
Special Commentary: Scenarios for a Post-COVID Middle East

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It is worth approaching an assessment of the likely impacts of the COVID-19 pandemic on the Middle East with a strong dose of humility. Nonetheless, it is clear that the spread of this disease has already had major impacts on the global economy, drastically reducing demand for Middle East oil exports, and leading to a historic collapse in oil prices. The immediate challenges of dealing with the monumental health and economic challenges posed by COVID-19 will add to the troubles of a region already burdened by multiple civil wars, poorly performing economies, growing civil discontent, and intensified sectarian divisions. This article offers a preliminary assessment of the potential impacts of COVID-19 on the security landscape of the Middle East and advances recommendations for how US military strategy and operations might adapt.

THE LARGER REGIONAL STRATEGIC CONTEXT

Prospects for a military confrontation with Iran began growing in the summer of 2019 with Iranian attacks on international shipping in the Persian Gulf, drone attacks on Saudi oil refineries, and Iranian missile strikes on US facilities in Iraq. The vulnerability of these critical Gulf facilities gave Arab regional leaders an incentive to step away from direct military confrontation with Iran and demonstrated the inability of the United States to protect allies against these threats. Nonetheless, tensions are high and prospects for even unintended escalation remain. As Iranian-backed proxies in Iraq continue their attacks, Iran launched a military satellite into space in demonstration of its advancing military capabilities, and US officials publicly threatened to shoot Iranian naval ships harassing American military ships operating in the Gulf.

The fall of 2019 also witnessed widespread public protests against ruling elites in Iran, Iraq, Lebanon, and Algeria demonstrating the precarious positions of these and other regional governments. The inability of these and other regional leaders to effectively address political repression, corruption, and poorly performing economies will only be exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic as demonstrated most recently by renewed violent [protests](#) in Lebanon.

On top of these existing challenges, the COVID-19 pandemic gathered steam just as oil prices hit historic lows as a result of Russian-Saudi competition over market share and global demand for oil was cratering. Moreover, the coronavirus will very likely overwhelm the minimal health care capacity of many states in the region. Those with large populations (e.g., Egypt, Iran, Iraq, and Turkey) and those experiencing civil war (e.g., Syria, Yemen, and Libya) will suffer the most. Paul Salem, President of the Middle East Institute in Washington DC, [anticipates](#) that COVID-19 could potentially lead to more deaths in the region than all the wars and civil wars since the collapse of the Ottoman Empire while the regional economy could contract by as much as 10-30 percent. The damage inflicted by COVID-19 will further challenge governance in a deeply troubled region.

POTENTIAL CONSTRAINTS ON US MILITARY STRATEGY AND OPERATIONS

Reduced Budgets. Defense analysts are [warning](#) that the US military should anticipate significant cuts in funding that would compel a much smaller forward deployed force. Of course, this is not a certainty as the domestic politics of defense spending are complicated and have often been resistant to change. Nonetheless, it would seem to be a prudent step to plan along these more austere lines and develop options for a reduced and more sustainable US military presence in the region. Other analysts [anticipate](#) a decrease in [global military spending](#) that will mean traditional US allies in both Europe and the Middle East will be able to contribute less. These constraints will require US planners to carefully prioritize programs and consider how US force posture in the region could be restructured as [analysts](#) at the Brookings Institute have proposed.

Smaller Force Structure. The COVID-19 crisis is also likely to amplify both domestic and regional pressures for a reduced military footprint in the region. For instance, the need to secure the health of US troops as COVID-19 spreads through Iraq is adding momentum to a process of [base consolidation](#) that began after the exchange of US and Iranian strikes earlier this year. Of course, Iranian leaders are exploiting these fissures to accomplish their goal of expelling the United States from the region.

Impaired Operations. Meanwhile, the ability of the US Navy to sustain global operations has been degraded by COVID-19 as the disease has already incapacitated crews on the aircraft carrier [USS Theodore Roosevelt](#) and the guided missile destroyer [USS Kidd](#). Additionally, crews on at least three other aircraft carriers have tested positive and further spread throughout the force is likely. These developments indicate how difficult it could be to maintain a robust US military presence in the Middle East when confronted with challenges like COVID-19.

Posturing for Near-Peer Competition. Finally, a reduced presence in the Middle East is a strategic necessity if US policymakers are serious about posturing military forces for competition with near-peer competitors in the form of a belligerent Russia and an increasingly assertive China as dictated by our own [national security](#) and [defense](#) strategies.

