

Rebalancing America's Security Engagement with Arab States

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A less military-focused U.S. approach to engagement with Arab states would help address the intense needs of the region while also serving U.S. national security interests.

Long before recent calls to downsize the U.S. military presence in Arab countries and end the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, U.S. security policy in the region needed rebalancing and a major overhaul. To be sure, recent developments such as the global rise of China, non-military challenges including the pandemic and climate change, America's growing energy independence, and rapid advances in military technology such as artificial intelligence have cast into sharp relief the anachronistic nature of a military-led approach. In this evolving landscape it now seems dusty and out of date, the relic of a bygone era.

Unfulfilled Promise

Even beyond being outdated, the United States' heavily securitized engagement in the Middle East—anchored in conventional arms transfers, brick-and-mortar military basing, and bilateral ties with autocratic Arab states—has never fully delivered on its promise. It has not made the region more secure but rather enabled military

interventions by Arab allies in Yemen and Libya that have advanced neither U.S. interests nor values—and have been catastrophes on the human as well as strategic level. Nor has it succeeded in cordoning off Iran from the region or deterring its involvement in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Yemen, and elsewhere.

Security assistance has also not succeeded in building up the militaries of regional partners to levels where they can credibly defend themselves without U.S. help or participate, in a significant way, in U.S.-led multilateral operations. With few exceptions, that assistance has not produced appreciable American leverage over the domestic and foreign behaviors of U.S. allies. Worse, it has often implicated the United States in those allies' abuses at home and made U.S. policymakers reticent to criticize them for fear of losing access for U.S. forces.

Great Power Competition

The challenge of great power competition and in particular expanding Russian and Chinese influence in the Middle East has often been advanced as a rationale for keeping America in the regional arms game. Nearly all U.S. allies in the region have turned to other foreign suppliers, including European states as well as Russia (and to a lesser extent China), and they frequently use threats to do so as a form of leverage with Washington or to communicate their displeasure with U.S. policies. Arab allies still know, however, that their other suppliers cannot provide comprehensive security guarantees, and when they go ahead with third-party purchases they are often frustrated by the materiel's inferior quality, absence of sustained service and follow-up, and problems of integration and interoperability.

More important, though, in the case of competition with China, the United States is losing out by playing yesterday's game. While the Chinese are certainly exporting arms (mostly drones) to the region, they are more focused on marketing themselves as a purveyor of economic progress and modernization, while letting America shoulder the security burden through expensive military adventures and a seemingly perpetual military presence.

Post-Oil Future

Yet another compelling argument for why the status-quo U.S. security approach is no longer tenable in the Middle East comes not from factors external to the region such as great power encroachment, technological advances, or even the pressing need for reform and renewal within the United States. Rather, it springs from the immense changes underway within Arab states themselves: the socioeconomic, political, and demographic trends that spawned the Arab uprisings of 2011 and 2019 and that have in many instances been accelerated by the aftershocks from the 2020–21 COVID-19 pandemic.

At the forefront of these challenges is the long-term [decline in global demand for oil](#) and its impact on the rentier model on which nearly every Arab state relies directly or indirectly. Simply put, Arab regimes will soon no longer be able to rely on the distribution of hydrocarbon wealth to keep themselves afloat. The consequences of this impending era, coming on top of the strains imposed by the current pandemic, are likely to be profound for social stability, undercutting the current authoritarian playbook of ruling through patronage, co-optation, coercion, and a bloated public sector rather than governing through inclusivity, economic productivity, and a genuine social contract.

Yet with few exceptions, Arab rulers have been slow to make the changes needed to build productive, diversified economies let alone responsive, accountable governance. Their extraordinarily high levels of defense spending, often on high-end prestige items such as advanced fighter aircraft, underscore their continued conception of national security in narrow and outmoded terms, with an emphasis on ensuring regime survival and playing regional power games. For its part, the U.S. has continued to feed this appetite for arms, though recent steps by the Biden Administration in halting a proposed Trump-era weapons transfer to Saudi Arabia indicate the possibility of a shift.

Rebalanced Engagement

A new, less military-focused U.S. approach to Arab countries would contribute to stability by helping to address the intense needs of the region while also serving U.S. national security interests. While the United States is not obligated to help Arab countries find their way to productive post-oil economies—based on human capital and technology—doing so would serve U.S. interests by diminishing the region’s propensity for generating armed conflict, militant groups, and waves of migration. Shifting U.S. resources towards addressing some of the worst effects of climate change, for example, such as water shortages and diminishing arable land, might well pay greater dividends than yet another offensive weapons system that Arab states will either not use or, worse, sometimes use for ill.

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