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# Rebalancing the Books: A Realist Strategy for Managing Iran and the Budding Sunni Regional Order

By Hekmat Matthew Aboukhater

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Washington should pursue a policy of controlled de-escalation with Iran to prevent the Middle East from tipping into a new regional imbalance. In the post October 7th Middle East, the fall of Assad has weakened the Shia Axis and opened space for Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to shape the postwar order in their interests. Continued U.S. pressure on Iran will contain Tehran, but also risk breaking the only remaining counterweight to this rising Sunni Regional Order.

This paper recommends ending the war, restraining Israeli efforts to restart it, and returning to a JCPOA-style framework built around strict IAEA inspections, limited enrichment, and gradual sanctions relief. This approach faces serious obstacles: Tehran may no longer trust Washington after the collapse of the original JCPOA and subsequent attacks, Sunni powers may react to U.S.-Iran de-escalation by coordinating more closely, and domestic politics in Washington and Tehran could block any durable opening.

Still, this paper argues that U.S. long-term interests in the region are not served by the complete destruction of Iran and its proxies, a scenario that, with more Americans demanding the departure of the U.S. military from the region, leaves the post-axis-of-resistance void ready to be filled by nascent Sunni powers that are growing in military and economic strength.

## Introduction

The Hamas October 7 attacks changed the nature of power politics in the Middle East in an irreversible way. The fall of Bashar al-Assad that followed broke the Shia *axis of resistance* and helped link the Sunni one in its

**Hekmat Matthew Aboukhater** is an MPP candidate at Yale's Jackson School of Global Affairs and the Director of the Young Voices Debates series in New York City. He previously worked with the Quincy Institute's Democratizing Foreign Policy program and the United Nations Department of Peacebuilding and Political Affairs. He holds degrees from Boston College and EDJ Nice in France.

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place.<sup>1</sup> Damascus was severed from the crescent that connected Tehran, Baghdad, Damascus, and Beirut, giving Iran strategic depth, pliant governments in its immediate vicinity, and a route through which it could arm Hezbollah and pressure Israel's northern border. Syria has now become Turkey's security frontier and the Gulf's reconstruction market, with Ahmed al-Sharaa's transitional government navigating between Turkish military support and Gulf diplomatic backing. With Damascus out of Iran's orbit, the old map of the Middle East is being redrawn in real time, and the vacuum left by Tehran is already being filled by Ankara, Doha, Riyadh, and Abu Dhabi.

This is the mechanism Washington is missing. U.S. pressure on Iran is so effectively containing Iran that it is accelerating a regional imbalance by weakening the last remaining counterweight to Turkey and the Gulf monarchies. The same campaign that degrades the IRGC, isolates Tehran, and shatters Iran's proxy network also clears space for Sunni powers to build a novel Sunni Bloc that stretches from the region's energy corridors to the Bosphorus with Syria at its core. Turkey is already shaping the new Syrian military through training, munitions, logistical support, and Turkish-made systems, while Saudi Arabia and Qatar have worked to give Damascus financial and diplomatic oxygen.

Washington's response to this changing regional map has been to apply even more pressure on Iran. At its peak during *Operation Epic Fury*, the U.S. buildup placed three carrier strike groups in the region, alongside hundreds of Navy aircraft, thousands of sailors and Marines, Arleigh Burke-class destroyers, undersea assets, and additional troops added to an already massive American footprint in the Middle East. Recent reporting has put the broader U.S. presence at more than 50,000 troops, with two Marine Expeditionary Units moving into the theater, while CENTCOM's effort to reopen and police traffic through the Strait of Hormuz has involved roughly 15,000 personnel. In the same period that Sunni powers have moved to consolidate the post-Assad order, Washington has continued to treat Tehran as the only actor capable of overturning the balance of power in the region.

