



 REPORT ARAB REGIONAL SECURITY

Strategic Recalibration

A Palmerstonian U.S. Middle East Regional Strategy

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If there were any lingering doubts that the United States needs to rethink its Middle East regional strategy, Donald Trump has dispelled them. But Trump's policy toward the region is only the latest of a series of wake-up calls. The neoconservatism of George W. Bush's administration, which brought the 2003 Iraq War, wreaked its own havoc. Barack Obama's administration had more of a sense of what it did not want to do than of an alternative, proactive strategy to implement. And the region has been rocked by its own dynamics. The sources of Middle East instability are wide and deep, whether one's analysis emphasizes the inherent flaws in the century-old Sykes-Picot maps, Sunni-Shia animosity, intra-Arab Sunni state rivalries, al-Qaeda and the Islamic State and other terrorist groups, the ongoing Israeli-Palestinian conflict, environmental degradation, the economic and societal factors going back to the 2002 Arab Human Development Report, the broader context of tchanging global geopolitics, or other factors and fissures.¹

Invoking calls for "American leadership," while long the bipartisan trope of choice, does not get us very far in thinking about the actual elements of an optimal U.S. regional strategy. Nor does "engagement"—an oft-deployed but inherently indeterminate word. Engage with whom? According to what strategy? With what mix of force and diplomacy? With what objectives?

A handful of questions are core. First, what are U.S. interests in the Middle East? The dictum of nineteenth-century British statesman Lord Palmerston is a helpful guidepost: Nations "have no eternal allies, and . . . no perpetual enemies," he said. "Our interests are eternal and perpetual, and those interests it is our duty to follow."² With that in mind, what is the mix of change and continuity with past U.S. interests? Although this question should not encourage pure whiteboarding—completely writing off traditional relationships and commitments—it should not be assumed that what (and who) served U.S. interests in the past will necessarily serve them going forward. Second, how can those interests be achieved? Even to the extent that prior policy was successful, are the conditions and assets that contributed to that success sufficiently intact to be comparably conducive and effective to current efforts? And what lessons are to be learned from past policy failures?

This reappraisal of interests and reassessment of strategy—here more broadly termed "strategic recalibration"—has four fundamental elements when applied to the Middle East.³ First, strategy needs to shift from regional dominance to regional balance. The United States must accept that Russia and China are global powers with interests in the region, and stop seeking to minimize their presence and assure American preponderance. Instead, a forward-thinking strategy should combine competition, collaboration, and complementarity. Second, in relations with traditional Arab allies, and Saudi Arabia in particular, the United States has to move beyond the "support our friends" mantra and be more assertive of its own interests where they differ on counterterrorism, domestic political reform, and overall regional security architecture. Third, even if U.S. policy toward Iran continues to focus on containment, depending on the latter's aggression, Washington should also seriously and creatively pursue diplomacy, and probe possibilities for substantial

improvement in relations with Tehran. Fourth, even though the United States and Israel have faced divisive issues in the past, their greater divergence on the issues of Israeli-Palestinian peace and Iran, combined with political changes in both American and Israeli domestic support bases for the U.S.-Israeli relationship, poses significant challenges that must be addressed. The United States needs to maintain its commitment to Israel's core security even as it supports a two-state solution.

Order from Ashes

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Major Powers in the Middle East: Competition, Collaboration, Complementarity

Even if it were in American interests to keep other major powers “out” of the Middle East's geopolitics, this would not be a viable strategy. Russia and China have their interests in the region. Numerous regional states have interests in increased relations with them.⁴ A more practical approach to the United States' strategic recalibration in the Middle East must take into account the ways in which U.S. policy can go beyond competition with other regional powers in order to encourage collaboration and complementarity—not merely as a means of lessening tensions in the region, but also as a way to explore areas of common ground and opportunities for further cooperation.

Russia's Regional Reemergence

Throughout the Cold War, containing Soviet influence in the Middle East was a major component of U.S. regional and global strategy. Even in the midst of the 1970s détente, the two superpowers came close to a nuclear confrontation when they took separate sides in the 1973 Arab-Israeli War.⁵ The Arab-Israeli peacebroker role that the United States established in the 1970s through Henry Kissinger's shuttle diplomacy and Jimmy Carter's role in the Camp David Accords was in part a gambit positioning Washington as the key player for both sides. The December 1979 Soviet invasion of Afghanistan spurred an expanded U.S. military presence in the region, as articulated in the Carter Doctrine and manifested in the formation of the United States Central Command (CENTCOM). Even though this force was geared to respond to the threats posed by Iran's Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, as late as 1988 the

overarching U.S. concern was “still largely focused on the potential threat of a massive Soviet invasion.”⁶

Immediately after the Cold War, the dynamic between the United States and Russia became more cooperative. But Russia was very much the junior partner. Although Russia cosponsored the October 1991 Madrid Peace Conference and the multilateral working groups established afterward, it was clear—in the wake of the formidable U.S.-led Gulf War victory in 1991 and the central Middle East peacebroker role assumed by the administration of Bill Clinton—that the United States was the sole surviving superpower. The 2003 American invasion of Iraq made the United States’ dominance all too glaring and grating, and brought to a head a widespread resentment of American unilateralism that Russia was not alone in feeling. Even the nuclear nonproliferation negotiations with Iran that resulted in the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA, the Iran nuclear deal) were principally a U.S.-Iranian bilateral interaction, for all that it formally conferred a participating role for Russia as part of the P-5+1 (Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia,



PRESIDENT ASSAD VISITS A SYRIAN MILITARY BASE WITH RUSSIAN ARMY CHIEF OF STAFF VALERY GERASIMOV, IN JUNE.
SOURCE: TWITTER.

and the United States).

