

Between Retreat and Overinvestment in the Middle East and North Africa

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U.S. Interests in the Middle East and North Africa

The George W. Bush administration's approach to the Middle East and North Africa (Middle East) left the United States overextended, provoking a region-wide backlash against U.S. policy. President Barack Obama's effort to execute a cautious, managed "rebalance," slowly and carefully withdrawing investments in the region, proved unworkable. The Trump era has upended both of these approaches. While President Donald Trump's predecessor and a growing number of current political leaders from both parties share his goals of retreating from the region, the callous, often chaotic means through which he has chosen to do so have eroded U.S. leadership and interests and upset global alliances.

The United States has the opportunity, in the wake of the Trump administration, to chart a new strategy for the Middle East, one that begins with a general agreement regarding key U.S. interests in the region. As the authors in this volume will argue, these interests vary by subregion and country. Overall, however, they include preventing

terrorism and proliferation from threatening the United States; advancing Israeli-Palestinian peace; de-escalating conflicts, particularly in Syria and Yemen; protecting civilians by promoting a rules-based governance system and universal human rights; and ensuring stable global energy markets.

In order to secure these interests, some recent authors have advocated returning to the Bush-era hegemony that characterized U.S. foreign policy in the region, arguing that only U.S. dominance will ensure success. According to Richard Fontaine and Michael Singh, the United States needs “a Middle East policy that aims to retain U.S. primacy and freedom of action in the region, forges great-power cooperation where possible, and prevents or mitigates damaging competition where necessary.”¹ Arguments for preserving U.S. regional dominance often rest on the assumption that U.S. hegemony in the Middle East is necessary to confront China’s and Russia’s inroads in the region, which is the key to securing U.S. global power. In arguing for muscular power competition with China and Russia in the Middle East, Robert Satloff, for instance, contends that the United States must maintain its role as the singular great power in the region and that a U.S. departure would create a vacuum advantaging our competitors.²

Yet, putting aside the theoretical desirability of American primacy in the Middle East, returning to an era of singular U.S. dominance in the region may no longer be possible—especially after the Arab uprisings of 2011, the Syrian civil war, and the retreat of U.S. leadership during the Trump administration. Moreover, such an argument inflates the ambitions of China and Russia in the Middle East. While each may harbor short-term, transactional interests, neither country seeks to replace the United States as a regional security guarantor or dominant external power. In fact, Russia may not have the capacity to play that role even if it so desired. And, given U.S. budget constraints, public opinion trends, and increasing support for isolationism among Republicans and Democrats, the American public is simply not committed to a great game in the Middle East—and certainly not increasing investments in the region in order to advance a global struggle against Russia and China.

Others have doubled down on the logic behind the Obama-era

effort to downsize the U.S. role in the Middle East. Martin Indyk, a former U.S. diplomat who has spent his career arguing for the importance of Arab-Israeli peace, among other key interests in the region, has called for a reduced U.S. investment in the region. In what many see as a significant change of perspective, he now argues that “few vital interests continue to be at stake in the Middle East.”³ Trita Parsi, a consistent critic of U.S. policy in the region under administrations of both parties, now favors policies that deprioritize the Middle East, as “U.S. activities in the region have brought more turmoil than stability” there.⁴

This instinct toward reductionism is understandable, given both the political appeal of this argument and the poor track record of the United States in the Middle East over the past several decades. Yet a call for a new pivot away from the Middle East neglects the fact that long-term U.S. interests endure in the region, and are likely to persist at least for the next decade. Meanwhile, the “known unknowns” include the ever-present, even likely, unpredictability of politics and security crises in the Middle East, compounded by the devastating effects of the COVID-19 pandemic. In addition, the complete drawdown of U.S. power and investments in the region would invite further regional and global competition, generating new types of insecurity. Although we do not necessarily agree with their characterization of U.S. policy in the Middle East as a “purgatory” in their 2019 *Foreign Affairs* article, we agree with Mara Karlin and Tamara Wittes that “Washington can do better than choosing between abandoning its interests there and making a boundless commitment.” U.S. policymakers should be debating what the U.S. presence looks like in the Middle East, not whether there should be one.⁵

Why These Interests? A Dose of Humility

Both the recent history of U.S. engagement in the Middle East and the region’s present circumstances are humbling. Therefore, we have articulated a set of U.S. interests that are practical, not transformational. While these objectives, if fulfilled, would not remake the Middle East, they could leave both the region’s residents and the United States better off than where they started. These are modest goals, surely, but they are still worthwhile.

Counterterrorism and Proliferation

The United States should seek to disrupt those terrorist groups that pose a direct threat to the United States and American citizens, and deny the proliferation of nuclear, chemical, and biological weapons to countries and groups in the region. While it is true that since September 11, 2001, U.S. foreign policy has become unduly focused on counterterrorism at the expense of other interests and values, terrorism continues to top the list of most Americans' foreign policy concerns.⁶ U.S. policymakers must consider how to set expectations with the U.S. public, not blowing the threat out of proportion while nonetheless focusing on countering terrorists coming from the Middle East who continue to plot against the U.S. homeland. Moreover, the potential intersection of terrorism and weapons of mass destruction, however remote the prospect, would have cataclysmic implications.