That pressure has also entered a more dangerous phase. U.S. and Israeli operations have moved from

degrading Iran's conventional military capacity into the terrain of internal destabilization, especially along Iran's ethnic periphery.<sup>2</sup> The clearest example is the Kurdish front in northwestern Iran, where reports have described Israeli strikes in support of Iranian Kurdish militants seeking to seize border towns, Kurdish consultations with U.S. officials over attacks on Iranian security forces, American arming of Kurdish separatists as admitted to by US president Trump, and American requests that Iraqi Kurdish leaders allow movement across the border.<sup>3</sup> A campaign that weakens the IRGC through pressure on Iran's internal fault lines may appear tactically useful, but if it helps fracture Iran into Kurdish, Baloch, Ahwazi Arab, and other separatist statelets, Washington will have traded one problem for a larger one.<sup>4</sup>

A balkanized Iran would not stabilize the Middle East. It would remove the only regional counterweight left to a rising Sunni Bloc, leaving Turkey and the Gulf monarchies with far more room to shape Syria, Iraq, the Levant, and the region's energy corridors on their own terms. Turkey now has a far stronger economy than Iran, a mature defense industry, a growing drone and missile sector, and, according to recent reporting, an intercontinental ballistic missile with a reported range of 6,000 kilometers. The Gulf monarchies sit atop the energy arteries of the global economy, with Saudi Arabia pledging open-ended support for Syria, Qatar using its gas wealth and mediation networks to pull the Levant further from Iran's orbit, and the UAE moving through ports and logistics, including DP World's \$800 million agreement to develop Tartus port in Syria. If these states found the political unity and strategic confidence to coordinate their power, Washington could once again face the crisis of a 1973-style energy shock in a far more multipolar world.

While it is true that the central threat to American interests in the region is an Iran strong enough to dominate its neighbors, an equally dangerous threat is a scenario where Iran is broken so completely that nothing remains in its stead to balance the Sunni powers moving into the vacuum. The United States is still crushing Iran as if Tehran stands as the only regional threat, and in doing so, it risks creating the imbalance that American strategy should be designed to prevent.

## The New Sunni Regional Order

The new Sunni Bloc is best understood as a convergence of interests in a timely geopolitical vacuum instead of a clear formal treaty bloc. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE do not agree on everything, and in some theaters like Libya, Yemen, and Sudan, they actively compete. Yet the weakening of Iran has given them a shared opportunity to shape the political, military, and economic future of the post-October 7 Middle East with Tehran too wounded to balance them.

This is why the American fixation on Iran has become increasingly irrational. Washington is still treating the Islamic Republic as the only actor capable of overturning the region's balance, even as Sunni powers acquire the geography, capital, military tools, and diplomatic reach to build a new order in Iran's place.

### Syria as the Strategic Hinge

Syria lies at the center of this narrative, as its December 8th, 2024, regime change fundamentally reordered the geopolitical power structure of the region. For decades, Syria provided Iran with indispensable strategic depth, serving as a corridor that connected Tehran to Baghdad, Damascus, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. This "Shiite Crescent" allowed Iran to arm its proxies, pressure Israel, and lead an anti-Israeli regional front. The fall of the Assad regime shattered this corridor and opened the geographical space to Iran's rivals, initiating a transition from the Iranian-led "Axis of Resistance" to a burgeoning "Sunni Regional Order" centered on Ankara, Riyadh, Doha, and Abu Dhabi.<sup>5</sup>

Turkey has moved aggressively to transform Syria into a security frontier and its primary military-industrial outpost in the Levant. Ankara signed a landmark security agreement in August 2025 to fully rehabilitate the Syrian security system and train a new national army according to NATO combat doctrines. This force, currently estimated at 100,000 soldiers with plans to double to 200,000, is being integrated into a Turkish-led defense architecture.<sup>6</sup> This includes the planned deployment of advanced HISAR-A and HISAR-O air defense systems at the T-4 airbase and the installation of Turkish navigation

and radar systems at Damascus International Airport to ensure logistical continuity.<sup>7</sup>

