Diplomacy and Extremism: Iran, ISIS and U.S. Interests in an Unraveling Middle East

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# Table of Contents

Rapporteur's Summary ................................................................. 1  
*Karim Sadjadpour*

Syria, Iraq, ISIS and the Region: Implications for the U.S. ......................... 9  
*Ryan Crocker*

*Amy Myers Jaffe*

What Should We Make of the JCPOA? ............................................... 17  
*Ariel Levite*

America’s Middle East Challenge .................................................... 23  
*Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mehrdad Saberi*

Nuclear Deal, the Road to Peace between Iran and the West ....................... 29  
*Seyed Hossein Mousavian*

Pluses and Minuses of the Outlined Iran Nuclear Deal .............................. 31  
*George Perkovich*

Saudi Arabia: The Kingdom Today ................................................... 35  
*Ali al Shihabi*

The Yeminis Are Coming (to Saudi Arabia) ........................................... 39  
*Ali al Shihabi*

How to Get Egypt’s Generals Back on Our Side ...................................... 43  
*Steven A. Cook*

The Islamic State in Libya: U.S. Policy Options ...................................... 47  
*Frederic Wehrey*
Collected Essays ................................................................. 51
Nicholas Burns

Regional Impact of U.S. Policy toward Iraq and Syria ............................. 57
Tamara Cofman Wittes

Why Democracy in Egypt Still Matters .............................................. 63
Tamara Cofman Wittes

The Coming Disintegration of Iraq ..................................................... 65
Col. Joel Rayburn

Conference Participants ................................................................. 69

Conference Agenda ................................................................. 71
Rapporteur’s Summary

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The Aspen Institute’s Congressional Program conference on extremism in the Islamic world, titled Diplomacy and Extremism: Iran, ISIS and U.S. Interests in an Unraveling Middle East convened in Montreal, Canada, from May 26-31, 2015. Participating were 21 members of Congress along with 15 scholars. The conferees met on the cusp of an agreement being reached with Iran that would curb its pursuit of nuclear weapons and end the embargo, with profound implications for the region. 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 Syria

An expert on Iraq contended that we need a new regional order and a new political covenant for Iraq. The recent fall of Ramadi to ISIS reflected the failure of the post-2003 nation-building project in Iraq and the current state of affairs is completely unworkable. The reality is that only the Kurdish Peshmerga and Shia militias have been confronting ISIS; the Iraqi military lacks the same presence and capability.

ISIS thrives on the broken politics of Iraq/Syria and the existing political economy of corruption. Moving forward, the Shia militias need to be incorporated into the state and major religious centers in the region (such as Al Azhar in Egypt and Najaf in Iraq) need to reject ISIS, saying “not in the name of Islam”. Though American aid and support is paramount—Erbil would likely have fallen without U.S. air support—no amount of American power or money can take the place of local responsibility.

A former senior U.S. official said that United States policy choices have failed to fully appreciate the historic context of the Middle East. He described it as a region “whose yesterday denominates both the past and the future.” For example, the 1982 Hama massacre [in which 20,000 were killed] set the stage for the Syrian uprising in 2011.

The region is currently home to four failed states (Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Iraq) and oscillates between “hot” and “cold” wars, most notably the sectarian-inspired “cold war” between Saudi Arabia and Iran. Despite the great upheavals instigated by the 2011 Arab Uprisings, the era of the nation-state in the Middle East is far from over; in fact, many of the conflicts that we see are state-state confrontations.

The former official noted that defeating ISIS requires addressing the root cause: the disenfranchisement of Sunni communities in Iraq and Syria. One option is the creation of a regional force in Sunni-majority areas that can take responsibility for confronting ISIS. Unfortunately, the United States’ post-2003 construction in Iraq proved unsuccessful.
A former U.S. official also noted that American priorities must first be defined and then policy makers can determine the best way to further them. In crude simplicity, U.S. priorities should be to make good things happen for the country and prevent bad things. Currently, the U.S. is less engaged in the Middle East than at any time since 1945. Though Washington has been justifiably cautious in a region with a fraught history of Western interventions, disengagement in the region has and will continue to produce equally great consequences. Iraq is a prime example of the dangers of both engagement and disengagement.

A U.S.-based expert on Iraq noted that one of the weaknesses of the U.S. fight against ISIS is the fact that it’s directed out of Kuwait and Tampa (CENTCOM), rather than Iraq itself. Today, the Shia militias that once fought the United States are now leading the fight against ISIS after having been legitimized and largely incorporated into the current Iraqi government. Iran has a strategic interest in the failure of the U.S. assistance program to the Iraqi army and prefers a weak Iraqi army at the mercy of Shia militias.

Though ISIS is the shared enemy of the United States and the Shia militias in Iraq, these militias would also like to see the United States expelled from the region; Shia militias have also captured, taken hostage, and executed Americans.

Several members of Congress argued that U.S. efforts to bring democracy to the Middle East unintentionally kicked a hornet’s nest of sectarianism and tribalism and consequently Americans are increasingly opposed to greater U.S. financial or military involvement in Iraq and elsewhere. One representative asked if arming the Free Syria Army would be as futile as the United States’ efforts to arm the Iraqi army, which not only failed, but led to these weapons falling to the hands of ISIS. Another representative noted that while violence is not unique to Islam, great powers (British, Ottomans, Romans, etc.) have all failed to stabilize the Middle East, which leads to a natural question: What are the United States’ interests in the region and why should we be invested in this region compared to all the others?

**Iran and its nuclear capability**

An American nuclear policy expert opened the session by arguing the goal of the Iran nuclear negotiations is to affirm an Iranian decision not to pursue a nuclear weapon and deter it from breaking an agreement. Iran needs to get something in return for a deal, or else they will have little incentive to uphold a deal. In turn, the consequences of Iran violating this agreement must be made abundantly clear. Though some worry that Iran may export its nuclear technology, Iran has paid several hundred billion dollars for an antiquated nuclear program: hardly a model for others that may harbor nuclear ambitions. Sanctions have produced a lose-lose dynamic in that they were destroying Iran’s economy, but they were not curtailing its nuclear program.

One scholar outlined several reasons why the P5+1 nuclear negotiations have been successful: 1) The U.S. position moved from no enrichment to no bomb (“the previous decade of talks failed because Washington insisted on zero enrichment”); 2) The 2013 election of Iranian President Rouhani and appointment of Foreign Minister Zarif; 3) The commencement of direct dialogue between the U.S. and Iran; 4) Iran’s desire to rid itself of economic sanctions; 5) The U.S. understanding that increased sanctions resulted in increased enrichment; 6) A U.S.-Iranian understanding that they must cooperate in a changing Middle East.

The Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) framework was based on three key principles: transparency, limitations, and sanctions relief. Moving forward, challenges include: Inspections, which Iranians dispute beyond the Additional Protocol of the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); Research and Development (“Iranians do not understand why they should be banned from doing scientific work”); and the sequence of sanctions relief.

Rouhani, who promised relief from the sanctions, has one year left to deliver on the economy. Elections for the Assembly of Experts and the parliament are coming up and conservatives will likely win significant majorities if a bad deal is reached or sanctions are belatedly removed. Conversely, moderate voices would be empowered by a successful deal. A successful deal will also mean continued U.S.-Iran engage-
ment, while failure could lead to the cessation of direct talks between the two countries. A nuclear deal would certainly increase U.S.-Iran regional cooperation for the better.

One expert contended that current parameters are a recipe for a “deeply flawed deal”, outlining the following fundamental flaws:

1. The U.S. is overly eager to reach a nuclear deal;
2. Iran does not have legitimate fuel needs for the purposes of producing nuclear energy;
3. The United States has allowed Iran to become a legitimate nuclear threshold state;
4. The incentive structure to ensure compliance is under contention and very weak, making “snap back” sanctions unlikely;
5. If successful, the deal will only yield a severely strained inspections regime.

The only way this can be fixed is if Iran transforms its nuclear program into a purely civilian energy program and the U.S. Congress accelerates sanctions relief. It was argued that there is no economic justification for Iran’s enrichment activity. Economically, Iran would require at least 20 power plants and advanced technology, of which it has neither. Iran’s six thousand centrifuges cannot produce enough fuel for a reactor. This is only enough for a weapon.

Several members expressed the view that Iran’s nefarious role in the region is exactly what makes a nuclear deal necessary; a nuclear-armed power creating mischief in the region would be far more dangerous. Another noted that if Iran wanted a nuclear bomb, no one could prevent it from acquiring one. Others also noted that it’s important tactically for the United States not to be perceived as the intransigent party and be blamed for a failure in talks; this would unravel international unity. One participant remarked that they key question to ask is “will the United States be better or worse off following a nuclear deal?”

First, the United States needs to more deeply understand the power structure in Iran. This structure does not easily allow for political, economic, or social change and when reformist governments like Rouhani’s come to power, they ultimately fail to bring about substantial change; the real power lies with conservative clerical and military institutions. The previous Khatami government failed because it lacked the blessing of the top Iranian leadership, and Rouhani’s government will likely meet the same fate.

Most significantly to the U.S., Rouhani’s government lacks the approval of the top leadership to engage the U.S. and achieve a tangible nuclear deal. The hardline establishment initially supported entering negotiations for economic reasons, not because negotiations fell within their understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s interests.

Second, like the USSR in 1970s, Iran’s external power projection is not commensurate with its internal capabilities and the country is currently facing a major governance crisis. Khamenei used to praise sanctions for helping Iran become self-sufficient, rather than blaming them for hardship. But there is currently $150 billion worth of unfinished projects. The ministry of petroleum owes $35 billion in outstanding contracts and an impending water crisis may spark mass emigration. The country is also suffering from low birth rates.

It was argued that regime change in Iran is neither possible nor feasible, as there is no alternative to the current Iranian political structure. That said, there is now a generational clash in Iran between the younger, more open-minded generation and the generation of the 1979 revolution. The vast majority of students are not ideological. Even conservatives in Iran are ideologically fatigued due to governance failures and inefficiencies.

Regarding policy recommendations for the U.S., several experts felt that the negotiations must continue. The sanctions regime can change some of Iran’s regional policies but not Iran’s hostility toward Israel, which is the greatest impediment to U.S.-Iran normalization. Opposition toward Israel is a political obsession among Iran’s elites, not socially driven from the grassroots.

One specific suggestion put forth was for Congress

**Iran internally**

One academic opined that U.S. nuclear policy should address the future of Iran, based on two underlying propositions.
to improve the Voice of America’s Persian News Network (PNN), which has the ability to reach tens of millions of Iranians but is woefully mismanaged.

One participant asserted that the Revolutionary Guards, which are hostile to the U.S. interests, does not fall under the responsibility of the elected government of Iran. How should the United States deal with a government that lacks the power to rein in key elements behind its rogue behavior? An analyst added that, should a nuclear deal be reached, the U.S. military would need to reposition itself in the Gulf. This could alter the Iranian perception of U.S. military aid in the Gulf, which would exacerbate Iranian proxy activities.

One representative said Iran was one of the few potential bright spots in an otherwise dark region. Iranians held candle light vigils after September 11. There seems to be some openness to change in Iran and nuclear negotiations are the only way to do it; continued dialogue between the U.S. and Iran is important given the sordid history between them.

**Saudi Arabia**

One expert noted that the region is composed of status quo powers and anti-status quo powers. Status quo powers want a continued U.S. presence in the region, whereas anti-status quo powers are either trying to fight or co-opt the U.S.. The United States, which is more or less a bumbling elephant in the region, inherited the role of upholding the status quo, which is exactly what provoked bin Laden and al-Qaeda’s ire. Given its current role, the United States should help status quo powers to reform and widen the number of beneficiaries of these powers’ rule.

It was argued that al-Qaeda and ISIS are different faces of the same phenomenon. Radical Islam is simply the latest, most convenient tool for anti-status quo revolutionary forces, which realized after the 1979 Iranian revolution that religion is an effective mobilizing force.

Saudi Arabia is the strongest force still preserving the status quo in the region, particularly by holding up countries like Egypt and Jordan. Though a “benevolent dictatorship” by regional standards, the governance system needs to be brought into the 21st century and to increase its accessibility to the average citizen. One scholar contended that democracy is not necessarily the answer in Saudi Arabia but the system needs independent checks and balances and the justice system needs to be applied to the elite. This is where the United States can pressure Gulf elites, as Arab leaders overestimate American power in the region.

Saudi Arabia is growing increasingly vulnerable and its patronage system is clearly unsustainable. Over 70% of the Saudi population is under 29 and unless status quo powers pursue sensible reform, they will be overthrown. At the moment, there are approximately 15,000 royals and well-connected elites, and about 100,000 from this exclusive group receive government paychecks. The royals need to be downsized to about 5,000. There is also the issue of Saudi Arabia’s disenfranchised Shia minority, which is only 20% of the population but 90% of the population of the oil-rich eastern province and Saudi Aramco employees.

A member asked what tools the United States possesses to push reform in Saudi Arabia. Another noted that the United States’ first instinct is regime change, but maybe we should be advocating incremental change instead. There is an inherent tension between what Arabs should be doing indigenously and what should be pushed from outside. Another representative raised the issue that Arab officials have never been receptive to U.S. advice and that the Saudi government stoked sectarianism against Shia, thus enabling sectarian violence, such as the recent bombing of a Shia mosque in Qatif.

One expert observed that only three to five men make major decisions in Saudi Arabia (including the King and two crown princes) so it’s important to know whom to influence. The United States has many sticks given the vast amount of military protection Saudi Arabia receives. It is essential that the United States push reform on its autocratic allies in the region now; once an uprising occurs, it’s too late. Regarding Saudi Arabia, the Kingdom has depended on the United States turning a blind eye to corruption and repression of women. One suggestion is to sanction Saudi Arabia for its prohibition on female drivers. This restriction is rooted in the Wahabi establishment, not the Saudi government.

Many in the region are currently trying to secure their religious base, though this is not new. Saudi
Arabia used religion to fight Arab nationalism and communism, which empowered the Saudi religious establishment. These religious forces were further indulged after the Iranian revolution and the Saudis have long funded the spread of extremist ideology throughout the region. One participant argued that Boko Haram, the Taliban, Arhar al-Sham, and other terrorist groups have all been inspired by Saudi Wahabism.

It’s essential that the Gulf Cooperation Council include Yemen in federal structure. Rising powers versus weak powers create instability and the GCC needs to be one block. This is something that the United States can push for, especially because remittances will be sent back to support Yemen. Many of Yemen’s problems began when Saudi Arabia expelled the Yemenis for supporting Saddam Hussein. Bringing Yemen back into the GCC can start to rectify some of Yemen’s problems. That said, the Saudi-led military operation in Yemen was very popular in the Kingdom—for once people saw the country as punching, rather than being punched.

**Egypt**

An expert on Egypt remarked that Egyptians have been chanting the same slogans of “bread, freedom, social justice” for over a century. American and others’ confidence in Egyptians’ ability to transition to democracy was misplaced. In the past year, President Sisi has declared the Muslim Brotherhood a terrorist organization and judges are issuing mass death sentence after death sentence. The country is teetering economically and surviving only due to the largesse of Gulf countries, namely the United Arab Emirates. Egyptians can’t even keep the lights on and tourism, one of its main industries, has dropped precipitously.

Egypt is by no means stable, but the current order could last for a while. This highly repressive order is likely to breed extremism, even as the Egyptian government is confronting an insurgency in the Sinai that has declared its allegiance to ISIS. Egypt is no longer a constructive factor in regional politics; given his track record thus far, Sisi wants to rule, not to govern.

A representative asked if we reached the end of the utility of U.S. aid to Egypt. U.S. values have not only been offended, but the country is building instability for itself. Yet is docking military aid to Egypt going to make it more democratic or more unstable? Another representative asserted there seem to be five islands of stability in the Middle East with heartburn: Turkey, Israel, Egypt, Iran, and Saudi Arabia, while the rest is chaos. Is the best course to work with the former or to push them to latter?

U.S. interests in Egypt are 1) expedited passage through the Suez Canal, 2) Egypt’s leadership role as a quarter of the population of the Arab world, 3) and permission for overflights to the Gulf. That said, there seems to be waning return on the American investment in Egypt. As one member noted, actions speak louder than words, and though Sisi often says the right things, the regime’s actions say otherwise.

The Egypt expert argued that the poor treatment of women in Egypt warrants a U.S. policy intervention. In a 2013 UN study 99% of women said they experienced sexual harassment, 75% monthly, 50% on a daily basis. Mubarak used sexual harassment as a means of political control; while some allege that the Sisi government has engaged in state-sponsored rape. The country desperately needs educational reform and a competitive governance model as well. The U.S. Congress is in internal disagreement about the priority of these values, making it difficult to preach those values overseas.

A member argued that soft power and American values need to be interwoven in everything we do; Washington has allowed soft power instruments—like USAID—to wither and now the priority focus is national security. Another member lamented that powerful women have not risen up in outrage against global violence against women. Another suggested that the U.S. condition aid to Egypt based on treatment of women, while a third said that it is in the U.S. interest (and part of its values) to cultivate strong international partners that respect women.

**Libya**

An expert on Libya argued that the country is experiencing the legacy of forty-two years of authoritarianism; deposed dictator Moamar Ghaddafi didn’t leave behind a workable government. The revolution against him was bottom-up and decentralized.
Elections following Ghaddafi’s ouster were premature. There is no effective police or army, so the current conflict is generally between remnants of old order versus the young revolutionary camp (which includes Islamists). The various Libyan militias do not exceed 1,000 members and their artillery mostly consists of anti-aircraft guns mounted on pickup trucks.

Libya is still grappling with who has monopoly over coercion and has fallen victim to “de-baathification,” i.e. anyone previously associated with the Ghaddafi regime has been purged from receiving a salary, pension, etc. The July 2013 counterrevolution in Egypt that brought current Egyptian president Sisi and the military back to power emboldened Libya’s old officers. “Operation Dignity,” led by General Khalifa Hifter, has embarked on an ambitious plan to purge Libya of Islamists and is supported by Egypt and the U.A.E.

The country is currently divided by two competing claims of authority: the elected government and House of Representatives in the East (controlled by Hifter) and the Islamist-dominated parliament backed by Turkey and Qatar in the western city of Tripoli. Amidst this chaos, ISIS is filling a vacuum and has established a presence in three Libya provinces. The one positive point is that ISIS has not yet gained access to oil reserves.

The United States’ position is to end the civil war and to push both sides to form a unity government. The Saudi-Qatar rapprochement has injected renewed hope into this goal, but the U.S. is struggling to confront the terrorist problem in Libya and determine how to work through non-state actors.

A member noted that the attack on the American consulate in Benghazi has paralyzed U.S. policy discussions on Libya’s future. Another representative contended that Libya occurred in the context of Obama not wanting to engage in nation-building exercises; The EU and UN were supposed to play a larger role in Libya.

The analyst responded that the United States does not understand the sociology and landscape of militias. This is part of a larger U.S. weakness, in that we are used to interacting with other states as formal entities, and not with tribes, militias and informal leaders. A former U.S. diplomat remarked that ambassadors often struggle over whether to put young officers in the field, as the best intelligence is produced by young diplomats in field, not huge bureaucracies in Washington. On this note, should the United States re-open its embassy in Libya? The analyst responded that it is hard to assess, but that the United States currently receives intelligence from Libyans who cross the border to Tunisia or Egypt.

Current challenges include spillover from the conflict, loss of face to the Russians and Chinese over Libya, insecure borders, smuggling, and the rapid rate at which Libyans are burning through their oil reserves; 97% of Libya’s population gets a salary from the state. Moving forward, the United States should place its focus and energies on institutions, not intolerant strongmen. Declining oil revenues presents a danger to Libya. When the Iraqi economy collapsed, it made it very cheap for al-Qaeda and other groups to put young men on their payroll.

U.S. Strategic Options

A former U.S. diplomat argued that there is not an inherent conflict between American values and interests in the Middle East. The U.S. is strongest when it focuses on ideals; prioritizing stability and focusing on so-called islands of stability is not a panacea. Moving forward, the U.S. must ask whether strong men enhance stability or generate more instability?

The region is currently undergoing a wave of disorder, but many of the states in the region were weak prior to the 2011 Arab Uprisings. The old model of secular Arab dictators is gone and not coming back. Arab populations do want order and stability, but there is a limit to what they will tolerate. Monarchies have proved the most resilient because they have more legitimacy and money to co-opt their people. ISIS is the symptom of a bigger problem that requires a political as well as military solution.

The post-2011 Middle East is characterized by a “great game” characterized by three factors:

- Sunni versus Shia (Iran versus Saudi Arabia)
- Secularist versus Islamist
- Jihadis versus everyone else (who wants to live a decent life)
Many Arab states are currently preoccupied with either Iran or the Muslim Brotherhood. The United States has struggled to formulate a coherent regional policy to this new reality because many of its allies currently advance incoherent regional policies and are struggling to act collectively. Some regimes have been more assertive than others, which has created increased space for ISIS and al-Qaeda. The impending nuclear deal with Iran will not have a major impact on these regional dynamics.

In response, the U.S. should adopt three hedging strategies:

1. Cooperative, transactional interests with our Arab partners. The United States should be clear that many of the actions taken by Arab allies go against both their own interests and ours.

2. Cooperation with allies that share our values, such as Israel and Tunisia.

3. Bolster the beleaguered voices pushing for coexistence, tolerance, and pluralism. They should be supported diplomatically and financially by the United States.

A second expert put forth three overarching realities that the United States needs to keep in mind over the next decade:

1) The Middle East will face another decade or so of instability, violence and revolution. Unrest is most likely in Iraq, the Levant, and North Africa, though it may spread to the Gulf as well. The region has just begun to grapple with deeply rooted social revolutions.

2) The Middle East is vital to the United States. The preponderance of U.S. interests will soon shift to East Asia (China and India), but even if the United States is energy secure and independent, its major global partners (EU, India, etc.) will remain dependent on Middle East energy. Long time Arab allies, as well as Israel, cannot simply be forsaken, particularly in the face of expanding Iranian influence in the region.

3) The United States is the most important outside actor in the region and has far more credibility and trust than China or Russia.

Challenges and recommendations:

1) The United States should reassert the Carter Doctrine and emphasize its concrete interests in the Gulf. This will require a continued struggle over balancing human rights/democracy with security.

2) ISIS is not an existential threat to the United States, but it could be. Current administration rhetoric is to defeat ISIS, but the policy has been to contain it and prevent it from spreading into Kurdistan or threatening the Haditha and Mosul dams. Outside of these key areas, ISIS seems to be growing (Palmyra, Ramadi, etc.). If the United States opts to stretch beyond containment, it will have to increase the aerial campaign and ask the hard question as to whether to commit special forces on the ground.

