

U.S. Strategic Interests in the Middle East and Implications for the Army

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Many U.S. administrations have attempted to limit American involvement in the Middle East. The immense costs of previous interventions cast a heavy shadow over how policymakers view the risk of wading into the many conflicts of the region. “Isn’t this someone else’s war?” has become a common and colloquial way to express that wariness.

The same debate is mirrored within the U.S. Army, where the U.S. European Command (EUCOM) and the U.S. Pacific Command (PACOM) have now come to provide the natural “pacing scenarios” around which the Army plans its force structure. Specifically, strategists and analysts typically argue that preparing to meet the demands of dealing with North Korean collapse and deterring or defeating Russian aggression should now be the Army’s focus. This is a logical response to the great challenges that such contingencies would present, but, as among civilian policymakers, this prioritization is also partly due to the fatigue induced by Operation Iraqi Freedom (OIF)¹ and Operation Enduring Freedom (OEF), which greatly

strained the Army’s force generation model and moved it away from core competencies—such as combined arms operations and land-based deterrence—that it needs today.

While it would simplify planning if the Army could treat the U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) area of responsibility (AOR) as a lesser-included case, it is not. There are currently only three places in the world with sizable combat deployments, and all three are in the CENTCOM AOR. Two are in the Middle East, where Army personnel are deployed in Iraq and Syria, both active conflict zones. The region’s mix of violent extremism, malign Iranian influence, and decaying regimes require the involvement of the United States—to include the U.S. Army—and can be expected to do so for years to come, even if that involvement does not take the form of large-scale stabilization operations akin to OEF and OIF. There is little prospect that American military actions can resolve fundamental problems in the Middle East beyond the destruction of the Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant’s (ISIL’s) would-be caliphate, but there are ample threats and other

security concerns that the Army may nevertheless be called on to address in the future. Broader regional instability, plotting by ISIL and al-Qa'ida from safe havens, or partners (such as Israel, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates [UAE]) embroiling themselves in military operations that turn out to imperil their own security could compel the U.S. president to consider other options for U.S. intervention. Therefore, the Army will need to man, train, equip, and posture its forces so as to be able to deal with such contingencies, and it will be crucial for Army leaders to be able to play a leadership role in future debates about potential roles of U.S. land power in the region.

Recognizing and Protecting U.S. Interests in the Middle East

The traditional definition of U.S. interests in the Middle East has centered on ensuring the free flow of natural resources and maintaining relationships with key allies and protecting them from external threats, in part to ensure access for U.S. military operations. These interests persist, although the regional environment, the nature of the threats to these interests, and the identities of America's closest partners in the Middle East have transformed since the days of the Cold War "Twin Pillars" strategy, when Iran and Saudi Arabia were the bulwarks against Soviet influence and cornerstones of U.S. efforts to promote regional stability. Relationships among regional powers have also changed. Iran and Iraq, once at loggerheads and embroiled in conflict in the 1980s, are now closely aligned. Similarly, cyclic patterns of rivalry tied to differing threat perceptions have made ties among the six Gulf states increasingly fragile. These relationships can and do complicate U.S. efforts

to maintain stability and ensure access—pivotal to U.S. military operations—and are often far beyond Washington's control.

In spite of America's reduced dependence on Middle Eastern petroleum, the United States still seeks to protect energy flows that remain vital to the global economy. Among threats to partners, intra-state conflict and violent extremism have largely eclipsed the risk of inter-state conflict, and the one capable state adversary the United States needs to worry about in the region—Iran—often operates through asymmetric tactics. The instability posed by these threats also has knock-on impacts for the U.S. and its allies in Europe. For example, the complicated civil war and rise of ISIL in Syria has led to massive refugee flows to Europe, exacerbating the domestic economic, political, and security issues facing critical European allies. Moreover, the rise of ISIL and ISIL-inspired "lone-wolf" terrorists has increased the threat of terrorism to the U.S. homeland and to U.S. allies around the world.

