

# CSBA

Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments

## CONTAIN, DEGRADE, AND DEFEAT

A DEFENSE STRATEGY FOR A TROUBLED MIDDLE EAST



ERIC S. EDELMAN  
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Cover: 1) Aviators provide air support for ground forces during a training exercise held at COB Speicher. U.S. Army Photo by Specialist Bryanna Poulin. 2) An F/A-18E Super Hornet taxis across the flight deck of the aircraft carrier USS Dwight D. Eisenhower in the Arabian Gulf. U.S. Navy photo by Mass Communication Specialist 3rd Class Nathan T. Beard.

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# Executive Summary

The decade and a half the United States has spent fighting the “long war” in the Middle East has yielded many tactical successes but left a lasting victory elusive. The inconclusive nature of these struggles has sapped support for the U.S. policy of shouldering the burden of providing security and stability in the region. Although many believed U.S. involvement in the region resulted in more violence, disorder, and radicalization of local Arab populations, the current situation in the Middle East illustrates that inaction has been highly destabilizing. The United States must contend with two intertwined challenges in the region: Iranian aspirations for mastery in the Middle East and the Muslim world and often related violent jihadist terrorism. Both threaten the security of the broader Middle East and the U.S. homeland.

The Middle East, and specifically the Persian Gulf, first emerged as a strategically important region at the end of the World War II. The Marshall Plan spurred major shifts in energy production and consumption, leaving both the United States and European nations dependent on the region for oil. As the nascent stages of the Cold War in the Middle East emerged, the political orientation of the resource-rich region became a growing concern. Soviet expansion compelled Washington to take a clear stand on its political and military commitments in the region. The withdrawal of British assistance to Greece and Turkey in 1947 provided the necessary catalyst for the Truman administration to reorient American foreign policy decisively in sharp contrast to previous U.S. policy, which had largely avoided foreign commitments beyond the Western Hemisphere during peacetime. The U.S. assumption of a preeminent role in Iran after 1953 marked the beginning of Britain’s long retreat from the Middle East; it extended over the better part of two decades before the British decision to cede the prime security role in the region to the United States in the late 1960s. The decision marked the beginning of America’s ascendancy and transformed U.S. security policy in the Middle East.

The Nixon Doctrine paved the way for significant increases in U.S. military aid to allies in the Middle East, specifically the “twin pillars” of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The unexpected fall of the Shah, the resulting Iranian revolution, the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, and the Soviet invasion into Afghanistan shortly thereafter challenged U.S. ability to control events in the strategically important region. Washington reorganized and equipped its forces to intervene rapidly if necessary to safeguard U.S. interests. President Carter signaled that the United

States would not tolerate domination of the Persian Gulf by an outside power; the Carter Doctrine outlined a broader strategic vision for the region that signaled a new era of direct U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf.

The emergence of an aggressive Iraq with regional hegemonic aspirations led by Saddam Hussein and the subsequent Iran–Iraq War led the administration to ask Congress for a general increase in the top line of the defense budget. The expansion of the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean gave teeth to Carter’s rhetoric. The war devastated both Iraq and Iran, but the domestic Iranian narrative of the Islamic Republic as a beleaguered underdog persecuted by the West and its Sunni Arab neighbors reinforced the grievances that had fueled the revolution in 1979, providing the regime enduring legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the Iranians leading the country today. With the collapse of the Soviet Union, Saddam’s regime emerged as the biggest threat to regional stability, culminating with its invasion of Kuwait. Although U.S. and coalition forces swiftly eradicated Saddam’s forces in Kuwait, the United States decided to abandon its effort to maintain a balance of power between Iran and Iraq and rather sought “dual containment” to blunt the danger posed to U.S. interests and regional stability. Confrontations with Saddam’s regime continued throughout the 1990s until the Bush administration’s reduced tolerance for risk after 9/11 ultimately led to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq.

The post-Cold War Middle East before 2001 underwent periodic episodes of conflict but was ultimately a secure state-centered region. Post-2001 U.S. military operations toppled the Taliban’s regime in Afghanistan and the Baathist regime in Iraq, fundamentally altering the region’s balance of forces. The disarray created by the so-called “Arab Spring” also contributed to this shifting balance and provided an opportunity for Iran to pursue regional hegemony more aggressively.

Although the United States has been the key outside player maintaining stability in the region since the late 1960s, the recent declining American involvement has coincided with the return of great power competition in the Middle East. While the United States no longer enjoys unprecedented influence and freedom of action in the Middle East, the continuing importance of the region makes it difficult for U.S. policymakers to extricate themselves from involvement there.

Despite the U.S. path to energy self-sufficiency, the region still contains a large share of the world’s oil reserves, to which disruptions would have serious and far-reaching effects on the U.S. economy, U.S. allies, and broader international stability. The volatile ongoing power struggles of the Middle East have already reverberated globally, causing crises both in neighboring Turkey and North Africa as well as in Europe and elsewhere. Lastly, U.S. policies of retrenchment and a risk-averse attitude have allowed our adversaries to fill the gap, worsening the instability in the region and ultimately undermining the legitimacy of U.S. guarantees to Middle Eastern partners. Moving forward, Washington policymakers will need a strategy to actively advance U.S. interests in the region for the foreseeable future and tackle the twin challenges of countering Iranian political ambitions and violent Sunni Islamic extremism.

The Islamic Republic of Iran will be one of the most pressing policy issues that will confront the new administration. The revisionist state is exceptionally dangerous to its neighbors, U.S. allies and partners, and the broader stability of the Middle East. As the world's largest state sponsor of terrorism, Iran advocates for the elimination of Israel and patronizes threats to the security of the production and transit of regional energy supplies. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his inner circle of religious and military leaders interpret almost all U.S. actions—regional military presence, commitment to sanctions, covert operations, and even offers to negotiate—as instruments to overthrow the Iranian regime. As a result, Iran has a strong motivation to develop the capabilities needed to counter U.S. force projection. Specifically, the Islamic Republic has consistently sought asymmetric warfare capabilities to offset overwhelming U.S. military superiority.

Iran has invested in ballistic missile development, a guerilla navy, and air defense systems as part of its emerging anti-access/area-denial capabilities (A2/AD), all of which take advantage of the Persian Gulf's geographic and geopolitical characteristics. This “mosaic defense” A2/AD strategy might be able to deter or prevent the United States from intervening effectively in a Gulf crisis, to inflict losses on U.S. forward-stationed forces at the outset of a conflict, to prevent the deployment of U.S. reinforcements, and to create the time and space needed for Iran to consolidate gains and force a political settlement.

Iran, by consistently investing significant resources into producing long-range rockets, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and long-range cruise missiles, wields one of the most formidable missile arsenals in the region. Iran's missile program is cost-effective, efficient, and a central part of its strategic deterrent; it sees its arsenal as a great equalizer against the qualitative advantages of its adversaries. As such, it continues to invest aggressively in improving their accuracy and lethality. Tehran has also pursued asymmetrical naval capabilities to counter the U.S. presence in the Gulf. The confined waters of the Persian Gulf—and particularly the Strait of Hormuz—make Iranian swarming tactics, mines, and short-range missiles especially effective against U.S. naval assets within range of Iran's short-range capabilities. Lastly, given the air superiority of the United States, Israel, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE), Iran prioritizes air defense systems. The deployment of the Russian-made S-300 air and missile defense system to Iran, in particular, would significantly alter the local balance of forces.

Given Iran's heavy reliance on asymmetric approaches to warfighting, it is unsurprising that Iran has devoted increasing amounts of resources to cyber warfare capabilities. In the future, cyber warfare may become Iran's preferred weapon and a central component of its national security strategy because it has fewer drawbacks than more escalatory warfighting measures in Tehran's arsenal.

Lastly, a fundamental and enduring part of Iran's foreign policy toolkit is its support for terrorism. Iranian support for proxies and surrogates remains one of the most disruptive tactics the Islamic Republic wields in its effort to exert mastery over the region. Supporting proxies allows Iran to undermine rivals, disrupt the status quo, and project power beyond its

borders at a relatively low cost with high levels of deniability. Its largest proxy, Hezbollah, is also one of the most advanced terrorist organizations in the world. The presence of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) force and proxies frequently yield an influential, if not decisive, impact in the Middle East, the most recent example being Iran's support for Syria.

While Iran's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East concerned U.S. officials in the 1980s and 1990s, its burgeoning nuclear program in the mid-1990s quickly became the preoccupation—and remains so to this day. Although the threat of a U.S. conventional military response still puts some limits on Iran's aggressiveness, a nuclear-armed Iran would have serious implications for the region. Iranian leaders might conclude that possession of nuclear weapons would enable them to deter a U.S. conventional strike, and the U.S. ability to promote and defend its interests in the region could diminish as Iran's coercive leverage grows. Moreover, an Iranian nuclear capability would make the local nuclear balance particularly dangerous and raise legitimate questions about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence in the region. A major question facing a Trump administration will be whether the JCPOA prevents Iran from emerging as a nuclear power or if it simply recognizes the Islamic Republic as a threshold nuclear weapons state.

The United States needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with Iran's multi-pronged challenge rather than singling out issues—even those as important as the nuclear issue. This strategy must first acknowledge that Iran is not a conventional state that simply seeks to maximize its national interests, but rather a revolutionary regime whose objective is to overturn and subvert the regional security order that the United States has carefully shaped and sustained since 1971. Rolling back Iranian influence should employ indirect approaches that leverage alliance relationships, build partner capacity, and utilize non-military advantages rather than direct U.S. military force.

Given the extent to which Iran threatens this system, U.S. policymakers should seek to systematically undermine the basis of the clerical regime's power and encourage the Iranian population to seek greater freedom of expression and democracy.

The nuclear deal itself will certainly need to be addressed as a priority matter by the new administration. If revision becomes a possibility, the priority objectives in the renegotiation should be ending the sunset provisions, which put time limits on measures restricting Iran's uranium enrichment activities, and more intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear program. Another important part of any U.S. strategy for blunting Iran's reach is energy policy. Keeping the price of oil at a reasonably low level will deny extra resources for Iran.

No effort to contain Iran, through energy policy or military cooperation, will be successful without healthy U.S. partnerships with the states in the region, many of which are currently strained. A priority for the Trump administration should be to repair these relationships. Developing a common understanding on the appropriate political-military division of labor among allies will be imperative to imposing costs on Iran, limiting its reach around the region,

and rolling back some of its geopolitical gains. A reinvigorated U.S.–Gulf security dialogue in particular can help focus the Gulf States on procuring the kind of capabilities that would raise the costs of conflict to Iran and help deter the outbreak of hostilities in the region.

The difficulty of dealing with Iran is accentuated by the fact that the United States must concurrently deal with the second great challenge to regional stability: the struggle against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria.<sup>1</sup> Although the Islamic State has waxed and waned over the years, the group emerged stronger than ever in 2014 when Islamic State founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi captured Mosul and declared a new Caliphate after Iraqi security forces fled the city. Within two years of its resurgence, the Islamic State has erased the border between eastern Syria and Western Iraq, established a reputation for apocalyptic ideology and savage violence, and become a destination point for jihadists worldwide. In response to the group's rapid spread, President Obama announced the United States would “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.” The Islamic State has lost almost half of the territory it conquered in Iraq and a quarter of what it controlled in Syria since its peak in 2014; it additionally faces enormous financial stress.

The greatest challenges are yet to come. Lasting peace will require more than battlefield victories in Mosul and Raqqa, and the manner in which these and other cities are liberated, as well as the identity of the liberators, will have a huge impact on their stability and the effectiveness of governance in the future. Moreover, as the physical Caliphate disintegrates, it is unlikely the Islamic State will simply disappear. The myriad previous iterations of the Islamic State suggest that the group is resilient and tactically flexible. The United States should expect the Islamic State to shift tactics from occupying territory to carrying out terrorist attacks and inflaming sectarian tensions.

An attainable and realistic strategy for defeating ISIS would aim to reduce the problem to one that is manageable by local indigenous forces in the Middle East and provide ongoing support for training and equipping partner forces, with occasional reprisal raids and strikes by U.S. special and air forces. This strategy would require, first, the elimination of the physical Caliphate, followed by an unrelenting counterterrorism campaign and a political component that supports an inclusive Iraqi government that eschews a sectarian approach to governance. The liberation of the Islamic State territory, although a daunting task, will pale in comparison to the challenge of filling the vacuum, especially since both the Islamic State and al Qaeda have shown incredible resilience surviving adverse conditions only to reemerge when circumstances are ripe for resurgence. The United States will need to maintain and manage the international coalition that it has put together to fight ISIS and continue to engage in the dexterous diplomacy needed to manage difficult relationships with Iran, Turkey, and Russia—the other

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1 The Islamic State is variously rendered as ISIS, ISIL, or DAESH (the Arabic acronym). This study will refer to it as the Islamic State or ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and Syria) but will maintain the rubrics used by various quoted sources in the citations.

powers currently engaged in the conflict—whose interference could seriously complicate or undermine U.S. objectives.

Despite the growing importance of different regional theaters in which the United States must operate, it seems almost certain that the dual challenges of Iran’s regional rise and the persistent threat of violent jihadists will continue to demand the time, attention, and resources of national security decision-makers. The Middle East presents an enormous set of difficulties for policymakers against a backdrop of long-lived conflict and turmoil that is likely to persist for a generation—or perhaps longer. The United States has historically been successful in accomplishing its strategic objectives in the region, and it can be again if it develops a clear strategy that aligns ways, means, and ends and builds up capable partners in the region to contain Iran’s ambitions and defeat violent jihadists; both powers otherwise threaten the governments of America and its partners.

# Introduction

The United States has spent a decade and a half in a long war in the Middle East, fighting a series of counterterrorism and counterinsurgency campaigns that have yielded many tactical successes, yet victory remains elusive. The inconclusive nature of these struggles has sapped both public and elite support for the venture in what is frequently characterized as “war-weariness.” Public opinion polls consistently show that a majority of Americans no longer believe that the wars in Iraq and Afghanistan were worth the effort. Moreover, the growth of domestic oil and gas production has brought the nation to the brink of energy self-sufficiency, leading some observers to question the continued importance of the Middle East, long a source of energy imports for America and its closest allies, to the United States.<sup>2</sup>

These factors help explain the desire of some U.S. political figures and policymakers to end the customary U.S. policy of shouldering the burden of providing security and stability in the Middle East. The Obama administration appeared to have shared some of these sentiments and developed a strategy of retrenchment in the region. They eschewed putting U.S. “boots on the ground” in large numbers and avoided major involvement in stabilization and reconstruction efforts in Libya, Syria, Yemen and elsewhere based upon the premise that U.S. involvement in the region resulted in more violence, disorder, and radicalization of local Arab populations. The current situation in the Middle East, however, illustrates that inaction has brought about similar results, if not worse.<sup>3</sup>

The United States is at an inflection point concerning its role in the Middle East. If U.S. policymakers pursue a traditional foreign policy of providing a framework for security and stability in the Middle East, there are pressing challenges ahead. The United States must address both the states threatening U.S. national interests—perhaps with nuclear weapons in the future—as well as the non-state actors flourishing in the growing ungoverned spaces in

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2 Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, *Oil Security 2025: U.S. National Security Policy in an Era of Domestic Oil Abundance* (Washington, DC: Securing America’s Future Energy [SAFE], 2014).

3 The best recent overview is Hal Brands, “Barack Obama and the Dilemmas of American Grand Strategy,” *The Washington Quarterly* 39, no. 4, Winter 2017.



the region. The terrorist groups that emerge from this mix threaten not only the security of the broader Middle East but also the U.S. homeland.

This report lays out a brief history of U.S. strategic involvement in the Middle East, the nature of the security challenges in the region, and the capabilities required should U.S. policy-makers decide to take on the challenges of containing hegemonic aspirants while prosecuting a vigorous counterterrorist campaign to degrade and defeat jihadist threats.

Chapter 1 provides a brief history of the U.S. strategic involvement in the region; Chapter 2 illustrates the enduring importance of the Middle Eastern region to the United States; Chapter 3 outlines the security challenges in the region posed by Iran and offers solutions for U.S. policymakers to challenge and contain Iran's bid for regional hegemony; and Chapter 4 discusses the challenges to containing the jihadist threat in the region.

**FIGURE 1: POLITICAL MAP OF THE MODERN MIDDLE EAST**



Map: United States National Geospatial-Intelligence Agency



## CHAPTER 1

# The United States and the Middle East, Post-World War II to Present

The surrender of Germany and Japan at the close of World War II precipitated the emergence of a bipolar international order dominated by two global superpowers—the United States and the Soviet Union. The pair engaged in global competition for advantage and influence for nearly half a century. Over time, the Middle East emerged as one of the most important arenas for superpower competition due to its strategic position astride three major continents and home to some of the world's most vital waterways: the Persian Gulf, Suez Canal, and Turkish Straits. The United States, for its part, was primarily focused on containing Soviet influence, securing Persian Gulf oil, and protecting the nascent state of Israel. These objectives would prove difficult to achieve in the face of the rise of Arab nationalism, two major Arab–Israeli wars, an oil embargo, the 1979 collapse of the Shah's regime in Iran, and the rise of radical interpretations of Islam in the region's political regimes. Successive U.S. administrations have understood the Middle East's enduring value and the connection between influence in the region and the security of and access to resources that were imperative for the economic health of the United States and its allies.

After the Second World War, the Marshall Plan would spur three major shifts in energy production and consumption. These changes made Middle Eastern oil reserves essential not only for European reconstruction but also for American industrialization and strengthened relations between the Middle East and the United States. First, the plan converted Europe from a coal-based to oil-based economy. Before the war, Western Europe depended on coal for over 90 percent of its energy requirements. However, the war curtailed production sharply, and Eastern Europe's oil resources, which subsequently fell under Soviet control, were no longer accessible. Petroleum and petroleum products from the Middle East—crude oil, gasoline, and diesel fuel—accounted for a substantial part of the dollar expenditures of all 17

Marshall Plan countries to aid in their reconstruction. Indeed, oil was one of the key commodities in the European Recovery program; more than 10 percent of the \$120 billion (in 2016 current dollars) in aid money was spent on this resource, more than any other commodity. Substituting oil for coal also facilitated the political objectives of America's containment strategy, as many coal miners belonged to communist-led unions.<sup>4</sup>

The second shift was that the Middle East, over time, displaced the Western Hemisphere as the main source of Europe's oil. Before 1947, Europe received 43 percent of its crude oil from the Middle East. In the first year of the Marshall Plan, it rose to 66 percent, and by 1950, as Europe became increasingly dependent on the Middle East for its oil, it reached 85 percent.<sup>5</sup> The last concurrent shift was that oil production in the Middle East had a new arbiter: the United States. U.S. foreign aid programs under the Marshall Plan, complemented by U.S. policies encouraging American oil companies to expand to the Middle East, led to the displacement of Britain as the most powerful outside influence in Middle Eastern oil production. U.S. companies quickly began dominating all parts of the oil supply and services industry from engineering and manufacturing to furnishing the equipment for oil exploration, drilling, and extraction. The realization of the immense strategic importance of the Persian Gulf emerged as the shifts created by the Marshall Plan occurred, and the connection this development established between Middle Eastern and European security continues to this day. In the mid-1950s, the Soviet Union began to emerge as the other major player in the region, and the political orientation of the resource-rich region became a growing concern to decision-makers in Washington.<sup>6</sup>

## Post-War Period and the Northern Tier Strategy

Against the backdrop of the Marshall Plan, the nascent stages of the Cold War in the Middle East were emerging. In 1946, growing Soviet expansion compelled Washington to take a clear stand on its political and military commitments in the region. The policy of creating stronger security ties with Turkey, Iran, and Pakistan was part of the larger Northern Tier strategy that emerged after the Iran crisis of 1945–1946. The Truman administration sought to shield them from Soviet influence because it considered these three non-Arab nations as an important barrier to the spread of communism throughout the region. During World War II, Iran had served as a critical transit corridor for shipping supplies to the USSR that were vital to the war effort. After the war's end, Iran requested the withdrawal of the foreign troops that had occupied the country to secure the transit route. The United States and the United Kingdom

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4 For background on the energy shifts during the Marshall Plan, see David S. Painter, *Oil and the American Century: The Political Economy of U.S. Foreign Oil Policy, 1941–1954* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986); and David S. Painter, “The Marshall Plan and Oil,” *Cold War History* 9, no. 2, 2009.

5 Edward H. Shaffer, *The United States and the Control of World Oil*, Routledge Library Editions: The Economics and Politics of Oil and Gas, vol. 12 (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2016), p. 95.

6 For the security challenges of the Gulf during the Cold War, see Charles A. Kupchan, *The Persian Gulf and the West: The Dilemmas of Security* (Boston: Allen & Unwin, 1987).

promptly acceded to this request, but the USSR procrastinated and then refused. Moreover, Moscow soon started pressuring Tehran for a joint Soviet–Iranian oil concession and began to stir up a separatist movement among the Azeri population in northeastern Iran.

The United States responded to Soviet pressure by demanding that Moscow withdraw its forces and submit its energy demands to the Iranian Majlis. Moscow eventually capitulated, but that confrontation was the first significant clash of the Cold War; it intensified Truman’s worry about Stalin’s intent to use military aggression to support Soviet expansion in the region. Iran was considered the most strategically important Northern Tier nation, and although U.S. diplomacy had apparently blocked the Soviets, the crisis inclined the Truman administration to take a harder line toward Stalin. In order to obtain military access to the Gulf and uphold the political status quo of the region, the United States began using an airfield in Saudi Arabia (that had initially been intended to resupply the allies during World War II) and British port facilities in Bahrain to host the U.S. Middle East Force.<sup>7</sup>

In 1946 Moscow also pressured the Turkish government to grant Soviet ships access to the straits connecting the Black Sea to the Mediterranean. Stalin called a conference to discuss Soviet claims, and Moscow showed its resolve on the matter by conducting naval maneuvers in the Black Sea and dispatching troops to the Balkans. Turkey, like Iran, turned to the United States for support. The United States and Great Britain both sent notes to the Soviets affirming their support for Turkey, and Truman dispatched a naval task force, including the battle-ship USS Missouri, to transport the remains of the recently deceased Turkish Ambassador in Washington to Istanbul. A reassured Turkey rejected Soviet demands, and Moscow again yielded. The consequences of Soviet pressure in these two formative Cold War crises were enormous. The results confirmed the belief of policymakers in Washington that resolve backed by an implicit threat of force was an effective formula for successful coercive diplomacy against the Soviets in the region. As one historian noted, “Soviet pressures on Iran and

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7 For the importance of the Persian Corridor in World War II, see T. H. Vail Motter, *The Persian Corridor and Aid to Russia*, United States Army in World War II series: The Middle East Theater (Washington, DC: Center of Military History, 2000, first printed in 1952). The literature on the Iran crisis of 1946 is extensive, but particularly useful studies include Gary Hess, “The Iranian Crisis of 1945–46 and the Cold War,” *Political Science Quarterly* 89, no. 1, March 1974; Richard Pfau, “Containment in Iran, 1946: The Shift to an Active Policy,” *Diplomatic History* 1, no. 4, October 1977; Eduard M. Mark, “Allied Relations in Iran, 1941–1947: The Origins of a Cold War Crisis,” *Wisconsin Magazine of History* 59, no. 1, Autumn 1975; Stephen McFarland, “A Peripheral View of the Origins of the Cold War: The Crisis in Iran, 1941–1947,” *Diplomatic History* 4, no. 4, October 1980; Natalia I. Yegorova, *The “Iran Crisis” of 1945–46: A View From Russian Archives*, Cold War International History Project Working Paper no. 15 (Washington, DC: Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, May 1996); and Louise Fawcett, “Revisiting the Iranian Crisis of 1946: How Much More Do We Know,” *Iranian Studies* 47, no. 3, March 2014. The Northern Tier policy is outlined and analyzed in Bruce Robellet Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East: Great Power Conflict and Diplomacy in Iran, Turkey, and Greece* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1980).

