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PAPERS

FOR THE NEXT

PRESIDENT



RESET, NEGOTIATE, INSTITUTIONALIZE

A Phased Middle East Strategy
for the Next President

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Center for a
New American
Security

About the Author



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About This Series

Over the course of the next 18 months the Center for a New American Security will release reports designed to assist the next president and his or her team in crafting a strong, pragmatic, and principled national security agenda. The Papers for the Next President series will explore the most critical regions and topics that the next president will need to address early in his or her tenure and will include actionable recommendations designed to be implemented during the first few months of 2017.

About the Middle East Security Program

The Middle East Security program conducts cutting-edge research on the most pressing issues in this turbulent region. The program focuses on the sources of instability in the region, maintaining key U.S. strategic partnerships, and generating solutions that help policymakers respond to both fast-moving events and long-term trends. The Middle East Security program draws on a team with deep government and non-government experience in regional studies, U.S. foreign policy, and international security. It analyzes trends and generates practical and implementable policy solutions that defend and advance U.S. interests.

Cover Photo

The next president's strategy to stabilize the Middle East must start with resetting both perceptions and realities on the ground. A significant focus of this effort will have to be on the Syrian civil war, which has dragged on for 5 years and left upwards of 250,000 dead and the country in ruins. During Syrian peace talks in November 2015, U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry, Russian Foreign Minister Sergei Lavrov, and UN Envoy for Syria Staffan de Mistura address the media in Vienna, Austria. A Syrian walks through the rubble of a bombed-out building. (Left: Reuters/Right: Getty)

RESET, NEGOTIATE, INSTITUTIONALIZE

**A Phased Middle East Strategy for
the Next President**

First 100 Days Agenda

The strategy outlined in this paper will take years to execute. Still, during the first months of a new administration, the president will have an opportunity to send early signals even as she or he looks toward a longer-term strategy for this complex region.



Announce an early Middle East trip focused foremost on America's closest regional partners.

Such an approach should emulate President Barack Obama's early outreach to European partners after a very difficult relationship with President George W. Bush. The trip should include stops in Israel, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, Turkey, Iraq, and possibly Egypt. An early trip and public statements, while ultimately symbolic, can set the tone in reassuring U.S. allies that the United States will remain engaged in the Middle East and is not intending a pivot to Persia.



Task a high-level interagency strategy review for filling the security vacuums in the Middle East from the bottom up.

The primary focus of this initial effort should be Iraq and Syria. But the United States should also assess whether similar strategies can be deployed in Yemen, Libya, and the Sinai, although in those arenas it will have to be American partners who take on a much greater role, with the United States in support. This review should solicit input from U.S. regional partners and be a key agenda item on the new president's initial trip to the Middle East.



Ask the military and the intelligence community to develop a series of options for pushing back on Iran's destabilizing behavior in the Middle East.

These should begin with proposals for how the United States can work with Israel and the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states in various forums, such as a multinational joint task force or a high-level intelligence and defense dialogue, to counter Iran's activities. Military and intelligence planners should also be tasked with providing a series of options for operations that: 1) embarrass Iran and raise the costs associated with its regional meddling; 2) send a clear signal to Iran that the United States has the will and capacity to respond directly to actions that are destabilizing and directly contradict U.S. interests; 3) are conducted jointly with partners, thus sending them a message of reassurance; and 4) are unlikely to lead to a major escalation. Countering Iran's behavior in the region should also be a primary agenda item for the president's first Middle East trip.



Look for early deliverables with Middle East partners on bureaucratic and technical issues.

Regional partners have many complaints about the maze of U.S. bureaucracy and red tape when it comes to approving arms sales and providing aid.¹ The next president should task an early review of potential deliverables and identify noncontroversial but meaningful items that should be relatively easy to fast-track through the U.S. bureaucracy with high-level intervention. On the president's first trip to the region, she or he should be able to make concrete commitments to U.S. partners on these items, which would improve the environment for these early meetings and send an early signal of a renewed U.S. commitment to its partners.



Emphasize commitment to implementing the Joint Comprehensive Plan Of Action (JCPOA) and keeping channels open with Iran.

From the start, the new president should be very clear publicly and privately about the U.S. commitment to implementing the JCPOA. She or he should also encourage the secretary of state to continue regular engagements with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and task an interagency review geared at examining additional issue areas where the United States and Iran could practically increase their engagement without triggering significant anxiety from U.S. regional partners. Any additional steps that the United States chooses to take on this front should also be transparently communicated to Arab partners.

First 100 Days Agenda



THE WHITE HOUSE

Washington, DC

January 2017

NEXT PRESIDENT'S SAMPLE AGENDA FOR FIRST TRIP
TO THE MIDDLE EAST

COUNTRIES TO VISIT:

Israel, Jordan, United Arab Emirates, Saudi Arabia,
Turkey, Iraq, and Egypt

MEETING AGENDA FOR EACH PARTNER:

1. Bottom-up strategy to fill regional security vacuums.
2. Approach for countering Iran's destabilizing behavior in the Middle East.
3. Steps the United States will take bilaterally to signal its commitment to its partners.
4. U.S. expectations of its partners.

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Executive Summary

Since the start of the Arab revolutions five years ago, the Middle East has experienced unprecedented instability. In such an impossibly fluid situation, the initial response of President Barack Obama and his administration was, understandably, to pursue crisis management – narrowly defining U.S. interests on a case-by-case basis and tackling each challenge individually instead of pursuing a holistic regional strategy.² The president also viewed every decision he made in the Middle East through the lens of the U.S. intervention in Iraq and was determined not to embroil the United States in new quagmires.³

Obama's approach has avoided major and costly blunders similar to the invasion of Iraq. It has achieved a historic breakthrough with Iran, which not only addresses the nuclear challenge but could open the door for greater diplomatic engagement even if it does not fundamentally reshape Iranian domestic politics or foreign policy.⁴

But the Obama administration's policy also has shortcomings. Slow responses, especially in Iraq and Syria, have created openings that have been exploited by the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) and other extremists. And Obama's cautious approach has left many U.S. partners in the region confused and unsure about America's commitment at a time when they are feeling vulnerable and insecure – causing some, most notably Saudi Arabia, to move aggressively on their own.