3) The Syrian crisis remains intractable, but it can—and will—get worse if nothing is done. More than 260,000 Syrians have been killed and more than 11 million (half the country) have been displaced. Syria represents the most urgent humanitarian crisis in the world today and it cannot be resolved simply through urgent diplomatic efforts. The United States should bite the bullet and negotiate with the Russians and other regional powers to broker a transition agreement.

4) President Obama is right to try to negotiate a nuclear deal with Iran. The best way to resolve this issue is through a negotiated solution. That said, it is not in the American interest to facilitate the expansion of Iranian power; it’s not inconsistent to negotiate a nuclear deal and arrange a regional coalition against Iran. The United States must also remember that Qassem Soleimani represents the Iranian government more than Rouhani or Zarif.

5) It is difficult to exercise power in the Middle East at the moment. Obama’s policy of “do no harm” is wise, but pulling back to this extent so quickly has damaged U.S. credibility. The United States should not have pulled out of Iraq abruptly. We essentially left it to the Iranians, who would be happy with a divided, weak
Iraq. The United States no longer has the same respect among regional allies and needs to do a better job of taking the diplomatic lead. A step in the right direction would be determining the proper disposition of U.S. power in the region ("diplomats on point, military on re-serve").

A representative noted that both speakers primarily discussed military, rather than economic themes. What about young men with frustrated ambitions? Another member added that the American public has been exhausted by war in the Middle East and that the human cost has been too high.

There are different prescriptions for different areas. In the Gulf, for example, the problem is less economic and more political/security oriented. Economics play a much greater role in North Africa. The unprecedented tumult in the Middle East is also directly correlated with an unprecedented leadership void in the region.

Another official noted that the Iranian nuclear negotiations have taken priority over all other initiatives in the Middle East for the last four years. In this context, there are two things that Congress can do: put in place clear legislation that authorizes the use of force and produce regular budgets with regular appropriations. Functional governance is also crucial; in countries with functional governments, terrorism is a marginal problem, rather than an existential threat. Additionally, the issues where the United States needs Iran’s cooperation the most, such as Syria, are likely to be the areas where Iran is least willing to compromise.

The session concluded with member comments on how terrorism breeds on failed states, the persecution of religious minorities, U.S. versus Iranian interests, and the role of the United States in the Middle East over the next decade.
Always a turbulent region, the Middle East is experiencing upheavals unprecedented in its post-WWI history. For almost 100 years, while mandates gave way to monarchies and monarchies to republics, the state structure of the area remained intact. Today, there are three failed states—Libya, Syria, and Yemen. Others, like Lebanon, Iraq, Afghanistan, and Pakistan, may collapse. It is no coincidence that as states have weakened, non-state actors have moved to occupy the space governments once controlled. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State (ISIS) have erupted on the Middle East stage, challenging not only regional governments and the West, but also the state system itself.

Today’s events, as chaotic and unpredictable as they may seem, have histories. The recent history of Syria is especially instructive. When popular demonstrations in the spring of 2011 were met by violent regime repression, pundits and politicians in the west swiftly adopted the slogan that its leader, Bashar al-Assad, must go. Corrupt and authoritarian, he would suffer the fate of other dictators: Mubarak in Egypt, Qaddafi in Libya, Ben Ali in Tunisia. But Assad and Syria have different histories, and Assad wasn’t going. To understand the differences, one needed to go back nearly 30 years, to Syria’s fourth largest city of Hama in early 1983. There, Bashar al-Assad’s father Hafez cornered the violent Syrian Muslim Brotherhood in the old city of Hama, ringed it with armor and artillery and eliminated the Brothers as a threat to his regime. In the process, he also eliminated some 10,000 – 15,000 of Hama’s Sunni Muslim inhabitants. It was an episode virtually no American remembered and no Syrian ever forgot. The Assads, father and son (Bashar took power after his father’s death in 2000), knew a day of reckoning might come, and spent decades perfecting a police state with multiple, interlocking security and intelligence services that would insure the minority Alawi (an offshoot of Shia Islam) regime could survive Sunni retribution. That it has was not unforeseeable.

Also not unforeseeable was the sectarian radicalization of many in the Sunni community because of the slaughter in Hama. That armed opposition to the Assad regime was quickly dominated by Jibhat al-Nusra, Syria’s al-Qaeda affiliate, and the even more extreme Islamic State, was not especially surprising.

The Islamic State has its own history. It rose in Iraq, not Syria, growing out of al-Qaeda in Iraq (AQI) which appeared in the wake of the 2003 invasion (AQI’s first leader, Abu Musa’ib al-Zarqawi from Jordan, was in Iraq before the invasion, apparently without the knowledge of Saddam Hussein). The Islamic State leader today, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, was an early member of AQI and was an American prisoner at Camp Bucca in Iraq.

At the height of the U.S. military surge in Iraq in 2007 – 2008, coalition forces damaged and degraded AQI but could not destroy it. AQI maintained a foothold in Mosul and along the Euphrates river valley, strongholds of ISIS now. The coalition troop surge and AQI’s own excesses against Sunni populations in Iraq put the organization on the defensive. At the
same time, anti-Sunni sectarianism on the part of the Shia-dominated government in Baghdad, left enough political space in Sunni areas for AQI to survive. Now it flourishes in these same areas.

ISIS has allies. The most powerful and improbable is the Army of the Men of the Naqshibandiya (known by its Arabic acronym JRTN), composed of former officers from Saddam Hussein’s military. The lightning advance of ISIS through northern Iraq in 2014 owed much to the experience of JRTN in maneuvering troops. But it is an alliance of convenience, driven by hatred of the Shia ascendancy in Iraq rather any ideological affinity.

Ethnic and sectarian identities and conflicts have shaped Iraqi politics since 2003. Sectarianism has always been present in Iraq; until 2003 this translated as Sunni dominance. Those charged with the development of new Iraqi political structures in the wake of the invasion (I was one of them) were informed by history. When Iraq became a British mandate after the defeat of the Ottoman Empire in WWI, the British largely preserved Ottoman structures and their inherent Sunni ascendancy. One result was a Shia revolt, spurred by a fatwa from the Grand Ayatollah of the day in Najaf. We were determined to avoid a repeat, and the first Iraqi political structure to emerge in 2003, the Governing Council, had 13 Shia among its 25 members, a majority. Though they ranged from communists to clerics, their sectarian identity signaled a new era in Iraq’s political history. The Coalition Provisional Authority did not create sectarian and ethnic identities; it simply recognized them. It was clear at the time that of Iraq’s three main communities, Arab Sunnis, Arab Shia and Kurds, the Sunnis would be the relative losers with the prospect of a Sunni revolt instead of one from the Shia.

The new Iraq is a federal state, at Kurdish insistence. The Kurdish Region already has substantial autonomy, and the collapse of central government authority in the north in 2014 has sparked speculation that autonomy may be followed by independence. It is a hard truth, however, that there are more nationalisms than nations and the Kurds have been divided among four countries that have historically opposed independence, often with force. The weakening of the Iraqi state may present a new opportunity for the Kurds. A drive for Kurdish independence in northern Iraq could have far reaching and not necessarily positive consequences for an already destabilized state and region. But there are also factors that may work against Kurdish independence. Perhaps the most important is economic: the Kurdish Region relies heavily on the 17% of budget revenues apportioned to it by the central government in Baghdad.

As grave as Iraq’s internal problems are, they are exacerbated by its neighbors. Iran plays a particularly significant role. The Islamic Republic has supported armed groups in Arab states for decades, most notably Hizballah in Lebanon and now Syria. They have followed a similar strategy in Iraq, backing groups like the Ba’th Corps, Jaysh al-Mahdi, Kataib Hizballah and Asa’ib Ahl al-Haq. All of these militias were engaged in the recent campaign to wrest control of Tikrit from ISIS, supported by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Quds Force, the Islamic Republic’s chief instrument for projecting power beyond its borders.

With Iran and its Iraqi proxies engaged in the fight against ISIS, some have speculated that the US and Iran have the same objectives. Once again, history can be very important in making a reasoned judgment. Iran and Iraq fought a brutal, eight year ground war from 1980 to 1988 in which thousands died to gain a few hundred yards of land in campaigns the world has not seen since the trench warfare of WWI. Some on both sides, like Iranian Quds Force commander Qasim Solimani, served through the entire war. Solimani was an infantry officer on the southern Fao front, the bloodiest sector in the conflict. Final victory eluded Solimani and his nation which reluctantly accepted a truce in 1988. Ayatollah Khomeini likened it to a poisoned chalice. For Solimani and others in the Iranian leadership, the situation now in Iraq presents an opportunity for Iran to achieve that victory, not through the defeat of ISIS which poses little threat to Iran but through the permanent division of Iraq into Kurdish, Shia and Sunni entities. A fractured Iraq would never again threaten Iran, and Shia militias operating in Sunni areas with Iranian support are a powerful weapon to produce those fractures.

All of this presents formidable challenges to Iraqi prime minister al-Abadi. Although from the same Shia religious party as his predecessor Nuri al-Maliki,
al-Abadi appears to understand the importance of steps to reverse the sectarian policies of al-Maliki. He has worked to form a more inclusive government and to take steps such as requesting American air support at Tikrit, something opposed by Iran and its allies. How he battles ISIS going forward may be as important as the battles themselves. The liberation of Sunni areas must be done by national forces with Sunni support.

So what does all this mean for US interests and options?

First, ISIS. It is not the Wehrmacht, but it is by no means a spent force. It has shown extraordinary resilience in the past and poses an extraordinary threat for the future with thousands of fighters with western, including US, passports and no need for visas to enter our country. But its greatest threat is in the region, with a de facto state in parts of Syria and the potential to shatter a very fragile Iraq. Coalition air strikes have damaged ISIS; they will not defeat it. The collapse of the Jabhat ash-Shamiyah, an anti-jihadist coalition initially supported by Ankara and Riyadh is further evidence that at the current time, there is no credible third force in Syria, opposed to ISIS and the regime. A coherent fight against ISIS must be led from Iraq.

Iraq. The development of events in Tikrit have created an opportunity for the Iraqi government and the US to gain ground against ISIS while reweaving a badly torn domestic political fabric. For more than a decade, AQI/ISIS have found space in the rifts between the Sunni and Shia communities. The fight for Sunni Tikrit, initially led by extremist Shia militias backed by the Iranians, could have led to a sectarian divide in Iraq more dangerous to the country’s future than ISIS occupation. That Iran and its allies were perceived as ineffective while the US and Iraqi forces prevailed provides a chance to forge a new momentum against ISIS and more critically toward Sunni inclusion. The al-Abadi government and the US wisely chose Anbar province over Mosul for the next sustained engagement against ISIS. This must be an Iraqi government campaign with Sunni tribal support, and the Shia militias must be kept out of the fight. But the Iraqis cannot do this on their own. In addition to air support, the US should increase the number of military advisers and embed them with Iraqi combat units, including Sunni auxiliaries. A successful counter-offensive against ISIS in Anbar could build momentum for a campaign in Mosul on the basis of renewed Shia and Sunni cooperation, the absence of which opened space in Iraq for ISIS in the first place and fostered its alliance with an unnatural partner, JRTN. The best interests of all of Iraq’s communities lie within a unitary, federal state. It is achievable – with US leadership.

Syria. Success against ISIS in Iraq will not directly translate into success in Syria. Different dynamics are at work, set against different histories. The Administration has wisely backed away from its public insistence that Assad must go. Recent setbacks notwithstanding, he’s not going, and in any case we really don’t want what would come after – a jihadist regime at the heart of the Arab world. Assad’s horrific crimes against his own people make direct support for him impossible, but it is worth noting that our closest friends in Syria, the Kurds, are reportedly working with Damascus against ISIS in the north. A bloody stalemate may develop in Syria. If it does, conditions might arise that would make a political settlement conceivable, involving an Alawi calculation that their future security is better without al-Assad, and a Sunni decision that the Jihadi extremes are contrary to long term community interests. That time is not now, however, and our options are limited to the current campaign of degrading ISIS from the air and working with the international community to ameliorate the human catastrophe in Syria. Arming a non-existent moderate opposition would only channel more weapons to the far stronger ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra organizations.

Iran. Tehran is a major player in the turmoil in Syria and Iraq. Through Hizballah and directly, the Iranians have been a critical backer of the Assad regime since the fighting began in Syria. In Iraq, as we have seen, the Iranians continue to support sectarian militias whose ultimate aim may be the destruction of a unitary state. Iranian efforts in both Iraq and Syria are consistent policy pillars, for a decade in the former and more than three decades in the latter. They are unlikely to shift anytime soon, but they can be countered. We have done so in the past in Iraq.
The US. We might wish it otherwise, but the US is a major actor in the Middle East whether through presence or absence. When we are absent, others will step in to fill the space as they have done in Iraq – ISIS in the west and Iranian proxies in the east. A time of unraveling in the region is exactly the time when US leadership is most important. This does not necessarily mean sending in the troops. It does mean supporting our interests and our allies while challenging our adversaries with all the instruments of US power.
A tour of military conflict around the Middle East today could be likened to the American children’s game “Capture the Flag” when it comes to oil installations. As borders and ruling institutions have become contested, so has control of the region’s major oil and gas facilities. Initially an outgrowth of disunity inside Iraq, warring militias, Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS), Al Qaeda and traditional governments are increasingly focused on maintaining or gaining control of oil production and refining installations. Analysis conducted by Peter Toft explores a link between intrastate conflict and oil supply disruptions. By recording oil production changes during the course of the 39 civil wars in oil producing countries between 1965 and 2007, Toft concludes that intrastate conflict intermittently leads to oil supply disruptions – around fifty percent of the time. While Toft’s assessment serves as a valuable indicator of the short-term impacts of civil war, it fails to take into account the long-term political and social changes that drive down oil production post factum. There is an indication that a protracted process of consolidating power that follows the transformation of internal politics can be far more harmful to oil sector investment – and thus production capacity – than simply the infrastructural damage incurred during the initial course of the conflict. Militias throughout the Mideast have learned they can undermine the authority of existing political leadership in the region by overtaking oil facilities. A prime example of this strategy has been a successful transitioning government fell into disarray as rebel factions grabbed and turned off key oil installations and denied access to eastern Libyan export ports. A more threatening trend line is the focus of the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) on a similar strategy.

The recent battles over oil fields in Iraq and Syria, extending now to Yemen, raises a serious new risk that regional oil facilities will be considered both strategic assets and spoils of war not only in the greater battle for Syria and Iraq and the struggle against the Islamic State (IS) but also potentially in the wider struggle for geopolitical power across the entire region. Water and oil issues loom large in many locations, not just in Iraq and Syria, but also in Jordan/Israel/Palestine, in Libya, and along the borders of Iraq and Iran with Saudi Arabia and Kuwait. Saudi Arabia has fortified its northern borders with Iraq with more military hardware and troops, while Iranian forces have moved into positions surrounding the southern Iraqi oil fields, raising the risks of border skirmishes. The militarization of border areas so heavily populated with oil fields and transport infrastructure brings with it unique risks, were territory to start changing hands. The deteriorating situation caused by the multitude of warring factions in Yemen has also raised the specter of extremist groups capturing oil infrastructure. To date the Yemeni army has ceded control of a group of oil fields to a coalition of armed tribes in mid-April to protect the acreage from being captured by al-Qaeda, which had made territorial gains in the
area.\textsuperscript{3} In addition, in late March, crude production from Block 10, the country’s largest producing block located in the eastern Hadramawt region, fell sharply as companies suspended operations and scaled back output, pointing to security risks and staff issues.\textsuperscript{4}

**ISIS and Oil Conflict**

The acceleration of conflict targeting of oil facilities are rooted in the history of repression of sectarian economic interests in key countries such as Iraq, Libya and Syria. In many cases, sectarian communities living in local oil producing regions did not receive an equitable share in wider national budgets during the reign of authoritarian regimes, and this reality has created larger problems in the post-Arab Spring environment. Disagreements over the divisions of state oil revenues have exacerbated ongoing sectarian conflict in not only Iraq, but in Libya and Syria.

In the case of Libya, long standing, historical grievances from citizens of eastern Libya about the sharing of oil revenues under strongman Muammar Qadaffi undermined the initial coalition government and put military competition for control of oil facilities at the center of the civil conflict over power sharing. Without an effective Libyan government, a proxy war erupted in the country as rival nearby Arab states support competing leaders and militias (Qatar and Turkey backing the provisional government based in Tripoli and the United Arab Emirates and Egypt backing the opposition government and parliament situated in the eastern part of the country). The resulting chaos and violence created opportunity for extremist groups like Al Qaeda and ISIS who have been able to build their operations in the country and are currently engaged in a military campaign to seize control over Libyan oil infrastructure or deny it to competing factions. One theory suggests that depriving any potential Libyan unity government of oil wealth is aimed to prevent a new government from effectively fighting and defeating ISIS.\textsuperscript{5}

Armed forces affiliated with ISIS have recently conducted a string of attacks on energy facilities in central and eastern Libya, including on fields run by joint-ventures with Western companies.\textsuperscript{6} One such attack occurred on March 6, when gunmen with allegiance to ISIS stormed the Ghani oil field, located in the prolific eastern Sirte Basin and operated by state oil firm Harouge Oil Operations in a joint venture with Canada’s Suncor Energy, kidnapping at least nine foreign oil workers and reportedly beheading eight guards. Such attacks prompted Libya’s National Oil Corp. (NOC) to declare force majeure at 11 fields operated by both Waha Oil Co. and Mabruk Oil Operations, while state oil firm Zuetina Oil Co. announced it had evacuated personnel from its NC-74A license.\textsuperscript{7}

**ISIS’ Failure to Maintain Captured Oil Facilities in Iraq and Syria**

When ISIS began its campaign in June 2014 to form an Islamic caliphate by seizing large swathes of land in northern Iraq and eastern Syria, of paramount interest to the group was gaining control of producing oil fields and capitalizing on existing oil smuggling operations out of Iraq and Syria to help fund the group’s high operating costs. Initial high estimates of $1 to $3 million a day for ISIS’ oil earnings were based on one time gain from “…draining down pipelines, storage tanks and pumping stations in northern Iraq.”\textsuperscript{8} But more recently, the extremist group is finding it cannot sustain oil production, both because it lacks the technical know-how and also because its fighters cannot stave off attacks to recapture key installations. Few people with strong technical expertise have remained in ISIS-controlled territory and the group’s efforts to coerce skilled staff into staying by threatening the lives of their families or seizing the assets of engineers who have fled in hopes of prompting their return has proved ineffective. ISIS has relied upon junior engineers who it has either pressured to stay on at their jobs or recruited.\textsuperscript{9}

However, anything involving serious repair or more complex procedures, such as water injection at Syria’s mature producing fields, is proving a challenge for ISIS. At one juncture last summer, ISIS was controlling a half a dozen Syrian oilfields (al-Furat, al-Omar, and Deir ez-Zor) that prior to the war had a capacity of 114,000 b/d. At present, ISIS current production capacity in Syria is roughly 15,000 to 30,000 b/d. ISIS has also captured 6 oil fields in northern Iraq since last summer, including the Ajeel, Himrin, Ain Zalah, Safiyah, Batmah, and Qayara. The fields which have nameplate capacity of 175,000 b/d are now pro-
ducing less than 10,000 b/d, down from peak levels of 37,000 b/d from peak levels seen when they were first taken over by ISIS.

The U.S.-led air campaign against ISIS has severely diminished the radical Islamist group’s ability to produce, refine and sell the crude under its authority. In recognizing the importance of oil income to the terrorist organization as a means to help defray its high overhead costs, the U.S. has specifically targeted downstream and marketing operations in northern Iraq and eastern Syria. According to the U.S. Department of Defense, as of March 2015, Operation Inherent Resolve had damaged or destroyed 151 oil infrastructure targets. Prior to the U.S. airstrikes, ISIS was estimated to be loading around 120 trucks a day to transport roughly 20,000 b/d from Iraq’s Ajeel field, but the aerial attacks that included specifically targeting convoys sliced that traffic to about 10 trucks and 2,000 b/d.

The deteriorating situation caused by the multitude of warring factions in Yemen has also raised the specter of extremist groups capturing oil infrastructure. To date, the Yemeni army has ceded control of a group of oil fields to a coalition of armed tribes in mid-April to protect the acreage from being captured by al-Qaeda, which had made territorial gains in the area. In addition, in late March, crude production from Block 10, the country’s largest producing block located in the eastern Hadramawt region, fell sharply as companies suspended operations and scaled back output, pointing to security risks and staff issues. Boko Haram, the militant Nigerian Salafi-jihadi group, is currently engaged in outright warfare with the Nigerian government from the group’s base in the country northeast and has also threatened to attack oil facilities. In February, Boko Haram leader Abubakar Shekau threatened attacks from his group in the Niger Delta region, saying, “You will in coming days see your refinery bombed.”

**Implications for US Diplomatic Strategy**

As border lines in the Middle East get redrawn, militias and extremist groups will aim to capture oil fields and infrastructure for its territorial domain. This turn of events is a serious challenge to stability across the Middle East and for the global economy. My research with econometrician Mahmoud El-Gamal shows that oil facilities damaged during wartime can dramatically reduce access to oil from a country years, if not decades, later.

Take the case of Iran, for example: Iran’s oil production averaged around 6 million b/d in the late 1970s. Following the Iranian Revolutions of 1978-1979, Iranian output fell to 1.5 million b/d; three decades later, the country’s oil output capacity stands at less than 60% of its pre-revolutionary levels. In Nigeria, regime change prompted a similar outcome: the Biafran civil war in 1967 sank oil production by around 40%. During the transition from military rule in 1979, oil production dropped 30%, continuing its decline until 1983. In Libya, the historical links between regime change and oil output offer a prelude for today’s revolutionary state: Muammar Qaddafi’s ascension to power in 1969 led to a rapid evaporation of foreign investment and operations in the oil sector. By 1975, the previous regime’s output average of 3.2 million b/d had sunk over fifty percent; and by 1985, oil production had dropped to a mere one million b/d.

Political solutions to equitable division of oil revenue will be vitally important to future stability in the post-Arab Spring Middle East. To date, the United States has not done a particularly good job in its diplomatic efforts to assist local leaders in managing oil revenue sharing conflicts in places like Iraq and Libya, and this failure has crippled US efforts to stabilize those countries. It is high time for the United States to organize a political plan for the equitable distribution of oil revenues and peaceful maintenance and use of oil facilities in the Middle East.

Modern warfare has often involved targeting of fuel supply lines so the U.S. military’s recent decision to target the oil supply chain of ISIS in Syria is not surprising. But as the U.S. and its coalition partners deliberate on how to cut off ISIS militarily from its remaining profitable oil smuggling operations, the United States and its NATO allies also need to be building a diplomatic initiative and institution building towards a sustainable oil revenue sharing conflict resolution among first in Iraq, and then across the Middle East.

