

Testimony of  
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**U.S. Policy Toward the Middle East After the Iranian Nuclear Agreement**

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The United States Senate

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Mr. Chairman and distinguished Senators, I am honored to be able to appear before you to discuss the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) with Iran and, in particular, its regional implications. I believe this to be, arguably, the most important aspect of the agreement. For that reason, I consider it imperative that the United States be ready to shape the regional environment to ensure that the JCPOA contributes to American security, rather than undermining it. To me, that will be determined primarily by America's behavior in the region after the JCPOA, and not by the specific terms of the deal itself. This agreement is likely to be made or broken on the battlefields of Iraq, Syria, and Yemen, not in the centrifuge halls of Natanz and Fordow.

**The Deal**

Let me start by being candid about my thinking on the deal itself. Unenthusiastically but firmly, I believe that the United States should accept the Iranian nuclear agreement and implement it fully. I am unenthusiastic about the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action because it is an imperfect agreement at best. I was not in the room while it was being negotiated, so I cannot be certain, but I do not believe that it was inevitable that we ended up with this agreement, given where we started from with Iran two years ago. I continue to believe that the United States could have negotiated a better deal with Iran had the Obama Administration handled those negotiations differently. I am particularly concerned that the most stringent constraints on Iran's nuclear program effectively end after 10-15 years. While it is not unreasonable to believe that Iran will be a very different country in 10-15 years, or may find reasons not to resume development of a nuclear weapon at that time, it is equally plausible that we will face the same old Iran then that we do now, and *that* Iran may seek a nuclear weapon.

Nevertheless, I firmly believe that it would be a mistake for the Congress to override a presidential veto and prevent the United States from adhering to the agreement. First, it is not a disastrously bad deal. For 15 years, Iran's nuclear program will be very limited. It will be difficult to cheat and the Administration won important victories in ensuring that ultimately the inspectors are to be given access to any facility they want to see, and the United States retains the ultimate threat of having the UN sanctions reimposed with only the cooperation of our European allies. One of the most important lessons that we should have learned from our painful experiences with Iraq is that this is what makes for a successful arms control agreement. It is

NOT necessary to be certain that you can detect every instance of cheating—that is impossible, and the United States did not do that even in Iraq where the inspectors had far, far greater access and authority. It is merely necessary that the target country believe that there is a reasonable probability that any cheating activity will be detected, and an equally reasonable probability that such cheating will result in consequences that it finds unacceptably painful. That was what ultimately convinced even Saddam Husayn to give up his hidden WMD programs (although he did so in his own inimitably bizarre manner). The JCPOA creates just that disincentive for Iran, and therefore I think we can have a reasonably high degree of confidence that Iran will abide by it. Indeed, I think it unlikely that they will meaningfully cheat for the foreseeable future—although it is impossible to know if that means three years, five years, 15 years, or longer.

I know that opponents of the deal bristle whenever they hear it, but I believe that, imperfect as it is, accepting the deal is considerably better for the United States than any of the realistic alternatives. I have written extensively about these alternatives in the past, even warning two years ago that I feared we would soon be forced to confront the very dilemmas we now face.<sup>1</sup> I believe that stopping Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons militarily would likely require a major war, and quite possibly a full-scale U.S. invasion and occupation of Iran. I do not think that necessary or desirable. I believe that Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's belief that the United States could reject this deal and somehow force Iran to negotiate a new one that is better for the United States is misplaced. I think it far more likely that were the United States to turn down the JCPOA, we would find ourselves in a far worse position. In those circumstances, I think it most likely that Iran would gain widespread international sympathy, the sanctions would erode and then collapse—as I watched the same happen to the even-tighter Iraq sanctions when I was the NSC Director for Persian Gulf Affairs during the late 1990s—and Iran would emerge stronger and less constrained than it is today. I do fear that in such a scenario, Iran would narrow its breakout window significantly, or even field a nuclear arsenal.

This may not be the deal we want or even the deal might have had, but it is the deal we have. And I am convinced that it is the only deal we will ever have and we are more likely to regret turning it down than we are to regret having accepted it.

### **And Now for the Hard Part**

Ultimately, I see the JCPOA as a pretty good deal for 15 years, but after that it's a bet. A bet that after 15 years, Iran will be kinder, gentler, smarter, better disposed toward us and our allies, or more sober about the cost-benefit values of acquiring nuclear weapons.

