



مركز أبعاد للدراسات والبحوث  
Abaad Studies & Research Center

# Implications of the Growing US Military Presence in the Red Sea and Arabian Gulf

**Situation Assessment**

**Political Analysis Unit**

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## Introduction

The United States has recently bolstered its military presence in the Middle East, particularly in international trade routes in the Red Sea and the Arabian Gulf. New US forces, including thousands of troops, a number of naval vessels and various types warplanes, have been deployed to the region. This briefing seeks to answer the following questions: What are the motives and implications of this American move? What are its goals? And what impact can it have on regional stability?

## Deploying More American Forces

The US Navy's Fifth Fleet announced the [arrival](#) of more than 3,000 US Marines in the Red Sea on August 06 aboard two warships: USS Bataan and USS Carter Hall. The deployment of these forces is a measure in a previously announced plan to bolster the American presence in the Middle East. In late March, the United States [deployed](#) warplanes to the region. In July, it [announced](#) its decision to deploy additional forces, including thousands of marine personnel, F-35 and F-16 fighters, as well as the destroyer USS Thomas Hunder. According to US military officials, these forces will be [permanently](#) positioned in the region. It is not clear where the new US forces will be stationed exactly, but the area of operations of the Fifth Fleet covers international waters extending from the Strait of Hormuz and the Sea of Oman to Bab al-Mandab Strait, the Red Sea and the Suez Canal, in addition to some parts of the Indian Ocean. Military [reinforcements](#) have already been deployed to American bases in eastern Syria, where American forces have conducted military maneuvers, in which the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF) and the Free Syrian Army participated. US forces will conduct military exercises and other field operations with regional partners over the next few days.

## Implications and Goals

These US military moves are linked to some regional and international developments, particularly the China-brokered Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, the war in Ukraine, and shifts in the dynamics of relations between some countries in the region and the great powers, including changes in these countries' relations with the United States in particular and the West in general, which had been stable for decades. This change is evident in the new policy adopted by traditional GCC allies of the US, which is referred to by some analysts as the 'multi-alignment policy'.

This policy is based on going beyond the traditional alliance with the United States and building relations with various global powers, including US rival powers, especially China and Russia. These transformations are undesirable for Washington since they come at the expense of American influence in the region and hint at its decline. The Saudi-Iranian rapprochement, in particular, revealed the growing influence and broadening roles of China. These developments also laid bare the inadequacy of the current approach of US policy towards the region and put the Biden administration in an awkward position, instigating internal pressure and demands of reconsidering current US policy line. Given this amalgam of factors, the American administration had to adopt a [new line of policy](#) towards the region.

However, deploying additional US forces to the region is not merely an outcome of such developments. The modest outcomes of US diplomacy— as demonstrated by the Iranian nuclear program negotiations and the Yemeni crisis, in particular— reflected the need for additional tools to ensure better chances of success of the US role and soft diplomacy in dealing with the various issues in the region. This explains the recent US military move and places it squarely within the [deterrence](#) principle adopted by the Biden administration as one of the pillars of its policy towards the region.

The US Middle East policy focuses on a set of objectives. These goals revolve around boosting the American position and role in the region, redefining US relations with countries in the region, and reversing the effects of undesired transformations that have begun to affect relations between the countries of the region and the major powers.

## 1. Enhancing US Position and Roles

In addition to retaining great economic influence, the United States will remain the most important security [actor](#) in the region. The US has to prove that it is still the most important international player and the most dominant and influential power in the region. In so far as the US needs to confirm and invest in this position, statements released by US officials indicate that Washington takes practical measures to enhance its position and military capabilities in the region. The [Pentagon](#) emphasized a set of overlapping goals that involve boosting the US presence in the region, enhancing the capabilities of US forces to patrol the Strait of Hormuz and the surrounding waters, activating the rapid response system, and broadening the scope of options and flexibility for decision-makers at the White House and military commanders in the field.