Protracted violence in Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Libya is taking its toll on energy infrastructure, with long
term ramifications for the ability of those societies to rebuild their economies. More attention needs to be given to conflict resolution diplomacy connected to oil revenue sharing as part of the formula for creating conditions that will permit cease fires to take hold on the ground. Without resolving underlying conflicts about who will control the rents from oil, it will be impossible to stabilize the region. Moreover, internal conflicts over oil rent sharing creates opportunities for external parties to inflate international oil prices by supporting proxies to escalate conflicts over oil production facilities.

The escalation in the Yemen war has contributed to a significant rise in oil prices, bringing Brent crude oil back over $60 per barrel and West Texas Intermediate crude up from $57 p/b from recent lows in the $40s earlier this year.

Oil movements through the Suez Canal have to traverse the Bab El-Mandeb chokepoint which borders Yemen and Djibouti. Roughly 3 to 4 million b/d of oil travels that route which is now more susceptible to attack by ISIS or other extremist groups. While it is possible for shippers to bypass the Suez Canal, escalation of the Yemen conflict unnerved oil markets for several reasons beyond fears of physical disruptions to tanker movements. Firstly, it showed that the conflict between Saudi Arabia and Iran continues to spread across the region, with potentially negative consequences for other regional production. Secondly, it showed that Russia and Iran are willing to use military force via proxies to counter Saudi efforts to lower oil prices. To lessen this geopolitical risk to the global economy will take a concerted diplomatic effort to reduce internal, sectarian conflicts over oil resource sharing.

Endnotes


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What Should We Make of the JCPOA?

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The ink has barely dried on the recent “Parameters” for a “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (JCPOA), which itself is merely another interim step en route to a fully-fledged comprehensive agreement that may or may not be reached by the end of June and which, furthermore, even if concluded could (certainly if judged in light of the previous agreements with Iran) significantly deviate from its current composition. Already, predictably conflicting narratives between Iran and the US have emerged on what was agreed upon in Lausanne, raising serious questions whether the parameters of the deal as described will survive the ongoing negotiations. Under these circumstances it is challenging to provide a definitive assessment of the agreement in hand.

Nevertheless, how does it look? In our judgment a great deal depends on one’s vantage point. If one is persuaded that the agreement averted imminent Iranian nuclearization and that such prospect would have inevitably unleashed war with Iran, then almost any deal seems preferable. If on the other hand you believe that Iran was not about to resume its pre-2003 Manhattan-type nuclear weapons program and war was a remote prospect, then time need not have been of the essence for the P-5, which in turn casts the achieved outcome in a much less favorable light.

Who got more out of the announced parameters? If we use the opening positions of the two sides as benchmarks, then Iran emerges the unquestionable winner. While agreeing to pay a price in temporarily restricting some and scaling back other aspects of its nuclear program Iran was able to get out of the P5+1 negotiators virtually all of the demands it has made since day one: sustained enrichment activity on a militarily significant scale in Natanz, scaling it up over time, continuation of the Arak research reactor, retention of the Fordow site as an active nuclear center with many centrifuges installed therein, exclusion of its missile activity from the negotiations, keeping its stocks of enriched uranium in Iran, sustained R&D activity on more advanced centrifuges. It was also able to refrain from committing to ratify the IAEA additional protocol (only to implement it) as well as to hold back from providing regular access to its military sites, or even fully implementing its Agreed Framework with the IAEA especially on Possible Military Dimension of its program. Perhaps most ominously, Iran was able to break the linkage originally insisted upon by the US in the interim agreement (the JPOA) between its enrichment activity and its energy needs. Now, there is no apparent peaceful energy need against which to rationalize and evaluate Iran’s nuclear activities. Iran was also able to get a firm commitment for early (simultaneous with its implementation or perhaps as Iran now claims far sooner) sanction relief as well as winding down of the United Nation Security Council resolutions pertaining to Iran. Clearly the comparison to the opening US positions on all of these issues is not flattering.

Another angle of judgment would be to assess the respective gains made (and losses incurred) by both sides in advancing their strategic objectives.
Employing this yardstick naturally runs into some difficulty because the ultimate strategic goals of both sides (and, in fact, there were far more than two sides to these negotiations) are not necessarily what they publicly profess. Still, one can reasonably assume that for Iran the key goals were to gain formal recognition for its status as an advanced nuclear hedger, to legitimately retain (and gradually upgrade) all the indigenous capabilities (in the fuel cycle, and nuclear weapons research and engineering, and long-range delivery domains) necessary to make and use nuclear weapons, to shake loose of the punishing sanctions imposed on it, and to normalize its international standing. For the current US administration the strategic goals seem to have been to codify restraint and constraints on Iran’s nuclear activities and more extensively monitor them in an effort to keep Iran for at least the next 10 years more than one year away from being able to make nuclear weapons to facilitate strategic realignment in its relations with Iran with an eye toward opening the way for more positive role for it to play in the Middle East, and perhaps also to enhance the prospect of transition toward a more moderate regime in Iran. Finally, the US administration obviously wanted to get this deal without alienating Congress or seriously alarming its regional allies in the Middle East.

Looked upon through these lenses the picture that emerges is far more nuanced, precisely because formulated this way the goals of the two sides do not seem incompatible. Iran was certainly able to accomplish virtually all of its goals through the JCPOA. In fact, the JCPOA’s explicit objective of keeping Iran one year from a breakout capability paradoxically and most dramatically underscores Iran’s strategic gain of a formal, legitimate strategic nuclear hedge with indigenous capabilities to back it up. Similarly, sanctions relief and the commitment to normalize Iran’s status in the UNSC, re-legitimizes Iran’s nuclear position notwithstanding its dismal proliferation track record and longstanding defiance of UNSC resolutions and International Atomic Energy Agency probes.

But the United States also has accomplished its strategic goals, albeit far more tentatively. Iran’s obligations in the JCPOA regarding its fuel-cycle activity would severely constrain the country’s capacity to quickly produce enough fissile material for a bomb over the coming decade and would make it considerably more difficult for it to do so clandestinely. The impact on the fortunes of domestic forces in Iran is impossible to predict with confidence, though it is true that the more progressive elements in Iran have reacted enthusiastically while others seem at the very least far more reserved. Regarding Iran’s regional behavior, a strong case can be made that the deal would empower Iran financially and politically embolden its extremists (especially within the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC)) to pursue even more aggressively its subversive role in the region. But, conversely, it might also be argued that Iran would now turn inwards to address its domestic woes, tame its regional behavior and operate more cooperatively with the US.

Which brings us to the two more contentious elements of the deal: its intrusive verification provisions and its mechanism for re-imposing sanctions (snap-back”). Verification and sanctions relief have been extremely contentious in the negotiations because both sides profoundly distrust the sincerity of each other’s intentions. The compromise struck here would not be ideal for either, but on balance clearly tends to favor the Iranians. Removing the anchor of both the sanctions and verification mechanism from their current grounding in UNSC resolutions will make re-imposition of sanctions through the UNSC very tough to accomplish. This point is made abundantly clear by the JCPOA’s failure to mention that China and Russia support such provisions. Similarly, the effective application of a rigorous IAEA verification scheme that goes well beyond standard IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards Agreements hinges on many conditions, every one of which would be difficult to meet. To begin with the IAEA (as its Director General has recently made clear) would require a significant budget increase for this purpose, retooling of its inspectors, and also a new mandate for the mission from its Board of Governors (BOG). But above all it would also require exemplary collaboration from Iran. Yet, transparency and cooperation with inspections are areas where Iran’s track record both before and after 2003 have been sorely inadequate. Iran consistently defied key aspects of scores of UNSC and IAEA BOG resolutions. So unless explicitly anchored in UNSC and IAEA BOG resolutions, the prospects of an adequate verification arrangement look dim.
A daunting challenge would pertain to benchmarking Iran’s past activities. It is especially important to have an inventory of Iran’s stockpile of centrifuges and components that could be used to make more of them, and also to understand activities Iran has already conducted related to nuclear weaponization (developing the capability to package the fissile material into a nuclear explosive device and miniaturizing it so that it would fit into a missile warhead). Both categories of past activities affect Iran’s future capacity to make nuclear weapons, either by breaking out of an agreement or waiting until it lapses. The more that is known about these activities, the easier it will be to detect their recurrence and to identify them as new, and thereby to deter Iran from seeking nuclear weapons.

Another major concern is the IAEA’s resolve and capacity to pursue over time intelligence-driven leads on dubious Iranian activities, not merely in the fuel cycle domain but also on the weaponization side. If its past behavior is any guide, the IAEA, as its former Director General ElBaradei has repeatedly stated, would refrain from providing the US with a smoking gun which it could then use to justify a military attack on Iran. Furthermore, the IAEA, as its current Director General Amano has repeatedly stated, is prudently determined to painstakingly authenticate through its own sources every intelligence lead it gets on Iran before leveraging such information against Iran. Under the best of circumstances, therefore, turning intelligence into inspections and verification actions by the IAEA will be a very challenging and time-consuming process even under the best of circumstances. The process will be even slower and more uncertain when some states within the IAEA (BOG) resist the IAEA Secretariat’s application of the State Level Concept (a holistic approach for upgrading the implementation of IAEA Safeguards by looking comprehensively at states’ nuclear activities).

This is a sobering analysis when one realizes that the IAEA is the sole legitimate watchdog over Iran’s program and Iran retains at a minimum a one-year breakout capacity. It is even more troublesome when one understands the serious legitimacy challenge the US (already haunted by the Iraq precedent) would encounter were it to consider responding unilaterally to Iranian nuclear transgressions before the IAEA has come out corroborating them. Implicitly acknowledging this concern President Obama has recently advanced the concept mentioned in the JCPOA parameters of setting up a dispute resolution process to oversee and presumably arbitrate disagreements over the performance of JCPOA commitments. Yet as the JCPOA makes clear this yet to be fully flushed out mechanism is not Iran focused but rather symmetrical and open to all the JCPOA. Consequently it could end up creating as many problems as it solves, making it dubious that it could remedy rather than aggravate the abovementioned verification concerns.

So where does all this leave us? This leaves us with an agreement that, unless fixed, would set back the cause of non-proliferation by setting a precedent where even a state that has systematically cheated on the NPT and IAEA Safeguards, and has had a nuclear weapons program and defied successive UNSC and IAEA BOG resolutions, is then granted formal legitimacy in retaining and even augmenting nuclear capabilities that give it a rather advanced hedge toward nuclear weapons. Worse still, Iran gets this status without even a remote justification for any of its fuel-cycle activities as necessary for an exclusively peaceful nuclear energy program. Iran is not required to fulfill any other attributes of normal civilian nuclear energy programs in the areas of safety, security, or liability. It has not even been asked to commit to transform its program to conform to the patterns of other purely peaceful programs. Little surprise then that such precedent and package, as well as negotiating track record is hardly reassuring to those US allies living in the Middle East.

We now enter the next phase of the negotiations that hopefully will lead, presumably over the next three months, to a true Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action. Obviously many details remain to be worked out. But beyond getting these details right, what is really needed are conceptual changes that would reinforce a comprehensive agreements’ chances of credibly and irreversibly defusing the acute challenge presented by the Iranian program. These changes should not stand in the way of operationalizing and finalizing the parameters in the JCPOA. In fact quite the reverse, they could enhance the chances that a JCPOA, once concluded, would actually reassure its open-minded skeptics in Congress as well as among the US allies in the Middle East and beyond.
First, sanctions relief must be tied to actual implementation of Iran’s various nuclear obligations under the JCPOA as well as under IAEA Comprehensive Safeguards, the Additional Protocol and the IAEA-Iran Agreed Framework for Cooperation. Even under the best of circumstances these steps would not happen overnight. Yet Iran emboldened by its accomplishments to date and seeing President Obama’s credibility already so heavily vested in the deal, might be even more strongly inclined to bring things to a head over the sanctions issue. Iran already claims that sanctions relief should be undertaken by the UNSC in the first phase of the JCPOA implementation rather than after it has met all of its obligations therein. Iranian officials threaten retaliation if this would not be the case. Budging or even fudging on this issue is a sure recipe for a failed deal.

Just as importantly, Iran, as it has previously done in the decade-long nuclear diplomacy over its program (and practically every other deal it has struck), is bound to test to the limit every other obligation it assumes.

A similar resolve must thus be manifest in the Congressional, UNSC and IAEA BOG resolutions to monitor and uphold Iran to the US understanding of its JCPOA obligations in order to ascertain that Iran’s leeway for encroaching on the JCPOA is minimized, thereby enhancing the chances that it actually delivers on its promised benefits.

Additionally, the US and its European allies must not compromise on retaining a “snap back” mechanism for sanctions that the UNSC would be relieving. If Russia and China cannot be brought around to support it, the whole “snap back” mechanism would be in great jeopardy. At a minimum, the P-3 (The US, UK, and France) would have to resist any other UNSC resolution that will merely “endorse the JCPOA and urge its full implementation”. Without some clear and rapidly applicable credible mechanism to restore massive pressure on Iran if it does not uphold an agreement, a JCPOA endorsed by the Security Council would tempt those in Iran who want to press on with building up the country’s nuclear weapon option.

Third, as alluded to above, Iran’s interlocutors should insist that the Iranian nuclear program adopt agreements and practices that all other peaceful nuclear programs have. To be fair this should not be done in a manner that singles out Iran. In order to stem a proliferation cascade that could easily occur as a result of the unhelpful precedent set with Iran, the international community must apply a minimal yardstick for welcoming any state to enjoy access to nuclear technology under Article IV of the NPT. The UNSC should insist that Iran, like any country claiming the benefits of its “inalienable right” under the treaty, must ratify and implement in good faith the cornerstone international conventions in the three areas of safety, security, and liability (Convention on Nuclear Security, Convention on Physical Protection of Nuclear Materials, and Convention on Supplementary Compensation for Nuclear Damage or, Vienna or Paris conventions).

Fourth, the IAEA must be authorized (both by the UNSC and its own BOG) to inspect the Iranian nuclear program in a manner that would enhance its ability to assess with confidence the orientation of Iran’s nuclear program, and do so with far lower dependence on externally supplied intelligence. The IAEA normally takes a “2C” approach to safeguards, focusing on Completeness and Correctness of declarations. Forthwith in Iran, and in the future elsewhere as well, it must also look for an additional 3Cs: Compatibility, Comprehensiveness, and Coherence. A “5 Cs” model would be necessary to build confidence that Iran’s post-deal nuclear program is exclusively peaceful, and as such would be invaluable to apply as standard operating procedure for the IAEA.

Compatibility refers to the degree to which activities undertaken are indeed commensurate with their stated peaceful purposes—including the sequencing and scale of activities, economic rationale underlying them, safety, security, and liability provisions governing the nuclear activity etc. Activities or conditions that are not compatible with purely peaceful purposes should be deemed to indicate a possible nuclear-weapons orientation, inviting more rigorous transparency to clarify questions. Comprehensiveness refers to the extent that additional activities undertaken by the state that go beyond the scope of safeguards (and certainly beyond those declared to the IAEA) such as in the weaponization and militarization domains fit with the typical features we would expect to see
in a purely peaceful nuclear program (in practice an extension of the original IAEA work on the “Physical Model” -- an attempt to identify, describe and characterize various components of the nuclear fuel cycle, providing a technical tool to aid enhanced information analysis, now constituting an integral part of the on-going Safeguards’ State evaluation process). Finally, Coherence refers to the extent that the activities undertaken fit into an alarming pattern by being both interconnected and realizing many/all the known elements necessary for a nuclear weapons program.

While highly desirable it is neither necessary nor feasible that all of these conceptual changes be reflected in a final JCPOA. But those elements that could not be accommodated within the JCPOA should make their way into US Congressional legislation, the new UNSC resolution, and IAEA BOG decisions endorsing the JCPOA. And even if these additional elements did get eventually incorporated into the JCPOA these institutions would be prudent to reinforce them when they inevitably take up and act on the JCPOA in order to facilitate its implementation.

The U.S. Congress would be well advised to go along with the JCPOA but attach to it provisions (including the abovementioned parameters) that the Congress would look to see satisfied as it oversees implementation of the JCPOA. It would be highly beneficial if the Congress were to go further and authorize relief of US sanctions on Iran if Iran meets these terms, and to volunteer U.S. peaceful nuclear assistance and other non-threatening aid to Iran so long as it truly reorients its nuclear program. By the same token, it would be appropriate for Congress to explicitly affirm President’s Obama commitment to use all the means at the US disposal to prevent Iranian acquisition of nuclear weapons were Iran to move in the opposite direction.

In the final analysis one ought to see in the agreed (?) parameters for the JCPOA recently announced in Lausanne no less but also no more than the first step in a long and arduous way to defuse the Iranian nuclear challenge and redress the acute threat it has been posing to the global nuclear order as well as to regional stability in the Middle East. For the JCPOA to have a chance to live up to its promise and genuinely provide the well sought after turning point it must be both meticulously applied and significantly reinforced by complementary measures. One or the other by itself would not do. Together they might, and if this is indeed the course ultimately chosen its potential benefits would greatly outweigh its risks making it worthy of our full support.
America’s Middle East Challenge

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Seyed Hossein Mousavian and Mehrdad Saberi

For the past seventy some years, the Middle East has been a chessboard for the victors of the Second World War. The ongoing chaos in the region can be traced to how Great Britain, the United States, and France exercised their power here in the post-war years. The primary sources of conflict date back even further: to the arbitrary borders that were drawn by the French and the British in much of former Ottoman territories in the aftermath of the First World War; to the enthroning of kings, emirs, and sheikhs; and ultimately to the seizure of the wealth of the countries under their imperialistic control. A colonial mentality still prevails in the way Western powers and in particular the United States approach the Middle East.

American and Arab leaders like to claim an unshakable bond of trust, but in reality it is predicated upon a fragile ground; American relations with Iran, in turn, are all about mistrust. The presence of foreign forces in the Middle East has turned the region into two zones; one that sides with the United States, for example the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries; and another with a different foreign policy agenda that does not align with Washington— for example, Iran. The presence of foreign and particularly American military forces in the Middle East has served to disrupt the cordial relationships between regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Turkey, and Egypt. This disruption is felt especially strongly as the region confronts growing instability and terrorism today.

Iranian Mistrust

The main origins of Iranian mistrust of the United States are Washington’s involvement in overthrowing Mohammad Mosaddegh and imposing the rule of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The mistrust increased after the Islamic Revolution in 1979 when the United States embarked on a strategy of regime change. An early sign of the policy could be seen in Washington’s blatant support for Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980. That eight-year conflict became one of the lengthiest and costliest wars of the twentieth century, with more than one million casualties on both sides and $600 billion infrastructure damage to Iran. The United States, though claiming to be the champion of combating the proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), turned a blind eye to Saddam’s use of chemical weapons against the Iranian people and reportedly assisted the Iraqi army with intelligence in carrying out those attacks.

At the end of the Iran-Iraq War, Iran was devastated and the nation was in dire need of foreign investment to rise from the ruins. The United States refused to invest in the Iranian economy, and sought to prevent other nations from economic cooperation with Iran as well. The conventional Western perception is that it is Iran that is adamant in maintaining a hostile relationship with the United States; in fact, the general consensus in various Iranian administrations has been that neither country benefits from tit-for-tat policies, and that prudence dictates that we can and should
ultimately become friends. This general consensus stems from the fact that the framework of foreign policy in the Islamic Republic is not based upon the wishes of one person or one branch of power, but on the collective view among various strands of power. At the end of the consensus-building process, the supreme leader must authorize it. Except in very few cases, the leader has always approved of the decisions made by the Supreme National Security Council. Thus, it can be argued that however extremely guarded he may be of America’s real intentions toward Iran, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is also inclined to put an end to the long spiral of animosity.

Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who served as president in the aftermath of the Iran-Iraq War, was the first to embark on normalizing Tehran’s relations with Washington. During his presidency from 1989 to 1997, Iran invited an American oil firm, Conoco Inc., to take part in the development of the Siri oil field project and offered Washington cooperation in areas such as terrorism and drug trafficking. However, without exception, all of the approaches were rebuffed by the United States.

America’s unwillingness to ease tensions continued under President Mohammad Khatami, who publicly called for a “Dialogue Among Civilizations” to improve relations with the West. The September 11 attacks on the World Trade Center and Pentagon occurred during the Khatami presidency; in contrast with other nations in the Middle East formally allied with the United States, the Iranian people as well as the Iranian government were among the first to offer condolences to the American people and their government.

Even before 9/11, a round of talks was held between Iranian and American officials to address issues of mutual concern as well as bilateral matters. After 9/11, Iran played a substantial role in the toppling of the Taliban in Afghanistan by assisting the United States with logistical and military support, as well as intelligence. In response, President George W. Bush declared Iran to be part of an “axis of evil” (along with Saddam Hussein’s Iraq and North Korea)—a move that effectively scuttled any path to détente.

The pragmatism of President Rafsanjani and moderation of President Khatami exhausted Iran’s diplomatic approaches to mend ties with the United States. It became clear that Washington was simply not inclined to normalize its relations with Tehran. In Iran, the political road had thus been paved for the emergence of a more conservative Iranian leader, President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad.

Contrary to conventional wisdom, even President Ahmadinejad was not completely opposed to improved relations. In 2006, he penned an eighteen-page letter to President Bush that raised issues from the history of grievances between the two countries to American support for Israel. Regardless of the content of the letter, it was an unprecedented gesture by an Iranian leader, the first of its kind since the 1979 revolution. President Ahmadinejad also congratulated Barack Obama on his election in 2008, yet another surprising and positive outreach to the American leadership from a conservative and principlist Iranian president.

Nonetheless, under President Obama the United States ratcheted up pressure on Iran by orchestrating an international consensus, sometimes through arm-twisting, to impose crippling sanctions on Iran. In her 2014 book Hard Choices, former Secretary of State Hillary Clinton spoke of her “pride” after the United Nations Security Council passed Resolution 1929 against Iran. The move came amid growing pressure on the administration from Congress, Israel, and pro-Israel lobby groups. Since the mid-1990s Israel has been pushing Washington to pursue a harsh policy toward Iran. In July 1996, Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu gave a speech to a joint session of Congress where he stated that “time is running out” for preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons and called for immediate and effective prevention. The most recent American-led sanctions not only target Iran’s oil industry, financial transactions, Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps, and arms sales, but they also make it almost impossible for Iranians to purchase goods such as medicines and medical equipment. The sanctions policy, which is intended to dissuade Iran from developing its nuclear program, has been mainly targeting the lives of ordinary Iranians rather than the nuclear program. Clear testament is the substantial increase despite sanctions in the size of Iran’s enrichment capacity over the past decade from roughly 200 centrifuges to more than 20,000 centrifuges.
The American approach to Iran has been predicated upon engagement and pressure. Therefore, positive overtures toward Iran are perceived by Iranians with suspicion. Hillary Clinton states very clearly that during her term as secretary of state the policy of engagement “would open our hand in seeking tougher sanctions on Iran.” Ayatollah Khamenei believes that the United States is intent on toppling the Islamic Republic, citing American support for Saddam Hussein’s invasion, covert operations against Iran, open backing for anti-regime groups, denial of Iran’s right to peaceful enrichment under the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty, and paralyzing economic sanctions. The declaration that “all options are on the table,” used by various American administrations, is insulting language that exacerbates the shortage of confidence on the Iranian side.