Meanwhile, new threats have emerged that were not anticipated in the traditional expression of American interests in the greater Middle East. The rise of ISIL and the expansion of Kurdish influence have probed the depth of American interest and commitment to maintaining the state structure in the region as represented by physical borders drawn a century ago. And while the United States has long worried about the Arab Gulf states' "checkbook diplomacy," only now is it faced with these states independently deploying military power, including in ways uncoordinated with their traditional security guarantor.

ISIL and Violent Extremism

At the time of this writing, a coalition led by the United States is well under way toward its goal of rolling back ISIL territorial

control in its self-declared caliphate. Among the coalition forces are American troops—including U.S. Army Rangers—in Iraq and Syria. As the physical caliphate is diminished and potentially defeated, the United States must prepare for what comes next, both from ISIL as a guerilla movement and from other violent extremist groups that may emerge in the vacuum left in its wake. The Army’s role in this fight will be manifold, from small deployments to training partner militaries to operate effectively as liberation and stabilization forces.²

ISIL has lost control over the majority of its territory in the past year, and the caliphate as a physical entity appears to be in terminal decline. The American Special Envoy for that campaign estimated at the end of November 2016 that more than half of the populated territory once held by ISIL in Iraq had been liberated and roughly one-quarter of the territory ISIL held in Syria had been retaken. Operations are under way to expel ISIL from the largest cities under its control in the two countries—Iraq and Syria—that make up its core.³ Mosul has already been announced as liberated following an intensive effort by Iraqi forces supported with intelligence, airpower, and advising by the United States and its coalition partners, and Raqqa has entered the isolation phase of the campaign, with a Kurdish-led force moving on ISIL’s Syrian capital from several directions.

The United States should now be planning its counterterrorism strategy for the world after the demise of ISIL’s physical caliphate.⁴ The continued relevance of counterterrorism operations in this area, even after the eventual liberation of Mosul and Raqqa, is due to two principal factors. First, while the threat posed by ISIL is exacerbated by its control of territory which provides greater opportunity for recruitment, training, and external plotting, the

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group will continue to pose a residual risk even after it is forced underground, complicating stabilization efforts in these areas.⁵ It is likely that ISIL will become a less-centralized terrorist movement following its defeat in Iraq and Syria, much as al-Qa’ida in Iraq (AQI), ISIL’s predecessor organization, continued to pose a security threat after it was forced to retreat from major population centers in western Iraq in the mid- and late 2000s. Second, even if ISIL is significantly diminished, it is merely the latest standard bearer—albeit a particularly barbaric one—in a global jihadi movement that will continue and will almost certainly generate successors as yet unknown. Once Raqqa and Mosul have both been taken, there is likely to be escalating conflict in both Iraq and Syria to determine the new political order in those countries, during which there is a considerable chance that U.S. ground forces will be committed to support or protect factions that Washington favors or to deny those that it opposes from achieving their objectives. Severe instability in Libya, Yemen, or other countries could similarly trigger U.S. intervention. Violent extremism runs deeper than ISIL and governance vacuums tend to fill quickly; thus, Army leaders should look at what may come next and then consider implications for Army planning.⁶

Iran

The principal potential threat to freedom of navigation and the flow of resources in the Gulf is the Islamic Republic of Iran. The Iranian threat is asymmetric in nature—Tehran’s capabilities are concentrated in fast boats that can harass America’s larger vessels and mining activities that probably could not sustain a closure of the Strait of Hormuz, but could significantly raise the risk premium of transiting it. Recent provocations near Bab el-Mandeb, including provocation of a U.S. destroyer, demonstrate the significance of the risk that Iran and Iranian-supported groups pose to freedom of navigation.

In recent years, and particularly since the negotiation of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) reduced Washington’s fears of Iran obtaining a nuclear weapon, the modus operandi has been to deescalate incidents at sea through high-level diplomatic contact. Notwithstanding some limited détente between the two countries since the JCPOA, many American policymakers disagree with this conciliatory approach and place the onus of these incidents on Iran given its aggressive exercises, harassment of American warships, and the detention of American naval personnel who stray into Iran’s territorial waters. A desire by U.S. officials to deter Iranian actions through more forceful responses could induce escalation, including the use of ground forces.