The United States will never succeed in defeating all terrorist groups, banishing the use of terrorism as a political tactic, or eliminating all nuclear, chemical, or biological weapons in the region. But if we are vigilant and focused, we can not only prevent the vast majority of terrorist attacks on American targets, but also degrade the capacity of those groups that could try to conduct such attacks. We also can prevent additional countries from developing nuclear, biological, and chemical weapons capabilities, and stop such weapons from falling into the hands of terrorist groups.

Advance Israeli-Palestinian peace and protect Israel's security. The United States has a long-term commitment to the security of Israel as a Jewish, democratic state, which is rooted in the American public's moral and historical interest in the welfare of the Jewish people.⁷ In addition to the moral dimension of U.S. support for a Jewish state in the post-Holocaust era, a stable and democratic actor with a strong military in the heart of the Middle East also benefits hard U.S. security interests, particularly when it comes to threats of mutual concern. U.S. support to Israel is manifested in the commitment to help Israel retain its qualitative military edge in the region—defined in law as its “ability to counter and defeat any credible conventional military threat from any individual state or possible coalition of states or from non-state actors, while sustaining minimal damage

and casualties.”⁸ U.S. military aid to Israel—embodied most recently in the ten-year security assistance package negotiated by the Obama administration—plays an important part in sustaining this dominance.⁹

Ultimately, however, both Israel’s long-term security and its democratic character depend on ending the occupation through an agreed resolution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. Creating a viable, sovereign Palestinian state is the only way to preserve Israel’s Jewish and democratic nature while also respecting the national rights and upholding the dignity of the Palestinian people. Given realities on the ground, the next administration should not expect to be in a position to negotiate an end-of-conflict settlement between Israel and the Palestinians. U.S. leaders nevertheless can perform a critical service by protecting the two-state solution from actions that undermine its practicality—such as settlement expansion and terrorism. This means that a future U.S. president will have to exert pressure on Israeli and Palestinian leaders to rein in these and other self-defeating propensities, including unilateral annexation. The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not the sole, or even the primary, cause of instability in the Middle East, but the demise of the two-state solution would only add to regional chaos.

De-escalate regional conflicts that have spread insecurity, enabled terrorist groups, impaired economic growth, and created opportunities for malign actors to meddle. The many persistent civil conflicts across the region threaten U.S. interests in the Middle East. Terrorists exploit the security vacuums created by ongoing fighting in Yemen, Syria, and elsewhere to set up shop, train, and plot attacks. Iran capitalizes on the fissures widened by these conflicts to cultivate new proxies, further weakening national governments and extending its influence. These conflicts have ravaged the region’s economic life, stunted political development, and ruptured the social fabric of countries, precipitating a self-reinforcing cycle of instability that could take generations to overcome. Every U.S. regional interest, from ensuring Israel’s security to sustaining energy supplies to countering terrorism, is more difficult to pursue in the presence of conflict. While the United States will not be able to bring a swift resolution

to the Middle East's many burning conflicts through its own diplomacy overnight, at the very least it can help to mitigate the costs and de-escalate the levels of fighting in the short term, while preserving opportunities for conflict termination over the medium term.

Register meaningful and genuine improvements in governance, respect for human rights, and popular inclusion in the political systems of the Middle East. You do not need to be a human rights activist to believe that the quality and nature of governance around the globe affects a variety of U.S. interests, including counterterrorism and economic growth—and therefore should be a priority for the United States. Given the current prevalence in the region of authoritarian rule mixed with conflicts and power vacuums, democracy seems like an aspirational goal. While the United States cannot singlehandedly change this reality, we can still hold out hope for more incremental progress in terms of regional leaders' respect for universal human rights norms, economic reform, and representative, accountable governance. The release of political prisoners, greater transparency and inclusivity of central and local governments, augmented electoral integrity and freedom, and wider space for civil society and media, among other items, should not be a bridge too far.

In pursuing even these comparatively modest governance goals, the United States should remain humble about its influence and sensitive to the danger that our actions, however well intentioned, could be counterproductive. U.S. diplomacy and programming can, nevertheless, be calibrated carefully to empower local actors pushing for change, recognizing that they—and not outside powers—must be the central players in the drama unfolding in the Middle East. Tunisia, where the United States has successfully supported locally driven democratization, could represent a valuable model for future U.S. efforts.