Since the start of President Obama’s second term, though, a change in American policy toward Iran has been evident. A change in tone appeared in the remarks of President Obama in the UN General Assembly, where he shed light on the mutual mistrust between the two countries and the need to resolve years of animosity through diplomatic means. In an unprecedented move, President Obama and President Hassan Rouhani spoke over the phone after the latter’s election in 2013. There have also been meaningful high-ranking talks between Iranian Foreign Minister Mohammad Javad Zarif and his American counterpart, John Kerry, over the nuclear program; such talks were hard to envisage only three years ago. Since President Rouhani took office, there have been a number of substantive and constructive negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program that resulted in an interim deal called the Joint Plan of Action in November 2014 and an outline agreement for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in April 2015.

Should the dispute over Iran’s nuclear program be resolved, it will certainly prepare ground for cooperation between Iran and the United States. The two countries have common interests in the Middle East: combating drug trafficking, stability in Iraq and Afghanistan, containing and ultimately eradicating the Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), and putting an end to the Syrian civil war. Thus, a comprehensive resolution based upon mutual respect over Iran’s nuclear program could be a promising first step in further Iranian-American cooperation and could pave the way for a paradigm shift in relations.

Arab Suspicion

Arab attitudes toward the United States are grounded to a large extent in U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict is an old wound in the relations between the Arab World and the United States. The peace plan supported by both would have at its core a two-state solution—one state for the Palestinians and one for the Israelis—has long lost its viability. The 1967 borders that have internationally been recognized as the basis for the fruition of a two-state solution are no longer accessible given the mass construction of Israeli settlements beyond the 1967 borders and on the territory of the future Palestinian state. The number of Israeli settlers in the occupied territories has risen from 200,000 in 1991 to roughly 600,000 today. The Arab Peace Initiative that was suggested by the late King Abdullah bin Abdulaziz Al-Saud of Saudi Arabia in 2002, which was endorsed by the entire Arab World, does not have any applicability given the settlement issue and Israel’s rejection of any compromise. Benjamin Netanyahu, who on numerous occasions stated his commitment to the two-state solution, ruled out the possibility of a Palestinian state in the days before the 2015 Israeli election. Furthermore, the American policy of not recognizing Palestinian statehood is itself humiliating to the Arabs and a source of contention between the Arab World and the United States.

Iraq proved to be another area of serious friction for U.S.-Arab relations. Although several Arab states had joined the U.S.-led coalition to eject Saddam Hussein’s troops from Kuwait in 1991, many Arab governments were uncomfortable with the Iraqi human suffering that resulted from severe American sanctions following the conflict. Prior to the American-led invasion of 2003, Iraq still constituted a potential security threat to its Arab neighbors. However, unlike the case in 1991, U.S. war plans ignored the considerations of Arab countries and left them uneasy and humiliated.

America’s policy toward Iran is one of the main Arab grievances against Washington. Many Arab
countries perceived and continue to perceive that the U.S. invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan paved the way for the steady rise of Iran’s influence in the region at their expense. Saudi Foreign Minister Prince Saud Al-Faisal put it this way: “Several years ago, we fought a war with the United States and Saudi Arabia in order to save Iraq from the occupation of Iran. Now it seems that Iran is being handed over Iraq on a golden platter.”

It should be pointed out that the Arab concerns about Iran come against the backdrop of Iran’s repeated calls for the consolidation of security and stability in the region. Nonetheless, some GCC countries led by Saudi Arabia have sought and failed to win an even stronger Western stance against Iran. Saudi Arabia was unable to convince Washington to launch a military strike on the Islamic Republic. The truth is that Iran’s rich history, civilization, human resources, and strategic energy resources are the reasons that Iran has managed to resist pressures from the United States and its Arab allies. But now that Iran possesses substantial influence in Iraq, Lebanon, Syria, and to a lesser extent Yemen, the Arabs blame the United States for Iran’s rising influence.

The nuclear talks between Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany (P5+1) are another factor in Arab suspicion toward the United States. The Arab concern is primarily predicated on the assumption that any resolution to Iran’s nuclear program would enhance Iran’s position in the region vis-à-vis its neighbors. The Arabs fear that Iranian-American détente may lead to an American departure from the region that would be detrimental to their national interests and security. The main concern of the Saudis and other monarchies may be the potential political upheaval that could follow such a strategic realignment in the Persian Gulf. A Rand Corporation report in 2009 noted that “Saudi Arabia has tried to paint Iran as a cultural and ideological aberration from the rest of the region, and the most expeditious means of doing this has been to cast the Islamic Republic’s Shi’a/Persian ambitions as a threat to Sunnis everywhere.”

Another area of concern for Arabs is America’s response to the political upheaval of the so-called Arab Spring that swept the region starting in 2010. The United States called for Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to step down, supported the election of Muslim Brotherhood leader Mohammed Morsi, and threatened to cut off military aid after a coup brought Abdel Fattah El-Sisi to power. Prince Saud laid out Saudi uneasiness about this: “Concerning those who announced stopping their assistance to Egypt or threatening to stop them, the Arab and Islamic nation is rich with its people and capabilities and will provide a helping hand to Egypt.” The Saudis and other monarchs in the Persian Gulf are highly concerned by the potential rise of Islamist ideologies and organizations, including the Muslim Brotherhood. It could embolden the disenfranchised segments of these societies to embark on violent actions against their governments. Therefore any successful political change in any of the Arab countries of the Middle East can potentially ignite major political challenges to the Gulf monarchies as well. It could be argued that Mohammed Morsi’s ouster and Saudi support for El-Sisi were partly triggered by Morsi’s inclination to normalize Egyptian relations with Iran, which had been suspended since 1979.

Bahrain is another area of contention. The United States has a strong interest in preserving the security of Bahrain, as the country hosts the United States Fifth Fleet. However, Bahraini officials seem to be grappling with the assumption that Washington is covertly colluding with the Shia opposition leaders who might share ideological and religious affinity with Iran. The Bahraini government has accused Iran of meddling in the domestic affairs of Bahrain by supporting the Shia-dominated opposition groups (an accusation rejected by Iran). Last year, a senior U.S. diplomat was expelled from Bahrain for meeting Sheikh Ali Salman, secretary-general of Al-Wefaq National Islamic Society, one of the opposition groups in Bahrain. However, given the importance of Bahrain to the U.S. military presence in the region, it seems unlikely that Washington would be willing to jeopardize its interests by weakening the Bahraini government.

Syria is another area where the United States has not acted according to the desires of its Arab allies in the region, who seek the ouster of President Bashar Al-Assad. In spite of immense pressure from the governments of Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and United Arab Emirates, as well as Turkey, Washington did not intervene in Syria to overthrow the Al-Assad government.
The United States has launched aerial bombardments in Syria against ISIS, but it seems increasingly logical to assume that the Obama administration might find it necessary to cooperate with the Al-Assad government in fighting ISIS more in line with the Iranian strategy in Syria. This will certainly be another blow to the already tense American-Arab relations.

The menace that has engulfed Syria and Iraq is to a large extent due to logistical and financial support given to various extremist groups by a number of Arab countries as well as Turkey. Although denied by the heads of these states, Vice President Joe Biden noted the role of Saudi Arabia, United Arab Emirates, and Turkey in creating the quagmire. “Our allies in the region were our largest problem in Syria,” Biden said. “They were so determined to take down Assad and essentially have a proxy Sunni-Shia war, what did they do? They poured hundreds of millions of dollars and tens, thousands of tons of weapons into anyone who would fight against Assad. Except that the people who were being supplied were Al-Nusra [Front] and Al-Qaeda.” Had it not been for the support that ISIS has received, it would have been impossible for it to destabilize the region to the extent it has done this far. Ironically, all the countries that either directly or indirectly helped ISIS to come into being joined the United States in a coalition to fight ISIS through air strikes. Zarif, Iran’s foreign minister, termed it the “coalition of repenters.”

It should be recalled that the quagmire is partly due to shortsighted American foreign policy toward the region. The chaos and disorder that followed the U.S. invasion of Iraq created fertile ground for Sunni radicals such as Abu Musab Al-Zarqawi to pursue the most extreme brutality and terror. Al-Zarqawi was a Jordanian terrorist who set up the forerunner to ISIS: Jamaat Al-Tawhid Wal-Jihad (Party of Monotheism and Jihad) made up mostly of non-Iraqis.

The threat now posed by ISIS has brought the United States and Iran closer together, which might well result in even more uneasiness for Arab countries. The late Saudi King Abdullah told John Kerry that if the Iranians were invited to join the coalition against ISIS, Saudi Arabia would boycott the talks. Obviously Iran as a country that possesses tremendous influence in Syria and Iraq can play a major role in the fight against ISIS—indeed it is a role that Iran has already been playing in collaboration with the governments in Baghdad and Damascus.

**Toward a Master Plan**

The Middle East is in dire need of cooperation on issues of long-term interest to the stability and well-being of the whole region. The Arab Spring has resulted in political instability in many countries, while extremist and terrorist groups have wreaked havoc across the region. It is imperative for Middle Eastern countries to work collaboratively in order to tackle these region-wide challenges.

The United States faces lack of trust from Iran and suspicion from its Arab allies. America’s oil-centered involvement in the Middle East is becoming less strategically important as the United States moves toward becoming the leading exporter of oil and gas. As a result, the Arabs are losing their oil leverage with Washington and are resorting to suicidal strategies to destabilize the region, by funding various extremist groups, in hopes that it would compel America to stay involved.

America’s increased involvement in the Middle East is inevitable as a result of the expansion of ISIS and other terrorist groups. This heightened involvement could result in positive outcomes if it is calculated carefully. The United States should come to the realization that its military might is not capable of bringing about peace in the Middle East. As Chas W. Freeman Jr. argued in his book *America’s Misadventures in the Middle East*, “How do we propose to manage the contradiction between our desire to assure the stability of the Persian Gulf and the fact that our presence in it is inherently destabilizing?” However, U.S. military superiority could be applied positively and used to support regional governments to fight terrorism in the region. Washington’s efforts toward a regional cooperation system in the Persian Gulf (akin to that of the European Union) would fill the vacuum caused by an eventual U.S. departure and assuage Arab fears of a resurgent Iran. President Rouhani, in his 2014 address to the UN General Assembly, pointed out, “The right solution to this quandary comes from within the region and regionally provided solutions with international support and not from outside the region.”
The United States needs to abandon its foreign policy approach of alienating Iran and recognize Iran’s power and potential in the region. Iran, in return, as a regional power should engage with neighbors such as Saudi Arabia to tackle regional issues. As it did in the 1990s, Iran should once again embark on a policy of good relations with its Arab neighbors. Normalization of relations between Iran and Egypt would be of utmost importance. In 2007, President Rouhani, in his previous capacity as secretary of Iran’s Supreme National Security Council, proposed the establishment of a regional cooperation system between Iran and the GCC. His ten-point initiative encompassed an array of issues of mutual concern. The initiative proposed the establishment of a Persian Gulf security and cooperation organization between Iran, Iraq, and the GCC; facilitation of cultural, economic, and political cooperation; plans to ensure the security of energy supply and production; cooperation on nuclear-related issues and establishment of a region free of WMD; and finally paving the way for the withdrawal of foreign forces from the region.

Regional cooperation faces serious challenges, however. For some Arab countries such as Saudi Arabia, the proverb the “enemy of my enemy is my friend” justifies its Israel-like policy toward nuclear talks with Iran. The Kingdom has persistently been involved in sabotaging the talks by hinting that international endorsement of Iran’s nuclear program would trigger a nuclear proliferation race in the Middle East. Saudi Arabia’s former Director General of the General Intelligence Directorate Prince Turki Al-Faisal stated in an interview with BBC, “ending the fear of Iran developing weapons of mass destruction is not going to be the end of the troubles that we’re having with Iran.” The Saudis now perceive themselves to be entangled in an Iranian-dominated Middle East that straddles Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. The Saudis, thus, feeling alienated by its oldest ally, the United States, has recently been engaged in forging a block against Iran’s growing power in the region.

Iran can commit itself in reaching security, political, and economic agreements with its neighbors, particularly with Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt to restore security and stability in the region. This would be to the benefit of the region, the United States, and the entire world. As an influential player in the Middle East, the United States should restore the confidence of its Arab allies, gain the confidence of Iran, and help provide a foundation for collaboration among regional countries to eradicate terrorism. The United States and the regional powers need to engage other great powers such as Russia, China, and the European Union to realize such a master plan.
Nuclear Deal, the Road to Peace between Iran and the West

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After eight days of marathon talks in Switzerland, Iran and world powers reached a framework agreement on Iran’s nuclear dossier on April 2, 2015. This initial agreement serves as the basis for continued talks until the June 30 deadline toward a comprehensive deal. Following a short pause in negotiations, all parties will commence drafting the final agreement with its relevant clauses to bring an end to more than a decade of contention over Iran’s nuclear program.

The announcement outlined in surprising detail the commitments and concessions by Iran and the world powers (P5+1, which includes US, UK, Russia, France, China and Germany). The agreed framework places unprecedented intrusive inspections and transparency measures to ensure Iran’s nuclear program remains peaceful. It also limits Iran’s production and stockpile of fissile materials with a majority of its enriched uranium stockpile destined for export. In return, the United Nations Security Council, European Union and United States will terminate all nuclear-related sanctions, simultaneous with the IAEA verifying implementation by Iran of its key nuclear commitments.

If the framework agreement is finalized within a comprehensive deal and fully implemented—it will be a win-win for all parties involved as it meets their key demands. From the beginning, the Iranians insisted on two major outcomes from the negotiations. The first is for the international community to acknowledge and respect the rights of Iran for peaceful nuclear technology, including enrichment, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT); and second to lift comprehensive sanctions. Similarly, the Iranians have shown flexibility and commitment to take concrete steps to address the concerns of the P5+1 over nuclear weapons proliferation. President Obama’s statement following the breakthrough talks acknowledged, “This framework would cut off every pathway that Iran could take to develop a nuclear weapon. Iran will face strict limitations on its program, and Iran has also agreed to the most robust and intrusive inspections and transparency regime ever negotiated for any nuclear program in history.” Iran has accepted all confidence building measures assuring no diversion toward weaponization and the deal will in fact set a new and higher bar for global non-proliferation policy.

It did not take long for the opponents of any diplomatic progress to come out of the woodwork. Israeli Prime Minister Binyamin Netanyahu took to the US airwaves to voice his opposition and call the framework agreement “a very bad deal” that does not go far enough to dismantle Iran’s nuclear infrastructure nor “stop [Iran’s] aggression in the region.” Here are the facts regarding Bibi’s concern for nuclear weapons proliferation in the Middle East and aggressive policies.

- Iran does not have nuclear weapons and is a member of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) that advocates for nuclear disarmament and limiting its spread.
• Israel on the other hand has over 400 nukes and has never joined the NPT.

• For over a decade, Iran has granted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) more than 7000 mandate inspections of its nuclear facilities—an unprecedented access in the history of the United Nations nuclear agency.

• The number of inspections Israel has permitted to the IAEA during the past decade is an impressive—zero!

Regarding regional aggression and what Netanyahu claims as the Iranian “military machine that is busy conquering the Middle East.” Iran in last 200 years has not invaded any country, while Israel since its formation in 1948 has been responsible for occupying Palestinian territories and waging multiple wars against its neighbors (Egypt, Jordan, Syria, Lebanon, Iraq and Gaza). Ironically, Netanyahu and his government’s policies have been reckless for the region, reinforced by Bibi’s recent rejection for the “two states” solution to the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

Another major threat to the deal is the Republican-led U.S. Congress, seeking to press for further sanctions and pressures. The argument in support of such coercive policies—by majority of US congress, several US Arab allies in the region and Israel—is that it would force Iran to capitulate. Taking a closer look at the history of such policy toward Iran indicates the opposite outcome has been achieved. The principles of the framework agreement made in 2015—following nine years of comprehensive sanctions, sabotage, assassination of nuclear scientists and international isolation of Iran—is exactly the same as the one proposed to European countries in March 2005 (when I served as then spokesperson for the Iranian nuclear team). Those nuclear talks failed primarily because of the United States insistence that Iran cannot have any enrichment on its soil—a clear violation of Iran’s rights.

In 2013, the U.S. accepted Iran to have enrichment based on the NPT albeit with limitations and specifically for Iran’s practical domestic needs. This change in US policy was the impetus to break the deadlock in nuclear talks and reach the interim nuclear deal or the Joint Plan of Action (JPOA) signed in November 2013. Washington’s change of heart was not to appease Iran, rather a realization that sanctions have accelerated Iran’s nuclear program. Prior to the sanctions, Iran possessed few hundred centrifuges, was enriching uranium at below 5% with its stockpile amounting to couple hundred kilograms. After the sanctions, Iran’s installed centrifuges numbered 22,000 with an increased uranium enrichment level to 20% and 9000 kilograms of stockpile. The endless calls by Netanyahu and Congress for further sanctions or even war will only be reciprocated with an expansion of Iran’s nuclear program and retaliation.

The latest triumph through diplomacy puts into motion measures that go beyond any international nuclear non-proliferation monitoring, verification and inspections regime. The technical in the US negotiating team, US energy secretary Ernest Moniz stated that the deal would provide “unprecedented access and transparency” for inspectors, adding that “we’ll have continuous surveillance of centrifuge production” and warning that “if they [Iran] fail to meet any of these requirements, we are immediately going to know.” Such unprecedented measures could serve as a basis for improved regional nuclear non-proliferation system in the Middle East. A final agreement on the nuclear file expected by end of June this year would also open the pathway for further discussions between Iran and world powers on pressing regional issues—such as stability and security in Iraq, Syria and the fight against extremism—that have sunk the Middle East into chaos. Another positive development from the nuclear talks is the extensive bilateral discussions between US and Iran. While decades of mistrust and animosity cannot be wished away, the fact that both sides have engagement openly at the highest level ever since the 1979 Revolution is a positive development for broader normalization between the two countries.
Pluses and Minuses of the Outlined Iran Nuclear Deal

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Iran More Likely to Uphold an Agreement than the Washington Debate Assumes

Multiple U.S. intelligence estimates conclude that Iran’s leaders have not decided to acquire nuclear weapons, and, according to one report, that “Iran’s nuclear decision making is guided by a cost-benefit approach, which offers the international community opportunities to influence Tehran.”

If this assessment is correct, it is possible to devise an arrangement that will satisfy Iran’s needs for a peaceful nuclear energy program and the international community’s requirement that Iran not acquire nuclear weapons. A sound deal, in short, would have to convince Iran that the risks of cheating and the cost of non-compliance are too high. Rather than “trust but verify,” as Ronald Reagan defined his approach to nuclear arms control, the logic with Iran should be “distrust, verify, and deter.”

The benefits Iran hopes to accrue from sanctions relief can themselves augment deterrence of cheating. To the extent that Iranian businesses and citizens welcome the economic improvements that follow, they will hold their government responsible if it acts in ways that cause sanctions to be snapped back on. While the Iranian internal security apparatus remains repressive, it is sensitive to popular discord, which can be expressed even in constrained presidential elections.

For all of the imperfections of the comprehensive deal whose details must now be completed, the compromises that are being made to persuade Iranian leaders to accept it augment their incentives to uphold it. These leaders distrust the United States at least as much as the United States distrusts them. They have struggled to retain leverage in the negotiated arrangements to deter the U.S. and its partners from reneging on our side of the bargain. The underground research and development facility at Fordow, for example, is retained as insurance against military attack. The likely phasing of disclosure of past activities with possible military dimensions is meant to bide time to see if sanctions relief will be delivered as promised. Rather than being inherently bad for the U.S., the leverage Iran retains gives their leaders reason to think the U.S. will not renege on a deal.

Recent history demonstrates that Iran is deterrable. Iran began its secret quest for enrichment capability in 1985 during the war with Iraq. Saddam Hussein’s forces were attacking Iranian cities with ballistic missiles armed with chemical weapons. The United States and France rebuffed Iranian efforts to mobilize the UN Security Council to make Iraq stop. Iranian leaders then began looking for a nuclear option to ensure that their country would “never again” face such a threat.

Throughout the 1990s the United States and others reasonably sought to block most of Iran’s nuclear initiatives, as they also sought to verifiably eliminate all of Iraq’s weapons of mass destruction. While Iranians quietly welcomed the efforts in Iraq, they noticed the Bush Administration’s increasingly dire warnings that Iraq had Weapons of Mass Destruction and would use them.
The invasion of Iraq in 2003 removed the perceived Iraqi threat. At the same time, intelligence exposed that Iran was secretly building facilities to enable it to enrich uranium and produce plutonium, for which there was no realistic civilian requirement. The International Atomic Energy Agency began investigating and uncovered a long list of Iranian violations of requirements to report sensitive nuclear activities. The threat of possible U.S. intervention from Iraq into Iran also loomed. At this point, according to the U.S. intelligence community, “Tehran halted its nuclear weapons program... primarily in response to increasing international scrutiny and pressure resulting from exposure of Iran’s previously undeclared nuclear work.”

Negotiations ensued in 2003 and continued on and off until today. Since early 2014, the Joint Plan of Action that Iran implemented has essentially frozen its fuel-cycle program. Throughout, Iranian leaders have assiduously sought to preserve space for an ambitious nuclear energy program, relenting only where the terms of the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) clearly require and when international pressure, including economic sanctions, made it too painful to press for more. The NPT clearly proscribes acquiring nuclear weapons, but it does not define precisely which enabling activities and capabilities are forbidden.

Iran’s performance since 2003 suggests, but does not prove, that its interests can be served without nuclear weapons. Saudi Arabia is a leading source of Sunni resistance to Iran, in terms of ideology and funding. But as long as Saudi Arabia does not have nuclear weapons, Iran will retain a significant power advantage over it. If making and keeping a nuclear deal reduces the likelihood of a Saudi bomb, Iran will be better off. And Iran does not need nuclear weapons to fight the Islamic State and other Sunni militias in Iraq.

A robust nuclear arsenal might make Iran more secure vis-a-vis Israel and the United States, but the problem is that getting from today’s capability to a robust nuclear arsenal would risk a war with one or both. Implementing a nuclear deal – and retaining the leverage of the capabilities it allows – practically removes the threat of Israeli and American military attack. And, by relieving Iran’s international isolation and earning it kudos from many countries, a nuclear deal would enhance Iran’s standing for condemning Israel’s own nuclear arsenal and occupation policies. The latter possibilities will not be welcome in Israel and the U.S., but this only buttresses the assessment that Iran would have an interest in upholding a nuclear deal.

