Dictators, Democrats and Extremists: Discerning U.S. Interests in the Middle East

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The Aspen Institute’s Congressional Program conference on extremism in the Islamic world, titled “Dictators, Democrats and Extremists: Discerning U.S. Interests in the Middle East,” convened in Istanbul, Turkey, from August 14-19, 2014. Participating were 15 members of Congress along with eight scholars from the region and six U.S.-based analysts. Today’s Middle East is grappling with failed states, civil wars, brazen autocracies, and terror groups such as ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria), whose macabre behavior makes even al-Qaeda appear moderate in comparison. The aim of the conference was to facilitate a frank, informative and non-partisan discussion to examine these trends as well as viable U.S. strategies to counter them.

Iraq and ISIS

Several participants asserted that former Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki deserves primary responsibility for the country’s deteriorated security environment. After the 2007 surge of U.S. military forces, violence in Iraq dropped significantly. But Maliki’s highly sectarian, autocratic leadership style alienated Iraq’s Sunni Arab community, which squandered the reconciliation process that had taken place during the surge.

Maliki also undermined the effectiveness of Iraqi security forces by replacing its top commanders with Shiite loyalists, which destroyed the chain of command. Consequently, an army that was once well-trained and equipped—thanks to $24 billion worth of U.S. government support—proved incapable of fending off the threat posted by the radical extremist group ISIS. Its emergence is also attributable to the festering Syrian civil war, which greatly aided al-Qaeda in Iraq—the precursor of ISIS—by giving it combat training and experience. Rather than engage and co-opt Iraq’s Sunni Arab community away from al-Qaeda, Maliki alienated them and squandered the reconciliation process that had taken place during the surge.

More importantly, Maliki also lost critical support from within his own Shia community, including from Grand Ayatollah Sistani, causing him to lose Tehran’s backing. Maliki’s likely replacement as Prime Minister—Haydar al-Abadi—comes from a prominent Baghdad family and holds a PhD from the United Kingdom, where he spent two decades in exile. He is a technocrat who will likely be more inclusive than Maliki and focused on developing Iraq’s economy and private sector rather than settling sectarian scores.

Because of Iraq’s current vulnerabilities, the U.S. has more influence in the country than we’ve had in a long time. The Kurds need our support, as their military force—known as the Peshmerga—are more of a “checkpoint army” and not sufficiently well equipped or trained to carry out combat operations. U.S. air support fending off ISIS saved the day for the Kurds.

While Iraq’s Kurdish community appears ready to make a bid for independence, the 17 percent of
Iraq’s total oil revenue they’re entitled to is more than 100% of their own oil revenue.

Countering ISIS requires not only a military strategy but more importantly a political strategy. When Iraq’s Sunni and Kurdish community are back into the fold, U.S. air support can help the Iraqi government retake the territory that ISIS now controls. Kurds will have greater autonomy than before. Sunnis will likely agitate for the same, as well as their own security force. Yet in contrast to the Kurdish and Shia regions the Sunni regions of Iraq are not oil-rich.

Several members of Congress questioned how an Iraqi army, in which the U.S. had invested $24 billion, could have been so quickly defeated by less than 15,000 ISIS fighters in Mosul. Wasn’t it too simplistic to pin the blame on entirely one man, Nouri al-Maliki?

One participant responded that Maliki had reversed Sunni-Shia reconciliation, lost the confidence of the Kurds, and destroyed the relationship between leader and led. Maliki also opposed the Status of Forces Agreement (SOFA) with the U.S. government which undermined the cohesion and professionalism of Iraq’s security forces.

More than one member of Congress focused on the original causus belli for the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Bush administration’s assertion that Saddam Hussein had weapons of mass destruction (WMD). One former senior government official responded that “Saddam had run the greatest deception campaign in order to fool Iran….we genuinely believed they had WMD.” He expressed hope that, in contrast to Maliki, a government led by PM Abadi would receive more support from Sunni Arab governments in the region. King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia has voiced support for Abadi and offered $500 million in aid. Regional Arab countries, however, are unlikely to take on ISIS in Iraq, especially absent a political environment in Baghdad which accommodates Sunni Arabs and a clear U.S. strategy.

While Iran has significant influence in Iraq, Maliki wasn’t necessarily an Iranian puppet. Nonetheless, all Iraqi politicians—including Sunnis—have to deal with Iran. Iranian Revolutionary Guard commander Qassem Soleimani has played a key role in forming previous governments in Baghdad, and Iraq is heavily dependent on Iran for its energy, religious tourism, and infrastructure projects.

Several members of Congress asked how the U.S. could best contend with ISIS. One former official argued that the greatest threat to the American homeland is not ISIS but al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula, in particular Yemen-based master bomber Ibrahim al-Asiri. “We’ve narrowly dodged bullets from al-Asiri.”

ISIS is more of an immediate threat to the people of Iraq and Syria. Even when the U.S. had 165,000 troops in Iraq it was very hard to combat radicals and persuade Sunni Arabs to fight radicals within their own community. The latter in particular will be critical in countering ISIS’s reach.

When asked about U.S. support for the Kurds, one participant asserted that while the U.S. government will continue to provide security assurances to the Kurds—including equipment and training—the post-Maliki Iraqi government would first have to fail before Washington would formally support Kurdish independence. What’s more the Kurds have a financial incentive not to go for independence as they would lose the 17% portion of Iraq’s oil revenue that they currently receive. Several made the point that U.S. policy should be to keep Iraq together, not partition it.

One member of Congress asserted that U.S. regional allies such as Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, and Qatar bear some responsibility for the rise of ISIS, given their support for radical Sunni groups, but that ISIS is now “an attack dog that’s escaped the leash.”

**Iran**

One expert assessed Iran’s domestic context, its regional context, and the context of its nuclear program. He argued that Iran’s domestic political struggle pits hardline “principlists”, led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, against “pragmatists” led by President Hassan Rouhani. Both sides consider themselves soldiers of the revolution and committed to preserving the Islamic regime but they disagree how to best do that.

Whereas pragmatists believe Iran needs to prioritize economic and national interests before ideology, principlists argue that diluting or abandoning revo-
olutionary ideals will doom the Islamic Republic just as Perestroika unraveled the USSR. Pragmatists hope Iran can become like China, where principlists fear the Islamic regime could go the way of the Soviet Union.

For principlists, there are three symbolic pillars of the Islamic Revolution: the rejection of Israel’s existence, resistance against U.S. hegemony, and the mandatory veiling of women (which symbolizes Islamic piety). While principlists cloak these pillars in ideology, they are in reality driven by self-preservation. Abandoning these pillars could shake the foundations of the Islamic Republic.

While Iran’s youthful society overwhelmingly supports a more pragmatic and less ideological course, principlists have a monopoly over coercion, control of the country’s oil wealth, military, and judiciary, and hence have a firm grip on power.

In a regional context, Iran is integral to seven major U.S. foreign policy concerns, namely: Syria, Iraq, Afghanistan, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, terrorism, energy security, and nuclear proliferation. Invoking the words of former U.S. Secretary of State Henry Kissinger, one analyst argued that Iran must decide whether it’s “a nation or a cause” and reconcile the national interests of Iran and the ideological prerogatives of the Islamic Republic. For example, while a constructive working relationship with the United States is in the interests of Iran, it’s inimical to the worldview of the Islamic Republic.

One of the fault lines between Iran’s pragmatists and principlists is that the former are willing to work with U.S. against Sunni radicals (such as ISIS), where the latter are willing to work with Sunni radicals against the U.S. One of the perennial challenges for the U.S. government in dealing with Iran is the fact that Iranian pragmatists who are accessible to US officials can’t deliver, while principlists who can deliver are inaccessible.

Numerous conflicts in today’s Middle East—including those in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen—are arenas for the Iran-Saudi rivalry, which is at once ethnic (Persian vs. Arab), sectarian (Shia vs. Sunni), and ideological (Western-opposed vs. Western-aligned). In Syria, Iran feels its support for the Assad regime has been vindicated. Whereas two years ago Assad appeared on the verge of collapse, today—with the help of Iran and its proxy Hezbollah—Assad appears to have a clear advantage over the rebels. Given that decorated U.S. diplomats such as Ryan Crocker have written publicly that Assad is a better alternative to Syria’s rebels, Iranian officials likely feel confident that Washington will soon accommodate itself to Iran’s position on Syria rather than vice versa.

The deadline for reaching a nuclear deal between Iran and the members of the UN Security Council is November 24, 2014. There are three likely outcomes: resolution, escalation, or managed irresolution.

Resolution

At the moment the biggest source of contention between Washington and Tehran is the question of uranium enrichment. From the U.S. perspective, in order to reach a resolution, Iran would need to cap its enrichment activity to no more than a few thousand centrifuges for at least 10 years, in exchange for the gradual removal of sanctions.

From Tehran’s perspective Iran would agree to a short-term (five years or less) cap on centrifuges in exchange for an immediate lifting of all sanctions.

Prospects for reaching a resolution were seriously undermined by Supreme Leader Khamenei’s assertion in July that Iran needs 190,000 SWU (Separative Work Units, the equivalent of 190,000 P1 centrifuges) in the next decade. This number is at least ten times more than the U.S. would be willing to countenance.

President Hassan Rouhani has invested all of his political capital in trying to reach a nuclear deal, and there is a widespread perception that Iran’s pragmatists would be strengthened by a deal, and significantly weakened in the event of no deal. For this reason Tehran’s hardliners have done their best to scuttle negotiations and prospects for U.S.-Iran détente.

Escalation

If the negotiations fail to produce a resolution, there is a real possibility of a return to status-quo escalation. Failure to reach a deal will likely compel the U.S. Congress to pass additional sanctions in order to force Tehran to compromise.
Given that the most onerous sanctions have already been passed, Tehran will likely respond by nullifying the compromises it made in the interim deal and putting its foot on the accelerator.

The most onerous sanctions have already been passed, however, and it will prove significantly more difficult to muster widespread international support against the Rouhani government, in contrast to the gratuitously offensive government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Consequently, additional sanctions will be insufficient to force Iran to surrender, but they could well provoke a dangerous mutual escalation.

Managed Irresolution

Given the potentially significant risks of a return to escalation for both Tehran and Washington, the two sides may conclude that while a comprehensive nuclear settlement may be untenable, it still behooves both sides to keep the momentum of negotiations moving forward.

This would require Congress to refrain from passing onerous new sanctions and it would require Tehran to continue halting its nuclear progress. While neither side will consider this option desirable, in the absence of a comprehensive deal it is the least bad option available.

The rise of ISIS begs the question of whether Iran feels more vulnerable and hence more inclined to make a nuclear compromise, or does Tehran believe that Washington needs Iranian help to counter ISIS and hence Tehran can afford to be more intransigent in nuclear negotiations. While the answer to this question remains uncertain, there are increasing signs of the latter.

Syria

The regime of Bashar Assad is firmly ensconced in Damascus and Western Syria, thanks in large part to Iran and its military reinforcements, namely Hezbollah and Iraqi Shia militias. Tehran considers Assad an indispensable—albeit subordinate—partner and a crucial artery to Hezbollah, Iran’s number one pressure point against Israel.

Eastern Syria is dominated by ISIS, which appears on the surface to be an ideological and sectarian adversary of the Assad regime. In reality, however, both ISIS and Assad are fighting the same target, the more moderate Free Syria Army (FSA). The FSA is under tremendous pressure in Aleppo and elsewhere and desperately needs help in order to contend with both Assad and ISIS. There’s an increasing possibility that they’ll be defeated soon.

The human consequences of the Syrian conflict are staggering—over 150,000 dead and nearly half of Syria’s population of 22 million displaced, including three million Syrian refugees abroad. To its credit, Congress has allocated $2.4 billion in humanitarian relief to Syria.

The Assad regime supported al-Qaeda in Iraq by ferrying terrorists from Syria to Iraq. Some of these radicals later returned to fight Assad—such as the Nusra front—whereas ISIS has only fought Assad sparingly and has instead sought to secure a base for its “Caliphate”.

One of the geopolitical consequences of the Syrian conflict for the United States is the fact that Iran has secured its hold over Western Syria. Both Iran and Assad believe they have won. Many U.S. allies have observed the gap between US rhetoric and action in Syria and worry about American resolve on their issues.

Several contended that had President Obama armed the Syrian rebels two years ago the situation today would have been immeasurably better. Still, nationalist forces in Syria—the FSA—urgently need to be resupplied in their battle against both Assad and ISIS. They need a way to challenge the Assad regime’s helicopters.

The worst possible outcome for the United States is Syrian being partitioned by Iran and Assad in one half of the country and ISIS in the other. Absent a different U.S. strategy that is becoming Syria’s de facto reality.

Several members of Congress asked about the status of the chemical weapons treaty negotiation. One analyst asserted that Assad is now calculating that he can continue to inflict mass violence against his population as long as it’s not chemical.

Assad and ISIS have de facto collaborations against the FSA. Iran needs ISIS dead in Iraq and alive in
Syria. The U.S. has been offering the FSA only low-level support, their biggest source of weaponry has been from the Syrian army.

One former government official with extensive experience in the Middle East similarly argued that Syrian moderate rebels should be supported as they are the enemy of America’s enemy, ISIS. What’s more Assad’s calculations and willingness to negotiate won’t change if he doesn’t feel pressured.

A former senior advisor to President Obama asked members of Congress why they had not supported President Obama to take military action against Syria in the aftermath of Bashar Assad’s chemical weapons attack. Several members of Congress responded by saying President Obama did not make a clear or effective case to Congress regarding his strategy and goals in Syria. “I believed the President wasn’t serious,” said one member. “I don’t think he wanted Congress to support this initiative.”

Some members of Congress also expressed concern that U.S. military support for the Syrian rebels could end up in the hands of radicals. One analyst conceded that it would be impossible not to have some weapons get in the hands of the wrong people.

A member of Congress questioned whether the U.S. should intervene in Syria when two chief U.S. adversaries—Hezbollah and al-Qaeda—were fighting one another. What’s more, our experience in Iraq taught us that while we are capable of removing governments from power, we do not have the capacity to deliver a sound replacement government as well as law and order.

One analyst assessed that Syria is a proxy war between Iran and Saudi Arabia and any peace settlement in Syria will require a regional scenario.

In response to questions about the nature and end goal of the Syrian rebels, one analyst responded that while their end game is clear (“the removal of Assad”) their leadership is “beneath abysmal”. The term “Nationalist” is more important than “moderate” in today’s Middle East. What’s important is those who see the struggle against Assad in the context of the Syrian nation state, rather than a global jihad. “What’s happening on the ground now in Syria is so horrible, I don’t worry as much as others about having an established, coherent opposition.” The business elite of Damascus has been generally supportive of the Assad regime, but at the beginning of the uprisings many were hedging their bets.

Another analyst argued that Obama’s refusal to take action after Assad crossed his “red line” undermined U.S. deterrence vis-à-vis Iran. He also faulted the chemical weapons (CW) deal for not determining the provenance of Syria’s chemical weapons program (so as not to implicate Russia), allowing the use of chlorine gas, and not being able to investigate whether Syria secretly hid some of its CW stockpile.

Several members of Congress argued that U.S. policy toward Syria appeared long on tactics and short on strategy. One analyst argued “we’re in an emergency situation in which tactics will have to do.” Sizable amounts of humanitarian assistance from Congress will continue to be needed.

Turkey

Turkish Prime Minister Recep Tayep Erdogan has been a political phenomenon in Turkey who’s led a slow motion counterrevolution against the legacy of Turkey’s secular founder Mustafa Kemal Attaturk. Whereas Attaturk sought to secularize Turkey and align it with the West, the deeply pious Erdogan and his AK (Justice and Development) party believe Turkey has a manifest destiny to lead the Islamic world.

Although one analyst argued that Turkey’s bid for leadership in the Arab and Muslim world is a “romantic fallacy”. “There is a huge disconnect between how Turkey perceives itself in the Arab world and how Arabs perceive Turkey.”

The EU rejection of Turkey has provided fertile ground for this worldview. In response to one member’s question asking why the EU had refused to admit Turkey, the Turkey expert asserted that Turkey could be a huge strategic asset to Europe, but neither EU leaders nor their publics are prepared to accept 75 million Muslims entering the EU. Turkey’s failure to enter the EU has in turn served to marginalize Turkish liberals.

Turkey is at the moment a nation torn between its Islamic and European/Western identity. Erdogan has a deep, emotional connection with his own constituency and his political fortunes have been buoyed by
his economic success. Yet Erdogan is a polarizing figure, as was evidenced by the large Gezi Park protests against his paternalistic leadership style.

In light of the EU’s rejection, the lynchpin of Turkey’s relationship with the West is no longer Europe but America. Turkey can be key to transatlantic economic cooperation and in the security and foreign policy dimension there are many opportunities to strengthen U.S.-Turkey cooperation. The U.S. must aim to champion liberal and democratic values and foster the pro-Western tendencies which are still strong in Turkey. Human rights is low on America’s agenda with Turkey at the moment and the US should be “tough but fair” about the precarious state of Turkish democracy. There remains in Turkey a strong electoral tradition. Cooperation with the Kurdish Regional Government has been one of the very few Turkish foreign policy successes of the last decade.

Turkey had adopted a policy that enemies of Syria’s Bashar Assad are friends of Turkey. This meant Turkey either supported Islamist militants fighting Assad or acquiesced as these groups used Turkish territory to fight Assad. In April of 2014 there was a reassessment of this policy, however, given the rise of ultra-radical groups such as ISIS. Turkey’s leadership is Islamist but it doesn’t see radical Islamists as allies. In response to one member’s question whether Turkey would help the U.S. government take on ISIS, one analyst responded by saying “yes, but not overtly.”

Several members of Congress expressed concern about the Erdogan government’s authoritarian and Islamist tendencies, casual anti-semitism, and patriarchal views and policies toward women. “It will be difficult for Turkey to solidify its relationship with the United States if it is oppressive toward women,” said one member.

Turkey has the fifth largest Facebook population and seventh most active Twitter community, yet there is growing concern about new limits on public expression in Turkey--as manifested by restrictions imposed on social media. Social media’s role in fueling the Gezi Park protests last year provoked the Turkish government into taking efforts to block these communications.

Turkey is a polarized society and Erdogan’s seemingly retrograde views are a reflection of a not insignificant segment of traditional Turkish society. Turkish liberals on the other hand have been unable to bridge the gap between grassroots protests and parliamentary politics. That said the presence of the Turkish private sector, and the fact that Turkey is not a commodity-run economy, prevents a Putin-style dictatorship. Turkey needs foreign investment and can’t rely on oil.

Egypt

Since the June 30, 2013, coup, the Egyptian government has arrested 35,000 people, including three Al Jazeera reporters. Egypt’s Coptic Christian minority (who compose around 10% of the population) continues to be subject to daily abuse and former president Hosni Mubarak seems poised for rehabilitation. Turnout was so low in the June presidential election of Field Marshal al-Sisi that voting was extended to include a third day.

However, there have been some positive developments, such as the fact that the new constitution has better provisions regarding women’s rights than the constitution promulgated under former president Mohamed Morsi.

Since taking office, President Sisi has been pursuing the following goals:

• “Defeating terrorism,” i.e. the Muslim Brotherhood. Sisi’s current approach is no leniency, no truth, and no reconciliation.
• Stabilizing the Egyptian economy. This includes massive infrastructure projects such as a $40 billion investment in building low income housing (funded by the UAE and under-taken by the military) and widening the Suez Canal
• Political stability. At its heart, the Egyptian military desires stability. Whether they achieve this goal is yet to be seen.

Sisi enjoys broad-based popularity in Egypt, but his support is quite shallow. The lifting of fuel subsidies will surely dampen his approval to some extent. However, Sisi has partially been able to draw on the military’s popularity for his support. The Egyptian
military is one of the country’s largest, most powerful institutions with immense resources at its disposal, including universal conscription. Most Egyptians also perceive the military as representing the country and safeguarding its interests, making it materially and ideologically impossible to oppose.

