338 combat-capable aircraft including F-15s, Tornados, and Typhoons.[32]

In fact, air power is the strong suit of most GCC members. Oman operates F-16s and has purchased 12 Typhoons, which entered service in 2017. According to *Defense Industry Daily*, "The UAE operates the F-16E/F Desert Falcon, which holds more advanced avionics than any F-16 variant in the US inventory."[33] Qatar operates French-made Mirage fighters and recently bought 24 Typhoons from the UK.[34] The UAE and Qatar deployed fighters to participate in NATO-led operations over Libya

in 2011 (although they did not participate in strike operations). Beginning in early fall 2014, all six GCC members joined the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, with the UAE contributing the most in terms of air power.[35] Air strikes in Syria by members of the GCC ended in 2017. The navies of the GCC members rarely deploy beyond their Exclusive Economic Zones, but all members (other than Oman) have participated in regional combined task forces led by the U.S.[36] In 2016, Oman and Britain launched a multimillion-dollar joint venture to develop Duqm as a strategic Middle Eastern port in the Indian Ocean to improve defense security and prosperity agendas.[37]

With 438,500 active personnel and 479,000 reserve personnel, Egypt has the largest Arab military force in the Middle East.[38] It possesses a fully operational military with an army, air force, air defense, navy, and special operations forces. Until 1979, when the U.S. began to supply Egypt with military equipment, Cairo relied primarily on less capable Soviet military technology.[39] Since then, its army and air force have been significantly upgraded with U.S. military weapons, equipment, and warplanes.

Egypt has struggled with increased terrorist activity in the Sinai Peninsula, including attacks on Egyptian soldiers, attacks on foreign tourists, and the October 2015 bombing of a Russian airliner departing from the Sinai, for all of which the Islamic State's "Sinai Province" terrorist group has claimed responsibility. The government's response to the uptick of violence has been severe: arrests of thousands of suspected Islamist extremists and restrictive measures such as a law criminalizing media reporting that contradicts official reports.[40]

Jordan is a close U.S. ally with small but effective military forces. The principal threats to its security include ISIS, turbulence in Syria and Iraq, and the resulting flow of refugees. Jordan is currently home to more than 1.4 million registered and unregistered Syrian refugees. While Jordan faces few conventional threats from its neighbors, its internal security is threatened by Islamist extremists returning from fighting in the region who have been emboldened by the growing influence of al-Qaeda and other Islamist militants. As a result, Jordan's highly professional armed forces have been focused in recent years on border and internal security.

Considering Jordan's size, its conventional capability is significant. Jordan's ground forces total 74,000 soldiers and include 390 British-made Challenger 1 tanks. The backbone of its air force is comprised of 43 F-16 Fighting Falcons.[41] Jordan's special operations forces are highly capable, having benefitted from extensive U.S. and U.K. training. Jordanian forces have served in Afghanistan and in numerous U.N.-led peacekeeping operations.

Iraq has fielded one of the region's most dysfunctional military forces. After the 2011 withdrawal of U.S. troops, Iraq's government selected and promoted military leaders according to political criteria. Shiite army officers were favored over their Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish counterparts. Then-Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki chose top officers according to their political loyalties. Politicization of the armed forces also exacerbated corruption within many units, with some commanders siphoning off funds allocated for "ghost soldiers" who never existed or had been separated from the army for various reasons.

The promotion of incompetent military leaders, poor logistical support due to corruption and other problems, limited operational mobility, and weaknesses in intelligence, reconnaissance, medical support, and air force capabilities have combined to weaken the effectiveness of the Iraqi armed forces. In June 2014, for example, the collapse of up to four divisions, which were routed by vastly smaller numbers of Islamic State fighters, led to the fall of Mosul. Since then, the U.S. and its allies have undertaken a massive training program for the Iraqi military, which led to the liberation of Mosul on July 9, 2017.

