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The Middle East 2017

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Conference Agenda

The Brookings Institution
March 14–15, 2017

Tuesday, March 14

8:00–8:30 Continental breakfast

Saul/Zilkha

8:30–8:50 Welcome and introductory remarks

Falk
Dr. Bruce Jones, *Brookings Institution*
Air Commodore Michael Gray (RAAF),
U.S. Central Command

8:50–9:00 Logistics of the conference

Falk
Kenneth M. Pollack, *Brookings Institution*

9:00–10:30 Iraq after Mosul

Falk
Moderator – Tamara Cofman Wittes,
Brookings Institution
Panel:
• Emma Sky, *Yale University*
• Florence Gaub, *European Union Institute
for Security Studies*
• Kenneth M. Pollack, *Brookings Institution*

10:30–11:00 Break

11:00–12:30 Syria after Aleppo

Falk
Moderator – Daniel Byman, *Brookings Institution*
Panel:
• Frederic C. Hof, *Atlantic Council*
• Barbara Walter, *UC San Diego*
• Charles Lister, *Middle East Institute*

12:30–2:00 Lunch

Saul/Zilkha

2:00–3:30 The Yemen problem

Falk
Moderator – William McCants, *Brookings
Institution*
Panel:
• Eric Pelofsky, *Washington Institute*
• Elisabeth Kendall, *Oxford University*
• Barbara Walter, *UC San Diego*

Wednesday, March 15

8:00–8:30 Continental breakfast

Saul/Zilkha

8:30–9:15 Keynote remarks

Falk
General Joseph Votel, *Commanding General,
U.S. Central Command*

9:15–10:45 The future of Saudi foreign policy

Falk
Moderator – Shadi Hamid, *Brookings Institution*
Panel:
• Bruce Riedel, *Brookings Institution*
• F. Gregory Gause III, *Texas A&M University*
• Jean-Francois Seznec, *Georgetown University*

10:45–11:05 Break

11:05–12:30 Whither Iran?

Falk
Moderator – Kenneth M. Pollack,
Brookings Institution
Panel:
• Suzanne Maloney, *Brookings Institution*
• Matthew McNnis, *American Enterprise Institute*
• Karim Sadjadpour, *Carnegie Endowment
for International Peace*

12:30–2:00 Lunch

Saul/Zilkha

2:00–3:30 Russia in the Middle East

Falk
Moderator – Fiona Hill, *Brookings Institution*
Panel:
• Pavel Baev, *Peace Research Institute of Oslo*
• Mark Katz, *George Mason University*
• Yuri Zhukov, *University of Michigan*

3:30–3:45 Closing remarks

Falk
Kenneth M. Pollack, *Brookings Institution*

A new administration confronts the old Middle East

Reflections on the 2017 Brookings-U.S. Central Command Conference

Kenneth M. Pollack

March 27, 2017

Perhaps someday the Middle East will be tranquil. Perhaps someday we will not have to agonize over its ceaseless tumult, or debate the extent to which the United States needs to invest its resources to prevent the chaos of the region from affecting vital U.S. interests. But that is not the world we live in, nor the region we face.

The Middle East remains a land of turmoil. Its complexities bedevil all who seek to cure its ills, but hard experience has demonstrated that trying to run from them in hope that they will not follow is a fool's errand. Left unchecked, the problems of the region grow. They intermingle. They react to one another, and that typically only propels them to greater destructiveness.

Hopeful notes...

Of course, not everything about the Middle East is disastrous. There is light within the darkness. Indeed, the speakers at the 2017 Brookings-CENTCOM Conference were at pains to emphasize reasons for (modest) optimism. There was little doubt that ISIS would soon be defeated militarily and driven from its strongholds in Mosul and Raqqa—and eventually, Hawija, Tal Afar, and elsewhere. There was a hopefulness that many governments and many American officials recognized that realizing the fruits of victory would require a sustained commitment to Iraq not just militarily, but economically and politically as well in order to address the underlying problems that had spawned ISIS in the first place. There was even praise for Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi, who appreciates the need to heal Iraq's political, bureaucratic, and economic flaws, and has eagerly sought Western assistance to do so. Likewise, the panel discussion of Saudi regional policy agreed that Riyadh has realized that its involvement in the Yemeni civil war has been a mistake and many senior Saudis are looking for a way out. There was even some hope that the Saudis might find such an exit soon.

Moreover, there was a real sense that the Saudis, among others, had internalized the need for far-reaching political, economic, and social reform to finally address the structural flaws that had brought down the regimes in Egypt, Libya, Syria, Tunisia, and Yemen and threatened those in Bahrain, Iran, Jordan, Morocco, and Oman. Although in a far more advantageous situation, the United Arab Emir-

ates has been adopting new political and economic measures as well. And Prime Minister Abadi has made clear his determination to reform Iraq's paralyzed political system, sclerotic bureaucracy, and one-trick economy, even if his ability to do so remains badly hamstrung.

Moreover, both speakers and participants in the conference noted that there had been an intellectual sea change among both European and Middle Eastern states in their approach to the problems of the region. The threat from the embedded flaws in the Arab state system, the raging civil wars, and the terrorism, refugees, and radicalization that they breed have generated previously unimaginable threats to the peace of Europe and the durability of Arab regimes. In response, both European and Arab governments have increasingly reached the conclusion that they can no longer ignore or repress these problems, but rather need to commit real resources to try to overcome them. That too is a hopeful sign, especially at a time when Americans are struggling with how much the United States should commit to try to end (or even manage) the problems of the Middle East.

... amid ominous melodies

Yet these silver linings came on the edges of great black storm clouds blanketing the Middle Eastern sky. In Iraq, the recognition of the need for large-scale postwar assistance has so far not been met with meaningful commitments. Moreover, there was considerable skepticism that Iraq's fragmented and paralyzed political system would be able to make use of such aid if it came. Even at the height of the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq, copious aid could not solve all of Iraq's problems and had barely dented many. With the U.S. and its allies less able to guide Iraqi politics today than in 2003–2011, there were concerns about how much could be done for Iraq this time around, even if the Iraqis and their prime minister were more desirous of receiving external assistance.