Several participants contended that U.S. aid should be conditioned on the Egyptian government taking action to serve core American interests, such as the Camp David Accords and counterterrorism cooperation.

A member of Congress asked if the United States is undermining its core interests if the United States is viewed as complicit in the repression of Egyptians, citing reports that “made in USA” appeared on tear gas canisters used against protesters. One analyst responded that the U.S. is seen in a negative light by various rival Egyptian factions and there is a widespread belief among the Egyptian population that the U.S. wants a weaker Egypt.

Most of the top leaders of the Muslim Brotherhood have either been imprisoned or are exiled to Turkey or Qatar. The organization is now torn between participating in elections and agitating against the government. There continue to be daily, pro-Brotherhood protests, particularly at universities and it is unlikely that the Muslim Brotherhood will be reintegrated into Egyptian society any time soon.

The Egypt discussion provoked a debate among participants regarding the merits of illiberal democracy vs. liberal autocracy. One viewpoint was that a military authoritarian regime in Cairo is preferable for the U.S. than an Islamist authoritarian system. Another view was that such an approach by the U.S. of supporting “moderate dictators” would eventually backfire. A member of Congress concurred that U.S. support for authoritarian regimes has fueled anti-American sentiment and to continue this approach would be unwise.

Several members asked questions regarding Egypt’s relationship with Israel. Unlike Morsi, who had been less hostile to Hamas, the Sisi government is shutting down the supply tunnels between Egypt and the Gaza Strip. At the moment, most Egyptians desire better treatment of Palestinians, but many dislike Hamas because it is associated with the Muslim Brotherhood.

Several members asked to evaluate President Obama on his handling of Egypt. Firstly, whatever the U.S. president says is likely to be misconstrued by Egyptians. The Muslim Brotherhood claims that he supports the military, whereas the military alleges that Obama supported the Muslim Brotherhood. The best counsel is to tread lightly and exert a light touch. A senior scholar gave Obama a poor grade, particularly for removing Mubarak quickly rather than easing him out over time. This created a vacuum, as youthful revolutionaries lacked time to formulate significant demands, and political parties, particularly the Muslim Brotherhood, rushed into elections in spite of internal political problems.

One member of Congress argued that although Democracy is the soul of America and the brand of America, it is not a panacea for U.S. interests in the Middle East. It didn’t work in Iraq or in the case of the Muslim Brotherhood in Egypt. A U.S.-based scholar and former Obama advisor argued that neither economics nor culture precludes the possibility of democracy in Egypt, and criticized the Obama administration for not having a plan to aid Egypt’s transition after the fall of Mubarak.

A former political prisoner in Egypt responded that Islamists are inherently incapable of democratic values. We must distinguish between Islamism and Islam. Islamism is incompatible with democracy; Islam is not. Another expert responded that rather than cultural explanations, “Democracy comes about because political actors are constrained by democracy and this constraint develops through evolutionary socioeconomic processes.”

### Jordan

A majority of Jordan’s population are Palestinian, Iraqi, and now Syrian refugees, which imposes a tremendous economic burden on a country with few resources. The Jordanian government employs 40 percent of the workforce—one of the highest rates in the world—and has incurred a sizable budget deficit.

Several members of Congress expressed concern about Jordan’s large and growing Syrian refugee community. Many children in Syrian refugee camps have not been going to school for three consecutive years. Some of them have been recruited by radical organiza-
tions that have financial means to induce them.

Jordan did not experience the same popular tumult as elsewhere in the Arab world and few Jordanians want the Hashemite Kingdom to leave. But both “native Jordanians” (known as East Jordanians) as well as Palestinians cite governmental corruption as a major grievance, a phenomenon that’s worsening.

While King Abdullah pays lip service to political reform, in reality the country’s executive branch and intelligence services reign supreme. Given the failed transitions and carnage in Syria, Iraq, and Egypt, Jordan is not witnessing any major public protests. Jordan’s widespread socioeconomic frustrations and lack of employment opportunities for youth could create a fertile recruiting ground for ISIS. As such, to check ISIS requires not only a military strategy but also a political and economic one. One participant observed, “If the U.S. comes up with a political strategy in Iraq and Syria many regional countries would stand up to ISIS with the U.S.”

Several participants contended that reform efforts in Jordan have been hampered by the uncertainty of the Palestinian question. Yet a two-state solution between Israelis and Palestinians is no longer viable, and yet there are no good alternatives to a two-state solution. “We’re coming to an era of no solution”, one analyst observed, which has major implications for Jordan given its sizable Palestinian population.

**Saudi Arabia**

Several members of Congress expressed concern about female inequality in Saudi Arabia, in particular laws preventing women from driving. One analyst responded that King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia had made positive but only minor changes in women’s rights, and conceded female inequality is a major problem within the Wahabi Muslim faith and it will require reform within Islamic schools in order to change it. For Wahabis the issue of women driving is symbolic, they worry “the day Saudi women will drive they will start calling for even more rights.” One analyst added that female inequality in the Middle East is both cultural and legal. While cultural norms will take years to change, there must at least be an effort to remove legal discrimination against women.

Several members of Congress also expressed concern about Saudi Arabia’s support for Islamist militancy throughout the region, and inquired about the possibility that these same jihadists would eventually come to threaten the stability of the Saudi Kingdom. “Are the Saudis sharpening the knife that will eventually slit their throat?” one member asked. While the Riyadh government has recognized the dangers of supporting radical actors abroad, Qatar has become a major supporter of radicalism and has alienated its Gulf neighbors. “Qatar is the most talked about issue in the Gulf right now.”

An expert from Saudi Arabia critiqued the country’s approach toward the United States, saying that Saudis overexpress their differences with Washington, fail to explain their policy goals, and don’t provide alternatives. Change in Saudi Arabia will be incremental, given the country’s geriatric leadership and its very conservative Wahabi Islamic tradition.

One member of Congress asked whether America’s indigenous shale oil bonanza has made Saudi Arabia nervous. The Saudi expert assessed that Riyadh does not appear worried given growing demands for energy throughout the world, particularly in Asia, as well as the fact that Saudi Arabia’s chief oil competitors—such as Iran and Iraq—are plagued by sanctions and political insecurity.

A former senior U.S. official distinguished King Abdullah of Jordan and King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia by saying the former runs a small family business while the latter runs an enormous family business. While Jordan has no sustainable water or energy resources, Saudi Arabia is flush with cash and has been sending hundreds of thousands of students to be educated abroad. Saudi Arabia also has a younger generation of well-trained princes who are in important leadership positions now. Hence “the rumors of Saudi demise have been greatly exaggerated.”

One analyst noted that while the Arab uprisings brought down autocratic “republics” in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya, Arab monarchies—with the exception of Bahrain—had thus far avoided political tumult. Of the eight Arab monarchies, two of them (Jordan and Morocco) have more open systems than the republics while the six Gulf monarchies “have more money to throw at their problems,” one analyst observed.
Afghanistan

Despite Afghanistan’s enormous challenges, the country has made tremendous progress since the removal of the Taliban. In 2001 the country had only one million kids in school (none female) and a GDP of $2 billion. Today it has nine million students (more than a third female), literacy has doubled, and GDP has risen to over $18 billion. Life expectancy has increased from 40 to 64, and the country went from only 32 miles of paved roads in 2001 to 7,500 miles of paved road today.

Afghanistan’s most pressing challenge is to smoothly manage the security, political, and economic transition that will take place once President Hamid Karzai’s successor is clear and U.S. forces leave the country in 2016. The Afghan army has made real progress but it won’t be able to secure the country on its own. Pakistan continues to harbor and foster the Taliban. While opinion polls show that the Taliban have less than 10 percent popular support (the figure is higher in the south) they still maintain a formidable fighting force of as many as 75,000 people.

Several members of Congress expressed frustration with the mercurial personality of President Karzai and said that he had singlehandedly undermined U.S.-Afghan relations. One expert described Karzai as someone who is highly paranoid and mentally unstable with no grasp of economic issues and no political vision. While Karzai’s tone toward Washington is confrontational, he refers to the Taliban as his “brothers” and has released over 3,000 Taliban commanders.

Several members of Congress also expressed skepticism about Afghanistan’s progress and stability and described it as a multibillion dollar “black hole” in the eyes of many of their constituents. “Why are we building roads in Afghanistan when we have to borrow money from China in order to build roads in the U.S.?” one member asked. This sentiment is exacerbated by Hamid Karzai’s seeming lack of gratefulness.

A former U.S. official who’s served in Afghanistan asserted that we should be under no illusions about the country’s challenges, but we must stay the course for a sufficient period of time in order to train and enable the Afghan security forces to be self-sufficient.

An abrupt U.S. abandonment of the country would likely mean the regrouping of both the Taliban and al-Qaeda, which would eventually prove more costly to the U.S. Several experts asserted that reconciliation with the Taliban is “a pipe dream”.

Extremism

One analyst contended that the West is now fighting a fully blown global jihadist insurgency. Yet the tactics the West has used to counter this threat—including regime change in Iraq, drone strikes, and non-intervention in Syria—have not worked.

In order to understand the nature of the threat it’s important to understand the five structural distinctions that make Islamist movements such a potent force:

- Clear ideas and motivations, i.e. Sharia law
- Powerful narrative (“there is a war against Islam” i.e. Muslim victimhood)
- Prominent Leadership (Bin Laden, al-Baghdadi, leader of ISIS)
- Symbols and iconography (images of ISIS flag, use of social media)
- Concrete end goal (Unite the Muslim world under one leader, the caliph)

The confluence of these factors has enabled the Islamists to consistently eclipse their liberal rivals, who lack these structural distinctions. If you’re asked what are the five factors of the democratic movement in the Middle East we will struggle to identify them. One attempt to counter the Islamists with a liberal movement is www.khudipakistan.com, which is an attempt to franchise liberal groups the same way that Islamists franchise the Muslim Brotherhood. “Just as Islamism eclipsed socialism, we want to eclipse Islamism,” noted one analyst.

There was a majority view that Islamist extremism is the most serious existential threat to several Islamic countries, including Pakistan, Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Mali and that citizens of those countries must counter it. The U.S. can help quietly, especially in areas such as cyber-space. The spread of Islamism has been exacerbated by the failure of the Arab spring and the growth of “ungoverned” areas including the Egyptian Sinai, Syria, and Iraq.

The litmus test for U.S. counterterrorism strategy should be “does the strategy to counter extremism...
kill more bad guys than it creates? If the answer to that question is “no” then it shouldn’t be carried out.” One analyst emphasized that in order to curb extremism you have to coopt populations not only use military force. “Drone strikes are not the preferred option, they’re the last resort. You always want to take a detainee rather than kill someone…..We never believed that taking out leaders would put a stake in the heart of Islamist organizations.”

Another expert cautioned against associating extremism with religious forces alone, arguing that “other forms of extremism by secular forces have been equally destructive in the Arab world”, including dictators such as Saddam Hussein, Ghaddafi, and Bashar Assad. On the other hand some Islamist parties—such as in Tunisia and Morocco—have exhibited signs of tolerance and moderation.
Introduction

Since the start of the Arab uprising of 2011 the three decade long rivalry between the two regional heavyweights, Iran and Saudi Arabia, has been brought center stage. From Gaza to Mosul and from Sanaa to Homs, the signposts of small proxy wars and skirmishes are all evident; and in each and every single debate on the “Arab Spring”, democratization, human rights and the will and dignity of the people have centered on the differences of two main discourses – the one proposed by Iran and the one proposed by the Saudis. There is no shortage of accusations and trading of insults with sectarian and ethnic overtones.

Then there is the outside, Western outlook which sometimes blames Saudi for its reactionary stance and radical interpretations of its religious heritage; and there are those who blame Iran’s zealous revolutionary ambitions and utilization of terrorist groups across the region and beyond. Almost every commentator of contemporary Middle Eastern politics arrives at the same conclusion; Saudi-Iranian reconciliation is the only solution to the rest of the dilemmas encompassing this wretched part of the world. Personally, I have been researching this topic for a decade, meeting Iranian officials and Saudi decision-makers, and I can convey to you that the issue is far more complicated.

Let me present to you a summary of what this rivalry is about - and what scholars think of it – and why it is most likely to continue in the near future.

History has recorded the stature of Ibn Saud, founder of Saudi Arabia. He was wise and brave and an excellent administrator. When one considers the fatal events for which Iran is now the theater, one cannot but rejoice at seeing Saudi Arabia still free and independent. One can only pray to God that it remains so.

-Muhammad Reza Pahlavi

The followers of the camel grazers of Riyadh and the barbarians of Najd, the most infamous and the wildest members of the human family … If you think these camel-grazers are a model for development … Why don’t you invite advisors from the Saudi royal court to teach you civilization and eradicate superstition from among you.

-Ayatollah Khomeini

Letter to a group of Iranian clerics in 1971

In a meeting with US Ambassador John C. West on 2 October 1979, Crown Prince Fahd told the ambassador:

Instead of pressuring the shah into bringing his thoughts and actions up to date so as to pull the rug from under the communist agitators, you let him go … Look at what has happened in Iran! They have killed the cream of their society—the best brains in the military, the professions, and the civil service have all been executed or forced into exile. (In: Trofimov 2007:60)
Like any other inter-state relationship, understanding Saudi–Iranian relations is dependent on how we understand foreign policy and interstate rivalry in world politics today. In their notable book, Explaining and Understanding International Relations, Hollis and Smith (1990: 1-2) argue that social scientists face a basic choice between two approaches to their subject matter: the first —explaining— is aimed at finding causal mechanisms and social laws, which is usually identified with a positivist approach to IR (Wendt 1998: 102). The second —understanding— that seeks to make sense of events and what they mean by recovering the individual and shared meanings that motivated actors to do what they did. This approach is usually identified with post-positivism. (Hollis and Smith 1990: 3-4)

In light of this argument, one might question whether we are trying to explain or understand the Saudi–Iranian rapprochement of 1997. According to this debate, employing state identity as an explanatory tool is different from using state identity as a way of understating the case study. In the first approach, the explanation requires establishing a causal association between state identity and a state’s foreign policy, and therefore exploring the effect and causation of state identity as an agent in determining foreign policy. Understanding the role of state identity is more about detailing its different meanings in the language used in foreign policy discourse, its meaning for the social actors, its meaning regarding actions and their contexts, and finally how it comes to be perceived as a sign or symbol. (Hollis and Smith 1990: 68-71)

In the literature on Saudi–Iranian relations, there have been three prevailing approaches. The first is a power politics approach, which has focused on the balance of power between the two states. The second focuses on religious and ideological differences in the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution. The third focuses on the personalities of leaders and the structure of foreign policy decision-making. These three approaches have been active in shaping the way we see Saudi–Iranian relations today. In examining two major works on the topic—one written from a Western perspective, Saudi–Iranian Relations Since the Fall of Saddam (Wehrey 2009), and another written from a regional point of view, Arab-Iranian Relations (Haseeb 1998)—it is quite striking how similar the conclusions are despite arriving from different ontological and theoretical backgrounds. Both works emphasize the power dynamics of competing Saudi and Iranian interests, arguing that the relations are destined to rivalry as each side aspires to enforce its hegemonic influence. Even issues such as sectarianism and nationalism are assumed to be political forces employed to win hegemonic competitions, or at least constrain the rival’s regional role.

The power politics approach traces the Saudi–Iranian rivalry to an early stage, when a majority of modern Gulf states were still under British protection. For advocates of this approach, the Saudi–Iranian rivalry started with the British announcement of withdrawal in the early 1970s, which ignited a rivalry between the two emerging powers for the control of the Gulf region. (Al-Saud 1997: 10) The competition was constrained by the conditions of the Cold War, and the two states were forced to forego their differences and accept a silent détente. They were both allied with the US against communism and Arab Nationalism during the 1970s, and shared an interest in recognizing newly independent Gulf states to ensure regional stability. This arrangement was due to change as Saddam Hussein and his radical Ba’thist Party rose to power, and as Iran experienced a transformation to revolutionary state in 1979. In summarizing the power politics approach to the case, Ehteshami (2002: vii) notes that: In terms of regional balance of power and the role local actors in the political life of the Persian Gulf, however, it is an indisputable fact that three countries—Iran, Iraq, and Saudi Arabia—have played an instrumental role in the drawing of its current political and strategic map they have been the Gulf’s main movers and shakers, and the three combined have, in pursuit of their respective national interests, made their mark on the sub-region, sometimes with vigor and commitment, sometimes with dangerous overzealousness.

Moreover, the power politics approach located three major issues working as forces behind the foreign policy of Saudi–Iranian relations. First, there was the dispute over maritime and territorial borders. This has been illustrated in Iran’s claims over Bahraini and Kuwaiti oil fields, and more importantly its occupa-
tion of three Arab Islands—Greater Tunbs, the Lesser Tunbs, and Abu Musa in the Persian Gulf—belonging to the United Arab Emirates. Second, there was the competition over regional order, emphasizing the Iranian opposition to US military presence in the region, and more significantly the threat of Saudi–US alliance to Iranian security. Third, economic competition, namely over oil prices and the frequent fights over OPEC control, has had an immense effect on the two countries, which are highly dependent on oil revenues to survive. (Gause 2010: 2) Finally, the arms race between the two countries has created a competitive environment of fear. With Iran pursuing a controversial nuclear program, Saudi Arabia has felt threatened by a possible nuclear Iran that would enforce its supremacy and blackmail neighboring states. (Gause 2010: 33)

The second approach, which focuses on sectarian or ideological differences, is linked primarily to the breakout of the Iranian Islamic Revolution and the Shia revival it generated across the region. The literature of this approach came in two waves. One wave followed the 1979 revolution and the threat it posed to neighboring Saudi Arabia, which has a considerable Shia minority; the second wave followed the overthrow of the Ba’thist regime in Baghdad in 2003, which paved the way for the resurgence of Shia rule in Iraq. In both cases, researchers argued that the central source of contention in Saudi–Iranian relations was the religious and ideological differences between the two states. (Fürtig 2002; Keddie and Matthee 2002)

Accordingly, the Saudi monarchy saw the Shia Islamic Revolution as a threat to its survival, and has acted to confront the Islamic Republic in Tehran to ensure its own stability. As Nasr (2007: 143) notes, ‘The effects of that revolutionary project spread like a ripple across the region. Once the reality sank in that a Shia uprising would not take place through the sheer force of example, Tehran began spreading money and organizational help to create Shia militants and revolutionary groups that would call for Islamic revolutions’. In response, Saudi Arabia backed Iraq during the Iran–Iraq War, thus turning the conflict into an ideological battle. Moreover, ‘Saudi propaganda underscored Khomeini’s Shia identity on the one hand and the divide between Shi’ism and Sunnism on the other’. (Nasr 2007: 156)

The religious-ideological approach was centered on two assumptions about why Saudi Arabia and Iran have become immense rivals. First, following the Iranian Revolution the two states became obsessed with claiming religious and spiritual leadership of the Islamic world. Both sides were actively challenging the authority and legitimacy of each other within the ideological competition over the region and beyond. The hajj riots and demonstrations by Iranian pilgrims are a vivid example of these religious battles. Second, the fall of Baghdad and the Shia revival it generated challenged Saudi domestic authority, and therefore transformed the rivalry into a ferocious, sectarian “cold war” that is likely to survive for decades to come.

