Middle East

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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 to help them defend themselves. The U.S. also has a long-term interest in the Middle East that derives from 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 as well as 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 the constant vying for power among religious extremists, are central to many of the region's current challenges. In some cases, these sectarian divides have persisted for centuries. Contemporary conflicts, however, have less to do with these histories than they do with modern extremist ideologies and the fact that today's borders often do not reflect cultural, ethnic, or religious realities. Instead, they 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 region's Arab countries.

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 between many Sunni Arab powers and Iran, the Persian Shia power, compounded by clashing national and ideological interests, has fueled instability in such countries as Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The COVID-19 coronavirus exposed Sunni–Shia tensions when Sunni countries in the region blamed "Shia backwardness," likely referencing the lack of religious shrines, as the reason for the rapid spread of the virus in Iran.[3] Sunni extremist organizations like al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (IS) have exploited sectarian and ethnic tensions to gain support by posing as champions of Sunni Arabs against Syria's Alawite-dominated regime and other non-Sunni governments and movements.

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 many countries' inadequate political, economic, and educational infrastructures, and the lack of access to education, jobs, and meaningful political participation fuels discontent. Because almost two-thirds of the region's inhabitants are less than 30 years old, this demographic bulge will continue to have a substantial effect on political stability across the region.[4]

The Middle East contains more than half of the world's oil reserves and is the world's chief oil-exporting region.[5] As the world's largest producer and consumer of oil,[6] the U.S., even though it actually imports relatively little of its oil from the Middle East, has a vested interest in maintaining the free flow of oil and gas from the region. Oil is a fungible commodity, and the U.S. economy remains vulnerable to sudden spikes in world oil prices.

During the COVID-19 crisis, oil prices plunged to below zero in April 2020 after stay-at-home orders caused a severe imbalance between supply and demand. This unprecedented drop in demand sparked an oil price war between Saudi Arabia and Russia. U.S. oil producers were forced to cut back production, and "[i]f prices don't regain stability, analysts' biggest fear is that the U.S. energy sector won't be able to bounce back."[7] Although oil exporters Russia and Saudi Arabia eventually agreed to reduce production by 12 percent, the plummet in oil prices over 2020 caused significant shocks for exporters and importers. Saudi Arabia's economy—the largest in the region—shrank by 4.1 percent in 2020, with a 3.3 percent decline in oil output during the first quarter alone.[8] This decline in oil production will cause long-term damage to importers who now face reduced foreign investment, remittances, tourism, and grants from exporters.[9]

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 is both the world's third-largest economy and largest importer of liquefied natural gas (LNG).[10] 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 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.

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 Arab Spring uprisings, which began in early 2011 and disrupted economic activity, depressed foreign and domestic investment, and slowed economic growth.

The COVID-19 pandemic has had massive repercussions for the entire region, affecting economies and shaking political systems in the aftermath of the crisis. Over 2020, the regional economy experienced a 5 percent decline in GDP growth, with declines across the region fluctuating between 2 percent (Qatar) and almost 20 percent (Lebanon).[11] Recovery will likely take years, exacerbating tensions already present in many Middle East countries. For example, the pandemic has already added to Lebanon's political instability, fueling conflict between rival political factions competing to secure scarce medical resources for their supporters and aggravating tensions between Lebanese citizens and desperate refugees who have flooded in from neighboring Syria.[12]

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 (2010–2012) formed a sandstorm that eroded the foundations of many authoritarian regimes, erased borders, and destabilized many of the region's countries,[13] but 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, they made slow progress toward democratic reform; at worst, they added to political instability, exacerbated economic problems, and contributed to the rise of Islamist extremists.

Today, the region's economic and political outlooks remain bleak. In some cases, self-interested elites have prioritized regime survival over real investment in human capital, aggravating the material deprivation of youth as unresolved issues of endemic corruption, high unemployment, and the rising cost of living have worsened. In response to this lack of progress, large-scale protests reemerged in 2019 in Lebanon, Iraq, Egypt, Sudan, Algeria, and other countries.[14] Despite COVID-19 lockdowns and curfews, protests also resumed in Lebanon and Iraq in 2021.[15] The protests in Lebanon and Iraq could even affect the operational environment for U.S. forces in the region.[16]

There is no shortage of security challenges for the U.S. and its allies in this region. Using the breathing space and funding afforded by the July 14, 2015, Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA),[17] for example, Iran has exploited Shia–Sunni tensions to increase its influence on embattled regimes and has undermined adversaries in Sunni-led states. In May 2018, the Trump Administration left the JCPOA after European allies failed to address many of its serious flaws including its sunset clauses.[18] A year later, in May 2019, Iran announced that it was withdrawing from certain aspects of the JCPOA.[19] U.S. economic sanctions have been crippling Iran's economy as part of the former Trump Administration's "Maximum Pressure Campaign." The sanctions are meant to force changes in Iran's behavior, particularly with regard to its support for terrorist organizations and refusal to renounce a nascent nuclear weapons program.[20]

