



# GNSI DECISION BRIEF

## What Keeps the US in the Middle East?

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### Introduction

In early August the United States sent “More than 3,000 Marines and Sailors [to the Middle East] in a deployment meant to deter Iran from seizing and harassing merchant ships near the Strait of Hormuz.”<sup>i</sup> The decision likely caught many off guard, considering that just two years prior, the US had finalized its troop withdrawal from Afghanistan. Yet, this isn't the first instance of the United States oscillating in its engagement with the Middle East. Historically, a range of factors have consistently drawn America into the region. The US had minimal involvement in the Middle East until the compounding interests of oil, great power competition, fighting terrorism, and the resource needs of allies fully engaged it.

### US Evolving Interests in the Region

The US had little interaction with the Middle East during the 1800s. It remained focused closer to home with the implementation of the Monroe Doctrine. Additionally, the predominant roles held by the Ottoman Empire and European powers left little room for US involvement in the region. The limited engagement that did occur came from religious motivations and archaeological curiosity. American missionaries started their missions in Ottoman Syria and expanded them throughout the region by establishing schools, hospitals, and other institutions.<sup>ii</sup> Later in the century, the US did not involve itself in the decline of the Ottoman Empire known as the "Eastern Question."<sup>iii</sup> Even the Armenian massacres of 1894-1896, which elicited international outrage and calls for intervention from US missionaries did not provoke a US response.<sup>iv</sup>

In the early 1900s, American involvement in the region slowly expanded. This included the work of Howard Baskerville, a young American missionary teacher in Tabriz, Iran.<sup>v</sup> He deeply empathized with the cause of the constitutionalists during the Iranian Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911). Tragically, in 1909, he lost his life while supporting the cause during the siege of Tabriz, and he remains a revered figure in Iran's history. In 1911, as oil gained increasing importance, the relationship between the United States and Persia took an interesting turn when the Iranian Parliament appointed American lawyer, Morgan Shuster, as its treasurer general. He did not keep his post long as Russia and the United Kingdom threatened military intervention if he remained.<sup>vi</sup> During this time, trade relations between the US and Middle Eastern countries continued to experience modest growth around imports from the region including items such as figs, raisins, licorice root, rugs, nuts, wool, opium, hides, and oil.

### *Cold War: Competition in the Middle East*

Missionary purposes initially brought the US to the Middle East, but oil and strategic competition would keep it there. Prior to and during World War II, the US had increased its role in the region and American troops would fight there during the war. During the subsequent Cold War, the Middle East became a pivotal arena in the geopolitical tug-of-war between the US and the Soviet Union. The region's vast oil reserves and strategic locations underscored its importance. An example of its growing importance came with the nationalization of the Suez Canal by Egypt's President Gamal Abdel Nasser in 1956. This act caused an international crisis as Britain, France, and Israel invaded Egypt; the US and the Soviet Union sided against the invasion. By the 1960s, Israel had transitioned to forging a more robust alliance with the US, accompanied by a growing pro-Israel lobby. Oil, always a cornerstone of US interest in the region, saw its significance magnified with the establishment of Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) in 1960. Amid these shifting sands, the Soviet Union also achieved a strategic foothold in the Middle East with the emergence of the People's Democratic Republic of Yemen in 1967, which provided an opportunity for the Soviets to challenge existing US influence.

Additionally, terrorism started to pose a significant challenge for the US. On October 23, 1983, a truck packed with explosives detonated after ramming into the US Marine barracks at Beirut International Airport. The explosion claimed the lives of 241 American Servicemembers, making it the deadliest assault on US Marines since the Battle of Iwo Jima.<sup>vii</sup> The US attributed the attack to a group associated with Hezbollah, possibly operating with the backing of Iran and Syria. This attack showed the growing price the US would have to pay for influence in the region. The rise of terrorist threats along with US interests to thwart Soviet efforts and the need for low oil prices created long-term US commitments.