A third approach, Foreign Policy Analysis (Korany and Fattah 2008; Ramazani 1992), argues that both states are structurally bound to rival each other due to the nature of their political regimes and the way foreign policy is made and practiced in both states. Advocates of this explanation suggest that critical Saudi foreign policy decisions, such as normalization of foreign relations, are concentrated in the hands of the king and close associates in the royal court. Therefore, personal experience and age play a crucial role in whether the state is willing to take risks to normalize with its adversaries. On the Iranian side, Iran’s revolutionary principles are vehemently antimonarchical, they formalize clerical authority in politics and they advocate an explicitly populist line. Furthermore, Iran’s political system is characterized by factionalism, competing bureaucratic interests, and informal networks fighting for privilege and power. The net effect of this dynamic is a state that seems unable to articulate a coherent foreign policy and whose frequently erratic and escalatory behavior may be serving the parochial goals of key elite rather than the state’s larger interests. (Wehrey et al. 2009b)

Therefore, the Iranian state is seen as fundamentally in conflict with its Saudi neighbor.

Although these approaches have informed our knowledge of Saudi–Iranian relations, they nevertheless fail to account for a number of facts, notably that despite those areas of Saudi–Iranian contention
the two countries enjoyed a healthy rapprochement between 1997 and 2005. Furthermore, they were able to restrain themselves from going to war throughout the turbulent period following the Iranian Revolution, and instead played out their differences through distant proxies—such as Lebanon, Palestine and Iraq—without engaging in an outright confrontation. The two approaches have lacked a proper IR theory about the relationship; therefore, it has not been possible to explain the current relationship in terms meaningful to International Relations research.

An alternative approach

To date, there has been no adequate theorization of this important relationship and how it functions, let alone its significant regional implications. Attempting to put this master relationship of Middle Eastern politics in a proper theoretical context is a very important, yet very challenging, task. The 1997 rapprochement is key to understanding those states that are considered the “movers and shakers” of contemporary Middle Eastern foreign policy. The study of state identity and its role in foreign policy decision-making is needed to establish a proper understanding of what is labelled the longest Islamic “cold war” of modern times.

It has been evident that since the 1979 revolution, that state identity in Iran and—in direct reaction to it—Saudi Arabia has been altered dramatically, to the extent that they have produced a foreign policy towards each other that unmistakably frames the ‘other’ as an enemy. This has been the case for thirty years, and is the prime reason why both states suffer from an endless rivalry. (Al-Mani 1996: 159) The 1997 rapprochement was only possible when both states were attempting to redefine their respective state identities, and it failed when neo-conservatives assumed power in Iran in 2005 and revived Iran’s radical, revolutionary state identity. Since then, Saudi Arabia has been uncertain about how it should deal with its Iranian neighbor. It has been convinced that it is best to retain its cautious approach towards its Iranian rival while keeping its relations friendly with some elements of Iran’s political leadership, such as Rafsanjani, Khatami and Mehdi Karroubi; however, those friendly elements are no longer responsible for shaping Iran’s state identity. If Saudi Arabia and Iran were to redefine their state identities to an extent that they ceased to consider each other as enemies, there is a strong possibility that this unsettling rivalry would cease to persist.

In fact, the Supreme Leader had always doubted Saudi intentions and had negative attitudes towards the Saudi leader, King Fahd. Syrian Vice President Abdul Halim Khaddam (1984–2005) recalled that Ali Khamenei had deep mistrust of King Fahd and Saudi officials in general. (Khaddam 2010) In a meeting with Khamenei during the Tanker War crisis of 1986, Khaddam delivered King Fahd’s response to allegations that Saudi Arabia was aiding Iraq in targeting of Iranian ships. Khamenei dismissed the Saudi letter, describing King Fahd in harsh words and accusing him of being a liar working secretly to undermine Iran. According to Khamenei:

King Fahd does not always maintain truthfulness in what he says. Mutual relations should be based on trust and confidence. If trust and confidence are shattered, then the person becomes suspicious. In his statements, official messages, through his envoys and by telephone—and I have talked to him twice—he stresses the necessity to enhance the relations, but when critical issues are raised, it’s often something else . . . As for the media, we are prepared to compare our media with the Saudi’s targeted campaign against us; hundreds of books were published by the Muslim World League with Saudi knowledge that attack Imam Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution . . . King Fahd’s talk does not represent truthfulness that leads to serious dialogue . . . Saudis do not speak the truth and they do not show their true intentions. (Khaddam 2010: 118-120)

On another occasion, Khamenei downplayed Saudi Arabia’s regional power: ‘Saudi Arabia is not a Great Power, it is a name that became larger due to the increase of its oil income’. (Khaddam 2010: 124) Khamenei’s opinion of Saudi Arabia and his public criticism of Saudi leaders were common among other Iranian officials during the 1980s; however, following the resumption of relations in 1991 he avoided direct criticism of Saudi officials and tended to level his warnings against the GCC leaders in general. The only exceptions were made over the hajj issue. Nevertheless, Khamenei—as Ambassador Mousavian notes—privately stated on a number of occasions that
détente with the Saudis was important. (Author’s Interview, Mousavian 25 October 2010)

Key observations after the 2011 uprising

- Rivalry between Iran and Syria to continue for the near future. The Syrian Civil War will continue to be the battlefield, although recent arrest of a terrorist cell recruiting young Saudis to Fight in Syria is putting considerable pressure on advocates of continuing the war there. But whether the Saudis are ready to back away from Syria is still unclear.

- The imbalance of power to continue further. Two states to watch: Qatar and Egypt. In Qatar we can anticipate three scenarios:
  1) Withdrawal from excessive regional involvement as Sheikh Tamim advances his control to focus on power consolidation inside;
  2) Changing course in regards to the alliance with Islamists (Ikhwan of Egypt in particular) to alleviate GCC pressure;
  3) Switching sides regarding Syria and restoring the Moqawam axis with Iran, Hezbollah and other Sunni Islamists like Hamas. In this scenario, Qatar doesn’t need to reconcile with Asad personally.

- As for Egypt after current elections, we have two scenarios:
  1) The generals continue Mubarak policy of reserved in involvement in regional disputes but safe guarding its security interests with the west.
  2) Egypt’s new president follows a populist approach to foreign policy, which might result in normalization with Syria and Iran. This scenario doesn’t require Egypt to break its close relations with other GCC states, let us remember Egypt’s generals differ with Saudi and UAE over Syria. Two things remain: to reconcile with Qatar there needs to be a compromise in the dispute over the Ikhwan. The same goes for Hamas strained relations with Egypt.

- The retreat of reform versus radical change.
- Economic difficulties to cause more strains.
- Islamists in majority will not moderate as long as the largest of them all is on the run.
- Terrorism will increase but will be more fragmented and contending power within itself and the state.
- Sub-nation actors to grow which will further weaken central governments creating more uncontrolled territory.
- Succession in most countries will face increasing competition from contending actors. Kingdoms, despite this problem, suffer fewer troubles because there is vested interest to keep the system and maintain wealth.
Questions to my Fellow Egyptians
and Remarks to Human Rights Defenders

Amr Hamzawy
Professor of Political Science, Department of Public Policy and Administration
American University in Cairo

Did you take part in June 30, 2013 as a form of peaceful pressure to achieve early presidential elections within a democratic process? Or to empower the military establishment and the security apparatus to take power and deviate from the democratic transition?

Was it to support democratic values, rule of law, communal accord and a constitution that guarantees modern civil rights, in opposition to a religious state or a military state? Or were you willing to sacrifice these democratic values, rule of law and communal accord all in order to end the presidency of Mohamed Morsi and overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood?

Was it in order to defend human rights and freedoms after the violations committed before, after and during the Presidential Palace protests and in order to apply a comprehensive transitional justice mechanism that holds the perpetrators to account? Or were you willing to accept/ignore/apply double standards to widespread violations of human rights and freedoms and see a return of systematically repressive practices on the part of the security services, all just to end Morsi’s presidency and overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood?

Was it because you believe in your fundamental right to peaceful protest and peacefully advocate change when the political elite in power and the opposition are unable to achieve it and respond to your demands? Or did you want to exercise one last “safe” peaceful protest in order to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood and provide “political cover” to empower the military establishment and the security services to take power? Were you willing to accept being banished from the public sphere and driven out of the street and square through legal means (i.e., the Protest Law) and repressive practices (arrests, torture, preventive detention) unless you offer unquestioning support to the new authorities and adopt a false consciousness?

Did you take part in June 30, 2013 in order to reject the sectarian incitement practiced by the Muslim Brotherhood-Salafi religious right, to reject Morsi’s arrogance towards Copts (he never once visited a church) and to reject the abuse of religion in politics and governing affairs? In all these efforts, you believed in variety, diversity, the right to disagree, acceptance of the other and equal rights without discrimination as the fundamental basis of civil harmony. Or did you just reject incitement that comes from the religious right, while remaining indifferent to incitement, extremism, aggression and hatred used to claim a false monopoly on patriotism? Did you drop your defense of variety and diversity and your acceptance of the other when the mouthpieces of the military-security complex started to cast accusations of treason and distort the image of human rights advocates and opponents of the new regime, and impose one view, one voice and one hero?

Was it in the hopes of saving the state from becoming ungovernable? To empower its institutions to cohere through democracy and the rule of law in the face of major internal and regional challenges? To achieve civil peace by ending injustices and violations
and holding the perpetrators to account? To start placing the values of diversity, citizenship and social justice at the forefront of society and to overcome the arrogance and insularity of the Brotherhood and its allies, removing them based on communal accord? Or was your only aspiration to overthrow the Muslim Brotherhood and you had no objection if along with it the military establishment and security services took control? Or if the new regime places the nation-state in danger through violations of human rights and freedoms, undermining the rule of law, and engaging in an extensive geography of oppression? Or if it threatens civil peace through an exclusive reliance on security solutions and state violence to contain acts of terrorism? Or if it promotes collective punishment and hatred, while keeping silent on the blood that was shed in breaking up sit-ins and protests?

To the citizens who took part in June 30, 2013: if you responded yes to the former of each set of questions, then you are on the margins right now. Our role is to continue defending democracy, rights and freedoms and to seek restitution for the victims both in prison and on the outside. On the other hand, if you responded yes to the latter of each set of questions, I call on you to reconsider, wake up and try to exercise some self-criticism – if only a little – one year after we made our painful deviation from the democratic transition and the oppression and violations began to pile up.

**Remarks to Human Rights Defenders**

Yes, one year has passed since June 30, 2013. It has also been one year since July 3, 2013, which put an end to the democratic transition and imposed the dominance of the military establishment and the security apparatus over the government.

One year has passed of repeated violations of human rights and freedoms that saw you facing prosecution, monitoring, arrest and detention. One year of silence by the elite, parties and public figures, whether out of support for the military-security complex, due to their dependency on it for political/economic/financial benefits, or out of fear. Or they remained silent based on a losing bet that the violations would not go beyond the “objects of their hatred” among the leadership and members of the religious right, as if such figures have no human dignity, rights or freedoms, and as if it were not inevitable that repressive practices and violations would pile up and any and all opponents of the regime would be targeted.

It has been one year of excessive force to break up sit-ins and protests without any accountability for the blood that has been shed and without any transitional justice mechanism. One year of security solutions that disregard the rule of law, threaten civil peace and annihilate rights and freedoms. One year since the regime and its allied elites have unleashed shadowy figures to control the media, sell justifications for excessive force, and disregard the rule of law – at times to dehumanize opponents, at other times to promote the fascism of collective punishment and at other times to spread false accusations of treason and collaboration.

One year has passed since politics has been extinguished and the right of citizens to free choice has been rescinded, as they have been banished from the public sphere through repressive laws and through violations of rights and freedoms. One year filled with draconian prison sentences for Ahmed Maher, Ahmed Douma, Mohamed Adel, Alaa Abdel Fattah, Mahienour al-Massry and Omar Hazeq, in addition to others whose names are not known. One year since the return of the security state.

One year has passed since the public and private media have been imposing a single opinion and a single voice by concealing facts and information, by blocking out other views and other voices or by constraining the spaces available for them and policing those who hold other opinions. For one year, they have engaged in systematic distortion of the human rights agenda by claiming that it is incompatible with the requirements of bread, security and stability, or by claiming that it is incompatible with the goals of defending the strength of the nation-state and the solidity of its institutions and national security.

It has been a year of manufacturing the image of the lone savior coming from the military establishment. A year of reproducing the statements of civil, political and party elites who are “incapable” of running the country and the elite showing this by supporting the “hero,” taking part in the “popular mandate,” remaining silent about violations and their current frenzy to play the role of “political partisans of the president.” One year of a new, bloody one-man
rule where the military-security complex dominates the executive branch, and the latter holds supremacy over both the legislative and judicial branches and all administrative agencies and vital sectors, including public universities.

For one year a volatile public mood has overlooked the repression and violations for a time, only to then reject oppression and injustice at other times. For one year your contact has faltered with many popular sectors that are looking for bread and security and that want you to provide a convincing way of combining these things with rights and freedoms. For one year, means of access to citizens on a daily basis have been cut off. Nevertheless, you have realized that it is necessary to achieve this contact despite the high risks that surround your work, and despite the feelings of despair and frustration that may beset some of you and many of your friends through the ordeal of prison, detention, or arrest.

Yes, one year has passed in this painful fashion. However, you are still in the midst of society and in the midst of life, fighting for your principles to prevail. You are fighting to defend rights and freedoms and confront violations without drawing distinctions between victims, in order to raise people’s awareness that bread, security, stability and a strong nation-state can only be achieved through justice, the rule of law and freedom – not one-man rule. Yes, it has been a difficult year. But you are not alone.

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Syria: Should the West Work With Assad?

Frederic C. Hof  
Senior Fellow  
Atlantic Council

The combination of the Islamic State in Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS) running amok in Iraq and the appearance of an Assad regime military victory in western Syria have added octane to arguments that Washington should forego its step-aside guidance to Bashar al-Assad. An unnamed senior Obama administration official recently told The Daily Beast, “Anyone calling for regime change in Syria is frankly blind to the past decade; and the collapse of eastern Syria, and the growth of Jihadistan, leading to thirty to fifty suicide attacks a month in Iraq.” The senior official was wise to insist on anonymity: he or she implied that a murderous regime is part of the solution and attributed blindness to a president who, nearly three years ago, told Assad to step aside. Other analysts have gone farther, suggesting that the West work with Assad to counter ISIS and rebuild Syria. Should Washington and its allies consider cooperating with the Assad regime?

There are two aspects of the “do business with Assad thesis:” one posits that the regime has won; and the other suggests that the ISIS rampage in Iraq wipes the slate clean in terms of the Assad regime’s complicity in creating the problem to be solved. Thus, the regime’s role in the establishment of al-Qaeda in Iraq becomes yesterday’s news. The regime’s sheer brutality—serving as a magnet for ISIS and its cadre of Sunni foreign fighters—becomes irrelevant. The de facto collaboration of ISIS and the regime in seeking to obliterate Assad’s Syrian opposition may, once that pesky opposition disappears, be safely put to the side. The sheer scope of the ISIS emergency, according to this line of thinking, makes it mandatory for the West to work with the Assad regime to beat ISIS.

Indeed, the Syrian opposition is back on its heels and perhaps headed for a knockdown; if not a knock-out. In Aleppo, it faces a murderous barrage of regime barrel bombs to its front and ISIS assaults to its back. Whatever Bashar al-Assad and Abu Bakr Al-Baghdadi may think of one another personally, their top tactical priority in Syria is identical: destroy the Syrian nationalist opposition to the Assad regime.

That destruction is vital to both parties. From the beginning, Assad has maintained that terrorists, top-heavy with foreign fighters, are his only opponents of consequence. By focusing his firepower on the nationalist opposition and by largely ignoring the ISIS phenomenon, he seeks to give his argument the attribute of truth and restore his value to the West. As for ISIS, exterminating Assad’s opposition opens up two possibilities: incorporating non-regime Syria into its declared state; and setting the stage for its ultimate showdown with the regime (unless, of course, it and the regime extend indefinitely their live-and-let-live arrangement).

Is the definitive defeat of the Syrian opposition inevitable and (if so), would that defeat mandate a renewal of the transactional relationship between the regime and the West?

Surely, the leisurely, disinterested attitude of the
West (nominally led by Washington) makes the opposition’s prospects dim. The State Department seems at last to have dropped its rhetorical device citing the inevitable ebb and flow of battle. The ebb is one-way entirely these days, as it has been for over a year. The White House appears unmoved by the barrage of barrel bombs and has asked Congress for an opposition equip and train appropriation that cannot materialize—even under ideal circumstances—until the end of 2014. Were there a sense of urgency the president would direct the Department of Defense to reprogram a fraction of the $500 million requested to pump emergency aid now into beleaguered nationalist units. Given an element of urgency, the administration would also release a handful of MANPADS so that regime helicopters—now acting with impunity—could be taken down before unloading explosive barrels of metal on hospitals, mosques, schools, and bakeries.

Still, even if there were—at long last—a sense of urgency, it would not be easy to extricate the opposition from the two-sided assault it faces with resupply alone. As the administration struggles in Iraq with the chicken-and-egg dilemma of hitting ISIS first or waiting for an inclusive Government of Iraq to emerge, it might consider hammering ISIS unmercifully in Syria. Yes, the Assad regime, Iran, and Russia all need ISIS alive and well in Syria to help crush Assad’s opposition. Yes, they would all be quietly appalled by such a step. Yet how could they possibly object publicly or even privately to the United States obliterating key pieces of the terrorist entity they all publicly decry? If getting critical materiel to the nationalist opposition two years too late is seen by the administration as too hard to do, might it not be possible to damage one side of the pincer in which the opposition is trapped? Would not the battering of ISIS in Syria have salutary effects in Iraq as well?

Still, what if the opposition is simply crushed? Would it then be mandatory for the administration and the West to find ways to do business with Assad?

Surely, the people of Syria will need massive assistance for many years, regardless of how the war ends. If the Assad regime is left atop the ruins, Iran and Russia should take the lead in funding reconstruction: they have, after all, enabled and encouraged the homicidal regime approach to political survival that has physically destroyed much of the country. For the West, it is precisely that murderous survival strategy that would make participation in Syria’s reconstruction politically difficult and morally unpalatable if the Assad regime survives. As Stephen Rapp, Ambassador-at-Large in the State Department’s Office of Global Criminal Justice recently told an audience at the Atlantic Council, not since Hitler’s Germany has there been a regime so willing and eager as that of Bashar al-Assad to document its atrocities. Tons of documentary evidence have been secured and archived for eventual prosecution. Those who counsel cooperation with Assad should think things through very, very carefully with their own reputations in mind.

Yet would the crushing of the opposition open the door to tactical cooperation with the regime against ISIS anyway? Again, the alternative to making common cause with a criminal regime is to expedite assistance to the armed opposition now while engaging ISIS lethally (from the air) in Syria. Yet even if the opposition were to evaporate, it is doubtful that the regime would or could go after ISIS. Iran, after all, now has what it needs territorially to support Hezbollah from Syria: any willingness it might have to expend Arab Shia lives in the defense of Baghdad would not likely be replicated in an anti-ISIS offensive in Syria, unless ISIS were to move against its Syrian client. Assad’s army—reliant as it is on Shia foreign fighters to gain and secure territory—would be of little use against ISIS. Those who envision a deal with the devil should specify the deliverable that would somehow justify—in practical terms—the moral corruption and depravity of the transaction in question.

The United States has, as it has always had, the ability to tilt Syria’s tactical playing field without owning or occupying the field itself. At many points over the past two years observers, including strong supporters of President Obama in and out of government, have warned that inaction would only deepen the dilemmas presented by conflict in Syria and make action—when absolutely required—all the more difficult to implement effectively. The administration’s fear of a slippery slope has paralyzed it, even as it slides downward and headlong into the dark unknown. If acceptance of and cooperation with a regime neck-deep in war crimes and crimes against humanity should become thinkable, then the amazingly deep extent of the fall will be painfully clear to one and all.
Afghanistan: Return to Chaos?

