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The United States and the Middle East: Interests, Risks, and Costs

Daniel Byman and Sara Bjerg Moller

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The United States has long been involved in the Middle East, and its role has only grown since the end of the Cold War. Yet in contrast to Europe, another region of longstanding interest, or Asia, where the United States plans to “pivot” in the years to come, trade relations and cultural ties remain weak, and the region’s military power marginal. During the Cold War, the Middle East’s energy supplies and several communist-leaning regimes rendered it part of the US-Soviet chessboard. In the 1990s the United States expanded its security presence in the region to contain Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and the clerical regime in Iran. At the same time, Washington engaged in an energetic and sustained, but ultimately unsuccessful, effort to bring about peace between Israel and its Arab neighbors.

Following the 9/11 attacks, US involvement grew even greater. The United States deepened counterterrorism cooperation with longstanding allies like Egypt and Jordan and pushed to establish more extensive ties with hitherto neglected or adversarial regimes, like Yemen and Libya. Most dramatically, of course, in 2003, the United States invaded Iraq and, in so doing, triggered an insurgency that led to a sustained US presence in the country until the end of 2011. And then, just as US forces departed Iraq, the so-called “Arab Spring” shook the region, toppling longstanding US allies in Egypt, Tunisia, and Yemen and creating civil wars in several countries, most notably Syria. Although the Obama administration resisted a large-scale US military commitment in the region, after the 2014 Islamic State advances in Iraq, it began air strikes against Islamic State forces and stepped up its efforts to work with regional allies and local partners against the group.

Today’s posited US interests in the Middle East can be broken down into five areas: ensuring the free flow of oil; preventing nuclear proliferation; fighting terrorism; maintaining the security of Israel; and promoting democratization. Iran, the Islamic State, and al-Qa’ida at times

pose real threats to these interests, but we argue that the threat they represent is often overstated and that many US interests in the region stand little risk of disruption. In fact, it is our allies' own problems that present a bigger concern, and the Arab Spring and subsequent civil wars brought many of these into the forefront. The US approach to managing these problems has generated many benefits, including deterring and disrupting foes and successfully reassuring allies. However, it has at times exacerbated internal problems and contributed to anti-Americanism. To protect its interests, the United States should try to contain the violence in Iraq and Syria, weaken the Islamic State, and reenergize its efforts to promote peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Washington must also recognize the limits of its power as it tries to protect its interests in this turbulent region.

The remainder of this essay is divided into four parts. Section one describes the array of US security commitments to states in the Middle East, ranging from formal military agreements to more rhetorical declarations of interest. Section two assesses the posited US interests in the region, presenting the arguments to their importance and raising questions about the validity of many of the justifications on which they are based. It also reviews the threats to these interests and evaluates which represent the most worrisome cases. Section three attempts to prioritize US interests and discusses those over which the United States can exert meaningful influence. The essay concludes in section four by presenting the implications of this dissection and the recommendations for policy.

1. US SECURITY RELATIONSHIPS IN THE MIDDLE EAST: A REVIEW

The United States maintains a range of security relationships in the Middle East. These include defense cooperation agreements, basing and access rights, the prepositioning of equipment, and other “hard” forms of cooperation. In addition, the United States has made rhetoric commitments to several of its allies (and explicit and implicit threats to its enemies) and fulfills the role of major arms supplier to the region. These relations are particularly extensive with states of the Arabian Peninsula, Egypt, and Israel.

The US basing network in the Middle East is quite extensive. Even taking the US presence in Afghanistan out of the picture, the United States positions numerous bases, Forward Operation Sites (FOS) and Cooperative Security Locations (CSL) and forces along the Gulf littoral, as well as in the eastern Mediterranean and along the Horn of Africa. Although accurate numbers are hard to come by due to the political sensitivities of the host nations and regular changes in the specifics of basing as operational needs vary, US military sites in the region number in the dozens. Among the major US Army military installations located in the CENTCOM theater are Kuwait's Camps Arifjan and Buehring along with Camp As Saliyah in Qatar.¹ The US Air Force also maintains installations in Kuwait, UAE, and Qatar. In 2015, the US Air Force also began deploying air assets from Incirlik Air Force Base in Turkey.² Additionally, at any given time, as many as two of the Navy's three forward-deployed aircraft carriers are also deployed in the region.³ The conversion of one of the Navy's oldest transport ships in 2012 into a floating forward base marks the introduction of yet another basing platform in the region.⁴ Taken together, this arrangement provides the United States the ability to deploy forces at or near a wide range of potential crisis points.

This basing network is reinforced by several thousand troops deployed in various states throughout the Persian Gulf. The United States also retains several dozen personnel in Oman and an advisory presence in Saudi Arabia. To strike the Islamic State, the United States and its allies have stepped up cooperation with Turkey and bombed from bases there and in Jordan and other states in the region. In addition, the United States maintains several hundred troops afloat in the region at any given time.⁵ The US still retains an unmatched ability to quickly ramp up additional assets in the region should events there warrant it, as evidenced by the late summer 2013 US Navy positioning of an additional ten ships, including the aircraft carrier the USS Nimitz, into the Red Sea in preparation for a possible limited strike against Syria.⁶ As such, the US will continue to maintain a strong military presence in the region for the foreseeable future.

Washington also holds numerous longstanding security agreements with the smaller states of the Arabian Peninsula that give the United States access to facilities and bases in the

region and the right to preposition equipment. Kuwait is a “Major Non-NATO ally” and the country served as a base for over 20,000 US troops during the Iraq War. Despite withdrawal of US forces from Iraq, Kuwait (along with Qatar) has remained an important regional hub, with the US bases there coordinating logistical and training support. The United States also deploys missile defense systems to the country and helps train the Kuwaiti military.⁷ Further south, Bahrain is home to the American Fifth Fleet and, like Kuwait, is a “Major Non-NATO Ally,” enabling it to buy advanced American weapons systems. The United States has supplied Bahrain with surplus military equipment and helped Bahrain expand its air and coastal defenses.⁸ Bahrain also provided basing and other support for US operations in Iraq and Afghanistan.

Qatar’s importance as a US base dates to the 1990s when Washington sought alternatives to Saudi Arabia. Qatar is the forward deployed base of CENTCOM and houses the Combined Air and Space Operations Center. In 2011, Doha signed a bilateral security agreement with Washington regarding information sharing, aviation and cyber security, and other homeland defense-related issues. Qatar also hosts a missile defense radar station.⁹

The UAE’s Jebel Ali is the most visited foreign port in the world for the American Navy. In addition, the US positions several air defense systems in the country, which also functions as the base for the Integrated Missile Defense Center. The United States trains large numbers of Emiratis and other Gulf students in the UAE, and there is a considerable effort to develop and support the country’s air forces.¹⁰ Oman is home to several US Air Force bases and prepositioned American equipment. US forces maintain access to bases in Oman for contingencies and engage in a range of training programs and joint exercises with the Omani armed forces.¹¹

The United States has long cooperated militarily with Saudi Arabia and has worked extensively—though without much success—to train the Saudi military. The United States is widely perceived as firmly committed to Saudi Arabia’s security, but no formal defense agreement exists between the two countries. In the 1990s, the United States deployed tens of thousands of troops to Saudi Arabia, primarily to defend the region against Iraq, but withdrew in 2003 after the fall of Saddam Hussein. Several hundred troops remain in the country to

administer training programs. Washington has also undertaken a range of counterterrorism cooperation efforts with the Saudi regime, including measures to work together to combat terrorism financing.¹²

In addition to formal defense cooperation agreements with traditional allies on the Arabian Peninsula, and the implicit guarantee of Saudi security, the United States signed a “Strategic Framework Agreement” with Iraq in 2011. Although this promises cooperation in various areas, it comes after unsuccessful attempts to conclude a more formal defense arrangement, which foundered on Iraq’s unwillingness to grant US forces a separate legal status. Given the ongoing war against the Islamic State in much of Iraq, the Obama administration has deployed additional forces to train the Iraqi army as well as work with Iraqi tribes and Kurdish forces. It is also considering deployments of special operations forces.

To back up these various formal agreements, the United States engages in repeated public declarations of support for the security of its allies in the region. President Obama, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and Secretary of Defense Leon Panetta, and their successors have repeatedly declared their commitment to individual states’ and to the security of the region as a whole.¹³ As further evidence of these strong ties, senior US administration officials undertake frequent trips to the region.

