



The Middle East in Transition

July 22, 2015
Washington, D.C.

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A LETTER FROM TAMARA COFMAN WITTES

Each year, the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings and the United States Central Command jointly convene two days of discussions that bring together analysts, officers, and policymakers to examine both new and enduring challenges facing the United States in the Middle East. This year's conference, *The Middle East in Transition*, took place over July 22nd and 23rd, and explored the upheaval in key countries of the region resulting from the Arab uprisings, as well as longstanding conflicts and challenges like terrorism and regional power competition.



The conference featured academic experts, visitors from the Middle East, and senior American policy voices, creating a robust dialogue that spanned topics from settling civil wars to rebalancing military and civilian tools of statecraft. We were honored that General Lloyd Austin, CENTCOM's commander, joined us to deliver opening remarks and participated in much of the conference. At our special evening event, the Honorable Michèle Flournoy, Ambassador Richard Haass, and Ambassador Martin Indyk joined me in a spirited conversation about how the United States could build a sustained and coherent strategy toward a region undergoing such fundamental change. 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 what other civil wars can teach us about the instability in Iraq and the ongoing conflict in Syria. The next panel focused on the showdown between Saudi Arabia and Iran over Yemen, and the wider regional implications of this conflict in a poor and embittered corner of the Arab world. The final panel examined how the nuclear deal with Iran affected U.S. policy toward other regional issues, including instability in Egypt and the unmet demand for social and political change among a still-active and still-marginalized young generation of Arabs across the region.

I'm delighted to share with you this summary of the rich discussion at our conference sessions, together with a framing essay by Brookings Senior Fellow 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 to my team at the Center for Middle East Policy, for their efforts in producing this high-quality conference and these summary proceedings. Of particular note are the contributions of Lieutenant Colonel Grant Vineyard and Colonel Ronald Tucker to the planning and execution of the event. My special thanks to General Lloyd J. Austin, III, for his vision and commitment to rigorous analysis and to our annual collaboration.

Tamara Cofman Wittes
*Senior Fellow and Director, The Center for Middle East Policy
at the Brookings Institution*

CONFERENCE AGENDA

The Ronald Reagan Building and International Trade Center, Washington, D.C.
July 22, 2015

- 8:30 **Opening Remarks**
General Lloyd Austin
U.S. CENTCOM

Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Senior Fellow and Director, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*
- 9:00 **PANEL 1: The Iraq-Syria Nexus**

Raad Alkadiri, *Managing Director for Petroleum Sector Risk, IHS Energy*

Andrew Tabler, *Senior Fellow, the Program on Arab Politics, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy*

Barbara Walter, *Professor of Political Science, University of California San Diego*

MODERATOR: Kenneth Pollack, *Senior Fellow, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*
- 10:30 **Break**
- 11:00 **PANEL 2: The Wider Yemen Quagmire**

David Laitin, *Professor of Political Science, Stanford University*

Bruce Riedel, *Senior Fellow, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*

Jillian Schwedler, *Professor of Political Science, Hunter College*

MODERATOR: Daniel Byman, *Senior Fellow and Director of Research, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*
- 12:30 **Lunch**
- 14:00 **PANEL 3: Competing Struggles**

Michele Dunne, *Senior Associate, Middle East Program, The Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*

Nasser Hadian, *Tehran University*

William McCants, *Fellow and Director, The Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*

Kori Schake, *Research Fellow, The Hoover Institution*

MODERATOR: Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Senior Fellow and Director, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*
- 15:30 **Concluding Remarks**

Kenneth Pollack, *Senior Fellow, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*
- 18:00 **Dinner Panel on Crafting a Unified Strategy toward the Middle East**

Hon. Michèle Flournoy, *CEO, The Center for a New American Security*

Amb. Richard Haass, *President, The Council on Foreign Relations*

Amb. Martin Indyk, *Executive Vice President, The Brookings Institution*

MODERATOR: Tamara Cofman Wittes, *Senior Fellow and Director, The Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings*

OPENING REMARKS

General Lloyd Austin



Good morning, everyone, and welcome. Thanks again to Tamara Wittes, and to Brookings for co-hosting the event. It's going to be a good two days here.

The theme for this conference is a fascinating one, in my opinion, the

Middle East in transition. And, frankly, it's hard to imagine a time when that particular part of the world was more in flux, more chaotic, more volatile, more tumultuous than it is today.

I often tell people that when you're responsible for a part of the world that consists of places like Iraq, Syria, Iran, Egypt, Yemen, Lebanon, and Afghanistan, when you're responsible for that part of the world, you never know what kinds of challenges or crises that you're going to wake up to on any given day.

Today there is widespread conflict and fighting in Iraq and Syria. Operations are ongoing in Afghanistan. The Houthis and al-Qaida elements are busy pursuing their own interest in Yemen and, of course, just last week the members of the P5+1 reached a deal with Iran regarding its nuclear program. And these are just a few of the things that keep us busy these days.

As you would expect, at U.S. Central Command, much of our efforts are focused on doing what we can to help manage the various challenges that are facing the region. However, it is just as important to make sure our efforts are aimed at shaping the environment and moving things in a direction of increased stability and security. And key to doing this, as all of you well know, is understanding the root causes of the problems that we're dealing with. What is the genesis of the violence? And what links the different events and behaviors together?

