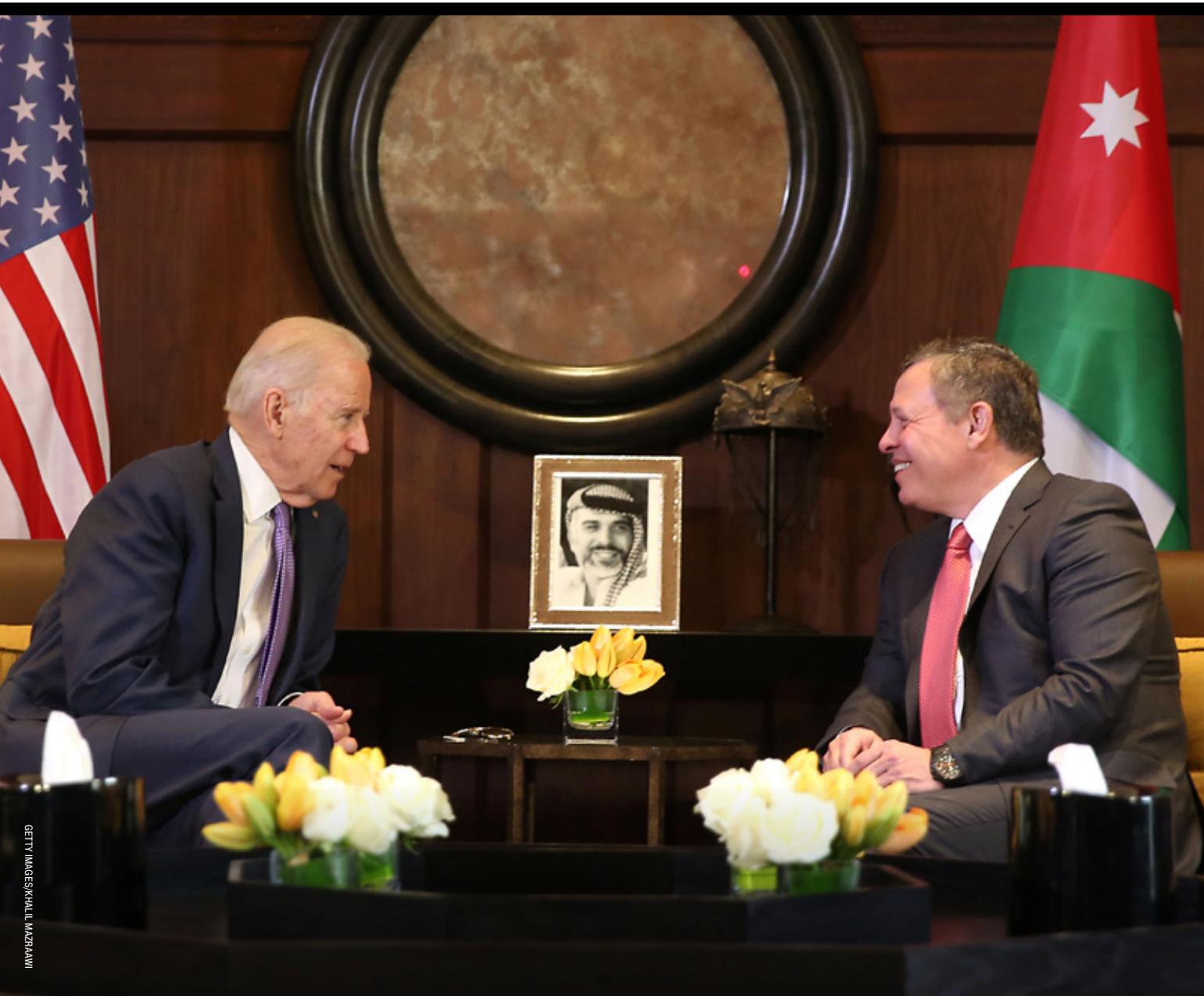


# Strategic Reengagement in the Middle East

Toward a More Balanced and Long-Term Approach for U.S. Policy

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# Introduction and summary

In January, President Joe Biden entered office with a daunting list of priorities at home and abroad, ranging from the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic to Russian-origin cyberattacks—with the Middle East decidedly low on the list of broader priorities.<sup>1</sup> In his first 10 months in office, President Biden and his foreign policy team adopted an approach of pragmatic engagement in the Middle East, trying to avoid overpromising results and setting a new practical plan for U.S. engagement in the region.<sup>2</sup> In its opening months, the administration emphasized diplomacy: It appointed a special envoy for Yemen, worked unsuccessfully to revive the Iran nuclear deal, and began rationalizing America’s military presence in the Persian Gulf.<sup>3</sup> At the same time, it dealt with crises in the region, including an outbreak of Israeli-Palestinian violence and Iranian-sponsored attacks on U.S. troops deployed in Iraq and Syria.<sup>4</sup>

As the Biden administration’s first 10 months in office demonstrate, the Middle East needs steady engagement rather than disengagement or a vague, ill-defined notion of “restraint.” The region presents the United States with too many challenges, crises, and opportunities to simply be downgraded or ignored. Instead, the United States should adopt a steadier, quieter, and above all more patient policy toward the Middle East—one that recognizes the region’s importance as a bridge between Europe, Asia, and Africa and a crucial crossroads of the global economy beyond energy production.<sup>5</sup> Indeed, the Middle East has become an economic hub in its own right, serving as an important transit point for people and cargo moving by air and sea—as well as an area of geopolitical competition with Russia and China.<sup>6</sup> Recognizing these realities, the United States should move from the current model of being the unrivaled regional security guarantor in a hub-and-spoke set of bilateral relationships to one of being a regional integrator on a range of issues, including security, economic, and energy concerns.