States in the Middle East also serve as major purchasers of US military equipment. In 2011 Saudi Arabia agreed to purchase over eighty F-15SA fighter aircraft and upgrade its existing fleet of seventy F-15s, along with air-to-air and air-to-ground packages. The \$29.4 billion sale was the largest of its kind to a single recipient. In recent years the UAE, though far smaller than Saudi Arabia, agreed to purchase over ten billion dollars of US equipment, including up to 80 F-16s.¹⁴ Other sales to these and other regional states have included not only high-end aircraft, tanks, and other military systems, but also packages for system support, logistics, and upgrades. As part of these sales, the US has also agreed to deploy standoff weapons to Saudi Arabia and UAE. And, as in the past, US military personnel will jointly train with the Emirati and the Saudi pilots.¹⁵

The United States does not hold a defense treaty with Egypt, but it is a major recipient of US assistance, particularly military aid. From 1987 through the present, Egypt received \$1.3 billion a year in military aid and has long stood as the second largest recipient, after Israel, of US foreign assistance. Much of this aid goes towards military acquisitions, upgrades of existing equipment, and maintenance. Some analysts believe that US aid covers perhaps eighty percent of Egypt's weapons procurement costs.¹⁶ Egyptian arms acquired from the US include M1A1 Abrams tanks, F-16s, and other advanced equipment.¹⁷ Although the Obama administration began a case-by-case formal review of aid programs in early July in response to Congressional pressure to suspend or curtail aid following the Egyptian military's violent ouster of President Mohammed Morsi, the White House is unlikely to support such calls given the importance of the US-Egypt relationship.¹⁸

The United States maintains a wide range of security cooperation efforts with Israel. Washington helps Israel preserve its "Qualitative Military Edge," with legislation ensuring Israel's superiority over "any conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors."¹⁹ In 2007, the Bush administration agreed to a ten-year, \$30 billion military aid package. Israel is the top recipient of US Foreign Military Financing, through which it has received F-35s/Joint Strike Fighters, bunker-busting bombs, and much of its most advanced equipment. Israel also has access to many of the top US weapon systems. Pentagon officials described the military sales as part of an ongoing US effort to ensure Israel maintains unprecedented air superiority into the next generation.²⁰

US and Israeli defense companies often work together on projects, including on missile defense programs such as the Arrow and Arrow II anti-missile systems. The United States also maintains a large emergency stockpile of material on Israeli soil for US contingencies, with the possibility of its use by Israel in a crisis situation.²¹ The "Iron Dome" anti-missile system, which helps protect Israel from Hamas and Hizballah rockets, was a joint US-Israel effort. US officials repeatedly emphasize America's commitment to Israel's security in public rhetoric as well.

The United States also enjoys substantial trade relationships with several Middle Eastern states, though these are usually dwarfed by US trade relationship with more advanced industrialized economies in Europe and Asia. In 2012 (the latest year for which data is available), the United States exported almost twenty-five billion dollars' worth of goods to the UAE and twenty-five billion dollars to Saudi Arabia. The United States imported almost fifty-six billion dollars in goods, primarily petroleum, from Saudi Arabia and billions more from other Gulf States (the figure varies dramatically depending on the price of oil). Israel exported over twenty-seven billion dollars to the United States.²² (Japan, in contrast, in 2012 exported over \$173 billion in goods to the United States and imported \$116 billion.²³)

2. POSITED US INTERESTS TO THE REGION—AND THREATS TO THESE INTERESTS

US leaders have declared a range of vital (and not-so-vital) American interests in the Middle East. These have varied by administration and historical era, but they have long included ensuring the free flow of oil and maintaining Israel's security. The United States has also expressed a strong desire to prevent further nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, and since 9/11, placed particular emphasis on counterterrorism. In addition, Washington has demonstrated an episodic commitment to the spread of democracy in the region. This section describes these interests, examines questions concerning their validity, and surveys potential threats posed to them.

Oil

Ensuring the free flow of oil represents perhaps the most constant, and many would say the most important, US interest in the Middle East. Since at least the 1970s, America's key strategic interests in the region have involved not only securing easy access for itself but also guaranteeing an open and secure market for Japan and Europe. Middle East countries, especially the states of the Persian Gulf, are key oil producers, exporting far more than they consume. In 2015, Persian Gulf states produced almost thirty percent of total world oil production, with the United States receiving roughly twenty-one percent of its imports from the region in the first six

months of 2015.²⁴ Europe, China, and Japan all also depend on oil imports for their energy needs.

One common myth is that the country of origin of the oil is what matters most. Iran has often been referred to as a major supplier of particular European or Asian countries. In 2011, for example, Italy and Spain together imported over ten percent of their oil from Iran.²⁵ In reality, however, oil is a global market—who supplies whom at any given moment matters far less than the overall supply and demand, which is what sets the overall price. Thus, Iran’s value to a particular economy depends largely on how much oil it contributes to the global market. The stability or instability in a particular country consequently matters equally for the whole world based on how much oil they use for their overall economy.

It is possible that the Gulf may, in the near future, play a lesser role not only for US energy interests but also in world oil supplies. Both Republican and Democratic administrations have voiced their commitment to American energy independence and the Obama administration has introduced several policy measures aimed at reducing American reliance on Middle East oil. Technological improvements have enabled production from so-called “tight” oil, increasing overall world supply as well as the relative US share, and that of stable allies like Canada, of production.²⁶ Due in part to rapid growth in new petroleum sources in the Western Hemisphere like shale energy or the use of fracking to exploit fields once thought exhausted, analysts now anticipate a fifty percent drop in US oil imports from the region by 2035.²⁷ Most analysts project that US domestic oil output will rise significantly over the next decade.²⁸ However, increases in global demand are likely to match supply increases, particularly if China and India continue high growth rates. On the supply side, most of the growth in OPEC petroleum production is expected to come mainly from the Persian Gulf countries, with current US government projections putting their market share within OPEC at roughly seventy percent by 2040.²⁹ Although both the total likely additional demand and supply remain speculative at this point, recent projections in both supply and demand suggest the Persian Gulf will continue to a major player in the global oil market for years to come.³⁰

In many ways, a stable price is as important as a low price. The United States and other advanced economies have proven that, over time, they can adjust to both high and low energy prices and maintain economic growth. In addition, oil exporters often use any surge in their wealth from exports to increase their own imports from Western countries and increase investment there as well, thus balancing some of the economic losses that would otherwise accrue to the West.³¹

The greater danger comes from sudden price shocks: oil is notoriously inelastic, as it is difficult to quickly change consumption should the price of oil rise. Yet even here there may be good news. During the post-war period through the 1970s, oil price elasticity was as high as -0.29: when the price of oil increased ten percent, real GNP figures declined a staggering 2.9 percent. However, this fell sharply from the 1980s on, as the market became more accustomed to volatility: elasticity fell to an average of -0.02 in the first year after a sudden price increase and -0.05 in the second, leading to a GDP decline of 0.2 percent and 0.5 percent in the first and second year: high figures (particularly if, say, the price of oil increased thirty percent in a year) but not catastrophic.³²

Eugene Gholz and Daryl Press point out “potential supply disruptions are less worrisome than scholars, politicians, and pundits presume.”³³ They go on to argue that spare consumption, changes in transport routes, and consumer adaptation can reduce the cost of oil shocks. In addition, oil companies often diversify their portfolios, accounting for political risk and, in so doing, anticipating the likelihood of unexpected decreases in global supply. Moreover, oil shocks lead to increases in exploration and production elsewhere, leading to an increase in supply over time.³⁴ However, as these authors also note, the Strait of Hormuz is perhaps “the world’s only true chokepoint,” and they contend that preventing the conquest, and thus the consolidation, of major Persian Gulf suppliers represents an important US interest, albeit one that they do not see as facing serious threat today.³⁵

Notionally, the threat to oil arises in two forms. First, a hostile state could invade and occupy an oil-producer or cut off a key chokepoint such as the Strait of Hormuz. The hostile

producer, of course, would almost certainly want to sell the oil, thus in the long-term, supply would likely remain constant. However, the short-term disruption caused by invasion (and perhaps an insurgency in response) could prove highly disruptive. In addition, it is possible that the invading power, if it gained control of a significant percentage of the world's reserves, would acquire the ability to manipulate the market, deliberately creating price spikes.