I've spent a significant amount of time over the last 28 months traveling around the Central Region and talking with our regional partners and I've come to appreciate what I refer to as the underlying currents that are at play in the volatile part of the world. And these underlying currents include a growing ethno-sectarian divide. Now, even more so than in the past, ethnic and sectarian identity is considered more important than national identity and this is causing some very real problems, and Iraq is a case in point. It is more important to be a Shi'a or a Sunni or a Kurd than it is to be an Iraqi. And until this changes, it is going to be increasingly difficult to unify the country.

Other underlying currents include the struggle between moderates and radical extremists and the rejection of corruption and authoritarian rule. And also the youth bulge, which consists of young and unemployed or underemployed and disenfranchised men and women, who, unfortunately, are highly susceptible to the ideas espoused by many extremists.

These and the other root causes of the problems that plague the Central Region have to be addressed if we hope to achieve lasting change in this part of the world, and they will have to be addressed primarily by the people who reside there. We can't do it for them and expect for the changes to endure. And I think all of us here recognize such fact. So I think the theme of the conference is very appropriate as we consider at the macro level a region that is in the midst of a significant period of transition.

Of course, nowhere is this more apparent today than in Iraq and Syria. This morning we'll spend a good bit of time talking about what's going on right now in both countries, and I certainly am looking forward to the discussion.

I've been in this business for more than four decades and I've been fighting for much of the past 13 years, on

and off. And I will tell you that ISIL is the most barbaric enemy that I have ever witnessed. Likewise, the conflict that continues to plague the country of Syria is the most complex challenge that I have ever seen. What is happening in Iraq and Syria presents an incredibly difficult problem set and, unfortunately, there are no easy answers.

But that said, from a military perspective, I can assure you that we are achieving tremendous effects against this enemy and, contrary to what you may hear, our coalition airpower has been enormously effective. We've removed several thousand enemy fighters from the battlefield, to include dozens of ISIL's senior leaders. And we've destroyed vehicles and training facilities and weapons systems and oil refineries and crude collection points. And in doing so, we've significantly degraded ISIL's overall capability and, namely, its ability to mass forces and project combat power and to command and control elements on the battlefield, and also his ability to take and hold terrain.

The reality is that we're still in the early stages of this campaign. However, as a commander, I can assure you that we are taking the fight to the enemy in a major way and it is just a matter of time before he is defeated.

That said, keeping to the theme of this conference and the focus on transitions, I really do believe we need to give serious thought to what comes next. We know what we want to accomplish in Iraq, but what exactly do we hope to transition to in Syria, and are we doing what is necessary to achieve those desired end states? In Iraq, as I said, we can and we will defeat ISIL militarily. However, unless we stem the flow of foreign fighters, and unless we cut off the enemy's ability to resource himself and create additional capability, and unless we figure out how to effectively counter the radical ideologies that so often inspire extremist behavior, unless we do these kinds of things, and unless the Iraqi government achieves some sort of political reconciliation, then it is highly likely that we'll find ourselves back here in two years or five years or at some point in the future and we'll be dealing with the next version of ISIL.

The same applies to Syria. As you know, we often get asked the question, why aren't you doing more in Syria? And what I would tell you is that we are achieving good effects against ISIL inside the country. And while the enemy has greater freedom of movement in Syria—and primarily because of the large amounts of ungoverned space—their capability has been significantly degraded, and the Kurds in the northeast part of the country continue to put increasing pressure on the enemy's lines of communication between Syria and Iraq. And I'll be interested in your thoughts on this important topic, as well.

Indeed, I look forward to hearing what you have to say about any and all of the challenges facing us today in the Central Region. With everything that's going on in Iraq and Syria and Yemen and Jordan and Lebanon and Egypt, and with the P5+1 deal recently inked, with all of this going on in the Middle East we could easily extend this conference into a week-long event. We are, without question, in the midst of a significant period of transition and we face a number of tough challenges. But as Albert Einstein famously stated, "In the midst of difficulty lies opportunity." And I believe that that is exactly how we must view the region.

Periods of transition, by their nature, are rife with opportunities and I believe that we can and we will effectively move things in that strategically important part of the world in a direction of increased stability and security. And that, of course, is our ultimate goal.

All of us here want to see our core national interest in our homeland protected and we've got many of the greatest experts in the business sitting in the room together today. As I look around the room and look at the talent in this room, I fully expect that we'll have most of these problems solved by noon tomorrow.

Again, I want to thank everyone for taking the time to be here and to join in what I believe is a very important dialogue. Each of you brings unique perspectives and tremendous expertise and your opinions are highly valued, and we do look forward to hearing from everyone. As I said, we have a lot to talk about and just a few hours to cover a lot of ground.

PANEL 1: THE IRAQ-SYRIA NEXUS



Although the Islamic State may be the most immediate threat to the security and stability of the Middle East and to U.S. interests in the region, the fact is that it is merely one symptom of the underlying civil wars currently roiling Iraq and Syria. Thus, if we truly want to defeat the Islamic State and prevent it or something even worse from taking root in the future, we must address these wider civil wars. To help think through some of the possible ways to do this, Kenneth Pollack, senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy (CMEP), moderated a discussion with Raad Alkadiri, managing director for Petroleum Sector Risk at IHS Energy; Andrew Tabler, senior fellow at the Program on Arab Politics at the Washington Institute for Near East Policy; and Barbara Walter, professor of political science at the University of California San Diego.

The conversation began with a general discussion of historical trends related to how civil wars end and the factors that are more likely to produce lasting negotiated settlements to end civil wars. It was noted that the civil wars that have historically ended in successful negotiated settlements all shared three critical elements: the warring parties had reached a military stalemate; a mediator was present during the negotiations; and the terms of the settlement included specific political or

territorial power-sharing guarantees for all of the major fighting factions as well as some sort of mechanism (such as a third party) to guarantee the security of all parties, including and especially minorities.