As bleak as this situation may seem, Iraq was the happy case. The panels on both Syria and Yemen were far more pessimistic. On Syria, the panel concluded that while the Bashar al-Assad regime and its Russian and Iranian allies had gained the upper hand in the western part of the country, they still had a long, hard path to retake east-

ern Syria—and the panels on both Iran and Russia raised doubts about the willingness of either Moscow or Tehran to continue to pour resources into Syria to do so. While the Saudi panel posited that Riyadh was now more focused on Yemen than Syria, it acknowledged that Qatar and the UAE remained fixed on Syria and might opt to escalate their commitments to the Syrian opposition to help prevent the regime and the Iranians from consolidating their gains.

The Yemen panel was particularly enlightening, but the light it shed mostly illustrated the darkness of the matter. While the panelists were quite confident that each side of the ongoing conflict had reasonable demands and was willing to make some compromises, they also suggested that none was willing to make the kinds of compromises necessary to reach an agreement with the other. In the grand Venn diagram of the Yemeni civil war, there did not yet appear to be any overlap among the circles.

One of the speakers, an expert on civil wars, provided a haunting reminder at the end of the first day of the conference, warning that historically civil wars with significant external intervention like Syria and Yemen (and Libya, for that matter) last an average of 10 ½ years. Thus, we probably have not even reached the halfway point of any of these wars.

Conflict of interests

The panels on the second day of the conference focused on the regional interests and strategies of three key actors: Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Russia. In addition to providing a wealth of insight and information into each of these countries, the panels also highlighted a region-wide problem that had surfaced repeatedly on the first day. While it was certainly true that each of these actors has a distorted view of the motives and activities of the others, mere miscommunication is only part of the problem—and probably not the most important part of it.

A far larger problem is that all of these states, and the United States as well, have critical, divergent interests. Russian interests run diametrically opposed to those of the United States on most issues, even if there is a commonality on the need to defeat ISIS. Likewise, Saudi and Iranian interests are just as incompatible. Tehran might complain that it is not looking for a fight with Riyadh and that the animosity is largely a result of Saudi actions. Yet the simple fact is that Iranian support for the Assad regime, Hezbollah, and the Houthi rebels in Yemen run directly contrary to Saudi interests, as the Saudis define them, and vice versa. Similarly, although the United States

and Iran have tacitly cooperated in Iraq to drive out ISIS and support the Shiite-dominated government in Baghdad, Iran continues to define its interests as inimical to the United States, while Washington continues to see Iran's efforts to fight and undermine Sunni states as a direct threat to American interests.

In other words, the problems of the region are not problems of miscommunication and a perception of threats where none exist. There certainly is miscommunication and every state (likely including the United States) exaggerates at least some of the threats it faces. However, there are real differences among these states on issues of critical importance—issues on which they are willing to spill blood and treasure. Moreover, these fundamental differences are both driving direct actions that all of these states are taking against one another, and stoking the bloodshed of the civil wars by encouraging ever-greater external intervention. It is a recipe for wider regional war in the future and could produce direct clashes between these states.

America: No longer the hegemon, but still first among equals

The conference also provided a useful perspective on the changing role of the United States in the Middle East. America remains the strongest power in the region and when it is willing to employ its military, economic, and diplomatic resources, it can do things that no other power can. Although the strength of other countries to push back against the United States is growing, and the willingness of the American people to commit such resources is waning, our allies still look to us to lead, even though it is heartening that they are more willing to act on their own and commit resources to address regional problems. Likewise, our adversaries still have great respect for American power, particularly our conventional military capabilities and economic resources. Yet both groups are fixated on America's willingness to use our hard power in a region that is ever less susceptible to soft power.

All of the speakers and panelists at the 2017 Brookings-CENTCOM conference shared this sense of importance, though many different positions on that topic were heard. This discord fittingly seemed to reflect the wider debate across the American polity over the same question: Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows endlessly hurled at us by the Middle East, or to take up arms against a sea of troubles and end them (to mangle Shakespeare). The problems of the Middle East are not going away and they will not leave us alone, but they are not easily fixed either.

Part of the issue for the Middle East is the unsettled policies of the new Trump administration. The region—and the many countries whose prosperity is bound up with it—are unsure how to reconcile the rhetoric of the Trump campaign and White House with its choices for key national security posts and their past positions and recent statements. The states of the Middle East are hopeful that the new administration will once again choose to lead in the Middle East, and will lead in directions they want to follow, but they are unsure. In the face of this uncertainty, they have tried to put the best face on the Trump administration's statements in order to convince others (and themselves) that Washington is going to do exactly what they want. But they are all preparing to act unilaterally or in concert with others to try to advance their interests even without the United States.

In the past, countries would typically follow America's lead or do nothing—and then deplore Washington's unwillingness to do what they wanted. But they largely did not believe that they had the capacity or the political space to pursue their interests independently of the U.S. That has changed significantly. Today, an increasing number of countries are developing the capacity to act independently in the region. The Russians and Iranians, and to a lesser extent the Emiratis and Saudis, have all demonstrated a capacity to project power beyond their borders. The Saudis, Emiratis, and Qataris are taking dramatic action, employing limited capacities and finding allies where they can. Iran is building an increasingly expeditionary security apparatus, mixing its own indigenous forces with Shiite militias from across the region and Russian firepower.

In theory, the United States could prevent any of them from acting, but that is becoming more difficult than it once was, and the U.S. is less willing to do so. Although this could be seen as a virtue for the United States—allowing other states to take on tasks that only the United States would have dared in the past—the reality has been very different. America's allies have created more problems for themselves and Washington by trying to tackle problems beyond their abilities while the Russians and Iranians have proven themselves more able and determined to act in ways that hurt American interests rather than help them.

Managing American retrenchment

Thus, the final theme to emerge from the 2017 Brookings-CENTCOM Conference, and the greatest challenge for the incoming administration, is deciding when, where, and how to exercise power in the Middle East. In the decades after the end of the Cold War and the Per-

sian Gulf War, the United States possessed overwhelming power in the Middle East. This predominance made strategy easy. The United States wanted to see the Middle East calm and peaceful, so that the oil would flow (cheaply) and America's allies could live without fear. With such power the U.S. could stamp out every conflict or threat to regional peace that emerged—or at least try to do so, because some proved far more difficult to stamp out than they should have been.

