

A Blueprint for a Progressive U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East

Progressives want a U.S. foreign policy that aligns interests and values. There's a better path forward for America in the Middle East. Century International proposes a blueprint for a progressive U.S. policy in the Middle East, for Congress and the executive branch.

This is a “living document” version of Century International’s “[A Blueprint for a Progressive U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East](#),” which was published on July 16, 2024.

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Big Ideas, Clear Policies

Progressives have been kept busy for far too long trying to stop terrible U.S. foreign policies, such as the 2003 invasion of Iraq and ongoing forever-war counterterrorism policies that have come to define America in the Middle East. But the progressive vision for America's role in the world goes far beyond repairing the damage wrought by careless forever warriors and indifferent isolationists.

Progressives believe that America's core values—universal rights, equality, due process—can and should align with America's interests around the world. They also understand the deep organic connections binding all countries, economically, politically, culturally, and strategically. America's hard security, just like its prosperity and rule of law, is intertwined with the world's.

For more than a hundred years since its establishment, The Century Foundation has promoted policies to secure peace and prosperity at home and abroad, from the short-lived League of Nations and fair trade to nuclear arms control and negotiated settlements to bitter wars. This work has always shown an understanding of a truth that eludes too many in American politics—that domestic and international matters are inextricably linked.

Drawing on this proud tradition of analysis and advocacy, Century International is presenting a blueprint for a progressive U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East, though many of the policies we propose could be applied in other regions, or even globally.

We consider this blueprint a starting point for a progressive policy agenda in the Middle East. Polarized rhetoric has obscured a simple fact: most of the supposedly intractable problems in the Middle East are, in fact, solvable. The solutions require leaders willing to act in the best long-term interests of the United States and the Middle East—rather than worrying only about the next election or the news cycle.

U.S. politics rarely turns on foreign policy, but issues like the war in Gaza can galvanize some voters strongly enough to sway their decisions and affect election outcomes. According to a Century Foundation/Morning Consult poll of 1,834 registered U.S. voters conducted in July, the 2024 presidential race could well be one of those elections.

Nearly 4 in 10 voters nationwide (38 percent) say they are *less* likely to vote for President Biden due to his handling of the war in Gaza—significantly more than the portion who say they are *more* likely to do so. Self-identified independents—who carry outsized influence in tight presidential races—are especially unhappy with Biden's record on Gaza. More than 1 in 3

independents (36 percent) say they are less likely to vote for the president as a result, with 27 percent saying they are *much* less likely to do so. Only 13 percent of independents say they are *more* likely to vote for Biden due to his handling of Gaza.

Progressives have precise answers to the hard questions of what the U.S. government should do about the most pressing crises in the Middle East, which for decades have preoccupied the lion's share of policymaker attention despite repeated attempts to "pivot" elsewhere. Here, we propose actions for the executive branch and Congress that would accomplish the core progressive aims for foreign policy in the Middle East: **demilitarize American policy; restore moral leadership; equitably face the climate emergency; and, finally, support a just and durable peace for Palestinians and Israelis.**

This blueprint is a starting point. There are kernels of support for many of these policies—some of it bipartisan—and our hope is that this document can grow into an enduring vision for a different approach to U.S. foreign policy. As such, we will continuously expand the blueprint with new ideas in a [living document](#) that can serve as a resource for progressive policymakers.

1. Power through Diplomacy, Not War

The big idea: The United States should always resort first to diplomacy to pursue shared interests and de-escalate conflicts in the Middle East. Washington should go further than ending the forever wars; it should invest in force projection through civilian means and soft power, relying on rule of law rather than coercion. It should create incentives for partners and allies to do the same. Investment in diplomacy instead of warfare is good politics as well as good policy. According to the Century International/Morning Consult poll conducted in July, more than one in three voters said that America's top priority in the Middle East should be to reduce violent conflict.

Decades after the misbegotten invasion of Iraq—[a war with a \\$3 trillion price tag](#)—the United States continues to cling to a foreign policy that defaults to military tools to address all problems, and all too easily resorts to military intervention. The vast military footprint built after 9/11 created a huge infrastructure for war, which has come to dominate all other tools of statecraft, including the diplomatic and civilian efforts made by agencies like USAID, Treasury, Commerce, Energy, and State. This military infrastructure creates perverse incentives—effectively militarizing all policy questions.

The problem is not just that this model is [bloody](#) and [expensive](#). It's also ineffective. Despite two decades of massive investment in hard security, neither America nor the Middle East is getting more [safe](#), stable, [free](#), or prosperous.