While many of America's European allies publicly denounced the Trump Administration's decision to withdraw from the JCPOA, most officials agree privately that the agreement is 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.[21] With the arrival of the Biden Administration in 2021, Iran has been mounting its own maximum-pressure campaign to force President Joseph Biden to lift sanctions and unconditionally return to the 2015 agreement. Indirect talks brokered by the European Union have been ongoing between U.S. and Iranian diplomats in Vienna since April 2021, but as of the time this study was being prepared, a deal had not been reached.[22]

Tehran attempts to run an unconventional empire by exerting great influence on sub-state entities like Hamas (the Palestinian territories); Hezbollah (Lebanon); the Mahdi movement (Iraq); and the Houthi insurgents (Yemen). The Iranian Quds Force, the special-operations wing of Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, have orchestrated the formation, arming, training, and operations of these sub-state entities as well as other surrogate militias. These Iran-backed militias have carried out terrorist campaigns against U.S. forces and allies in the region for many years. On January 2, 2020, President Donald Trump ordered an air strike that killed General Qassem Suleimani, leader of the Iranian Quds Force, and Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, leader of the Iraqi Shia paramilitary group, both of whom had been responsible for carrying out attacks against U.S. personnel in Iraq. Suleimani's and Muhandis's deaths were a huge loss for Iran's regime and its Iraqi proxies. They also were a major operational and psychological victory for the United States.[23]

In Afghanistan, Tehran's influence on some Shiite groups is such that thousands have volunteered to fight for Bashar al-Assad in Syria.[24] Iran also provided arms to the Taliban after it was ousted from power by a U.S.-led coalition[25] 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 its 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; and Jordan has been inundated by a flood of Syrian refugees and is threatened by the spillover of Islamist extremist groups from Syria.[26] Meanwhile, Tehran has continued to build up its missile arsenal, now the largest in the Middle East; has intervened to prop up the Assad regime in Syria; and supports Shiite Islamist revolutionaries in Yemen and Bahrain.[27]

In Syria, the Assad regime's brutal repression of peaceful demonstrations early in 2011 ignited a fierce civil war that killed more than half a million people and created a major humanitarian crisis: according to the United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "13.4 million people in need of humanitarian and protection assistance in Syria"; "6.6 million Syrian refugees worldwide, of whom 5.6 million [are] hosted in countries near Syria" like Turkey, Lebanon, and Jordan; and "6.7 million internally displaced persons" within Syria.[28] The large refugee populations created by this civil war could become a source of recruits for extremist groups. For example, both the Islamist Hay'at Tahrir al-Sham, formerly known as the al-Qaeda–affiliated Jabhat Fateh al-Sham and before that as the al-Nusra Front, and the self-styled Islamic State (IS), formerly known as ISIS or ISIL and before that as al-Qaeda in Iraq, used the power vacuum created by the war to carve 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.[29]

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 thousands from Western countries, including the United States. In 2014, the U.S. announced the formation of a broad international coalition to defeat the Islamic State. Early in 2019, the territorial "caliphate" had been destroyed by a U.S.-led coalition of international partners.

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.

At the end of 2020, the signing of the Abraham Accords caused a brief spark of hope. These U.S.-brokered agreements normalizing relations between Israel and the UAE and between Israel and Bahrain are important milestones in the diplomatic march toward a broader Arab–Israeli peace.[30] However, in May 2021, a real estate dispute in the East Jerusalem neighborhood of Sheikh Jarrah escalated into active conflict between Israel and Hamas. Violent riots intensified in the city of Jerusalem, and Hamas threatened to attack if Israel did not withdraw its police by the evening of May 10. When Israel ignored this ultimatum, Hamas unleashed a barrage of almost 4,300 rockets at Jerusalem and southern Israel according to the Israeli military. Israel's Iron Dome air defense system was able to stop most of these rockets. Following 11 days of fighting, a cease-fire brokered by Egypt was reached between Hamas and Israel. At least 243 people were killed in Gaza, and 12 people were killed in Israel.[31]

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 six members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC): Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the United

Arab Emirates. Because the historical and political circumstances that led to the creation of NATO have been largely absent in the Middle East, the region lacks a similarly strong collective security organization.

When it came into office, the Trump Administration proposed the idea of a multilateral Middle East Strategic Alliance with its Arab partners.[32] The initial U.S. concept, which included security, economic cooperation, and conflict resolution and deconfliction, generated considerable enthusiasm, but the project was sidelined by a diplomatic dispute involving Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Qatar.[33] 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 UAE, Bahrain, Egypt, and several other Muslim-majority countries cut or downgraded diplomatic ties with Qatar after Doha was accused of supporting terrorism in the region.[34] All commercial land, air, and sea travel between Qatar and these nations was severed, and Qatari diplomats and citizens were evicted. In January 2021, Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt agreed to restore ties with Qatar during the 41st Gulf Cooperation Council Summit. Per the agreement, Saudi Arabia and its GCC allies lifted the economic and diplomatic blockade of Qatar, reopening their airspace, land, and sea borders. This diplomatic victory from Washington paves the way toward full reconciliation in the GCC and, at least potentially, a more united front in the Gulf.[35]

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. It is not unusual for governments in this region to see value (and sometimes necessity) in pursuing a relationship with the U.S. while having to account for domestic opposition to working with America: hence the perceived need for secrecy. 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 United Kingdom (U.K.) and France—that are active in the region.

