



# AFPC Senior Vice President discusses the Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy

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Crisis and Opportunity in U.S. Mideast Policy

Ilan Berman

Executive Summary

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

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

Iran

In a region that boasts no shortage of problems, none have been more vexing to the United States over the past four decades than the one posed by the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Today, the Biden administration is engaged in a protracted diplomatic effort to bring Iran back into the confines of the 2015 nuclear deal. Administration officials initially hoped a revival of that agreement would serve as a prelude to a “longer and stronger” agreement with Tehran.<sup>4</sup> That, however, has not happened; to the contrary, as of this writing, the most likely outcome of U.S. diplomatic talks is a “less for more” deal that would impose fewer restrictions on Iran’s nuclear effort while providing the regime in Tehran with more lavish concessions and sanctions relief than ever before. In the process, the Biden administration has scaled back its engagement with Iranian opposition forces and deprioritized the plight of the Iranian people, over the entreaties of activists. The Administration has thus

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

Russia

Moscow's return to the region of recent years represents the culmination of a long-standing ambition on the part of the Kremlin. Russia's foreign policy in the Middle East has often been depicted as overwhelmingly opportunistic in nature.<sup>7</sup> While that has certainly been the case, it would be a mistake to underestimate the scope of the Kremlin's ambitions. To date, the United States has failed to adequately recognize Russia's expanded presence and influence in the Middle East, or to begin to mobilize against it. For the moment, the Biden administration is preoccupied with Russia's new war against Ukraine, and deterring the Kremlin from expanding that conflict still further. Notably, the course of that conflict has prompted changes to Russia's military posture – including a reallocation of resources from the Middle East and Africa.<sup>8</sup> Nevertheless, it is reasonable to expect Russia to retain a strategic presence in the Middle East, and to maintain an interest in serving as a “spoiler” for American regional efforts there. In turn, addressing this presence will require a U.S. policy of sustained political and military engagement with the countries of the region that diminishes the Kremlin's attractiveness as a strategic or military partner for those nations.

## China

The growing focus on China among policymakers in Washington has contributed to America's current turn away from the Middle East. As a result, comparatively few U.S. analysts and experts have taken note of Beijing's expanding strategic footprint in the Middle East (as well as Africa). When they have, astute observers have expressed growing alarm at what they see as an “emerging Middle East Kingdom” that Beijing is erecting in the region. China's offensive has come in the form of deep—and ongoing—economic investments. Beijing's outreach, moreover, is not confined to the Sunni nations of the region; China is significantly expanding ties to Shi'ite Iran as well. Simultaneously, China has also become deeply invested in Israel, and this growing stake has begun to create tensions in the long-standing “special relationship” between Jerusalem and Washington. U.S. officials have become

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

For its part, Beijing views these investments in distinctly geopolitical terms: as a way of displacing the United States in the Middle East and blunting American influence there. The PRC's emergence as a serious strategic player in the Middle East carries enormous consequences, both for the United States and for America's regional allies. As the United States reduces its presence in—and influence over—Mideast affairs, the resulting vacuum is being filled by China, which is using its economic engagement and technological exports to reshape the contours of the region in a less free, more authoritarian direction.<sup>1</sup>

## Syria

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

## Israeli-Arab Normalization

The links between Israel and various Arab states in the region...

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