(especially) on Turkey led the Truman administration to designate the Near East a region so vital to American security as to be worth a world war.”<sup>8</sup>

Withdrawal of British assistance to Greece and Turkey in 1947 provided the necessary catalyst for the Truman administration to reorient American foreign policy decisively, to include implicit U.S. security guarantees to the “imperfect democracies” vulnerable to Soviet expansion. The doctrine was in sharp contrast to the previous U.S. policy that had largely avoided foreign commitments beyond the Western Hemisphere during peacetime. President Truman requested that Congress provide \$400 million worth of aid to both the Greek and Turkish governments and support the dispatch of American civilian and military personnel and equipment to the region. The United States considered Turkey to be the most powerful nation in the Eastern Mediterranean and, given its shared border with the Soviet Union, a key U.S. foothold in the region. Truman argued a Communist Turkey would undermine the stability of the Middle East, a now unacceptable scenario in light of the region’s immense strategic importance to the United States. Although the British still had major interests in the Middle East (including their base in Egypt, which was crucial to U.S. war plans for a possible conflict with the Soviets), they were reluctant to confront the USSR directly without explicit U.S. support. During this period, the United States went from being a junior partner in the defense of the Middle East to taking on an increasing share of the responsibility for providing security to the region.<sup>9</sup>

U.S. officials once again worried that Iran was vulnerable to Soviet influence after Prime Minister Mosaddeq came to power in 1951 as a staunch supporter of Iranian independence from Western interference and called for the nationalization of Iran’s oil fields. Washington feared his anti-Western rhetoric would make him sympathetic to the influence of the Communist Tudeh Party and lead Iran into the Soviet sphere. The United States eventually joined with Britain in a covert action that ousted Mosaddeq and returned the young Shah Reza Pahlavi to power. The Shah’s regime would be a key U.S. regional ally during the Cold War until the 1979 revolution installed the dictatorship of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. The regime change that U.S. and UK intelligence facilitated was a seminal moment in the history of the modern Middle East. It brought the United States another step closer to displacing Great Britain as the dominant power in the region, but it also created a persistent myth of U.S.

8 For the Turkish Straits crisis, see Eduard Mark, “The War Scare of 1946 and Its Consequences,” *Diplomatic History* 21, no. 3, Summer 1997; Süleyman Seydi, “Making a Cold War in the Near East: Turkey and the Origins of the Cold War, 1945–1947,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 17, no. 1, 2006; Melvyn P. Leffler, “Strategy, Diplomacy, and the Cold War: The United States, Turkey, and NATO, 1945–1952,” *Journal of American History* 71, no. 4, March 1985; and Kuniholm, *The Origins of the Cold War in the Near East*. For a more charitable view of Soviet motivations Geoffrey Roberts, “Moscow’s Cold War on the Periphery: Soviet Policy in Greece, Iran, and Turkey, 1943–1948,” *Journal of Contemporary History* 46, no. 1, January 2011; and Anthony R. DeLuca, “Soviet-American Politics and the Turkish Straits,” *Political Science Quarterly* 92, no. 3, Autumn 1977.

9 Walter LaFeber, *America, Russia and the Cold War, 1945–2006*, 10<sup>th</sup> ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill Education, 2006), p. 64. For U.S. basing needs in the Middle East, see Michael J. Cohen, *Fighting World War Three from the Middle East: Allied Contingency Plans, 1945–1954* (London and Portland: Frank Cass, 1997). For the broader context of U.S. national strategy and basing, see Melvyn P. Leffler, “The American Conception of National Security and the Beginnings of the Cold War, 1945–1948,” *American Historical Review* 89, no. 2, April 1984.

guilt for imposing a despotic regime on the Iranian people. Paradoxically, this view denies the Iranian people, particularly the merchant class and clerics who supported the Shah's return, agency in their own history. As recent scholarship has demonstrated, Iranians were the main actors in this drama, and U.S. and UK intelligence services played merely a supporting role.<sup>10</sup>

## British Retreat and American Ascendancy in the Middle East

The U.S. assumption of a preeminent role in Iran after 1953 marked the beginning of Britain's long retreat from the Middle East that extended over the better part of two decades and was punctuated by acute crises in Egypt (Suez), Jordan (1958), and Kuwait (1961) before the ultimate British reached the decision to cede the prime security role in the region to the United States in the late 1960s.

Along the way, the United States and the United Kingdom passed through one of the most traumatic events in the history of the "special relationship" between the two countries—the Suez crisis of 1956. After World War II, both countries saw Egypt as an ideal location for bases from which to mount military operations against the Soviet Union should deterrence fail. The United Kingdom became enmeshed in a difficult negotiation with the government of pan-Arab nationalist Gamal Abdel Nasser over base rights and access.

Although Washington was initially supportive of Britain, it became increasingly concerned that the United States, in an era of decolonization and rising nationalism in the Third World, would be tarred with the stigma of colonialism in the region. When the Anglo–Egyptian crisis reached a fever pitch over the nationalization of the Suez Canal in 1956, the Eisenhower administration pulled the rug out from under the British, the French (who were concerned about rising Arab nationalism in Algeria and like the U.K. were parties to the Canal regime), and the Israelis (who were attempting to seize the Canal and eliminate Nasser and his regime). The United States undermined the British pound on currency markets and threatened to embargo oil shipments to the UK and France, whose economies were still recovering from the ravages of World War II.

The policies the United States was pursuing were contradictory; Washington was attempting to both limit British and French influence in the region while erecting a policy of containment on the back of Britain's residual military presence. The Suez episode is sometimes seen as a far-sighted moment in American diplomacy, but, in fact, it was a disastrous misstep.

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<sup>10</sup> The literature on the 1953 coup in Iran is as voluminous as it is tendentious. The best accounts are Ray Takeyh, "What Really Happened in Iran: The CIA, the Ouster of Mosaddeq, and the Restoration of the Shah," *Foreign Affairs* 93, no. 4, July/August 2014; Francis J. Gavin, "Politics, Power, and U.S. Policy in Iran, 1950–1953," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 1, no. 1, Winter 1999; and Darioush Bayandor, *Iran and the CIA: The Fall of Mosaddeq Revisited* (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 2010). For interpretations that rely too heavily on CIA sources, which necessarily exaggerate the American role, see Stephen Kinzer, *All the Shah's Men: An American Coup and the Roots of Middle East Terror*, 2<sup>nd</sup> ed. (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, 2008); and, a more scholarly account, Mark J. Gasiorowski, "The 1953 *Coup d'États* in Iran," *International Journal of Middle East Studies* 19, no. 3, August 1987.

Henry Kissinger observed that the United States “did not understand how important it was for its policy that two close North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) allies be permitted to adjust to the new circumstances without undermining their image of themselves as Great Powers.” U.S. leaders, he writes “opted for a chance to win over the radical nationalists, first by dissociating themselves from Great Britain and France diplomatically, later by publicly opposing them and demonstrating the limits of their capacity to shape Middle East events—in other words, bringing home to them the end of their roles as Great Powers.” The half-life of gratitude for interceding in this manner, however, was short-lived in Egypt and elsewhere in the region. As Kissinger acerbically notes, “Within a few months of the Suez crisis, America was no better off among the Nonaligned than Great Britain. What these nations remembered most about the Suez crisis was not America’s support of Nasser but that Nasser had achieved major successes by his dexterity at playing the superpowers off against each other.” The British role in the Levant had been diminished, forcing the United States to shoulder the major responsibility for security in the region as demonstrated by the 1958 crises in Lebanon and Jordan. Eventually President Eisenhower came to see Suez as his worst mistake in office—a conclusion that would have a major impact on his Vice President, Richard Nixon, when he ascended to the presidency a little more than a decade later.<sup>11</sup>

In the late 1950s and early 1960s, Great Britain was also undergoing major domestic changes. The period witnessed both a slowdown in economic growth, downward pressure on the pound sterling, and an ongoing political debate about increasing the extent of the welfare state, all which effectively capped defense spending. After the 1966 Defense Review, Britain chose to prioritize European defense. The shift was significant; Britain had exercised almost unencumbered influence over the southern coast of the Persian Gulf since the 19<sup>th</sup> century. When Prime Minister Harold Wilson’s government announced the conclusions of its Defense Review, there was no immediate threat in the Persian Gulf. Moreover, the United States and Gulf States strongly opposed the decision since the former was not looking for new burdens to take on and the latter had long sheltered under the protection of a British defense umbrella. The 1967 announcement that Britain would no longer be responsible for security East of Suez after 1971 effectively marked an end to Britain’s influence in the region, the beginning of America’s

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11 On the basing issues, see Michael J. Cohen, “From ‘Cold’ to ‘Hot’ War: Allied Strategic and Military Interests in the Middle East after the Second World War,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 5, 2007. The most comprehensive study of the Suez Crisis is Keith Kyle, *Suez: Britain’s End of Empire in the Middle East*, revised ed. (London: I.B. Tauris, 2011). Kissinger’s critique of U.S. diplomacy is in Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), pp. 525–533. For a conventional account that looks at Suez in a positive light, see Donald Neff, *Warriors at Suez: Eisenhower Takes America into the Middle East* (New York: Linden Press/Simon and Schuster, 1981); and a more recent account in the same vein, David A. Nichols, *Eisenhower 1956: The President’s Year of Crisis—Suez and the Brink of War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2011). For a brilliant reconstruction of Eisenhower and Dulles’s thinking that reveals their recognition of the wrong-headedness of U.S. policy at Suez, see Michael Doran, *Ike’s Gamble: America’s Rise to Dominance in the Middle East* (New York: Free Press, 2016).



ascendancy, and the eventual emergence of Bahrain, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates as independent Gulf States.<sup>12</sup>

## The Nixon Doctrine and the Twin Pillars Strategy

The British withdrawal from East of Suez, along with the 1967 war between Israel and its Arab neighbors, transformed U.S. security policy in the Middle East. The U.S. Navy was now more frequently patrolling the Persian Gulf, and Washington increasingly saw the Middle East as an area of vital U.S. interest, but the cross-pressures to reduce U.S. global involvement as a consequence of the Vietnam War weighed heavily on U.S. policymakers. Early in his term, President Richard Nixon articulated a new strategy that put the onus on American allies and partners to bear a greater burden in providing for their own defense. Some powers would be essentially deputized to provide regional security, while the United States supplied arms, equipment, and training in addition to the benefit of an implicit U.S. security guarantee. The Nixon Doctrine paved the way for a significant increase in U.S. military aid to allies in the Middle East, specifically the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and Iran, which had already been characterized during the Johnson administration as the “twin pillars” of regional stability. The United States had maintained a small naval force in the Gulf off the coast of Bahrain since World War II but undertook no other formal security commitments to fill the gap created by the British departure; instead it focused its energies on building up local militaries. Total arms transfers from the United States to Iran alone increased over 500 percent from 1970 to 1972, and sales to Saudi Arabia increased twentyfold in the same time period. Over the next decade, the United States committed 22 billion dollars in arms sales to Iran and 35 billion dollars to Saudi Arabia. Both countries became increasingly dependent on American security assurances and competed for preeminence in the region by rapidly expanding their respective militaries.<sup>13</sup>

The United States continued providing security, arms, and aid to Middle Eastern countries, but the dynamic of that relationship shifted after the 1973 oil embargo. The Arab oil embargo

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12 The process of the United States replacing the UK as the primary power in the Gulf is covered in Nigel John Ashton, “A Microcosm of Decline: British Loss of Nerve and Military Intervention in Jordan and Kuwait, 1958 and 1961,” *The Historical Journal* 40, no. 4, December 1997; Tore Tingvold Petersen, “Crossing the Rubicon? Britain’s Withdrawal from the Middle East, 1964–1968: A Bibliographical Review,” *The International History Review* 22, no. 2, June 2000; Simon C. Smith, “Power Transferred? Britain, the United States, and the Gulf, 1956–71,” *Contemporary British History* 21, no. 1, 2007; Simon C. Smith, “Britain’s Decision to Withdraw from the Persian Gulf: A Pattern Not a Puzzle,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 44, no. 2, December 2015; W. T. Fain, “John F. Kennedy and Harold Macmillan: Managing the ‘Special Relationship’ in the Persian Gulf Region, 1961–63,” *Middle Eastern Studies* 38, no. 4, 2002; F. Gregory Gause, III, “British and American Policies in the Persian Gulf, 1968–1973,” *Review of International Studies* 11, no. 4, October 1985; John Dumbrell, “The Johnson Administration and the British Labour Government: Vietnam, the Pound and East of Suez,” *Journal of American Studies* 30, no. 2, August 1996; and Wm. Roger Louis, “The British Withdrawal from the Gulf, 1967–71,” *The Journal of Imperial and Commonwealth History* 31, no. 1, 2003.

13 For the Nixon Doctrine, see Jeffrey Kimball, “The Nixon Doctrine: A Saga of Misunderstanding,” *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36, no. 1, March 2006. Details over the arms transfers and sale to the Gulf during this time is detailed in Faisal bin Salman al-Saud, *Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Gulf: Power Politics in Transition* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2003). See also Michael Palmer, *Guardians of the Gulf: A History of America’s Expanding Role in the Persian Gulf, 1833–1992* (New York: Free Press, 1992); and Steve A. Yetiv, *The Absence of Grand Strategy: The United States in the Persian Gulf, 1972–2005* (Baltimore, MD: Johns Hopkins University Press: 2008).

was a direct response to American support for and resupply of Israel during the Yom Kippur War. The use of oil as an economic and political weapon underscored the vulnerability of the United States and its allies to supply shortages and price hikes. The tripling of world oil prices dealt an especially painful blow to Europe's economy and boosted skyrocketing inflation. The embargo and contemporaneous nationalization of oil and gas resources drastically changed the terms of the relationship between the U.S. government and regional powers, but that shift did not prevent U.S. companies and the U.S. government from developing new ties with Middle Eastern regimes. The new petrodollar windfall flowing into Middle Eastern coffers was largely reinvested in the West, providing new linkages between the United States and leaders in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Iran, and other Gulf countries. The windfall also provided the means to finance growing arms sales to the region from the United States and other Western powers. Around this time, the Nixon administration began to favor one of the twin pillars, Iran, slightly over the other, Saudi Arabia. In response to increased Soviet patronage of the revolutionary regime in Iraq and due to the Shah's long-standing efforts to make Iran the pre-eminent power of the Gulf, the administration provided a so-called blank check to the Shah, allowing him to buy weapons that were not available to other customers. Whether unrestricted arms sales and the use of Iran as a proxy was a wise policy was a source of controversy at the time and remains a matter of contentious debate to this day.<sup>14</sup>

Western vulnerability and dependence on Middle Eastern oil became apparent once more when the Iranian revolution disrupted world energy markets at the end of the decade. The unexpected fall of the Shah was the first in a series of events at the end of the 1970s that caused a major shift in Gulf relations and deepened anxieties over Western access to Middle Eastern oil. The Iranian revolution was also the first indicator of the rise of Islamic fundamentalism, a phenomenon Laurence Freedman has called the second wave of post-colonial radicalism (the first wave consisting of Nasserist pan-Arab nationalism). The Saudi pillar was severely shaken as well when Wahhabi extremists seized the Grand Mosque in Mecca in November 1979, and a Shiite revolt in the oil-rich Al-Hasa region of the country broke out the following month. The instability in Saudi Arabia illustrated that extremist Islam was not uniquely a Shia phenomenon limited to Iran but that it could spread throughout the Arabian Peninsula. Moreover, the almost simultaneous sacking of the U.S. Embassy in Islamabad, carried out spontaneously by crowds that blamed the United States for the attack on the Grand Mosque, demonstrated the ability of false ideas to travel quickly in the emerging information age. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan introduced a dimension of Great Power politics to

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14 Stephen McGlinchey, "Richard Nixon's Road to Tehran: The Making of the U.S.–Iran Arms Agreement of May 1972," *Diplomatic History* 37, no. 4, 2013; Stephen McGlinchey and Andrew Moran, "Beyond the Blank Cheque: Arming Iran during the Ford Administration," *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 27, no. 3, 2016; and Roham Alvandi, "Nixon, Kissinger, and the Shah: The Origins of Iranian Primacy in the Persian Gulf," *Diplomatic History* 36, no. 2, April 2012. See, for instance, the contemporaneous article by Theodore H. Moran, "Iranian Defense Expenditures and the Social Crisis," *International Security* 3, no. 3, Winter 1978/1979; as well as two Congressional Committee reports, *United States Arms Sales to the Persian Gulf, Report of A Study Mission to Iran, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia, May 22–31 1975, Pursuant to H.R. 315* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, December 1975); and *U.S. Military Sales to Iran: A Staff Report to the Subcommittee on Foreign Assistance of the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate* (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, July 1976).



the region's simmering conflicts and strengthened U.S. security relationships with the Middle Eastern countries that feared a Soviet drive to the Persian Gulf. The U.S. response, while ultimately successful in forcing the Soviet Union to withdraw from Afghanistan, had the unintended result of convincing the Islamic fundamentalists who served as proxies that they were up to the task of militarily defeating a superpower.<sup>15</sup>

The cumulative effect of the momentous events of 1979 and 1980 forced the United States to articulate clearly its interests in the Persian Gulf region and publicly declare its willingness to use military force to protect them. Although the United States continued to rely on local allies to preserve regional order and ensure access to its energy resources, Washington reorganized and equipped its forces to intervene rapidly if necessary to safeguard U.S. interests. This included increasing its access to facilities and pre-positioning equipment in the region. The necessity for a rapid intervention capability was underscored by the failed effort to rescue U.S. hostages held in Tehran by Iranian extremist elements in 1980.

## The Carter Doctrine

President Jimmy Carter, in his 1980 State of the Union message, declared: "Let our position be absolutely clear: An attempt by any outside force to gain control of the Persian Gulf region will be regarded as an assault on the vital interests of the United States of America, and such an assault will be repelled by any means necessary, including military force."<sup>16</sup> Although Carter's emphasis was on the unacceptability of any outside power controlling the vital Persian Gulf waterways, it became increasingly clear that the United States would not tolerate the domination of those waters by a hostile local power—either Iran or Iraq—as well. Washington continued to encourage and oversee the modernization of the Saudi military and enhance cooperation between the other Gulf States, now organized into the Gulf Cooperation Council, but the Carter Doctrine's broader strategic vision for the region signaled a new era of direct U.S. military intervention in the Persian Gulf.<sup>17</sup>

As these conflicts brewed, another one surfaced: an increasingly aggressive Iraq led by Saddam Hussein. With aspirations for regional dominance, Saddam took advantage of the Iranian hostage crisis and Tehran's provocations to launch the Iran–Iraq War in late 1980. For U.S. policymakers, the Iraqi intervention raised the possibility that the Ayatollah's regime would seek to end the hostage crisis and concentrate instead on the existential threat Iraq posed to the nation. Indeed, some believed that the Carter administration had been somehow complicit in the Iraqi attack and provided a "green light" to Baghdad. With the advantage of

15 Lawrence Freedman, *A Choice of Enemies: America Confronts the Middle East* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2008).

16 The Carter Doctrine Speech can be found at <https://www.jimmycarterlibrary.gov/documents/speeches/su80jec.phtml>.

17 William E. Odom, "The Cold War Origins of U.S. Central Command," *Journal of Cold War Studies* 8, no. 2, 2006; Olav Njølstad, "Shifting Priorities: The Persian Gulf in US Strategic Planning in the Carter Years," *Cold War History* 4, no. 3, 2004; and James Mann, *Rise of the Vulcans: The History of Bush's War Cabinet* (New York: Penguin Books, 2004) pp. 79–90. The next several paragraphs draw on the material in these careful studies of U.S. policy toward the Gulf.

hindsight and access to captured Iraqi records, it is now possible to dismiss such speculation. The Carter administration did, however, seek to engage Saddam's regime and laid the basis for the Reagan administration's subsequent tilt to Iraq. The bloody conflict was one of the longest wars of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and would ultimately cost over a million lives.<sup>18</sup>

U.S. strategy and policy in the region had come to rely on special relationships rather than formal alliances with partners like Israel; moderate Arab states such as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Jordan; and the Shah's Iran. The collapse of the Shah's regime and the emergence of Islamic fundamentalism brought about a fundamental rethinking of U.S. strategy. American policymakers concluded that:

- Management of the Arab–Israeli dispute was seen as a *sine qua non* for U.S. efforts to contain Soviet ambitions in the region, and Egypt was key to the effort.
- Saudi Arabia alone lacked the will and capacity to bear all the weight of U.S. hopes for regional security. This precipitated the organizational changes in U.S. force posture in the region noted above.
- The emergence of Iraq and its conflict with Iran made it clear that the Soviet Union was not the only challenge to regional stability that the United States would need to manage in the coming years.

The language of the Carter Doctrine was specifically meant to deter the Soviet Union from intervening in the Gulf, but the United States had only maintained a limited military presence in the Middle East up until that point. The administration asked Congress for a general increase in the top line of the defense budget (in effect initiating the Carter-Reagan defense buildup); sought to expand the U.S. naval presence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean; and created the Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force (RDJTF), the predecessor to U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM), to oversee it all.

## Maintaining the Balance of Power between Iran and Iraq

The hostage crisis and subsequent shifts in regional foreign policy concerns, including the designation of Iran as a “state sponsor of terrorism” in 1984 and the worry that Iran would attempt to block U.S. and Western access to regional energy supplies, prompted the United States to adopt a policy of tilting toward Iraq during the war. Although the war was primarily a brutal land conflict between the two countries, the threat to shipping via the Gulf attracted

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18 Our knowledge of this period has been enriched by scholarship based on the Iraqi records captured during Operation Iraqi Freedom, particularly that of Kevin Woods, David Palkki, and Hal Brands. See, for example, Hal Brands, “Before the Tilt: The Carter Administration Engages Saddam Hussein,” *Diplomacy & Statecraft* 26, no. 1, 2015; Hal Brands, “Saddam Hussein, the United States, and the Invasion of Iran: Was There a Green Light?” *Cold War History* 12, no. 2, 2012; Hal Brands, “Why Did Saddam Invade Iran? New Evidence on Motives, Complexity, and the Israel Factor,” *Journal of Military History* 75, no. 3, July 2011; Williamson Murray and Kevin M. Woods, *The Iran–Iraq War: A Military and Strategic History* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 2014); and Pierre Razoux (Nicholas Elliott, trans.), *The Iran–Iraq War* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015).

a disproportionate amount of international attention because of its potential impact. These concerns came to a head in the late 1980s as a result of the “Tanker War.” In order to protect Kuwaiti and other shipping through the Gulf, the United States led an international effort to “reflag” much of the shipping and convoy it safely through the chokepoints of the Gulf. Tensions escalated after an anti-ship mine hit the USS Samuel B Roberts in April 1988. In retaliation, the U.S. Navy undertook its largest engagement since the end of World War II, Operation Praying Mantis, which sank half of the Iranian Navy and resulted in substantial damage to a number of Iranian oil platforms.<sup>19</sup>

The war devastated both Iraq and Iran, but the growing Iranian narrative of the Islamic Republic as a beleaguered underdog being persecuted by the West and its Sunni Arab neighbors reinforced the grievances that had fueled the revolution in 1979, giving the regime enduring legitimacy, especially in the eyes of the Iranians leading the country today. This helps to explain the deep anti-Americanism and suspicion toward the West that persists today among the clerical elite and the generation of war veterans populating the senior reaches of the regime.<sup>20</sup>

## Operations Desert Storm and Desert Shield

Up until the late 1980s, possible Soviet aggression against Iran was the most significant threat facing the United States in the Middle East. With the collapse of the Soviet Union and the end of the Iran–Iraq War, Saddam Hussein’s Iraqi regime emerged as the biggest threat to regional stability. Saddam’s increasingly bellicose pronouncements in 1990 were the first indication that Iraq, rather than becoming a more moderate player and contributing to regional stability as some had hoped, would become a radical element, a challenging one for the United States and Iraq’s neighbors to manage. The Iraqi invasion of Kuwait on August 2, 1990 confirmed this. Saddam swiftly invaded his neighbor, assumed control of Kuwait City, and installed a puppet government. Iraqi troops stationed in occupied Kuwait were capable of striking into Saudi Arabia. A successful Iraqi invasion of the Kingdom would have secured 60 percent of the world’s oil reserves under Iraq’s control. Although U.S. policymakers had been focused on the Soviet threat to the Gulf, they now turned their attention to the danger that Iraq’s occupation of Kuwait and threats to Saudi Arabia posed to the region. The United States responded by assembling an international coalition of more than 30 nations to expel Iraqi forces from Kuwait. CENTCOM commanded the U.S. contribution of more than 532,000

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19 For the U.S. “tilt” to Iraq, see Bruce W. Jentleson, *With Friends Like These: Reagan, Bush, and Saddam, 1982–1990* (New York: W.W. Norton, 1994). for Operation Praying Mantis, see Craig L. Symonds, *Decision at Sea: Five Naval Battles that Shaped American History* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2005) pp. 263–320; and David B. Crist, *Gulf of Conflict: A History of U.S.-Iranian Confrontation at Sea*, Policy Focus # 95 (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, June 2009), pp. 1–10.