Current U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

The United States maintained a limited military presence in the Middle East before

1980, chiefly a small naval force based at Bahrain since 1958. The U.S. "twin pillar" strategy relied on prerevolutionary Iran and Saudi Arabia to take the lead in defending the Persian Gulf from the Soviet Union and its client regimes in Iraq, Syria, and South Yemen,[42] but the 1979 Iranian revolution demolished one pillar, and the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased the Soviet threat to the Gulf. President Jimmy Carter proclaimed in January 1980 that the United States would take military action to defend oil-rich Persian Gulf States from external aggression, a commitment known as the Carter Doctrine. In 1980, he ordered the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), the precursor to USCENTCOM, which was established in January 1983.[43]

Up until the late 1980s, a possible Soviet invasion of Iran was considered to be the most significant threat facing the U.S. in the Middle East.[44] After the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saddam Hussein's Iraqi regime became the chief threat to regional stability. Iraq invaded Kuwait in August 1990, and the United States responded in January 1991 by leading an international coalition of more than 30 nations to expel Saddam's forces from Kuwait. CENTCOM commanded the U.S. contribution of more than 532,000 military personnel to the coalition's armed forces, which totaled at least 737,000.[45] This marked the peak U.S. force deployment in the Middle East.

Confrontations with Iraq continued throughout the 1990s as a result of Iraqi violations of the 1991 Gulf War cease-fire. Baghdad's failure to cooperate with U.N. arms inspectors to verify the destruction of its weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorism led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. During the initial invasion, U.S. forces reached nearly 150,000, joined by military personnel from coalition forces. Apart from the "surge" in 2007, when President George W. Bush deployed an additional 30,000 personnel, American combat forces in Iraq fluctuated between 100,000 and 150,000.[46] In December 2011, the U.S. officially completed its withdrawal of troops, leaving only 150 personnel attached to the U.S. embassy in Iraq.[47] In the aftermath of IS territorial gains in Iraq, the U.S. has redeployed thousands of troops to the country. Today, approximately 5,000 U.S. troops operate in Iraq.

In addition, the U.S. continues to maintain a limited number of forces in other locations in the Middle East, primarily in GCC countries. Currently, tens of thousands of U.S. troops are serving in the region. Their exact disposition is not made public because of political sensitivities,[48] but information gleaned from open sources reveals the following:

- **Kuwait.** Approximately 15,000 U.S. personnel are based in Kuwait and are spread among Camp Arifjan, Ahmed Al Jaber Air Base, and Ali Al Salem Air Base.[49] A large depot of prepositioned equipment and a squadron of fighters and Patriot missile systems are also deployed to Kuwait.

- **UAE.** In 2017, the U.S. and the UAE signed a new defense accord expanding the level of cooperation.[50] About 5,000 U.S. personnel, mainly from the U.S. Air Force, are stationed in the UAE, primarily at Al Dhafra Air Base.[51] Their main mission in the UAE is to operate fighters, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), refueling aircraft, and surveillance aircraft. The United States also has regularly deployed F-22 Raptor combat aircraft to Al Dhafra.[52] Patriot missile systems are deployed for air and missile defense.

- **Oman.** In 1980, Oman became the first Gulf State to welcome a U.S. military base. Today, it provides important access in the form of over 5,000 aircraft overflights, 600 aircraft landings, and 80 port calls annually. The number of U.S. military personnel in Oman has fallen to about 200, mostly from the U.S. Air Force. According to the Congressional Research Service, "the United States reportedly can use—with advance notice and for specified purposes—Oman's military airfields in Muscat

(the capital), Thumrait, and Masirah Island."[53]

- **Bahrain.** Today, some 7,000 U.S. military personnel are based in Bahrain.[54] Bahrain is home to the Naval Support Activity Bahrain and the U.S. Fifth Fleet, so most U.S. military personnel there belong to the U.S. Navy. A significant number of U.S. Air Force personnel operate out of Shaykh Isa Air Base, where F-16s, F/A-18s, and P-3 surveillance aircraft are stationed.[55] U.S. Patriot missile systems also are deployed to Bahrain. The deep-water port of Khalifa bin Salman is one of the few facilities in the Gulf that can accommodate U.S. aircraft carriers.

- **Saudi Arabia.** The U.S. withdrew the bulk of its forces from Saudi Arabia in 2003. Little information on the number of U.S. military personnel currently based there is available. However, the six-decade-old United States Military Training Mission to the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the four-decade-old Office of the Program Manager of the Saudi Arabian National Guard Modernization Program, and the Office of the Program Manager–Facilities Security Force are based in Eskan Village Air Base approximately 13 miles south of the capital city of Riyadh.[56]

- **Qatar.** Approximately 10,000 U.S. personnel, mainly from the U.S. Air Force, are deployed in Qatar.[57] The U.S. operates its Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base, which is one of the most important U.S. air bases in the world. It is also the base from which the anti-ISIS campaign is headquartered. Heavy bombers, tankers, transports, and ISR aircraft operate from there. Al Udeid Air Base also serves as the forward headquarters of CENTCOM. The base also houses prepositioned U.S. military equipment and is defended by U.S. Patriot missile systems. So far, the recent diplomatic moves by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states against Doha have not affected the United States' relationship with Qatar.