Here the variation in current and spare production in the region must be taken into account. As the world's reaction to the crisis in Libya and, before that, the disruption in Iraqi oil supplies showed, world oil markets can adjust to losing the production of one of the region's suppliers. Because of the concentration of the world's oil supplies in the Gulf region—and much larger portion of spare production there—the possibility of disruption of the region in general (i.e. the production of more than one state), or of Saudi Arabia in particular, deserves additional scrutiny.³⁶

Historically, only Iran and Iraq posed a threat to oil from the Gulf region—Iraq from conquest, as it attempted in Kuwait in 1990, and Iran through subversion. With Saddam Hussein gone and Iraq in turmoil, in the near to medium-term, Iran represents the country of greatest concern with regard to invasion. However, even a cursory look at Iran's capabilities suggests how difficult this would be. Tehran's military lacks the ability to project power outside its borders in a sustained way. Iraq's military is weak and unable to “balance” Iran, but Iran's seizure of oil-rich parts of Iraq would be difficult to achieve and would probably lead to a protracted insurgency on the part of local Iraqis. Striking across the Gulf at Kuwait and Saudi Arabia would be exponentially harder, requiring sea and air capabilities the Islamic Republic lacks and exposing attacking forces to strikes from the forces of the Gulf States, which are prepared for this eventuality. Politically, Tehran does not claim the territory of any of its neighbors (a few disputed minor islands aside), and the Islamic Republic still bears the scars from the country's long struggle with Iraq. Tehran has no appetite for another large-scale war.

In recent years, one much-touted concern is that Iran might try to block the Strait of Hormuz, perhaps the world's most important chokepoint for oil supplies: thirty-three percent of

all oil shipped by sea and nearly twenty percent of all oil traded worldwide passed through the Strait in 2009.³⁷ Stopping traffic through the Strait would cut off over eighty percent of the Gulf states' oil exports, driving up shipping costs, and otherwise lead to a major spike in the price of oil—and one that could not be quickly made up from other sources.³⁸ Caitlin Talmadge finds that Iran has significant capabilities to close the Strait for perhaps a month, using a combination of mines, anti-ship cruise missiles, and land-based air defense.³⁹ Even so, the potential disruption to the global oil market stemming from a crisis over the Strait could be significant, especially in the short term. In December 2011, after Iranian Vice-President Mohammad Reza-Rahimi threatened to close the Strait if new sanctions were levied, oil prices jumped over two percent in one day. However, the ensuing week—which witnessed both Iranian and American naval exercise—saw oil prices quickly return to pre-incident levels.⁴⁰ Still, some energy analysts predict the price of oil could rise by as much as fifty percent within days of the Strait's closure.⁴¹

One reassuring counterargument is that it would be self-defeating for Iran to close the Strait as Iran itself is dependent on the Strait to export its oil. However, it is plausible (though not likely) that Iran might still try to close the Strait: scenarios might include a full boycott of Iranian oil should Iran renew its nuclear program, which means Iran has no significant exports to lose, or a more ideological or desperate regime in Tehran. Such an action, however, would create a counterbalancing coalition, including Europe and China, that would lead to economic and diplomatic isolation as well as support for aggressive US military action.

Moreover, Washington's existing regional assets provide it with options should Iran choose to disrupt traffic in the vital shipping channel. In 2012, President Obama reportedly sent a private letter to Tehran declaring Iranian closure of the Strait of Hormuz a "red line" for the United States.⁴² When the Iranian Coast Guard seized a Marshall Islands-flagged Maersk cargo ship in April 2015 the administration demonstrated its commitment to protecting the passageway by sending the guided missile destroyer USS Farragut to patrol the channel. In addition to sending American warships to shadow US-flagged merchant ships CENTCOM announced it was considering offering its assistance to non-US flagged merchant ships, an effort

to bring the Strait under US extended deterrence.⁴³ The ongoing US naval presence in the region should afford Washington continued deterrence opportunities.

Another risk comes from Iranian-supported subversion and perhaps even limited military strikes on Gulf oil facilities. Tehran in the past sponsored a coup in Bahrain and various terrorist attacks in Kuwait and Saudi Arabia. The circumstances for this are far from impossible given, the growing polarization of Sunni and Shi'a in the Muslim world, the proxy wars between Iran and Saudi Arabia in Syria and Yemen, and other issues. Here the direct threat to supply would be less, but the increased risk premium would lead to price increases and perhaps even a short-term spike until the situation stabilized one way or another.

The potential for non-state actors to disrupt the region's oil supply, while in the realm of possibilities, remains low. Although the Islamic State's control of several Iraqi and Syrian oil refineries and distribution assets since 2014 garnered significant news coverage, the oil fields controlled by the organization are responsible for only a fraction of regional output capacity. Rather than destroy many of these sites the group has kept several oilfields operational as part of an elaborate oil smuggling operation in order to fund its activities. While troublesome from a counterterrorism perspective—illicit oil sales reportedly netted the organization several million dollars a month in 2014—terrorist groups like the Islamic State do not as yet pose a serious and consistent challenge to the region's oil supply.⁴⁴

Regional allies are also at risk of internal strife unrelated to foreign subversion. In Iraq during the height of the civil war in 2006, in Libya during the revolt against Qaddafi, and in Iran during the early days of the revolution, internal unrest led to significant decreases in oil production.⁴⁵ The Arab Spring embodies the latest reminder that many regimes in the Middle East rest on fragile foundations. While oil-rich Gulf States have largely escaped massive unrest, they have witnessed some demonstrations though these have tapered off. Because of its large share of global production and world spare capacity, Saudi Arabia represents a particular concern in terms of internal instability. Yet even here there may be less cause for concern than some suggest. Domestic instability may not be as destabilizing to oil production as previously thought.

Mahmoud El-Gamal and Amy Jaffe find that regime change by itself historically has “not resulted in significant medium term (32-64 month) disruptions in output.” The authors conclude that while regime change may hamper investment and production in the immediate short term, only outright wars that destroy production and transportation infrastructure would produce significant medium-term output disruption.⁴⁶

Nuclear Proliferation

Preventing the spread of nuclear weapons represents a central, and often cited by leaders, US interest in the Middle East. In part, this policy intends to prevent any hostile state from gaining enough power to threaten US interests regarding oil security. But this issue also involves concerns relating to the security of Israel and a more general viewpoint that proliferation is dangerous, particularly with regard to “rogue” or hostile regimes.

The arguments against proliferation (or, more rarely, in favor of it) are well-known and thus only briefly summarized here. While some contend that nuclear weapons make leaders more cautious, others argue that their spread risks the use of nuclear weapons in war or by accident, either way a catastrophic event. A particular fear is the so-called “stability-instability paradox”: Even if states become more cautious in their willingness to go to war, they will be more willing to engage in limited aggression (including supporting terrorists and insurgents) in the belief that their nuclear capability insulates them from conventional attack.⁴⁷ As Robert Jervis has argued, “To the extent that the military balance is stable at the level of all-out nuclear war, it will become less stable at lower levels of violence.”⁴⁸ This more pessimistic view is the common wisdom in policy circles.

The United States does not view the Israeli nuclear program, which dates back to the 1960s, as a threat because Israel is an ally. US officials are further reassured by the fact that Israel did not use nuclear weapons even when its security was threatened in the 1973 war. Successive US administrations have deemed Israel a stable and rational actor with a professional military that will be careful to prevent a nuclear accident and will ensure proper command and control.

Today the biggest risk of proliferation comes from Iran. Tehran developed an extensive nuclear program and has enriched uranium to twenty percent, but comprehensive sanctions helped convince Iran to go to the negotiating table. In 2015, the United States and Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action designed to disband Iran's nuclear weapons program in exchange for sanctions relief.⁴⁹

Tehran is hostile to the United States and Israel, and its command and control and accident-prevention procedures are uncertain. Many critics of the deal argue that Iran cannot be trusted to uphold its end of the bargain, that inspection procedures are too lenient, and that the eventual expiration of the agreement enables Iran to eventually get a nuclear weapon. However, should Tehran acquire a nuclear weapon, it is highly unlikely to use it as a "bolt from the blue" or pass it to terrorist groups, though the possibility of an accident remains quite real.⁵⁰

Even assuming that Iran eventually gets a bomb, much comes down to the "stability-instability paradox."⁵¹ Tehran sponsors a range of terrorist and insurgent groups, and analysts fear it would become more aggressive as its nuclear capability would act as a deterrent to conventional military attacks. So a nuclear Iran could mean a risk of greater terrorism, subversion, and support for insurgency. However, although the Iranian regime aspires to greater influence in the near-abroad, sectarian issues have prevented Tehran from achieving its goal of becoming a leader of the Muslim world. Save for in Syria and Iraq where Iranian influence has grown in recent years, the Arab street's perception of Iran and its proxy Hizballah has markedly declined.