20 Michael Axworthy, *Revolutionary Iran: A History of the Islamic Republic* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2013), pp. 293–295; and Ray Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2009), pp. 81–110.

military personnel to the coalition armed forces, which totaled at least 737,000.<sup>21</sup> It was the largest U.S. force deployment in the Middle East in history and the largest and most significant use of U.S. military force since Vietnam. After a lengthy air campaign and 100 hours of ground operations, Iraqi forces were driven from Kuwait, and the ruling family was restored. Although Saddam's regime seemed to be teetering, he ultimately survived and would continue to bedevil the security of the region for another decade.<sup>22</sup>

## Dual Containment

In the wake of the Gulf War, the United States abandoned the effort to maintain a balance of power between Iran and Iraq but developed a strategy of dual containment to blunt the danger to U.S. interests and regional stability. Iran was a revolutionary state that continued to support terrorism, oppose the Arab–Israeli peace process violently through its proxy Hezbollah, and abuse human rights egregiously. It also showed signs of pursuing the development of nuclear power capabilities, raising the specter of nuclear proliferation. The Saddam regime brutally repressed its Kurdish and Shia populations and continued to nurse its ambitions for nuclear weapons and regional hegemony.

The new U.S. policy toward the region, announced in May 1993 by National Security Council official Martin Indyk, stated that:

The Clinton administration's policy of "dual containment" of Iraq and Iran derives in the first instance from an assessment that the current Iraqi and Iranian regimes are both hostile to American interests in the region. Accordingly, we do not accept the argument that we should continue the old balance of power game, building up one to balance the other. We reject that approach not only because its bankruptcy was demonstrated in Iraq's invasion of Kuwait. We reject it because of a clear-headed assessment of the antagonism that both regimes harbor toward the United States and its allies in the region. And we reject it because we don't need to rely on one to balance the other.

The dual containment strategy initially seemed to satisfy the other Gulf States; Saudi Arabia and Kuwait were primarily concerned about Iraq, whereas the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, and Bahrain viewed the Islamic Republic as the greater threat. U.S. containment against Iran included sanctions, embargos, and limitations on transfer of sensitive technologies—measures that would strain Iran's economy and limit its ability to fund offensive capabilities and destabilizing overseas activities. In light of its recent invasion of Kuwait, the measures that the United States took against Iraq were far more active than those against Iran. These

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21 Dakota L. Wood, ed., *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength: Assessing America's Ability to Provide for the Common Defense* (Washington, DC: The Heritage Foundation, 2015).

22 Lawrence Freedman and Efraim Karsh, *The Gulf Conflict, 1990–1991: Diplomacy and War in the New World Order* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1993). The thinking of U.S. policymakers is well laid out in George Bush and Brent Scowcroft, *A World Transformed* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1998), pp. 302–492. The issue of war termination and its strategic consequences are covered in Thomas G. Mahnken, "A Squandered Opportunity? The Decision to End the Gulf War," in Andrew J. Bacevich and Efraim Inbar, eds., *The Gulf War of 1991 Reconsidered* (Abingdon and New York: Routledge, 2003).

steps included no-fly zones over the northern and southern parts of Iraq (to protect local populations from Saddam's brutality), the inspection regime to control Iraq's appetite for weapons of mass destruction (WMD), and economic sanctions (although some were eased over time as part of the United Nation's Oil for Food Program to minimize the suffering of the Iraqi people).

Although dual containment had some success in checking Iraq, efforts to maintain both sanctions on Iraq and inspections of its WMD programs became increasingly politically costly for the Clinton administration as international support waned over time. Iran, for its part, continued to withstand a range of sanctions imposed by the U.S. Congress. Dual containment was not as successful as it might have been since U.S. unilateral sanctions did not lead to parallel efforts by U.S. partners and allies. One scholar noted: "While the United States sought the containment of both states, in effect, it pursued two separate policies simultaneously—a fact that became more obvious as Clinton, in his second term, sought to mend fences with Iran while Washington's attitude toward Saddam Hussein's Iraq remained consistently hostile."<sup>23</sup>

Confrontations with Saddam's regime continued throughout the 1990s due to Iraq's violations of the 1991 Gulf War ceasefire, failure to cooperate with UN arms inspectors to verify the destruction of its WMD, and continued support for terrorism. The Bush administration's reduced tolerance for risk after 9/11 ultimately led to the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. During the invasion, U.S. forces reached nearly 150,000 and were joined by military personnel from coalition forces. The major combat phase of the operation rapidly defeated the Iraqi military and decapitated the Baath regime, but victory proved elusive. Saddam was on the run for almost a year before he was captured. Iraqi military forces melted away, but irregular forces, the Fedayeen Saddam, fought more vigorously than anticipated and seemingly created the basis for the development of a more prolonged insurgency.<sup>24</sup>

The intervention in Iraq and the elimination of the Baath regime set off a series of consequential changes that continue to reverberate through the region. The Kurdish region that had already enjoyed a measure of independence from Baghdad's authority before 2003 became even more self-sufficient. More important in the short run, however, was the introduction of elections and a more pluralistic political system, leading to the emergence of Shia-dominated governments that were more reflective of the demographic composition of Iraq. This, in turn, created a feeling of disenfranchisement on the part of the Sunni Arab minority that fueled an ongoing insurgency. The rise to power of Shia-dominated political parties also led to an

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23 Martin Indyk, "The Clinton Administration's Approach to the Middle East," Washington Institution for Near East Policy Conference Report, Soref Symposium, May 1993; Keith Smith, "Realist Foreign Policy Analysis with a Twist: The Persian Gulf Security Complex and the Rise and Fall of Dual Containment," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 3, February 2016; Alex Edwards, "Dual Containment" *Policy in the Persian Gulf: The USA, Iran, and Iraq, 1991–2000* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014), pp. 53–76, quotation on p. 75; and Ray Takeyh and Suzanne Maloney, "The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6, November 2011.

24 The best accounts are Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *Cobra II: The Inside Story of the Invasion and Occupation of Iraq* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2006); and Michael R. Gordon and Bernard E. Trainor, *The Endgame: The Inside Story of the Struggle for Iraq, from George W. Bush to Barack Obama* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2012).

increase in Iranian political influence in Iraq; many of the leading Shia political figures had spent their exile in Iran or had ties to elements of the Iranian regime.

The insurgency was also intertwined with the rise of al Qaeda in Iraq, a terrorist franchise that sought to expel the U.S. military from Iraq and spark a sectarian war between Sunni and Shia Arabs. Although there had been a fear of internecine strife before the U.S. intervention, inter-ethnic relations remained relatively stable for a few years after the initial U.S. invasion. In early 2006, however, a terrorist attack in Samarra against a Shia shrine set in motion a spiral of sectarian violence that threatened a full-scale civil war. The attack was particularly well-timed from the terrorist's point of view since it took place while the Iraqi political class was struggling to reach agreement on a new governing coalition following the nation-wide elections in December 2005. Without a functioning government and perceiving a rising threat after the February 2006 Mosque bombing, several Shia militias emerged to provide protection for their local communities. Conditions deteriorated through the summer and fall, ultimately prompting a policy review inside the U.S. government and a decision to change the political-military strategy that had been guiding U.S. policy.

Before the fall of 2006, the United States had been attempting to train Iraqi security forces and transition the responsibility for security in various parts of Iraq to the Iraqis in the hope that U.S. forces could drawdown. The fall 2006 policy review and subsequent decisions by President Bush called instead for a fully resourced counterinsurgency effort that would both "surge" increased numbers of U.S. forces in Iraq but, more importantly, change their mission from "train and transition" to working jointly with Iraqi security forces to provide population security. After an initial increase in levels of violence, the new strategy began to successfully suppress the insurgency, and levels of violence were greatly reduced when a new U.S. administration inherited the issue in 2009.<sup>25</sup>

The Obama administration operated under a Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) negotiated by the Bush administration. After desultory discussions with the Iraqi government, it decided to complete the withdrawal of U.S. forces that the SOFA required. In December 2011, the United States officially completed its withdrawal of troops. The rise of the terrorist Islamic State and the collapse of Iraqi security forces, however, propelled the United States back into Iraq in 2014. In 2015, approximately 35,000 U.S. military personnel were operating in 22 countries in the Middle East, almost 5,000 of whom were serving in Iraq.<sup>26</sup>

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25 For the surge decision, see Peter D. Feaver, "The Right to Be Right: Civil-Military Relations and the Iraq Surge Decision," *International Security* 35, no. 4, Spring 2011. For the success of the surge in reducing violence, see Stephen Biddle, Jeffrey A. Friedman, and Jacob N. Shapiro, "Testing the Surge: Why Did Violence Decline in Iraq in 2007?" *International Security* 37, no. 1, Summer 2012; and Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame*.

26 Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame*; Emma Sky, *The Unraveling: High Hopes and Missed Opportunities in Iraq* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2015); David Kilcullen, *Blood Year: The Unraveling of Western Counterterrorism* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2016); and Wood, *2015 Index of U.S. Military Strength*.



## Conclusion

The initial post-Cold War era saw a Middle East that gave rise to periodic concerns over regional order but was a notably stable, secure, state-centered region. Israel was the most powerful local state and sole (unofficially) nuclear power; Turkey had a pro-West tilt; both Iran and Iraq were aggressive but relatively contained; and Jordan and Egypt had West-friendly regimes. The September 11, 2001 attacks, however, demonstrated that the apparent stability was largely illusory. The deficits in democracy, public education levels, and socially progressive policy that had afflicted the region for many years had rendered it an economic and cultural backwater, immune to many of the positive results of increasing globalization. Dominated by authoritarian regimes that were less stable than they appeared, the region was a seething cauldron of poverty, rapid population growth, and radicalization, with Islamism as virtually the only option for voicing opposition to the prevailing political and social order.<sup>27</sup>

The post-2001 U.S. military operations in the region, the toppling of the Taliban's regime in Afghanistan, and the ouster of the Baath regime in Iraq fundamentally altered the region's balance of forces. First, the removal of Saddam Hussein provided Iran with immense geopolitical benefits. The disestablishment of the Sunni-dominated Baath Party government dramatically increased Iran's political standing in Iraqi politics; Shia political parties and movements became an ascendant force, commensurate with their demographic majority. Second, the establishment of a more pluralistic yet disorderly democratic political regime in Iraq began to have broader regional consequences. It appears to have sparked the "Cedar Revolution" in Lebanon in 2005, which prompted the withdrawal of Syria from Lebanon and perhaps influenced Iranians to take to the streets during the "Green Revolution" in response to reports of serious election tampering by the regime in June 2009. Third, the waxing and waning of jihadism has closely followed the spread of instability throughout the region. The rise of al Qaeda in Iraq, a movement led by Jordanian Islamic extremist Abu-Musab al-Zarqawi, was defeated in 2007–2009 largely as a result of the revised counterinsurgency tactics used by U.S. forces during the surge. After the United States had largely pulled its forces from the region in 2011, popular rebellions in Syria, Libya, Yemen, and elsewhere created ungoverned spaces, and the Islamic State was able to emerge from the ashes of al Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) and create a proto-state in parts of Syria and northern Iraq. The disarray in the region created by the "Arab Spring" that began with the uprising in Tunisia in 2011 also provided an opportunity for Iran to pursue regional hegemony more aggressively by using Shia and other proxies around the region to extend its influence and undermine the Sunni political regimes in both the Gulf and the Levant.

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27 United Nations Development Programme (UNDP), Arab Fund for Economic and Social Development, *Arab Human Development Report: Creating Opportunities for Future Generations* (New York: UNDP, 2002). The relative stability of the regimes was a staple of the conventional wisdom among political scientists. See Eva Bellin, "The Robustness of Authoritarianism in the Middle East: Exceptionalism in Comparative Perspective," *Comparative Politics* 36, no. 2, January 2004; and James T. Quinnivan, "Coups-Proofing: Its Practice and Consequences in the Middle East," *International Security* 24, no. 2, Fall 1999. Like so much conventional wisdom, these nostrums were true until they weren't.

Today, after years of illicit efforts to develop a nuclear capability, and despite the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in 2015, Iran is a nuclear threshold state with hegemonic aspirations. Turkey, for its part, has become an unreliable NATO ally under the leadership of President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's Islamist Justice and Development Party. Today Ankara finds its policies more in alignment with Russia and Iran than its putative allies in NATO. Syria, dependent on Iran, Hezbollah, and increasingly Russia, has descended into a five-year civil war. That conflict threatens the stability of Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. Egypt, once the anchor of the U.S. position in the Arab world, is under severe economic strain and has undergone two major revolutions in three years. Moreover, the authoritarian government in Cairo struggles to suppress an ongoing insurgency in the Sinai. Paradoxically its brutal effort to suppress the Muslim Brotherhood may be stoking more jihadism in the long run.

The United States has been the key outside player maintaining stability in the region since the British withdrew in the late 1960s. In the wake of the American interventions in Afghanistan and Iraq, it is increasingly an open question whether the American public and policymaking elites are willing to continue playing that role. The Obama administration continued U.S. involvement at lower levels than his predecessors, believing that the United States overinvested in the region and that other parts of the world such as East Asia were more important to U.S. interests in the long run.<sup>28</sup>

Receding American involvement has coincided with the return of great power competition in the Middle East as Russia projects military power in Syria and establishes itself as a political arbiter more broadly. This has effectively ended the post-Cold War period in which the United States seemed able to project military power and political influence in the region with very few constraints. At the end of the Cold War, the United States, in the absence of a great power rival, enjoyed unprecedented influence and freedom of action in the region. Russia and China were largely preoccupied with internal economic and political developments—Russia was moving from a command economy to private enterprise, and China was undergoing market economic reforms. In the absence of serious competitors, the United States, for its part, was largely focused on resolving the Palestinian–Israeli dispute; preserving a balance in the Gulf; and, after 9/11, rooting out terrorist groups and destroying their support networks.

Today, revisionist powers Russia and China have begun to exert increased influence in the region. President Putin wants to secure a long-time Russian client—the Bashar al-Assad regime—in power, as well as maintain access to Russia's naval base in Tartus. Thwarting U.S. influence and promoting arms exports are also important Russian goals for the region. Russia has forged a functional division of labor with Iran, which has supported the Alawite-based Assad regime for some 30 years. Their informal alliance has relied on Russian air and naval

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28 Derek Chollet, *The Long Game: How Obama Defied Washington and Redefined America's Role in the World* (New York: PublicAffairs, 2016). President Obama's views in his own words are contained in Jeffrey Goldberg, "The Obama Doctrine," *The Atlantic*, April 2016, available at <http://www.theatlantic.com/magazine/archive/2016/04/the-obama-doctrine/471525/>. For a less charitable and more convincing assessment of the Obama strategy, see Colin Dueck, *The Obama Doctrine: American Grand Strategy Today* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015).



forces and Iranian ground forces to shore up the Damascus regime. For China, securing long-term access to energy resources appears to be a major motivation, since it receives about 60 percent of its oil from the region and understands that instability there threatens access to this resource. President Xi has also announced his New Silk Road plan that will create a series of commercial links between China and the Middle East. China deploys soldiers to the region as part of UN peacekeeping efforts and is increasing its naval activity as part of international counter-piracy efforts. The interests of these great powers do not seem likely to diminish in the years ahead.

In sum, after World War II, the United States assumed increasing responsibility for preserving the regional security order in the Middle East. It developed a number of relationships with countries like Israel, Egypt, Jordan, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States that were tantamount to alliance relationships. As the Cold War ended, from the Tanker War to Operation Desert Storm to Operation Iraqi Freedom, U.S. involvement in the region appeared to require greater and greater direct application of U.S. military force. The Obama administration had sought to lessen that involvement and reorient U.S. national security strategy toward Asia, but the continuing strategic importance of the region, as well as the myriad Middle Eastern state and non-state threats to U.S. security, make it difficult for U.S. policymakers to extricate themselves from pronounced involvement there.



## CHAPTER 2

# The Enduring Importance of the Middle East

Whereas the United States has been predominantly focused on counterterrorism efforts in the Middle East over the last decade and a half, broader geopolitical issues necessitate a sustained and focused U.S. engagement there. As noted above, the U.S. intervention to remove Saddam Hussein from power facilitated a growth in Iranian influence and triggered a Sunni insurgency that threatened to destabilize Iraq. By 2008–2009, however, the insurgency had been defeated. The Obama administration initially hoped to reduce the U.S. strategic investment in the region and sought to minimize the role of U.S. “boots on the ground.” It was unable, however, to prevent the spread of disorder in the region after the outbreak of the Arab Spring in 2011. In fact, pursuing a hands-off policy has facilitated the worsening chaos in the region.

### **Vital Energy Resources**

Although it is tempting to believe that U.S. energy self-sufficiency makes it less necessary than it once was to police the Middle East, the region still contains a large share of the world’s oil reserves, and disruptions to those energy flows would have serious and negative effects on the U.S. economy. In addition, U.S. allies continue to rely on these sources of energy, and our alliances remain a source of strategic comparative advantage. Moreover, the events of the past five years have repeatedly illustrated that instability in the Middle East reverberates throughout the world. Refugee flows are threatening to overwhelm the institutions of Europe, putting the prosperity and domestic stability of many of our closest allies and trade partners at risk. Although continued U.S. involvement may not be popular, the twin challenges of countering Iranian political ambitions and violent Sunni Islamist extremism will impose themselves on U.S. policymakers for years to come.

Securing access to oil and natural gas remains important not only for the United States and our allies but also for broader international stability. As the world’s chief oil exporting region,

Saudi Arabia, Iran, Iraq, Bahrain, Kuwait, and the United Arab Emirates together control about 55 percent of the world's proven oil reserves and produce almost a third of the oil consumed globally. The U.S. Energy Information Administration projects that it will continue to produce the same share in 2040, even with the expected increases in North American shale production.<sup>29</sup> Moreover, self-sufficiency does not make the United States immune to sudden shifts in energy markets. The United States remains vulnerable to changes in the global price of this fungible commodity, and a disruption in the global oil supply would have serious effects on inflation and the growth rate of the U.S. economy. As quickly as shale production is growing in North America, it is insufficient to counterbalance the loss of Saudi production, let alone the collapse of multiple oil producing states. Our allies in the Western Pacific are even more vulnerable to disruptions in the flow of oil; Japan and South Korea receive 77 percent and 74 percent, respectively, of their oil imports from the Gulf States.<sup>30</sup> Their dependence on Middle Eastern oil is made even more acute by the vulnerable maritime chokepoints through which much of the oil is transported. Over 30 percent of seaborne traded oil flows through the Strait of Hormuz, and there are currently few alternatives for other shipping routes.

Iran represents the chief threat to the flow of oil and has threatened, on multiple occasions, to attack ships or impede the flow of petroleum exports from the Persian Gulf. Iran could use its growing navy or missile arsenal to block the strait. Internal conflicts could also take a dramatic toll on oil production, cutting it by 60 or even 90 percent in some cases.<sup>31</sup> Although a regional interstate conflict like the Tanker War provides the most likely scenario, terrorist acts might also succeed in shutting down the strait for some period of time. The recent Commission on Energy and Geopolitics noted in 2014: "Even a failed attempt to close one of these strategic passages could cause global oil prices to rise rapidly from current levels. A successful and extended closure could result in severe negative economic consequences."<sup>32</sup>

## Instability in the Middle East Reverberates Around the World

What happens in the Middle East affects the world. As Kenneth Pollack has stated, "Given the ongoing importance of Middle Eastern energy resources to the international economy, the region's central geographic location, its multiplicity of terrorist groups, and the extent of regional anger at numerous other countries for their predicament, it would be a mistake to assume that these security problems will not affect the wider world."<sup>33</sup>

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29 Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, *Oil Security 2025*; and Kenneth M. Pollack (convener), *Security and Public Order: A Working Group Report on the Middle East Strategy Task Force* (Washington, DC: Atlantic Council and Brookings Institution, 2016).

30 Mark Gunzinger and Chris Dougherty, *Outside-In: Operating from Range to Defeat Iran's Anti-Access and Area-Denial Threats* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2011).

31 Pollack, *Security and Public Order*, p. 25.

32 Caitlin Talmadge, "Closing Time: Assessing the Iranian Threat to the Strait of Hormuz," *International Security* 33, no. 1, Summer 2008; Pollack, *Security and Public Order*; and Commission on Energy and Geopolitics, *Oil Security 2025*, p. 20.

33 Pollack, *Security and Public Order*.

Due to economic globalization and the Middle East's critical location, the effects of humanitarian crises, the spread of terrorism, and economic crises that occur in the region reverberate around the globe. Instability in one Middle Eastern country breeds instability in others, and volatility in the broader region spills over into peripheral ones. The toll the Syrian civil war has taken on Europe is the most visible example. Half a million Syrians have died in the civil war since 2011, and nearly eleven million have been displaced. Refugee populations in the millions threaten to destabilize neighboring states like Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon. The terrorist attacks in Paris, Nice, and Brussels demonstrate that home-grown radicalization has become inextricably linked to jihadism. The return of foreign fighters who have fought in Syria will continue to threaten the security of Europe and potentially the United States. And this only reflects the costs of Syria; meanwhile conflicts in Iraq, Libya, Yemen, Afghanistan, and elsewhere in the region will also contribute to the migration problems and terrorist threats.<sup>34</sup>

## Return of Great Power Competition

The U.S. presence in the Middle East has long afforded safe access to important strategic waterways in the region, including the vital chokepoints in the Strait of Hormuz, Suez Canal, and the Bab el-Mandeb Strait. The United States has also provided the security framework for the region by sponsoring the Arab–Israeli peace process, forging the international coalition that reversed Iraq's invasion of Kuwait, and leading efforts to prevent Iran from developing nuclear weapons. Yet the credibility of U.S. standing as the predominant external player in the Middle East has suffered serious blows in the past several years. The recent policy of retrenchment has allowed Russia to emerge as the arbiter of success on Syria's battlefield and facilitated Iran's increasingly bold advances in Syria, Yemen, and the Gulf. Moscow, for its part, has worked out a seeming division of labor with Tehran, allowing Russian air power to complement Iranian-sponsored Shia militias to augment the Assad regime's manpower deficiencies. Its efforts have helped to keep Assad in power and positioned Moscow to be the arbiter in negotiations over the future of Syria, which, in turn, has augmented its diplomatic clout with U.S. allies like Turkey. Ryan Crocker, a career diplomat who served as Ambassador to Afghanistan, Pakistan, Kuwait, Iraq, Syria, and Lebanon, calls this moment “the lowest ebb since World War II for U.S. influence and engagement in the region.”<sup>35</sup>

Although the United States still has a formidable presence in the region and enjoys deep ties with long-time partners, America's ability to influence the region has been reduced by a growing conviction in Washington that the United States does not have a leadership role in the Middle East. America's risk-averse attitude and its hesitancy to use its hard power in the region has ultimately undermined the legitimacy of our guarantees to our Middle Eastern partners while emboldening our adversaries to act more aggressively.