Syria may also prove to be an arena for friction between Iran and the United States, although not directly. Iran’s boots on the ground and asymmetric tactics, along with its use of proxy groups, have further exacerbated the already complicated conflict, in which parties are fighting against ISIL and other extremist groups as well as the Syrian regime. As the U.S. military escalates its role in the

fight against ISIL, Iran’s involvement could put Washington and Tehran on a collision course via proxies.

Tehran can also threaten U.S. military personnel and installations in the Middle East. There are currently more than 15,000 active-duty Army personnel in the CENTCOM AOR, scattered across military installations in the region, including the Army’s operational command post at Camp Arifjan in Kuwait and forward units in Iraq. More than 18,000 Army reserve and civilian personnel supplement these units. Iran’s asymmetric activities in the region, particularly in Iraq, pose a risk to U.S. personnel. And conventionally, Tehran has sought to increase its medium- and long-range ballistic missile capability by developing the Shahab-3 medium-range ballistic missile and acquiring the S-300 (SA-20) long-range surface-to-air missile. Many U.S. military installations in the Gulf region, including Camp Arifjan, are well within the range of these weapons.

Iran also poses an ideological threat to its Sunni Arab neighbors. The ideological threat posed by the Iranian regime is threefold. First, as a republic, Iran represents a challenge to the monarchical system of which the Gulf Arab states are all but the last holdouts. Second, as a revolutionary state, Iran challenges the outlooks of its neighbors, who for decades have operated largely as reactive, status quo powers. Finally, Iran champions a sect,

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Shi'ism, which is typically disenfranchised on the other side of the Gulf despite constituting the majority in Bahrain and a significant minority in Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen. Sectarianism on both sides of the Gulf intensifies and deepens the regional conflict.⁷

However, what makes Iran particularly threatening to its neighbors is that the Islamic Republic fuses this ideological challenge to an asymmetric toolkit that the Gulf states sincerely fear, and almost always blame—both genuinely and disingenuously—when faced with domestic unrest. The threat posed by Iran is deeply internalized by its neighbors and, since the fall of the Sunni regime in Iraq, they are eager to check any further Shi'a advances in their periphery.

A U.S.-Led, Not U.S.-Dominated, Regional Security Order

The United States continues to be the most important external power in the Middle East, but it now faces a region in which local actors, including longstanding partners, are defining their own national and economic interests in ways that often diverge from those of the United States. This is not a new phenomenon; rather, it is a troubling cyclic pattern that complicates U.S. interests and policy goals in the region. The diversification of relationships in the Middle East represents a shift away from the nearly dominant U.S. position in the regional security landscape that emerged after Britain withdrew from “east of Suez” in 1971 and grew as the Soviet role in the Middle East eroded and then disappeared, paving the way for the United States to gradually take up a nearly monopolistic role as the region's external security guarantor.

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how to best achieve them, and the types of relationships they wish to pursue with other actors. Once-minor powers such as Qatar and the UAE have emerged as consequential and increasingly independent military players.⁸ Further confusing the regional order, the priorities of these actors are so contradictory that even shared threats like ISIL, which challenge the states and nonstate groups of the Levant, Israel, and the Gulf alike, are not sufficient to galvanize unified responses. While many of these countries participate in Operation Inherent Resolve (OIR), the coalition campaign against ISIL, the extent of their contributions has declined, and some continue to pursue parochial agendas that undermine coalition action. Despite these states' dependence on the United States to ensure their security, the gap between Washington's ability to influence regional actors during the 1990–1991 Gulf War and its ability to do so today is striking.