Israeli Prime Minister Netanyahu may or may not believe that Iranian leaders are as wildly revolutionary and violent as he says, and are therefore not deterrable, even by Israel’s own nuclear arsenal. But whatever he genuinely believes, he needs others to share his assertion that Iran would be undeterrable if it were allowed to retain significant nuclear capabilities. Yet, the fact that the Iranian government does loathsome and threatening things does not mean that it is undeterrable. If you examine the history of the Iranian leadership over the past several decades, you find little evidence that it would not be deterrable. The Iranian leadership has been very careful. It’s not an accident that Iranian leaders like Khomeini, Khamenei, and Rafsanjani tend to live a long time. They are not suicidal. They are not risk takers to the point of threatening Israel (or the United States) in such a way that could invite the destruction of Iran in retaliation.

Indeed, Israeli officials including Netanyahu share this assessment when they argue that if the United States (or someone else) bombed Iran’s nuclear program, the Iranians would not go crazy with military action and terrorism in response. Israeli officials widely believe, with reason, that Israel’s 2006 war with Hezbollah “reestablished deterrence.” Netanyahu says Hezbollah is a proxy of Iran, so that would mean that Iran, too, is deterrable.

Indeed, a great many Israeli military and intelligence leaders privately—and sometimes publicly—concur that Iran is and would be deterrable, even though it would be much better for Israel and everyone else if Iran did not acquire nuclear weapons. The U.S. military and intelligence community shares this assessment. If Iran is deterrable, then the risks of a nuclear deal with it are much more manageable than the prime minister and others wish to acknowledge. Indeed, a deal that is beneficial to the international community and Iran would itself create strong incentives for Iranian leaders not to risk those benefits to break such a deal, or to invite the same sorts of isolation, sanctions and threat of force by seeking nuclear weapons after a deal expires.
To reinforce this Iranian calculation, the details of a comprehensive agreement should combine deterrence and positive incentives. On the deterrence side, verification is vital. Iranian leaders should conclude that efforts to cheat will be detected with enough time to allow military interdiction before Iran could acquire nuclear weapons. The primary risk is in the domain of uranium enrichment. Here, Iran’s activities must be monitored from mining of ore all the way through the enrichment process, as the U.S. fact sheet released April 2 says it will. All of Iran’s facilities and activities involved in producing centrifuges must be monitored, as well as all operations of centrifuges, from research and development to larger-scale production of low-enriched uranium for reactor fuel.

The United States has also said that Iran would establish and allow the monitoring of a dedicated procurement channel for “the supply, sale, or transfer to Iran of certain nuclear-related and dual use materials and technology.” Much will depend on the details, but if Iran agrees to limit the procurement of sensitive items to a declared and monitored channel, this would mean that, unlike today, intelligence analysts and policymakers would not have to debate whether a detected activity actually signifies a violation of the NPT or of any other international nonproliferation norm or guideline. Rather, any attempts to procure such items by other means would violate the agreement. Such a mechanism would significantly reduce the risk that Iran would conduct undeclared nuclear activities, because the danger of being detected doing so would be greater than ever.

A satisfactory agreement also should prohibit research and development activities whose purposes are closely associated with nuclear weaponization. Even if Iran will not resolve the IAEA’s ongoing questions about past activities with possible military dimensions until the later stages of an agreed arrangement, Iran should conduct no new activities of this sort. To verify this, Iran will have to agree to procedures for international inspections of any facilities reasonably suspected of conducting work related to nuclear weaponization. Such arrangements would correct a shortcoming of the 1968 NPT and serve as an important precedent to be applied to all non-nuclear-weapon states.

Deterrence of cheating will be further enhanced by the process designed for relieving sanctions on Iran. In the initial years of an agreement, Iran’s performance of its obligations should be reciprocated by waivers of U.S. and other sanctions, rather than the removal of the underlying legal authorities behind them. This way, if Iran fails to perform, sanctions can be “snapped-back” into place quickly by ending waivers.

A final comprehensive nuclear agreement should be codified in a UN Security Council resolution, under Chapter VII, as it now appears has been agreed in Switzerland. The U.S. and other Security Council members can augment deterrence by explaining that violation of such a resolution may be punished by force. The U.S. Congress could affirm that it would support the use of force in the event Iran materially breached the agreement.

None of this is to gainsay the violence Iran’s protégés and its Revolutionary Guard forces perpetrate in neighboring countries. Nor is it to accept the theocratic repressiveness of Iranian politics and governance. The U.S., Israel and Iran’s Arab neighbors will continue to contest Iranian assertiveness, as Iran will in reverse. Washington will continue to press for democratization and protection of human rights in Iran, just as Iran will denounce Israel’s treatment of the Palestinians and Washington’s complicity with it. A nuclear deal will limit the dangers of this competition by significantly reducing the risks of nuclear proliferation and war, and providing an opportunity to test whether diplomatic agreements can be maintained.

If the proposed deal can be completed as now planned, at the end of its duration, near 2030, a major threat to international peace and security and the global nuclear order will have been abated. At that time, Iran will have been restored to good standing under the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, bound by its now clarified terms. Iran’s first-generation revolutionary leaders will have passed from the scene. Then, if new Iranian leaders somehow concluded that they wanted to try again to move towards nuclear weapons, as Prime Minister Netanyahu and others warn, they should expect an immediate and decisive international campaign to stop them.
Where the Outlined Deal Appears to Fall Short

To build the confidence of Iran’s neighbors and the international community that Tehran will not violate an agreement and/or seek nuclear weapons 15 years from now, there needs to be an agreed basis for inspecting facilities where there is good reason to suspect that undeclared activities related to nuclear weapons are occurring. Given Iran’s past record, including work done in facilities controlled by the military/Revolutionary Guards, merely stating that the IAEA’s Additional Protocol would be applied in Iran is not sufficient.

On the other hand, Iran has legitimate reason to worry that the U.S., Israel and others could abuse open-ended inspection authority to seek intelligence for targeting Iranian facilities and personnel, and/or for making allegations and inspections demands in ways that create a constant sense of crisis which would impede sanctions relief and broader international engagement with Iran. Iranians insist that, unlike Iraq in the 1990s, they have not been defeated in war and the international community has no right to send foreign inspectors anytime and anyplace the U.S. (and others) wants. Nor do Iranians accept that the IAEA would be a fair arbiter of when and where non-routine inspections should occur; they point to WikiLeaks leaked documents wherein U.S. officials report that the IAEA secretary general defers to U.S. preferences.

Public statements by the U.S. and by Iran do not indicate that the inspections issue has been adequately resolved when it comes to military or other undeclared facilities. A weak or ambiguous resolution of this issue would be a major problem, and perhaps invite crisis down the road.

Similarly, the outlined agreement does not appear to specify and proscribe research and development activities that are so closely associated with nuclear weaponization that they should be deemed illegitimate in a non-nuclear-weapon state. The proposed agreement concentrates narrowly on the nuclear fuel-cycle, leaving open the possibility that Iranian actors could conduct research and experiments that observers could fear are precursors to nuclear-weapons development, but which Iran could say is not forbidden. This failure to specifically address potential weapons-related research and development, paired with the unresolved questions regarding inspections of military facilities, is a significant shortcoming. It also represents a missed opportunity to establish a normative firewall between a genuinely civilian nuclear program and one that may verge to illegitimate military applications. Such a firewall could then be applied to other states in the future.
The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia today faces a multiplicity of domestic and external threats. Should this kingdom, often described as the “central bank” of the global oil industry, fall to an external attack or internal revolution, the political impact on what remains today of the Arab nation-state order and the knock-on effect on global oil prices will be incalculable.

Today, radical jihadi ideology calling for the overthrow of the House of Saud spreads among frustrated Saudi youth who are increasingly politicized and radicalized by social media and also militarized by fighting in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. This threat becomes all the more potent as jihadis arrive on the kingdom’s northern border with Iraq and on its southern border with Yemen. At the same time, a hostile Iran, with aggressive political ambitions in the Middle East, tightens its hold over Iraq’s Shia provinces, as spreading sectarianism provides Iran and its, Iraqi allies with increasing access to and influence over the disgruntled Shia community of Saudi Arabia’s oil-producing Eastern Province and also with the recently empowered Houthi Shia militia on the Saudi–Yemeni border.

Arabian elites live contentedly on islands of conspicuous wealth and prosperity surrounded by an ocean of poor, covetous, and hostile people. These are the millions of underprivileged Arabs in Yemen, Jordan, Iraq, and the Levant; the masses of economically distressed Iranians; and a not insubstantial number of less-privileged Saudi citizens. While not as desperately poor as their neighbors, these Saudis are increasingly demanding a “fair” share of what they consider to be their oil wealth while accusing their rulers of taking a disproportionate share for themselves. Such envy and resentment provides a natural breeding ground for the growing hostility that is enveloping the Saudi ruling order.

Despite these dangers, the kingdom continues to be led by rulers who are distracted by internal family politics and are seemingly oblivious to the extent of their vulnerabilities. For their security, they continue to depend on their traditional alliance with the elders of the Wahhabi establishment and on US military protection combined with the occasional financial largesse that they dispense both to their neighbors and their own people. Regardless of some noises to the contrary, their actions show that they do not fully appreciate that times have changed, their people’s expectations and political awareness have increased, their enemies have multiplied and become more dangerous, and the United States may no longer be willing or even able to protect them as before.

Saudi rulers do not see any need to adapt their ruling model to cope with this increasingly complex and dangerous environment. Their model of a huge, self-absorbed, and generously provided for royal family exerting unconstrained and absolute power over more than twenty-eight million people is simply not sustainable in this day and age. Al Saud’s success, so far, in beating the odds that have always been stacked up against them has numbed their senses to the shifting ground they stand on. While today they probably
retain the power, the resources, and enough prestige and legitimacy with the majority of their people to be able to succeed with political reform, every day they postpone introducing such reform brings the day of reckoning inevitably closer.

International stakeholders in Saudi stability watch developments in the kingdom in a somewhat detached and complacent manner, not fully absorbing the enormity of what is at stake here. The United States, the only stakeholder with any possible influence on the Saudi monarchy, continues to call for “democracy” in the region, as it has done for years. While US politicians like to repeat this mantra, mostly for the benefit of their domestic constituencies, the United States’ decades-long singular public focus on this issue has only served to encourage the Al Saud to waste political capital creating cosmetic façades of public political participation, such as a consultative council and municipal councils—talking shops with no power that are even limited in what they are allowed to talk about. Such empty gestures, if anything, only serve to alienate the growing pool of frustrated and resentful non-royal Saudi intellectual elites. While the United States still retains the influence needed to prod Al Saud toward reform, the lack of adequate scholarship on the politics of the Saudi state renders US leaders bereft of sufficient knowledge, understanding, and imagination (and perhaps even the will) needed to approach this delicate task with any confidence.

The dearth of knowledge on, and limited understanding of, Saudi politics is due to the fact that research on this subject is crippled by the lack of original Saudi source material. Unfettered access to government archives, to the extent that they exist at all in any organized form, is forbidden to independent researchers. This deprives Saudi political history of its main source of original information and makes any substantive analysis of the inner workings of the Saudi government virtually impossible. Consequently like Kremlin-watchers of old, today’s Saudi-watchers are often reduced, for their analyses, to waiting for smoke signals to emerge from the palaces of Riyadh.

Furthermore the kingdom has always been an inhospitable place for foreign analysts. The country is difficult to access and its society hard to penetrate, even for resident diplomats, who end up spending the majority of their time with fellow expatriates and a tiny pool of westernized Saudis. A public, political, or even social space that is open to interested foreigners and that can be accessed to gauge public opinion has only recently emerged with social media.

This problem is compounded by the absence of frank and honest memoirs written by former members of the Saudi government. The Al Saud have always frowned upon such work; hence, tragically, critical Saudi Arabian political history dies with its participants. This not only prevents outsiders from getting a thorough understanding of Saudi Arabian political history, but it also even deprives newer-generation Saudi leaders of this privilege.

Former Oil Minister Ahmad Zaki Yamani was the senior Saudi official who came closest to shining a light on the inner workings of Saudi power by cooperating with a biography written about him in 1989, which was very critical of King Fahd. In the book, Yamani was seen as trying to settle a personal score with the king after having been unceremoniously dismissed by him. It upset Saudi leaders so much that they completely ostracized Yamani and continue to do so to this day. My late father, who worked closely with Saudi leaders for a period of nearly sixty years, always ignored my pleadings that he write his memoirs, justifying his refusal by saying that he didn’t want to break this unwritten rule of discretion.

The Al Saud never understood or appreciated that if any history about them was to be seen as credible, then it needed to include the good and the bad—and that if the good, on balance, exceeded the bad, then the historical record would ultimately be judged favorably. In any historical work that the government would allow or cooperate with, Saudi leaders had to be presented as nearly perfect human beings who were adored and respected by all—leaders who exhibited almost superhuman skills when dealing with the issues of the day. This is why, for example, a credible history of the founder of the modern dynasty, King Abdul-Aziz, has never been written by a respected international scholar, even though he was a giant of early twentieth-century Arabian history. Unlike another giant of the era, Turkey’s Kemal Atatürk, who was widely studied and consequently lionized by history and whose many biographies highlight the good and the very bad (including, even, his alleged debauchery and pedophilia), history has virtually
ignored King Abdul-Aziz and the enormous impact he had.\(^4\)

In addition to the above-mentioned constraints, independent analysts face Saudi Arabia’s very effective policy of severely limiting outside analysts’ access to the country itself, so preserving this difficult and rare access becomes the lifeblood of “Saudi experts.” They have to be extremely careful about what they write and say, so as not to offend their hosts and lose that access, particularly since they very well realize that Saudi rulers, unlike Western politicians, have never had to accept or deal with a hostile domestic media and, therefore, never developed a tolerance for “bad press.”

Such a dearth of original source material for the analyses of Saudi internal politics may be difficult for outside observers to fully appreciate given the deluge of publicly available information available on such matters in Western democracies. For researchers into contemporary American politics, for example, the amount of original source material is enormous. Even with history that is still in process, like the current Obama administration with two years still left in its tenure, credible and critical memoirs and books have already come out with information from key players in the administration about deliberations, disagreements and the thinking of the President and his key advisors. When you add that to the oceans of historical information about US politics going back decades, including original documents from presidential libraries, tape recordings like those put in place by both Presidents Nixon and Johnson and the constant stream of leaks to the media, ongoing disclosures to Congress, information made available to the media in the course of the daily functioning of the US government, information that inevitably emerges in adversarial political campaigns and debates etc. you have an enormous amounts of data about the functioning of the American political system that intelligent conclusions can be based on. An independent analyst of internal Saudi politics simply has none of the above at his disposal. He can only judge the output of Saudi politics, as in public actions and decisions taken by Saudi leaders, and sometimes add to that second-hand information that may be available from foreign sources and then try and opine on Saudi policy. It is a process that, in comparison to that in the US, is sometimes akin to flying blind.

This lack of adequate scholarship on Saudi politics will continue, despite the very recent advent of social media, which in itself—and in the absence of the other factors, as explained above—can never provide analysts with anything near a complete picture.

All of this only contributes to many outside stakeholders’, and even local elites’, false sense of security about the ongoing stability of the Saudi state, while the emerging local and regional enemies of the kingdom—the Sunni Islamists from within and the expansionist jihadis from without, plus the Iranian theocracy and its Arab Shia allies—circle like hungry predators, eagerly waiting for an opportunity to pounce.

Saudi Arabia as a coherent state will, in all likelihood, not be able to survive a fall of the House of Saud. The lack of any other institution of governance that has the ability to hold the country together virtually ensures that the removal of Al Saud will bring about a complete breakdown of law and order, the disintegration of the country, and the likely destruction of its oil infrastructure. The geopolitical implications of such a collapse will inevitably stretch far beyond the borders of the country. The Saudi kingdom is probably the last major foundational pillar holding up the shaky edifice of the modern Arab nation-state system. Its collapse will not only bring down the remaining states of the Arabian Peninsula and possibly the Levant but may also have a disastrous impact on Égypt’s precarious stability.

The failure of many analysts to imagine such potentially apocalyptic outcomes has a lot to do with the fact that the many previous crises in the Arabian Peninsula/Persian Gulf—namely, the decade-long Iraq–Iran war, two US-led wars in Iraq, and the revolutions of the Arab Spring—all happened without causing cataclysmic regional oil production or supply disruptions. This has lulled global oil, commodities, and financial markets into complacency, as reflected in the low geopolitical risk premiums attached to such risks in these markets today.\(^5\)

This complacency is reinforced by the Saudi government’s decades-long track record of overcoming the multiple challenges that have been constantly thrown at it and people’s natural tendency to expect the future to be a linear extrapolation of the present. The continuation of the status quo in Arabia, however, is becoming increasingly unlikely, as the tempo
of what French historian Daniel Halévy termed the “acceleration of history” only increases with the explosion of new media and with the spreading democratization of violence.

The emergence of powerful non-state actors across the Arabian Peninsula, Iraq, and the Levant, and their ongoing successes in attacking status quo powers, has captured the imagination of the disgruntled and frustrated youth bulge of this region. Arab masses are beginning to realize that the era of the omnipotence of the Arab state is clearly over. Non-state actors like Hezbollah, Hamas, the Islamic State, al-Qaeda, and others have not only exhibited a capacity to acquire and deploy armaments effectively but, more important, have also succeeded in training and motivating their operatives to reach standards of performance in combat that are proving to be far superior to those of conventional Arab military forces. The intense revolutionary zeal that jihadist fighters are bringing to battle is being met by government troops that exhibit little of their opposition’s enthusiasm. These troops show a lack of willingness to risk their lives for the sake of a ruling order in which they have no particular stake. It is also unlikely, if the jihadi virus continues to spread, that this lack of enthusiasm can be successfully overcome with the involvement of US airpower and intelligence support. For a ruling order to survive, its foot soldiers must want to defend it.

Saudi leaders have yet to comprehend these tectonic shifts taking place around them. Nor have they absorbed the dangerous implications for their survival.

Endnotes

3 For example, the recent biography of Abdul-Aziz by Michael Darlow and Barbara Bray, proceeding from the admission that the “details of many of the key events in the life of Ibn Saud are still disputed,” breaks little new ground. See Barbara Bray and Michael Darlow, Ibn Saud: The Desert Warrior Who Created the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (London: Quartet Books, 2010).
Yemen presents another political and military danger to Saudi Arabia. A country with over twenty-five million poor people boxed in at the southwest corner of the Arabian Peninsula, the rapidly failing state of Yemen is home to potential waves of desperate refugees waiting for an opportunity to climb over their rich neighbor’s border fence.

Yemen has been a security problem for Saudi Arabia since its 1962 revolution, which saw the overthrow of its ruling royal family. This led to years of civil war, which involved Saudi Arabia on the side of the royalist forces and Egypt on the side of the republican revolutionaries. When this civil war ended with Egypt’s defeat in 1967, Saudi Arabia was left stuck with a miserably poor country ravaged by war on its doorstep.

As part of a wise and sustainable approach to dealing with this problem, King Faisal then allowed Yemeni workers virtually unlimited access to the Saudi labor market and even extended to them labor rights similar to those enjoyed by Saudi citizens. This created millions of jobs for Yemenis and contributed massively to Yemen’s economy. While this policy was somewhat unpopular in Saudi Arabia (where low-income Saudis justifiably saw the Yemenis as competition), it wisely recognized the more serious long-term danger to the kingdom’s security posed by a poor, hungry, un-stable Yemen.

Unfortunately, this wisdom came to a screeching halt with the Iraqi invasion of Kuwait and with Yemeni leader Ali Abdullah Saleh’s open support of Saddam Hussein. The Saudi government immediately retaliated by withdrawing the special Yemeni labor privileges, effectively expelling most Yemeni laborers from the country in what would prove to be an unfortunate decision with devastating consequences for the Yemeni economy.

While the discovery and export of oil beginning in 1986 had given the Yemeni economy a temporary boost, corruption and inefficiency mitigated any long-term structural benefits that such a windfall could have brought to the economy. At the same time, the country’s scarce aquifer-based water reserves have been depleting at astronomical rates to feed an unproductive drug habit that most Yemenis have, consuming a mildly stimulating narcotic leaf called khat. With oil revenues diminishing, water running out, and the country losing any capacity it may have to feed itself without foreign aid, Yemen is a nation in economic collapse.

In a report dated February 26, 2015, the Australian think tank Future Directions International described Yemen, as “spiral out of control” with an unemployment rate of 35 percent (and getting worse), and over ten million Yemenis, 42 percent of the population, as “food insecure.” Despite this, agricultural production has been steadily declining across the country on account of human displacement, instability, damaged irrigation and infrastructure, and destroyed farmland. The report also quoted the World Bank as describing Yemen as one of the “five most water-stressed countries in the world.”
The country is highly dependent on food imports, having to import as much as 90 percent of its staple foods and 55 percent of its overall food supply. On top of needing foreign currency to pay for these imports, the country suffers from inadequate food-storage capacity and infrastructure.\(^2\) And if that were not enough, Yemen itself is the recipient of over 230,000 refugees, mostly bitter and war-hardened men, from neighboring war-torn Somalia.

When all of this is added to the gradual breakdown of law and order that is spreading across the country, driven by the Iranian-backed Houthi takeover of North Yemen, the growth of jihadi activity inspired by al-Qaeda and ISIS, and the secessionist movement in the south, it becomes clear that Yemen is well on its way to becoming a failed state.\(^3\)

This failed state is one with a politically mobilized and heavily militarized citizenry (and an acute youth bulge; 46 percent of the population is under the age of fifteen) organized around numerous insurgent groups that are competing for power and space. Today, the country is wracked by rebellion and insurgency, and the central government is unable to control even Sana’a, its capital. On one side is a rebellion by the Houthis, named for the founder of their movement, Hussein al-Houthi (d. 2004), and belonging to a Shia sect that is being courted by Iran. Between 2004 and 2010, the Houthis fought six wars with the central Yemeni government. Since the 2011 uprising against former President Ali Abdullah Saleh, they have “in effect run a state within a state” in the northwest province of Saada, which borders Saudi Arabia. Most recently, the Houthis succeeded in taking control of the Yemeni capital.\(^4\)

The Iranians see their own advantage in creating a new hostile Shia front on Saudi Arabia’s southern border, one that can work with them to undermine Saudi stability and territorial integrity. Consequently, the Houthi rebels have been receiving military and financial support from the Iranians and are rapidly using this to take over wide swaths of Yemeni territory on Saudi Arabia’s southwestern border. In 2012, unnamed US officials told the \textit{New York Times} that “the Iranian aid to Yemen … mirrors the kind of weapons and training the Quds Force is providing the embattled government of President Bashar al-Assad of Syria.”\(^5\) A “war” against these rebels in 2009 was an embarrassing failure for the Saudi military, which lost about a hundred soldiers and did little to damage the Houthi movement.\(^6\)

In the rest of Yemen, extremist Sunni jihadist Islamism has been metastasizing for years. Successful antiterrorist efforts made by the Saudi Ministry of Interior, after the bombings in Riyadh that followed 9/11, chased a lot of Saudi al-Qaeda operatives out of the country. They found a receptive new home in Yemen. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP) was then established as a merger between the Saudi and Yemeni branches of al-Qaeda and has been busy building up its network and capabilities since that time. Continued attempts by the Saudi and Yemeni governments, with US military support and involvement through the drone program, have done little to arrest their growth. If anything, the US drone program has served only to publicly embarrass the Saudi government, as the Saudi opposition quickly took advantage of the inevitable leaks in the US media concerning this program, and the disclosure of the location of its base in southern Saudi Arabia on the Yemeni border, to accuse the Al Saud of “participating in the murder” of Muslims of Yemen.