Military training is an important part of these relationships. These exercises are intended principally 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.

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. With support from the United States, Israel has developed one of the world's most sophisticated air and missile defense networks.[36] 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.

After years of strained relations during the Obama Administration, ties between the U.S. and Israel improved significantly during the first two years of the Trump Administration. In May 2018, the U.S. moved its embassy from Tel Aviv to a location in western Jerusalem.[37] On January 28, 2020, President Trump unveiled his Israeli–Palestinian peace proposal.[38] The plan accorded Israeli security needs a high priority, recognized Israel's vital interest in retaining control of the border with Jordan, and cleared the way for U.S. recognition of Israeli sovereignty over many settlements and Jewish holy sites in the disputed territory of the West Bank.[39]

So far, the Biden Administration has shown little interest in taking an active role in Israeli–Palestinian peace negotiations. However, if the conflict between the two sides continues to escalate, President Biden may be pressured to become more involved.

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, but it has come under intense strain since the murder of Saudi dissident and *Washington Post* journalist Jamal Ahmad Khashoggi, allegedly by Saudi security services, in Turkey in 2018.

The Saudis enjoy huge influence across the Muslim world, and approximately 2 million Muslims participate in the annual Hajj pilgrimage to the holy city of Mecca. Riyadh has been a key partner in efforts to counter the influence of 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.

Gulf Cooperation Council. The GCC's member countries are located close to the Arab–Persian fault line and are therefore strategically important to the U.S.[40] The root of 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.

GCC member countries often have difficulty agreeing on a common policy with respect to 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 problem.

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, the former of which prides itself on its regional neutrality and the latter of which shares 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. Intra-GCC relations also can be problematic.

Egypt. Egypt is another important U.S. military ally. As one of six Arab countries that maintain diplomatic relations with Israel (the others are Jordan, Bahrain, the UAE, Sudan, and Morocco), 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 difficult 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.

Sisi's government faces major political, economic, and security challenges. Rare anti-government protests broke out for two weeks in September 2018 despite a ban on demonstrations, and waves of arrests and detainments followed in a massive crackdown.[41] The demonstrations exposed Egypt's tenuous stability, and support for President Sisi appears to be waning.

Quality of Armed Forces in the Region

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; others spend very little. Saudi Arabia is by far the region's largest military spender in terms of budget size. As a percentage of GDP, Oman leads the way, spending 11 percent on defense, followed by Saudi Arabia at 8.4 percent in 2020, the most recent year for which data are available.[42]

Historically, figures on defense spending for the Middle East have been very unreliable, and the lack of data has worsened. For 2020, there were no available data for Qatar, Syria, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute.[43]

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 threat to its existence is now an Iranian regime that has called for Israel to be "wiped off the map."[44] 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.[45] For the Gulf States, the main driver of defense policy is the Iranian military threat combined with internal security challenges; for Iraq, it is the internal threat posed by insurgents and terrorists.

The Israel Defense Forces (IDF) are considered one of the most capable military forces in the Middle East. Recently, Iran and other Arab countries have spent billions of dollars in an effort to catch up with Israel, and the resulting "arms race" could threaten Israel's qualitative military effectiveness (QME). Iran is steadily improving its missile capabilities and, due to the expiration of the U.N. conventional arms embargo in October 2020, now has access to the global arms trade.[46] In response, other Arab countries are procuring and upgrading their weapons capability while establishing officer training programs to improve military effectiveness.[47]

Israel funds its military sector heavily and has a strong national industrial capacity that is 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.[48] The Israelis regard their cyber capabilities as especially important and use cyber technologies for a number of purposes, including defending Israeli cyberspace, gathering intelligence, and carrying out attacks.[49]

In 2010, Israel signed a $2.7 billion deal with the U.S. to acquire about 20 F-35I "Adir" Lightning fighter jets, a heavily modified version of the Lockheed Martin F-35 stealth fighter.[50] In the 2021 conflict with Hamas, these jets were deployed in a major combat operation that targeted dozens of Hamas rocket launch tubes in northern Gaza.[51]

Israel maintains its qualitative superiority in medium-range and long-range missile capabilities and fields effective missile defense systems, including Iron Dome and Arrow, both of which the U.S. helped to finance. Israel also has a nuclear weapons capability (which it does not publicly acknowledge) that increases its strength relative to other powers in the region and 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 GCC countries. 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 has forced oil-exporting countries to adjust their defense spending patterns. At present, however, GCC nations still have the region's best-funded (even if not necessarily its most effective) Arab armed forces. All GCC members boast advanced defense hardware that reflects a preference for U.S., U.K., and French equipment.