The ongoing Saudi- and Emirati-led intervention in Yemen—already a fragile state—provides one clear example of the fundamental challenge these local initiatives pose to the United States. While the United States has reticently supported Saudi and Emirati

efforts by providing targeting; intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance (ISR); refueling; and, more recently, joint counterterrorism raids, the Yemen campaign has tended to undermine regional stability, exacerbate the preexisting humanitarian crisis, and enhance al-Qa'ida's foothold, all complicating U.S. interests. Recent provocations near the Bab el-Mandeb have challenged U.S. efforts to maintain open sea lines of communication, placing stress on a fundamental interest. As regional players display greater propensity for activism, regional instability is likely to be an unfortunate byproduct and it will be difficult for the United States to ensure that its partners' actions align with U.S. policy goals.⁹

This same trend is mirrored in the evolving U.S. relationships with Israel and Turkey. Just as the Arab Gulf states have their Yemen campaign, one could easily imagine Jerusalem or Ankara overruling U.S. advice to launch operations against their priority adversaries—Iran and the YPG.¹⁰ The risk is not only the instability that could be unleashed by a hypothetical Israeli strike against Iran or by Turkey increasing the scope of its cross-border operations against Kurdish militants in Syria and Iraq, but that the United States would be drawn into these conflicts to bail out its allies if they bite off more than they can chew or even be blamed for their actions, opening the United States to potential retaliation. Conversely, while not likely, it is not entirely out of the question that the Army could be called on to help protect Kurdish forces in Iraq or Syria, which have been the United States' staunchest allies in the war against ISIL, from potential or actual attack by Turkey, placing American forces in opposition to an army far more capable than those they have faced in past conflicts in the Middle East. Similarly, if Russian military involvement in the region continues to expand, given the risks of escalation and miscalculation, including

and especially in Syria, the United States will urgently need to clarify its interests and objectives and make them clear to Moscow.¹¹ Deterring malign actions by Russian forces against U.S. partners, particularly in Syria, may depend on Army forces in the region having combat capabilities sufficient to prevail in a confrontation with ground forces more heavily armed than typical battalion task forces from U.S. infantry or Stryker brigade combat teams.

Alliance Management

The political arrangements of the Middle East look vastly different now than they did when President Barack Obama took office. Popular uprisings in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, Syria, Bahrain and Yemen, three of which evolved into civil wars, have altered the landscape. These have resulted in occasional opportunities, such as the effort to build a stronger relationship with Tunisia, the only country that navigated its political transition via consensual politics. But more often, this tumult has strained relations between the United States and its partners. This is largely attributable to Middle Eastern allies' reduced faith in the U.S. security commitment, which they tend to read into every action and inaction. In the eyes of Arab rulers, not intervening to save Egypt's president Hosni Mubarak, chastising Bahrain for its crackdown on Pearl Square demonstrators, intervening in Libya's 2011 civil war without a plan for postwar stabilization, allowing the chemical weapons red line in Syria to be crossed without going to war against the Assad regime, and ultimately concluding a nuclear deal with Iran are all evidence of the same sin: abandonment.

It is hard to overstate how strained relations became with Ankara, Jerusalem, Cairo, and Riyadh in the second term of the Obama administration. Turkey alleged U.S. involvement in a coup

against the government, felt betrayed by the United States partnering with Kurdish forces in Syria, and has now taken to coordinating its own cross-border operations with Russia. Israel publicly opposed the Iran nuclear deal and undertook an unprecedented lobbying campaign to try to defeat it in Congress. Riyadh mounted a military campaign in Yemen against U.S. urging and has prosecuted it in a way that Washington considers escalatory. And Egypt accused the previous American administration of cozying up to the Muslim Brotherhood while failing to recognize the legitimacy of the 2013 “corrective revolution.” These partnerships have always been rocky—recall the 1973 oil embargo or Turkey’s restriction of access to its military bases during periods of Operation Northern Watch. But whether the state of relations between Washington and Middle Eastern capitals is at an exceptionally low point or not, it is objectively poor.