All of this is taking place amid a background secessionist movement in South Yemen that is gaining traction. In May 2014, thousands of South Yemenis who feel politically and economically marginalized by the ruling North Yemenis demonstrated in the port city of Aden, chanting, “Twenty years of repression and resistance.” They demanded independence, i.e., a return to the pre-1990 state of affairs when the two halves of the country were indeed separate.

On their own merit, Yemen’s problems are worthy of a book, but the point here is to stress that Yemen’s crisis will only overflow into Saudi Arabia—and nowhere else. Yemen is surrounded by the Indian Ocean and the Red Sea. Even its neighbors across the Red Sea, Somalia and Eritrea, are in very bad shape. This means that Saudi Arabia and, to a much lesser degree, Oman are the only countries to which Yemenis can escape, leaving their poverty and conflict behind.

Rather than attempting to create a permanent structural solution to this problem by fully opening Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) labor markets to Yemeni labor, GCC governments are simply attempting to put up a virtual wall and isolate themselves...
from Yemen. In 2013, Saudi Arabia deported some two hundred thousand Yemeni laborers as a means of addressing its own unemployment issues. It is also putting up a physical wall between itself and Yemen, constructing a thousand-mile border fence from the Red Sea to Oman. Such a shortsighted policy will inevitably fail.

In May of 2012, I published an article calling for Yemen to be invited in as a full member of the GCC so as to allow the country’s labor force free access to that market and also encourage GCC capital investment in Yemen. The reaction I got to that article from most of the GCC elites with whom I spoke afterward was almost wholly negative. They were horrified at the idea of admitting millions of “poor Yemenis with guns” into their countries, this despite the presence of nearly twenty million foreign laborers from countries as far away as India and the Philippines in these markets already, whose annual remittance earnings amount to billions of dollars. This remittance funding could instead end up in Yemen, stabilizing the country and giving its people a stake in a stable GCC. Now, as Yemen’s situation worsens by the day, the price of such short-term tactical thinking (at the expense of long-term strategy) becomes increasingly clear.

It would be, after all, ultimately easier to focus on the possible security problems that come with millions of Yemenis working in the GCC, most of whom will be gainfully employed and hence have a vested interest in their employers’ well-being, rather than deal with the security nightmare that a collapse of the country will bring, not to mention the subsequent waves of angry, desperate, and militarized Yemenis pouring over the borders of the GCC.

The smaller GCC countries, in particular, have a very high absorptive capacity for foreign labor. Millions of laborers from the Indian subcontinent and other Asian countries have flooded Gulf markets in recent years. With the growing dynamism of India’s and Asian countries’ home markets, these workers could be repatriated and replaced with Yemeni laborers. Here, the multiplier effect of employing Yemeni labor (i.e., deploying young men in the labor market rather than in the “conflict market”) combined with the impact of remittances on the Yemeni home economy would be massive. This would also help turn Yemen into a consumer of light industrial goods, which the GCC countries produce in large quantities, and hence add to GCC economic prosperity. The common market impact of such an arrangement is potentially massive, and the lack of imagination evident among the GCC leaders in their failure to appreciate this fact will only blow back negatively on their countries in time.

Yemen will most likely crumble. As law and order break down, basic services break down, and poverty and desperation spread out among Yemen’s population, a refugee crisis of immense proportions will emerge, driving millions of Yemenis over the fence and into Saudi Arabia. Nothing and no one will be able to stop them once they move. The potentially dire implications of this should be painfully obvious.

Endnotes

2 Ibid.

The article is available at http://www.alishihabi.com/2012/05/case-for-yemen-joining-gcc.html.


“A collapsed Yemen would lead to a surge in refugees crossing the border into Saudi Arabia, increased crime in the kingdom’s southern provinces, primarily in the form of smuggling, and perhaps also piracy similar to that around Somalia,” in addition to more jihadists using “the country as a safe haven and a platform for launching armed attacks in Saudi Arabia” and the Iranians buying greater “influence in the country.”
How to Get Egypt’s Generals Back on Our Side

Hint: Pay them.
And it’s going to take a lot more than the $1.3 billion the U.S. government sends Cairo each year.

Steven A. Cook,
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Almost as soon as the nasheed, a religious chant, begins, an improvised explosive device destroys a military vehicle in the distance. The scene repeats again, in super-slow motion. The nasheed continues, encouraging jihadists to raise up their swords, fight for god, and make their way to paradise. In the next scene, terrorists assault a small military outpost nestled amid palm trees, shooting their way through the rubble and killing a soldier who returns fire. A tank comes into view, its turret swinging wildly, raking the area with machine gun fire ineffectively, and then beating a hasty retreat. The footage then shifts to the gruesome aftermath: a burned-out tank, a disabled armored personnel carrier, and dead, mangled soldiers.

The attack on Oct. 24, purportedly captured in a video released by Ansar Bayt al-Maqdis, a jihadist group that pledged allegiance to the Islamic State in November, killed 33 Egyptian soldiers and officers. It was the worst loss of life for Egyptian military forces since the insurgency in the Sinai Peninsula kicked into high gear in the summer of 2013. The military has paid a high price in its fight against the jihadists: Over the past year, 190 Egyptian conscripts and officers have been killed in terrorist attacks. Added to the problem in the Sinai is the gathering threat from the west, as Libya implodes. In time, Egypt may very well face insurgencies on two fronts.

Nothing the Egyptians have done to pacify the Sinai has worked, and some of it—scorched-earth responses to terror attacks, evacuating entire villages—runs against the basic tenets of an effective counterinsurgency strategy. Yet unlike Iraq, where the United States has deployed 3,000 soldiers and has been pummeling the Islamic State with almost continuous airstrikes, Egypt requires something entirely different from Washington to win its battle against the jihadists—money and trust.

The caricature of the Egyptian military leadership is a group of officers single-mindedly focused onprocuring M1A1 tanks and F-16 fighter jets from the United States. There is, of course, some truth to this. For the better part of the last decade, American officials have been nudging the Egyptians to take a fresh look at their military doctrine and alter it to what the Pentagon calls “21st-century threats,” such as terrorism and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. However, U.S. defense officials have not gotten far in this effort: State Department cables released by Wikileaks recount how Egyptian defense officials essentially stonewalled their American counterparts on the issue. In keeping with the old cliché, Egypt’s military establishment seems like it would prefer to fight its last war—which took place 41 years ago.

For all of Cairo’s apparent stubbornness, however, its position is driven by more than an irrational and unquenchable desire for new military toys. As one officer asked during a private discussion about Egypt’s military doctrine and force structure: “What kind of military would we be if we did not have tanks and planes? We don’t want to be a gendarmerie.”
No doubt he was deflecting a subject Egypt’s officers would otherwise prefer not to discuss, but he was also revealing their profound mistrust of the United States and its goals in Egypt. After more than a decade of tension between Washington and Cairo, the officers want to be reassured of American support, of which there are no better symbols than brand new F-16s, Apache helicopters, and tanks. Until Washington does something to ameliorate this suspicion, it will get nowhere with the Egyptians on issues of the Sinai and border security; harming the interests of both countries.

It is hard to come to grips with the fact that Egyptian officers do not trust Washington. Since the mid-1970s, American taxpayers have spent $40 billion on the Egyptian Defense Ministry. When the Egyptians deployed 35,000 soldiers to Saudi Arabia in 1990 to take part in Operations Desert Shield and Desert Storm, President George H. W. Bush’s administration (along with Arab creditors) wrote off or cancelled $20 billion in Egyptian debt. Washington also convinced the Paris Club to forgive another $10 billion in debt, or half of what the Egyptians owed to European countries, the United States, Canada, and Japan. During Egypt’s fight against terrorists in the 1990s, Washington stood shoulder-to-shoulder with Cairo.

Even on the sole occasion the United States has sought to punish Egypt, it has done so in a way that carefully avoided compromising Egyptian security. President Barack Obama’s administration may have held up the delivery of 20 F-1 6s, 10 Apache helicopters, US M1A1 tanks kits, and 20 Harpoon missiles in the months following the coup that ousted Mohammed Morsi, but this had a marginal effect on the Egyptians’ ability to fight jihadists in the Sinai. The Obama administration has thus far released Apaches, but the F-16s, tank kits, and Harpoon missiles remain in the dock. Even if this equipment was critical to counterinsurgency operations, which is debatable, the Egyptians already had plenty of it. Cairo boasts the fourth-largest inventory of F-16s in the world (a total of 220), almost three dozen Apaches, and a sizable fleet of main battle tanks.

Notwithstanding Washington’s past support, the Egyptian military has good reasons to be suspicious of the United States. First, although it is common for virtually everyone to refer to U.S. military assistance as “generous,” it has actually been painstakingly slow and increasingly expensive for the Egyptians. The annual $1.3 billion payout is the same amount Washington has been appropriating to Cairo since 1987, but it is worth less than half of what it had been originally—owing to inflation. As a result, the aid no longer buys what it once did. Second, although by all measures the level of strategic cooperation between Egypt and Israel is the best since the 1979 peace treaty, the Egyptians have historically chafed at the fact that the military equipment Washington makes available to them is inferior to what the Israelis can buy. For example, Israeli and Egyptian F-16s may look a lot alike, but the advanced avionics and other bells and whistles “under the hood” of Israel’s jets make them more capable.

Beyond the nuts and bolts of military aid, Egyptian military officers cannot figure out why—even well before the 2011 uprising that brought Hosni Mubarak’s long rule to an end—they were being blamed for Egypt’s authoritarian government. Beginning with President George W. Bush’s administration, the senior command (and the entire Egyptian elite, for that matter) came to believe that the United States was no longer committed to what was then the prevailing regime. When the uprising happened and the United States accommodated itself to the Muslim Brotherhood’s electoral victories, it merely confirmed these suspicions. President Barack Obama’s decision to delay some military aid after then army chief Abdel Fattah al-Sisi toppled Morsi in the July 2013 coup—not suspend it completely, as U.S. law required—hardened the officers’ views of Washington even more.

Yes, the officers are refusing to recognize the fact that they have been the beneficiaries and primary defenders of a non-democratic system. But it is also not lost on them that while Americans recoil at the idea that Washington’s own policies have produced radicalization and made America a target for terrorists, they routinely lecture the Egyptians that their policies have wrought death and destruction. There is, of course, a repression-radicalization dynamic that contributes to violence that officials in Cairo willfully overlook, but the hypocrisy and self-righteous indignation of American interlocutors suggests to them that Washington’s commitment to Egypt is no
longer what it once was. It’s hard not to come to this conclusion, given that the foundations of the relationship either no longer exist—containing the Soviet Union and using Egypt as a base in the event of a crisis in the Persian Gulf—or are not as pressing as in previous decades, as with ensuring Egypt-Israel peace. The changing relationship with Washington, in turn, is driving the Egyptian Ministry of Defense’s tighter coordination with the Israelis and Emiratis—as well as its more worrying flirtation with the Russians.

The U.S.-Egypt relationship will continue to change. The logic that drove it over the course of the last three decades is no longer as strong as it once was, and the profoundly repressive way in which President Sisi is ruling has further strained ties with Washington. Yet for the time being, there are important security matters that affect the interest of both countries: unimpeded traffic in the Suez Canal, the suppression of jihadist groups in Sinai, and the maintenance of peace with and security in Israel. All of these require trust between Washington and Cairo. And the only way the Egyptians are going to be convinced that the United States stands firmly with them in their fight against terrorism is through more money.

If this sounds perverse, that’s because it is. In order to get the Egyptians to deal with the problem of terrorism in a more effective way—something that is in Cairo’s interest—Washington will have to appropriate more money to Egypt for military assistance. Thus far, funds that are used for counterterrorism come out of the $1.3 billion aid package, which reduces the amount available for big ticket items like tanks and planes. In a crude way of demonstrating Washington’s commitment to see the Egyptians through this current security challenge, the United States should add funds to the military assistance program devoted specifically to counterinsurgency technology, training, and advising. This way, the tanks and planes are safe, and Egyptian officers’ fears of their army being transformed into a gendarmerie will be allayed.

There’s a coalition of counterterror, pro-Israel, and defense industry interests in Washington that would be happy to go back to business as usual in Egypt. That said, the idea of doling out additional millions to Cairo is going to be hard to swallow. How do you give more money to a leadership that has jailed tens of thousands, killed between 1,000 and 2,500, restricts freedom of expression, and forces dissidents into self-imposed exile, much of it in the name of counterterrorism? Critics will argue that offering more assistance to the Egyptian military is worse than a return to the U.S.-Egypt relationship under Mubarak. It is a fair point: In a way, it would look like Washington is rewarding Sisi for his repression.

At the same time, however, advocates of using security assistance as an instrument of behavior modification tend to give short shrift to the political dynamics—Sisi’s popularity, the demobilization of large pans of the Egyptian population, strong Egypt-Israel security cooperation, the threat from the Islamic State, and an American administration aware of the limits of democracy promotion—that will likely render the approach a failure, even counterproductive.

There is no easy answer to these dilemmas, but it is important to recognize that Washington’s ability to modify Egypt’s behavior has proven over and over again to be limited. In addition to democracy promotion, the United States has made the fight against terrorism its defining foreign policy issue of the last 13 years. It is here where the United States can actually do something useful in Egypt—if Washington is willing to pay a price for it.
Libya has long served as a source of foreign fighters for Syria and Iraq, with some estimates placing the total number of Libyans involved at roughly 500. Some have joined Jabhat al-Nusra, some the Islamic State, while still others are fighting with non-jihadist groups. The return of Libyan foreign fighters from the conflict has long been a concern. In the spring and summer of this year, the pace of the jihadist return picked up, spurred in part by the outbreak of factional fighting in Benghazi.

In early October 2014, the Darnah-based Islamic Youth Shura Council (IYSC) pledged loyalty to the Islamic State, declaring eastern Libya to be a province of the Islamic State. It was the first such pledge by a Libyan jihadist group, facilitated by the return to Libya of a group of pro-Islamic State Libyan jihadists from Syria, the so-called Bitar Battalion, and the later arrival of Yemeni and Saudi emissaries from the Islamic State.

In the ensuing weeks, the IYSC tried to copy the more draconian functions of the Islamic State’s governance, setting up its own morality patrols, convening Shari’a courts, and conducted the first public execution in Libya since Qaddafi’s overthrow. On November 12th, the self-styled caliph of the Islamic State, Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi, accepted the oath of the IYSC, urging Libyans (along with Algerians, Tunisians, and Moroccans) to “fight the secularists.”

Since then, the Islamic State has set up three regional branches in the east, the south and the west. It has staged gruesome and theatrical executions of Coptic Christians and Ethiopian migrants. It launched a brazen daytime assault on Tripoli’s most prominent luxury hotel, killing nine, including an American security contractor. In an effort to hasten Libya’s already deteriorating economy, it has staged attacks on oil facilities in the Sirte Basin. Taken in sum, these are worrisome new developments.

**Terrorism Entrenched in Civil War**

Part of what makes Libya’s terrorist threat so confounding is that it is deeply embedded in a broader, more complex power struggle that has effectively split the country’s nearly nonexistent political and security institutions.

Since the summer of 2014, Libya has been wracked by civil war with the launch of Operation Dignity—a coalition of military units, Qaddafi-era military officers, eastern tribes, federalists, and Zintani militias in the west, led by retired General Khalifa Hifter.

The immediate goal for Operation Dignity was to rid Benghazi of Islamist militias including Ansar al-Shari’a and restore security in the troubled city, which had been rattled by a spate of assassinations. But a broader unstated goal was to reshape Libya’s security sector and political institutions to privilege the Qaddafi-era officer class and allied technocrats, while excluding the militias, younger Islamists, and Misratan factions. Hifter’s forces enjoy support from the internationally recognized parliament in Tobruk, the House of Representatives (HOR), and the cabinet of Prime Minister Abdulla al-Thani.
On the opposing side is Operation Dawn, a loose and increasingly fragmented coalition of militias from the powerful coastal town of Misrata, Islamist factions in Tripoli, and western mountain communities (including ethnic Berbers or Imazighen). The Dawn allies have rejected the legitimacy of the Tobruk parliament, convened their own unrecognized parliament, and installed their own prime minister, Omar al-Hassi.

A common labeling of the Dawn coalition and Misrata as the Islamist faction is mistaken: their key difference with Dignity is not over ideology but rather the inclusion of ex-regime officials into the new political order. Nevertheless, the Dawn forces have allied themselves militarily with Ansar al-Shari'a and its Islamist militia coalition in Benghazi. The alliance largely stems from a common enemy and is ultimately expedient—as are most alliances in Libya.

In essence, there are two separate but blurred theaters of conflict in Libya. In the east, there is an urban insurgency being waged by Islamist militias, some which have ties to al-Qa’ida and now the Islamic State. In Tripoli and the west, there is a struggle for political power and resources.

The challenge now for the United States is how to isolate the terrorist threat and tackle it in such a way to avoid exacerbating the civil war or further derailing the country’s democratic transition.

**U.S. Counterterrorism Options**

A survey of the counterterrorism options available to the United States shows the difficulty of overcoming these shortcomings:

**Option One: Liaise with Libya’s Security Services and Police**

This is the normal way that the United States deals with terrorist threats overseas—working discreetly with local security and police services to collect intelligence on and apprehend terrorist groups. In Libya, this is a severely limited option: across the country, militias provide security; the intelligence services and police are largely non-existent. Liaison is further complicated by the absence of an equitable judicial structure under which terrorism suspects could be tried: Libya has no functioning courts, the militias run its prisons, and torture is widespread.

**Option Two: Build Up Libyan Counterterrorism Forces**

Another option is to train and equip Libya’s military counterterrorism forces. Sometime in late 2012 or early 2013, U.S. Special Operations Forces began to do this. The focus of the program was the 800-strong 22nd Libyan Special Operations Forces (LSOF) Battalion, based at a military facility west of Tripoli known as “Camp 27” or “Camp Younis.” But the initiative collapsed in the summer of 2013, and its demise holds a number of lessons for counterterrorism moving forward.

First, the training occurred in the context of a Libyan military that had an ill-defined command structure and a hollow institutional base; was rife with tribal, regional and factional rivalries; and whose overall strength paled in comparison to the better-armed militias.

Second, the battalion’s composition was skewed. Its members were comprised primarily of Zintanis and other westerner tribes, to the exclusion of Misratans (the Zintanis’ longtime rivals) and easterners from Benghazi. In effect, the United States was creating yet another tribal and regional militia that would likely be used against political opponents and rival armed groups rather than U.S.-designated terrorists.

Third, the training exposed the difficulty of physical security and access in a country controlled by a complex mosaic of warring militias. The entire program ended in the summer of 2014 when the camp was raided twice by rival tribal militias, possibly with the collusion of Islamist figures who opposed the buildup of a force that would challenge the primacy of their own militias. U.S. trainers were not present, but the assailants absconded with U.S. military equipment.

**Option Three: Train Libyan Conventional Forces**

Outside analysts often point to the training of a Libyan army as a silver bullet and a missed opportunity, one that if the United States and its Western allies had seized in late 2011 could have reversed the country’s decline and with it the growth of terrorism. This is mostly wishful thinking, especially in the wake of America’s hard-won lessons in building militaries in divided, post-conflict societies like Iraq, Afghanistan, and Mali. In Libya, these difficulties are compounded
by the fact that the United States would have been starting from scratch: the Libyan army was largely de-funct, hollowed out by years of neglect by Qaddafi and then by defections during the 2011 revolution.

Nevertheless, by early 2013, the Libyan government under then-Prime Minister Ali Zeidan devised a plan to train a roughly 20,000-strong conventional military known as a General Purpose Force (GPF). The United States, Britain, Turkey, and Italy each agreed to train a portion of this total at overseas bases.

From the outset, the GPF plan was doomed. The divided Libyan government was unable to define the force’s purpose, control, composition, and a mechanism for vetting its recruits. Operationally, many in Libya and the United States had doubts about the force’s applicability to Libya’s challenges. As its name implies, the GPF was meant to perform general military tasks, not the highly specialized work of counterterrorism or urban policing. It is unlikely that a six-month course of basic infantry skills and small-unit leadership would have created a force capable of tackling terrorism.

By early and mid-2014, the effort began to unravel. The U.S. training never got off the ground because the Libyan government never provided payment up front. Trainees in Turkey suffered what one U.S. official called “astronomical” attrition rates due to poor vetting. Those in Italy fared better due to stricter screening.

But recruits who did complete the program returned to Libya to find that there was no military structure for them to join. Militias occupied military bases and armories, and staffing functions like payroll and logistics were largely nonexistent. Many were put on indefinite leave while others joined militias or Hifter’s forces. The British program fell apart when recruits at the U.K. training base were charged with sexual harassment of local women; the remaining trainees were sent home.

At the root of the collapse was the fragmented and contested nature of Libya’s security sector. Put simply, there is no cohesive, centrally controlled “army” to train.

Option Four: Provide Counter-Terrorism Assistance to General Hifter and Operation Dignity

Despite the divisions, some analysts have recently argued that the United States should abandon all pretense of neutrality and lend direct military support to General Hifter’s forces and the Tobruk government more broadly. Hifter himself underscored this logic when I spoke to him in June 2013 at his fortified compound in eastern Libya. “We need Apaches, drones, and C-130s from America,” he said.

To be sure, Hifter claims control of a “Libyan National Army.” But the body is national in name only and should rightly be regarded as one militia among many. Hifter’s span of control over the army’s armed formations is more limited than is commonly assumed. An optimistic estimate by its spokesperson placed roughly 20 percent of its forces from “the official military.” Yet even these units are heavily penetrated by tribal and regional loyalties. The remaining Dignity allies are drawn from an assortment of federalist and tribal militias.

A more dangerous risk of direct support to Operation Dignity is Hifter’s elastic definition of terrorism. Extending that label beyond Ansar al-Shari’a to Islamist and even non-Islamist political factions in the west presents a dire risk to stability and to Libya’s democratic institutions more broadly. Some of the Islamist factions in Dawn are unquestionably problematic for U.S. diplomacy because of their illiberal values and conduct. But they do not meet the U.S. threshold as terrorists or a threat to U.S. interests.

