



The United States and the Middle East: Avoiding Miscalculation and Preparing for Conflict

September 11, 2013
Washington, D.C.

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A LETTER FROM TAMARA COFMAN WITTES

On September 11-12, 2013, the Saban Center at Brookings and the United States Central Command brought together analysts, officers, and policymakers to discuss both new and enduring challenges facing the United States in the Middle East. The conference, *The United States and the Middle East: Avoiding Miscalculation and Preparing for Conflict*, explored the upheaval in key countries of the region resulting from the Arab uprisings, as well as longstanding conflicts and challenges. In our discussions, we sought to focus attention on those issues where the risks and opportunities for the United States are the greatest.



Vice Admiral Mark Fox, CENTCOM's deputy commander, delivered opening remarks, and we were pleased to have former Secretary of State, Dr. Henry Kissinger, deliver a keynote address. The conference also featured experts visiting from the Middle East alongside senior American analysts and officials, creating a robust dialogue. Together, the speakers and conference participants offered insights that went well beyond conventional Washington wisdom, peered into the future, and provided valuable lessons and ideas for the U.S. military and the broader policy community.

Our panel discussions began with a consideration of the ongoing conflict in Syria, and of President Obama's embrace of multinational diplomacy to resolve the Asad regime's alleged use of chemical weapons. The next panel focused on Iran's new president and how Hassan Rouhani might change Iran's diplomatic relations with the region and the world. The final panel brought several themes of the conference together by examining how regional actors view these developments, as well as how they view the United States' role in the region.

The pages that follow include summaries of rich discussion at the conference sessions, along with an overarching essay by Kenneth Pollack. Except for Ken's essay and his welcoming remarks, the conference was held under the Chatham House Rule, so no statements are attributed to any particular speaker.

I am sincerely grateful to our partners at CENTCOM and the staff at the Saban Center, for their efforts in producing this high-quality conference and these proceedings. Particular thanks go to General Lloyd J. Austin III for his commitment to working with us in our successful annual collaboration. Special thanks also go to Robert Earl for his partnership, support, and contributions throughout the planning and execution of the event.

Tamara Cofman Wittes
*Director, Saban Center for Middle East Policy
at the Brookings Institution*

CONFERENCE AGENDA

The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, D.C.
September 11, 2013

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| <p>9:00 Welcoming Remarks
Tamara Cofman Wittes, <i>Director, The Saban Center For Middle East Policy At Brookings</i></p> <p>9:10 Welcoming Remarks
VADM Mark Fox, <i>Deputy Commander, U.S. CENTCOM</i></p> <p>9:15 SCENESETTER ADDRESS: The Regional Crisis
Kenneth M. Pollack, <i>Senior Fellow, The Saban Center For Middle East Policy At Brookings</i></p> <p>10:00 Break</p> <p>10:15 PANEL 1: The Syrian Civil War As A Driver Of Instability

Frederic C. Hof, <i>Senior Fellow, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, The Atlantic Council</i>

Murhaf Jousefati, <i>Professor, NESACenter for Strategic Studies, National Defense University</i>

Salman Shaikh, <i>Director & Senior Fellow, Brookings Doha Center</i>

Andrew Tabler, <i>Senior Fellow, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy</i>

MODERATOR: Daniel Byman, <i>Director of Research, The Saban Center at Brookings</i></p> <p>11:45 Lunch</p> <p>12:00 KEYNOTE ADDRESS: A Conversation with Dr. Henry Kissinger
Moderated by Kenneth M. Pollack</p> | <p>13:30 PANEL 2: Iran as a Driver of Instability

Nasser Hadian, <i>Assistant Professor of International Relations, University of Tehran</i>

Scott Peterson, <i>Istanbul Bureau Chief, The Christian Science Monitor</i>

Karim Sadjadpour, <i>Senior Associate, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</i>

MODERATOR: Suzanne Maloney, <i>Senior Fellow, The Saban Center at Brookings</i></p> <p>15:00 Break</p> <p>15:30 PANEL 3: Middle Eastern Perspectives on the Regional Crisis

Kemal Kirisci, <i>TUSAID Senior Fellow & Director of the Turkey Project, Center on the United States and Europe, The Brookings Institution</i>

Marwan Muasher, <i>Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace</i>

Amos Yadlin, <i>Director, Institute for National Security Studies, Tel Aviv University</i>

MODERATOR: Tamara Cofman Wittes, <i>Director, The Saban Center at Brookings</i></p> <p>17:00 Closing Remarks
Tamara Cofman Wittes, <i>The Saban Center at Brookings</i></p> <p>17:15 Cocktail Reception</p> <p>18:00 Dinner & Final Remarks

