



# US needs a strategy for a realigned Middle East

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**Related Categories:** Islamic Extremism; Iran; Israel; Middle East

As recent events make clear, the Middle East is increasingly becoming a bifurcated region, with Israel and its growing Sunni Arab allies on one side, and Iran and its state and terror-group allies on the other.

Gone are the days when the region was bifurcated in another way — between Israel and everyone else — and when the Israeli-Palestinian conflict was considered the main obstacle to wider Arab-Israeli peace.

The realigned Middle East has major implications for efforts to resurrect the 2015 global nuclear agreement with Iran, which rested on naïve U.S. hopes that it would moderate the radical regime in Tehran and nourish warmer U.S.-Iranian relations. At this point, Washington, Jerusalem, and like-minded governments should prepare for life beyond that agreement — whether it ever comes back to life or not.

Consider what we've seen across the region just in recent days. For starters, Israel and the United Arab Emirates have just signed the first ever comprehensive free trade agreement between the Jewish state and any Arab nation, and it's expected to greatly expand trade between these two nations in the coming years and also encourage Israeli companies to build manufacturing sites in the UAE.

The trade deal builds on the U.S.-brokered Abraham Accords of 2020, which brought formal diplomatic relations between Israel and the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco — and (preceded by Egypt in 1979 and Jordan in 1994) increased the number of Arab states with formal ties to Israel to six.

At the same time, prospects are growing that Saudi Arabia, the region's most influential Sunni state, is inching closer to normalizing relations with Israel. President Biden reportedly will stop in Saudi Arabia as part of his trip to Europe and Israel in the coming weeks, and Secretary of State Antony Blinken highlighted Riyadh's "critical role" in potentially expanding the Abraham Accords.

In a step that could lay important groundwork for full Saudi-Israeli normalization, Washington is mediating sensitive negotiations between Jerusalem, Riyadh, and Cairo that involve the transfer of two islands in the Red Sea — which were demilitarized under the Israeli-Egyptian peace deal — from Egypt to Saudi Arabia.

As Jerusalem deepens its ties to the Sunni world, Tehran continues to expand its nuclear program and destabilize the region.

On the nuclear front, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) reported that Tehran still hasn't provided "credible" answers for the undeclared nuclear material that it found in Iran, and that Iran now has about enough highly enriched uranium to make a nuclear bomb. In a related matter, the *Wall Street Journal* reported that Iran "secured access to" secret IAEA documents almost two decades ago and used them to "conceal" its "suspected past work on nuclear weapons."

Regarding the broader region, Jordan's King Abdullah II expressed concern that Russia's withdrawal of forces from southern Syria would create a vacuum that "will be filled by the Iranians and their proxies. So, unfortunately, we are looking at maybe an escalation [of] problems on our borders."

In the Persian Gulf, Iranian forces seized two Greek tankers that Athens said were in international waters — in response to Greece's impounding of an Iranian tanker to enforce oil-related sanctions on Iran — and a source told Iran's Tasnim news agency that Tehran could seize 17 other Greek vessels that were in the Gulf.

All of this makes the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran seem like a quaint relic of an earlier time. Moreover, the talks in Vienna on reviving it seem to exist in a "never-never land" with little connection to today's new reality: Iran's nuclear program and related ballistic missile program are both far more advanced than they were in 2015, Tehran refuses to come clean about its past nuclear activities, and the regime is growing more brazen in its regional aggressiveness.

As critics such as Senate Foreign Relations Committee chairman Robert Menendez propose, Washington needs a new strategy for Iran that is not centered on reviving a nuclear agreement that — in its time-limited restrictions on Iranian nuclear work and loophole-filled inspection regime — was too weak to begin with.

The Biden administration may be signaling that it agrees. Presumably looking past a revived agreement, U.S. and Israeli security officials met to discuss ways to prevent Iran from going nuclear. That meeting came just hours after Israel's Air Force simulated a strike on regional targets including in Iran, during which the U.S. Air Force reportedly planned to refuel Israeli fighter jets.

While seeking to deter Tehran by threatening military action, Washington also should nourish stronger ties to Iran's people, who are currently protesting rising inflation, unemployment, and poverty in the streets of many cities and who presumably will tire of their odious government at some point and replace it with a more responsive one — and who may look for support down the road from the United States.

Washington lacks a comprehensive strategy to constrain Iran's regime while strengthening U.S. ties to its people. An increasingly realigned Middle East requires more than ever that it develop one.