Enable the free flow of oil and natural gas from and through the Middle East and North Africa. For both environmental and political reasons, it is imperative that the United States free itself of dependence on fossil fuels. In at least the short term, however, oil will remain critically important to the U.S. economy and American living

standards. Renewed U.S. oil production has made it more difficult for Middle East governments to wield oil as a weapon, but it has not eliminated our vulnerability to developments in the regional Middle Eastern oil market. The major risk Middle Eastern oil presents to the United States is no longer that a country like Saudi Arabia would deliberately reduce oil production to punish us—such action would ultimately hurt the Saudis much more than it would hurt the United States. Instead, the risk is that a reduction in the oil supply caused either by internal unrest in the Middle East or the seizure of regional oil fields by a hostile power could generate a massive spike in world oil prices. The Middle East, as a whole, accounts for 37 percent of global oil production, while Saudi Arabia and the small Arabian Gulf statelets alone produce 23 percent of oil worldwide.¹⁰ It is not hard to see how interruptions in regional oil supplies could wreak havoc on the global oil market, as well as on the international economy. As long as stable oil markets are critical to the health of the U.S. economy, ensuring reliable supplies of oil from the Middle East will remain a core national security priority.

An Opportunity for a New Approach Based on Limited Principles

Changing circumstances in the Middle East and the United States demand not only identifying the specific interests that we are pursuing in the region, but also using a different approach to achieve these objectives. While the region's relative importance to the United States has declined, for better or worse, the United States does not have the luxury of ignoring the countries and people of the Middle East. On the other hand, a strategy that continues to give the Middle East unquestioned primacy in U.S. foreign policy would be unwise, unaffordable, and unpopular domestically.

If the United States is to achieve the five objectives laid out above, the next administration will have to forge a strategy that can cope with two central dilemmas. First, there is tension between the American public's growing fatigue with the Middle East (exacerbated by the emergence of other global challenges) and the inescapable reality that this region continues to matter.¹¹ Second, advancing U.S. inter-

ests in the Middle East must be done in a way that avoids the perpetual risk of overcommitment.¹² Coping with these dilemmas will require navigating frictions, ambiguities, and some uncertainty.

We believe a strategy that both reduces costs and contains risk, while advancing core U.S. interests in the Middle East, is possible. The best way to overcome the two central dilemmas listed above is to ensure that this strategy adheres to a number of key principles. The following four principles, when taken together, form the foundation of a smart, self-interested, and cost-sensitive approach to U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Developing clear U.S. priorities, empowering diplomats and aid workers in the field, and emphasizing conflict-prevention will be even more critical components of this strategy in the COVID-19 era, as unpredictable access, security, and health conditions persist. Through a combination of skillful statecraft, robust diplomacy, and the responsible use of military force, the United States can cut costs without cutting-and-running, and remain a major regional player without the baggage of hegemony.

1. U.S. interests across the Middle East should drive U.S. policy. It seems obvious that U.S. policy in the Middle East should be primarily guided by American interests and values, rather than uncritically shaped based on the interests and agendas of traditional regional partners. Under Donald Trump's presidency, however, U.S. regional policy has been effectively subcontracted to select Middle Eastern partners, especially Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Israel. From the Trump administration's seemingly unconditional support for the strategically disastrous war in Yemen to the short-sighted pressure campaign on the Palestinian Authority, the Trump administration's regional agenda appears to be a product of local actors successfully convincing an impressionable U.S. president to act according to their immediate agendas. At other times, the parochial business interests of President Trump, his family, and his associates seem to drive regional policy choices, making the concept of economic statecraft a proxy for self-interest and self-enrichment. While the United States continues to share certain interests with many Middle Eastern countries, our interests are not identical. Pretending

otherwise only harms the American people and risks implicating the United States in costly initiatives that are either immaterial to our interests or directly contrary to them.

Instead, the identification of U.S. interests in the Middle East should be determined largely endogenously. U.S. policy must prioritize those issues that bear on the security, prosperity, freedoms, and values of the American people, such as counterterrorism, counterproliferation, energy security, Israel, and political reform/human rights. Other matters, such as the personal economic interests of a particular foreign leader or the religious agenda of one faction in a friendly country, should not be U.S. priorities. Yes, in order to forge effective partnerships with regional players, we will have to consider their concerns. And the United States should not hesitate to partner with local actors on mutual interests. However, we should never lose sight of our own interests, pretend that traditional allies share them in their entirety, or allow regional actors in the Middle East to use us in the pursuit of objectives of dubious strategic logic or morality.