Thus, as much as it seeks to flex US power projection muscle in the Middle East, Washington acts assertively to maintain its edge against competitors such as Russia and China through introducing additional advantages. According to [commander](#) of the US Central Command (CENTCOM), "the new forces will add unique capabilities to the region". Such a need is emphasized by the fact that [security will continue](#) to be a central factor in the United States' relations with its allies in the region; i.e., Israel and the GCC countries. This step becomes more vital in light of charges of insufficient US action to guarantee the security of its allies and to deter Iranian attacks and threats to international navigation.

## 2. Mending Relations with US Allies

In light of recent developments, the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement and the manner in which the GCC countries dealt with the war in Ukraine— which have revealed failings in the America's relations with its allies in the region, Washington needs to mend its relations with those allies and prove that it is still committed to guaranteeing their security and that it can do something in the context of deterring and pressuring Iran. Moreover, the US dedication to affirm its military presence in the region and to demonstrate its superiority and advantages in the Middle East is another way of serving its efforts to demonstrate its commitment to the security of its partners, distance them from rival forces and to ensure that they continue to view it as the "only" security partner. Reforming relations with US allies acquires additional importance in the context of the Biden administration's effort to play a more significant role in the region and score a major victory in foreign policy that supports its position in the upcoming presidential elections. In this direction, it seeks to conclude a big deal with Saudi Arabia. According to leaks, the deal may include security understandings that guarantee defending Saudi Arabia in the face of external threats, in addition to normalization of relations between Saudi Arabia and Israel.

## 3. Deterring Iranian Activities

Washington maintains that deploying additional forces to the region is meant to protect the free flow of international trade, explaining that the act is particularly a [response](#) to Tehran's activities of threatening navigation and its attempts to seize commercial ships. Iran has seized or attempted to seize about 20 cargo vessels over the past two years. Stressing that goal, last week Washington stated it was considering putting troops on commercial ships traveling through the Strait of Hormuz to deter Iran's hijacking activities, adding that some Marines had already been trained for this purpose.

However, deterring Iranian activities threatening international navigation is not the whole story. These moves are also a way to [pressure](#) Iran in other issues. For example, the Biden administration seeks to reach an agreement with Iran on the latter's nuclear program, an endeavor that may have been instigated by the Saudi-Iranian rapprochement. Such moves secure some of the required pressures to ensure Tehran's engagement with this endeavor and reaching of an agreement that is acceptable to Washington's Gulf allies and Israel, or at least not opposed by them. It is also meant to rationalize Iran's behavior in the region. By flexing its military power and influence in the region, Washington seeks to build greater military coordination against Iran.

Pressures stemming from these moves may also push Iran to play a positive role in the Yemeni issue and contribute to ending the conflict and bringing peace, especially as the Biden administration stresses that ending the conflict is a priority. The US deals with the Iranian position with suspicion and believes that nothing in Iran's policies indicates that it intends to be a good neighbor in the long term or contribute to ending the conflict in Yemen on its own.

Analysts link deploying more US forces to the region to US plans to attack Iran. They cite the reinforcements of US bases in eastern Syria, which, they [say](#), can only be justified as an attempt to cut the lines of communication between Iran and both Syria and Lebanon in Albukamal in the event of conflict with Iran. Such suspicions are reinforced by Israeli [press](#) reports according to which the main goal of the United States is to secure the Strait of Hormuz and international navigation from any Iranian reaction in the case of a military attack against Iran.

#### **4. Containing the Influence of Competing Powers**

Deploying more US forces to the region comes at a time when China's influence is expanding and its partnerships with the countries of the region are broadening. The United States has a vested interest in containing this growing influence, especially by mitigating its attractiveness militarily. Although China still has a long way to go to play competitive roles at the security and military levels, it [provides](#) security support to its friends in the region in various ways, such as internal security support, training programs and surveillance technology. Although Chinese arms deals, for example, [account only](#) for 5% of the price of arms deals in the region, purchasing Chinese weapons much is easier than buying American weapons and arms sales are unconditional.