Washington's interlocking defense commitments and network of military bases create path dependency: military tools are usually the quickest and best-funded options for policy problems, even when they are not suitable. And this military architecture creates a moral hazard for the many regional players who expect the United States to step in to help local partners in regional conflicts, even when those conflicts are the product of reckless adventurism. This runaway militarism has blown back domestically, exacerbating troubling dynamics in law enforcement and detention and creating an American economic dependency on the weapons industry. Military commitments lock the United States into forever wars, and create toxic policy contradictions when American partners abuse human rights, erode democracy, and undermine U.S. interests.

A progressive U.S. policy must scale back the country's defense commitments and military footprint in the Middle East, and replace it with nimbler hard security tools to pursue America's counter-terrorism and defense interests. At the same time, U.S. policy must invest equally in the

tools of diplomacy and soft power, which can simultaneously serve the interests of the United States and the Middle East.

What's at Stake (one-page summary)

Actions for the Executive Branch

- 1.1. **Reduce CENTCOM's physical footprint and entangling commitments.** Review CENTCOM activities and related infrastructure, with the aim of reducing spending on CENTCOM's overseas activities ([\\$26.8 billion in FY23, and \\$20.9 billion requested for FY24](#)) by half. Wherever possible, the United States should divest itself of [permanent military bases in the region](#), including major air and naval facilities in the Gulf, and transition to an over-the-horizon posture outside the region. In response to a true security threat, the United States can use remote technology until it is able to deploy resources—a slow but studied military response is better than a quick but inappropriate one. America's basing architecture creates unnecessary friction with Iran, increasing the likelihood of conflict; and traps Washington in unhealthy relationships with partner governments, who take American bases as license to act recklessly abroad or engage in repression at home.
 - 1.1.1. **Base cuts:** We recommend shutting down America's major bases in the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, maintaining small deployments on locally controlled bases, and removing the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet from Bahrain, and keeping it outside the Gulf. Large, fixed bases oriented toward Iran increase the likelihood of conflict through friction points and moral hazard for reckless and escalatory regional partners. Other bases, including in Jordan and Iraq, should be assessed and configured in a review process (see next recommendation).
 - 1.1.2. Review of all bases should **aim to cut the budget by half for bases and deployments** in the CENTCOM area of operations. The president should order the Pentagon to undertake a comprehensive review of basing, infrastructure, and defense commitments, with the explicit aim of streamlining and reducing those commitments and shifting to over-the-horizon capabilities. It's also time to restore transparency to America's military operations: the executive branch should publish accurate, up-to-date information on the number of troops and contractors deployed in the CENTCOM area of operations.

- 1.1.3. A review of defense commitments should **publicly examine [all of America's military partnerships in the region](#)**, including those with Israel, Egypt, Jordan, and the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council. The aim of the review should be to clarify all of the American defense commitments in the Middle East and North Africa. The review should present the White House with options to reduce and streamline America's defense commitments.
 - 1.1.4. There should be **no new military alliances**. The United States should stop exploring a new NATO-style defense pact with Saudi Arabia—the order of the day is less moral hazard and fewer entangling military partnerships, pacts, and alliances. The United States should invest its (mostly nonmilitary) commitments in partnerships with countries with advanced democratic practices and a track record of respecting human rights.
 - 1.2. **Withdraw U.S. troops from northeastern Syria and stabilize the U.S. military partnership with Iraq.** The legally dubious American troop deployment in Syria [creates more risks than it solves problems](#); without an orderly withdrawal, the U.S. mission will inevitably end with a speedy withdrawal, most likely under fire. The executive branch should pull U.S. troops out of northeastern Syria within a year, ideally per agreements with Turkey, Iraq, and Syria (by way of Russia). Washington should support negotiations by the United States' local Syrian partners, the Syrian Democratic Forces, and the Syrian government on post-withdrawal security and governance arrangements. The United States should also transition to a bilaterally agreed role in Iraq that focuses on counterterrorism, and reduces friction points with Iranian-backed factions. (See related policy recommendation 2.2, on ending limbo for Islamic State detainees, under "Restoring America's Moral Leadership.")
 - 1.3. **End recurring military assistance to Israel, Jordan, and Egypt.** U.S. military aid to [Israel](#), [Jordan](#), and [Egypt](#)—which totals [more than \\$6 billion a year](#)—is not necessary to ensure these countries' continued commitment to the Camp David and Wadi Araba treaties. The three countries have maintained an enduring peace with each other out of their own national interests—not because of annual U.S. aid payments. These payments should be phased out as existing memorandums of understanding expire, and bilateral assistance should be revised to better reflect these countries' development needs and U.S. regional policy objectives. Any future aid should not take the form of current agreements, which feature ten-year memorandums of understanding, and which create expectations domestically and abroad and lock the United States into relationships that restrict its flexibility to leverage aid.