Simultaneously, the Gulf states are working to pull the Levant out of Iran's orbit by establishing a massive financial and diplomatic wall. While Saudi Arabia and Qatar have moved to stabilize the new administration by clearing Syria's World Bank debts, Riyadh has signaled an "open-ended" commitment with "no ceiling" for reconstruction. Saudi Arabia is also contributing to a \$6.5 billion international reconstruction package, targeting critical sectors such as aviation, energy, and telecommunications.<sup>8</sup>

This coordination extends into the diplomatic arena, where the order has begun to operate as a unified bloc to constrain regional rivals. This is most evident in the coordinated Sunni rejection of Israel's recognition of Somaliland and the joint condemnation of Israeli military violations in Syrian territory, which the order views as a threat to the stability of the new Syrian state. While Israeli F-35s initially operated uncontested during operations like "Rising Lion," the emerging order is rapidly building a Sunni diplomatic and military wall designed to limit Israel's strategic maneuverability and replace the previous Iranian influence with a more coordinated and durable Sunni-led order.

### Turkey's Military-Industrial Reach

Turkey is the hardest edge of the new Sunni Regional Order. Unlike Qatar, Saudi Arabia, or the UAE, Ankara brings a large army, a mature defense industry, NATO experience, drone power, and a demonstrated willingness to use force across borders. Turkey backs the new Syrian government, trains and advises Syrian forces, and, according to Reuters, has no immediate plan to withdraw its more than 20,000 troops from northern Syria, while also exploring the creation of additional bases throughout the country.

Turkey has also emerged as a major drone manufacturer and defense exporter. Its Bayraktar drones have been exported to conflict zones ranging from Nagorno-Karabakh to the African Sahel, giving Ankara influence well beyond its immediate borders.<sup>9</sup> At the same time, Turkey has become a missile producer with global ambitions. Recent reporting showed that Turkey

unveiled the Yıldırımhan at the SAHA 2026 weapons expo, describing it as the country's first intercontinental ballistic missile.<sup>10</sup>

This military-industrial rise is now paired with a more open Turkish reassessment of the region's nuclear balance. As early as September 2019, President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan told a rally in Sivas that Turkey, a G20 middle power, could not accept a global order in which major powers possess nuclear weapons while Ankara is denied them, pointing especially to Israel's own undeclared deterrent as proof that nuclear capability shields states from external pressure. In February 2026, Foreign Minister Hakan Fidan pushed the argument further, describing nuclear capability as a "high-level strategic issue" that Turkey must examine within the larger picture of the Middle East's arms race.<sup>11</sup>

Ankara remains a signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty and is not openly racing toward a bomb. Yet its expanding civilian nuclear infrastructure, including the first of three planned nuclear power plants, gives it a growing base of technical knowledge that could be useful if the regional balance continues to erode.<sup>12</sup> For Washington, the question is not whether Turkey is an enemy. It is whether a Sunni NATO member with expanding bases in Syria, battle-tested drones, a growing ICBM program, and a more aggressive nuclear posturing should still be treated as a secondary concern while Iran remains the only targeted threat around which U.S. policy in the region is organized.

## **The GCC's Financial and Energy Leverage**

While Turkey represents the hard military edge of the new Sunni Regional Order, the Gulf monarchies represent its financial and energy center. Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE do not always agree, they are currently supporting opposing factions in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan.<sup>13</sup> Still, together they bring the capital, resource control, infrastructure reach, and diplomatic access needed to shape the post-October 7th order.

Qatar's leverage comes from gas, liquidity, and mediation. Doha is one of the world's most important LNG suppliers, accounting for roughly 20 percent of

global LNG exports, with plans to expand capacity by 2030.<sup>14</sup> It has also made itself indispensable as a mediator with actors like Hamas and the Taliban, using relationships most states avoid to give itself influence far beyond its size. In a post-Assad Syria, Qatar's money, gas, and Islamist networks make it a serious player in the budding Sunni Order.