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34 For the human toll of Middle East conflict, see World Bank, “The Economic Effects of War and Peace,” *MENA Quarterly Economic Brief*, no. 6, January 2016; and Anthony H. Cordesman, *The Human Cost of War in the Middle East: A Graphic Overview* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, February 2016).

35 John McLaughlin, “The Middle East That Awaits a New US Administration,” *Politique étrangère*, no. 2, 2016.

## Conclusion

Unfortunately, U.S. retrenchment in the Middle East over the past decade has coincided with and contributed to the most violent transition the region has undergone since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire at the end of World War I. The region's energy resources, multiple inter- and intra-state conflicts, migration crises, and continuing terrorist threats (from violent Islamic extremists emanating from both governed and ungoverned spaces) ensures that Washington policymakers, no matter how much they may desire to turn their attention elsewhere, will need a strategy to actively advance U.S. interests throughout the Middle East for the foreseeable future. U.S. objectives remain the same—reduce the challenge to regional stability that Iranian ambitions present and degrade and ultimately defeat radical Sunni terrorist organizations.<sup>36</sup> The United States should not and cannot shoulder the burden alone. Both our Western and local allies should be persuaded to do more. Mobilizing such support, however, will require the United States to develop a compelling strategy to deal with the region's problems. Although U.S. credibility has been damaged over the past few administrations, it remains the case that U.S. leadership can accomplish a great deal. Kenneth Pollack notes: "Only the United States has the combination of capabilities and potential willingness to lead, develop, and implement these strategies. If the United States is unwilling to do so, it is unlikely that any other state can or will, and the security problems of the Middle East will likely worsen as a result."<sup>37</sup> The United States and its allies and partners in the region will need to elaborate a consensus on the nature of the threats and the appropriate ways and means to deal with those threats.

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<sup>36</sup> Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Preserving the Balance: A U.S. Eurasia Defense Strategy* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2017), p.33.

<sup>37</sup> Pollack, *Security and Public Order*.

## CHAPTER 3

# Iran as the foremost threat in the Middle East

Against the backdrop of violent conflict throughout the region, the Islamic Republic of Iran emerges as the most pressing policy issue that will confront the new administration. Iran is exceptionally dangerous—to its neighbors; to U.S. allies and partners such as Egypt, Israel, and the Gulf States; and to the broader stability of the Middle East. It is a revisionist state seeking a dominant position in the region. The world's largest state sponsor of terrorism, it advocates for the elimination of Israel and constitutes an ongoing threat to the security of both the production and transit of regional energy supplies. Since the Iranian revolution in 1979, many observers have hoped that, over time, the fervor that accompanied the rise of the theocracy would give way to a more moderate regime that would engage the United States and the outside world. Former Secretary of Defense Robert Gates notes in his memoirs: "The Islamic Republic of Iran has bedeviled every American President since the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Events in Iran contributed to Jimmy Carter losing his reelection bid in 1980, and nearly got Ronald Ragan impeached in 1987. Every president since Carter has tried in one way or another to reach out to the leadership in Tehran to improve relations, and every one of them has failed to elicit any meaningful response." Former Director of National Intelligence James Clapper asserted, as recently as February 2016 in an annual threat assessment testimony before Congress, that Iran "present[s] an enduring threat to U.S. national interests" because of its support for regional proxies, the Assad regime, anti-Israel policies, the development of advanced military capabilities, and the pursuit of a nuclear weapons.<sup>38</sup>

Although Iran's very complex and opaque internal politics make it difficult to predict how the regime is likely to evolve, several things seem clear. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and his inner circle of religious and military leaders interpret almost all U.S. action—from shows of

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38 Robert M. Gates, *Duty: Memoirs of A Secretary at War* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 2014), pp. 177–178; and James R. Clapper, Director of National Intelligence, "Worldwide Threat Assessment of the US Intelligence Community," Statement for the Record, Armed Services Committee, U.S. Senate, February 9, 2016.

U.S. regional military presence and commitment to sanctions, covert operations, and even offers to negotiate—as instruments to overthrow the Iranian regime. Iranian distrust of and disdain for the United States continue despite the lengthy negotiating process and many U.S. concessions that resulted in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015. This is the case, at least in part, because anti-Americanism remains a central element of the regime’s identity. Although much of the Iranian public, born after the 1979 revolution, does not share in this vision, the hostility toward “the Great Satan” and the West is the glue that holds the disparate elements of the theocratic regime together. The Islamic Republic’s leaders, as a result, have a strong motivation to develop the capabilities needed to counter U.S. force projection.<sup>39</sup>

Because the JCPOA does not cover the Iranian ballistic missile program or other non-nuclear capabilities, Tehran has felt itself free to continue the development and testing of ballistic missiles and build up its conventional forces. As sanctions are removed, the Islamic Republic will enjoy increased income and flexibility to support these efforts. Iran’s seizure of U.S. Navy personnel in 2016, its aggressive actions near U.S. naval vessels in the Gulf, and its robust support for proxy forces suggest an increasingly assertive competitor in the region whose ambitions will not be propitiated by greater U.S. restraint.

## Iranian Strategic Culture

Iran’s strategic culture and military doctrine are largely derived from a combination of its Persian past, including the country’s conversion to Shiism; its revolutionary Islamic identity; and its experiences in the Iran–Iraq War. The core elements of Iran’s strategic culture are a deep-seated conviction that Shiism is the source of the country’s national identity and the regime’s political legitimacy; a belief in Iran’s role as the leader of an Islamic civilization and master of the region; an all-encompassing fear of the nation’s domestic and external vulnerabilities; and the “ingrained perception” that the United States intends to overwhelm and ultimately destroy Iran and Islamic civilization.<sup>40</sup> Tehran’s attempts to project power, pursued most intensely in its immediate periphery, are consistent with the belief that Iran is the natural leader in the Gulf by virtue of its religious vocation, size, geography, and natural resources. Iran’s strategic culture also explains its nuclear ambitions; acquiring a nuclear

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39 On anti-Americanism as an anchor of the regime’s identity and policy, see Takeyh, *Guardians of the Revolution*. For the continuing role post-JCPOA, see Reuel Marc Gerecht and Mark Dubowitz, “The Iranian Nuclear Paradox,” *Wall Street Journal*, July 8, 2015; and Krepinovich, *Preserving the Balance*, pp. 31–33.

40 This account of Iranian strategic culture is drawn from Jennifer Knepper, “Nuclear Weapons and Iranian Strategic Culture,” *Comparative Strategy* 27, no. 5, November 2008; Kamran Taremi, “Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomeini’s Interpretation of Shiite Islam,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 35, no. 1, March 2014; Michael Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Religion, Expediency, and Soft Power in an Era of Disruptive Change*, MES Monograph 7 (Quantico, VA: Marine Corps University Press, November 2015); and Willis Stanley, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, Report Prepared for Defense Threat Reduction Agency, Advanced Systems and Concepts Office (McLean, VA: SAIC, October 31, 2006).



weapon would advance its goals of self-preservation and regional leadership, hinder U.S. dominance in the Persian Gulf, and lend legitimacy to its religious authority.<sup>41</sup>

The Iran–Iraq War was a pivotal moment for the Islamic Republic, and the Iranians who fought in that war today make up the country’s military leadership. The perceived global indifference to Iraq’s use of chemical weapons in that war contributed to a profound mistrust of the West and international organizations, which continues to this day. Iran has traditionally lacked allies. It was surrounded by Sunni states to the East, West, and South, as well as a hostile Russia to the North. This isolation, combined with 30 years of economic sanctions, has strengthened Tehran’s commitment to the principle of self-reliance. Iran has consistently sought asymmetric warfare capabilities to offset overwhelming U.S. military superiority. Perhaps the most important and most enduring of these has been Iran’s reliance on proxies like Hezbollah to undercut U.S. and Western influence, burnish Iran’s anti-Israel credentials, and secure the rights of Lebanon’s Shia population.<sup>42</sup>

Michael Eisenstadt defines Iran’s way of war as follows: indirection, mainly through proxies; ambiguity through deniability; strategic patience to mitigate risk; the calibrated use of violence; an emphasis on the moral, spiritual, and psychological dimensions of war; tactical flexibility; and wedge-driving among potential adversaries. Iran’s incremental, indirect waging of war contrasts sharply with the American way of war, which favors a quest for quick and decisive victory. Tehran has adopted a model of attrition warfighting that raises the risks and costs for an opponent that is dependent on technological and qualitative advantages (in this case, most potential Western interlopers in the region). This is ideal for Iran, whose experience in the 1980s demonstrated a high threshold for casualties through a large reserve of manpower, against an opponent such as the United States, which Iranian leadership views as largely risk averse and more sensitive to casualties. This complements Iran’s goal of inflicting physical losses and psychological pain, thereby degrading the enemy’s will to fight.<sup>43</sup>

Iran is sometimes described as an irrational, ideologically driven nation undeterrable by normal calculations of costs and benefits or traditional threats to use force against it. The Islamic Republic encourages this characterization because it galvanizes its fundamentalist base, enhances its deterrence posture, and indulges Iran’s idealized version of itself. While the Islamic Republic remains staunch in spreading its revolutionary interpretation of Shia Islam to the region, it has also shown itself to be quite pragmatic when confronted by powerful adversaries. Ayatollah Khomeini’s decision to end the Iran–Iraq War in 1988 and the regime’s 2003 decision to “freeze” its nuclear program in response to the U.S. military operations in Afghanistan and Iraq provide ample evidence of this fact. Although Iran’s leaders are not irrational, assessing Tehran’s decision calculus can still be a challenge. The multiple layers of

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41 Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

42 Augustus Richard Norton, *Hezbollah: a Short History* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2007); and Nicholas Blanford, *Warriors of God: Inside Hezbollah’s Thirty-Year Struggle Against Israel* (New York: Random House, 2011).

43 Ibid.

decision-making with formal state institutions and revolutionary bodies like the Guardianship and Expediency Councils operating in parallel make it difficult to be sure where authority rests on any given issue. This uncertainty increases the risk of miscalculation in a time of crisis.

## The Iranian Nuclear Program and Challenge

Through the 1980s and 1990s, U.S. officials were primarily focused on the threat posed by Iran's support for terrorist groups in the Middle East. Concern over its burgeoning nuclear program began in the mid-1990s when Iran contracted with Russia to build a nuclear power reactor in Bushehr, contacted the A.Q. Khan nuclear proliferation network, and procured uranium hexafluoride from China. The 2002 revelation by the National Council of Resistance of Iran (NCRI) that Tehran had been covertly developing a uranium enrichment facility and a heavy water production reactor put the issue of Iran's nuclear program at the top of Washington's nuclear non-proliferation agenda. The 2009 revelation that an additional enrichment facility was being constructed near Qom heightened concerns, and Western fears escalated in 2010 when Iran began enriching uranium at levels just below weapons-grade. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) confirmed in late 2015 that Iran had been conducting research on a triggering mechanism—among other possible military dimensions of its nuclear program.<sup>44</sup> Iran's path to a nuclear capability has not been a sprint to build a weapon but rather a protracted process as part of its overall defense strategy. The U.S. intelligence community, for example, assesses that Iran "halted" its research work on nuclear weaponization in 2003, and Iran did agree to limit elements of its enrichment program under the JCPOA. Since a nuclear capability would be the ultimate guarantor of independence, obtaining one remains an objective worth pursuing in the eyes of the Iranian leadership, despite a potentially protracted timeline.<sup>45</sup>

## Implications of a Nuclear Iran

A nuclear Iran would be disastrous for the countries of the region and for the United States. It would significantly alter both the regional and global strategic environment. Although the main purpose of an Iranian nuclear weapon would be to deter a U.S. or Israeli attack, the Islamic Republic could be emboldened to act even more aggressively than it currently does in regional or global conflicts. Despite a decade-long U.S. policy of restraint in the Gulf, currently, the threat of a U.S. conventional military response still deters Iran's aggressive behaviors somewhat. But Iranian leaders would almost certainly conclude that possession of nuclear weapons could enable them to counter or, more likely, prevent a U.S. conventional

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44 Thomas C. Reed and Danny B. Stillman, *The Nuclear Express: A Political History of the Bomb and its Proliferation* (Minneapolis, MN: Zenith Press, 2009), pp. 291–300; and Institute for Science and International Security (ISIS), *Iran's Nuclear History from the 1950s to 2005* (Washington, DC: ISIS, April 17, 2013), available at [http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Iran\\_Nuclear\\_History.pdf](http://www.isisnucleariran.org/assets/pdf/Iran_Nuclear_History.pdf).

45 National Intelligence Council (NIC), *Iran: Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities*, National Intelligence Estimate (Washington, DC: NIC, November 2007), available at [https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203\\_release.pdf](https://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203_release.pdf).

strike in response to Iranian actions; it could deter Western forces entirely by targeting U.S. allies or even the U.S. homeland with nuclear weapons. The U.S. ability to promote and defend its interests in the region would be diminished, and Iran would extraordinarily increase its coercive leverage; it would be capable of wielding a powerful deterrent against any escalation in response to Iran's use of force.

The local nuclear balance would be particularly dangerous. The intense hostility and absence of direct communication between Israel and the Islamic Republic will create a particularly unstable nuclear balance in a crisis. Short flight times, relatively small arsenals, reciprocal fears of a surprise attack, and the debatable survivability of nuclear command and control would all be convincing incentives for both sides to launch first in a crisis. A successful first strike would provide the attacker with an enormous advantage.<sup>46</sup>

A nuclear-armed Iran would also raise legitimate questions about the credibility of U.S. extended deterrence in the region. Iran might use these uncertainties among its neighbors to either entice them to shelter under an Iranian security umbrella or, more likely, compel them to refuse basing, access, or overflight rights to the United States, diminishing U.S. military power and influence in the region. To prevent Middle Eastern countries from bandwagoning with Iran, Washington might find itself under pressure to provide a legally binding security guarantee to Middle Eastern countries with which it has heretofore had only a special relationship. Arriving at such "treaty" arrangements might not only prove contentious but could run into problems in the United States Congress where they would have to be ratified.

Many traditional partners in the region already feel abandoned by U.S. policies of retrenchment and its outreach to Iran that culminated in the signing of the JCPOA. This will make the business of providing credible U.S. assurances particularly challenging in the event Iran emerges as a nuclear power, and especially since successive U.S. administrations have repeatedly said that a nuclear-armed Iran was unacceptable.<sup>47</sup>

Bolstering U.S. extended deterrence obligations in the Middle East is further complicated by significant reductions in the U.S. nuclear arsenal that have resulted from the SORT and New START arms control agreements. Maintaining the credibility of extended deterrence during the Cold War with a much larger arsenal was difficult; how the United States would manage this feat with a shrinking stockpile of weapons while both Russia and China are modernizing and increasing the size of their respective arsenals remains unclear. Moreover, the U.S. nuclear arsenal is made up mostly of high-yield warheads, and adversaries and allies alike may

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46 On the implications of a nuclear Iran, see Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran," *Foreign Affairs* 90, no. 1, January/February 2011.

47 Kathleen J. McInnis, "Extended Deterrence: The U.S. Credibility Gap in the Middle East," *The Washington Quarterly* 28, no. 3, Summer 2005; and Mark Doyle, "A Nuclear-Armed Iran and US Extended Deterrence in the Gulf," *Strategic Assessments* 16, no. 3, October 2013. Gulf officials already pressed for something like a treaty as the Iran deal was coming to a conclusion. See Barbara Slavin, "GCC Won't Get Written Defense Guarantees at Camp David," *Al-Monitor*, May 7, 2015, available at <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2015/05/gcc-no-written-defense-guarantees-camp-david-1.html>.

doubt the United States would employ such devastating weapons in an actual conflict. The United States, in effect, could find itself self-deterred.<sup>48</sup>

The effectiveness of the U.S. deterrent has been one of the most important tools of non-proliferation policy in its arsenal. Without credible extended deterrence guarantees from the United States, a nuclear Iran could spur a nuclear arms race in one of the world's most volatile regions. The United Arab Emirates is already reconsidering its pledge to adhere to the "gold standard" 123 Agreement for nuclear power cooperation with the United States considering the industrial-scale Iranian enrichment capability enshrined in the JCPOA. Although developing nuclear weapons remains a slow and difficult task even for states with the necessary economic resources, the leaders of Saudi Arabia have made it clear that they will not allow Iran to be the only Muslim state in the region with a nuclear weapons capability. The Saudis would not only want to deter a nuclear Iran but also preserve its leading position in the Muslim world. They would presumably need the assistance of the Pakistani government, whose nuclear program is producing new plutonium and nuclear weapons at a relatively high rate. Islamabad could provide technical support that Saudi Arabia would need to produce nuclear weapons, or Pakistan might deploy its own nuclear weapons on Saudi soil under some type of "dual key" arrangement.<sup>49</sup>

This Middle East nuclear arms race could become even more dangerous if Iran transferred nuclear technology or capabilities to extremist groups. And regional tensions could more easily flare into devastating consequences if nuclear weapons spread beyond Iran, Israel, and Saudi Arabia to other neighboring nations like the UAE, Egypt, Turkey, and Jordan. Throughout the Cold War, nuclear theorists worried about the unpredictability of a so-called "nth country" multipolar nuclear competition. A nuclearized Middle East, rather than becoming a more stable region, would likely yield greater instability, a higher risk of miscalculation, and a considerable danger of nuclear use for only the second time in world history.<sup>50</sup>

The unstable local nuclear balance, the difficulties of making U.S. extended deterrence work in the wake of a successful nuclear test, and the dangers of a proliferation cascade make it very difficult to imagine a successful containment regime in the region in the event of a developed Iranian nuclear capability. The major question facing the new administration will be whether

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48 Keir A. Lieber and Daryl G. Press, "The New Era of Nuclear Weapons, Deterrence, and Conflict," *Strategic Studies Quarterly* 7, no. 1, Spring 2013.

49 For the role of deterrence in non-proliferation policy, see Francis J. Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition: U.S. Grand Strategy, the Nuclear Revolution, and Nonproliferation," *International Security* 40, no. 1, Summer 2015. For more on the potential for cooperation with Saudi Arabia and Pakistan on nuclear technology, see Edelman, Krepinevich, and Montgomery, "The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran"; *Chain Reaction: Avoiding a Nuclear Arms Race in the Middle East*, Report to the Committee on Foreign Relations, United States Senate, One Hundred Tenth Congress, Second Session, February 2008 (Washington, DC: U.S. GPO, 2008); and Christopher Clary and Mara E. Karlin, "The Pak-Saudi Nuke, and How to Stop It," *The American Interest* 7, no. 6, June 2012.

50 See Andrew F. Krepinevich, *Critical Mass: Nuclear Proliferation in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2013); and Andrew F. Krepinevich and Jacob Cohn, *Rethinking Armageddon: Scenarios Planning in the Second Nuclear Age* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments, 2016), pp. 19–42.

the JCPOA prevents Iran from emerging as a nuclear power or if it simply recognizes the Islamic Republic as a threshold nuclear weapons state.

## The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

The JCPOA between Iran, the United States, and five other great powers in July 2015 was an attempt by the Obama administration to curb Iran's nuclear program. In exchange for major sanctions relief from the United Nations, the United States, and the European Union, Iran agreed to make major cutbacks in its stockpile of uranium and accept limits on its enrichment activities albeit with a large residual enrichment infrastructure left intact. Indeed, the decision to allow Iran an industrial-scale enrichment infrastructure is one of the chief deficiencies of the JCPOA.

Although some students of international relations have advocated the spread of nuclear weapons to stabilize the region, practitioners almost unanimously have sought to prevent nuclear proliferation in general—and especially in the unstable Middle East. The elimination of the Baathist regime in Iraq and Libya's subsequent renunciation of its nuclear program had at one time removed major proliferation threats from the region. As a result, Iran's persistent efforts to obtain a nuclear weapon have been the focus of international attention and U.S. diplomatic efforts since 2003; both the Bush and Obama administrations pursued a negotiated end to the Iranian program.

As the negotiations continued, and as the Iranian nuclear program progressed and expanded, U.S. objectives began to subtly shift from eliminating or freezing Iran's enrichment capability to restricting it sufficiently so that the break-out time for an Iranian "sprint" to a weapon would be more than 12 months, sufficient time for the United States to determine whether to pursue a military response. This meant learning to live with a much larger uranium enrichment infrastructure than many experts had heretofore suggested would be tolerable.<sup>51</sup>

The main deficiency in the JCPOA is that it contains sunset clauses that eliminate the restrictions on enrichment after 10 and 15 years, lifts the UN arms embargo after five years, and stops restricting ballistic missile technology transfers after eight years. As former President

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51 For examples of scholarly advocacy for proliferation, see Kenneth N. Waltz, "Why Iran Should Get the Bomb: Nuclear Balancing Would Mean Stability," *Foreign Affairs* 91, no. 4, July/August 2012; and Steven J. Rosen, "A Stable System of Mutual Nuclear Deterrence in the Arab-Israeli Conflict," *The American Political Science Review* 71, no. 4, December 1977; and Gavin, "Strategies of Inhibition." On the Iraqi and Libyan Nuclear programs, see Hal Brands and David Palkki, "Saddam, Israel, and the Bomb: Nuclear Alarmism Justified?" *International Security* 36, no. 1, Summer 2011; and Robert G. Joseph, *Countering WMD: The Libyan Experience* (Fairfax, VA: National Institute Press, 2009).

Obama has admitted, once the “sunset provisions” expire, “The breakout time would have shrunk almost down to zero.”<sup>52</sup>

Iran was also allowed to avoid mandatory declarations about the possible military dimensions (PMD) of its nuclear program, making it extremely hard to develop a baseline against which to measure Iranian activity. Although negotiators promised unprecedented transparency, the IAEA did not receive the authority to conduct “anytime, anywhere” inspections of Iranian nuclear activity and is precluded from visiting military sites, including those controlled by the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corp and its Quds Force. Other significant drawbacks to the deal include the early removal of sanctions, effectively freeing up resources for investment in military capabilities, and the lack of restraints of Iran’s maturing ballistic missile development program.