- 1.4. **Stop U.S. weapons from being used for war crimes.** The United States must enforce the Leahy Laws and [other existing U.S. laws](#) that require the suspension of military aid used for war crimes, human rights violations, or by dictatorships. [Relevant domestic laws](#) relating to compliance with international law and ensuring access to humanitarian aid include the Arms Export Control Act, the Leahy Laws (Section 362 of Title 10 and Section 2378d of Title 22), and Section 620I of the Foreign Assistance Act. Relevant policies include the Conventional Arms Transfer Policy, Civilian Harm Incident Response Guidance, and the recently issued National Security Memorandum 20.
 - 1.4.1. The State Department should monitor all use of American weapons and [issue formal determinations](#) when U.S.-origin weapons and intelligence are used in violation of the law of war.
 - 1.4.2. State Department findings should immediately be factored into new weapons transfers. In the case of the Gaza war, the White House should immediately stop all offensive weapons transfers to Israel.
 - 1.4.3. The White House should codify the [Conventional Arms Transfer Policy](#) such that it is binding law.
- 1.5. **Negotiate a de-escalation in the Red Sea with Yemen's Houthis that ensures secure use of Red Sea shipping lanes.** Involve the UN and the Security Council's other four permanent members in negotiations, as necessary. Red Sea shipping is a shared global commons interest, not a parochial interest to be protected by a U.S.-led coalition of the willing. Future security missions in the Red Sea should not take the form of U.S.-led coalitions of the willing versus the Houthis; they should be multilateral, with UN backing.
- 1.6. **Initiate an ongoing high-level dialogue with Iran on regional stability and de-escalation,** including Iranian support for nonstate armed groups considered threats by the United States and its regional partners; use and proliferation of Iranian missile and drone technology; and Iran's nuclear program.
- 1.7. **Remove support for abusive military forces.** Enforce existing prohibition on military train-and-equip missions for forces that have contravened U.S. law and commit human rights abuses, as determined by the State Department's annual review.
- 1.8. **Create direct American diplomatic channels with key actors in regional conflicts,** including groups that are designated as terrorist. Dialogue with belligerents does not represent an endorsement—but it does enable the United States to promote security and attempt to manage or de-escalate armed conflicts. It also means that U.S. officials would not have to rely on third parties to communicate and negotiate with advisers. For example, U.S. officials should

initiate dialogue with Islamist-leaning groups, including the Muslim Brotherhood and its country chapters and offshoots, to understand shifts in their strategies since the October 7 attacks. Such dialogue could explore new leverage points over Hamas.

- 1.9. **Reinvigorate nuclear nonproliferation efforts.** Initiate a regional dialogue that puts all nuclear programs, including Israel's, up for discussion. Under the umbrella of the existing Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (known as the NPT), the United States should prioritize oversight and monitoring of existing nuclear programs and any proposed new civilian nuclear power programs such as the one Saudi Arabia seeks.

Actions for Congress

- 1.10. **Revoke blanket war authorizations.** Congress should invite the White House to request new, limited congressional authorizations for any ongoing wars it wants to continue—and can justify. Two blanket [Authorizations for Use of Military Force \(AUMFs\)](#) from [2001](#) and [2002](#) continue to [be used to justify American wars that have no connection to the 9/11 attacks](#). Congress should pass the repeal of these authorizations (it has made some attempts in the past, but failed due to support that was limited, although bipartisan). Congress has the sole power to authorize war, although you wouldn't know it from the way administrations since George W. Bush have used and abused their privileges to initiate war, declared and undeclared, open and secret, since 2001. A small but growing bipartisan coalition in Congress [supports AUMF reform](#), although the Gaza conflict has stalled reform efforts, including in the House, to repeal [the 2002 Iraq AUMF](#).
- 1.11. **Pass the [National Security Powers Act](#),** which would overhaul the War Powers Resolution to try to install more meaningful guardrails regulating the use of force under Article II of the Constitution. For example, the current U.S. armed conflict with the Houthis in Yemen should require congressional approval—and would, under the National Security Powers Act.
- 1.12. **Prevent U.S. weapons from being used for war crimes.** Congress should pass legislation to overhaul the statutory framework governing arms sales to give Congress more control. Multiple bipartisan bills have been proposed in recent years. One example is the proposed [National Security Powers Act](#).

