The U.S. Role in a Rapidly Changing Middle East

April 2-7, 2013

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# Table of Contents

Rapporteur’s Summary ................................................................. 1  

*Karim Sadjadpour*

Why the Syrian Popular Awakening Turned Into a Regional Proxy War .................. 13  

*Bassma Kodmani*

Inside Iran: Its Nuclear Ambitions and U.S. Policy Implications ............................... 19  

*Dennis Ross*

Egypt’s Tribulations and the United States ......................................................... 23  

*Steven Cook*

How Stable is Saudi Arabia? ........................................................................ 27  

*Bernard Haykel*

Conference Participants ................................................................................... 31

Conference Agenda .......................................................................................... 33
Rapporteur’s Summary

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The Aspen Institute’s Congressional Program conference on the Islamic world convened in Istanbul, Turkey, from April 2-7, 2013. Twenty-one members of Congress participated, along with a dozen scholars from the U.S. and the region. The aim of the conference was to facilitate a frank, informative and non-partisan discussion about The U.S. Role in a Rapidly Changing Middle East.

Syria

The biggest debate in the Syria discussion was whether there should be a more active U.S. role in Syria’s conflict in order to expedite Assad’s collapse and begin trying to stabilize and rebuild the country. While a clear majority of scholars and analysts seemed to favor greater U.S. involvement, many members of Congress—while acknowledging the need to try and quell Syria’s humanitarian crisis—expressed concern about the efficacy of greater U.S. involvement in Syria. Many believe the U.S. has neither the financial resources to spare, the on-the-ground expertise, the like-minded allies, nor the vital national interests at stake.

Scholars from both the U.S. and the region offered the following key observations:

• Syria is “occupied” by a mafia—the Assad regime—that is alien to the country’s culture.
• The opposition is not composed only of Islamists; democratic groups are also on the ground fighting.
• Iran’s financial assistance to the Assad regime has been enormous.
  o Iranian officials and military experts, along with their Lebanese Shiite client Hezbollah, are directly collaborating with the Assad regime to quell the protests, although it’s unclear to what extent.
• The Syrian population is not only fighting against a Syrian dictatorship, but also Iran and non-state actors such as Hezbollah.
• The Maliki government in Iraq has been supportive of the Assad regime.
• Gulf countries—such as Saudi Arabia and Qatar—have been critical supporters of the opposition. They feel they “lost” Iraq to Iran, and Syria has hence become a critical battleground for them.
• Financial aid from the Gulf goes overwhelmingly to Islamist actors in the Syrian opposition, ranging from Islamist democrats to radicals (i.e., Salafists).
• There has been no effective management of the Syrian crisis. It has been a drifting situation that is deteriorating toward Civil War.
  o Syrian society has thus far resisted civil war.
Groups have not been targeted for merely sectarian reasons, and there has not been sectarian retribution in a systematic way, i.e., ethnic cleansing.

- Quelling the tumult in Syria will require effective management from outside powers, including the U.S. and Europe, in the form of military support and diplomatic management.
- What’s happening in Syria is a real revolution, driven by people living in broken political cultures, run by the secret police.
  - “The barrier of fear has been broken.”
  - Revolutions, like Syria’s, are lovable when they’re young and spontaneous, but often turn ugly.
- The battle for control over Damascus, the country’s capital, is just over the horizon.
- The country is increasingly out of Assad’s control, and he will never rule all of Syria again.
  - The big question is what happens the day after Assad falls?
- There’s a serious danger of Islamist radicalism in post-Assad Syria.
  - Radical rebel groups such as Jabhat al-Nusra—an offshoot of Al-Qaeda in Iraq—have been among the most effective fighting forces. Some of their fighters proclaim, “All we want is a chance to die.”
- The big question for the U.S. is: How can we help Syrians acquire the skills to manage their country the day after Assad falls?
- Due in part to popular war-weariness in the U.S., Obama’s instincts on Syria have been to “stay away.” The White House is averse to a Libya-style intervention.
- Short of direct intervention, the U.S. can improve the cohesion of the opposition by managing the flow of weapons to Syria’s rebels.
- At the moment Saudi Arabia is supporting around 37,000 Islamist rebels—known as the Jabhat al Tahrir, a Salafist coalition.
- The more moderate FSA (Free Syrian Army)—under the command of General Salim Idriss—boasts around 50,000 fighters.
- The U.S. should work with Saudi Arabia and Qatar to bring all rebel forces under the command of Idriss. What’s more, the U.S. should accommodate General Idriss’ request for training in three areas:
  - How to properly dispose of chemical weapons
  - Adherence to the international laws of war and Geneva conventions on captives (to avoid revenge killings)
  - Counterterrorism training
- The U.S. has not begun this training, though it could potentially take place in either neighboring countries (such as Jordan) or in parts of Syria that have been “liberated” i.e., not under the control of the Assad regime.
- The U.S. should also focus its efforts on helping to rebuild Syrian infrastructure—both physical and civilian—the day after Assad falls.
- An important lesson learned from Iraq is that as much of the Syrian bureaucracy as possible should be retained—such as teachers, civil servants, etc. Disaffected functionaries and bureaucrats in the Assad regime should also be accommodated.

The discussion centered on six main themes:

**Why a greater U.S. role in Syria is important**

- The U.S. has opted for inaction in Syria, but this is not viable. The more the conflict has persisted, the more extremism has mushroomed.
  - Left to its own devices, Syria could become a failed state indefinitely.
  - The Syrian nation and Syrian society may not survive this conflict—but if the only way of maintaining “Syria” is via a
reign of terror and tyranny— then it’s not worth doing so.

- America’s credibility is being called into question; America isn’t exhibiting the same leadership it used to.
- The Syrian rebels’ biggest need today is not weapons, its coordination and management.

Reticence about U.S. intervention, military/financial assistance to Syrian rebels

- This isn’t America’s crisis. The U.S. didn’t bring Assad to power, and its involvement hasn’t destabilized the situation. People in the region need to take responsibility for this crisis.
- The U.S. cannot get ideologically disparate Syrian rebel factions to work together.
- Congress can’t lead on Syria; it can at best play a supporting role. The Obama administration must figure out what it wants to do.
- Obama cannot be a war president with a war party. Congressional Democrats are at best ambivalent about greater U.S. involvement in Syria.
- The Syrian crisis, as bad as it is, does not warrant U.S. troops on the ground, or U.S. planes in the air.
- Popular war-weariness combined with major fiscal challenges (such as the sequester) prohibit the U.S. from properly being able to respond to humanitarian crises.

What should be the U.S. role?

- There hasn’t been a serious conversation in Congress about America’s role in Syria—the macro foreign policy focus has been the pivot to Asia.
- Until now, America’s primary method of projecting power and trying to provide stability to places in turmoil has been to send the military. It needs a larger, more modern and effective version of the Peace Corps.
- The U.S. military is at best unenthused if not opposed to intervention in Syria.
- The U.S. should attempt to see if there is a way of working with the Iranians, once Assad has collapsed.
- There likely won’t be a clear “end” of the Assad regime i.e., a “day after.” The ‘day before,’ ‘day of,’ and ‘day after’ are all seamless.
- The U.S. hasn’t yet defined its goals in Syria, and without a clear end it’s difficult to decide the means.
  - Humanitarian aid?
  - Stop Iranian influence?
  - Prevent or contain chemical weapons usage?
  - Preserve U.S. influence?
  - Regional stability?

Easing human suffering, helping stability

- Syrians who inhabit “liberated areas” are not able to reconstitute their lives, for the Assad regime continuously bombs them to prevent a sense of normalcy from setting in.
  - The creation of a “no fly zone” should be contemplated to prevent this.
- One of America’s top priorities should be training the Syrian police, in order to maintain law and order and stability once there is a major power vacuum.

Sectarian War

- Gulf countries, via their financial support, have changed the political culture of Syria. The mushrooming of radical Islamists in Syria is a function of Gulf support for radical Islamist ideology.
  - The strong Salafist undercurrent of the rebels is also a function of the fact that the Assad regime is an Alawite minority, which is considered heretic by orthodox Islamists.
• Syria’s Alawite community feels like they’re fighting for their survival, ‘either kill or be killed.’

• U.S. cooperation with Saudi Arabia can help contain the influence of Qatar, which is prone to support radical Islamist elements of the opposition.

• Iran and Hezbollah have in many ways assumed management over the conflict. They’re directly involved, with forces on the ground.

Regional instability
• The breakup of Syria will not stop at Syria’s border; Syrian instability will spread to neighboring countries such as Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq.
  o Given its small size and already sizable number of Palestinian and Iraqi refugees, Jordan can ill-afford a large influx of Syria refugees.
  o The ascent of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt and likely in Syria will put additional pressure on the secular Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan.

• Turkey is enormously frustrated at what is sees as Washington’s abandonment of an issue of critical importance to Ankara.

• Sunnis in Iraq feel solidarity with Syrian Sunnis; Sunnis around the region are looking for come-uppance after they “lost” Iraq to a Shiite regime. Regional actors who feel they “lost” Iraq are now “doubling down” on Syria.
  o Iraqi Sunnis are supportive of the Syrian opposition, many Iraqi Shiites are supportive of the regime, and the Kurds are somewhere in the middle.

Egypt
A recurring debate in the Egypt discussion was whether the U.S. should continue to offer financial aid to the Morsi government, how that aid should be spent and conditioned, and what would be the consequences of an Egyptian financial collapse. Apart from a few exceptions, both scholars and members of Congress agreed that it would be imprudent and premature to cease U.S. aid to Egypt.

Scholars from both the U.S. and the region offered the following key observations:
• The legacy of 60 years of dictatorship is undermining Egypt’s current attempts at democratization.
  o Egypt is still engaged in a power struggle. The post-Mubarak government still doesn’t have full control over the state’s important institutions.
  o Institutions need to be reformed from their very roots, which will not happen quickly.