Consequently, what looms largest in my assessment of the nuclear agreement is how the United States deals with Iran during those 15 years. Can we shape circumstances in such a way that we are more likely to have a better Iran emerge from those 15 years? Perhaps more important still, we should never lose sight of the fact that an Iranian nuclear weapon was never the real threat to American interests. It was exceptionally unlikely that Iran would ever use a nuclear weapon, let alone give one to terrorists.<sup>2</sup> Instead, the reason that we and our allies have focused so heavily on Iran's nuclear program is because an Iranian nuclear arsenal threatened to enable further

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<sup>1</sup> I treated all of these options at great length in my book *Unthinkable: Iran, the Bomb and American Strategy* (Simon and Schuster, 2013).

<sup>2</sup> For longer explications of these views, see Pollack, *Unthinkable*, esp. pp. 66-70.

Iranian subversion and/or aggression in the Middle East—a part of the world that does not need any more instability than it already has.

That is why I am more concerned about how the United States conducts its foreign policy toward the Middle East under the auspices of the JCPOA than I am about the technical pros and cons of the agreement itself.

We will probably have 15 years before we really have to worry about the prospect of an Iranian nuclear arsenal again. But Iran probably won't pull in its horns, give up its regional ambitions, and suddenly embrace America and its allies during that period of time. If the various remarks of Iran's Supreme Leader are any guide, Iranian policy is unlikely to become any more accommodating, and could become far more confrontational as Tehran seeks to demonstrate that it has not lost its revolutionary mojo and tests whether the United States plans to use the JCPOA to justify further disengagement from the region.

Indeed, that is what I fear most. That a war-weary and "Middle East-weary" U.S. administration will point to the JCPOA and say, "See, we removed the greatest threat to U.S. interests and allies in the Middle East, so now we can afford to step back from the region even more than we already have." I fear that the JCPOA will justify another "pivot to Asia," which as best as I can tell was nothing more than an excuse for pivoting away from the Middle East, with demonstrably catastrophic consequences in Iraq and elsewhere.

Even here, the real questions are not those about regional proliferation, which has dominated discussion of this matter to date, but about the civil and proxy wars currently roiling the Middle East, and the likely role of the United States in the region after a nuclear accord with Iran. It is those issues that are likely to determine whether a nuclear deal with Iran leads to greater stability or greater instability in the Middle East, and thus whether it ultimately benefits or undermines American national security.

## **Iran**

It is important to begin any assessment of regional dynamics in the wake of an Iranian nuclear agreement by asking how Iran itself is likely to behave. As always, we need to be very humble about our ability to predict Iran's future behavior. Iran has an opaque and convoluted political system, riven by factions and presided over by a Supreme Leader who has often made decisions by not making decisions or by splitting the Solomonic baby. Indeed, it seems most likely that once the JCPOA has been agreed to by all sides, there will be a debate in Tehran over Iranian foreign policy (as there always is), with moderates and reformists arguing for Iran to use the deal as the start of a larger process of reopening to the world and even rapprochement with the United States. Inevitably, various Iranian hardliners and conservatives will argue that a deal makes such moves unnecessary and that instead Iran can and must redouble its efforts to export Khomeini's revolution and drive the United States and its allies out of the Middle East altogether.

Ayatollah Khamene'i's various statements in recent weeks continue to lead me to conclude that he views the JCPOA in purely transactional terms. It is a straightforward deal for him: sanctions relief for constraints on his nuclear program. Nothing more and nothing less. It seems unlikely he will countenance a wider rapprochement with the United States, although we can all hope that

Foreign Minister Javad Zarif and President Hassan Rouhani will be able to convince him otherwise.

Iran has always seemed to fashion discrete policies toward different states of the region. In each case, it has a certain set of interests in a country and engages in a policy debate over how to act toward that country—in which Iran’s complicated domestic politics interact with various strategic perspectives to produce a policy toward that country. Right now, Iran probably has a Syria policy based on its interests and its politics as they relate to Syria. It appears to have an Iraq policy based on its interests and its politics as they relate to Iraq. And the same for Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Yemen, etc. Neither those interests nor those politics appear likely to change much, if at all, as a result of the nuclear deal, at least in the short term. Instead, Iranian actions toward all of those places seem precisely calibrated to what Iran is trying to achieve there, and that is unlikely to be affected by the nuclear deal one way or the other.

