



# Middle East

## Summary and Key Talking Points

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### Policy Proposals

1. Prevent ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups from creating sanctuaries in Syria and Iraq.
2. Encourage Baghdad to contain and marginalize the political influence of pro-Iranian militias.
3. Support Egypt's fight against Islamist terrorist groups.
4. End the Biden Administration's tilt toward the Houthi rebels and put pressure on the Houthis and Iran to end the war in Yemen.

### Quick Facts

1. The Arab Spring, which began in December 2010, toppled autocratic leaders in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen.
2. Syria's Assad regime, aided by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, has survived by defeating opposing factions in a civil war that has killed more than 400,000 Syrians.
3. The Trump Administration accelerated the downfall of ISIS in Syria and Iraq, and the Biden Administration should not allow ISIS to resurge by restoring the Obama Administration's tight restrictions on the use of U.S. air power and special operations forces.

### Power Phrases

#### Volatility and Violence

- The Middle East is the world's most volatile and conflict-ridden region and continues to generate some of the most dangerous threats to U.S. security.
- Current threats in the region include the resurgence of ISIS; the meltdown of Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen; and the growing threat posed by Islamist extremists.

#### U.S. Involvement

- Containing Iran and fighting terrorism in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen make the U.S. safer and more secure.
- U.S. Middle East policy should protect our security interests without risky and costly mission creep and the overly ambitious goal of nation-building.
- U.S. forces ultimately should be brought home—but only after each mission is complete—and this should be carried out in phases, taking into consideration regional dynamics and the situation on the ground.

## The Issue

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The Middle East, the world's most volatile and conflict-ridden region, continues to generate some of the most dangerous threats to U.S. security. The Trump Administration inherited many problems from the Obama Administration, which failed to formulate effective policies to address the challenges posed by the rise of ISIS; the meltdown of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen; and the growing threat from Islamist extremists throughout the region. The Trump Administration effectively mitigated the threat of ISIS and supported Saudi Arabia's efforts in Yemen; the Biden Administration's policies threaten this progress. (See sections on Iran and Israel.)

The Obama Administration's premature withdrawal of U.S. troops from Iraq in 2011 weakened Iraqi counter-terrorism, intelligence gathering, and special-operations capabilities, thereby enabling a decimated al-Qaeda to revive and resurge as ISIS. The Obama White House underestimated the threat posed by ISIS and reacted slowly and reluctantly with a series of half measures. It never effectively matched ends and means: It initially barred combat operations by American ground troops; delayed deploying military advisers and, when it did deploy them, restricted them from being deployed with front-line Iraqi forces; and put tight restrictions on the use of air strikes to avoid civilian casualties.

The Trump Administration eased many of the political restrictions that hampered the military efforts against ISIS and delivered much more robust military support to help the Iraqi government and Kurdish militias to dismantle the so-called caliphate. ISIS has been forced to return to its underground roots in Iraq and Syria but continues to pose a terrorist threat to the U.S. and its allies. ISIS also has established affiliates in Egypt, Yemen, and in multiple countries in Asia and Africa.

In January 2021, the Biden Administration began to review U.S. policies across the Middle East, including its policies on Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. In Iraq, the Administration indicated that it would conclude the combat mission of U.S. military forces in Iraq by the end of 2021, but troop levels remained the same at 2,500. A joint U.S.–Iraq statement specified that the bilateral security relationship will be focused on training, advising, and intelligence-sharing to mitigate the threat from the remnants of ISIS. However, the principal threat to U.S. forces is the Iran-backed Iraqi Shia militias that continue to launch rocket attacks against Iraqi bases that host U.S. troops.

A rocket attack on February 15, 2021, killed a Filipino contractor at a military base at Irbil in northern Iraq. In response, President Joe Biden ordered a February 25 air strike against military facilities in Syria controlled by Iraqi militias backed by Iran, including Kataib Hezbollah, one of Iran's most dangerous Iraqi surrogate groups. An American contractor died of a heart attack during a rocket attack attributed to Kataib Hezbollah in March, but the Biden Administration did not retaliate overtly until June 28, when it targeted the infrastructure used by Iran-backed Iraqi militias in Syria and Iraq while minimizing the hostile militias' casualties. By contrast, the Trump Administration held Iran responsible for the attacks of its proxy militias in Iraq by killing General Qassem Soleimani, who directed the operations of Iraqi militias as leader of Iran's Quds Force, in a drone strike in Baghdad in January 2020.