• While Egypt is undergoing serious economic problems, including a downturn in tourism, the situation is “salvageable.”
  o Egypt has great potential but is undermined by its economic weaknesses.

• The International Monetary Fund (IMF) loan is an important prerequisite to bringing back foreign investment and reducing capital flight.

• The reticence of Gulf countries to support President Mohammad Morsi reflects their insecurities about their own internal Islamist movements.

• Saudi Arabia should be encouraged to invest more money and support in the Egyptian government.

• The harassment and rape of women in Egypt has undermined equality. It’s a situation that needs to be urgently addressed, and the Morsi government has attempted to do so.
  o It needs to be approached delicately, due to traditional concerns about women’s participation in politics.

• The dichotomy of the Egyptian revolution is captured in Tahrir square.

• The first Tahrir square uprisings (January/February 2011) were peaceful demonstrations for freedom and dignity that transcended religious and political affiliations.
  o Yet they lacked leadership and coherence and
contained well concealed elements of anarchy and wanton resistance against central authority.

- As a result, the second Tahrir uprisings (January 2012) exhibited thuggery, gang violence, rape, and people demanding the death of the military commanders.

- The Egyptian military is seeking to wield power without accountability.

- No political party or grouping in Egypt has a vision that is emotionally, materially satisfying to a majority of Egyptians.

- Since acquiring power via democratic elections, the Muslim Brotherhood—who were late in entering Tahrir Square—have often resorted to the same authoritarian methods as President Mubarak, and have seen themselves as above the law.

- Economic grievances haven’t been the primary factor in motivating people to go to the streets.
  - People are resistant against a new authoritarianism and motivated by their desire for a “just society.”
  - There will likely continue to be unrest.

- The U.S.-Egypt relationship was built in the 1970s, in the context of containing the USSR.

- Members of Congress must reassess the underlying rationale for the strategic relationship with Egypt. What does the U.S. want from Egypt?
  - Stability, continued unfettered access to the Suez Canal, continued Egyptian-Israeli peace?

- Many people in Washington want to see the Muslim Brotherhood fail, but are the potentially enormous consequences of the Brotherhood’s failure worth it?
  - Egypt is the largest importer of wheat in the world, and soon might not be able to feed itself.
  - It’s the largest center of Sunni learning in the world, but also a cradle of transnational jihadism. Egypt’s failure could accentuate the latter.

- The U.S. needs to be able to help Egyptians without punishing them at the same time.

The discussion centered on six main themes:

**We can’t allow Egypt to fail**

- The Muslim Brotherhood will eventual fail, but how they fail—and the lessons drawn from it—is important. The wrong lesson will be learned both in Egypt and throughout the region if the Muslim Brotherhood’s failure is based on the perception that the U.S. withdrew aid too precipitously in order to ensure their failure.
  - This might offer the Muslim brotherhood a pretext.

- The United States didn’t “bet against” Hosni Mubarak or “bet on” the Muslim Brotherhood. Egyptians determined the country’s political transition, not Washington.

- Egypt is central to the Arab world, and the Arab Spring. If Egypt fails, the whole region’s democratic process will be aborted.

- Not supporting the Egyptian military is unrealistic. While flawed and needing reform, the Egyptian military is a crucial backbone of Egypt and has been an important ally to the United States.

- $1.3 billion in aid is a relatively small price to pay in the grand scheme of the U.S. budget if it prevents the most populous country in the Middle East from failing.

- Under Morsi, Hamas has delivered more than under Mubarak (i.e., release of Israeli POW Gilad Shalit).

**Egypt’s economic malaise**

- Egypt’s economy is in free fall and U.S. largesse cannot save it indefinitely. Egypt must get its fiscal house in order rather than depend on external aid.
• There are major question marks as to whether the Egyptian government can use economic aid wisely.

  o The U.S. should at a minimum provide Egypt food aid. USAID should also be used as it’s intended to be used, “to support Egyptians, not U.S. contractors.”

• Micro lending to women is much more effective than lending to men, as they tend to be much better fiduciaries. The U.S. should encourage female business owners and entrepreneurs in Egypt.

Why the U.S. should cease giving aid to Egypt

• Why should the U.S. interfere in Egypt’s internal dynamics and bail out the Muslim Brotherhood, when they haven’t delivered or made good on their promises?

• Anytime money is given to an authoritarian regime, it’s going to lead to corruption.

Is the U.S. partly to blame for Egypt’s current travails?

• America’s long relationship with the Egyptian military has retarded Egypt’s path to democracy.

  o What’s happening now in Egypt is penance for having supported 30 years of dictatorship. This is a new world older, and the U.S. is going to have to adjust itself to working with Islamists for the next 2-3 decades.

• The U.S. is to the Arab world (like Egypt) what the USSR was to Eastern Europe, i.e., a patron of autocratic regimes.

  o (One participant replied that Mohammad Morsi bares little resemblance to Vaclav Havel).

  o What’s taking place now in Egypt is like the French Revolution, it will take decades to play out. The U.S. can’t exercise surgical control over it from afar, and both the administration and Congress are doing a better job managing it than people think.

Tough times for women and minorities

• The Tahrir uprisings were not class-based—not just young educated women. It included women from very different backgrounds engaging in some forms of protest.

• There is increasing sectarian violence, and Egypt’s Coptic Christian community is feeling increasingly vulnerable.

  o Despite assurances from the Muslim Brotherhood, they will likely continue to emigrate abroad.

What does it mean for Israel?

• Egypt is far too consumed with its internal economic and political travails, and is in no position to threaten Israel.

• The opposition to the peace treaty with Israel is a nationalist issue, not just a Muslim Brotherhood issue. Many liberal/leftist groups also criticize it.

• The fact that Morsi is a well-known anti-Semite and anti-Zionist can be beneficial, in that he won’t need to prove his anti-Israel bonafides like Mubarak.

Iran

The main theme of the discussion was the potential for a nuclear deal with the Iranian government, and a look at the possibilities of U.S. or Israeli military actions against Iran’s nuclear facilities, in the event that diplomacy fails.

Scholars from both the U.S. and the region offered the following key observations:

• The Iranian government has attempted a heavy political and economic centralization.

• There has been a widespread crackdown in Iran on liberals and universities. The regime has attempted to control the flow of information and communication.

• There has been a systematic effort to force Iranian society to adhere to one single narrative.
It’s been the most authoritarian period in Iran since after the 1979 revolution.

It has caused widespread exodus. There are now 130,000 Iranians living in Malaysia, and one million Iranians in Turkey.

- The Islamic Republic can be best described as a military-intelligence-oil industry-oligarchy.
- Most decision making is confined to the Supreme Leader and five of his top advisors.
- 2,000 military commanders (from the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps) have 25 percent of fundamental decision making.
- There is a strong emphasis on bringing young people from rural/provincial areas to positions of power.
- The Supreme Leader micromanages the state, and power is based on one’s proximity to him.
  - As long as he’s in power, there will be very little political change in Iran.
- Iran suffers from tremendous brain drain and heavy corruption.
- Over the last 100 years, around 65 percent of the nation’s $1 trillion in oil income was earned during Ahmadinejad’s tenure.
- Rather than invest in infrastructure, government policy has focused on stipends in order to keep the population placated.
- Iran as a nation is in decline.
- Iran is far away from democratic change, and Iranian politics can be expected to be authoritarian for quite some time. Military elements are likely to take over once the Supreme Leader dies.
- The Supreme Leader believes the U.S. is a declining power that doesn’t have the determination to strike Iran militarily.
- Iran’s leadership is deeply paranoid and believes that the underlying policy of the U.S. government—of which there is a bipartisan consensus—is regime change in Tehran, not behavior change.
- They spend billions of dollars per year trying to counter the U.S. “soft revolution.”
- Normalization with the United States would be “political suicide” for Iran’s hardline elite.
  - It would be difficult to justify to their base, after three decades of hostility toward the U.S.
  - It would likely empower moderate and liberal groups within the country.
- Their strategy is a protracted conflict with the U.S., short of military engagement.
- In return for a reduction of sanctions, it’s plausible that Iran’s leadership will consider a nuclear compromise, after the country’s June 2013 presidential election.
- The U.S. doesn’t need a regime change strategy in Iran. The current structure of the Islamic Republic contains within it the seeds of its own destruction.
- The U.S. needs to expand its connection with the Iranian people, including students and universities.
- Hostility toward the U.S. is a requirement of the Islamic Republic of Iran.
- At the beginning of Obama’s tenure the U.S. made a serious effort to reach out to the Supreme Leader but “we got nowhere.”
- Inducing Iranians to give up their nuclear program is an impossibility.
  - The Supreme Leader believes that when Ghaddafi gave up his nuclear program it made him vulnerable to NATO intervention, while North Korea’s nuclear weapons provide them a cloak of immunity.
- Left to their own devices, there is very little prospect that they will give up their nuclear program.
  - Yet they move forward deliberately.
- While inducements will not work, there is a possibility they can be pressured into nuclear compromises, if subjected to existential angst.
It would be a tactical, not a strategic adjustment.

- It’s not clear to anyone how grounded the Supreme Leader is in reality, and whether he fully appreciates the magnitude of the situation.

- A continued step-by-step negotiating process is unlikely to work.

- The U.S. should privately convey to Tehran a “clarifying proposal” that offers them a civilian nuclear energy program, but is complimented by coercive diplomacy and invokes a credible military threat that makes them fearful of a failure in diplomacy.

- Such a strategy needs to coordinated with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council—the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom and France, plus Germany).

- One way of letting the Iranians know we’re serious about the military option is to display our massive ordinance penetrator—which is capable of dropping 30,000-pound bombs—to journalists and on YouTube, for the Iranians to see.

The discussion centered on four main themes:

**Iran’s internal political and economic dynamics**

- Tehran’s revolutionary elites have never been interested in economic development, and don’t care about their global image, or at least the perception of them in the West.

- “Seventy percent of Iran’s tangible and non-tangible wealth is in the hands of the Revolutionary Guards.”