It is also worth noting that, across the region, the Iranians seem pretty comfortable with their current policies. They may well believe that things are mostly going their way. Their Shi’a allies are dominant in Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen (despite recent tactical reverses in Yemen). In Syria, the Asad regime is embattled and has suffered some setbacks, but it remains in power and Iran continues to commit its own resources and the troops of its Iraqi and Hizballah allies to shore up the Alawi position there. Most reports indicate that the Iranians exert far greater control over Asad’s rump Syrian state than they ever have in the past. Thus, Iran may feel its position has improved in Damascus, even if Damascus’s control over Syria has taken a beating. Tehran may also feel it could be doing better in Bahrain, but of the countries in play in the region, that’s the only one Iran cares about where Tehran may not believe it is “winning.”

In short, all other things being equal, it seems unlikely that Iranian policy toward the region will change merely as a result of a nuclear agreement with the P5+1. There is no particular reason to believe that Iran is ready to throw in the towel in any of these places. But neither is there any reason to believe that Iran is looking to increase its aggressive involvement in any of these states but has been somehow constrained from doing so by the nuclear negotiations.

But all other things may not prove equal. It may be that Khamene’i will feel that a nuclear deal is a major concession to Rouhani and the Iranian Left and therefore may feel the need to demonstrate to the hardliners of the Iranian Right that a nuclear deal does not mean that Tehran has abandoned Khomeini’s ideology by giving up its enmity with the United States. If that is the case, Iran may ratchet up some of its anti-status quo activities in certain selected venues.

Israel is the obvious case in point: Iran may try to convince Hizballah, Hamas, Palestine Islamic Jihad (PIJ), and others to mount attacks on Israel. That’s almost a “freebie” for Iran. Israel is unlikely to retaliate directly against Iran, everyone will know that Tehran is behind the attacks, and since the Netanyahu government has managed to isolate Israel in ways that the Palestinians never could, Tehran will be playing to a popular cause. The problem here is that Iran may not be able to pull the trigger on such a campaign. Hizballah and Hamas are both extremely wary of picking a fight with Israel, as demonstrated by the fact that neither has done so in the face of multiple Israeli provocations. The events of the Arab Spring and the Syrian civil war has estranged

Hamas from Iran and tied Hizballah down in intense combat such that neither may be willing to heed a hypothetical Iranian call for new attacks on Israel. The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states have begun a campaign to wean Hamas from Iran entirely and bring it into the Sunni Arab fold. For their part, PIJ and other Palestinian proxy groups probably face the same anti-Iranian pressures as Hamas, are weaker than in the past, and may have a hard time penetrating Israel's ever more sophisticated defenses.

Bahrain is another possibility. Because Bahrain is a majority-Shi'a state whose people have been disenfranchised and oppressed by the regime—and their Saudi allies—it is another arena where Iran may be able to burnish its revolutionary credentials in a relatively popular international cause. But here, too, there are limits. Some Bahraini Shi'a clearly accept aid from Iran, but the majority appear to prefer not to. They recognize that the more that they can be dismissed as Iranian agents, the harder it is for them to get international pressure on the regime to reform. In addition, Bahrain is a very sensitive issue for the Saudis, and the Iranians have to worry that if they press on Bahrain, the Saudis might push back somewhere else where they are more vulnerable.

A last possibility is Yemen. Iran has few direct stakes in Yemen, and its nominal allies, the Houthis, remain dominant militarily despite their inability to retake Aden. So Iran has a relatively powerful ally and little to lose there. But, once again, Iran's ties to the Houthis have been exaggerated, and it is another very sensitive spot for the Saudis.

Consequently, it may prove difficult for Iran to make much mischief in any of these arenas—more difficult than it may be worth for them.

As this analysis suggests, I believe that Iran's most likely course after a nuclear agreement will be to continue to pursue the same regional strategy it has pursued over the past three years. That strategy is inimical to the interests of the United States and its allies in many ways. However, there is a much greater danger: the danger that Iran will interpret American behavior after a nuclear agreement as a sign of further disengagement from the Middle East. If that is the case, it is highly likely that Iranian goals will become more expansive and its policies more aggressive as it believes that the United States will not be as willing (or able) to block its moves. Thus, the most important variable in Iranian regional behavior after a deal may well prove to be the U.S. reaction, rather than anything derived from Iranian strategy or politics itself.