Saad Mohseni
Group CEO and Chairman
MOBY Group

Afghanistan — although largely a success story in terms of human and political development in the last decade — remains highly vulnerable to destabilizing domestic and international factors. Despite huge improvements since 2001, Afghan government institutions remain relatively weak and are at times challenged, while there is still a continuing war with the Taliban. The results of the second round of the Afghan presidential elections instigated a political crisis in July of this year with Abdullah Abdullah claiming fraud at the hands of the government of Hamid Karzai in favor of his rival Ashraf Ghani. At the time of this writing U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry had brokered a compromise in which every vote would be audited. Both Abdullah and Ghani agreed they would abide by the results of the audit and contribute to the formation of a national unity government. Earlier, President Barack Obama had spoken by phone with both Abdullah and Ghani. It is too soon to judge whether this compromise will result in a breakthrough and the creation of an inclusive, stable government. Earlier, President Barack Obama had spoken by phone with both Abdullah and Ghani. It is too soon to judge whether this compromise will result in a breakthrough and the creation of an inclusive, stable government. Earlier, President Barack Obama had spoken by phone with both Abdullah and Ghani. It is too soon to judge whether this compromise will result in a breakthrough and the creation of an inclusive, stable government. Earlier, President Barack Obama had spoken by phone with both Abdullah and Ghani. It is too soon to judge whether this compromise will result in a breakthrough and the creation of an inclusive, stable government.

As this episode and the recent lessons from Iraq show us, it is vital that the world persists in engaging Afghanistan, especially just as longer-term viability for the country is in sight. Indeed, ahead of the withdrawal of foreign troops this year, it is useful to reflect on how we can keep the country from descending into chaos and build on previous accomplishments.

First of all, the election crisis highlighted the continued importance of international engagement in maintaining Afghanistan’s stability — and the relatively low cost of this engagement given its potential dividends. The United States has a unique role when it comes to bringing together Afghanistan’s fractious political elite. Afghan politicians — notwithstanding President Hamid Karzai’s intransigence — by and large see the United States as a fair broker and necessary partner. That Secretary Kerry was able to announce this deal while flanked by both Abdullah and Ghani brings home the point that the United States, despite numerous missteps, retains influence in Afghanistan and can use its diplomatic pull to bring the disputing parties together. Secretary Kerry’s success is also a reflection of the clout America has via its troop presence in Afghanistan. Retaining some military presence in the country is important to ensuring the United States’ continued leverage there. Though nearly half of Americans polled recently would like to see the United States pull back from its role on the world stage, the Afghan example shows that small numbers of American troops can increase public morale, lower the dangers of political rivalries, encourage economic confidence, and help the still nascent Afghan armed forces. The United States and the West in general ought to remain strongly engaged in Afghanistan if they do not wish to see the country fall into internal crisis, or alternatively, fall victim to Iran, Pakistan, and other regional actors who may see a weak, divided
Afghanistan as once again a playground for their geo-strategic interests. Those regional powers have shown repeatedly that they are ready to interfere the moment there is a power vacuum in the country.

Western leaders must also not fall for the fallacy – now a cliché – that the war in Afghanistan has been a failure. One crucial thing to remember is that the past 12 years have seen huge improvements for Afghanistan that will be difficult to reverse after the exit of foreign troops. Afghans have emerged after decades of isolation and, thanks to media and education, now see themselves as a crucial part of the world. Eight million children are enrolled in school – 2.6 million of them girls – compared to under a million boys and practically no girls in 2001.2 Young Afghans today have a thirst for higher education that our universities are struggling to quench – indicating the creation of a striving, youthful middle class that will build the country in the years to come. Life expectancy has shot up to beyond 60 after being stuck at 40-odd years for centuries.3 Women in particular have made huge strides – 80 percent have access to a mobile phone,4 they make up 28 percent of the Afghan parliament,5 and in the recent presidential election, they made up more than a third of the voters.6 There is a long way to go to fully protect women’s rights in Afghanistan, but this is swift progress in a country where barely a decade ago women were blocked from any participation in public life.

Another major accomplishment of the last decade is the Afghan military. So far, the rebuilt Afghan armed forces have stood their ground and not interfered in the recent political disputes. International financial support will be needed for the army, but it will cost between 4 to 5 billion dollars per year compared to the hundreds of billions that were needed each year to sustain U.S. and NATO forces.

Another narrative that ought to be dispensed with is that the Taliban insurgency is popular, strong, and poised to take over large parts of Afghan territory as soon as international forces leave. The reality is that the Taliban are no Viet Cong, and they have no base of support inside the country. A comprehensive survey of Afghans conducted in 2014 found that just 7 percent favored the Taliban governing their province or country.7 However, the Taliban are strengthened when people see the government as corrupt and predatory, or when the government is weakened by internal splits, as we are seeing happen now.

It is also useful to be reminded of just how high the stakes are in Afghanistan, not only for the security and prosperity of its own people, but also the wider impact events in Afghanistan can have on the rest of the world. Afghanistan can become a regional model for countries such as Pakistan and Iraq, as a country where an extremist narrative has been replaced by a more moderate approach to religion and politics. Afghanistan has served as a focal point for Muslims since the 1920s, when Indian Muslims and Hindus were inspired to demand independence from Britain; to the 1980s influx of Islamists to fight the Soviets; to the 1990s when the Taliban attracted a new generation of fundamentalists. Victory in Afghanistan over radicalism could forever change the perceptions of Muslims across the region. The establishment of Afghanistan as a prosperous democracy would also help improve people’s regard for the United States, at a time when its reputation in the Middle East and Central Asia has been deeply damaged. Finally, there are serious economic dividends to working to ensure a stable Afghanistan: peace in the country would grant an opportunity to revive the ancient Silk Route, providing a land link for trade and oil and gas pipelines that would connect Central Asia with the Persian Gulf and South Asia.

Though life in Afghanistan has fundamentally changed for the better since the fall of the Taliban, that progress should not be taken for granted. Failure to establish a cohesive, functional government risks squandering the last decade of gains as well as the enormous opportunity now facing Afghanistan – to build a truly modern, diversified economy that draws on the country’s natural and human resources, to the benefit of its own people as well as the safety and prosperity of the region and the world. Afghanistan’s future is fundamentally the responsibility of the Afghans themselves. But it would be negligent at this point for the United States and the West to turn their back on the country after having invested so much in Afghanistan’s future. At a time of increasing global turmoil, especially in the Middle East, continued engagement is the only way to ensure that the mistakes of the past are not repeated.
How will history judge the uprisings that started in many parts of the Arab world in 2011? We now know that the label “Arab Spring” was too simplistic. Transformational processes defy black and white expectations. Do these movements resemble what happened in Europe in 1848, when several uprisings took place within a few weeks only to be followed by counterrevolutions and renewed authoritarian rule? Do they resemble the 1989 collapse of the Soviet Union, after which some countries swiftly democratized while others remained in the thrall of dictatorship? Whatever the case, it is clear that these processes will need decades to mature, and their success is by no means guaranteed.

The first Arab Awakening started in the late nineteenth century with an intellectual renaissance that eventually found its way into popular movements, though they failed to bring democracy to the Arab world. The second Arab Awakening now underway started with popular movements that have yet to find their way into intellectual frameworks. These movements are more unanimous about what they are against than about what they are for. But the debate to define this awakening has begun.

The principal fight in the Arab world is the battle for pluralism, not simply a fight against despotic rule. Decades ago, the region succeeded only in exchanging foreign despots for domestic ones. The second Arab Awakening must not emulate the first but go beyond it. It must anchor new policies with lasting respect for political, cultural, and religious pluralism, good governance, the rule of law, and inclusive economic growth. If any factor has contributed most to the years of stagnation in Arab society, it is the near-total absence of diversity and pluralism from political and cultural discourse. Truths are still regarded as absolute. A single person, party, or ideology is presented as the holder of all answers to all problems, while the public’s role is largely to submit to those in power.

But the answer to the question of whether this battle for pluralism is indeed being waged after the revolts is tentative at best. Many forces claim to be committed to pluralistic principles—regimes that have not yet been toppled, political Islamists recently come to power, or third forces trying to carve a place for themselves—but this commitment has often proven to be little more than lip service. So far, the developments of the past two years suggest that when in power, most forces place their own interests ahead of democracy and pluralism.

The commitment to pluralism is a prerequisite for a sustainable political and economic renewal of the Middle East, and it must be demanded of everyone, Islamists and secularists alike. Instead of fearing Islamist participation and trying to marginalize various political groups, all countries need to ensure that no group can monopolize truth, rule indefinitely, deny the rights of others, or impose its cultural or religious views.

If there is real hope that societies will begin to respect, indeed embrace, diversity in the Arab world, the fight for democracy needs two simultaneous guar-
guarantees: everyone’s right to peaceful political participation, and no one’s right to monopolize truth or power. There must be an ironclad commitment to resist the temptation to use violence to shape the political environment. This includes security forces under government control, allied but plausibly deniable thugs, and flirtations with “uncontrollable” extremists.

Not enough is being done. Both the Islamist and the secularist sides are crystallizing in an increasingly polarized environment. Both need to work harder to advance democracy and accountability, rather than employing exclusionist words and behaviors that prevent the healthy development of societies. Neither “reform from above” nor “reform from below” is likely to succeed if these principles are not firmly adopted. If the new Arab order still insists on a winner-take-all approach and zero-sum outcomes, and if the principle of peaceful alternation of power does not become firmly entrenched, the second Arab Awakening will be for naught.

The Battle is Not against Islamists

As Islamists develop their economic and political programs, all other players must do the same. They must stop wasting their energies seeking ways to prevent an Islamist rise based on irrational fears of theocracy. It will do no good to pretend that Islamist parties do not enjoy broad popular support. Political Islam will not go away if Arab governments and the West ignore it. Repressing it through force will backfire. In a burgeoning democracy, Islamists have a right to be part of the process, and in any case they cannot be stopped from entering the political realm. Authoritarian regimes tried to exclude Islamists in the past, but the Arab public is clearly ready to move beyond the old exclusionary tactics.

Moreover, pushing Islamists out of the political process has historically resulted in cycles of violence and retaliation—a process that ultimately radicalizes the Islamists. The focus should instead be on bringing them in while cementing constitutional guarantees for pluralism and the right to organize that can be upheld at all times and for all people. The issue is not trusting Islamists’ intentions but rather building a system that treats everyone the same and protects everyone’s inviolable right to be included.

One should not fear Islamist parties in the Middle East simply because they are based in religion. Europe has many Christian Democratic parties that are socially conservative but advocate liberal social and economic policies—not much different from many Muslim Brotherhood parties. Currently, eighteen of the 120 Israeli Knesset members belong to religious parties that typically possess hardline views on the peace process—again not dissimilar from Islamist parties in the Arab world. In other words, it is not the presence of religious parties that matters but whether they are committed to democracy, the peaceful rotation of power, and the protection of individual rights.

This call for religious parties to be included is not an argument in support of their views. Selective democracy is no democracy at all. All political forces need to understand that if they accept the exclusion of others, they accept that they too may be excluded.

Third Forces

More than two years after the Arab uprisings, clear leaders of the battle for pluralism have yet to emerge. While secular forces claim to be the bearers of this torch, the continued hesitation by many of them to accept the participation of Islamists belies this commitment. All attempts to create a new Arab order—by old regimes trying to reinvent themselves, Islamist forces taking power after decades of semi-repression, or third forces still struggling to develop clear programs and organizational capabilities—have stopped short of a categorical, unqualified, and genuine commitment to individual and minority rights and a rejection of force.

Operating in a region that lacks well-developed democratic practices, all political groups are suddenly forced to learn how to build their own constituencies while understanding that they cannot deny that right to others. To assume they will do so intuitively or immediately is wishful thinking. It is interesting to watch all forces in the Arab world today accusing others of exclusionist practices while employing the same type of exclusionist discourse. This was apparent in Egypt, where many secular forces acquiesced to the military’s undemocratic practices because it served their short-term interests against the Islamists.

The change will have to play itself out, until
political forces either suppress their opponents by coercion—and therefore achieve little from the second Arab Awakening—or realize that their own right to operate must include the same right for others, thereby resulting in pluralistic and stable societies.

It would be wrong to assume that these forces will take familiar forms or follow a predefined path. Moreover, the resulting institutions should not necessarily be modeled on Western structures and processes. While some universal values transcend culture, different regions in the world have been able to evolve into pluralistic societies without necessarily adopting all of the details of Western models. Democracy as developed in the Arab world must contain features that are unique to that region, or it is not likely to survive. Many formulas will be tried as Arab countries embark on their transitions. Western countries must not assume that Arab democracies will be identical to theirs, or that they must blossom instantly.

To have any hope of reshaping their societies—regardless of what unique details this ultimately includes—third forces in the Arab world must be founded on three basic values: pluralism, reliance on peaceful means only, and inclusion. These three values are embedded in the uprisings and can be found in the language of many of the protesters. Among the reasons cited for wanting to topple regimes was a desire for a functioning, honest government with limited powers that would grant every citizen the right to political participation. Many protesters chanted silmiyyah (Peaceful!) and carried flowers, sometimes in the face of deadly snipers, as in Syria for the first few months of the uprising. The movements that toppled the regimes were visibly inclusive, placing national identity above all other considerations (at least during the initial euphoria prior to bringing down the leader). These three values contributed significantly to the success of the uprisings.

**Pluralism**

Pluralism can best be defined as the fundamental commitment to political diversity at all times. It means that no party has a monopoly on the truth and no party can impose its views on the rest of society. Such a commitment must include developing a system of checks and balances that redistributes power away from the executive and toward the legislative and judicial branches of government. Across the Arab world, the executive branch is too dominant, often with unelected and unaccountable institutions beholden to it. The intelligence services, for example, typically play a role in domestic affairs that far exceeds their security mandate. Any reform that does not end in true power sharing among the three branches of government cannot be deemed serious or successful.

To achieve a political space in which all are free to participate and none can monopolize the debate, these countries need protective constitutional mechanisms. They need a multiparty system, with majority rule but also one that protects or guarantees minority and personal rights; an independent judiciary; freedom of expression and of the press; the complete application of the rule of law; equality before the law and equal protection under the law for all citizens, regardless of gender, religion, ethnicity, or position; and serious respect for human rights. The protection of personal rights—such as freedom of worship, freedom of choice of clothing, right to privacy—is key. It would greatly allay the fears of not only the various Christian and Muslim groups but also secular Muslims who do not want their freedom of choice to be compromised by Islamist parties seeking to impose their religious views. But no matter which constitutional mechanisms a country adopts, they will not be respected unless there is also a balance among the political forces—for example, the ability of different political forces to coexist.

The third forces belonging to the old generation are not off to a good start. Many of them have favored their short-term interests over democracy, and many have shown themselves to be little different from the other dominant forces in Arab societies. That many are liberal will not be enough if they are not also democratic.

Thus the potential torchbearers of a pluralistic culture appear to be the new generation. This is the generation that started the uprisings, even if it has not yet shaped the course of the revolutions to address its needs and aspirations. When I met in June 2012 with Ziad Ali, cofounder of the grassroots organization Masrena (Our Egypt), he seemed aware of the challenges. “We have to go through the learning process. It is not fair to judge this process harshly or quickly.” But
he also understood the priorities. “Our challenge is to build institutions quickly. The young are different from the old forces. We are coordinating very well. I assure you a critical mass is being built that believes in a better life for Egyptians, even if it is not in their lifetime. There is a paradigm shift in Egyptian society.”

Ahmed Maher, another youth activist and a cofounder of the April 6 movement, mobilized young Egyptians through new technologies and social networking sites such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter. He too was clear on the path forward. “We need to build third parties,” he told me. “We are seen so far as a spark, not an alternative. The youth and the liberals are weak, not organized, and fighting each other. Our main plan is to use the next five years organizing. We want to build a grassroots movement first, then a party.”

Such talk seems to dominate the speech of the new generation, but it is hardly present among the older ones. The youth are likely to plant the seeds of pluralism. The Arab world will have to wait for decades, however, before the democratic experiment matures and societies enjoy a pluralistic culture with a manageable number of political parties.

**Peaceful Means**

Pluralism cannot survive unless all parties concede that only the state can carry arms, in line with the German philosopher Max Weber’s “monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force” theory. Actors such as Hamas, Hezbollah, and the various armed groups in Iraq must be fully disarmed and integrated into the political process in their own countries. Residual militias in Libya, Yemen, and Syria, despite winning popular support for opposing autocrats, must also disarm.

In May 2008, after the government ordered the shutdown of its telecommunications network, Hezbollah occupied West Beirut and effectively turned its weapons against the Lebanese people for several days. The Arab-brokered deal to end the fighting in Lebanon bolstered the group’s political strength by granting Hezbollah veto power in the parliament. Nevertheless, the episode had negative consequences for the movement on the Lebanese street. Hezbollah lost some credibility in the eyes of the public and, by resorting to violence, set the democratic process back in Lebanon.

By the same token, governments must resist the temptation to use armed force to serve a partisan agenda. The police, intelligence services, and army must be inviolably neutral and must see their role as guaranteeing access for all to the political arena. Recourse to external proxies must be rigorously eschewed. When the governments of Libya and Syria used military power to suppress largely peaceful demonstrations, they forfeited their legitimacy as rulers and in effect authorized armed resistance. The new Libyan government, and any new Syrian one, will have a very hard time disarming the militias that have emerged as a result of their civil wars. The reconciliation process will also suffer.

Under a government committed to peaceful processes, no party can substitute guns for the ballot box or use force to repair an electoral defeat.

**Inclusion**

The Arab world is a mosaic of ethnic and religious communities. These include Sunnis, Shiites, and other Muslim sects; Christians of all denominations; Jews; and others. Ethnically, they include Amazigh (Berbers), Arabs, Armenians, Chechens, Circassians, Kurds, and many smaller groups. While the Arab world prides itself on its diversity, its politics and culture do not match the rhetoric.

Rights of minorities—and often majorities—have been systematically subordinated to the power of the ruling elites. How else can one explain the repression of the Kurds in Iraq and Syria, or the Amazigh in North Africa? How can one justify the treatment of Shiites as second-class citizens, often accused of serving as Iranian agents, in Saudi Arabia or Bahrain, or the Copts under successive Egyptian regimes? How can one explain the legal discrimination against women? Such official discrimination makes its sufferers feel they are less than citizens and prompts them to seek outside protection.

Societies prosper only when their members recognize that not everyone thinks or behaves similarly—nor should they be expected to. Diversity of views and perspectives is a prerequisite to problem solving, scientific and economic innovation, and artistic creativity. An appreciation of different views is also an important factor in the development of domes-
tic peace. Respect for diversity should be not only enshrined in Arab constitutions but codified in law and taught in educational institutions so that legal and cultural norms can harness the full potential of the different constituencies that form any Arab state.

The Arab uprisings demand that all regimes reconsider their policies toward the ethnic and religious constituencies that make up the Arab world. Inclusion is therefore a core component not only of political pluralism but also of social, geographic, and political cohesion in the region. Arab governments cannot hope to build prosperous societies unless they treat the entire population as citizens, irrespective of their ethnic, religious, or gender differences. The discourse of the emerging third forces must advocate a society that regards diversity as a positive force. It should also include an unwavering position that women are full participants in society, with equal political and legal rights.

Even after they take these three values to heart, the emerging third forces will still face fundamental challenges as they navigate a transitional period that will last years, if not decades. Standing in the way of the hope for a successful second Arab Awakening are the two dominant forces—existing governments or elites, and Islamists. Despite their shared history of not embracing pluralism, these two forces will also need to fight for real change and diversity.
In many ways, Jordan is the model of what a second Arab Awakening could have looked like. But the potential has not been realized yet. Ruled by a monarchy that is accepted as legitimate by the overwhelming majority of the population—and necessary as a unifying force for the country’s different ethnic groups—Jordan started the rule of King Abdullah II in 1999 with much hope. The new king was thirty-eight years old and eager to lead a modern country that would be a model for the rest of the region. But by the start of the Arab uprisings, rhetoric had supplanted any serious reform process. The status quo forces resisted any serious change in the way the country had been run, and reform plans—despite, or perhaps because of, their holistic and inclusive attributes and measurable benchmarks—were shelved.