In June 2021, despite the continuing attacks on U.S. troops in Iraq and Syria, the Biden Administration began the withdrawal of eight Patriot air defense batteries and a Terminal High Altitude Area Defense system from Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Kuwait, and Jordan. This signal of U.S. complacency undoubtedly emboldened Iran to continue its proxy attacks and stiffen its demands at the nuclear talks. (See section on Iran.) Iran-backed Iraqi militias, undeterred by symbolic military reprisals, escalated their aggressive attacks by launching a drone strike at the residence of Iraqi Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi on November 7, 2021. On March 13, 2022, Iran launched ballistic missiles that targeted a house near the U.S. consulate in northern Iraq. The house belonged to a Kurdish businessman that Iran claimed was cooperating with Israeli intelligence.

U.S. policy in Syria is even less clear. U.S. partners in the Middle East started to normalize relations with the Syrian regime in 2021 even though President Bashar al-Assad is still in power. Secretary of State Antony Blinken has stated that the U.S. has no plans to “normalize or upgrade” diplomatic relations with Syria, and the Administration has continued the deployment of 600–900 U.S. military personnel in northeastern Syria without specifying the conditions that would enable them to be withdrawn. Meanwhile, Lebanon is on the brink of collapse after years of sectarian squabbling, corruption, and mismanagement by its political elites. Hezbollah, Iran’s strongest proxy militia, continues to dominate Lebanese politics, drain state resources, and stockpile Iran-supplied arms for another war against Israel.

In Yemen, the Biden Administration reversed the Trump Administration’s hard-line policies, rescinded President Donald Trump’s designation of the Houthi rebels as a terrorist organization, halted support for the Saudi-led coalition fighting the Houthis on behalf of Yemen’s internationally recognized government, and distanced itself from Saudi Arabia. In addition, the Biden Administration’s threat to cut off U.S. arms sales to Saudi Arabia, if implemented, would severely weaken the kingdom’s ability to counterbalance Iran and its proxies, potentially tilting the balance of power in Iran’s favor and pushing Saudi Arabia into the arms of China or Russia for arms sales. It also would embolden Iran-backed proxies to continue their efforts to destabilize Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, Gaza, and parts of the West Bank.

The U.S. has strategic interests in containing Iran and fighting terrorism in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen. The challenge for policymakers is to formulate a policy that advances these interests without a risky and costly mission creep toward the overly ambitious goal of nation-building. President Trump was correct when he said in December 2018 that U.S. forces should come home from Syria. Ultimately, they must come home, but this must be carried out in phases, taking into consideration regional dynamics and the situation on the ground. Washington should not make the same mistake it made in Iraq in 2014 by leaving a vacuum that Islamist terrorists or Iran can exploit. Instead, U.S. policy must take account of the deteriorating political, economic, and security conditions in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and Yemen.

## Recommendations

**Prevent ISIS, al-Qaeda, and other terrorist groups from creating sanctuaries in Syria.** The permanent defeat of ISIS remains a top U.S. priority in Syria and Iraq. While ISIS has been ousted from its so-called caliphate, it remains a lethal force and could make a comeback as it did in Iraq in 2014. The Biden Administration should not ignore Syria and Iraq. The drawdown of U.S. forces in both countries should be gradual and linked to security conditions on the ground, not governed by a rigid timetable. An abrupt U.S. departure would be a strategic error that would benefit Iran, the Assad regime, Russia, Hezbollah, and ISIS.

The U.S. should lead an international effort to prevent an ISIS resurgence, primarily providing air support, intelligence, counterterrorism assistance, training, and logistical support, while gradually withdrawing U.S. ground troops from Syria. The U.S. should also work with Jordan, Iraq, and allies in the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) to coordinate more robust Arab efforts to defeat ISIS that include assuming a greater responsibility for stabilizing eastern Syria with troops and economic support and stepping up aid for Syrian refugees to prevent them from being radicalized by ISIS.

**Help Iraq’s government withstand the challenges posed by ISIS.** Inside Iraq, the U.S. should work with the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government in Erbil to help resettle Iraqis displaced by the war with ISIS and protect them from an ISIS resurgence. Washington should continue to train and arm Iraqi army and counterterrorism forces to help them permanently defeat ISIS and provide a counterweight to the growing power of pro-Iran Shia militias. Ultimately, the appeal of ISIS will be weakened only if Baghdad’s Shia-dominated government reaches out to Sunni tribal and moderate political leaders to give them a stake in Iraq’s future and undermine the appeal of ISIS and other Islamist extremists.