After five years of chaos, the trend lines in the region are clearer, and the next president will have to move beyond crisis management to address the three primary drivers of instability in the Middle East:

1. The **collapse of state authority** and resulting governance and security vacuums, which set conditions for regional chaos.⁵
2. **Intensified Iranian-Saudi competition**, which has increased sectarianism and transformed what were initially local conflicts into regional proxy fights.⁶
3. The **perception of American withdrawal**, which has led to greater aggressiveness on all sides, emboldening competitors of the United States while causing American partners to lash out due to insecurity.

Addressing these trends requires a years-long concerted strategy to stabilize the Middle East. Such a strategy must start with an initial one- to three-year phase of resetting both perceptions and realities on the ground by:

1. Addressing security vacuums from the bottom up in cooperation with regional partners.
2. Countering Iran's support for its surrogates and proxies in cooperation with regional partners.
3. Leaving the door open for engagement with Iran.

Phase two should concentrate on negotiating agreements with the key local, regional, and global actors to mitigate and eventually end the civil wars plaguing the Middle East. Though the next administration can immediately take foundational steps, any real progress should not be expected until the second half of the first term, once the situation on the ground is reset.

Phase three should leverage the negotiating process described in phase two to institutionalize a broader multilateral security architecture for the Middle East that creates a conflict resolution mechanism and increases stability, similar to the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) or the Association of Southeast Asian Nations (ASEAN).⁷ This will be a years-long process that the next president can start in her or his second term, but it will require a sustained and stable American commitment.

Overall, this strategy must be pursued with great patience and humility. No strategy will transform the Middle East overnight, and many factors outside of American control will certainly intervene to complicate matters. Moreover, this approach is limited to the security arena and will not answer the very difficult and challenging questions about long-term governance, which are critical but beyond the scope of this paper. Still, taken together, this strategy has the potential to stabilize the Middle East and appropriately size the U.S. commitment to the region, avoiding both the expensive quagmires and overcommitment of George W. Bush and the disengagement of Barack Obama.

Drivers of Instability in the Middle East

The Middle East currently faces tremendous and lethal turbulence, with civil wars raging in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya and a dangerous ungoverned space also developing in the Sinai. Three major drivers are feeding these crises, and only in addressing them can the next president – working with regional and international partners – return some semblance of order to the region. First, state collapse in multiple countries created security and governance vacuums across the region and acted as the initial match that lit the fire engulfing the region. Second, the decades-long Iranian-Saudi competition has intensified in recent years and acted as the region's kerosene, igniting local conflicts into regional and sectarian proxy wars. Lastly, the perception that the United States is disengaging from the region has caused competitors such as Russia and Iran, as well as partners such as Saudi Arabia and the Gulf states, to step into the breach and take a more aggressive approach.

State Collapse and the Emergence of Governance and Security Vacuums

There are numerous reasons for the collapse of state institutions in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, not all of which can be addressed here. The culmination of the Cold War brought to an end the external superpower patronage system whereby the United States and the Soviet Union competed for influence and loyalty by passing largesse to authoritarian states, thus stabilizing them.⁸ Middle Eastern economies have remained stagnant and failed to provide economic opportunities for a young and burgeoning population.⁹ Education systems have not provided practical skills preparing young graduates for the workforce. And increasing social mobilization and radicalization in the region have reinforced these trends.¹⁰ The reality is that many of these issues will continue for years to come and pose challenges for the region's governments, which will have to find a way to address the needs of their people.

The most striking example of state collapse is Syria, where in the aftermath of the peaceful uprising of 2011 and the violent response by the regime of Bashar al-Assad, the government lost control of the majority of its territory.¹¹ Numerous extremist groups, most notably ISIS and al Qaeda affiliate Jabhat al Nusra – two of the most powerful groups in Syria – have stepped into the void. The instability in Syria has also spread to Iraq,

which has been in a precarious position since the 2003 U.S. invasion. ISIS exploitation of extremist networks and tribal relationships that have existed since the Sunni insurgency early during the Iraq War combined with Sunni alienation in western Iraq from the Shia-led Iraqi central government to seize control of western Iraq.

State collapse in multiple countries created security and governance vacuums across the region and acted as the initial match that lit the fire engulfing the region.

The collapse of Yemen's government in 2011 led to the replacement of president and strongman Ali Abdullah Saleh by Abdu Rabo Mansour Hadi. Saleh later aligned himself with the Houthis – an armed Shia sect based in northern Yemen that, with Saleh's assistance and tribal connections, proceeded to make its way across the country and overthrow Hadi. Meanwhile, the Hadramawt, Marib, and Shabwa regions of Yemen have been bases of operations for al Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP), and the ongoing civil war has only created more flexibility and space for it to thrive.¹²

In Libya, too, the uprisings of 2011 quickly devolved into a civil war between the Moammar Gadhafi-controlled west and rebels in the east. The international community intervened to overthrow Gadhafi primarily because of the relatively low military cost involved and the fact that he had alienated so many leaders around the globe that there was overwhelming international support to do so.¹³ But in the aftermath there has been little follow-through from the United States or its international partners, while the leaders of the Libyan revolt also misjudged the level of external security support they would require. The country has fractured, falling prey to warlords and tribalism, and today an ISIS affiliate is establishing a new safe haven in Libya that threatens to become a proto-state similar to the one in Iraq and Syria.¹⁴

Intensified Saudi-Iranian Competition

The conflicts that emanated from the collapse of state authority have been dramatically exacerbated by the regional competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Both sides fear a loss of control in the new security vacuums that could undermine their own regional positioning. Both also see opportunities to increase their influence. The end result has been intensified regional competition as both Iran and Saudi Arabia, as well as their partners, have flooded the regional security vacuums with money and weaponry and in some cases have intervened directly to secure their position.¹⁵ They have also chosen to support non-state and state actors based largely on sectarian criteria, exacerbating the Sunni-Shia divide. This type of external meddling – clearly evident throughout the region – has historically been one of the most important factors in intensifying and prolonging civil wars.¹⁶

In Syria, the Assad regime would have likely collapsed long ago or been forced to abdicate through a managed transition if Iran had not intervened militarily. Iran and its proxies have trained thousands of local militia fighters aligned with the regime and inserted approximately 15,000 Shia militia fighters from Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan.¹⁷ The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) Quds Force (QF) has also deployed 2,000 trainers and advisors, and Hezbollah has brought roughly 6,000 fighters to the conflict from Lebanon.¹⁸ Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Turkey have responded by providing arms and funds to various Sunni groups, especially in northern Syria around Aleppo and Idlib, with little concern about ideological or extremist tendencies. The result is that a war that might have ended much more quickly has now dragged on for five years with approximately 250,000 dead.