In the wake of the U.S. military withdrawal from Afghanistan, the United States will find it even harder to disengage from or downgrade its ties with the Middle East. If anything, the region—and America’s relations with its partners there—will become even more important moving forward.

Too often, however, policymakers have seen the Middle East mainly as a region of crisis and instability—and not without reason. But a U.S. policy discussion dominated by the false choice between staying in or leaving the region, with a narrow focus on military footprints and tactics, frequently fails to see the opportunities available to help the people of the Middle East achieve the greater freedom and prosperity they desire.

A wider view of American interests in the Middle East yields three primary concerns:

- **Security:** Protecting America, its worldwide allies, and its regional partners against terrorist threats originating in the Middle East—such as al-Qaida, the Islamic State group, and Iranian terrorist and proxy networks—should remain a focus of U.S. engagement in the region. Continued terrorist threats undermine regional and global security, as do ongoing civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen. The U.S. homeland is now much more protected and safer from these threats than it was 20 years ago, but America should still take active measures to insulate its regional partners and the broader international system from threats that emanate from the region.
- **Economics:** The Middle East’s energy resources remain critical to the global economy—particularly for American allies in Asia such as Japan and South Korea. In addition, over the past two decades, the region itself has quietly emerged as an international transit hub connecting Europe, Asia, and Africa. As the United States and other leading economies look toward a post-COVID-19 economic recovery phase, they should work to broaden and build lasting economic ties with key centers of innovation in the Middle East and North Africa and look for ways to boost economic ties that support decent work and investments in human capital.
- **Values:** More than 10 years after the start of the popular uprisings across the region, the Middle East remains on the front lines of the worldwide struggle for human dignity and universal rights, values that the United States supports—including religious freedom, women’s rights, and freedom of expression. The region’s lack of freedoms prevents its people from achieving their aspirations of dignity and prosperity while undermining its stability in the long term. In a global context where Chinese and Russian technological authoritarianism and state-dominated capitalism presents itself as an alternative model of governance, the Middle East is a contested space in this global values competition.

At the same time, the Middle East presents three main, interrelated opportunities for American policy:

- **Generational transitions across the region bring new perspectives to the public debate in key countries in the Middle East.** New, younger, and more digitally attuned generations unburdened by the politics of the past are coming to power across the Middle East, creating new openings for both positive and negative change in the region and within its individual countries—change with the potential to help create new opportunities to advance liberal values and economic progress. However, there are obstacles to promoting progress on this front, including the complicated diplomatic challenge of showing regional leaders a pathway toward more open and accountable societies—one that draws countries away from the dictatorship and authoritarianism that has crushed human potential in the region for decades.
- **Economic changes in the region open the door to economic cooperation in new fields.** With regional governments’ stated intention of moving their economies away from dependence on energy revenues, new options for economic cooperation could emerge beyond the traditional realms of hydrocarbon extraction and military hardware to areas such as tourism, information technology, and clean energy.
- **Change in America’s internal debate about the Middle East can help build a more sustainable and stable relationship with the region.** Many Americans—policymakers and citizens alike—are looking for ways to protect America’s still-significant interests in the Middle East while devoting less attention and fewer resources to the region. This evolving domestic policy dialogue presents an opportunity for the United States to redefine its relationship with the region to one that focuses as much, if not more, on political, economic, and social ties than on military and energy concerns.

The United States can safeguard its interests in the Middle East and meet the opportunities the region presents by building five pillars of strategic reengagement over the next decade:

1. **Launch joint initiatives on human security challenges such as the COVID-19 pandemic, economic security, human rights, and climate change.** A focus on broader human security concerns should also examine ways to use economic integration to create more value beyond energy production and better integrate the region’s economy with the three main global economic engines of Asia, Europe, and the United States.

2. **Put diplomacy first in efforts to end conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya.** Stepped-up and creative U.S. diplomacy is needed to untangle and de-escalate these complicated conflicts that have drawn in regional and global powers while addressing persistent threats from terrorist networks with a global reach.
3. **Contain and engage Iran with diplomacy backed by a balanced regional security strategy.** Renewed diplomacy with Iran must include America's regional security partners in order to produce lasting results, and the United States should recognize that Iran's support for violent militant groups, such as Hezbollah and the Houthis, jeopardizes America's values and interests across the region.
4. **Create conditions for progress and greater regional integration with renewed and inclusive diplomacy on the Arab-Israeli front.** The United States should seize upon the openings provided by recent normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab countries to improve conditions on the Israeli-Palestinian front, include the Palestinians as central actors, and move from the current one-state reality toward a two-state outcome.
5. **Advance a more balanced regional security policy with greater focus on emerging challenges.** The United States should move from the current security model of being the unrivaled regional security guarantor in a hub-and-spoke set of bilateral relationships to one of being a regional security integrator, encouraging like-minded countries to build a self-sustaining regional security architecture over the long run.

These five main pillars for U.S. policy are based on the following five key lessons learned from decades of U.S. engagement in the Middle East:

1. **Global geopolitics factor into the success or failure of diplomacy in the Middle East.** The greatest advances in regional security—Arab-Israeli diplomacy in the 1990s and the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran, for instance—have come when geopolitical conditions were favorable. When the United States coordinates with other nations around the world and works closely with regional partners, it achieves its best diplomatic results and security outcomes.