2. The division between values and interests is a false dichotomy. Assuming these two elements of U.S. foreign policy are inherently at odds has been an easy, though often inaccurate, prism. This oversimplified binary is often used by decisionmakers to justify de-prioritizing human rights in U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East. Yet, while de-escalating regional tensions, focusing on conflict prevention, and prioritizing human rights and governance reforms are morally sound approaches reflecting the universal values animating U.S. foreign policy, they are often also the most direct way to achieve U.S. interests. Too often, past administrations have largely ignored brewing conflicts until they have escalated to the highest levels of violence, a point at which nonmilitary options are sometimes no longer available. This pattern of last-minute interventions tends to be more costly to American taxpayers, particularly to the extent that it leads to an overreliance on the military. All else being equal, diplomatic forms of engagement are far cheaper than the military alternatives. And while the American public is war weary, public opinion polls show continued support for nonmilitary U.S. leadership in the Middle East.¹³

With the exception of Trump's quixotic attempt to negotiate the "ultimate deal" between Israel and the Palestinians, the Trump administration has sidelined efforts to resolve regional conflicts, including in Libya, Syria, and Yemen.¹⁴ In the absence of U.S. engagement, we have seen the intensity of these conflicts increase, existing political processes diverge from U.S. preferences, or both.

By placing a renewed emphasis on conflict prevention and management in the Middle East, a new administration can reassert American influence, better contain destabilizing regional dynamics, and economize on resources. The first step in revitalizing U.S. conflict management capacity will be to reverse the damage the Trump administration has done to the State Department, USAID, and the U.S. diplomatic corps. Beyond strengthening our civilian international affairs institutions, the next administration will have to be sensitive to those fleeting opportunities when conflict resolution is possible, while not shying away from the less glamorous but equally important work of conflict mitigation.

Similarly, the next administration can make an important and relatively cheap investment in a more peaceful future for the Middle East by making governance and human rights concerns a core part of all of our bilateral relationships. Specifically, U.S. diplomats should stop censoring themselves on these points in private meetings. As noted above, governance failures and human rights abuses can exacerbate, and may even be the primary source of, regional security challenges, including terrorism, ethnic conflict, and state failure. In the interest of avoiding friction with traditional partners, however, policymakers have often pulled punches when it comes to internal political issues. Seeking to avoid unpleasant conversations with friendly governments, U.S. officials often signal tacit acceptance of unstable domestic practices, even if these domestic practices will irritate U.S. relationships in the Middle East in the short term and are likely to produce medium-term negative security externalities for our partners and ourselves. When we raise these uncomfortable domestic concerns with Middle Eastern partners, we should begin by explicitly disavowing regime change, to allay unnecessary tension with our partners and to emphasize that our focus on human rights in no way detracts from our commitment to their external security. In short,

pursuing both U.S. values and interests are mutually reinforcing and inextricably intertwined approaches to the Middle East.

3. The United States should adopt a new approach to security partnerships with regional actors. The Trump administration deserves widespread criticism of its transactional approach to foreign policy, a global approach that has rankled U.S. allies and severely weakened the post–World War II global order. On the other hand, in the Middle East, where most states tend to be transactional in their foreign relations, taking such an approach may be warranted at times. Ironically, Trump has treated several regional countries who do not share American values—Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates in particular—as strategic partners deserving of a blank check, forgoing transactionalism with them while descending into tit-for-tat squabbles with our European allies. The results have been unfortunately predictable, as Middle Eastern states have pocketed blanket U.S. support while continuing to pursue agendas contrary to U.S. interests.

A different approach to security and political cooperation with most countries in the Middle East is long overdue. Instead of blindly supporting those leaders or states designated as friends, we should begin specifying clear conditions and delineating what we expect for our support, including transparency on how recipient states will use our support and assistance. And, critically, we will need to impose consequences when our partners violate these expectations, something the United States has been loath to do in the Middle East. In an effort to preserve the “relationship” with putatively friendly but problematic countries, the U.S. government has often lost sight of whether any given relationship is working to the benefit of the United States. In the past, preserving the relationship became the end, not the means to achieve U.S. goals. The guiding principle for our relationships in the Middle East should be mutual benefit, in the short and long terms. The United States should not hesitate to make changes to partnerships where this is not the case. Having difficult conversations with countries we think of as partners is never easy. If we are more explicit about our aims and what we will support, however, the United States may be able to avoid the type of unnecessary misunderstandings that erode trust over time.

4. The United States should more critically evaluate its military posture in the region and, where possible, elevate civilian power instead. U.S. military strength enhances our diplomatic power, but it is not a substitute for it. Conflicts will not resolve themselves, and certainly not peacefully, just because we are strong. American diplomats need to become once again our first resort in dealing with conflict.

Since at least September 11, 2001, and perhaps even earlier, U.S. foreign policy in the Middle East has over-relied on military tools. Today, effective deterrence against potential external aggressors, whether Russia or Iran, does not necessarily require a large permanent footprint in the region, as long as U.S. redlines are clearly and publicly articulated, and prepositioning agreements as well as emergency basing rights remain in force. Technological changes on the horizon, such as a growing array of floating platforms, will further reduce the importance of maintaining a large military footprint in the Middle East. There will still be circumstances in which the United States needs to employ military force in the Middle East (or at least threaten to do so), particularly in the Gulf. However, we should eschew a binary choice between withdrawing all troops and the status quo, understanding the array of arrangements in between that could give us greater flexibility to advance U.S. interests at a more acceptable cost to the American public.