TWO BROAD STRATEGIC FUTURES FOR A POST-COVID MIDDLE EAST

These global and regional developments—exacerbated by the COVID-19 crisis—will confront US and regional leaders for the foreseeable future. For analytical purposes, two broad and distinct alternative futures are envisioned here to illustrate the full range of potential US military options that planners might consider.

Scenario A: Improved Regional Cooperation and Eased Tensions

Regional leaders could harness this crisis to advance political, economic, and security cooperation; ease sectarian tensions; support negotiated conclusions to the civil wars in Syria, Yemen, and Libya; implement needed economic reforms; and foster tolerant and resilient civil societies. King Abdullah II of Jordan has [called](#) for just such a foresighted approach to “set aside our differences and recognize that yesterday’s rivalries are meaningless against this shared threat.”

This would be a sensible response to regional challenges that COVID-19 has exacerbated. The COVID-19 virus is the “invisible enemy” that respects no borders or sectarian identities on the ground. Only a region-wide system of early warning, open exchange of information, adequately funded health care systems, and cooperative approaches could hope to limit the spread of this or future pandemic diseases. Moreover, the steep fall in the price for oil should underscore the urgency for regional leaders to implement long overdue economic reforms and improve financial transparency that is a prerequisite for attracting foreign investment. Finally, the immediacy of the COVID-19 crisis could provide the opportunity and incentive for regional leaders to abandon their support for regional proxies fueling civil wars and instead devote those resources to addressing pressing domestic needs.

There are some limited early signs that such a scenario is possible even if not especially likely. In late 2019, Saudi Arabia initiated a secret [dialogue](#) with Iranian leaders in order to reduce the prospect of open armed conflict. Similarly, in July 2019 the United Arab Emirates sent a [coast guard delegation](#) to Tehran in an effort to improve security for international shipping through the vital Strait of Hormuz. Moreover, the UAE used the opportunity of the current COVID-19 crisis to send a [medical team](#) to Iran as a gesture of humanitarian and diplomatic outreach.

Additionally, the COVID-19 crisis has re-energized momentum for a negotiated end to the civil war in Yemen. The United Nations Special Envoy for Yemen has [called](#) for an end to fighting to focus on helping Yemen deal with the pandemic. In response to the COVID-19 crisis, Saudi Arabia initially declared a two-week ceasefire in Yemen that has been [extended](#) through the month of Ramadan. Meanwhile, the UN Secretary General has called for a [global ceasefire](#) in all conflict zones to allow for a more singular focus on the threat posed by COVID-19.

Finally, the prospect of low oil prices and reduced government revenues could encourage regional leaders to abandon or at least restrain their (over)investments in regional proxies and

acquiring advanced offensive military weapons systems that threaten neighbors, exacerbate the regional security dilemma, and divert resources from needed domestic investments in public health, education, and infrastructure.

Together these developments would ease regional tensions, improve prospects for stability, and minimize the need for major US military investments in the Middle East during a period of strategic restraint.

Roles for the US Military in an Optimistic Future

The primary roles of the US military in this scenario should be designed to:

a. foster and coordinate regional security mechanisms that reduce prospects for conflict (e.g., participate in international and regional maritime security operations to ensure freedom of navigation through the Hormuz and Bab al-Mandab Straits and prevent attacks on international shipping, establish a military 'hot line' with Iran similar to that established with Russia in Syria to improve communications and deconflict ongoing operations, conduct region-wide coalition training exercises that potentially include Iranian conventional naval forces to improve professionalism of forces operating at sea);

b. tailor existing military assistance programs and arms sales to focus more narrowly on improving partner capabilities related to counterterrorism; emphasizing defensive capabilities such as integrated regional missile defense systems; and addressing non-traditional threats such as cyberwarfare, space, and pandemic disease;

c. improve transparency between all players in the region (e.g., facilitate information exchange and take immediate steps to bolster the region's COVID-19 medical treatment capabilities, provide military expertise to develop and implement regional arms control inspection regimes);

d. facilitate the flow of humanitarian goods to vulnerable refugee communities in Syria, Yemen, and Libya in order to stabilize these vulnerable groups in place, contain the spread of COVID-19, and discourage additional refugee flows.

Scenario B: Exacerbated Regional Tensions, Continued Conflict, and Instability

Unfortunately, a far more likely scenario is that the COVID-19 crisis will [exacerbate](#) the already burdensome political, economic, and security challenges confronting the region. Leaders will likely exploit the crisis for their own narrow purposes of enhancing authoritarian controls at home and stoking regional and sectarian conflict in order to deflect domestic fear, frustration, and anger outward. This behavior will perpetuate the regional cycle of violence and further destabilize the region. US civilian and military leaders will need to be prepared for this far more challenging security environment.