In designing an alliance management strategy that can place these partnerships on firmer footing, the current administration will have to walk a careful line. Unconditional support is not an option, as these partners often operate against U.S. interests. For example, many would argue that Turkey abetted the growth of extremists in Syria in its early effort to bring down Assad in 2012 and 2013. Israel continues to take unilateral actions—including the expansion of settlements—that poison the water for a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The new regime in Cairo has carried out a crackdown on opposition of all stripes that is widely recognized as more repressive than Mubarak. And Saudi Arabia continues to fan sectarianism to counter Iranian influence. Therefore, going along to get along is not an option. Furthermore, it is essential to maintain strong security ties with such countries as

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Moreover, it is unclear whether declining faith in American commitments to partner security is reversible. These states’ perception of abandonment is partly driven by their read of American policies, but it also reflects a new nationalism that is neither caused by U.S. actions nor susceptible to influence by them. In other words, has Saudi Arabia acquired a taste for independent action? Does Turkey’s autocratic turn under Erdogan allow a constructive partnership with Washington? It may be that irrespective of U.S. policies, these partners are in the midst of an inward refocusing that precludes the United States from playing its traditional role as the region’s external balancer.

Limits of U.S. Influence

The United States possesses the capability to protect and advance its core interests in the Middle East, but only when policymakers stay wedded to clear and consistent formulations of what constitute these core interests. This requires an understanding that aspirational changes, such as catalyzing democracy and halting intra-state conflict, are desirable ends but fall outside the scope of change

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that the United States can readily bring about in a region that is beset by authoritarian legacies and seemingly chronic conflict.

Crucial to managing the United States' limited ability to effect change in the Middle East is the ability to discern genuine opportunities from potential misadventures. There have been times when the United States has been ascendant in the Middle East, but the reasons generally have as much to do with circumstance as the culmination of strategy. The 1990–1991 Gulf War, for example, was a period when the United States consolidated its regional power while it was emerging triumphant from the Cold War. In the confrontation with Iraq, even such traditional adversaries as Syria jumped on the bandwagon with U.S. power. In that case, the United States was helped by a shared interest in turning back Saddam Hussein's invasion of Kuwait. The United States benefited from clarity in its objectives—Iraq's occupation of Kuwait would not stand—and deployment of the exact capabilities—conventional force with an emphasis on precision weapons—that played to American strengths.

2017 is far removed from 1990, not just temporally but also in terms of the types of threats and opportunities that the region presents. Against the backdrop of a multipolar regional environment mired in civil wars and sectarian violence, inter-state rivalries, and violent extremism in ungoverned spaces, the United States has a limited ability to change, rearrange, and influence the actions of aggressive adversaries and assertive allies. In this landscape, the presence of Army and other U.S. military forces, both in conflict operations and peacetime activities such as security cooperation, can have modest but significant stabilizing effects—or the opposite.¹² The Army should man, train, and equip its forces and con-

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duct its planning in ways that strengthen the chances of the former and minimize the risks of the latter.

The Army and Limited Military Interventions

The rise of ISIL—first in Syria and Iraq, and subsequently in offshoots in Libya, Afghanistan, and elsewhere—has represented a new and yet familiar challenge to U.S. defense policy generally and Army planners in particular. Following the U.S. exit from Iraq in 2011, and with a clear path toward drawdown outlined for Afghanistan, many sought to put a decisive end to the United States' decade of counterinsurgency warfare. Yet ISIL threatened many important (albeit not vital) U.S. security interests. It posed a direct terrorist threat to the United States and its key allies and threatened to destabilize and possibly topple U.S. partners in the Middle East and potentially more broadly. It provided opportunities for Iran to expand its influence, and it could disrupt the flow of oil and gas from the region.

Once again, U.S. decisionmakers and defense planners were confronted with a question with which they had struggled in the past: How could the United States combat the durable and protean

threat posed by radical militants at a reasonable cost? Drawing from the historical record of military interventions, it is clear that military options can help the United States avoid the worst outcomes, in some cases make gradual improvements, and occasionally set partners on a path toward sustainable peace. But even the most modest of “wins” comes at a sizeable cost, and success is far from assured. Moreover, military intervention is not the answer to every conflict that emerges in the Middle East, nor is it the primary role for the Army in the region. However, it is important to understand how the Army has been involved in limited interventions in the past in the Middle East to better understand how military power could be employed in future regional contingencies.