- **Jordan.** According to CENTCOM, Jordan "is one of our strongest and most reliable partners in the Levant sub-region."[58] Although there are no U.S. military bases in Jordan, the U.S. has a long history of conducting training exercises in the country. Due to recent events in neighboring Syria, approximately 2,300 troops, a squadron of F-16s, a Patriot missile battery, and M142 High Mobility Artillery Rocket Systems have been deployed in Jordan.[59]

CENTCOM's stated mission is to promote cooperation among nations; respond to crises; deter or defeat state and non-state aggression; support economic development; and, when necessary, perform reconstruction in order to establish the conditions for regional security, stability, and prosperity. Execution of this mission is supported by four service component commands and one subordinate unified command: U.S. Naval Forces Middle East (USNAVCENT); U.S. Army Forces Middle East (USARCENT); U.S. Air Forces Middle East (USAFCENT); U.S. Marine Forces Middle East (MARCENT); and U.S. Special Operations Command Middle East (SOCCENT).

- **U.S. Naval Forces Central Command** is the maritime component of USCENTCOM. With its forward headquarters in Bahrain, it is responsible for commanding the afloat units that rotationally deploy or surge from the United States, in addition to other ships that are based in the Gulf for longer periods. USNAVCENT conducts persistent maritime operations to advance U.S. interests, deter and counter disruptive countries, defeat violent extremism, and strengthen partner nations' maritime capabilities in order to promote a secure maritime environment in an area encompassing about 2.5 million square miles of water.

- **U.S. Army Forces Central Command** is the land component of USCENTCOM. Based in Kuwait, USARCENT is responsible for land operations in an area encompassing 4.6 million square miles (1.5 times larger than the continental United States).

- **U.S. Air Forces Central Command** is the air component of USCENTCOM. Based in Qatar, USAFCENT is responsible for air operations and for working with the air forces of partner countries in the region. It also manages an extensive supply and equipment prepositioning program at several regional sites.

- **U.S. Marine Forces Central Command** is the designated Marine Corps service component for USCENTCOM. Based in Bahrain, USMARCENT is responsible for all Marine Corps forces in the region.

- **U.S. Special Operations Command Central** is a subordinate USCENTCOM unified command. Based in Qatar, SOCCENT is responsible for planning special operations throughout the USCENTCOM region, planning and conducting peacetime joint/combined special operations training exercises, and orchestrating command and control of peacetime and wartime special operations.

In addition to the American military presence in the region, two U.S. allies—the United Kingdom and France—play an important role that should not be overlooked.

The U.K.'s presence in the Middle East is a legacy of British imperial rule. The U.K. has maintained close ties with many countries over which it once ruled and has conducted military operations in the region for decades. Approximately 1,200 British service personnel are based throughout the Gulf.

The British presence in the region is dominated by the Royal Navy. In terms of permanently based naval assets, there are four mine hunters and one Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ship. Generally, there also are frigates or destroyers in the Gulf or Arabian Sea performing maritime security duties. Although such matters are not the subject of public discussion, U.K. attack submarines also operate in the area. As a sign of its long-term maritime presence in the region, the U.K. opened its first overseas military base in the Middle East in more than four decades in Bahrain.[60] The U.K. has also made a multimillion-dollar investment in modernization of the Duqm Port complex in Oman to accommodate the new U.K. *Queen Elizabeth*-class aircraft carriers.[61]

The U.K. also has a sizeable Royal Air Force (RAF) presence in the region, mainly in the UAE and Oman. A short drive from Dubai, Al-Minhad Air Base is home to a small contingent of U.K. personnel. The U.K. also operates small RAF detachments in Oman that support U.K. and coalition operations in the region. Although considered to be in Europe, the U.K.'s Sovereign Base Areas of Akrotiri and Dhekelia in Cyprus have supported U.S. military and intelligence operations in the past and will continue to do so in the future.