VADM Mark Fox, <i>Deputy Commander, U.S. CENTCOM</i>

H.E. Mohamed Bin Abdullah Al-Rumaihi, <i>Ambassador of Qatar to the United States</i></p> |
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INTRODUCTORY REMARKS

Ken Pollack



The opening session of this year's conference began with introductory remarks by Kenneth Pollack. As the U.S. government contemplated taking military action in Syria in response to the recent chemical weapons attack, and with political

chaos sweeping through the region, Pollack noted a number of underlying trends for policymakers to consider, including the tumultuous Arab Spring, the survival of al-Qa'ida, the prevalence of civil wars, and the rise of China in the affairs of the Middle East.

Two years ago, participants at the same conference were optimistic when looking at the changes sweeping through the region as a result of the Arab Spring. Today, there is a question as to the current state of the Arab Spring and whether it has devolved into an "Arab Winter." Looking at recent events in the region, including the wave of counter-revolution sweeping through Egypt and the outcome of the recent elections in Jordan, there is evidence to suggest that perhaps the Arabs have simply grown weary—or wary—of change.

Another trend identified by Pollack is the persistence of terrorism, in particular the persistence of Salafi jihadist groups. This year's conference coincided with the 12th anniversary of the September 11th terrorist attacks on the United States, and the first anniversary of the attack on the United States consulate in Benghazi. A close examination of the events transpiring in the region today suggests that al-Qa'ida has not only survived a decade of United States-led counterterrorism efforts, it has thus far weathered the Arab Spring. The ability for al-Qa'ida to continue to adapt and rebrand itself speaks to the changing nature of the threat from terrorism, and

is a threat that runs through all major conflicts in the region. Pollack surmised that al-Qa'ida may be shifting from a "franchise" based model in which homegrown off-shoots conduct largely autonomous operations in each country, to a "subsidiary" model in which these same groups can grow, expand into neighboring states, and establish self-governing regions of their own. He cited the efforts of al-Qa'ida in Iraq to morph into the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria as the most obvious example of this.

A third underlying trend in the region today is the prevalence and the spread of civil wars. The Syrian conflict has not only escalated, it is stoking new sectarian conflicts in neighboring Lebanon and Iraq. Yemen continues to serve as a major hub of terrorism while the situation in Libya continues to deteriorate. Against this backdrop is the ongoing Sunni-Shia schism, a historic conflict that most Western nations would prefer to avoid becoming entangled with. Pollack suggested that further civil war and sectarian strife may be more likely than the emergence of democratic prosperity in much of the region in the coming years. While the United States government and the American public would prefer not to police the region, as history has shown, these civil wars will eventually have a direct impact on the United States.

Even with our absence, the United States plays an important role in the region. One might make the case that our most important role in the region in the last few years has been the absence of the United States, as the Obama administration looks to refocus United States commitments in response to the Bush administration's policies. At the moment however, the region is in enormous turmoil, crying out for a greater American role. Many in the region are deeply perplexed, even alarmed, by what they perceive as Washington's greater willingness to step back, and disengage from the affairs of the region than under previous administrations.

Today, far too many people in the region are confused by U.S. policy, given the uneven response of the U.S. government to the various conflicts in the region. For instance, it is difficult for them to understand the U.S. willingness to intervene in Libya but to refrain from taking on a greater role in the Syrian conflict or in Bahrain. Many are confused by the U.S. response to the Egyptian revolution in 2011, compared to Washington's reaction to the uprising in Bahrain just weeks later, or the situation in Egypt over the past two months.

The evolution of U.S. policy in the region has followed the pattern of the British when they first became involved in the Middle East. Examining these broader historic trends may help United States policymakers determine the right course for United States policy in the region going forward. During the 19th century, the initial involvement of the United States in the region was in the role of missionaries and merchants, and for many Americans today, this remains their preference. However, as the United States grew economically and militarily, access to the resources of the Middle East

became increasingly important. Though initially, Americans were content to have the British play a greater role in the political and security issues in the region, over time, the United States was unable to maintain this preferred role. When the British withdrew from the Suez in 1968, the United States grudgingly took on a greater role in the politics and security of the region.