In the meantime, the U.S. government should also review its security assistance practices in the Middle East in the hope that we can help regional countries develop more effective and responsible militaries that can later take over some security responsibilities from the United States. Despite receiving billions of dollars in arms and countless training programs from the United States, the military performance of most Middle Eastern countries has not improved markedly. We need a new approach if this is to change, one that emphasizes institutional reform, not just operational training. Bilateral compacts should embed security assistance programs and these compacts should establish a clear strategic vision for U.S. support. More rigorous and systematic reviews of past security assistance programs would enable these changes. While it will not be easy to reform these programs, the status quo is simply not working; it is time to start experimenting with new models of cooperation. Finally, traditional security assistance,

typically focused on military-to-military training and equipment programs, must be complemented by other crucial assistance programs: development, intelligence sharing, and law enforcement. A new approach to foreign assistance would build in rigorous expectations that the United States is advancing its own goals and objectives through its foreign aid programs, whatever the nature of the assistance.

The Inheritance: Constraints to U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East in a Post-Trump Era

The above principles may seem clear-cut, but navigating them will encounter many constraints. The Coronavirus pandemic is likely to generate yet more challenges for the United States in the region. As of mid-2020, some immediate-term effects of the COVID-19 crisis in the Middle East were beginning to emerge, including the dramatic downturn in the region's economy, particularly as oil prices sank and major sectors such as tourism crashed.

The first constraint is that U.S. foreign policymakers in a post-Trump world will not be able to start from a clean slate; they will have to contend with the legacy President Trump leaves in the Middle East, correcting for his many missteps to the extent possible. This volume proceeds from the assumption that President Trump will continue to ply a chaotic, unpredictable path in the Middle East, swinging erratically between his two somewhat inconsistent goals of disengaging from the region and taking on Iran. There may be a military confrontation, and further precipitous decisions to deploy and redeploy troops.

Overall, we assume that the inconsistent stops and starts in this approach will generally serve to undermine U.S. credibility in the region. We expect Trump to remain capricious in his decisions on military deployments, recklessly withdrawing troops from places they are needed (such as in northeastern Syria), while surging more forces to countries where they are either not needed or potentially carry significant unintended consequences (such as in Saudi Arabia). In the diplomatic realm, Trump will continue to cultivate closer ties with Saudi Arabia—in spite of the brutal murder of Jamal Khashoggi—and the United Arab Emirates, whose activist authoritarianism and

fulsome flattery appeal to the U.S. president. The rest of the Arab world will either receive Trump's rhetorical endorsement but not much else (currently the case with Egypt), or Trump will ignore them entirely (the status of Tunisia and Morocco). President Trump will maintain his unstinting political embrace of Israel's right-wing government, and enable Israel's most hawkish policies within the West Bank and across the region. The president's almost obsessive hostility toward Iran will persist. Human rights issues will continue to be marginalized, and the United States will take a back seat to other actors in conflict management and resolution in Syria, Yemen, and Libya. Instead, the focus of U.S. diplomacy will increasingly revolve around the promotion of arms sales and other commercial activities.

Trump may not yet have caused irreversible damage to U.S. interests, though he is getting perilously close. Partners forsaken by the Trump administration, including Jordan, Tunisia, the Syrian Kurds, and the Palestinians, will probably give the next administration some benefit of the doubt. Future policy officials will have to countermand Trump's most egregious decisions, including suspending funding to the Palestinians, embracing Khalifa Haftar as the solution to Libya's problems, and granting a blank check to the Saudis and Emiratis. Other decisions, such as recognizing Jerusalem as the capital of Israel and moving the U.S. embassy there, will be politically hard to reverse. Instead, U.S. officials will have to balance out these past decisions with new measures to neutralize much of the harm inflicted on U.S. interests. As of this writing, the JCPOA (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action) may still be salvageable, but ongoing developments may ultimately render it obsolete. And if the Trump administration recognizes Israel's annexation of parts of the West Bank, it could fundamentally change what options are available to his predecessors in dealing with the Israeli-Palestinian conflict. The next administration should not rely on inheriting a clean slate from its predecessor.

The second constraint for any new U.S. strategy involves the continuing turmoil in the Middle East. The Arab world's decades-old nation-state system is under assault both from within—from the forces of tribalism, sectarianism, and dramatic socioeconomic change—and from without—from destabilizing actors like Iran and Russia. Economic stagnation, an immense youth bulge, venal gover-

nance, and the persistent appeal of extremist groups are simultaneously the cause and result of the growing instability that has come to characterize the region. The Middle East appears to be in the middle of a prolonged process in which the relationship between societies and political authority is being contested and renegotiated. This contestation could take a generation to resolve fully. And the ensuing instability will play out against a backdrop of intensified regional rivalries not only between Iran and Saudi Arabia, but also between two blocs—Qatar/Turkey and the UAE/Egypt/Saudi Arabia.