2. **Diplomatic initiatives need to be synced to security and economic policies to improve the lives of people and basic rights in the Middle East.** U.S. diplomacy will prove more effective when it links efforts to improve the economic, social, and political conditions of the people of the region to diplomatic progress. In other words, the people of the region need to feel the positive results of diplomacy in their everyday lives.
3. **Outside pressure only rarely produces sustainable results.** Attempts by the United States and other powers to coerce governments and political movements in the Middle East are not likely to produce lasting progress. Enduring progress is more likely when parties to conflicts and internal political tensions engage directly with one another, not when the United States or any other outside party attempts to force talks.
4. **Diplomatic success is more likely when it addresses and reduces security threats.** While military and counterterrorism operations can only do so much to shape the environment for peace, regional perceptions about politics and security determine the success or failure of diplomacy in the Middle East. Effective diplomacy to end conflicts and reduce tensions in the Middle East takes these realities into account rather than ignoring or denying them.
5. **Politicizing U.S. foreign policy is counterproductive and weakens America's geopolitical standing, especially in the Middle East.** America's position is stronger when Republicans and Democrats work together to build a consensus in America on next steps forward in the Middle East. When the two parties fail to build this consensus, it encourages outside actors to game U.S. domestic political divisions and avoid making their own difficult diplomatic and political choices necessary to end conflicts.

An era of heavy and direct U.S. military involvement is ending in the Middle East, but the new order is not yet clear. The region itself faces a period of overwhelming economic and social pressures exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic, and the United States under President Biden is still trying to more clearly define its role in the region. A realistic and responsible approach would seek to strengthen the state system in the Middle East in order to enable each state to address the broader humanitarian, economic, and security challenges facing its citizens. This approach would use diplomacy, economic statecraft, and security cooperation as its primary tools to build the confidence of all U.S. partners across the Middle East, to make the region's people feel more secure, and to use the leverage the United States still possesses to make slow but steady progress.

## Pillar 1

# Launch joint initiatives on human security challenges

With the Middle East confronting ongoing regional conflicts, challenges from Iran, and the persistent Arab-Israeli dispute—all eroding the foundations of stability in this global bridge—the United States can reengage in the region and shore up these shaky structures by sharpening its focus on four basic human security concerns:

- Coordinating efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus and distribute vaccines
- Building joint efforts to address climate change
- Working with regional partners and international institutions on a coordinated economic response that helps create new jobs
- Prioritizing human rights in bilateral discussions

A policy of U.S. strategic reengagement in the Middle East would prioritize these challenges as it seeks to help the region establish itself on a more stable footing.

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## Coordinate efforts to stop the spread of the coronavirus and distribute vaccines

By the start of November 2021, more than 275,000 people across the Middle East and North Africa had died due to COVID-19—likely an undercount of the overall death toll given ongoing conflicts and opaque government reporting.<sup>7</sup> As a proportion of their populations, Tunisia, Iran, Lebanon, and Jordan have all suffered the most, with each country seeing more than 1,000 deaths per 1 million people. Israel, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and four small Gulf Arab states—the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Oman, Bahrain, and Qatar—have fully vaccinated more than half their populations; by comparison, 56.85 percent of Americans have been fully vaccinated.<sup>8</sup> Overall, more than 303 million COVID-19 vaccines have been administered in the Middle East—nearly three-quarters of the more than 423 million shots given in the United States and 4.2 percent of total vaccines administered worldwide.<sup>9</sup>

So far, the United States has donated more than 13.5 million COVID-19 vaccines to countries in the Middle East and North Africa, including 8.25 million Pfizer-BioNTech doses to Egypt;<sup>10</sup> 1.9 million Moderna and Pfizer-BioNTech doses to Tunisia;<sup>11</sup> 1.2 million Johnson & Johnson and Pfizer-BioNTech doses to Morocco;<sup>12</sup> 604,800 Johnson & Johnson doses to Algeria;<sup>13</sup> 500,000 Pfizer-BioNTech doses to Iraq;<sup>14</sup> 500,000 Pfizer-BioNTech doses to Jordan;<sup>15</sup> 500,000 Moderna doses to the West Bank and Gaza;<sup>16</sup> and 151,200 Johnson & Johnson doses to Yemen.<sup>17</sup> Some of these vaccines were distributed through COVAX, the global COVID-19 vaccination distribution body. For its part, COVAX has allocated more than 11.8 million vaccine doses to countries across the Middle East and North Africa.<sup>18</sup>

Looking ahead, the United States should work with wealthier regional partners such as the Gulf Arab states to purchase and distribute COVID-19 vaccines to countries in need across the region. A regional vaccine purchase and distribution network could be established to work with COVAX and help accelerate vaccination in larger and less wealthy nations in the Middle East. This network could also serve as a vehicle for constructive vaccine diplomacy, with the United States and key regional partners such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE working together to help Jordanian, Lebanese, and Palestinian civil authorities vaccinate their populations, for instance.

A regional vaccine consortium presents an excellent opportunity for practical cooperation between Israel and its Arab neighbors, one that can build on recently forged ties and make new connections while benefiting the Palestinians in the process. Such a network could also offer to provide vaccine doses to Iran, though it remains unlikely that Tehran would accept help from countries the regime sees as rivals and enemies. Still, the attempt should be made in good faith.