**Contain and mitigate the destabilizing spillover effects of Syria's civil war.** Washington should focus on strengthening border security to prevent fighting from spilling across Syria's borders and threatening U.S. allies, particularly Israel and Jordan, and limiting the outflow of refugees by helping to care for them closer to their homes. The U.S. also should work with allies to stop foreign fighters from returning to their home countries and encourage foreign countries to extradite their citizens from prisons in Syria and Iraq. Washington should offer more humanitarian aid to support refugees inside Syria and in surrounding countries but should not become a party to the conflict by deploying U.S. forces inside Syria to maintain safe zones. The U.S. can best help to protect Syrian refugees by focusing on mitigating the threat of ISIS and supporting a political settlement that ends the fighting, allows displaced Syrians to return home, and limits the influence of Islamist extremists, including Iran and Hezbollah.

**Deter the use of illegal chemical weapons by the Assad regime.** President Trump restored U.S. credibility after President Barack Obama's failure to enforce his own 2013 red line prohibiting the Assad regime from using illegal chemical weapons against its own people. In April 2017 and April 2018, President Trump ordered cruise missile strikes against Syrian forces that were involved in chemical weapons attacks. These forceful actions have deterred major attacks, but the regime could be tempted to resort to smaller covert attacks. The Biden Administration must therefore continue to lead an international effort against the use of chemical weapons in Syria.

**Help Iraqis to build a secure and stable government.** Washington should encourage Iraq's predominantly Shia leaders to build an inclusive government that welcomes participation by Iraq's Kurdish, Sunni, Christian, and other minority groups. Reaching out to moderate Sunni Arab leaders is particularly vital to undermining the appeal of ISIS and other Sunni Islamist militants. The U.S. and its allies should continue efforts to professionalize and reform internal security forces to prevent abuses, nepotism, and corruption. Washington should also continue to train the Iraqi army to preserve it as a counterweight to pro-Iran militias that have come under the government's security umbrella.

Iran expanded its influence as ISIS receded and is pushing for a greater political role for the radical Shia militias that it controls. The danger is that these proxies could exploit such an enhanced role to subvert Iraqi sovereignty in the same way that Hezbollah, another Iran-backed group, subverted Lebanon's sovereignty. Washington should encourage Baghdad to contain and marginalize the political influence of the pro-Iran militias and promote better relations between Baghdad and the Sunni Arab states to provide a counterweight to Iran's influence. Washington also should promote better relations between the central government in Baghdad and the Kurdistan Regional Government and broker a bilateral agreement on the equitable sharing of oil revenues.

**Strengthen U.S. strategic partnerships, especially with Israel.** The 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran had a corrosive effect on bilateral relationships with important U.S. partners in the Middle East, particularly countries such as Israel, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Bahrain that are most threatened by Iran. The Trump Administration strengthened ties with Arab partners after pulling out of the Iran nuclear deal and imposing sanctions on Iran in 2018. The Biden Administration, however, is rushing to embrace Iran as the Obama Administration did, which is disastrous for U.S. interests as well as the interests of Israel and Arab partners. Instead, the Biden Administration should give priority to safeguarding the vital security interests of the U.S. and its partners by maintaining a favorable regional balance of power to deter and contain Iran and fight terrorism. The U.S. and its European allies also should strengthen military, intelligence, and security cooperation with Israel and Arab states threatened by Iran.

**Support Egypt's fight against terrorism.** Egypt is a key ally against Islamist extremism and a crucial supporter of Arab-Israeli peace efforts. ISIS has spearheaded an insurgency in Egypt's Sinai Peninsula since the 2013 coup that removed President Mohamed Morsi's Islamist government from power and remains a potent terrorist threat to Egypt and to Israel. Washington should help Egypt's army and security forces to replace

Cairo's narrowly focused and militarized counterterrorism efforts with a population-centric counterinsurgency campaign against ISIS and its supporters that includes enhanced political outreach to disaffected Bedouin tribes in the Sinai. Washington should also provide technical assistance in finding and destroying tunnels under the Egypt–Gaza border that Hamas and other Islamist terrorist groups use to smuggle arms, terrorists, and contraband into and out of Gaza. President Abdelfattah el-Sisi's government, although increasingly authoritarian, has a better chance of laying the groundwork for a stable democracy than Morsi's regime had. The U.S. should leverage aid to Egypt to ensure that Cairo adheres to the terms of its peace treaty with Israel and respects the freedom and human rights of its own citizens.