In the immediate term (two to three years), however, there is likely to be substantial divergence at the subregional level. In Syria and Iraq, the durability of gains by the U.S.-led counter-ISIS coalition will be tested by a combination of geopolitical intrigue, persistent sectarian-ethnic tensions, and dysfunctional politics. Starting in the spring and summer of 2019, the Syrian regime, aided by Russian airpower, begin to reconquer Idlib Province. Meanwhile, the October 2019 offensive by Turkey in the north, encouraged by Trump's bizarre decision to draw down U.S. forces with little notice, will empower the Syrian regime, Iran, Russia, and ISIS. Israel will continue its air strikes against Hezbollah in Syria as Iran slowly fortifies its presence in the war-torn country. In Iraq, the challenges of addressing the Sunni Arab community's long-standing grievances, an increasingly restive Shia community dissatisfied with corrupt and feckless governance, and Kurdish national aspirations will remain nettlesome. Recent violence between the United States and Iran and its Iraqi proxies that began in late December 2019 has further undermined Iraq's stability and could lead to a wider confrontation.

Unresolved failed states in Yemen and Libya will continue to fester, as the divergent agendas of regional and international actors exacerbate centrifugal forces in countries whose internal national coherence has always been tenuous. Libya will face difficulty establishing a single set of national institutions that reach to all corners of the country, particularly as Libyan militias and factions have become increasingly bogged down in intraregional and interregional competition over time, while in Yemen southern secession is a distinct possibility. A variety of other states that have so far averted state failure but still suffer from deep structural problems will manage on the

brink of instability. Countries in this category include the kingdoms of Jordan, Morocco, and Bahrain; authoritarian republics in Egypt and Tunisia, which continues its inspiring transition to democracy amid a faltering economy. In Lebanon, an economic emergency has brought long-standing discontent to a head, and it is unclear whether any conceivable government can manage popular expectations and the pressures of the international financial system. All of these states will most likely survive this period, but we cannot discount the possibility that a shock, whether external or internal, will bring regime change or even chaos to at least one of these states.

In Israel, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu's desperate attempts to stay in power and to avoid conviction on corruption charges have overtaken Israeli politics. Beneath these personality conflicts, however, it is not clear that there are major policy differences between Netanyahu and his former primary challenger-cum-coalition partner, Benny Gantz of the Blue and White Party. With the Trump administration's ongoing support for right-of-center political positions, parties on the center-right are primed to further their consolidation of power in Israel. Meanwhile, the combination of the continued growth of Israeli settlements in the West Bank, possible Israeli annexation, and potential Palestinian succession makes the prospects for progress toward ending the occupation and realizing a two-state solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict seem remote at best.

In the Gulf, we will continue to see enhanced regional activism by Saudi Arabia and the UAE, countries that until recently were traditionally passive players. President Trump's unwillingness to come to the defense of Saudi Arabia after Iran struck a major oil installation has induced some momentary caution in Riyadh and Abu Dhabi, but these countries' risk-acceptant leaders are unlikely to retreat from the scene. Qatar, on the other hand, has temporarily scaled back its regional ambitions in response to Saudi-Emirati pressure and greater scrutiny of its activities. In spite of the blockade on Qatar, Emir Tamim's government, which presides over a population of just 300,000 citizens and has sufficient proven natural gas reserves to last several more decades, may prove to be the Gulf's most stable country.¹⁵ Other countries in this subregion, already struggling with low oil prices, are on the wrong side of their production plateaus, straining

their ability to sustain decades-old social welfare contracts with their publics. These pressures are, and will remain, particularly acute for Saudi Arabia, which has a rapidly growing population and an economy that has been severely damaged by COVID-19. The Saudi public's political, social, and economic expectations are not being met.¹⁶

The third constraint, as discussed above, is the fact that the American public has little appetite for more military adventures in the Middle East after nearly two decades of war. Many Americans have concluded that the post-9/11 “forever wars” achieved comparatively little at great cost. Public opinion, therefore, will militate against new military entanglements in the region.¹⁷ In contrast to past years, the burden of proof will increasingly rest with those advocating military action in the Middle East, not those counseling restraint. The use of force will remain part of the next administration's toolkit, but a new president should not expect to enjoy the same free rein as his or her predecessors.

Fourth, the so-called return of great power competition will also constrain U.S. policy in the Middle East. As the Pentagon's National Defense Strategy makes clear, China and Russia are likely to displace the Middle East as the central focus of U.S. foreign policy. And, as priorities change, so, too, will the distribution of resources. The more manpower, money, and attention that is devoted to near-peer competition, the less that will be available for the Middle East. Absent major increases in not just defense but also the foreign affairs budgets—a remote possibility, given the current domestic political reality—U.S. officials working on the Middle East will have to make do with less.