Examining the implications of these insights for the cases of Iraq and Syria, the panelists agreed that in both cases, the warring parties have not yet reached a military stalemate and still believe that they can achieve victory through violence, although it was suggested that in Iraq, the parties are becoming so frustrated and alienated that they are beginning to think about different options. However, the panelists agreed that unless and until regional players (including Iran, but also Saudi Arabia and other Sunni states) abandon the mindset that there is opportunity to be found in chaos and stop supporting the various factions in the conflicts, the groups will continue to believe that fighting is a viable alternative to negotiation.

The panelists suggested that this is where the United States can perhaps play a role by helping the regional actors understand that their long-term security interests would be better served if they were instead to encourage their various proxies to seek a negotiated political settlement rather than a decisive military victory.

However, several panelists argued that, particularly in the case of Iraq, the United States is not seen as a fair player because of its post-2003 legacy and thus is not the best candidate to play the role of mediator in any future negotiations.

Two additional barriers to reaching a successful negotiated settlement in Iraq were identified: the lack of consensus among the different groups in Iraq on how the state should be structured, due in part to wildly different interpretations of what “federalism” actually means; and the prolonged absence of any kind of national reconciliation in which all communities believe that they have equal access to power and the rules of the game are clearly established.

Moving to Syria, the panelists explained that regional actors have carved out spheres of influence inside Syria out of legitimate concern for their own security interests and that each country is looking for people like themselves to support in the civil war; this, the panelists asserted, makes the positions of the regional powers very important, especially in the face of U.S. apathy. It was argued that it is time for the United States and other actors to accept that these spheres of influence exist and to prepare for the realities of long-term de facto partition of Syria.

The panelists also noted that the idea of separatism/partition has become far more acceptable in Iraq in last two years and that parties are demonstrating an increasing

willingness to give up territory that they would not have been willing to part with in the past. This, the panelists explained, is in part because of the lack of effective governance and institutions in the country and in part because the political system the United States helped set up in Iraq post-2003 was formally organized along ethno-sectarian lines. The point was made that if you set up a system that is formally based on such divisions, that becomes the central organizing principle of government, and there will ultimately be parties that benefit disproportionately from that system. Leaders of competing political groups use ethnicity or religion as a tool for mobilization, and the result is that ethno-sectarian identities become hardened.

The argument was made that the strategy that calls for the United States to support Sunnis and Kurds to balance Iran and the Shia in Iraq is simplistic and the kind of thinking that got us into this problem in the first place; rather, what Iraq needs is a complex political compact, perhaps using the Lebanon post-1989 solution as a model. In Syria, the panelists agreed that a key goal should be figuring out a way to fight the Asad regime without destroying the existing state structures in the process.

Ultimately, the panelists agreed that it is the warring parties themselves—along with the regional actors—that have the mandate to solve these civil wars; no one else.

PANEL 2: THE WIDER YEMEN QUAGMIRE



The second panel of the conference focused on how Yemen's civil war is becoming entrenched in the strategic relevance of the region as the civil war continues to expand. The panelists discussed the reasons for Yemen's slide into chaos, highlighting social, economic, and political factors. They also refuted the idea that Yemen's civil war was instigated by sectarian conflict. The discussion was moderated by Daniel Byman, senior fellow and director of research at the Center for Middle East Policy (CMEP) at Brookings, and featured David Laitin, professor of political science at Stanford University; Bruce Riedel, CMEP senior fellow and director of the Intelligence Project at Brookings; and Jillian Schwedler, professor of political science at Hunter College.

The conversation began with a discussion of the social science literature on civil wars and an examination of how well the leading social science models for predicting the onset of civil war performed in the context of the Arab Spring in general and the Yemeni civil war in particular. It was noted that the models fairly accurately predicted possible conflict arising in Yemen during its unification in 1990 because of the combination of the country's high poverty level, unstable government, and status as an emerging state. However, the model was unable to see the susceptibility of the Middle East and North Africa during the Arab Spring. The suggestion was made that a more important variable to

predict conflict is government effectiveness, as not all autocracies are equally able to defend against threats.

The degree to which regional diffusion, or the so-called contagion effect, played a role in the spread of the Arab uprisings was debated by the panelists. One panelist opined that it would be hard to imagine the Egyptian revolution having occurred without the Tunisian revolution having taken place first. Another panelist countered that although that perspective seems logical, it does not actually reflect the broader social mechanisms at work and argued that the decision to pursue radical change is not entirely dependent on geographical continuity. As an example, the panelist remarked that Bolshevik Revolution inspired Mexican activists to solidify their own revolution. Political actors had seen a new vision for themselves in a changing world, similar to what occurred during the Arab uprisings.

The discussion then moved to a closer examination of the specific internal factors that are instigating fractionalization in Yemen. The panelists agreed that Yemen's violence does not stem from sectarian conflict, but rather from a number of other factors including the highly armed nature of Yemeni society, the secessionist aspirations of the south, and the breakdown of state structures. It was explained that framing the Yemeni civil war as product of longstanding tensions between

Sunnis and Shi'a is historically inaccurate: for example, it was not until recently that mosques in Yemen were identified as Sunni or Shi'a. In addition, many tribes in Yemen are not aligned with either side. However, the panelists acknowledged that this does not prevent other actors from viewing the conflict through a sectarian lens. Saudi Arabia in particular is concerned about what it perceives as Iranian meddling on its border.