In Iraq, Sunni-Shia conflict is at the heart of ISIS' return to western Iraq. The refusal of the Shia-led government of Nouri al-Maliki to integrate Sunnis into state institutions alienated the Sunni population and led to an opening, which ISIS exploited; the militant group then took significant territory in 2014 as Iraqi security forces collapsed.¹⁹ While this behavior was primarily driven by Maliki and his associates, Iran also had an interest in a Shia-controlled weak Iraq and did not do enough to rein in Maliki, until 2013 – by which time it was too late.²⁰ With the emergence of ISIS, Iran has felt its own borders under threat and responded forcefully. Unfortunately, its tool of choice remains the mobilization of sectarian Shia militias, who cannot remain the tip of the spear if Iraq ever hopes to integrate its Sunni communities and establish long-term stability.²¹

In Yemen, Saudi-Iranian competition has also transformed a local conflict into a regional war. Initially, this was a fight between the Houthis, with the assistance of Saleh, against the Hadi government over the control of Yemen. Iran has provided some aid to the Houthis in its efforts to increase pressure on Saudi Arabia, but it does not view Yemen as a vital strategic arena and Iran's support has not been decisive.²² When the Houthis aligned themselves with Saleh, using his connections with local tribes and within the security forces to make significant territorial gains, and were on the verge of overrunning the country and taking the southern city of Aden, Saudi Arabia and its Gulf partners responded with a direct military intervention. The Saudis view the Houthis as an Iranian proxy and fear that an Iranian outpost on their southern border could jeopardize Saudi stability, given the deep tribal ties between Yemeni and Saudi society in the kingdom's southern territory. The Saudi intervention has led to tremendous human suffering because of its imprecise use of air power and the fundamentally asymmetric nature of this conflict.²³ And while the Gulf coalition has made progress in pushing back on the Houthis, the conflict continues to rage.²⁴



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry sits with Saudi Arabia's King Salman bin Abdul Aziz al-Saud during a bilateral meeting in Riyadh in May 2015. Saudi Arabia, an important U.S. partner in the Middle East, is seeking strong reassurance from the United States that it will forcibly counter Iranian regional ambitions. Resetting U.S.-Saudi relations will be an important part of the next administration's Middle East strategy. (U.S. Department of State/Flickr)

The Perception of American Withdrawal

The United States has traditionally played the role of external security guarantor in the Middle East, but there is now a perception in the region that the United States is leaving.²⁵ The Obama administration has signaled a reduced role for the United States in the region as it corrects for the over-investment caused by the Iraq War. The American announcement of a “pivot” to Asia and the consistent emphasis in Obama’s public statements on the limits of American intervention in the Middle East have also fueled this perception.²⁶ Further, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and increasing American engagement with Iran have created an impression in the Arab world that the United States is pursuing a fundamental realignment in the region toward Iran. Finally, the slow U.S. response to Syria and ISIS and the 2013 decision not to pursue military strikes against Assad after he violated a stated American redline by using chemical weapons have cemented this perception.²⁷

Some of this perception and blame on Obama is unfair and the reflection of insecure regional states. For example, regional partners fault the United States for abandoning Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak during the start of the Arab Spring, without acknowledging that it is unclear if the United States could have done anything to keep Mubarak in power and that ultimately it was the Egyptian military that chose to not fire on protesters in the street. Perceiving the JCPOA as the start of a broad regional pivot is also not in line with the facts, given the emphatic insistence by Obama and his team that the agreement is strictly concerning nuclear issues and does not portend a broader shift. Indeed, if American commitment were measured in military presence and arms sales to U.S. partners, it would be clear that this regional and global perception is inaccurate. The United States still has significant numbers of troops stationed in the region, is conducting an active military campaign against ISIS, and continues with billions of arms sales to the region.²⁸ Even when Assad crossed the American redline by using chemical weapons, the United States achieved its primary objective of removing Assad’s chemical weapons.

Still, part of the perception of American withdrawal has been fueled by shortcomings in the Obama administration’s policies. The most notable example was the 2013 Syria redline incident, in which the president and the administration strongly signaled that they would

pursue military action against Assad, only to walk these threats back and first seek a congressional authorization for the use of force. Another example was the slow U.S. response to arm elements of the Syrian opposition early in the conflict despite the advice of the president’s national security team.²⁹ And while there was Iraqi opposition to keeping U.S. forces in Iraq beyond 2011, the United States could have pushed harder or at the very least stayed more engaged in Iraq’s internal politics than it did after the withdrawal that year.

In the end, it does not matter if the fault lies in Washington or in the region. Today perceptions are driving reality, and there is little doubt that across the Middle East there is a unified view that the United States is abandoning the region; this perception is driving key actors’ behavior.³⁰ U.S. partners feel more vulnerable and are lashing out aggressively on their own due to a profound sense of insecurity. Meanwhile, Iranian and Russian competitors feel more confident that they can intervene in conflicts without the risk of an open confrontation with the United States.

In Syria, this perception is playing a major role as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Qatar choose to pursue their own approaches and fund conflicting armed opposition forces with little vetting – against American objections.³¹ This has contributed to the splintering of the Syrian opposition and the empowerment of extremists. It is also hard to imagine that Russia would have chosen to intervene in Syria in the fall of 2015 if it thought that a direct American intervention was a credible and real possibility. The Russian intervention has also prolonged the war, strengthening Assad at a time when the regime was quite weak and might have been more open to a negotiated solution.

The Saudi decision to intervene in Yemen was driven primarily by insecurity and fear of Iranian gains in its backyard. But it did so even as the Obama administration tried to dissuade it from taking this course.³² Indeed, by all accounts, the Saudi intervention came as a surprise to the United States. And even though the United States has supported the Saudis by sharing intelligence, targeting information, and refueling capabilities, for the Saudis to launch their most significant military operation in a generation, with little notice to their historically most important security partner, is an indicator of how they view the American commitment.