However, Russia now clearly wants back into the Middle East. Syria is the most obvious example. Russia’s September 2015 military intervention in the Syrian conflict has had a number of objectives. These include direct, tangible objectives such as supporting the regime of Bashar al-Assad and solidifying an ongoing military presence in the region through expanded military basing in Syria. But Russia’s actions also have indirect, message-sending objectives such as taking a

stand against yet another American-supported regime change and—along with its moves in Ukraine—demonstrating that it is back in the global geopolitical game. But Syria is not the sole focus of attention, as Russia has also been increasing relations with other major countries in the region.

Russian-Egyptian relations have grown closer since General Abdel Fattah el-Sisi came to power in his 2013 military coup. Moscow and Cairo convened their own tracks of Syrian peace talks as alternatives to the official UN Geneva talks, which were dominated by the United States. Egypt supported Russian efforts to block UN Security Council resolutions seeking to end the September 2016 Aleppo siege and the humanitarian crisis it caused. In October 2016, Russia and Egypt held joint military exercises, something the United States and Egypt had done regularly until 2011. More meetings have been taking place at the ministerial level in search of new economic and military agreements. Russia supplies close to 60 percent of Egyptian wheat imports; with inflation projected as high as 36 percent and Sisi trying to maintain bread subsidies to avoid food riots, this external economic support is vital to Egypt's internal political stability.⁷ In March 2017, Russia deployed special forces to western Egypt. These forces then reportedly moved into Libya in support of Field Marshal Khalifa Haftar, head of the Libyan National Army, who had been receiving some U.S. support but now is referred to as “Moscow’s man.”⁸

Even given differences over Syria, Russian-Saudi relations have been developing around such other shared interests as raising oil prices (for example, they agreed in May 2017 to jointly reduce production through March 2018) and counterterrorism. Saudi foreign minister Adel al-Jubeir spoke of his country's desire to “build the best relations with Russia in a number of joint cooperation fields,” adding that the kingdom is “ready to give Russia a stake in the Middle East that will make Russia a force stronger than the Soviet Union.”⁹ Riyadh also calculates possible channels for its anti-Iran policies through Moscow's mix of cooperation with and wariness toward Tehran.

Russian-Israeli relations are “the warmest in history,” the Jerusalem Post headlined in March 2017. The previous June, on one of Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's numerous trips to Moscow, President Vladimir Putin hosted him at the Bolshoi Ballet. “Russia and Israel can take pride in our high level of partnership, fruitful cooperation and far-reaching business contacts,” Putin said in a speech before the ballet.¹⁰

Syria has posed challenges that cut both ways. Israel has been increasingly concerned about the gains that Iran and Hezbollah have been making in the conflict, with at least some tacit Russian support, and yet reports from September 2017 have spoken of Russian pressure on Assad not to respond to an alleged Israeli attack on a Syrian military site and of an encrypted Russian-Israeli military hotline for deconfliction—helping their forces to avoid unintentional overlap or clashes. Russia has largely refrained from blocking Israeli strikes against Hezbollah arms shipments crossing Syria.¹¹ Netanyahu and other right-wing politicians also have the political motivation of more than one million Russian

immigrants who are now Israeli citizens, including three Russian-speaking cabinet ministers. Trade with Israel is not huge but is growing, and includes some military sales, such as a late-2015 sale of ten surveillance drones.¹² Anti-Semitism is never all that far away in Russia, although the threat has been sufficiently in check for Ronald Lauder, president of the World Jewish Congress, to have expressed gratitude to Putin.¹³

Some see these dynamics as triangulation by American allies, motivated by differences with Obama's foreign policy to hedge bets and forge new alliances that would make them a little less reliant on the United States. Such analyses usually posit that these new dynamics will subside as Trump embraces Sisi, the Saudi leadership, and Netanyahu. The reality is that the causes of these new interactions run deeper. Few states anywhere in the world, let alone the Middle East, see their interests strictly aligning with one major power or another. Egypt, Israel, and Saudi Arabia are all likely to continue to want to have close relations with the United States, but not exclusive ones. Whereas interests in the bipolar era of the Cold War were largely defined as being on one side or the other, a pluralization of diplomacy is inherent in the current era's distribution of global and regional power, the array of threats each country sees, and each country's domestic politics. There are ways in which the increased Russian presence in the region could be problematic both for U.S. interests and for the regional order. But an America that tries to push allies too far away from other major powers is likely to find its leverage limited.

Moreover, Russian relations with states that the United States considers allies are not necessarily negative for American interests. Some competition is inherent in these relationships, but it is highly unlikely that Israel or Saudi Arabia or even Egypt is going to "tilt" to Russia and against the United States. More likely, these relations will give Russia stakes in regional stability that, at least to some degree, offset its more disruptive motivations.