Another concern is so-called "reactive" or "tit-for-tat" proliferation: when the acquisition of a nuclear weapon by one country triggers a response by that country's neighbors, thus greatly increasing the number of nuclear powers, and thus the risk of accident and war. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, Egypt, and other regional countries are all cited as potential reactive proliferators should Iran's program lead to a nuclear weapon. However, Philipp Bleek's research indicates that reactive proliferation is far from automatic but is more likely when a state exhibits an intense rivalry with another, possesses its own indigenous research and industrial base to build a bomb,

and lacks a security guarantee from a nuclear-armed ally.⁵² Iran's rivalry with its neighbors is significant, but not necessarily intense by standards of say India versus Pakistan. Even more reassuringly, Saudi Arabia lacks the necessary industrial and technological resource base, though in contrast to most potential proliferators, it might have the ability to purchase a weapon outright from an ally like Pakistan. Turkey, however, possesses the necessary resource base, but it too does not have an intense rivalry that would drive the development of a weapon. Most important, many of the potential proliferators are US allies and thus can "balance" against the greater Iranian threat. At one time a cause for concern in Washington, Syrian efforts to build a nuclear program of their own have effectively been stopped by the 2007 Israeli air strike and the ongoing civil war, suggesting that the main threat to nuclear proliferation in the coming years in the region will continue to be Iran alone.

Regarding the proliferation (and use) of chemical and biological weapons, the picture is mixed. The Bush administration succeeded in getting Libya to abandon its programs for the development of biological, chemical, as well as nuclear weapons in 2003. The Obama administration was also able to compel the Syrian regime to dismantle its chemical weapons programs. Going forward, deterring CBRN proliferation in the region will continue to remain a major goal of all American administrations.

Security of Israel

Since the 1960s, the United States has had an increasingly close relationship with the state of Israel.⁵³ Administrations of all stripes have repeatedly declared that the security of Israel represents a significant US national interest. This alliance is based on three pillars: security interests, shared values, and domestic support.

The United States and Israel have long opposed common foes in the Middle East. This ranged from pro-Soviet (or at least not pro-American) regimes like Nasser's Egypt and Saddam's Iraq, to the clerical regime in Tehran and, more recently, a range of terrorist groups. Israel played an important role in helping the United States set back Iran's nuclear program in the years before the JCPOA. Champions of the US-Israel alliance also stress that Israel represents an island of

democracy in the authoritarian sea of the Middle East. In helping defend Israel, the United States is thus defending its own values. In addition, Israeli public opinion of the United States—in contrast to Arab state public opinion—is favorable, and the alliance is based on people-to-people as well as government-to-government relations.

Americans strongly support close ties to Israel. A 2015 poll found that over seventy percent of Americans view Israeli favorably—far higher than support for other countries in the Middle East.⁵⁴ Support is particularly high among the American Jewish community and the white evangelical Protestant communities.⁵⁵ In recent years support has become especially strong within the Republican party, with Democratic party supporters being more ambivalent about Israel's policies. This strong domestic support makes it likely that any president will strongly support Israel. However, in some cases—notably Obama's championing of the Iran deal—US leaders will pursue regional goals even against Israel's objections.

There are several arguments made against the designation of the security of Israel as a critical US interest. First, as John Mearsheimer and Stephen Walt have contended, among their other criticisms of the U.S-Israel partnership, Israel is widely reviled in the Arab and Muslim worlds. Thus, close US ties to Israel and support for its unpopular policies drag down favorable opinion of the United States. Many of the reasons the United States has enemies in the region, they contend, is due to its ties to Israel.

This argument is both true and overstated. US support for Israel remains a grievance held by friends and enemies alike in the Arab and Muslim world and does increase anti-US sentiment. In many cases, however, this grievance figures as simply one among many. So Iran is hostile to the United States because of Washington's support for Israel, but also because of past US meddling in Iran, US support for Iraq in the Iran-Iraq War, US opposition to Iran's attempt to expand its influence, rejection of US secular values, and other concerns. Al-Qa'ida of course strongly rejects Israel and repeatedly identifies US support for Israel as a reason to the attack the United States. Al-Qa'ida propaganda, however, also cites a range of other supposed US crimes. Some of these are factual such as the US military presence in the Middle East and historical

support for authoritarian regimes. Others are tied to US values, such as support for women's rights, religious minorities and, increasingly, the rights of homosexuals. Still others tend toward the delusional, such as a supposed US campaign aimed at subordinating Muslims and undermining Islam throughout the world. As the Syrian civil war has heated up and other concerns have risen to the fore, the importance of Israel as a grievance has declined.

A second argument leveled against the partnership is that Israel represents simply one power among many in the region, and the hostility regional governments hold towards the Jewish state creates difficulties in US diplomacy and hinders US alliances. But often this hostility is more public than private: a number of US allies in private have shown little concern about Israeli activities and even expressed indirect support for an Israeli attack on Iran's nuclear facilities. And one of the ironies of the US-Iran deal is that Israel joined Saudi Arabia and other foes of Iran in opposing the deal.

The actual US role in helping secure Israel is unclear. Israel does not face a threat from conventional military attack. Even before Syria collapsed into civil war, Israel's forces were far more capable than those of its neighbors combined, and while US support increases the capabilities gap, without Washington's backing Israel's forces would still enjoy a considerable advantage. The last decade has witnessed a steady increase in Israeli capabilities, with little comparable growth in that of its neighbors. The United States and civil war shattered Iraq's military power. Egypt, in theory, could again become hostile, but the conventional gap in military capabilities remains considerable and the Sisi government there has furthermore reaffirmed its support for the peace treaty.

The security threat to Israel today comes primarily from terrorism or from rocket attacks from Hamas, Hizballah, and other substate or quasi-state foes. Israel has gone to war with Hamas several times since the terrorist group seized power in Gaza, often over the threat of rockets. Working with the United States, Israel has developed the "Iron Dome" and "Arrow" systems, improving its defenses against missiles and rockets.⁵⁶ Such systems, however, are unlikely to present a cure-all to a weapon that, in the end, is primarily psychological. Rockets

have killed relatively few Israelis, but the risk of rocket attack remains disruptive to Israeli society. Israel, using its own intelligence and military capabilities, has dramatically reduced the scale and scope of terrorism in the last ten years. The US has at best a limited role to play by helping Israeli diplomacy and assisting Israeli research.

Israel faces a political and diplomatic jeopardy—that it risks becoming a world pariah. Israel’s increasing isolation is a threat to its security, and the United States can help lesson its pariah status. Already it does not have diplomatic relations with many states, and constant pressure for sanctions and other punishments against Israel persists due to its continued occupation of the West Bank. Indeed, some of this hostility would continue regardless of the status of peace talks, but the lack of progress on peace with the Palestinians means this pressure is likely to continue, and perhaps grow. US efforts to move the peace process forward require encouraging both Israelis and Palestinians to make difficult and politically unpopular concessions in the name of peace.

Democratization

The United States also professes an interest in the spread of democracy throughout the world. For many years various US administrations embraced a “Middle East exceptionalism,” wherein the United States acted as if democracy in the region represented both an unlikely and undesirable development. This policy changed significantly in the George W. Bush administration, but the disastrous occupation of Iraq and the success of Hizballah and Hamas in elections in Lebanon and Gaza respectively made the embrace of democratization appear naïve and counterproductive.⁵⁷ The unexpected occurrence of the Arab spring, however, returned democracy promotion to center stage, though democratization ardor cooled as the Arab spring devolved into civil wars and led to a coup in Egypt.

Several arguments emerged for democracy promotion. Mubarak’s Egypt, Qaddafi’s Libya, Salih’s Yemen, and other authoritarian regimes produced terrorists who often targeted the United States as well as local authorities: dictatorship, it seemed, provided al-Qa’ida both a grievance to exploit and a large pool of recruits. In addition, US support for dictatorship

tarnished the image of US in the eyes of many Arabs. Thus, democracy promoters anticipated that a change in policy would lead to a change in hearts, as democracy is genuinely popular in the region.⁵⁸ Supporting democracy also aligns with US values, while, strategically, the most enduring and close US alliances are with strong democracies. Consequently, if democracy was successfully fostered, Israel would not be the only regional country with shared political values.

Critics, however, point to several weaknesses in these arguments. First, US endorsement of democracy under President George W. Bush, and then belatedly under Obama, has won little support for the United States in the Arab world. In Jordan, approval of the United States is at just fourteen percent. In Egypt, among Palestinians, and in other countries of the region, rates remain similarly low, largely unchanged since before the Arab spring.⁵⁹

Second, many of the dictators were staunch US allies, and two of them, Jordan and Egypt, maintained peace with Israel—something far harder for popularly elected governments to accomplish given widespread public hostility toward Israel. So in supporting democratic movements, the United States was in essence abandoning friends, while their replacements were still unknown. Indeed, democratic regimes are not likely to be more pro-American than their authoritarian predecessors, and indeed, have good reason to adopt a more hostile position. Broad anti-American sentiment in the Arab world suggests that regimes responsive to the mood of their people are likely to oppose close relations with the United States. In addition, Islamists emerged as one strong alternative, and they hold views on personal freedoms and the role of religious minorities, among other issues, that diverge sharply from those held by the U.S, rendering, the “shared values” objective a much less likely outcome.

