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Diverging Interests: US Strategy in the Middle East

Christopher J. Bolan, Jerad I. Harper,
and Joel R. Hillison

ABSTRACT: The novel coronavirus is only the latest in a series of global crises with implications for the regional order in the Middle East. These changes and the diverging interests of actors in the region have implications for US strategy and provide an opportunity to rethink key US relationships there.

Major global crises, such as the Great Depression of the 1930s and the terror attacks on September 11, 2001, can result in a significant reordering of the global and regional orders. The ongoing coronavirus pandemic has the potential to accelerate a trend already well underway in the Middle East: the emergence of a new and dynamic regional order making the attainment of US interests more challenging. This latest crisis provides an opportunity for policy makers to reassess US strategy in the Middle East. For decades the region has been a focal point for American foreign policy and the object of multiple US and allied military campaigns.

Securing American national security interests in this troubled environment will require US policy makers to be flexible, creative, agile, and adaptive in managing rapidly evolving and transient relationships among actors in the region. This article briefly examines how the actions of key regional powers—Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel—diverge from US interests in the region and offers recommendations for how US policy should adapt to these shifting realities.

Key US Interests

The 2017 *National Security Strategy* describes the US vision of “a Middle East that is not a safe haven or breeding ground for jihadist terrorists, not dominated by any power hostile to the United States, and that contributes to a stable global energy market.”¹ Realizing this goal requires promoting enduring US regional interests such as preventing the emergence of a regional hegemon, promoting regional stability, ensuring global access to the region’s energy resources, guaranteeing the survival

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1. Donald J. Trump, *National Security Strategy of the United States of America* (Washington, DC: White House, December 2017), 48.

of Israel, limiting the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, and containing terrorism. The actions of emerging major regional powers, namely Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, will strongly influence the ability of the United States to promote these interests.

Iran

Tehran's post-revolutionary foreign policy has been aimed at countering and reducing the influence of the United States and its close regional allies. US policy since the revolution has been to isolate and contain Iranian influence. Accordingly, the United States has subjected Tehran to a network of American and international sanctions designed to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons' technology, limit its ballistic missile program, and constrain its support of terrorist organizations.

Since the United States ended its compliance with the 2015 Iran nuclear deal—formally known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action—it has imposed a steadily intensifying campaign of economic sanctions dedicated to compelling changes in Iran's behavior. While this policy of intensified sanctions has clearly imposed significant damage on Iran's economy, Iran's malign influence continues in the region.

In response, Iran has taken steps to reduce its compliance with the nuclear accord, expand its civilian nuclear activities, and shorten the so-called breakout time required to produce a nuclear weapon.² More recently, Iran temporarily denied the International Atomic Energy Agency access to some sites with suspected ties to a nuclear weapons program.³ These steps, while reversible, are especially worrisome as some hard-line Iranian leaders are signaling a willingness to withdraw from the Non-Proliferation Treaty.

Similarly, Iran's missile programs also continue to advance despite intensified and expanded American sanctions. In April 2020 Iran's Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps successfully launched its first satellite into orbit—a step the United States strongly criticized as a cover for Iran's further development of a ballistic missile program designed to be capable of delivering nuclear weapons in the future.⁴

Iran is also actively seeking to undermine regional stability through a network of Shia militia groups trained, equipped, and sponsored under the leadership of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. This network includes a close relationship with Lebanese Hezbollah—a group the US government formally designated a foreign terrorist organization in 1997. In addition to arming Hezbollah with rockets and missiles capable of

2. Greg Priddy, "Concerns about Iran's Nuclear Breakout Time Are Set to Grow," *Stratfor*, February 21, 2020, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/concerns-about-irans-falling-nuclear-breakout-time-are-set-grow-jcpoa-iaea-united-states-centrifuges>.

3. Lara Jakes, "Iran to Allow U.N. Inspections of Previously Blocked Nuclear Sites," *New York Times*, August 26, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/08/26/world/middleeast/trump-iran-nuclear-iaea.html>.