Saudi Arabia maintains the GCC's most capable military force. 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

450 U.S.-made M1A2s. Its air force is built around American-built and British-built aircraft and consists of more than 443 combat-capable aircraft that include F-15s, Tornados, and Typhoons.[52]

In fact, air power is the strong suit of most GCC members. Oman, for example, operates F-16s and Typhoons. In 2018, the U.S. government awarded Lockheed Martin a $1.12 billion contract to produce 16 new F-16 Block 70 aircraft (Lockheed Martin's newest and most advanced F-16 production configuration) for the Royal Bahraini Air Force.[53] Qatar operates French-made Mirage fighters and is buying 24 Typhoons from the U.K.[54]

In November 2020, the U.S. State Department notified Congress that it had approved the sale of a $23.4 billion defense package of F-35A Joint Strike Fighters, armed drones, munitions, and associated equipment to the UAE. After a temporary freeze on arm sales by the Biden Administration, the sale moved forward in April 2021.[55] The sale is somewhat controversial, however, because of Israeli concerns about other regional powers also possessing the most modern combat aircraft, potentially challenging an important Israeli advantage.

Middle Eastern countries have shown a willingness to use their military capability under certain and limited circumstances. The navies of GCC member countries rarely deploy beyond their Exclusive Economic Zones, but 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.[56] Since 2001, Jordan, Egypt, Bahrain, and the UAE have supplied troops to the U.S.-led mission in Afghanistan. The UAE and Qatar deployed fighters to participate in NATO-led operations over Libya in 2011, although they did not participate in strike operations. To varying degrees, all six GCC members also joined the U.S.-led anti-ISIS coalition, with the UAE contributing the most in terms of air power.[57] Air strikes in Syria by members of the GCC ended in 2017.

With 438,500 active personnel and 479,000 reserve personnel, Egypt has the largest Arab military force in the Middle East.[58] 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.[59] 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. The Islamic State's "Sinai Province" terrorist group has claimed responsibility for all of these actions.[60]

Jordan is a close U.S. ally and has small but effective military forces. The principal threats to its security include terrorism, turbulence spilling over from Syria and Iraq, and the resulting flow of refugees. Although 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 focused on border and internal security in recent years.

Considering Jordan's size, its conventional capability is significant. Jordan's ground forces total 86,000 soldiers and include 182 British-made Challenger 1 tanks and four French-made Leclarc tanks. Forty-seven F-16 Fighting Falcons form the backbone if its air force,[61] and its 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.[62] Shiite army

officers were favored over their Sunni, Christian, and Kurdish counterparts, and former 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.[63] It is unclear whether Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi will follow the same model, but both Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and the United States have welcomed the appointment.[64]

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 undermine the effectiveness of Iraq's armed forces. In June 2014, for example, the collapse of as many as four divisions that were routed by vastly smaller numbers of Islamic State fighters led to the fall of Mosul.[65] The U.S. and its allies responded with a massive training program for the Iraqi military that led to the liberation of Mosul on July 9, 2017.[66]

Current U.S. Military Presence in the Middle East

Before 1980, the limited U.S. military presence in the Middle East consisted chiefly of a small naval force that had been 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,[67] but the 1979 Iranian revolution demolished one pillar, and the December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan increased the Soviet threat to the Gulf.

In January 1980, President Jimmy Carter proclaimed in a commitment known as the Carter Doctrine that the United States would take military action to defend oil-rich Persian Gulf States from external aggression. In 1980, he ordered the creation of the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), the precursor to U.S. Central Command (USCENTCOM), which was established in January 1983.[68]

Until the late 1980s, America's "regional strategy still largely focused on the potential threat of a massive Soviet invasion of Iran."[69] 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.[70] This marked the peak U.S. force deployment in the Middle East.

