

US Military Strategy in the Middle East and the Challenge of Demilitarization

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With its troop withdrawals from Iraq in 2011 and Afghanistan in 2021, the United States currently exhibits a much smaller military footprint in the Middle East than it did in the mid-to-late 2000s. US regional strategy, however, remains structured around the capacity to deploy military force as a means to maintain regional influence, contain Iran, and compete against China and Russia. For many analysts and political leaders, and for much of the American public, a reduced US military posture in the Middle East is very compelling. While some argue that the United States should completely withdraw its forces from the region since none of its vital security interests are currently threatened, even those taking the opposing position and calling for continued engagement recognize the value of rebalancing the US military posture in response to changing contexts and needs.

However, the challenge for any withdrawal or rebalancing is that US engagement in the Middle East has become so deeply entangled with military institutions and assets that uprooting it would further erode US influence in the region. At the same time, even as previous rationales for

the strategic value of the region decline, the United States is increasingly approaching the Middle East as an arena for militarized great power competition. As a result, any sustained reduction in the US military posture there would require a broader demilitarization of US policy, the reduction of great power conflict, and the development of alternative means to address diverse sources of regional insecurity.

The Current US Military Posture and Strategy

Over the past few years there has been much debate in Washington about the need to reduce and rebalance the United States' military posture and security commitments in the Middle East.¹ Since its peak in 2008, the total number of US military personnel deployed to the region has been reduced by 85 percent.² And in recent years it has ranged between 40,000 and 60,000 troops.³ The Biden administration, however, has sought to maintain a robust posture. As US Secretary of Defense Lloyd J. Austin III has noted, "We have very real combat power in this theater. [...] And if needed, we will move in more."⁴ US Central Command (CENTCOM) has spelled out its strategic priorities as deterring threats posed by Iran and its allies, and to a lesser degree continuing to contain violent extremist groups while also increasingly competing with China and Russia.⁵ In response to past US policies that included high-profile troop drawdowns (in Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan) and past refusals to use force in response

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- 1 Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, "America's Middle East Purgatory: The Case for Doing Less," *Foreign Affairs*, December 11, 2018, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2018-12-11/americas-middle-east-purgatory>.
 - 2 "Statement of General Michael 'Erik' Kurilla on the Posture of U.S. Central Command - SASC Hearing Mar 16, 2023," U.S. Central Command, March 16, 2023, <https://www.centcom.mil/ABOUT-US/POSTURE-STATEMENT/>.
 - 3 Seth G. Jones and Seamus P. Daniels, "U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East," Center for Strategic and International Studies, May 2022, p.2, https://csis-website-prod.s3.amazonaws.com/s3fs-public/publication/220519_Jones_USDefensePosture_MiddleEast_0.pdf?VersionId=60gG7N1_4FxFA6CNgJKAbr24zmsKXhwX.
 - 4 Lloyd J. Austin III, "Remarks on Middle East Security at the Manama Dialogue," U.S. Department of Defense, November 20, 2021, <https://www.defense.gov/News/Speeches/Speech/Article/2849921/remarks-by-secretary-of-defense-lloyd-j-austin-iii-on-middle-east-security-at-t/>.
 - 5 "Statement of General Michael 'Erik' Kurilla.," Micah Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East: An Appraisal," Chatham House, October 2018, p.18, <https://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/default/files/publications/research/2018-10-18-us-military-policy-middle-east-zenko.pdf>.

to attacks on regional allies (most notably against the Abqaiq oil facility in Saudi Arabia in 2019), Biden administration officials have repeatedly told their longstanding regional partners that, “The US is not going anywhere. This region is too important, too volatile, too interwoven with American interests to contemplate otherwise.”⁶

According to estimates published in the 2023 edition of *The Military Balance*, the US has around 40,000 military personnel deployed to the Middle East.⁷ The bulk of these forces operate in the Arabian Gulf region from bases that were developed over years of intense combat focused on Iran and Iraq. Kuwait hosts the largest share of US ground forces, with over 10,000 military personnel and regional army headquarters. Another 10,000 are based in Qatar, now also a major non-NATO ally, which hosts the largest US Air Expeditionary Wing in the world, with heavy bombers and other aircraft. The US Air Force regional command and the regional forward headquarters of the US Special Operations Command are also located at Al Udeid Air Base in Qatar. Since its reactivation in 1995, the US Navy’s Fifth Fleet has been based in Bahrain, which hosts a sprawling naval base with about 4,700 personnel, and from which the United States coordinates marine operations with allied forces and efforts such as Task Force 59 that uses artificial intelligence and unmanned craft to “secure the region’s vital waterways.”⁸ The Fifth Fleet patrols the Arabian Gulf and the region’s waterways, maintaining rotational deployments of Naval carrier strike groups (with about 7,500 personnel) and marine amphibious ready groups (with another 5,000).

