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Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy

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NATIONAL INSTITUTE FOR PUBLIC POLICY

**Crisis and Opportunity in U.S.
Mideast Policy**

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Executive Summary

A great debate is underway in American foreign policy: a tug-or-war over the extent of U.S. interests in—and American engagement with—the Middle East. To some, the region has come to be seen as a “purgatory” that continues to leech valuable resources and national attention.¹ Others have contended that “the Middle East isn’t worth it any more,” and Washington should downsize its regional presence to a more modest and sustainable footprint.² Still others have argued that, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement in the Middle East represents an “unnecessary expensive and wasteful” venture which should be terminated altogether.³

In the post-Cold War era, U.S. interests in the region have undergone a profound redefinition, driven by a range of factors. One of them is the decline of the Middle East as a key source of U.S. oil supply. Another factor has been the changing nature of U.S. counterterrorism policy. Perhaps most prominent, however, has been the U.S. shift in strategic focus away from the Middle East and toward Asia as a region of primary concern and competition. That focus has both persisted and been reinforced in recent years by the global rise of China and changing perceptions of the PRC among U.S. policymakers. Cumulatively, these factors

¹ Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory,” *Foreign Affairs*, January/February 2019, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>.

² Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Any More,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317>.

³ Ted Galen Carpenter, “Now Is The Time To Shed Our Middle East Burdens,” *The American Conservative*, June 27, 2020, <https://www.theamericanconservative.com/articles/now-is-the-time-to-shed-our-middle-eastern-burdens/>.

have helped to reinforce an American turn away from the Middle East, even as the region has presented an array of new and pressing challenges, as well as opportunities, to U.S. strategic interests.

Iran

In a region that boasts no shortage of problems, none have been more vexing to the United States over the past four decades than the one posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. Today, the Biden administration is engaged in a protracted diplomatic effort to bring Iran back into the confines of the 2015 nuclear deal. Administration officials initially hoped a revival of that agreement would serve as a prelude to a “longer and stronger” agreement with Tehran.⁴ That, however, has not happened; to the contrary, as of this writing, the most likely outcome of U.S. diplomatic talks is a “less for more” deal that would impose fewer restrictions on Iran’s nuclear effort while providing the regime in Tehran with more lavish concessions and sanctions relief than ever before.⁵

In the process, the Biden administration has scaled back its engagement with Iranian opposition forces and deprioritized the plight of the Iranian people, over the entreaties of activists.⁶ The Administration has thus

⁴ “Blinken says US to seek ‘longer and stronger’ deal with Iran,” *i24 News*, January 19, 2021, <https://www.i24news.tv/en/news/international/1611087752-blinken-says-us-to-seek-longer-and-stronger-deal-with-iran>.

⁵ On the perils of such an agreement, see Jacob Nagel and Mark Dubowitz, “‘Less for More’ is the Worst Deal of All,” *Newsweek*, November 8, 2021, <https://www.newsweek.com/less-more-worst-deal-all-opinion-1645727>.

⁶ See, for instance, Adam Shaw, “Iranian dissidents urge Biden to keep up pressure on Tehran, say regime at ‘weakest point in history,’” *Fox News*, February 23, 2021, <https://www.foxnews.com/politics/iranian-biden-pressure-on-tehran-weakest-point>.

effectively chosen the country's aging clerical regime over its young and westward-looking population – and done so at precisely the time when the Islamic Republic is arguably at its weakest point in four decades. This could end up being a fateful decision, one that robs the United States of a meaningful ability to shape Iran's political trajectory in the years ahead. A more balanced strategy on the part of the United States would seek to deter and contain the predatory regional behavior of Iran's current clerical regime while simultaneously engaging meaningfully with alternatives to it, with the ultimate objective of empowering a post-theocratic transition in Iran that better aligns the country with American values and interests.

Russia

Moscow's return to the region of recent years represents the culmination of a long-standing ambition on the part of the Kremlin. Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East has often been depicted as overwhelmingly opportunistic in nature.⁷ While that has certainly been the case, it would be a mistake to underestimate the scope of the Kremlin's ambitions. To date, the United States has failed to adequately recognize Russia's expanded presence and influence in the Middle East, or to begin to mobilize against it. For the moment, the Biden administration is preoccupied with Russia's new war against Ukraine, and deterring the Kremlin from expanding that conflict still further. Notably, the course of that conflict has prompted changes to Russia's military posture – including a reallocation of resources from

⁷ See, for instance, Frederic Wehrey and Andrew S. Weiss, "Reassessing Russian Capabilities in the Levant and North Africa," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, August 31, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/08/31/reassessing-russian-capabilities-in-levant-and-north-africa-pub-85222>.

the Middle East and Africa.⁸ Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect Russia to retain a strategic presence in the Middle East, and to maintain an interest in serving as a “spoiler” for American regional efforts there. In turn, addressing this presence will require a U.S. policy of sustained political and military engagement with the countries of the region that diminishes the Kremlin’s attractiveness as a strategic or military partner for those nations.

China

The growing focus on China among policymakers in Washington has contributed to America’s current turn away from the Middle East. As a result, comparatively few U.S. analysts and experts have taken note of Beijing’s expanding strategic footprint in the Middle East (as well as Africa). When they have, astute observers have expressed growing alarm at what they see as an “emerging Middle East Kingdom” that Beijing is erecting in the region.⁹

China’s offensive has come in the form of deep—and ongoing—economic investments. Beijing’s outreach, moreover, is not confined to the Sunni nations of the region; China is significantly expanding ties to Shi’ite Iran as well. Simultaneously, China has also become deeply invested in Israel, and this growing stake has begun to create tensions in the long-standing “special relationship” between Jerusalem and Washington. U.S. officials have become

⁸ See, for instance, Jennifer Cafarella, Ezgi Yazici, and Zach Coles, “Russia Mobilizes Reinforcements from Syria and Africa to Ukraine,” Institute for the Study of War *Backgrounder*, March 31, 2022, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/russia-mobilizes-reinforcements-syria-and-africa-ukraine>.

⁹ Michael Doran and Peter Rough, “China’s Emerging Middle East Kingdom,” *Tablet*, August 2, 2020, <https://www.tabletmag.com/sections/israel-middle-east/articles/china-middle-eastern-kingdom>.

increasingly alarmed over ways in which Israel's deepening connection to the PRC could potentially compromise bilateral military cooperation.¹⁰ They have also raised concerns over China's involvement in critical infrastructure projects in Israel, such as the port of Haifa, that might provide Beijing with insights into, and access to, vital intelligence pertaining to the U.S.-Israeli alliance.¹¹

For its part, Beijing views these investments in distinctly geopolitical terms: as a way of displacing the United States in the Middle East and blunting American influence there. The PRC's emergence as a serious strategic player in the Middle East carries enormous consequences, both for the United States and for America's regional allies. As the United States reduces its presence in – and influence over – Mideast affairs, the resulting vacuum is being filled by China, which is using its economic engagement and technological exports to reshape the contours of the region in a less free, more authoritarian direction.¹²

Syria

More than ten years on, the Syrian civil war continues to fester, and to exert a profound influence over the

¹⁰ See, for instance, Michael Wilner, "U.S. Navy may stop docking in Haifa after Chinese take over port," *Jerusalem Post*, December 15, 2018, <https://www.jpost.com/Israel-News/US-Navy-may-stop-docking-in-Haifa-after-Chinese-take-over-port-574414>.

¹¹ See, for instance, Douglas J. Feith and Shaul Chorev, "National Security Perils of China's Belt and Road Policy," National Institute for Public Policy *Information Series* No. 447, October 22, 2019, <https://nipp.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/03/IS-447.pdf>; See also Ilan Berman, "Israel's Dangerous Dalliance With China," *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2019, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/israels-dangerous-dalliance-with-china-11547411591>.

¹² Ilan Berman, "The 'China Model' Comes To The Middle East," *Al-Hurra Digital*, July 17, 2019, <http://www.ilanberman.com/22944/the-china-model-comes-to-the-middle-east>.

geopolitical currents of the region in a number of concrete ways. Recent American policy, however, threatens to make the overall situation significantly worse. Since taking office, the Biden administration has scaled down the U.S. commitment to isolating the Assad regime on the world stage or to meaningfully resolving the region's most intractable conflict. In turn, the Administration's *laissez faire* attitude, and its failure to enforce existing sanctions against Syrian officials, has helped spur a "regional normalization" of the Assad regime, as more and more Middle Eastern states begin to engage with Damascus anew.¹³ As a result, the conflict's current destructive *status quo* is becoming further entrenched, and finding a meaningful resolution to it all the more difficult.

Israeli-Arab Normalization

The links between Israel and various Arab states in the region have set in motion a qualitatively new trend in the Middle East – what Israeli officials have termed a "new era" of peace, prosperity and coordination between Israel and the Arab World.¹⁴ Yet these connections are currently taking place largely without the involvement of the United States. Such a posture of disengagement and disinterest carries tremendous risks for the United States. By failing to acknowledge the new strategic currents taking shape in the Middle East, the United States will relegate itself to the role of a mere bystander in the region, without much ability to

¹³ See, for instance, Josh Rogin, "Biden is tacitly endorsing Assad's normalization," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/2021/10/07/biden-is-tacitly-endorsing-assads-normalization/>.

¹⁴ Seth J. Frantzman, "Abraham Accords, one year later: The inside story," *Jerusalem Post*, August 11, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/abraham-accords-one-year-later-the-inside-story-676440>.

shape regional events or influence its dynamics. Moreover, by not backing the region's evolving economic and political partnerships, the United States will inevitably find itself eclipsed by other regional actors (such as Russia and China) who have begun to throw their backing behind these new connections.¹⁵

The foregoing strategic dynamics are of enormous consequence to the United States. They present policymakers in Washington with new challenges and fresh opportunities that cumulatively demand a re-conception of the role that America can and should play in the region.

Such a rethink begins with the understanding that the Middle East is not peripheral to American interests, or to its global priorities. For roughly a decade, the United States has been in strategic retreat from the region, as other priorities have steadily risen in prominence for American policymakers. This inattention has been exploited by adversaries such as China and Russia, which have adroitly taken advantage of U.S. disengagement to advance their own agendas and presence in the region—and done so in ways that disadvantage long-term American interests. At the same time, the deepening political, economic and strategic integration now visible between Israel and the Arab World holds the potential to significantly advance American security and U.S. strategic interests.