It was suggested that the best way for Yemen to break out of its cycle of violence is for the country to go back to the agreed-upon terms of federalism that came out of the National Dialogue Conference in 2013. The point was made that the Houthis had objected to the terms of the new federated state, but not federalism itself. Part of the issue was that in the new redistricting, the Houthis would be landlocked and cut off from major resources. By coming back to the table on this issue, the peace process could start from previously agreed-upon terms.

The conversation then moved to a discussion of the Yemeni civil war from the perspective of Saudi Arabia. It was explained that the intervention in Yemen is an especially sensitive issue for the new king, Salman bin Abdulaziz Al Saud. Almost immediately after his succession to the throne, the Yemeni civil war flared up; this became a significant problem for the leadership, since they have deep antagonism toward the Houthis. The decision to intervene in Yemen was the first major foray into foreign policy for King Salman, and he has now become the face of the Saudi intervention. As such, any failure in Yemen will reflect poorly on the new king, whose legitimacy is already somewhat shaky given that he is the grandson of the kingdom's founder,

not one of the other sons—a situation unprecedented in modern Saudi history.

The panel ended with a discussion of what role the United States should play in the Yemeni conflict. On this question, the panelists disagreed. One panelist argued that the international community should revisit the UN Security Council resolution on Yemen because the current one is extremely one-sided and focuses all of the blame on the Houthis. The panelist also suggested that other international actors, such as Oman and Pakistan, could also be useful in brokering a return to the political process.

Another panelist said the United States should encourage the formation of an international neo-trusteeship run by a consortium of the interested international parties—namely, the United States, Saudi Arabia, and Iran—to oversee the adoption and implementation of a power-sharing arrangement among the various groups in Yemen, as was done in the past in Kosovo and the Democratic Republic of Congo. In those cases, the weaker parties in the conflict were assured that international institutions would be present for a long period of time and that the principle leadership would not take advantage of the weaker actors.

Finally, a third panelist disagreed that the United States could play any major role at all and stated that the best policy for the United States to pursue would be to urge the Saudis to consider the humanitarian consequences of the crisis, arguing that the situation could deteriorate past even the scale of the Syrian civil war. All panelists agreed that if no solution to the conflict is found soon, the humanitarian consequences will be dire.

PANEL 3: COMPETING STRUGGLES



The Middle East's civil conflicts do not exist in isolation. Multilayered identity conflicts—Sunni vs. Shi'a, jihadi extremists vs. state actors, political Islamists vs. secularists, etc.—all contribute to the chaos and instability currently engulfing the region. While some point to these collective conflicts as fault lines for the region's troubles, these divisions have been present for some time. To help understand why these identity conflicts have now erupted into violence, Tamara Cofman Wittes, senior fellow and director of the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, moderated a conversation with Michele Dunne, senior associate in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace; Nasser Hadian of Tehran University; William McCants, fellow and director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World in the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings; and Kori Schake, research fellow at the Hoover Institution.

The conversation began with a look at the different Iranian perspectives on the region's crises. It was explained that Iran's foreign policy establishment is largely split into two camps with differing viewpoints. The dominant group supports an assertive role for Iran in the Middle East on the basis that stability and territorial integrity are Iran's main priorities. This camp fears that regional insecurity will reach Iran unless it actively takes steps to ensure the region's security.

The second camp argues that Iran lacks the resources to continue fighting the Islamic State broadly in both Iraq and Syria and believes that Iran should take a minimalist approach and only defend southern Iraq's sacred Shi'a shrines and the coastal region of Syria. This camp contends that despite doing more to fight the Islamic State than any other nation, Iran has been slandered and accused of imperialism. As a result, it should let the Arabs lead the fight. It was noted that although this is not the dominant viewpoint within the Islamic Republic, many elites support a minimalist Iranian role because they do not believe that the Islamic State threatens Iran: the group requires Sunni support to operate, so its natural expansion leads toward Saudi Arabia, not Shi'a areas.

The discussion then turned to the Islamic State and whether the group is currently winning the argument that violence is the Salafi community's only path. The panelists discussed the internal debate that has played out for over a decade about whether Salafis should participate in the political process or eschew gradualism for violence. Ten years ago, al-Qaida split on the issue; its senior leadership argued that expelling the United States from the Middle East was the group's immediate goal, which required popular support to accomplish. In contrast, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and his cohorts in al-Qaida in Iraq (AQI), the precursor of the Islamic

State, argued that popular support was not necessary to achieve the political goal of re-establishing a Sunni caliphate, believing that brutality and imposing one's will was more effective.

The defeat of AQI in 2008 seemed to vindicate the view that popular support is essential and a prerequisite for state-building. The Arab uprisings that began in 2010 further reinforced this view: Salafis believed they could advance their religious interests by participating in new political openings that followed the Arab Spring. However, they became disabused of that notion over the next two years as political participation in Egypt and elsewhere failed to produce the desired results.

The collapse of the Syrian state and its descent into civil war allowed the remnants of AQI, now calling themselves the Islamic State, a second chance to try state-building. Their hyper-sectarian rhetoric, brutality, and recruitment of foreign fighters proved wildly successful this time around: the Islamic State is the first actor to credibly claim the establishment of a Sunni caliphate since the fall of the Ottoman Empire. As long as they continue to endure and expand, they will continue to serve as a stark rebuttal to the idea that nonviolence and political participation are the most effective ways for Islamists to achieve their aspirations. The argument was made that when the Islamic State is defeated, other jihadist groups will ask what made it so successful and will likely take the lesson that brutality is the key to achieving political objectives. As a result, future jihadists will be more brutal and focused on state-building than in the past.