The United Arab Emirates, another important US partner, has its own growing military capabilities and operates al-Dhafra Air Base that hosts 5,000 US military personnel, as well as surveillance and combat aircraft. And Dubai’s Jebel Ali Port is a frequent port of call for US naval forces. The United States also maintains an air base and 2,000 personnel

6 Brett McGurk, “Remarks at the IISS Manama Dialogue,” International Institute for Strategic Studies, November 21, 2021, <https://www.iiss.org/Globalassets/Media-Library--Content--Migration/Files/Manama-Dialogue/2021/Plenary-Transcripts/Concluding/Brett-McGurk-Coordinator-For-The-Middle-East-And-North-Africa-Nsc-United-States--As-Delivered.pdf>.

7 James Hackett, ed., *The Military Balance 2023* (London: Routledge, 2023) 47–49. All personnel figures are from *The Military Balance 2023*, unless otherwise noted.

8 Jake Sullivan, “Keynote Address: 2023 Soref Symposium,” Washington Institute for Near East Policy, May 4, 2023, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/keynote-address-national-security-advisor-jake-sullivan>.

in Saudi Arabia. The US-led campaign against the so-called Islamic State (IS), meanwhile, draws on military personnel based in Jordan, where 3,000 troops are stationed, and where the United States maintains a drone operating base. Another 900 remain in northeast Syria, where they work with local Kurdish militias to contain IS, and about another 2,000 remain at bases across Iraq, though now mainly in an advise-and-assist role. There are small numbers of US military personnel in other locations around the Middle East, such as those who help operate Israel's Iron Dome missile defense system and those involved in training and supporting the Lebanese Armed Forces.⁹ In addition, as of December 2022, the US military employed about 22,000 contractors across the region, of whom about one-third were US citizens.¹⁰

The US military engagement in the region is extended by its military aid programs and arms sales. Following the 1978 Camp David Accords, the United States has been granting Israel about \$3 billion annually in military aid designed to maintain its "qualitative military edge," while Egypt receives over \$1 billion annually, despite occasional congressional efforts to withhold aid due to human rights violations by the Egyptian government.¹¹ Meanwhile, the Foreign Military Sales program helps the United States maintain long-term strategic ties with the region. Between 2018 and 2022, the US has facilitated almost \$18 billion in sales to Saudi Arabia, \$6 billion to the UAE, \$5 billion to Egypt, \$3 billion to Kuwait, \$2 billion to Jordan, and over \$1 billion to Qatar.¹² These sales in fighter jets and other hardware, together with related training and joint exercises to increase cooperation, allow the US to sustain and deepen close military-to-military ties.

Apart from the 2021 withdrawal from Afghanistan, there has been little sign of major redeployments, though force structures and missions are being adjusted. As White House Coordinator for the Middle East and

9 Zenko, "US Military Policy in the Middle East," pp.13–14.

10 Andrea Mazzarino, "The Army We Don't See: The Private Soldiers Who Fight in America's Name," Tom Dispatch, May 9, 2023, <https://tomdispatch.com/the-army-we-dont-see/>.

11 Jeremy M. Sharp, "U.S. Foreign Aid to Israel," Congressional Research Service, updated March 1, 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33222.pdf>. On Egypt, see: Jeremy M. Sharp, "Egypt: Background and U.S. Relations," Congressional Research Service, updated May 2, 2023, <https://sgp.fas.org/crs/mideast/RL33003.pdf>.

12 "Historical Sales Book Fiscal Years 1950–2022," Defense Security Cooperation Agency, 2022, <https://www.dscs.mil/sites/default/files/2023-01/FY%202022%20Historical%20Sales%20Book.pdf>.