For these reasons, the United States has wisely not provided security assistance to Hifter’s forces, despite its recognition of the HOR and the al-Thani government.

Option Five: Let Arab States Conduct Counterterrorism in Libya

Over the past two years, Libya has become a proxy battleground for regional states. This summer, Egypt and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) conducted airstrikes and special-operations raids against jihadist forces in Benghazi and Darnah and against Dawn militia positions in Tripoli. Increasingly, there are
reports of Egypt providing military assistance and training to the Tobruk-based government.

The U.S. government maintains that such interference is unhelpful for a resolution of the conflict, with one official saying that it risks torpedoing the U.N. talks. Nonetheless, some observers have argued that the United States should lend greater assistance to the UAE and Egypt in the fight against terrorism in Libya by providing intelligence.

Such logic is misplaced for a number of reasons. First, U.S. objectives in Libya diverge significantly from those of the UAE and Egypt. As noted above, Egypt and the UAE are intervening in Libya with a far broader goal than the elimination of a terrorist threat: they want to undercut the influence of Islamist political factions and their affiliated militias whom they believe—wrongly in some cases—to be linked to the Muslim Brotherhood.

Second, the actual military effectiveness of their incursions has been limited and counterproductive. Airstrikes by themselves, as the United States is learning in its fight against the Islamic State, are a notoriously ineffective way to eliminate insurgent groups embedded in urban environments. The effect of the ground raids is less clear, although one Western diplomat noted that the Egyptian raid had produced “mixed results.”

Egyptian training assistance to the Libyan military is equally undesirable: a Libyan civil-military arrangement built on the Egyptian model and a police force trained to Egyptian standards is hardly a promising start for the country’s democratic transition.

Option Six: Overwatch, Containment, and Assistance to a Unity Government

Given the risks of providing more direct backing to local actors in the counterterrorism fight, the best—or least bad—U.S. option in Libya is a strategy of Overwatch (a persistent, focused effort of intelligence collection and diplomatic reporting), containment, and, when needed, limited military action. In tandem, the United States should redouble its efforts to contain the terrorist threat through regional cooperation on border control, working closely through the European Union, which has set up a border-advisory mission.

The United States should use diplomatic tools to actively shape the political environment to make it less conducive to the growth of the Islamic State and other radical actors. Support for the U.N.-sponsored talks on a ceasefire and an expansion of authority for the U.N. Support Mission in Libya (UNSMIL) are crucial steps for restoring security. The use of multilateral sanctions and designations is a way to persuade more pragmatic Dawn elements to abandon their support for Ansar al-Shari’a and other rejectionists.

Already, there are indications this approach is taking effect: Misratan militias previously allied with more radical Islamists in the Dawn coalition in Tripoli have begun to peel away and are now actively fighting Islamic State militants in the central coastal town of Sirte.

Once the military forces of Dawn and Dignity are put under some kind of joint command—through a coordination cell or operations room monitored by external observers—the U.S. can begin considering military assistance. Over the long term, the United States and its partners should support a clear roadmap for militia disarmament and demobilization that would include job creation and scholarships.

Once diplomatic access is restored, the United States should strengthen its support for civil-society actors capable of pushing back against the terrorists’ narrative. It should bolster judicial reform to avoid incubating new strands of radicalism. And most importantly, it should encourage better governance, administration, and economic growth at the municipal level—crucial reforms in long-marginalized areas like Darnah and Benghazi where the Islamic State and other extremists have taken root.
The following four opinion pieces are all by Nicholas Burns and recently appeared in *The Boston Globe* and the *Financial Times*:

**Nicholas Burns**
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**Save Britannia:**
**As Britain’s Malaise Grows, So Do Worries for the US**

Op-Ed, first appeared in the April 30, 2015, *The Boston Globe*

For 70 years since the end of the Second World War, the United Kingdom has been America’s strongest, most trusted, and most dependable ally. How long that will be the case is now in question as an inward looking, weaker, and less self-confident Britain approaches a potentially transformative election on May 7.

On a visit to London last week, I was struck by the number of influential Brits who worry openly about their country’s ability to confront challenges that, if unmet, may well propel the disengagement and gradual decline of a country that has played a central role in global affairs since the 18th century.

The most visible aspect of Britain’s malaise is the deterioration of its once world-class military. In an insightful *New York Times* article this week, reporter Steven Erlanger chronicled aspects of this fall from grace. The current Conservative government, led by Prime Minister David Cameron, has instituted substantial military budget reductions since 2010 that have reduced Britain’s military capacity in striking ways. Defense spending has fallen below the suggested NATO minimum of 2 percent of gross domestic product.

By 2020, the British army will have fewer soldiers than at any time since the Napoleonic Wars. The once proud Royal Navy currently deploys no working aircraft carrier. The next British government may struggle to find the funds to finance the construction of four new nuclear submarines to host Britain’s Trident nuclear weapons force. If it fails to do so, Britain will lose its independent nuclear deterrent, a calamity for the country and its NATO allies.

Britain’s will to lead is also in question. During nearly all past security crises in Europe for decades now, a troika of the British prime minister, French president, and German chancellor would step up to lead. And the United States could always count on Britain. But Cameron has been curiously disengaged on major crises lately, such as countering Russian aggression in Ukraine. And he has seemingly managed to distance London from both Washington and the European Union.

Would a Labour-led government act much differently? While Labour’s Shadow Foreign Secretary Douglas Alexander is widely respected in the United States, Ed Miliband, the party leader and a candidate for prime minister, barely mentioned the United States in a much anticipated foreign policy speech last week. That startling omission should concern Americans who believe our ties to Britain are vital.

All this matters for Britain’s friends, especially the United States. Britain is not done yet as a capable and consequential global force. It still wields political influ-
ence through its permanent seat on the UN Security Council, its central place in NATO and the European Union, and its capable diplomatic corps. It is the most important country in connecting the United States to Europe and in helping to bridge inevitable differences between the West and increasingly assertive Russian and Chinese leaders. Its central place in the British Commonwealth gives it political reach.

But can Britain maintain this unique global role? Next week’s election, which is too close to call, may be critical in answering that question. No matter which party ends up leading the next coalition government, a central concern in the minds of Americans who trust and depend on a strong Britain is this: Will the new government in London arrest the trend of British retrenchment in global affairs? Will it find a way to rekindle the will to lead? And, most importantly for those on this side of the Atlantic, will it restore the once proud links that have made our relationship with the British so vital and indeed so special for so long?

How Obama Can Win on Iran

Op-Ed, first appeared in the April 3, 2015, The Boston Globe

Now that President Obama and Secretary of State John Kerry have reached an interim nuclear agreement with Iran, they need to pivot quickly to win over a deeply skeptical Congress and worried Middle East allies.

These extraordinarily tough, prolonged, and complex negotiations with Iran are a major test for American diplomacy. It is positive that we are talking to Tehran seriously for the first time in 35 years. But we are still far from a deal to prevent Iran from becoming a nuclear weapons power. Kerry should set a high bar for a final agreement by the June 30 deadline. Iran needs a nuclear deal more than the United States. And Obama must demonstrate unusually strong presidential leadership to win the support of four key groups here at home and in the Middle East. Otherwise he won’t have the necessary political support to make a final deal.

Win the battle on Capitol Hill: Republicans will ask tough questions and may try to block the agreement despite the fact it does not require Senate ratification. A Sen-ate vote of disapproval or a move to prevent Obama from lifting some of the sanctions on Iran would be a crippling setback. Obama needs to summon his inner Lyndon Baines Johnson and lead an aggressive, personal campaign to sustain Democratic support and persuade very skeptical Republicans. Throughout his time in office, Obama has rarely deployed all his considerable presidential powers to win a battle with Congress as LBJ did so emphatically with the Civil Rights Act of 1964. Iran is Obama’s top foreign policy priority. Can he change course late in his presidency to do what Capitol Hill insiders believe is essential — work the Iran issue personally, emphatically, and incessantly to keep Congress in check?

Make up with Bibi: Obama has legitimate reasons to be bitter about his famously difficult relationship with Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu. A cardinal rule of diplomacy is that friends can disagree, but not in public. Netanyahu has crossed that line once too often in his determination to defeat Obama’s Iran policy in Congress. But this is no time for personal recriminations. Obama needs to end the war of words with Netanyahu and reset relations with Israel to heal the most serious public disagreement between Washington and Jerusalem since the 1956 Suez Crisis. Together, they have to show Iran there will be no daylight between the two strongest military powers in the region — Israel and the United States.

Circle the wagons with Saudi Arabia, Egypt, Jordan, and the Gulf states: Long the most loyal American partners in the Middle East, these countries worry about an Obama team that they fear may normalize relations with Iran at their expense following the nuclear deal. In the Arab world, personal ties among leaders are essential. Obama needs to make a persuasive case to Arab leaders that the United States will shield them from the dramatic expansion of Iranian power in the heart of the Sunni world.
Hold the “permanent five” together: Obama will also need the active support of Britain, France, Russia, China and non-permanent Security Council member Germany. They have worked with us to hold Iran’s feet to the fire on the nuclear challenge. They must continue to pressure Iran to honor the agreement and threaten renewed sanctions should it not do so. If this critical coalition splinters, Iran will be the beneficiary.

With Putin on the march in Europe, a turbulent Middle East in crisis, and China ascendant in Asia, Iran presents the one compelling global challenge where Obama has a chance of a major breakthrough. If he can use the powers of the presidency to convince the American public and Congress of the merits of his Iran policy, he may yet make it his most significant foreign policy achievement. But if he fails to lead the process himself, as presidents must do at such critical moments, Iran could end up as his greatest disappointment.

Imperfect deal Will Help an Uneasy Peace: Iran Now has the Knowledge and Expertise Needed to Build a Nuclear Weapon

Op-Ed, first appeared in the April 3, 2015, Financial Times

It may be the biggest foreign policy bet of Barack Obama’s presidency. It is also a sensible step forward for Iran and the west. Ten years in the making, the framework nuclear deal announced on Thursday in Lausanne makes it reasonable to hope that a final written pact can be hammered out by the summer, preventing Iran from obtaining a nuclear weapon.

This tentative progress is testament to the power of diplomacy. President Obama and John Kerry, his secretary of state, deserve credit for persisting with negotiations despite trenchant opposition from some quarters in Congress. Still, the tortuous negotiations in Lausanne this week, along with Iran’s record of deception on the nuclear issue, also testify to how hard it will be to conclude a final deal.

Speaking at the White House, Obama set the bar high. Iran’s once flourishing uranium enrichment industry would be subject to strict limits at every stage, closing Iran’s path to a bomb. Another route, to a plutonium bomb, would be blocked by dismantling the core of the heavy water reactor at Arak. Iran’s commitments would be policed by intrusive international inspections, and many of the sanctions that have degraded its economy would be lifted only if Tehran complies at every step.

These are the essential elements of a deal that Iran needs far more than the west does. The Islamic Republic is a pariah government, isolated by the international community after years of nuclear transgressions. It will be the big loser if the talks ahead do not succeed. Tehran must demonstrate beyond doubt that it is sincere, and western negotiating teams must remember that they occupy a position of strength.

Even then, the deal will not be perfect. It is far from what was once envisaged at the State Department, where I worked on Iran policy in the middle of the last decade.

Back then, we hoped to place far more stringent limits on Iran’s nuclear program. But Tehran refused our offer to negotiate in 2006 and again in 2007, instead accelerating a dramatic build-up of its nuclear capabilities. As a result, Iran is now much further along the nuclear continuum.

There are those who object that 6,000 centrifuges are far more than Iran should be allowed to keep, and that the current deal does not demand an Iranian capitulation.

But it is unrealistic to try to resurrect the demands of a decade ago. Iran now has the scientific and engineering knowledge needed to build a nuclear weapon.
But the framework agreement will put the country at least a year away from having enough weapons-grade uranium to make a bomb.

That is a deal worth getting, even if it does not seem so to Benjamin Netanyahu or to some conservative US lawmakers. Imagine if America had walked away from the talks, as the Israeli prime minister in effect urged when he spoke before Congress last month. Our European allies might not have left with us. Russia and China would have faulted Washington for the breakdown; they and others would have enlarged their trade links with Iran. Tehran would have broken free from the restrictions that have weakened its economy and frozen its nuclear program for the past year and a half.

Still, the Obama administration will have to fight to convince Congress that this is the right deal. It will need Europe’s help to force a country that has lied before about its nuclear activities to live up to its commitments. We have to assume that Tehran will again try to cheat. Europeans should resist the temptation to restore full commercial and political relations with an Iranian government whose hardliners may yet try to scuttle the deal. The west must resolve to impose tough sanctions again if Iran reneges.

This is merely the latest step in the cat-and-mouse struggle over Iran’s nuclear ambitions. Europe and America may need to return to the negotiating table time and again to ensure full Iranian compliance.

Those western romantics who are already calling for a strategic rapprochement with Iran, especially on the crises afflicting a burning Middle East, need to be restrained.

Even if the agreement holds, we face the mounting challenge of rising Iranian power in the heart of the Sunni world. In Iraq, Tehran plays godfather to powerful Shia militant groups, and wields unsettling influence over the government in Baghdad. In Syria, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Command is the Assad government’s most effective partner. Iran is the key ally of radical Houthi rebels who have instigated a civil war in Yemen. It also exerts substantial control over Hizbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, as they seek to weaken Israel and the moderate Palestinians.

All this should motivate Obama to shore up America’s base of power in the Middle East with Israel and America’s Arab partners, notably Saudi Arabia. If there were ever a time for Washington to reset relations with an obstreperous Turkish government and a recalcitrant Israeli leader, this is it.

The deal with Iran is a major accomplishment for the US and Europe. It will help us to keep an uneasy peace. But it does not end the decades-long struggle for power with a willful and often untrustworthy Iranian government. In many ways, that struggle has just begun.

The Iran Deal’s Rare Achievement

Op-Ed, first appeared in the April 16, 2015, The Boston Globe

WHAT SEEMS lost in the furious, partisan debate about the Iran nuclear deal is just how long it took the United States to actually get back to a negotiating table with the Iranian government — nearly 35 years.

The talks have already achieved something tangible and rare: The United States and Iran are talking again, after decades of a bitter divorce and near total isolation from each other.

While neither really wants to admit it, Democrats and Republicans worked in tandem to get us to this point. Most Democrats don’t give President George W. Bush enough credit for his critical decision in 2005 to seek negotiations with Iran before considering the use of force.

Similarly, most Republicans can’t bring themselves to admit that President Obama has been skillful in adopting Bush’s original construct of combining tough sanctions and the threat of force with diplomacy to pressure Iran to negotiate.

Because we had been isolated from Iran for so many
decades, both presidents also suffered from the diplomatic handicap that we simply did not know enough about what makes Iran tick.

The deep freeze between the two countries began when Iran’s revolutionary government held 52 American diplomats hostage for 444 days in 1979-81. The United States rightly broke diplomatic relations, and embassies in both Washington and Tehran were closed.

The result was that from 1980 on, hardly anyone in my generation of American Foreign Service officers traveled to Iran, interacted meaningfully with Iranian diplomats, or studied Farsi. We lost our collective knowledge of one of the foundational civilizations in the Middle East.

When Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice asked me to organize a new Iran effort at the State Department in 2005, I went looking for expertise in our respected Near East bureau. To our surprise, we discovered the extent of our ability to follow events in Iran was exactly one officer who spent half his time on Iran. That was it. To her credit, Rice ordered the creation of a much larger Iran desk. We encouraged younger officers to become Iran experts and to learn the language and culture. Rice wanted us to have a smarter and more sophisticated understanding of Iranian politics, economics, and society because, as she wrote, “we were making policy on Iran with one hand tied behind our back.”

Bush and Rice also overturned their prior skepticism about talks and joined with the Europeans, Russia, and China to offer negotiations on the nuclear issue to Iran in 2006 and again in 2007. But Iran refused. That is when we turned to sanctions, passing three Chapter VII resolutions against them at the United Nations. We also introduced US financial sanctions. Obama then strengthened those sanctions in his first term in office.

This history is important because it reminds us that it took a highly integrated campaign by Democratic and Republican administrations, along with our partners, to force Iran to accept negotiations. In foreign policy, one president hands the baton of leadership to his or her successor. In this case, the Bush and Obama policies reinforced each other. We will need this bipartisan unity in dealing with a difficult and often mendacious Iranian government for a decade or more to come on the nuclear issue.

Diplomacy may or may not turn out to be the vehicle that resolves our differences with Iran. But there is at least the possibility that diplomacy’s redemptive powers might open new opportunities with this once implacable adversary.

Congress is moving this week to insert itself into the negotiations with Iran. Senior Republicans and skeptical Democrats would be wise to do so in a way that strengthens rather than weakens the president’s hand in the difficult negotiations with Iran this spring.

The president and his team know the road to a final agreement by June 30 will be long and problematic. They know substantial differences persist. They also understand that Iran needs a final deal more than we do. But let’s not give up on Obama’s diplomacy. It is still the surest path to where we should want to be with Iran after the deep freeze of the last three decades — working out our differences at a negotiating table rather than on a distant battlefield.
Chairman Ros-Lehtinen, Ranking Member Deutch, Members of the Committee, thank you for the invitation to appear before you today. I am delighted to offer my views. I must emphasize, as always, that I represent only myself before you today; the Brookings Institution does not take any institutional positions on policy issues.

The Roots of Regional Disorder

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

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

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

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

The terrible choices of these terrible leaders, more than anything else, created the openings Al Qaeda, ISIS, and sectarian killers across the region now exploit for their own purposes, including to threaten American interests. And those same terrible choices that created a demand for militias in Syria has had a similar effect in the Arab states that are still standing – populations fearful of spreading violence are demanding that their governments provide order and security – even at the cost of freedom, accountability, or basic rights.

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

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

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

• One is about the nature of the state – a conflict between the traditional governments and the movements of political Islam.

• One is about the balance of power – a conflict between traditional Sunni Arab states led by Saudi Arabia and the revolutionary Shia Islamic Republic of Iran and its allies.

• A third is about the purpose of life – an argument between the apocalyptic forces of Da’esh (ISIS) and everyone else.

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

U.S. Policy in Iraq and Syria

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

The first uncertainty is whether the coalition military commitment is sufficient to achieve the goals President Obama laid out in September – to degrade, defeat, and ultimately destroy the movement dubbed the Islamic State of Iraq and Syria, or ISIS.

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

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

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

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

The Broader Implications of ISIS

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

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

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

Sectarianism and Conflict in Today’s Middle East

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

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

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

The Iranian Threat as a Unifying Factor

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

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

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

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

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

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

The Impact of a Nuclear Deal

These escalatory dynamics within the region are likely to persist regardless of whether the P5+1 states achieve an agreement that constrains Iran’s nuclear program. In fact, whether there’s a nuclear deal or not, I predict we will see a more aggressive approach by Iran in a host of arenas around the region, where the upheaval has given them greater opportunities than before.
If there is a nuclear deal, the hardline elements within the Iranian regime, those most opposed to a deal, are also those with the greatest interest and investment in regional troublemaking. They are likely to use their ability to make noise regionally to try and compensate for the power disadvantages they see inherent in a deal – and they are likely to have a green light from the Supreme Leader to do so, because he will want to compensate them for their unhappiness with a deal.

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

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

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

No matter what equipment or systems the United States is willing to sell to its Arab partners, no matter what aid it is willing to provide, no matter what US assets the administration is prepared to base in the region – our partners are looking for a different kind of reassurance. They are looking to see the United States demonstrate its recognition of Iran’s troublesome activities around the region, and demonstrate its readiness to push back against Iran’s expansionism around the region. And the primary arena in which the Arab states wish to see that from the United States is in Syria.

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

Policy Implications

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

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

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

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

• The United States must devote greater attention to supporting governments who are using political compromise instead of violence to resolve disputes, like Tunisia.

• The United States should help local partners forge meaningful governance – not just a security presence – in ungoverned spaces like the Sinai.

• The United States should help communities in the Middle East, through indigenous civil society, to build their own capacity for peaceful dialogue and conflict resolution.

Ultimately, building resilient societies and marginalizing ISIS, Al Qaeda, and their brethren across the region requires more effective, responsive institutions that can win citizens’ trust and loyalty, and more fair and functional systems that can offer young people meaningful opportunities – not just jobs, but a chance to fulfill their long-denied dreams instead of placing their hopes in a world after this one.
The United States needs to accept that the days of one-man rule are gone forever. Three years after the hopeful scenes of the Arab Spring, the situation in places like Syria and Libya looks more like a tragic mess. The most dramatic reversal of fortune, perhaps, is in Egypt, whose Tahrir (Freedom) Square came to symbolize the hopes of 2011. Egypt under longtime ruler Hosni Mubarak was an anchor of stability in the region, in large part because of its close ties to Washington and its historic peace treaty with Israel. But Egypt today is in turmoil: Its third post-revolutionary government, installed by the military, is cracking down on basic rights while facing an upsurge in violence from Islamist militants, an economic crisis and vicious anti-Americanism stoked by the media. The decimated Muslim Brotherhood rejects any hint of compromise and talks to its followers of martyrdom. Many outside analysts worry that the zero-sum confrontation now underway in Egypt is dragging the country over a cliff into further violence.

In the face of these troubling developments, some are ready to conclude that Egypt “isn’t ready” for democracy, or that the Arab Spring was just an opening for extremists to pursue an “Islamist winter.” It’s understandable why American Jews in particular wonder if Egypt’s tumultuous politics spell trouble for Israel, and ask whether the old Egyptian regime wasn’t better for stability. But the days of one-man rule in Egypt are gone forever. The future of the Middle East is now up for grabs—a future that matters deeply to both Israel and the United States—and real stability will come only from resisting the urge to clamp down.

For a half-century, the United States worked with a set of regional powers—mainly Israel, Saudi Arabia and Egypt—to protect a stable regional order. But since Mubarak’s fall, Washington policy has been on a roller coaster of its own. The one consistent element of Washington’s approach has been to stay engaged with Egypt and work with whoever is in power. There’s a simple reason for that: The United States has strong interests in Egypt, no matter who is in charge of the country. Even if the United States didn’t import Arab oil anymore, Egypt’s Suez Canal would still be a vital lifeline. The U.S.-Egypt security partnership is valuable for targeting violent extremists and containing Iran. U.S.-Egyptian-Israeli cooperation is crucial to combating terrorists along the Sinai border and from the Gaza Strip. And Egypt’s peace with Israel is a cornerstone of regional—not to mention Israeli—security.

But the old prescriptions for regional stability are not going to work with a new generation. The Egyptian revolution, like the other Arab uprisings, was sparked by a rising young population, empowered by education and technology but constrained by corruption, inequality and leaders who didn’t listen. Nearly two-thirds of Egyptians are now under 30. They learned in school that their nation was a post-colonial leader alongside Indonesia and India, but then they saw how young Indonesians and Indians were thriving in a world of open markets and open
societies, while Egypt was left behind. In 2011, they rose up to try and join that world, which my colleague Robert Kagan calls “The World America Made.”

