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Biden's Middle East Drawdown

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The Biden Administration is reportedly in the process of redeploying military assets from the Middle East. This is part of a broader effort to rebalance America's global force posture, which is seen as requiring reduced U.S. presence in the region. However, this move sends the wrong signal as the United States begins nuclear negotiations with Iran as it will leave U.S. interests and Arab partners exposed to, and therefore will likely provoke, growing aggression from Iran and its proxies. Washington must work closely with its regional partners to expand defensive and offensive capabilities for protecting against and deterring Iran and its proxies.

What Happened?

- According to [The Wall Street Journal](#), the United States has removed at least three Patriot antimissile batteries from the Gulf, including one positioned at Prince Sultan Air Base in Saudi Arabia. The Biden Administration is also in the process of redeploying additional defense assets, such as an aircraft carrier and surveillance systems, away from the Middle East.
 - After heavy fire on energy installations in September 2019 from Iran the [Pentagon deployed](#) 2,000 troops, a Terminal High Altitude Air Defense system, two Patriot antimissile systems, and two squadrons of aircraft, among other materiel to Saudi Arabia.
 - Now, some of these assets are being removed from the region, even as Iran-backed drone and missile attacks have escalated.
 - To offset the reduced military capabilities, the Pentagon is reportedly considering “sales of specific, defensive weapons, such as missile interceptors; expanded intelligence-sharing; additional training; and military-to-military exchange programs” to the Saudis.
- The decision to withdraw military assets from the Middle East and Saudi Arabia specifically comes as the Biden Administration is pursuing a global posture review.

- Biden's [interim national security guidance](#) emphasized strategic competition with China in the Indo-Pacific and stated that, in the Middle East, the United States “will right-size our military presence to the level required to disrupt international terrorist networks, deter Iranian aggression, and protect other vital U.S. interests.”
- The shift also comes on top of other moves by the Biden Administration to distance the United States from Saudi Arabia by cutting off U.S. support for Saudi offensive operations against the Houthis, suspending certain recent arms sales pending review, and making public an intelligence report on MBS's links to the murder of Jamal Khashoggi.

Why Does it Matter?

- Increased attacks from Iran and its proxy allies are part of a counterpressure campaign with the goal of achieving sanctions relief and forcing a smaller U.S. posture in the Middle East.
 - The decision to withdraw assets from the Middle East amid a significant escalation in Houthi and other aggression will be perceived by Tehran as achieving its objectives.
 - Deputy Commander of the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps Quds Force Brigadier General Mohammad Hejazi [described Biden's move](#) as “the beginning of their (US’) exit and expulsion from the region.”
 - With reduced defensive capabilities and perceived American retrenchment from the region, Tehran and its proxies will only be incentivized to pursue even more dangerous actions to destabilize its neighbors.
 - Despite the positioning of U.S. air defenses in the Middle East, numerous attacks in [Iraq](#) and [Saudi Arabia](#) throughout much of 2020 and the beginning of 2021 signal that Iran and its proxies are undeterred and capable of striking U.S. interests.
- Withdrawing assets not only leaves U.S. partners with too little defense, it also removes offensive capabilities for deterring and punishing Iranian and Iran-backed aggression.
 - Biden Administration deserves credit for [retaliating after a rocket attack in Erbil, Iraq](#) and [sending B-52 flyovers](#) to the region.
 - But these actions have not stopped ongoing attacks against Saudi Arabia or Israeli ships in the region, suggesting a more [extensive use of force](#) is necessary to respond and calm regional aggression.
- The Biden Administration is also reassessing and reducing its support for Riyadh, particularly in relation to the Yemen civil war.