The British presence in the region extends beyond soldiers, ships, and planes. A British-run staff college operates in Qatar, and Kuwait chose the U.K. to help run its own equivalent of the Royal Military Academy at Sandhurst.[62] The U.K. also plays a very active role in training the Saudi Arabian and Jordanian militaries.

The French presence in the Gulf is smaller than the U.K.'s but is still significant. France opened its first military base in the Gulf in 2009, in Abu Dhabi in the UAE. This was the first foreign military installation built by the French in 50 years.[63] In total, the French have 650 personnel based in the country along with eight Rafale fighter jets.[64] French ships have access to the Zayed Port, which is big enough to handle every ship in the French Navy except the aircraft carrier *Charles De Gaulle*.

Another important actor in Middle East security is the small East African country of Djibouti. It sits on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which an estimated 4.8 million barrels of oil a day transited in 2016 (the most recent

year for which U.S. Energy Administration data are available) and which is a choke point on the route to the Suez Canal. An increasing number of countries recognize Djibouti's value as a base from which to project maritime power and launch counterterrorism operations. It is home to the U.S.'s only permanent military base in Africa, Camp Lemonnier, with its approximately 4,000 personnel. In 2017, China chose Djibouti as the location for its first permanent overseas base, which can house 10,000 troops and which Chinese marines have used to stage live-fire exercises featuring armored combat vehicles and artillery. Saudi Arabia also announced in 2016 that it would build a base in Djibouti. France, Italy, Germany, and Japan already have presences of varying strength there.

Key Infrastructure and Warfighting Capabilities

The Middle East is critically situated geographically. Two-thirds of the world's population lives within an eight-hour flight from the Gulf region, making it accessible from most of the globe. The Middle East also contains some of the world's most critical maritime choke points, such as the Suez Canal and the Strait of Hormuz.

Although infrastructure is not as developed in the Middle East as it is in North America or Europe, a decades-long presence means that the U.S. has tried-and-tested systems that involve moving large numbers of matériel and personnel into and out of the region. For example, according to the Department of Defense, at the height of U.S. combat operations in Iraq during the Second Gulf War, the U.S. presence included 165,000 servicemembers and 505 bases. Moving personnel and equipment out of the country was an enormous undertaking—"the largest logistical drawdown since World War II"[65]—and included the redeployment of "the 60,000 troops who remained in Iraq at the time and more than 1 million pieces of equipment ahead of their deadline."[66]

The condition of roads in the region varies from country to country. For example, 100 percent of the roads in Israel, Jordan, and the UAE are paved. Other nations, such as Oman (49.3 percent), Saudi Arabia (21.5 percent), and Yemen (8.7 percent), have poor paved road coverage according to the most recent information available.[67] Rail coverage is also poor. For instance, Saudi Arabia has only 563 miles of railroads.[68] By comparison, New Hampshire, which is roughly 1 percent the size of Saudi Arabia, had 489 freight rail miles alone in 2015 (the most recent year for which Association of American Railroads data are available).[69] In Syria, years of civil war have wreaked havoc on the rail system.[70]

The U.S. has access to several airfields in the region. The primary air hub for U.S. forces is at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Other airfields include Ali Al Salem Air Base, Kuwait; Al Dhafra, UAE; Al Minhad, UAE; Isa, Bahrain; Eskan Village Air Base, Saudi Arabia; Muscat, Oman; Thumrait, Oman; and Masirah Island, Oman, in addition to the commercial airport at Seeb, Oman. In the past, the U.S. has used major airfields in Iraq, including Baghdad International Airport and Balad Air Base, as well as Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. Just because the U.S. has access to a particular air base today, however, does not mean that it will be made available for a particular operation in the future. For example, it is highly unlikely that Qatar and Oman would allow the U.S. to use air bases in their territory for strikes against Iran.

The U.S. has access to ports in the region, perhaps most importantly in Bahrain. The U.S. also has access to a deep-water port, Khalifa bin Salman, in Bahrain and naval facilities at Fujairah, UAE.[71] The UAE's commercial port of Jebel Ali is open for visits from U.S. warships and prepositioning of equipment for operations in theater.[72]

Approximately 90 percent of the world's trade travels by sea, and some of the busiest and most important shipping lanes are located in the Middle East. For example, tens of thousands of cargo ships travel through the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait each year.[73] Given the high volume of maritime traffic in the region, no U.S. military operation can be undertaken without consideration of how

these shipping lanes offer opportunity and risk to America and her allies. The major shipping routes include:

- **The Suez Canal.** In 2017, more than 1 billion tons of cargo transited the canal, averaging 48 ships each day.[74] Considering that the canal itself is 120 miles long but only 670 feet wide, this is an impressive amount of traffic. The Suez Canal is important for Europe in terms of oil transportation. The canal also serves as an important strategic asset, as it is used routinely by the U.S. Navy to move surface combatants between the Mediterranean Sea and the Red Sea.