North Africa Brett McGurk has explained, the United States is no longer seeking “maximalist” goals in the Middle East, such as regional political transformation or regime change in Iran.¹³ Although the United States is committed to preventing Iran from obtaining nuclear weapons capabilities, it is currently seeking to avoid confrontation with Iran-backed militias in Iraq. Meanwhile, it has sought to address the concerns of partners like Saudi Arabia and the UAE. What McGurk refers to as a “back to basics” approach is focused on “rebalancing” by rebuilding traditional alliances and strengthening the military capacity of allies through their integration with US forces and regional partners.¹⁴ At the center of this effort is the building of “an integrated air and maritime defense architecture in the region.”¹⁵

This integration has been advanced in the political realm through agreements such as the so-called Abraham Accords and the Negev Forum, which have accelerated Israeli cooperation with other US partners, such as the UAE. Military cooperation has also been developed through joint exercises, efforts to promote interoperability, and collaborative operations such as the Combined Maritime Forces. More broadly, McGurk has stated that the US envisions an “interconnected, prosperous, and stable region over the medium and longer term.”¹⁶

A Military Pivot Away from the Middle East?

Broad swaths of the US public and a diverse range of security and Middle East analysts have long called for a reduction in the US military posture in the Middle East. Most adamantly, advocates of a grand strategy of “restraint” propose that the US embrace a very narrow conception of its security interests in the Middle East, one that could justify a near total withdrawal from the region.¹⁷ Defining the central US security concern

13 McGurk, “Remarks at the IISS Manama Dialogue.”

14 Ibid.

15 Brett McGurk, “Remarks at the Atlantic Council Rafik Hariri Awards,” Atlantic Council, February 14, 2023, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/commentary/transcript/brett-mcgurk-sets-out-the-biden-doctrine-for-the-middle-east/>.

16 Ibid.

17 Barry R. Posen, *Restraint: A New Foundation for U.S. Grand Strategy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2015).; Eugene Gholz, “Nothing Much To Do: Why America Can Bring All Troops Home From The Middle East,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, June 24, 2021, <https://quincyinst.org/report/nothing-much-to-do-why-america-can-bring-all-troops-home-from-the-middle-east/>.

as preventing the rise of a hostile hegemon in the oil-rich Arabian Gulf, they argue that no regional power has the military capacity to dominate the region, that external powers like China have no interest in doing so, and that the fragmented multipolar geopolitics of the region mean that any rising power will be balanced by rivals. There is no strategic rationale, they argue, to justify the massive costs of the US presence in the Gulf. They note that there is little evidence that the United States has made the region more stable or made US territory more secure, and they question the logic of so-called “energy security.”¹⁸ Even hostile powers would sell oil on international markets, these proponents argue, and thus the US military is not needed to secure global “access” to Middle East energy sources. At the same time, these analysts, as well as many other observers and policy makers, have argued that in recent years the strategic value of the region and the threats the United States faces from it have diminished; the United States has become energy independent, Israel is regionally powerful and now has close ties with several Arab states, and terrorism is best viewed as a regional threat.¹⁹

Advocates of restraint call for the United States to evacuate most of its bases in the region over a five-to-ten-year period, leaving less than 5,000 personnel.²⁰ This drawdown would include most ground forces and leave limited air and maritime assets to support an offshore presence. The United States would end its practice of keeping a naval carrier strike group and marine amphibious ready group in theater, as it would only need a small maritime capability to patrol the seas. To safeguard the capacity to project force from over the horizon, the United States would maintain the option of access to bases in the region and the deployment of remote vehicles and surveillance technologies. Those promoting this position also argue that such a military disengagement from the region would reduce the threats the United States faces, such as being the target

18 Robert Vitalis, *Oilcraft: The Myths of Scarcity and Security That Haunt U.S. Energy Policy* (Stanford, CA: Stanford University Press, 2020).

19 Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/the-middle-east-isnt-worth-it-anymore-11579277317>.; Sean Yom, “US Foreign Policy in the Middle East: The Logic of Hegemonic Retreat,” *Global Policy* 11, no. 1 (February 28, 2020): 75–83.