Most concretely, ongoing regional challenges, such as the threat posed by Iran and the conflict in Syria, require a new security architecture capable of providing assurance to regional allies and a common defense against shared threats. Today, the rationale for such an effort has been greatly advanced by the new dynamism and connectivity evident in Israeli-Arab ties, which have created the political

¹⁵ See, for instance, Tuvia Gering, "China's View of the Abraham Accords," Jerusalem Institute for Strategy and Security, October 20, 2020, <https://jiss.org.il/en/gering-chinas-view-of-the-abraham-accords/>.

and economic infrastructure to make such an alignment possible. Yet, since taking office, the Biden administration has abandoned the idea (pursued by its predecessor) in favor of a more traditional approach to the Middle East—one focused on bilateral diplomacy with Iran and routine political contacts with Israel and the countries of the Persian Gulf and North Africa. In the process, it has overlooked a key opportunity to create a persistent regional presence that enhances U.S. deterrence and better protects key partners and allies.

Whatever form it ultimately takes, U.S. policy must be predicated on the understanding that the Middle East is both a vital area for American interests and a key arena for 21st century competition. For, if the United States fails to take the region and its evolving strategic dynamics seriously, Washington will inevitably be marginalized in it—with profound (and profoundly negative) consequences for American security and prosperity.

Introduction

A great debate is underway in American foreign policy: a tug-or-war over the extent of U.S. interests in—and American engagement with—the Middle East. To some, the region has come to be seen as a “purgatory” that continues to leech valuable resources and national attention.¹⁶ Others have contended that “the Middle East isn’t worth it any more,” and Washington should downsize its regional presence to a more modest and sustainable footprint.¹⁷ Still others have argued that, in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic, engagement in the Middle East represents an “unnecessary expensive and wasteful” venture which should be terminated altogether.¹⁸

It was not always this way. Throughout the decades of the Cold War, the Middle East occupied a central role in U.S. strategic thinking. Part of this focus was derivative in nature and a response to the USSR, which had come to view the region as a crucial arena in the struggle for influence against the United States and consequently extensively supported anti-American regimes and movements there in the 1970s and 1980s.¹⁹ Yet the United States also maintained important freestanding interests in the Middle East, most prominent among them safeguarding the security of the State of Israel (with which it had forged a strategic partnership beginning in the early 1980s) and ensuring the free flow of oil from the region. These and other factors helped shape a robust and extended American commitment

¹⁶ Karlin and Wittes, *op. cit.*

¹⁷ Indyk, *op. cit.*

¹⁸ Carpenter, *op. cit.*

¹⁹ Ariel Cohen, “The Primakov Doctrine: Russia’s Zero-Sum Game with the United States,” Heritage Foundation *FYI* no. 167, December 15, 1997, <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-primakov-doctrine-russias-zero-sum-game-the-united-states>.

to the region. As President Ronald Reagan outlined in September 1982:

Our involvement in the search for Mideast peace is not a matter of preference; it's a moral imperative. The strategic importance of the region to the United States is well known, but our policy is motivated by more than strategic interests. We also have an irreversible commitment to the survival and territorial integrity of friendly states. Nor can we ignore the fact that the well-being of much of the world's economy is tied to stability in the strife-torn Middle East.²⁰

In the post-Cold War era, however, U.S. interests in the region have undergone a profound redefinition, driven by a range of factors.

One of them is the decline of the Middle East as a key source of U.S. oil supply. Since the dawn of the oil era early last century, American engagement with the Middle East has been shaped by the region's role as a global energy producer. Access to oil stood at the center of the historic entente forged between President Franklin Delano Roosevelt and Saudi King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud in February 1945, and in the U.S. engagement with the other oil rich monarchies of the Persian Gulf of subsequent years. These contacts provided the United States with preferential access to Middle Eastern oil, and the region became a vital source of energy for the U.S.²¹ However, this made the United

²⁰ Ronald Reagan, Address to the Nation on United States Policy for Peace in the Middle East, September 1, 1982, <https://www.reaganlibrary.gov/archives/speech/address-nation-united-states-policy-peace-middle-east>.

²¹ By the late 1970s, oil imports from the Middle East accounted for more than 26% of total U.S. annual oil imports. Data drawn from the U.S. Energy Information Administration <https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=p&s=mcr&f=a>.

States deeply susceptible to external shocks, such as the one caused by the October 1973 Arab oil embargo, which was undertaken by the Arab members of OPEC in response to U.S. support for Israel during the Yom Kippur War that year.

In the post-Cold War era, American dependence on Middle Eastern energy continued—and deepened—amid soaring U.S. consumption. When tallied in 2001, oil from Persian Gulf countries accounted for 23 percent of total U.S. crude imports.²² By 2008, that figure had declined slightly, to under 19 percent, but the region still constituted an indispensable part of America’s overall “energy mix.”²³

Over the past decade, however, an American energy “revolution” has taken hold, driven by a bipartisan commitment to eliminate dependence on foreign sources of oil. Encompassing dramatic increases in domestic oil and natural gas production, as well as investments in renewable energy sources, this effort has allowed the United States to begin to fundamentally alter its patterns of energy production and consumption. As part of this shift, America’s dependence on foreign sources of energy, including the Middle East, has begun to decline. According to data from the U.S. Energy Information Administration, in 2020 the Middle East accounted for less than 10 percent of total U.S. imports.²⁴ While the Biden administration, through decisions like the 2021 cancellation of the Keystone

²² See Robert Rapier, “How Much Oil Do We Import From The Middle East?” *Forbes*, January 7, 2020,

<https://www.forbes.com/sites/rpapier/2020/01/07/how-much-oil-do-we-import-from-the-middle-east/?sh=4be1f17021c6>.

²³ *Ibid.*

²⁴ U.S. Energy Information Administration, “U.S. Imports from Persian Gulf Countries of Crude Oil,” n.d.,

<https://www.eia.gov/dnav/pet/hist/LeafHandler.ashx?n=pets&s=mcrimuspg2&f=a>.

XL pipeline project,²⁵ has signaled that energy independence does not rank high on its list of priorities, the larger trendline of U.S. energy disengagement from the Middle East has continued apace, at least at present.²⁶ As it has, it has fostered a rethink among U.S. officials regarding the indispensability of the Middle East to American strategic interests.

Another factor has been the changing nature of U.S. counterterrorism policy. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001 ushered in an intense period of U.S. overseas military operations, beginning with 2001's Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan and extending to Operation Iraqi Freedom in 2003. At home, it spawned the creation of a vast governmental bureaucracy dedicated to proactive counterterrorism policing, intelligence collection and law enforcement. This focus has been sustained for the past two decades by the rise of new threats, such as the Islamic State terrorist group, and the emergence of conflicts (like the civil wars in Libya and Syria) which threaten U.S. interests and allies. Yet, while these engagements have been overwhelmingly successful along a key metric, that of preventing subsequent attacks on the U.S. homeland, their extended nature, amorphous objectives and resource-heavy

²⁵ Matthew Brown, "Keystone XL pipeline nixed after Biden stands firm on permit," Associated Press, June 9, 2021,

<https://apnews.com/article/donald-trump-joe-biden-keystone-pipeline-canada-environment-and-nature-141eabd7cca6449dfbd2dab8165812f2>.

²⁶ For instance, U.S. imports of oil from Saudi Arabia – which previously served as America's principal Mideast supplier – has declined precipitously; in 2008-2009, the United States imported roughly one million barrels a day from the Kingdom; as of January 2021, that figure had declined to virtually zero. Sheela Tobben and Julian Lee, "U.S. Imports No Saudi Crude for First Time in 35 Years," *Bloomberg*, January 6, 2021,

<https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2021-01-06/saudi-oil-exports-to-u-s-at-zero-for-first-time-in-35-years>.

requirements have led them to decline in popularity with the American electorate. Germane, too, has been the rise of domestic terrorism as a serious concern within the United States. This phenomenon has captured significant national attention of late, and shifted both intelligence and law enforcement away from the challenge posed by Islamic extremism.²⁷

Perhaps most prominent, however, has been the U.S. shift in strategic focus away from the Middle East and toward Asia as a region of primary concern and competition. A little over a decade ago, amid the ferment of the “Arab Spring” in the Middle East, President Obama announced what would come to be known as a “pivot to Asia.” In November 2011 remarks before the Australian Parliament, he underscored plans for a “broader shift” away from the Middle East, in which the U.S. would turn its attention to “the vast potential of the Asia Pacific region” to take advantage of political and economic opportunities there.²⁸ At the time, that shift was seen by many as an attempt on the part of the Obama administration to disengage from the troublesome strategic dynamics of the Middle East in lieu of more favorable ones in the Asia Pacific theater.²⁹

²⁷ See, for instance, John Haltiwanger and Sonam Sheth, “War at home: 20 years after 9/11, jihadists are no longer the biggest threat facing the US,” *Business Insider*, September 10, 2021, <https://www.businessinsider.com/white-supremacists-biggest-extremist-threat-us-september-11-20th-anniversary-2021-9>.

²⁸ White House, Office of the Press Secretary, “Remarks By President Obama to the Australian Parliament,” Canberra, Australia, November 17, 2011, <https://obamawhitehouse.archives.gov/the-press-office/2011/11/17/remarks-president-obama-australian-parliament>.

²⁹ Stephen P. Cohen and Robert Ward, “Asia Pivot: Obama’s Ticket out of the Middle East?” Brookings Institution, August 21, 2013, <https://www.brookings.edu/opinions/asia-pivot-obamas-ticket-out-of-middle-east/>.

That focus has both persisted and been reinforced in recent years by the global rise of China and changing perceptions of the PRC among U.S. policymakers. Since 2013, the increasingly aggressive foreign policy adopted by China under the guidance of Communist Party General Secretary and President Xi Jinping has helped demolish the so-called “Washington consensus” regarding China: that is possible to transform the PRC into a “responsible stakeholder” on the world stage through deeper political and economic engagement.³⁰ During its time in office, the Trump administration embraced a national security strategy which had as its central pillar the idea of “great power competition” with China (as well as Russia) across a series of domains.³¹ That priority has been echoed by the Biden administration, which since taking office has recognized the need for “long-term strategic competition” with China.³² (More recently, the White House has gravitated toward a more restrained version of this effort.³³ However, by and large, the priority still remains in effect

³⁰ The idea was most famously articulated by then-Deputy Secretary of State Robert Zoellick back in 2005, in a speech before the National Committee on U.S.-China Relations. The full text of Zoellick’s speech is available at

https://www.ncuscr.org/sites/default/files/migration/Zoellick_remarks_notes06_winter_spring.pdf.