While the Iranian government banned the import of U.S.- and British-developed COVID-19 vaccines in January 2021, for instance, that ban has not prevented Iran from acquiring more than 6.5 million doses of the U.K.-origin AstraZeneca vaccine via COVAX.<sup>19</sup>

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## **Build joint efforts to address climate change**

The Middle East already faces the challenges of climate change, with Israel suffering a deadly heat wave in May 2020 that was obscured by the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>20</sup> Aging power grids in Lebanon, Iraq, and Iran have not been able to cope with summer temperatures that now routinely rise to 122 degrees Fahrenheit.<sup>21</sup>

Climate change will exacerbate existing water scarcity problems in Yemen and the Jordan Valley in the years ahead as well, with Jordanian farmers seeing their growing season shrink by two months.<sup>22</sup> Gulf Arab states confront a double bind: They remain dependent on oil and natural gas for their revenues, yet they will face the brunt of climate change over the course of the coming century, including potential heat waves that could render cities such as Doha and Dubai too hot for human habitation.<sup>23</sup>

In short, climate change will further stress the region's dysfunctional social contracts and economic models—perhaps to the breaking point. Although U.S. climate policy understandably focuses on big issues such as domestic investment in clean energy or grand diplomatic deals such as the Paris Agreement, climate change also represents an opportunity for the United States to put diplomacy first in the Middle East and to transform its relationships with the people of the region.<sup>24</sup> Indeed, current U.S. climate envoy and former Secretary of State John Kerry has already made multiple trips to the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt to discuss climate policy.<sup>25</sup> For their parts, the UAE and Saudi Arabia have committed to net-zero carbon emission goals for 2050 and 2060, respectively, while Iraq has pledged to end gas flaring in its energy industry by 2030.<sup>26</sup>

While various country-specific bilateral climate mitigation programs run by the U.S. Agency for International Development could help, a wider regional approach that leverages the region's wealth and technical know-how would be beneficial. Climate policy represents a potential arena for cooperation both within the Middle East and between America and its regional partners. Israel possesses the technical know-how to help with the climate challenge, while the Gulf states remain at least rhetorically committed to transitioning away from their own dependence on fossil fuel revenues. The United States can serve as a key broker between these countries on this vital subject, perhaps building on Israeli participation in the joint U.S.-UAE Agriculture Innovation Mission for Climate announced at President Biden's virtual climate summit in April.<sup>27</sup>

For all the important differences between the United States and countries such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Egypt on human rights issues and political freedoms, these countries will play important roles in the efforts to implement a global energy transition and combat climate change in the Middle East and around the world. Saudi Arabia, for instance, not only remains the world's leading oil producer but also is deeply involved in international climate negotiations such as the recent round of U.N. climate talks in Scotland—and often not in constructive ways.<sup>28</sup> But as the United States and other advanced industrial countries transition away from

carbon-intensive energy sources—such as recent announcements from U.S. auto-makers indicating that they will shift to all-electric vehicle production lines and the electric vehicle infrastructure investments in the Infrastructure Investment and Jobs Act<sup>29</sup>—transitioning Saudi Arabia’s economy away from its dependence on oil revenues will become even more imperative.

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## **Work with regional partners and international institutions on a coordinated economic response that creates new jobs**

Significant economic gaps exist within and between societies across the Middle East. In 2019, for instance, the gross domestic product (GDP) of the region’s oil exporters stood at more than 4 1/2 times that of its nonoil-exporting countries.<sup>30</sup> At nearly \$400 billion, Israel’s 2019 GDP alone amounted to two-thirds of that of the region’s other nonoil-exporting countries—and more than 24 times the size of the Palestinian economy in the West Bank and Gaza in 2018 (the most recent available data).<sup>31</sup>

Despite well-publicized plans by wealthy Gulf states such as Saudi Arabia and the UAE to wean their economies from a dependence on oil revenues, insufficient progress had been made before the COVID-19 pandemic hit.<sup>32</sup> In nonoil-exporting countries, the International Monetary Fund projects that the pandemic will exacerbate existing inequality “as informal jobs are hit harder by the crisis and social safety nets remain weak.”<sup>33</sup> Social contracts and economic models that were already outdated and under strain before the pandemic will emerge from it weaker and even more in need of change.

In the most recent G-7 summit, member nations committed to a global “build back better” agenda that included action on vaccine distribution, reforms to international trade, pledges on climate change, and renewed partnerships with other nations around the world.<sup>34</sup> The United States should push for the G-7 to engage with energy-producing Gulf states to help reinvigorate their attempts to transition away from economies dependent on hydrocarbon revenues. Other oil-producing countries such as Iraq and Libya face different challenges adapting to both climate change and a world economy less dependent on oil, and the G-7 should work with these countries to help them do so—at least to the extent possible given their internal conflicts and security issues.

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## Prioritize human rights in U.S. engagement across the region

In addressing dismal human rights conditions in the Middle East, the United States should focus on modest or concrete goals such as the release of political prisoners rather than on sweeping political and social transformations of societies across the region.<sup>35</sup> As America knows from its own national experience, political and social change takes time and often suffers setbacks. An emphasis on discrete cases and tangible projects or concerns where progress can be seen or measured may prove more fruitful than high-level arguments about principles or the pursuit of thoroughgoing societal transformation.

Addressing some countries' penchant for holding political figures prisoner and detaining dual nationals—individuals who hold citizenship or residency in two countries—presents a good opportunity to address human rights in a concrete way. This focus on political prisoners and detained dual nationals can and should apply to all countries in the region: Both Saudi Arabia and Iran, for instance, detain American citizens and dual nationals—with Tehran often using them as hostages.<sup>36</sup> American diplomatic and political pressure will not always be successful, but if maintained and applied consistently, it can help open up political and social dialogue in societies across the region and advance America's interest in free and open societies abroad.