Iraq and Libya are more complex cases. When the United States left Iraq in 2011, it gave Maliki a free hand to disregard American entreaties, marginalize Sunni communities, and move closer to Iran. But one of the major reasons for the withdrawal was Iraqi refusal to approve a new Status of Forces Agreement and provide necessary immunities to U.S. forces. Still, if the United States had stayed more politically engaged at the highest levels during that time, it might have seen the ISIS phenomenon coming earlier and been able to act more forcefully before the fall of Mosul in June 2014.

Meanwhile, in Libya there was not much desire from the post-Gadhafi leadership to depend heavily on external forces. And this is also an arena where America's European partners should have done more to follow through in the aftermath of the toppling of Gadhafi. Obama himself has expressed regret for not keeping sufficient focus on the issue in the aftermath of the NATO-led intervention.³³

Today perceptions are driving reality, and there is little doubt that across the Middle East there is a unified view that the United States is abandoning the region.



U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry and U.S. Secretary of Energy Dr. Ernest Moniz stand with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and Iranian Vice President for Atomic Energy and President of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran Dr. Ali Akbar Salehi in Lausanne, Switzerland, in March 2015. The establishment of high-level U.S.-Iranian diplomatic channels is a major accomplishment of the nuclear negotiations that should be maintained to engage with Iran on issues of common interest in the region. (U.S. Department of State/Flickr)

U.S. Middle East Strategy for the Next Administration

Objective

Achieve greater stability in the Middle East

Key Challenges

- State collapse and the emergence of governance and security vacuums
- Intensified Saudi-Iranian competition
- Perception of American withdrawal

1 PHASE ONE: Reset	2 PHASE TWO: Negotiate	3 PHASE THREE: Institutionalize
<p>Reset both perceptions and realities on the ground by:</p> <ol style="list-style-type: none">1. Addressing security vacuums from the bottom up in cooperation with regional partners.2. Countering Iranian support for its surrogates and proxies in cooperation with regional partners.3. Leaving the door open for engagement with Iran. <p>Start immediately with next administration.</p>	<p>Facilitate negotiated agreements with the key local, regional, and global actors to mitigate and end the civil wars plaguing the Middle East.</p> <p>Start in second half of the first term of next administration.</p>	<p>Build out a broader multilateral security architecture for the Middle East and especially around the Persian Gulf.</p> <p>Start in second term of next administration.</p>

A Middle East Strategy for the Next President

Before proposing a strategy for the next president, it is important to briefly evaluate U.S. interests and objectives. Despite the tremendous chaos, U.S. interests in the Middle East have remained remarkably consistent and have changed little since September 11, 2001:

- Prevent terrorist attacks on the U.S. homeland and against American partners.
- Prevent the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction in the world's most unstable and conflict-prone region.
- Ensure the security of key regional allies, most notably Israel but also other key Arab partners.
- Ensure the free flow of oil out of the region to sustain the global economy.

The greatest threat to all of these interests is the instability afflicting the region. Therefore, the primary objective of any U.S. regional strategy should be to pursue greater stability. This approach comes with a number of caveats. First, expectations have to be reasonable. The problems afflicting the region mean that any strategy will take time to show results and will lead not to a complete transformation but incremental improvement. Second, American investments need to be proportional to U.S. interests in the region. This means avoiding major land wars and resource-heavy policies that crowd out other national priorities. The United States must recognize that it does not have complete control over many of the actors and factors in the region and that there could be a number of unpredictable complications that the United States cannot control. Finally, this approach does not dive deeply into the internal governance and institutional challenges facing the region. The states of the region will also have to consider whether their own internal governance models can meet the needs of their people and lead to sustainable stability in the long term. This paper focuses primarily on the more immediate challenges of security relations between states and strategies to address situations in which the state has collapsed.

A new strategy for the region should be implemented in three phases. In phase one, the primary objective of U.S. policy should be to change both realities and perceptions on the ground and address the three destabilizing trends outlined in the previous section. With the increased

American leverage and improved regional situation resulting from phase one, after one to three years the United States can move to phase two and pursue negotiated outcomes for the civil wars plaguing the region. Finally, in her or his second term the next president can leverage the negotiating venues and political will used to end the civil wars in the region to begin building a more stable multilateral regional security architecture.

Phase One: Reset Perceptions and Realities on the Ground

The next administration should immediately begin to reset the regional dynamic, which will require three lines of effort. First, in collaboration with its partners, the United States must lead efforts to plug and begin to fill the security and governance vacuums with acceptable actors. Second, the United States should also work together with its traditional partners, especially Israel and the Gulf states, to push back forcefully and deter Iranian meddling. These two lines of effort should provide significant reassurance to U.S. partners, serving to reduce their tendency to pursue aggressive policies out of fears of abandonment. These

As the last few years in Syria and Iraq have shown, when the United States cedes the battlefield the end result is usually a worse situation, which then requires a deeper commitment afterward.

efforts will also provide the United States with greater leverage to dissuade what it sees as escalatory policies by its partners such as arming extremists in Syria or indiscriminate bombing in Yemen. Still, these two lines of effort should be complemented with a third line: maintaining a direct channel of communication to resolve possible disputes and cooperate on areas of common interest even as the United States pushes back aggressively elsewhere.

PHASE ONE: RESET PERCEPTIONS AND REALITIES ON THE GROUND

Fill the security and governance vacuums from the bottom up.

- Deepen U.S. support for the Southern Front in southern Syria, including consideration of a no-bombing zone.
- Attempt to replicate the Southern Front in northwest Syria.
- Pursue a tribal strategy in eastern Syria and increase U.S. footprint in the northeast.
- Directly support Sunni fighters in western Iraq.
- Support Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) hold-and-clear operations in Yemen but demand that U.S. partners adjust some of their tactics and priorities.

Push back against Iranian support for its surrogates and proxies in cooperation with regional partners.

- Establish a high-level defense and intelligence forum with the GCC and Arab partners to counter Iran.
- Set up a multinational joint task force with Arab partners targeted at countering unconventional threats from the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and Sunni extremists.
- Pursue direct actions targeted at Iran's support for its surrogates and proxies.
- More actively interdict Iranian weapons shipments.

Engage with Iran on issues of common interest.

- Maintain and expand communication channels with Iran.
- Look for new substantive areas of engagement with Iran, including in the maritime arena and on Afghanistan.
- Recognize that while some deconfliction is possible in the common fight against ISIS, this is not a central area for cooperation.