- 1.13. **Conduct a public accounting of the U.S. footprint and strategy in the Middle East.** Currently, it's impossible to say exactly how many U.S. troops are in the Middle East at any given time—and why they're there. The executive branch keeps the numbers opaque, and deploys a significant number of private contractors who functionally operate like official troops. The Committees on Armed Services in both the House and the Senate should robustly exercise their oversight authority, summoning Pentagon officials to testify with precise numbers about all U.S. deployments; define the mission of those deployments; explain the U.S. interest served; and finally, enumerate the criteria by which each mission will be accomplished and the timeline for its end. Congress should legislate an ongoing reporting requirement that the Pentagon disclose troop and contractor deployments, and mission parameters and timelines.
- 1.14. **Enhance the Leahy Laws and codify the conventional arms transfer policy.**
 - 1.14.1. Congress should pass any legislation necessary to codify the [conventional arms transfer policy](#), such that it is binding law.
 - 1.14.2. Congress should conduct hearings to hold the State Department and other responsible executive branch entities accountable for not enforcing laws prohibiting the use of U.S. weapons in war crimes.
- 1.15. **Use diplomatic pressure with allies to suspend those allies' arms sales and security assistance to places in crisis.** For example, Emirati shipments to Sudan are fueling a bloody and possibly genocidal civil war; the United States could pressure the Emirates to stop arming parties to the conflict.

2. Restore America's Moral Leadership

The big idea: America's greatest asset has always been its robust and credible world leadership—not its military might. America maximizes its influence in the world not through coercion, but when governments and people choose to emulate the U.S. approach. The wind-down of American military overspending that we propose is not a retreat from the Middle East. Rather, it is an invigoration of moral leadership and persuasive capacity.

But effective American leadership also requires a new vision adapted to the realities of the twenty-first century. Neither militarism nor isolationism make America safer or help the world. America's vision must be collaborative and principled—not bullying, transactional, or opportunistic. America will continue to build lasting power and influence in our increasingly interconnected world as an honest and cooperative champion of rights, rules, and global progress.

What's at Stake (one-page summary)

Actions for the Executive Branch

- 2.1. **Dismantle the forever war machinery.** Post-9/11 counterterrorism policy architecture still includes abuses in detentions, domestic surveillance, remote targeting, and assassinations, all of which have spurred copycat policies around the world.
- 2.2. **No more detainees in permanent limbo.** Close al-Hol camp and other detention centers in northeastern Syria, ending limbo for 50,000-plus people labeled as "ISIS adjacent." Close the detention facility in Guantanamo Bay, releasing all remaining detainees or transferring them to U.S. courts.
- 2.3. **Review sanctions.** U.S. sanctions too often punish civilians and fail to change the behavior of targeted states. What's more, the United States' overuse of unilateral sanctions stresses its relationships with friendly countries and encourages the development of alternatives to the U.S.-centered international financial system.
 - 2.3.1. **Regular reviews of existing sanctions.** The executive branch should introduce periodic reviews of sanctions' efficacy and effects, including unintended impacts.
 - 2.3.2. **Targeted sanctions.** When introducing new sanctions under existing authorities, the executive branch should prioritize designations of individuals (as with Magnitsky-style sanctions, for example); avoid or lift

- sanctions encompassing entire economic sectors and sanctions on economically pivotal state entities (such as service ministries, central banks, and the public administrations of maritime ports).
- 2.3.3. **Exercise existing discretionary authorities in support of policy ends.** The executive branch should use its prerogatives and authorities to issue waivers in existing sanctions legislation and regulations, even over the objections of some loud constituencies in Congress and various interest groups.
 - 2.3.4. **Rationalize export controls.** The executive branch should direct the Department of Commerce's Bureau of Industry and Security to study expanded license exceptions for countries subject to export controls, such as Syria; as well as other adjustments to export controls to facilitate the export of controlled items consistent with U.S. policy ends (for example, medical equipment).
 - 2.3.5. **Encourage financial institutions to continue business in situations with limited sanctions.** Many banks and private institutions simply stop doing business when there are sanctions in a country, even when many business activities remain permitted. The executive branch should follow through on the Treasury Department's [2023 De-risking Strategy](#) and its recommendations to encourage private entities to engage in permitted activities in sanction contexts.
 - 2.3.6. **Pursue alternative solutions to sanctions.** The executive branch should study the viability of alternative solutions for humanitarian organizations affected by sanctions, including clearing payment channels for organizations engaging in permitted humanitarian activities in sanctioned contexts.
- 2.4. **Establish a strategic international forum for the Middle East and North Africa.** Such a forum will initiate Middle East and North Africa regional dialogue with other outside powers, including Russia, China, and the European Union.
 - 2.5. **Support universal jurisdiction trials underway in Europe for perpetrators of war crimes and torture in the Middle East.** The executive branch should initiate prosecutions in the United States, [using authorities in existing statutes](#), to prosecute individuals from the Middle East and North Africa region who are now in the United States, or U.S. persons, who are responsible for war crimes or torture.
 - 2.6. **Join the International Criminal Court (ICC) and support its indictments.** The executive branch should [sign the Rome Treaty](#) and lobby the Senate to ratify it. The ICC serves as a court of last resort, which most U.S. allies support. By joining