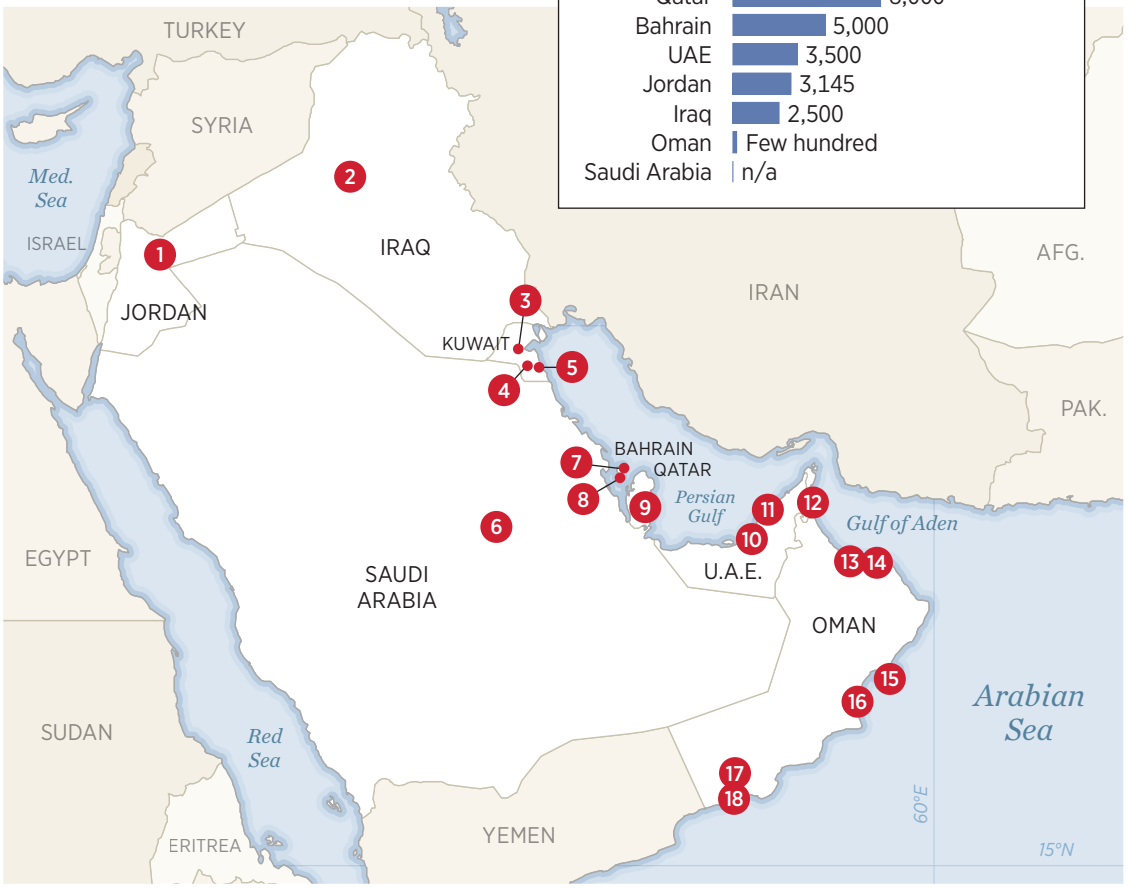
Confrontations with Iraq continued throughout the 1990s as Iraq continued to violate the 1991 Gulf War cease-fire. Baghdad's failure to cooperate with U.N. arms inspectors to verify the destruction of its weapons of mass destruction and its links to terrorism led to the U.S. invasion of Iraq in 2003. During the initial invasion, U.S. forces reached nearly 192,000,[71] joined by military personnel from coalition forces. Apart from the "surge" in 2007, when President George W. Bush deployed an additional 30,000 personnel, the number of American combat forces in Iraq fluctuated between 100,000 and 150,000.[72]

In December 2011, the U.S. officially completed its withdrawal of troops, leaving only 150 personnel attached to the U.S. embassy in Iraq.[73] In the aftermath of IS territorial gains in Iraq, however, the U.S. redeployed thousands of troops to the country to assist Iraqi forces against IS and help to build Iraqi capabilities. Despite calls from the Iraqi parliament to expel U.S. troops after the January 2020 air strike that killed General Qassem Suleimani, U.S. forces remain in Iraq and have "consolidated their basing" and "deployed new missile defenses."[74] According to U.S. Central Command, U.S. force levels in Iraq declined from 5,200 to 3,000 in August 2020, and in November 2020,

MAP 4

U.S. Access to Bases and Facilities in the Middle East

COUNTRY	U.S. TROOPS
Kuwait	13,500
Qatar	8,000
Bahrain	5,000
UAE	3,500
Jordan	3,145
Iraq	2,500
Oman	Few hundred
Saudi Arabia	n/a



JORDAN
1. Muwaffaq Salti Airbase

IRAQ
2. al-Asad Air Base

KUWAIT
3. Ali al-Salem Air Base
4. Ahmad al-Jabir Air Base
5. Camp Arifjan

SAUDI ARABIA
6. Eskan Village Air Base

BAHRAIN
7. Khalifa bin Salman Port
8. Shaykh Isa Air Base

QATAR
9. Al Udeid Air Base

UNITED ARAB EMIRATES
10. Al-Dhafra Air Base
11. Jebel Ali Port
12. Fujairah Naval Base

OMAN
13. Musnanah Air Base
14. Muscat International Airport
15. RAFO Masirah
16. Al Duqm Port
17. RAFO Thumrait
18. Salalah Port

SOURCE: Heritage Foundation research.

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"President Trump directed a further drawdown to 2,500 by January 2021."[75]

The U.S. also continues to maintain a limited number of forces in other locations in the Middle East, primarily in GCC countries. Rising naval tensions in the Persian Gulf prompted additional deployments of troops, Patriot missile batteries, and combat aircraft to the Gulf in late 2019 to deter Iran, although reductions in U.S. forces were subsequently announced in May 2020.[76] The decision perhaps indicated a shifting strategy to counter Iran or an assessment by U.S. officials of a reduced risk as Iran continued to mitigate the economic and political effects of COVID-19.