Similar diplomatic and political pressure could be applied to discourage government crackdowns against civil society and nongovernmental organizations across the Middle East—and encourage the growth of these groups where it can. Widely seen as crucial to the protection of human rights in societies around the world, these organizations constitute obvious targets for repression by autocratic governments. American engagement with regional partners such as Jordan and Egypt can help preserve such space as exists for these groups and open up more for them.<sup>37</sup>

Too often, U.S. policy toward the Middle East has neglected issues of human security in favor of more traditional security issues. The COVID-19 pandemic and the looming effects of climate change have made these issues impossible to ignore. This first pillar of strategic reengagement in the region aims to both rectify this shortcoming in U.S. policy that often overlooks the people of the region and to refocus American policy on the critical issues that affect the lives of millions. By helping the Middle East help itself with its human security challenges, the United States can improve its relationship with the region.

## Pillar 2

# Put diplomacy first to address conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya

Strategic reengagement in the Middle East requires renewed U.S. diplomatic efforts to end destructive internal conflicts in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Active U.S. diplomacy will prove critical toward untangling and de-escalating these civil wars while simultaneously addressing persistent threats from terrorist networks with a global reach. Until civil wars in the region subside significantly, the Middle East will not be able to reach its full potential, and security threats will persist and thrive amid the chaos and disorder that this bloodshed generates.

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## Syria

The continued presence of American forces in northeast Syria gives the United States significant diplomatic influence in the country. The United States should use its remaining leverage as best it can to help bring about a negotiated political settlement to Syria's civil war. If this proves unrealistic, the United States should attempt to forge a durable de-escalation agreement that stabilizes existing areas of international influence in the country, includes major players such as Russia and Turkey, and puts an end to major fighting for the foreseeable future.<sup>38</sup> America should also use its influence to keep cross-border humanitarian corridors beyond the control of the Assad regime open in the face of Russian attempts to use them to force recognition of the regime.<sup>39</sup>

In addition, the United States should continue to pursue accountability for the Assad regime through policy vehicles such as the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.<sup>40</sup> These sanctions provide an important diplomatic tool that the United States can use to discourage other nations from normalizing relations with Assad. That task may prove easier with traditional American allies in Europe than with security partners in the Middle East, but the sanctions approach should still be attempted, and America's Middle East partners should be warned against active participation in efforts to rehabilitate the Assad regime. Waivers for U.S. sanctions against the Assad regime remain a powerful tool that should be wielded to

discourage these partners from taking normalization too far. The U.S. government should be stingy with these waivers and place strict conditions on those it does grant to its regional partners.

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## Yemen

Multiple internal disputes and regional military interventions in Yemen make the country's security challenges severe and exceptionally difficult to resolve. In the short term, the United States should focus on bringing major fighting between the Iranian-backed Houthis and the Saudi-led coalition to an end through rigorous diplomacy that takes military realities into full account. Over the long run, American diplomacy must move beyond the immediate Saudi-Houthi hostilities and help Yemenis devise new modes and methods of political decentralization that can help keep divisions between the country's various political factions from erupting into renewed violence. Doing so will require a broader base of persistent diplomatic engagement with factions beyond the Houthis and the internationally recognized Hadi government. As a RAND Corp. study succinctly put it, "[A] peace agreement negotiated among elites is not enough to ensure an enduring peace in Yemen."<sup>41</sup>

In engaging with this broader range of Yemenis, it will prove vital to work with longtime American regional partners such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and Oman—all of whom have influence and relationships with a wide range of Yemen's factions, including the Houthis. These countries—along with other possible international partners such as the United Kingdom—could constitute a new contact group focused on the long-term questions of political decentralization and post-conflict reconstruction in Yemen. The Biden administration's move to appoint a special envoy for Yemen and dispatch national security adviser Jake Sullivan to Saudi Arabia to discuss the conflict represent important steps in this direction.<sup>42</sup>

Bringing stability—if not peace—to Yemen will require patient and persistent U.S. diplomatic engagement over a long time frame, as well as humility about America's ability to achieve rapid progress.

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## Libya

In contrast to Syria and Yemen, Libya appears on a more stable path to conflict resolution. In October 2020, U.N.-brokered negotiations produced a cease-fire agreement between Libya's two main factions: the Turkish- and Qatari-backed

Government of National Accord in Tripoli and the Emirati-, Egyptian-, and Russian-supported faction led by former Libyan military general Khalifa Haftar in the country's east.<sup>43</sup> The United States should focus its diplomacy on maintaining and implementing the cease-fire deal brokered by the United Nations. Perhaps the most important role the United States can play in making the cease-fire deal work is by helping to rein in the mutually destructive interventions embarked upon by allies and partners such as the UAE and Turkey.<sup>44</sup> Patient, quiet diplomacy has helped maintain a relative sense of calm in Libya this year, and the country is poised to hold national elections in late December 2021.

The United States should suffer no illusions about how difficult it will be to de-escalate conflicts as disparate and long-lasting as those in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. American diplomacy will not necessarily achieve results quickly or easily and must therefore remain persistent and aware of the ebb and flow of the fighting it hopes to end. Even when agreements to end civil wars are reached, implementation will prove crucial—requiring U.S. engagement in the region well beyond the signing of peace deals.