### *Post-Cold War and 9/11*

With the dissolution of the Soviet Union in 1991, the United States emerged as the world's sole superpower. This new unipolarity shifted American foreign policy an emphasis on promoting democracy and preemptively addressing threats. The Gulf War in 1991 saw the US lead a coalition against Iraq's invasion of Kuwait heightening the US military presence in the region for years.<sup>viii</sup> The presence of these foreign troops in the heartland of Islam created consternation and provided a rallying cry for extremist Islamic ideologies. Some of these ideologies quickly radicalized into the form terrorist organizations such as, Al-Qaeda, led by Osama bin

Laden. Motivated by perceived Western aggressions and emboldened by successful operations against U.S. targets overseas, Al-Qaeda sought to strike the US homeland. The 9/11 attacks were transformative, not just for the US, but for the world. Almost immediately, the US launched the "War on Terror." By the end of 2001, the US and its allies had toppled the Taliban in Afghanistan. The ripples of 9/11 also led the US back to Iraq. In 2003, based on the possible premise of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMDs) and the alleged links between Saddam Hussein and terrorist groups, the US invaded Iraq.<sup>ix</sup> The removal of Saddam, however, opened a Pandora's box of sectarian conflicts and gave rise to extremist groups. Overall, the post-Cold War era and the aftermath of 9/11 redefined US engagement in the Middle East to protect oil interests, counterterrorism, and attempt to spread democracy.

### *The Iranian Question*

The Iranian Question has been a defining factor in the US's intricate involvement in the Middle East, shaping a narrative of transformation and complexity over time. The turning point emerged with the Islamic Revolution of 1979. Internal grievances against economic inequality and Western interference laid the foundation for Ayatollah Khomeini's leadership after the ousting of the Shah. The US Embassy hostage crisis (1979-1981) in Tehran highlighted this rupture.<sup>x</sup> The prolonged standoff deepened anti-American sentiment, resulting in severed diplomatic ties and setting the stage for a new geopolitical landscape. Iran's post-revolution expansionist approach sought to export its revolutionary ideology across the region, including supporting militant groups like Hezbollah and Shia militias.

Recently, Iran's involvement in Russo-Ukrainian War challenged US sanctions. Iran has supplied an undisclosed number of Shahed-131 kamikaze drones to the Russian army. These drones have proven invaluable to Russian forces, especially in targeting Ukraine's energy infrastructure. As Moscow increasingly relies on Iranian weaponry, including kamikaze drones, Iran has emerged as the primary supplier of arms to Russia.<sup>xi</sup> Iran's defense industry continues to meet Russia's military needs, while Moscow plans to reciprocate by providing Iran with advanced fighter aircraft and anti-missile systems.<sup>xii</sup> This transaction represents a new level of Russo-Persian partnership challenging the US led order.

### *US Interests Today*

Today, American interests in the region can be summarized as countering great power rivals, ensuring the free flow of energy resources and trade to itself and its allies while pre-empting any terrorist threat.<sup>xiii</sup> China's expanding economy and its need for energy resources have driven its involvement in the region.<sup>xiv</sup> Consequently, China has made substantial investments in energy infrastructure and deepened economic connections. In 2001, when the US invaded Afghanistan, China's annual exports to the Middle East amounted to around \$9 billion,<sup>xv</sup> whereas American exports to the region exceeded \$25 billion.<sup>xvi</sup> However, by 2021, China's exports to the Middle East had risen to approximately \$169 billion,<sup>xvii</sup> more

than double the US exports of \$62 billion,<sup>xviii</sup> establishing China as the primary exporter to the Middle East. In addition to China, Russia's resurgence on the global stage has been underscored by its military involvement in the Middle East, notably in Syria. Moscow's support for the Syrian government has not only solidified its regional position but has also posed a challenge to American influence. Furthermore, Russia's arms sales and diplomatic maneuvers have expanded its footprint. To bolster its standing in the region, alongside Syria, Iran, and Iraq, Russia established the RSII Security coalition in 2015, with two headquarters in Baghdad and Damascus.<sup>xix</sup> The RSII coalition has held annual meetings in Baghdad, focusing on intelligence exchange and regional developments.