When Jordan introduced the concept of a National Agenda in 2005, it was a novel approach to address political, economic, and social reform. This was also a “reform from above” effort; it included several elements that promised a smooth and gradual transition to real reform. The king appointed a national committee, which I headed, that comprised people from across the political, social, and economic spectrum (including individuals from government, parliament, media, political parties, and the private sector, as well as women activists) to develop the reform framework. It was the first effort by an Arab country to initiate such an inclusive, holistic, and measurable reform process. The committee’s final report did not limit itself to general statements but presented a comprehensive framework, complete with specific initiatives that were included in the national budget, performance indicators, and time frames for reform.

While Jordan was ahead of the curve in presenting both a vision and a road map for how reform from above could be successfully initiated, it conspicuously failed to muster the political will needed to implement such a vision and overcome the predictable obstacles. The beneficiaries of the status quo resisted moving the country away from a rentier system, which offered privileges in exchange for blind loyalty, and toward a merit-based system that would have threatened those privileges. When the National Agenda suggested a new election law that would gradually strengthen parliament by allocating some seats to national lists rather than just to district candidates, the traditional political elite—the “rentier layer”—managed to shoot down not just the electoral changes but the whole National Agenda effort.

Seven years later, as I write this book two years into the Arab uprisings, Jordan still seems stuck in a system that has promised far more reforms than it has delivered. Despite his wide legitimacy and popularity, the king has not yet been able to sustain a reform process that would bring a gradual transition to democracy without the shocks that countries like Egypt and Tunisia have faced. The intelligence services continue to play a role far beyond their security mandate, interfering in all political matters and decisions large and small. Jordan’s hesitant approach, compared to Morocco’s, has left the public increasingly frustrated.
Social tensions and an increasing loss of respect for the state have manifested themselves through such incidents as attacks against government buildings and property, and tribal fights inside university campuses.

Jordan has not seen large-scale demonstrations since the Arab uprisings began. But there are constant small ones. The occasions for protest have ranged from calls for a redistribution of power among the three branches of government to demands for social equity, more attention for rural areas outside the capital, and combating corruption. Protests have focused on changes within the regime rather than on regime change. Since January 2011, in response to these protests, the government has implemented a few reforms, some of them meaningful though hardly sufficient. The constitution was amended by a committee appointed by the king—this time without any opposition party members. Still, the amendments did establish a constitutional court—long a demand of political activists—and an independent commission to supervise all aspects of the election process. But they omitted several necessary measures.

While the king lost the ability to postpone elections indefinitely, his other powers have been left intact. For example, the monarch still appoints and dismisses the prime minister and all members of the upper house of parliament. While the king has talked about a parliamentary government in the future, it is still to be seen how this will be implemented, given that the electoral law will not lead to a political-party-based parliament for several years. Also, while the amendments slightly limited the role of the security services in political affairs, they have hardly been curbed. These services have in the past directly interfered by rigging elections, “instructing” some members of parliament on how to vote, vetoing government appointments, and acting as the arbiters on many government political decisions.

On the key issue of the election law, not much has changed. Though the king established a National Dialogue Committee in March 2011 to reach consensus on a new election law, a recommendation to enact proportional representation was shelved almost as fast as the recommendations of the National Agenda. Instead, three successive governments have since tried their hand at a new law before finally passing one that only slightly deviates from the old one. Eighty-two percent of parliament would be elected exactly according to the old, unpopular formula, with 18 percent of the seats allocated to national lists. The new law, which was put forward with little consultation, angered secular groups, traditional pro-regime groups, and Islamist forces alike. Elections that were held in January 2013, though conducted in an atmosphere far freer than earlier ones, produced a parliament that was not much different than the one it replaced. A poll taken by the Center for Strategic Studies in Jordan showed that only 28 percent believed the current parliament would be better than the last one. Without an election law that would pave the way for stronger parliaments, political reform appears stuck, and promises for a stronger, more representative parliament ring hollow.

Only two alternatives are open to the public in Jordan. The state has not relinquished the monopoly on political and economic power that it has enjoyed for decades, largely by offering jobs, health and education benefits, and social status in exchange for loyalty, coupled with the unchecked use of intelligence services to regulate public life. The regime appears unable to confront the unsustainability of the rentier system and has not grasped that power sharing is necessary for the stability and prosperity of the country. The religious opposition strengthened for decades by its exclusion from the system, thus allowing it to claim martyrdom and to promise to purify politics without ever having to try, also lacks solid political and economic programs.

The state continues to resort to scare tactics, saying Islamists are congenitally opposed to democratic norms. Islamists, on the other hand, are increasingly emboldened by the Arab uprisings and are demanding a share of the political pie rather than their accustomed cosmetic participation in parliament. Rhayyel Gharaibeh, one of the current leading Jordanian Islamists, told me that the Brotherhood in Jordan is “totally committed” to political, cultural, and religious diversity, although many secular elements doubt that this commitment is categorical. He claimed that the state exercises the same undemocratic practices it accuses his group of contemplating.

Given that political party life was suspended for decades in Jordan (from 1957 to 1989), leaving only Islamists any opportunity for organized
political activity, the prospects for breaking the state–Muslim Brotherhood duopoly appear extremely dim. If activists are creating third party forces in Egypt or Morocco, they have yet to be heard of in Jordan. True, the country has witnessed the emergence of youth groups, frustrated and unwilling to settle for the life their parents lived. But they are terribly disorganized, defined more by their frustration and anger toward the system than by any clear vision for the country’s future. They appear in no hurry to organize into formal political structures, yet they grow increasingly frustrated with a system they no longer feel is attentive to their needs.

To be sure, the king has to balance the demands of political activists who want a larger say in their country’s governance with those of conservative groups who see no contradiction in wanting corruption addressed without endangering their privileges under the rentier system. This is not an easy task, and the king cannot do it alone. But he has chosen to deal with this challenge largely by appeasing the conservatives, retaining almost no one within his inner circle who solidly believes in political reform. The king has often declared his intention to implement gradual and serious reforms. So far, this has not systematically taken place.

Moreover, the government has no clear plan for dealing with the country’s economic problems. High unemployment and a gaping budget deficit have remained largely untouched. The country cannot continue to channel large numbers of university graduates into guaranteed government jobs and maintain expansionary, often unproductive fiscal policies. The budget deficit has risen from about 3.5 percent of GDP at the time Jordan graduated from the IMF program in 2004 to about 11.5 percent at the end of 2012. Public debt has gone from $10 billion in 2004 to more than double that amount in 2012. A move away from a rentier, privilege-based system to a merit-based one is not simply an economic decision. It will take great political will for Jordan to wean itself from its traditional reliance on outside aid from Gulf States and the West to finance largely unproductive expenditures, and move toward a self-reliant economy. Today, largely as a result of the uprisings, it is clear that such political and economic policies have become unsustainable.

If reform from above had any real chance of succeeding, it would be in a place like Jordan. Though the country does not have a strong parliamentary tradition, the Hashemites (the royal ruling family in Jordan and descendants of the prophet Muhammad) have always advocated liberal social policies, including for Christians and women. While the system did not allow much political competition, it did not engage in abusive practices against its opponents and does not have a culture of imprisoning and brutalizing political prisoners. Because the Muslim Brotherhood was allowed to operate legally in the country—albeit as a charity organization—the Islamists adopted moderate policies in comparison to their sister organizations in other Arab countries, and for a long time saw themselves as part of the regime.

In short, the country has all the elements to be a model for political and religious tolerance, but it has refrained from taking sustained steps on the political front. Yet the Jordanian ruling system cannot continue unchanged. The population is better educated than most neighboring populations, and its citizens are aware of their rights and are demanding a larger say in their affairs. Cosmetic reform will no longer work. Many in the regime still surprisingly act as if reform can be not just slow but glacial. Jordanian officials have so far maintained that the protests that took place last year were limited to few hundred people and that discontent is largely restricted to a few outspoken elites. Such a blind spot shows them to be seriously out of touch with the country. If reform from above is to succeed in Jordan, it will require a dramatic shift of priorities by a system that has so far resisted change—a shift that can be led only by the king.

From Marwan Muasher’s book “The Second Arab Awakening And the Battle for Pluralism.”
In the broadest of terms, the “terrorist” threat has been shaped by a handful of incidents in the last decade: the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, the death of Osama bin Laden, the failures of the Arab Uprisings and, most recently, the rise of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi’s “Islamic State”. Each, in its own way, has had a profound effect upon the issues that we, academics and practitioners alike, have to work against. And each, in its own way, demands its own nuanced approach. The ever-shifting, ever-evolving nature of the threat will never just “evaporate” as seemed to be the common conception in the spring of 2011, when Osama bin Laden was found and executed by US Navy Seals in Abbottabad, Pakistan.

Many thought that, with the head of the snake dead and buried, the terrorist threat against American citizens would be gone. Scenes of jubilation erupted in cities all over the United States. President Obama addressed the nation in what looked to me like a repeat of Bush’s “mission accomplished” faux pas. Analysts clamored to hail the demise of al-Qaeda in sheer glee. I looked on anxiously. In this case, it was an opportunity for the Islamist idea to assert its own buoyancy beyond the life of any one person.

I knew that al-Qaeda would continue to grow long after bin Laden. With nothing but narratives as ammunition to hold the ideological frontlines against groups that believe in summary execution as a means for change, I couldn’t help but feel that execution, as a method, had just received a huge boost from the United States itself. An inconvenient fact, often overlooked by we who presume to fight the “good fight,” is that bad ideas are just as bulletproof as good ones. They wear the same flak jackets, dodge the same bullets, and erect the same blast shields. You can’t kill an idea, even if it’s bad.

In my humble view, it would have been far more consistent to bring bin Laden to justice, as had been attempted with Saddam Hussein, who, due to fears that he was able and willing to unleash chemical warfare, was certainly deemed no less dangerous. Except there was an election on the horizon for an already embattled president, and President Obama would not take the risk of anything going wrong. Forgive me for being cynical, but I found myself agreeing with the sentiments of school teacher Jessica Dovey:

I will mourn the loss of thousands of precious lives, but I will not rejoice in the death of one, not even an enemy.¹

In light of Jessica’s words, which spread around the world and were erroneously attributed to Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the street celebrations after bin Laden’s execution seemed to me rather brash. As I had expected, al-Qaeda continued to go from strength to strength. Ayman al-Zawahiri, an Egyptian who, like me, had spent time in Egypt’s jails, was quickly appointed the head of al-Qaeda. Even George W. Bush, despite all the mistakes of his militarized neo-conservatism, had come to realize the importance of inverting his model and working to bolster
grassroots initiatives during the last two years of his administration. Frustratingly, the Obama administration took its eye completely off this crucial ideas debate. Amid a policy of targeted drone killings at a frequency far higher than Bush’s—including the controversial targeted killing of an American citizen, Anwar al-Awlaki, in Yemen—Obama’s administration turned toward a crude, results-driven desire to secure body bags.

When tactics become the strategy, you lose sight of the overall aim. And this is how the heirs of Osama bin Laden strategically blindsided the Obama administration. Al-Qaeda deftly utilized the security vacuum created in North Africa after the Arab uprisings and moved in with the dexterity of a surgeon’s hand. Soon, under their new Egyptian leader’s command, the group had achieved what it had never done under bin Laden himself: control of a territory the size of France directly by al-Qaeda in sub-Saharan Mali, as the ancient city of Timbuktu was seized and razed by jihadist militants. In Yemen, the Abyan province and then chunks of land in the southwest of the country came under direct al-Qaeda control as well. In Syria, the uprising to remove that country’s brutal dictator was all but hijacked by Jabhat al-Nusra, a group formed of al-Qaeda veterans who descended upon this new battlefield from neighboring Iraq.

And then there was Libya. In September 2012, Quilliam’s President and former jihadist Noman Benotman and I were sitting in the office in London gaping at our news screens. An unknown had uploaded a “film” to YouTube that was gratuitously insulting to the Prophet of Islam. Some hooligans across various Muslim-majority countries seized on this event to incite riots and looting. The Islamist narrative that there was a full-blown war against Islam had just received a huge boost.

Symbiotically, the right-wing narrative that Muslims were uncivilized, ungovernable thugs had also just received reaffirmation. But that was not what we were gaping at. The news was reporting that US ambassador to Libya Chris Stevens had just been killed amid mob riots in the city of Benghazi. The accepted view across all media outlets was that this death was a result of the film, and the US government confirmed this version of events.

After some brief and tense calls to our network on the ground in Benghazi, Noman turned to me and said grimly, “Maajid, this was not a spontaneous attack.”

“What are you saying, Noman?” I asked.

The reply came with Noman’s characteristic confidence: “It is my belief, from the information that I have gathered, that Ambassador Chris Stevens was assassinated in a preplanned al-Qaeda terrorist attack in revenge for the US drone killing of al-Qaeda’s number two, Abu Yahya al-Libi.”

I stared blankly at Noman, taking in what he had just said.

“I think we should make a statement,” he continued.

“But, Noman, the entire world, the US government, CNN, the BBC, everyone is saying this was a spontaneous attack. Are they all wrong? How can we be so sure?”

Noman looked at me with steely determination and the sigh of someone who has seen too much in life. “This attack was timed to coincide with the anniversary of 9/11, and a warning had already been given by al-Zawahiri in a pre-released video. The attack was orchestrated with military precision in two waves, using RPGs, which are not found randomly among mere angry mobs. Let me draft something, and you can see if you agree.”

Instinctively knowing he was right, I let him put something together.

By the next day, while the world was still focused on the “film” and the deaths resulting from the furor surrounding it, the obvious seemed to be staring at me from a piece of paper on my desk. No doubt about it, the killing of Stevens was an al-Qaeda operation.

“Noman, if we release this, you do realize that we’re putting our reputation on the line? If we’re wrong, governments, the media, and especially Muslims will ridicule us.” I continued, “They’ll say, ‘Here’s Quilliam trying to resurrect the terrorism debate after terrorism is dead along with bin Laden.’”

Noman looked me square in the eyes. “But we’re right, Maajid.”

“And if we’re right, we severely embarrass the Obama administration and people lose their jobs. No one is saying what we are about to claim,” I said.
“It’s the right thing to do,” he said simply. He was correct, of course.

What was happening was nothing short of a scandal. Whether deliberately contrived or negligently missed, the world’s greatest power had turned away from the terrorism agenda. It was as if with a killing here or a drone strike there—all the while seeing no evil, hearing no evil—Obama had hoped that the problem would simply cease to exist. But al-Qaeda continued to spread, maturing into an insurgency with deep roots in some of the world’s most troubled countries. You can’t kill an idea. Somebody needed to shake things up.

After we sent out the press release, our phones and email accounts came alive. The allegation we had made was initially reported with skepticism and credited to Quilliam. As the East Coast of the United States awoke, the rate of press queries we were receiving started rising to fever pitch, and our phones began dancing to their own tune. Pundits who we knew for a fact had received our press release—they are on our mailing list—started repeating our words verbatim across US media outlets without crediting their source.

Eventually, experts and news outlets began realizing that they might have all made a mistake. Received wisdom had shifted; what had happened in Benghazi was now deemed a terrorist attack. It took the US government another week to finally accept the truth. The CIA eventually conceded that it had arrived at the same conclusion, and the White House issued a public admission.

The family of Chris Stevens and other victims would now know the truth and could better seek justice. “Uncivilized” Muslim mobs in Libya would no longer be made the scapegoat for a preplanned terrorist attack. Obama’s administration had learned the hard way not to neglect the terrorism agenda. From our office in central London, Quilliam had just forced the world’s only superpower to change its course.

The simple fact was that, since bin Laden’s death, al-Qaeda had not only failed to evaporate, but it had gone from being a terrorist group to a full-blown insurgency in at least Mali, Yemen, and the Levant. You can’t kill an idea. Ideas are bulletproof. They can also evolve into others. By April 2013 the Islamic State of Iraq had announced its merger with Jabhat al-Nusra in Syria.

Just over one year later, Baghdadi’s group had taken over huge swathes of Iraq and Syria and declared the restoration of the Caliphate, something unprecedented for modern-day jihadism. Now, because of this one time al-Qaeda affiliate, we are watching the largest mobilization in a generation of volunteers traveling abroad to join someone else’s war. More than a quarter of those combatants are from Western countries, mostly from Britain, France, Germany, Sweden and Belgium. Australians, Canadians and U.S. citizens have also joined the ranks of the so-called “Islamic State” that al-Zawahiri disavowed early on the year for being too extreme. When the “moderate” option for Western fighters in Syria is Al Qaeda, the term “moderate” loses all meaning.

But, judging by our complacency, you would be forgiven for not knowing that this had been happening for months before the fall of Mosul. Now, the problem is metastasizing more rapidly than anyone could have predicted. Certainly, no amount of drone-strikes or boots on the ground will resolve what’s happening in Iraq and Syria right now, nor will it deter foreign fighters – the group which presents the greatest long-term terrorist threat to Western states – from going out to fight the jihadist cause.

So, what can be done? We must start by asking why so many Western Muslims are prepared to travel and risk their lives to fight everyone else, including their fellow Muslim rebels, in Syria. Such decisions are not made overnight, and not in an isolated context. No amount of charismatic recruitment alone is powerful enough to achieve this feat if people are not already primed for exploitation.

For years, the intolerant Islamist ideology has been spreading unchecked across Western capitals, as we stand by navel-gazing and wondering what to do. There are thousands of young Muslims who already subscribe to the basic views of ISIS and al-Qaeda and thus present a well of recruitment for jihadist mobilization. Despite this, thought, the ostensibly non-violent versions of Islamism are patronized as antidotes to Al Qaeda and violent extremism. It is time to challenge that idea and to challenge its advocates in civil society.
A new standard, expecting a commitment to universal human rights and a freedom of varied cultures and identities must be raised by government, by private organizations and the media, to combat the kind of one-dimensional Islamism prevalent among many angry Western Muslims.

As part of the fight back against this jihadist brand, it is crucial that the alternative -- a free and fair civil society -- be respected by the rest of us. If we are to push for human rights as a standard, then government measures to stem the flow of these fighters must be seen to adhere to the rule of law. This requires genuine engagement at multiple levels and across the government spectrum, not simply the blunt tools of police and prosecutors.

A more coherent messaging strategy needs to be employed. We are missing an opportunity when we fail to highlight the fact that joining one of the militias in Syria is futile and counterproductive, especially when an aspiring jihadist is more likely to be engaged in fighting other rebels than against Assad. Indeed, more Westerners have been killed by intra-jihadist infighting than by the regime itself.

Political inclusion and engagement through the mainstream political system must be encouraged as a non-violent and legal way to address grievances. At the same time we should discourage the kind of isolationist, exclusivist identity politics one sees where only intra-community solutions are looked for or accepted. In the United Kingdom, just as in the rest of the world, we need to promote an inclusive identity that involves and empowers people from all ethnic and faith backgrounds.

We are already years behind in this work. We are faced with people who are battle-hardened, indoctrinated, globally networked and fluent in English. They are not bound even by Al Qaeda’s discipline. They are angry at everyone because of what they have seen in Syria; because they have been rejected there; because they were angry to begin with; and they are feeling empowered by the gains IS has made in the Levant, especially since the establishment of Baghdadi’s pseudo-Caliphate.

It would be naïve in the extreme to assume that some of these fighters will not plan attacks on the West. In fact, they are already warning us. A member of ISIS with a North American accent released earlier on in the year a video vowing to Canada and “all the American tyrants: We are coming and we will destroy you.”