## Pillar 3

# Contain and engage Iran with diplomatic efforts and a balanced regional security strategy

America’s strategic reengagement in the Middle East requires a balanced approach that seeks to address the threat perceptions of key partners and de-escalates tensions across the region. This path has important implications for Iran policy and for a revival of the 2015 nuclear agreement—the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—with Tehran. Indeed, without an improved regional security environment, any future deal with Iran will not last long.

Tehran’s most potent threat to regional stability and security comes from its support of militant groups across the Middle East, ranging from Hezbollah in Lebanon and Palestinian Islamic Jihad to the Houthis in Yemen and various Shia militias in Iraq. But given how central these groups are to Iranian foreign policy, a diplomatic agreement to curtail Iranian support for them appears unlikely to materialize. U.S. diplomacy with Iran should instead prioritize more potentially tractable—but still difficult—issues such as Tehran’s nuclear and ballistic missile programs.

It is also important to recognize that opposition to the United States remains an article of faith for the regime in Tehran.<sup>45</sup> Accordingly, it is unlikely that the United States or its security partners will be able to reach a viable grand bargain with Iran any time soon. While diplomacy can address specific issues such as Iran’s nuclear program, only with time and generational change in Iran’s political leadership will actual rapprochement prove possible.

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## Nuclear diplomacy

Indirect negotiations to revive the JCPOA began in April 2021 and continued through June, going on hiatus following Iran’s presidential election and transition of power. Iran briefly returned to international talks in Vienna at the end of November, but those talks did not produce any progress.<sup>46</sup> U.S. State Department officials said progress had been made and that Iranian negotiators appeared “serious” during earlier rounds,<sup>47</sup> but by September, Secretary of State Antony Blinken and his European counterparts began to warn that the window for nuclear talks would not remain open indefinitely.<sup>48</sup>

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Even with the revival of the nuclear deal, it is unlikely that the United States or its security partners will be able to reach a viable grand bargain with Iran any time soon. Only with time and generational change in Iran’s political leadership will actual, sustainable rapprochement prove possible.

An interim agreement on the nuclear issue would give the United States time and space to consult with regional partners on subsequent negotiations over Iran’s ballistic and cruise missile programs. Iran has launched ballistic and cruise missile attacks against American bases and a wide variety of Saudi targets, both directly and via proxy groups, in Yemen and Iraq.<sup>49</sup> The goal of these consultations should be to create a common plan of action for ballistic and cruise missile arms control in the region—an opening bid for wider talks with Tehran on the subject.<sup>50</sup> It will be important for the United States to coordinate closely with other interested parties, such as Israel and European allies.

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## Regional security coordination

At the same time, the United States should take sustained and concrete steps to bolster the security of its regional partners against likely Iranian threats. Two immediate priorities stand out: maritime security and air and missile defense. Iranian attacks over the past two years have demonstrated the inadequacies of America’s Gulf Arab partners in both areas. Building on the 2015 and 2016 U.S.-Gulf Cooperation Council communiqués,<sup>51</sup> the Biden administration should work to better integrate the Gulf’s air and missile defenses and improve its maritime security capabilities. An ad hoc effort is already reportedly underway with Saudi Arabia as the United States draws down its own air and missile defenses in the country, and this effort should be made more systematic and expand to include other Gulf Arab partners.<sup>52</sup>

Similarly, maritime security remains a pressing concern in the Gulf. Iranian mines disabled oil tankers off the UAE in 2019, and the Iranian military revealed an underground anti-ship missile complex on its Gulf coast in early 2021.<sup>53</sup> In response to Iranian aggression, the United States created a new international maritime security coalition in November 2019 that includes Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE, along with the United Kingdom and NATO allies Estonia, Lithuania, and Albania.<sup>54</sup>

The Biden administration should work to incorporate other Gulf Arab states as well as European allies beyond the United Kingdom and current members. A good first step in that direction would be closer coordination and greater integration with the European-led Maritime Awareness in the Strait of Hormuz mission.<sup>55</sup>

A dual focus on air and missile defense and maritime security would also help shift the nature of U.S. defense cooperation with Gulf Arab states away from the purchase of expensive, high-prestige weapons such as fighter aircraft and toward more practical defensive equipment such as patrol vessels and anti-missile systems. Such a shift would harden Gulf Arab defenses against likely Iranian threats and enable them to take greater constructive responsibility for regional security, allowing the United States to reduce its own military commitments to the Middle East over time.

When it comes to Iran's support to terrorism and militant groups across the region, there remain limits to what the United States can achieve without making the elimination of these groups the overriding goal of U.S. policy in the Middle East—a goal the United States may not achieve without jeopardizing its interests elsewhere in the world. American partners in the region, such as Israel, have had success imposing costs on Iran's attempt to embed itself in Syria, but Iran still appears to be able to ship increasingly advanced weapons to Hezbollah, Hamas, and other proxies.<sup>56</sup> Given the relatively quiet reaction from the Assad regime and its allies thus far, the United States should continue to support Israel's military campaign against Iran in Syria—but it should be prepared to adjust it in response to a change in diplomatic circumstances.

All in all, diplomacy remains the best way for the United States to address its concerns about Iran's nuclear program and other outstanding questions. But it is important to recognize that the current political leadership in Iran remains ideologically opposed to rapprochement with the United States; diplomacy will have its limits for the foreseeable future. Meanwhile, the United States should help its regional security partners better integrate their defenses against likely Iranian methods of attack while highlighting the Iranian regime's assaults on human rights and basic freedoms.