The conversation then moved to a discussion about the social and political demands that led to the Arab Spring. It was noted that the Middle East's political models have largely failed to address regional grievances. A question was raised: Where has the demand for change gone?

One panelist commented that in addition to the Sunni/Shi'a, extremist/state actor, Islamist/secularist

divides, demography is another incredibly important yet often overlooked fault line. Because of the Middle East's youth bulge, young people are becoming increasingly important, and Arab states are vulnerable largely because they have not met the needs of their youth, particularly in the areas of education, employment, and expression.

The panelists agreed that traditional models of governance (monarchies and republics) are unlikely to survive future turmoil unless they do a much better job of providing for rising generations. The argument was made that the Islamic State's ability to attract large numbers of foreign fighters from the Arab world can partly be attributed to the group's popularity with young people in the region who are driven by a narrative that feeds off latent frustration and rejection. It was suggested that a promising new model exists in Tunisia, where a pluralist and participatory governance structure is attempting to bridge the divides between Islamists and secularists.

Finally, the panelists addressed the issue of U.S. policy toward the region and the relationship between the United States and the Arab countries, with several agreeing that the relationship is too heavily focused on security. One panelist opined that the United States' narrow focus on security has not produced the desired results because the United States has not seriously engaged its military capabilities. Regional allies are exasperated because they see great capacity for the United States to help but little willingness to do so. The speaker asserted that the United States has done a poor job of navigating the narrow line between pushing its allies to create better social compacts with their citizenries and engaging with them militarily in an attempt to put out the regional wildfires.

The panelists generally agreed that military and security interactions should be bolstered by engagement in other areas. Educational and economic interactions are important for regional stability and should not be overlooked.

DINNER PANEL: CRAFTING A UNIFIED STRATEGY TOWARD THE MIDDLE EAST



In the closing session of the conference, Tamara Cofman Wittes moderated a panel on U.S. grand strategy in the Middle East featuring the Honorable Michèle Flournoy, co-founder and CEO of the Center for a New American Security; Ambassador Richard Haass, president of the Council on Foreign Relations; and Ambassador Martin Indyk, executive vice president of the Brookings Institution.

The conversation began by examining how America's engagement in the Middle East has changed. During the Cold War, the United States' involvement in the region was largely driven by the desire to maintain and expand U.S. influence in the region in order to counter the Soviet Union and by the need for oil. After the fall of the Soviet Union and the end of the Cold War, the U.S. experience in the Middle East was defined by its desire to maintain the free flow of oil, its dominance in the Gulf War, and its role as a peace-broker in the Arab-Israeli conflict. With the events of 9/11 and the 2003 invasion of Iraq, U.S. engagement in the region was almost exclusively focused on security and counterterrorism.

Today, many in the United States question America's interests in the Middle East and whether military dominance and the use of force are the most effective

foreign policy tools in the region. It was stated that although the free flow of oil is still crucial for American interests, the importance of this has waned in light of the decreased efficacy of force in the region.

The panelists emphasized the importance of U.S. partners in the region and the need to assess which are reliable political actors that share our interests and which are problematic partners. The argument was made that the United States should be supporting Tunisia, Morocco, and Jordan, but they are not good partners because they are small and weak. Israel is militarily our best ally, but serves better as a covert partner. Saudi Arabia straddles the line between being part of the problem and being part of the solution. While working with partners can be a challenge, the United States needs them because it cannot solve many of the problems of the region on its own.

The argument was made that the idea that the United States needs to craft a coherent, unified grand strategy for the Middle East is fundamentally incorrect and that what the United States really needs to be able to successfully confront the challenges it faces in the region is an inconsistent and perhaps even inherently contradictory policy that addresses each problem on a case-by-case basis. The argument was that the sources of

instability in the region do not have a common thread and thus a grand strategy would not be as effective as treating each problem individually. Every case is different, and the solution to one problem may cause more problems in other areas.

The point was raised that the outgrowth of terrorism in the region is a new and vital U.S. interest that makes government legitimacy and state stability in the Middle East much more important to the United States, because when governments fall and states collapse, the vacuums they leave behind can often serve as safe havens for terrorist organizations. The argument was made that the United States should be very concerned about these safe havens and should be actively defending against them, even though the United States is wary about engaging and leading in the Middle East.

The view was also expressed that more effort should be made to engage the American public on rewarding investments in the Middle East and that the United States needs to more effectively articulate what a “victory” looks like in the Middle East, with the expectation that public perception can change very quickly. The temptation is to walk away from the region, but it is more important to emphasize to the public what American interests are in the Middle East and why they should be protected.

There was the viewpoint that the distortion of Middle East security has misplaced too many resources and that the new balancing of interests has helped keep

U.S. interests in check. The assertion was made that the United States has taken more steps to prevent threats than it has to pursue peace, moving from a more positive direction toward a more negative agenda. The best example of this, it was suggested, is the Obama administration’s strong focus on the Iran nuclear deal. One panelist predicted that the Middle East will become even more dysfunctional and argued that U.S. foreign policy should shift from a focus on fixing problems abroad to a focus on protecting itself. However, the panelist stated that Obama’s lack of movement in Syria was a critical mistake.