Saudi Arabia and the UAE bring a different kind of weight to the emerging Sunni order. Riyadh has moved quickly to give the new Syria government Arab legitimacy and financial oxygen, including working with Qatar to clear Syria's debts to the World Bank and pledging billions in investments across aviation, energy, real estate, telecommunications, finance, tourism, healthcare, and construction.<sup>15</sup> The UAE has moved through its preferred tools: ports, logistics, and trade corridors, with DP World signing an \$800 million agreement to develop Syria's Tartus port and related infrastructure.<sup>16</sup>

For Washington, the danger is that these states are well-positioned to act on their ambitions. They have the money, the energy leverage, and the diplomatic access to reshape a region that is changing fast. The deeper risk is that American policy begins to confuse their interests with its own. If Iran is crushed so completely that it can no longer balance this bloc, the United States will have helped build a Middle East where Turkey and the Gulf monarchies have far more room to shape the region on their own terms.

## **Why This Regional Order Is Not a Formal Alliance**

The Sunni Order should not be overstated. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE have spent years competing with one another, and in three major theaters their interests have oftencollided directly: Libya, Yemen, and Sudan. These conflicts show that the emerging grouping is not a disciplined bloc with a single command center. It is a loose convergence of powers that can cooperate in one arena while undermining one another in a different one.

In Libya, Turkey and Qatar largely backed the Tripoli-based, U.N.-recognized government, while the UAE, Egypt, Russia, and at times Saudi Arabia supported Khalifa Haftar's eastern-based Libyan National

Army.<sup>17</sup> Turkey's support was arms and military-based and direct, including advisers, drones, and troop deployments after its 2019 security agreement with Tripoli. The UAE, by contrast, became one of Haftar's most important external backers, providing military support to his campaign against the Tripoli government. This made Libya one of the clearest proxy battles between the Turkey-Qatar camp and the UAE-Saudi camp.<sup>18</sup>

Yemen shows a different fracture, this time between Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Both entered the war against the Iranian-backed Houthis, and both formally backed Yemen's internationally recognized government, but their local partners have diverged sharply. Riyadh has generally supported the Presidential Leadership Council and the idea of a unified Yemeni state, while Abu Dhabi has backed the Southern Transitional Council, a secessionist force that has pushed for southern independence and seized key territory in Hadramawt and Mahra.<sup>19</sup> This rivalry has turned Yemen into a battlefield between the Saudi-led coalition and the Houthis on one front and also between Saudi and Emirati visions for Yemen on another.

Sudan presents the third and perhaps most revealing split. The UAE has repeatedly been accused of arming and financing the Rapid Support Forces, claims Abu Dhabi denies, while Saudi Arabia has positioned itself as a diplomatic broker and has leaned closer to the Sudanese Armed Forces camp alongside Egypt, Turkey, and Qatar. Brookings has described the war as one in which outside actors sustain both sides, with accusations against the UAE over support for the RSF and Egypt, Qatar, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, and Iran behind the SAF.<sup>20</sup>

These divisions are pronounced and could become a serious barrier to any fully consolidated Sunni Regional Order. Turkey and Qatar remain more comfortable with Islamist movements than Saudi Arabia and the UAE. Saudi Arabia and the UAE increasingly compete over ports, oil policy, and regional leadership. Yet closer to home, especially in the Arabian Peninsula, Syria, Iraq, and the broader Middle East, their interests are becoming more aligned as Iran weakens. Their rivalry may continue, but they all benefit from the same basic outcome: a region where Tehran is too damaged to impact the balance of power.

## **Historical Reference: When Iran Was Useful to the Regional Balance**

The idea that Iran can only be understood as a permanent American enemy is historically shallow. In *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*, Trita Parsi shows that the triangle between Washington, Tehran, and Tel Aviv has always been more pragmatic than the public rhetoric suggests.<sup>21</sup> Parsi's seminal research shows that when regional balance required it, both Israel and the United States repeatedly found ways to work with Iran.