- The Revolutionary Guards (IRGC) is not a monolith—many members are privately critical about the current state of the country.

- The security establishment in Iran is unlikely to give up the nuclear program, as they believe it will guarantee their legitimacy for many years to come.

- Ayatollah Khamenei’s goal in the June 2013 presidential election is the victory of a lackey who can absorb any criticism in the context of a nuclear deal or other sensitive national decisions.

- Passive dissent is a hobby in Iran, but the cost of active political dissent is too high for most Iranians. Average people are focused on their economic subsistence, and have retreated from the public/political sphere or moved abroad.

- Iran is a country in decline, but not a failing state. It’s a wealthy country and has great potential.

- According to government statistics, 72 percent of Iranians get their news from BBC Persian TV or Voice of America Persian.

- There should be a concerted effort to try and expose the wealth of the “mafia elite” in Iran.

**The dangers of a nuclear-armed Iran**

- If Iran crosses the nuclear threshold, it’s “unmistakable” that Saudi Arabia will also choose to do so, perhaps by purchasing nuclear weapons from Pakistan.

- A nuclear-armed Middle East is more dangerous than other regions, and very different from the Cold War, in that there is often little or no communication among actors.

- The key to coercive diplomacy is having our threat of force believed by the Supreme Leader. It must be perceived as credible.

  - America’s inaction in Syria has led Iran to believe that the U.S. is less likely to attack them.

**Prospects for a U.S. or Israeli attack on Iran’s nuclear facilities**

- Given Iran’s support for the Assad regime in Syria, which is brutally suppressing Sunni Arabs, the predominantly Sunni Arab world may not necessarily take umbrage against a U.S. or Israeli strike on Iran.
In some ways the Israelis are better equipped to carry out a "surgical" attack on Iran’s nuclear sites.

- The U.S. would likely go after 30 targets, including Iran’s air defense, command and control, and cruise missiles. Casualties would likely be greater if the U.S. were to do it.

- One member of Congress said he agreed with the Supreme Leader that President Obama is likely bluffing about military action. Obama has never shared military plans in private with senior members of Congress. “If you thought you were going to war in a year you wouldn’t be doing a sequester of the U.S. military.” It’s understandable why Khamenei thinks the U.S. is bluffing and more likely heading in the direction of containment. The executive branch hasn’t shown any resolve to follow through on its military threats.

**Iran policy requires less coercion and more engagement**

- Up until now, 80 percent of Obama’s Iran policy has focused on pressure and coercion. Now time and effort needs to be put into diplomacy.

**Iraq and Saudi Arabia (KSA)**

The focus of discussion was the broader role of the U.S. in the Middle East. While most scholars and analysts argued that a strong U.S. presence and leadership in the region is essential, many members of Congress argued that the U.S. no longer has the resources, popular will, or strategic interests to retain the outsize role it has over the last half-century.

Scholars from both the U.S. and the region offered the following key observations:

- Ten years after the 2003 removal of Saddam Hussein, Iraq is not a stable democracy.

- Iraq is not the friendly, self-reliant democracy that the U.S. came to expect.

- The country is embroiled in a cycle of sectarian and ethnic violence and could be on the brink of a civil war.

- The Kurds have been more accommodating to the Iraqi national program than Sunnis or Shia. Some Shia want to have a central, authoritarian structure, while other Shia want their own province. Sunnis are still coming to the realization that they can never be back in power as they were during the Saddam era.

- Iraq is being sustained by high oil prices (the second largest oil reserves in the world after Saudi Arabia, if not first), but there are profound differences about how to manage that oil wealth.

- The oil wealth of Baghdad during the Saddam era was used to wage genocide against Kurds. The Kurds are not willing to let their oil wealth go back to Baghdad.

- Many of the struggles of today’s Middle East can be found in Iraq: Sunni vs. Shia, Kurd vs. Arab, and centralized authority vs. a more diffuse model.

- While American leverage isn’t what it used to be, it remains indispensable to the world, and the U.S. must be much more engaged to ensure that the current situation doesn’t degenerate into civil war.

- The Turkic, Persian, and Arab world all converge in Iraq.

- Saudi Arabia is an easy country to hate: it is undeservedly rich, anti-democratic, and it mistreats women and minorities.

- From the U.S. perspective, however, it also has positive aspects: It doesn’t need money, it pursues an oil policy which is friendly to U.S. interests (i.e., doesn’t use oil as a weapon), it was on our side during the Cold War, and it’s a force for stability, both domestically and regionally.

  - Without the Saudi royal family the country could likely splinter.

- The most important question now in the KSA is succession. Most of the royal family’s top princes are in their late twilight years and so focused on internal power struggles that they’re neglecting society.
• They think because they have over $600 billion in cash reserves that they can buy off their population for a long time. They also have an impressive repression machine.

• The Saudi economy is almost totally reliant on the price of oil. The “break even” price has gone from $50 to $90+.
  o They’re very worried about the shale revolution in the U.S.

• Saudi society is very tech-savvy, and Saudi youth are big users of social media like Facebook and Twitter. They watch more YouTube than any country in the world.
  o There is very serious criticism of the royal family on Twitter.
  o The Saudi royal family consists of 6,000 princes and princesses that parasitically subsist off the Saudi state.

• They have three assets to fend off the Arab Spring from coming to the KSA:
  o They can write a lot of checks.
  o They can use the weapon of Islam (i.e., play the Sunni sectarian card).
  o They can use oil as a weapon (2 million barrels spare capacity).

• The KSA has not helped Egypt or the Muslim Brotherhood throughout the region; they’re very wary of them.

• Nearly half of U.S. weapons sales goes through Saudi Arabia.

• They can pay off Palestinians.

• They have been helpful on Iran by exporting oil to China.

The discussion centered on six main themes:

**Lessons learned from the Iraq war**

• One of the important lessons learned from Iraq is that it’s not about how you start the war; it’s about the day after.

• The Coalition Provisional Authority turned Americans from liberators into occupiers.

• The U.S. should have given the Iraqi provisional government responsibility and accountability.

• The U.S. also underestimated the interests of regional powers, like Saudi Arabia and Iran, who had interests in destabilizing the situation.

• Institution building was confused with building personalities. Iraq’s institutions have been undermined by strong characters.

**Why America must remain engaged in the Middle East**

• Many Americans would like to turn away from the Middle East, but history shows that doing so frequently comes back to bite us. Afghanistan is a case in point.

• Sixty-five percent of the world’s proven oil reserves are in the Persian Gulf. If the U.S. decides to reduce its presence there, China may well fill the vacuum. It could divert the region’s oil to itself and its allies.

• The U.S. needs to restore its own economic vitality, without giving into neo-isolationism, to help establish a multi-polar world instead of a unipolar world.

**Why U.S. involvement in the Middle East is no longer necessary**

• Nowhere else in the world are U.S. interests and values more in conflict than in the Middle East. This wasn’t the case in Japan or Europe. Usually U.S. interests are its values.

• As the U.S. becomes increasingly energy independent due to shale, the Middle East is becoming less important to the U.S., not more. There is not the same need to be in the Middle East as there used to be.

• The Middle East isn’t the USSR, which connotes a threat.

• The U.S. is the executor of the British estate, since it inherited these lines on the map from the
British. The U.S. is not going to change behavior that has been engrained over centuries with a few troops. Perhaps it can redraw some of these lines, ethnic self-determination, i.e., Kurdistan.

More soft power, less hard power

- The British ruled over 300 million people in the Indian subcontinent with 17,000 people who had knowledge of the local cultures, language, and human intelligence. The U.S. needs less hard power, more knowledge and soft power.

- American diplomacy tends to try to woo enemies and forget friends. The U.S. needs to also remember to show its enemies who its friends are.

- The U.S. needs to shift its military assistance to direct economic assistance. It costs $1 million a year to keep each soldier in Iraq or Afghanistan. The U.S. could send 20 Peace Corps volunteers with that same number.

- If the U.S. doesn’t spend resources on education in the region, the Salafists certainly are.

Internal Saudi dynamics and relations with the U.S.

- Liberals and democrats don’t have a social base in KSA society.

- There are more women than men in Saudi universities; they are better students and more motivated. Yet there are far fewer employment opportunities for them when they leave.

- Saudi Arabia is totally unpredictable. It’s conceivable it could collapse tomorrow, and it’s conceivable it could last another 50 years.

- The KSA is the most patriarchal, chauvinistic population on the planet.

- What explains Saudi Arabia’s astronomical spending on U.S. military items:
  - “Boys with toys”
  - It’s a way of giving kickbacks to princes.
  - They’re buying a constituency in the U.S.

Saudi Arabia’s regional role

- Absent Saudi largesse, Yemen and Jordan could well be failed states. Bahrain could be a Hezbollah-ruled state.

- The Middle East is different from Europe or Asia in that rulers of one country can meddle into the affairs and cultivate the populations of other countries. Saudis cultivate the Sunnis of Iraq, the Levant, and Gulf, while Iran cultivates the Shiites of Bahrain and Lebanon.

- Given Saudi and Israeli mutual concerns about Iran, now is a good time to reinvigorate the Israeli-Palestinian peace process. But Saudi Arabia won’t spearhead any initiatives. The U.S. will have to do it for them.
  - The Saudis want the Palestinian issue solved; they want to focus on Iran.
Why the Syrian Popular Awakening Turned Into a Regional Proxy War

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In Syria, unlike in any of the Arab countries where societies rose against their leaders, the aspirations of the people have collided with the complex geopolitics of the region and beyond and have turned a popular uprising into a deadly conflict with disastrous humanitarian consequences and dangerous implications for the security of the Middle East.

More than 80,000 civilians have died since the beginning of the uprising, with approximately 150,000 prisoners, 40,000 disappeared, over one million registered as refugees in neighboring countries, more than four million internally displaced persons (many displaced several times already), and massive destruction of infrastructure and houses by the regime forces that are impossible to estimate.

