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Hearing: Regional Impact of U.S. Policy Toward Iraq and Syria
House Foreign Affairs Subcommittee on the Middle East and North Africa
April 30, 2015

Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I am delighted to offer my views. I must emphasize, as always, that I represent only myself before you today; the Brookings Institution does not take any institutional positions on policy issues.

The Roots of Regional Disorder

The Middle East is disordered, more so than at any time since the 1950s, when the Suez War, revolutions in a host of states, and the Yemeni civil war shaped the Arab state system we knew before 2011. Today's disorder came about because of long-building trends, and long-brewing problems, that undermined the authoritarian bargain by which these states maintained support from and control over their societies, and that produced widespread discontent that burst into the open in late 2010.

This is not to say that the Arab Spring caused the turmoil and violence we are witnessing now. It is to say that today we are witnessing the outcome of a longstanding crisis in state-society relations in the Arab world, one that took several decades to germinate, one that governments failed to address. This long-brewing crisis generated revolutions, to which many governments responded poorly: in ways that exacerbated societal divisions, further weakened and in some cases collapsed state institutions, generated violence, enabled the growth of terrorist movements, and has morphed in at least three countries into outright civil war.

It's no accident that Syria and Libya are the most disordered and violent parts of the region today. These are the places where leaders, having failed to act in a manner that could have prevented mass popular uprisings, then sought to repress their people through the use of force. Instead of restoring order, these brutal, power-hungry and shortsighted men broke their crumbling states to bits and drove their societies to civil war.

As institutions of basic governance and community order failed, those with guns to impose their will gained power. As the state apparatus turned against its own citizens, those citizens turned elsewhere for protection – toward identity-based, sectarian militias and toward extremist groups, often with horrific agendas.

The terrible choices of these terrible leaders, more than anything else, created the openings Al Qaeda, ISIS, and sectarian killers across the region now exploit for their own purposes, including to threaten American interests. And those same terrible choices that created a demand for militias in Syria has had a similar effect in the Arab states that are

still standing – populations fearful of spreading violence are demanding that their governments provide order and security – even at the cost of freedom, accountability, or basic rights.

The roots of the region's upending – in the fraying and broken social contract – remind us that ISIS is not just an accelerant of chaos but is also a symptom of an underlying disorder. It is not the cause and not the disease. Where leaders have the will and capacity to govern without violence, where citizens are active participants in public life, and where state institutions respond to citizens' needs and are accountable to the public, terrorism may be a fringe phenomenon but will not be a dire threat.

The broken state-society relationship must be addressed if the region is to return to some form of stability. This has important implications for U.S. policy now, as the coalition pushes back ISIS in Iraq, and a coalition of extremist rebels in Syria pushes back Bashar al-Assad's forces in Syria.

With the breakdown of states, we also witnessed the breakdown of the regional order that had been in place more or less since the end of World War II. I don't think it's appropriate to talk about the end of Sykes-Picot, because what we are dealing with is not really about borders – and changing borders is no magic bullet for resolving the existing inter-communal conflicts. Instead, one can envision the conflicts raging across the region as along three distinct axes:

- One is about the nature of the state – a conflict between the traditional governments and the movements of political Islam.
- One is about the balance of power – a conflict between traditional Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the revolutionary Shia Islamic Republic of Iran and its allies.
- A third is about the purpose of life – an argument between the apocalyptic forces of Da'esh and everyone else.

These cross-cutting conflicts draw the states of the region into shifting coalitions in different arenas.

U.S. Policy in Iraq and Syria

Despite his previous intentions and preferences, and despite the initial reticence and war-weariness of the American public, President Obama last year reversed his effort to "rebalance" America's foreign policy focus away from the Middle East, and re-committed American blood and treasure to a fight against violent extremism in the heart of the Arab world. This reversal, not two years after the United States had withdrawn its last soldiers from Iraq, was driven by a recognition that the spillover from the Syrian civil war could no longer be contained, and by the horrific video-broadcast beheadings of two American civilians by the so-called Islamic State group. But Obama's new commitment to the Middle East is fraught with uncertainties that are already provoking anxiety, both in the United States and in the region itself.