Moving forward, it is hard to imagine that the United States will play the same, predominant role that it played from 1990–2010. We will not take over every problem across the region and try to solve it as we once did. We need to be more discerning and more restrained in our use of resources.

That is likely to prove easier said than done. As the old autocracies continue to break down and the civil wars churn on, the interactions both among and (increasingly) within states are likely to become exponentially more complex. The Kurds furnish just one example of this headache-inducing complexity. The United States supports the Kurdistan Regional Government of Iraq, and its two principal parties of the Kurdistan Democratic Party (KDP) and the Patriotic Union of Kurdistan (PUK). But the KDP is aligned with Ankara in fighting the Kurdistan Worker's Party (PKK) in Turkey, as well as the PKK's Syrian offshoot, the People's Protection Units (YPG). The PUK is influenced by Iran, which, along with Russia and Hezbollah, supports the Assad regime. The United States opposes Iran's hegemonic expansionism broadly, and its role in Syria and Iraq specifically. Yet the United States also supports the YPG against ISIS, and while we try to discourage its ties to Iran and the PKK, we mostly look the other way, infuriating our Turkish and KDP allies. Thus, directly or indirectly, the United States somehow supports and opposes virtually every group mixed up in greater Kurdistan.

Which is why, more than ever, the United States needs a unifying theme—an overarching strategy—from Washington to guide the formulation of specific policies to address specific problems. As new crises emerge, one of the most critical questions that Washington will have to answer is whether to get involved, in pursuit of what interests, and to achieve what ends? We no longer have the will to pour resources into every problem, not that we ever really did so. But more judicious decisions about which problems to tackle and what tools to employ can only flow from a clear, well thought out strategy to secure America's enduring interests in a turbulent Middle East.

Panel I: Iraq after Mosul



As Iraq regains territory from ISIS, the question becomes how the fractured country can practice good governance and build durable stability. To that end, political and military experts, government officials, and policymakers must determine how Iraq can learn from the failures of previous years, and avoid a further spiral into sectarian violence, weak institutions, and poor security.

To discuss this question of integrating sustainable political and security strategies in Iraq, Tamara Cofman Wittes, senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy (CMEP) at the Brookings Institution, moderated a panel featuring Florence Gaub, senior analyst at the European Union Institute for Security Studies; Kenneth Pollack, senior fellow in CMEP at Brookings; and Emma Sky, director of the Maurice R. Greenberg World Fellows Program and senior fellow at the Jackson Institute for Global Affairs at Yale University.

The panel began by stressing the differences between the current situation and the 2007–2009 period, when Iraq had just emerged from civil war. This time, there is no large American presence to play referee. Panelists emphasized that the rise of ISIS was a symptom of governance failure. The fight against ISIS has generated a confluence of interests among Iraq's competing groups, but these same groups have simultaneously capitalized on the chaos. The Kurds have sought to maximize their territory, Shia militias have exploited the sectarian strife to seize a larger role in Iraqi society, and intra-group competition has spiked in all of Iraq's constituent communities. Meanwhile, on the political level, former Prime Minister

Nouri al-Maliki continues to maneuver against current Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi. The primary challenge for the United States and the international community is not to pick winners and losers, but rather to try to bring legitimacy to the governing process. A stable Iraq can only be built on strong national institutions, not the election of a preferred candidate or faction.

The political solution requires at least a partial answer to the country's security challenges, above all the rise of sectarian militias. The key to disarmament, demobilization, and reintegration (DDR), one speaker posited, is jobs. The historical record of similar conflicts demonstrates that men will drop their weapons faster if there are opportunities to do something else. With regard to the militias, one speaker suggested the analogy of gremlins—relatively harmless and possibly even helpful at first, but insidious and destabilizing over time, and perilous after a figurative “midnight.” In Iraq's context, there will likely be a window of time following the fighting when sufficient economic development could lead a majority of militiamen to abandon their militias for better opportunities. However, using this gremlins analogy, “midnight” is when the militiamen discover there are no jobs available, and thus the militias become permanent fixtures of the political landscape. It was speculated that we may already be past that window. There was also mention of a “trilemma of integration of the armed forces,” whereby Iraq must choose between two of three goals: first, capping the size of the armed forces, which will be far too small to incorporate every militia's soldiers; second, ensuring the institutional

health of the armed forces; and third, preserving the soul, or ideology, of the armed forces which binds its members together.

The speakers emphasized how crucial it was to ensure that Iraqis do not feel tied to militias when they go to vote. While Iraqi politics is likely to remain somewhat violent for the foreseeable future, leaders can still shape a narrative that helps the country move forward. In 2006, that narrative was the so-called Anbar Awakening. Prime Minister al-Abadi is now trying to promulgate a new narrative, one based on inclusivity. In terms of fostering national, multiethnic cohesion, several participants backed the idea of national conscription in Iraq, where the armed forces would partially serve as a means to replace loyalty to a militia with loyalty to the state.

One panelist contrasted Iraq with South Africa regarding future reconciliation. The key difference lies in the fact that there is no Iraqi F.W. de Klerk (the South African president widely credited with helping to end apartheid): a respected leader of the displaced ruling group to reconcile the Sunni-Shia and intra-Shia divides that have festered over the last five years. Moreover, more blood has been spilt in Iraq than in South Africa, and Iraqi government efforts at “de-Baathification” (akin to dismantling the apartheid system) have gone far beyond that—Sunnis rightfully feel excessively disadvantaged. One way to tackle the challenge of bringing about a more inclusive society is to understand that the past emphasis on multiculturalism in Iraq was really just an emphasis on sub-identities; moving forward, it would be wise to place an emphasis instead on rebuilding a shared national identity.

The speakers also discussed the advantages and pitfalls of decentralization. When governance is conducted at a local level, it becomes much harder to campaign using sectarianism, and instead politics become centered on the provision of services. The difficulty is avoiding a situation where local actors seek to exploit decentralization in order to illegally agglomerate power.

On electoral reform, one speaker explained that parliamentarians are currently accountable not to the people, but to the parties that empower them. This sectarian representational system has therefore prevented bold action, while punishing those who have done a good job but have angered their parties (e.g., the removal of former Finance Minister Hoshiyar Zebari). Proportional representation should be scrapped for voting by locality.