FILL THE SECURITY AND GOVERNANCE VACUUMS FROM THE BOTTOM UP BY FOCUSING ON WHOM AND WHAT THE UNITED STATES AND ITS PARTNERS SUPPORT - NOT WHOM THEY ARE AGAINST.

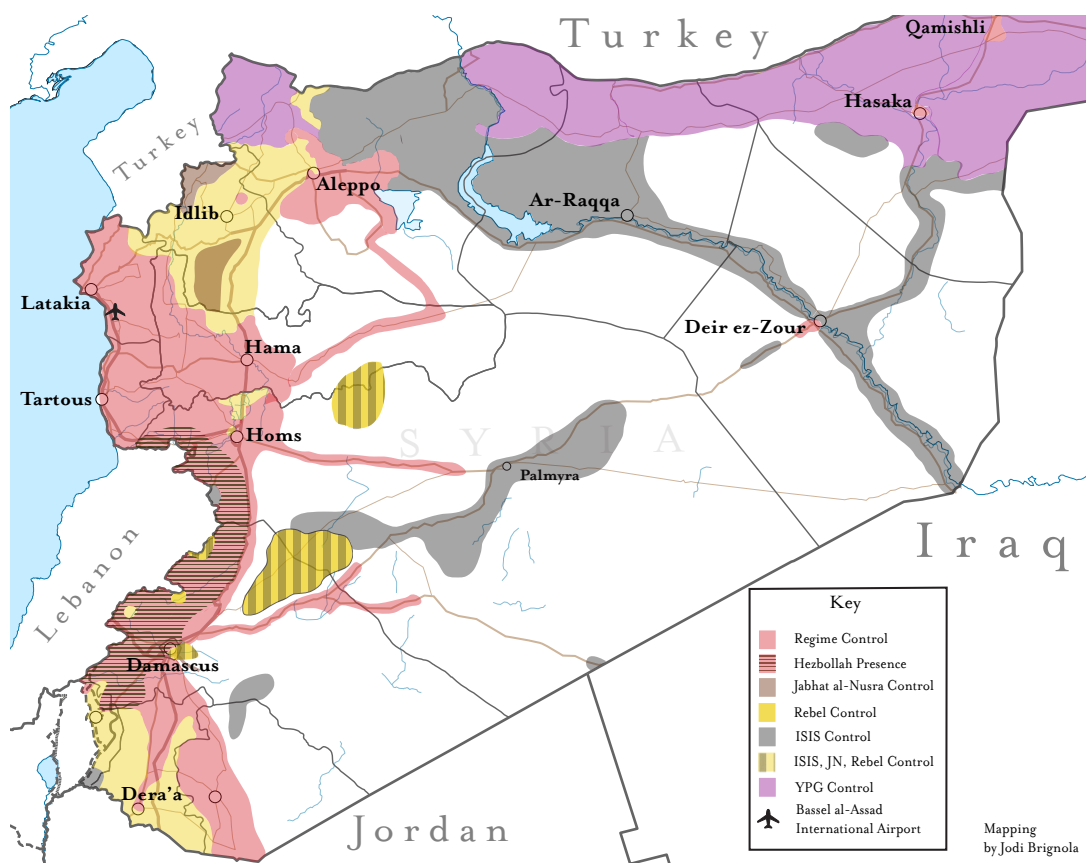
For the past few years most U.S. efforts to address the challenges in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya have focused primarily on whom they were against: Assad, ISIS, AQAP, Gadhafi.³⁴ But what matters is whom the United States is for and whether it can find acceptable actors in the vacuums that it can support. This will improve U.S. ability to stabilize security vacuums while increasing its leverage on the ground and increasing buy-in from regional partners to support the same actors.

There is obviously a risk that it is too late for such a strategy to work and that there are not enough acceptable actors on the ground to make this approach viable. It is also inevitable that some of the support the United States provides will end up in the hands of extremist actors. But as the last few years in Syria and Iraq have shown, when the United States cedes the battlefield the end result is usually a worse situation, which then requires a deeper commitment afterward.

In Syria there is a successful model in the south for how to arm and support acceptable option groups. The United States has worked closely with Jordan to support the Southern Front – an alliance of relatively moderate opposition forces whose views are acceptable to U.S. interests and who have become the most effective force in that part of the country.³⁵ This approach has only worked because of close coordination and agreement between the United States and its Jordanian partner and because of Jordan's policy of controlling its border and preventing the flow of extremist fighters.

The United States should do more to help the Southern Front, specifically by eliminating its vulnerability to air attack. If Russia follows through on its commitment to withdraw from Syria, this should be much easier to accomplish. But even if Russia is still there, the United States can start by engaging it and testing whether it would be willing to cease air attacks on the Southern Front, while pressuring the Syrian regime to do the same. If that is not possible, another option would involve more direct military intervention in southern Syria through the creation of no-bombing zones that eliminate both the Assad regime's and Russia's air superiority. The United States could declare that if anyone uses air power to attack specific groups it is supporting in the south, it will respond with direct strikes against

Map of the Areas Under the Control of the Different Main Combatants in the Syrian Civil War



Institute for the Study of War

Assad regime targets. The purpose would be to create a deterrent against devastating air attacks that are undercutting groups acceptable to U.S. interests. If either Russia or the Assad regime were to test the American declaration, which certainly could happen, the United States could respond using stand-off weapons to target Assad regime targets, while avoiding targets such as air bases that have a major Russian presence. This would reduce the possibility of getting into a direct conflict with Russia and avoid having to fly over Syrian air defenses, while having a meaningful effect in reducing the regime's air superiority.³⁶ But more importantly, as the American threat becomes more credible it is quite likely that some kind of understanding could be reached with the Russians. Such a move would also send broader signals to both the United States' partners and its adversaries about its commitment to the Middle East.

Coordinating the U.S. approach with Turkey [in Syria] may be the single biggest challenge.

The situation in northwest Syria is much more dire, with splintered extremist groups holding the upper hand. The United States should identify groups whose views and behavior are compatible with its interests, and it should sit down with the Turks, Saudis, and Qataris and make clear that it is now willing to significantly increase its involvement in arming and supporting a select acceptable group of players in the northern part of the country, such as Jaysh al-Nasr. It should also make clear to its regional partners that it is willing to support these groups whether they are fighting Assad or ISIS – a key sticking point, as many U.S. partners prioritize Assad's demise.

