

The United States in the Middle East: The Return of *Realpolitik*?

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(Royal Court of Saudi Arabia - Anadolu Agency)

On July 16, US President Joe Biden's wrapped up his highly anticipated trip to the Middle East that included stops in Israel, the Occupied Palestinian Territories, and Saudi Arabia where he attended a summit meeting of the Gulf Cooperation Council along with Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. Much of the coverage of the trip was focused on interpreting Biden's 'fist bump' with Saudi Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, overlooking the more concrete developments to emerge out of the various meetings. Beyond that, the nature of the meetings pointed to a shift in US relations with its traditional regional partners, which is not wholly captured by the 'pivot to Asia' or end of 'Pax Americana' narratives. US domestic political dynamics will continue to complicate these endeavours, however, in an era of renewed great power competition, momentum towards maintaining an interest-based approach devoid of the ideologically-driven policies of the post-9/11 era will continue. This Policy Outlook explores the contours of American engagement in the region in light of this shift with a focus on the implications of Joe Biden's visit for the American strategic outlook in the Middle East.

Introduction

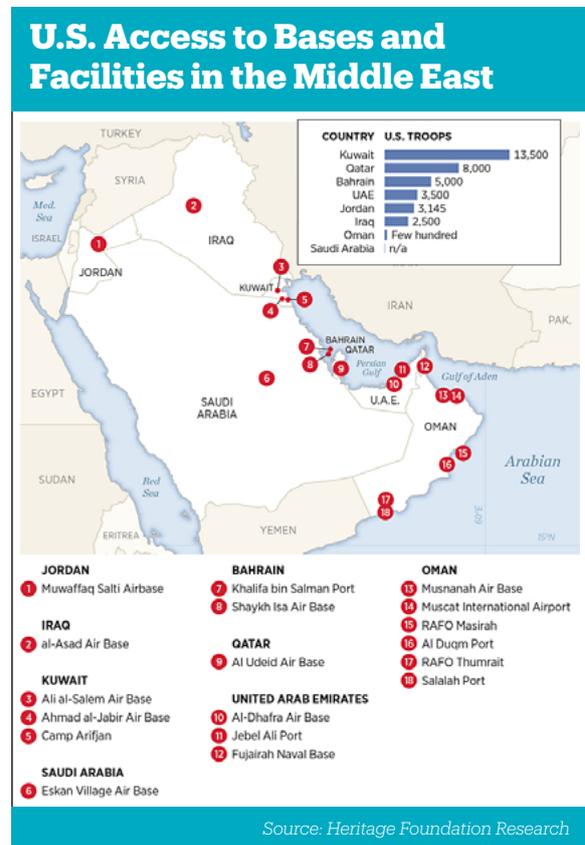
Prior to departing on his recent trip to Saudi Arabia, US President Joe Biden was quoted as [saying](#) that “The reason that I’m going to Saudi Arabia [...] is to promote US interests [...] in a way that I think we have an opportunity to reassert what I think we’ve made a mistake of walking away from: our influence in the Middle East.” This simple response to a question of why the American President was deciding to re-engage with the Kingdom after having effectively shunned its leadership since taking office was, in fact, a sober assessment on the reasons underpinning his trip. Contrary to much of the coverage and analysis of the trip, both within and outside the United States, it was not ultimately intended to secure oil production agreements from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates, nor was it primarily about building a military coalition in preparation for a confrontation with Iran (an unrealistic expectation in any case) nor even directly about countering China. Rather, the primary objective of the trip was to signal to its regional partners, but importantly also to its adversaries, that the US continues to be committed to the region and takes its strategic interests in the region seriously. While US engagement in the region will necessarily be different from what it has been over the past two decades for reasons ranging from shifts in US strategic priorities to more assertive and independent regional partners, the region has demonstrated its strategic value to long term US interests once more.