Syria is a microcosm of the political, ideological, ethnic, sectarian and religious diversity of the larger region. Nationalism, which was dominant in the 1940s until the 1980s, was shared with Egypt, Iraq, Palestine, and Algeria. The Ba’ath Party was born in Syria and extended into Iraq with parties in Jordan, Yemen and among Palestinians; Alawites have brothers across the border in Lebanon and sectarian proximity with the Alawites of Turkey; so do the Druzes (3% of the population) who are largely responsive to the leadership of the community exorcised from Lebanon and, if allowed, would probably reconnect with the Druzes of Israel; Syria’s tribes extend into Iraq and the Gulf countries; the Kurds of Syria aspire to some form of unity with their brothers of Iraq and Turkey.

Syria is a typical pivotal country in the geopolitical sense of the term. During the Cold War when ideology and politics dominated, it was a key pivot in the balance of power between the West and the Soviet camp. In the age of identity politics that traverses the region from Iran to Israel, Syria has emerged again as a pivot between Shiism and Sunnism, between Kurds and Arabs, between Israel and the Arab and Muslim countries, between the so-called imperialist powers (usually the United States, Great Britain and France) against so-called ‘anti-imperialists’ (although it is difficult to identify the latter).

Thus, Syria’s clout has varied over time depending on the ability of its leaders to leverage support from outside forces and keep the initiative without falling prey to the ambitions of the powerful countries of the region. With Bashar el Assad in power, the last decade has witnessed a growing dependence of the regime on outside patrons, particularly Iran. With the uprising, the regime increased its dependence on its allies while on the side of the revolution, a similar dependence developed due to the need for financial and military support.

Since the early days of the uprising, the population realized that it was facing much more than a dictator controlling power in their country.

The key countries who supported the demands of the people and called on Assad to step down have more often been analyzing and managing the Syrian crisis with the regional issues in mind than accord-
ing to the realities of the country: the victory of the Islamist parties in Egypt and Tunisia increased fears of an Islamist hegemony in Syria; the breakdown of the international consensus around intervention in Libya in application of the norm of responsibility to protect (Russia’s and China’s anger at western powers who they accuse of having abused the United Nations Security Council) causes knee-jerk reactions in the region and outside about the legitimacy of intervention in Syria and has tainted the very principle of Responsibility to Protect (R2P); the French war in Mali is seen as an extension of the intervention in Libya and opinion leaders have rushed to say that the arms provided to the Libyan rebels by western countries have ended up in the hands of extremists in Mali (even though there is no evidence of this).

I. The Regime’s Survival Strategy

What the majority of Syrians want has not changed since the first demonstrations in the southern city of Deraa in March 2011. Their very first slogans were about the unity of the Syrian population as if to preempt the strategy that the regime eventually used to incite hatred among communities.

In spite of constant divisions, the Syrian opposition has been largely consensual on the vision for the future Syria. In July 2012 in Cairo, a broad range of groups from all political and ideological backgrounds signed off on a detailed document stating their joint desired outcome from the revolution and the shape of the transitional period identifying the different stages to reach a democratic political system: the ousting of the Assad family, support for the Free Syrian Army as a necessity irrespective of the desire for a political or a military solution; equality for all citizens in a diverse society, a civil state that is neither dominated by the military nor under the rule of religious clerics; strong local government and balanced relations within the region.

As the conflict undergoes successive phases, the militarization of the uprising has led to its radicalization. Islamists understood earlier than others that military confrontation was inevitable and began to prepare for it before others, but all groups reached a point in the uprising where a peaceful strategy no longer seemed sustainable.

In response to a peaceful revolt, the Assad regime chose a three pronged strategy: first, violent repression of the movement in order to crush it and to draw the peaceful movement towards military confrontation where the regime has the advantage; second, inciting sectarian hatred among the different communities of the country so as to secure the unconditional support of the Alawite community to the regime (10% of the population); and, thirdly, mobilizing regional and international support to transform a home-grown movement into a confrontation between regional forces and countries to cause sectarian and ideological polarization.

Early on in the first months of the uprising, the regime started distributing arms in multisectarian cities and villages, first to the Alawites as part of its effort to mobilize the community as its natural constituency, then to the Christians and other minorities who it sought to convince that they were under threat (with limited success). The objective was clearly to create the conditions for a civil conflict.

The regime also manipulated the Kurdish issue. After decades of discriminating against the Kurds (10% of the population), the regime sought to gain their support by offering them advantages or rather by removing discriminatory measures. It also struck a deal with the most radical group among them, the Democratic Union Party (PYD)—an offshoot of the Kurdistan Workers’ Party (PKK)—which advocates secession from Syria and the creation of an independent Kurdish state. The government forces handed over the strategic areas where the Kurdish population is concentrated in the north of the country to the PYD militiamen. Today, the pro-PKK Kurds militarily control the Kurdish areas.

In the course of the last two years, the regime has steadily lost territory to the opposition. Unable to spread its security control over the whole country, it ceased providing basic services (police, judiciary, schooling and health care) in many areas and is withdrawing its troops while continuing to pound those areas from the air. These northern provinces are now under opposition armed groups’ control.

Assad worked to draw in his allies to support his regime as well as to attract some of the most radical among his enemies into the confrontation in order to lead supporters of the opposition to shy away from
supporting it. As a result of the regime’s strategy, it became necessary for the revolutionary fighters to seek the support of regional powers.

II. Direct or Indirect Belligerents

**Iran** sees the Syrian crisis as a strategic fight in which its vital national interests are directly at stake: its role as a key regional power and as a protector of the Shia communities in the Muslim world. The alliances with the Assad regime in Syria, with Iraq’s Shia government, and support to Hezbollah are key strategic assets in the region. It sees that the fall of Assad will facilitate a combined U.S.-Israeli attack on its soil if so decided. Iran therefore entered the fight early on in support of the regime and increased its direct involvement over time. It offered weapons, direct military advice and financial support, then mobilized its Lebanese ally Hezbollah to provide fighters. In mid-2012, it began to work on developing a Shia-Alawite militia directly trained by Iranian leaders of the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdarans). It is widely believed that Iran will support the regime until the end. But what if it sees that the end is near? Tehran could decide to support the establishment of an Alawite entity on the Syrian coast as part of a wider strategy of encouraging the emergence of a regional Shia axis; or if the comprehensive negotiation process between Iran and the West reaches a compromise, Syria’s removal from the Iranian sphere of influence would become possible.

Iraq has been in turmoil for a decade and the Syrian conflict is increasingly spilling over into Iraq. The reinforcement of the Iraqi military presence along the Syrian-Iraqi border and a recent incident in which Syrian soldiers were killed in the western province of Anbar by an al-Qaida linked brigade indicate that a new threshold has been crossed. The Sunnis of Iraq have been protesting against the Shia led government and its discriminatory policies against the Sunni community. Iraqi Sunnis support some of the Sunni-led brigades of the Free Syrian Army, and it seems some of the radical Iraqi Sunnis are fighting with the extremist Jihadi group Jabhat Al Nusra. The crisis in Syria is destabilizing Iraq’s north-central and western regions dominated by the Sunni community, and local Sunni factions are supporting Syrian rebel fighters positioned along the border. For the Shia government and for the Sunni opposition alike, the fall of Assad’s regime is seen as decisive in reversing the balance of power in Iraq.

Likewise, the war in Syria is exacerbating tensions between the Iraqi government and the autonomous Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG) of Masoud Barzani. Recently, the KRG refused to allow the Iraqi army to deploy its troops along the KRG administered border with Syria.

**Arab monarchies** have taken a clear position against the Syrian regime with one key objective that unites them all; namely, the opportunity to challenge Iran’s rising military power and expanding influence in the region particularly since the U.S. war on Iraq. But behind the effective cooperation that has driven their behavior a traditional rivalry is evident between Qatar on one side and Saudi Arabia on the other, with the Emirates and Kuwaiti governments siding clearly with Riyadh. The Gulf countries have been the driving force behind the Arab League’s actions to isolate and delegitimize the Assad regime and to support the Syrian opposition.

**Qatar** has been the most active player on the financial, military, political and media levels. It has brokered political alliances between Syrian opposition groups, funded and armed the Free Syrian Army (FSA), and heads the ministerial committee of the Arab League on Syria. Although it has sought to promote opposition figures from various political trends, it has been a steady supporter and funder of conservative Islamic groups including the Muslim Brothers. That Doha is seeking to promote an Islamic fundamentalist agenda in Syria is fairly obvious. Yet it is probably more accurate to say that it seeks to position itself as the ‘king maker’ in post-Assad Syria in order to reap the dividends of its full support for the revolution.

**Saudi Arabia’s** efforts may be less visible but the Saudi government has provided considerable financial and military support and has invested political capital in convincing reluctant Arab countries to change their positions and succeeded in tilting the balance inside the Arab League in favour of the opposition. The Saudi government is very weary of fundamentalist Islamic groups, particularly the Muslim Brothers, who have challenged the legitimacy of the ruling family in the past. Islamist groups in Saudi Arabia
are supported and protected by the Wahabi religious establishment, which itself maintains a complex relationship with the political elite of the country. It is therefore important to differentiate between the Saudi official policy of the government and that of private religious channels that have been providing generous funding to a wide spectrum of Islamist groups.

The United Arab Emirates/Kuwait. The UAE and to a lesser extent Kuwait are also fully supportive of the anti-Assad revolution but, here also, the same distinction must be made between the governments’ policies and the private networks of money and arms.

In brief, the Gulf countries have been the key supporters of the anti-Assad forces but their funds have often empowered groups that did not originally exist in Syria and who pursue different objectives from the democratic agenda of the ordinary Syrians who rose up in spring 2011.