- the ICC, the United States can show that it is concerned about justice for victims, rather than undermining it.
- 2.7. **Back International Court of Justice rulings.** The executive branch must avoid statements and actions that undermine the court and its standing.
 - 2.8. **Use the UN Security Council veto sparingly—and in support of human rights.** The United States should be judicious with its veto power at the UN Security Council and avoid using it to shield states from accountability, particularly when a resolution concerns well-documented gross violations of human rights.
 - 2.9. **Support aid packages that catalyze reform in Lebanon and other places.** U.S. policy should support conditionality for assistance from international financial institutions. Support the World Bank and the IMF's insistence on meaningful reform conditionality for their assistance to countries like Lebanon. Resist appeals to weaken that conditionality for political reasons, or to sweeten some other, unrelated deal.
 - 2.10. **Adopt a digital public infrastructure policy that is [fair and accountable](#),** and supports digital freedom and safety. Promote open government data initiatives that increase transparency and enable Middle Eastern and North African citizens to hold their governments accountable. Advocate for international policies that protect digital rights, including freedom of expression online and privacy protections against government surveillance. (This is an important strategic goal, since it goes against the [localization efforts led by India](#).)
 - 2.11. **Facilitate direct dialogues and partnerships between U.S. policymakers and persecuted groups and communities in the Middle East and North Africa.** Such minorities could include Shia groups in Saudi Arabia and Bahrain, Muslim Brotherhood and other Islamist-leaning groups in Egypt, Lebanon, Jordan, and Syria, and political opposition in the United Arab Emirates.

Actions for Congress

- 2.12. **Review sanctions.**
 - 2.12.1. **Sunsets for sanctions:** Congress should include expiration dates in any new sanctions legislation.
 - 2.12.2. **Mandate reviews.** Congress should ensure any new sanctions legislation mandates periodic reviews of sanctions' unintended effects, and press relevant committees to conduct oversight, including hearings.

- 2.12.3. **Target sanctions.** In any new sanctions legislation, Congress should prioritize designations of individuals (as with Magnitsky-style sanctions, for example); avoid or lift sanctions encompassing entire economic sectors and sanctions on economically pivotal state entities (such as service ministries, central banks, and public administrations of maritime ports).
- 2.12.4. **Phase out the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act.** Congress should allow the Caesar Act to sunset in 2025, and should not pass the successor Assad Regime Anti-Normalization Act.
- 2.12.5. **Support waivers.** Congress should support the White House in exercising waiver authority as appropriate, so that the issuance of necessary waivers does not automatically prompt unanimous congressional rejection.
- 2.13. **No more foreign policy vacancies.** Congress should reform the congressional confirmation process, so that Congress exercises its oversight but enables diplomatic posts to be filled within the first six months of a new administration.
- 2.14. **Join the ICC.** The Senate should ratify the Rome Treaty.
- 2.15. **Recommit to opposing torture.** Congress should consider legislating amends or compensation to people temporarily held in U.S. detention who have been tortured. No such amends have ever been made, and they need to be done in order to right the wrongs of the past.
- 2.16. **Fund diplomacy.** Congress should provide equal funding for military and nonmilitary international policymaking in the Middle East and North Africa.
- 2.17. **Budget for reconstruction and *ex gratia* amends for civilian harm** in all future conflicts and, retroactively, dating back to the conflicts that began in 2001, after 9/11. The cost of any bombing campaign should include accounting and paying for civilian harm, and rebuilding destroyed infrastructure. Paying for such reconstruction and harm is not a job for someone else—it doesn't serve U.S. interests, for example, to destroy urban areas to fight the Islamic State and then leave those areas in ruins indefinitely, thus guaranteeing a revival of the targeted group by its disaffected constituents. Every dollar spent on air campaigns [must be matched by an equal amount](#), disbursed by USAID, to rebuild and provide livelihood assistance to affected communities (as the United States did previously in Iraq and Afghanistan). Congress has already appropriated funds for *ex gratia* payments to civilians harmed by U.S. operations, but the administration has never made use of them.
- 2.18. **Fund soft-power exchanges.** Reauthorize, or newly budget, for critical programs that encourage international exposure to American education, culture, and ideas, including the Fulbright Program, the U.S. Agency for Global Media, and the State

Department's public diplomacy functions. The United States should charter a revived agency under the direction of the State Department or USAID that promotes U.S. culture abroad, a function performed until 1999 by the U.S. Information Agency.