4. Sandra Erwin, "Pompeo Blasts Iran's Space Program in Wake of Satellite Launch," *Space News*, April 26, 2020, <https://spacenews.com/pompeo-blasts-irans-space-program-in-wake-of-military-satellite-launch/>.

threatening Israeli population centers, Iran provides critical financial and military support to the Houthis militants in Yemen, enabling the group to launch missile and drone attacks on Saudi civilian and military facilities.⁵

In Iraq, Iran has deep and enduring ties with numerous Shia militia groups. While playing a supporting role in liberating Iraqi territories from ISIS control, these groups have also continued to launch direct attacks on US and Iraqi facilities alike.⁶ Meanwhile in Syria, Iran continues to recruit local fighters and Shia militia groups to bolster its only regional ally in Damascus.⁷ There is little sign Iran will abandon its historical support for these groups despite economic strains.⁸

Additionally leaders in Tehran have demonstrated the ability to attack directly US and allied energy interests in the region. In September 2019 Iran conducted missile and drone strikes on refining facilities in Saudi Arabia that temporarily cut Saudi oil production in half and reduced global supplies by 5 percent.⁹ While Saudi Arabia quickly restored this capability, these incidences highlighted the vulnerability of the Arab Gulf state to Iranian attacks and clearly demonstrated the limits of any US security guarantee.

As a direct consequence, Arab leaders have begun to hedge their support for an American strategy of *maximum pressure* on Iran by directly reaching out to Tehran to ease tensions. In early August 2019 the United Arab Emirates (UAE) sent a military delegation to Tehran to discuss coordinating security efforts to protect shipping in the Gulf and more recently sent an airplane full of medical supplies to Iran in a gesture of solidarity to help combat the coronavirus.¹⁰ Similarly, leaders in

5. Corey Dickstein, "CENTCOM: Weapons Shipment from Iran Seized in Arabian Sea Was on the Way to Houthi Rebels in Yemen," *Stars and Stripes*, February 19, 2020, <https://www.stripes.com/news/middle-east/centcom-weapons-shipment-from-iran-seized-in-arabian-sea-was-on-the-way-to-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-1.619374>.

6. Louisa Loveluck and Missy Ryan, "Militia Attacks on Americans in Iraq Are Becoming More Audacious," *Washington Post*, March 28, 2020, https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/middle-east/militia-attacks-on-americans-in-iraq-becoming-more-audacious-us-wrestling-with-how-to-respond/2020/03/27/7b31d76c-6d38-11ea-a156-0048b62cdb51_story.html.

7. Golnaz Esfandiari, "Analysts See Little Change in Iran's Strategy in Syria despite Reports of Withdrawal," Radio Free Europe, May 15, 2020, <https://www.rferl.org/a/tactical-change-or-withdrawal-iran-s-syria-strategy-analyzed-amid-reports-of-force-reductions/30614695.html>.

8. Raz Zimmt, "Iran's Regional Ambitions Are Not Going Anywhere," Atlantic Council (blog), April 10, 2020, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/irans-regional-ambitions-are-not-going-anywhere/>.

9. Humeysra Pamuk, "Exclusive: U.S. Probe of Saudi Oil Attack Shows It Came from North – Report," Reuters, December 19, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-aramco-attacks-iran-exclusive/exclusive-u-s-probe-of-saudi-oil-attack-shows-it-came-from-north-report-idUSKBN1YN299>.

10. "Rivals Iran and UAE to Hold Maritime Security Talks," Reuters, July 30, 2019, <https://www.reuters.com/article/mideast-iran-emirates/rivals-iran-and-uae-to-hold-maritime-security-talks-idUSL8N24V3BO>; and "UAE Sends Medical Aid to Iran as Coronavirus Outbreak Intensifies," *Al-Monitor*, March 17, 2020, <https://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2020/03/uae-iran-medical-aid-coronavirus-outbreak.html>.