## **Israel**

Let me now turn to the question of likely Israeli responses to a nuclear deal. I think it important to address the elephant in the living room first: It is highly unlikely that Israel will mount a military attack against Iran if the JCPOA is enacted by all sides. As I have laid out in greater detail elsewhere, Israel currently does not have a good military option against Iran for both military-technical and political reasons.<sup>3</sup> That's why Israel has uncharacteristically abstained from a strike, despite repeated threats to do so since the late 1990s.

The political circumstances are even worse now and will remain so after the JCPOA goes into effect. Consider the context: Iran has just signed a deal with the United States and the other

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<sup>3</sup> See in particular, Pollack, *Unthinkable*, esp. pp. 183-223.

great powers agreeing to limits on its nuclear program, accepting more intrusive inspections than in the past and reaffirming that it will not try to build a nuclear weapon. If the Israelis were to attack in these circumstances, an already anti-Israeli international climate would almost certainly turn wholeheartedly against them.

The question of how the international community would react to an Israeli strike on Iran is of more than academic interest to the Israelis. If Israel attacks Iran, there is a very real risk that Iran would respond by withdrawing from the JCPOA and probably the NPT, evicting the inspectors and announcing that it will acquire nuclear weapons since its own conventional forces and the word of the international community were clearly inadequate to deter an unprovoked Israeli attack. The Iranians would doubtless also demand that the remaining sanctions on them be lifted (and probably call for the imposition of sanctions on Israel). If such actions were not forthcoming, Tehran would probably set about busting the sanctions with the active connivance of many other countries, probably including members of the P5+1.

The problem for the Israelis is that in those circumstances, with the entire world furious at them for committing aggression and destroying a deal that most see as having been the best way to keep Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons, there is likely to be very little will to preserve the sanctions on Iran. It's hard to imagine a scenario in which Iran has a better chance to break out of the sanctions cage than this one.

Thus, an Israeli military strike in these circumstances would be unlikely to help prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. It is more likely to ensure an Iranian nuclear weapon and jeopardize the international containment of Iran.

While this set of problems makes an Israeli military response unlikely, that doesn't mean that Jerusalem will just roll over and accept the JCPOA or the new world it will make. First, I suspect that the Israelis will ramp up their covert campaign against Iran and its nuclear program. More Iranian scientists may get mysteriously assassinated in Tehran. More sensitive Iranian facilities might blow up. More computer viruses might plague Iranian networks. More money might find its way to Iranian democracy activists and ethnic minorities. Of course, even then, the Israelis may show some restraint: The Iranians are believed to have greatly improved their own cyberwar capabilities, and even a right-wing Israeli government might not want to provoke a harsh Iranian response that would affect Israel's civilian economy.

Second, I think it pretty much a foregone conclusion that the Israelis will also seek greatly expanded U.S. aid in response to a nuclear deal with Iran. I assume that Secretary of Defense Ashton Carter got hints of the Israeli shopping list when he was in Jerusalem last month. I expect that Israel will seek to improve its capability to strike Iranian targets, to defeat retaliatory missile and rocket attacks by Iran or its allies, and to ensure that Israel has a secure second-strike capability. More F-35s, greater funding for Israel's Arrow anti-ballistic missile and Iron Dome anti-rocket systems, and more capable bunker-busting munitions all seem like certain Israeli requests. But Jerusalem may well ask for other weapons and capabilities previously denied it, both because it may feel a strategic need for such enhanced capabilities and because it may believe that the United States will be more willing to provide them to secure Jerusalem's (grudging) acquiescence to the deal. It may also seek greater American forbearance for the

acquisition of additional cruise-missile subs, which appear to be the core of Israel's secure second-strike capability.

Finally, a nuclear deal with Iran could push Israel to become more aggressive in its own neighborhood. The Israelis will doubtless argue that the deal has made them feel less safe, and therefore less willing to take risks on other security matters—particularly developments with the Palestinians, but potentially in Syria and Lebanon as well. (The Israelis are very comfortable with the Egyptian and Jordanian governments and are unlikely to take actions that would undermine them or diminish their cooperation with Israel.) For instance, in the wake of a nuclear deal, Israel may look to smash Hizballah and/or Hamas in Gaza again to convince them not to mount new attacks against Israel once their old Iranian allies (a strained relationship in the case of Hamas) begin coming out from under the sanctions and possibly flexing their muscles across the region.