As of early 2020, "approximately 14,000 U.S. military personnel had been added to a baseline of more than 60,000 U.S. forces in and around the Persian Gulf...and those in Iraq and Afghanistan."[77] Although their exact disposition is hard to triangulate because of the fluctuating nature of U.S. military operations in the region,[78] information gleaned from open sources reveals the following:

- **Kuwait.** More than 13,500 U.S. personnel are based in Kuwait and are spread among Camp Arifjan, Ahmad al-Jabir Air Base, and Ali al-Salem Air Base. A large depot of prepositioned equipment and a squadron of fighters and Patriot missile systems are also deployed to Kuwait.[79]

- **UAE.** About 3,500 U.S. personnel are deployed at Jebel Ali port, Al Dhafra Air Base, and naval facilities at Fujairah. Jebel Ali port is the U.S. Navy's busiest port of call for aircraft carriers. U.S. Air Force personnel who are stationed in the UAE use Al Dhafra Air Base to operate fighters, unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs), refueler aircraft, and surveillance aircraft. In addition, the United States has regularly deployed F-22 Raptor combat aircraft to Al Dhafra and recently deployed the F-35 combat aircraft because of escalating tensions with Iran. Patriot missile systems are deployed for air and missile defense.[80]

- **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 a few hundred, mostly from the U.S. Air Force. According to the Congressional Research Service, "the United States reportedly has access to Oman's military airfields in Muscat (the capital), Thumrait, Masirah Island, and Musnanah" as well as (pursuant to a March 2019 Strategic framework Agreement) the ports of Al Duqm and Salalah.[81]

- **Bahrain.** Approximately 5,000 U.S. military personnel are based in Bahrain. Because Bahrain is home to Naval Support Activity Bahrain and the U.S. Fifth Fleet, 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-8 surveillance aircraft are stationed. 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.[82]

- **Saudi Arabia.** The U.S. withdrew the bulk of its forces from Saudi Arabia in 2003. After the October 2019 attacks on Saudi Arabia's oil and natural gas facilities, the U.S. Department of Defense deployed 3,000 additional troops and sent radar and missile systems to improve air defenses, an air expeditionary wing to support fighter aircraft, and two fighter squadrons in an effort to deter future attacks.[83] This large-scale military buildup to counter Iran was reduced in May 2020 after the U.S. removed two Patriot missile batteries and dozens of troops that had been deployed during the troop buildup.[84] 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.[85]

- **Qatar.** More than 8,000 U.S. personnel, mainly from the U.S. Air Force, are deployed in Qatar.[86] The U.S. operates its Combined Air Operations Center at Al Udeid Air Base, which is one of the world's most important U.S. air bases. It is also the base from which the anti-ISIS campaign was headquartered. Heavy bombers, tankers, transports, and ISR (intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance) aircraft operate from Al Udeid Air Base, which also serves as the forward headquarters of CENTCOM. The base 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 [America's] strongest and most reliable partners in the Levant sub-region."[87] 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, in addition to other military assets like fighter jets and air defense systems, "approximately 3,145 U.S. military personnel are deployed to Jordan to support Defeat-ISIS operations, enhance Jordan's security, and promote regional stability."[88]

CENTCOM "directs and enables military operations and activities with allies and partners to increase regional security and stability in support of enduring U.S. interests."[89] Execution of this mission is supported by four service component commands (U.S. Naval Forces Middle East [USNAVCENT]; U.S. Army Forces Middle East [USARCENT]; U.S. Air Forces Middle East [USAFCENT]; and U.S. Marine Forces Middle East [MARCENT]) and one subordinate unified command (U.S. Special Operations Command Middle East [SOCCENT]).

- **U.S. Naval Forces Central Command.** USNAVCENT is USCENTCOM's maritime component. 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 that encompasses approximately 2.5 million square miles of water.

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

- **U.S. Air Forces Central Command.** USAFCENT is USCENTCOM's air component. Based in Qatar, it 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.** MARCENT is USCENTCOM's designated Marine Corps service component. Based in Bahrain, it is responsible for all Marine Corps forces in the region.

- **U.S. Special Operations Command Central.** SOCCENT is a subordinate unified command under USCENTCOM.

Based in Qatar, it 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.

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 that it once ruled and has conducted military operations in the region for decades. Approximately 1,350 British service personnel are based throughout the region. This number fluctuates with the arrival of visiting warships.[90]

The British presence in the region is dominated by the Royal Navy. Permanently based naval assets include four mine hunters and one Royal Fleet Auxiliary supply ship. In addition, there generally are frigates or destroyers in the Gulf or Arabian Sea performing maritime security duties,[91] and although such matters are not the subject of public discussion, U.K. attack submarines operate in the area. In April 2018, as a sign of its long-term maritime presence in the region, the U.K. opened a base in Bahrain—its first overseas military base in the Middle East in more than four decades.[92] The U.K. has made a multimillion-dollar investment in modernization of the Duqm Port complex in Oman to accommodate its new *Queen Elizabeth*–class aircraft carriers.[93]

The U.K. has a sizeable Royal Air Force (RAF) presence in the region as well, 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, and small RAF detachments in Oman 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 it is expected that they will continue to do so.

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.[94] 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 still significant. France opened its first military base in the Gulf in 2009. Located in the emirate of Abu Dhabi, it was the first foreign military installation built by the French in 50 years.[95] The French have 700 personnel based in the UAE, along with eight Rafale jets, as well as military operations in Kuwait and Qatar.[96] French ships have access to the Zayed Port in Abu Dhabi, which is big enough to handle every ship in the French Navy except the aircraft carrier *Charles De Gaulle*.