On foreign assistance, one speaker proposed the United States give \$1–2 billion per year in civilian aid for the next five years. The United States should, however, advocate for burden sharing. The EU can also do better with helping on the economic issues it knows best, such as youth unemployment. Meanwhile, other Arab states are still nowhere to be seen on Iraq, and their absence constitutes a missed opportunity.

On Iranian influence in Iraq, speakers stressed that the United States should avoid direct competition because Iran would win such a battle of attrition. Moreover, both countries do have interests in Iraq that overlap, including, in a panelist’s opinion, Iran’s recognition that U.S. efforts to build a more stable Iraq are a positive development.



Panel II: Syria after Aleppo



The Middle East is challenged by civil wars, sectarian tensions, destabilizing rivalries, and failing states, but one tragedy outshines the rest in any frank discussion on the region: the Syrian civil war. Since the start of the conflict in 2011, U.S. foreign policy makers in the Middle East have struggled to find agreement on a viable approach or even desired outcomes. To tackle the subject of Syria and possible American policy options for the conflict, Daniel Byman, senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings, led a conversation with Frederic C. Hof, director of the Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East at the Atlantic Council; Charles Lister, senior fellow at the Middle East Institute; and Barbara Walter, professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at University of California, San Diego.

The conversation was framed around the new realities on the ground in Syria after the fall of Aleppo to the government in late 2016. According to one panelist, this was an important moment in the war for the opposition, despite having prepared for defeat in the city for nearly a year. Members of the opposition still fervently believe in their revolution, and they do not accept that they have lost. The panelist also noted, however, that there was a significant shift underway within the opposition: a change of narrative. Although the spectrum of armed opposition has always included many groups of wildly different views, their disagreements were largely about military rather than political matters. From 2011 to late 2016, the narrative that animated the majority of the opposition was revolutionary. The only other narrative that has been around for this long is al-Qaida's sectarian vision. The policies of

the United States focusing on ISIS are currently, albeit inadvertently, feeding this latter narrative. In a matter of months, the panelist warned, the sectarian narrative could come to define the opposition permanently.

As the third round of peace talks began in Astana, Kazakhstan, one panelist explained that the Syrian civil war follows a pattern that many civil wars have displayed. In about 60 percent of cases, combatants at some point seek to engage in serious, comprehensive peace negotiations. Certain conditions tend to facilitate this decision: a military stalemate, increasingly heavy war costs, limited outside intervention, and mediation. Clearly, the Syrian case does not display all of these characteristics. As the discussion showed, there is reason to believe that a real, mediated solution to the conflict is still many years away.

Of all the parties present in Astana, Russia factored most heavily into the conversation. A panelist contended that President Vladimir Putin's decisions regarding Syria were largely guided by domestic considerations. Putin's message was that the United States under President Barack Obama was on a "regime change jihad" through the region. Putin would stop it, demonstrating to the world that Russia was ready to reclaim its status as a great power after decades of humiliation. Putin has been largely successful in convincing his domestic audience of this message and his success. The question is what Russia will do now that it has largely secured President Bashar Assad's regime. If Putin were to shift policies, does Russia have the power and leverage to marginalize Assad and/or move toward some sort of settlement? Even if it did, Assad does not have the power

to rebuild a Syria that would be valuable to Russia—one capable of hosting Russian military bases, building a respectable Syrian-Russian trade relationship, or purchasing Russian defense equipment. While one panelist saw little indication that Russia wanted to pivot in Syria, certain members of the Syrian opposition have supposedly been in discussions with Russians and claim to see interest in a policy change. Russia's military leadership is especially frustrated with the indiscipline of foreign Shiite militias that have been brought in and commanded by Iran. Another panelist noted that Iran is the main determinant of Assad policy these days, and that Iran will not want to see him marginalized, since the Assad regime is the best guarantor of Iran's principal interest in Syria: Hezbollah and its predominant place in Lebanon.

Prompted by a question from the audience, one panelist addressed Iran's relative success in using proxies and the failed U.S. policy of arming moderate rebels. According to the panelist, Iran has a political and religious ideology that it uses to mobilize and recruit very effectively and is willing to provide the support that its proxies need to be effective. American attempts to train and equip forces to fight ISIS have failed from day one because the United States believed it could create a new narrative for forces that had spent years fighting the brutal Assad regime. Furthermore, the United States and its allies have always looked at proxies as provisional and easily manipulated. These groups may take U.S. financial support, but their goals remain different from American ones. Iran has generally recognized and accommodated the ultimate goals and original narratives of their proxies.

Iran and the United States do not share any interests in Syria: while Iranian interests can thrive in a chaotic Syria, the United States needs a stable country. One panelist argued that the United States needs to take another look at the issue of civilian protection. Another panelist noted that the idea that Assad was never really an enemy of the United States is a fiction. While some panelists agreed that the focus of U.S. policy should be the security of Americans and the United States, another emphasized that this was not enough. The United States needs policy for the long-term, one that takes into account not just immediate tactical gains but also strategic victory—winning the narrative and assisting the emergence of a stable government in Syria.

There are a number of possible outcomes to the war, including a decisive military victory by Assad. One panelist suggested that, contrary to the views of many, an Assad victory may not be the worst possible outcome. The Is-

lamic State would then become Assad's problem. Alternatively, a negotiated settlement could bring about an end to the conflict, but conflicts that end as a result of negotiations are not necessarily stable in the long-term. In a negotiated settlement, a third party (a practical impossibility in Syria) would likely have to enforce the agreement, while certain reassurances would have to be made to the opposition, as well as to Iran, Turkey, and other parties. A negotiated settlement, even if it remains the most probable outcome, is still likely several years away. The average length of a civil war with extensive outside intervention is 10 ½ years, with serious negotiations beginning around the eighth year. The duration tends to increase when there are multiple factions fighting, as is the case in Syria. According to one panelist, any stable settlement will have to include empowered local governance.

The worst outcome for the United States, the region, and the international community would be one in which the civil war festers and destabilizes the region. As explained by a panelist, one of the best predictors of whether a civil war will break out in a given country is whether that country's neighbor is undergoing a civil war of its own. This puts Jordan, Lebanon, and Turkey at risk. Furthermore, the emergence of radical Islamist groups has been shown to coincide with the emergence of civil wars. The major security goal for the United States remains the elimination of the conditions that give rise to groups like ISIS—chaos, anarchy, and civil war.