It is worth noting that some Israeli officials may favor such actions out of a genuine belief that this is what is necessary to guarantee their security after what they depict as a ruinous Iran deal. Others may do so cynically, using their well-known unhappiness with the JCPOA to justify doing a bunch of things that they believe that the U.S. and international communities would be loath to condone otherwise.

### **Saudi Arabia**

Especially in light of these assessments of likely Iranian and Israeli behavior after the nuclear deal, Saudi Arabia is the real wild card we must consider. The Saudis aren't exactly fans of a nuclear deal with Iran. And Saudi Arabia is the most likely candidate to acquire nuclear weapons if Iran were to do so.<sup>4</sup> In private, Saudi officials have repeatedly warned American officials (including this author) that if Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, Saudi Arabia will follow suit—and nothing will stop them—because they will not live in a world where Iran has a nuclear weapon and they do not. Prince Turki al-Faisal, the former Saudi intelligence chief, has gone so far as to repeat that warning in public.<sup>5</sup> For instance, in 2011, Turki commented that “It is in our interest that Iran does not develop a nuclear weapon, for its doing so would compel Saudi Arabia, whose foreign relations are now so fully measured and well assessed, to pursue policies that could lead to untold and possibly dramatic consequences.”<sup>6</sup>

Yet the Saudis are often far more subtle and creative than others give them credit for. Even if Iran were to acquire an actual weapon or a near-term breakout capability, the Saudis might not simply take the obvious path forward and buy a nuclear weapon itself. There are many actions the Saudis could take to create ambiguity and make Iran (and others) wonder whether the Saudis had acquired a nuclear capability without declaring that the Kingdom had joined the nuclear club. Riyadh could build a nuclear plant of its own and begin to enrich uranium, perhaps even hiring large numbers of Pakistanis and other foreigners to do so very quickly, in almost exactly the same manner that the Iranians have proceeded. A favorite Israeli scenario is that one day, satellite imagery of Saudi Arabia suddenly reveals the presence of a half-dozen nuclear-capable

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<sup>4</sup> For a concurring Israeli assessment, see Amos Yadlin and Avner Golov, “A Nuclear Iran: The Spur to a Regional Arms Race?” *Strategic Assessment*, Vol. 15, No. 3 (October 2012), pp. 7-12.

<sup>5</sup> Associated Press, “Prince Hints Saudi Arabia May Join Nuclear Arms Race,” *New York Times*, December 6, 2011.

<sup>6</sup> Jay Solomon, “Saudi Suggests ‘Squeezing’ Iran over Nuclear Ambitions,” *Wall Street Journal*, June 22, 2011.

Pakistani F-16s at a Saudi air base. Pakistan has long contributed military support, equipment, and even whole formations to Saudi defense, so this would not be anything extraordinary. Everyone would wonder whether the F-16s had brought nuclear weapons with them and the Saudis could studiously avoid answering the question. The Iranians, and the whole world, would not know. There would be no proof that the Kingdom had acquired a nuclear weapon and therefore no particular basis to impose sanctions on Riyadh. Yet overnight, the Iranians would have to calculate that the Kingdom had acquired a nuclear weapon.

But all of that lies in the realm of hypotheticals inappropriate to the current context. If Iran ratifies the JCPOA, it will be publicly pledging not to acquire a nuclear weapon—and it will have the entire international community (except Israel) giving them the benefit of the doubt. In that context, we should *not* expect the Saudis to acquire a nuclear weapon of their own in response.

The Saudis have had good reasons for not acquiring one all of these years (and the Pakistanis good reasons for not giving it to them). More than that, the optics would be all wrong for the Saudis. Iran has just signed a deal with the U.S., UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China agreeing never to build a nuclear weapon and accepting limits on its enrichment program to reassure the world that it won't/can't get a nuclear weapon. In that context, if Saudi Arabia goes out and buys a bomb from someone, suddenly Riyadh (and whoever sold it to them) will become the international pariahs. All of the sympathy will swing to Iran, which will be seen as having behaved well, whereas there will be worldwide demands to sanction the Saudis (and their suppliers) for doing exactly what Iran has agreed not to do. None of this makes sense for the Saudis and probably explains at least part of why Pakistan is already distancing itself from Riyadh on military matters despite their historic (nuclear) ties.

That said, the Saudis may react in other ways. First, we should expect that the Saudis will announce that they are going to build up a nuclear program of their own to the precise levels Iran has been allowed by the JCPOA. Doing so would be an important warning both to the Iranians (that the Saudis will match their nuclear capabilities at every step) and to the West (that they will have further proliferation in the Middle East if they do not force Iran to live up to its new commitments).