**Prevent Yemen from becoming a terrorist sanctuary or Iranian ally.** Arab Spring protests enabled Houthi rebels aligned with Iran to overthrow the Yemeni government in a bloody 2015 coup that violated a U.N.-brokered cease-fire. An Arab coalition led by Saudi Arabia intervened militarily to support Yemen's internationally recognized government. High levels of civilian casualties and growing food shortages have put millions of Yemenis on the brink of starvation. Iran has sought to transform the Houthi Ansar Allah movement into the "Hezbollah of Yemen"—a permanent threat to regional stability and security that directly conflicts with U.S. interests—and has illegally transferred sophisticated ballistic missiles, drones, and remote-controlled boat bombs to the Houthis, who have used them against cities, airports, oil pipelines, and other civilian targets in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The Biden Administration should end its pro-Houthi tilt and support efforts to roll back the Houthi coup and reach a political settlement that stops the fighting, averts widespread starvation, limits Iran's influence, and allows a greater focus on defeating ISIS and al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, two terrorist groups that have flourished amid the chaos of Yemen's civil war.

## Facts + Figures

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**FACT: The Arab Spring, which began in Tunisia in December 2010, brought popular protests, political instability, and chaos to many Arab countries.**

- Autocratic leaders were toppled in Tunisia, Libya, Egypt, and Yemen, and the beleaguered Assad dictatorship in Syria fought back ruthlessly, triggering a sectarian civil war that threatens the stability of surrounding countries.
- Although the initial pro-democracy impetus of the protests was encouraging, Islamist extremists were positioned to exploit the ensuing political turmoil, economic disruptions, power vacuums, and anarchy.
- The Arab Spring has weakened governments aligned with the West while creating political instability, economic collapse, and chaos, all of which benefits Islamist extremists as they compete for power in affected countries.
- Al-Qaeda and ISIS have exploited the chaos to expand their influence and carve out sanctuaries in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Egypt's Sinai Peninsula.

**FACT: President Obama overpromised and failed to deliver on Syria policy.**

- After declaring in August 2011 that Syrian dictator Bashar al-Assad must relinquish power, the Obama Administration did little to advance that goal.
- The Administration's insistence on multilateralism, almost as an end in itself, led it to outsource policy on Syria to the U.N., where Russia and China exercised their veto power to block effective action.
- Syria's Assad regime, aided by Russia, Iran, and Hezbollah, has gained the upper hand in a civil war that has killed more than 400,000 Syrians and driven more than 11 million people out of their homes and more than 5 million out of the country into refugee camps in neighboring Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, and Iraq.

**FACT: The Trump Administration enforced the red line against the use of chemical weapons in Syria that President Obama proclaimed but failed to enforce.**

- After a massive chemical attack in August 2013 that reportedly killed more than 1,000 Syrians, President Obama publicly threatened to launch a military reprisal against the Assad regime.
- After having second thoughts, President Obama agreed to a risky and problematic Russian diplomatic proposal to dispatch international inspectors to disarm Syria's chemical weapons arsenal that bolstered the legitimacy of the Assad regime, demoralized the Syrian opposition, and strengthened Moscow's role in the Middle East.
- When the Trump Administration came to office, it discovered that the Assad regime not only had failed to give up its chemical weapons, but also was still using them covertly against the rebels.
- President Trump enforced the red line against chemical warfare by launching two cruise missile strikes against Syrian forces that had unleashed chemical weapons in April 2017 and April 2018.
- President Trump warned that the use of chemical weapons is unacceptable and declared that the United States has a vital national security interest in preventing and deterring the spread and use of deadly chemical weapons.

**FACT: The Trump Administration accelerated the downfall of ISIS in Syria and Iraq.**

- The Obama White House micromanaged the war against ISIS and did a poor job of it. For example, it ruled out bombing ISIS-controlled oil facilities to avoid civilian casualties, but those self-imposed restrictions enabled ISIS to exploit Syria's oil resources to expand its power and slaughter greater numbers of civilians.
- The Trump Administration removed tight restrictions on the use of U.S. air power and special operations forces that the Obama Administration had imposed.
- President Trump trusted his military advisers and gave the Pentagon the support it needed to step up military efforts against ISIS rather than allowing mid-level political appointees to challenge the judgement of military professionals.

**FACT: The Trump Administration strengthened security cooperation with Egypt, a key ally frozen out by the Obama Administration.**

- Since the 1978 Camp David Accords, Egypt has been an important U.S. ally helping to stabilize a highly volatile region.
- Egypt has played an important role both in encouraging peace negotiations between Israel and its Arab neighbors and in combatting Islamist terrorism.
- Egypt has granted U.S. naval vessels priority access to the Suez Canal and allowed overflights of American military planes flying to and from the region.
- Egypt's armed forces, one of the Middle East's largest, could play a key role in assembling an Arab military coalition to safeguard regional stability.

## Additional Resources

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