

# THE U.S. WALKS AWAY

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BUT NOT COMPLETELY,  
FROM THE MIDDLE EAST

CSIS

CENTER FOR STRATEGIC &  
INTERNATIONAL STUDIES

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## OUTLINE

- ▶ Introduction
- ▶ Enduring U.S. interests
- ▶ Striking the balance
  - ▶ Saudi Arabia
  - ▶ Israel
  - ▶ Iran
  - ▶ The Rest
- ▶ What comes next?



IN THE WHITE HOUSE

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**SOME THINGS DON'T CHANGE**

## ENDURING INTERESTS

- ▶ Energy security
- ▶ Freedom of navigation
- ▶ Counterterrorism
- ▶ Non-proliferation
- ▶ Security of allies and partners





WITH NEW  
PRESIDENTS

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**SOME THINGS  
DO CHANGE**

## BIDEN MIDDLE EAST PRIORITIES

- ▶ Partnerships
- ▶ Deterrence
- ▶ Diplomacy and de-escalation
- ▶ Integration
- ▶ Values





## DRAWN FROM LARGER STRATEGIES

- ▶ National Security Strategy
  - ▶ Great Power competition
  - ▶ Cooperation on shared global challenges
  - ▶ Shaping rules of road
- ▶ National Defense Strategy
  - ▶ Great Power Competition
  - ▶ Deter strategic attacks
  - ▶ Right-size forward presence
  - ▶ Support regional coalitions

## NOTABLE FOR WHAT PRIORITIES DO NOT INCLUDE

- ▶ Countering violent extremism
- ▶ Improving governance
- ▶ Eliminating terrorism
- ▶ Aiding economic transformation in face of energy transition
- ▶ Cooperation on energy production levels





COMPETING INTERESTS

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**STRIKING THE  
BALANCE**

## SAUDI ARABIA

- ▶ Society, government changing rapidly, but bigger shifts ahead
- ▶ Vast wealth for decades
- ▶ Pro-Western orientation will stay but may diminish
- ▶ Period of US isolation has ended.
- ▶ U.S. now embedding in process with Israel, but principal yield may be more process



## ISRAEL

- ▶ Current ruling coalition challenging, especially for Democratic presidents
- ▶ Israel's political crisis has no obvious solution or timeline
- ▶ Intifada increasing possibility; so is economic malaise, capital flight and emigration
- ▶ Prospect of Saudi deal gives Biden leverage—but can Bibi deliver?



## IRAN

- ▶ Government unpopular and economy weak
- ▶ No direct US engagement, and fraught politics in US to resume them
- ▶ Less for less? Understandings short of an agreement?
- ▶ Deep skepticism in Iran there is any way to blunt Western hostility, so no use trying



## THE REST OF THE REGION

- ▶ US lacks logic for sustained engagement
- ▶ Rising concern with energy transition
  - ▶ But that's not a direct US problem
- ▶ Arab Spring didn't yield positive results
- ▶ Determination to diminish US military footprint without leaving vacuum
- ▶ Migration larger threat to Europe than US, but still destabilizing
- ▶ Concern with China's moves but uncertainty as to what they mean





SO.....

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**WHAT'S NEXT?**

## LOOKING FORWARD

- ▶ Biden believes Middle East is site neither of great threats or great opportunities for US
- ▶ But also fear that Middle East can create threats if neglected
- ▶ US public hostile to deeper US engagement
- ▶ Region is more skeptical of US capabilities and intentions than ever

## ROLES FOR PARTNERS AND ALLIES?

- ▶ Keen to develop cooperation among regional partners
  - ▶ Between Gulf states
  - ▶ Between richer and poorer states
  - ▶ Between Israel and neighbors
- ▶ Openness to working more broadly, but unclear mechanism
  - ▶ Perhaps opportunity for *ad hoc* effort of like-minded states?



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