What is coming, without doubt, is the blowback from the savagery currently rocking the Middle East region, and we are woefully unprepared to address it.

The news out of Iraq is, once again, exceedingly grim. The resurrection of al Qaeda in Iraq -- which was on the ropes at the end of the surge in 2008 -- has led to a substantial increase in ethno-sectarian terrorism in the Land of the Two Rivers. The civil war next door in Syria has complicated matters greatly, aiding the jihadists on both sides of the border and bringing greater Iranian involvement in Mesopotamia. And various actions by the Iraqi government have undermined the reconciliation initiatives of the surge that enabled the sense of Sunni Arab inclusion and contributed to the success of the venture. Moreover, those Iraqi government actions have also prompted prominent Sunnis to withdraw from the government and led the Sunni population to take to the streets in protest. As a result of all this, Iraqi politics are now mired in mistrust and dysfunction.

This is not a road that Iraqis had to travel. Indeed, by the end of the surge in 2008, a different future was possible. That still seemed to be the case in December 2011, when the final U.S. forces (other than a sizable security assistance element) departed; however, the different future was possible only if Iraqi political leaders capitalized on the opportunities that were present. Sadly, it appears that a number of those opportunities were squandered, as political infighting and ethno-sectarian actions reawakened the fears of Iraq’s Sunni Arab population and, until recently, also injected enormous difficulty into the relationship between the government in Baghdad and the leaders of the Kurdish Regional Government.

To understand the dynamics in Iraq -- and the possibilities that still exist, it is necessary to revisit what actually happened during the surge, a history now explored in a forthcoming book written by my executive officer at the time, Col. (Ret.) Peter Mansoor, now a professor of military history at the Ohio State University.

Leading the coalition military effort during the surge in Iraq in 2007 and 2008 was the most important endeavor -- and greatest challenge -- of my 37 years in uniform. The situation in Iraq was dire at the end of 2006, when President George W. Bush decided to implement the surge and selected me to command it. Indeed, when I returned to Baghdad in early February 2007, I found the conditions there to be even worse than I had expected. The deterioration since I had left Iraq in September 2005 after my second tour was sobering. The violence -- which had escalated dramatically in 2006 in the wake of the bombing of the Shiite al-Askari shrine in the Sunni city of Samarra -- was totally out of control. With well over 50 attacks and three car bombs per day on average in Baghdad alone, the plan to hand off security tasks to Iraqi forces clearly was not working. Meanwhile, the sectarian battles on the streets were mirrored by infighting in the Iraqi government and Council of Representatives, and those disputes produced a dysfunctional political environment. With many of the oil pipelines damaged or destroyed, electrical towers toppled, roads in disrepair, local markets shuttered, and government workers and citizens fear-
ing for their lives, government revenue was down and the provision of basic services was wholly inadequate. Life in many areas of the capital and the country was about little more than survival.

In addition to those challenges, I knew that if there was not clear progress by September 2007, when I anticipated having to return to the United States to testify before Congress in open hearings, the limited remaining support on Capitol Hill and in the United States for the effort in Iraq would evaporate.

In short, President Bush had staked the final years of his presidency -- and his legacy -- on the surge, and it was up to those on the ground to achieve progress. In the end, that is what we did together, military and civilian, coalition and Iraqi. But as my great diplomatic partner Ryan Crocker, the U.S. ambassador to Iraq, and I used to note, Iraq was "all hard, all the time."

**The Surge of Forces and the Surge of Ideas**

The surge had many components. The most prominent, of course, was the deployment of the additional U.S. forces committed by President Bush -- nearly 30,000 of them in the end. Without those forces, we never could have achieved progress as quickly as we did. And, given the necessity to make progress by the hearings anticipated in September 2007, improvements before then were critical.

As important as the surge of forces was, however, the most important surge was what I termed "the surge of ideas" -- the changes in our overall strategy and operational plans. The most significant of these was the shift from trying to hand off security tasks to Iraqi forces to focusing on the security of the Iraqi people. The biggest of the big ideas that guided the strategy during the surge was explicit recognition that the most important terrain in the campaign in Iraq was the human terrain -- the people -- and our most important mission was to improve their security. Security improvements would, in turn, provide Iraq's political leaders the opportunity to forge agreements on issues that would reduce ethno-sectarian disputes and establish the foundation on which other efforts could be built to improve the lives of the Iraqi people and give them a stake in the success of the new state.

But improved security could be achieved only by moving our forces into urban neighborhoods and rural population centers. In the first two weeks, therefore, I changed the mission statement in the existing campaign plan to reflect this imperative. As I explained in that statement and the guidance I issued shortly after taking command, we had to "live with the people" in order to secure them. This meant reversing the consolidation of our forces on large bases that had been taking place since the spring of 2004. Ultimately, this change in approach necessitated the establishment of more than 100 small outposts and joint security stations, three-quarters of them in Baghdad alone.

The establishment of each of the new bases entailed a fight, and some of those fights were substantial. We knew that the Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias would do everything they could to keep our troopers from establishing a presence in areas where the warring factions were trying to take control -- and those areas were precisely where our forces were needed most. Needless to say, the insurgents and militias would do all that they could to keep us from establishing our new operating bases, sometimes even employing multiple suicide car bombers in succession in attempts to breach outpost perimeters. But if we were to achieve our goal of significantly reducing the violence, there was no alternative to living with the people -- specifically, where the violence was the greatest -- in order to secure them. Our men and women on the ground, increasingly joined during the surge by their Iraqi partners, courageously, selflessly, and skillfully did what was required to accomplish this goal.

"Clear, hold, and build" became the operative concept -- a contrast with the previous practice in many operations of clearing insurgents and then leaving, after handing off the security mission to Iraqi forces that proved incapable of sustaining progress in the areas cleared. Then -- Lt. Gen. Ray Odierno, commander of the Multi-National Corps-Iraq, and his staff developed and oversaw the execution of these and the other operational concepts brilliantly. Indeed, in anticipation of the new approach, he ordered establishment of the initial joint security stations in the weeks before I arrived. His successor in early 2008, then Lt. Gen. Lloyd Austin, did a similarly exemplary job as our operational commander for the final portion of the surge. On receiving the Corps’ guidance, divi-
ession and brigade commanders and their headquarters orchestrated the implementation of these concepts. And our company, battalion, and brigade commanders and their troopers translated the new strategy and operational concepts into reality on the ground in the face of determined, often barbaric enemies under some of the most difficult conditions imaginable.

But the new strategy encompassed much more than just moving off the big bases and focusing on security of the people. Improving security was necessary, but not sufficient, to achieve our goals in Iraq. Many other tasks also had to be accomplished.

The essence of the surge, in fact, was the pursuit of a comprehensive approach, a civil-military campaign that featured a number of important elements, the effects of each of which were expected to complement the effects of the others. The idea was that progress in one component of the strategy would make possible gains in other components. Each incremental step forward reinforced and gradually solidified overall progress in a particular geographic location or governmental sector. The surge forces clearly enabled more rapid implementation of the new strategy and accompanying operational concepts; however, without the changes in the strategy, the additional forces would not have achieved the gains in security and in other areas necessary for substantial reduction of the underlying levels of ethno-sectarian violence, without which progress would not have been sustained when responsibilities ultimately were transferred to Iraqi forces and government authorities.

**The Sunni Awakening and Reconciliation**

Beyond securing the people by living with them, foremost among the elements of the new strategy was promoting reconciliation between disaffected Sunni Arabs and our forces -- and then with the Shiite-dominated Iraqi government. I often noted at the time that we would not be able to kill or capture our way out of the industrial-strength insurgency that confronted us in Iraq. Hence we had to identify those insurgents and militia members who were “reconcilable,” and we then had to persuade them to become part of the solution in Iraq rather than a continuing part of the problem. Reconciliation thus became a critical component of the overall strategy.

We were fortunate to be able to build on what ultimately came to be known as the Sunni Awakening, the initial increment of which began several months before the surge, outside the embattled Sunni city of Ramadi in violent Anbar Province, some 60 miles west of Baghdad. There, in the late summer of 2006, during the height of the violence in Anbar, Col. Sean MacFarland, a talented U.S. Army brigade commander, and his team agreed to support a courageous Sunni sheikh and his tribal members who decided to oppose al Qaeda in Iraq, which the tribesmen had come to despise for its indiscriminate attacks on the population and implementation of an extreme version of Islam that was not in line with their somewhat more secular outlook on life. The initiative included empowering young men of the tribes who wanted to help secure their areas against al Qaeda depredations. Ultimately, shortly after the surge of forces commenced and throughout 2007 and into 2008, this arrangement was replicated over and over in other areas of Anbar Province and Iraq. The Awakening proved to be a hugely important factor in combating al Qaeda terrorists and other Sunni insurgents and, over time, similar initiatives in the Shiite population proved important in combating some militias in select areas as well.

Some observers have contended that we got lucky with the Awakening. Undeniably, it was fortunate that the initial development of a tribal rebellion against al Qaeda had begun by the time the surge began. Despite this reality, however, the spread of the Awakening beyond Ramadi was not serendipity; rather, it was the result of a conscious decision and a deliberate effort. I was well aware that there had previously been reconciliation initiatives that had worked in the short term. Indeed, I oversaw the first of these initiatives, in the summer of 2003, when I commanded the 101st Airborne Division in northern Iraq and Amb. Jerry Bremer, the head of the Coalition Provisional Authority, personally authorized me to support an Iraqi-led reconciliation effort. That effort helped make that part of Iraq surprisingly peaceful well into the fall of 2003, as the Sunni Arabs cast out of jobs and out of society by the de-Ba’athification policy still had hope of being part of the new Iraq in our area. Ultimately, however, that initiative, along with reconciliation efforts
in subsequent years in western Anbar Province and elsewhere, founders due to a lack of support by Iraqi authorities in Baghdad. I watched these initiatives during my second tour in Iraq, as commander of the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq from June 2004 to September 2005.

Given my recognition of the importance of reconciliation, I was determined that we would support the nascent Awakening and then, over time, gain our Iraqi partners’ support, as well. In fact, my first trip outside Baghdad, shortly after taking command on Feb. 10, 2007, was to assess the progress of the initiative in Ramadi. After seeing the results of the Awakening up close, I quickly resolved that we would do all that we could to support the tribal rebellion there and also to foster its spread through other Sunni areas of Iraq. (Eventually, we also supported Shiite awakenings in some of the areas troubled by Shiite militias.) We would, in effect, seek to achieve a “critical mass” of awakenings that would set off a “chain reaction” as rapidly as was possible -- initially up and down the Euphrates River Valley in Anbar Province and then into neighboring Sunni Arab areas of Iraq. Of equal importance, we would also seek the support of Iraqi Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki for these initiatives. (I personally took him to Ramadi in March 2007 to speak to the tribal sheikhs leading the Awakening there, and I subsequently took him to other Sunni areas for similar endeavors as well.)

The decision to support the Awakening movement and, in essence, reconciliation carried considerable risk and was not initially embraced by all of our commanders. Many correctly pointed out that the leaders and members of the groups that wanted to reconcile with us -- groups that might be willing to embrace the Awakening -- had American blood on their hands. Beyond that, it was clear early on that Prime Minister Maliki was willing to allow us to support awakenings in strictly Sunni areas such as Anbar, but that he had understandable concerns about them when they approached areas of greater concern to his Shiite coreligionists; moreover, he also was not at all enthusiastic initially about providing Iraqi resources and assistance for what came to be known as the “Sons of Iraq,” the young men who helped augment coalition and Iraqi police and army forces in securing their tribal areas. Regardless, I was convinced that there was no alternative if we were to reduce the violence and divert key elements of the Sunni insurgency from their actual or tacit support for the actions of al Qaeda. So we pressed ahead and dealt with the many issues that arose along the way, helped initially by my first deputy, British Lt. Gen. Sir Graeme Lambe, a friend and colleague of many years, and then by the establishment of a Force Reconciliation Cell that was headed by a talented two-star British officer and an impressive senior U.S. diplomat.

Ultimately, the Awakening movement -- and, in effect, reconciliation -- did spread dramatically. There were many challenges as this transpired, especially when Prime Minister Maliki and other Shiite leaders developed concerns over the spread of the movement into Baghdad and areas near predominantly Shiite or mixed communities. Our reconciliation team -- aided enormously by Emma Sky, a brilliant British woman who served as a special assistant to me during the latter part of the surge (having served as General Odierno’s political adviser earlier and subsequently) -- worked tirelessly to deal with the seemingly endless list of issues and with the woman appointed by Prime Minister Maliki to oversee reconciliation initiatives for the Iraqi government. And, ultimately, a year and a half into the surge, we had on our payroll more than 100,000 “Sons of Iraq” (more than 20,000 of them Shiite), young men who lived in the areas of the Awakening movements and who then helped secure their neighborhoods from both Sunni insurgents and Shiite militias.

In sum, the spread of the Awakening was not serendipity; it was the result of a deliberate decision I took soon after taking command. To be sure, the timing of the initiative outside Ramadi was fortuitous, but from even before taking command I knew that reconciliation had to take place if we were to reduce violence significantly by the fall of 2007. We thus were determined to capitalize on the Ramadi initiative by promoting the spread of Awakening movements and facilitating the resulting reconciliation among sects, tribes, and factions. I understood the numerous risks, and we took measures to ensure that Awakening movements and the “Sons of Iraq” did not turn into an unaccountable militia force that would cause more trouble for Iraq in the long run than they were worth in the near term. Looking back, the risks clearly were worth the resulting gains.
Targeted Special Operations

Another critical component of our comprehensive approach was an intensive campaign of targeted operations by U.S. and British Special Operations Forces to capture or kill key insurgent and militia leaders and operatives. Although I publicly acknowledged from the outset that we would not be able to kill or capture our way to victory (hence the need to support the Awakening), killing or capturing the most important of the “irreconcilables” was an inescapable and hugely important element of our strategy. Indeed, we sought to pursue key irreconcilables even more aggressively than was the case before the surge.

Then-Lt. Gen. Stan McChrystal, commander of the U.S. Joint Special Operations Command and the Counter-Terrorism Special Operations Task Force operating in Iraq, led this effort brilliantly. Our special operators were relentless in the pursuit of al Qaeda and other Sunni Arab extremist leaders, bomb makers, financiers, and propaganda cells -- and of key Iranian-supported Shiite Arab extremists as well (though the latter effort was frequently constrained by Iraqi political factors, given the proclivities of the Shiite-led government). As the surge proceeded, the capacity and pace of U.S.- and coalition-targeted Special Operations under Lt. Gen. McChrystal and subsequently by then-Vice Adm. William H. McRaven increased substantially, as did the tempo of targeted operations by the Iraqi counterterrorist forces that we trained, equipped, advised, and also enabled with helicopters and various intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets. The results were dramatic: the targeted operations -- as many as 10 to 15 per night -- removed from the battlefield a significant proportion of the senior and midlevel extremist group leaders, explosives experts, planners, financiers, and organizers in Iraq. Looking back, it is clear that what the American and British special operators accomplished, aided enormously by various intelligence elements, was nothing short of extraordinary. Their relentless operations, employment of unmanned aerial vehicles and other advanced technology, tactical skill, courage, and creativity were truly inspirational. But by themselves they did not and could not turn the tide of battle in Iraq; once again, the key was a comprehensive approach, in which this element, like the others, was necessary but not sufficient.

The Development of Iraqi Security Forces

Supporting the development of the Iraqi Security Forces was also vitally important -- and an effort with which I was intimately familiar, as I had led the establishment of the so-called “train and equip” organization and commanded the Multi-National Security Transition Command-Iraq for the first 15 and a half months of the organization’s existence, during which I was also dual-hatted as the first commander of the NATO Training Mission-Iraq.

Although I halted the transition of tasks from coalition to Iraqi forces shortly after I took command, we knew that ultimately such transitions would be essential to our ability to draw down our forces and send them home. As President Bush used to observe, “U.S. forces will stand down as the Iraqi forces stand up.” We knew that ultimately the U.S. military could not support the replacement of the five surge brigades and the other additional forces deployed to Iraq in 2007. It thus was imperative that Iraqi forces be ready by the latter part of 2007 to assume broader duties so that coalition forces could begin to draw down and the surge forces could go home. Beyond that, Iraqi leaders, frequently with unrealistically elevated assessments of the capabilities of their security forces, repeatedly advocated the continued transition of security and governance tasks -- a desire that was commendable, if sometimes premature.

Under the capable leadership of then-Lt. Gen. Marty Dempsey and his successor, Lt. Gen. Jim Dubik, the train-and-equip mission steadily expanded its efforts not just to develop Iraqi army, police, border, and special operations units but also to build all of the institutions of the Ministries of Interior and Defense, their subordinate headquarters and elements, and the infrastructure and systems needed for what ultimately grew to a total of 1 million members of the Iraqi security forces.

These tasks required Herculean efforts. Our programs supported every aspect of Iraqi military and police recruiting, individual and collective training, leader development (for example, the creation of basic training complexes, a military academy, branch schools, a staff college, a war college, and a training and doctrine command), equipping Iraqi forces with everything from vehicles and individual weapons to
tanks and aircraft, the conduct of combat operations (with advisory teams at every level from battalion and above), development of logistical organizations and depots, construction of tactical and training bases and infrastructure, establishment of headquarters and staffs, and, as noted earlier, the development of all of the elements of the ministries themselves. Indeed, it is hard for anyone who did not see this endeavor firsthand to appreciate its magnitude. Additionally, progress required our Iraqi counterparts to replace substantial numbers of senior army and police leaders who proved to be sectarian, corrupt, or ineffective in the performance of their duties before or during the early months of the surge. Fortunately, Prime Minister Maliki and his senior military and police leaders proved willing to undertake the vast majority of the necessary changes.

Over time, we and our Iraqi counterparts achieved slow but steady progress in building the capabilities of the Iraqi Security Forces. With effective partnering of Iraqi and U.S. forces, Iraqi forces steadily shouldered more of the burdens and took over more tasks. They also increasingly bore the brunt of combat operations, with their losses totaling several times those of coalition forces. I often noted to the president, the prime minister, and others, in fact, that as the surge proceeded, Iraqi security forces clearly were fighting and dying for their country. Progressively, over the months and years that followed, the coalition turned over responsibility for security tasks to Iraqi forces until, at the end of 2011, Iraqi elements assumed all security tasks on their own, with only a residual U.S. office of security cooperation remaining in Iraq.

The Civilian Components

The comprehensive strategy employed during the surge also had significant civilian components. Indeed, Ambassador Crocker and I worked hard to develop unity of effort in all that our respective organizations and coalition and Iraqi partners did. The campaign plan we developed in the spring of 2007, in fact, was a joint effort of my command, Multi-National Force-Iraq, and the U.S. embassy, with considerable input from coalition partners such as Britain. (This civil-military plan built on the partnership that my predecessor, Gen. George Casey, had developed with then-U.S. Ambassador Zalmay Khalilzad, albeit with the changes in strategic and operational concepts that I have described.) And over time, our plan was also, of course, synchronized in close coordination with our Iraqi counterparts. Appropriately, the mission statement in the campaign plan we finalized in the early summer of 2007 included many nonmilitary aspects, highlighting the combined approach on which we all embarked together.

As security improved, the tasks in the civilian arena took on greater importance. It was critical, for example, that we worked with our coalition and Iraqi civilian partners to help repair damaged infrastructure, restore basic services, rebuild local markets, reopen schools and health facilities, and support the reestablishment of the corrections and judicial systems and other governmental institutions. While not determinative by themselves, such improvements gave Iraqi citizens tangible reasons to support the new Iraq and reject the extremists, insurgents, and militia members who had caused such hardship for them.