The concept of the “Goldilocks” conundrum was raised: If Iraq represents overreach and Syria represents underreach, how can the U.S. realistically make an impact in the Middle East? This, the panelists generally agreed, is the question the United States must face when considering its policies toward the Middle East.

The speakers concluded by fielding questions from the audience, discussing how an inconsistent strategy in the U.S. can be translated to regional actors, how Turkey’s designs play into American foreign policy, and the consequences of the U.S. Congress overriding the presidential veto and scuttling the Iran nuclear agreement. The speakers agreed that, regardless of opinions on the deal itself, the presidential veto being overridden by Congress on the Iran deal would be catastrophic for U.S. credibility and would damage economic and political interests abroad.

STEMMING THE TIDE AND PLAYING FOR BREAKS

Finding Purchase in a Chaotic Middle East

Kenneth M. Pollack

The problems of the Middle East get worse and worse. They deepen. They expand. They encompass new lands and new people. They interact in unexpected but seemingly always negative ways. There are still those who struggle against the descent, but too few. And too many who have lost hope and chosen to ride the current rather than fight it, believing that it is the only way they may live, even though doing so only makes the problems worse. In the Hobbesian state of nature that more and more of the Middle East increasingly resembles, doing whatever it takes to survive is all that makes sense for any individual, even if it enflames the war of all against all that is so disastrous for the collective.

And yet, all is not lost. That was the paradoxical view repeatedly expressed by speakers and participants at the annual Brookings Institution-U.S. Central Command Conference. Most of the people of the Middle East still lead ordinary lives, although they do so with a worried eye cocked toward the storms on their horizon. Most of the governments of the region have not fallen into chaos, even if they have done little to repair the structural rot that affects all of them and was the root cause of the state failures elsewhere. Some have even found a surprising resilience amid the crossfire of the proliferating conflicts. That strength may prove temporary, as many of our speakers and participants warned, but furnishes a starting point for those seeking a path back to peace and stability.

Surprisingly, while the speakers and participants evinced a great deal of fear and frustration, there was no sense of hopelessness. Not yet. Instead, speakers suggested that the situation was serious, but not yet tragic. There were actions that well-meaning actors could take that might not bring about a total solution to one problem or another, but could create opportunities that others might build on. Stepping back from the conference's many discussions, there was no longer a sense that any of the region's problems could be fixed quickly or in

relatively straightforward fashion—let alone with minimal effort. However, there were still many ideas for smaller steps that might create an opportunity in one place, or begin to get some positive movement in another, or merely help staunch the bleeding somewhere else. That might not be everything we might like or want, but it may be what we need to get started.

Symptoms and Diseases

There is always a tension between long- and short-term imperatives, between strategic goals and tactical opportunities. That has always been an element of America's policy toward the Middle East, as much as it is for the countries of the region themselves. Nevertheless, a theme running through the discussions at the 2015 Brookings-CENTCOM Conference was that this dilemma has become more critical than ever.

The immediate problems of the Middle East rage out of control. Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen are all convulsed by civil war. Hundreds of thousands have died in Syria and Iraq, tens of thousands in Libya and Yemen. Millions are at risk of starving to death in Yemen. Of course, these wars do not respect the lines drawn in the sand a century ago. Instead, they spill across those borders, showering misery and instability on all of their neighbors. Turkey, Jordan, Lebanon, Kuwait, Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Tunisia, and Iran are all struggling with spillover from these wars in the form of refugees, terrorists, secessionist movements, the radicalization of their populations, and the economic problems that accompany all of these first-order problems.

The past year has seen regional states become ever more enmeshed in these wars in desperate bids to mitigate that spillover. Saudi Arabia led an Arab coalition in an unprecedented involvement in the Yemeni civil war. Turkey finally joined the U.S.-led coalition against

Da'ish (or the Islamic State, ISIS, or ISIL), but is considering the establishment of a sanctuary in northern Syria—a buffer zone, reminiscent of Israel's failed 25-year effort in Lebanon. Indeed, Turkey's change of heart seems to be as much about the threat of Kurdish secession as it is about the threat from Da'ish. Egypt and other Arab states have bombed targets in Libya and hope to garner Arab support for a broader intervention there. Unfortunately, in conformity with the history of civil wars, the interventions by neighboring states has made the conflicts worse, not better, and threaten to overtax the limited military, political, and economic capacities of the intervening states themselves.

The terrorism problems of the region continue to metastasize, fed both by the civil wars and the underlying political, economic, and social problems of the Muslim Middle East. Da'ish has carved out a proto-state from ungoverned spaces in Iraq and Syria and is trying to do the same in Libya, Sinai, Yemen, and elsewhere. Al-Qa'ida and other Salafi terrorist groups continue to pop up across the region—ironically hurt more by the popularity of Da'ish than by successful counterterrorism campaigns or popular antipathy.

These immediate problems have become so dangerous and desperate that they often blot out our vision of everything else. That too is a hazard, because the immediate problems were not conjured from nothing. All were the product of the underlying problems that have been eroding the institutions of the Arab states and Iran for the past two to three decades. None of these states effectively created in the wake of decolonization after World War II was ever terribly functional. However, for several decades they clunked along reasonably well, new monarchies and secular “republics” (read: dictatorships) alike. However, as the UN's Arab Human Development Reports began to warn in 2002, all of these states were failing: their political systems ever more callous and corrupt, their economies ever less efficient, and their social systems ever more defensive in the face of a globalizing modernity that was leaving them behind. The Arab states and Iran were increasingly fragile. Hollow. Rotted from within.