### Implementation of the JCPOA

Iranian implementation of the JCPOA has, at least temporarily, slowed Iran’s progress in enriching uranium and plutonium production capabilities. Iran has removed all but 6,100 centrifuges, reduced its stockpile of 3.67 percent enriched uranium to 660 pounds, and has rendered the core of the Arak reactor inoperative, impeding its ability to pursue the plutonium route to a nuclear weapon. Observers have noted, however, that Iran continues to violate elements of the deal. It has produced more heavy water than allowed under the terms of the agreement, and it is not clear if the levels of low enriched uranium (LEU) have been reduced in compliance with the agreement because the IAEA’s reporting has become less detailed than it was before the JCPOA was negotiated, obscuring the ability of (independent) outside observers to judge Iran’s compliance.<sup>53</sup>

The deal has brought about immense economic relief to the Iranian regime. Sanctions relief and the unfreezing of Iranian assets has yielded the regime at least 10 billion dollars in cash and gold, and foreign corporations eager to do business with the country are helping ease Iran’s international isolation and facilitate its economic growth. Foreign governments and

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52 The best and most balanced account of the negotiation of the Iran Nuclear agreement is Jay Solomon, *The Iran Wars: Spy Games, Bank Battles and the Secret Deals that Reshaped the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2016). President Obama is quoted in JINSA, Gemunder Center Iran Task Force, Scorecard for the Final Deal with Iran (Washington, DC: JINSA, July 2015), p. 9, available at <http://www.jinsa.org/publications/scorecard-final-deal-iran>. The criticisms in the next paragraph are documented in the Gemunder Center Task Force report.

53 Kenneth Katzman, *Iran: Politics, Gulf Security and U.S. Policy*, RL32048 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, March 30, 2016). In particular, see the reports of the Institute for Science and International Security: David Albright, Serena Kelleher-Vergantini, and Andrea Stricker, *IAEA’S First Implementation Day Report: Key Information Missing* (Washington, DC: ISIS, February 26, 2016); David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *U.S. Purchase of Iran’s Heavy Water: Encouraging a Dangerous Nuclear Supplier* (Washington, DC: ISIS, May 23, 2016); David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *JCPOA Exemptions Revealed* (Washington, DC: ISIS, September 1, 2016); David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *Analysis of the IAEA’s Fourth Iran Deal Report: Time of Change* (Washington, DC: ISIS, November 15, 2016); and David Albright and Andrea Stricker, *Heavy Water Loophole in the Iran Deal* (Washington, DC: ISIS, December 21, 2016).



corporations are augmenting investment in the country, making it increasingly difficult to re-impose multilateral sanctions if Iran were to violate the deal.<sup>54</sup>

## Iran's Emerging A2/AD Bubble

Additional financial resources could help fund Iran's ballistic missile development and other military capabilities that create operational challenges for U.S. forces in the region, including an emerging A2/AD bubble. In recent years, a number of revisionist powers, including Iran, have invested heavily in anti-access/area-denial capabilities as a cost-effective way to offset the U.S. military's strategic and operational advantages.

Since Iran lacks the conventional capabilities to go head-to-head with the United States, the asymmetric approaches and strategies made possible by A2/AD capabilities are an ideal way to challenge U.S. supremacy in the Gulf. Iran's army is large but poorly trained. Its air force, constrained by years of U.S. and international sanctions, is obsolete for both air defense and strike purposes, and it is no match for either U.S. or Israeli air forces. The Iranian navy's aging surface combatants would fare no better in a conflict. If it cannot confront the United States directly, Iran can at least confront them with growing, and perhaps prohibitive, costs of war. To this end, other Iranian priorities include land- and ship-based rockets and cruise missiles, ballistic missiles, fast-swarmed small craft, mines, and submarines, including midsize submarines. While such capabilities would constitute a direct threat to U.S. forces, they do not appear to be sufficient to militarily defeat those forces in the foreseeable future, though they could significantly increase U.S. combat losses. These advantages mean that investment in A2/AD capabilities is likely to remain the strategy for rising regional powers such as Iran.

Reliance on these types of capabilities would extend the timeline of a potential U.S. military operation, threatening unacceptable losses and costs on the U.S. force and allowing Iran to carry out lower-level acts of aggression such as cyber or terrorist attacks. In the event of a conflict, Iran would likely use a layered approach that is consistent with Iran's concept of a "mosaic defense": one that begins with offensive strikes over long ranges and culminates with defenses that increase in intensity as U.S. forces approach the Iranian coast.

Iran's mosaic defense A2/AD strategy might be able to deter the United States from intervening in a Gulf crisis or at least prevent them from intervening effectively. It could inflict losses on U.S. forward-stationed forces at the outset of a conflict, prevent the deployment of U.S. reinforcements, and create the time and space needed for Iran to consolidate gains and force the United States and its allies to choose between fighting their way into the Gulf or accepting some kind of a political settlement. Fundamentally, Iran's maturing A2/AD bubble means the U.S. Navy will no longer enjoy the unencumbered freedom or unchallenged primacy in the waters of the Gulf that it has enjoyed since the World War II.

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54 Carol E. Lee and Jay Solomon, "A Tally of Iran Sanctions Relief Includes More than \$10 Billion in Cash, Gold," *Wall Street Journal*, December 30, 2016.



Finally, the Persian Gulf's geographic and geostrategic characteristics are likely to shape Iran's A2/AD strategy and present U.S. forces with a unique set of challenges. Iran can concentrate its exclusion capabilities on the relatively small Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz choke-point. The geography also favors Iran's ability to easily resupply its armed forces. The United States or other outside powers, conversely, are forced to operate very far from their respective home bases of operation. The asymmetry in operational requirements in the Gulf's maritime domain also applies to air operations. U.S. forward bases in the Persian Gulf are well within range of many of Iran's ballistic missiles, while potential target areas inside Iran are beyond the unrefueled range of U.S. fighter aircraft launched from those bases. In addition, the concentration of population and government infrastructure in most Persian Gulf States, well within range of Iranian missiles, may make them more susceptible to Iranian coercion; Tehran could easily hold their tourist and energy infrastructure at risk. Indeed, Iran's leaders may regard the holding hostage of U.S. partners and allies as their ace in the hole. Although Iran's missiles are not very accurate today, and therefore might not be as big a threat as some fear, the record suggests that, with time, ballistic missile programs produce missiles with greater range and accuracy.<sup>55</sup>

## Missiles

Throughout the Iran–Iraq War, and particularly during the War of the Cities, Iranian cities were subject to repeated attacks by Iraqi missiles. The war convinced Tehran that a strong, capable missile force was critical to the country's security and since the 1980s, Iran has put significant resources into producing long-range rockets, short- and medium-range ballistic missiles, and long-range cruise missiles. It has not only grown its magazine of missiles and rockets but also enhanced the lethality and effectiveness of its armaments by improving their accuracy and developing new submunition payloads. This allows Tehran to wield one of the most formidable missile arsenals in the Middle East. Although Iran still lacks a sophisticated precision-strike capability to inflict significant damage on military, civilian, or other critical installations, the size of its arsenal can be highly effective if used with mass fires against population centers.<sup>56</sup>

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55 For more on anti-access and area-denial motivations, requirements, and capabilities, see Terrence Kelly, David C. Gompert, and Duncan Long, *Smarter Power, Stronger Partners, Volume I: Exploiting U.S. Advantages to Prevent Aggression* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016), available at [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR1359.html](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR1359.html). For the "Persian characteristics" of anti-access/area denial, see Gunzinger and Dougherty, *Outside-In*, pp. 21–52. On Iranian Doctrine, see Michael Connell, "Iran's Military Doctrine," *The Iran Primer* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace), originally published in 2010, available at <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/irans-military-doctrine>.

56 Joshua R. Itzkowitz Shiffrin and Miranda Priebe, "A Crude Threat: The Limits of an Iranian Missile Campaign against Saudi Arabian Oil," *International Security* 36, no. 1, 2011. They contend that the Iranian missile force lacks the precision to execute an attack on energy infrastructure. This ignores the fact that the history of missile programs is a history of increasing accuracy and massed effects could make up for lack of precision, not to mention that a presumed nuclear capability could completely change the nature of everyone's calculations about Iranian missile attacks. See Michael Eisenstadt, "The Role of Missiles in Iran's Military Strategy," Research Note 39, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, November 2016.

Iran maintains stockpiles of missiles of different ranges, possesses a variety of delivery systems, and plans to mass-produce more missiles. All of this suggests that Iran intends to field regional offensive strike capabilities that could easily overwhelm enemy rocket and missile defenses and create a dramatic psychological impact on its adversaries. An Iranian precision-strike capability, moreover, would radically increase the lethality of Iran's longer-range systems against high-value military and civilian targets like key energy production facilities, water desalinization plants, and tourist infrastructure. Over the course of the next 20 years, it is possible that Iran will make progress toward addressing existing shortfalls in accuracy since its development of the Ghadr and Sajjil missiles suggest that Iran is seeking to extend the range of its missiles. These programs demonstrate that Iran's indigenous ability to design, develop, and manufacture the systems needed to upgrade its missile arsenal is evolving.

Tehran's rejection of multiple UNSC resolutions calling for various restrictions on its ballistic missile program and related activities, even the one passed to underpin the nuclear deal, demonstrates the degree to which Iran is committed to maintaining and developing this capability. Moreover Iran, almost certainly in anticipation of the removal of sanctions, increased its defense budget by 32.5 percent in the 2015–2016 fiscal year, allocating much of it to the purchase of missiles and conventional arms.<sup>57</sup>

One cannot emphasize enough the role Iran's missile program plays as an "equalizer" against the enormous qualitative and quantitative advantages that the United States and potential regional adversaries, especially when matched against Iran's conventional air power. Most of Iran's combat aircraft and surface to air missiles either date back to the time of the Shah or are low-quality export versions of Russian and Chinese weapons. Iran's missile development can be seen as a pursuit of a modern force and the implementation of a cost-imposing strategy on its potential opponents. Building offensive ballistic and cruise missiles costs Iran a fraction of what it would take for Iran to procure a modern air force or for its putative adversaries to invest in developing effective missile defense systems. Missiles, therefore, will likely remain a cost-effective, efficient, and central part of maintaining its strategic deterrent—projecting power in the Gulf and shaping the regional military balance. Iran therefore has strong incentives to develop precision-guided conventional armed missiles that could give it strike capabilities approaching "weapons of mass effectiveness" as a surrogate or substitute for WMD. The potential use of these conventional weapons might be considerably more credible as a deterrent or instrument of coercive diplomacy in a crisis than nuclear weapons.

The missile force can also be seen as a harbinger of Iran's future nuclear capability by demonstrating the ability to deliver a nuclear warhead. Currently, Iran's medium-range ballistic missiles could theoretically deliver a first-generation nuclear weapon. It was precisely these kinds of activities that Iran is alleged to have suspended in 2003. Iran is reported to be developing a Shahab 4 missile with a maximum range that is sometimes estimated at around

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57 Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

2,000–4,000 kilometers, and it is also making progress on space launch vehicles that will provide Tehran with the ability to develop longer-range missiles in the future, including inter-continental ballistic missiles (ICBM) capable of reaching Europe and the United States. Former Secretary of Defense Ash Carter testified to Congress in July 2015 that this capability was in the realm of possibility, stating he wouldn't "rule out that in 10 years, Iran could progress to an ICBM."<sup>58</sup>

Iran's continued progress in developing ballistic missiles will deepen doubts, over time, about the credibility of any U.S. security guarantees. Ballistic missiles provide the Iranians with a capability that raises the cost of operating in the region by holding U.S. allies and forces in the region at risk and ultimately threatens the U.S. homeland itself. Middle Eastern allies such as Saudi Arabia, for example, may doubt that the United States would use all its missile defense interceptors to defend them in a conflict if it meant there were few left to defend Israel or the continental United States.

Iran's missile forces not only support the nation's strategy for deterring a U.S. attack but also fulfill a largely symbolic and psychological role in its "resistance doctrine" to the U.S.-supported regional order. It demoralizes U.S. allies and partners with the prospects of a protracted and inconclusive conflict with the United States and direct attacks on the region's economic and energy infrastructure. Missiles, even without advanced guidance capabilities, can still terrorize civilians and potentially break an enemy's will. Iran's attention to psychological warfare and propaganda is illustrated in the prominent role missiles have in regime military parades.

The Iranian missile program also presents a serious targeting problem with which the U.S. military became familiar in the 1991 Gulf War. This is because Iran's missiles are mobile, easily disguised, and well-hidden. Many of are mounted on transportable launchers, some of which look like civilian vehicles, and others are deployed in large numbers of "one-time use" silos. Iran has tunnel launch complexes that service underground missile halls built under mountains. The use of mobile launchers and remote underground facilities greatly complicate preventive or preemptive targeting of its missile force with conventional weapons. Iranian forces would have ample pre-launch preparation time for a surprise attack or to conduct mass fires from protected positions concurrently. Tehran clearly sees its ballistic missile development program in terms of classic Western deterrence theory. As former Minister of Defense Ali Shamkani said more than a decade ago, "We have prepared ourselves to absorb the first strike so that it inflicts the least damage on us. We have however prepared a second strike which can decisively avenge the first one while preventing a third strike against us."<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>58</sup> Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran, Missiles, and Nuclear Weapons* (Washington, DC: Center for Strategic and International Studies, December 2015).

<sup>59</sup> Eisenstadt, "The Role of Missiles in Iran's Military Strategy."

## Guerrilla Navy

Although Iran has two distinct naval forces—the Islamic Republic of Iran Navy (IRIN) and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy (IRGCN)—it is the latter that plays an integral role in Iran’s A2/AD strategy in the Gulf. The IRIN is a blue-water navy made up of older, mid-sized naval combatants that predate the 1979 revolution. It is mostly consigned to the Gulf of Oman and the Caspian Sea. The IRGCN, conversely, is the main executor of Iran’s asymmetric naval guerrilla warfare strategy and has full operational jurisdiction over Iran’s maritime forces in the Persian Gulf. The Tanker War was a watershed moment for Iran. Its decisive defeat at the hands of the U.S. Navy convinced Iran’s leadership that direct competition with U.S. naval forces was inadvisable and an asymmetric approach would be the only effective way to counter the U.S. naval presence in the Gulf. Consequently, Iran began to acquire small fast attack craft, anti-ship missiles, mines, submarines, and unmanned aerial vehicles (UAV). The budding “guerrilla navy” contributes to and extends Iran’s layered defense strategy, thereby making a major contribution to Iran’s emerging A2/AD capabilities and its mosaic defense.<sup>60</sup>

As noted above, the geography of Persian Gulf inherently disadvantages outside forces and compounds the advantages of IRGCN forces. The constricted space of the Gulf—especially the Strait of Hormuz—mitigates the technological advantage of the U.S. Navy by limiting the freedom of maneuver of its large surface assets. It also places U.S. naval assets within range of Iran’s short-range capabilities such as anti-ship cruise missiles (ASCM), fast attack craft (FAC), mines and submarines. The narrow waterways make Iranian swarming tactics, mines, and short-range missiles especially effective and will likely require that the United States conduct a fight against Iranian forces from greater range should a conflict erupt. U.S. forces remain vastly superior to Iran’s, but Iran is working hard to create enormous operational difficulties for the U.S. military.

The proximity of the strait to major Iranian port facilities such as Bandar Abbas and its fortified islands straddling major shipping lanes in the Gulf allow Tehran’s guerrilla navy to engage or disengage enemy forces swiftly in maritime exclusion operations. It also grants Iran very short lines of communication, making resupply, rearming, repair, and maintenance less difficult compared to U.S. naval units, which may need to withdraw to be able to do the same. Moreover, Iran’s 1,000 nautical miles of coastline contains many coves and marshes that are ideal for concealing small boats. Over 3,000 local vessels and hundreds of crude carriers and cargo ships pass through the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz each day, making it hard for outside air and naval forces to distinguish civilian ships from hostile ones. Making matters more complicated, the IRGCN sometimes employs civilian boats to approach and attack enemy targets. The IRGCN may also “hide” among civilian vessels or use them as information, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR) resources.<sup>61</sup>

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60 Office of Naval Intelligence, *Iranian Naval Forces: A Tale of Two Navies* (Washington, DC: Office of Naval Intelligence, February 2017).

61 Gunzinger and Dougherty, *Outside-In*, p. 29.

Many of Iran's small surface vessels, like the Ashura-class and Tareq-class craft, are small speedboats armed with machine guns, unguided rockets, and occasionally **Man-Portable Air-Defense Systems (MANPADS)** to defend against air attacks. These unguided rockets can be fired collectively to either overwhelm defenses or distract them from larger ASCM-carrying craft such as Azarakhsh-class<sup>62</sup> and Tondar-class missile boats or the North Korean IPS-16 missile/torpedo boat. Iran has also developed undersea warfare capabilities that can deny freedom of maneuver to enemy naval forces and civilian shipping in the Persian Gulf. Tehran's most modern undersea vessels, mainly active in the Gulf of Oman are the Type 877EKM Kilo-class submarines purchased from Russia that can carry torpedoes, mines, and potentially ASCMs. Iran's fleet of smaller submarines such as the Ghadir-class and Nahang-class can also be used for minelaying. Consistent with a maritime guerrilla warfare strategy, Iran has invested heavily in mines and minelaying platforms, including many of its surface ships, submarines, and "commercial" vessels that are used for clandestine minelaying operations. Publicly available estimates suggest Iran possesses an arsenal of 2,000 to 3,000 mines, which includes simple free-floating and moored contact mines, as well as more sophisticated bottom influence mines such as the Russian-made MDM-6 and the Chinese EM-52 rocket-propelled mine. Finally, Iran's maritime exclusion capabilities include a large number of ship-launched ASCMs as well as ASCMs that deploy in batteries along the coast and on its fortified islands.<sup>63</sup>

## Air Defenses

Given U.S. reliance on establishing early air superiority in a conflict, air defense is an obvious priority for Iran. Iran's air defense force operates a combination of Russian-built SA-2, SA-5, and SA-15 as well as some leftover U.S. Improved HAWK surface-to-air missiles (SAM).<sup>64</sup>

The emphasis on air defense rather than modernizing its fighter aircraft makes sense from a cost perspective, as SAMs are far cheaper than developing and fielding a fleet of modern combat aircraft. Iran's military has opted to use its limited air defense assets to protect high-value point targets, including the national command authority in Tehran and the country's nuclear facilities. The most advanced of these systems, like the short-range SA-15 for example, is deployed at key nuclear facilities such as the uranium conversion facility at Isfahan and the Russian-built nuclear reactor at Bushehr.<sup>65</sup> Iran's existing SAM capabilities are still vulnerable to electronic warfare and have limited sensor range, which makes long-distance targeting difficult. Shortfalls in Iran's Command, Control, Communications, and Computers (C4) infrastructure prevent it from combining its disparate air defenses into an integrated air defense

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62 Not to be confused with the Iranian-built fighter aircraft of the same name, the Azarakhsh-class are Iranian-built versions of China Cat-class missile boats. See Fariborz Haghshenass, *Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare* (Washington, DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, September 2008), p. 12.

63 Ibid., pp. 41–43.

64 Ibid., pp. 44–45.

65 Ibid.

system (IADS). Iran continues to seek capabilities from Russia and China for a long-range, modern SAM-based IADS.

Many observers, particularly in Israel, have argued that the deployment of the Russian S-300 air and missile defense system to Iran significantly alters the balance of forces in the region. This SAM system is capable of simultaneously identifying, targeting, and shooting down multiple aircraft and missiles. Depending on the variant, the S-300 can be used against a wide range of aircraft and missiles including fixed and rotary wing, unmanned aerial systems, short- and potentially medium-range ballistic missiles, cruise missiles, and air-launched standoff weapons. The S-300 can operate as a standalone, road mobile unit with some off-road capability or be integrated into a larger IADS. Unlike the systems that the Iranians currently have, the S-300 is difficult to jam or spoof. Rendering the system ineffective would require sophisticated manned aircraft, potentially with stealth capabilities and standoff munitions—capabilities that few militaries besides the United States possess.<sup>66</sup> The deployment of the S-300 would make it a priority target for U.S. forces before they could proceed to other tasks. It will also force regional militaries to invest in more sophisticated platforms if they want to maintain their current ability to conduct airstrikes against Iran.

### Passive Defenses

Iran's passive defense architecture owes a great deal to lessons learned from observing Iraq's crushing defeat at the hands of U.S. air power in both 1991 and 2003. Since Iran's military doctrine heavily emphasizes surviving an initial attack, it is not a surprise that Tehran has invested significant effort to creating passive defenses. In the prevailing political culture of the Middle East, simply surviving an attack would still allow Iran to achieve an overall political and psychological "victory." A political or ideological victory could entail merely withstanding an assault, retaining some asymmetric capabilities including its nuclear technology, and maintaining some ability to continue to resist the Great Satan. This could be accomplished even if Iran sustained heavy casualties and equipment losses. Iran seeks to strengthen its survivability by employing measures such as asset dispersion, hardened shelters, and hidden installations.

Iran's many hardened and deeply buried facilities impose serious constraints on the strike assets of Iran's opponents. Such targets would require specialized heavy munitions such as the GBU-28, a 5,000-pound class penetrating laser-guided bomb that can only be carried by U.S. Air Force bombers and F-15E aircraft. The mobility of Iranian missile systems, as noted earlier, makes them harder for U.S. or Israeli fighters to locate and destroy. Tehran could also conceal military systems along its coastline, which is naturally peppered with islands, inlets, and coves, or in tunnels and underground bunkers on islands built by the IRGC. Iran has also built underground silos to make its ballistic missiles less vulnerable to airstrikes. The use of

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66 Christopher Harmer, *The Strategic Impact of the S-300 in Iran* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute, 2016).

decoys and deception can also cause U.S. forces to waste sorties and expensive precision-guided munitions.<sup>67</sup>

Iran's mosaic defense emphasizes a decentralized command and control architecture to provide commanders more autonomy to respond to circumstances in their area of responsibility. This is also part of Iran's passive defense efforts, making its forces more survivable and resilient in the face of initial strikes. The overall system takes advantage of Iran's strategic depth, 800 miles of coastline, and extreme mountainous geography. The autonomy enjoyed by provincial commanders makes Iran an even more unpredictable adversary in the event of a conflict in terms of escalation, especially in the Gulf.

## Cyber

Iranian leaders have chosen to rely heavily on asymmetric approaches to warfighting over the past 30 years, and Iran's emerging cyber warfare capabilities provide yet another arrow in their national security quiver. Cyber remains the next frontier for Iranian deterrence and aggression as it allows Iran the capability to "strike its adversaries and project power globally, instantaneously and on a sustained basis." These are objectives it cannot achieve in the physical sphere.<sup>68</sup>

The development of Iran's cyber capabilities initially stemmed from the regime's desire to control domestic politics by preventing the infiltration of foreign culture, which Iran's clerical leaders feared would undermine the country's social cohesion and the legitimacy of the Islamic Republic. This effort was concentrated on the anti-regime opposition and was galvanized by the eruption of the Green Revolution following the disputed Presidential election of June 2009. At that point, Tehran intensified its cyber-surveillance efforts and Internet censorship. These capabilities were increasingly focused externally after Iran discovered Stuxnet, a computer worm that caused physical damage to 1,000 centrifuges enriching uranium, effectively delaying Iran's nuclear program by at least a year. In the following two years, Iran discovered two malware programs, Duqu and Flame, on its computer networks, indicating to Iranian officials that adversaries continued to carry out cyber-attacks against the Islamic Republic. It is not surprising that the Supreme Council of Cyberspace, a body that answers to Supreme Leader Khamenei directly, was created in 2012 and began hacking into the emails of at least 300,000 Iranian Gmail users.<sup>69</sup>

In flexing its nascent cyber-espionage capabilities, Iranian entities later targeted individuals, government offices, and infrastructure in at least 16 countries using spear-phishing emails and spyware to gain sensitive and person data about individuals. These units were also collecting

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<sup>67</sup> Gunzinger and Dougherty, *Outside-In*, p. 45.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Eisenstadt, "Iran's Lengthening Cyber Shadow," Research Note 34, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 2016.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.



data related to critical infrastructure such as airports, major transportation networks, telecommunication and technology firms, educational institutes, healthcare providers, oil and gas companies, U.S. military installations, and defense contractors. Iran has greatly increased the tempo of its cyber operations over the past five years, apparently corrupting 30,000 hard drives at Saudi Aramco in 2012 and later targeting Qatar's RasGas. The same year, it targeted U.S. banks and the U.S. stock exchange in three separate waves of attacks, in addition to unsuccessfully attempting to infiltrate Israeli and Saudi power grids.<sup>70</sup> Like its warfighting capabilities, Iran also began exporting cyber capabilities to its proxies. Hezbollah, its most important proxy, has conducted cyber-attacks on Israeli critical infrastructure.