20 Mike Sweeney, “A Plan for U.S. Withdrawal from the Middle East,” *Defense Priorities*, December 21, 2020, <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/a-plan-for-us-withdrawal-from-the-middle-east>.; Eugene Gholz, “Nothing Much To Do,” 54.; Jones and Daniels, “U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East,” 22–28.

of terrorist attacks or assaults from pro-Iran militias, and would also incentivize regional actors to develop their own capacities for self-defense and to work toward both the de-escalation of conflicts and regional accommodation. Some observers point to the end of the blockade of Qatar in 2021, an ongoing cease-fire in the war in Yemen, and the recent normalization of Saudi-Iran ties as effects of the US adjusting its security commitments. Others simply suggest that the United States should seek to insulate itself from the geopolitical instability of the region.

Aside from those advocating for a US withdrawal from the region, there is an ongoing debate in Washington about the need for a limited rebalancing of the American military posture. Several members of the Biden administration, before entering their current posts, advocated for the need to shift away from a reliance on military tools to more active diplomacy instead. At the heart of this debate is the evolution of conceptions about core US interests and means. Many analysts call for the United States to reduce its posture in the region, leaving between 10,000 and 20,000 personnel to sustain a strategy of “limited engagement.”²¹ This approach recognizes that, in the words of researcher Becca Wasser, “The U.S. footprint at larger operating bases—particularly those within range of Iranian weapons—should be reduced.”²² Wasser advocates a more “distributed basing structure” that would shift assets from larger bases in the Arabian Gulf toward a “constellation of smaller bases located throughout the region,” such as in Jordan and Saudi Arabia.²³

This approach would also include converting current “hot” bases to “warm” ones that are maintained by host nations, but with the United States retaining contingency access and pre-positioning equipment. Under such an approach, the US Navy would limit the presence of a carrier strike group in the region, placing one in the Indian Ocean that could be deployed if needed, while keeping an amphibious ready group in rotation no closer than the Arabian Sea.²⁴ The purpose would be to

21 Jones and Daniels, “U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East, 28–33.”; Melissa Dalton and Mara Karlin, “Adapting U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East for New Priorities,” in *Re-Engaging the Middle East: A New Vision for U.S. Policy*, Dafna H. Rand and Andrew P. Miller, eds. (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2020), 225–38.

22 Becca Wasser, “Drawing Down the U.S. Military Responsibly,” Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/drawing-down-u.s.-military-responsibly-pub-84527>.

23 Ibid.

24 Jones and Daniels, “U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East,” 32.

reduce the firepower held close to Iran and move US forces away from possible conflict with pro-Iran militias in Iraq and from positions in range of Iranian missiles while retaining capabilities to deter threats to US partners. Additionally, others call for the US to try to redirect its arms sales and military support toward equipment and capabilities that are more clearly defensive, such as anti-missile technologies and intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) capabilities, or to more carefully define the criteria for using US equipment.²⁵

The likely regional geopolitical consequences of a US withdrawal or rebalancing that limits US security commitments are hard to assess. When former President Barack Obama sought to restructure US security commitments and suggested that America's Arab partners would need to accommodate a regional role for Iran, Gulf states reacted by escalating conflicts and resorting to force as a response to their fears about insecurity, thereby further eroding American leverage in the region. While most US partners have since dialed down their revisionist strategies and sought some regional accommodations, the United States continues to be the largest supplier of arms. For their part, critics of restraint who instead advocate a more robust military posture of "forward engagement" fear that such a withdrawal would leave current US allies and partners insecure in an increasingly unstable multipolar region and "shift the balance of power" in favor of rivals such as Iran, Russia, and China.²⁶ Absent the US capacity to promote "deterrence by denial" against Iran, Israel might go to war with the Islamic Republic, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE might want to develop their own nuclear programs.

In any case, a significant reduction of the United States' military posture or security commitments seems unlikely at this time. While such shifts might serve American security interests in rebalancing the US posture, avoiding conflict, and restraining allies, they would likely only further diminish US regional leverage. Put simply, the United States lacks the political leverage to sustain a transition from a focus on military impact to an emphasis on diplomatic influence at a time when regional actors are seeking more strategic autonomy in a multipolar system. Moreover,

25 Emile Hokayem, "Reassuring Gulf Partners While Recalibrating U.S. Security Policy," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/reassuring-gulf-partners-while-recalibrating-u.s.-security-policy-pub-84522>.