Riyadh have launched a quiet campaign of diplomatic outreach to Tehran in order to avoid direct conflict.¹¹

Moreover, US allies in Europe and in some Arab capitals have sought some level of accommodation with Iran. Leaders in Germany, Britain, and France are actively seeking to preserve the Iran nuclear deal by creating alternative means of facilitating both international business investments and the provision of humanitarian goods to Iran.¹²

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia has often directly contributed to US interests by using its position as a major swing producer of oil to stabilize global oil markets at critical junctures.¹³ But the so-called Shale Revolution has transformed the global energy market, propelling the United States into position as the world's largest oil producer and effectively making the United States and Saudi Arabia competitors for the global market share.¹⁴ In fact, some analysts directly attribute recent Saudi efforts to flood the oil market to a campaign designed to drive US shale companies out of business.¹⁵

In addition to these newly emerging tensions, the Kingdom has a mixed record in terms of battling Islamic extremism. Terrorism expert William McCants has characterized the Saudis as “both the arsonists and firefighters” in this battle.¹⁶ Saudi Arabia has undoubtedly used its wealth to promote a puritan and reactionary Wahhabi version of Islamic theology, which now fuels many of the violent Sunni jihadi terrorist groups threatening Western interests around the globe.¹⁷ While acknowledging this troubled past, terrorism expert Daniel Byman also notes Riyadh has simultaneously proven itself to be “a vital partner in the struggle to defeat the Islamic State, al-Qaida, and other groups.”¹⁸

Moreover, Saudi Arabia is now effectively being led by Mohammed bin Salman, the King's son, heir apparent, and at 35 years old stands to rule the country for several decades. At home he is pushing a

11. Declan Walsh and Ben Hubbard, “With U.S. Help No Longer Assured, Saudis Try a New Strategy: Talks,” *New York Times*, December 26, 2019, <https://www.nytimes.com/2019/12/26/world/middleeast/saudi-iran-qatar-talks.html>.

12. Leila Gharagozlou, “EU Implements New Iran Trade Mechanism,” CNBC, January 31, 2019, <https://www.cnbc.com/2019/01/31/eu-implements-new-iran-trade-mechanism.html>.

13. John Kemp, “Saudi Arabia Cannot Escape Destiny as Swing Producer,” Reuters, February 1, 2017, <https://www.reuters.com/article/us-saudi-oil-kemp/saudi-arabia-cannot-escape-destiny-as-swing-producer-kemp-idUSKBN15G4OO>.

14. Candace Dunn and Tim Hess, “The United States Is Now the Largest Global Crude Oil Producer,” Today in Energy, US Energy Information Agency, September 12, 2018, <https://www.eia.gov/todayinenergy/detail.php?id=37053>.

15. Enea Gjoza, “Saudi Arabia Is Starting a Reckless Oil War with Russia—but the US Is Also a Target,” *Business Insider*, March 14, 2020, <https://www.businessinsider.com/saudi-arabia-starting-oil-war-with-russia-us-also-targeted-2020-3>.

16. Scott Shane, “Saudis and Extremism: ‘Both the Arsonists and the Firefighters,’” *New York Times*, August 25, 2016, <https://www.nytimes.com/2016/08/26/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-islam.html>.

17. Farah Pandith, “Extremism Is Riyadh's Top Export,” *Foreign Policy*, March 24, 2019, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2019/03/24/farah-pandith-saudi-how-we-win-book/>.

18. Daniel L. Byman, “Saudi Arabia and Terrorism Today,” Markaz (blog), Brookings Institution, <https://www.brookings.edu/blog/markaz/2016/09/29/saudi-arabia-and-terrorism-today/>.

forward-looking economic agenda aimed at diversifying the Kingdom's oil-based economy, boosting the private sector, and creating a more favorable environment for foreign investment.¹⁹ The crown prince has also said he wants to foster a more tolerant version of Islam that is not susceptible to being hijacked by violent terrorist groups for their own purposes.²⁰

At the same time, however, bin Salman has shown no signs of undertaking any serious domestic political reforms that would be more inclusive or serve as a basis to weaken the strong ruling hand of the Saud family. Moreover, his behavior overseas has been reckless and costly. As defense minister he plunged Saudi Arabia into an ill-advised quagmire in Yemen that has highlighted Riyadh's military incompetence, drained its fiscal coffers, and raised doubts about the wisdom of his personal leadership.²¹

In addition, he led a regional campaign to isolate Qatar that has fractured the unity of the Arab Gulf Cooperation Council and created opportunities for Iran to expand its political, commercial, and military presence in the region—all of which work at cross-purposes with existing American strategies to isolate Iran. A continuation of these troubling behaviors could trigger potentially significant changes ahead in this long-standing partnership.