3. Equitable Response to Climate Change

The big idea: Climate change is the prime example of the type of highly networked twenty-first century problem that requires deep international collaboration to solve. And the Middle East presents a special challenge for climate change policy. Part of that challenge is that much of the region is arid and hot—already at the edges of habitability—and simply can’t absorb more heat and drought without causing major disruptions to societies. But even more important is the way that bad governance, cross-border competition over water, and environmental degradation have weakened the ability of countries such as Iraq to adapt. At the same time, the dependence of the region’s economies on oil and gas rents makes them unreliable partners in mitigation efforts, and more sluggish to adapt. Migration will accelerate because of climate pressures—from rural areas to cities in the Middle East, and from Middle Eastern countries to other regions. The United States should consider climate justice a question of human rights and of shared global prosperity, rather than as just a security problem. Washington should make climate change adaptation and mitigation hallmarks of its Middle East policy. If it doesn’t, the future will be ever more chaotic, expensive, and unpredictable.

What’s at Stake (one-page summary)

Actions for the Executive Branch

- 3.1. **Prioritize just climate transitions and reducing inequality with American financial assistance** through international financial institutions and [multilateral development banks](#). Inequality is a root cause of human suffering in the Middle East, and just transitions will be key to successfully weaning the region off of oil and gas. With the United States the dominant shareholder in the [IMF](#) and the World Bank, the White House should task Treasury with refocusing the programs of international financial institutions and multilateral development banks around just transitions and ending inequality.
- 3.2. **Push for water diplomacy.** Water shortages are the cutting edge of the climate emergency, and have become engines of widespread human misery. Nations that share river watersheds must negotiate new, equitable agreements to share water resources. The United States can lend catalytic diplomatic and political support to water diplomacy, and should heavily promote transborder water and environmental agreements across the region. Washington should also pressure

countries like Turkey to sign such treaties. The implementation of these treaties is essential.

- 3.2.1. **Push for a Nile water agreement.** The White House should support the [Nile Basin Initiative](#) and any other international mediation among the Nile countries, whether mediated by the African Union or the United Nations. The United States should commit presidential-level diplomatic attention to resuming Nile water sharing negotiations among riparian countries and fund continuing negotiations if riparian countries all agree to new talks. The United States should integrate water into its diplomatic agenda with Nile basin countries, especially Egypt and Ethiopia, whose support is essential for improving water dynamics in the Nile Basin.
- 3.2.2. **Support a Tigris and Euphrates water conference.** The White House should commit presidential-level diplomatic attention to supporting international, multilateral negotiations between the countries that share the Tigris and Euphrates Rivers. The United States should fund continuing negotiations if riparian countries all agree to talks aimed at equitable and transparent water-sharing agreements. The United States should integrate water into its diplomatic agenda with Turkey, whose support is essential for improving water dynamics in the Tigris–Euphrates basin.
- 3.3. **Support green energy and cleaner oil industry in the Middle East and North Africa.** The executive branch should support economic projects that prioritize economic diversification with an emphasis on suitability. Such projects should include gas capture in Iraq, solar infrastructure, and minimizing oil pollution.
- 3.4. **Link hard security agreements to climate progress.** Specifically, the United States should support investments in green energy and agreements on water sharing. Sometimes, adversarial parties can be pushed to work together over water issues, such as Turkey, Syria, Iraq, and the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (the PKK), which all have a stake in the disposition of the Euphrates.
- 3.5. **Invest in green energy in the United States to reduce the power of oil in the Middle East.** The United States needs to lead by example and reduce its dependence on fossil fuel. Accelerating the American transition to renewable energy has broader benefits than slowing climate change. It will also restore geopolitical balance, so that Middle Eastern petrostates no longer have outsize influence just because they are sitting on oil and gas. Investing in green energy will thus make the United States less reliant on erratic, undemocratic partners.

Actions for Congress

- 3.6. **Fund a U.S.-led Middle East and North Africa climate bank.** As a first step that can be implemented in a period of less than four years, Congress should immediately pass legislation creating a funding mechanism for just-transition climate projects in the Middle East and North Africa and appropriate seed funding, and pledge matching funds for additional donors. The climate bank will serve as a U.S.-led development bank for climate projects.
- 3.7. **Fund an international climate finance agency.** As a second, longer-term step, Congress should initiate an international financing mechanism, created in partnership with the EU, China, and other wealthy states. Just transitions should not solely rely on mobilizing private capital.
- 3.8. **Overhaul intellectual property laws to promote decarbonization.** Congress should support attempts to [reform international intellectual property laws](#) for climate-related technology and strengthen programs that support technology transfer to help build local industry. The [UN Framework Convention on Climate Change enables climate-related technology transfer](#), but at too slow a pace. The United States government should accelerate [existing programs to facilitate green technology transfers](#).