³¹ White House, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America*, December 2017, <https://trumpwhitehouse.archives.gov/wp-content/uploads/2017/12/NSS-Final-12-18-2017-0905.pdf>.

³² See, for instance, Jacob Fromer and Mark Magnier, “US, EU must prepare for ‘long-term strategic competition with China,’ says Joe Biden,” *South China Morning Post*, February 20, 2021, <https://www.scmp.com/news/china/article/3122460/us-eu-must-prepare-long-term-strategic-competition-china-says-president>.

³³ See, for instance, “US looking for responsible competition with China, White House says,” *Press Trust of India*, October 8, 2021, https://www.business-standard.com/article/international/us-looking-for-responsible-competition-with-china-white-house-says-121100800049_1.html.

across the Federal bureaucracy.) Consequently, the Asia Pacific is now an arena of intense strategic focus for Washington, ranging from alliance-building (in the form of the Quad and the newly formed AUKUS alliance) to initiatives intended to better defend Taiwan against Chinese aggression.³⁴

Cumulatively, these factors have helped to reinforce an American turn away from the Middle East, even as the region has presented an array of new and pressing challenges, as well as opportunities, to U.S. strategic interests.

A Changing Iran

In a region that boasts no shortage of problems, none have been more vexing to the United States over the past four decades than the one posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. The fall of the Pahlavi dynasty in the Spring of 1979 transformed Iran from a dependable strategic ally of the United States into an implacable ideological adversary. The success of the Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's Islamic Revolution ushered in a violent, totalitarian theocracy committed to the exportation of its radical religious creed beyond its borders, and to ideological confrontation with the West.³⁵ In the years since, those priorities have

³⁴ Gordon Lubold, "U.S. Troops Have Been Deployed in Taiwan for at Least a Year," *Wall Street Journal*, October 7, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/u-s-troops-have-been-deployed-in-taiwan-for-at-least-a-year-11633614043>.

³⁵ Thus, the Preamble of Iran's original 1979 constitution, released just months into Khomeini's new government, declares that the country's clerical army, the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC), "will be responsible not only for guarding and preserving the frontiers of the country, but also for fulfilling the ideological mission of jihad in God's way; that is, extending the sovereignty of God's law throughout the world." See

manifested themselves in a number of concrete ways, from extensive support for international terrorism to persistent meddling in the internal affairs of other nations, both in its immediate neighborhood and beyond.

These destructive tendencies drove the United States to view Iran as a cardinal regional threat in the 1980s and 1990s, and structure much of its policy in the Middle East in response to it. Over the past two decades, these regime proclivities have been compounded—and progressively overshadowed—by another: the Islamic Republic’s persistent pursuit of a nuclear capability. Yet today, the Islamic Republic is on the cusp of profound change as a result of a number of key trends, with vast implications for regional security—and for American interests.

Among the most far-reaching is demographics. The Islamic Republic is now in the throes of a generational transition that will help reshape the contours of the country’s politics, the complexion of its regime, and its larger relationship with the world. With a median age of 32, Iran ranks among the older nations of the Middle Eastern region.³⁶ Yet the age structure of the Islamic Republic is highly significant; today, 37.47 percent of Iran’s population of 85.8 million people is aged 24 or younger.³⁷ The practical consequences of this breakdown cannot be overstated. Simply put, this cohort has no recollection of the Islamic Revolution, and lacks the ideological bonds that would tether it securely to the regime in Tehran. It has

https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/Iran_1989.pdf?lang=en.

³⁶ “Median age of the population in Middle Eastern countries in 2020,” statista.com, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/591024/median-age-of-the-population-in-the-middle-east/>.

³⁷ “Iran,” *CIA World Factbook*, October 27, 2021, <https://www.cia.gov/the-world-factbook/countries/iran/#people-and-society>.

consequently become an overriding source of worry for Iran's ruling elite.

Iran's clerical class, meanwhile, is increasingly aging and infirm, and preoccupied with the survivability of its ideological order. The senior leadership of the Iranian regime is heavily populated by clerics and officials now in their 80s and 90s, many of whom have begun to pass from the political scene. Iran's Supreme Leader, Ali Khamenei, is now 82 years old, and has for years suffered from a range of ailments, including prostate cancer.³⁸ Ahmad Jannati, the ultra-conservative cleric who heads both Iran's Assembly of Experts, the powerful clerical body that will select the country's next supreme leader, and its Council of Guardians, which oversees the country's legislature to ensure compliance with revolutionary principles, is now aged 94. A number of high-profile national figures, meanwhile, have passed away in recent years.

As this transition has taken hold, the Iranian regime has shifted its political strategy and adopted a more hands-on approach to governance. In the 1990s, the regime had been confident enough to countenance the appearance of political pluralism within the Iranian system and permit the rise of "reformist" elements such as former President Mohammed Khatami. Today, by contrast, it has adopted an increasingly intrusive and invasive political strategy aimed at shaping the strategic direction of the country. In the words of one observer, the Iranian regime has quite simply "stopped pretending" that it is anything other than an authoritarian theocracy.³⁹

³⁸ Thomas Erdbrink, "Iran's Top Leader Undergoes Prostate Surgery," *New York Times*, September 8, 2014, <https://www.nytimes.com/2014/09/09/world/middleeast/irans-ayatollah-khamenei-has-prostate-surgery.html>.

³⁹ Karim Sadjadpour, "Iran Stops Pretending," *The Atlantic*, June 20, 2021, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2021/06/iran-president-raisi-biden/619252/>.

Another key trend is environmental. In the Summer of 2021, protests erupted in Iran's Khuzestan region over water shortages caused by deepening drought conditions and governmental mismanagement. The unrest in Khuzestan quickly spread to other cities throughout the country before eventually being quelled by government forces, but it underscored a longstanding problem—one with the power to fundamentally undermine the authority, and the stability, of the Iranian government. After decades of poor administration, bad resource allocation and government mismanagement, Iran is now suffering through a water crisis that is truly national in scope.

The problem is not new. Back in 2018, Mohammad Hossein Shariatmadar, the head of Iran's national center for strategic agriculture and water management, warned that the Islamic Republic was "only five years away from an all-encompassing water disaster as a result of five decades of mismanagement."⁴⁰ The following year, the World Resources Institute, a leading environmental think tank, ranked Iran as one of the world's most "water stressed" nations, and estimated that the Islamic Republic consumes some 80 percent of its available water resources every year. This situation, it warned, means that "even small dry shocks—which are set to increase due to climate change—can produce dire consequences."⁴¹

In other words, the Islamic Republic has become deeply susceptible to environmental disruptions. As evidence, at least 110 cities throughout the country were forced to implement some form of water rationing or suffered disruptions this past summer in response to record drought

⁴⁰ "Iran And Its Neighbors Face 'Extraordinary Water Crisis' - Report," *Radio Farda*, August 8, 2019, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-and-its-neighbors-face-extraordinary-water-crisis---report/30099295.html>.

⁴¹ Ibid.

conditions, according to official governmental tallies.⁴² In turn, hundreds of protesters were arrested, and dozens killed, in clashes with authorities over increasingly desperate ecological conditions.

The political consequences are potentially profound. The looming resource crisis created by decades of official mismanagement has created a truly universal problem—one that affects every strata of Iranian society, even those that sat out previous rounds of anti-regime activism (such as the 2009 protests). Quite simply, water scarcity has provided a common rallying point for all Iranians, as well as a shared grievance against the Iranian regime. It is for this reason that observers have identified environmental degradation and increasingly harsh climatological conditions as a potential “Achilles heel” for the Iranian regime.⁴³

The third consequential trend taking place within Iran is a shift in internal political debate. A little over a decade ago, when protests broke out in response to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s fraudulent reelection to the Iranian presidency, the internal political discussion within Iran still largely centered on the possibility of affecting incremental behavioral change within the Islamic Republic. Indeed, the two main leaders of the so-called “Green Movement,” Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi, were both establishment figures who had previously served in senior regime positions. As a result, the change they promised was

⁴² Neville Teller, “Iran’s water crisis threatens the regime,” *Jerusalem Post*, August 4, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/opinion/irans-water-crisis-threatens-the-regime-opinion-675852>.

⁴³ Javad Heiran-Nia and Mahmood Monshipouri, “Iran’s environmental woes could be Raisi’s Achilles heel,” *Atlantic Council IranSource*, September 16, 2021, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-environmental-woes-could-be-raisis-achilles-heel/>.

tactical in nature, and built around a reformation of the existing regime rather than its elimination.

Today's opposition narrative, by contrast, is fundamentally different. While Iran's notoriously fractious opposition remains riven along political, ideological and cultural lines, it is increasingly united around the notion that the Iranian regime is an unreformable ideological construct that must be fundamentally discarded.⁴⁴ For its part, the Iranian regime is acutely aware of this internal shift. It is the reason why, since the start of the current cycle of civil unrest in Iran in December 2017, the regime has embraced increasingly draconian methods to maintain order and suppress dissent, including mass killings and the full shutdown of the national internet.⁴⁵ Quite simply, the Iranian government is cognizant that it has lost the "hearts and minds" of its captive population, and is now prepared to go to extreme lengths to maintain its hold on power in the face of popular disaffection.

But if this trend is apparent to Iranians and the Iranian government, it still is not in the West. There, the trope that Iranian politics are caught in a contest between "reformists" and "hardliners" continues to prevail—and to profoundly shape Western policy toward Iran, which continues to revolve around engagement with, and containment of the

⁴⁴ See generally Ilan Berman, *The Fight for Iran: Opposition Politics, Protest, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Nation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

⁴⁵ "Special Report: Iran's leader ordered crackdown on unrest - 'Do whatever it takes to end it,'" Reuters, December 23, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-protests-specialreport/special-report-irans-leader-ordered-crackdown-on-unrest-do-whatever-it-takes-to-end-it-idUSKBN1YR0QR>; Ilan Berman, "Uprising Averted," *The National Interest*, November 27, 2019, <https://nationalinterest.org/blog/middle-east-watch/uprising-averted-iran-completely-shut-down-internet-within-its-own-borders?page=0%2C1>.

current regime in Tehran, rather than exploiting its bankruptcy or exploring alternatives to it.