Turkey is arguably the most important player in the Syrian crisis. It has been a staunch enemy of the Assad regime since the early days of the uprising—after several failed attempts at convincing Assad to bring real change—and is a strong supporter of the Syrian opposition. It is the main conduit for arms and other forms of support to the FSA and the population. But Turkey went through several phases over the last two years; it thought it could manage the crisis as a big regional actor dealing with a smaller neighbor. It then discovered that the risks were much too high for its own security (the most serious being the manipulation by the Syrian regime of the Kurdish issue), and it realized that there was no consensus on any decisive action by its Western allies.

Internal opposition was also growing against the Erdogan government, attacked by the secular parties as well as by the Alawite community of the country, most of which lives in the Hatay province. Alawites in Turkey fear that Sunni militants returning to Turkey in the aftermath of the war might turn their rancor against them, thus creating sectarian instability.

The government has since sought to adjust its position to minimize the risks for itself. It requested NATO protection which was provided with the deployment of Patriot missiles along the border. The NATO decision was understood by many as a first step towards the establishment of a no-fly zone in northern Syria but for now the Patriots serve as an effective deterrent vis-à-vis the Syrian regime, thus allowing Turkey to continue to channel arms to the FSA.

The Kurds. Turkey’s greatest concern since the start of the Syrian uprising has been its impact on the Kurds of Turkey. Erdogan’s government engaged in negotiations with the leader of the PKK, Abdallah Ocalan, who agreed to a cease-fire with Ankara a few weeks ago. If a political deal is reached with the PKK, it would be a major political achievement for the Turkish government. The consequences for Syria are difficult to anticipate. While it could bring an end to PKK support for the radical Syrian Kurds of the PYD, the risk may be that dissident elements of the PKK will take refuge inside Syria, thus aggravating Syria’s Kurdish problem.

Jordan is host to some 400,000 Syrian refugees. It is exposed to emergency needs and political and security threats. It has reinforced its northern border in recent months, sending thousands of additional troops to the frontier. Unpopular austerity measures are fueling domestic social and political turmoil.

The Jordanian leadership is most concerned about prolonged chaos or the emergence of a fundamentalist regime in Syria, both of which would represent a vital threat for the stability of the monarchy. Since fall 2012, Jordan has increasingly become the rear-base for planning attacks, arming and training Syrian fighters, mainly by U.S., British and French military experts.

Lebanon is about to be engulfed in the conflict. The war in Syria has exacerbated sectarian fault lines as tensions spike between Sunnis who back the rebellion in Syria and the Shiite militia Hezbollah which backs the Assad regime. Lebanon hosts some 900,000 Syrian refugees (according to the Lebanese government), almost a quarter of the Lebanese population. No camps have been constructed by the Lebanese authorities; therefore, Syrian refugees sought shelter in Palestinian camps. A massive influx of refugees into Lebanon could jeopardize its fragile sectarian stability. The fall of Syria’s regime will inevitably weaken the powerful Hezbollah movement which has exercised a hegemonic role in Lebanese politics over the last decade and a half, resulting in a recalibration
of Lebanese politics. The risk is also high that, after Assad, Sunni militants in Syria will come to Lebanon seeking revenge against the Shiite militia.

**Israel.** Most Syrians believe that Israel wants a weak Syria and is encouraging its destruction and possibly its breakup into small sectarian states. It is also clear that the fall of the Assad regime would weaken its two main allies and Israel’s most dangerous enemies, Iran and the Lebanese Hezbollah. But with the dangerous mess growing inside the country, Israel fears the absence of a central authority, a failed state in Syria. The Israeli government announced recently that it won’t “stand idle” as it sees the risks of Syria’s war spilling over its border and undermining its homeland security: the fate of the regime’s arsenal of missiles, the risk that chemical weapons could fall into the hands of jihadists, the emergence of a safe haven for al Qaeda are risks that have grown over the months as the situation has been left to drift. In January, the Israeli government built a security fence along the border on the Golan Height and deployed some troops to monitor the movements of armed groups and regime forces alike.

### III. Regional or International Crisis Management

A review of the role of regional actors indicates clearly that the direct and indirect belligerents in the conflict are hardly the ones to bring a solution to the crisis. When the Arab League took the issue to the UNSC it was hoping for a binding decision from the Council, but divisions among members of the Council have so far prevented a responsible management of the crisis at the international level. Russia’s refusal to allow a condemnation of the regime’s repression has encouraged Assad to believe that he can continue to crush the uprising and remain unpunished. Assertions by the United States and European countries that no alternative to a political solution will be considered has further emboldened the regime and frustrated opposition groups who had hope in the international community. This in turn has undoubtedly strengthened the influence of the most radical groups fighting the regime.

The quest for a political compromise led to the drafting of the Geneva document in June 2012 which calls for a political transition without mentioning the fate of the Assad family. In spite of its vague and ambiguous formulation, the Geneva document could have served as the basis for a negotiated outcome had it been adopted as a resolution of the UNSC. Short of that, it remains without value and continues to depend on the good will of the regime.

The political deadlock has not led to a credible alternative strategy which could have come in the form of the provision of weapons to the opposition in quantities and quality that can make a difference on the ground, or a no-fly zone, a humanitarian intervention in the form of a corridor of safe passage, or a Libya-like military operation. All of these options carry risks but the choice of letting the situation drift without choosing any of these options may prove to be the most dangerous option of all. Syria will not be stabilized without decisive action, political or military (or a combination of the two).

Any change of the Syrian political system will result in major changes in the regional equation. The key to breaking the deadlock lies as much with Russia as with the United State, which has the capacity to demonstrate resolve and determination and bring about a change of policy on the part of Moscow.
Inside Iran: Its Nuclear Ambitions and U.S. Policy Implications

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There was no national security issue that President Obama spent more time on in his first term than Iran. Apart from realizing its significance for stability in the Middle East, he saw it tied fundamentally to his broader objective of preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and strengthening the prohibitions against their development. He presided over a two-track policy that emphasized engagement and pressure. While recognizing Iran’s human rights abuses, use of terror, and threats to the region—including its determination to preserve its strategic investment in the Assad regime in Syria—the president set the Iranian nuclear program as his top priority.

In many ways, the administration succeeded beyond its own initial expectations, at least with regard to pressure. It successfully mobilized sanctions that have cut off Iran from broad sectors of international commerce, including the banking and insurance sectors. Iran increasingly struggles to do business, and the costs of any transactions—and goods—have gone up dramatically. The production and export of oil—which provides 85 percent of the regime’s revenues—have fallen significantly. Consider that, in 2009, Iran was producing about 4.2 million barrels a day (mbd) and exporting roughly 2.6 million mbd. Today, its overall production is 2.6 mbd, and its exports are running at just over 1 mbd. It has had to shut down oil fields and given its energy infrastructure’s need for a massive infusion of capital and technology—both of which are now unavailable because of the sanctions—Iran has little prospect of getting these fields back on line, meaning the stream of its revenue will be down for the next several years. To make matters worse, the value of its currency has also plummeted.

That is the good news about the pressure track. The bad news is that Iran has not altered its nuclear program, and it is continuing to progress. The Iranians have now accumulated more than five bombs’ worth of low-enriched uranium (LEU) and roughly half a bomb’s worth of uranium enriched to 19.75%. In addition, it may have finally overcome the technological problems it has had with the next generation of centrifuges, the IR2s. Iran recently informed the International Atomic Energy Agency that it will be installing the IR2s at the Natanz facility—and if these centrifuges are truly operational, the Iranians will be able to produce LEU two to four times faster than has been the case up until now.

What must also be put in the bad-news category is that the engagement track has not produced anything to date. The Iranians have continued to resist bilateral engagement with the United States, and at this point, they continue to avoid engaging in serious negotiations with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany). It remains to be seen whether the recent meeting in Almaty will change the character of Iran’s engagement.

With the pace and development of the Iranian nuclear program and the increasing economic pressures on the Iranian regime, it is hard to escape the conclusion that 2013 will be decisive one way or
the other. The pace of the Iranian nuclear program and the president’s objective of “prevention” and not “containment” mean that something will have to give this year. Either Iran will agree to alter its program or unilaterally slow it down or we face the prospect that, by year’s end, Iranian nuclear capabilities may make it difficult for us to know whether we could take action before it presents the world with a nuclear weapon as a fait accompli. In other words, by the end of the year, the Iranians could pass the point where we could have high confidence that we could fulfill our objective of prevention.

To be sure, we could act to destroy the capability after the Iranians have it. However, that may not only be more difficult after the fact—e.g., would we know where the weapons are?—but it would also represent a clear U.S. failure to “prevent” the Iranians from crossing the threshold.

That said, the Iranians would run a grave risk if they choose neither to agree to alter their program through negotiations nor to slow or alter the pace or character of their nuclear program this year. We could act militarily and destroy their investment at a time of great economic difficulty for Iran. Indeed, in such a circumstance—one in which the Iranians refuse possible deals—our use of force against their nuclear program could be seen as justified, and we might well have the ability to preserve the sanctions regime.

While the sanctions have not yet swayed Iranian behavior, the economic cost is creating dissonance within the Iranian elite. In the fall, after demonstrations in the Tehran bazaar over the currency devaluation and criticisms of the head of the Central Bank of Iran by the leader of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), the Supreme Leader felt obliged to give two speeches calling for a halt to the internal public bickering—something he did after calling the sanctions “brutal.” Moreover, recently former Iranian foreign minister Manoucher Motaki criticized those on his side, whom he described as playing silly games about the time and location of talks at a point when Iran needed the economic sanctions to be lifted.

Both because the United States may be driven to use force if diplomacy does not produce an outcome this year and because the Iranians clearly do want the sanctions lifted, serious talks are likely to occur. With Israeli concerns about the point at which they will lose their military option vis-à-vis the Iranian nuclear infrastructure likely to become more acute in the first half of this year, it will be important for the Obama administration to clarify what is possible with Iran. Such a necessity argues not for a continued step-by-step approach in the P5+1 talks, but for more of an endgame proposal on the nuclear issue. The step-by-step approach assumes there is much time for negotiations to work and that sanctions will eventually bring the Iranians around. If we had several more years to test the proposition, this approach might prove itself. But we do not have the time. Even if the Israelis decide they will not act—something we should not take as a given—our timetable is also now limited.