Third, fighting terrorism requires strong governments, and for the short-term in particular, democracy actually weakens governments while the risk of civil strife creates opportunities for al-Qa’ida and like-minded groups.⁶⁰ So while the grievances that foster support for terrorists may decline, governments’ abilities to fight them will too. The collapse of weak governments in Yemen and Libya despite hopes for democratization—and the growth of jihadist terrorism in Egypt since the Arab spring—are in part because of the collapse of government

authority. In addition, if governments are more hostile, their intelligence services are less likely to cooperate with the United States.

Finally, skeptics point out that the most important dynamics are domestic. Active US backing of democracy, if anything, backfired under President George W. Bush, and the Arab Spring had little to do with US policy. The United States, they would contend, should simply pursue its interests unconcerned with the type of government in the Arab world, as it cannot effect this type of change through its own efforts.

The primary threats to democratization are internal. Regimes are entrenched and resist reform. New actors that come to power after the collapse of dictators may not accept the premise of democracy or may implement it fitfully. Most regional economies are in poor shape, and the rule of law is often weak. On the margins Washington might influence these dynamics, but US intervention, even in small ways, could easily backfire, discrediting those we seek to help.

Yet the threat posed to democracy is not completely internal. In Syria, Iran has backed the Asad regime in its efforts to resist a popular revolution. In Egypt, organizations in Saudi Arabia showered money on Salafi groups that are opposed to liberal interpretations of democracy, and Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates backed the Sisi coup with billions of dollars. Most dramatically, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia backed the Bahraini government's 2011 crackdown on dissent, deploying its troops to shore up government control. Bruce Riedel argues that Saudi Arabia is implementing a version of the Brezhnev doctrine, using force and money to ensure that revolutions do not occur in its backyard.⁶¹

Nowhere have the intricacies of America's position toward democratization in the Middle East been more apparent than in Egypt. The White House's reluctance to publically condemn the Egyptian military's July 2013 overthrow of the democratically elected Morsi government as well as its subsequent dismissal of congressional calls for the suspension of foreign aid demonstrated once more the fine line Washington walks when its own interests clash with democratic tenets. Although numerous foreign policy commentators and members of Congress argue that Washington's annual foreign aid package to Cairo provides the US with leverage in

influencing Egyptian politics, the truth is more complicated. In exchange for the \$1.3 billion in military aid given to Egypt each year the United States receives over-flight rights, preferential access to the Suez Canal, prepositioning at Cairo West Air Base, and intelligence on al Qaida. Were Washington to suspend aid to Cairo, the United States could be on the “losing end” of the relationship as well.⁶²

In Egypt, the Obama administration’s position was further complicated by the Egyptian public’s support for the military’s ouster of Morsi and subsequent crackdown against the Muslim Brotherhood. Faced with supporting a democratically elected but anti-American regime or the widely popular Egyptian military, many of whose leaders had long established ties to US officials and close relations with Israel, the Obama administration came down on the side of stability and order over democracy. However, lingering concerns over democracy and the harsh crackdown in Egypt strained relations with the Sisi government. With the aftershocks of the Arab Spring likely to continue to ripple through the region in the coming years Washington may resort to taking a long view on democracy in the Middle East.

Terrorism and Counterterrorism

Since the 9/11 attacks in particular, the United States has prioritized counterterrorism in its policy towards the Middle East. Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen became especially valued for their counterterrorism cooperation, and Washington has expanded ties to previously neglected countries like Algeria. In Saudi Arabia and other wealthy Gulf states, both the George W. Bush and Obama administrations pushed hard for a crackdown on terrorist financing and on support for jihadist movements in general. The intelligence services of Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, and Syria have all reportedly penetrated al-Qa’ida with human assets.⁶³

Al-Qa’ida, the Islamic State, and associated movements can be seen as posing three categories of threats. First, they might directly plot attacks on US and allied targets, both in the Middle East and in the West. The al-Qa’ida core itself has attempted several attacks in Europe and the United States since 9/11, and al-Qa’ida of the Arabian Peninsula came close to success -

nearly downing a US passenger plane in 2009 and a U.S cargo aircraft in 2010. The al-Qa'ida core has not successfully attacked the West for some time.

However, the emergence of the Islamic State has raised a range of terrorism fears. Western officials worry that young European Muslims who have gone off to fight in Syria as anti-Asad idealists will return to Europe as anti-Western terrorists directed by the Islamic State. As FBI director James Comey warned, "All of us with a memory of the '80s and '90s saw the line drawn from Afghanistan in the '80s and '90s to Sept. 11." He then warned, "We see Syria as that, but an order of magnitude worse in a couple of respects."⁶⁴

Despite these warnings and the real danger that motivates them, the Islamic State-linked Syrian foreign fighter threat can easily be exaggerated.⁶⁵ Fears about foreign fighters were raised concerning many conflicts, including after the US invasion of Iraq, but this did not lead to massive anti-Western terrorism. Previous cases and the information already emerging from Syria suggest several mitigating effects that reduce—but hardly eliminate—the potential terrorist threat from foreign fighters who have gone to Syria. Many of the most radical die, blowing themselves up in suicide attacks or perishing quickly in firefights with opposing forces. Many of the most radical never return home, but continue fighting in the conflict zone or at the next battle for jihad. Some of those who go quickly become disillusioned, and even those who return often are not violent. Others are arrested or disrupted by European intelligence services. Indeed, becoming a foreign fighter—particularly with today's heavy use of social media—makes a terrorist far more likely to come to the attention of security services. This is not to say that the danger is not real—it is. But American and European security services have tools that they have successfully deployed in the past to mitigate the foreign fighter threat. Finally, the Islamic State itself prioritizes the ingathering of fighters in contrast to al-Qa'ida, which sought to train foreigners and send them back home to conduct attacks. Both organizations have tried to inspire Lone Wolves in the West. The Islamic State in particular has proven successful in recent years.

Less directly, but more significantly for the region, al-Qa'ida actively backs insurgencies. Algeria, Iraq, and Yemen are all threatened by sizeable insurgencies linked to al-Qa'ida.

Zawahiri's organization also backs insurgents outside the Arab world such as in Somalia and Chechnya, and is closely tied to a number of Pakistani groups.⁶⁶ These insurgencies have claimed tens of thousands of lives and risk fundamentally destabilizing the countries in question. Mali, Nigeria, Syria, and the Sinai Peninsula all represent areas that offer potential opportunity for an al-Qa'ida-like movement to expand its presence. The Islamic State too tries to create "provinces"—and has gained the loyalty of groups in Nigeria, North Africa, Sinai, and Afghanistan, among others. So far it has used these relationships primarily for prestige, and—with the exception of Libya—has not devoted significant resources to supporting them.

Counterterrorism cooperation helps all concerned. Through cooperative efforts, the United States gains access to vital intelligence, local services use their agents and capabilities to target and disrupt terrorists at home, and in some cases, such as Yemen, the United States secures physical access in order to launch drone strikes. In 2010, the Saudis played a critical role in foiling an AQAP plot to bomb a US airliner, and a joint US-Saudi operation against the group disrupted similar plots.⁶⁷

For alliance purposes, counterterrorism importance and terrorism have a symbiotic relationship. Today, Pakistan and Yemen host dangerous anti-US terrorist groups, and these governments' policies at times augment the strength of the jihadists. Wealthy individuals in Saudi Arabia have long been the primary financier for jihadist groups. Similarly, much of the reason for the growth of the Islamic State is the Assad regime's deliberate fostering of sectarianism and the Iraqi government's discriminatory policies against the country's Sunnis. In many of these cases, flawed government policies and government weakness have amplified the problem of terrorism. Because the problem is grave, however, the importance of these allies increases. Thus, the gravity of the threat and the importance of the alliance vary together.

In counterterrorism, much depends on where the line is drawn. Hamas and Hizballah are two powerful terrorist organizations that also function as important political players. In contrast to al-Qa'ida, both are hostile to the United States, but neither is actively planning operations

against Americans. However, both have regularly attacked Israel, and Hizballah is often cited as likely to attack the United States should there be a military confrontation with Iran.

Counterterrorism often goes against democracy promotion. By working with allies to fight terrorism, in reality the United States is working to bolster their intelligence services—often the least democratic part of an undemocratic regime. Counterterrorism also risks creating a self-fulfilling prophecy. By aiding allies and acting unilaterally, the argument goes, the United States puts itself in the terrorists' crosshairs. Moreover, the manner in which US responded to the threat only reinforced the jihadist narrative.