This was the exact same pattern that the British had followed when they first became involved in the Middle East. At the moment, China appears poised to follow this same trajectory. The rise of China in the affairs of the region is an important emerging trend. As China becomes increasingly dependent on the resources of the region, they are bewildered by the security, political and economic problems that plague the Middle East. For the moment, the Chinese government is content to focus on trade and extracting the resources they need, but as Americans grow weary of the burden, it remains to be seen whether the Chinese will assume a greater role. Today, though Americans are weary of war, the United States remains indispensable to the region.

PANEL 1: THE SYRIAN CIVIL WAR AS A DRIVER OF INSTABILITY



Just prior to the conference, President Obama announced his willingness to pursue a political solution proposed by the Russian government to the issue of the Syrian regime's use of chemical warfare agents against Syrian civilians. However, there remained deep skepticism about whether or not such a deal would actually achieve its intended objective of deterring future chemical weapons use by the Asad regime. There was equal or greater skepticism that this same goal could be achieved quickly and cheaply. Daniel Byman, director of research at the Saban Center, moderated a discussion with Frederic C. Hof of the Atlantic Council, Murhaf Jouejati of the National Defense University, Salman Shaikh, of the Brookings Doha Center, and Andrew Tabler, of the Washington Institute for Near East Policy.

The panelists were in agreement that President Obama needs to articulate a clear strategy for Syria, both a political and military strategy, to ensure that the entire U.S. government understood what the administration's national security objectives are in Syria. For their part, the panelists argued that the primary American goals should be eliminating Asad's chemical weapons stockpile, bringing an end to both the Asad regime and the al-Qa'ida presence in Syria, and replacing the Asad regime with a democratic, inclusive government predisposed to cooperate with the United States. The conversation highlighted that achieving those potentially desirable goals would require credible threats of military force in the event that the Syrian government fails

to relinquish its weapons of mass destruction (WMD) or abide by the Geneva transition formula. In addition, the panelists all argued that the United States needed to do more to equip and train the opposition to expand its military capability, while working with the international community and the UN and NATO.

The panelists largely felt that the debates in the United Kingdom and in the U.S. Congress over whether to employ force against the Asad regime for its use of CW highlighted the need for the United States and the international community at large to build a coalition that included the non-aligned, including the BRICs. This coalition should also enable an intra-Syrian dialogue where Syrians inside of Syria are provided a safe space to discuss what the future of Syria should look like and how to bring about a democracy that reflects the needs of the people. Another critical point of collaboration should be alleviating the humanitarian crisis of the Syrian people. With winter only a few months away, it is vital that humanitarian organizations, including the UN and the International Committee of the Red Cross, should be given access to all areas of Syria to minimize the human cost that has transpired as a result of lack of access to food, medicine, and housing. Neighboring countries will have absorbed three million refugees by the end of 2013, creating serious dangers for regional dynamics. For example, one-fourth of Lebanon's population now consists of Syrian refugees.

There was extensive discussion by the panelists regarding the regional implications and the role of foreign fighters—including Hizballah and al-Qa’ida—in Syria, and the growing sectarian violence that has flowed from it. Iran’s greater involvement in the Syrian conflict has been a source of angst for the United States and Israel, as has the increase in extremist groups operating semi-autonomously from the more moderate opposition forces, and even at times fighting against them. Panelists emphasized that breaking the Iran-Hizballah-Syria alliance would be the most powerful defeat for Iran in the last 25 years. To counter these extremist movements and still support the defeat of Asad, a panelist emphasized the need to work through the Supreme Military Council under the National Coalition for Syrian Revolutionary and Opposition Forces, as well as the international community that wants to see this conflict end in the region.

A discussion of post-Asad Syria brought to light various scenarios that could arise were Asad to lose control of the north and the southwest. Protracted conflict only increases the chance of atomization in Syria, with various parts separating from the others and potentially pledging loyalty to different countries or transnational groups. The Gulf countries in particular have voiced concerns that U.S. policy is confusing. They contend that one reason that they support radical Salafist groups is that Washington has not made it clear which groups they *should* support.

The audience pressed the panelists to explain how (in their view) the U.S. administration intends to end the conflict given its most recent diplomatic maneuvers. The panelists responded that they believed that

Washington meant to apply continuous pressure on the regime to end its chemical weapons use, and would increase its support for the Syrian opposition. While there was disagreement as to the exact makeup of the Syrian opposition, and how much of the opposition were extremists, there was agreement that the moderates should be strengthened. One panelist emphasized that training and supporting the Syrians languishing in the refugee camps was key. The discussion ended with a question regarding the popularity of the radical groups on the ground, and how likely it was that Syria would have large Islamist enclaves or would become fully Islamist post-Asad. Two panelists agreed that, like Lebanon, Syria does not offer the appropriate social and political environment necessary to establish an Islamic state. For this reason, all panelists highlighted the need for the U.S. administration and the international community to work with and support the moderate, nationalist Syrians who are working for a democratic Syria and have refused to join hands with the extremists.