## Pillar 4

# Create conditions for progress and greater regional integration with inclusive Arab-Israeli diplomacy

As May 2021's unrest in Jerusalem and renewed fighting in Gaza make clear, no policy of strategic reengagement in the Middle East would be complete without a thorough examination of Arab-Israeli diplomacy. The United States should leverage recent normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab countries to improve conditions on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Though major progress on the core Israeli-Palestinian conflict does not appear likely at the moment, stepped-up U.S. diplomatic engagement that seeks to achieve gradual and simultaneous progress on multiple fronts can improve the lives of both Israelis and Palestinians while keeping the possibility of an ultimate two-state outcome viable.

The Biden administration should approach Arab-Israeli relations as the keystone of a broader, robust diplomatic approach that seeks steady progress on multiple fronts across the region simultaneously, with four main areas of focus:

- Renew, strengthen, and broaden ties between Palestinians and Americans.
- Deepen U.S.-Israel bilateral ties and prepare for the next phase of security cooperation.
- Work with Palestinians and Israelis on a set of targeted measures to steadily improve the quality of life of Palestinian and Israeli people.
- Launch an inclusive regional diplomatic initiative that builds on recent normalization agreements, includes the Palestinian leadership, and seeks an updated Arab Peace Initiative.

Taken together, these approaches can help keep the prospect of a two-state outcome to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict alive by improving the lives of Israelis and Palestinians while building on recent regional diplomatic progress.

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## **Renew, strengthen, and broaden ties between Palestinians and Americans**

The Biden administration is already working to restore the relationship with the Palestinian Authority, including reestablishing a diplomatic presence and restoring aid delivered directly to the Palestinian people. But a broader historical point remains: Relations between Americans and Palestinians should exist on their own terms and not be treated simply as a subsidiary to U.S.-Israel relations or other regional relationships. That is, America's relationship with Palestinians has typically been seen as a function of American bilateral relations with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, or other countries rather than important in and of itself.

As the United States works to reestablish ties with Palestinians, the Biden administration should keep a number of policy considerations in mind, beginning with the likelihood of a generational transition in Palestinian politics away from the current leadership of President Mahmoud Abbas and toward an increasingly fragmented political landscape with no clear leaders or dominant factions. Understanding the complexities of Palestinian politics and society remains critical and requires deeper diplomatic, cultural, and economic engagement between Americans and Palestinians. That engagement can start with the reopening of the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem, but it must not end there.

At the same time, the United States should maintain its security engagement with the Palestinian Authority. As the United States resumes security cooperation with the Palestinians,<sup>57</sup> the Biden administration should assess this cooperation and look for ways to improve it by encouraging the Palestinian Authority Security Forces to operate more effectively and with greater respect for the basic freedoms of the Palestinian people. This festering discontent with an authoritarian Palestinian Authority is likely to be a major issue in Palestinian politics moving forward.<sup>58</sup>

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## **Deepen U.S. -Israel bilateral relations ahead of the next phase of security cooperation**

U.S. strategic reengagement in the Middle East must include a stronger foundation for U.S.-Israel bilateral ties—one that is less vulnerable to short-term domestic political considerations in both countries. A mainstay in the bilateral relationship is security cooperation, but it needs to evolve toward a new paradigm based on broader joint cooperation and less dependence on U.S. taxpayer aid.<sup>59</sup>

The two countries should continue ongoing discussions planning for the future of U.S.-Israel security cooperation as the current memorandum of understanding signed at the end of the Obama administration draws to a close.

These discussions should result in a series of bilateral agreements that create a new framework for security cooperation between the two countries. These agreements could cover technology transfers, joint defense research and development projects, and regulation of cyber-warfare firms, among other topics.<sup>60</sup> Moreover, these new agreements should directly address U.S. concerns about Israel's ties with China in several sensitive areas such as infrastructure and information technology.<sup>61</sup> This framework would allow both countries to move toward a security relationship whose mutual benefits are more readily apparent.

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## **Work to improve the day-to-day lives of Israelis and Palestinians**

Charting a new horizon on the Israeli-Palestinian front means working toward steady progress on the security, economic, and living conditions of Palestinians and Israelis alike.<sup>62</sup> These efforts to strengthen U.S. ties with the Palestinians and Israel should serve as a foundation for a long-term effort seeking to link U.S. diplomatic, economic, and security engagement to progress on the ground in ways that bolster political support for a negotiated settlement that satisfies both parties. This progress needs to be connected to regional diplomacy to increase political support in Israel, with Palestinians, and with the broader region for negotiations over final status issues.

Overall, U.S. diplomacy should demonstrate that negotiations produce tangible results that benefit average Palestinians and Israelis and lay the groundwork for a future Palestinian state. Moving forward, a renewed U.S. diplomatic push should aim to synchronize diplomacy and institution-building efforts in ways that combine to produce a new political horizon for both Israelis and Palestinians. Potential areas where U.S. diplomacy could prove effective include rebuilding or refurbishing schools and health clinics in Area C (parts of the West Bank currently under full Israeli control) or an expansion of Palestinian rights to access olive groves, stone quarries, and other resources in Area B (parts of the West Bank under Palestinian civil administrative control but shared Israeli-Palestinian security control) and Area C.<sup>63</sup>

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## **Launch an inclusive regional diplomatic initiative that builds on recent normalization accords, includes the Palestinian leadership, and seeks an updated Arab Peace Initiative**

The Biden administration should build on the progress of the 2020 normalization accords between Israel and the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. That work should not come at the expense of the Palestinians; rather, strategic reengagement would seek to use diplomacy to build a more constructive circle of regional and international support for progress on the Israeli-Palestinian front. Accordingly, the Biden administration should create a new Middle East contact group—an inclusive multilateral group of countries working together to create more openings on the Arab-Israeli front while also taking steps to de-escalate tensions with Iran and ending conflicts through diplomacy first.