Indeed, as of this writing, the Biden administration is engaged in a protracted diplomatic effort to bring Iran back into the confines of the 2015 nuclear deal. Administration officials had initially hoped a revival of that agreement would serve as a prelude to a “longer and stronger” agreement with Tehran.⁴⁶ That, however, has not happened; to the contrary, as of this writing, the most likely outcome of U.S. diplomatic talks is a “less for more” deal that would impose fewer restrictions on Iran’s nuclear effort while providing the regime in Tehran with more lavish concessions and sanctions relief than ever before.⁴⁷

In the process, the Biden administration has scaled back its engagement with Iranian opposition forces and deprioritized the plight of the Iranian people, over the entreaties of activists.⁴⁸ The Administration has thus effectively chosen the country’s aging clerical regime over its young and westward-looking population – and done so at precisely the time when the Islamic Republic is arguably at its weakest point in four decades. This, in turn, could end up being a fateful decision, one that robs the United States of a meaningful ability to shape Iran’s political trajectory in the years ahead. A more balanced strategy on the part of the United States would seek to deter and contain the predatory regional behavior of Iran’s current clerical regime while simultaneously engaging meaningfully with alternatives to it, with the ultimate objective of empowering a post-theocratic transition in Iran that better aligns the country with American values and interests.

⁴⁶ “Blinken says US to seek ‘longer and stronger’ deal with Iran,” *op. cit.*

⁴⁷ On the perils of such an agreement, see Nagel and Dubowitz, *op. cit.*

⁴⁸ See, for instance, Shaw, *op. cit.*

Russia's Return

In August 2021, Saudi Arabia's deputy Defense Minister, Prince Khalid Bin Salman, traveled to Russia to take part in the International Military-Technical Forum, a prominent multinational defense trade showcase held outside the Russian capital of Moscow. The exhibition was more than simply an opportunity for the Kingdom to acquire new hardware from international suppliers, however. On the sidelines of the gathering, Prince Khalid met with his Russian counterpart, Alexander Fomin, and signed a new agreement aimed at developing military cooperation between Moscow and Riyadh.⁴⁹

The development was momentous, marking a major shift in alliances on the part of Saudi Arabia, a traditional American ally. Yet it could not be said to be entirely unexpected, coming as it did amid a profound souring of relations between Saudi Arabia and the United States in the Biden era. It was also a reflection of Moscow's increasingly prominent footprint in the Middle East and North Africa, where the Kremlin has staked out the start of a nascent sphere of influence.

Moscow's return to the region represents the culmination of a long-standing ambition on the part of the Kremlin. During the decades of the Cold War, the Soviet Union's approach to the region sought to balance American influence through the support of regional rogues such as Saddam Hussein's Iraq, Muammar Qadhafi's Libya and Yassir Arafat's Palestine Liberation Organization.⁵⁰ The

⁴⁹ "US Ally Saudi Arabia Signs Rare Military Deal With Russia," *The New Arab*, August 24, 2021, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/us-ally-saudi-arabia-signs-rare-military-deal-russia>.

⁵⁰ Ariel Cohen, "The Primakov Doctrine: Russia's Zero-Sum Game with the United States," Heritage Foundation *FYI* no. 167, December 15, 1997, <https://www.heritage.org/report/the-primakov-doctrine-russias-zero-sum-game-the-united-states>.

collapse of the USSR in the early 1990s caused a temporary retraction of involvement in regional affairs, as the new Russian state struggled to establish the contours of its new, post-Soviet identity. Quickly, however, Russian officials resumed their attempts to recreate a zone of influence for Moscow in the Middle East.⁵¹ Yet it was not until 2015, when the Kremlin made the decision to intervene militarily in Syria in support of the regime of Bashar al-Assad, that Russia can be said to have truly reentered the region.

Russia's Syria intervention was propelled by a number of political considerations.⁵² One was the pace of its concurrent conflict with Ukraine, then entering its second year. Contrary to President Vladimir Putin's domestic political promises, that conflict was progressing far less decisively than the Kremlin had initially hoped, and had begun to take a political toll at home. Russian officials therefore hoped to change the political conversation, away from the increasing cost of their conflict with Kyiv and toward a different strategic theater. Another was Russia's fear of a potential loss of strategic position in Syria, where it had maintained a military base since the 1970s pursuant to a Soviet-era basing arrangement hammered out with the regime of Hafez al-Assad. The growing opposition to the Syrian regime suggested that Russia could soon lose its naval base in Tartus, and as a result its foothold for power projection into the eastern Mediterranean—a possibility that Moscow was eager to forestall. A third consideration, and a distinctly domestic one, was the fact that Russia's

⁵¹ See generally Ilan Berman, "Russia and the Mideast Vacuum," Institute for Advanced Strategic & Political Studies *IASPS Research Papers in Strategy* no. 12, June 2001, <http://www.mafhoum.com/press/55P3.pdf>.

⁵² For an extensive discussion, see Ilan Berman, "Making Sense Of Russian Strategy In Syria," *Al-Hurra Digital*, September 22, 2017, <http://www.ilanberman.com/20338/making-sense-of-russian-strategy-in-syria>.

rapidly growing Muslim minority was becoming increasingly mobilized, and radicalized, as a result of the Syrian civil war, with many joining the ranks of the Islamic State terrorist group. Moscow, in turn, was eager to externalize this discontent and fight these radicals beyond its borders, rather than wait for them to return home. Relevant, too, was the opportunity for Russia to expand its influence in a key strategic theater, and do so at the expense of the United States at a time when the Obama administration was committed to an active presence in Syria.⁵³

These factors conspired to convince Russian leaders of the prudence of opening a strategic front in support of the Assad regime in Syria, which they did to great effect. The success of Russia's Syrian campaign, in turn, allowed the Kremlin to use its foothold there as a springboard for a further entry into the region. As a result, Russia today enjoys an expanded military presence not only in the Levant but also throughout the Middle East and North Africa.

Most concretely, this presence has come in the form of military deployments. In Syria, Russia is estimated to have some 4,000 troops spread between the Hmeimim air base in Syria's northwest and the Tartus naval base on the country's southwest seaboard.⁵⁴ In Libya, Russian forces and irregulars attached to the Wagner Group of mercenaries are fighting in support of rebel warlord Khalifa Haftar in his efforts to overthrow the UN- and U.S.-supported

⁵³ Peter Baker, Helene Cooper and David E. Sanger, "Obama Sense Special Operations Forces to Help Fight ISIS in Syria," *New York Times*, October 30, 2015,

<https://www.nytimes.com/2015/10/31/world/obama-will-send-forces-to-syria-to-help-fight-the-islamic-state.html>.

⁵⁴ Sinan Ulgen and Can Kasapoglu, "Russia's Ambitious Military-Geostrategic Posture in the Mediterranean," Carnegie Europe, June 2021,

https://carnegieendowment.org/files/Ulgen_Kasapoglu_RussiaMed_final.pdf.

Government of National Accord.⁵⁵ And in Sudan, Russia has erected a naval base in Port Sudan pursuant to a 25-year deal hammered out by the Kremlin with the then-government in Khartoum in December 2020.⁵⁶ Further south, Russia has also signed military cooperation agreements with no fewer than 20 nations,⁵⁷ deployed mercenaries to the Democratic Republic of Congo, the Central African Republic (and may soon do so in Mali), and is now said to be contemplating a range of security partnerships on the African continent.⁵⁸

Russia's arms sales to the region have also surged in recent years. During the Cold War, the provision of arms to friendly regimes and ideological fellow-travelers was an essential part of the Soviet Union's engagement. Over the decades, this created a deep dependency on Russian arms on the part of regional regimes – one that has endured in many quarters. For instance, some 90 percent of Algeria's military equipment was of Russian origin in the late 1970s; today, Algiers is still reliant on Moscow for roughly the same percentage of its weaponry.⁵⁹ Similarly, Syria, which

⁵⁵ Ibid.

⁵⁶ Ibidem.

⁵⁷ Jakob Hedenskog, "Russia is Stepping Up its Military Cooperation in Africa," FOI Memo 6604, December 2018, <https://www.foi.se/rest-api/report/FOI%20MEMO%206604>.

⁵⁸ Natalya Bugayova et al., "The Kremlin's Inroads After the Africa Summit," Institute for Understanding War, November 8, 2019, <https://www.understandingwar.org/backgrounder/kremlins-inroads-after-africa-summit>.

⁵⁹ Adlene Mohammadi, "Russia-Algeria: A flexible and pragmatic partnership," Fondation Méditerranéenne d'Études Stratégiques, January 22, 2021; <https://fmes-france.org/russia-algeria-a-flexible-and-pragmatic-partnership-by-adlene-mohammed/>; Missy Ryan, "Pentagon calls for new cooperation with Algeria to counteract growing Russian influence in Africa," *Washington Post*, October 1, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/national-security/us-military-africa-russia/2020/10/01/ac53cf66-0415-11eb-8879-7663b816bfa5_story.html

relied on the USSR for the majority of its weapons during the decades of the Cold War, is still heavily dependent on arms exports from the Russian Federation for the continued functioning of its military.⁶⁰

Moreover, the Middle East is today a growing commercial focus for Russia, the world's second largest arms exporter. "The Middle East is the fastest-growing arms market in the world, and the most attractive and lucrative to arms manufacturers such as Russia," explains Alexey Khlebnikov of the Russian International Affairs Council.⁶¹ It is one where the Kremlin has positioned itself well as a result of its expanding regional activities. Russian tactical military successes in Syria have transformed the country into a "showroom" of sorts, putting the Kremlin's military prowess and hardware on display for potential regional clients.⁶² This presence has paid concrete dividends for the Kremlin, much to the alarm of policymakers in Washington.⁶³ Between 2016 and 2020, Russia is estimated to have supplied 69 percent of Algeria's total arms imports, 41 percent of Egypt's, and 34 percent of those of Iraq.⁶⁴ And

⁶⁰ See, for instance, David Kenner, "What Russia Gave Syria," *Foreign Policy*, June 21, 2012, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2012/06/21/what-russia-gave-syria/>.

⁶¹ Alexey Khlebnikov, "Why Russia is increasing military ties with Saudi Arabi and Egypt," *Middle East Eye*, September 1, 2021, <https://www.middleeasteye.net/opinion/russia-saudi-arabia-egypt-military-cooperation-increasing>.