Turkey

When Recep Erdogan's Justice and Development Party came to power in 2003, the United States had hoped the republic would become an example of how Islam and democracy could coexist in a secular state. Over time, Erdogan's Islamic leanings and domestic repression have increasingly tarnished the image of Turkey as a secular democracy. After the failed 2016 coup attempt, Erdogan blamed his former ally, Fethullah Gülen, and the United States for failing to extradite Gülen from his compound in the Poconos. The Gülen issue, along with terrorism and Turkish cooperation with Russia, have increased tensions between the United States and Turkey.

The Syrian civil war has exacerbated the instability in Turkey, the Middle East, and Europe. In 2017 Turkey established observation posts in Idlib to monitor agreements with Moscow to de-escalate tensions. Since then, Turkey has sent around 20,000 troops into the Idlib province in addition to clearing Kurdish fighters from the border with Turkey.²² This action has not only resulted in clashes between the Turkish and

19. "Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030 Is Too Big to Fail—or Succeed," Stratfor, July 27, 2018, <https://worldview.stratfor.com/article/saudi-arabias-vision-2030-plan-too-big-fail-or-succeed>.

20. Martin Chulov, "I Will Return Saudi Arabia to Moderate Islam, Says Crown Prince," *Guardian*, October 24, 2017, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2017/oct/24/i-will-return-saudi-arabia-moderate-islam-crown-prince>.

21. Yoel Guzansky and Ari Heistein, "Saudi Arabia's War in Yemen Has Been a Disaster," *National Interest*, March 25, 2018, <https://nationalinterest.org/feature/saudi-arabias-war-yemen-has-been-disaster-25064>.

22. Isabelle Khurshudyan and Sarah Dadouch, "Russia and Turkey Agree to Cease-Fire in Syria's Idlib Province," *Washington Post*, March 5, 2020.

Syrian armies, it has also increased the risk of conflict with Russian and US forces in the region.

Further, the Syrian war has created a massive influx of some 3.6 million refugees and migrants that Turkey hosts today.²³ The offensive in the Idlib province has displaced another 1 million Syrians.²⁴ While the EU has at least partially compensated Turkey for this burden—over €6 billion—Turkish citizens and Erdogan are losing their patience with the refugees. To deal with the recent movement of Syrians, Erdogan has threatened to move them through Turkey to Europe.²⁵ The COVID-19 virus may exacerbate tensions caused by the refugees and displaced persons, placing additional strains on Turkey.

Erdogan's obsession with the (real but exaggerated) security threat posed by the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK—an organization designated as a terrorist group by Turkey, the United States, and many European countries) has led him to intervene militarily on multiple occasions into neighboring Syria and Iraq. These operations have strained Turkey's military, which is still reeling from the massive leadership purges of senior and mid-level officers ordered by Erdogan in wake of the failed 2016 coup. These Turkish interventions into the sovereign affairs of neighbors have at various times exacerbated tensions with leaders in Baghdad, Damascus, Washington, Brussels, and Moscow alike.

Considering its concerns over the PKK, Turkey has increasingly cooperated with Russia to pursue its interests in the region. In addition, both the United States and NATO have pushed back strongly against Turkey's deal to purchase S400 missiles from Russia, resulting in Turkey's suspension from the F-35 fighter program.²⁶

In addition, Erdogan's open support for the Muslim Brotherhood has placed him into open conflict with regional leaders in Riyadh, Tel Aviv, and Cairo. Meanwhile, his decision to intervene in Libya has also put Turkey at odds with Egypt, Russia, and the UAE.²⁷ The recently escalated Nagorno-Karabakh conflict could also increase tensions between Russia and Turkey, although both sides are working to constrain the fighting.²⁸ Further, Turkish drilling and exploration operations off the coast of Cyprus are causing tensions between Turkey and members of the Eastern Mediterranean Gas Forum which includes Cyprus, Egypt,

23. United Nations High Commissioner for Refugees, "Turkey Fact Sheet," February 2020, <https://www.unhcr.org/tr/wp-content/uploads/sites/14/2020/03/UNHCR-Turkey-short-Fact-Sheet-February2020f.pdf>.