Finally, the panel agreed that President Obama must pursue the ongoing diplomatic option with the Russians because he lacks the support of the international community and Congress to launch a military attack. An attack is not a strategy, panelists stressed. Nonetheless, even if this diplomatic option succeeds in stripping Asad of his chemical weapons stockpile, this will likely not be the last time the administration must deal with the Syrian conflict because a much larger struggle still rages in Syria. While the passage of time only exacerbates what already exists, there may indeed come a time when the United States and the international community are able to support a democratic Syria under the direction of a more united, moderate, opposition.

KEYNOTE ADDRESS: A CONVERSATION WITH DR. HENRY KISSINGER



Former Secretary of State Henry Kissinger began his luncheon discussion with an assessment of the fundamentals of formulating foreign policy. The conversation touched on the idea that when formulating policy it was critical first to

assess the status quo, and then to develop a conception of where you might want to go if you decided that the status quo was undesirable or unsustainable. With respect to United States foreign policy regarding the Iranian nuclear program, the ongoing debate on possible United States military intervention in Syria, and United States policy towards Egypt, all were lacking in both a well-defined goal (or desired end-state) and a clearly-articulated strategy.

There was extensive discussion of the Obama administration's efforts to respond to the recent chemical weapons attack in Syria. Examining this through a historic lens, there are a number of factors that United States policymakers must take into account, in particular the war weariness of the American public and the desire to focus on resolving domestic challenges. Also, the administration must be cognizant of the loss of appetite among the American public for becoming involved in wars that United States policymakers do not know how to end, as has been the case of the majority of wars the United States has fought since World War II. As to the issue of military intervention in Syria, the international community must not permit nuclear weapons to become conventional weapons. To deter further use of weapons of mass destruction in Syria, the challenge for the Obama administration was to make the case as to why military force should be used in this instance, while avoiding the establishment of a general principle of intervention, which could harm relations between the United States and its allies.

From the beginning of the conflict in Syria, Russia has sought a major role, and as U.S. influence has diminished, the Russians have been able to play a greater role. Though there are a number of reasons that could explain Russia's decision not to call for the overthrow of the Assad regime thus far, including a decades-long friendship with the Assad family and the Russians' desire to maintain their naval base off the Syrian coast, these reasons are not the central element behind Moscow's Syria policy. For the Russians, the most pressing issue is the spread of Islamic radicalism. The Russians have been concerned that the overthrow of Assad could result in the rise of Islamic radicalism in the region, creating new security challenges for the Russians in the Caucasus in particular. On this matter, the United States has a common interest with Russia. In light of this parallel interest in stopping the spread of radicalism, it may be possible to forge a partnership between Russia and the United States, although this would require expanding bilateral discussions beyond the singular issue of nuclear disarmament.

An indefinite continuation of the Assad regime is not possible. At some point in the near future Assad will have to step aside. The real challenge will be if a unitary government is established immediately thereafter. If the outcome of the Syrian crisis involves moving straight from Assad to another absolute ruler, Syria will likely repeat the problems of Egypt, but on a much more violent scale.

The question about the ongoing negotiations to halt the Iranian nuclear program was raised. It was noted that the United States is currently in the eleventh year of negotiations with Iran, yet United States policy remains unclear. There is no precise definition as to what is meant by a "nuclear program" or "threshold," and no consistent policy in terms of what the United States considers to be "unacceptable." This ambiguity is problematic for the outcome the United States hopes to achieve in the negotiations, and has a negative impact on the reputation of the United States.

The lack of a well-defined goal for United States policy towards Syria and negotiations with Iran, creates significant problems for the United States in reassuring its allies in the region. The speaker noted that for Israel, their threshold for survival is much narrower than that of the United States, and as a result, a number of the risks that may be bearable to the United States are unacceptable to the Israelis, which may lead them to act unilaterally to thwart the Iranian nuclear program. The question was raised whether regime change in Iran was necessary in order for the United States and Iran to resolve the current impasse in negotiations on the nuclear program. The speaker observed that at this point it is too late to halt the nuclear program altogether, which initially was the preferred outcome of the United States. Yet while negotiations remain the optimal course of action, steps must be taken to prevent Iran

from acquiring nuclear weapons. The United States cannot afford to wait for regime change in Iran and thus must continue the negotiations with the current regime.