4. Just and Durable Peace for Palestinians and Israelis

The big idea: Outrage over Israel's nearly complete destruction of Gaza after the October 7 Hamas attack has galvanized much of the American public. And yet Israel's indiscriminate killing of civilians in Gaza is but the latest chapter in a long story of Palestinian suffering: occupation, land theft, settler violence, expulsion, and disenfranchisement. Of course, Palestinian leadership has hardly helped—but ordinary Palestinians have had little say in choosing their leadership, with no national elections in nearly twenty years. Meanwhile, America has continued to send billions in unconditional military aid, while offering only vague political proposals and bromides about the two-state solution. This approach has made the U.S. government actively complicit in Israel's conduct of the war, and a potential codefendant in international legal proceedings assessing whether Israel's military campaign meets the definition of genocide.

American voters express a desire to see the U.S. government uphold its own laws, which prohibit sending American weapons to foreign governments that use them to commit war crimes. According to Century International's recent poll, fewer than 1 in 5 voters (19 percent) believe that the U.S. should continue sending Israel weapons *without any conditions*. A majority (58 percent) say Israel should meet at least one of a number of conditions for the United States to continue providing military support. Respondents who expressed this view included 68 percent of Democrats, 58 percent of independents, and 46 percent of Republicans. More than half of American voters (51 percent) want the U.S. to stop sending offensive weapons to Israel if that country is found to have committed war crimes or violated human rights. Nearly a third agree that the United States should stop sending both offensive *and defensive weapons* in such an event. A policy that implements American values and laws on weapons transfers would enjoy broad bipartisan public support.

U.S. policy is now wildly out of touch with reality, and has emboldened extremists. Israelis and Palestinians already live together in an apartheid system that is an affront to American values. It is time for America to turn a new page in its relationship with Israel, based on the principles of rights, justice, and freedom.

What's at Stake (one-page summary)

Actions for the Executive Branch

- 4.1. **Push for an immediate ceasefire** by withholding military aid, conditioning other aid, enforcing U.S. law regarding the legitimate use of military aid, and supporting meaningful ceasefire resolutions at the UN Security Council. The United States must take meaningful measures to constrain Israel's actions, not just broadcast more empty rhetoric. Initial necessary actions include sanctions on settlers and halting the supply of weapons for Israel's Rafah operation.
- 4.2. **Demand Gaza's reconstruction, and fund it.** The United States should play a primary role in funding and politically supporting a multilateral Gaza reconstruction plan. Clear guidelines and principles for reconstruction should include the following features:
 - 4.2.1. Gaza and the West Bank should be reintegrated, ending Gaza's separation and isolation.
 - 4.2.2. Reconstruction should be advanced, with the aim of strengthening substantive Palestinian sovereignty.
 - 4.2.3. The effort should be multilateral and international—not an exclusive U.S. effort—and led by an inclusive and representative Palestinian Liberation Organization (PLO) with a plan for governing the West Bank and Gaza as one territorial unit with requisite security arrangements. Palestinian leaders and institutions must be at the helm of reconstruction efforts from the very beginning.
- 4.3. **Support universal rights and substantive sovereignty for Palestinians.**
 - 4.3.1. The executive branch should support **legitimate Palestinian leadership**. In parallel to reconstruction, the United States government should support the emergence of a unitary, cohesive, and representative leadership Palestinian structure that enjoys broad legitimacy among Palestinians both inside and outside of the occupied Palestinian territories.
 - 4.3.2. The executive branch should support **Palestinian control (or at least no Israeli veto) over borders, ports, critical infrastructure, and energy—including power plants and offshore gas resources.**
 - 4.3.3. Advance a United Nations Security Council resolution **establishing an international transitional supporting authority** for Palestinian governance and independence, with a multilateral security prong and a civil transitional governance prong, including reintegration of Hamas-affiliated public service employees and police and security forces. This resolution should include a timeline. The United States can lead on the drafting of such a resolution (rather than waiting for other countries to write one, only to be met with a U.S. veto).