While in the Saudi red sea city of Jeddah, the US president attended a number of meetings, the most talked about of which was his meeting with Saudi Crown Prince Mohamed bin Salman. Other notable events included a bi-lateral meeting with United Arab Emirates President Mohamed bin Zayed and the President’s attendance of the GCC+3 meeting, attended by GCC member states, Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq. And while much of the media frenzy over the trip was focused on Biden’s ‘fist-bump’ with MbS and the potential conflict between American values and interests that the trip represented, some significant developments did emerge from the meetings. These include initiatives, some more tangible than the others, related to security and defence, infrastructure, energy security and climate cooperation, cybersecurity and 5G, space exploration and a host of regional cooperation issues. More broadly, there was a general American re-commitment to maintain strategic relations with its traditional regional partners in a effort to assuage concerns about American retrenchment.

Whether or not this new outlook will survive the turbulent politics of Washington DC remains to be seen. What does appear to be clear, however, is that US strategy in the Middle East will increasingly be based on a more realist outlook as the hubris of the so-called ‘War on Terror’ era continues to fade.

The Evolution of US Strategic Posturing in the Middle East

The United States has been engaged in the region since late 19th century when American missionaries were involved in, among other things, setting up educational institutions meant to shape the minds of the region’s youth in a decidedly American way. It was not until the latter days of the Second World War, however, that American security commitments in the region began. These commitments can be traced back to the iconic 1945 meeting between US President Franklin D. Roosevelt and Saudi King Abdul Aziz Ibn Saud aboard the USS Quincy on the Great Bitter Lake in Egypt, which not only secured US access to Saudi oil at a time when there were fears in the United States that a major oil shortage was imminent, but also laid the groundwork for the next eight decades of US-Saudi relations. A significant buildup of the US military presence in the region did not occur, however, until the 1979 invasion of Afghanistan as part of an effort to deter any further southward advance of Soviet military or political power. This served to increase the strategic importance of the region on par with US interests in Europe and the Asia-Pacific, what [Zbigniew Brzezinski](#) would refer to western and eastern extremities of the Eurasian chessboard. For the Gulf monarchies, in particular, this growing military footprint would come to be viewed as an insurance policy against potential existential threats to their rule.



The 9/11 attacks altered the terms of this engagement substantially. Not only did the Middle East take centre-stage in American security thinking, but its approach was dominated by an exclusively security-focused lens, putting military solutions at the forefront of US policy in the region. Moreover, poorly thought out notions of 'victory' and the heavy ideological undercurrent of the so-called '[Global War on Terror](#)' combined to create a policy environment characterised by an incompatibility of grand ideas with on the ground realities. Led by the Neo-Cons of the George W. Bush years, US officials began speaking in terms of 'reforming' supposedly repressive societies and democracy promotion, much of it selective, all in the name of enhancing US national security. The securitization of US policy in the region would turn out to have wide-reaching consequences, both in human terms and in terms of political capital. The failures of this securitized approach to the region have been increasingly recognized by political elites in the US in recent years, contributing to a sense that US policy in the region had become directionless. The 9/11 attacks ultimately persuaded US policymakers that the US needed a bold a transformative plan to remake the region in order to remove threats to US interests. Today, there is a general agreement that this approach failed. However, there is less agreement on what should replace it.

In its [2012 Defence Strategic Guidance](#) document, the Obama administration made clear its intention to shift away from the 'War on Terror' policies of the Bush era in order to dedicate resources to other priorities planners foresaw for the 21st century. The 2015 JCPOA represented an important aspect of this strategy as it related to the planned drawdown in the Middle East. However, the administration all but dismissed the consternation from some of its partners in the region that the deal would, in fact, embolden Iran with sanctions relief providing the funding necessary for Iran to pursue its regional agenda.