Options for Military Intervention

Typically, when faced with an irregular threat such as ISIL, the United States is trying to achieve one or more of three goals. First, it can attempt to disrupt, degrade, and, if possible, defeat the militants. Second, it can help to maintain—or, if necessary build—partner governments who are willing and capable of sustaining an acceptable outcome without permanent, large-scale U.S. involvement. Finally, if the conflict cannot be resolved in terms the United States finds acceptable at a cost it is willing to bear, the United States can at least seek to contain radicalism and violence and prevent it from spilling over into other countries. Examples include efforts to reinforce Jordan and Tunisia against the ongoing conflicts in Syria and Libya, respectively.

In addition to the diplomatic and development tools at its disposal, the United States has a variety of military instruments it can use to accomplish these goals. At one extreme, it can launch large-scale counterinsurgency operations, such as those in Vietnam, Iraq,

and Afghanistan. Such large operations are exceedingly rare, however. Much more common are limited, or “light footprint,” interventions. These interventions can take the form of direct actions, such as ground combat, air strikes, and Special Operations raids, or indirect actions, such as intelligence sharing and the deployment of trainers and advisors to partner security forces.¹³ Interventions like the ongoing OIR in Iraq and Syria and Operation Freedom’s Sentinel in Afghanistan, as well as the recently concluded Operation Enduring Freedom–Philippines, are the norm. All of these have deployed fewer than 10,000 U.S. forces on the ground at a time.

A common criticism of the U.S. interventions in Iraq and elsewhere is that they have been too ambitious, seeking to promote democracy or right historical wrongs rather than simply seeking to secure U.S. interests at the lowest possible cost. But even if we define success more narrowly, simply as battlefield outcomes, the record of accomplishment in foreign military interventions is modest. Looking across the record of more than four dozen interventions since 1946, there is no evidence that, in aggregate, they improve the odds of an outright military victory—and this is true whether the interventions are large or small, conducted by the United States or other powers. But military interventions can prevent defeat. They greatly improve the odds that an embattled partner government will fight a war to a stalemate, either concluding a negotiated settlement or reaching some indeterminate outcome, such as de facto partition with low levels of residual violence.¹⁴ Even such partial success comes at a cost: Wars ended through foreign military intervention are more likely to recur, often within just a few years, than wars that ended without foreign involvement. The conflict in Iraq, which appeared largely over by 2009, only to

resume with the rise of ISIL, is not an aberration; rather, it is the norm. Stability operations can help to buttress postconflict political orders, but typically they are long-term commitments.

If the substantial costs and uncertain outcomes of direct ground interventions are not acceptable, the United States does have alternatives. Air strikes—particularly with the persistent ISR and precision strike capabilities of drones—can disrupt and degrade militants, reducing their ability to undertake attacks (although not their ability to produce and disseminate propaganda). Even this limited ability to disrupt and degrade, however, appears to be achievable only in instances of intensive campaigns, and the effects appear to be relatively short-lived if the strikes are discontinued.

Alternatively, the United States could seek to contain the violence by strengthening the security sectors of the states surrounding the conflict-affected region, a role that could be played by the Army. There is some evidence that U.S. security-sector assistance can indeed reinforce stability in partner nations.¹⁵ But these effects are extremely gradual, with substantial improvements realized over decades of sustained effort, not months or even years. Put simply, as a tool to insulate countries against the immediate threats of spillover violence, security-sector assistance appears poorly adapted to the short-term requirement.

Considerations for U.S. Military Interventions

Based on analysis of past military interventions by the United States and other nations, several key lessons emerge. First and perhaps most importantly, experience counsels statesmen and strategists to have realistic expectations regarding what “success” looks like. Many observers, for instance, label the U.S. counterin-

surgency in Iraq a failure. By certain standards, it clearly is. Judged in comparison with outcomes in similar contexts, however, it may be considered a qualified success. The historical record suggests that such partial successes are typical. Whether such outcomes can justify the costs paid to achieve them is another question.