Before the 1990s, Israel itself saw Iran as useful. Parsi argues that Israeli strategy relied on alliances with non-Arab states on the periphery of the Middle East to balance the immediate neighborhood of Arab powers. Iran was the most important of those peripheral states because of its military weight, its access to oil, and its ability to check hostile Arab nationalism. Under the Shah, this relationship was easier to sustain because Iran was secular, anti-Soviet, and quietly aligned with the American-backed regional order. That exact relationship cannot be recreated with the Islamic Republic, a regime that built much of its legitimacy on opposition to the United States and Israel. But the logic underneath the relationship, using Iran as a counterweight to stronger Arab and Sunni power centers, remains relevant.

## **Iran, Israel, and the United States Before the 1990s Shift**

Parsi's central historical lesson is that the ideological shift of the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran did not erase the realities of geopolitics. Even when Khomeini's government denounced Israel as the "Little Satan" and the United States as the "Great Satan," the regional circumstances that made Iran useful to Israel had not disappeared. Saddam Hussein's Iraq remained a dangerous Arab power. The Soviet Union remained a concern. Iran remained large, oil-rich, militarily significant, and positioned on the eastern edge of the Arab world.

This is why Israel's posture toward Iran after the revolution was more complicated than its rhetoric. Israeli leaders understood that a completely defeated

Iran would leave Iraq stronger, and that Iraq under Saddam Hussein was a more immediate conventional threat than revolutionary Iran. Parsi's account shows that Israel, which today presents Iran as an eternal and existential enemy, once understood the usefulness of Iran's survival for the broader regional balance. The U.S., in pursuit of its own long-term interest must relearn this valuable lesson.

## **The Iran-Iraq War and the Logic of Pragmatic Cooperation**

The Iran-Iraq War made this logic visible. Publicly, revolutionary Iran was isolated and ideologically toxic. Privately, Israel became one of Iran's key sources of military equipment during the war. According to Parsi's account, summarized in later reporting, Israel supplied military equipment, instructors, and intelligence to Iran because a strengthened Tehran could serve as a bulwark against Iraqi power.

This was a clear example of the realist pragmatic regional balancing that is at the heart of the proposed US policy moving forward. Saddam Hussein's ambitions threatened to make Iraq the dominant Arab military power in the region, and both Israel and, at moments, the United States had an interest in preventing either side from winning too decisively. This is the context in which Iran-Contra later emerged. The famous Bible and key-shaped cake episode has survived because it captured the absurdity of the period: an officially hostile Islamic Republic receiving arms through channels connected to the same American and Israeli governments it publicly condemned.<sup>22</sup>

Even in one of the most ideologically charged moments in U.S.-Iran relations, when the hostage crisis still shaped American memory and Khomeini's rhetoric shaped Iranian politics, regional balance still produced quiet cooperation. Washington and Tel Aviv did not need to trust Tehran to understand that the collapse of Iran would empower a worse balance from their perspective.

## **The Post-9/11 Missed Opening**

The same pattern appeared after September 11. Iran and the United States shared an immediate enemy in the Taliban, a Sunni extremist movement that had

threatened Iran, killed Iranian diplomats in Mazar-i-Sharif in 1998, and destabilized Iran's eastern frontier. Parsi's account of this period shows Iranian officials working with the United States during the Afghanistan campaign, including through backchannel diplomacy and intelligence cooperation.

This was the great missed opening. Iran helped against the Taliban, signaled willingness to discuss broader issues, and explored the possibility of a wider settlement with Washington. The Bush administration answered with the "Axis of Evil" speech and a policy of pressure that vindicated Iranian hardliners who had always argued that negotiating with Washington was futile.<sup>23</sup> Instead of using the moment to preserve influence over Tehran, the United States treated Iranian cooperation as irrelevant once the immediate battlefield need had passed.

The lesson is that the United States has repeatedly benefited from narrow cooperation with Iran when Sunni extremist movements or Arab military powers threatened the regional balance. Iran's usefulness has never required much more than overlapping interests and enough diplomatic contact to make those interests investable.