Military support from the U.K. and France has been particularly important in Operation Inherent Resolve, a U.S.-led joint task force formed to combat the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria. In March 2020, France and the U.K. announced that they would be reducing their footprint in Iraq because of the impact of COVID-19.[97] However, as of February 2021, the French Armed Forces had resumed their operations. France has 650 troops stationed in the UAE, 600 stationed in Syria and Iraq, and 700 stationed in Lebanon.[98] The U.K. temporarily redeployed troops back to the U.K. as a result of COVID-19 but announced in February 2021 that the 500 troops would be sent back alongside an additional 3,500 extra troops to boost its counterterrorism training mission in Iraq.[99] Additional troops will help to prevent the IS from returning and manage threats from Iran-backed militias more effectively.

Another important actor in Middle East security is the small East African country of Djibouti. Djibouti sits on the Bab el-Mandeb Strait, through which an estimated 6.2 million barrels of oil a day transited in 2018 (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.[100] An increasing number of countries recognize

Djibouti's value as a base from which to project maritime power and launch counterterrorism operations. The country is home to Camp Lemonnier, which can hold as many as 4,000 personnel and is the only permanent U.S. military base in Africa.[101]

China is also involved in Djibouti and has its first permanent overseas base there, which can house 10,000 troops and which Chinese marines have used to stage live-fire exercises featuring armored combat vehicles and artillery. France, Italy, and Japan also have presences of varying strength in Djibouti.[102]

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 other regions of the globe. The Middle East also contains some of the world's most critical maritime choke points, including 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, during a decades-long presence, the U.S. has developed systems that enable it to move large numbers of matériel and personnel into and out of the region. 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 "the largest logistical drawdown since World War II" and included 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."[103]

The condition of the region's roads varies from country to country. The most recent available data reflect that 100 percent of the roads in Israel, Jordan, and the UAE are paved. Other nations—for example, Oman (49.3 percent); Saudi Arabia (21.5 percent); and Yemen (8.7 percent)—have poor paved road coverage.[104] Rail coverage is also poor.

The U.S. has access to several airfields in the region. The primary air hub for U.S. forces is 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.

The fact that a particular air base is available to the U.S. today, however, does not necessarily mean that it will be available for a particular operation in the future. For example, because of their more cordial relations with Iran, it is highly unlikely that Qatar and Oman would allow the U.S. to use air bases in their territory for strikes against Iran unless they were first attacked themselves.

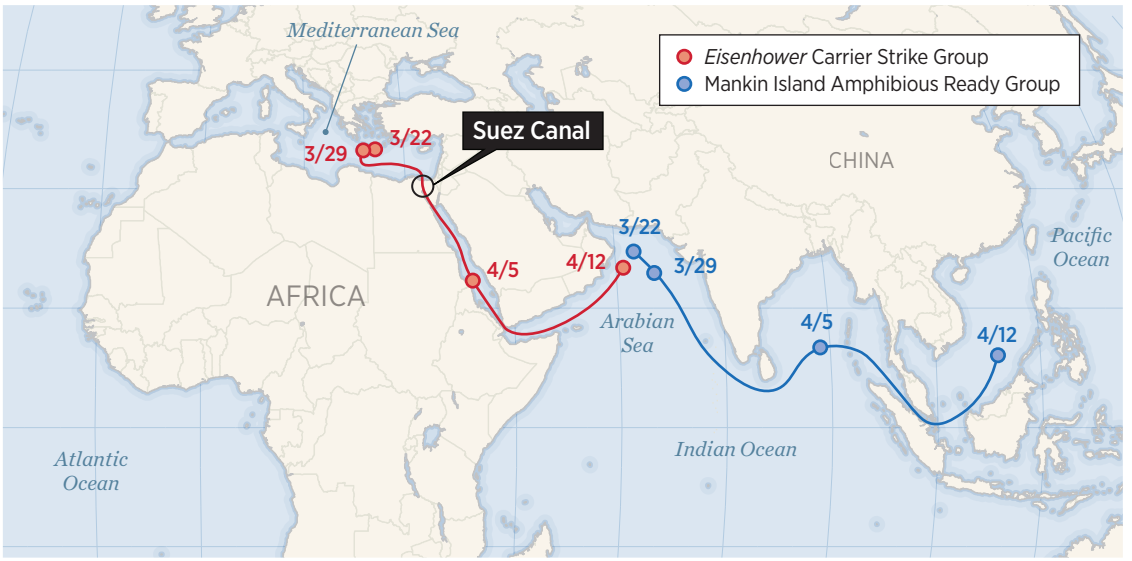
The U.S. has access to ports in the region, perhaps most importantly in Bahrain, as well as a deep-water port, Khalifa bin Salman, in Bahrain and naval facilities at Fujairah, UAE.[105] The UAE's commercial port of Jebel Ali is open for visits from U.S. warships and the prepositioning of equipment for operations in theater.[106] In March 2019, "Oman and the United States signed a 'Strategic Framework Agreement' that expands the U.S.–Oman facilities access agreements by allowing U.S. forces to use the ports of Al Duqm and Salalah."[107] The location of these ports outside the Strait of Hormuz makes them particularly useful. 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. Tens of thousands of cargo ships travel through the Strait of Hormuz and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait each year.