The work to expand normalized ties should not function in the same way as bypass roads built to connect Israeli settlements in the West Bank to Israel—roads that allow Israelis to drive through the West Bank without encountering Palestinians. Rather, it should include the Palestinians and seek to improve the lives of Palestinians and Israelis in tangible ways. Improving the quality of life and security of Palestinians and Israelis alike is necessary to lay a stronger foundation for a sustainable peace that has legitimacy, meets the national aspirations of Israelis and Palestinians, and secures their basic rights.

## Pillar 5

# Advance a more balanced regional security policy with more focus on emerging challenges

Strategic reengagement in the Middle East must address the large question of America's significant military presence in the region. Too often, however, this question comes both first and last in policy debates, dominating discussions about America's approach to the Middle East and posing a false choice between the status quo and withdrawal from the region. Instead, the United States should determine how it can protect its still-significant interests in the Middle East while encouraging its regional partners to shoulder more of its security burdens.

America's military footprint in the Middle East cannot ultimately be separated from the interests and regional dynamics that drive it. Two core national interests compel the United States to maintain a significant military presence in the region:

1. Counterterrorism, particularly against Salafi-jihadi groups such as the Islamic State group and al-Qaida
2. Preventing any one hostile power from dominating the region and its maritime chokepoints, which today largely means countering Iranian influence and deterring Iranian aggression

These two interests will likely persist indefinitely. But securing them does not necessarily require U.S. military deployments to the Middle East on the scale the region has seen over the past two decades. Rather, it requires shifting American's role in regional security from that of a guarantor to an integrator and bringing in traditional allies from Europe and Asia.

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## Shifting from regional security guarantor to regional security integrator

For decades, the United States has tried and failed to foster greater security cooperation among its regional partners. This is due to a complex range of factors, stretching from regional political and diplomatic rivalries to a lack of a dedicated focus on the problem by American policymakers. Sporadic initiatives

across administrations meant to increase the responsibilities and capabilities of American regional partners foundered amidst other priorities, leaving massive arms sales as the primary mechanism for security cooperation between the United States and its partners.<sup>64</sup>

Changing America's security role in the Middle East from a guarantor to an integrator will take time. Overcoming regional rivalries and convincing partners that they will need to take greater responsibility for the region's security will require persistent and inclusive diplomacy. But the case for regional security integration remains strong—all the more so if Israel can be brought into the system. The United States can either reinforce bad habits and lament the need to remain engaged in the Middle East, or it can shift its strategic approach to regional security and gradually reduce its own military presence while securing its national interests.

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## **Bringing traditional allies into regional security discussions**

The United States should also make every effort to convince its allies and partners outside the Middle East to participate in these two efforts. Of America's traditional allies, only the United Kingdom participates in the International Maritime Security Construct. Australia left the coalition at the end of 2020,<sup>65</sup> while more recent NATO allies such as Albania, Estonia, and Lithuania continue to take part. At the same time, eight EU member nations mounted their own maritime security initiative in the Strait of Hormuz<sup>66</sup>—and an effort should be made on both sides of the Atlantic to integrate these two multinational initiatives.

These allies and partners should also be invited into any potential Gulf air and missile defense arrangement. They all share an interest in a stable Middle East not dominated by a hostile Iran, and the United States should expect these nations to shoulder at least some of the burden moving forward.

# Conclusion

An era of heavy and direct U.S. military involvement is ending in the Middle East, but the new order is not yet clear. The region itself faces a period of overwhelming economic and social pressures exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic. For its part, the United States under President Biden is trying to more clearly define its still-important role in the region at a time of overwhelming pressures at home and competing interests worldwide—a process made all the more complex by the Taliban takeover in Afghanistan.

The experience of the post-9/11 decades has left many Americans wary of engagement in the Middle East, with voices on both the left and right calling for a downgrade of U.S. involvement in the region. Some propose retrenchment to deal with problems at home, and others call for a wholesale shift to other regions of the world such as Asia or to competitors, including Russia and China. But as the withdrawal from Iraq in 2011 and the subsequent emergence of the Islamic State group in Iraq and Syria demonstrated, how America reduces its role in the Middle East has a major impact on regional dynamics for good and for ill.

However, reducing America's role in the region and cutting ties with flawed but long-standing regional security partners will not serve American interests or values in the long run.<sup>67</sup> Instead, it is a recipe for greater instability. This approach would pave the way for increased engagement by Russia and China, which would likely further weaken the structural foundations of the region's state system and lead countries of the region to export more instability into the international system.

A more realistic and responsible alternative would seek to strengthen the state system in the Middle East in order to enable each state to address the broader humanitarian, economic, and security challenges facing their citizens. At the same time, it would aim to reduce chronic political divisions between Arab countries and build stronger relationships between Israel and its neighbors—especially the Palestinians.

The primary tools of this alternative should be diplomacy, economic statecraft, and security cooperation, combined with a shift away from direct military action. This balanced alternative seeks to build the confidence of all U.S. partners across the Middle East, to make the region's people feel more secure, and to use the leverage the United States still possesses to make slow but steady progress.

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