24. Khurshudyan and Dadouch, "Cease-Fire in Idlib."

25. Paul Hockenos, "Europe's Morality Is Dying at the Greek Border," *Foreign Policy*, March 5, 2020.

26. Jarod Taylor, "U.S. Sanctions and Turkey's Purchase of Russia's S-400 Air Defense System," E-Notes, *Foreign Policy*, July 12, 2019.

27. Keith Johnson, "Newly Aggressive Turkey Forges Alliance with Libya," *Foreign Policy*, December 23, 2019.

28. Maria Tsvetkova and Olzhas Auyezov, "Analysis: Russia and Turkey Keep Powder Dry in Nagorno-Karabakh Conflict," Reuters, November 9, 2020.

Greece, Israel, Italy, Jordan, and the Palestinian Authority.²⁹ Moreover, Turkey has developed a working relationship with Iran through the Astana peace process and by providing humanitarian and medical assistance for Iran to combat the coronavirus pandemic. Turkish entities such as Halkbank have also sought to evade US sanctions on Iran.³⁰

Clearly, the relationship between Turkey and the United States is in trouble. Polling in 2019 indicates over 80 percent of the Turkish public now views the United States as a threat rather than an ally.³¹ Congress has taken a harsher approach to Turkey by supporting sanctions on Turkish arms manufacturers and, symbolically, by formally recognizing the Armenian genocide in 1915.³²

Israel

The preservation of Israel has been a vital interest for the United States from the Cold War onward. While US support has been instrumental in aiding Israel, today a strong and confident Israel with a muscular foreign and internal security policy presents its own challenges to the US interest in regional stability. Israel's long-running effort to guard against the external threat once posed by its Arab neighbors has been replaced by a forward defense strategy against the threat of Iran and its nonstate actor Shia Arab proxies. Meanwhile Israel's struggle to maintain and expand control over the occupied territory of Palestine continues to complicate its relationships with Arab states who otherwise might be inclined to pursue a more formal and visible partnership.

Despite the negative stigma of its continued occupation of Palestine, Israel shares many values and a democratic political system with the United States. The country also benefits from strong and active constituencies within America's Jewish and Evangelical Christian populations that make support for Israel a domestic and foreign policy concern for American leaders.

Regional threats to Israel's security have eased due to extensive continued US military assistance. Both Egypt and Jordan, which traditionally posed a sustained and significant conventional military threat to Israel's southern and eastern borders, today share Israeli concerns about the threat posed by Islamist terrorist groups and have developed effective working security relationships with Israel. More recently, US diplomacy and weapons sales have helped induce the UAE and Bahrain to normalize relations with Israel—making official what had long been quietly expanding economic and security cooperation.

29. Nimrod Goren, "Gas Forum a Diplomatic Opportunity for Israel," *Jerusalem Post*, February 8, 2020; and "Turkey, Cyprus and Gas Deposits: What You Need to Know," *Deutsche Welle*, July 16, 2019.

30. Brendan Pierson, "U.S. Prosecutors Accuse Turkey's Halkbank of Scheme to Evade Iran Sanctions," *Reuters*, October 16, 2019.

31. Ragıp Soylu, "Anti-US Sentiment in Turkey Reaches a New High, Poll Shows," *Middle East Eye*, February 1, 2019.

32. Philip H. Gordon and Amanda Sloat, "The Dangerous Unraveling of the U.S.-Turkish Alliance: Washington and Ankara Still Need Each Other," *Foreign Affairs*, January 10, 2020.