The first uncertainty is whether the coalition military commitment is sufficient to achieve the goals President Obama laid out in September – to degrade, defeat, and ultimately

destroy the movement dubbed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

Iraq: Already the United States has had to send more military advisers than initially planned to support a decimated and demoralized Iraqi army. Already, the Iraqi government has given non-state militias, some under Iranian influence, a large role in the fight in ways that have exacerbated Sunni anxieties, and undermined the ability to peel local support and acquiescence among Iraqi Sunnis away from ISIS. That said, the operation in Tikrit last month, in which Iranian-supported militias failed and the Iraqi government relied on American air support for victory, showed the limits of Iranian influence in the Iraqi fight against ISIS, and showed the wisdom of a U.S. strategy that allows the Iraqi government the space to own responsibility for its own choices in this battle for its territory and for the hearts and minds of its population. However, this strategy ultimately stands or falls on Iraqi Prime Minister Abadi's ability to move forward with the kind of political and security steps that will build the confidence of Iraq's Sunnis in the Iraqi state.

Syria: A regular stream of news reporting suggests that U.S. efforts to equip and train cooperative Syrian opposition forces is only slowly taking shape, and will take more than a year, perhaps two or more, to have any meaningful battlefield impact. Meanwhile, recent reports suggest that a coalition of more extreme Islamist groups, including Jabhat al-Nusra, is successfully routing Syrian military forces in Idlib province (whether they can hold this territory is another question).

If Assad rallies, this war of attrition between him and the Islamist opposition forces could drag on for a long time, with mounting human cost and mounting spillover to neighboring states like Lebanon and Jordan. If somehow Assad is defeated, or pushed back to a narrow area around Damascus and Latakia, then the extremist rebels will have won the day, and they are unlikely to cede political authority to more moderate forces who did not do the fighting, nor to exiles, nor to Syria's remaining beleaguered liberals.

A second uncertainty is whether, even should the military campaign succeed, the necessary politics and diplomacy will follow to restore stability to these two broken states. If Arabs and Kurds, with U.S. air support, successfully push back ISIS in Iraq, can Iraq's distrustful ethnic and sectarian groups work together well enough to hold the country together? Prime Minister al-Abadi has introduced a National Guard proposal to parliament, but it is stalled, holding up something that restive and suspicious Sunnis see as a prerequisite for them to remain part of a Shi'a-dominated Iraqi state. Likewise, even should a moderate, US-supported Syrian opposition successfully challenge both ISIS and Assad in the bloody Syrian civil war, there's still little reason to believe that Iran and Russia are prepared to end their support for Assad, that Assad would agree to join a peace process that promises to end his reign in Damascus, or that Syria's fractious opposition factions could negotiate as a unit to achieve that goal.

<u>The Broader Implications of ISIS</u>

While President Obama was persuaded that ISIS presented a sufficient threat to U.S.

interests to justify a sustained military response, ISIS is only a symptom of the underlying breakdown in regional order. The upheaval in the Middle East has likewise generated newly assertive regional powers like Turkey, new opportunities for longstanding troublemakers like Iran and Hizballah, and sometimes bitter disputes amongst Arab states like Qatar and the United Arab Emirates.

And, of course, this disorder is itself the product of the long-building pressures that generated the Arab Spring – the rise of a massive, educated, but largely unemployed generation of youth whose expectations for themselves and their societies far exceeded the real opportunities they could obtain given the arbitrary, repressive, and kleptocratic leaderships that characterized the pre-revolutionary Libya, Tunisia, Egypt and Yemen. While Iraq and Syria may get all the newsprint, marginalizing extremist movements like ISIS and Al Qaeda demands attention to other weak and fragile states in the Middle East and North Africa.

What that means is that, even as the United States focuses on arenas of intense violence, like Syria and Libya, attention must be paid to those areas where governing institutions are still functioning, albeit challenged – and we need to focus on helping institutions to listen to, include and serve the marginalized majority of the region, its young people.

Sectarianism and Conflict in Today's Middle East

In responding to the Arab uprisings, many governments found a sectarian narrative useful in justifying their actions and in rallying their populations. Iran of course saw a golden opportunity in the GCC crackdown in Bahrain in March 2011, and the Bahraini and Saudi media likewise waged a vicious anti-Shia campaign to label those protesting as agents of the enemy rather than citizens with a legitimate grievance. This sectarian narrative fit well also with events in Iraq, where Maliki was escalating his purge of Sunni politicians and military officers, and in Syria, where Bashar Assad, with help from Iran, was brutally suppressing mainly Sunni protesters. The sectarian narrative has helped both sides of this regional power struggle mobilize support, and also helped Sunni countries with Shia minorities deter, isolate, and punish any domestic Shia dissent. And in the face of the violence of recent years, that narrative of sectarian conflict is a reality for too many in Iraq and Syria.