Panel III: The Yemen problem



Any analysis of the contemporary Middle East should identify humanitarian crises, deepening sectarian cleavages, failing political systems, and escalating competition of regional and great powers through proxies and interventions as the critical challenges to regional stability. While Iraq and Syria unsurprisingly occupy top billing of concern for the United States and the international community, the oft-forgotten civil war in Yemen exhibits all of the above challenges. Resolving the Yemeni civil war is certainly in the interests of the United States, but a clear strategy, much less an achievable solution, remains elusive. In the third and final panel on civil wars in the Middle East, William McCants, senior fellow and director of the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at Brookings, moderated a discussion on the Yemen dilemma with a panel featuring Elisabeth Kendall, senior research fellow at Pembroke College of Oxford University; Eric Pelofsky, visiting fellow in the Program on Arab Politics at the Washington Institute; and Barbara Walter, professor at the School of Global Policy and Strategy at University of California, San Diego.

The conversation began with the frank acknowledgment that the war in Yemen remains opaque to most. The Houthis seem to have the upper hand, but how much backing they receive from Iran and their realistic path to victory seem uncertain. The Saudi-backed government faction of deposed President Abdrabbuh Mansour Hadi wants to take back Sana'a and re-establish legitimacy as a national government. Despite two years of effort by the Saudi coalition, one panelist estimated, the Hadi government is making only limited progress in recapturing territory. On the other hand, the Houthis seem to want to

have authority over all of Yemen without actually having to govern. Furthermore, former President Ali Abdullah Saleh is seeking to retake power and appears willing to take any opening toward that end. Al-Qaida in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) sees the war as a great opportunity to exploit the security and governance vacuum.

When it comes to the foreign powers, there is another mess of interests and vague goals. The Saudis would gladly extricate themselves from the conflict if they were confident Iran had done the same. Additionally, a panelist noted that the Saudi leadership, particularly the deputy crown prince, wants to be able to claim victory. The Emiratis, who field the most effective force in the theater, want to avoid getting sucked into a black hole, but only without rebuffing their Saudi ally. Finally, Iran has used the conflict as a low-cost way to inflict pain and sap revenue from the Saudi government, further distracting the United States in the process.

The panel agreed that there are few upsides for the United States, which has remained committed to the Saudis despite Riyadh's lack of a realistic strategy as well as growing humanitarian liabilities. One speaker argued that the U.S. tried to thread a needle by tightly calibrating its efforts to help the Saudis without becoming directly involved, but the communication of this effort failed. The United States cannot easily abandon the Saudis, but there is nothing to be gained by becoming more deeply involved in the war. Unfortunately, according to another panelist, the Saudis will probably remain intransigent in their onerous demands on the Houthis, precisely because they have the benefit of U.S. backing.

The discussion then moved to the other reason Yemen remains relevant to U.S. foreign policy: the presence of AQAP. According to one panelist, AQAP's success in gaining a territorial foothold and even briefly holding some cities and villages is a symptom of dysfunction. The issue was reframed by the panelist around the question of why the general Yemeni population was in a state to now tolerate AQAP, considering that the group has been present in Yemen for more than a decade without gaining many adherents. The reality, according to this panelist, is AQAP, like ISIS in Syria, better performed state functions for local communities than the nonexistent national government. This is even demonstrated in media output, with only 3 percent of AQAP propaganda mentioning the Houthis and most of the rest celebrating the group's provision of social services. A panelist warned that it would be counterproductive for the United States (or any nation) to declare that any Yemeni who collaborated with AQAP is an enemy. Such a strategy would play directly into the group's hands, as AQAP deftly banded with local governing bodies and addressed real concerns.

In a rare bit of positive news, a panelist did note that the native ISIS affiliate has been widely unsuccessful in replicating AQAP's success. It is perhaps telling that in comparison with AQAP's fruitful policy of intertwining their efforts with the community and their concerns, the ISIS branch was perceived as a band of extremists and frauds attempting to impose themselves without respect for local Yemeni interests. However, if the ongoing U.S. counterterrorism campaign in the country intensifies under the new administration, one panelist worried it could adversely change this calculus. By aggressively killing their leadership, the United States may inadvertently create a common cause that helps bring AQAP and ISIS together with the population. In the near-term, the ISIS affiliate may also gain strength with the loss of territory in Syria as fighters flee to Yemen as a nearby safe haven, particularly native Yemenis.

The panel concluded by addressing the future of the conflict, particularly the possibility of a settlement. As with the other civil wars in the region, there are a range of possible ways the war could end. The panel outlined four primary forms of resolution: military victory, foreign occupation, negotiated settlement, and partition. Outright military victory is the least likely as both sides have foreign backing and solid foundations of local support. There is effectively no chance of a competent (i.e., Western) occupation of the country. There was some disagreement amongst the panelists on the viability of partition. While Yemeni society is sufficiently culturally fragmented and geographically distinct enough to suggest that a partition would be practicable, the panelists recognized there is no obvious line of

division. The east-west divide in the country is nearly as distinct as the better-known north-south division.

This leaves a negotiated settlement as the most viable and likely solution, but, as in Syria, the intervention of foreign powers and the existence of numerous factions suggest that Yemen may have a long way to go. Counterintuitively, one unexpectedly positive factor in the Yemen case, according to a panelist, is the ubiquity of arms in the population. Successful negotiated settlements require mechanisms that guarantee the parties abide by the terms, such as a peacekeeping force, but it remains highly unlikely the international community would be interested or able to provide such a commitment to Yemen (it would be difficult enough in Syria). This panelist argued an armed populace could act as a natural check on the centralization of power and effectively serve as guarantor of this hypothetical settlement.

The problems in Yemen are not getting easier. A panelist pointed out that almost half of the country's population are youths. Traditional means of working in the country through tribal patronage networks may become less effective as more Yemeni youth no longer feel beholden to these traditional power structures. The United States is particularly handicapped by the near total absence of a diplomatic presence in the country, which means that Washington no longer knows which Yemenis to talk to. A panelist delivered a final warning that the party making the most noise, as has often been the case in Yemen, often fails to work with the actual stakeholders.