These deep structural problems produced widespread discontent, then terrorism, then insurgencies, and then the stunning wave of revolutions in 2011.* The success of those revolutions in toppling several of the rotten autocracies, coupled with their failure to build anything more durable instead, produced the state failures and civil wars in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, and helped reignite the civil war in Iraq. The same might well have happened in Bahrain, Jordan, and elsewhere had the Gulf oil monarchies not shored up other collapsing frames with wads of cash. (Plus, when many would-be revolutionaries saw the end in Syria and Libya, they decided—at least for now—that enduring injustice was preferable to chaos and civil war.)

As the third panel of the conference discussed, these underlying problems have not gone away. In some ways they are being held in check by Gulf money and popular fear, but they persist, festering under the surface. They will almost certainly reemerge at some point, but it is impossible to know when, or what form they will take. Will it be another wave of revolutions as in 2011? Will it be something else entirely?

The only thing that we can be sure of is that they *will* manifest again. And they will continue to feed the immediate problems of the region. While Da'ish appears to be more a product of the civil wars, al Qa'ida and its affiliates are frustrated revolutionaries born of the underlying grievances. Refugees are quickly depleting the water resources of Jordan. The threat of starvation in Yemen derives from a combination of civil war and two decades of Yemeni farmers shifting from food production to *Qat* production. Many of the problems plaguing Egypt, Bahrain, Kuwait, Jordan, Iran, Saudi Arabia, Morocco, and Lebanon today derive more from these underlying political, economic, and social dysfunctions than from spillover from the civil wars. Indeed, many of these rulers are blaming spillover from the civil wars for all of their problems as the newest excuse to avoid addressing the deep structural flaws in their states.

Thus, we are left with the same basic dilemma that

* The 2009 Green Revolution in Iran was functionally equivalent and should be considered the first of the Middle Eastern revolts provoked by the pervasive dysfunctions of the Muslim Middle Eastern state system.

has tortured American policymakers for decades (and British and Turkish officials before them): whether to use limited resources to deal with the immediate problems or the longer-term problems of the Middle East. The difference is that both sets of threats have become far more dangerous. As bad as the immediate dangers may have been before 2011, they pale in comparison with those of the civil wars threatening to consume the region or even spark a general Sunni-Shi'a conflict across the Middle East and beyond. Yet the underlying political, economic, and social dysfunctions are no longer just a potential danger. They spawn scads of terrorists and hordes of desperate refugees. Worse still, they cause outright state collapse that in turn produces civil wars. In short, the dilemma remains as acute as ever, but the threats on either hand have worsened dramatically.

The Civil Wars

The civil wars of the Middle East loomed large in our discussions for all of the reasons mentioned above. Although they were (largely) a product of the wider, underlying problems of the Middle East that has undermined the Arab and Iranian state structure, they are now creating problems of their own. They are malignant dynamos, inflicting misery and instability on all of their neighbors. Thus, they are both cause and effect of the region's troubles.

Ending or at least quelling the civil wars consequently should be a high priority for those seeking to improve the regional status quo, or at least prevent its further slide into something even worse. But that's the rub: While it is not impossible for external powers to end someone else's civil war relatively peacefully—and it has been happening more and more frequently during the past two decades as we learn more about how best to do so—it is not easy or cheap. The extensive scholarly literature on civil wars has identified three critical components for a negotiated settlement to a civil war:

1. A military stalemate in which all of the warring factions realize that they will not be able to achieve military victory.
2. A new power-sharing arrangement among all of the rival groups that provides for an equitable distribution of political power and economic benefits, along with protection for minorities.
3. A mechanism to give all groups, but particularly minorities, a strong expectation (if not a guarantee) that one or more of the groups will not resort to violence again, particularly the group that controls the plurality or majority of political power. This is often best accomplished by a long-term, third-party peacekeeping force. However, where no such force is available, it is possible (but much harder) to have an internal institution—a monarch or the armed forces, if they are professional and apolitical—serve this role instead.

Unfortunately, none of the civil wars ongoing in the Middle East seems close to meeting any of these criteria. Iraq is unquestionably “better” off than the rest, but that is a highly relative statement. If the Iraqi Security Forces (ISF) are able to remain cohesive and begin to retake territory from Da'ish without extensive help from the Shi'a militias, if the government trains up significant numbers of Sunni fighters and allows them to participate in the pacification of Sunni-dominated lands, if the Shi'a militias do not engage in ethnic cleansing and other atrocities, then perhaps that will convince Sunni and Shi'a to negotiate seriously over a new national reconciliation process that could forge a new power-sharing agreement. But all of that seems very far off. And when compared to Iraq, the civil wars in Syria, Libya, and Yemen seem even farther from achieving these three essential conditions for a peaceful resolution. Absent such resolutions, however, the civil wars will rage on for years or decades, destabilizing other countries. As one of the speakers pointed out, the best indicator that a state will slide into civil war is if it borders a state already experiencing a civil war.

The Question of Iran

Behind and amid all of the turmoil of the region is Iran. Today, in the afterglow of the nuclear agreement between Tehran and the P5+1, Iran hangs like a question mark over the whole Middle East. In some

instances, Iranian interests coincide (even if only partially) with those of the United States and many of its regional allies. Iran appears to want to see peace and stability restored to Iraq and Syria. It too wants to see Da'ish, al-Qa'ida, and other Salafi extremist groups defeated and discredited. Moreover, it does seem that President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif would like to emphasize these common interests in hope of forging a less-confrontational relationship with the West, including the United States.