Perhaps the most common argument against prioritizing counterterrorism is that the threat today is low.⁶⁸ Since 9/11, the US homeland has suffered almost no terrorist attacks emanating from abroad, despite several near misses. Moreover, the United States has suffered over 6,000 deaths in Iraq and Afghanistan so far, more than twice as many as died on 9/11—suggesting the risks of supposedly decisive interventions in the Middle East. Several reports suggest the al-Qa'ida core has been hit hard and is far weaker than it was ten years ago. The death of Bin Ladin, setbacks in Iraq, the “Arab Spring”, and an ideological critique within the Salafist community are all cited as sources of the organization's decline.⁶⁹ The paucity of recent al-Qa'ida core attacks also suggest the movement's weakness. This argument, however, depends on whether al-Qa'ida's weakness is due in part to a constant US counterterrorism campaign or whether it is largely independent of US actions. It also depends on whether al-Qa'ida affiliate groups are considered part of the core movement and a threat to the United States or simply local groups that pose at best an indirect threat to US interests.⁷⁰

Regional Threats and Challenges to US Interests

In meeting these key interests, the US faces a number of challenges. Iran could present obstacles to several core US interests in the region, including securing access to oil, counterterrorism, nuclear proliferation, and protecting Israel's security. With regards to securing both regional and global access to oil, the good news is that the United States can prevent Iran from using its conventional military power to dominate oil reserves. The poor condition of Iran's

conventional forces and the weakness of most other potentially hostile states' forces indicate that allies can do reasonably well on their own, particularly if they have access to US backing in a crisis. To ensure this, the United States would want rapid-deployment forces and the basing and access structure to enable rapid deployment to the region—both to tip the military balance further in allies' favor and to signal resolve. However, it already possesses this capability, and a further reduction of US forces in the region would not significantly reduce this. Given the unlikelihood of a sudden Iranian attack, the United States does not need a large on-the-ground presence but can rely more on an over-the-horizon one.

While the 2015 JCPA did not eliminate the Iranian nuclear proliferation threat in its entirety, the agreement did reduce the danger of a near-term military confrontation between the US and Iran. The agreement also made possible the addition of several safeguards: monitoring and verification procedures will be conducted by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) on a regular—and in some cases, continual—basis.⁷¹ Additionally, the involvement of the EU+3 in the drafting and implementation of the agreement suggests that should the Iranian regime renege on its commitments the US will be in a stronger position to secure widespread international support should it choose to respond with punitive measures.

Iranian regional subversion is harder to stop, but the threat it presents remains more limited. Iran's primary capacity to meddle involves the Shi'a populations of neighboring states, and it has undertaken such efforts with varying degrees of success in Afghanistan, Bahrain, Iraq, Lebanon, and Saudi Arabia. However, the Arab/Persian divide and local nationalism often lead to resentment of, rather than loyalty to, Tehran among the Arab Shi'a. In addition, regime security forces have long focused on this threat, since the 1979 revolution, and have successfully cowed and penetrated Shi'a communities. Furthermore, in Sunni-majority societies, little danger exists of Shi'a radicals gaining broader popular support. At most they could launch a limited terrorism campaign that would raise the price of oil somewhat, but not catapult it into the stratosphere.

A second internal challenge comes from the festering Arab-Israeli conflict. Without a lasting solution agreed upon by the two main parties, violent clashes between Israelis and Palestinians will continue to erupt with regularity every couple of years, negatively impacting other US interests in the region. The United States should work to prevent Israel from becoming a complete pariah state: vetoing UN resolutions, pushing for trade to stay open, and otherwise defending Israel in international fora, while also trading with the Jewish state. Peace with the Palestinians would greatly reduce Israel's pariah status and somewhat improve the US image in the Middle East, though only marginally. Here, ironically, the United States would be pushing on behalf of its ally against the wishes of the ally's own government. The Netanyahu government's support for peace initiatives is tepid, at best, and for the United States to drive Israel to the negotiating table would require a sustained and public quarrel with a close and politically powerful ally.

In contrast to the challenges posed by Iran and the Arab-Israeli conflict, the challenge of combating the Islamic State requires the investment of additional resources in the region; specifically, a significant US air presence to augment the forces of local allies. To date, the United States has tried—with little success—to arm and train large numbers of capable local forces (Iraqi and Syrian Kurds, moderate Syrian opposition forces, and Iraqi tribes) to fight the Islamic State. The United States should continue these efforts but also work to contain the fires burning in Syria.⁷² Part of this involves reducing the conventional and insurgent military threat the Islamic State poses. It also requires working with refugees and shoring up the border defenses and counterterrorism capabilities of neighboring states like Lebanon and Jordan

Other Threats and Potential Challenges to US Interests

In addition to the internal regional challenges to US interests mentioned above, the US faces a number of challenges originating from outside of the region. The Middle East has long been a source of contention for great powers. Driven by their own national interests, many of which often do not align with those of Washington, outside actors have the potential to serve as spoilers for the US Chief among the list of states able to influence dynamics within the region

and, in the process, potentially undermine US interests there, is China, and to a lesser extent, Russia. While the US has faced great power competition in the region before (from Great Britain during its initial foray into the Middle East and later from Moscow,) competition from an ascending China is unlikely to resemble past challenges. In contrast to the US-Soviet clash during the Cold War, China's main strategic interests in the Middle East are economic. Even so, the potential for Chinese interests to interfere with US objectives in the region is real.

Nowhere is China's growing presence in the Middle East more visible than in the oil and gas industry. The largest energy consumer in the world, China became the second largest net oil importer in the world behind the US in 2009. As the largest source of China's crude oil imports, more oil flows from the Middle East to China than to any other destination in the world. Saudi Arabia alone accounts for nearly one quarter of all Chinese oil imports. In 2011, the region as a whole made up fifty-one percent (2.6 mil bbl/d) of total crude oil imports to China.⁷³ In an effort to secure continued access, major Chinese oil and gas companies like the Sinopec Group have invested heavily across the region, with the largest investments occurring in Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia. Moreover, unlike its American counterpart, Chinese investment comes with "no strings attached."

In the billions of dollars, these investments not only buy access but also influence. Regional governments and their publics are keenly aware that after more than two decades of unmatched influence, an alternative to US authority now exists. Beijing has increasingly become the destination of choice for new leaders upon assuming office: not counting regional trips both Saudi Arabia's King Abdullah and Egypt's President Morsi undertook their first official foreign trips to China.⁷⁴ The change is also reflected on the streets. China's favorability ratings surpass those of the US by double digits throughout much of the region. In Jordan, a longtime US ally, forty-seven percent of the population views China favorably compared with just twelve percent for the US. The outlook is equally bleak in Egypt where support for China outshines that for the US by more than thirty percent.⁷⁵

Although access to energy is at the crux of China's interests in the Middle East, Beijing remains a key player with respect to other US strategic interests in the region. China is a leading source of arms in the region. Currently the third-largest supplier behind the US and Russia, Chinese military sales are on the rise. Although the main destinations for Chinese arms in the past have been Iraq and Iran, Beijing recently signed several major arms deals with Algeria and Morocco.⁷⁶ With a proven track record of doing business with everyone, regardless of international pariah status or regime type, Chinese interests may also clash down the road with US efforts to promote democratization in the region. One area in which the two countries do see eye to eye on in the region however is guaranteeing a stable and secure oil flow. Another shared common interest is counter-terrorism. Still, as China's power continues to grow it is unclear whether the US will be able to get Beijing to support Washington's broader goals for the Middle East. However, China still lacks strong security ties to any state in the region, and its ability to project military power to the Middle East are limited.

Moscow too has the potential to serve as a spoiler to US interests in the region. In 2015, Russia intervened in Syria on behalf of the Assad regime, using its air force to bomb opposition forces. By focusing on the more moderate Syrian opposition rather than the Islamic State Russia's actions not only directly challenge US counterterrorism and democracy promotion objectives in the region but also increase the likelihood of unintended military "friendly fire" incidents or other accidents between the two former Cold War superpowers.

While the US is hardly the only foreign power interested (or currently engaged) in the region it remains the most powerful external actor in the Middle East today. China's interests are largely economic and unlikely to directly challenge US security interests while Russia's increasing involvement in the region represents more of an irritant than a viable challenge to American influence there. Additionally, Moscow's military and political support for the Assad regime in the Syrian conflict places Russia firmly in the Iranian camp in the wider Shia-Sunni regional struggle, a development which is likely to draw the ire of the Gulf monarchies and limit Russia's regional gains.