  Thanks to a bilateral arrangement between Egypt and the United States, the U.S. Navy enjoys priority access to the canal. However, the journey through the narrow waterway is no easy task for large surface combatants. The canal was not constructed with the aim of accommodating 90,000-ton aircraft carriers and therefore exposes a larger ship to attack. For this reason, different types of security protocols are followed, including the provision of air support by the Egyptian military.[75]

- **Strait of Hormuz.** The Strait of Hormuz is a critical oil-supply bottleneck and the world's busiest passageway for oil tankers. The strait links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman. "The Strait of Hormuz is the world's most important oil chokepoint," according to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, "because its daily oil flow of about 17 million barrels per day in 2015, accounted for 30% of all seaborne-traded crude oil and other liquids. The volume that traveled through this vital choke point increased to 18.5 million b/d in 2016." Most of these crude oil exports go to Asian markets, particularly Japan, India, South Korea, and China.[76]

  The shipping routes through the Strait of Hormuz are particularly vulnerable to disruption, given the extreme narrowness of the passage and its proximity to Iran. Tehran has repeatedly threatened to close the strategic strait if Iran is attacked. While attacking shipping in the strait would drive up oil prices, Iran would also lose, both because it depends on the Strait of Hormuz to export its own crude oil and because such an attack would undermine Tehran's relations with such oil importers as China, Japan, and India. Tehran also would pay a heavy military price if it provoked a U.S. military response.

- **Bab el-Mandeb Strait.** The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is a strategic waterway located between the Horn of Africa and Yemen that links the Red Sea to the Indian Ocean. Exports from the Persian Gulf and Asia destined for Western markets must pass through the strait en route to the Suez Canal. In 2016, oil tankers transported approximately 4.8 million barrels of oil per day through the strait.[77] The Bab el-Mandeb Strait is 18 miles wide at its narrowest point, limiting passage to two channels for inbound and outbound shipments.[78]

Maritime Prepositioning of Equipment and Supplies. The U.S. military has deployed non-combatant maritime prepositioning ships (MPS) containing large amounts of military equipment and supplies in strategic locations from which they can reach areas of conflict relatively quickly as associated U.S. Army or Marine Corps units located elsewhere arrive in the areas. The British Indian Ocean Territory of Diego Garcia, an island atoll, hosts the U.S. Naval Support Facility Diego Garcia, which supports prepositioning ships that can supply Army or Marine Corps units deployed for contingency operations in the Middle East.

Conclusion

For the foreseeable future, the Middle East region will remain a key focus for U.S. military

planners. Once considered relatively stable, mainly due to the ironfisted rule of authoritarian regimes, the area is now highly unstable and a breeding ground for terrorism. Overall, regional security has deteriorated in recent years. Even though the Islamic State appears to have been seriously weakened, what its successor will be like is unclear. While Iraq has restored its territorial integrity after the defeat of ISIS, the political situation and future relations between Baghdad and the U.S. remain uncertain in the wake of the recent election victory of Muqtada al-Sadr. The regional dispute with Qatar has made U.S. relations in the region even more complex and difficult to manage, although it has not stopped the U.S. military from operating. The Russian, Iranian, and Turkish interventions in Syria have greatly complicated the fighting there.

Many of the borders created after World War I are under significant stress. In countries like Iraq, Libya, Syria, and Yemen, the supremacy of the nation-state is being challenged by non-state actors that wield influence, power, and resources comparable to those of small states. The main security and political challenges in the region are linked inextricably to the unrealized aspirations of the Arab Spring, surging transnational terrorism, and the potential threat of Iran. These challenges are made more difficult by the Arab–Israeli conflict, Sunni–Shia sectarian divides, the rise of Iran's Islamist revolutionary nationalism, and the proliferation of Sunni Islamist revolutionary groups.