- 4.3.4. Support **real Palestinian self-determination** and Palestinians' selection of their own leaders and representatives, not just placing Palestinians under some new form of outside tutelage or installing approved, hand-picked Palestinian collaborators. Further, in elections, Palestinians must be able to vote in Jerusalem.
- 4.3.5. Support **Palestinian democratic institutions**, encourage reassertion of judicial independence, civil liberties, and independent electoral bodies—to lay the groundwork for future elections. These actions must take place on an accelerated timeline.
- 4.4. **Secure unimpeded, full, and regular aid access to Gaza by land routes through Israel.**
 - 4.4.1. The executive branch should insist on **full transparency from the Israeli government regarding humanitarian aid** entering and accessing Israel. It should use existing accountability mechanisms against civilians and officials who are hindering aid delivery.
 - 4.4.2. The executive branch should pressure Israel to **raise quotas of fuel entering Gaza** at least to levels prior to Rafah operation (they have fallen an estimated 75 percent since the operation began).
- 4.5. **Take meaningful action against settlements.**
 - 4.5.1. Broadly, the executive branch should **recommit to policies and language condemning settlements**—and not just individual settlers—as violations of international law and a significant trigger for imminent West Bank escalation.
 - 4.5.2. The executive branch should **widely impose sanctions**, using existing authorities, against individuals undermining peace and security in the West Bank, [as the White House did in February 2024](#).
 - 4.5.3. The executive branch should **enforce the correct labeling of products made in areas captured in 1967 as “made in West Bank,”** including from Israeli settlements (reversing Trump-era policies calling for these goods to be marked “made in Israel”). The White House should also clarify the U.S.–Israel Free Trade Agreement so that its provisions do not extend to settlement products. Preferential status should apply to products from inside Israel's recognized borders, and to Palestinian goods.
 - 4.5.4. The executive branch should **issue a risk warning regarding investment in settlement businesses**, such as the [French government warning](#) on the website of the Ministry for Europe and Foreign Affairs.
- 4.6. **Support a real political process that includes *all* Palestinian and Israeli stakeholders.** Any viable negotiations over long-term arrangements between

Palestinians and Israelis will have to include the full range of legitimate representatives and potential spoilers. A reinvigorated PLO that includes all Palestinian political forces will enable interlocutors to deal with groups that they cannot meet with directly.

- 4.7. **Declare that criticism of Israeli policy is not anti-Semitism.** The White House should reject the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance definition of anti-Semitism, which defines much criticism of Israeli policy as anti-Semitism.
- 4.8. **Protect civil society groups.** The executive branch should protect the independence and funding of nongovernmental organizations, in the United States as well as Israel-Palestine, to insulate them from demonization as terrorist or anti-Semitic.
- 4.9. **Protect journalists in war zones.** The White House should pressure Israel not to target journalists, and to revoke its ban on Al Jazeera.
- 4.10. **Promote judicial independence in Israel.** The executive branch should advocate for the preservation and strengthening of judicial independence in Israel.
- 4.11. **Equal rights.** The executive branch should pressure Israel to cancel discriminatory laws against Palestinian citizens of Israel.
- 4.12. **Upgrade diplomatic relations with Palestine.** The White House should reopen PLO offices in Washington, and upgrade U.S. representation to Palestine. Further, the executive branch should provide sovereign immunity protections so Palestinian diplomatic missions aren't liable for lawsuits. It should also encourage independent Palestinian foreign relations in practice—trade, projects, investment—in order to begin building the Palestinian infrastructure for future independence
- 4.13. **Oppose Israeli expropriation of Palestinian energy resources,** including Gaza marine and Zone G gas reserves.
- 4.14. **Apply relevant U.S. laws to prosecute U.S. citizens involved in alleged war crimes,** including those responsible for war crimes against American citizens in the Gaza war.
- 4.15. **Prevent U.S. weapons from being used for war crimes.** (See detailed suggestions in section 1 of this blueprint.)
- 4.16. **Legalize the PLO.** The executive branch has the authority to override Congress's finding that the PLO and all of its affiliates are terrorist organizations. The president should exercise this override authority. Congress's terrorist designation effectively criminalizes a body that represents the Palestinian people, which thereby criminalizes Palestinians. The congressional designation also prevents the executive branch from freely engaging with the PLO, which undermines the White House's foreign affairs authority.

Actions for Congress

- 4.17. **Take meaningful action against settlements.**
 - 4.17.1. Congress should **pass legislation that limits donations to settlements and the Israeli military** by tax-exempt nonprofits. (State legislatures can also pass such legislation).
- 4.18. **Legalize the PLO.** Congress should repeal legislation that allows retroactive jurisdiction on damage claims against the PLO.
- 4.19. **Fund UNRWA.** Congress should end legislative prohibitions on contributions to UNRWA (the Relief and Works Agency for Palestine Refugees in the Near East). It should also appropriate funds for UNRWA.
- 4.20. **Declare that criticism of Israeli policy is not anti-Semitism.** Congress should pass legislation that protects political speech critical of Israeli policy and that officially defines anti-Semitism in terms of racism, calls to violence, and other legal elements of hate speech. The law should define anti-Semitism precisely in order to protect political speech, while supporting the necessary legal tools that punish hate crimes, including anti-Semitic hate crimes.