Second, it is important to choose partners with care. Where the partner nation is at least relatively well-governed—as was the case in Colombia, for instance, during the years running up to the recently announced peace deal—limited U.S. assistance can have disproportionately large effects.¹⁶ However, the United States does not always have the luxury of choosing its allies; political developments, security threats (such as terrorism), and humanitarian concerns often dictate choices in partners as a matter of necessity, and well-governed states do not tend to be where crises affecting U.S. national security usually occur. In the most challenging partner nations, such as Afghanistan and Yemen, expectations about what intervention can accomplish should be far more limited, and decisions about whether to intervene should be based on such realistic expectations.

Larger interventions generally yield improved odds of success, but are subject to diminishing returns. Large numbers of forces are typically only employed in the most-challenging situations, often after smaller interventions have been attempted and failed. In such daunting circumstances, large interventions might prevent the collapse of a partner government, but it is relatively rare that they are able to overcome the lack of capable indigenous authority. The Syrian intervention in Lebanon to stabilize the Ta’if Accords represents a relative success, but such outcomes are rare when the partner government is profoundly weak. Moreover, postconflict states are extremely fragile; more than half return to war. Substan-

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tial assistance—both military and civil—is required to prevent such conflict recurrence. Unfortunately, all foreign interveners, and especially democracies, find it extremely difficult to undertake large interventions for extended periods of time. Small-scale interventions are much more sustainable; the United States, for instance, has now had forces in Afghanistan for 16 years, although at relatively low levels for over half of that time. The future willingness of the United States to sustain such commitments for long periods, especially when they yield only partial or ambiguous gains in security, is an open question.

The Army and the Middle East

Regional instability and conflict have often frustrated U.S. leaders' aspirations to pivot away from the burdens of military involvement in the Middle East in order to shift resources to other priorities or to parts of the world where the United States has more vital interests. This is likely to continue. As the Army looks across the Middle East and North Africa in 2017, it can anticipate and should be prepared for its current involvement there to extend into the future. There will be short-term requirements, including some limited boots on the ground to support a “by, with, and through” campaign to finish off ISIL's physical caliphate. After ISIL's remaining strongholds are overrun—or even before—the Army could also

find itself called on to send forces to Libya, Yemen, or somewhere else in the Arab world, though experience indicates that large-scale intervention in such conflicts is likely to produce disappointing results. Army leadership of the Coalition Joint Task Force–OIR (CJTF-OIR) is projected to continue. This is critically important, as the Army's role may significantly increase as it leads the fight to defeat the corporeal remnants of ISIL in Iraq and in Syria.

Army deployments in Camp Arifjan in Kuwait will also continue to serve as a deterrent and crucial trip wire against any efforts by Iran to coerce its neighbors in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). However, personnel in Kuwait and deployed troops in Syria and Iraq are not the only U.S. Army human equities in the Middle East. Army personnel serve in every U.S. embassy in the region, and trainers and advisers work to build capacity in partner armies. Developing partners capable of defending their own territory has long been a U.S. priority for decades, and the Army has held a critical role in these efforts, operating in such places as Egypt and the U.S. Military Training Mission in Saudi Arabia. It is axiomatic to assume the Army will continue these activities. However, as recently seen, U.S. efforts to build military capabilities of partner forces is not without risk and complication. How the White House chooses to manage these unintended effects of building partner capacity will inevitably impact Army personnel requirements in the region.

Casting a shadow over everything will be the persistent possibility that a major partner (e.g., Israel, Turkey, or Saudi Arabia) will embark on a military operation that will suck the United States into its wake, or that the United States will suffer a terrorist attack launched from the region of such magnitude that a major military intervention in response will be politically unavoidable. Such

operations involve Army capabilities well beyond those routinely deployed to the CENTCOM AOR, and as the United States increases its military presence in Europe to strengthen deterrence against Russian aggression there, decisions about facilities and force posture should take into account potential demands for Army capabilities in Europe to support operations in the Middle East.