During the Trump years, the US took a more assertive stance against Iran under the 'maximum pressure' campaign much to the delight of partners such as Saudi Arabia, the UAE and Israel. Trump had also committed to drawing down the US presence in the region in an appeal to a growing populist sentiment against US engagement in 'forever wars'. However, Trump's preference for transactional diplomacy and personalized relations to the neglect of more traditional diplomatic approaches also served to exacerbate inter-regional instability contributing to, among other things, the blockade of Qatar and an intensification of the war in Yemen.

The Biden administration inherited this complex legacy. Biden's national security and foreign policy team, including a number of veterans of the Obama era, like their predecessors also declared the intention to downsize the US footprint in the region as part of an effort to re-deploy American military assets in response to the increasing prominence of great power competition. The March 2021 Interim National Security Guidance statement's emphasis on "antagonistic authoritarian powers" as the primary national security threat to the United States made it clear that its primary foreign policy and national security priorities were no longer centred on the region.

Towards A More Mature Relationship?

From the Obama administration onwards, there has been a growing sense among many US partners in the Middle East that American security commitments in the region were waning. This sense has been driven by numerous factors including what amounts to the ceding of the initiative in [Syria](#) to Russia, a perceived lack of a decisive response to Iran, and the withdrawals from Iraq and Afghanistan, the latter of which was particularly harmful for America's reputation in the broader region.



U.S. President Joe Biden (R) meets President of the United Arab Emirates Mohammed bin Zayed Al Nahyan (L) within Jeddah Security and Development Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on July 16, 2022. (UAE Presidential Court - Anadolu Agency)

Since the 1991 Gulf War, the US has spent both blood and treasure in pursuit of maintaining their strategic dominance in the region. This includes billions of grants and loans given to regional partners, billions more worth of weapons sales, and the establishment of a string of military bases across the region that continue to be manned by tens of thousands of American soldiers. In more recent years, doubts have grown in Gulf capitals regarding the extent to which the United States is willing to act to deter threats to the stability of the region and to the ruling families in particular. This, in conjunction with the near-obsessive focus on China in Washington DC, has left traditional US partners feeling vulnerable. This perception has led to a certain amount of hedging on the part of US partners in the region.

For example, Saudi Arabia and the UAE have sought to diversify their strategic relationships and shift their weapons procurement networks away from American suppliers. The UAE's burgeoning relationship with France is an example of the former. Saudi Arabia's 2021 [military cooperation agreement](#) with Russia and the UAE's deal for the purchase of [80 Rafale fighter](#) jets from France are examples of the latter. While these examples can, to a certain extent, be interpreted in light of the growing desire of Saudi Arabia, the UAE, and others, for more [strategic autonomy](#), part of thinking is that they may be able to indirectly influence Washington's outlook by turning to competitors of powerful US arms manufacturers. The thinking being that this could cause US companies to push for continued military outreach to regional governments.

Additionally, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE have flirted with China in ways that caused the Biden administration to push back against issues it deemed to be counter to its strategic interests. In the case of the UAE, alleged Chinese attempts to construct a military facility in the port of Khalifa, ostensibly without Emirati knowledge, were quickly [abandoned](#) following US intervention that reportedly included direct conversations between Biden and then-Crown Prince Mohammed bin Zayed al-Nahyan, and a visit to the UAE from US National Security Advisor Jake Sullivan and White House Middle East Coordinator Brett McGurk. With regards to Saudi Arabia, in late 2021 US intelligence assessed that Saudi Arabia was [collaborating with China](#) in the manufacturing of ballistic missiles.

The response of US partners in the Middle East to the Russian invasion of Ukraine further served to emphasize this point. In the first weeks after Russia launched its invasion, both Saudi Arabia and the UAE both took positions that raised eyebrows in Washington. While the Saudis would not commit to raising crude production levels in order to offset spiking [oil prices](#), the UAE abstained from a key United Nations Security Council vote on the Russian invasion, something the Wall Street Journal Editorial Board [called](#) a "poor decision" for which the US "will have to adjust its relationship with Abu Dhabi accordingly." Initial incredulity

in the US, however, as expressed in key media outlets and amongst power brokers in Washington DC, about the tepid response of US partners in the region towards American efforts to isolate Russia internationally seem to have largely subsided.