In exchange for this increased American commitment, the United States would expect its partners to stop supporting extreme organizations and instead work together to channel support to agreed-upon actors. And it also will expect Turkey to more aggressively control the flow of fighters into northern Syria. Over time, if it is able to build an effective force in the north, the United States should negotiate an agreement with the Russians to prevent the use of air power against these forces or be willing to consider a no-bombing zone in that part of the country, similar to the one proposed for the south.

Coordinating the U.S. approach with Turkey may be the single biggest challenge. However, increased American intervention and investment in the opposition and the potential promise of a no-bombing zone in the north, similar to that in the south, would be a compelling carrot for the Turks. The United States should reassure Turkey that its investment in the Syrian Kurds is limited to helping them regain and hold their own territory that was taken by ISIS – not expand it further. But the United States should also make clear to Turkey that if it cannot help build moderate Sunni opposition groups in northwest Syria to seal the Turkish border, the United States will have no choice but to invest more in Syrian Kurds to finish cutting off the border in order to fight ISIS and protect American interests. This combination of reassurance and threat can apply some pressure on Turkey to comply.

In northeastern and eastern Syria, the United States is pursuing a more effective approach, working with Kurdish groups that have increased pressure against ISIS and are now attempting to add Sunni Arab fighters to this effort and begin pushing south through the heart of ISIS-held territory in Raqqa and Deir-ez-Zor.³⁷ But the Kurds ultimately cannot take and hold large swaths of ISIS territory, which ultimately must be governed by Sunnis and will require a larger Sunni force. The United States should cultivate local tribes – most notably the Shammar, Ougaidat, and Mashahda, which are the most influential in this region. These tribes have deep relationships with Saudi Arabia, which the United States should press to play a more direct role in cultivating these tribes. Moreover, the United States can also consider significantly increasing its footprint in northern Syria and converting it into a major staging base from which to launch operations all over Syria and Iraq. Northern Syria can also become a location from which to train and equip local Sunni fighters in the area.

In the Sunni heartland of western Iraq, the United States should accelerate efforts to build a force that can retake territory. There are thousands of displaced Iraqi Sunni fighters who have fled to Kurdish-controlled parts of northern Iraq. Thus far, the United States has insisted that training and arming be done with the approval of the Shia-controlled central government, which is not interested in building out such a force and has significantly slowed efforts.³⁸

If the Iraqi central government continues to stand in the way, the United States should be willing to more directly arm and build a Sunni force capable of leading the efforts against ISIS and holding territory in the aftermath of its being retaken. Such an approach risks alienating the Iraqi central government, and there is danger of harming Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi's standing. But it might also improve U.S. leverage with the Iraqi central government as the United States would make clear to the government that it can either be a part of the solution and have some say and control over the Sunni fighters that the United States supports, or if it continues its current unhelpful policies it can have zero leverage over the fighters.

In Yemen, given that U.S. interests are not as directly affected, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates should lead the efforts to plug the security vacuum. The United States can take a more active role by working with Emirati special forces to arm and support the forces that have retaken southern parts of the country



Southern Front fighters stand at attention during a training exercise in Dara'a, Syria. The United States, working with Jordan, has built the Southern Front into a successful model that requires greater support. (Syrian Revolutionaries Front/YouTube)



U.S. Marines from Fox Company, 2nd Battalion, 7th Marine Regiment conduct live fire exercised in May 2014's multilateral military exercise Eager Lion. Hosted in Jordan, the event is designed to strengthen military-to-military relationships with U.S. regional partners and enhance Middle East regional security. (U.S. Naval Forces Central Command/U.S. Fifth Fleet)

from the Houthis. And it can help train and support other Gulf state special operations forces in order to improve their capacity in such a fight. The United States can also consider providing more intelligence, refueling, and air capabilities.

There should be two conditions to this effort. First, the fight should prioritize not just the Houthis but also AQAP-controlled territory. Second, in exchange for greater involvement, the United States will expect its partners – especially Saudi Arabia – to change their tactics and reduce the indiscriminate air bombing campaign causing significant civilian suffering and alienating the local population.

PUSH BACK AGAINST IRANIAN SUPPORT FOR ITS SURROGATES AND PROXIES IN COOPERATION WITH REGIONAL PARTNERS.

To reduce Saudi-Iranian tensions, the United States will have to address two sources of rising escalation: Iranian confidence among certain key institutions – especially the Islamic Revolutionary Guard – that the United States is pulling back; and Saudi and GCC insecurity and fear of American withdrawal.³⁹ The best way to do that is for the United States to develop a comprehensive approach to compete with and when necessary forcefully counter the IRGC-QF support for regional surrogates and proxies. This will send a clear signal to Tehran, which has in the past feared getting into direct conflict with the United States and tends to react to assertive

steps by the United States by backing down and retrenching. It will also send a clear signal to Saudi Arabia about American willingness to get involved, which should be parlayed into greater Saudi restraint.

Such an approach comes with the potential risk of escalating the sectarian conflict in the region or undermining the JCPOA. But right now the greater risks are Iranian overconfidence and Saudi insecurity, which are fueling the conflict. A forceful but measured American response is more likely to deter Iran than cause it to escalate. And the reality is that Iran is deeply invested in the economic benefits that come from the JCPOA and is unlikely to walk away from an agreement even if the United States pushes back harder on its destabilizing actions in the Middle East.

The United States should start by creating a high-level defense and intelligence forum at the cabinet level that regularly meets with Gulf Cooperation Council states and Arab partners to oversee the development and execution of a strategy to counter both Iran's destabilizing activities in the Middle East and Sunni extremist groups in the region. This forum would be designed specifically to address strategies that are being developed to fill the governance and security gaps previously discussed. The Obama administration has already begun this effort, which was launched with the May 2015 Camp David Summit with GCC partners and follow-on working groups. But more can be done to focus this specifically on the counterterrorism and low-intensity conflict elements of the challenge.⁴⁰

The United States should also form a multinational joint task force with Arab partners targeted at countering unconventional threats from the IRGC and Sunni extremists. This task force would conduct joint exercises to counter Iran's unconventional capabilities, focus on training U.S. partners in foreign internal defense and unconventional warfare, and include a joint intelligence fusion center to counter Iran's asymmetric capabilities. The most likely arenas for operations include Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, as well as in the maritime domain to address smuggling. There are different risks associated with operating in some of these areas. In some places, such as Iraq, eastern Syria, or in maritime domains, the United States would be much more comfortable taking a lead role, while in others, such as Yemen or western Syria, U.S. partners may take on the primary effort.⁴¹