Basically, an endgame proposal needs to offer the Iranians what they say they want: a civil nuclear power capability. It would have to include restrictions to prevent an Iranian breakout capability as well as extensive transparency measures to ensure that Iran is not cheating. If the Iranians truly want only a civil nuclear power capability, they could have it. If they don’t, and reject such an offer, they would be exposed before the world and their own public—thus creating a context should force have to be used.

While the purpose of the end-game proposal is to clarify, its presentation should be designed to enhance the prospect of reaching a deal. It should be presented privately and shaped by a discussion about reaching an agreement in principle, with discussion on precise details and implementation, including in phases, pursued once we know whether the Iranians are prepared to accept the essence of the deal. But Iranians should also know that if no deal is possible, we will publicize the proposal and make clear that the failure of diplomacy should scare them more than it scares us.

If diplomacy is to succeed, the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei, must know that force is the alternative to an agreement. It appears he continues to doubt this. The mixed messages that different representatives of the administration sent during the first term need to end. Interestingly, President Obama’s own words have been clear, but when senior officials explicitly or implicitly suggested that the costs of striking Iran’s nuclear program would be horrific, they signaled to Khamenei that we were more likely to live with an Iranian nuclear weapons capability than
act militarily against it. The irony in most cases of coercive diplomacy is that, to avoid the use of force, the threat must be seen both as credible and as one the United States is willing to execute. That is why the Iranians must receive clear signals from us that they have far more to fear from the failure of diplomacy than we do; that we are preparing the ground for the use of force not because we seek to use it but because the Iranian behavior leaves us no choice; and that when we say time is running out, we are acting in a way that reflects the window for diplomacy is, in fact, closing.

Making an endgame proposal is one such signal. Letting our partners in the P5+1 know that we want to start planning for the day-after scenario when diplomacy fails and force may have to be used is another. Starting to provide lethal assistance to the Syrian opposition once we satisfy ourselves regarding which forces should receive it could be yet another such signal.

These signals will certainly convey our resolve and counter the impression of some of the mixed messages that have been sent. They could, of course, also provoke the Iranians to engage in more aggressive behaviors. While we should not discount that possibility, it is important to remember that their behaviors, particularly of the IRGC’s Qods Force, are already aggressive, threatening, and irresponsible. Certainly, our Arab friends in the Gulf perceive the aggressive behavior, and the recent interception by the Yemeni government of Iranian arms destined for Yemeni insurgents, including shoulder-fired surface-to-air missiles capable of bringing down civilian airliners, demonstrates Iran’s readiness to test certain limits in the area.

If anything, we should enhance our planning with our friends in the Gulf. Much was done by the administration in its first term in this regard, and one way to underpin our resolve is to further develop our discussions with the Gulf Cooperation Council states on Iranian threats and our plans for dealing with them. Already we have built an impressive security architecture in the Gulf that reflects not only increased bilateral cooperation with these states but also much greater integration of missile defenses, early warning, maritime security, and protection of critical infrastructure. Enhanced cooperation along these lines will convey the message to Iran that nothing will be gained by threats and that continued refusal to change its behavior will leave it less and not more secure.

In short, this is likely to be a decisive year. Diplomacy can still succeed in altering Iran’s nuclear behavior in a way that would permit the Iranians to have civil nuclear power and save face by claiming that this is all they were seeking. But the messages from the administration—and not just the president—must be consistent. Pressure must be real even while we offer the Iranians a way out that includes the phased lifting of key economic sanctions coincident with Iranian steps that demonstrate their readiness to give up a breakout capability.
Egypt’s Tribulations and the United States

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Egypt today is a country on the edge of political turmoil and economic collapse. Only a little more than two years after the January 25th uprising that toppled President Hosni Mubarak in a surprising demonstration of people power, unity, and national dignity, the Egyptian political arena is deeply polarized. The stalemate is one in which none of the relevant political forces either believe they have to or can—for political reasons—compromise on the critically important political issues of the day. The inevitable result is political uncertainty, instability, and periodic spasms of violence. This unhappy situation is, of course, obvious to even the most casual observer of Egypt, but why this has happened and what is in store for the country’s future trajectory remain the subjects of furious debate and speculation.

The Sources of Instability

Analysts and other observers have offered a number of explanations for Egypt’s problems including the shortcomings of the revolutionaries who instigated the uprising, the ineffectiveness of Egypt’s liberals, the worldview of the Muslim Brotherhood, and the incompetence of the Supreme Council of the Armed Forces (SCAF), which led the country from Mubarak’s fall until the rise of Egypt’s current president, Mohammed Morsi—a leader of the Muslim Brotherhood. To be sure, each of these groups has played a leading role in Egypt’s current tribulations, but understanding the military’s flawed transition or the Brotherhood’s use of religion, the language of political reform, and quasi-democratic institutions in the service of an authoritarian agenda provides insight into the details of the everyday political struggles in Egypt, but precious little analytic purchase on why what is happening and what will likely happen.

It is important to remember that Hosni Mubarak fell after almost sixty years of dictatorship that began with the Free Officers’ coup of July 1952. Before then, a weak and corrupt monarch—under the tutelage of British colonial administrators (though Egypt was never a colony of the Great Britain)—ruled Egypt. As a result, for the first time certainly since the 1950s, but even well before then, Egyptians are openly debating how they can realize four central goals: representative government, social justice, economic development, and the national prestige deserving of a country with Egypt’s civilizational legacy. Yet, no political group, party, or faction has offered a vision that appeals to the vast majority of Egyptians about how these aims can be realized. It was widely believed both in Egypt and abroad that the Muslim Brotherhood, which couches its political agenda in a religious vernacular, would articulate a vision that was attractive to Egyptians, yet even as the group remains popular it has found that for as much support as it enjoys there seems to be an equal number of citizens for whom the Brotherhood’s vision does not resonate. As a result, like the SCAF before President Morsi and Presidents Mubarak, Sadat, and Nasser before the uprising, the Muslim Brothers have sought authori-
tarian solutions to undermine opposition against them. Yet unlike before the January 25th uprising, Egyptians are not willing to submit to yet another non-democratic leader.

It does not matter, however, whether it is the Muslim Brotherhood’s Mohammed Morsi or former International Atomic Energy Agency Director-General, Mohammed ElBaradei; Amr Moussa, the former foreign minister; the Islamist, Abdel Monem Aboul Fotouh; or the Salafist Hazem Abu Ismail who is running the country. Until Egyptians resolve fundamental questions concerning what kind of government they want, the relationship between religion and society, the organizing principles of the Egyptian political system, what Egypt stands for, and its place in the Middle East as well as the world, Egyptian politics is going to be unstable. Without consensus on these issues, leaders will seek to impose their will on the people and Egyptians will continue to resist.

**Economy, Demography, and Public Health**

Other than Egyptians’ unwillingness to resign themselves to a new form of authoritarianism, there is very little good news regarding Egypt’s transition. While debates about Egypt’s political trajectory are being hashed out in the streets, the economy is collapsing. In the last month Egypt’s Central Bank has reported that its hard currency reserves are at “critical minimums,” meaning that the country, which is the largest importer of wheat in the world, has only three months of resources with which to purchase both food and fuel. An agreement with the International Monetary Fund (IMF) that would provide Egypt with some relief has been on and off since last fall. Much of the blame lies in Cairo, where political divisions have made it hard to build the consensus necessary to move forward with the Fund. Morsi and the technocrats around him are ready to sign a deal, but members of the Brotherhood’s Freedom and Justice Party object for political reasons and only want Cairo to enter into an agreement with the IMF after parliamentary elections. The Fund is deeply unpopular among Egyptians for two reasons. First, they (quite rightly) fear its prescriptions will make their already precarious economic situation worse in the short run. Second, they object to the IMF on nationalist grounds. The Fund tends to evoke the joint British-French debt commission of the late 19th century that paved the way for European penetration and occupation of Egypt. As a result, although negotiations with the IMF continue, President Morsi has taken a tough stand, calculating that he benefits politically by not submitting so quickly to the Fund, and confident that the IMF, United States, and other potential donors will not let Egypt fail.

Beyond the economy, Egypt is grappling with a host of social pressures that the political deadlock only accentuates. Egypt is home to a large unemployed or unemployable group of young people. This is an environment in which extremist ideologies tend to thrive. In addition to being a traditional center of knowledge and culture in the Arab world, Egypt has been a crucible of various strains of religious extremism. Thus far, however, mobilized yet alienated young men have not taken up *jihad*, opting instead for nihilism or the anarchist groups that revolve around Egyptian soccer clubs. The “Ultras,” as they are known, were once the shock troops of the revolution, but not because they shared the revolutionaries’ dreams of a more just and open society, but rather because they reject the authority of the state regardless of whether it is authoritarian or democratic. In addition, Egypt is contending with a number of public health issues that can be a source of instability, but that the government is—even under the best of circumstances—manifestly unprepared to manage. These include the highest incidence of Hepatitis-C in the world, out of control avian flu, rampant hoof and mouth disease, and a resurgence of polio.

**Egypt and the United States**

For all the talk among American and Egyptian officials about common interests and close alignment, few can define what this actually means. President Barack Obama has worked hard to keep relations between Washington and Cairo on track as Egypt has lurched from one political crisis to another over the last two years—but where exactly is that track supposed to be leading?

Inside the Beltway, there is an odd disconnect about Egypt. Among one group, there are officials who understand how much has changed in Egypt—but nevertheless talk about doing business with Egypt
as if it were 2010, or 1999, or 1989. It’s all about aid and access to Egypt’s airspace and the Suez Canal, which are byways to places of more intrinsic importance to the United States.