Beyond the initial outrage in Washington over the reactions of its Middle Eastern partners, the Russian invasion of Ukraine has pointed to an important dynamic that is set to characterize relations between the US and its partners in the Middle East moving forward: namely, a mutual acceptance that expectations have changed. This will likely entail a recognition on the part of the US that its partners are going to act more independently, as well as an acknowledgement from US partners in the region that the US may no longer be responsive to their needs and wants as they have been in years past. This will also entail a recognition on the part of the US that their partners will in instances look to US rivals in seeking to fulfill their national interests.

In Washington DC, there has been a growing sense for some time that its partners in the region have not been pulling their weight, particularly regarding security issues deemed to be of vital national interest to the United States. There had been a widely held assumption in Washington DC that decades of financial and security assistance to Israel, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, etc. would automatically translate into support for US priorities, which of course has proven to be incorrect. At the same time, strategic inconsistency on the part of the US has created a situation where governments in the Middle East have come to expect that the only consistent thing about US policy is that it will invariably waver.

Whether the recent visit will prove to be enough to convince sceptical regional partners that the US is indeed committed to remaining engaged in the region remains to be seen. The meetings produced no grand announcements on oil production nor any significant movement with regards to the much-discussed possibility of Saudi Arabia establishing formal relations with Israel. Moreover, in the lead up to the trip, the messaging of the administration itself was unhelpful as it remained unclear almost right up until the moment Biden departed Israel for Saudi Arabia what the intended purpose of the visit was. Biden's [op-ed](#) published in the Washington Post only served to further muddy the waters, offering not clarity, but rather a smorgasbord of justifications and supposed accomplishments of his administration in the region.

Partly owing to a sub-par strategic communications strategy and partly to all the spin surrounding the trip, much of the substantive elements discussed in Jeddah have been overlooked or simply dismissed as being insignificant. This may not only cost Biden politically, but it also provided an opportunity for potential US adversaries in the region to try to score public relations wins. Iranian media outlets, in particular, pointed to what they characterized as

the 'pointlessness' of the trip. However, an argument could also be made that the nature of the meetings and the topics discussed point to the beginnings of a more balanced relationship between the US and its regional partners, a relationship in which both sides will have to recognize the limits and more clearly identify areas of mutual cooperation. This is precisely what the substantive elements of the recent meetings in Jeddah suggest; namely a commitment from both the US and its regional partners to work on issues of mutual benefit that, while they may fly under the radar of much of the media hype surrounding the visit, are nonetheless important indicators of the future direction of relations.

The Jeddah Summit – the GCC+3

Objectively meaningful progress appears to have been made on several important fronts, most notably with regards to regional energy security and a host of other security and military-related issues. Infrastructure appears also to have been a considerable topic for discussion. Infrastructure has become a key arena for competition with China, particular as it relates to China's Belt and Road Initiative (BRI). This underscores the significance of the agreements reached at the summit with regards to strategic investment cooperation. The US took the opportunity to make a pitch for the [Partnership for Global Infrastructure and Investment](#) (PGII), a G7 initiative announced at the most recent summit in late June. As part of an agreement to enhance cooperation on strategic investment, the US secured a planned [\\$3 billion](#) commitment from GCC states towards various infrastructure projects that align with PGII objectives. The significance of this should not be underestimated, particularly as it comes so soon after the initia-

tive was announced. That the agreement encompasses 5G and 6G digital connectivity, among other information and communications technology-related objectives (ICT), is particularly significant given the ongoing push by the US to make life difficult for Chinese companies working in these fields.

However, perhaps the most significant development to come out of the Jeddah Summit was the GCC+3 concept. Billed as a summit between the US and the GCC+3 the meetings at the Jeddah Summit touched on a range of issues related to energy connectivity, supply chain security and the movement of people.