The session concluded with a discussion of U.S. policy towards Egypt. For the moment, U.S. policy towards Egypt should demonstrate support for the interim government. However, in so doing, the United States should state as an objective the improvement of economic conditions. Given the tumultuous situation in Egypt in the wake of the removal of Egypt's democratically elected president, current U.S. policy towards Egypt must balance providing support to assist the Egyptians in determining their political future, while employing U.S. influence towards the spread of human rights and democratic institutions.

PANEL 2: IRAN AS A DRIVER OF INSTABILITY



The second panel of the conference focused on the new opportunities presented by the election of President Hassan Rouhani in Iran as well as the continued security and diplomatic challenges that the Islamic Republic poses to the United States. Suzanne Maloney of the Saban Center moderated a discussion featuring Scott Peterson of the *Christian Science Monitor*, Nasser Hadian of the University of Tehran, and Karim Sadjadpour of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

Rouhani's electoral success was described by all as a highly unexpected event. It was suggested that only two figures from outside the conservative establishment—former presidents Mohammad Khatami and Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani—were thought to have the clout and appeal to affect the outcome of the election. Yet, even with neither of them among the final list of candidates, Rouhani was able to appeal to a combined centrist and reformist base without incurring the ire of Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, winning a stunning first-round majority in June's polls and raising hopes in Iran and around the world for a shift in the Islamic Republic's policies toward the international community. It was argued that Rouhani has a wider political base than any other Iranian president, giving him a strong mandate to enact change.

Iran's role in the Middle East was discussed, with some debate among the panelists. Some on the panel argued that Iran is no longer a truly revolutionary state, but a status quo power that wishes to maintain the dynamics established in the region after U.S. military action removed anti-Iranian regimes in Iraq and Afghanistan. In this view, Iran's activities in its neighborhood are designed more to protect its interests rather than expand the projection of its power. In addition, many of Iran's actions that can be seen as destabilizing by Washington are largely opportunistic in nature, such as the backing of various militias in Afghanistan and Iraq in response to the power vacuum that emerged in those two nations. Other seemingly provocative Iranian actions are actually reactive—for example, perceived aggression against Iran, in the form of the Stuxnet virus and the assassinations of Iranian nuclear scientists, was the likely motivation behind alleged Iranian attacks in India, Georgia, Thailand, and elsewhere. This view was supported by assertions that Iran wishes to avoid sectarian conflict in the region, and that any support it gives to the Syrian government of Bashar al-Asad comes not from a desire to see his Alawite sect strengthened against the Sunni majority but out of pure geopolitical interests.

It was also expressed that Iran's paradigm—one of a resistance ethos rooted in Islam—is in direct competition with the sectarian Sunni Islam espoused by Sau-

di Arabia and the modern Islamic government model led by Turkey. That said, partially due to the decline of the appeal of Iran's "resistance axis" since it reached the apex of its popularity with the 2006 Hizballah-Israel war, the new Iranian government may move to improve its relations with its regional rivals. This could take the form of outreach to Gulf Cooperation Council members like the United Arab Emirates and Qatar, including reassurances that Iran does not seek regional dominance. Repairing the damaged relationship with Turkey and decreasing tensions with Saudi Arabia will also likely be a priority for Iran, although the proxy conflicts in which Tehran and Riyadh support opposing sides in Syria, Lebanon, and Bahrain are likely to present complications.

It was mentioned that Iran's desire to maintain the status quo could be the driving force behind its nuclear program. Even if Iran is not necessarily seeking weapons, it could be seeking the clear capability to weaponize, which may be possible under Iran's international legal obligations. It would view such a capability as a deterrent against foreign interference or attack. That said, optimism was expressed for some form of negotiated resolution to the nuclear crisis, notably due to the freedom apparently being given by Khamenei to Rouhani and Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif to pursue diplomacy. It was noted, however, that Iran will not agree to give up its entire enrichment program, and will require more than simply sanctions relief to commit to a deal.

There was agreement that, in spite of their conflicting ideologies and history of enmity, the United States and Iran have areas of common interest that could help spur progress toward negotiated cooperation. Foremost on this list is Syria. While it was said that Iran is highly unlikely to consider giving up its support for Hizballah, or for Asad—at least while the latter still maintains

power in much of Syria—Iran's visceral hatred of chemical weapons, stemming from its own experience as a victim during the Iran-Iraq war, could make it a partner in stemming their use in Syria. Particularly if Asad loses his standing to some degree, it was suggested, that Iran would continue to explore alternatives in order to protect its interests should he fall from power. In addition, Iran, like the United States, would like to avoid further sectarian strife or Sunni jihadist presence in Syria. However, it was warned that contrary to sending a message to Iran about the seriousness of American resolve, an American strike on Syrian targets would further motivate Iran to eschew negotiations and pursue a nuclear deterrent out of a desire for self-preservation.