Fifth, the checkered standing of the United States among the people of the Middle East limits what the United States can achieve there. Regional mistrust of the U.S. government, if not the American people, is not new, but it remains a handicap for policymakers. Whether it is U.S. support for Israel and repressive dictatorships, or anti-colonial sensitivities, there is deep opposition to U.S. policy in the Middle East. Authoritarian leaders play on popular suspicions of U.S. motivations to discredit even the most well-intentioned aid programs. The presence of U.S. forces in the Middle East often provokes a strong nationalist backlash, endangering our troops while destabilizing host countries. Increasingly, this mistrust has spread

to regional leaders, who accuse the United States of abandoning long-standing friends and warming up to their Iranian enemy. Friction is inherent in U.S. relationships with Middle Eastern countries and, while this will not stop cooperation, it will continue to complicate it.

Based on the preceding analysis, it is clear that the next administration will face an extremely challenging policy environment in the Middle East. The region is likely to remain mired in turmoil, leaving few opportunities for major policy victories. A new administration will not be in a position to solve the region's many problems in its first four years, and probably not in eight years. Simply put, the United States should view the Middle East as a region to be managed over time, not one awaiting deliverance.

This Volume

In this volume, we have gathered the most passionate, most thoughtful emerging voices. These authors worked for policymakers across the Clinton, Bush, Obama, and Trump administrations. They have reflected for years on policy trade-offs and challenges in the Middle East. In this compendium, they lay out a path for future U.S. engagement with regional countries, reflecting distinctions within the subregions. The authors as a cohort represent the new generation of Middle East policymakers. While each has worked on the region from within the U.S. government over the past fifteen years, their analysis does not dwell on past mistakes. Rather, each author considers anew how to resolve key regional and subregional challenges, understanding that the future will not look like the past.

The following chapters, when taken together, are not meant to be exhaustive. Left out of this volume are key issues and key countries that are likely to merit key consideration and attention in the future. In particular, we did not have the space to address intra-Gulf tensions; the changing politics within Algeria; and the local political dynamics, and spillover from regional conflicts, affecting Jordan and Lebanon. Moreover, we have dedicated little space to the significant economic and trade trends in the region as well as the Trump ad-

ministration's focus on commercial diplomacy. Its approach to the Middle East has overempowered U.S. industries' voices in key decisions, whether it comes to prioritizing the concerns of the U.S. defense industry in human rights policies toward the Gulf or elevating the importance of investments in the United States by key Middle Eastern states or rich individuals. In this volume, rather than commercial diplomacy or economic decisionmaking, we home in on the political and security elements of U.S. strategy. We have organized this volume around three themes based on three big picture challenges that future policymakers will have to tackle: de-escalating key regional crises; reimagining key U.S. security partnerships; and addressing crosscutting regional issues.

The authors in part I ask how U.S. foreign policy can manage, mitigate, and eventually resolve the many civil conflicts that persist across the Middle East. Wa'el Alzayat argues that the next U.S. administration will find few opportunities to change the bad outcomes facing U.S. foreign policymakers in Syria. Nonetheless, we cannot afford to give up. We must try to move the needle, where possible, on U.S. interests such as counterterrorism, protecting civilians, providing humanitarian aid, and eventually generating a diplomatic environment more favorable to U.S. goals in Syria and beyond. Christopher Le Mon makes a case for prioritizing ending the Yemen war—in part because of its deadly human costs and in part because de-escalating the conflict will allow the United States to achieve its other interests in Yemen. Even if the next administration fully extricates the United States from the war, sustained and creative U.S. diplomacy—particularly U.S. pressure exerted on the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia—will be necessary for any meaningful de-escalation on the ground. Megan Doherty argues that the United States must work with the European Union to stabilize Libya. However, in order to counter ISIS's growth in Libya over the medium term, and in order to achieve a modicum of stability, the United States and its allies must help the Libyan parties address deficits in governance and the weakness of local institutions.

The authors in part II reconsider U.S. security partnerships in the Middle East, analyzing how the United States can prioritize its own

interests and values rather than submit to the objectives and preferences of the partner country. Dan Shapiro reimagines a U.S. alliance with Israel that revisits Israeli-Palestinian peace as a way to protect Israeli security. Jon Finan argues that key U.S. interests in the Middle East converge in Iraq, where, in spite of the risks of being caught in U.S.-Iranian tensions, the still-fragile transitioning democracy needs U.S. political, military, and economic support. Amy Hawthorne and Andrew Miller show how the U.S.-Egypt partnership—once a security lynchpin of U.S. strategy in the region—might not matter as much for U.S. interests. At the same time, Egypt’s authoritarian governance, combined with its economic and demographic crises, means that President Abdel Fattah al Sisi’s rule will continue to be destabilizing. Finally, Daniel Benaim argues that the United States must recalibrate its partnership with Saudi Arabia. Partners should agree to disagree candidly where interests diverge, even as they find areas for cooperation on limited goals.