Oman may soon follow and even Saudi Arabia's crown prince reportedly favors eventual recognition.³³

To Israel's north, Syria and Lebanon are now confronting serious political, economic, and social divisions. Such divisions are consuming the attention of leaders in Damascus and Beirut and will prevent these states from presenting a serious conventional military threat for years to come. America's 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein and Baghdad's current domestic political turmoil and more immediate ISIS threat effectively eliminate Iraq as a meaningful threat to Israel's security. These developments leave Iran and its proxies in Syria and Lebanon as the most serious regional threat to Israel's security.

In a dramatic change from the previous seven decades of its existence, Israel today benefits from the parallel security concerns of other Arab states, similarly focused on the threat posed by Iran's growing influence. Although public opinion in the Arab Street remains anti-Israel, many regional Arab governments have quietly formed increasingly strong security ties with Israel based on their own pragmatic needs.³⁴ These quiet partnerships complement US national security interests. Nonetheless, while this behind-the-scenes coordination and the expanding official recognition of Israel are important steps, continued Israeli occupation and the absence of a formal peace agreement with the Palestinians will act as constraints on Israeli hopes of becoming a fully integrated and accepted member of any emerging, region-wide political, economic, or security architecture. Additionally, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's plans to annex formally much of the West Bank, although temporarily suspended, continue to produce friction with Jordan and other US Gulf allies.

Israel's concerns about the growing threat from Iran have led it to take increasingly aggressive active unilateral military and diplomatic measures. Militarily, Israel continues periodic, but extensive air strikes throughout Syria against Iranian or Iranian-backed targets and has demonstrated its willingness to risk inflammatory and potentially escalatory aftereffects.³⁵ One strike in 2018 even led to Syrian air defenses shooting down a Russian jet in the ensuing confusion.³⁶ More recently, Israel has expanded its reach into Iraq, including a series of summer 2019 drone strikes against Iranian proxies in Iraq that raised a potential threat to the fragile US-Iraqi relationship and could have placed US

33. Mark Landler, "Another Gulf State Recognizes Israel. Here's Why It Matters," *New York Times*, September 12, 2020, <https://www.nytimes.com/2020/09/12/world/middleeast/bahrain-israel.html>.

34. Omar H. Rahman, "Order from Chaos: What's Behind the Relationship between Israel and Arab Gulf States?" Brookings Institution, January 28, 2019.

35. Judah Ari Gross, "'Operation House of Cards,' the IAF Mission to Cripple Iran's Presence in Syria," *Times of Israel*, May 10, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/operation-house-of-cards-the-iaf-mission-to-destroy-irans-presence-in-syria/>.

36. "Report: Syria Mistakenly Downes Russian Plane While Repelling Israeli Strike," *Times of Israel*, September 18, 2018, <https://www.timesofisrael.com/report-syria-mistakenly-downs-russian-plane-as-it-repels-alleged-israeli-strike/>.

military forces in Iraq at risk from Iranian retaliation.³⁷ While these preemptive actions are understandable from the standpoint of an Israeli state assessing itself vulnerable and increasingly surrounded by threats, they complicate America's efforts to counter Iranian and extremist influence throughout the region.

Implications for US Policy

In a region increasingly under stress, the United States will need to adopt policies that advance US interests in an increasingly complex and constantly evolving security environment. Given the tremendous uncertainties surrounding the region's future, US policy makers should adopt a hedging approach: pursue adaptive and flexible strategies toward these states, based on the specific interests concerned; build diverse coalitions-of-the-willing to confront challenges as they emerge; and avoid large, one-sided investments in any single static group of countries or partners.

As a part of this hedging approach, bilateral relationships with these four countries will need to change. First, the United States should take a more nuanced and expansive approach to Iran. Iranian influence in the region should be resisted to the extent it harms US interests, but US policy makers should also seek constructive engagement where interests overlap. With a population of over 80 million people and significant reserves of oil and natural gas, Iran and its regional influence cannot simply be eliminated but instead must be actively opposed when necessary and channeled in positive directions where possible.