Still another group of policy makers recognizes the changes in Egypt and wants to penalize it for straying from American interests. This one-dimensional view holds that the Muslim Brothers are Islamists and Islamists are terrorists, thus Egypt should not get aid from the United States. Everyone else, meanwhile, is simply stymied by the complexity of the “new Egypt” and is just hoping the country does not collapse under the weight of its mounting economic problems and stalemated politics.

The problem with defining a strategy is that Washington is not much interested in Cairo. To be sure, policy makers and analysts discuss the importance of promoting democracy in Egypt, but American policy in the region is geared toward larger goals—ensuring the flow of oil from the region, helping to protect Israel, and making sure no single country dominates the Middle East. In other words, Egypt—whether it is a democracy or not—is a means to some other end. Washington is interested in Egyptian stability because it is interested in Saudi security, or the Iranian challenge, or Israel’s well-being.

Perhaps clarity of purpose in U.S. policy is impossible at a moment when Egyptian politics are so unsettled. It seems that sunk costs—a total of around $75 billion since the mid-1970s—bureaucratic inertia, and the fact that the Egyptians need the United States right now all account for the current loveless marriage.

It may just be that strategic alignment between Egypt and the United States represented a moment that has now passed. U.S. investments in Cairo have brought benefits to Washington—but now the best thing for the United States is not to try to mend the old strategic ties, but start anew. President Obama got it right in May 2011 when he stated that Americans must look at what has happened in the Arab world with humility, but without abdicating their values. That means, in part, recognizing that Egyptians want a relationship not necessarily of equals—that is impossible—but one that is more respectful of the way they define their national interests.

This formulation quite rightly makes some Americans (and Israelis) nervous. But there’s good news: Whatever comes to pass, Cairo is unlikely to align with Washington’s enemies. Morsi’s flirtations with Iran are about showing Egyptians that there is a difference between the Mubarak era and now. It is also about signaling to the Saudis that Cairo plans to be an influential player in the region. In the same way, the Egyptians have proven tougher on Hamas than many expected, refusing the organization’s request to open an office in Cairo and flooding the tunnels that run under the Egypt-Gaza frontier, which have served as a critical Hamas supply line. And needless to say, the new Egypt still has no use for Hezbollah or Syrian President Bashar al-Assad.

It is unlikely that there will be a dramatic change in Washington’s approach to Cairo anytime soon. Now is a time of crisis management during which the United States should do what it can to make sure Egypt does not fail, the regional security consequences of which are great. Yet when President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry are not dealing with the Egyptian crisis of the moment, they will have accomplished much if they move U.S.-Egypt relations out from the straitjacket of outdated strategic ties to more normal relations, befitting the changes in Egypt and the region around it.

This requires that policy makers take the long view—an alleged strength of the current administration—and understand that a bit of distance between Washington and Cairo could be a good thing. If Egypt pursues a foreign policy without the widely perceived notion that it is just a client of the United States doing Washington’s bidding, it may ultimately be a better interlocutor for Washington in the Arab world.
Since the end of WWII, Saudi Arabia has been viewed as an anachronism whose leadership was about to be overthrown at any moment. Books and articles on Saudi Arabia are filled with failed predictions that the Al Saud dynasty is about to fall and be replaced either by secular nationalists (during 1960s and 1970s) or more radical Islamist groups (during 1990s and 2000s). These have all proven to be wrong. The predictions were based on the fact that Saudi Arabia is an absolutist and religious monarchy that rejects democracy and participatory politics on principle. The Quran is Saudi Arabia’s constitution, and upholding Islamic law is the basis of the regime’s legitimacy. The Saudi leadership rules according to a rigid and literalist interpretation of Islam—referred to as Wahhabism—that most Muslims find hard to accept let alone follow. In particular, Sufi and Shia Muslims reject Wahhabism because of its intolerance and rejection of their teachings on Islam. The Saudis also restrict the rights and autonomy of women in the name of faith and generally treat foreigners, especially guest workers, very poorly.

Saudi Arabia strikes Westerners as an anti-modern and medieval bastion of backwardness, and therefore should not endure. Yet it does and the Saudi royals are still with us and have outlived, and outwitted, all their opponents from Arab nationalists, to socialists, to communists, to liberal modernizers, as well as radical and violent Islamists such as Al-Qaeda. What explains the Saudi leadership’s survival and success? And how should the United States think of Saudi Arabia? What policies should it pursue? These are the questions this paper will seek to address.

The Blessing and Curse of Oil

One common explanation for the Saudi regime’s endurance is oil wealth. Saudi Arabia has abundant oil reserves (nearly 25% of proven conventional reserves) and can produce up to 12.5 million barrels a day. At present world prices, the Saudi treasury collects about $1 billion per day and has amassed over the last decade nearly $600 billion in cash reserves, most of which are invested in U.S. treasuries. The argument is that such wealth allows the Saudi leadership to buy off its population, which it does not tax and which receives enormous state-funded benefits (jobs, free health and schooling, nearly free water, gasoline etc.). Social peace is bought through government largesse, as when the Saudi government recently created 300,000 new public sector jobs in response to the Arab Spring events and the threat that demonstrations might start at home. There is some merit in the claim that oil is an important factor for the regime’s survival, but it is not a sufficient explanation. Furthermore, oil is a curse in that it allows for a system of entitlements that the citizens come to expect and which the government finds difficult to maintain as the population grows and as the price of oil drops. Should the price of oil drop below $70 per barrel, Saudi Arabia would find it exceedingly difficult to balance its budget and this would eventually precipitate a crisis.
Buying Social Peace

Unlike Qatar or the United Arab Emirates who can effectively buy off their nationals, Saudi Arabia has a large population at some 27 million, 21 million of whom are citizens. There isn’t enough money to meet such large needs, especially going forward, since 3 million new jobs need to be created in the next decade to employ the new entrants into the labor market. To obtain the obedience of its citizens and to quell potential dissent, the government has had to rely on ideological as well as security measures. And so far these have proven quite effective. The ideological measures involve invoking Islamic teachings and mobilizing Muslim scholars and activists against public and organized dissent. In 2011, the Senior Council of Scholars issued a fatwa banning all public demonstrations because these flaunt Islamic teachings. More specifically, the Saudi government has employed the usual tactics of divide and rule between various individuals and groups in society with the aim of preventing any organized force from emerging. The political landscape of the country is deliberately kept fragmented.

As for security measures, the government has highly-trained domestic police, intelligence and paramilitary forces under the Ministry of the Interior which is headed by Prince Muhammad bin Nayef. These have been vigilant in crushing any form of organized dissent. Finally, the government has targeted the minority Shia religious sect (some 10% of the population) which constitutes a historic nemesis of the majority Sunni population. In other words, the government has used the sectarian card very effectively to rally its own Sunni majority base of supporters.

But just as important as all the factors mentioned above, is the regional situation with uprisings, civil wars and troubles all around Saudi Arabia. Iraq is still roiling from the effects of the war and is bursting with sectarian tension, as it is led by the Shia autocrat, Prime Minister Nuri al-Maliki. Syria is in bloody turmoil, and Egypt is an economic and political mess. Yemen is a slightly more stable but remains fragile and impoverished. Bahrain continues to face a majority Shia uprising against a minority Sunni leadership. Such conditions make many Saudis adopt the view that they have it better than most other Arabs and, moreover, that the toppling of the Saudi regime would lead to dreaded chaos. This popular fear of chaos has been a factor that has sustained the government in Riyadh and continues to do so.

Riyadh’s Response to the Arab Spring

The Saudi leadership has decided to use its revenues to protect its interests both domestically and regionally, and so far it has succeeded. Domestically, it has already been mentioned that new jobs and entitlements have been given. In the region, the Saudis have also spent considerable economic and political capital to protect their interests. Bahrain, for example, constitutes a red line for Riyadh. Under no circumstances are the majority Shiias to be allowed to gain more political power. The fear here is not only about greater enfranchisement of the people, something the house of Saud is against on principle, but more important is the real anxiety that greater Shia power in Bahrain would lead to Iran dominating the island kingdom. A worst case scenario would be to have a Hizbollah-like situation in Bahrain—a proxy of the Iranian regime in control of a territory that lies just off of Saudi Arabia’s Eastern Province and its hydrocarbon resources and facilities.

In Yemen, the Saudis have spent money and energy to ease President Saleh out of power and to lay out a transition process toward new elections while maintaining a unified Yemen. It remains unclear what Saudi Arabia wants in Yemen in terms of a final outcome. In practice, the policy has amounted to kicking the can down the road by preventing Yemen from becoming a failed state. But the signs in Yemen all indicate that the country is headed toward disaster, with an Al-Qaeda presence, a Shia rebellious group in control of two northern provinces, a southern secessionist movement, as well as the near total depletion of ground water and eventually oil.

In Egypt, the Saudi leadership does not like the new president or the party he represents. The Muslim Brotherhood constitutes a threat to the Saudis because, like the latter, it claims to speak in the name of Islam. Furthermore, the Saudis and the Muslim Brotherhood have a history of mutual distrust and antipathy. Without Saudi investments and support, Egypt will find it difficult to emerge from its economic crisis and the Saudis will dole these out at a
heavy political price. The Saudis also have the Salafis in Egypt as potential protégés and clients.

In Syria, the Saudis have been supporting the opposition forces to the Assad regime but not those who are Islamist or Salafi-Jihadi in orientation. Riyadh wants the Assad regime toppled because it is an ally and proxy for Iran, but it would be unhappy if the Muslim Brotherhood were to come to power in Damascus. Because of this, the Saudis have been coordinating with the Jordanians (a regime they also aid financially) to support elements that might be considered nationalist rather than Islamist in Syria.

Most importantly, the Saudis have managed to stave off an uprising within the kingdom itself, and they have used their money to bolster their allies around the region.