Panel IV: The future of Saudi foreign policy



The first panel of the second day of the conference focused on Saudi foreign policy and its impact on the region. The core of Saudi foreign policy remains its escalating rivalry with Iran, which has already exacerbated instability and violence throughout the Middle East. However, Riyadh has also begun to address its uncertain future as it faces the volatile combination of dynamic global energy markets, economic questions, and the end of an era, when King Salman, the last son of Ibn Saud, dies. To explore this future, Shadi Hamid, senior fellow in the Project on U.S. Relations with the Islamic World at Brookings, steered a panel discussion featuring F. Gregory Gause III, professor, John H. Lindsey '44 Chair, and head of the international affairs department at the Bush School of Government and Public Service at Texas A&M University; Bruce Riedel, director of the Intelligence Project and senior fellow in the Center for 21st Century Security and Intelligence and Center for Middle East Policy at Brookings; and Jean-François Seznec, founder and managing director of the Lafayette Group and a visiting associate professor at the Center for Contemporary Arab Studies at Georgetown University.

The panel began by taking stock of Saudi Arabia's foreign policy record over the last few years. While it is an oversimplification to label Saudi foreign policy as merely reactionary, the panel felt that it had largely failed on its own terms. One speaker argued that the primary objective of containing Iran has clearly failed, especially considering the perceived acquiescence by the Obama administration toward Tehran embodied in the 2015 nuclear deal. Even on secondary goals, such as pulling Hamas and Syrian

President Bashar Assad away from Iran, the Saudis had failed "spectacularly." Still, another panelist did point to some key successes, particularly in reacting to the Arab Spring revolutions: the overthrow of Egyptian President Mohammed Morsi and the suppression of Bahrain's protest movement. However, the principal foreign policy effort of the last two years remains Riyadh's tragic intervention in the Yemeni civil war.

The panel further argued that an important reason for Saudi underperformance in regional politics has been the inadequacy of its tools, especially compared to Iran. According to one panelist, there are three elements critical to a successful foreign policy in the region. The first is money; the Iranians and Saudis both have it, but the Saudis have more. Unfortunately, money has proven to be the least useful of these tools. Second, a country needs deployable military forces to aid allies, proxies, and clients. Despite their Yemeni adventure, Saudi Arabia is effectively powerless compared to Iran when it comes to hard power projection. Finally, an effective foreign policy requires loyal and reliable allies and clients to help carry out the country's bidding. Again, the Iranians have dedicated and effective allies and clients—as witnessed in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq—whereas Saudi Arabia's Gulf and Western allies have as many problems with Riyadh as they do common interests.

The Saudis were unhappy and tired of President Obama, despite the president spending considerable time in the Kingdom and selling more than \$110 billion worth of arms. The previous administration was perceived, rightly or wrongly, as a supporter of revolutions in the Arab world, and therefore

an existential threat to the Kingdom. The election of Trump, in the opinion of one panelist, had produced a mixture of relief and trepidation. There is relief that the new administration will no longer bother about “nonsense like human rights or gender equality,” but there remains serious concern about the competence of the new White House team to adequately handle the Iranian challenge.

The panel felt that the future of Saudi foreign policy was recently on display with the king’s tour of East Asia. The Saudis are looking for a different approach, and the trip east was meant both to attract new investments and to counter Iran on the international stage. Finally, the courting of China signals the long-term strategic direction of the Kingdom as it recognizes the waning American role in global affairs and seeks to impress a possible replacement. Nonetheless, another panelist countered that while the Saudis are looking to expand their relationships in Asia, they also understand that the United States remains, at least for now, the key power in their neighborhood.

As the panel moved to the U.S.-Saudi relationship, a speaker argued that the United States should find a way to help the Saudis end their disastrous war in Yemen. The panelist compared the Saudis to a drunk driver as they erratically responded to perceived Iranian aggression, while the United States has remained stuck in the back seat. Unfortunately, according to this panelist, the car crash has already happened, as demonstrated by the 15 million Yemenis facing starvation from the Saudi blockade.

Additionally, the Saudis have led the regional arms race with the third largest defense budget in the world, yet they remain hesitant to use their military after its feeble performance against the Houthis. Indeed, it was one panelist’s contention that the intervention in Yemen was meant as a massive live-fire exercise for the Saudi Armed Forces to learn to fight. This seemed unlikely to another participant though, regardless of how the Saudi military has performed. This panelist felt that the Saudi leadership would not countenance risking its own forces anywhere else. For the Trump administration going forward, it was recommended that the United States affirm to Riyadh its recognition of a credible Iranian threat in Yemen, but convince the Saudis that their intervention has been ineffectual, if not counterproductive, and find a quick, honorable exit.

The panel moved on to the role of Wahhabi-Salafism and Islamism more broadly in the Kingdom’s foreign policy. For one speaker, the Saudi leadership lost control of Salafism as a political instrument in the 1950s or 1960s. Though the clerical establishment can continue

to define proper Islam at home, that ability ends at the border. It was noted that there is also a growing generational divide, with many Saudi youth feeling detached from and even rebellious toward strict religious rule. The Saudi government will in general, though, remain wary of Islamists, because they ultimately pose a threat to the legitimacy of the monarchy.

Saudi Arabia is still finding its place in a rapidly evolving geopolitical environment. The collapse of oil prices has inevitably taken a toll on the Kingdom, but the panelists agreed that the leadership has skillfully leveraged the crisis into an opportunity to enact substantive reforms. Deputy Crown Prince Mohammad bin Salman’s central domestic project, Vision 2030, will almost certainly fall short, but the panel commended the real improvements in increasing taxation, diminishing subsidies, and encouraging economic diversification. The most disruptive impact of suppressed oil revenue and Vision 2030 will be the decline of government jobs, which remain the primary source of employment for native Saudis. However, the greatest domestic concern of the Kingdom is the uncertainty of succession following the eventual death of King Salman. It remains to be seen how the royal family will resolve the unprecedented step of transferring power to a new generation.

