



# ISIS, Al-Qaeda and the Middle East

*W. Andrew Terrill*

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The threat perceptions of many Arab states aligned with the United States have changed significantly as a result of such dramatic events as the 2011 U.S. military withdrawal from Iraq, the emergence and then fading of the Arab Spring, the rise of Iranian power and Tehran's nuclear agreement with key world powers, the Egyptian revolution and counterrevolution, and the development of civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya. A particularly worrisome development and expansion has been the dramatic rise of the "Islamic State" (IS) organization which has seized considerable tracts of territory in Iraq and Syria and inspired terrorists throughout the region. Elsewhere in the region, the 2013 election of the pragmatic and statesmanlike Iranian president Hassan Rouhani is viewed by some Arab states as a potential opportunity but also a danger since the new Iranian government has a potentially shrewder and more effective president and cabinet than seen during the Ahmadinejad years. There have also been some notable differences that have developed between the United States and its Arab allies over how to address these issues and most especially Iranian regional ambitions.

Some Arab leaders, including a number of Saudis and other Gulf Arabs, have subtly but publicly criticized the United States for appearing to lose interest in the Middle East as it becomes less dependent on that region's energy and due to serious problems encountered with the U.S. military intervention in Iraq. Many Arab states are also concerned that the United States may become increasingly interested in disengaging from the problems of the Arab World at a time when increased U.S. attention may be required to address the discord over the South China Sea and emerging problems in Eastern Europe and particularly Ukraine. To these Arab states, other regions are something of a distraction and they see any increased U.S. attention on Asia or Eastern Europe as a potential long-term national security problem. Moreover, while the rise of the Islamic State (IS) organization has refocused U.S. attention on the Middle East, most conservative Arab states remain concerned about retaining a sustained U.S. commitment to the region and are worried that Washington and Tehran are in considerable agreement over the danger posed by IS, even as they are distrustful of each other.

U.S. efforts to prepare for conflicts in the Middle East consequently remain vital, and doing so through actions which deter such conflicts is an especially optimal outcome. Shaping the Middle East strategic environment through carefully tailored collaboration with Arab partner nations presents one of the best ways to both prepare for a potential conflict and to deter that conflict through U.S. and allied defense preparedness. In this environment, it is important that Washington has an array of options that can be used to support and reassure local allies and deter aggression so that the threat of war can be averted before it is realized. The United States continues to project its interest in the region through a number of ways examined in this work including multilateral exercises such as Eager Lion in Jordan, regionally aligned forces, military forward presence, and military advice and assistance. Even with increased energy independence, the United States maintains a number of core interests in the Middle East and is often drawn back to the emerging problems and crises there. In parallel, the conservative Arab states are aware that they have no good alternative to the United States as their most important security partner at the present time. A variety of U.S. officials are committed to a strong effort to convince Arab allies that the United States will not abandon them or downgrade the importance of their security concerns.

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