- Shortly after taking office, Biden ordered a [review of arms sales](#) to Saudi Arabia and the UAE, including Riyadh's purchase of precision-guided munitions and Abu Dhabi's \$23 billion arms package with the Trump Administration to purchase 50 F-35 aircraft and MQ-9 Reaper drones.
 - While the UAE sales hold may soon be lifted, the package of additional PGMs for Riyadh is likely to be cancelled, delayed or substantially reduced.
- The Biden Administration released an [intelligence report](#) implicating Saudi Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman in the death of former Washington Post journalist Jamaal Khashoggi.
- The Biden Administration [delisted the Houthis](#) as a foreign terrorist organization (although several of the group's leaders remain sanctioned) and announced that the United States would stop supporting offensive operations for the Saudi-led campaign in Yemen.
- This approach is likely to have an opposite-than-intended effect of even greater collateral casualties in Yemen if the Saudis act against Houthi-related targets with "dumb bombs" and without U.S.-provided intelligence.
- The Pentagon's decision comes shortly after a Chinese visit to Saudi Arabia and the announcement of a 25-year partnership between China and Iran.
- While Russia has [pushed for the Saudis to purchase](#) its S-400 air defense system, this option seems unlikely.
 - The S-400 system would not be interoperable with the U.S. surveillance network that underpin Saudi defenses, would not enable the Saudis to recognize U.S. or partner aircraft, or allow data flow from partner radars.
 - Going this route would also further strain U.S.-Saudi ties at a time when Riyadh is trying to rebuild relations and subject them to Countering America's Adversaries Through Sanctions Act (CAATSA) sanctions.
- Against the background of already reduced U.S. support for regional partners and increased regional activity by America's global competitors, the latest decision to withdraw U.S. assets from the region might lead U.S. partners to look elsewhere.
 - While America's security partners are currently reliant on U.S. arms, training, and funding, they could turn to China as a security and stability enabler given the perception of a U.S. pullback from the region.
 - As Washington considers how to do less in the Middle East for reasons of great power competition, Beijing is focused on doing more.

What Can the United States Do Next?

- The Pentagon's consideration to mitigate the redeployment of military assets in the Middle East by providing defensive weapons, intelligence-sharing, additional training, and military exchange programs are productive and should be accelerated and expanded. These measures are insufficient, however, to fully offset the rapid growth in Iranian and proxy attacks throughout the region.
- The United States should enhance its cooperation with, and between, regional partners to build defensive capabilities to protect effectively and economically against Iran's growing rocket and missile threat.
 - U.S. Central Command (CENTCOM) should increase efforts to interdict Iranian weapons proliferation bound for Yemen and Iraq.
 - Washington should coordinate with Saudi Arabia, Israel, Egypt, and Jordan to develop shared early-warning systems in the Red Sea.
 - The Department of Defense should expand joint military training and collaborate alongside America's Israeli and Arab partners to form a regional multi-layered air defense system.
 - A combination of land- and CENTCOM-dedicated sea-based systems could reduce the ability of Iran and its proxies to target American servicemembers, partners, and interests in the Middle East.
 - The Arab Gulf states are well-located for intelligence, surveillance and reconnaissance, on Iran and the Houthis. The United States should not reduce existing ISR assets in the region merely to plug near-term gaps in our shift towards great power competition in the Indo-Pacific.
 - Israel already has a proven multi-tiered missile defense architecture with short-, medium-, and long-range systems that has region-wide capabilities and can provide a unique force-multiplying enhancement to current Gulf-based defense capabilities, [as JINSA called for 2018](#). Such cooperation must, of course, be consistent with preserving Israel's qualitative military edge over current and future potential threats.
 - The United States and its regional partners should expand research and development on cost efficient, flexible air and missile defense technologies, such as counter-drone innovations, directed energy—both lasers and microwave systems—and unmanned boost-phase engagement technologies.
 - Alongside efforts to form a regional air defense architecture, the U.S. Army should expedite the deployment of the two Israeli Iron Dome systems it has recently acquired. The David's Sling system interceptor should also be rapidly procured for use in U.S. Patriot launchers and other relevant systems.

- According to the U.S. Director of Air and Missile Defense Brigadier General Brian Gibson, the Army has been testing and training the Iron Dome batteries, which should be ready for use by the end of 2021.
- The United States must also work with partners to respond to and deter Iranian aggression.
 - President Biden should hold Iran and its proxies accountable by ordering additional military force against perpetrators of attacks on Americans, partners, or interests in the Middle East.
 - Without a permanent aircraft carrier presence in the Middle East, the Pentagon should shift to unpredictable carrier rotations by having carrier groups in the Indo-Pacific and Europe traverse Middle Eastern waterways, specifically the Arabian Gulf and Red Sea. The Biden Administration must firmly commit to fulfilling this deployment strategy, however, as regional allies and partners are certain to initially view such a shift with skepticism.

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