As of June 2023, the United States still maintained roughly 30,000 troops in the Middle East.<sup>xx</sup> Considering Chinese and Russians growing presence in the region, a total withdrawal of the US from the Middle East would create a power vacuum opening the door for its great power competitors to assert their influence. China accounts for 28.4% of global manufacturing output.<sup>xxi</sup> The Middle East accounts for 48% of the world's oil and 40% of its natural gas reserves.<sup>xxii</sup> If China gains more influence over those resources, it could consolidate its power to pose a greater challenge to US interests.

### *Continuing to Counter Terrorism*

The US has made significant strides with the defeat of ISIS and the elimination of al-Qaeda's top leadership, including Osama bin Laden and Ayman al-Zawahiri, which has substantially diminished the threat of terrorist attacks against the US and its interests. However, political instability across the region, ongoing civil wars in Yemen and Syria, economic challenges, rising unemployment among Middle Eastern youth, and the Taliban's return to power in Afghanistan all present a concerning backdrop. This volatile environment could provide fertile ground for the emergence of new extremist groups. As such, the US should remain ready to address these threats before they gain momentum.

### *The Interests of Allies*

The Middle East's crucial role in supplying fossil fuels to American allies in Europe and East Asia make it strategically important for US power projection. A significant security disruption in the region could have detrimental effects on allies' ability to maintain economic stability and support for the US. As [General \(Ret\) Frank McKenzie](#) stated, "If you're able to get cheap, renewable energy, then that's going to affect the relative importance of the Middle East, because some of the reasons we're there are purely pragmatic, not [the US] so much now... but our allies and friends across the world need the hydrocarbons that come out of there."<sup>xxiii</sup> Even if the United States does not rely directly on the Middle East's oil or feel directly impacted by regional events, its allies certainly do. Given that the US's hegemonic position is, in part, built upon its alliance network, it cannot overlook allied interests. In this vein, the deployment of three thousand US Servicemembers sends a clear message to both allies and adversaries about America's ongoing commitment to regional stability and secure waterways for the movement of resources.

## Decision Points

- Can the promotion of democracy in the Middle East lead to a decrease in the inclination toward extremism?
- Can the United States establish boundaries for Iraq's participation in the RSII coalition?
- How can the US limit China's influence in the region, considering China's expansive Belt and Road Initiative (BRI)?

- Could Iran's collaboration with Russia potentially result in a new military alliance in the region aimed to challenge the US and its allies?
- Could the United States reduce allies' reliance on the Middle East's hydrocarbons by exporting US-produced gas and oil?
- What criteria would allow the US to leave the region militarily?

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<sup>v</sup> R. Aslan, [An American martyred himself for the people of Iran. Here's his story](#), Atlantic Council (2022)

<sup>vi</sup> R. Brown, [Iran's American Friend: William Morgan Shuster](#), *The Iran Wire* (2016)

<sup>vii</sup> [The Beirut Bombing: Thirty Years later](#), Marine Corps University

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<sup>xi</sup> A. Madhani, and Z. Miller, [US: Russia, Iran moving toward full defense ‘partnership.’](#) The Associate Press (2022)

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<sup>xiii</sup> [Challenges & Opportunities for US Policy In The Middle East](#), Middle East Institute (2020)

<sup>xiv</sup> A. Mahmoudian, [The Peaceful Rising of the Silent Dragon in the Middle East](#), *Harvard Journal of Middle Eastern Politics & Policy* (2021)

<sup>xv</sup> [Products Imports by China from Middle East & North Africa 2001](#), World Integrated Trade Solution (2021)

<sup>xvi</sup> Ibid

<sup>xvii</sup> [Products Imports by China from Middle East & North Africa 2021](#), World Integrated Trade Solution (2023)

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