The steps Iran has taken to reconstitute components of its civilian nuclear program in the wake of US withdrawal from the nuclear deal must be at the top of US security concerns. Thus far these steps are reversible; Iran's foreign minister has repeatedly stated Iran will return to full compliance with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action once sanctions are lifted in accordance with the terms of the original deal.³⁸

Should policy makers decide to return to negotiations with Iran, the window for a potential agreement will be short due to upcoming Iranian presidential elections scheduled for early 2021. Hardliner and conservative candidates swept Iran's parliamentary elections held in February 2020 suggesting diplomatic proposals to make open concessions to the United States will meet strong resistance.³⁹ Taking advantage of this fleeting opportunity will require urgent and creative US diplomacy that incentivizes Iran's return to the negotiating table and lays out a credible plan for the phased easing of sanctions tied to specific

37. Katie Bo Williams, "Alleged Israeli Strikes Bring US to Crossroads in Iraq," *Defense One*, August 29, 2019, <https://www.defenseone.com/threats/2019/08/alleged-israeli-strikes-bring-us-crossroads-iraq/159541/>.

38. "Iran's Fifth Step Away From the Nuclear Deal," *The Iran Primer* (blog), United States Institute of Peace (USIP), January 6, 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/jan/06/iran%E2%80%99s-fifth-step-away-nuclear-deal>.

39. Garrett Nada, "2020 Parliamentary Election Results," *The Iran Primer* (blog), USIP, February 24, 2020, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2020/feb/24/2020-parliamentary-election-results>.

changes to Iranian activities in the region. Such diplomacy must generate sufficient international support, reassure nervous US regional allies, and refrain from generating opposition from Russia and China in the UN Security Council.⁴⁰

Additionally, Iran has the potential to play constructive or destructive roles in addressing many of the region's major security challenges whether in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Lebanon, or Afghanistan. US policy makers will need to craft the right combination of pressures and incentives to channel Iranian influence.

The current COVID-19 pandemic may present an opportunity for US policy makers to reassert American leadership, build international goodwill, and open a window for renewed negotiations with Iran. Although the extent of the damage is unclear, Iran has been hit extremely hard by the coronavirus at a time when its leaders were already under intense domestic pressure. Extending an olive branch in the form of humanitarian aid and temporary conditional lessening of sanctions could offer a unique opportunity to demonstrate American support for the Iranian people. Such a move could also de-escalate mounting US-Iranian tensions.⁴¹

Similarly, future policy makers could initiate international, regional, and bilateral discussions aimed at establishing the parameters for a more enduring and effective Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action targeting the full range of Iran's problematic behavior. Such a diplomatic and economic bridge-building exercise could start with small confidence-building measures, including a targeted relaxation of sanctions and expansion of foreign investments in Iran's economy in exchange for parallel restrictions on Iranian nuclear, missile, and other regional activities.

At the same time, the United States should seek to capitalize on the convergence of Israel and Gulf Arab interests in contesting Iran's growing influence in the region by deepening and expanding the recently concluded normalization agreements with the UAE and Bahrain. Continuing the tradition of extensive US conventional military assistance to and cooperation with Israel and Saudi Arabia provides a strong foundation for deterring overt Iranian aggression. The United States, nonetheless, should also be careful of relying too much on Israel and Saudi Arabia as proxies to confront Iran. Ongoing Israeli air strikes into both Syria and Iraq as well as the costly Saudi intervention into Yemen demonstrate either of these partners are capable of instigating larger regional conflicts into which the United States could easily be drawn.

40. Daniel Benaim and Jake Sullivan, "America's Opportunity in the Middle East: Diplomacy Could Succeed Where Military Force Has Failed," *Foreign Affairs*, May 22, 2020, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2020-05-22/americas-opportunity-middle-east>.

41. Robert Malley and Ali Vaez, "The Coronavirus Crisis is a Diplomatic Opportunity for the United States and Iran," *Foreign Policy*, March 17, 2020, <https://foreignpolicy.com/2020/03/17/coronavirus-crisis-maximum-pressure-iran-usa-diplomacy-opportunity/>.

US regional military strategy should rely heavily on a strong—if necessarily transient—naval and air force presence to serve as a deterrent to Iranian military adventurism that directly targets the United States and its regional allies or endangers international shipping through the Hormuz Strait. Meanwhile, the US Army presence in the region should more narrowly focus on defeating ISIS and building partner capacity. This reduced US physical military presence in places like Kuwait will place primary responsibility for regional security in the hands of Arab leaders while still providing a residual on-the-ground presence to reassure allies.