⁶² Mansur Mirovalev, "Syria's war: a showroom for Russian arms," *Al-Jazeera* (Doha), April 6, 2016, <https://www.aljazeera.com/news/2016/4/6/syrias-war-a-showroom-for-russian-arms-sales>.

⁶³ Ryan, "Pentagon calls for new cooperation with Algeria to counteract growing Russian influence in Africa."

⁶⁴ "Russia's share of total imports of major arms in countries where it is one of top three suppliers from 2016 to 2020," *statista.com*, n.d., <https://www.statista.com/statistics/1102702/countries-where-russia-is-a-major-arms-supplier/>.

while Russia still lags behind the United States in terms of the volume of its arms sales to the region, the trendline is clear: more and more countries in both the Middle East and Africa are turning to Moscow as a source of materiel and strategic support.

Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East has often been depicted as overwhelmingly opportunistic in nature.⁶⁵ While that has certainly been the case, it would be a mistake to underestimate the scope of the Kremlin's ambitions. "Over the last six years, the Russians have attempted to leverage their military expedition in Syria into an attempt to overthrow the U.S.-led security system in the Middle East," Col. Joel Rayburn, who served as the Trump administration's special envoy for Syria, has noted. "Moscow has made much more progress on this than they should have, and there is as yet no major effort underway to stop them from doing so."⁶⁶

A significant part of the reason why has to do with the prevailing view of Moscow in Washington: that the challenge posed by Russia is likely to be fleeting in nature. Conventional wisdom has long held that, despite its aggressive international posture and expeditionary foreign policy, Russia is a waning world nation – and that therefore its foreign entanglements are not sustainable in the long term. While the analysis of Russia's decline is indeed true today along some metrics, such as demographics, experts like Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor have argued convincingly that it may be more accurate to think of Russia instead as a "persistent power" that will continue to challenge U.S. strategic interests in various global regions, including the Middle East, for the foreseeable future.⁶⁷

⁶⁵ See, for instance, Wehrey and Weiss, *op. cit.*

⁶⁶ Author's interview, Washington, DC, November 2021.

⁶⁷ Michael Kofman and Andrea Kendall-Taylor, "The Myth of Russian Decline," *Foreign Affairs*, November/December 2021,

Today, the future of Russia's Middle East policy has been called into question by its adventurism in Ukraine. Beginning in late February of 2022, the Kremlin launched a major military campaign against its western neighbor intended to roll back Ukrainian sovereignty and bring it back under Moscow's sway. What was supposed to be a rapid, overwhelming military offensive, however, has bogged down in the face of stronger-than-expected Ukrainian resistance and a major show of political unity from NATO and the West. As it has, Moscow has been forced to progressively reallocate resources in order to sustain its Ukraine offensive—including by redeploying forces from the Middle East and Africa to the Ukrainian front.⁶⁸ Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect Russia to retain a strategic presence in the Middle East in the years ahead, and to maintain an interest in serving as a "spoiler" for American regional efforts there. As a result, in the future the United States will need a policy of sustained political and military engagement with the countries of the region that diminishes the Kremlin's attractiveness as a strategic or military partner for those nations.

China's Entry

Recent years have seen a profound redefinition of America's relationship with the People's Republic of China (PRC). Since Xi Jinping's assumption of power in 2013, China has discarded concepts such as "peaceful rise" and "peace and development," which previously characterized its foreign policy, in favor of an increasingly assertive approach to global affairs. Over time, this shift, as well as its by-products (such as China's Belt & Road Initiative [BRI]

<https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/russian-federation/2021-10-19/myth-russian-decline>.

⁶⁸ See, for instance, Cafarella, Yazici, and Coles, *op. cit.*

and the aggressive “wolf warrior diplomacy” practiced by its diplomats), has sparked a reconfiguration of U.S. assumptions about China, and a marked change in its approach to the PRC.

Yet, while the conversation over competition with China now extends to many arenas (among them supply chains, telecommunications, artificial intelligence and even space), it has not yet touched upon the Middle East. In fact, if anything, the growing focus on China among policymakers in Washington has contributed to America’s current turn away from the Middle East. As a result, comparatively few U.S. analysts and experts have taken note of Beijing’s expanding strategic footprint in the Middle East (as well as Africa). When they have, astute observers have expressed growing alarm at what they see as a “emerging Middle East Kingdom” that Beijing is erecting in the region.⁶⁹

China’s offensive has come in the form of deep – and ongoing – economic investments. Whereas in the late 2000s China’s overall investment in the Middle East totaled just \$1 billion annually,⁷⁰ the past several years have seen an explosion in the volume of Chinese funds flowing to the region. In 2016, China became the Middle East’s largest foreign investor, a position it has maintained in the years since. Since the formal launch of its premier foreign policy project, the BRI, Beijing has pumped at least \$123 billion into BRI-related projects in the Middle East.⁷¹ It has commenced

⁶⁹ Doran and Rough, op. cit.

⁷⁰ “No Questions Asked: China’s Money Is Behind Some Of The Arab World’s Biggest Projects,” *The Economist*, April 20, 2019, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2019/04/20/chinese-money-is-behind-some-of-the-arab-worlds-biggest-projects>.

⁷¹ Charles W. Dunne, “China’s Belt and Road Initiative and US Middle East Policy,” Arab Center Washington DC, January 13, 2021, <https://arabcenterdc.org/resource/chinas-belt-and-road-initiative-and-us-middle-east-policy/>.

major port and infrastructure projects throughout the region, including in Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Oman and Egypt. And it has become a major player in the telecom sectors of all five Gulf Cooperation Council countries, as well as those of Lebanon and Egypt.⁷²

Beijing's outreach, moreover, is not confined to the Sunni nations of the region; China is significantly expanding ties to Shi'ite Iran as well. In the spring of 2020, the PRC and the Islamic Republic formally signed a massive new strategic cooperation agreement. The 25-year accord, which is believed to be valued at a staggering \$400 billion, codifies a "comprehensive strategic partnership" between the two countries that provides China with preferential access to a range of Iranian infrastructure projects, as well as Iranian ports and naval facilities.⁷³ The agreement, coming as it did at the height of the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" policy, was a clear attempt by the Iranian regime to mitigate the economic and political effects of sanctions pressure on the part of the United States. The strategic benefits for Beijing, however, were profound; through it, the PRC has positioned itself to become the Islamic Republic's main global partner, while the advent of the Biden administration and its relaxation of U.S. sanctions pressure on Iran has allowed Beijing to capitalize greatly on this partnership.⁷⁴ Surging Chinese purchases of Iranian

⁷² See, for instance, Sophie Zinser, "China's Digital Silk Road Grows With 5G in the Middle East," *The Diplomat*, December 16, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/12/chinas-digital-silk-road-grows-with-5g-in-the-middle-east/>.

⁷³ Faramarz Davar, "Exclusive: Iran Agrees To Be China's Client State for the Next 25 Years," *IranWire*, July 8, 2020, <https://iranwire.com/en/features/7275>.

⁷⁴ See, for instance, Guy Taylor, "China upholding Iranian regime with oil purchases," *The Washington Times*, November 4, 2021, <https://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2021/nov/4/china-upholding-iranian-regime-oil-purchases/>.

crude, meanwhile, have gone a long way toward stabilizing the Iranian economy.⁷⁵

China has also become deeply invested in Israel. Over the past decade, the PRC has become a major patron of Israeli innovation, with investments totaling billions of dollars and spanning the length and breadth of the Israeli economy. Significantly, much of this involvement has been concentrated in Israel's high-tech industry, which has emerged as the most vibrant and dynamic sector of the country's economic infrastructure. So consequential have Chinese investments been that estimates have predicted the PRC could eclipse the United States as the single largest investor in the Jewish state in coming years.⁷⁶

China's growing stake in Israel, however, has begun to create tensions in the long-standing "special relationship" between Jerusalem and Washington. U.S. officials have become increasingly alarmed over ways in which Israel's deepening connection to the PRC could potentially compromise bilateral military cooperation.⁷⁷ They have also raised concerns over China's involvement in critical infrastructure projects in Israel, such as the port of Haifa, that might provide Beijing with insights into, and access to, vital intelligence pertaining to the U.S.-Israeli alliance.⁷⁸ Israel has taken some steps to ameliorate these concerns (including through the creation of institutional mechanisms

⁷⁵ Ibid.

⁷⁶ Mark O'Neill, "China to Overtake US as Biggest Investor in Israel," *EJInsight*, February 1, 2018, <https://www.ejinsight.com/eji/article/id/1757853/20180201-china-to-overtake-us-as-biggest-investor-in-israel>.

⁷⁷ See, for instance, Wilner, *op. cit.*

⁷⁸ See, for instance, Feith and Chorev, *op. cit.*; See also Ilan Berman, "Israel's Dangerous Dalliance With China," *Wall Street Journal*, January 14, 2019, *op. cit.*

within its national security establishment to vet Chinese investments).⁷⁹

Yet worries over ongoing Chinese involvement in Israel have lingered in Washington. Like its predecessor, the Biden administration has raised concerns with Israel over its engagement with China, and the potential vulnerabilities that could result from those contacts.⁸⁰ Unlike in the past, however, Washington and Jerusalem today find themselves increasingly at odds on regional policy, in particular with regard to Iran.⁸¹ This divergence is likely to make Israeli officials less open to American concerns about their country's economic and political engagement with China, and less amenable to corrective action to mollify U.S. worries. As a result, this issue has the potential to cause significant friction in the "special relationship" between the United States and Israel in the future.

For its part, Beijing views all of these investments in distinctly geopolitical terms: as a way of displacing the United States in the Middle East and blunting American influence there. While "American policymakers have long assumed that Chinese and American goals in the Middle East are largely complementary," Michael Doran and Peter Rough of the Hudson Institute have noted, China's machinations make clear that the PRC's ultimate goal is to

⁷⁹ Arie Egozi, "Israelis Create Foreign Investment Overseer; China Targeted," *Breaking Defense*, November 13, 2019, <https://breakingdefense.com/2019/11/israelis-create-foreign-investment-overseer-china-targeted/>.

⁸⁰ See, for instance, Barak Ravid, "Biden administration presses Israel on Chinese investments," *Axios*, January 5, 2022, <https://www.axios.com/us-israel-china-investments-talks-e48fe0fa-25ab-4e6d-ae3c-eef68380a538.html>.