The problem with governments wielding that sectarian narrative is that it becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy, and it actually increases the incentive on both sides for a real power competition to be fought both directly and through proxies. And we see that playing out across the region now.

Whatever motivated the Saudi-led intervention into Yemen, one consequence of this action is the hardening and extension of this narrative of sectarian conflict, aligning Sunni governments in a coalition that has defined its enemy in sectarian terms. I think we need to be concerned with the ways this development might exacerbate sectarian violence across the region over the longer term.

The Iranian Threat as a Unifying Factor

A year ago, I would have said that the Sunni Arab states that were struggling to deal with the disorder unleashed by the 2011 revolutions actually saw political Islam as a greater threat than Iran. Today, however, Saudi Arabia and others seem to have prioritized the Iranian threat. The fall of Mosul last June brought a momentary unity between American priorities and those of our traditional regional partners, and allowed the establishment of this anti-ISIS coalition – but if we are honest, that coalition, at least within the region, has always been paper-thin.

Our regional friends agree that ISIS is a threat, but they don't agree on how much of a threat, or how best to combat it. And they really don't agree about what sort of state should replace its rule, or the rule of the governments they dislike in Damascus and Baghdad. When it comes to Syria, different regional governments also disagree on whether Assad's ouster, or Syria's territorial integrity, or ISIS, should be the highest priority. Partly as a result, they have had a lot of trouble agreeing on which Syrian opposition actors are worthy of their support, or which of the various diplomatic initiatives for Syria are worthy of support.

The military operation in Yemen, while launched precipitously, not especially clear-cut in its goals or hopeful in its outcomes, seems to have served our Arab partners by unifying them more solidly against Iran than they were against ISIS, helping them to overcome internal divisions that had been sapping their capacity for effective collective action. That has obvious implications for the fight against ISIS in Iraq and Syria – especially given Saudi fears that the United States has ceded influence to Iran inside Iraq in order to fight ISIS. This presents a challenge for ongoing U.S. efforts to scale up its Arab partners' efforts against ISIS.

Some argue that this Arab assertiveness and fractiousness is a consequence of American disengagement – that if America had been more deeply invested in the region, especially militarily, our partners would line up and follow. There might have been a time, early in the Syrian conflict, when that was true. But today our regional partners are so caught up in what they view as existential struggles, that they are not necessarily interested in waiting for or following an American lead. In several instances over the last four years, the United States has voiced clear preferences and advanced clear efforts to resolve regional crises, and been rebuffed by regional governments – from Bahrain in 2011 to Egypt in 2013 to Libya in 2014. Regardless, today even a more engaged America that has reinserted itself into Iraq and is providing support to the campaign in Yemen cannot restore order without regional allies that share with Washington a clear view of the order they seek to impose, and that are prepared to set aside their differences so as to act together to impose it.

That's not what we have. In the contexts of the cross-cutting conflicts across the region, America's partners are so uncomfortable at the collapse of the region they knew, so fearful of the forces that collapse has unleashed, so mistrustful of one another's motives, that collective action is very difficult to achieve or sustain. Even the much-touted Saudi-led coalition that intervened in Yemen was missing Oman, a major GCC member and neighbor of Yemen, and had several partners that were more symbolically than materially part of the fight.

Combining the shake-up in the regional balance of power, the sectarian dimension of regional politics, the anxieties of Sunni Arab governments, and the expansion of conflict in several regional arenas, we have the ingredients for proxy wars, miscalculations, and unintended or intended escalations of existing conflict. It is not an optimistic picture, but perhaps a period of conflict will have to proceed before regional actors are prepared for the imperfect compromises and the more far-reaching reforms that will be necessary to end civil conflicts and stabilize the region.

The Impact of a Nuclear Deal

These escalatory dynamics within the region are likely to persist regardless of whether the P5 +1 states achieve an agreement that constrains Iran's nuclear program. In fact, whether there's a nuclear deal or not, I predict we will see a more aggressive approach by Iran in a host of arenas around the region, where the upheaval has given them greater opportunities than before.