Even on Syria, American and Russian interests may have sufficient common ground for collaboration. Concern about an intensified proxy war and even direct clashes between Russia and the United States may have been alleviated somewhat by the agreements reached by Trump and Putin at their July 7, 2017, meeting on the margin of the G-20 conference in Hamburg, Germany. Although predicting Putin is a risky exercise, there are indications, despite a flurry of reports about how much Assad is again in control, that Russia's role may be facing a point of diminishing returns. Even with all the support Russia has provided, the Syrian military is getting weaker; by some estimates no more than twenty thousand troops are well enough trained and sufficiently loyal to deploy in major operations.¹⁴

And while the Kremlin tries to hide Russian casualties incurred in Syria, reports keep seeping out with numbers mounting.¹⁵ What cannot be hidden is the terrorist blowback from the Islamic State and other aspects of Russian involvement in Syria.¹⁶ Just a few examples are the April 2017 St. Petersburg metro bombing, the December 2016 assassination of the Russian ambassador to Turkey, the October 2015 bombing of Metrojet Flight 9268 over the Sinai,

and the return of Islamist militants to Chechnya and elsewhere in the Caucasus. With serious and skilled diplomacy, the United States and Russia could find common ground on a political transition plan consistent with both countries' interests and with at least some prospect of moving Syria toward reconciliation and reconstruction.¹⁷



CHINESE PRESIDENT XI JINPING WITH EGYPTIAN PRESIDENT ABDEL FATTAH EL-SISI ON AN OFFICIAL VISIT TO CAIRO IN JANUARY 2016. SOURCE: FACEBOOK/ABDEL FATTAH EL-SISI.

Beijing on the Rise

China's Middle East role is also increasing. Oil is China's principal interest in the region. It imports almost 60 percent of its oil, and over half of that comes from the Gulf. The United States imports just 28 percent of all the oil it consumes, with just 16 percent of imports coming from the Gulf. It has been estimated that by 2020 (albeit based on pre-Trump policies) imports will be down to 11 percent of total American oil consumption, which the United States could satisfy solely with imports from Canada and Mexico.¹⁸ Still, it is doubtful that the United States would choose that option. Even if it did, security of world oil supplies would still be a U.S. interest because of both its allies' dependencies and the broader economic effects, including on financial markets, of such security. But given the shared interests in Gulf oil, and China's arguably greater interest, the United States does not stand to lose much if anything by letting China take on some of the responsibility for, stakes in, and costs of assuring the security of Gulf maritime shipping routes. China already conducted joint navy exercises in the Gulf with Iran in 2014 that, while focused more on their bilateral concerns, did show the Chinese Navy's oceanic reach ("blue-water capacity").

China's own natural preference is to free-ride on the U.S. Navy. It is not Trumpian economic nationalism or Rand Paulian isolationism to propose shared roles and shared costs. Indeed, having more than just American ships in those waters could provide further disincentive for terrorists or Iran to attack or otherwise disrupt Gulf shipping. Shared operations could be structured like the multilateral antipiracy operations off the Horn of Africa, with more informal complementarity than direct coordination. Much detail would need to be worked out, but this collaboration could be an example of collective interests taking precedence over zero-sum competition. Those concerned that expanded economic relations and military presence will bring China greater influence can take some comfort in the fact that U.S. leverage remains limited despite Washington's far more extensive economic, military, and diplomatic ties.¹⁹

President Xi Jinping's January 2016 trip to the Middle East, the first such visit by a Chinese leader in seven years, also manifested a range of other interests. A report from the RAND Corporation put it well, stating that even with limited diplomatic activity, "China has managed the impressive feat of maintaining good relations with virtually all countries in the region."²⁰ A number of Middle East countries have joined China's new economic multilaterals, such as the Asian Infrastructure Investment Bank (AIIB) and the Belt and Road Initiative (formerly One Belt One Road). In November 2016, China and Saudi Arabia signed a five-year security cooperation agreement that included counterterrorism, military exercises, and Saudi purchases of Chinese military technology. China is Saudi Arabia's top trade partner for the latter's imports and for its oil exports. The RAND report argues, along the lines of this report's point about complementarity, that "expanded security cooperation between China, Saudi Arabia, and other GCC [Gulf Cooperation Council] countries is not necessarily a cause for U.S. alarm. Such cooperation may be helpful and contribute toward a more stable regional environment."²¹

In Egypt, too, China is becoming more of a presence. In December 2014, Xi and Sisi upgraded their relationship to a "comprehensive strategic partnership." During Xi's 2016 visit, twenty-one bilateral deals totaling \$10 billion were signed, including the high-priority Suez Canal Corridor Project and memorandums of understanding for nuclear energy cooperation and solar energy projects.

China-Israel relations have also been growing. China is now Israel's largest Asian trading partner, an increasing investor in Israel's economy, and a beneficiary of some of Israel's leading agricultural technologies. Bilateral free-trade negotiations are in progress. Israel has also joined the AIIB. Military cooperation, limited for a number of years because of U.S. restrictions on the Israeli sale of military technologies with sensitive U.S. components, has started to work around these. Political differences remain on issues like the Palestinians and Israeli settlements, but these have a limited impact on the overall relationship.

None of these openings for building connections with Russia and China, as well as deepening relationships with their regional partners in the Middle East, is intended to ignore the inherent dynamics of major power competition. But there is also a realpolitik calculation in pursuing collaboration and working with complementarity, where such opportunities exist.



PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP AND FIRST LADY MELANIA TRUMP JOIN KING SALMAN BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD OF SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE PRESIDENT OF EGYPT, ABDEL FATTAH AL SISI, IN MAY TO PARTICIPATE IN THE INAUGURAL OPENING OF THE GLOBAL CENTER FOR COMBATING EXTREMIST IDEOLOGY. SOURCE: FLICKR/THE WHITE HOUSE/SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD.

The United States and Traditional Arab Allies

Contrary to the U.S. mantra that “we need to support our friends”—meaning those Arab Sunni states that Washington has traditionally supported—the above-mentioned Palmerstonian dictum needs to be applied. It is not that friends should be abandoned or treated callously. But it also should not be taken as a given that if interests were shared under one set of geopolitical conditions, they are necessarily shared given changes in at least some of those conditions. Unlike the Cold War and the immediate aftermath of 9/11, there is now no overarching, superseding, shared strategic threat. Moreover, oil markets are less dependent on OPEC decisions and the American economy is less vulnerable to these decisions than it once was. U.S. relationships with Arab countries, and particularly that between Washington and Riyadh, should be maintained but recalibrated on three key issues: counterterrorism, domestic political reform, and overall regional security architecture.

In some respects, terrorism is a shared threat. The United States and regional allies mutually benefit from sharing intelligence, military measures, and other cooperation against terrorism. Indeed, coordinating in the fight against terrorism was billed as the principal theme for Trump's May 2017 trip to Saudi Arabia. His speech to the conclave of fifty leaders of Arab and Muslim-majority countries set "one goal that transcends every other consideration . . . to conquer extremism and vanquish the forces terrorism brings with it."²² Yet for all the praise he heaped on Saudi Arabia, the country needs to "examine its own role in fostering a climate of extremism," as Brookings expert Daniel Byman puts it.²³ A recent study by a British think tank is even more critical, estimating that Saudi Arabia has spent \$87 billion on its self-serving strategy of preserving its internal stability by exporting its jihadist problem.²⁴ To claim, as the Saudi leadership did right after the Trump trip, that Qatar has been such an egregious supporter of terrorism as to warrant suspension from the GCC and severe economic and diplomatic sanctions is more than a little hypocritical. Saudi Arabia does what serves its interests with regard to terrorism, whether or not such actions serve U.S. interests. American policy must look past fancy new high-tech counterterrorism centers and bring pressure to bear on Saudi Arabia to stop its support for extremist Salafism and for other gambits geared to its own internal security that exacerbate terrorism threats to the United States and others.

On that same Middle East trip, Trump said nary a word about political reform. The hands-on-the-magic-orb scene with Saudi king Salman and Egyptian president Sisi added a special touch. Yet consider the following analysis by the United States' National Intelligence Council—the closest thing the American government has to an in-house think tank:

*Political upheaval will characterize the next five years in the Middle East and North Africa, as populations demand more from entrenched elites and civil and proxy wars are likely to continue in a number of failed states. Contests among religious and political forces are likely as low energy prices weaken institutions. . . . The endemic leadership and elite disconnect from the masses will almost certainly persist for many countries in the region through the period. Socioeconomic and popular challenges will worsen [given] tension rooted in the region's legacies of authoritarian rule, repression, and dependency. . . . In the next five years, states' failures to meet popular demands for security, education, and employment will continue to provide fertile ground for **violent radicalization** [emphasis in original].²⁵*

To be sure, one of the lessons of the 2011 Arab uprisings and the disappointments and wars that have followed is that the road that leads from the end of the old order to the start of a new one is rocky and uncertain.²⁶ The sources of instability run deep with varying mixes of old tensions (ethnic, confessional, tribal), long-built-up frustrations (socioeconomic stresses, political repression) and new forces (technology, demographics, terrorist networks). "It's an entire country that needs to be remade," a Tunisian mayor observed. "It's not going to be one year or two years or three years. It's an entire generation."²⁷ But the longer the wait until this process starts, the harder it will be. To the extent that repressive rule is

needed for Arab regimes to stay in power, U.S. support likely will end up making the emergence of anti-American regimes more likely over time, not less. This is another lesson to be learned from the Cold War, when the U.S. practice of lumping together leaders, parties, and movements that in any way smacked of radicalism as part of the Soviet orbit was a key factor in many American foreign policy failures in the Third World.²⁸

Greater prioritization to political reform thus has a strategic rationale, not just a values-based one. Relations need to be built with whole societies, not just elites. This includes working with political Islam and its “many faces,” as the scholar Mohammed Ayoob put it even before the 2011 Arab uprisings.²⁹ This was the Obama administration’s intent in Egypt. The extent to which the Muslim Brotherhood regime failed on its own or was set up for failure by the Egyptian deep state continues to be debated. Even if the Obama administration had more clearly and firmly opposed the Sisi coup, in the face of the Saudi-Emirati \$16–\$20 billion bailout the \$1.5 billion per year in U.S. military and economic aid provided only limited leverage. But given that terrorism has increased in the Sisi years—in the Sinai, against Coptic Christians, and at tourist sites—Trump’s embrace of Sisi is even less likely to make Egypt more stable and otherwise serve American interests.