The conversation concluded with the possibility of Iranian-Saudi reconciliation. The entire panel agreed that Tehran would be more than willing to consider reconciliation, because they have largely won in their proxy contests—Yemen, Syria, and Iraq. For that reason, the Saudis will be unwilling to consider rapprochement for the foreseeable future. Instead, Saudi Arabia may try to be smarter (and more frugal) in confronting Iran, as was already demonstrated by the king’s Asian tour. If the Iranians truly want reconciliation, they will need to give up something to bring the Saudis to the table. In a panelist’s opinion, the easiest place for this is Yemen, which Saudi Arabia considers its backyard but where Iran has only limited interests. Regardless, the Saudis have already begun to de-emphasize costly efforts such as Syria by being less vocal about Assad having to leave power. Support for Egypt could also decrease as fiscal realities force the Kingdom to make tough decisions.

The Saudis will observe the new U.S. administration closely as they adjust their foreign policy. If they believe the Trump team is competent, it is likely they will assume a more traditional relationship as a U.S. ally. Nonetheless, the Kingdom continues to prepare for a Middle East without American leadership.

Panel V: Whither Iran?



The administration of former President Barack Obama played a leading role in fundamentally changing the relationship between Iran and the rest of the world. Even so, Iran continues to play a central role in the civil wars consuming the Middle East—in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The future of Iran’s international relationships and its involvement in the region could change drastically in May 2017, as the country heads to the polls for presidential elections. To discuss Iran’s relations with the international community, the region’s wars, elections, and more, Kenneth Pollack, senior fellow at the Center for Middle East Policy (CMEP) at Brookings, moderated a discussion with Suzanne Maloney, senior fellow in CMEP and the Energy Security and Climate initiative and deputy director of the Foreign Policy program; J. Matthew McInnis, fellow at the American Enterprise Institute; and Karim Sadjadpour, senior fellow in the Middle East Program at the Carnegie Endowment for International Peace.

The panel began by discussing the prospects of a second term for Iranian President Hassan Rouhani. All panelists agreed that the system inherently favors the incumbent for re-election although it will be important to see if Iran’s conservative and hardliner factions are able to unite against him. Ultimately, an incumbent’s loss would signal a repudiation of the policies that the system had been pursuing. In this case, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei would be abandoning the policies that he had previously endorsed (however tepidly), and in doing so would increase the probability of confrontation with the United States. Furthermore, Rouhani is a reliable hand on the proverbial wheel at a time of considerable uncertainty in the international, regional, and

domestic political environments. Rouhani is a cleric, not a real reformer, and he views the Iranian political system as something that needs to be tweaked but not completely transformed. In his second term, Rouhani would likely focus on economic reforms, an agenda that commands a degree of consensus across the political spectrum.

Thus, the panelists felt that a dramatic change in leadership at the presidential level seemed unlikely, and a dramatic change at the very highest level—that of the supreme leader—seems more unlikely still. The panelists felt that Khamenei’s successor would likely be determined by power brokers outside the Assembly of Experts—the body that technically oversees the succession process—and Iran’s Revolutionary Guard Corps will likely have a much larger role to play in practice than they do on paper. Rouhani could be a possible successor, but one panelist suggested that the next supreme leader will likely be someone that no one is talking about now, a “lowest common denominator” pick. All panelists agreed that Khamenei could actually be in power for many years to come.

The conversation then turned to Iran’s regional policy, and in particular to Iraq and Syria. According to one panelist, Iran feels relatively comfortable that it is securing its most important interests in both countries. In Iraq, Iran has prevented the emergence of a new hostile state that could threaten it or allow freedom of action for the United States or another foreign power. In the Syrian war, which Iran views as a war of attrition and where it has less control, any major changes in the policies of the United States, Russia, Turkey, or Israel could disrupt Iranian policy, which at least for now seems to be successful in serving Iran’s interests.

Regarding Iranian strategies and tactics more broadly, it was noted that Iran's involvement in Syria has demonstrated that its system of proxies, which has served Iran well in the past, is insufficient to fight the wars in which Iran is now engaged. In Syria and Iraq, Iran is faced with the humiliating fact that it is unable to secure the respective friendly governments without the assistance of a foreign power (Russia and the United States, respectively).

Iran's use of proxies remains a problem for the United States. According to a panelist, Iran utilizes proxies for two reasons: to conduct unconventional warfare when Iran cannot or will not do so directly, and to spread Iran's ideology and political influence. These proxy networks become increasingly problematic for the United States and its allies over time. For example, Hezbollah is a true Iranian proxy (ideologically aligned and under Iran's command and control) and is already integrated into Iran's security framework, as part of the Islamic Republic's overall deterrent strategy. Once a Syrian wing of Hezbollah has entrenched itself, Iran's stakes in Syria will increase dramatically. This pattern could also play out in Yemen. If the Houthis become true Iranian proxies (which they are still far from being, according to the panelists), the Yemeni war will no longer be a war of opportunity and choice for Iran, it will become a war of necessity.

The panelists then briefly discussed Yemen and Saudi Arabia. Iran is beginning to see diminishing rates of return from its efforts in Yemen, and one panelist contended that Iran would like to potentially resolve the war there, at least to some degree. Iran's interest in Yemen is in part based on the fact that, so far, actions have cost Iran very little but have imposed great costs on Saudi Arabia (and by extension the United States). One panelist noted that the difference between today's rising Iranian-Saudi tensions and those we have seen in the past is that, unlike in previous decades, neither Riyadh nor Tehran is working to constrain the potential for escalation.

On the topic of the recent provocations by the Iranians in the Persian Gulf, it was noted that Iran is seeking to deter the U.S. The constant harassment sends a message to the United States and other foreign powers that they cannot intrude on Iranian maritime or land territory with impunity.

The conversation then turned to the Iran nuclear deal. One panelist observed that in the few instances in which the Islamic Republic has compromised, it has done so

in response to significant, unified international pressure coupled with U.S. diplomacy. While the supreme leader eventually endorsed the deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) has not led to the economic revival that Iranian citizens were told to expect and, due to the structure of the Iranian economy, it remains unlikely. Even so, the panelists noted that Iran is unlikely to walk away from the deal, despite its efforts to push the envelope and public threats to renege. The international community and the United States must be as unified as possible in responding to Iran's provocations. One panelist expressed concern that the Trump administration would ultimately provoke the unravelling of the deal, leaving the impression that Iran is the reasonable actor and the United States to blame for fumbling the historic agreement. Another concern expressed on the panel involved the threat that a competent Trump administration could pose to Iran. The extent to which regime change animates the outlooks of some administration officials is likely to rouse anxiety, even paranoia, within the leadership in Iran, where the regime is animated by a deep-seated fear that the world is aligned against Tehran. If the Trump administration acts on these regime change views it could provoke a real reaction. An American establishment divided on the issue of Iran is thus actually a gift to the regime.