To facilitate and coordinate such efforts, each brigade and division headquarters was provided an embedded provincial reconstruction team of approximately a dozen civilian and military experts (often led by retired diplomats and development specialists). The U.S. Congress also provided the units substantial funding (through the Commander’s Emergency Response Program) to help with these efforts (and the U.S. embassy and some coalition nations did likewise through their sources of funding). Again, over time, progress in these initiatives proved essential to gaining the support of the Iraqi people for their government and to turning the people against both Sunni and Shiite extremists. These tasks were huge and often expensive, but they were essential to gradually improving basic services and other aspects of life for the Iraqi people. With steadily improving security and with the U.S. Army Corps of Engineers taking on the oversight of the larger reconstruction projects for the embassy as well as for the military, the effort moved forward relatively well, although there were innumerable challenges, including security issues, corruption, design and management shortfalls, and so on. But even in the face of such obstacles, substantial reconstruction progress was nonetheless achieved.
Detainee Operations and Rule-of-Law Initiatives

Another important component of the comprehensive approach was the conduct of detainee operations. In this area also, we had to implement significant changes. The scope of this effort was enormous. In fact, the number of detainees in U.S.-administered facilities reached 27,000 after I temporarily halted releases until we could implement programs that provided a review process for the detainees in our facilities and could establish rehabilitation and reintegration programs to reduce the recidivism rate of those we released back to their communities.

Early on in the surge, it was clear to many of us that the detainee facilities we were operating had become breeding grounds for extremism. Indeed, some of our special operators, having recaptured the same individuals more than once, began calling our facilities “terrorist universities.” We were, to be sure, providing humane treatment; however, we had not identified and segregated from the general detainee population the hardcore extremists. Until that was done, the extremists asserted control (often brutally) in the facility enclosures -- some of which contained up to 800 detainees -- and spread extremist thinking and expertise among the detainee population. It became clear that we had to carry out “counterinsurgency operations inside the wire” in order to identify and separate from the detainee population the irreconcilables, just as we sought to do outside the wire in Iraqi communities. The leadership of Marine Maj. Gen. Doug Stone and of those who led the elements that constituted our detainee operations task force was instrumental in this component of our overall campaign. And the performance of the thousands of soldiers, airmen, and sailors who carried out the myriad duties in the facilities -- individuals who often had been retrained from other specialties to augment the limited number of military police detention specialists available in the U.S. Army -- was equally impressive.

Over time, Maj. Gen. Stone’s team also began helping our Iraqi partners as they sought to increase their own capacity and to build the prison infrastructure to conduct Iraqi corrections operations. This was another significant U.S. civil-military effort, and it was complemented by a similarly large civil-military initiative to help the Iraqis reestablish their judicial system and to rebuild the infrastructure to support it.

Then-Col. Mark Martins led the judicial support effort on the military side, staying in Iraq for two full years -- as he was later also to do in Afghanistan -- to oversee it, even as he also served as my senior legal counsel. The scope of this civil-military endeavor was enormous, encompassing construction of judicial facilities, training of judicial security elements, and support for reestablishment of judicial systems and structures. Partners from the U.S. State Department, Department of Justice, FBI, and other government agencies also played key roles in this substantial effort.

Another important initiative that supported the overall campaign was the effort to improve our intelligence about the various extremist elements and what was going on in Iraq more broadly. Here again, we pursued civil-military programs to build our capabilities (including fusion cells started under General Casey at each division headquarters to bring together all elements of the U.S. intelligence community); to expand the intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets available (everything from drones to cameras on towers); to build a massive database that our analysts could use to identify correlations and linkages between individual and organizations; and to improve intelligence sharing with coalition and Iraqi partners. We also established human terrain teams at each brigade headquarters to help our commanders understand in a more granular manner the composition, power structures, customs, and views of the Iraqi people in their areas of responsibility. And we extended secure Internet access to unprecedented levels (down to most company headquarters) within our organizations, as well. Counterinsurgency operations depend on a keen understanding of the political, historical, cultural, economic, and military situation in each area, and our initiatives built on those begun earlier in the war to further our understanding of the dynamics of each province, district, and community. Truly understanding the human terrain was vital to our ability to improve its security.

The Iraqi Political Component and Strategic Communications

The heart of the struggle in Iraq was a competition for power and resources between the major factions in the country -- the majority Shiite Arabs
and the minority Sunni Arabs and Kurds. (There were subfactions of each group as well, of course, in addition to other minority sects and ethnicities such as Turkoman, Yezidis, and Iraqi Christians, among others.) Achieving enduring progress in Iraq thus required achievement of political agreements on a host of key issues that divided the various factions. Consequently, seeking to foster agreement on such issues was yet another important component of the overall approach, and it developed into one to which Ambassador Crocker and I devoted considerable focus and effort. During the course of the surge, there were important laws passed and initiatives agreed upon -- for example, a provincial powers act, an elections law, a reform of the de-Ba’athification decree, an amnesty law, and so forth; however, it was in this area that the most additional progress was (and still is) needed. Nonetheless, the surge made politics once again the operative mechanism through which Iraqis would divide power and resources -- even as they struggled to create the political impetus and find the common ground to seize the moment and the opportunity offered to them.

Strategic communications, or public affairs, was another important element of the campaign. My guidance here was clear: we should seek to “be first with the truth,” to be as forthright as possible, to provide information on all developments and not just “good news,” and to avoid the practice of “putting lipstick on pigs” (trying to make bad news look good through spin). This also meant highlighting the violent acts carried out by al Qaeda and the Sunni insurgents, as well as those carried out by Shiite extremists. Hanging around the neck of Shiite cleric Moqtada al-Sadr was the assassination of Shiite police chiefs and governors and the violent acts of his followers in the holy city of Karbala in the summer of 2007, for example, which contributed to his decision to order his militia to stand down until the following March. (Of course, increased pressure by coalition and Iraqi forces and Prime Minister Maliki’s courageous confrontation with the militia members in Karbala contributed to Sadr’s decision, as well.) Clearly establishing in the eyes of the Iraqi people that Iranian elements were supporting members of the most violent Shiite militias also helped turn some Iraqis against Tehran’s meddling in their country. And fostering concepts of integrity in government and pride in the Iraqi security forces, as well as awareness of what was being achieved by coalition and Iraqi efforts -- even while acknowledging our shortfalls and mistakes -- was all part of a comprehensive strategic communications campaign. Like most of our other efforts, this campaign was increasingly coordinated with -- and, over time, replaced by -- Iraqi efforts.

There were, of course, many other components of the overall campaign: engagement with religious and academic leaders, jobs programs, support for governance at all levels, initiatives to attract outside investment back to Iraq, work with countries in the region to reengage with Baghdad and to prevent their young men from traveling to Iraq to join the extremist elements, initiatives to improve security on the borders and to reestablish customs and immigrations facilities, and programs to reduce terrorist and insurgent financing. But the elements I have outlined were the major components of the comprehensive civil-military campaign plan that guided our operations and activities. Each was of central importance to the achievement of progress during the course of the surge and accomplishments in each component reinforced and made possible further steps forward in other areas -- the cumulative effect of which was considerable by the end of the surge in July 2008. Indeed, some of the various facets of our strategy continue to contribute to the situation in Iraq today, even after all U.S. combat forces have left the country, despite the considerable backsliding in the political and security situation.

Once again, it is important to note that the surge was all of the above, a comprehensive civil-military campaign, not just a substantial number of additional forces. The extra forces were critical to achieving progress as rapidly as we did, but they would not have been enough without the other components of the campaign.

The Magnitude of the Difficulty

As I’ve made clear, all of this was extraordinarily difficult and carried out in an environment of tremendous violence and frustratingly difficult Iraqi political discord. Moreover, we knew -- and I stated publicly on numerous occasions -- that the situation in Iraq would get worse before it got better. That
proved true. There was no way to stop the violence without confronting those responsible for it. And there was no way that we could do that without putting our troopers and those of the Iraqi forces on the sectarian battle lines in Baghdad and elsewhere, especially in the areas most affected by al Qaeda terrorists and sectarian militias. When we did that, the insurgents and militia members predictably fought back. Consequently, violence rose throughout the first five months of the surge, reaching a crescendo in May and June, to well over 200 attacks per day, before beginning to abate and then falling fairly rapidly in July, August, and September of 2007.

The decline in violence overall, and the substantial reduction in car bombings in particular, as well as gradual improvements in a number of other areas of our effort made possible by the improved security, enabled Ambassador Crocker and me to report guarded progress in congressional hearings in September 2007. While highly charged emotionally at the time, those hearings gained us critical additional time and support, without which it is likely that the mission in Iraq would have failed. And, after we were able to report further progress when we testified again in April 2008, having already commenced the drawdown of the surge as well, we were able to gain still further time and support for our efforts in Iraq.

The progress continued throughout the remainder of the surge and beyond, with periodic upticks in violence, to be sure, but with the overall trajectory positive, despite continued inability to resolve many of the major political issues that divided the Iraqi people. Nonetheless, the comprehensive civil-military endeavor pursued during the surge made it possible over time to transfer tasks from U.S. and other coalition forces to Iraqi soldiers and police and, ultimately, for the United States to withdraw its final combat elements at the end of 2011 without a precipitate descent back into the violence and civil conflict that made the surge necessary in the first place. None of this could have been possible were it not for the extraordinary sacrifices and service of the men and women in uniform in Iraq during the surge and their diplomatic, intelligence, and development community partners.

At the highest level, President Bush’s decision to conduct the surge was exceedingly courageous. His advisers were split on the decision, with many favoring other approaches that in my view would have failed. And as the going did get tougher over the early months of the surge, President Bush’s steadfast leadership and his personal commitment to seeing the war through to a successful conclusion (albeit one that might take many years to unfold) took on enormous significance.

I was privileged, together with Ambassador Crocker, to participate in a weekly video teleconference with the president and the members of the National Security Council. It began promptly at 7:30 a.m. Washington time each Monday, thereby ensuring that all participants were focused at the start of the week on the mission to which the president had given his total commitment. I do not believe that any battlefield commander ever had that frequency of contact with his commander in chief, and it was of vital importance to me, as was the support of Secretary of Defense Bob Gates.

I also had a weekly video teleconference with Secretary Gates, who personally drove forward a number of programs of incalculable value to our men and women on the ground, programs such as the accelerated production of mine-resistant, ambush-protected MRAP vehicles; a huge increase in intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance assets (such as Predator unmanned aerial vehicles and optics on towers, among many others); and a host of individual protective systems and enablers for our troopers -- not to mention the additional forces that I requested once I got on the ground and identified additional needs beyond those addressed by the initial surge force commitment. Secretary Gates and all of us in Iraq were supported enormously, as well, by Gen. Pete Pace and then Adm. Mike Mullen, the two officers who served as chairman of the Joint Chiefs during the surge. General Pace and Admiral Mullen also did yeoman service in maintaining the support of the military service chiefs who were understandably under enormous strain to produce the forces that we needed, while also gradually increasing the effort in Afghanistan, as it began to go downhill. At one point, of course, this required the extension of the tours in Iraq and Afghanistan from 12 to 15 months, an enormous sacrifice to ask of our men and women there and their families at home, but one that proved hugely important to the campaign.
President Bush’s commitment had an enormous psychological effect on our men and women in Iraq, as well as on the Iraqi people. Our troopers recognized that we had a chance to do what was needed to reverse the terrible cycle of violence that had gripped Iraq in the throes of civil war. And the citizens of the Land of the Two Rivers realized that there was still hope that the new Iraq could realize the potential that so many had hoped for in the wake of the ousting of Saddam Hussein and the collapse of the Ba’athist regime in 2003.

**Commanding MNF-I**

I recognized early on that I had become the face of the surge. I had not asked for this role, but whether I liked it or not, I had to fill it. Beyond that, of course, it was essential that I determine the right big ideas (with lots to help, to be sure), provide clear direction, communicate that direction in all possible forms, and then oversee the implementation of the resulting plans. It was also critical that I spend time with our troopers on the ground, that I share a measure of risk with them, and that I give encouragement and provide cautious optimism that we could, indeed, achieve the objectives we’d set out for ourselves and our Iraqi partners. In truth, from the beginning I believed that our approach was correct and that we would achieve progress; however, there were undeniably moments when I was uncertain whether we could achieve sufficient progress quickly enough to report that to Congress by September 2007. On more than one occasion as the early months went by, in fact, I sat alone with Gen. Odierno after our morning updates and discussed with him when we thought the situation was going “to turn.” No theater commander ever had a better “operational architect” than I had in him.

As the coalition commander, I also had extensive contact with the military and civilian leaders and legislators of the countries contributing forces to the coalition and also, of course, with Prime Minister Maliki and our key Iraqi partners from all sectors of the population. I had considerable interaction as well with the U.S., international, and Iraqi press. In the latter effort, as with the leaders of the coalition countries, I worked hard to avoid projecting unfounded optimism. When asked whether I was an optimist or a pessimist, for example, I typically replied, “I am neither an optimist nor a pessimist; rather, I am a realist. And reality is that Iraq is all hard, all the time.” I would then note the progress we’d achieved and setbacks we’d suffered in recent weeks. I worked hard, in fact, to maintain credibility with coalition leaders and the media, as well as with our troopers and their Iraqi counterparts. The provision of realistic assessments was hugely important and ranked among the biggest of the many “rocks” in my personal rucksack.

Needless to say, it was the greatest of privileges to serve with the selfless men and women, Iraqi and American and those of our coalition partners, civilian as well as military, who did the hard, dangerous work of the surge. There seldom was an easy period; each day was tough. But those on the ground consistently demonstrated the skill, initiative, determination, and courage needed to turn the big ideas at my level into reality at their levels and in their areas of responsibility. They also displayed the flexibility that was required to ensure that Multi-National Force-Iraq was a learning organization, one that could react faster and display greater adaptability than our terrorist, insurgent, and militia opponents. As the surge progressed, the men and women I was privileged to command continually refined tactics, techniques, and procedures, and they ultimately defeated their enemies in both the physical and intellectual manifestations of counterinsurgency battle.

Because of the complexity of counterinsurgency operations and the mixture of military and civilian tasks that they entail, it is sometimes said that counterinsurgency is the graduate level of warfare. However debatable that assessment may be, there is no question that the men and women of the surge demonstrated a true mastery of all that was required to conduct such operations. As I often noted in later years, they earned the recognition accorded them as “America’s New Greatest Generation.”

**The Road Ahead**

In many respects, Iraq today looks tragically similar to the Iraq of 2006, complete with increasing numbers of horrific, indiscriminate attacks by Iraq’s al Qaed a affiliate and its network of extremists. Add to that the ongoing sectarian civil war in Syria -- which is, in many aspects, a regional conflict
being fought there -- and the situation in Iraq looks even more complicated than it was in 2006 and thus even more worrisome -- especially given the absence American combat forces.

As Iraqi leaders consider the way forward, they would do well to remember what had to be done the last time the levels of violence escalated so terribly. If Iraqi leaders think back to that time, they will recall that the surge was not just more forces, though the additional forces were very important. What mattered most was the surge of ideas -- concepts that embraced security of the people by “living with them,” initiatives to promote reconciliation with elements of the population that felt they had no incentive to support the new Iraq, ramping up of precise operations that targeted the key “irreconcilables,” the embrace of an enhanced comprehensive civil-military approach, increased attention to various aspects of the rule of law, improvements to infrastructure and basic services, and support for various political actions that helped bridge ethno-sectarian divides.

The ideas that enabled progress during the surge are, in many respects, the very ideas that could help Iraq’s leaders reverse the tragic downward spiral that we have seen in recent months. As we discovered in the run-up to the surge of 2007, a singular focus on counterterrorist operations will most likely fail to stem the violence gripping Iraq. If Iraq and the Iraqis are to have yet one more opportunity to move forward, they would likely find it useful to revisit the entire array of approaches pursued in 2007 and 2008. It is heartening, thus, to know that some of the veterans of the surge, American as well as Iraqi, are engaged in the effort to help Iraq determine and then pursue the initiatives needed to address the terrible increase in violence in that country. This is a time for them to work together to help Iraqi leaders take the initiative, especially in terms of reaching across the sectarian and ethnic divides that have widened in such a worrisome manner. It is not too late for such action, but time is running short.

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Turkey and its Post-Erdogan Government

Sinan Ülgen
Senior Fellow
Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies

Turks are set to go to the polls next month to choose for the first time the country’s President. Until now the President was elected by Parliament. The switch to a popular vote will mean a change in the nature of this institution that hitherto had few constitutional powers and was designed to ensure political neutrality at the top as a counterbalance to the wide scope of executive competences held by the government. The August elections will necessarily upend this system of institutional quasi neutrality with consequences for the future of Turkish politics but also for the regional role of Turkey.

Recep Tayyip Erdogan, Turkey’s Prime Minister since 2003 is the ruling AKP’s candidate for the presidency. Other candidates are Ekmeleddin Ihsanoglu, the former secretary general of the Organization of Islamic Countries. He entered the race as the joint candidate of the two largest opposition parties. There is also Selahattin Demirtaş, the Kurdish HDP’s candidate. Many expect Erdogan to also win this race given his continued popularity.

An Erdogan win would be a watershed for Turkish politics. It will bring to an end the series of Turkish governments with him at the helm. AKP will then need to find a new leader and the country will have a new Prime Minister. In a way, Erdogan’s uninterrupted rule over the country as its omnipotent top executive will then come to an end. Erdogan has made no secret of his plans to introduce a US style executive presidency. But the requirement of a constitutional amendment which he failed to carry through will force him to establish a modus operandi with the government and its new leadership at least until he gains enough support for changing the constitutional order. The relationship between an Erdogan presidency and the new AKP government is therefore set to be the first critical systemic challenge facing Turkey.

But with Erdogan’s mitigated heritage, the new government will soon face a series of more substantive challenges in the areas of domestic governance, economic performance and foreign policy.

Domestic Governance

With the difficulties now becoming fully apparent for the wider application of democratic rule in the Arab geography, Turkey’s success in establishing a flawed and yet functional democracy warrants a new examination. Since the transition to multi-party democracy in 1950, Turkey gradually improved its democratic credentials and each successive government strived to add a new layer to this construct. AKP’s most impressive achievement in this respect has been the elimination of the military’s undue political influence and the normalization of the civil-military relationship. Although as yet a work in progress, equally important will be a lasting settlement of the Kurdish problem. Based on this track record, it can easily be contended that Turkey has been able to establish a democratic tradition with a range of now mature institutions of representation such as robust political parties, a functional executive, a lively
Parliament and well performing local administrations.

But a genuinely liberal democracy also needs institutions of restraint designed to constrain the power of the executive. A free and independent judiciary, a pluralistic and free media, a vibrant and unthreatened civil society are the essential features of such a system of governance. That is where the performance of Turkey’s democracy has been less and less commendable. During his rule, Erdogan over-emphasized the importance of the institutions of representation to the detriment of the institutions of constraint. This was abetted by a vision which prioritized elections as the sole instrument of legitimacy. This fetishism of the national will, leading to majority rule proved to be inimical to democratic progress which in Turkey’s case clearly requires a strengthening of checks and balances and the institutional setup that underpins this aim. A related and equally important challenge is the tolerance to dissent. When leaders identify themselves with the national will, almost every form of dissent, be it violent or non-violent, tends to be viewed as an illegitimate attack on the elected government. The Gezi protests of the last summer were a real test of the country’s democratic maturity. Turkey failed this test. Instead of being celebrated as a world class and colorful demonstration of non-violent dissent, Gezi was turned into symbol of polarization. To overcome Turkey’s democratic drawbacks, the post-Erdogan’s government main task will be to re-establish a balance between the institutions of representation and the institutions of constraint also allowing for a more liberal understanding to emerge on the role of dissent in democratic societies.