Since then, Egyptians have overthrown three successive leaderships in attempts to bring the change they seek. Each had tried to impose on Egypt a political system that would privilege his allies and contain or exclude his enemies. None has succeeded. Thirty-year dictator Mubarak resigned when his army refused to put down mass protests with brute force. His successor, Field Marshal Mohamad Hussein Tantawi, was forced by public pressure to respect the outcome of free presidential balloting that elected the military’s worst nightmare—a leader from the long-banned Muslim Brotherhood. That Muslim Brotherhood leader, Mohamed Morsi, declared his actions above judicial review and pushed through a constitution written almost exclusively by Islamists. He faced angry mass demonstrations last summer and was ousted by a military coup on July 3.

The crackdown since then has been brutal. With more than 2,000 dead and 20,000 in jail, Field Marshal Abdel-Fattah El Sisi now presides over an Egypt more repressive than that of Mubarak. And yet many Egyptians who supported the revolution in 2011 now support El Sisi for president, hoping he can bring security and stability after three years of chaos.

The United States wants Egyptian stability too—the question is how to get there. El Sisi and his allies see themselves locked in an existential battle with the Muslim Brotherhood for control of the country; they seek U.S. support for a crackdown that includes a draconian anti-protest law and arrests of journalists and peaceful political dissenters. The Egyptian government deserves support in combating terrorist violence, but it must also learn from the failures of Mubarak, Tantawi and Morsi that Egyptians will no longer submit to being ruled through repression by a single man or movement.

Many Israeli analysts I talk to argue that El Sisi can get Egypt under control if given a chance—but then, they said the same about Mubarak. To marginalize the extremists and stabilize the country, Egypt’s current leaders must allow greater freedom and find a way to bring more of Egypt’s diverse population—Islamists, secularists and Christians; young activists and entrepreneurs; textile workers and farmers—into new governing institutions.

The Obama Administration’s emphasis on stability is understandable, and so is Israel’s; both need a government of Egypt that can be an effective partner in regional security. But only an open, pluralist system will bring Egyptians together to make the big decisions the country needs and to reform its politics and economics. Egypt’s youth may not love the United States or Israel, but they want their nation to be part of the globalized world these two countries exemplify. Washington’s task is to stay aligned with that vision for Egypt—one that will advance stability, security and U.S. interests.
The Coming Disintegration of Iraq

Joel Rayburn

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Nouri al-Maliki may have agreed to step down as prime minister of Iraq on Thursday, but the damage he has wrought will define his country for decades to come. The stunning collapse of the Iraqi state in its vast northern and western provinces may be Maliki’s most significant legacy. After nine decades as the capital of a unitary, centralized state, Baghdad no longer rules Kurdistan, nor Fallujah, nor Mosul, and might never rule them again.

To his likely successor, Haider al-Abadi, Maliki will bequeath an Iraqi state that has reverted to the authoritarian muscle memory it developed under Saddam Hussein. But it will be a state that effectively controls not much more than half the territory Hussein did. As Maliki and his loyalists succeeded in consolidating control of the government and pushing rivals out of power, they drove the constituencies of those they excluded — especially Sunni Arabs and Kurds — into political opposition or armed insurrection. Their drive for power alienated Iraqis across all communities from the central state whose wards and clients they had once been, leaving almost no provincial population trustful of the central government. Maliki has held sway in Baghdad, but whole swaths of Iraq have fallen out of his control: The tighter he grasped the state, the more the country slipped through his fingers.

The current crisis in Iraq goes far beyond the question of who will lead the next government in Baghdad. Iraqis have entered into a civil war whose logical conclusion is the breakup of the country. What we are witnessing in Iraq today is the beginning of a process that could become at least as destructive and bloody as the breakup of Yugoslavia. The longer it is allowed to unfold, the less likely it will be stopped, and the more likely it will spill over on a large scale to de-stabilize the surrounding region.

It is tempting to conclude that the U.S.-led regime change of 2003 inevitably led to sectarian violence and politics in Iraq by opening up the country’s preexisting fractures. But the deep sectarianism of the past decade was neither foreordained to follow Hussein’s fall nor completely natural in Iraqi society. It was instead a calculated objective of the powerful, mainly expatriate parties that arrived in Baghdad after April 2003, bringing with them sectarian agendas that had been decades in the making. These groups, which included Maliki and the Dawa party, as well as almost all of Iraq’s major Islamist and ethnic parties, have had independent but complementary interests in polarizing the country, turning a mixed-sect, multiethnic nation into one of homogeneous ethnic and sectarian political constituencies. The result has been a devastating civil war, and an Iraq more thoroughly sorted by sect and ethnicity than ever before.

As Iraq’s major parties have carved the nation into political empires, they have in many regions allowed the state to recede from the streets, creating power and security vacuums that militant and criminal groups have been quick to fill. The creeping takeover of Sunni neighborhoods by Islamic State fighters and their fellow travelers has been well documented, but
in other areas Shiite Islamist militants have roamed freely for years, with the state absent or complicit. Away from the Islamic State’s atrocities in the far north, Shiite militant groups trained by Iran to fight U.S. troops until 2011 now seem poised to insulate Baghdad and the Shiite south from the Islamic State threat. They eventually may evict Sunnis from the region around Baghdad in the name of counterterrorism, with the assistance of the Iranian regime and Lebanese Hezbollah, and with the political blessing of the Shiite Islamist political parties that on Monday nominated Abadi as their premier.

For years now, some outsiders and some Iraqi factions have called for the partition of the country as a matter of policy — a solution to the intractable political disputes. Perhaps the best-known instance was in 2006, when then Sen. Joe Biden and Leslie Gelb of the Council on Foreign Relations called for the division of the country into three autonomous regions, based on sect, with a central government that would “control border defense, foreign affairs and oil revenues.” Invoking the example of Bosnia, Biden and Gelb offered their plan as a way to keep the country intact and prevent sectarian warfare from escalating.

But as we are likely to find out in the coming years, there is no way for Iraq to be divided into three homelands for Shiites, Kurds and Sunnis without experiencing exactly the massive human misery that Biden, Gelb and others hoped partition might forestall. No clean ethnosectarian lines already exist in Iraq, meaning that the boundaries of the various statelets would have to be fought over. The populations of northern and central Iraq in particular are so intertwined that separating people into sectarian enclaves would immediately prompt violent sectarian cleansing on a scale sure to exceed that of Yugoslavia. At least a quarter of a million non-Sunnis would probably be forced to leave Sunni-majority territories, while more than half a million Sunnis would probably be expelled from the greater Baghdad region, with those Sunni Baghdadis that remain herded into ghettos in and around the city.

There would also be millions of Iraqis in intermarried families of Shiite and Sunni or Arab and Kurd? The fragmenting of the country into sectarian cantons would leave these millions with no clear place to go.

Nor is it likely that the fragmentation of Iraq, once begun, would stop at just three sections. The country would be far more likely to split effectively into four pieces or more. The Sunnis of Anbar and Mosul, who have a long-standing rivalry, would be unlikely to consent to living together in one Sunnistan, where one region might be dominated by the other. They would be more likely to live in competing Tigris and Euphrates regions or statelets. Nor is it clear that, once unmoored from Baghdad, the major Kurdish parties would live together in one region where one party could rule the others. Lastly, the shrunken Shiite-majority section would be a rump Iraq stretching from Samarra to the Persian Gulf, rich in oil but certain to fall into the Iranian regime’s orbit for the foreseeable future.

Nor would the creation of these sections be the end of the matter, as then-Deputy Prime Minister Saleh al-Mutlak, a Sunni, warned in a 2011 CNN interview: “Dividing the country isn’t going to be smooth, because dividing the country is going to be a war before that and a war after that.” The new states or quasi-states of the former Iraq would surely enter into a long series of wars that none would be strong enough to decisively win, with a death toll unlikely to be less than the roughly quarter-million killed in the Yugoslav wars and a total displacement of perhaps one-quarter of Iraq’s population.

If Iraq fragments in this manner, either formally or de facto, there will be no way to preserve a meaningful central structure in which the different sectarian enclaves together defend the country’s borders and share natural resources. In the north in particular, Sunni Arabs, Turkmen and Kurds are more likely to war over the oil-rich disputed territories, while the governments in Baghdad and Irbil will never share oil revenue with Sunni provinces that are at war with the Shiites and Kurds. And since there are no bodies of water or mountain ranges separating Iraq from its western and southern neighbors, these conflicts will not be physically contained as the Balkan wars were. They are sure to spill over, eventually drawing in every neighbor even more deeply than they are already.
Iraq’s prospects for political stability are dim, and the country faces fundamental questions that Maliki’s impending departure will do little to solve. Reintegrating the Sunni community and provinces back into the Iraqi state would be the necessary starting point for leaders who wish to preserve their country. But the political environment that Maliki will leave behind is largely devoid of the trust necessary for partnerships and power-sharing. One reason Maliki and his allies have mightily resisted leaving power is that after eight years of rough rule, no member of his group can be fully assured that a successor party will leave them to live in peace. Similarly, what Kurdish leader believes that Sunni Arabs, if ever back in power, would not immediately attempt to push the Kurds back into the mountains and crush Kurdish nationalism? And after a decade of attempting to make Sunnis a permanent minority underclass, what Shiite supremacist does not fear what Sunnis would do if they ever regained control of Baghdad?

The enduring dilemmas that have dogged modern Iraq — the relationship between the people and the state, the relationship between Kurdistan and Arab Iraq, the relationship between Sunnis and Shiites, the relationship between Baghdad and its 18 provinces — remain unsettled. It would take a leader or movement of extraordinary vision to settle them peacefully, and no such visionary is on the horizon. It is Iraq’s strongmen, sectarians and Islamist resistance who control the path to conflict resolution. The longer they hold sway, the smaller the chance that Iraq will hold together.

It is not too late for Iraq. But soon, it will be. The civil war of the past decade has been many things: a struggle between terrorists and the state, between religious extremes, between Maliki loyalists and their rivals, between regional proxies, between sects and ethnicities that have not relearned how to coexist. But it has most essentially been a war on Iraqi society itself, slowly draining the lifeblood of one of the world’s oldest countries, which after five millennia has begun to expire before our eyes.
Diplomacy and Extremism: 
Iran, ISIS and U.S. Interests in an Unraveling Middle East

PARTICIPANTS

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and Anne Blumenauer 
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TUESDAY, MAY 26
Participants arrive in Montréal late afternoon

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.

WEDNESDAY, MAY 27
Roundtable Discussion

Syria, Iraq And Isis: Assessing U.S. Interests And Strategy
The future of both Iraq and Syria are in serious jeopardy. In Syria a civil war now in its fourth year has killed over 200,000 and displaced more than half of the country’s 20 million inhabitants. In Iraq, divisions between the country’s Shia, Sunni, and Kurdish communities appear increasingly irreconcilable. The power vacuum and sense of Sunni Arab disenfranchisement in both countries has been exploited by the self-proclaimed “Islamic State” (aka ISIS), whose 20,000-30,000 fighters have established brutal domain over a sizable chunk of land—and population—spanning the Iraq-Syria border nearly the size of Great Britain.

• How stable is the Syrian regime of Bashar Al-Assad and what is the state of the Syrian opposition?
• Can Iraqi Prime Minister Haider al-Abadi maintain an inclusive government that serves to reduce sectarian tension?
• What are U.S. interests and priorities in Iraq and Syria and which policies can best forward them?
• Is ISIS growing weaker or stronger and how effective is the U.S.-led aerial campaign against it? To what extent, if at all, are U.S. regional allies directly or indirectly aiding ISIS?
• What are the interests and activities of external actors such as Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Qatar, and Russia in Iraq and Syria? What are the implications of continued civil strife in Iraq and Syria for neighbors such as Lebanon, Jordan, Turkey, and Israel?
• To what extent is an independent Kurdish state viable, and should the U.S. support Kurdish autonomy?
• Iran is militarily engaged inside Iraq in confronting ISIS. Is this helpful, and what are its implications?

**Ryan Crocker**, former U.S. Ambassador to Syria and Iraq  
Dean, George Bush School of Government and Public Service,  
Texas A & M University, College Station, Texas

**Barham Salih**, former Prime Minister of the  
Kurdistan Regional Government, Erbil, Iraq

Luncheon Remarks

**The Geopolitics Of A Changing Energy Industry**

Dramatic increases in U.S. energy production and decisions affecting market pricing of oil have contributed to a significant reduction in energy costs that is having global consequences. Some believe that the changing energy climate is a significant motivating factor for Iran to make a nuclear deal. The decline in energy prices has had a significant impact on Russia and Venezuela. Continued conflict in Iraq and Libya has impacted their oil production and state revenues. ISIS uses black market oil sales to fund its aggression. And continued advancement of renewable forms of energy foreshadowed long-term implications for traditional reliance on the Middle East as an energy source—with geopolitical considerations.

**Amy Myers Jaffe**, Executive Director, Energy and Sustainability,  
University of California, Davis

Individual Discussions

Members of Congress and scholars meet individually to discuss U.S. foreign policy. Scholars available to meet individually with members of Congress for in-depth discussion of ideas raised in the morning and luncheon sessions include Ryan Crocker, Barham Salih and Amy Myers Jaffe.

Working Dinner

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**THURSDAY, MAY 28**

Roundtable Discussion

**The State Of Nuclear Negotiations With Iran**

The P5+1 (the United States, Russia, China, United Kingdom, France, and Germany) and Iran have until July 1 to conclude a comprehensive nuclear deal. Despite significant progress, meaningful obstacles still remain regarding the size, scope, and transparency of Iran’s program, as well as the duration of the deal and sanctions relief. A potential nuclear deal has proven extremely controversial in Washington, Tehran, and Tel Aviv. Though the U.S. and Iran now regularly engage in nuclear dialogue, deep-seated differences remain. Meanwhile the U.S.-Israel relationship, in part due to differences over Iran, has reached its lowest point in decades.
What are the criteria for reaching a lasting nuclear deal? What happens if an accord isn’t reached, and what are the prospects for escalation?

How close is Iran to developing nuclear weapons? To what extent is a nuclear Iran a threat to Israel? To the region? To the U.S.?

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, Europe, and Saudi Arabia?

How has the U.S. relationship with Israel been impacted or challenged by nuclear negotiations with Iran?

How has increased partisanship in the United States impacted the prospects for a nuclear deal and future détente with Iran?

What is Iran’s perspective? What motivates its pursuit of nuclear capability? What motivates it to seek a deal?

George Perkovich, Vice President for Studies, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Ariel (Eli) Levite, former Principal Deputy Director General for Policy, Israeli Atomic Energy Commission, Tel Aviv

Hossein Mousavian, former member of Iran’s nuclear negotiation team; former Iranian Ambassador to Germany; Research Scholar, Princeton University

Roundtable Discussion

A Look At Iran Internally

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 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 has Iranian civil society and human rights fared under Rouhani?

To what extent is the Iranian public informed of their government’s nuclear and regional policies? How will either a nuclear deal or failed nuclear talks impact Iran domestically?

How have U.S. and international economic sanctions affected Iran’s economy and society?

Karim Sadjadpour, Senior Associate, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace
Luncheon Remarks

**Challenges In The Middle East**

_**Salam Fayyad,** former Prime Minister of the Palestinian Authority, Ramallah_

Individual Discussions

Members of Congress and scholars meet individually to discuss U.S. foreign policy. Scholars available to meet individually with members of Congress for in-depth discussion of ideas raised in the morning and luncheon sessions include George Perkovich, Ariel (Eli) Levite, Hossein Mousavian and Karim Sadjadpour.

Working Dinner

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**FRIDAY, MAY 29**

Roundtable Discussion

**Saudi Arabia And Yemen: Conflicting U.S. Interests And Values**

Though Saudi Arabia has thus far avoided the tumult of other regional countries, the combination of a restive young population, aging leadership, sectarian tension, oil price decline, and concerns about Islamist radicalism are persistent sources of anxiety. Domestic concerns are exacerbated by a turbulent regional context. Saudi Arabia’s southern neighbor Yemen is on the brink of constant collapse and its capital Sanaa was recently overrun by Iran-backed militants known as Houthis. Saudi Arabia and Iran are also embroiled in proxy battles in Syria, Lebanon, Iraq, and Bahrain. While oil and concerns about Iran have formed the basis of the Saudi-U.S. alliance for over three decades, the seeming thaw in U.S.-Iran relations coupled with America’s shale energy bonanza raise questions about the strength and future of the relationship.

- What is the worldview of 79-year-old King Salman and how, if at all, will Saudi domestic and foreign policy change under his leadership?
- How vulnerable is the Saudi government to homegrown Islamist radicalism? To what extent does the Saudi government or private individuals support Islamist extremists abroad?
- 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 sources?
- What is Saudi Arabia’s relationship with neighboring Gulf countries?
- How can the United States reconcile deep disagreements with Saudi Arabia, particularly related to human rights, women’s rights, and religious freedom, with its strategic partnership with the Kingdom?
- How should the United States navigate the current political situation in Yemen and what is its impact on U.S. counterterrorism initiatives in the region?

_**Ali al-Shihabi,** Member of the Board, Middle East Broadcasting Corporation, Riyadh_
Roundtable Discussion

**Egypt’s New Authoritarianism**

One year after President al-Sisi’s ascent to power following the July 2013 protests and military coup against Muslim Brother President Mohamed Morsi, authoritarianism in Egypt is worse than during the years of ousted former president Hosni Mubarak. The democratic roadmap established after Morsi’s removal remains incomplete as parliamentary elections, originally scheduled for March 2015, have been postponed to an unspecified future date. Islamist violence has increased in Cairo and the Sinai peninsula, where insurgents have pledged allegiance to ISIS. Prioritizing economic progress and stability over democracy, Egypt’s military regime has used the fight against Islamist radicalism as a pretext to violate human rights on an unprecedented scale, which has seemingly fueled violent extremism.

- What is the political and economic agenda of President Sisi? Is his government vulnerable to continued uprisings?
- How precarious is Egypt’s economy, and can it survive without continued aid from staunch Gulf allies such as Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates?
- What is the state of Egypt-Israel relations?
- How has civil war and the spread of Islamist radicalism in Libya affected Egypt?
- Is Sisi a force against extremism, or are his policies fueling the very radicalism he claims to be fighting? Is accepting his authoritarianism a “Faustian bargain” necessary to further U.S. interests?
- What is the future of the Muslim Brotherhood? If it is forced underground, how serious is the danger of radicalism? Is reconciliation between Egypt’s military government and the Muslim Brotherhood possible?
- What should be the goal of U.S. policy toward Egypt? Should the U.S. continue to limit or suspend aid to Egypt?

*Steven Cook, Senior Fellow for Middle Eastern Studies, Council on Foreign Relations*

**Individual Discussions**

Members of Congress and scholars meet individually to discuss U.S. foreign policy. Scholars available to meet individually with members of Congress for in-depth discussion of ideas raised in the morning and luncheon sessions include Ali al-Shihabi, Steven Cook, and Heba Morayef.

**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.

**SATURDAY, MAY 30**

Roundtable Discussion

**Libya’s Downward Spiral**

More than three years after the U.S./NATO-led deposition of former dictator Muammar Qaddafi, Libya has deteriorated into civil war. The resulting power vacuum has provided fertile ground for Islamist groups such as ISIS, al-Qaeda franchises, and jihadi groups not affiliated with either camp. The country’s main two factions—the
Libya Dignity coalition led by General Khalifa Hifter and Libya Dawn forces—have deferred taking serious action against ISIS in order to continue fighting one another. Neighboring Tunisia, Algeria, and Egypt are extremely concerned about the spread of ISIS across their porous borders. Tunisia has shouldered the burden of taking in anywhere from 500,000 to one million Libyan refugees.

- What are U.S. strategic interests in Libya? What should the U.S. do to counter the ISIS in Libya and its growing presence in North Africa?
- What is the role of external actors in Libya, such as the United Arab Emirates, Qatar, Turkey, and Egypt?
- What are the prospects for a unity government in Libya? What can the U.S. do to support efforts to form a unity government or to end the violence?
- What is Libya’s potential to further destabilize the region?
- What is the impact of Libya’s civil strife on neighboring countries, particularly Tunisia and Egypt?
- Did the U.S./NATO role in Qaddafi’s ouster imply a responsibility to contribute toward finding a stable solution?

Frederic Wehrey, Senior Associate, Middle East Program, Carnegie Endowment for International Peace

Roundtable Discussion

U.S. Strategy For The Middle East: A Choice Between Democracy And Stability?

Four years after the Arab uprisings began, nearly every society in the greater Middle East is grappling with increased domestic and regional instability. While Islamist radicalism makes headlines, many so-called liberal forces have adopted exclusionary, non-democratic approaches to governing. Sectarianism, particularly between Sunnis and Shia, remains an enormous source of instability, fueling both civil and proxy wars throughout the region. 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. Egypt has embarked on a brutal campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood, as well as secular political dissidents, under the pretense of combating terrorism and returning stability to Egypt and the region. Tunisia, perceived as the sole success story of the Arab Spring, still faces an uphill battle in consolidating its democratic transition and contending with radical Islamist forces.

- How can the United States best advocate for political and economic reform within allied-countries such as Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Egypt without undermining the stability of these governments?
- How can the United States support democratic successes in political transition such as Tunisia and continue to aid successful efforts toward representative governance in other countries?
- How can Washington support allies in combating terrorism without aiding the repression of legitimate political dissent, particularly in the context of Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, and Egypt’s campaign against the Muslim Brotherhood? How do states manipulate extremist groups and sectarianism for both internal and external political expediency?
- Is Iran a tactical partner of the United States?
• Which policies employed by both regional and Western governments, including the U.S., have successfully contained or reversed the spread of extremism, and which policies have exacerbated it?

• How does the U.S. sort out its priorities among conflicting policy values of security, stability, representative governance, religious freedom and protection of human rights?

Nicholas Burns, former Under Secretary of State for Political Affairs;  
Professor of International Relations, Harvard University

Tamara Cofman Wittes, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Near Eastern Affairs;  
Director, Center for Middle East Policy, Brookings Institution

Working Lunch
Discussion continues between members of Congress and scholars on the challenges for the U.S. response posed by extremism.

Individual Discussions
Members of Congress and scholars meet individually to discuss U.S. foreign policy. Scholars available to meet individually with members of Congress for in-depth discussion of ideas raised in the morning and luncheon sessions include Fred Wehry, Nicholas Burns, and Tamara Cofman Wittes.

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, MAY 31:
Return travel to the USA

Resource Scholars:

Kim Ghattas, former Beirut Bureau Chief of the BBC

Col. Joel Rayburn, Senior Military Fellow,  
Institute for National Strategic Studies, National Defense University