Thanks to decades of U.S. military operations in the Middle East, the U.S. has tried-and-tested procedures for operating in the region. Bases and infrastructure are well established. The logistical processes for maintaining a large force forward deployed thousands of miles away from the homeland are well in place. Unlike in Europe, all of these processes have recently been tested in combat. The personal links between allied armed forces are also present. Joint training exercises improve interoperability, and U.S. military educational courses regularly attended by officers (and often royals) from the Middle East allow the U.S. to influence some of the region's future leaders.

America's relationships in the region are based pragmatically on shared security and economic concerns. As long as these issues remain relevant to both sides, the U.S. is likely to have an open door to operate in the Middle East when its national interests require that it do so.

Scoring the Middle East Operating Environment

As noted at the beginning of this section, various aspects of the region facilitate or inhibit the ability of the U.S. to conduct military operations to defend its vital national interests against threats. Our assessment of the operating environment utilizes a five-point scale, ranging from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covering four regional characteristics of greatest relevance to the conduct of military operations:

1. **Very Poor.** Significant hurdles exist for military operations. Physical infrastructure is insufficient or nonexistent, and the region is politically unstable. In addition, the U.S. military is poorly placed or absent, and alliances are nonexistent or diffuse.
2. **Unfavorable.** A challenging operating environment for military operations is marked by inadequate infrastructure, weak alliances, and recurring political instability. The U.S. military is inadequately placed in the region.
3. **Moderate.** A neutral to moderately favorable operating environment is characterized by adequate infrastructure, a moderate alliance structure, and acceptable levels of regional political stability. The U.S. military is adequately placed.
4. **Favorable.** A favorable operating environment includes good infrastructure, strong alliances, and a stable political

environment. The U.S. military is well placed for future operations.

5. **Excellent.** An extremely favorable operating environment includes well-established and well-maintained infrastructure, strong and capable allies, and a stable political environment. The U.S. military is exceptionally well placed to defend U.S. interests.

The key regional characteristics consist of:

a. **Alliances.** Alliances are important for interoperability and collective defense, as allies would be more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Various indicators provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance. These include whether the U.S. trains regularly with countries in the region, has good interoperability with the forces of an ally, and shares intelligence with nations in the region.

b. **Political Stability.** Political stability brings predictability for military planners when considering such things as transit, basing, and overflight rights for U.S. military operations. The overall degree of political stability indicates whether U.S. military actions would be hindered or enabled and considers, for example, whether transfers of power in the region are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability.

c. **U.S. Military Positioning.** Having military forces based or equipment and supplies staged in a region greatly facilitates the ability of the United States to respond to crises and, presumably, achieve success in critical "first battles" more quickly. Being routinely present in a region also assists in maintaining familiarity with its characteristics and the various actors that might assist or thwart U.S. actions. With this in mind, we assessed whether or not the U.S. military was well positioned in the region. Again, indicators included bases, troop presence, prepositioned equipment, and recent examples of military operations (including training and humanitarian) launched from the region.

d. **Infrastructure.** Modern, reliable, and suitable infrastructure is essential to military operations. Airfields, ports, rail lines, canals, and paved roads enable the U.S. to stage, launch, and logistically sustain combat operations. We combined expert knowledge of regions with publicly available information on critical infrastructure to arrive at our overall assessment of this metric.[79]

In summary, the U.S. has developed an extensive network of bases in the region and has acquired substantial operational experience in combatting regional threats, but many of its allies are hobbled by political instability, economic problems, internal security threats, and mushrooming transnational threats. Although the overall score remains "moderate," as it was last year, it is in danger of falling to "poor" because of political instability and growing bilateral tensions with allies over the security implications of the nuclear agreement with Iran and how best to fight the Islamic State.

With this in mind, we arrived at these average scores for the Middle East (rounded to the nearest whole number):

- Alliances: **3—Moderate**
- Political Stability: **2—Unfavorable**
- U.S. Military Positioning: **3—Moderate**
- Infrastructure: **3—Moderate**

Leading to a regional score of: **Moderate**

Operating Environment: Middle East

	VERY POOR	UNFAVORABLE	MODERATE	FAVORABLE	EXCELLENT
Alliances			✓		
Political Stability		✓			
U.S. Military Posture			✓		
Infrastructure			✓		
OVERALL			✓		

Endnotes

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