## **The Lesson for Today**

The question today is whether Washington can relearn that older realism in a much harder environment. A surviving Iran, weakened but not shattered, can still complicate the rise of a Sunni Regional Order centered around Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. A destroyed Iran would leave that budding Order with no meaningful regional counterweight.

The United States does not need to recreate the Shah's alliance, and it should not embrace the Islamic Republic. It needs something narrower and more realistic: a relationship cold enough to preserve leverage, limited enough to avoid empowering Tehran, while also being stable enough to keep Iran from collapsing into a vacuum that Sunni powers would immediately fill.

## Policy Proposal: Controlled De-escalation and Rebalancing

The United States should end the war, restrain Israeli efforts to restart it, and return to a JCPOA-style diplomatic framework with Iran. This does not require trusting Tehran, embracing the Islamic Republic, or pretending that Iran's regional conduct has been benign. It requires recognizing that the current strategy is producing the wrong kind of success. By degrading Iran's military, crushing its economy, and flirting with its internal balkanization, Washington risks destroying the only remaining regional counterweight to the rising Sunni Regional Order now taking shape from Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.

The core of the proposal should be simple: a ceasefire, a return to nuclear diplomacy, and gradual sanctions relief tied to verifiable Iranian compliance. The United States should allow Iran limited civilian enrichment under strict caps, returning to the JCPOA benchmark of enrichment no higher than 3.67 percent uranium-235, paired with intrusive IAEA monitoring and inspection access.<sup>24</sup> Any revived agreement should also include robust IAEA inspections, a point IAEA Director General Rafael Grossi has emphasized as essential for any new U.S.-Iran deal.<sup>25</sup>

Sanctions relief should not come all at once. It should be gradual, reciprocal, and tied to concrete benchmarks: enrichment caps, stockpile limits, and expanded inspections. As Narges Bajoghli, Vali Nasr, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, and Ali Vaez argue in *How Sanctions Work*, comprehensive sanctions on Iran have failed to produce their intended political outcomes.<sup>26</sup> Instead, they have strengthened the Iranian state, impoverished the population, increased repression, and escalated Iran's military posture toward the United States.

A country under economic siege and direct military threat from the United States and Israel, one declared nuclear power and one widely understood to possess nuclear weapons, will not become more open, more moderate, or more responsive to its own society. It will empower its hardliners, and treat dissent as a national-security threat. If Washington wants Iranian society to continue moving toward reform in the post-Mahsa Amini protests, it has to create space in which

Iranians are not forced to rally around the state and its flag because the country itself appears to be under existential attack.<sup>27</sup>

A controlled de-escalation would therefore serve two American interests at once. First, it would reduce the risk of another direct U.S.-Iran war. Second, it would leave Iran strong enough to balance Turkey and the Gulf monarchies, but constrained enough that it cannot dominate the region. This is the realist middle ground. The United States should not seek an Iranian victory, but it should also avoid an Iranian collapse. The goal is an Iran that survives, breathes economically, accepts nuclear limits, and remains capable of checking the Sunni powers now moving into the vacuum left by Tehran's retreat.

## Limitations

The first limitation is Tehran itself. After the assassination of Ismail Haniyeh in Tehran, the assassination of Ayatollah Khamenei and the succession of his son, the 12-day war, and the current confrontation over the Strait of Hormuz, Iran may no longer believe that any agreement with Washington is worth the paper it is written on. Iranian leaders already watched the United States walk away from the JCPOA once, after Iran had accepted IAEA inspections and strict enrichment limits. Now, after absorbing Israeli and American attacks and discovering how much leverage it can generate by threatening traffic through Hormuz, Tehran may decide that re-engagement only exposes it to future uncertainty.