Overall, Iran was characterized as a nation seeking to strengthen its own security rather than hoping to extend its reach. Its soft power initiatives have been largely unsuccessful as of late, both as the rhetorical leader of the resistance axis and as an attempted patron of poorer nations, including Afghanistan and many sub-Saharan African states, where it has failed to make great impact. Therefore, it was said, the United States must remain confident of its power advantage as it moves forward with Iran, but must also realize that the window for negotiations may not be long. Rouhani and Zarif may represent the two most willing and capable officials ever entrusted to negotiate by the Islamic Republic, and, it was said, testing Iranian outreach in new talks is a win-win situation. While refusing to seriously push for a settlement may lose Washington the support of many actors, including Russia, who have so far assented to sanctions, engaging Tehran, if it fails, will show Iran to be the intransigent party. And if negotiations do succeed in reaching an agreement, the security of American interests in the Middle East will be far more assured than in many years. Thus, it was agreed, now is the time to push for diplomacy with Iran.

PANEL 3: MIDDLE EASTERN PERSPECTIVES ON THE REGIONAL CRISIS



The conference's afternoon panel, "Middle Eastern Perspectives on the Regional Crisis," featured speakers from the region—both in and out of CENTCOM's Area of Responsibility (AOR). Saban Center Director Tamar Cofman Wittes moderated a discussion with Kemal Kirisci of the Turkey Project at the Brookings Institution, Marwan Muasher of the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, and Amos Yadlin of the Institute for National Security Studies at Tel Aviv University.

The session focused on regional views of U.S. Middle East policy as well as what role regional actors seek from the United States in the region. Turkey and Israel, though outside CENTCOM's AOR, are important U.S. allies and both affected by events in and U.S. policy toward the region, especially the crisis in Syria. Israel appreciates its alliance with the United States, but does not want America to fight on its behalf and recognizes the need to be strong enough, militarily, to face threats alone.

Turkey's leaders are fixated on the goal of getting Bashar al-Asad to give up power in Syria, but the Turkish public is skeptical of intervention. Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdoğan banked on his close relationship with President Obama to move this goal forward. From Turkey's perspective, however, the Obama administration is less committed than Erdoğan's government in building public support for intervention.

U.S. regional policy is a huge question mark to regional actors at the moment. U.S. allies in the region do not see the United States as fulfilling its commitments to regional security and stability. The leaders of at least one regional country believe the region would be in better shape if the United States were more forthcoming in its long-term regional strategy.

Some of the regional question marks regarding U.S. policy are the result of a fundamentally different view of the Arab awakening between the United States and the Arab Gulf states. At this point, there is a difference between what is wanted from the United States in countries that are in transition and those that are not. To date, Gulf states have been relatively successful in staving off change through security and financial means, but these methods will not last forever, as the regional dynamics that created the Arab awakening still exist. There will come a time when the United States will have to have more candid, open conversation with the Gulf states about these issues. However, the United States acts as if it needs the Gulf states more than they need the United States.

A timely discussion ensued on U.S. credibility, given the "red line" President Obama set down on Asad's use of chemical weapons and the debate in Washington on the use of force and the Russian proposal to remove

chemical weapons from Syria. As a superpower outside the region, the United States has more time to think and follow a clear bureaucratic process, unlike regional actors, who may feel the need to respond immediately to such provocations. Regional events from 2011 onward have awoken the so-call “Arab street.” Public perceptions of the United States are very low and it may, ironically, be the case that a U.S. decision not to strike Syria could increase U.S. credibility with Arab publics. Such a decision, however, is likely to lessen U.S. credibility with Arab governments, displaying the difficult split in regional public and elite opinions, which U.S. policymakers must now consider.