The authors in part III consider crosscutting U.S. foreign policy issues relevant to the entire region. Alexander Bick argues against overinvesting in the Middle East in order to fight a new Cold War with Russia, limiting U.S. competition with Russia in the region to those few cases where core American interests are implicated. Sahar Nowrouzadeh and Jane Rhee contend that it is possible to manage the Iranian nuclear threat while also countering its dangerous regional behavior. They argue that a future Iran policy should retain an emphasis on dialogue, even if the channels of communication are limited. Mara Karlin and Melissa Dalton advocate for a smaller, smarter U.S. defense posture that confronts the threats the United States faces in the Middle East with more limited and strategic defense tools. Stephen Tankel argues for a more coherent, rigorous, and ultimately smaller U.S. security sector portfolio in the region. Currently, the United States is achieving too few returns on its extensive and growing investments in security assistance in the Middle East. Dafna H. Rand argues that policymakers should scrutinize the return on investment derived from the current civilian assistance portfolio, which is a derivative of many earlier policies; better strategy can ensure that U.S. aid achieves U.S. objectives, particularly in the realm of rule of law and institutional reform.

While the ends prescribed by the authors in this volume—a reduced, more strategic, more disciplined and principled Middle East policy—might not differ much from at least the intent of the past two administrations, new tactics and programs will be needed to achieve these policy ends where earlier generations of policymakers fell short. The conclusion considers key innovations to the bureaucracy and policy process that can advance more limited American goals in the Middle East over the coming decade.

Notes

1. Richard Fontaine and Michael Singh, “Is America No Longer the Middle East’s Greatest Power?” *The National Interest*, February 15, 2017.

2. Robert Satloff, “Don’t Pull Back,” in “Commitment Issues,” *Foreign Affairs*, May/June 2019.

3. Martin Indyk, “The Middle East Isn’t Worth It Anymore,” *Wall Street Journal*, January 17, 2020.

4. Trita Parsi, “The Middle East Is More Stable When the United States Stays Away,” *Foreign Policy*, January 6, 2020.

5. Mara Karlin and Tamara Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory,” *Foreign Affairs*, December 11, 2018.

6. In April 2000, 24 percent of Americans worried they or someone they knew could be a victim of terror. Following September 11, 2001, 58 percent of Americans believed they could be a victim of terror. In 2017, 42 percent of Americans believed that they could become a victim of terror. See Gallup polling “Terrorism” (<https://news.gallup.com/poll/4909/terrorism-united-states.aspx>).

7. United States Senate. 115th Congress. 1st Session S. RES. 5.

8. United States Senate. 116th Congress. 1st Session. S. RES. 234.

9. Peter Baker and Julie Hirschfeld Davis, “U.S. Finalizes Deal to Give Israel US\$38 Billion in Military Aid,” *New York Times*, September 13, 2016.

10. “International Energy Statistics,” EIA Beta (www.eia.gov/beta/international/data/browser/#/?c=4100000002000060000000000000g0002000000000000001&vs=INTL.44-1-AFRC-QBTU.A&vo=0&v=H&start=1980&end=2016&showdm=y).

11. A 2019 poll by Surveys of U.S. Veterans found 62 percent of adults thought the war in Iraq was not worth fighting and 58 percent thought the war in Afghanistan was not worth fighting. Ruth Igielnik and Kim Parker, “Majorities of U.S. Veterans, Public Say the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Were Not Worth Fighting,” PEW Research Center, July 10, 2019 (www.pewresearch.org/fact-tank/2019/07/10/majorities-of-u-s-veterans-public-say-the-wars-in-iraq-and-afghanistan-were-not-worth-fighting/).

12. Karlin and Cofman Wittes, “America’s Middle East Purgatory.” This article provoked a much needed debate about the U.S. role in the Middle East establishment foreign policy circles.

13. As of 2015, 50 percent of Americans considered the Middle East as very important to national security interests, while only 29 percent desired an increase in the U.S. military presence in the region. Dina Smeltz and Craig Kafur, “American Anxiety over Middle East Buffets Public Support for U.S. Presence in the Region,” Chicago Council on Global Affairs, November 9, 2015 (www.thechicagocouncil.org/publication/american-anxiety-over-middle-east-buffets-public-support-us-presence-region).

14. Bill Law, “Trump’s ‘Ultimate Deal’ Faces Ultimate Failure,” Al Jazeera, March 4, 2019 (www.aljazeera.com/indepth/opinion/trump-ultimate-deal-faces-ultimate-failure-190303130838617.html).

15. “The World Factbook” Central Intelligence Agency, September 9, 2019 (www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/qa.html).

16. Michael Amon and Nicolas Parasie, “Saudi Arabia’s Economic Overhaul Is Backfiring,” *Wall Street Journal*, March 23, 2019.

17. Igielnik and Parker, “Majorities of U.S. Veterans, Public Say the Wars in Iraq and Afghanistan Were Not Worth Fighting.”