In the future, cyber warfare may become Iran's preferred weapon and a central component of its national security strategy since it has fewer drawbacks than other warfighting measures in Tehran's arsenal. If, for instance, Tehran were to try and close the globally important Strait of Hormuz, it would also inflict serious economic harm on itself. Although Iran remains the leading state sponsor of terror, it has also been subject to terrorist attacks and assassinations of scientists involved in its nuclear program. The threat of missile attack by Iran's enormous and varied arsenal may be helpful in coercing its neighbors but would open Iran to retaliation. Cyber warfare, alternatively, gives Iran a wide set of scalable options that, given the difficulties of attack attribution, allows it deniability and ambiguity, which enable Iran to manage risks more predictably. Cyber warfare also fits well into Iran's prevailing strategic culture that puts an equal or even greater value on achieving psychological as opposed to physical effects.

Although it doesn't currently rival the cyber prowess of the United States or China, Iranian hackers are proficient at targeting the private sector and individual citizens. By acquiring cutting-edge cyber capabilities, Iran can establish itself not only as a regional power but also as one that could go head to head with United States, China, and Russia. Indeed, it continues to invest heavily and is already on its way to being the sixth member of the cyber superpower club. (It currently includes the United States, the United Kingdom, Israel, Russia, and China.) Although monetary expenditures are not necessarily the best metric, it is still a striking testimony to the seriousness of Iran's level of effort that Tehran says it spends about 1 billion dollars a year on cyber programs. Britain's electronic surveillance and cyber defense services (Government Communications Headquarters, or GCHQ) spends 2 billion.<sup>71</sup>

The relative advantage Iran's expanding cyber capabilities could yield in a military contingency could supplement its missile arsenal as a major part of Iran's strategic forces in the future.<sup>72</sup> In ten to fifteen years, Iran's missile force is expected to be double or triple the current size and much more accurate. The major limits of the nuclear deal will have been lifted, and it will likely possess more advanced cyber capabilities. In combination, these capabilities will pose major challenges for regional missile defenses that protect military and

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<sup>70</sup> Ibid.

<sup>71</sup> Sam Jones, "Cyber Warfare: Iran Opens a New Front," *Financial Times*, April 2016.

<sup>72</sup> Eisenstadt, "Iran's Lengthening Cyber Shadow."

critical infrastructure targets and civilian population centers. As a result, preventive military action by the United States, in the event of an attempted nuclear breakout or efforts to aid allies against Iran in a regional conflict, will likely take longer, cost more, and incur more casualties.

The lack of direct retaliation by the United States in the face of Iran's various efforts in the cyber domain may incline leaders in Tehran to make increasing recourse to the nation's cyber capabilities and perhaps lead them to overreach in this domain. For instance, during the period of time when Iran's enrichment activity is limited under the JCPOA, Iran may find it more attractive to rely on its cyber capabilities. Iranian cyber activity appears to have decreased while the Iran nuclear deal was in the final stages of negotiations. Since the signing of the JCPOA with the P-5, however, there has been a surge of malign Iranian cyber activity.<sup>73</sup> Lastly, many of the challenges that the United States faces related to Iran's growing cyber capabilities are inherent to the nature of cyber warfare in general. There are no generally accepted cyber war norms for nation-states and little consensus on what is merely a nuisance and what might be considered an act of war. As long as this remains the case, Iran seems prepared to develop and employ its cyber capabilities to its full advantage. In an environment where deterring Iran is already a challenge, cyber may prove one of the most difficult areas of all for Iran's competitors.

## Supporting Proxy Forces and Opposition Across the Region

Iran's leaders have employed terrorism as a fundamental and enduring part of their foreign policy toolkit since the early years of the Islamic Republic. These efforts have intensified over the past decade. Today, Iranian support for proxies and surrogates remains one of the most disruptive tactics Iran wields in its energetic effort to exert its mastery over the region.

Supporting proxies allows Iran to undermine rivals, disrupt the status quo, and project power beyond its borders at a relatively low cost and with high levels of deniability. Much like its other asymmetrical capabilities, terrorism allows Tehran flexibility to retaliate, intimidate adversaries, deter aggression, and compensate for the regime's lack of conventional military power. Keeping proxies and surrogates in the field is also relatively cheap, allowing Iran to sow instability with a relatively modest investment of resources. The combined costs of its regional activities is estimated to hover around 10 billion a year, which amounts to less than 3 percent of a GDP that experts assess at somewhere between 400 billion to 1 trillion dollars.<sup>74</sup> This may explain why Iranian support to regional allied and proxy militaries has remained robust and, by some estimates, has even increased despite the crippling financial sanctions that Iran has

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73 David E. Sanger and Nicole Perlroth, "Iranian Hackers Attack State Dept. via Social Media Accounts," *The New York Times*, November 24, 2015; and Jay Solomon, "U.S. Detects Flurry of Iranian Hacking," *The Wall Street Journal*, November 04, 2015.

74 Patrick Clawson, "How Iran's Economic Gain from a Nuclear Deal Might Affect Its Foreign Policy," Policywatch 2452, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy, July 10, 2015.

faced for many years. Even under the most difficult economic circumstances, the funds for the IRGC's activities are a priority, and its budget has not suffered.<sup>75</sup>

Iran exploits Sunni and Shiite tensions in Lebanon, Gaza, Yemen, Iraq, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Syria, and elsewhere in the region to facilitate recruitment of surrogate and proxy forces. Historically, Tehran relies on the IRGC Quds Force, the military branch assigned to special operations and unconventional warfare (UW), to train and employ these networks of violent non-state actors. These organizations help Iran wage low-level proxy or indirect wars and pressure regional states with threats to turn dissidence into full-blown insurgencies.

Its largest proxy, Hezbollah, is also one of the most advanced terrorist organizations in the world. Iran's longstanding ties with Lebanon's Shiite community dating back to the 1970s eventually evolved into operational and financial support for the terrorist organization. Hezbollah's ongoing "resistance" to Israel has inserted Iran into Levantine politics and given the Islamic Republic wider appeal throughout the Middle East. This intervention has come at the expense of the already fragile political balance in Lebanon.

The presence of the IRGC force and proxies frequently yield an influential if not decisive impact in the Middle East. The deployment of IRGC and other Iranian-sponsored Shia militias in support of Assad's regime in Syria—in coordination with Russia—has changed the military balance on the battlefield between the regime and the Syrian rebels. Iran has also supplied weapons and training to the Shia Houthi militants who took over Yemen's capital amidst its ongoing civil war. Its support to the rebel group hastened the government's collapse and the growth of the resulting power vacuum, which has sparked a civil war and enabled the resurgence of al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP).<sup>76</sup>

Iran's proxies have also been innovators in UW. Hezbollah pioneered the employment of suicide bombing against Israel in addition to the use of battlefield rockets for the bombardment of Israeli population centers with strategic effects. Hamas, for its part, pioneered the use of homemade rockets while Iranian-backed Shiite groups used explosively formed projectiles (EFP), a particularly effective shaped charge, and improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAM), against U.S. forces in Iraq.<sup>77</sup>

While spreading Iran's Shia-tinged revolutionary ideology was the initial impetus for backing terrorist groups, Tehran has, over the years, become more ecumenical in its support for terrorism. The Islamic Republic has provided support to Kurdish groups as well as Sunni Palestinian groups like the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (PIJ) and Hamas. Tehran's support for

75 Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Elite Guards to Gain Regional, Economic Power in Post-Sanctions Era," *Reuters*, January 19, 2016. For the limited impact of sanctions on Iran, see Takeyh and Maloney, "The Self-Limiting Success of Iran Sanctions."

76 For the activities of the IRGC, see Kenneth Katzman, *Iran's Foreign and Defense Policies*, RR 44017 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, February 6, 2017), pp. 4–6; and Frederick Kagan, Ahmad K. Majidiyar, Danielle Pletka, and Marisa Cochrane Sullivan, *Iranian Influence in the Levant, Egypt, Iraq, and Afghanistan* (Washington, DC: American Enterprise Institute and the Institute for the Study of War, May 2012).

77 Eisenstadt, *The Strategic Culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran*.

Hamas provides Iran with strategic access to Israel's southern border that complements the access it enjoys to the north with Hezbollah, elevating Israeli strategic concerns about the threat Iran poses to its security.

Iran's support for Syria, which has been one of Iran's few nation-state allies, has been the most consequential to the United States over the past few years. Iran's military support for Assad has helped remedy the manpower shortfalls that were crippling the regime's military performance in the civil war and dramatically improved the odds of the Baathist regime's survival. Iran has provided military supplies, training, and IRGC ground forces to prop up the Damascus government forces. It is also assisting pro-government Shia militias from other countries and Hezbollah in their direct combat role. Iran's non-military contributions to Assad's war efforts—mainly supplying oil to keep Syria's economy afloat—may be even more consequential. Given the influence Iran's proxies groups continue to wield in the Middle East at little relative cost, there is no reason to expect the leadership's priorities to change, especially as the sanctions relief provided by the JCPOA gives Iran greater access to the international financial system.

## How Should the United States Respond?

Iran's rise as a regional power and its ability to exercise its formidable array of asymmetric and irregular capabilities in pursuit of its ambitions for hegemony present the United States with one of its most complex defense and security policy challenges. The difficulty of dealing with the security issues posed by Iran is accentuated by the fact that the United States must concurrently deal with a persistent terrorist threat from Sunni Arab Islamist extremists—in addition to addressing myriad challenges in Asia and Europe. The prospect of withdrawal from the region or dealing with one but not both problems may sound attractive to analysts and political leaders, but the United States will nonetheless find itself forced to deal with both simultaneously and in short order.

The Islamic Republic should be challenged through indirect approaches that leverage alliance relationships, build partner capacity, and employ non-military advantages rather than the direct use of military force.<sup>78</sup> The United States needs to develop a comprehensive strategy to deal with Iran's multi-pronged modes of force subversion rather than singling out hot-button issues that have taken up inordinate policymaking time and attention—even those as important as the nuclear issue. A good strategy must first recognize that the Islamic Republic is not a conventional state that simply seeks to maximize its national interests, but rather a revolutionary regime whose objective is to undermine and overturn the regional security system the United States sustained since 1971. Given the extent to which Iran threatens this system, U.S.

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<sup>78</sup> For details on the generic challenges of global powers dealing with rising regional powers, see the exemplary study by Evan Braden Montgomery, *In the Hegemon's Shadow: Leading States and the Rise of Regional Powers* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2016). For the security challenges in Asia and Europe, see the other papers in this series by the Center for Strategic and Budgetary Assessments.

policymakers should seek to roll back Iranian influence and systematically undermine the basis of the clerical regime's power.

A tougher stance toward Iranian compliance with the nuclear deal should be a priority matter. The United States should no longer be in the position of either advocating exemptions or exceptions to the letter of the agreement. Iran has been complaining that the pace of sanctions relief has not been fast enough and that Iran still has difficulty gaining access to the international financial system. Concerns about Iran's ongoing ballistic missile program may provide the United States an opportunity to open a negotiation to revise the JCPOA or to make its limits permanent. The diplomacy involved in such an effort is beyond the scope of this paper, but if revision becomes a possibility, the priority objectives in the renegotiation should be, first, ending the sunset provisions that put time limits on those measures that restrict Iran's uranium enrichment activities and, second, more intrusive inspections of Iran's nuclear program on the order of what South Africa agreed to with the IAEA when it gave up its nuclear program.<sup>79</sup>

An important part of any U.S. strategy for blunting Iran's reach is energy policy. Keeping the price of oil at a reasonably low level will deny resources for Iran to continue supporting its terrorist proxies; its efforts to subvert its neighbors; its ballistic missile program; and its development of air and missile defenses, other asymmetric conventional capabilities that threaten U.S. forces in the region, and nuclear program. History is instructive here. Energy prices have played an outsized role in Iran's political and security upheavals in the past and may do so once again. Despite understandable desires to use America's new found energy self-sufficiency to disengage from this region, it is imperative that the new U.S. administration sees energy as a comparative strategic advantage in the military competition with Iran and make energy policy a centerpiece of its approach to and policy for containing Iran. The U.S. congress has already taken some steps allowing the United States to export oil. Other steps to increase energy exports from the United States could also be helpful to this objective.<sup>80</sup>

No effort to contain Iran, through energy policy or military cooperation, will be successful without healthy U.S. partnerships with the states in the region who have been de facto allies

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79 This section draws on Eliot A. Cohen, Eric S. Edelman, and Ray Takeyh, "Time to Get Tough on Tehran: Iran Policy After the Deal," *Foreign Affairs* 95, no. 1, January/February 2016. For Iranian complaints about sanctions relief, see Ladane Nasseri, "Zarif Wants U.S. to Reassure Banks on Doing Iran Business," *Bloomberg*, April 19, 2016, available at <https://www.bloomberg.com/news/articles/2016-04-19/zarif-wants-u-s-to-reassure-banks-on-doing-business-with-iran>; and Matthew Lee, "Kerry: US Open to Further Clarifying Iran Sanctions Relief," *Associated Press*, June 15, 2016, available at <http://bigstory.ap.org/article/1eb042f078f840acad85cf8f1b3f2055/kerry-norway-sees-iran-fm-over-nuke-deal-sanctions>. For the lessons of South Africa as applicable to the Iranian nuclear program, see David Albright with Andrea Stricker, *Revisiting South Africa's Nuclear Weapons Program: Its History, Dismantlement, and Lessons for Today* (Washington, DC: ISIS, 2016), pp. 275–299.

80 Congress has already taken steps to end the ban on oil exports from the United States, but more can be done. See Robert McNally, "American Energy Exports: Opportunities for U.S. Allies and U.S. National Security," Hearing Before the Subcommittee on Multilateral International Development, Multilateral Institutions, and International Economic, Energy, and Environmental Policy, U.S. Senate Committee on Foreign Relations, June 23, 2015; and Leon E. Panetta and Stephen J. Hadley, "The Oil Export Ban Harms National Security," *Wall Street Journal*, May 19, 2015.

for most of the post-World War II period. All those relationships—foremost with Israel, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Egypt, and Turkey—have been strained by deep differences with the United States over the Iran nuclear deal, the U.S. reaction to the Arab Spring, and the subsequent civil war in Syria. A priority for the Trump administration should be to repair these relationships. Developing a common understanding on the appropriate political-military division of labor among allies will be imperative to impose costs on Iran, limit its reach around the region, and roll back some of its geopolitical gains.

The long-standing Arab–Persian hostility is rooted in Tehran’s drive to export its revolutionary version of political Islam and subvert the rulers of the Sunni Gulf States as well as other countries in the region. While the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries help act as a bulwark against Iranian expansion and have an important role in collective security against Tehran, their capacity to act collectively and decisively is limited. Divisions among GCC countries over how to manage the Iran problem have frequently made it difficult for them to arrive at a common security policy. Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, and the UAE have been more outspoken about the Iranian threat in recent years than Oman and Qatar, both of which share natural gas fields with Iran. The latter are inclined to believe that containing Tehran’s ambitions should be done through trade and confidence-building measures rather than more coercive policies. Inter-GCC relations are also problematic with regard to issues other than Iran. The UAE, Bahrain, and Saudi Arabia, for instance, continually clash with Qatar regarding its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, which they see as a threat to their internal security.<sup>81</sup>

Naturally, these political differences have influenced military cooperation among the GCC states and between the GCC and the United States. Some of the GCC states possess technologically advanced radar and missile systems, aircraft, ships, and weaponry. The GCC has made significant gains in areas such as internal security, civil defense, critical infrastructure protection, and coastal defense, but there is more to be done in the areas of shared early-warning and integrated air and missile defense capabilities. Their reluctance to cooperate, however, means these countries are less likely to combine resources for mutual benefit, with negative consequences for regional security. The GCC states, for example, have squandered opportunities to create shared aerial refueling or airborne warning and control system (AWACS) fleets. As a result of this dysfunction, the GCC is less than the sum of its parts when it comes to generating deterrent capabilities against Iran.

The United States must remain a decisive player for the foreseeable future in determining whether the GCC matures into a coalition with meaningful capabilities to blunt threats

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81 For the background on the difficulties of GCC security cooperation, see Brian Katulis, “Sustainability is Elusive for Persian Gulf Regional Security System,” *World Politics Review*, June 29, 2010; F. Gregory Gause, III, “Why Isn’t There An Anti-Iran Alliance?” *Monkey Cage Blog*, Washington Post, June 3, 2015, available at <https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/monkey-cage/wp/2015/06/03/why-isnt-there-an-anti-iran-alliance/>; Christopher M. Blanchard and Richard F. Grimmett, *The Gulf Security Dialogue and Related Arms Sale Proposals*, RL 34322 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, January 14, 2008); and Jeffrey Martini, Becca Wasser, Dalia Dassa Kaye, Daniel Egel, and Cordaye Ogletree, *The Outlook for Arab Gulf Cooperation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016).



emanating from Iran. The United States has not only been the Gulf States' principal strategic partner and primary arms provider—with over 75 billion dollars in arms sales commissioned from U.S. vendors since 2007—but also acts as the nervous system of the coalition.<sup>82</sup> While the GCC has invested heavily in some of the most technologically advanced military systems, it still looks to its Western partners to provide the integrated solutions for the use of this equipment. The United States typically is the guiding hand that monitors the collaboration of such systems, ensuring cohesion and standardization.

Similarly, it is typically the United States that acts as a mediator prodding the GCC to resolve their internecine disputes. Middle Eastern countries have traditionally preferred to maintain bilateral relationships with the United States and have generally shunned multilateral arrangements due to the lack of trust among Arab states. The disharmony requires heavy involvement by the United States to help guide the GCC in the direction of increased cooperation.

U.S. relations with the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and the other Gulf States are strained. The occasionally sharp differences during the past few years over Iran have caused some of the Gulf States to question the credibility of the U.S. commitment to defend them. These U.S.–GCC tensions have complicated the already complex security cooperation picture in the Gulf. Declining public enthusiasm in the United States for further involvement in the Middle East and ongoing U.S. defense budget cuts have caused Gulf leaders to question whether Washington has the will and capability to intervene. Some Gulf countries believe the Iran deal was an excuse for further U.S. disengagement from the region. Leaders across the Middle East unfavorably contrast Washington's abandonment of its longtime partnership with Egypt's Hosni Mubarak with Tehran and Moscow's unwavering support for Bashar al-Assad. Perhaps no issue has done more to undermine U.S. credibility than President Obama's refusal to launch a military strike after Assad crossed the President's own "red line" against chemical weapons use in 2013. The Camp David Summit in May 2015 papered over some of the differences and called for intensified cooperation on security assurances; ballistic missile defense; military exercises and training; maritime, infrastructure, and cyber security; counterterrorism; counterterrorism finance; foreign fighter flows; and counterproliferation. Nonetheless, the divide between Washington and its partners in the region currently undercuts the relative strategic advantage that the United States previously enjoyed from its informal alliances in the region.<sup>83</sup>

The Trump administration should send signals that it is returning to the traditional U.S. policy of providing a security framework for the region. Otherwise, the Sunni states are likely to

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82 Mark Landler and Steven Lee Myers, "With \$30 Billion Arms Deal, U.S. Bolsters Saudi Ties," *New York Times*, December 29, 2011.

83 The Joint Statement and the annex to the statement setting out the renewed U.S. commitment to its Gulf partners can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>; and <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2015/05/14/annex-us-gulf-cooperation-council-camp-david-joint-statement>.



seek other options for their defense, either by hedging with Russia, China, and Iran or developing their own nuclear capabilities in anticipation of Iran's emergence as a nuclear power in ten years.<sup>84</sup>

A reinvigorated U.S.–Gulf security dialogue can help focus the Gulf States on procuring the kind of capabilities that would make the most contribution to raising the costs of conflict to Iran and deterring the outbreak of hostilities there. Priority investments would concentrate on tactical ballistic missiles, unmanned aerial vehicles, airborne and maritime strike, special operations forces, and directed energy defense systems to deter Iranian aggression. They might also consider investing in land-based missile and rocket artillery systems for counter-battery fires against Iranian cruise missiles and short-range ballistic missiles. Key capabilities should include tactical ballistic missiles with submunition warheads, coastal counter-battery radars, and airborne surveillance platforms with ground moving target indicator radar. Regional air forces should emphasize the suppression or destruction of enemy air defenses along the Iranian coast, enabling fixed and rotary wing platforms to counter Iranian cruise missiles, clear mines, and target Iranian surface vessels. Investments should be made in electronic warfare systems, anti-radiation missiles, multi-mission helicopters, and ground attack helicopters. Lastly, Gulf Arab naval forces should emphasize unmanned platforms such as rotary-wing UAVs that can operate from corvettes, land, and offshore energy platforms, as well as unmanned underwater vehicles (UUV) that can disperse mines in port to counter small boats and target enemy ports. Tactical ballistic missiles, ground attack aircraft, and unmanned undersea vehicles capable of dispensing sea mines can all be used to hold Iranian infrastructure at risk, compelling Iran to invest in point defenses and counter-mine capabilities. These capabilities would provide better ability to defend the Gulf States' energy infrastructure, provide for internal defense against subversion, and contribute to maintaining maritime security.

The Gulf countries can use Counter-Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar (C-RAM) systems in combination with passive defense measures and suppression attacks to defend high-value facilities against attacks by Iranian guided rockets and mortars, as well as to reserve scarce and costly missile defense interceptors to deal with Iranian counter attacks if necessary. In the long run, the GCC countries should invest in directed energy defenses, which will offer a much better cost-exchange ratio than current missile defense systems allow.

The development of UW capabilities should also top the priority list of America's Gulf allies. Although Iran supports proxies abroad, it is politically divided and ethnically fragmented. Iran may use its Shia proxies, but the GCC and the United States could target Azeri, Arab, Kurdish, and Baluch populations. The ability of the GCC countries to engage in UW operations, in concert with the United States, could exploit Iranian fears of internal unrest and compel Tehran to devote more resources to internal security. Some countries, like the UAE, already

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84 For details on the potential for a nuclear cascade in the region, see *Chain Reaction* (U.S. GPO, 2008).

possess robust SOF and internal security forces that could assist the other Gulf Arab States with their internal security.

The United States, in collaboration with the UK and France, will also want to disperse, harden, and diversify its existing bases in the region to neutralize the effects of Iran's missile capabilities. U.S. Gulf allies should be encouraged to assist in this effort because it would allow for more rapid U.S. reinforcement if and when it became necessary. Additionally, the United States and its allies will want to impose costs on Iran by playing on its existing paranoia and proclivities, forcing it to spend more on the defense of its own key facilities and infrastructure.