⁸¹ See, for instance, Julian E. Barnes, Ronen Bergman and David E. Sanger, "Iran's Nuclear Program Ignites New Tension Between U.S. and Israel," *New York Times*, December 10, 2021, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/12/10/us/politics/iran-nuclear-us-israel-biden-bennett.html>.

supplant America “as the dominant power in the Middle East.”⁸² Beijing, moreover, is making progress toward this objective. For instance, Saudi Arabia, a historic U.S. ally, has tilted decisively toward China in recent months as doubts over the durability of its strategic partnership with America have grown in Riyadh.⁸³ At the same time, other countries (including Qatar, Bahrain and Lebanon) have become deeply enmeshed with China’s “national champion” technology firms, like Huawei, in spite of American entreaties.⁸⁴

Engagement with the region also possesses a distinctly domestic component for Beijing. Through it, China has sought to blunt criticism of its persecution of its Uighur Muslim minority, with considerable success. Nearly without exception, Muslim nations have remained silent regarding the PRC’s treatment of their co-religionists—a policy which successive U.S. administrations have termed a genocide. In fact, more than a few Middle Eastern nations (among them Saudi Arabia, Oman, Kuwait, Qatar, the UAE and Syria) have come out in defense of China’s repression campaign, which is being conducted by Chinese authorities under the guise of “combatting extremism.”⁸⁵ China, in other words, has effectively used its investments abroad to

⁸² Doran and Rough, “China’s Emerging Middle East Kingdom.”

⁸³ Karen Elliot House, “Saudi Arabia Turns Toward China,” *Wall Street Journal*, November 9, 2021, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/saudi-arabia-china-crown-prince-mohammed-bin-salman-energy-prices-climate-xi-biden-iran-11636493333>.

⁸⁴ See, for instance, Dale Aluf, “China’s interest in the Middle East: from barrels to bytes,” *Asia Times*, October 15, 2021, <https://asiatimes.com/2021/10/chinas-interest-in-the-middle-east-from-barrels-to-bytes/>.

⁸⁵ See, for instance, Tom Miles, “Saudi Arabia and Russia among 37 states backing China’s Xinjiang policy,” *Reuters*, July 2, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-china-xinjiang-rights/saudi-arabia-and-russia-among-37-states-backing-chinas-xinjiang-policy-idUSKCN1U721X>.

buy the silence of the Muslim World regarding its atrocities at home.

The PRC's emergence as a serious strategic player in the Middle East carries enormous consequences, both for the United States and for America's regional allies. As the United States reduces its presence in—and influence over—Mideast affairs, the resulting vacuum is being filled by China, which is using its economic engagement and technological exports to reshape the contours of the region in a less free, more authoritarian direction.⁸⁶

The United States does not currently possess a cogent answer to these advances. While it has attempted to pressure regional allies (such as Israel and Morocco) to limit or circumscribe their ties to the PRC, it has thus far failed to offer a sustainable alternative to economic and political engagement with China to those nations. To do so, American policymakers will need to meaningfully engage with those countries across the same political, economic and military domains as the PRC currently is. Only by providing real alternatives to the current regional default of partnership with China can the United States hope to convincingly woo Middle Eastern states out of Beijing's orbit, and into its own.

The Syrian Crucible

In the Spring of 2011, the “Arab Spring” came to Syria in the form of grassroots protests against the corruption and repressive policies of the regime of Bashar al-Assad. The Assad government's draconian response to the discontent ignited a larger conflagration, as an assortment of rebel groups coalesced into a broad opposition front against the regime. The conflict also drew Islamist actors such as al-

⁸⁶ Ilan Berman, “The ‘China Model’ Comes To The Middle East,” *Al-Hurra Digital*, July 17, 2019, op. cit.

Qaeda and the Islamic State, which exploited the conflict to advance their own separate strategic agendas. More than ten years on, the Syrian civil war continues to fester, and to exert a profound influence over the geopolitical currents of the region in a number of concrete ways.

The first has to do with the complexion of Syria itself. After over a decade of conflict, the country is locked in a corrosive political stalemate. While Syrian president Bashar al-Assad and his regime have succeeded in clinging to power, the political opposition to his rule remains viable and active throughout the country. Despite years of pitched fighting, neither side can score a decisive victory against the other. The resulting *status quo* has been ruinous for the country and its people. The Syrian health system has been decimated by conflict, which has resulted in the destruction of hospitals, the departure of some 70 percent of the country's health care workers, and rampant shortages in medical supplies.⁸⁷ (This situation, in turn, has been gravely exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic.) Syria's education sector, too, has been significantly (and adversely) affected. In early 2021, the United Nations estimated that more than 2.4 million Syrian children, over half of the country's minor population, were out of school as a result of attacks on education facilities and personnel that have thoroughly crippled the provision of schooling.⁸⁸

Second, and related, has been the war's human toll. The Syrian conflict has become the world's largest humanitarian

⁸⁷ See, for instance, Elizabeth Tsurkov and Qussai Jukhandar, "Ravaged by war, Syria's health care system is utterly unprepared for a pandemic," Middle East Institute, April 23, 2020, <https://www.mei.edu/publications/ravaged-war-syrias-health-care-system-utterly-unprepared-pandemic>.

⁸⁸ Muhannad Hadi and Ted Chabian, "After almost ten years of war in Syria, more than half of children continue to be deprived of education," UNICEF, January 24, 2021, <https://www.unicef.org/press-releases/after-almost-ten-years-war-syria-more-half-children-continue-be-deprived-education>.

crisis, with roughly 13.5 million people—more than half of Syria’s pre-war population of 21 million—forcibly displaced either internally or externally, according to the estimates of leading humanitarian groups.⁸⁹ Nearly 7 million of this cohort are now refugees and asylum-seekers who have fled abroad, with the majority flooding into neighboring countries, severely straining political structures and social safety nets in those places in the process. Turkey is currently estimated to be playing host to nearly 3.7 million Syrian refugees, Lebanon to be housing some 850,000, Jordan nearly 670,000 and Iraq almost 250,000.⁹⁰ At present, there exists no coherent international strategy for dealing with this problem. A lasting resolution to the crisis would require Syrian refugees to be able to return home. Doing so, however, is impossible so long as the Assad regime remains in power.

Syria’s civil war has also spawned a protracted proxy conflict between neighboring Israel and the Assad regime’s key strategic partner, Iran. Over the past several years, Iran (working in tandem with Russia) has played a key role in buttressing the Assad regime and reinforcing its hold on power. Iran’s assistance has come in the form of political support, economic assistance, and the mass mobilization of foreign fighters under the direction of its clerical army, the IRGC.⁹¹ Via these avenues, Iran has dramatically expanded its strategic influence over both the present regime and the future of the Syrian state.⁹²

⁸⁹ “Syrian refugee crisis: Facts, FAQs, and how to help,” World Vision, n.d., <https://www.worldvision.org/refugees-news-stories/syrian-refugee-crisis-facts>.

⁹⁰ Ibid.

⁹¹ Navvar Saban, “FACTBOX: Iranian influence and presence in Syria,” Atlantic Council *MENASource*, November 5, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/factbox-iranian-influence-and-presence-in-syria/>.

⁹² See, for instance, Phillip Smyth, “Iran Is Outpacing Assad For Control Of Syria’s Shia Militias,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy

As Iran's influence has grown, so have Israeli worries over the presence of its regional nemesis on the territory of its northern neighbor. In response, Israel's government has acted repeatedly in recent years to militarily degrade Iranian deployed assets on Syrian soil. As then-Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu explained in late 2018: "We aren't prepared to accept the Iranian military entrenchment in Syria, which is directed against us. We will act against it vigorously and continuously."⁹³ This policy has been perpetuated by the current coalition government of Prime Minister Naftali Bennett, which has continued offensive military operations against Iranian targets on Syrian territory. Of late, it has done so with apparent tacit Russian support, suggesting an emerging meeting of the minds between Moscow and Jerusalem about the need to reduce the Iranian regime's footprint in Syria.⁹⁴ However, Israel's goal of affecting a lasting rollback of Iran's presence on its northern border will not be possible while Iranian forces continue to enjoy the patronage of the Assad regime.

Iran, meanwhile, is fundamentally altering the complexion of Syria via a broad economic, political and military offensive. Militarily, the start of the Syrian civil war saw a massive Iranian investment in expanding its direct

PolichWatch 2955, April 12, 2018, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/iran-outpacing-assad-control-syrias-shia-militias>; Anchal Vohra, "Iran is trying to convert Syria to Shiism," *Foreign Policy*, March 15, 2021, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2021/03/15/iran-syria-convert-shiism-war-assad/>.

⁹³ As cited in Josef Federman and Nataliya Vasiliyeva, "Israeli official confirms Syria airstrikes as Russia objects," *Associated Press*, December 27, 2018, <https://apnews.com/article/syria-ap-top-news-international-news-iran-hezbollah-7a0c14ede245411fb24a90fbc2fb2939>.

⁹⁴ See, for instance, Amos Harel, "Israel Broadens Strikes Against Iran In Syria, and Russia Doesn't Seem To Mind," *Ha'aretz*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.haaretz.com/israel-news/israel-broadens-assaults-in-syria-russia-doesn-t-care-1.10369895>.

presence and indirect influence in support of the Assad regime. It accomplished this through the cultivation of local militias, the deployment of IRGC personnel and foreign irregulars drawn from Afghanistan, Yemen, Pakistan, Iraq and elsewhere. At the peak of the conflict in 2016, the total size of this cohort is estimated to have numbered nearly 80,000 thousand fighters.⁹⁵ While this contingent has diminished in size since, Iran is widely understood to still maintain a major military presence on Syrian soil. Economically, meanwhile, the Islamic Republic has made major investments in the regime of Bashar al-Assad. When surveyed by the Atlantic Council in February of 2020, Iranian loans, grants, lines of credit and other financial assistance to Damascus were valued at between \$30 and \$105 billion.⁹⁶ Iran has likewise become a major supplier of infrastructure aid to Damascus, with Iranian investors estimated to be "involved in reconstruction projects in Syria worth \$600 billion."⁹⁷ In this way, the Iranian regime – itself experiencing economic hardship as a result of U.S. sanctions during the Trump era – became an indispensable financial lifeline for the Assad government.