Discussion about Syria turned from the regional view—of Gulf Arab states, Israel, and Iran—to the U.S. response to the Syrian regime’s use of chemical weapons. The regional view is that Iran is watching the U.S. response to Syria, and the consequences of Syria will reflect what would happen if Iran approaches the U.S. “red line” on nuclear weapons development. At the same time, U.S. success in Syria may help in negotiations with Iran on the nuclear issue. It was noted that the last time Iran halted its nuclear program was following the U.S. invasion of Iraq, which increased the credibility of military action if Iran continued. One argument now is that the Obama administration’s decision not to strike Syria, or at least to delay a strike, in response to the regime crossing a “red line” lowers the chances both that the United States would stop Iran from crossing a nuclear “red line” or that Iran would believe U.S. threats. On the other hand, it was pointed out that Syria is not Iran, that regional actors are more focused on the threat they face from a nuclear Iran than from Syrian chemical weapons aimed internally, and that Iran is an issue not just for a couple of regional states but for the entire world.

The developments of the Arab awakening have affected regional states as well as U.S. relations toward them. In addition to the gap between what Arab governments and Arab publics want from the United States, the

civil war in Syria and turmoil in Iraq has unleashed a Sunni-Shi’a divide that, despite starting as political issues, have increasingly religious overtones. Despite the upheaval, the transitioning Arab states are moving in the right direction. The brute force of authoritarianism cannot reemerge in these states, as was seen in the uprising against Egyptian president Mohamed Morsi. The transition process will be long, and such transitions have rarely gone smoothly anywhere. The region, with U.S. assistance, will have to find its way toward sustainable stability.

In addition to its credibility issue, the United States is viewed as having lost much of its leverage in the region. The Iraq war and subsequent withdrawal of troops sapped the United States of its military tool; while its economic tool was weakened by the global financial crisis. The continuation of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to cut into U.S. diplomatic might. Regional publics and even some governments also believe that the United States is not wielding any leverage that does exist. To this extent, the United States is increasingly viewed as irrelevant.

The discussion concluded on the topics of citizenship and the artificially drawn borders of the Sykes–Picot Agreement. Turkey, for one, is very concerned with the territorial unity of states and sees the unraveling of borders as rendering the Syrian crisis even more problematic for Turkey. It was pointed out that while the borders themselves are currently holding, the states within them—most notably Syria and Iraq—are not functioning as stable countries. Following the Arab Awakening, citizens have agency in helping answer the problems of governance that they did not before. In all countries of the region—those that have and have not begun to transition, and even those in conflict—addressing issues of citizenship is necessary for long-term stability. In the Balkans, during a similar period of flux, the European Union and NATO held out rewards for states as they continued through stages of transition. In comparison, the Middle East lacks similar institutions.

TROUBLED WATERS, TREACHEROUS SANDS

The Interlocking Crises of the Middle East

Ken Pollack

In 2006, the Middle East seemed headed for disaster. Today, as the annual Brookings-U.S. Central Command conference surveyed the Middle Eastern scene, the region seems to have somehow gotten worse. As many have remarked, the Arab Spring seems to have turned to inglorious winter although the problems that produced it have not been solved. Upheaval has led not to democracy and stability, but to more upheaval. And perhaps most dangerous of all, the crises of the region are feeding off one another, making each worse than it might otherwise be. Only the surprising election results in Iran—of all places—offer a glimpse of hope in what otherwise seems a bleak canvas.

Swirling Storm Clouds

Surveying the Middle Eastern landscape, turmoil seems the new normal. Somalia, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, Yemen and Libya are all wracked by violence of varying degrees but similar grief. Turkey, Sudan, Jordan, Kuwait and Morocco face lesser challenges, at least for now. It is almost becoming easier to count the states of the Middle East *not* facing an existential crisis than those that are.

It's impossible not to notice each individual crisis. However, what is often overlooked is the way that the multiple crises are intersecting, amplifying their problems and introducing wholly new ones. The Sunni-Shi'a confrontation and the Sunni fears of a looming "Shi'a crescent" began with civil war in Iraq in 2006-2008. But they have taken on both a new life and much greater urgency as a result of the problems in Bahrain, Yemen and especially Syria, which in turn is threatening to spill over and reignite sectarian conflict in Iraq and Lebanon. Were it not for the crises in all of those different places, the fears of a broader Sunni-Shi'a war today would seem as overblown as they were a decade ago when only Iraq was in a state of sectarian chaos.

A coalition of Sunni majority Arab states led by Saudi Arabia has emerged in response to the fears of a looming Shi'a threat. For them, the fight is as much about Iran as it is about Shi'ism. They often see the two as indistinguishable. And so they have involved themselves in virtually every hot spot in the region in the belief that, in every case, Iran is either causing the problem or taking advantage of it to advance Tehran's nationalistic or sectarian ambitions (the two seem inseparable in the minds of many). Of course, while they often exaggerate both Iranian power and pervasiveness, they aren't necessarily wrong. The Iranians have seen many of the national crises as opportunities to advance their agendas, even if sometimes they came late to the crisis and only did so because their Sunni opponents called their attention to a problem by blaming them for it.