Creating the conditions for a regional rollback of Iran's gains in Syria, Yemen, Iraq and elsewhere will be the most challenging element of a new strategy. The conflicts in Syria and Yemen have become brutal and complex. U.S. passivity has allowed Russia and Iran to dictate the shifting balance of power on the ground and shore up the Assad regime. Changing the dynamic will be difficult because the effective absence of the United States in regional diplomacy has now conditioned local parties to consider peace-making initiatives without seeking U.S. support. The recent trilateral Russian-Turkish-Iranian ceasefire is the best example.

Nonetheless, a basis for a renewed U.S. political-military role exists. None of the traditional U.S. allies and partners in the region, including problematic ones like Turkey, wish to submit to Iran's regional diktat. Kurds, Sunni Arab tribal groups, moderate Shia, and Druze provide an indigenous source of potential resistance to Iranian domination. Turning regional concerns about Iranian domination into an actual strategy will probably require a new strategic understanding with Turkey that resolves Turkish concerns about the emergence of a Kurdish entity, Rojava, in northeastern Syria and the establishment of some kind of no-fly and/or safe zone for refugees along the Turkish border. The United States will also have to become a full partner in the Saudi and Emirati efforts to defeat the Iranian-sponsored Houthi rebels in Yemen, providing more rather than less equipment and intelligence support to those countries. These efforts to combat Iranian adventurism in the region should be complemented by increased pressure on the illicit financial activities of Iran's proxies Hezbollah and Hamas.<sup>85</sup>

Intensified pressure on Iran's aggressive external policies will need to be reinforced by an effort to wage political warfare against the regime. Scholars debate Iran's vulnerabilities and whether they offer opportunities for the United States to compete more effectively with Iran. One recent study examining Iran's ethnic, demographic, and economic challenges concluded that the clerical regime was very well embedded in Iranian society and was unlikely to moderate its course if pressured from the outside. Furthermore, it suggested that U.S. military action against Iran would possibly retard the nation's inexorable tendency to move toward more democratic domestic political arrangements. This study was published shortly before the regime was rocked by the Green Revolution, once again demonstrating that regimes in the Middle East can seem very stable and safe until they aren't. A more recent study grounded

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85 Cohen, Edelman, and Takeyh, "Time to Get Tough on Tehran: Iran Policy After the Deal."

in the rich, sociological models of democratization in countries like Indonesia, South Korea, and the Philippines concludes: “The Islamic Republic has generated multiple, irreconcilable conflicts—rooted in the core of the theocracy—that are too extensive to be reformed. The Islamic Republic’s rulers have systematically downgraded the people’s role in the state and rejected democratic transformation. While the timing of an eruption is difficult to predict, the variables presented here strongly suggest that Iran’s democratization will likely proceed through a disruptive, revolutionary path.”<sup>86</sup>

Rather than predicated strategy on the assumption of inevitable liberalization or a violent, revolutionary change of regime, U.S. policymakers should seek to blunt the worst aspects of Iran’s regional behavior, raise the costs of Iran’s pursuit of destabilizing weapons programs, and encourage the Iranian population to seek greater freedom of expression and democracy. The latter, in and of itself, imposes a cost on the Iranian regime. The United States missed an opportunity in June 2009 to support the Iranian populace during the Green Revolution, but much of the Iranian population continues to be disaffected by the clerical regime. The United States needs to harness print, radio, television, and social media to highlight the costs of Iran’s overseas adventures as well as the corruption, cronyism, and economic misrule that have been the hallmark of the Iranian theocracy. Public exposure of defections from the regime could heighten the paranoia of an already suspicious regime. These measures could be supplemented by intensified sanctions on key leaders of the IRGC, a crucial instrument of Iran’s foreign adventures.

The United States cannot dictate the pace or timing of political change in Iran, but it can increase the odds that the Iranian people will demand changes in Iranian policy that make subverting its neighbors or upending the regional security order more difficult. The United States can also impose costs on Tehran by inducing Iran to spend more on defensive capabilities than on offensive ones, as it did with the Soviet Union. Finally, the United States can improve the capabilities of its allies and its own defense posture so that, if a conflict does come, it will be fought on more advantageous terms to the United States.

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86 Keith Crane, Rollie Lal, and Jeffrey Martini, *Iran’s Political, Demographic and Economic Vulnerabilities* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2008); and Misagh Parsa, *Democracy in Iran: Why It Failed and How It Might Succeed* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2016), pp. 320–321.

## CHAPTER 4

# A Strategy to Defeat the Islamic State, al Qaeda, and Other Jihadist Groups

The second great challenge to regional stability in the Middle East and to U.S. national security is the current struggle against the Islamic State and other jihadist groups in Iraq and Syria. It may be one of the most urgent security challenges confronting the Trump administration, but it dates to the Clinton administration, when the director of the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) proclaimed in a memorandum, “We are at war” with the transnational Islamic extremist movement al Qaeda. His prescient determination to fight the most dangerous Islamic terrorist group did not become a shared objective across the government, however, until the attacks on September 11, 2001.<sup>87</sup>

The 9/11 attacks galvanized the Bush administration to view and handle the challenge of al Qaeda’s terrorist campaign against the United States as a war rather than a law enforcement problem. To that end, the United States launched Operation Enduring Freedom to eliminate the Taliban regime in Afghanistan that hosted al Qaeda’s training camps and leadership. Subsequently, Operation Iraqi Freedom dismantled Saddam Hussein’s Baathist regime in Iraq, which sought to develop WMD, provided sanctuary and financial support for international terrorist groups, and disrupted the stability and security of the Gulf region for 20 years. These major combat operations were accompanied by a global counterterrorism campaign waged by the U.S. military and CIA and focused on senior al Qaeda leadership. Over the years, these military and paramilitary efforts have been supplemented by vigorous financial diplomacy to cut off the flow of funds that sustain terrorist operations. This counterterrorism campaign, punctuated by the successful May 2011 raid on Osama bin Laden’s compound in Pakistan, continues to this day. Over time, both Iraq and Afghanistan became venues for

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87 George Tenet with Bill Harlow, *At the Center of the Storm: My Years at the CIA* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2007) p. 118.

terrorist-led insurgencies that have embroiled U.S. forces in difficult and complex counterinsurgency and stabilization operations.<sup>88</sup>

The campaign against al Qaeda has had some success in decimating the ranks of the senior leadership and imposing prohibitive costs on the ability of the organization to plan mass casualty attacks on the U.S. homeland. Indeed, the United States has evaded any follow-on attacks on the scale of the 9/11 attacks. But al Qaeda has proven remarkably resilient. Despite sustaining heavy blows from U.S. Special Forces and the CIA, it continues to be an influential “brand” in international terrorism. It retains the ability to draw recruits, publish effective propaganda, and pose a serious, if diminished threat to the United States homeland. Ideological schisms in al Qaeda, however, have given rise to jihadist competitors such as the Islamic State. This group represents the greatest immediate threat to regional security in the Middle East.<sup>89</sup>

## The Islamic State Emerges

The militant Sunni movement and self-proclaimed Islamic State was born out of the Iraqi insurgent group Jama’at al-Tawhid wa’al-Jihad led by the Jordanian terrorist and occasionally al Qaeda-affiliated fighter Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. The group would later swear allegiance to al Qaeda, becoming al Qaeda in Iraq. It went on to play a large role in the Iraqi insurgency during the American occupation. The group was defeated and driven underground during the U.S. surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008. AQI’s defeat was attributable to more effective counterinsurgency efforts by U.S. and Iraqi forces in 2007–2008, as well as the fact that AQI’s brutal attacks on a range of targets, including innocent civilians, effectively alienated the extremist organization from large segments of the local population.<sup>90</sup>

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88 Bob Woodward, *Bush at War* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2002); and Bob Woodward, *Plan of Attack: The Definitive Account of the Decision to Invade Iraq* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2004). A more balanced and considered general account is Peter Baker, *Days of Fire: Bush and Cheney in the White House* (New York: Doubleday, 2013). For studies of the counterterror campaign, see Eric Schmitt and Thom Shanker, *Counterstrike: The Untold Story of America’s Secret Campaign Against Al Qaeda* (New York: Times Books, 2011); Peter L. Bergen, *The Longest War: The Enduring Conflict Between America and Al-Qaeda*, illustrated ed. (New York: Free Press, 2011); and Mark Mazzetti, *The Way of the Knife: The CIA, A Secret Army, and A War at the Ends of the Earth* (New York: Penguin Books, 2013). For the extension of the campaign to al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, see Scott Shane, *Objective Troy: A Terrorist, A President, and the Rise of the Drone* (New York: Tim Duggan Books, 2015).

89 Bruce Hoffman, “A First Draft of the History of America’s Ongoing Wars on Terrorism,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1, 2015; Bruce Hoffman, “Al Qaeda’s Uncertain Future,” *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 36, no. 8, 2013; Donald Holbrook, “Al-Qaeda and the Rise of ISIS,” *Survival* 57, no. 2, 2015; John Turner, “Strategic Differences: Al Qaeda’s Split with the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 26, no. 2, 2015; Javier Jordan, “The Effectiveness of the Drone Campaign against Al Qaeda Central: A Case Study,” *Journal of Strategic Studies* 37, no. 1, 2014; and Jenna Jordan, “When Heads Roll: Assessing the Effectiveness of Leadership Decapitation,” *Security Studies* 18, no. 4, 2009.

90 Joby Warrick, *Black Flags: The Rise of ISIS* (New York: Doubleday, 2015). The best accounts of the “surge” are Gordon and Trainor, *The Endgame*; Kimberly Kagan, *The Surge: A Military History* (New York: Encounter Books, 2008); and Biddle, Friedman, and Shapiro, “Testing the Surge.” For a particularly interesting account of Zarqawi’s relationship with Bin Laden and al Qaeda, see Brian Fishman, “Revising the History of al-Qa’ida’s Original Meeting with Abu Musab al-Zarqawi,” *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 10, October 25, 2016.

After U.S. troops withdrew from Iraq in 2011, the group reconfigured itself under new leadership and began to fill the security vacuum that emerged in Syria because of the worsening civil war there. While other militant groups were preoccupied fighting each other and the Assad regime, the Islamic State began to claim territory in the country's eastern provinces, eventually establishing its headquarters in Raqqa. The Islamic State also thrived in the disaffected Sunni tribal areas of Iraq that were progressively alienated from the increasingly sectarian Nouri al-Maliki government in Baghdad. Maliki's sectarianism undermined the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces by appointing officers based on religious confession rather than competence. In June 2014, Islamic State founder Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi captured Mosul and declared a new Caliphate after Iraqi security forces fled the city. After Mosul, the collapse of the Iraqi Security Forces led to a rapid expansion of the new Caliphate's territory in Sunni-majority areas of western Iraq. Within two years of this resurgence, the Islamic State had successfully erased the border between eastern Syria and western Iraq, established a reputation for apocalyptic ideology and savage violence against local populations and Westerners alike, and cultivated a dedicated following of jihadists worldwide. The leaders of the Islamic state soon proclaimed their global ambitions. The group went on to successfully inspire terrorist attacks throughout the region, in Europe, and in the U.S. homeland.<sup>91</sup>

## U.S Response 2014–2016

As a result of the beheading of American journalists James Foley and Steven Sotloff in the summer of 2014, as well as the subsequent public outcry, President Obama announced that the United States would “degrade, and ultimately destroy, ISIL through a comprehensive and sustained counterterrorism strategy.” The rest of that year and most of 2015 were spent carrying out desultory air operations and bolstering local forces such as the Kurdish Peshmerga and their associated Syrian Kurdish militias, Iraqi security forces, Sunni tribes, and the Free Syrian army.<sup>92</sup>

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91 The literature on the Islamic State is growing rapidly. In addition to Warrick, *Black Flags*, see William McCants, *The ISIS Apocalypse: The History, Strategy, and Doomsday Vision of the Islamic State* (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2015); Michael Weiss and Hassan Hassan, *ISIS: Inside the Army of Terror*, illustrated ed. (New York: Regan Arts, 2015); Jessica Stern and J.M. Berger, *ISIS: The State of Terror* (New York: Harper-Collins, 2015); Samuel Laurent, *L'État Islamique: Organigramme, Financements, Filières* (Paris: Éditions du Seuil, 2015); Pierre-Jean Luizard, *Le Piège Daech: L'État Islamique ou le retour de l'Histoire* (Paris: La Découverte, 2015); Kilcullen, *Blood Year*; Charles R. Lister, *The Syrian Jihad: Al-Qaeda, The Islamic State and the Evolution of an Insurgency* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2015); Brian H. Fishman, *The Master Plan: ISIS, Al Qaeda, and the Jihadi Strategy for Final Victory* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2016); and George Joffé, “The Fateful Phoenix: the Revival of Al-Qa’ida in Iraq,” *Small Wars & Insurgencies* 27, no. 1, 2016.

92 For the public reaction, see Pew Research Center, “As New Dangers Loom, More Think U.S. Does ‘Too Little’ to Solve World Problems: 54% Say Obama’s Approach on Foreign Policy is ‘Not Tough Enough’,” press release, August 28, 2014, available at <http://www.people-press.org/files/2014/08/8-28-14-Obama-and-Foreign-Affairs-release.pdf>; “Statement by the President on ISIL,” The White House, September 10, 2014, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2014/09/10/statement-president-isil-1>; and Mark Gunzinger and John Stillion, “The Unserious Air War Against ISIS,” *The Wall Street Journal*, October 14, 2014.

When he arrived in office in early 2015, Secretary of Defense Carter publicly suggested that the United States did not yet have a strategy to accomplish the strategic objectives President Obama had announced in September 2014. “I think we have the ingredients of a strategy,” he commented after a day-long discussion with military and diplomatic leaders in the region.<sup>93</sup> After conducting a strategy review, Secretary Carter articulated the elements of a revitalized strategy in Congressional testimony that outlined nine lines of effort:

1. Building a more inclusive, multi-sectarian government in Iraq and securing a post-Assad political transition to a more inclusive government in Syria that will help prosecute the campaign against ISIS.
2. Deny ISIS safe haven.
3. Build Partner Capacity, along with allies, in Iraq and Syria.
4. Intensify intelligence collection.
5. Disrupt ISIS’s finances.
6. Counter ISIS’s messaging campaign.
7. Disrupt the flow of foreign fighters.
8. Humanitarian support for those displaced by the conflict.
9. Protect the homeland.

After implementing this strategy and months of incremental progress rebuilding indigenous Iraqi forces, the Iraqis, with U.S. assistance and planning, retook Ramadi, Haditha, and the Islamic State’s stronghold in Fallujah. Once Iraqi forces had reestablished control over most of Anbar province, they began preparing to take Mosul, a battle that is still underway.

Before leaving office in December, Secretary Carter reported on the progress of the campaign. He noted that U.S. forces were “bringing the great weight of our entire range of capabilities to bear in the enabling of capable and motivated local forces” to expel ISIS from Raqqa and Mosul. Taking back territory from ISIS is key to undermining its narrative that it has created a new Caliphate and would put it “on an irreversible path to a lasting defeat.” That said, the only way ISIS can ultimately be defeated is by indigenous forces that can not only clear ISIS forces from Mosul and Raqqa but also hold and rebuild those areas. Furthermore, the only way to make sure that ISIS’s defeat is decisive and long-lasting will be to:

continue to counter foreign fighters trying to escape and ISIL’s attempts to relocate or reinvent itself. To do so, not only the United States but our coalition must endure and remain militarily engaged. In Iraq in particular, it will be necessary for the coalition to provide sustained

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<sup>93</sup> Gordon Lubold, “SecDef: The Strategy Against the Islamic State is Working,” *Defense One*, February 23, 2015, available at [http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/02/secdef-strategy-against-islamic-state-working/105900/?oref=d\\_brief\\_nl](http://www.defenseone.com/threats/2015/02/secdef-strategy-against-islamic-state-working/105900/?oref=d_brief_nl).



assistance and carry on our work to train, equip, and support local police, border guards, and other forces to hold the areas cleared from ISIL. And beyond security, there will still be towns to rebuild, services to reestablish, and communities to restore. Those aren't military matters, but they're part of how, after winning the battle, one wins the peace. That's why my principal concern at this juncture is that the international community's stabilization and governance efforts will lag behind the military campaign.

Counterinsurgency analysts who have examined the U.S. counter-ISIS strategy and its execution share these concerns.<sup>94</sup>

The Islamic State has lost almost half of the territory it conquered in Iraq and a quarter of what it controlled in Syria since its peak in 2014.<sup>95</sup> This past year also saw the Islamic State expelled from its former stronghold in the Libyan city of Sirte. In addition, the counter-ISIS coalition has also succeeded in destroying oil wells and interdicting delivery trucks and revenue repositories. These actions have put enormous stress on ISIS's finances because it relied on the oil trade to fill its coffers.<sup>96</sup> Notwithstanding this progress, the campaign to take Mosul has been very slow to unfold, and Iraqi forces have been limited by the fact that the bulk of the fighting has been done by the Iraqi Counter-Terrorism Service. There is also a grave danger that Shia militias operating under Iranian sponsorship will fatally complicate the Iraqi government's ability to execute the "hold and build" phase of the "shape, clear, hold, and build" campaign plan; their very presence is likely to alienate Sunni populations. The current trajectory appears lengthy, and success is not guaranteed, by any means.

Lasting peace will require more than battlefield victories in Mosul and Raqqa. Both the manner in which these cities are liberated as well as the identity of the liberators will have a huge impact on the ability to hold and govern them in the future. Kurdish Peshmerga or Shiite militia forces have been responsible for liberating many parts of Iraq from ISIS control, and there are limits to how far these groups can advance into predominantly Sunni areas without antagonizing the local population. The Islamic State is skilled at instigating sectarian tension and instability, then filling the resulting security vacuums. The ethnosectarian makeup of the liberation forces that hold the territory once it is freed could create tensions among the local populations. The United States has yet to successfully convince the local Sunni populations that were the key to the success of the surge, that it is as committed to the counter-ISIS fight today as it was in 2007–2009. Winning their acquiescence, if not

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94 Secretary Ashton Carter, Statement on Counter-ISIL before the Senate Armed Services Committee, July 7, 2015; Secretary Ashton Carter, "Ensuring Continued Excellence in Defense at a Time of Strategic Transition," Remarks at the Reagan National Defense Forum, Ronald Reagan Presidential Library, Simi Valley, California, December 3, 2016; and Linda Robinson, *Assessment of the Politico-Military Campaign to Counter ISIL and Options for Adaptation* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2016). A good critique of U.S. strategy against the Islamic State is Michael Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy," *War on the Rocks*, June 15, 2015, available at <https://warontherocks.com/2015/06/the-war-against-isil-in-search-of-a-viable-strategy/>.

95 Daniel L. Byman, "What's Beyond the Defeat of ISIS?" *Markaz Blog*, Brookings, September 27, 2016.

96 The counter-ISIS coalition is made up of 66 countries that have either made contributions or participated directly in operations in Iraq and Syria. Kathleen J. McInnis, *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*, R44135 (Washington, DC: Congressional Research Service, August 24, 2016).

their complete allegiance, will be a *sine qua non* for long term success in holding the territories from which ISIS is expelled.

Even if the physical Caliphate disintegrates, it is unlikely the Islamic State will simply disappear. Indeed, its retreat should not be mistaken for its defeat. The many previous iterations of the Islamic State have shown that the group is resilient and tactically flexible. In five years, the group went from a leaderless guerrilla movement to a quasi-state that conquered large swaths of territory by exploiting the collapse of the Syrian state and the sectarian disarray of Iraq. As a result, the Islamic State should be expected to shift tactics from occupying territory to conducting the kind of terrorist attacks that were the signature of the group under Zarqawi's leadership. Daniel Byman explains: "Such a shift is a time-honored rebel tactic: when they can, groups usually try to control territory, mobilize the population and otherwise act like a quasi-state; but if pushed back, they turn to other forms of violence to ensure their relevance."<sup>97</sup>

Islamic State leaders may also attempt to regenerate the organization by inflaming sectarian tensions in other parts of Iraq that have proven hospitable to the group previously. The use of terrorist attacks against Shia civilians would seek to provoke a counteraction by Shiite militias against Sunni Arabs, and potentially among Kurds or Sunni Turkmen. This would essentially replicate the effort that AQI made in late 2007 after it was cleared out of Anbar province by U.S. forces. A surge of attacks on civilians would erode civilian confidence in government and security institutions, impeding long-term efforts to rebuild the political and security architecture of the country. High-profile terrorist attacks can also help recruit new fighters, invigorate Islamic State supporters and sympathizers globally, and help reestablish its legitimacy.<sup>98</sup> If effective governance were to break down in Iraq again, it could potentially lead to a new challenge from al Qaeda or other Islamist extremists, once again raising the prospect of plots against U.S. forces in the region, its allies, and the homeland.

## A Fresh Look at U.S. Strategy for the Counter-ISIS Fight

Against this backdrop, how should the new administration think about articulating its own strategy for countering ISIS? The threat from jihadism, as the 9/11 attacks demonstrated, is a deadly serious one. Although this is not currently an existential threat to the United States, it could again become one over time. Jihadists might, for example, gain access to WMD. They might also undermine the stability of the Middle East to the point that the global order upon which the United States has predicated its approach to security and prosperity since the end of World War II is completely threatened.<sup>99</sup> To prevent this from happening, it would

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<sup>97</sup> Byman, "What's Beyond the Defeat of ISIS?"

<sup>98</sup> Michael Knights and Alex Mello, "Losing Mosul, Regenerating in Diyala: How the Islamic State Could Exploit Iraq's Sectarian Tinderbox," *CTC Sentinel* 9, no. 10, October 2016.

<sup>99</sup> For al Qaeda's interest in WMD, see Rolf Mowatt-Larssen, *Al Qaeda Weapons of Mass Destruction Threat: Hype or Reality?* (Cambridge, MA: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, January 2010).

be necessary to suppress ISIS by denying it territory to govern and preventing mass casualty attacks on Europe or in the U.S. homeland.

Because the threat that the Islamic State poses is not immediate, some observers have suggested that the United States should pursue a “containment” strategy. A containment strategy would abandon the goal of destroying or even defeating ISIS, seek to restrict its geographic reach, and attack its military formations. There is a range of containment options that would enable differing degrees of U.S. disengagement from the region. These could include steps to reduce the U.S. footprint radically in the region by relying on retaliatory raids against ISIS and other jihadist targets in the region. Or it could entail a somewhat larger, but still “light,” U.S. footprint to carry on counterterrorism missions against ISIS and other jihadist groups. The assumption underpinning this is: “The caliphate is rotten at its core and will eventually collapse. A sensible counter-ISIS policy will recognize [sic] this and leave it to rot, focusing in the short run on weakening it militarily and restricting it geographically.” The difficulty is that these more restrained approaches to fighting the Islamic State are likely to be insufficient to the task of degrading and disabling it and other jihadist forces. This is the lesson of the Obama administration’s experience after the killing of bin Laden until the rise of the Islamic State.<sup>100</sup>

If the new administration’s objective is the rapid defeat of ISIS, one option to consider would be to abandon the incremental increases in U.S. advisory forces and deploy a larger U.S. combat force. As David Johnson has pointed out, the counter-ISIS campaign is not a COIN campaign on the model of the surge, but rather a more conventional war against a proto-state.<sup>101</sup>

On the other hand, a vastly expanded campaign against ISIS would likely demand too much in the way of resources, given the other challenges the United States faces in East Asia and Europe. President Obama’s aim of destroying ISIS and President Trump’s promise to eradicate radical Islamic terrorism “completely from the face of the Earth” are not attainable strategic objectives. President Trump’s directive to Secretary of Defense Mattis to develop a strategy to defeat ISIS suggests the new administration, despite its rhetoric, understands this. A “counter-ISIS plus” strategy, as Hal Brands and Peter Feaver have dubbed it, would essentially accept that defeating ISIS means reducing the problem to one that is manageable by

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100 As a recent proposed bipartisan strategy report notes, “The situation in the Middle East is so egregious that some have compared it to the beginning of the Thirty Years War—the 17<sup>th</sup> century religiously-motivated conflict that claimed over a third of the Central European population. It is certainly a humanitarian and geopolitical calamity. There is a real threat of contagion, including terrorist attacks that could destabilize key U.S. allies in the region, in Europe, and parts of Africa, threaten the U.S. homeland, and further undermine the existing international order.” See Derek Chollet et al., *Building “Situations of Strength”: A National Security Strategy for the United States* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution, February 2017), p. 13; and Frederick W. Kagan, Kimberly Kagan, Jennifer Cafarella, Harleen Ghambir, and Katherine Zimmerman, *Al Qaeda and ISIS: Existential Threats to Europe and the United States*, U.S. Grand Strategy: Destroying ISIS and Al Qaeda, Report One (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, January 2016). James Fromson and Steven Simon, “ISIS: The Dubious Paradise of Apocalypse Now,” *Survival* 57, no. 3, 2015; quotation on p. 54. For an excellent critique of containment, see Hal Brands and Peter Feaver, “Trump and Terror: U.S. Strategy after ISIL,” *Foreign Affairs* 96, no. 2, March/April 2017, forthcoming.