⁹⁵ "The Future of Iran's Presence in Syria," Emirates Policy Center, February 23, 2021, <https://epc.ae/details/featured/the-future-of-irans-presence-in-syria>.

⁹⁶ Karam Shaar and Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "Iran's credit line to Syria: A well that never runs dry," Atlantic Council *IranSource*, February 10, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-credit-line-to-syria-a-well-that-never-runs-dry/>; Waleed Abu al-Khair, "Impoverished Iranians bristle at \$100 billion price tag for Syria 'investments,'" *Diyaruna*, April 19, 2021, https://diyaruna.com/en_GB/articles/cnmi_di/features/2021/04/19/feature-01.

⁹⁷ Oula A. Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria," Washington Institute *Policy Notes* No. 100, March 2021, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/media/4380?disposition=inline>.

Tehran's support, however, extends far beyond simply propping up Syria's dictatorship. The Islamic Republic is also attempting to reshape Syrian society along religious and sociocultural lines. Since the 1970s, the Islamic Republic has engaged in a systematic effort to co-opt local "Shia religious infrastructure" in Syria while building up a local alternative of its own through the construction of seminaries, shrines and religious centers.⁹⁸ It has also deeply insinuated itself into Syria's academic institutions; Iran is estimated to have rebuilt more than 10,000 Syrian schools destroyed during the civil war, and to now control a network of private Iranian schools throughout the country.⁹⁹ Iran is also co-opting Syrian higher education institutions, and has even established a branch of its own Islamic Azad University in the Syrian capital, Damascus.¹⁰⁰ The aggregate result of these tactics, according to Middle East scholar Oula Alrifai, is that the Islamic Republic "has entrenched itself in Syria far beyond the battle lines" with an ideological presence that the Syrian people and their international allies will find difficult to dislodge.¹⁰¹

Yet another layer of the Syrian civil war is the ongoing conflict between neighboring Turkey and the radical Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) and its offshoots. The PKK, since its establishment in the late 1970s, has emerged as the principal terrorist threat to the Turkish state, carrying out numerous attacks against both Turkish civilians and infrastructure in furtherance of its objective of establishing an independent Kurdish state. Robust Turkish counterterrorism operations during the 1990s, culminating with the 1999 arrest of PKK leader Abdullah Ocalan,

⁹⁸ Ibid.

⁹⁹ Ibidem.

¹⁰⁰ Ibidem.

¹⁰¹ Alrifai, "In the Service of Ideology: Iran's Religious and Socioeconomic Activities in Syria."

significantly diminished the group, but the start of the second Iraq War subsequently provided the organization with a new lease on life and safe haven in Iraqi Kurdistan. In 2013, the PKK and the Turkish government concluded a ceasefire and began a peace process, but the truce fractured two years later amid Turkey's concurrent struggle against the Islamic State.¹⁰² Since then, Ankara has carried out multiple military operations against the PKK and its offshoots.

The United States has inadvertently assumed a major role in this struggle. As part of its efforts to limit America's commitment in the fight against the Islamic State, the Obama administration gravitated toward a policy of arming Kurdish rebels in Syria.¹⁰³ Via this policy, the United States partnered with the PYD, the ruling party in Syrian Kurdistan, and provided arms and materiel to its armed wing, the YPG. The Turkish government considers both groups to be offshoots of the PKK, and as a result viewed American support for them as tantamount to a betrayal, with bilateral ties suffering greatly as a result.¹⁰⁴ The Trump administration inherited this policy, and during its time in office attempted to mitigate the damage, including via

¹⁰² "Turkey and the Kurds: the Truce between Turkey and Kurdish Militants is Over," *The Economist*, July 26, 2015, <https://www.economist.com/middle-east-and-africa/2015/07/26/the-truce-between-turkey-and-kurdish-militants-is-over>.

¹⁰³ Eric Schmitt, "Obama Administration Considers Arming Syrian Kurds Against ISIS," *New York Times*, September 21, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/09/22/world/middleeast/obama-syria-kurds-isis-turkey-military-commandos.html>.

¹⁰⁴ See, for instance, Ari Khalidi, "Obama deceived us over YPG: Erdogan," *Kurdistan24*, April 20, 2017, <https://www.kurdistan24.net/en/story/11263-Obama-deceived-us-over-YPG:-Erdogan>.

(unfulfilled) pledges to disarm the YPG.¹⁰⁵ President Trump's subsequent 2018 decision to draw down U.S. forces in northern Syria resulted in a stepped up Turkish cross-border military presence in Syria in the years since, with Ankara repeatedly targeting Kurdish forces on Syrian soil. The issue, however, remains a source of considerable friction in Turkish-American ties, and has cast a pall over dialogue and cooperation between Washington and Ankara.

Recent American policy now threatens to make the overall situation significantly worse. Since taking office, the Biden administration has scaled down the U.S. commitment to isolating the Assad regime on the world stage or to meaningfully resolving the region's most intractable conflict. In turn, the Administration's *laissez faire* attitude, and its failure to enforce existing sanctions against Syrian officials, has helped spur a "regional normalization" of the Assad regime, as more and more Middle Eastern states begin to engage with Damascus anew.¹⁰⁶ As a result, the conflict's current destructive *status quo* is becoming further entrenched, and finding a meaningful resolution to it all the more difficult.

New Connections

In September of 2020, the United Arab Emirates and Bahrain ushered in a qualitatively new phase in Middle Eastern politics when they formally agreed to normalize their diplomatic relations with Israel. That breakthrough was followed, in rapid succession, by others, as both Sudan

¹⁰⁵ "US to 'disarm YPG' after Islamic State defeat in Syria," *The New Arab*, June 23, 2017, <https://english.alaraby.co.uk/news/us-disarm-kurdish-ypg-after-islamic-state-defeat>.

¹⁰⁶ See, for instance, Josh Rogin, "Biden is tacitly endorsing Assad's normalization," *Washington Post*, October 7, 2021, *op. cit.*

and Morocco concluded their own normalization agreements with the Jewish state. By the time the Trump administration left office in January 2021, it had presided over the most consequential advance in Arab-Israeli peacemaking since the 1978 Camp David Accords.

The United States played an indispensable part in nurturing these agreements through steps such as the removal of Sudan from the official U.S. list of Foreign Terrorist Organizations and the formal recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the contested territory of the Western Sahara. It would be incorrect, however, to say that the Trump administration created the “Abraham Accords” from whole cloth. To the contrary, the quiet contacts that broke out into the open beginning in September 2020 had existed for years, nurtured by shared concerns over Iran and vibrant—if tacit—economic interaction among the “Accords” countries.

Nearly a year-and-a-half on, these connections are flourishing. Although the October 2021 *coup d'état* in Sudan has left the fate of relations between Jerusalem and Khartoum uncertain, Israel’s economic, political and strategic contacts with the remaining three “Abraham Accords” nations have expanded dramatically.

Ties between Israel and the United Arab Emirates represent the most dynamic and fast-moving dimension of the emerging Arab-Israeli rapprochement. Contacts between the two countries have proceeded along seven main vectors—investment, finance, health, civilian space program, civil aviation, foreign policy and diplomatic affairs, and tourism and culture—with striking results. From a paltry \$15 million just a couple of years ago, trade between the two countries approached \$675 million as of October 2021 as a result of partnerships in such fields as artificial intelligence, cyber security, food, water security,

and energy.¹⁰⁷ It is now predicted to exceed \$3 billion in just a matter of years¹⁰⁸ – and Emirati officials have envisioned \$1 trillion in overall economic activity by 2031.¹⁰⁹ The two nations have formally exchanged ambassadors, and direct flights have commenced, leading to a surge in tourism (with an estimated 250,000 Israelis having visited the UAE as of October 2021).¹¹⁰

While relations between Israel and Bahrain have evolved more slowly, they have followed the same general trajectory. Previously minimal, bilateral trade is estimated to reach hundreds of millions of dollars annually.¹¹¹ To maintain this momentum, Manama and Jerusalem inked a framework to fast-track trade, research & development and business exchanges in mid-2021.¹¹² The two countries have also begun coordinating on key aspects of foreign policy,

¹⁰⁷ Ismail Sebugwaawo, "UAE-Israeli bilateral trade exceeds \$675m since signing of Abraham Accords," *Khaleej Times*, October 17, 2021, <https://www.khaleejtimes.com/economy/uae-israeli-bilateral-trade-exceeds-675m-since-signing-of-abraham-accords>.

¹⁰⁸ Zev Stub, "One year into Abraham Accords, Israel's trade with UAE tops \$570m.," *Jerusalem Post*, August 8, 2021, <https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/one-year-into-abraham-accords-israels-trade-with-uae-tops-570m-676181>.

¹⁰⁹ Yousef Saba, "UAE seeks \$1 trillion in economic activity with Israel by 2031," *Reuters*, September 14, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/uae-aims-1-trillion-activity-with-israel-by-2031-2021-09-14/>.

¹¹⁰ Josh Corder, "250,000 Israel tourists visit UAE since Abraham Accords," *Hotelier*, October 17, 2021, <https://www.hoteliermiddleeast.com/news/250000-israel-tourists-visit-uae-since-abraham-accords>

¹¹¹ Danny Zaken, "The agreement for economic cooperation between Israel and Bahrain was distributed for government approval," *Globes*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.globes.co.il/news/article.aspx?did=1001379622>.

¹¹² *Ibid.*

signing a July 2021 accord on cybersecurity,¹¹³ subsequently establishing formal diplomatic representation, and inking agreements between several of their respective policy centers for joint research on issues such as countering Iran in the ideological and public diplomacy arenas. And in March of 2022, the foreign ministers of the two countries formally signed a “Joint Warm Peace Strategy” mapping out a roadmap for enhanced economic, security and political cooperation over the coming decade.¹¹⁴

With Morocco, too, ties have expanded dramatically. A Summer 2021 report by Israel’s Regional Cooperation Ministry and the Israel Export Institute laid out that Israeli exports to the Kingdom (which were valued at less than \$4 million in 2019) could soon reach as much as \$250 million annually.¹¹⁵ The two nations have exchanged ambassadors, direct flights have been established, and some 200,000 Israeli tourists are expected to visit the Kingdom annually, post-pandemic.¹¹⁶ Military ties have also blossomed; in November 2021, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz visited Rabat and signed a memorandum of understanding on bilateral military cooperation with his Moroccan

¹¹³ Shoshanna Solomon, “Israel, Morocco sign accord for cybersecurity coordination,” *Times of Israel*, July 15, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-morocco-sign-accord-for-cybersecurity-cooperation/>.