Given these risks, U.S. strategy should adhere to several guiding principles. The first would be to approach Iran, the lone major state threat in the region, on two different levels. One is to deter actions—and to be prepared to respond militarily should deterrence fail—that challenge U.S. *core* interests in the Middle East. These actions would include developing a nuclear weapons capability; flaunting of nonproliferation commitments under JCPOA; disrupting shipping through the Strait of Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb; attacking the sovereignty of GCC states; and committing aggression against U.S. forces based in the region, including aggression by Iranian-supported nonstate actors. Deterring Iran involves an array of U.S. and partner military capabilities, in which Army air and missile defenses and other anti-access systems loom large.¹⁷

The other level is defined by longer-term strategy, in which Iran is moderated via change from within.¹⁸ The greatest hope for a constructive relationship with Iran and improved regional stability lies not in coercing mullahs into compliance, but rather in allowing societal pressure to transform Iran over time. The country's history and fundamentals (education levels, cultural diversity, economic interests) auger for eventual change from within. And while the United States has some limited capability to encourage that change, it could easily slow it down through actions that can be exploited by the Iranian regime to rally people around the flag. As a result,

the United States should be cautious in demonstrating support for such progress, particularly as it may be ephemeral.

While the United States cannot create internal change in Iran, it can play a helpful role in shaping the conditions for a more welcoming regional environment. U.S. diplomatic efforts could be employed to reduce tensions between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This hostile relationship has played out in proxy arenas in Syria and Yemen, which has further destabilized these countries and the wider region. While rapprochement may be a bridge too far, both states have a pivotal role to play in the regional security architecture required to maintain stability in the Gulf. Similarly, the United States should ensure that Iran remains in compliance with the JCPOA, at the very least to ensure the proliferation of nuclear weapons in the Middle East does not occur.

In addition to deterring Iran, the Army should expect to continue being called on to assist in counterterrorism operations

The greatest hope for a constructive relationship with Iran and improved regional stability lies not in coercing mullahs into compliance, but rather in allowing societal pressure to transform Iran over time . . . while the United States has some limited capability to encourage that change, it could easily slow it down through actions that can be exploited by the Iranian regime to rally people around the flag.

in the region. ISIL, at least in its proto-state form, does not appear to be long for this world. But it can be expected to spawn a successor that will attempt to exploit ungoverned spaces to destabilize U.S. partners and possibly to plot operations against the American homeland. U.S. Special Operations Forces are likely to play an outsized role in this fight, but general-purpose force (GPF) Army units will also be important. Particularly crucial will be their role in building partner forces that can take the fight to extremist groups on the ground. Conducting multiple concurrent limited-liability operations at any given time in the region will depend most heavily on airpower and ground training teams. This will create substantial enduring demand for advise-and-assist brigades, but also two- and three-star headquarters, infantry, and military police to provide security and Quick Reaction Forces, and theater logistics structure.

The role of building partner capacity, while grinding and often uncelebrated, is crucial for addressing another key challenge: assuring American allies that the United States remains committed to their security. The rationale for this investment is not reassurance for its own sake. What the Saudi-led operation in Yemen, UAE involvement in Libya, and Turkish operations in Syria should teach us is that in the absence of American actions that signal a commitment to partner security, local actors will deploy their military

forces in ways that will sometimes be escalatory and threaten to draw the United States into broader conflicts. Simply put, investing in reassurance is not about preventing hurt feelings; it is about mitigating the potential for independent action that undermines U.S. interests. The presence of Army personnel in nations across the Middle East can also provide a source of stability during periods of tension or conflict among U.S. allies in the region, as in the June 2017 crisis between Qatar and its Arab neighbors.

Army leadership has an important role to play in strategy design, planning, and, of course, the execution of these missions. Having borne the brunt of previous interventions in the region, the Army is unusually well positioned to help policymakers understand both the utility and the limitations of U.S. military involvement in the Middle East. At times, this may require Army leaders to provide expert counsel about why military actions that are being considered should not be undertaken.¹⁹ Yet avoiding substantial involvement in the region, however appealing, is not likely to be possible, and the U.S. military needs to be ready for such contingencies. In such cases, both past experience and ongoing changes in the strategic landscape of the region argue in favor of military interventions that are limited in scale and modest in ambition.

Endnotes

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