101 David E. Johnson, “Fighting the ‘Islamic State’: The Case for U.S. Ground Forces,” *Parameters* 45 no. 1, Spring 2015.

local indigenous forces in the Middle East with ongoing support for training and equipping partner forces and occasional reprisal raids and strikes by U.S. special and air forces.<sup>102</sup>

What would this strategy consist of? It would require the elimination of the Caliphate, which is to say the territorial sanctuary that has been created in Iraq and Syria. It would need to be followed up by an unrelenting counterterrorism campaign that will require continuing some U.S. presence in Iraq—and perhaps no-fly zones along the Turkish and Jordanian borders, as well—to keep the disarray in Syria and Iraq from spreading to neighboring states and maintaining the large counter-ISIS coalition that has been assembled. Finally, it would require dexterous diplomacy to manage the outside powers—Iran, Turkey, and Russia—whose interference could seriously complicate or undermine the objectives of degrading and defeating ISIS and other jihadist forces.

The first and most significant step would be the destruction of the proto-state that ISIS has created on Syrian and Iraqi territory. The result of this action will be, predictably, to drive ISIS underground, where it will return to terrorism and an effort to spark ethnic and sectarian violence in Iraq. This, in turn, will necessitate both a persistent counterterrorism campaign against the remaining organizational nodes of ISIS and a political component to the strategy that supports an inclusive Iraqi government eschewing a sectarian approach to governance. The United States would need a limited but significant enough military presence to support its efforts to press the Iraqi government to pursue inclusive policies that empower Sunni tribal groups and forego the sectarian personnel policies that have undermined the effectiveness of the Iraqi security forces. This would probably require more air combat missions enabled by special operations forces with Joint Terminal Attack Controllers (JTAC), as well as looser rules of engagement both for air strikes and to enable U.S. troops advising Iraqi forces to accompany them into combat. At the more aggressive end of the spectrum “battalion-size U.S. forces would carry out combat operations on the ground, either independently or in support of regional partners.” All of this would have to be underpinned by an ongoing robust security assistance mission to maintain the effectiveness of Iraqi partner forces into the future.<sup>103</sup>

Another imperative will be to keep the disorder in Syria and Iraq from spreading. Turkey, Jordan, and Lebanon are already bearing an enormous refugee burden thanks to the Syrian Civil War. If any of those countries were to degenerate into civil strife, it would provide yet another medium in which ISIS and other jihadist forces could thrive, hence making these regional states more resilient will be an essential part of any effective counter-ISIS strategy. Building partner military capacity is one part of this. It will also necessitate strong and accountable governance by those countries. All three neighbors face challenges, but none faces

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102 Brand and Feaver, “Trump and Terror.” The transcript of President Trump’s Inaugural Address and remarks at the CIA can be found at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/inaugural-address>; and <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/21/remarks-president-trump-and-vice-president-pence-cia-headquarters>. “Presidential Memorandum: Plan to Defeat the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria,” The White House, January 28, 2017, available at <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2017/01/28/plan-defeat-islamic-state-iraq>.

103 Brands and Feaver, “Trump and Terror”; Eisenstadt, “The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy.”

more than Turkey (which will be addressed below). Another element in checking the spread of chaos in the region would be the establishment of a safe zone for refugees. These could be established along both the Turkish and Jordanian borders. They would need to be enabled by U.S. forces, but they could also be supported by indigenous forces with anti-aircraft artillery capability supplied by the United States and other allies.<sup>104</sup>

The United States will need to maintain and manage the international coalition that it has put together to fight ISIS, which consists of the nations participating in air strikes as well as training and equipping local security forces and special forces operations in both Iraq and Syria. Although the individual contributions are not particularly significant, and the United States has repeatedly called on allies to do more, collectively the participation of other states provides international legitimacy and, in some cases, irreplaceable training grounds, bases, and over-flight rights that enable U.S. operations. Without these allied contributions, prosecuting the counter-ISIS campaign would be much more difficult.<sup>105</sup>

## Managing Outside Powers

In addition to managing its allies' contributions, the United States will need to actively manage relationships with Iran, Turkey, and Russia, the result of which will be critical to the outcome of the counter-ISIS effort.

### Turkey

Turkey has borne a disproportionate share of the burden resulting from the Syrian civil war, but the consequences of some Turkish government policies are now haunting a nation beset by terrorist attacks conducted by ISIS and extremist Kurdish elements. Turkey initially sought to conciliate the Assad regime, but when the violence started, it quickly turned on the regime and began to assist the Sunni opposition. It favored, along with Qatar and some other neighboring states, Jabhat al Nusra (now Jabhat Fateh al Sham) and Ahrar al-Sham, but it also turned a blind eye to the activities of militants associated with the Islamic State. As a result, the extremists have well-developed and effective networks in Turkey that have been used to perpetrate terrorist attacks in Turkey itself. For domestic political reasons, the AKP (Justice and Development Party) government has abandoned its opening to the Kurdish population and started a war against the PKK (Kurdistan Workers' Party) terrorist organization that has spread to encompass much of the Kurdish population in Turkey's southeast.

This has created an enormous coalition maintenance and management problem for the United States because it has been relying on local Kurdish forces to conduct ground operations against ISIS in northeastern Syria. This conundrum has been exacerbated by the failed coup attempt against the Erdoğan government in July 2016, setting the stage for the

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104 Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy."

105 McInnis, *Coalition Contributions to Countering the Islamic State*.

Turkish government's current rapprochement with Iran and Russia. Unless careful diplomacy untangles this vexed issue, the United States will continue to face an uncooperative and obstreperous ally in Ankara, which will complicate coalition operations in the air and on the ground.<sup>106</sup>

## Iran

Iranian influence in Iraq is arguably at its highest point. Iranian-backed Shiite militias, or Population Mobilization Units (PMU), and the Revolutionary Guards have played a major role in fighting the Islamic State in northern Iraq. These forces could not only aggravate Sunni populations but may also pose a threat to American troops. Although Iran wants to eradicate the Islamic State, Tehran would prefer a weak and fragmented Iraq that is unable to challenge its regional hegemony. Moreover, the Shia militias, by their actions much less their very presence, have helped alienate the Sunni Arab population in Iraq from the predominantly Shia government in Baghdad.<sup>107</sup>

Tehran has also intervened in Syria, with which it has long ties, to try and shift the balance of forces on the battlefield with units of the IRGC Quds force as well as militia units from Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia groups. In addition, it is providing Syria with much-needed petroleum products and a seemingly limitless line of credit. Iran has a vested interest in keeping the minority Alawite regime of Bashar al-Assad in power. Maintaining the Assad regime ensures that Iran will have at least one nation-state partner in the region that similarly seeks to subvert the U.S.-supported regional order. The continuation of Iran's outsized role will ultimately make any political settlement in Syria very difficult to achieve.

## Russia

Russia directly entered the Syrian civil conflict with air strikes in September 2015. Like the Iranians, with whom they coordinated their intervention, the Russians were acting to support their long-time clients in the Assad regime. Although Russia's official position has been that they are acting to defeat the Islamic State, Russian airstrikes have frequently targeted U.S.-backed groups and rarely, if at all, hit ISIS targets. Moscow's activities in Syria have served to display its military power to the United States and its allies both in the Middle East and the West. It has also been a means of testing its new operational concepts and advertise its military capabilities to boost foreign military sales. Moscow also secured access to its naval base

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106 Eric S. Edelman, Svante E. Cornell, Aaron Lobel, and Michael Makovsky, *The Roots of Turkish Conduct: Understanding the Evolution of Turkish Policy in the Middle East* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, December 2013); Bipartisan Policy Center, Turkey Task Force, *Turkey: An Increasingly Undependable Ally* (Washington, DC: Bipartisan Policy Center, April 2015); Eric S. Edelman, "America's Dangerous Bargain with Turkey," *New York Times*, August 27, 2015; Rod Thornton, "Problems with the Kurds As Proxies Against Islamic State: Insights From the Siege of Kobane," *Small Wars and Insurgencies* 26, no. 6, 2015; and Eric S. Edelman and Henri J. Barkey, "The Obama Administration, Turkey, and Syria's Kurds," *The American Interest*, October 7, 2014.

107 See, for example, Human Rights Watch, *Ruinous Aftermath: Militia Abuses Following Iraq's Recapture of Tikrit* (New York: Human Rights Watch, September 20, 2015).



at Tartus and constructed an air base, allowing it to deploy strike and close support aircraft to reinforce Syrian regime military forces. Russia's active use of air power has also created a major potential impediment to the United States and other allies creating a no-fly or safe zone in Syria.

Russia was able to achieve what the Obama administration said was impossible: a military intervention to change the political balance in Syria. Russia's intervention has given it substantial clout at the negotiating table and allowed it to replace the United States, for the moment, as the nation providing the impetus and framework for efforts to arrive at a negotiated peace settlement in the country. The passivity of the United States in the face of the protracted Syrian crisis means it has a weak hand in Syria and diminished ability to limit and contain Russian influence. This was exemplified by the most recent Russian-Turkish-Iranian brokered ceasefire and subsequent diplomatic efforts from which the United States was excluded.<sup>108</sup>

## Broad Effects Outside of Syria and Iraq

Although the Islamic State is not as formidable a threat as it once was, it still poses a genuine and potentially lasting threat to the Middle East and the West. The tens of thousands of foreign fighters the Islamic State once recruited could now return home to commit acts of terrorism in their homelands. These foreign fighters will also have the benefit of being connected through informal networks generated by the proto-state, linking would-be jihadists to those with similar ideologies and ambitions for support around the globe.

The Islamic State's high-profile attacks, savvy use of social media, and the legitimacy it gained from holding territory have allowed it to expand its influence throughout the Muslim World. Its prominence prompted Nigeria's Boko Haram to declare its allegiance. ISIS sympathizers appear to have been behind the attack that took down a Russian airliner flying from Sinai to Russia, and terrorist attacks backed or inspired by the Islamic State have spread throughout the region: through Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Lebanon, and most recently Jordan. These attacks in the Arab world have second order effects. A rise in attacks could be used as a pretext for Arab leaders to enhance repressive security institutions, flout human rights concerns, oppress opponents, and generally reverse good governance practices, which, in turn, could increase the radicalization of young people and accelerate recruitment.

Many of the nations that produced the most foreign fighters—Belgium, Denmark, and the western Balkan states—also have the lowest capacity for dealing with the threat. A rise in terrorist attacks in Europe is a major potential consequence of the decline in ISIS's fortunes in Iraq and Syria. This is something that will largely have to be handled by ongoing intelligence cooperation among the United States and allied European intelligence services.

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<sup>108</sup> Kathleen Weinberger, *Putin Sets the Stage for the Incoming U.S. Administration* (Washington, DC: Institute for the Study of War, November 30, 2016).



## The Future of Syria

The U.S. counter-ISIS strategy has been focused on pushing ISIS fighters out of the Caliphate's "capitals" in Mosul and Raqqa. In Iraq, the United States has been able to work with Iraqi security forces to retake territory from ISIS. In Syria, the situation has been more complex, and although there is a small special forces presence, the United States has had to rely on a number of unsatisfactory proxies. The Obama administration's Syria policy too often pursued diplomacy without military backing or conversely military action without accompanying diplomacy. To address this gap, the United States should increase the resources devoted to backing armed groups who have the support of the local populations without regard to whether they are fighting the Assad regime or the Islamic State, especially including the Kurdish groups. This will require a nuanced strategy and an acute grasp of the micro-level conflicts in each area of Syria. Although this will be a difficult task, the United States has already seen the costs of inaction. The United States should simultaneously pursue more intensive diplomatic efforts with its allies Turkey and Saudi Arabia to win their support for these efforts. The entire undertaking will have to be underpinned by an increased military commitment to defeating ISIS and supporting U.S.-trained indigenous groups. Only this renewed commitment will enable the United States to shape the process of reaching a negotiated settlement. The United States has a weak hand as a result of its disengagement from the Syria conflict, but demonstrating its commitment to defeating ISIS in Syria and managing local alliances will be required for any successful U.S. strategy in the Levant. Ultimately, the United States will need to seek a negotiated political solution for Syria, but until it succeeds in strengthening the non-ISIS opposition to the Assad regime, this will not be possible.<sup>109</sup>

## Other Jihadist Threats

The liberation of Islamic State territory will pale in comparison to the challenge of filling the vacuum before it or other jihadists groups attempt to refill the void. The Islamic State has shown extraordinary resilience in surviving adverse conditions, reemerging when circumstances are ripe for its resurgence. It is not the only group that is adaptable and adept at playing the long game. Al Qaeda has been quietly but effectively rebuilding its reputation and presence in the Levant and, in particular, Syria, concentrating its resources and establishing itself as a loyal and formidable fighting force against the Assad regime. Whether al Qaeda plays a long game by seeking incremental gains in the Levant or chooses to unleash a wave of attacks to reestablish its legitimacy in the wake of the Islamic State's retreat, any failure by the United States to help fill the void left by the Islamic State will facilitate al Qaeda's resurgence.<sup>110</sup>

Outside of Iraq and Syria, the United States and its allies must seek to curb the spread of violent extremism. For now, the flow of new recruits to the Islamic State has been declining,

109 Thornton, "Problems with the Kurds As Proxies Against Islamic State"; and Eisenstadt, "The War Against ISIL: In Search of a Viable Strategy."

110 Hoffman, "Al Qaeda's Uncertain Future"; and Turner, "Strategic Differences."

but the group has been successfully inspiring attacks globally. Many ISIS and al Qaeda sympathizers have started their own franchises outside of the Levant. Countering violent extremism will require a long-term strategy that contests the ideological underpinnings of Islamist extremism. This will require the United States to develop better strategic communications capabilities, including combatting online radicalization. Better cyber tools and building networks of modern, moderate Muslim thinkers willing to counteract the ideological appeal of Islamists in the region need to be a persistent focus of U.S. policymakers in the struggle ahead.<sup>111</sup>

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111 Joseph L. Votel, Christina Bembenek, Charles Hans, Jeffery Mouton, and Amanda Spencer, *#Virtual Caliphate: Defeating ISIL on the Physical Battlefield is Not Enough* (Washington, DC: Center for a New American Security, January 12, 2017); Jytte Klausen, "Tweeting the Jihad: Social Media Networks of Western Foreign Fighters in Syria and Iraq," *Studies in Conflict & Terrorism* 38, no. 1, 2015; and Angel Rabasa, Cheryl Benard, Lowell H. Schwartz, and Peter Sickles, *Building Moderate Muslim Networks* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2007).



## Conclusion and Recommendations

America's engagement with the broader Middle East has a paradoxical quality. The broader public and many, if not most, policymakers appear to have had their fill of "nation-building" in a region of chronic turmoil. The diminished U.S. reliance on Middle Eastern energy resources has fueled a desire to reposition the U.S. global posture and shift its pattern of investment in security resources away from the region and toward Asia and, to a lesser degree, Europe to meet a range of new and pressing challenges. Despite this understandable and generally correct assessment of the relative importance of the different regional theaters in which the United States must operate, it seems almost certain that the dual challenges of Iran's aspirations for mastery of the region and violent jihadist terrorism will continue to demand the time, attention, and resources of national security decision-makers.

The post-World War II history of U.S. engagement in the region through the end of the Cold War reveals a pattern of relative success in achieving U.S. national security objectives.<sup>112</sup> This record of success has not been matched in the post-Cold War era. In fact, the ongoing violence and growth of ungoverned space in the region ensure that the terrorist threat to allies, as well as the U.S. homeland, will remain a priority issue for U.S. policymakers.

Iran's pursuit of a suite of A2/AD capabilities will make it harder for the United States to operate in adjacent waterways, and its use of proxy forces to extend its regional influence will help fuel the Sunni discontent that powers the recruiting efforts of the Islamic State. While the dual challenges to regional order will require the United States to develop regional solutions attuned to both specifically, many of the measures meant to roll back Iran's influence would also curb the spread of jihadists in the region.

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<sup>112</sup> This case is persuasively presented in Ray Takeyh and Steven Simon, *The Pragmatic Superpower: Winning the Cold War in the Middle East* (New York: W.W. Norton, 2016). The unhappy post-Cold War sequel is treated somewhat tendentiously in Andrew J. Bacevich, *America's War in the Greater Middle East: A Military History* (New York: Random House, 2016).

First, the United States will need to develop a comprehensive strategy for countering Iran's bid for supremacy. This would entail a broadening of the U.S. policy focus beyond the JCPOA. While holding Iran to account for performance under the agreement, the United States should also seek opportunities to revise and ultimately replace the agreement with one that permanently limits Iran's nuclear activities.

Second, the United States will need to foster reinvigorated relationships with its friends in the region to contain and, ultimately, reverse Iran's geopolitical gains in Syria, Yemen, Bahrain, and elsewhere. This would help stifle the instability Iran's regional adventurism generates, helping to stymie the sectarian violence in the broader Middle East that allows jihadist groups to flourish. This can only be accomplished by helping our allies among the GCC countries to develop high-end capabilities that blunt some of Iran's tools and, in turn, impose costs on Iran itself. This would include continued investment in missile defenses and pursuing directed energy weapons. U.S. allies could also usefully invest in unmanned aerial vehicles for strike, an augmented undersea warfare capability to counter Iran's guerrilla navy, and tactical ballistic missiles to hold Iranian infrastructure at risk. At the lower-end of the spectrum, enhanced irregular warfare capabilities could hold out the prospect that Iran would face some of the same challenges at home that it has imposed on its neighbors. A U.S. energy policy of keeping oil prices low would facilitate this cost-imposing strategy. It would help diminish the resource base with which Iran hopes to augment its growing asymmetric capabilities for countering both U.S. military forces and those of America's partners in the region.

Third, the United States and its allies will need to wage a more aggressive campaign of political warfare against the regime, taking advantage of the regime's lagging popular support and internal cleavages. This could take the form of highlighting the elite's corrupt business dealings and persistent human rights abuses. This would be an important part of establishing a strong narrative with U.S. and partner state publics to support the strategy called for in this paper.<sup>113</sup>

The fight against jihadist terrorism will have to proceed in parallel with U.S. efforts to combat Iran's effort at establishing its dominion over the region. Because of the ongoing threat of a terrorist attack on the homeland, the fight against the Islamic State and al Qaeda will continue to impose itself on senior U.S. policymakers. The United States will have to define its strategic objectives in the counter-ISIS campaign carefully. It cannot simply settle for a containment policy, but it will never be able to destroy or eliminate the jihadist movement totally. Rather, it should strive to defeat the Islamic State by destroying the physical Caliphate in Iraq and Syria with a counter-ISIS plus effort that builds on what has been accomplished and seeks to ensure that local, indigenous forces are positioned to hold and govern the liberated territories. This will require some additional U.S. special forces elements for stepped-up train-and-equip efforts as well as additional equipment for anti-ISIS and anti-Assad elements in Syria. It will also require a loosening of some rules of engagement to expand the target set for both the air

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113 Krepinevich, *Preserving the Balance*, pp. 70–74.

campaign that is denying ISIS the economic wherewithal to undergird the Caliphate as well as for more effective partnering of U.S. special forces with Iraqi and Syrian forces fighting ISIS on the field of battle.

The Middle East presents an enormous set of challenges for policymakers against a backdrop of conflict and turmoil that is likely to persist for a generation—or perhaps longer. The United States has historically been successful in accomplishing its strategic objectives in the region, and it can be again if it develops a clear strategy that aligns ways, means, and ends and builds up capable partners in the region to contain Iran’s ambitions and defeat violent jihadists; both powers otherwise threaten the governments of America and its partners.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>A2/AD</b>	anti-access/area denial
<b>AKP</b>	Turkey's Justice and Development Party
<b>AQAP</b>	al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula
<b>AQI</b>	al Qaeda in Iraq
<b>ASCM</b>	anti-ship cruise missile
<b>AWACS</b>	airborne warning and control system
<b>C4</b>	Command, Control, Communications, and Computers
<b>CENTCOM</b>	U.S. Central Command
<b>CIA</b>	Central Intelligence Agency
<b>C-RAM</b>	Counter Rocket, Artillery, and Mortar
<b>EFP</b>	explosively formed penetrator
<b>FAC</b>	fast attack craft
<b>GCC</b>	Gulf Cooperation Council
<b>GCHQ</b>	Government Communications Headquarters (UK)
<b>GDP</b>	gross domestic product
<b>IADS</b>	integrated air defense system
<b>IAEA</b>	International Atomic Energy Agency
<b>ICBM</b>	intercontinental ballistic missile
<b>IRAM</b>	improvised rocket-assisted munition
<b>IRGC</b>	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
<b>IRGCN</b>	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps Navy
<b>IRIN</b>	Islamic Republic of Iran Navy
<b>IS</b>	Islamic State
<b>ISIL</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant
<b>ISIS</b>	Institute for Science and International Security
<b>ISIS</b>	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
<b>ISR</b>	intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance
<b>JCPOA</b>	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
<b>JINSA</b>	Jewish Institute for National Security of America
<b>JTAC</b>	Joint Terminal Attack Controller
<b>LEU</b>	low enriched uranium
<b>MANPADS</b>	Man-Portable Air-Defense System
<b>NATO</b>	North Atlantic Treaty Organization
<b>NCRI</b>	National Council of Resistance of Iran



## LIST OF ACRONYMS

<b>New START</b>	Strategic Arms Reduction Treaty (2010)
<b>PIJ</b>	Palestinian Islamic Jihad
<b>PKK</b>	Kurdistan Workers' Party
<b>PMD</b>	possible military dimension
<b>PMU</b>	Popular Mobilization Unit
<b>RDJTF</b>	Rapid Deployment Joint Task Force
<b>SAFE</b>	Securing America's Future Energy
<b>SAM</b>	surface-to-air missile
<b>SOFA</b>	Status of Forces Agreement
<b>SORT</b>	Strategic Offensive Reductions Treaty
<b>U.S. GPO</b>	United States Government Publishing Office (or Government Printing Office)
<b>UAE</b>	United Arab Emirates
<b>UAV</b>	unmanned aerial vehicle
<b>UN</b>	United Nations
<b>UNDP</b>	United Nations Development Programme
<b>UNSC</b>	United Nations Security Council
<b>USSR</b>	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics
<b>UUV</b>	unmanned underwater vehicle
<b>UW</b>	unconventional warfare
<b>WMD</b>	weapon of mass destruction







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