**Economics**

Economics has an oversized importance in explaining the popularity of Erdogan. He oversaw during his tenure the sustained expansion of the national economy with per capita incomes increasing from $2 500 to $10 000. A less emphasized but equally critical factor has been his government’s continuous efforts for poverty alleviation, tackling income disparities and significant investments in social programs. Yet this economic success was achieved under an international economic conjuncture which channeled increasing amounts of financial flows to emerging markets. Instead of using this benign environment to implement difficult but necessary reforms to improve economic productivity, Turkish policy makers were lulled into complacency by this flow of money. But the easy times are now over. The end of the low interest policy in the US is affecting the financial resource allocation at the global level. As nominal yields start to improve, finance finds its way back to these more mature markets. With its over-reliance on the availability of cheap capital, Turkey’s economic performance has begun to suffer. The average growth rate in the 2002-2011 was 5.5%. In the last two years, it has dropped to 3%.

To avoid a protracted episode of lower growth and to escape the looming middle income trap, Turkey needs a substantial overhaul of its economic vision. The post-Erdogan government will need to address this gap by creating a new narrative about Turkey’s economic future in tandem with a serious commitment to hitherto sidelined structural reforms. Reforming the labor market, reducing the size of the informal economy, increasing the share of women in the working force and re-designing a national education system in light of the demands of a globalizing economy will be key to the success of this endeavor. Also to be able to attract much needed foreign direct investments, Turkish authorities will be forced to have a more visible agenda for fighting corruption and for strengthening the rule of law.

**Foreign Policy**

Just like its economic policies, the Erdogan governments’ foreign policies went through different phases, leaving the post-August government with a difficult heritage. The initial vision to normalize the country’s relationship with its Southern neighbors and to position Turkey as a regional power interested in advancing peace and prosperity in the region by emphasizing economic cooperation and mediation allowed Ankara to gain substantial ground. But then Turkish policy makers misinterpreted the country’s growing soft power and became over confident about their ability to shape the dynamics of the region. This failure of assessment became apparent with Ankara’s reaction to the now largely ill-fated Arab Spring. Turkey adopted a very assertive and reactive position to governments in particular in Syria and in Egypt that failed to embrace the wave of democratization believing that
it could force the “right” outcome by its confrontational stance. With its avid support to the civilian and military wing of the Syrian opposition and then to the Muslim Brotherhood, Ankara became a party to the disputes of the Middle East. Although the leadership defended this position by asserting to be on the “right side of history”, this was a radical departure from the established tenets of Turkish foreign policy which tended to prioritize caution and non-intervention in the region and alignment with the West. The debate over the normative aspects of foreign policy continues to this day but the balance sheet of this approach is rather negative with relations non-existent with the Syrian regime, and frayed with Iraq, Israel, Jordan, Egypt and even Saudi Arabia and the Emirates.

A second trend has been the shift in the institutional balance in foreign policy making between the Foreign Ministry and the Prime Ministry. In his last few years, Erdogan became a more visible foreign policy player and the Prime Ministry became much more involved in foreign policy decision making and even implementation with the different agencies attached to it including the overseas aid institution but also the intelligence services. During this period, Erdogan increasingly instrumentalized foreign policy for domestic purposes. In democratic societies, it is normal to see domestic concerns shaping foreign policy choices. But in Turkey’s case, this relationship was upended with foreign policy developments used to drive a domestic agenda. The unwavering and unconditional support to the Muslim Brotherhood may for instance have cost Turkey its influence its Egypt but it has helped Erdogan to cement the support of his constituency back at home.

The new government will therefore need to take stock of these trends and seek to recalibrate Turkey’s foreign policy. Already there is an effort in Ankara to regain the center ground and in a way to return to the pre-2011 period when Turkey’s star was rising. At the rhetorical level, criticism of the Syrian regime but also of the new Egyptian leadership is less frequent. Normalization with Israel is expected with a diplomatically negotiated draft awaiting Prime Minister Netanyahu’s approval. To illustrate its intent to play a more constructive regional role, the Erdogan government took a historic step in April of this year by unambiguously recognizing the tragedy that befell to the Ottoman Armenians in 1915. But more importantly the worsening security situation in the region, as illustrated by the recent territorial gains of ISIS, is leading Ankara to act more in concert with its established partners in the West and particularly the US.

Role of Turkey’s Western partners

With the onset of a non-Erdogan led Turkish government, Turkey’s partners in the West are due to re-assess the future of their relationship with Ankara. These last few years, Turkey’s relationship with the EU and the US has had their share of difficulties. The accession negotiations with the EU have stalled. In the past 4 years, only one chapter of the negotiations was opened. 13 of them remain blocked due to political difficulties over Cyprus and the legacy of the Sarkozy government in France. Moreover Eurosceptic parties have gained ground in Europe winning a record number of seats in the May elections of the European Parliament. Against this background, it is difficult to be optimistic on the near term future of the Turkey-EU relationship. Given the positive role that the EU dynamic has formerly played, it is certainly unfortunate that the EU lost its leverage and its transformational impact on Turkey. The challenge ahead will be to prevent a total loss of the accession momentum. One particularly useful policy initiative would be to deepen the Turkey-EU economic integration. The modernization of the Turkey-EU Customs Union which had entered into force in 1996 could achieve this aim. A new round of negotiations aimed to enlarge the scope of the Customs Union by including new sectors such as services and agriculture or new policy areas such as public procurement and dispute settlement could generate the needed momentum. It would also rekindle the interest of Turkey’s large and influential business community for the EU path.

This objective is also fully compatible with Turkey’s desire to become part of the enlarged transatlantic market to be set afoot by the Transatlantic Trade and Investment Partnership (TTIP). Turkey views TTIP as the economic pillar of the transatlantic community. For Turkish policy makers, TTIP should not be a purely bilateral arrangement between Brussels and Washington. This would be tantamount to introducing new divisions within the Transatlantic Alliance. Therefore TTIP should be designed in such
a way that once concluded between the EU and the US, it should be open to the accession of like-minded countries. Therefore Brussels and Washington should find the right institutional formula for ensuring this open door policy for TTIP. One solution would be to incorporate a suitably designed accession clause within the original agreement. Alternatively, the conclusion of a Turkey-US Free Trade Agreement would erode Turkish fears of being totally excluded from this ambitious economic project.

Going forward, for the new government faced with the intractable difficulties over its relations with the EU and having to operate in an increasingly hostile regional security environment, a sound and frictionless relationship with Washington will become even more indispensable. For Washington as well, having as an interlocutor a Turkish government that is more cooperative and more eager to listen will be an unrivalled advantage especially if despite the inclinations of the Obama administration an international intervention is due to be engineered to prevent the catastrophe of seeing ever larger bits of territory falling into disorder and lawlessness in Turkey’s southern neighborhood.
Dictators, Democrats and Extremists: Discerning U.S. Interests in the Middle East

PARTICIPANTS

August 14-20, 2014
Istanbul, Turkey

Members of Congress

Senator Barbara Boxer
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Representative Jim Cooper
and Mary Cooper
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and Steve Davis
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and Grace Nelson
Representative David Price
and Lisa Price
Representative Reid Ribble
and DeaNa Ribble
Representative Peter Roskam
Representative Chris Stewart
and Evie Stewart
Representative Henry Waxman
and Janet Waxman

Scholars/Experts

Hadi Al-Bahra,
President, Syrian Opposition Coalition, Istanbul

Adel Al-Toraifi
Deputy General Manager,
Al Arabiya television network, Dubai

Desmond Browne
Vice Chairman of the Nuclear Threat Initiative
Former United Kingdom Defense Secretary

Frederic C. Hof
Senior Fellow, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC

Ariel Levite
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,
Tel Aviv

Tarek Masoud
Professor, Harvard Kennedy School,
Cambridge, MA

Michael McFaul
Professor, Department of Political Science,
Stanford University, Stanford, CA;
Former U.S. Ambassador to Russia

Saad Mohseni
Group CEO and Chairman, MOBY Group, Dubai

Marwan Muasher
Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Amman;
Former Jordanian Foreign Minister
Maajid Nawaz
Co-Founder and Chairman, Quilliam, London

David Petraeus
General U.S. Army (Retired); Chair,
KKR Global Institute, New York
Former Commander of U.S. Forces in Iraq
and Afghanistan
Former Director of the Central Intelligence Agency

Karim Sadjadpour
Senior Associate, Middle East Program,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace,
Washington, DC

Randa Slim
Director, Initiative for Track II Dialogues,
Middle East Institute, Washington, DC and
Beirut, Lebanon

Sinan Ülgen
Director, EDAM (Center for Economics and
Foreign Policy Studies) and Carnegie Europe,
Istanbul

*Aspen Institute Staff*

Dan Glickman
Vice President
Executive Director, Congressional Program

Bill Nell
Deputy Director, Congressional Program

Carrie Rowell
Conference Director, Congressional Program

Douglas Farrar
Congressional Associate, Congressional Program

*Foundation Representatives*

Deana Arsenian
Vice President, International Program,
Carnegie Corporation of New York

Elizabeth C. Campbell
Vice President for Programs,
Rockefeller Brothers Fund, New York

Stephen Del Rosso
Director, International Programs,
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Tom Glaisyer
Program Director, Democracy Fund,
Washington, DC

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THURSDAY, AUGUST 14
American participants travel to Istanbul

FRIDAY, AUGUST 15
All participants arrive in Istanbul
Working dinner

SATURDAY, AUGUST 16
Welcome and Framework of the Conference

Dan Glickman, Executive Director, Aspen Institute Congressional Program

Whither Iraq?
Iraq’s territorial integrity and its future as a nation state are in serious jeopardy. The authoritarian, sectarian misrule of Iraqi Shiite Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and the festering conflict in neighboring Syria have fueled radical Sunni jihadist groups who managed to overtake the country’s second largest city, Mosul. This development has hastened the independence ambitions of Iraqi Kurdistan.

- How should radical groups such as ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant) be countered?
- Can and should Iraq’s territorial integrity be restored, and by whom?
- What are the linkages between the Syrian conflict and Iraq’s tumult? Is ISIS an ephemeral, containable nuisance or a serious threat capable of eventually taking over Baghdad?
- What U.S. policy errors contributed to Iraq’s current crisis? What are U.S. interests in Iraq, and which policies can best forward them?
- What are the interests and activities of neighboring countries such as Iran, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia?
• Who are viable alternatives to Prime Minister Maliki, and are any of them capable of placating the country’s disparate political forces?

• Is an independent Iraqi Kurdistan a viable state, and how would it be received in the region?

Gen. David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Retired)
Chairman, KKR Global Institute,
former commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan

How Iran’s Internal Dynamics Affects its Nuclear and Regional Ambitions

Despite the promise of a nuclear deal with Iran, hopes for a broader political détente between Washington and Tehran remain highly uncertain. The presidential election of pragmatic cleric Hassan Rouhani has not altered the fact that Tehran’s hardline unelected institutions - namely the office of the Supreme Leader and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps - continue to maintain control over the country’s most important political and coercive institutions, as well as its policies throughout the Middle East. How sustainable is this status-quo?

• What are the criteria for reaching a lasting nuclear deal between the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council—the U.S., Russia, China, the United Kingdom and France—plus Germany) and Iran? What happens if we fail to reach a durable accord, and what are the prospects for escalation?

• Can the U.S. successfully engage an Iranian regime whose top leadership continues to denounce Washington as its implacable enemy? What are possible areas of cooperation, and points of enduring confrontation?

• What are the interests and concerns of global and regional players such as China, Russia, Israel, and Saudi Arabia?

• What are Iran’s internal political and societal dynamics, including the balance of power between Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, President Rouhani, and the Revolutionary Guards?

• How have U.S. and international economic sanctions affected Iran’s economy and society, and what has been their effect, if any, on Tehran’s nuclear calculations?

Karim Sadjadpour, Senior Associate,
Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Working Lunch
Discussion continues between members of Congress and scholars on the challenges and opportunities for U.S. policy on extremism in the Middle East.

Working Dinner
Scholars and members of Congress will explore topics covered in the conference. Seating is arranged to expose participants to a diverse range of views and provide opportunity for a meaningful exchange of ideas. Scholars and lawmakers are rotated daily.
SUNDAY, AUGUST 17

The Syrian Crisis: Domestic and Regional Consequences

The embattled Alawite minority regime of Bashar al-Assad has seemingly grown stronger over the last year, fending off an increasingly sectarian popular uprising that has displaced over nine million people and taken the lives of over 170,000 Syrians. Though the Obama Administration initially called for Assad’s departure, it has seemingly downgraded its priorities to removing Assad’s chemical weapons stockpile. The U.S. has also been reluctant to provide significant military aid to the Syrian opposition for fear of empowering radical Islamist forces.

- Can Assad stay in power indefinitely, and what are they key sources of his support, both internally and externally?
- Who are the various rebel forces (including ISIS) fighting against Assad and who is supporting them? What are their goals?
- How successful was the effort to remove Assad’s chemical weapons stockpile?
- What are U.S. interests in Syria? What are the interests and activities of global powers such as Russia, as well as regional actors including Turkey, Iran, Saudi Arabia, and Qatar?
- What are the implications of continued civil strife in Syria for neighbors such as Lebanon, Jordan, Iraq, and Israel?

Frederic C. Hof, Resident Senior Fellow, Rafik Hariri Center for the Middle East, Atlantic Council, Washington, DC

Turkey’s Internal and External Challenges

Over the past year Turkey has been rocked by large-scale anti-government protests and a wide-reaching corruption scandal that has threatened the political fate of Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan. Meanwhile, Turkey’s efforts to unseat Syrian autocrat Bashar Assad have failed, and the country’s relations with the United States have grown increasingly fraught. What are Turkey’s internal political and societal dynamics, and how are they affecting the country’s foreign policies and its relationship with the United States?

- How stable is Turkey’s current political and economic order, and are there any viable alternatives to Prime Minister Erdogan and his long-ruling Justice and Development (AK) Party?
- What are Turkey’s regional ambitions, and how has its policies and priorities in Syria evolved over time?
- How will Turkey react to Iraq’s growing fragmentation, namely the possibility of an independent Kurdish state, which has major implications for Turkey’s Kurdish minority?
- What is the state of U.S.-Turkish relations, including sources of conflict and cooperation?

Sinan Ulgen, Director, (EDAM) Center for Economics and Foreign Policy Studies, Istanbul
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MONDAY, AUGUST 18

Egypt’s Authoritarian Drift
More than three years since the collapse of Hosni Mubarak, Egypt remains undemocratic and mired in political and economic instability. The summer 2013 popular protests that culminated in a military coup against Muslim Brotherhood President Mohammed al-Morsi have paved the way for a military-led government led by Field Marshall Abdel Fattah el-Sisi. Given the country’s internal tumult, can Egypt reclaim its traditional role as a leader of the Arab world?

• What is the political and economic agenda of President Sisi? Who are his key constituents?
• How precarious is Egypt’s economy, and has U.S. financial aid been eclipsed by Gulf countries such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates which are strongly anti-Muslim Brotherhood?
• What is the future of the Muslim Brotherhood? If it is forced under-ground, how serious is the danger of radicalism?
• Can Egypt reassert itself as the leading Arab power, or will its regional influence continue to be hindered by its internal tumult?
• What should be the goal of U.S. policy toward Egypt? Should the U.S. continue to provide aid to Egypt and, if so, should the aid be conditional?

Tarek Masoud, Professor, Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University

The (In)Stability of America’s Arab Allies
While longtime U.S. allies Saudi Arabia and Jordan have not experienced the same large-scale uprisings and destabilization of other Arab countries, both monarchies face a precarious domestic and regional environment. Jordan borders three conflict zones (Syria, Iraq, and the Palestinian territories), and its population increasingly comprises large and growing refugee communities from each of these places. Saudi Arabia is simultaneously supporting Sunni rebels in Syria against its regional rival Iran while trying to contain the threat of radical Sunni jihadists at home.

• Mindful of serious U.S.-Saudi policy differences on issues such as Syria, Egypt, Bahrain, and Iran, what is the future of U.S.-Saudi relations, particularly in light of America’s burgeoning domestic energy resources?
• Saudi King Abdullah is 90-years-old, while his successor, Crown Prince Salman, is 78-years-old. How is the succession process likely to play out and how will Salman differ from Abdullah?
• How vulnerable is the Hashemite Kingdom of Jordan to radical Ji-hadist groups such as ISIS? How has Jordan tried to mitigate the various conflicts on its borders?
• Given Jordan’s economy can it sustain its large and growing refugee population?
• How can the United States advocate for political reform in Jordan and Saudi Arabia without undermining the stability of either government?

Marwan Muasher, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, former Jordanian Foreign Minister, Amman

Adel Al-Toraifi, Deputy General Manager, Al-Arabiya television news network, Dubai

Working Lunch  The Russian Challenge

Russia’s involvement in the Middle East is greater than it has ever been since the collapse of the Soviet Union. What are Russia’s interests in the region, and to what extent are they a byproduct of U.S.-Russian relations? In light of U.S.-Russian tension, can Moscow be expected to continue to play a cooperative role in ongoing nuclear discussions with Iran? Has U.S. reluctance to intervene in Syria emboldened Russian President Vladimir Putin, in Ukraine and elsewhere?

Michael McFaul, Professor, Stanford University, Department of Political Science and former U.S. Ambassador to Russia

Working Dinner

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TUESDAY, AUGUST 19

Afghanistan: Return to chaos?

Afghanistan faces a presidential election dispute between the two main candidates hoping to succeed Hamid Karazi - Ashraf Ghani and Abdullah Abdullah - that has the potential to further fragment and destabilize an already fragile political order. As American-led combat forces are preparing to withdraw, can a return to chaos in Afghanistan be avoided?

• What are the main sources of instability in Afghanistan and to what extent are they driven by internal vs. external factors?
• What lessons can be drawn from America’s experience countering ex-tremism and state-building in Afghanistan?
• How strong is the Taliban, how have they evolved as an organization, and how should both foreign powers and Afghan moderates deal with them?
• Is there a risk that Afghanistan reverts back to the status-quo ante of pre-September 11, 2001?

Saad Mohseni, Group CEO and Chairman, MOBY Group, Dubai
An Overview of Extremism and Implications for U.S. Policy

Nearly every society in the greater Middle East, in varying degrees, faces the threat of Islamist radicalism, even while some governments have used these same radical forces as a tool of statecraft abroad. Due in part to ongoing conflicts in Syria and Iraq, sectarian tension - particularly between Sunnis and Shiites - remains an enormous source of instability, fueling both civil wars as well as proxy wars throughout the region.

• What are the backgrounds and motivations of individuals - often young men - who join extremist groups, and how are they recruited?
• How has identity evolved in the Middle East? Have religious and sectarian affiliations trumped nationalism?
• How do states manipulate extremist groups and sectarianism for both internal and external political expediency?
• To what extent is the festering Israeli-Palestinian dispute still considered a major cause of Islamist radicalism?
• Which policies employed by both regional and Western government, including the United States, have successfully contained or reversed the spread of extremism, and which policies have exacerbated it? What has been the track record of drone warfare?
• What are the prospects for pluralism in the Middle East? Has the power of radical political Islam peaked? What are future trend lines?

Maajid Nawaz, Co-Founder and Chairman, Quilliam, London

Gen. David H. Petraeus, U.S. Army (Retired) Chairman, KKR Global Institute
former commander of U.S. forces in Iraq and Afghanistan

Working Lunch The Crisis in Syria: A View From the Opposition

Hadi al-Bahra, President, Syrian Opposition Coalition, Istanbul

Working Dinner

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WEDNESDAY, AUGUST 20

American participants return to the United States

Additional Resource Participants:

Desmond Browne
Lord Browne of Ladyton, Vice Chairman, Nuclear Threat Initiative,
Former United Kingdom Defense Secretary, London

Ariel Levite
Senior Associate, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Tel Aviv

Karim Sadjadpour
Senior Associate, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, Washington, DC

Randa Slim
Director, Initiative for Track II Dialogues, Middle East Institute, Beirut