The second limitation is that a softer American posture toward Iran could itself frighten the Sunni powers into a more coherent alliance. Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Qatar, and Turkey may interpret U.S.-Iran de-escalation as the beginning of a new American tolerance for Iranian regional power. Even if Washington frames the policy as balance, Riyadh, Abu Dhabi, Doha, and Ankara could read it as abandonment. That fear could push them to coordinate more closely on Syria, Iraq, energy, arms purchases, and lobbying in Washington. In that case, controlled rebalancing would still be worth attempting, but it would need to be paired with clear reassurance that the United States is not giving

Iran a blank check.

The third limitation is Iran's own behavior. Iran still has ballistic missiles, armed partners across the region, a record of domestic repression, and a nuclear program that would require strict verification. A JCPOA-style agreement that allows enrichment up to 3.67 percent under IAEA inspection may reduce the nuclear risk, but it would not solve Iran's missile program, its relationship with Hezbollah, the Houthis, Iraqi militias, or its repression at home. Any re-engagement strategy would therefore need to be narrow and conditional. The goal should be to keep Iran alive as a regional counterweight, and not to pretend that Iran has become a normal partner.

The fourth limitation is that the Sunni Regional Order is still not fully unified. Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE compete in Libya, Yemen, and Sudan. They disagree over political Islam, the Muslim Brotherhood, ports, oil policy, and regional leadership. This weakens the idea that they can easily form a disciplined Sunni bloc. But their divisions do not erase the larger danger.

The final limitation is Washington itself. Israeli and Gulf influence in the capital is documented, well-funded, and institutionally powerful. Gulf governments have spent millions funding Washington think tanks and policy institutions, including major foreign-policy shops. Quincy Institute reporting found that the Atlantic Council, Brookings, and German Marshall Fund were among the top recipients of foreign government money since 2019, while Brookings has acknowledged past Qatari funding and the Middle East Institute has received large sums from UAE and Saudi-linked entities.<sup>28</sup> Pro-Israel institutions and lobbying networks also remain formidable. AIPAC reported nearly \$3.8 million in lobbying expenditures in 2025, and reporting on AIPAC-linked spending in Democratic and Republican primaries shows how aggressively pro-Israel networks can punish candidates who challenge the existing line.<sup>29</sup>

This points to a political obstacle that is structural to the way Washington operates. A serious shift toward de-escalation with Iran would face resistance from Congress, Israeli-aligned think tanks, Gulf-funded policy networks, Iranian hardliners, and American

politicians who have built entire careers on treating Iran as a permanent enemy. That does not make rebalancing impossible. It means that any realistic proposal has to begin modestly: end the war, prevent Israeli efforts to restart it, restore inspections, offer gradual sanctions relief, and use diplomacy to keep the regional balance from collapsing into another American-made overcorrection.

## Conclusion

Operation Epic Fury should end as soon as possible. The United States has already degraded Iranian power across the region, weakened its proxy network, and helped break the corridor that once connected Tehran to the Levant. Continuing this war may satisfy short-term demands, but it risks producing a Middle East that is less advantageous for long-term American interests. A broken Iran would not leave behind a neutral vacuum. It would leave space for Turkey, Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE to shape the post-October 7 and post-Assad order without any meaningful regional counterweight.

That outcome becomes even more dangerous when placed alongside the long-term American desire to reduce its military footprint in the Middle East. If Americans increasingly want the United States out of the region, Washington should be careful not to destroy the only remaining local balance valve before it leaves. The Middle East still contains the Strait of Hormuz, Bab al-Mandab, the Suez Canal, and some of the world's most important energy resources. Leaving those chokepoints and resources to be controlled entirely by a rising Sunni Regional Order would be a strategic blunder.

The better path is one of a controlled de-escalation. Washington should end hostilities, restrain Israeli efforts to restart the war, and begin work toward a JCPOA 2.0-style agreement that restores strict inspections, limits enrichment, and gradually eases sanctions in exchange for verifiable Iranian compliance. This would keep Iran alive, constrained, and economically capable enough to play the balancing role that American strategy requires in the long run.

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