As for Saudi Arabia, while much is being made about the ostensibly reformist new thirty-two-year-old crown prince, Mohammed bin Salman, one might bear in mind past American enticements with young reformers going back to Ngo Dinh Diem in South Vietnam in the 1950s, Hamid Karzai in Afghanistan, and others. Mega-plans for economic modernization are being developed. Some liberalizing steps, such as removing the criminal penalties for driving while female, are being taken. But repression has also increased: September 2017, for example, saw a wave of arrests of Prince Mohammed’s critics, who were painted as foreign-funded subversives.³⁰ Moreover, Saudi Arabia has styled itself as the “Metternich” of the Middle East, taking on a role akin to that of Austrian prince Klemens von Metternich, who in the early nineteenth century led the other Concert of Europe monarchs who were resisting the forces of political change in, as the historian F. H. Hinsley puts it, “the defense of the social order and the determination to stamp out dissidence.”³¹ Saudi leadership bitterly denounced Obama for not rescuing Hosni Mubarak from his own people. Riyadh led the March 2011 Peninsula Shield intervention to put down the “Pearl Revolution” in Bahrain, a majority Shia country but a Sunni monarchy, claiming “common responsibility” for helping with the “security and stability” of member states (though the intervention was really about Sunni and monarchical solidarity).³² Saudi intervention has been sending Bahrain down the road of an all-too-familiar Middle Eastern self-fulfilling prophecy: those who make peaceful change impossible feed radicalization and political violence. Bahraini Shias had long been more nationalist than Iranian-aligned, but have been radicalized by the Sunni monarchy’s crackdown.

In Yemen, Riyadh overstated the Houthi-Iran relationship and made it a test of American resolve to stop the spread of Iranian Shia regional influence. In truth, the situation was—like so many of those Third World Cold War issues—much more complicated. Saudi Arabia has been using Trump's green light to intensify attacks, yielding little if any gain in the war while pushing the Houthis and Iran closer together. This has contributed to a resurgence of al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula; the group's numbers have grown from a few hundred fighters in 2009 to four thousand today. The Saudi campaign also bears major responsibility for the world's worst cholera outbreak, with projections of as many as one million cases, as well as other humanitarian crises. UN estimates are ten thousand civilians killed, three million displaced, two million children with acute malnutrition, and 60 percent of the total Yemeni population facing food insecurity—and that was as of early 2017, the situation having grown worse since then.³³ Both sides bear responsibility for this crisis, but there is no getting away from American complicity, even if the United States does not have a direct role.

As for Qatar, Saudi Arabia saw the Qatari monarchy as dangerously un-Metternichian because of its sponsorship of Al Jazeera and its support for the Muslim Brotherhood, particularly in Egypt and the United Arab Emirates. Qatar's relations with Iran, limited as they were, were inconsistent with the Saudi drive to make the Sunni-Shia split the defining regional geopolitical dynamic. Doha was lax on terrorist financing and supportive of various Islamist factions in Syria—although Riyadh hardly had clean hands in either of these areas. Nevertheless, Saudi Arabia rallied Bahrain, Egypt, the Emirates, and other Arab states to join in extensive economic, diplomatic, and other sanctions, and issue a list of demands for Doha to meet. Trump complicated the situation with a barrage of tweets supporting the Saudi move, and by claiming that the move showed how much his trip had strengthened counterterrorism and the efforts against Iran.³⁴ Other American officials, including the U.S. secretaries of state and defense, expressed concern that even if the anti-Qatar front may have served Saudi interests within intra-Arab rivalry, it was damaging to U.S. interests. Al Udeid Air Base near Doha is the largest U.S. military base in the region. The anti-Islamic State coalition was further complicated when Turkey and others sided with Qatar. Iran stood ready to offer Qatar its ports to help break the blockade.

Even if the United States eventually receives credit for mediating the intra-GCC crisis, its takeaway should be to get out of the middle of intra-Arab politics. It should begin to shift its role from security provider to security enhancer; in other words, bolstering allies' national security and strengthening overall regional security in ways for which it has unique capacities, but with regional partners taking on more responsibility for their own and regional security. The GCC has had more of a hub-and-spokes model, with members more often working bilaterally with the United States than they do with each other. One is often told that this is how the members prefer it, that they have all sorts of issues with each other. But that is explanation, not justification, and it may actually make conflicts like the Saudi-Qatari one more likely since the countries at loggerheads know that the United States will be there to smooth things over. This is not principally a burden-sharing issue in terms of costs borne. It is about a sustainable model for regional security that gets away from

over-dependence on the United States and makes Washington acknowledge the need as well as the value of some shared decision-making. Such shifts need to be done transitionally—not abruptly—and with clear commitment based on the strategic logic of making security more of a genuinely collective effort.³⁵

The United States can also play an important role in helping create a full regional security structure including all the Maghreb, the Levant, the Gulf states, Israel, Iran, and possibly Turkey.³⁶ A more limited version was tried in the 1990s with the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) talks that were part of the Madrid peace process, which included Israel, twelve Arab states, and a Palestinian delegation.³⁷ Over time, comparable efforts should be renewed and enhanced. A number of other reports in this series focus more directly on mechanisms for regional security cooperation. My own experience in the mid-1990s as part of the U.S. ACRS delegation and through various Track Two initiatives showed me how difficult yet how necessary such initiatives are—the problems they face and the potential they have.³⁸



U.S. SECRETARY OF STATE JOHN KERRY MEETS WITH IRANIAN FOREIGN MINISTER JAVAD ZARIF IN GENEVA ON JANUARY 14, 2015, DURING NEGOTIATIONS OVER THE IRAN DEAL. SOURCE: FLICKR/U.S. MISSION/ERIC BRIDIER.