In this regard, one of the more significant, but under reported, developments to emerge out of the Jeddah Summit were agreements designed to further Iraq's [energy integration](#) with the GCC states and Jordan. In particular, the agreement between Iraq and the GCC Interconnection Authority (GCCIA) to link southern Iraq's electricity grid with those of the GCC represents a major development. Along with the plan to construct a new powerline between Saudi Arabia, the integration of Iraqi and GCC electricity grids is significant not so much because it offers Iraq some breathing room vis-à-vis Tehran, but primarily because it marks an important milestone of the infrastructural re-integration of Iraq into the Arab fold.

For some time now, Iraq has faced repeated calls from both the US and the Gulf monarchies to take steps to reduce its reliance on energy imports from Iran, however given that the [share of electricity](#) that Iraq receives directly from Iran is relatively minor, the deal should be seen more in light of intra-Arab integration. This is precisely what the head of the GCCIA was referring to in the month prior to the Jeddah Summit, when he [said](#) that "We are connecting



Jeddah Security and Development Summit in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on July 16, 2022. (Royal Court of Saudi Arabia - Anadolu Agency)

the GCC with Egypt, Jordan, and Iraq to have a pan-Arab market. The sector needs grids, interconnectivity, and technology.” Moreover, given that Iraq has come to play a mediating role between Riyadh and Tehran, the possibility of future electricity trade between Iran and Saudi Arabia via Iraq should not be overlooked.

For the US, the significance of these agreements lies in the fact that [the most significant geopolitical issue](#) facing the region is not the potential of a nuclear Iran, rather it is the long-time domestic weakness of so many Arab states, which ultimately opens the region to external intervention. Iran and its proxies have been the primary benefactors of this weakness, thus any moves towards regional integration will be seen positively in Washington DC.

US commitments to work towards more integrated maritime and air defence cooperation in the region is perhaps the most significant as it relates to America’s traditional toolkit in the region: hard power. For better or worse, when it comes to regional security, the US is still able to play a role that no other regional or international power is currently able to. The US has several tools at its disposal in this regard. Politically, the so-called ‘Abraham Accords’, despite their superficiality in many respects, provide a platform for the US to facilitate further regional cooperation. Militarily, the official [inclusion](#) of Israel into the US Central Command’s area of responsibility (CENTCOM) potentially provides further avenues for pushing for regional security integration under American coordination. In this regard, General Erik Kurilla, the head of US Central Command (CENTCOM), has been [tasked](#) not only with increasing military integration between the US and its regional partners, but also between the regional partners themselves.

While the idea of a regional military alliance in the spirit of NATO, conceptualized by the Trump administration as the Middle East Strategic Alliance, or MESA, never came close to seeing the light of day, and likely never will, the Regional Security Construct now in place provides a realistic framework for developing integrated air and missile defence and maritime security among other issues.

On the maritime front, ensuring the free flow of commerce through the highly strategic Bab al-Mandab and Strait of Hormuz was the guiding principle that led to a number of practical steps in this regard. Foremost among these is the newly-established Task Force 153 focused on the Red Sea’s Bad al-Mandab passageway and Saudi Arabia’s assumption of command of Combined Task Force 150, which reinforces shared maritime security objectives in the Gulf of Oman and North Arabian Sea.

Ensuring its partners are provided with suitable air defence systems continues to be of vital importance for the Biden administration. Air defence also continues to be a key security issue for Saudi Arabia and the UAE in particular given their experience with Iranian-supported Houthis

attacks against cities and key infrastructure. It is the exposure to Iranian ballistic missile and drone capabilities that represents the most significant threat in this regard. This is particularly true for the UAE, which lacks the kind of strategic depth possessed by either Saudi Arabia or Israel, making it almost exclusively dependent on an American-led security umbrella in the region.