Beyond military cooperation, US policy makers should also explore potential measures to forge regional and international arms control agreements that improve transparency and reduce the risks for miscalculations that could spark regional military conflict. US policy should expand both the substantive scope and roster of participants in maritime patrol operations, which would ensure freedom of navigation through critical choke points in both the Hormuz and Bab el-Mandeb Straits.

A tailored US military presence should be simultaneously bolstered by an increasingly active diplomatic and economic campaign aimed at reducing prospects for a military confrontation with Iran; repairing the internal Gulf Cooperation Council rift with Qatar; forging regional solutions to the civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya; and addressing the humanitarian needs of increasingly desperate refugee populations fleeing these conflicts. The roles of Turkey, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and Iran will be a key consideration in any of these efforts.

In some ways, Turkey may be the most difficult bilateral relationship to navigate. The United States must make a concerted effort to address Turkish fears emanating from an unstable southern border and the continued threat from the PKK. The United States should also work with its European allies to continue economic support for Turkey, which has borne much of the brunt of caring for migrants and refugees since 2015. The United States should continue bilateral and multilateral exercises—under NATO—with Turkey, commit to retaining a nuclear deterrent in Turkey, and roll back Congressional efforts to sanction Turkey's defense industry further.⁴²

Turkey remains a force multiplier for US efforts to contain Russian adventurism, to project power in the region, and to balance Iran's influence in the region. The United States should use its diplomatic, economic, and military instruments of power to keep Turkey in the NATO alliance, while working behind the scenes to curb Turkey's increasingly autocratic and expansionist tendencies.

At the same time, the United States needs to push back against Erdogan courting Russia and Iran. In addition to suspending Turkey from the F-35 program, US policy makers should consider limiting

42. Gordon and Sloat, "U.S.–Turkish Alliance."

other military sales to Turkey if Erdogan does not reverse course. The United States must also continue to work closely with Erdogan regarding Turkey's presence in Syria and Iraq. The United States should explore alternative basing arrangements so as not to be caught flat-footed in the event Erdogan demands US forces depart Incirlik Air Base. The United States should also seek to mediate competing resource claims between Turkey, Egypt, Greece, Israel, and Cyprus in the Aegean.⁴³ Finally, the United States should exert influence on Ankara to reinstate peace talks with the PKK that were suspended in 2015 and reduce military ties with the YPG (the People's Protection Units, a primarily Kurdish militia in Syria and the major component of the Syrian Democratic Forces) in Syria.⁴⁴

Conclusion

The future of the Middle East is more in flux than it has been for decades. The traditional poles of power emanating from Cairo, Baghdad, and Damascus have been eclipsed by the rise of non-Arab powers in Israel, Iran, and Turkey; competition from China and Russia; and increasingly divergent interests between these regional powers, Saudi Arabia, and the United States.

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced even more uncertainty into the region.⁴⁵ Saudi Arabia, for instance, may well have sufficient economic resources to emerge from this pandemic relatively unscathed; however, other countries including Iran, Turkey, Egypt, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen may suffer damage only large-scale international assistance can hope to mitigate. In this situation, existing US policies and strategies need to adapt quickly to these challenges as they emerge in the region. Even competently led and well-resourced governments will have trouble surmounting these challenges, and such governments are in rare supply in the Middle East.

43. Yiannis Baboulias, "Greece Accidentally Steered into a Foreign-Policy Crisis," *Foreign Policy*, February 3, 2020.

44. Joe Parkinson, "Turkish President Says Can't Continue Peace Talks with Kurds," *Wall Street Journal*, July 28, 2015, <https://www.wsj.com/articles/turkish-president-halts-talks-with-kurds-1438084113>.

45. Thomas Wright, "Stretching the International Order to Its Breaking Point," *Atlantic*, April 4, 2020, <https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2020/04/pandemic-lasts-18-months-will-change-geopolitics-good/609445/>.

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