A final challenge to US strategic interests in the Middle East comes from within the US itself. Following a decade of war, the American public is wary of becoming embroiled in overseas missions be they military or diplomatic. Americans are also increasingly skeptical of democratization. A September 2012 poll found a marked shift in American perceptions about the Arab Spring: where nearly half of the respondents thought the uprisings in the Arab world were about ordinary people seeking freedom in 2011, the figure had dropped to just 15 percent by the end of 2012. By contrast, the number of Americans believing the uprisings were the result of Islamist groups seeking power more than doubled to 38 percent over the same period.⁷⁷ However, Americans are highly concerned about the Islamic State. Although polls show continued skepticism about US involvement in the Middle East, fears of Islamic State terrorism and anger at its brutality, the vast majority favor military action against the group.⁷⁸

3. WHICH ALLIES MATTER MOST, AND WHERE DOES THE UNITED STATES HAVE INFLUENCE?

The US ability to secure many of its interests and influence events is both relatively easy and extremely limited. However, counterterrorism cooperation is one area where US influence is considerable. Washington both augments local capabilities, particularly with its superior signals intelligence and analytic resources, and serves as a regional and global orchestra conductor, bringing together information and assets from different countries that would otherwise function in isolation. Allies' information represents an even more vital resource to Washington as they are well-positioned to disrupt activities and gather intelligence.

In securing a range of interests, Washington also gains some ability to influence allies' policies toward one another and toward other regional actors through its military assistance efforts. The Middle East in general is weak on regional institutions—there is no OSCE or even an ASEAN equivalent, let alone something like the European Union. As an outside actor, the United States can use its good offices to work behind the scenes and ease regional disputes and personal rivalries. In addition, the US role in logistics and support gives the United States a near-

veto on independent military operations. For example, after the 1995 attempted assassination of Egyptian President Mubarak in Addis Ababa, Egypt sought to conduct military strikes on Khartoum, which it blamed for the attack. The United States, however, refused to cooperate and Egypt lacked the ability to strike on its own.

The alliance posture the United States pursues in the region should depend on which, if any, of the above interests the United States should emphasize and which can be discarded. Table 10.1 gives a review of the various countries in the region and the posited US interests. For energy, key states include of course Saudi Arabia, but also (and to a lesser degree) Algeria, Iran, Iraq, Kuwait, Libya, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. Nuclear proliferation represents a far more bounded problem, with Iran of greatest concern, and only Saudi Arabia deserving scrutiny among other states. The security of Israel prioritizes not only the Jewish state, but also its neighbors, especially Egypt, and the Palestinian territories. Counterterrorism positions countries with an al-Qa'ida presence or al-Qa'ida sympathizers near the top of the list, along with regimes that are effective in fighting them. So Algeria, Iraq, Jordan, Libya, Saudi Arabia, and Yemen figure prominently, as did Mubarak's Egypt in the past. Democratization prioritizes countries that have a chance of making a successful transition: a list that, at the time of writing, includes just one country, Tunisia.

Table 10.1: Posited US Interests and Possible Threats

Country	Free Flow of Oil ⁷⁹	Nuclear Proliferation Concern	Terrorism Problem?	Counterterrorism Assistance	Security of Israel	Democratization
Algeria	+		--	++		
Bahrain						
Egypt			-	++	++	+++
Iran	++/-- ⁸⁰	---	--	--	--	
Iraq	++		---	++		+
Israel				+	+++	
Jordan			-	++	+	
Kuwait	++			+		
Libya	++		--	+		+
Morocco				++		
Oman						
Palestinian Territories (WB)			-	+	++	
Palestinian Territories (Gaza)			--	-	--	
Qatar	++			+		
Saudi Arabia	+++	+	-	+++		-
Syria			--	+/- ⁸¹	--	-
Tunisia			--			+
UAE	++			+		
Yemen			---	+++		+

Note: Green means regime is of interest in a positive way from a US point of view. Red means country threat to that interest.

The above classification scheme suggests that several countries should continue to be alliance priorities, while others could be downgraded. For example, a cursory view of Table 10.1 above reveals that Egypt, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia offer the potential for cooperation on the most (3) number of US interests. An alternative metric would be to prioritize or rank interests, with oil, counterterrorism, non-proliferation, and Israel's security scoring high and the others lower. Even utilizing such an approach, however, the same three countries are likely to appear near the top of the list.

Egypt

With neither enough oil to support an export industry nor a viable nuclear program, Egypt's significance stems largely from its ability to affect—either adversely or positively—US efforts at counter-terrorism and democracy promotion as well as Israel's security. Historically, a leader in the Arab world, Egypt is still very much in transition as it continues to adjust to developments following the Arab Spring.

The Sinai region however continues to be a source of instability for both Egypt and Israel; though the Sisi government—following a spate of kidnappings—has recently begun to crack down on lawlessness there.⁸² Both Washington and Cairo share a common desire to seal the vast security vacuum in the Sinai, the source of many of the terrorist incidents in the country. Clamping down on extremists in the Sinai will also have a stabilizing effect on the Israeli-Egyptian relationship, which has faltered since Mubarak's fall. Egypt also has the potential to affect Libya and other Maghreb states from becoming terrorist footholds. Ongoing political and economic instability though threaten counterterrorism efforts. The Sisi government's crackdown on the Muslim Brotherhood, however, risks driving peaceful members of that group into the arms of radical terrorists and in general of perpetuating Egypt's political crisis.

Geography and history dictate that Egypt is a key player in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, and going forward it will continue to be so. Cairo not only controls the Rafah border crossing into Gaza, the location of the smuggling tunnels the Israeli's frequently complain about, but has successfully brokered a number of ceasefires between Hamas and Israel in the past.

In Egypt, as elsewhere in the region, the US ability to promote democratization and economic reform is extremely limited. America's recent record should give us pause: the George W. Bush administration's energetic efforts failed and perhaps backfired, discrediting regional reformers, while the Obama administration's initial inaction did not halt the Arab Spring nor the emergence of several more democratic movements. Nor was the United States able to prevent a military coup. Even relatively low-level US efforts, like funding civil society organizations, leads to charges of US meddling and, given the unpopularity of the United States in general, can discredit the very organizations it aims to help.

Iraq

Iraq plays a pivotal role in three of America's interests in the region: democratization; counterterrorism; and, oil. However after the 2003 war and a decade-long occupation the reality is such that America will be linked with Iraq whether it chooses to be or not.

Never great to begin with, America's influence in Iraq (and correspondingly Washington's ability to affect its interests there,) declined considerably in the wake of the withdrawal of US combat troops. After years of failed reforms, mounting corruption, and poor services, the Iraqi population has largely given up on Baghdad. Ongoing Sunni exclusion from the political process, repression of Sunni leaders, the exclusion of former Sunni fighters from the security services, and the failure to broker a lasting power-sharing agreement has led to an upsurge in sectarian violence. In 2014 the Islamic State capitalized on these sectarian tensions, gaining considerable Sunni support when it stepped up operations in Iraq in 2014, eventually taking Mosul and large swathes of the country. Iraqi security forces have failed to prevent the Islamic State from carrying out large-scale coordinated attacks in the country.

One positive note is that Iraqi oil production has been increasing strongly. With 3.1 million barrels per day, Iraq now accounts for one-tenth of all OPEC production.⁸³ Political instability and poor infrastructure however has led to disenchantment with Iraq's oil sector among the international community. Many foreign oil companies prefer to operate in Iraqi Kurdistan rather than the more volatile and dangerous south. The Maliki government however

has not yet reached an agreement with the Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) over the management of the countries' oil and natural gas resources and views Kurdish contracts with foreign oil companies as illegal.⁸⁴ Growing Turkish influence in Kurdistan along with plans to build a new pipeline with a western outlet have officials in Baghdad concerned while, for its part, Washington is monitoring growing Chinese influence in the Iraqi oil industry from afar.⁸⁵ According to the International Energy Agency, one quarter of all Iraqi oil will be destined for China by 2035.⁸⁶

Saudi Arabia

Saudi Arabia remains critical in terms of oil and counterterrorism, but its hostility regarding the Arab Spring and the Iran deal has placed it at odds with Washington. Riyadh's role varies considerably depending on US priorities.