In coordination with partners, the United States can also pursue covert or overt military or intelligence actions to counter Iran's influence in the region. There are real risks to such an approach, as an operation that goes wrong could lead to an escalatory international incident. For this reason, operations need to be carefully tailored. They should be designed to send a clear signal to Iran and U.S. partners that the United States is committed to countering Iran's activities in the region, raise the costs to Iran of its continued destabilizing activities in the region, and limit the risk of unintended escalation.⁴²

For example, Israel has a long history of interdicting Iranian arms shipments headed for Syria or Gaza and then publicly announcing the interdiction and displaying pictures of the weapons for the world to see.⁴³ The United States can work with Israel on such interdiction efforts but allow the Israeli military to conduct the operation, thus not risking a highly escalatory incident between the United States and Iran. However, once the mission is complete, the United States should be the one to make an announcement and disseminate pictures of Iranian weapons to the world. Alternatively, if the United States assesses that the risk is worth it, it can choose to conduct the interdiction operation itself.

The United States can also have a more proactive role in deterring the IRGC from shipping weapons to its surrogates and proxies in the region. Indeed, this approach has already experienced some success in Yemen: In April 2015 U.S. naval forces working with regional and international partners were able to identify an Iranian vessel attempting to bring weapons and materiel to Houthi fighters. By stationing warships off the coast of Yemen



Israel has a history of interdicting Iranian arm shipments to Syria or Gaza. In March 2011, the Israeli navy seized over 2,500 mortar shells destined for Hamas from the IRGC that had been smuggled aboard the Liberian-flagged vessel Victoria. (Israel Defense Forces/Flickr)

and publicly stating that Iranian shipments would need to be inspected, the United States succeeded in turning the convoy around and forcing another vessel to be sent to Djibouti for inspection.⁴⁴ This intervention sent a meaningful signal to Iran, the region, and the international community that the United States was serious about assisting its Middle East allies to reduce the influence of the IRGC in Yemen's civil war.

ENGAGE WITH IRAN ON ISSUES OF COMMON INTEREST.

Even as the United States pushes back on Iran in areas of competition and reassures regional partners, it should simultaneously look for areas of collaboration with Iran on issues of common interest.⁴⁵ This will have a stabilizing effect, given the importance of Iran in the region; indeed, this channel is even more important given that Saudi Arabia recently cut diplomatic ties with Iran. It is also important because eventually most of the civil wars afflicting the region will require a settlement that involves Iranian acquiescence.

Some will argue that the United States must choose between an adversarial or friendly posture toward Iran, but the reality is more complex. It is possible for the relationship to evolve from 35 years of adversarial dysfunction to one of more normal competition. The recent announcement of "Implementation Day" and the diplomatic flurry around it demonstrated the complexities and contradictions that are likely to characterize the U.S.-Iran relationship for years to come. In one week, diplomacy was shown to be truly effective, as Iran and the United States agreed on implementation of the nuclear agreement, settled a decades-long financial dispute dating back to the revolution, agreed on a prisoner swap, and diffused a potential crisis involving 10 U.S. sailors who had drifted into Iranian waters without incident. On the other hand, the American citizens being detained by Iran had been imprisoned without justification, videos of the American sailors were aired on Iranian television for propaganda purposes, and the United States imposed new sanctions on Iran for a ballistic missile test that violated U.N. Security Council resolutions. Ultimately, these are not the actions of a close friend and ally, nor are they characteristic of an implacable archenemy; they are instead those of a regional power with whom the United States has fundamental disagreements but with whom it should also learn to work.

The most important step for the next administration to take with Iran is to continue to expand on the

communications channels that the Obama administration has opened. The next secretary of state should take the mantle from Secretary of State John Kerry and ensure that a productive channel remains open with Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif. The United States should also look to deepen and expand beyond relations with the foreign ministry, given that the institutions primarily responsible for Iran's regional policy are the defense and intelligence apparatus – most importantly the IRGC and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC), which is the Iranian equivalent of the National Security Council.⁴⁶ The separate negotiations held by Iran and the United States on the January 2016 prisoner swap, which included Iranian intelligence and judiciary officials, demonstrated that the two sides are expanding channels and moving beyond the narrow nuclear realm and could serve as a model for expanding communication.⁴⁷

The United States can also look for new substantive areas of engagement with Iran. In the aftermath of the recent sailor incident, an agreement on incidents at sea, which creates protocols for de-escalation in the event of a naval situation in the crowded waters of the Gulf, would be a good first step. If that is not possible, opening a naval emergency hotline between the American commander of the 5th Fleet in Bahrain and his or her Iranian counterpart would be useful. Another area where there is likely to be common strategic overlap is Afghanistan, where the United States and Iran both have common interests in ensuring stability, stymieing the heroin trade, and preventing the Taliban, al Qaeda, or ISIS from coming to power.⁴⁸ And indeed, Iran and the United States have a track record of working together in Afghanistan, as they did after the fall of the Taliban and the establishment of a new Afghan government in 2001.

Still, there will be limits to engagement. In Iraq, the United States and Iran can deconflict operations and ensure that they do not inadvertently end up in a direct conflict. However, the United States cannot count on Iranian-supported Shia militias to act as the main ground force in liberating ISIS-held territory. Such a sectarian approach would alienate local Sunnis and simply create the environment for the rise of other Sunni extremists as a replacement for ISIS. Meanwhile, in Syria the United States and Iran ultimately remain on opposite sides, with Iran's continued support for the Assad regime. The United States should leave open a channel for negotiating a diplomatic end to the conflict with the Iranians as discussed later. But this is not an area where the United States should expect close collaboration with Iran in the near future.

Phase Two: Come to Negotiated Agreements Ending the Conflicts That Plague the Middle East

Ending the instability of the Middle East will mean ending the raging civil wars. Civil wars generally end in one of three ways: one side wins; an external power intervenes and ends the conflict; or a political agreement is reached to end the war.⁴⁹ In most of the conflicts plaguing the region, especially in Syria and Iraq, it is hard to see a scenario where one side wins or an external power intervenes to the point of forcing a definitive end to the conflict. Therefore, in most of these conflicts what will be needed is a political agreement to end the conflict.