In order to monitor, evaluate and advance these and other related initiatives, US Central Command plans to hold two separate, but interrelated [meetings](#), this first of which is scheduled to take place quarterly at the two-star level. The second will be held bi-annually and be attended by the chiefs of defence from the GCC plus Iraq, Jordan, and Egypt (GCC+3).

While it is still in its very early days, the GCC+3 format offers a glimpse into a strategic framework for the region that could significantly shape the geostrategic dynamic in the coming years. The fact that the US is acting as the key facilitator of these relationships, particularly in the military/security realm, is a clear sign as any that they continue to be the preferred partner of many Arab states and will continue to be able to exert significant influence over the strategic environment in the region.

This does not entail that these relations will necessarily be smooth. In fact, it is likely that points of tension will continue over issues ranging from human rights and Iran to dealings with Russia and China. What it does reflect, however, is a reality in which both the United States and its partners in the Middle East will continue to need each other more than they do not. For the Gulf monarchies in particular, they remain, and will continue to remain for the foreseeable future, in need of the security guarantees that come along with the US military presence in the region. Moreover, the development of their own military capabilities remains tied to the US. Developing a diversified arms procurement architecture, let alone a domestic defence industry, is both time and resource heavy and, as it stands today, no player in the Gulf is in a place to seriously undertake such a project. For the Americans, particularly for an administration that was initially keen to downplay the strategic importance of the region, there has been a growing realisation – intensified after Russia launched its invasion of Ukraine – that the region continues to be important to its overall global priorities.

US-Saudi Relations

Given Saudi Arabia’s centrality to US engagement in the Middle East over the years, it was only a matter of time until Joe Biden was going to seek to smooth things over with the Kingdom. The brutal [murder](#) of Jamal Khashoggi at the Saudi consulate in Istanbul in 2018, as horrendous as it was, was always unlikely to be the cause of a major rupture in US-Saudi relations.



US President Joe Biden (L) meets Saudi Arabian Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (R) at Alsalam Royal Palace in Jeddah, Saudi Arabia on July 15, 2022. (Royal Court of Saudi Arabia - Anadolu Agency)

While there are those within the State Department and the US intelligence community who were, and likely remain, weary of MbS, the overriding strategic interests of the US in the region appear to have won out over other concerns. During the 2020 US presidential campaign, amidst harsh rhetoric from the Biden camp directed at Saudi Arabia, an anonymous Gulf diplomatic source was quoted by Reuters as [saying](#) "there will be challenges, but there are long-term strategic institutional relationships, and no one wants to break the camel's back, though a Biden administration will want compromises."

Biden continues to face criticism both from Republicans who argue that Biden was not able to extract any major concessions, and Democrats who argue that he compromised American values, particularly by meeting with MbS. On the one hand, the rhetoric of some Democrats, including Biden himself, in the lead up to the 2020 US presidential elections about turning Saudi Arabia into a 'pariah state' are reflective of the toxic partisanship that has come to characterise American politics. Because Donald Trump so emphatically embraced the Saudis, and the Crown Prince in particular - and was embraced by them - the Democrats were almost bound to want to punish the Kingdom, even if only symbolically. Add to this the disastrous war in Yemen, the killing of Khashoggi, incarcerations of activists and others in the Kingdom, the [pursuit](#) of the Crown Prince's perceived enemies overseas, etc., and there developed a sense among Democrats that Saudi Arabia was Trump's mistake, seemingly dismissing the fact that US-Saudi relations go back 80 years.

On the other hand, substantial differences between Republicans and Democrats with regards to the Middle East have translated into significantly differing approaches over the years. It has been something of an open secret that the Saudis much prefer to deal with Republican administrations who tend to be friendlier towards the Kingdom. Among Democratic foreign policy and national security elites, there appears to be a deep ambivalence towards Saudi Arabia which was very much reflected in the sidelining of Saudi concerns in the lead up to the 2015 JCPOA.