While China has only one military base situated in Djibouti, there are chances of expanding China's military presence, especially in light of its participation in building a logistic facility in the UAE. China can also use its growing commercial facilities and bases as logistics stations to facilitate any military activities. Through boosting its military presence in the region and affirming its superior capabilities, the United States seeks to contain China's political roles in the region, in addition to the attempt to minimize chances of potential Chinese influence and military roles. For example, it would seek to make cooperation mutual cooperation between the countries of the region and China less attractive through highlighting the modest capabilities of China and other competing powers, such as Russia. Displaying this superiority also exposes China's shortcomings, depicting it as a power incapable of guaranteeing any political agreements it might mediate.

Consolidating control over one of the most important energy-producing regions in the world by deploying more forces is an additional advantage to the US in the competition with international powers, especially China. Such control poses a [threat](#) to the latter, a large part of whose oil supplies comes from the Middle East. Such a state of affairs is supposed to curb its ambitions, at least partially. This extends to China's military cooperation with Russia, with which it recently conducted large-scale naval and air exercises in the Sea of Japan. These maneuvers aroused Washington's [concern](#), especially in light of the tension between the two parties over the Taiwan issue.

## Impact and Repercussions for the Region

This US move is unlikely to have any immediate results, or to directly affect stability in the region, either positively or negatively. However, despite the fact that [easing](#) regional tension is one of the goals of the deployment of more American forces— according to statements of American officials, there are great chances that this move will exacerbate tension in the region. Although Iranian operations against commercial ships will probably decline and that Iran will avoid any direct provocations, [Iranian officials'](#) statements that the US military presence will fuel instability in the region is informed by the logic that applies to its interactions with this development. The US military presence raises Iranian concerns, especially due to fears of launching an attack on Tehran or on its nuclear facilities.

Therefore, Iran will have fingers on the trigger. In an implicit warning, an Iranian military [official](#) stated that the weapons and ammunition of the Iranian air force "can easily outmatch the sophisticated American systems and hit their targets." The Iranian suspicions aroused by these moves about cooperation and coordination between the GCC states and the United States will be reflected negatively on Iran's rapprochement with these countries and halt any progress in this direction. It will also increase chances of reescalation, particularly in view of the issues and disputes that can give rise to tension, such as the dispute over Al-Durrah gas field and the recent Iranian maneuvers in the island of Abu Musa. It is generally assumed that Iran will show a measure of resistance, but it is more likely that it will resort to indirect resistance through its proxies in the region, particularly the Houthis in Yemen.

American moves will be reflected, to varying degrees, on the various issues in the region, especially the Yemeni conflict. Despite the assumption that through pressurizing Iran and the Houthi group, American military moves will push towards ending the conflict in Yemen, such moves may backfire. Iran may act more conservatively and stick to the points it has often raised as justifications of its delay of resolving the Yemeni crisis, and its efforts of maintaining a stalemate until the outcomes of other issues, such as [the nuclear program](#), become clear. Iran's use of the Houthi group and the Yemeni crisis to resist the American moves is evidenced by recent Houthi escalations and the resumption of Hezbollah leader's rhetoric on the Yemeni crisis. The US forces are already deployed in the seas and waterways around Yemen as part of the Combined Maritime Forces, but the Houthi group seemed more alert this time, as the Houthi [deputy foreign minister](#) warned the United States, "To ensure international peace and security and guarantee safe navigation in the Red Sea, American forces must stay away from our territorial waters because any attempt (just attempt) to sail too close to Yemeni territorial waters could mean triggering the longest and costliest battle in human history." Other Houthi [leaders](#) voiced similar threats and warnings to the Americans, linking the presence of US naval vessels near Yemen to a conspiracy against the country. In general, over the last few weeks, Houthi leaders [have been talking](#) about the capabilities and sophistication of the group's naval forces and their ability to reach any targets in Yemeni waters and islands. The Houthi channel, Al-Masirah, quoted the commander of the Houthi coastal defense forces as saying, "We have been monitoring the American forces since their entry into the Suez Canal. If these forces draw near our territorial waters, we are ready to respond and to deter them."





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