¹¹⁴ See, for instance, “Foreign Minister signs Joint Warm Peace Strategy with Israeli counterpart,” *Bahrain News Agency*, March 28, 2022, <https://www.bna.bh/En/ForeignMinistersignsJointWarmPeaceStrategywithIsraelicounterpart.aspx?cms=q8FmFJgiscL2fwIzON1%2BDuAPexp0oqjwXN4esuLWGxc%3D>.

¹¹⁵ Hili Yacobi-Handelsman, “Export potential from Israel to Morocco could reach \$250M annually,” *Israel Hayom*, July 27, 2021, <https://www.israelhayom.com/2021/07/27/export-potential-from-israel-to-morocco-could-reach-250m-annually/>.

¹¹⁶ Safaa Kasraoui, “Trade Between Morocco, Israel Spiked After Re-Establishment of Ties,” *Morocco World News*, September 7, 2021, <https://www.moroccoworldnews.com/2021/09/344317/trade-between-morocco-israel-spiked-after-re-establishment-of-ties>.

counterpart, Abdellatif Loudiyi. The “unprecedented” agreement facilitates intelligence coordination, defense-industrial collaboration and strategic contacts between the two countries.¹¹⁷ Morocco has likewise become an Israeli defense client, purchasing the country’s “Skylock Dome” counter-drone system in late 2021 to better secure its “Southern Provinces” (as the Western Sahara is known domestically).¹¹⁸

Such contacts, moreover, are poised to expand still further. Experts have estimated that the new arrangements cumulatively have the potential to create as many as 150,000 new jobs for the signatory nations, and could help address the high rate of youth unemployment in the Arab World.¹¹⁹ The three countries have also drifted into strategic alignment over the shared threat posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran. In early 2021, Israeli Defense Minister Benny Gantz publicly aired plans to develop a “special security arrangement” with Israel’s new Gulf allies to jointly counter Iran,¹²⁰ and concrete coordination has begun via exercises such as naval drills in the Red Sea intended to

¹¹⁷ Judah Ari Gross, “In Morocco, Gantz signs Israel’s first-ever MOU with an Arab country,” *Times of Israel*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/in-morocco-gantz-signs-israels-first-ever-defense-mou-with-an-arab-country/>.

¹¹⁸ Agnes Helou, “Morocco buys Israeli counter-drone system Skylock Dome,” *Defense News*, November 24, 2021, <https://www.defensenews.com/unmanned/2021/11/24/morocco-buys-israeli-counter-drone-system-skylock-dome/>.

¹¹⁹ See, for instance, Daniel Egel, Shira Efron and Linda Robinson, “Abraham Accords Offer Historic Opportunity to Spur Mideast Growth,” *United Press International*, March 25, 2021, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2021/03/abraham-accords-offer-historic-opportunity-to-spur.html>.

¹²⁰ Dan Williams, “Israel’s defence chief sees ‘special security arrangements’ with Gulf states,” *Reuters*, March 2, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-israel-gulf/israeli-defence-chief-sees-special-security-arrangement-with-gulf-states-idUSKCN2AU1PW>.

ensure freedom of navigation in regional waterways.¹²¹ Other nations, such as Jordan, Egypt and Saudi Arabia, are now being drawn into the unfolding regional dynamic in the form of new agreements and strengthened diplomacy with Israel.¹²²

These links, and other emerging ones, have set in motion a qualitatively new trend in the Middle East – what Israeli officials have termed a “new era” of peace, prosperity and coordination between Israel and the Arab World.¹²³ Yet these connections are currently taking place largely without the involvement of the United States. Since taking office, the Biden administration has adopted a decidedly *laissez faire* attitude toward Arab-Israeli normalization. Administration officials have routinely minimized the significance of the unfolding rapprochement visible in the Middle East, or of the role that President Trump played in formalizing it.¹²⁴ It has walked away from financial vehicles designed by its predecessor to spur greater investment and interest from the private sector in business collaboration between the

¹²¹ Judah Ari Gross, “Israel, UAE, Bahrain, US hold major Red Sea drill ‘to counter Iran’s aggression,’” *Times of Israel*, November 11, 2021, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/israel-uae-bahrain-us-launch-drill-in-red-sea-in-apparent-message-to-iran/>.

¹²² See, for instance, Herb Keinon, “Abraham Accords are helping Israel transform the Middle East,” *Jerusalem Post*, November 25, 2021, https://www.jpost.com/middle-east/abraham-accords-are-helping-israel-change-the-middle-east-686995?utm_source=ActiveCampaign&utm_medium=email&utm_content=Meet+the+UAE+s+first+ambassador+to+Israel%2C+Mohammed+Al+Khaja&utm_campaign=Saturday+Features+November+27%2C+2021.

¹²³ Frantzman, op. cit.

¹²⁴ See, for instance, “White House: Trump didn’t do ‘anything constructive’ to bring Middle East peace,” *Times of Israel*, May 19, 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/liveblog_entry/white-house-trump-didnt-do-anything-constructive-to-bring-mideast-peace/.

parties.¹²⁵ And while it has affirmed some of the Accords' tenets (such as Morocco's sovereignty over the territory of the Western Sahara), it has not done much of substance to strengthen them.

Such a posture of disengagement and disinterest carries tremendous risks for the United States. By failing to acknowledge the new strategic currents taking shape in the Middle East, the United States will relegate itself to the role of a mere bystander in the region, without much ability to shape regional events or influence its dynamics. Moreover, by not backing the region's evolving economic and political partnerships, the United States will inevitably find itself eclipsed by other regional actors (such as Russia and China) who have begun to throw their backing behind these new connections.¹²⁶

Rethinking a Changed Region

The foregoing strategic dynamics are of enormous consequence to the United States. They present policymakers in Washington with new challenges and fresh opportunities that cumulatively demand a re-conception of the role that America can and should play in the region.

Such a rethink begins with the understanding that the Middle East is not peripheral to American interests, or to its global priorities. For most of the past decade, the United States has been in strategic retreat from the region, as other priorities have steadily risen in prominence for American policymakers. This inattention has been exploited by adversaries such as China and Russia, which have adroitly taken advantage of America's disengagement to advance

¹²⁵ Danny Zaken, "US freezes Abraham Fund, as Israel-UAE business ties falter," *Globes*, July 7, 2021, <https://en.globes.co.il/en/article-us-freezes-abraham-fund-as-israel-uae-business-ties-falter-1001377257>.

¹²⁶ See, for instance, Gering, *op. cit.*

their own agendas and presence in the region – and done so in ways that disadvantage long-term American interests. At the same time, the deepening political, economic and strategic integration now visible between Israel and the Arab World holds the potential to significantly advance American security and U.S. strategic interests.

Most concretely, ongoing regional challenges, such as the threat posed by Iran and the conflict in Syria, require a new security architecture capable of providing assurance to regional allies and a common defense against shared threats. During its time in office, the Trump administration attempted to create such a grouping. Beginning in 2017, administration officials worked quietly with the governments of Saudi Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Bahrain, Kuwait, the UAE and Jordan to erect what they dubbed the “Middle East Security Alliance.” The bloc, which was popularized in various articles as an “Arab NATO,”¹²⁷ was in truth designed to be much more. The Alliance indeed centered on a concrete military partnership – one aimed at “confront[ing] extremism, terrorism, [and] achieving peace, stability and development” in the region.¹²⁸ However, the bloc also aspired to economic functions, most notably the harmonization of energy policy as a means of stabilizing global markets.¹²⁹ But the Alliance never formally materialized during the tenure of the Trump

¹²⁷ See, for instance, Yara Bayoumy, Jonathan Landay, and Warren Strobel, “Trump seeks to revive ‘Arab NATO’ to confront Iran,” Reuters, July 27, 2018, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-usa-gulf-alliance/trump-seeks-to-revive-arab-nato-to-confront-iran-idUSKBN1KH2IK>.

¹²⁸ C. Todd Lopez, “Middle East Strategic Alliance Effort Aimed at Stabilization,” U.S. Department of Defense, April 30, 2019, <https://www.defense.gov/Explore/News/Article/Article/1829790/middle-east-strategic-alliance-effort-aimed-at-stabilization/>.

¹²⁹ Ibid; Author’s conversations with U.S. government officials, Washington, DC, January-February 2020.

administration, and the concept was subsequently abandoned by the Biden White House.

Today, the rationale for such an effort has been greatly advanced by the new dynamism and connectivity evident in Israeli-Arab ties, which have created the political and economic infrastructure to make such an alignment possible. Yet, since taking office, the Biden administration has abandoned the concept in favor of a more traditional approach to the Middle East—one focused on bilateral diplomacy with Iran and routine political contacts with Israel and the countries of the Persian Gulf and North Africa. In the process, it has overlooked a key opportunity to create a persistent regional presence that enhances U.S. deterrence and better protects key partners and allies.

Whatever form it ultimately takes, U.S. policy must be predicated on the understanding that the Middle East is both a vital area for American interests and a key arena for 21st century competition. For, if the United States fails to take the region and its evolving strategic dynamics seriously, Washington will inevitably be marginalized in it—with profound (and profoundly negative) consequences for American security and prosperity.

About the Author

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Mr. Berman is the editor of six books: *Dismantling Tyranny: Transitioning Beyond Totalitarian Regimes* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), co-edited with J. Michael Waller; *Taking on Tehran: Strategies for Confronting the Islamic Republic* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2007); *Iran's Strategic Penetration of Latin America* (Lexington Books, 2015), co-edited with Joseph Humire; *The Logic of Irregular War: Asymmetry and America's Adversaries* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2017); *Digital Dictators: Media, Authoritarianism, and America's New Challenge* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2018); and, most recently, *Wars of Ideas: Theology, Interpretation and Power in the Muslim World* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2021).

He is also the author of five others: *Tehran Rising: Iran's Challenge to the United States* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2005), *Winning the Long War: Retaking the Offensive Against Radical Islam* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2009), *Implosion: The End of Russia and What It Means for America* (Regnery Publishing, 2013); *Iran's Deadly Ambition: The Islamic Republic's Quest for Global Power* (Encounter Books, 2015), and *The Fight for Iran: Opposition Politics, Protest, and the Struggle for the Soul of a Nation* (Rowman & Littlefield, 2020).

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