It is true that few tangible deliverables emerged out the various meetings between US and Saudi officials held over two days in Jeddah and neither side can claim that they achieved everything they wanted. However, given the potential for an acrimonious encounter, particularly between the famously prickly Joe Biden and the head strong Crown Prince, the fact that the meetings did not, by all accounts, go badly, represents a positive takeaway by both sides. What is often forgotten is that when dealing with Saudi Arabia, relationships matter. This is arguably even more so the case today than in the past given that power has been increasingly centralized in the royal court where it was once more diffuse.

Top-down socio-cultural shifts have been accompanied by an unprecedented centralization of power in the hands of the King, the Crown Prince, and their chosen advisors and confidants. This is significant for US-Saudi relations in that they are increasingly dependent on maintaining good personal relations with these figures, particularly with MbS.

In fact, for the Saudis a significant objective of Biden's trip relates to the ongoing effort of MbS to re-ingratiate himself with the international community following the murder of Jamal Khashoggi. As observed by Jon Alterman, Senior Vice President, Zbigniew Brzezinski Chair in Global Security and Geostategy, and Director of the Middle East Program at the Centre for Strategic and International Studies (CSIS): "From a Saudi perspective, a large part of the visit is intended to re-enforce the importance of partnership with Saudi Arabia and refute the notion that the Crown Prince is an impetuous troublemaker and impossible partner."

From the American perspective, aside from the historical relationship with Saudi Arabia, there was a growing realisation that Saudi Arabia was still important to a number of its current global priorities and that having tense relations with its leadership was unproductive. This is unlikely to change anytime soon. With war continuing to rage in Europe and tensions with China ratcheting up, the US relationship with Saudi Arabia will continue to be one of the key pivots on which American engagement in the Middle East rests.

The return of *Realpolitik*?

For some, the lack of grand postulating about the region in the style of Barack Obama or George W. Bush has been taken as an indication of the death knells of a '[Pax Americana](#)' in the region. In some ways this is true. The era of absolute American dominance in the region is over, something that predates Joe Biden, but has become clearer in the course of his short tenure. However, relative American power and influence remains pre-eminent. Moreover, it is legitimately possible to understand the shift in US approach to the region as a return to a more normal state of affairs rather than a sign of American power in freefall. America's relative strategic importance is indeed diminished, globally in general and in the Middle East in particular. However, it remains the most formidable power in the region. As it stands today, there are no plans to close any major US military facilities in the region and American warships continue to be stationed in the Gulf. Coupled with increased agency and capacity of American partners in the region, the US is arguably in a strong position to maintain its key strategic interests in the region without having to act as an overarching superpower patron.

At the same time, it remains to be seen whether the US can leverage that position of strength to strike the balance necessary to actually advancing its interests. For [Natan Sachs](#), Director of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings:

"America has had a reverse Goldilocks approach to its very presence in the region – at turns too hot or too cold, never just right. It leaves the United States ill-equipped to shape the geopolitics of a region that remains globally consequential, whether through positive US engagement or through a credible threat of wholesale withdrawal. America's partners are unmotivated to help the US advance its interests, whether through carrots or sticks."

Like his predecessors before him, Biden has committed to downsizing the US military presence in the Middle East. Turning these commitments into actual policy is another issue altogether. The continued strategic importance of the region combined with the vested interests of certain segments of the US military as well as America's arms manufacturers will make it difficult to significantly reduce the US presence. Moreover, given the geopolitical stakes, it is unlikely that American decision makers will risk creating a security vacuum in the region through a significant draw-down of American forces.

Ultimately, regardless of how Biden's visit went or to what extent substantial results were achieved, the US will need to find a way to remain 'positively engaged' in the region in order for the recent meetings to bear fruit. US domestic po-

litical dynamics will continue to complicate these endeavours, however, in an era of renewed great power competition, momentum towards maintaining an interest-based approach devoid of the ideologically-driven policies of the post-9/11 era will continue. Time will tell how successful this will be.