Saudi Arabia possesses much of the world's spare oil capacity, roughly 3.5 million barrels a day, enabling it to play a critical role in support of US policies. Although the US is becoming less dependent on Saudi oil with time, Saudi Arabia's role as swing producer makes this largely irrelevant for most economic circumstances, as this role places the Kingdom at the top of the list in maintaining an open and secure global market. The Kingdom's spare capacity allows it to mitigate disruption of the market, should there be a price shock, such as the collapse of Libya's supplies during the Libyan revolution, or an unexpected surge in demand.⁸⁷

Riyadh's oil wealth also affords it unmatched influence among its neighbors. In an effort to counter what they perceive to be growing Iranian influence in the region, the Saudis have embarked on an active campaign of backing local politicians and political parties abroad. Saudi influence in Lebanon and Iraq is particularly strong. Riyadh's ability to sway events was on full display in 2011 when Saudi forces intervened in Bahrain in order to quell a growing uprising there. Though most demonstrations of Saudi influence are tacit, their ability to shape regional events is nonetheless significant.

After an initial slow start, US-Saudi counter-terrorism cooperation has greatly improved following the 2003 Riyadh bombing. The Saudi government maintains a "robust"

counterterrorism relationship with the United States and has welcomed enhanced bilateral cooperation with Washington.⁸⁸ The Saudis have made significant headway in their counter-radicalization and rehabilitation programs in an effort to check the flow of new recruits and stem the extremist tide. Much progress has been made on intelligence sharing and combatting terrorist financing as well. The US and Saudis have also cooperated extensively in protecting critical infrastructure targets in the Kingdom, such as oil installations.⁸⁹ Riyadh's support will also be necessary for dealing with the terrorist threat emanating from Yemen, though here, as on other issues, Washington's efforts are likely to be complicated by Saudi Arabia's (sometimes) opposing interests.

The Potential US Military Role

Given the interests and threats identified above, what level of capabilities can and should the US invest in the region? To protect against Iran or another hostile power, the United States requires military access to a range of countries—to protect states from conventional attack and to deter Iran should it go nuclear. To react immediately, the United States would need a presence in the Persian Gulf comparable to what it has today. To be able to react relatively quickly, the United States would need basing and access privileges and prepositioning, enabling a rapid deployment in the event of a crisis.

Given internal instability and the vagaries of local politics, Washington also values diverse basing, allowing it to pick and choose as necessary to ensure backups should a regime turn against the United States. This basing and access is also important for contingencies outside the region. For example, bases in the Middle East provide partial support to the campaign in Afghanistan.

Similarly, America's ability to strike at the Islamic State depends on ongoing access to regional bases and a continued naval presence in the region. Defeating or downgrading IS does not require a heavy US combat presence, however. Rather, the US should encourage, empower, and equip regional partners to confront and destroy the organization and restore the territorial

integrity of Iraq and Syria. This may require limited numbers of trainers and special operations forces, but not large numbers of conventional combat troops.

Alliances between the United States and countries in the region also enhance deterrence. Many US allies, particularly the smaller states of the Persian Gulf, but also Jordan and even Saudi Arabia, have weak conventional military forces.⁹⁰ An alliance with the United States enables them to resist pressure from hostile neighbors while simultaneously providing protection from outright invasion. So should Iran threaten the Gulf states with military force or increased subversion, the presence of American troops is a visible symbol that the United States will aid its allies in resisting Tehran.

The United States pays a price for its willingness to use its military to deter and repel regional aggressors in the Middle East. Even putting aside the 2003 war in Iraq as a policy approach unlikely to be repeated, the human cost can be considerable. Limited US uses of force and deterrence attempts may involve casualties comparable to the deterrence and coercion campaign of 1990 and 1991, after Iraq invaded Kuwait. Over 100 Americans died in combat in the 1991 Gulf war, and almost 500 were wounded—small figures compared to previous and subsequent wars, but nevertheless considerable given the limited long-term strategic results.⁹¹

The financial costs are difficult to determine precisely, but are large by any measure. Much of the size of the US military is determined by multiple contingencies as well as domestic concerns, so part of the air, naval, and ground presence in the region would have been developed and maintained for other reasons.

Furthermore, the US role in the region increases the risk of local “free riding” off the American security guarantee. The wealth of the Gulf states, and even their purchase of massive stocks of the most advanced aircraft, has not directly translated into military power. This weakness is due in part to the assumption that they can rely on the United States as a security guarantor and thus do not need to take the politically painful steps to dismiss incompetent generals, implement conscription or otherwise expand their militaries and reduce coup-proofing measures to increase effectiveness.⁹²

Deep anti-Americanism can weaken the stability of US allies in the region. The peacetime US military presence remains unpopular, and was a source of controversy in Saudi religious circles in the 1990s. The regional US military role is still a concern, though it represents a far less emotive issue today as concerns like the Syrian civil war have risen to the fore. Even so, however, radical groups, including those linked to al-Qa'ida but also those with Iranian support, are quick to deride any form of cooperation with the United States as a sign of the regime's fundamental illegitimacy. In their eyes, US troops often represent the highest form of betrayal. And, indeed, the US presence is a visible sign that US allies are not able to ensure their own security, a potential humiliation.

The most important current US military role is in fighting the Islamic State. This involves a mix of forces to help arm and train local allies combined with regular airstrikes against Islamic State forces and leaders. The United States also helps manage the broader air campaign of its many allies, including both Arab and European states.

4. POLICY IMPLICATIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Although recognizing that US influence in the Middle East is often at best limited, the above analysis suggests several policy changes for the United States.

First, there is little need for a large deployment of US forces given the conventional weaknesses of potential adversaries but the United States will want a significant air component and some special operations forces in the region to oppose the Islamic State. At the same time, maintaining a network of bases, prepositioned equipment, and access agreements, both assist in US deterrence and thus make Iran less likely to cheat on any deal and enable the United States to deploy quickly should deterrence fail or should an unexpected contingency occur requiring the use of military assets from the region. In addition, Washington should continue to emphasize maintenance and logistics as well as arms sales, as these functions provide it considerable influence over allied uses of force.

The good news is that for the first time in many years there appears to be strong regional support for a US security presence. If anything, many Gulf countries would like to see the US *expand* its military assurances to the region.⁹³ Washington should resist the temptation to do a massive expansion, however, and focus on the more limited capabilities necessary to fight the Islamic State and other immediate threats. Instead, the US should leverage its existing contributions to ensure our allies are pulling their own weight.

Second, a behind-the-scenes approach represents the most valuable method for securing the majority of US interests. Basing and access agreements, in contrast to troop deployments, can be low-profile. Counterterrorism cooperation is both clandestine and does not involve a large US footprint. Given the unpopularity of the United States, democracy promotion is also best done behind the scenes. A low profile on democratization is advantageous as it reduces the risk of a US-Saudi rupture on this issue. Furthermore, a higher profile has not proven to significantly help pro-democratic forces in the region. Inevitably, the United States will be damned for not aggressively supporting democracy, but given that doing so would probably have little impact and might be counterproductive both for the alliance in general and for democratization itself, it is best to err on the side of caution.

Third, reenergizing the Middle East peace process represents vital step both for Israel's security and for US interests. Counterterrorism and overall cooperation with the United States both are affected negatively by the continued regional and worldwide hostility toward Israel. This hostility would not vanish with a Palestinian state, but it would be diminished. For Israel's sake, pressure that could lead it to become a pariah would diminish, as would the costs and risks inherent in its ongoing occupation of the Palestinian territories.

Fourth, to further reduce the danger from foreign fighters going to Syria, several steps are necessary beyond fighting the Islamic State. These include increasing community engagement efforts to dissuade potential fighters from going to Syria; working more with Turkey to disrupt transit routes; improving de-radicalization programs to "turn" returning fighters into intelligence sources or make them less likely to engage in violence; and avoiding blanket prosecution efforts.

Most important, security services must be properly resourced and organized to handle the potential danger.

Additionally, the United States must recognize that its overall ability to influence some threats to its interests remains limited. Many of the dangers to the region are not amenable to the greatest tool of US influence—overwhelming conventional force—and some involve complex political dynamics that will often defy pressure from Washington. In particular, several states in the region are now or at risk of being failed states. Given strong anti-US sentiment and often limited interests, Washington can do little to alter this situation, but it can prepare for the aftermath. Washington should prepare for a period of prolonged instability, along with the possibility that the eventual victors may prove hostile to US interests.

Such a strategy is not only prudent and wise, it is sustainable. In an era of constrained resources, the task for America's leaders is to craft a national security strategy that will protect US interests in the Middle East while being affordable in the long term. Given the complexities of the region, the potential for the Middle East to suck in further American military forces and resources will always be there. A sustainable national security will be one that guards against this ever-present danger while still protecting US interests. Part of having a sustainable national security means not only curtailing ineffective or less vital obligations but also getting our allies to do more. Heightened insecurity among the Gulf states stemming from Iran's growing influence and the rise of the Islamic State mean the US may, at least in the short term, find itself in the unusual position of having to turn down invitations from regional allies to increase its security footprint in the region.

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