As Marina Ottaway observes in a recent article for the Wilson Center, [violence](#) is quite likely to continue unencumbered by COVID-19 whether in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, or Libya. In fact, she notes that the Islamic State (ISIS), as well as other militant groups, will instead view “the epidemic not as a reason to stop attacks, but as a golden opportunity to step up its activities while security services” are distracted by the virus. There are early signs that ISIS is taking advantage of this precise situation to increase attacks in [Iraq](#) and [Syria](#).

The fact that the regional epicenter for the spread of coronavirus was Iran will give Arab regional leaders an excuse to amplify existing distrust of not only Iran and its regional allies, but also of their own domestic Shi’a communities. This would be consistent with the broader global trends of intensified nationalism and leaders anxious to blame others for the difficulties that lay ahead.

For nearly a year after the United States unilaterally withdrew from the internationally negotiated nuclear deal, Iran adopted an [approach](#) of “strategic patience”—complying with nuclear restrictions while seeking to press Europe, Russia, and China into granting concessions that would compensate for the re-imposition of American sanctions. As tightening US sanctions devastated the Iranian economy, however, leaders in Tehran reversed course adopting a [strategy](#) of “maximum resistance.” This approach culminated in attacks on international shipping in the Gulf, strikes on Saudi refineries, and eventually ballistic missile strikes on US military facilities in Iraq. More recently, [harassment](#) of US naval ships by Iran’s Islamic Republican Guard Corps speed boats has led President Trump to order naval commanders to [destroy](#) any Iranian ships engaging in these provocative operations. Iran’s recent decision to [launch](#) a military satellite into orbit would seem to confirm the [growing clout of hardliners](#) in Tehran and is a strong signal that US policymakers will continue to confront an increasingly aggressive Iran.

The combination of depressed global economy and a long history of oil producing countries cheating on production quotas leave some [analysts](#) to predict oil prices hovering at about \$40 per barrel through 2021. This falls well below what most Arab oil producing states need to balance their annual budgets meaning years of more [deficit spending](#) and the imposition of additional austerity measures for their populations. These austere economic conditions for the oil producing countries will have tremendous [ripple effects](#) throughout the region. Relatively wealthy countries can no longer afford to subsidize the poorer countries like Egypt, Lebanon, and Jordan through worker remittances or generous foreign assistance, exacerbating the already yawning gap between the “haves” and “have-nots” in the region.

Charles Dunne at the Arab Center has [documented](#) how authoritarian leaders throughout the region are seizing upon this crisis as a cover to strengthen their control over societies, repress domestic dissent, jail reporters, and restrict the activities of non-governmental organizations. Former senior CIA Middle East analyst Emile Nakhleh [argues](#) that the devastating economic impacts of COVID-19 crisis will lead to civil unrest and the “inevitable collapse” of many authoritarian regimes in the region.

Roles for the US Military in a Pessimistic Scenario

This most likely and potentially more dangerous scenario will be much more challenging and will require particularly creative thinking and problem resolution. Steps and actions taken should be designed to:

- a. establish regional deterrence against Iran while simultaneously reducing America's military footprint in the region (involving increased reliance on transitory presence of air & naval forces; reduced headquarters staffing; limited ground presence focused on missile defense; and expanded prepositioning of military equipment stocks to facilitate potential rapid deployment);
- b. continue to build regional partner capacity focused on deterring Iranian adventurism and countering Iranian influence (strengthening existing partnership capacity primarily in Iraq & Lebanon);
- c. prevent the resurgence of terrorist groups attempting to take advantage of the chaos endemic to collapsing and faltering states in Syria, Yemen, Libya, and Iraq through US special operations forces and select support to state and non-state partners in fields of intelligence, surveillance, reconnaissance, and logistics;
- d. seek targeted allied contributions to compensate for US reductions; and
- e. minimize threats posed to regional stability posed by large disenfranchised refugee communities by providing security assistance and other support to key partners in Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and (potentially) Syria.

CONCLUSION

While the precise impacts of COVID-19 are impossible to predict with any degree of certainty, US policymakers must be prepared to secure US interests in the changing security environment of the Middle East. The actual future of the Middle East will likely contain elements of both the most optimistic and pessimistic scenarios outlined here. In any case, US military planners and decision makers will need to adapt US policies and strategies to the realities of a post-COVID Middle East.

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