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:

MAP 5

The Effect of the Suez Canal Blockage on the U.S. Navy

Suez Canal operations were suspended March 23–29 due to the grounding of a container ship, which created a 360-ship traffic jam. The *Eisenhower* Carrier Strike Group (CSG) transited the canal April 2 and arrived on station in the Arabian Sea 10 days later. If the *Eisenhower* CSG had had to circumnavigate Africa, the trip would have taken about three weeks.



SOURCE: U.S. Naval Institute News, "USNI News Fleet and Marine Tracker," https://news.usni.org/category/fleet-tracker (accessed August 19, 2021).

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- **The Suez Canal.** In 2020, more than 19,000 ships transited the Suez Canal, averaging 51.5 ships each day.[108] 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 to Europe because it provides access to oil from the Middle East. It 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.[109]

The journey through the narrow waterway is no easy task for large surface combatants. The canal was not constructed with the aim of accommodating 100,000-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.[110] These security protocols, however, are not foolproof. In April 2021, the Suez Canal was closed for over 11 days after a container ship blocked the waterway, creating a 360-ship traffic jam that disrupted almost 13 percent of global maritime traffic. This crisis proves that ever-larger container

ships transiting strategic choke points are prone to accidents that can lead to massive disruptions of both global maritime trade and U.S. maritime security.[111]

- **Strait of Hormuz.** According to the U.S. Energy Information Administration, the Strait of Hormuz, which links the Persian Gulf with the Arabian Sea and the Gulf of Oman, "is the world's most important oil chokepoint because of the large volumes of oil that flow through the strait. In 2018, its daily oil flow averaged 21 million barrels per day (b/d), or the equivalent of about 21% of global petroleum liquids consumption." In addition, "China, India, Japan, South Korea, and Singapore were the largest destinations for crude oil moving through the Strait of Hormuz to Asia, accounting for 65% of all Hormuz crude oil and condensate flows in 2018."[112] Given the extreme narrowness of the passage and its proximity to Iran, shipping routes through the Strait of Hormuz are particularly vulnerable to disruption. Iran attacked oil tankers repeatedly in May and June 2019 and continues to harass U.S. naval ships.[113]

- **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. Because the Bab el-Mandeb Strait is 18 miles wide at its narrowest point, passage is limited to two channels for inbound and outbound shipments.[114]

Maritime Prepositioning of Equipment and Supplies. The U.S. military has deployed noncombatant 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 area. 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 because of 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 (or at least its physical presence) appears to have been defeated, the nature of its successor is unclear. Iraq has restored its territorial integrity since the defeat of ISIS, but the political situation and future relations between Baghdad and the U.S. will remain difficult as long as a government that is sympathetic to Iran is in power.[115] Although the regional dispute with Qatar is now resolved, U.S. relations in the region will remain complex and difficult to manage, although this has not stopped the U.S. military from operating.

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 region's principal security and political challenges are linked to the unrealized aspirations of the Arab Spring, surging transnational terrorism, and meddling by Iran, which seeks to extend its influence in the Islamic world. 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. COVID-19 has already exacerbated these economic, political, and regional crises, which may destabilize the post-pandemic operational environment for U.S. forces.

Thanks to its decades of military operations in the Middle East, the U.S. has the tried-and-tested procedures needed to operate in the region. Bases and infrastructure are well established, and the logistical processes for maintaining a large force forward deployed thousands of miles away from the homeland are well in place. Moreover, unlike in Europe, all of these processes have been tested recently in combat. The personal links between allied armed forces are also present. Joint training exercises improve interoperability, and U.S. military educational courses that are regularly attended by officers (and often royals) from the Middle East provide an opportunity for 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 uses a five-point scale that ranges from "very poor" to "excellent" conditions and covers 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 are more likely to lend support to U.S. military operations. Indicators that provide insight into the strength or health of an alliance 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 reflects, for example, whether transfers of power are generally peaceful and whether there have been any recent instances of political instability in the region.

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 helps the U.S. to remain familiar with its characteristics and the various actors that might either support or try to 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.[116]

The U.S. has developed an extensive network of bases in the Middle East region and has acquired substantial operational experience in combatting regional threats. At the same time, however, many of America's allies are hobbled by political instability, economic problems, internal security threats, and mushrooming transnational threats. Although the region's 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

1. For example, during a 1916 meeting in Downing Street, Sir Mark Sykes, Britain's lead negotiator with the French on carving up the Ottoman Empire in the Middle East, pointed to the map and told the Prime Minister that for Britain's sphere of influence in the Middle East, "I should like to draw a line from the *e* in Acre [modern-day Israel] to the last *k* in Kirkuk [modern-day Iraq]." See James Barr, *A Line in the Sand: Britain, France, and the Struggle That Shaped the Middle East* (London: Simon & Schuster U.K., 2011), pp. 7–20. See also Margaret McMillan, *Paris 1919: Six Months That Changed the World* (New York: Random House, 2003).
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