Panel VI: Russia in the Middle East



Middle Eastern politics and the role of the United States in the region are in many ways being shaped by Russia and especially by President Vladimir Putin's actions toward Syria, Iran, Turkey, Israel, and other regional actors. To discuss these relationships and trends, Fiona Hill, senior fellow and director of the Center on the United States and Europe at Brookings, moderated a panel with Pavel Baev, nonresident senior fellow at Brookings and research professor at the Peace Research Institute Oslo; Mark Katz, professor of government and politics at George Mason University; and Yuri Zhukov, assistant professor of political science at the University of Michigan.

The panelists began with a few general observations about Russian foreign policy in the past few years, which all agreed is full of contradictions. Putin has sought to cultivate relations with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu while continuing his relationship with Iran; he maintains relations with the Kurds and Turkish President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan, with Fatah and Hamas, and with anti- and pro-U.S. regimes. All the while, Russia seeks to portray itself as a stabilizing force in the Middle East, even though one of its most fundamental interests in the region—high oil prices—depends on a degree of instability there. As one panelist noted, a country can benefit from cultivating relationships with all actors, but such a strategy leads these same actors to doubt whether the country can be trusted. Russia does not have the diplomatic and political resources to maintain this balancing act, and once the international community moves from conflict management to peacebuilding in the region, Russia will have no role to play, no resources to invest, and no experiences

to share. One panelist noted that the Soviet Union ran into a similar problem. The moment stability arrives in the Middle East, Russia's influence will largely evaporate.

While oil is certainly a central Russian interest in the Middle East, a panelist summed up Moscow's concern with the region in one word: security. Russia has long considered the Middle East its soft underbelly, the exposed southern flank. Contrary to what many believe and in contrast to views expressed in other panels, Russia's intervention in Syria is not a diversionary tactic to distract from the poor performance of the Russian economy (although that is a positive externality), nor does Russia seek to build permanent bases in Syria. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union did not stand a chance of matching the capabilities of the United States in the Eastern Mediterranean. Rather than relying on tightly regulated port access, Russia relied on offshore anchorages. Permanent bases clearly are not necessary. Thus, the main factor driving Moscow's intervention in Syria was to establish security, an aim much less cynical than the ones ascribed to Russia by many in the United States.

As was the case during the Cold War, Russia depends on a certain amount of conflict, but it also counts on that conflict not boiling over. Thus, much like the contradictions within its foreign policy more broadly, there is an incompatibility between the aims and immediate actions of Russia in Syria (as well as in Libya, where all panelists agreed Russia did not seek to intervene substantially). While Russia proclaims its aim to be conflict resolution and the enhancement of stability, full stability inevitably

would reduce Russia's influence. In the short term, some destabilization helps Russia, one panelist admitted, because it raises Putin's profile. In the long term, however, chaos is not beneficial; Russia knows this, and that is its main motivation for the intervention in Syria.

The discussion then turned to a review of Russia's relationships with states in the region. One panelist noted the particular characteristics of the Turkey/Russia/Iran strategic triangle. Russia clearly sees itself as the most reasonable of the three actors and views both Turkey and Iran as spoilers in many ways, including in the recent Syrian peace talks in Astana. While Russia's interests overlap more with Iran than with Turkey, Putin sees the Turks as easier to deal with in many cases. Even so, Russia and Iran likely favor different outcomes in Syria: while Moscow is interested in dignified disengagement in the long run, Iran (as with Turkey) is there to stay, and probably prefers to fight to the end to ensure a victory for Assad. As Iran continues to play the role of spoiler, Russia may be able to use Turkey as potential leverage against Iran in Syria. One panelist wondered if this was some sort of U.S. wedge strategy, an effort to sow division between Russia and Iran.

Despite the fact that Russia has typically aligned with Iran against the United States and Saudi Arabia, Moscow and Riyadh have a strong common interest in high oil prices. According to a panelist, in recent years Russia has become somewhat frustrated with Saudi Arabia, which as the traditional swing producer was responsible for maintaining high oil prices. Russia and Saudi interests clearly diverge over Yemen, but from the Russian point of view the Yemen conflict is a convenient distraction for Saudi Arabia, keeping it from focusing on support for the opposition in Syria. At the moment, Saudi Arabia effectively concedes that Assad will likely remain in power for the foreseeable future.

In response to a question from the audience, the panelists discussed the prospects of a war between Hezbollah and Israel. Russia is unlikely to condone any attacks from the Golan Heights into Israel. Such attacks are very unlikely in any event, since Hezbollah is completely preoccupied by the war in Syria. Russia has a lot to lose from souring relations with Israel, which Moscow depends on for modern technology, security cooperation, and trade.

The discussion then turned to Russian relations with the United States and China and their effects on the Middle East. According to one panelist, the emerging theory among Russian foreign policy elites is that the United States—some believe intentionally, others believe inadver-

tently—created ISIS. Russia views most of what is happening in the Middle East right now as America's fault. Clearly, Putin looks west when he looks at the world, not at China. One panelist noted that this lack of concern for China may be misguided. For now, China still relies on the United States to protect its oil interests in the region—but this could change.

Finally, the discussion returned to Russia itself, and participants asked about Russian counterterrorism efforts in the Caucasus and the concern about foreign fighters returning from Syria. While the return of foreign fighters is a risk, so far there have not been large numbers flowing into Russia. One panelist noted that the Russian government takes accusations that it helped create ISIS very seriously. Every time ISIS is referenced in the Russian press, it is accompanied by a qualifier stating that the group is forbidden there (the same qualifier is attached to references to Ukrainian nationalist groups). Russia has made vast improvements in counterterrorism efforts, and in doing so it has relied heavily on local proxies. These lessons may not be useful in Syria, though, and comparisons between Russian actions there and in Chechnya are misplaced.

One panelist explained that Russia's involvement in the Middle East depends not so much on events in the Eastern Mediterranean as on events in Russia and Europe. The Middle East is a secondary theater, and for Russia to be heavily involved in the region is something of a luxury, historically speaking.



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