The United States and Iran

The JCPOA, as the Obama administration stressed, was intended to deal with the particular issue of Iranian nuclear proliferation, eliminating the medium-term threat of Iranian nuclear weapons and preventing the more immediate risk of a crisis from American or Israeli preventive military action against the Iranian nuclear complex. As such it was transactional, dealing with the nuclear issue per se and not pursuing broader transformation of the Iranian-American relationship. Trade with Iran has increased somewhat (more for the European Union than the United States). The

January 2016 naval incident, in which two American naval vessels inadvertently crossed into Iranian waters and were seized by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard, was defused in large part through the direct communication that U.S. secretary of state John Kerry and Iranian foreign minister Javad Zarif had established. But there has been little follow-up relationship-building beyond JCPOA maintenance—and Trump has put the entire agreement in question by refusing to certify Iran’s compliance.³⁹ And differences over Iraq, Syria, and Yemen have intensified.

Obama may have been right that the JCPOA was all his domestic political traffic would bear, and even that barely. Still, it is worth asking whether keeping to the transactional and not the transformational is the optimal strategy. Often in diplomacy the latter is dependent on the former: we can have a new relationship only if we first fully resolve the specific issues between us. At times, though, those very issues may become more resolvable, the transactions more open to compromise, if the overall relationship at least begins to be transformed. The 1972 “opening” between the United States and China negotiated by Henry Kissinger and Zhou Enlai is instructive in this regard. “Only the settlement of fundamental questions first can lead to the settlement of other questions,” Zhou said to Kissinger in the first of their secret meetings. Kissinger struck a similar note, that even though there are “deep ideological differences between us . . . a strong and developing PRC [People’s Republic of China] poses no significant threat to any essential U.S. interest.”⁴⁰ This shared transformational objective made for a mutual willingness to compromise on the transactional issues of Taiwan (China got some U.S. concessions but less than it wanted) and Vietnam (the United States got some Chinese concessions but less than it wanted). There have been various contentious issues since, but the fundamental Sino-American rapprochement has held up for close to fifty years.

This is not to claim one-to-one correspondence between the case of the United States and China and that between the United States and Iran. Analogies are never perfect. But they can still carry lessons and implications. I am skeptical that the JCPOA on its own will be able to withstand the backflow from disputes over other issues without broader changes in the overarching U.S.-Iranian relationship. Such changes could bring substantial strategic gains for the United States. Forty years ago, Iran may have set off the era of anti-American Islam, but if the United States were to find a *modus vivendi* with it then the potential demonstration effect, even given Sunni anti-Shiism and the region’s growing sectarian polarization, could significantly reduce the utility of America-bashing in some parts of the Muslim world. It could weaken Hezbollah, help find an end to the Syrian civil war, and cut Hamas off from one of its few remaining arms channels. It also could be a crucial piece for a regional security regime. Indeed, at the 2017 Munich Security Conference, Iranian foreign minister Zarif called for a regional security dialoguethat was reasonably consistent with U.S., European, Sunni Arab, and even Israeli proposals, even if it contained some objectionable details.⁴¹

Savvy American statesmen could play a version of Kissinger's triangular diplomacy with regard to Russia and China. Although Russia and Iran operate at least in a loose tandem in their interventions in Syria, even in that country there are tensions. More broadly, even if there are some indications of deepening ties (for example, the visit of Iranian president Hassan Rouhani to Moscow), other signs show that they are at best "uneasy partners."⁴² China is Iran's largest trading partner. The two countries' defense ties go back to the 1980s and 1990s. In 2014, their navies conducted the joint Gulf maritime exercise noted above. As long as the United States keeps positioning itself as an adversary to Iran, Russia and China can use their relations with Iran, and Iran in turn its side of those relations, for leverage in their respective relations with the United States.

None of this is to ignore the ways in which Iran has been and continues to be a regional aggressor. Iran has its own decision to make about whether to continue to be an ideologically motivated revolutionary power seeking to actively expand its influence along the regional Shia-Sunni divide, or to become a major regional power pursuing its nation-state interests. U.S. policy can have only limited influence, and at that more negative than positive, in terms of confrontational rhetoric and policies reinforcing the internal political strength of the ideological, revolutionary side. Policies that at least leave open the possibility of improved relations can, as with the JCPOA, have a moderating impact, but only some. Fundamentally, this is Iran's decision to be shaped principally by domestic forces in what journalist Laura Secor depicts as "the struggle for the soul of Iran."⁴³

There is plenty of basis for hawkishness against Iran. To the extent that Iran is unwilling to shift its regional policies, or even to signal that it would be open to doing so, U.S. policy needs to be one largely of containment. Even then, the United States must be careful to not fall into regional Sunni-Shia bipolarity and not venture into the rhetorically seductive but strategically counterproductive trap of regime change. Possibilities need to be analyzed and strategized, not dismissed out of hand—particularly not for the fear of being labeled as "soft" that too often stunts the range of American political discourse and acceptable policy options.



PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP AND ISRAELI PRIME MINISTER BENJAMIN NETANYAHU SHAKE HANDS DURING THEIR JOINT PRESS CONFERENCE, WEDNESDAY, FEB. 15, 2017, IN THE EAST ROOM OF THE WHITE HOUSE IN WASHINGTON, D.C. SOURCE: OFFICIAL WHITE HOUSE PHOTO.

The United States and Israel

Portrayals of a long-standing deep, close, and special relationship between the United States and Israel simply do not stand up to the historical record. There is President Harry Truman's initial ambivalence about granting recognition to the State of Israel; Arabists in the State Department; the 1956 Suez Crisis and President Dwight Eisenhower's pressure on Israel, along with France and Britain, to withdraw their military forces from Egypt; young Shimon Peres's deception of the United States in working with France to initiate the Israeli nuclear program; and the questionable claim that Israel's attack on the American naval intelligence ship USS Liberty in international waters in the Mediterranean during the 1967 Arab-Israeli War was accidental. The 1973 Arab-Israeli War was a turning point in the threat to Israel's survival and the way it played into Cold War dynamics. Yet even though the United States has been a strong supporter of Israel since then, there still have been significant policy differences, including the Ronald Reagan administration's 1981 sale of a Boeing E-3 Sentry surveillance plane (known as AWACS) to Saudi Arabia, the George H.W. Bush administration's 1990–91 dispute over settlements and loan guarantees, and the George W. Bush administration's differences over the 2006 Lebanon war. General David Petraeus testified to Congress in 2010, when he was still the head of CENTCOM, that "Arab anger over the Palestinian question limits the strength and depth of U.S. partnerships with governments and peoples [in the region]."⁴⁴ All these incidents provide context that counters the framing of differences during the Obama administration as if U.S.-Israeli relations had been smooth sailing until the lack of chemistry between Obama and Netanyahu changed things.

Still, Obama-era U.S.-Israeli tensions did reflect two developments that marked some deeper changes. One is the greater divergence of security interests. The Obama administration did not fundamentally question the core threats that Israel continues to face to its basic security and its survival. That is why it agreed to a \$38 billion military and intelligence aid package a few months before Obama left office. Nor did it ignore U.S. gains from military and intelligence cooperation: for example, joint exercises in which the United States learned from Israeli experience in urban warfare and counterterrorism proved helpful in Afghanistan and Iraq. There has been much more counterterrorism cooperation than meets the eye. But on Iran, the JCPOA, and the peace process with the Palestinians, interests were more divergent. The Obama administration saw both the JCPOA and peace with the Palestinians as being in the United States' interest—and also in Israel's interest, a view shared by many experts, including Israelis and Americans. Netanyahu went far in injecting himself into American politics in opposition to the JCPOA. His openness to peace with the Palestinians was more feint than sincerity. Kerry's final Middle East speech as secretary of state, in December 2016, spelled out the degree of differences with Israel over a two-state solution, settlements, and other issues. If the United States pursues the two-track strategy with Iran that this report recommends, Israeli opposition is highly likely.

Second are political changes within both Israel and the United States, changes that run deeper than cyclical fluctuations. Israeli electoral politics have shifted from one-party dominance (the Labor Party) to two-party competitiveness (between Labor and Likud) to multiparty factionalism. In the last election, Likud did not win enough seats to form a government and had to bargain, Italy-style, with a host of small parties, particularly the ultra-Orthodox and others on the right. These shifts to the right run deep in Israeli society in ways that are having social consequences as well as foreign and security policy ones.⁴⁵ Meanwhile, within U.S. politics the support base for Israel has its own underlying shifts. Unblinking support for Israel is less common among young Jewish Americans than it was for previous generations. This generation has had fewer deep bonding experiences with Israel than generations past, and more disconcerting if not alienating ones. They also tend to have broader global interests and exposures competing for their attention and commitment. Even among the generations of Jewish Americans who survived the Holocaust or experienced the 1967 Arab-Israeli War, there is growing concern with the discriminatory and exclusionary policies the ultra-Orthodox are imposing on other Jews. Strong support for Israel among Christian evangelicals as well as the continuing political acumen of long-standing Jewish American lobbying groups are only partially offsetting these social and political shifts. In addition, broad demographic changes are bringing more ethnic, national, and other identity-based groups into the U.S. political process.

The Trump administration arrived with what appeared to many traditional American supporters of Israel as a reprieve. "Stay strong Israel, January 20 is fast approaching," Trump tweeted during the transition.⁴⁶ Netanyahu was among the first foreign leaders to pay a White House visit. David Friedman, Trump's choice for ambassador to Israel, has been a major donor not only to Israeli West Bank settlements but also to the even more controversial outposts. Yet even the

Trump administration found it necessary to temper some of its ardent pro-Israel policies, stepping back at least temporarily from the pledge to move the American embassy to Jerusalem, expressing some concern about settlement expansion, and claiming to be the ones who will strike “the ultimate deal.” Although the May 2017 White House meeting between Trump and Mahmoud Abbas, the Palestinian Authority president, did not lead to much substantively, it was an acknowledgment of the need to engage with both sides.