For the militant Sunni coalition, these dangers have convinced them to oppose not just Iranian meddling and Shi'a uprisings, but virtually all political change in the region. They seem to have concluded that serious reform cannot be controlled and will inevitably lead to revolution. As a consequence, they have become a counterrevolutionary league that has buttressed the efforts of autocrats to resist all change, and in so doing have imperiled reform across the region. Yet this has not meant that those who oppose both revolution and reform have found a better answer to the economic, social and political stagnation of the Muslim states of the Middle East—the very forces that produced the Arab spring in the first place. The desire for change may have temporarily abated, but unless those deep, structural problems can somehow be addressed in some other way, they will resurface at another time, and possibly in an even more virulent or explosive form.

Moreover, the fight within Islam between Sunni and Shi'a has now been joined by a fight within Islamism, or at least within *Sunni* Islamism, between more

mainstream parties like the Muslim Brotherhood, and Salafi extremists including terrorist groups like al-Qa'ida and Jabhat al-Nusra. This fight has, in turn created a rift within the militant Sunni league, with Turkey, Qatar and Jordan favoring the Ikhwan, while Saudi Arabia and the UAE favor the Salafists. It isn't at all clear that any of them will get the result that they seek, only that they favor groups most like themselves simply because they seem more like themselves than the others.

Inevitably, but also unfortunately, all of this has meant the survival of the region's many terrorist groups and in some cases their revival. Three to four years ago, al-Qa'ida in Iraq was all but extinct—relegated to a few frightened remnants, holed up around Jebel Hamrin and fighting for their survival. Today, AQI is back with a vengeance, wreaking havoc in Iraq and branching out into Syria as well. AQAP continues to be a force in Yemen, while their Maghrebi brethren were forced out of Libya (perhaps only temporarily) only to find a new home in Mali. A dozen years after 9/11, it is difficult to argue that terrorism is less of a problem in the region.

The Surprising Rays of Hope from Iran

The one potential bright spot in the Middle Eastern sky appears to be Iran. There, the multilateral sanctions seem to have had precisely the desired effect: forcing Iranians to concentrate on their economic fortunes, and in turn producing the surprise election of Hassan Rouhani as president. There seems to be little doubt that Rouhani is a genuine reformist, determined to transform Iran inside and out, as our panel on Iran unanimously averred. There even seems hope that the Supreme Leader may be willing to give Rouhani some latitude to try to get the sanctions lifted by agreeing to at least some concessions on Iran's nuclear program.

Without question, if Iran's nuclear program could be removed as a source of fear and a driver of instability by a diplomatic deal, that could have a major palliative effect. Just as fear of Iran ripples across the region's

many national crises, so removing that fear could make it easier to deal with the separate crises on their own terms. There would be far less of a tendency among parties to each crisis to take extreme action in the belief that Iran was somehow the source of the problem—or at least an exacerbating factor. Likewise, a sense of diminished threat from Iran would accordingly diminish the determination of regional governments to involve themselves in these crises in unhelpful ways all in the name of combating the Iranian threat.

However, as always in the U.S.-Iranian relationship, the devil will be in the details. Even though both the Obama Administration and Rouhani's new team both appear to want a negotiated resolution of the nuclear impasse there are many obstacles that might still bar the way. Hardliners on both sides will distrust any deal, and it is not entirely clear what either side is willing to give and whether it will be enough for the other.

One interesting point that arose from the discussion of Iran at the conference was that time is working against a U.S.-Iranian deal, but not in the way conventionally understood in the West. Since 2002, many Americans, Arabs, Israelis and others have feared that Iran's goal was to use negotiations to simply string along the international community while Tehran mastered atomic bomb technology and acquired both the fissile material and explosive device for a nuclear weapon. From that belief grew a conviction that diplomacy had to have an expiration date—and consequences if the Iranians allowed it to fail. In contrast, the Iran experts present at the Brookings-CENTCOM conference largely argued that time was far more pressing for Rouhani, who needed to show results (in the form of meaningful concessions from the West) quickly to stave off the efforts of his own right wing to stop his bid for a negotiated settlement in its tracks.

Thus, while the prospect of a deal on Iran's nuclear program seemed to be the light at the end of the tunnel, even this may prove only a falling star in an otherwise inky night.

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