The challenge is that the current situation on the ground is not ripe for a political agreement. The United States and its partners have little leverage to negotiate an acceptable outcome, as extremists have the upper hand in most of these conflicts and groups acceptable to the United States lack the necessary cohesion or influence. Meanwhile, the Arab states remain highly insecure and unsure of U.S. intentions, therefore taking a hard and unbending negotiating line in any diplomatic initiative. And Iran and Russia are feeling relatively confident in their positions in the region, which will also lead them to take a tough line and negotiate from a position of strength.⁵⁰ The end result is a situation that does not lend itself to an agreement.

However, after executing phase one of the proposed strategy and strengthening actors who are acceptable to the United States, pushing back on Iran, reassuring Arab partners of a U.S. commitment to them and the region's security – while leaving channels open with all of the parties – the United States can over time change this dysfunctional dynamic. At that point, possibly in the second half of the next president's first term and moving into her/his second term, the primary effort should shift to seeking negotiated outcomes for these conflicts.

This approach is most relevant in Syria and Iraq. The diplomatic process, which Kerry is driving, has succeeded in finally getting all of the key actors to the table, including all of the major Arab players, Iran, Russia, and the key European states.⁵¹ And while it is unlikely to lead to a successful outcome because of the reasons previously discussed, this forum should remain open and eventually be used to settle the conflict in Syria and possibly others as well.

Similarly, the United Nations is facilitating a Yemen negotiation process, though it has significantly less foreign engagement and investment. But any solution for Yemen will at a minimum require buy-in from Saudi Arabia, the Gulf states, and Iran, if not also additional regional and global players.⁵² Morocco is hosting and the United Nations is running the process in Libya, which will ultimately require engagement and buy-in from Libya's neighbors, most notably Egypt, as well as European powers, the United States, and the Gulf states.

To be clear, even though diplomatic outcomes to these conflicts are unlikely in the near term, this does not mean that Kerry and the next secretary of state should stop working the diplomatic process. With recognition that a major agreement is unlikely in the near future, the first priority should be focusing on the diplomatic legwork required to reassure regional partners and work together to shift the situation on the ground. Working toward an international peace process should be secondary until such a point as the United States starts to see stronger indicators that the situation is ripe for a diplomatic solution.



Iraqi Shia men gather at a rally in support of the Popular Mobilization Units (PMU), a nationwide paramilitary force that was formed in 2014 in response to the rise of ISIS in Iraq. The PMUs are an important component of Iraq's response to ISIS but they remain too reliant on Shia sectarian militias, which are influenced by the IRGC. (Huwaidar Al Sumari/YouTube)

Phase Three: Leverage Negotiated Agreement to Build a New Middle East Security Architecture

The third phase in setting the Middle East on a course to longer-term stability is to build a broader, inclusive security forum for the region. Such a forum should include the main regional powers driving today's conflicts, as well as the external global powers that play such a significant role in providing security in the region. The purpose of this venue would be for all sides to have a place to open a dialogue and seek common security solutions, reduce the security dilemma plaguing the region, and increase trust. This type of institution will take years to build, but the work can begin during the second term of the next president.

It may seem fanciful to conceive of such a forum, given the state of the region today, and indeed any attempt to start such a process now would fail quickly and spectacularly. But in the aftermath of the steps and strategy described in phases one and two of this paper, and especially after a regional negotiation to bring the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen to an end, there will be a natural meeting venue that can be parlayed into a more permanent regional security forum or institution. That venue will have just proved its value and effectiveness by playing a central role in ending some of the most immediate crises in the Middle East. And the Syria negotiations, for example, already include most of the relevant regional and global actors.⁵³

There are potential models that can be used to build a regional security forum. As Kenneth Pollack has written, the most relevant is the Commission on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE), which was launched in 1975 with the Helsinki accords and brought together all of the Warsaw Pact and NATO nations.⁵⁴ The CSCE then led to multiple months-long spinoff conferences on different key issues of concern and yielded important confidence-building and arms control agreements. The Helsinki Final Act required 21 days' advance notice of all military maneuvers of more than 25,000 people.⁵⁵ The 1986 Stockholm agreement on confidence- and security-building measures went a step further, calling for the exchange of annual calendars of military exercises and advance notice for smaller maneuvers, and inviting observers to certain maneuvers and exercises.⁵⁶ These efforts then culminated in the 1990 Conventional Forces in Europe agreement, which set clear limitations and guidelines for all parties in Europe on the deployments of their militaries.⁵⁷ While it may seem far-fetched to see the Middle East go in this direction, it was equally far-fetched in the height of the Cold War in the 1950s and 1960s to conceive of the CSCE.

A similar approach in the Middle East could focus on a number of key issues plaguing the region. The most important area for discussion would be how to work together to reconstruct the torn states of the region and limit competition among various external actors within them. Countries could work together on limiting the flow of terrorists and foreign fighters and coordinate efforts to counter radicalization. Over time, they could make commitments to limit support to various proxy actors. They could discuss freedom of navigation, especially in the Gulf but also other key choke points such as the Suez Canal and Bab el-Mandeb. There could also be a group to address questions regarding nonproliferation. Beyond security, there are also other arenas, such as trade, environment, and water, where countries could benefit from coordinated policies and exchange of ideas.⁵⁸

It is important to note that this security forum should not be viewed as a substitute for American security commitments to its closest partners. Indeed, the CSCE would have never worked without Europe's confidence in American security commitments through NATO. This does not necessarily mean that the United States must make treaty obligations to its GCC partners. But it does mean that the United States will have to maintain strong and deep security commitments to its partners and should also consider deepening the U.S.-GCC security forums that are already part of the regular dialogue and relationship, as well as some of the additional proposals described previously in this paper.⁵⁹

Conclusion

The Middle East is a difficult and unpredictable region that is experiencing unprecedented instability and has a long history of ensnaring American presidents. The strategy recommended here must be pursued with a major dose of humility. There will inevitably be surprises the United States cannot control, and given the level of American interests and requirements across the globe, the United States will not be able to provide unlimited resources to address the myriad problems facing the region. The United States will also not be able to solve some of the underlying governance, economic, and demographic challenges that the region is likely to face in the decades ahead. But pursuing the strategy described in this paper can move the United States away from the reactive posture of recent years and allow it to use its very significant regional and global influence to help put the Middle East on a more stable track that better suits the interests of the United States and its allies.

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