Second, the Saudis may choose to ramp up their support to various Sunni groups fighting Iran's allies and proxies around the region. The Saudis seem to agree with the Iranians that Tehran is "winning" in Lebanon, Iraq, and Yemen. Syria is a more uncertain affair, but Iran's allies are hardly defeated there and Iran is amping up its support for them. The Saudis also seem to believe that Iran is making important inroads in Oman and with various Shi'a communities elsewhere in the Gulf. So while the Iranians may want to hold to a steady course, the Saudis may choose to double down.

Unfortunately, there is a greater danger still. The Saudis and their Sunni Arab allies may fear that the United States intends to use a nuclear deal with Iran as a "Get Out of the Middle East Free" card. The Gulf states are convinced that this is the Obama Administration's intent. Across the board in private, Gulf officials damn the Administration for its weak response to Iran, brought to a head at the May 2015 summit at Camp David, where they claim that the United

States offered nothing new as reassurance that Washington would push back on Iran. The danger here is that, far from accommodating Tehran as some have feared, the Gulf states are far more likely to get in Tehran's face to try to deter or even roll back the Iranians and their allies. The GCC air campaign in Yemen is a perfect example of this. It represents a stunning departure from past GCC practice: They had never intervened directly with their own armed forces against another state, except behind a massive American force, as in the Persian Gulf War of 1990-91.

The ultimate problem is that the Gulf states are not strong enough to take on Iran alone, and if they act provocatively toward Iran, even if intended to deter Iranian aggression, they could easily provoke just such aggression and/or overstretch their own limited capabilities with potentially dire consequences for their own political stability. If the United States is not there to reassure the Gulf states and deter Iran, things could get very ugly.

### **The American Role**

Inevitably with any question related to the geopolitics of the Middle East, the question eventually turns to the United States. The preceding analysis all points to the centrality of the American response to the nuclear agreement with Iran as the critical factor that will determine whether the deal ultimately proves beneficial or detrimental to regional stability, and thus to American interests themselves. As always, the United States is master of its own fate to a much greater extent than any other country on earth, even in the turbulent and unpredictable Middle East.

Two points stand out to me from the preceding analysis and the modern history of the region. The first is that while Iranian strategy is anti-American, anti-status quo, anti-Semitic, aggressive, and expansionist, Iran is not reckless and is typically quite wary of American power. When the United States exerts itself, the Iranians typically retreat. The exception that proves the rule was in Iraq in 2007, when initially the Iranians did not back down from their support to various anti-American Iraqi militias, only to have those militias crushed and driven from Iraq during Operation Charge of the Knights and subsequent Iraqi-American campaigns along the lower Tigris. As we see in Iraq today, the Iranians apparently recognize that they misjudged both America's will and its capacity to act then, and are once again content to battle Washington for political influence in Baghdad but unwilling to challenge U.S. power militarily, even by proxy.

The second point that stands out is the other side of the coin from the first. In the absence of American engagement, leadership, and military involvement in the region, the GCC states (led, as always, by the Saudis) get frightened, and their tendency when frightened is to lash out and overextend themselves. Again, the unprecedented GCC air campaign in Yemen is a striking example of this. As the Gulf Arab states see it, the United States has never been so disengaged from the region—at least not in 35 years—and so they feel that they have to take equally exceptional action to make up for it. I continue to see the GCC intervention in Yemen as a wholly unnecessary and unhelpful move, a rash decision meant to check what the GCC sees as a looming Iranian “conquest” of Yemen. In private, GCC officials make no bones about saying that they felt compelled to intervene in Yemen because the United States was embracing Iran rather than deterring or defeating it. While all of that is a set of overstatements and exaggerations, it drives home the point that in the absence of a strong American role in pushing back on Iran, the GCC's default mode is to attack on their own—and that only makes the situation worse, not better.

What the Obama Administration offered the Gulf states at Camp David failed to allay their fears or reassure them that the United States was ready to help them address their security concerns. That too is understandable: Washington did not offer a new defense pact or even an explicit nuclear umbrella—just more of the same. Some new weapons. Some new training. Nothing categorically different that was really likely to convince the Gulf states that the United States was truly committed to Gulf security or to reassure them that a nuclear deal with Iran would not mean American abandonment of the region, let alone a shift toward Iran.