**Internet and Social Media**

Saudi Arabia has the highest rates of Internet penetration in the region. More Saudis watch YouTube than any other population in the world, and Twitter is all the rage. The effect of this has been to create a space for debate, discussion and dissent through tools of the social media that is proving impossible to control by the state. Does this pose a threat to the regime? Yes and no. Social media groups and discussions can only pose a threat to a government if these activities can be converted into physical mobilization of the population in the real world. The only issue in Saudi Arabia on which this has happened revolves around the Sunni and Shia political prisoners that are being held by the Ministry of the Interior. In both Sunni and Shia areas, families of these prisoners have mobilized in demonstrations, seeking the freedom of their loved ones. These demonstrations and the confrontations they inevitably lead to with the security services can snowball into a larger movement of dissent against the regime. It is the Sunni demonstrating families that pose a particular flash point and trigger for a more generalized movement of opposition.

**Recent Royal Developments in Saudi Arabia**

The top leadership in Riyadh is quite old, with the king in his late 80s and the crown prince in his late 70s. Change is bound to come in rapid succession and this is a potential cause for instability. To deal with this issue certain recent appointments have been made, and some of these will prove to be stabilizing factors in the near future. The most important appointment has been that of the relatively young prince Muhammad bin Nayef (MbN) as minister of the interior. MbN is in his early 50s and is known to be a dynamic and serious person who can keep the ship of state protected and on a steady course. The second appointment that is worth noting is that of Prince Muqrin bin Abdulaziz as second deputy prime minister, a post that is often construed as that of the second heir to the king after the crown prince. Muqrin is in his mid-60s and is the son of the founder of the kingdom. Formerly the head of the foreign intelligence service, he is not dynamic but can act ably as a figurehead while MbN runs the show. If these new appointments remain in place after the death of King Abdullah, then Saudi Arabia will be stable over the next decade. If, however, they are changed and less able people are put in charge, then it is possible to imagine the kingdom being very poorly run and therefore vulnerable to domestic movements of opposition. What is worth noting from the above is that the ultimate threat to the stability of the kingdom lies with the inner workings of the royal family and whether they can produce able leaders and keep their house in order under a united leadership.

**The U.S. and Saudi Arabia**

The U.S. and Saudi Arabia have a close and important working relationship. The U.S. effectively provides the kingdom with security against external aggressors, and the kingdom plays a stabilizing role in the region and on oil markets by acting as a reliable and major supplier of crude. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is a very large purchaser of U.S. products, especially military armaments. It is a relationship worth cultivating, and it serves little purpose for the U.S. to interfere aggressively in domestic Saudi politics on issues such as human or women’s rights or political liberalization. There are limits to the ability of the U.S. to influence change within the kingdom or on such crucial Saudi national interests as the survival of the Sunni regime in Bahrain. The Saudis prefer highly-personalized relationships with the executive branch of the government, and these are the most
effective way of influencing the leadership in Riyadh on any number of issues.

Important avenues for U.S. policy with the kingdom lie in the following areas:

1. **Syria.** It is important to coordinate with Saudi Arabia the policies to be pursued for toppling the Assad regime and the rebuilding of the country after this comes to pass.

2. **Iran.** It is also crucial to coordinate U.S. policy toward Iran with the kingdom because Riyadh shares a great antipathy for the regime in Tehran and wishes to see its influence in the region diminished.

3. **Israel-Palestine Dispute.** The Saudis can prove very useful mediators with the Palestinians and will prove crucial for the economic well-being of any future Palestinian state as well as the inevitable compensation of the refugees.

4. **Qatar.** Saudi Arabia and Qatar are oftentimes rivals and it would be helpful for the U.S. to mediate this and to help coordinate Qatar’s policies in the region with those of Saudi Arabia. Qatar has been aggressively supporting the Muslim Brotherhood while Saudi Arabia has shunned this movement.
The U.S. Role in a Rapidly Changing Middle East

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April 2-7, 2013
Istanbul, Turkey

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The U.S. Role in a Rapidly Changing Middle East

AGENDA

April 2-7, 2013
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The Syrian Crisis: Domestic and Regional Consequences

The Alawite minority regime of Bashar al-Assad continues to cling to power in Damascus by brutally fending off an increasingly sectarian popular uprising which has taken the lives of over 40,000 Syrian citizens. While the Obama administration has called for Assad’s departure, it has been reluctant to provide high-level military aid to the Syrian opposition for fear of empowering radical Islamist forces.

• What are Syria’s ethnic, religious, and geographic demographics, and which segments of Syrian society are involved in the revolt?
• Which segments of Syrian society continue to support the Assad regime, and why? What is a post-Assad order in Syria likely to resemble?
• What are U.S. interests in Syria?
• What are the interests and activities of great powers such as Russia and China in Syria, as well as regional actors including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar?
• What are the implications of continued civil strife in Syria for its fragile neighbors such as Lebanon and Jordan?

Bassma Kodmani, Executive Director, Arab Reform Initiative, Paris

David Ignatius, Associate Editor and Columnist
The Washington Post (Discussant)

Turkey’s Regional Role

Under the leadership of Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Ankara’s foreign policy focus gradually shifted from Europe to the Middle East. Though Turkish soft power and influence in the region has grown dramatically, its aspirational policy of having “zero problems” with its neighbors has unraveled as Turkey finds itself increasingly in conflict and competition with Syria, Iraq, and Iran. How is Turkey navigating these tumultuous waters, and what are the implications for the U.S.?

Asli Aydintasbas, Columnist for the Turkish daily newspaper
Milliyet, Istanbul
Inside Iran: Its Nuclear Ambitions, and U.S. Policy Implications

Iran has become integral to half a dozen major U.S. foreign policy challenges, namely Afghanistan, Iraq, Arab-Israeli peace, terrorism, energy security, and above all nuclear proliferation. Indeed few foreign policy challenges will figure more prominently than checking Iran’s nuclear ambitions, while at the same time trying to avoid another military conflagration in the Middle East. While U.S. officials believe that Tehran has yet to decide whether to produce nuclear weapons, absent a diplomatic agreement, the U.S. may soon face stark policy options.

• What are Iran’s internal political dynamics, and where does authority lie in Tehran on important political and nuclear matters—with the Supreme Leader or with the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps?

• How can the U.S. engage an Iranian regime whose opposition to America has arguably become an inextricable part of their revolutionary identity?

• How have economic sanctions affected Iran’s economy and society, and what has been their effect, if any, on Iran’s nuclear decision making?

• What is the relevance of Iran’s June 2013 presidential election, and what are the prospects for another popular uprising? How can the U.S. most effectively support the cause of democratic change in Iran?

• How has Iran been trying to influence the Arab Spring, and what are the implications for Iran, and its client Hezbollah, when and if the Assad regime in Syria finally collapses?

Dennis Ross, former Senior Advisor on the Middle East for the Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations
Counselor, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Prospects for a Palestine-Israel Solution

In the last several years, right-wing political parties have been in the ascent in both Israel and Palestine, with commitment to a two-state solution questionable. In the wake of another military conflict between the two sides in Gaza, and given a likely Palestinian demographic majority in the coming years, is a two-state solution still viable? What should the U.S. role be in helping to resolve this conflict?

Dennis Ross, former Senior Advisor on the Middle East for the Clinton, Bush and Obama Administrations
Counselor, The Washington Institute for Near East Policy

Robert Malley, Program Director, Middle East and North Africa
International Crisis Group

Egypt’s Trajectory: Still a U.S. Ally?

Two years after the collapse of Hosni Mubarak’s regime, Egypt remains politically and economically unstable and mired in a battle, pitting Islamists against non-Islamists to determine the country’s character and trajectory. Within months of taking office, President Mohammed Morsi’s attempt to grant himself unrestricted authority and push a divisive constitution—authored by the president’s Islamist allies—has spurred mass anti-government protests and serious concerns about Egypt’s democratic future.

• What are the primary fault lines between the Muslim Brotherhood and its opponents, and what are the fault lines within the Muslim Brotherhood and among Islamists more broadly?

• What are the prospects for Egypt’s economy, which relies heavily on tourism revenue?
• Can Egypt reassert itself as the leading Arab power, or will its regional influence be hindered by internal tumult?
• Which U.S. policies can best nurture Egypt’s transition to a tolerant, prosperous democracy? Should the U.S. continue to provide aid to Egypt and, if so, should the aid be conditional?
• What are Egypt’s relations with Hamas, and how fragile is Egypt’s peace agreement with Israel?

Maha Azzam, Advisor to the Egyptian Foreign Policy Forum, Cairo

Steven Cook, Senior Fellow, Middle Eastern Studies Council on Foreign Relations (Discussant)

Iraq and Saudi Arabia—How Stable?

Ten years after the removal of Saddam Hussein from power, Iraq’s stability remains uncertain. Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki has failed to establish himself as a unifying, non-sectarian political figure, and serious concerns exist about his commitment to democracy and Iraqi independence from Iran. In Saudi Arabia, an aging leadership is having increased difficulty contending with a young, tech-savvy population, a restive Shiite minority, and widening income disparity among its subjects. Despite a record oil windfall over the last decade, many close observers believe the country’s future is more uncertain than ever before.

• What are the power dynamics in Iraq, and what is the state of ethnic and sectarian relations among Shiites, Sunnis, and Kurds? Is there a risk of return to sectarian strife?
• How has Iraq’s burgeoning energy industry affected political and societal dynamics? What is the state of the Iraqi economy?
• How has the U.S. withdrawal affected Iraq’s internal dynamics, and what role can we best play in helping to prevent a return to instability and sectarian warfare?
• Could diplomatic engagement from Gulf countries, particularly Saudi Arabia, help wean Iraq away from Iranian influence?
• Given the old age and poor health of Saudi Arabia’s king and crown prince, who are their most likely heirs to the throne? How stable is the Saudi regime? What are the key sources of the country’s instability?
• Is U.S. policy toward Saudi Arabia shortsighted? In what ways could it be improved?
• How will America’s burgeoning shale oil industry—which is expected to reduce our dependence on foreign energy sources—affect U.S. relations with Saudi Arabia and Iraq?

Barham Salih, former Prime Minister of Iraqi Kurdistan, Erbil

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