Major breakthroughs for Arab-Israeli peace have been made only when the parties themselves took the key moves, as with Egyptian president Anwar Sadat’s historic November 1977 visit to Jerusalem and with the 1993 Oslo talks. Conversely, such moves did not happen with the talks pushed by Secretary of State Kerry. This fact by no means lets the United States off the hook; rather, it needs to continue diplomatic efforts but without feeding undue expectations and especially without giving any Israeli leaders an indication that the United States wants a peace agreement more than Israel does. It needs to separate itself from Israeli policies that make achieving a two-state solution even more problematic—such as expansion of West Bank settlements—both through public diplomacy and by ensuring that no U.S. funding or other support is diverted to these purposes. It needs to be supportive of the Palestinian Authority and help it develop governance capacity and a productive economy, while also opposing any actions that run counter to achieving a two-state solution.

Almost a quarter-century after the hopes of the Oslo Accords, disillusionment with the prospects for a two-state solution is more than understandable. Whereas other options such as a single state or a confederation are getting attention, the model of two states with Israel and Palestine living in peace and security has been, still is, and will continue to be the most likely basis for a sustainable peace and the option most consistent with U.S. interests. As Israeli military and intelligence officials often have said, even if there is no guarantee that peace with the Palestinians will bring security, Israel will never be secure without peace with the Palestinians.⁴⁷ Circumstances may become propitious for achieving such peace in conjunction with a broader regional peace, with buy-in from key Arab states motivated by the view that the enemy of my enemy is my friend (or at least no longer my enemy) in a regional version of the 2002 Arab Peace Initiative and the 1991 Madrid Peace Conference. But any sense that Israel can normalize relations with Arab states without making peace with the Palestinians is patently unrealistic.

The Israel-Palestine issue is not the master key to regional peace and stability that some depict. But nor is it as peripheral to Iran, the Islamic State, and other pressing regional concerns as some analysts make it out to be. An American policy that does not recognize the importance of Israeli-Palestinian peace is counterproductive to U.S. interests.

Conclusion

Following 9/11, which was the worst attack on the United States since Pearl Harbor, and Afghanistan and Iraq as the two longest wars in American history, the Middle East became more central for American foreign policy than ever before. By drawing down American forces in both wars and “pivoting” to East Asia, the Obama administration sought to reduce this centrality. But the Arab uprisings of 2011, the Israel-Palestine issue, the Syrian civil war, the rise of the Islamic State, and the Iranian nuclear proliferation threat meant that attention to Asia and other world issues had to come in addition to, and not instead of, attention to the Middle East.

The Middle East continues to occupy a place at or close to the center of the United States’ overflowing foreign policy agenda. And it is doing so with even more complexity, fault lines, and uncertainties than ever before. Indeed, one cannot help but bear in mind the painful history of the United States failing to anticipate major changes in the Middle East. The United States failed to see coming the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the 1990 Iraqi invasion of Kuwait, major peace breakthroughs like Anwar Sadat’s seminal 1977 trip to Israel and the 1993 Oslo Accords, the 9/11 attacks, the 2011 Arab uprisings, and the rise of the Islamic State. Some of this failure of course stems from the inherent unpredictability of complex social phenomena. Some also is the tendency, as the eminent political scientist Hans Morgenthau put it, of not getting past “residues of formerly adequate modes of thought and action now rendered obsolete by a new social reality.”⁴⁸ Although a viable twenty-first-century U.S. Middle East strategy does need to draw from what has worked in the past, it needs to do so in that Palmerstonian manner—adaptive and recalibrating based on what U.S. interests are in the world as it is today and will be going forward, not how it used to be or how we might want it to be.

Given that Russia and China have interests in the region, and a number of regional states are interested in increased relations with them, regional dominance is simply not a viable strategy. Nor is it necessary for American interests. A combination of competition, collaboration, and complementarity is more likely to be effective. Traditional allies should not be abandoned, but the United States needs to be more honest with itself and with them—Saudi Arabia in particular—about the mix of shared and divergent interests, and be more assertive of its own interests where they differ on counterterrorism, domestic political reform, and regional security architecture. Opportunities as well as threats need to frame relations with Iran. To the extent that Iran’s aggression continues, containment needs to be the principal response. But the United States should pursue, creatively and seriously, possibilities for a breakthrough that would improve relations, and do so in ways that allow it to be consistent with commitments to regional allies. Further, the United States needs to maintain its commitment to Israel’s core security while supporting a two-state solution and, as warranted, pursuing diplomacy with Iran.

The makers and implementers of American foreign policy may well need to reappraise U.S. interests and corresponding strategies worldwide, but such a reappraisal, the essence of strategic recalibration, is especially crucial for the Middle East.

PRESIDENT DONALD TRUMP POSES FOR PHOTOS WITH CEREMONIAL SWORDSMEN ON HIS ARRIVAL TO MURABBA PALACE, AS THE GUEST OF KING SALMAN BIN ABDULAZIZ AL SAUD OF SAUDI ARABIA, MAY 20, 2017, IN RIYADH, SAUDI ARABIA. SOURCE: FLICKR/THE WHITE HOUSE/SHEALAH CRAIGHEAD.

Notes

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Bruce W. Jentleson, Contributor

Bruce W. Jentleson is a professor of public policy and political science at Duke University. He served as senior advisor to the U.S. Department of State policy planning director from 2009–11. His book *The Peacemakers: Leadership Lessons from 20th Century Statesmanship* (W. W. Norton) will be published in April 2018.