In truth, I suspect that there is only one way that the United States is going to reassure the Gulf States that it does share their interests and is not going to leave the field open to the Iranians. Not coincidentally, it may be the only way to demonstrate to the *Iranians* that the United States is neither abandoning the region nor too fearful of jeopardizing the nuclear agreement to block Iran's continued aggressive activities around the Middle East. Indeed, it is probably what will prove necessary to force Iran to abandon its aggressively opportunistic regional policy. And that is for the United States to pick a place and take the Iranians on there.

Here there are three possibilities, but ultimately only one conclusion. Yemen is the wrong place for the United States to confront Iran. Yemen is simply not consequential enough to justify making any American investment there; in fact, Washington should be doing everything it can to help the Saudis and the GCC end their own intervention in Yemen, not reinforcing it. Iraq is also the wrong choice. The Iranians are too strong in Iraq now, Iraq is too important to Iran, and the Iraqis have a chance of solving their problems and regaining stability—but theirs is a fragile polity that probably could not survive a U.S.-Iranian war on their territory. Both we and the Iranians need the Iraqis to sort out their problems, and Iraq will probably need both of our help to do so. Thus, Iraq is also the wrong place at the wrong time.

That leaves Syria. If the United States is going to push back on Iran in the aftermath of the nuclear deal to demonstrate to both Tehran and our regional allies that we are not abandoning the field and allowing (or enabling) the Iranians to make greater gains, Syria is unquestionably the place to do it. Iran's allies in Syria have been considerably weakened in recent months. Our Arab allies are eager to have us take the lead there, and President Obama has committed the United States to just such a course, even if his actions have fallen woefully short of his rhetoric. This is not the place to describe how the United States might mount such an effort, nor to assess the likelihood that it would succeed if the U.S. were willing to commit the necessary resources (which would likely include a heavier air campaign than at present, but not ground combat troops).<sup>7</sup> I will simply point out that in the aftermath of the Iranian nuclear deal, finally executing the Administration's proclaimed strategy for Syria may be the best and only way to regain control over the dangerous confrontation escalating between Iran and America's Arab allies.

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<sup>7</sup> For the fullest explanation of the Administration's Syria strategy, see the testimony of the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, General Martin Dempsey, before the Senate Armed Services Committee on September 16, 2014. A transcript is available at [http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f\\_story.html](http://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/transcript-dempsey-testifies-to-the-senate-armed-services-committee-on-the-islamic-state/2014/09/16/a65b6aea-3da3-11e4-b0ea-8141703bbf6f_story.html). For an outside assessment along similar lines, see Kenneth M. Pollack, "An Army to Defeat Assad: How to Turn Syria's Opposition Into a Real Fighting Force," *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 93, No. 5 (September/October 2014), pp. 110-124.

Roughly 45 years ago, Great Britain announced that it was withdrawing from east of Suez, dumping the Middle East in America's lap. As I reflect on our handling of this unwanted responsibility, I am struck by our regular efforts to take some deliberate, decisive action and call it "done." Starting with 1988's Operation Praying Mantis, and continuing on to Operation Desert Storm, the Middle East peace process during the 1990s, the 2003 Invasion of Iraq, and the 2011 withdrawal from Iraq, the United States has kept searching for a political-military achievement that would make it possible to leave the Middle East behind. We never found it. Even when the achievements succeeded, they could not fix all of the problems of this troubled and troubling part of the world. And our determination to walk away only made the next problem even worse.

Although the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action is hardly a perfect deal, it is an accomplishment of sorts. It has the potential to make the Middle East a modestly safer place in the future—certainly for 10-15 years, and possibly for longer. But that will only happen if the United States resists its natural inclination to try to use the JCPOA as yet another excuse to walk away. Perhaps paradoxically to an American mind, the only way that the JCPOA is likely to make the Middle East a better place rather than a worse one is if the United States uses it to remain involved in the region. To reassure our allies and rein in their fearful aggressiveness. To deter the Iranians and demonstrate to them that we will not allow a nuclear agreement to become a cover for their own aggression. If we do that, then I believe that the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action could be an important aspect of a wider, more engaged American policy toward the Middle East. But without a wider, more engaged American policy toward the region, neither the JCPOA nor even an unattainable "perfect" agreement with Iran will amount to more than fodder for the Nobel Prize committee.