Yet even if Rouhani and Zarif are able to wrest control of Iran's foreign policy and steer it in a more accommodating direction, it may not be enough. If for them peace and stability in Syria means returning the Assad regime to power, that is incompatible with Western interests, and probably militarily impossible absent a massive Iranian intervention—which Tehran probably could not support or sustain. Likewise, in Iraq, if their vision of peace means the return of a Shi'a chauvinist government and the oppression of Kurds and Sunni Arabs, that too will not serve U.S. interests, nor is it likely to produce real stability. And fighting Da'ish more broadly cannot mean simply creating vicious, Hizballah-like Shi'a militias that will “fight fire with fire.” Nothing would provoke a broader Sunni-Shi'a war faster.

Moreover, it is unclear at best that Rouhani and Zarif will be able to set Iran's future foreign policy. The various statements of Iran's Supreme Leader and other key regime figures suggests that Iran's hardliners remain influential and may have a far greater say in determining Iranian strategy abroad. Indeed, they imply that the Supreme Leader may continue or even amplify Iran's aggressive, anti-status quo, and anti-American policies to demonstrate that the nuclear agreement does not represent any significant deviation from Iran's revolutionary line. If that proves to be the case, then the West will not be able to count on even tacit support from Iran in trying to address the multiplying crises of the Middle East. Iran may continue to exacerbate those problems instead.

Small Steps, Small Victories

How do we get a grip on these writhing and intertwining problems that seem to slip from our grasp whenever

we try to grapple with them? None of the speakers or participants at the 2015 Brookings-CENTCOM Conference were ready to present a grand solution. There were few big ideas about how to solve any of them individually, let alone all of them collectively. There was a pervasive sense that these problems have gotten too big to lend themselves to grand gestures.

Still, many felt that there was still hope. The region had not slid so far down into the abyss that it was impossible to imagine climbing back out. But doing so meant starting the climb immediately and taking advantage of what opportunities still existed to get some momentum going in the right direction, even if it was not yet possible to see how each step up might lead to eventual stability. The point was to start climbing wherever and however it was possible to do so, both to find footholds for future steps and to reverse the psychological momentum—the panic—gripping the region.

Consequently, most of the suggestions offered focused on taking advantage of opportunities when they presented themselves, building on successes and stability wherever they could be found, and doing what was possible in the short term in the hope that it would enable us to do what was necessary farther down the road. The critical point from our discussions was that the United States and its allies have only very limited resources to work with to tackle the vast problems of the Middle East. That necessitates the smart application of those resources in places where they can make a difference. It also means having the flexibility to apply resources when circumstances seem propitious—again, even if the situation is not necessarily the highest priority—to try to create bulwarks against further chaos and reverse the psychological momentum towards greater entropy.

As our second panel suggested, Yemen offers an example of an opportunity that could prove fleeting. Yemen's Houthis did not object to federalism per se, only to the specific federal boundaries they were presented. The retaking of Aden by Saudi-backed forces was the first significant check the Houthis have experienced. It may be enough to make them question whether military victory is possible, and thus offering to renegotiate a federal compact might appeal to them.

Iraq is another one. Iraq has the merit of being an important Arab country, intrinsically the most important of those engulfed by civil war. Iraq's Sunni Arab community still retains enough bad memories of its past experience under al-Qa'ida in Iraq (the predecessor to Da'ish) and enough good memories of pre-2003 Iraq where inter-sectarian tolerance was more the norm, that the Sunnis would prefer not to throw in their lot with Da'ish if given a reasonable alternative. Those sentiments were key elements in the success of the 2007-2008 "Surge" that ended the first round of Iraq's civil war. It all furnishes reason to hope that if—if—the ISF can remain cohesive, the government fields Sunni military formations, the Shi'a militias are kept from complicating the situation, and the Iraqis can agree on a more decentralized structure that will give Sunni Arabs the protection they want without leading to the dissolution of the country that the Shi'a fear, Iraq could be turned around, and in so doing, create a wider hope that the region is not headed inevitably for greater chaos and wider conflict.

Still another aspect of this approach worth contemplating is the idea of shoring up small, relatively more stable states rather than throwing resources at the biggest problems. Morocco came through the Arab Spring reasonably well, in part because its government was willing to make some gestures toward the kind of reforms that could actually begin to address the underlying structural problems that generated the 2011 revolts. Tunisia

is the only Arab state to have emerged from 2011 with a nascent (but increasingly embattled) democracy. Jordan continues to hold on amid the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars, mostly because Jordanians are so terrified that reform would lead to revolution and a failed state, but also because King Abdullah II has toyed with the notion of reform. All three countries are relatively small and relatively stable by the standards of the contemporary Middle East. Moreover, their reform-minded governments give hope that they can navigate the underlying problems of the region and avoid becoming the next Syria or Libya.

All of this suggests that, rather than throw away the limited resources available to the West for the Middle East on the worst problems and the biggest countries, these same resources might have a much greater impact on these smaller, more progressive countries. In so doing, it could transform them into breakwaters against the anarchic tide and even models of what progress might look like. Because they are small, the impact of success in these states would be much less than if it were to come in Egypt, for instance, but it may be better than wasting limited resources on limitless problems.

It is a grim, unsatisfying approach, but it may also be a necessary one. When you are caught in a mudslide, the first step is to find purchase on solid ground wherever you can find it. We are all caught in the Middle Eastern mudslide and we need to start by finding purchase.

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