26 Jones and Daniels, "U.S. Defense Posture in the Middle East," 26.

suggestions that regional states would be able to develop their own capacities for defense ignore how deeply interdependent regional states are on the US military infrastructure. For its part, US security assistance has too often been defined by local political needs and private sector economic interests than by operational requirements.²⁷ And even if regional states did seek to establish a stable regional balance of power, regional stability is by no means assured, as many of the sources of insecurity faced by regional states are due to internal factors, such as autocratic decision-making, political divisions, and states failing to address the needs and security of their societies.²⁸

In addition, the challenge of a withdrawal from the Middle East is no longer a regional question. The rise of great power competition with China and Russia have come to redefine the United States' global strategy and goals in the Middle East. While the United States can organize efforts to promote regional security integration around shared security interests such as the need to contain Iran and protect the free flow of commerce, it faces challenges due to some interests and perspectives that diverge from those of its partners. For example, the United States' regional partners view economic ties with China as a means to advance their broader goals of economic transformation and global integration; but the US views China's efforts to build economic ties and infrastructure under its Belt and Road Initiative as "a strategic lever to supplant US leadership in the region under the guise of benign economic initiatives and broadening security relationships."²⁹ As a result, CENTCOM Commander Michael 'Erik' Kurilla argues, "We are in a race to integrate our partners before China and Russia can deeply penetrate the region."³⁰

The Challenge of Demilitarization

The challenge for any major reduction of the US military posture in the Middle East is that US engagement has become so deeply entangled with military institutions and assets that disconnecting from them would only

27 Robert Springborg, "Retooling U.S. Security Assistance," Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, May 18, 2021, <https://carnegieendowment.org/2021/05/18/Retooling-U.S.-Security-Assistance-Pub-84525>.

28 Waleed Hazbun, "A History of Insecurity: From the Arab Uprisings to ISIS," *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 3 (2015): 55-65.; F. Gregory Gause III, "The Price of Order: Settling for Less in the Middle East," *Foreign Affairs* 101, no. 2 (March/April 2022): 10-21.

29 "Statement of General Michael 'Erik' Kurilla."

30 Ibid.

further erode American influence in the region. Military affairs analyst Micah Zenko notes that CENTCOM is “the most powerful and substantial US government actor in the Middle East.”³¹ This dynamic is reinforced by the economic linkages of arms sales, private contractors, and logistics firms, and by the circulation of former military officers as formal and informal advisors to governments and militaries in the region. Moreover, the militarized nature of US Middle East policy is sustained by the interest regional states have in US security commitments, which also help protect their regimes from domestic threats. These states often work to sustain US security commitments by maintaining political pressure and influence in Washington through direct lobbying, support for think tanks, and indirect economic leverage through arms purchases.

Against this self-reinforcing dynamic, any sustained reduction in the US military posture in the Middle East would likely require a reimagining of US foreign policy and a demilitarization of the institutions of strategic development and policy formation.³² More broadly, it would also require some sort of great power detente, the development of a new and inclusive regional security architecture less dependent on US military force, and alternative means to address sources of regional and domestic insecurity, many of which US military force is ill-suited to address.³³ Within such a context, the United States could seek to replace its reliance on military power projection with policies and resources directed to negotiating regional security agreements, assisting states to promote economic development, addressing the sources of human insecurity faced by societies across the region, and working collectively with states in the Middle East and elsewhere to address global challenges like climate change, autonomous weapons proliferation, and great power conflict.

31 Zenko, “US Military Policy in the Middle East,” 6.

32 Dalia Dassa Kaye, “America’s Role in a Post-American Middle East,” *The Washington Quarterly* 45, no. 1 (2022): 7–24.; Waleed Hazbun “Reimagining US Engagement with a Turbulent Middle East,” *Middle East Report* 294 (Spring 2020), <https://merip.org/2020/06/reimagining-us-engagement-with-a-turbulent-middle-east/>.

33 Paul R. Pillar et al., “A New U.S. Paradigm for the Middle East,” Quincy Institute for Responsible Statecraft, July 17, 2020, <https://quincyinst.org/2020/07/17/ending-americas-misguided-policy-of-middle-east-domination/>.; “The Middle East between Collective Security and Collective Breakdown,” International Crisis Group, April 27, 2020, <https://www.crisisgroup.org/middle-east-north-africa/gulf-and-arabian-peninsula/212-middle-east-between-collective-security-and-collective-breakdown>.; Dalia Dassa Kaye, et. al, *Reimagining U.S. Strategy in the Middle East: Sustainable Partnerships, Strategic Investments* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2021).