If there is a nuclear deal, the hardline elements within the Iranian regime, those most opposed to a deal, are also those with the greatest interest and investment in regional troublemaking. They are likely to use their ability to make noise regionally to try and compensate for the power disadvantages they see inherent in a deal – and they are likely to have a green light from the Supreme Leader to do so, because he will want to compensate them for their unhappiness with a deal.

If there's no deal on the nuclear issue, however, then the Iranian leadership will want to scale up its regional assertions of power for a different reason: in order to solidify or even strengthen its current regional power position in advance of whatever tougher American / Israeli / Sunni Arab efforts it anticipates to contain it.

Our Sunni allies are already upping their efforts in countering Iran regionally, as the Yemen operation and the renewed investment in the Syrian rebels demonstrates. Iran will have both the means and the incentive to respond in kind. This is a recipe for an escalatory spiral, perhaps most particularly in Syria and Iraq.

What this means is that, no matter how much the US government asserts its primary regional interest in combating ISIS and Al Qaeda, our major regional partners will remain resolutely focused on the Iranian threat as their primary concern. And it means that, in reassuring and bolstering its partners as part of any Iranian nuclear deal, the United States cannot limit itself to the nuclear issue, or to traditional defense and deterrence.

No matter what equipment or systems the United States is willing to sell to its Arab partners, no matter what aid it is willing to provide, no matter what US assets the administration is prepared to base in the region – our partners are looking for a different kind of reassurance. They are looking to see the United States demonstrate its recognition

of Iran's troublesome activities around the region, and demonstrate its readiness to push back against Iran's expansionism around the region. And the primary arena in which the Arab states wish to see that from the United States is in Syria.

Reportedly, recent gains by rebel forces against the Syrian military in Idlib province are the result of greater unity and strengthened capabilities due to more unified and concerted effort amongst the states of the Arab Gulf. If these forces continue to demonstrate success against Assad, they will be the most important players in shaping any post-Assad political order in what's left of Syria. We are still, tragically, a long way from negotiating a post-Assad political order – but to the extent that the United States does not have "skin in the game" on the ground in Syria, it will be difficult for Washington to exercise influence over either the Syrian rebels or their Gulf sponsors in shaping Syria's future. And the administration has resolutely resisted becoming more involved in shaping the trajectory of Syria's civil conflict, either directly or indirectly. This restraint is understandable, but if the current weakening of the Syrian military succeeds, or if the Iranian regime and Hizballah bolster Assad so that the conflict stalemates again at a higher level of violence, then the United States will be hard put to keep its focus in Syria on ISIS.

Policy Implications

None of the foregoing is meant to suggest that a nuclear deal with Iran that meets the requirements laid out by the administration in light of the Lausanne framework is a bad idea. On balance, in this regional context, and even if a deal does not last as long as envisioned, it's a good idea to constrain Iran's nuclear activities to the extent possible and for as long as possible. The aspects of Iranian behavior that most trouble our allies will be there, and will likely escalate, irrespective of a nuclear agreement – and thus efforts to help expose and push back against those Iranian behaviors must be a key element of America's policy in the coming months.

In addition, the United States must attend now to the political components of its policy in Iraq and Syria.

- In Iraq, that is primarily about how to help Iraqi Sunnis find their place within the Iraqi state, and how to help Prime Minister Abadi secure that space institutionally. Both Iran and the Sunni states have roles to play in stabilizing Iraq by ensuring that territory and people liberated from ISIS find a welcoming, responsive, and accountable government in Baghdad taking over.
- On Syria, the United States must escalate its engagement with political forces that have been preparing plans for post-Assad Syria, and must also intensify its dialogue with its Sunni partners in the region to bridge gaps regarding priorities and strategy in Syria.

Finally, as discussed, the United States must keep firmly in mind that the underlying vulnerabilities that produced this upheaval and gave space for ISIS still exist across the

region.

- The United States must devote greater attention to supporting governments who are using political compromise instead of violence to resolve disputes, like Tunisia.
- The United States should help local partners forge meaningful governance – not just a security presence – in ungoverned spaces like the Sinai.
- The United States should help communities in the Middle East, through indigenous civil society, to build their own capacity for peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution.

Ultimately, building resilient societies and marginalizing ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their brethren across the region requires more effective, responsive institutions that can win citizens' trust and loyalty, and more fair and functional systems that can offer young people meaningful opportunities – not just jobs, but a chance to fulfill their long-denied dreams instead of placing their hopes in a world after this one.