

## U.S. Strategy after the Arab Uprisings: Toward Progressive Engagement

Two years into the wave of upheaval sweeping the Arab world, new regional dynamics have become clearer, as have unresolved tensions in current U.S. policy toward the region. Given the scale and velocity of political turmoil associated with the Arab uprisings, the Obama administration has understandably adopted a largely reactive approach, attempting to adjust U.S. policies to a rapidly changing environment. It has been more successful in those efforts than is commonly recognized, maintaining effective pressure against Iran and al-Qaeda while helping to broker meaningful political transitions in Tunisia, Egypt, Yemen, and Libya. But now there is a sense of drift overtaking American strategy for the region. The time has come for the Obama administration to articulate a more coherent, overarching, positive agenda for the new Middle East.

The United States must frankly and carefully specify its vital national interests at stake in the Arab world, the resources it is able and willing to commit to pursue them, and the inherent contradictions among some of its objectives. We reject the popular argument that Washington must return to a more assertive and militarized regional grand strategy: the United States cannot afford deeper military involvement in regional conflicts or massive economic

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assistance to transitional countries. Furthermore, newly empowered regional publics embittered by decades of experience with heavy-handed U.S. interference and support for dictatorships have little interest in a domineering style of American leadership.

We also reject a return to embracing dictatorship in the name of stability, the seemingly easier alternative of relying upon alliances with conservative regional powers to

enforce the status quo. The coming years are likely to see continuing waves of popular mobilization and political instability that could well consume even the most powerful conservative Gulf states. On strategic as well as normative grounds, there is no return to the old authoritarian bargain. Supporting popular calls for reform may not guarantee the United States many friends among a skeptical Arab public in the near term, and it will inevitably produce friction with remaining authoritarian regimes who want more overt and unconditional support from international allies. However, neither cost outweighs the urgent reality that only meaningful political reforms will ensure long-term stability in this critical region. U.S. policy must therefore make the promotion of political reform its top priority in the Middle East.

We outline a new approach to the Middle East, which we label “Progressive Engagement.” The strategy focuses on encouraging political reform and broad-based engagement with emerging actors while “right-sizing” America’s military presence in the region. Both components are vital. Our vision of the Middle East that might emerge in five to ten years through such a strategy would include robust partnerships with more democratic and accountable governments, who are able to both effectively align with broad trends in public opinion and to cooperate with the United States on matters of vital shared interest.

Rebalancing America’s commitments in this manner does not mean abandoning the Middle East, sacrificing our vital interests, or abdicating a leadership role. It means pursuing our goals differently—in ways more in line with current U.S. capabilities and a more empowered and populist region. Regional actors must play a greater role in the security architecture and political process, with the United States serving as a critical node for cooperation—convening, facilitating, and guiding, rather than dominating. The United States needs to be willing to accept the outcomes of local politics and abandon delusions of controlling them, while clearly and forcefully laying out its own positive vision for democratic and liberal change. It will take time for the region—and Washington—to adjust to this new approach, since it breaks

with hard-wired expectations about American behavior, capabilities, and priorities—but that is all the more reason to start the transition immediately.

### **A Changing Regional Landscape**

The last two years have witnessed incredible changes across the Middle East. Some areas have experienced more upheaval than others (like Syria), but several trends remain critical to understand the shape of future events. First, the so-called Arab Spring has profoundly altered key regional dynamics, regime perceptions of internal and external threats, and the role of different political actors. A mobilized public opinion that includes a diverse array of popular forces, including but not limited to Islamists, matters more than ever before in regional politics. The mutating civil conflict in Syria has also rapidly consumed the strategic attention of the entire region, and threatens to destabilize much of the Levant. Second, although Iran has been weakened over the last two years, Iranian nuclear and hegemonic ambitions continue to worry its neighbors, Israel, and the West. Third, while al-Qaeda has similarly suffered profound organizational and political setbacks, its local affiliates have adapted in disconcerting ways. Fourth, the Israeli–Palestinian issue remains a core element of regional instability and a constant source of potential violence. Any viable U.S. strategy moving forward must account for these rapidly evolving dynamics.

**We reject the argument that Washington must return to a more militarized regional strategy.**

### **The Arab Uprisings**

The narrative of the Arab uprisings is now familiar. The self-immolation of Mohamed Bouazizi on December 17, 2010, cascaded into a 28-day revolution that toppled a 23-year-old regime in Tunisia. The revolution spread to Egypt, where Hosni Mubarak's decades-old reign came to an end over the course of eighteen days in January/February 2011. Mubarak's fall ensured the further spread of revolutionary fervor, as Arabs across the region suddenly believed that change was not only possible, but inevitable. Mass protests challenged regimes in almost every Arab country, from North Africa to the Gulf. The results of these protests were uneven, however. Egypt, Libya, Yemen, and Tunisia experienced troubled transitions away from authoritarian rule. In Jordan, Morocco, and Oman, modest protests produced tentative steps toward reform, while in Bahrain and the Eastern Province of Saudi Arabia, demands for political change were met with a stern government crackdown.<sup>1</sup>

The situation in Syria stands out. As of this writing, the conflict in Syria has devolved into a grinding civil war, producing tens of thousands of casualties and

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hundreds of thousands of refugees with no clear resolution in sight. It remains conceivable that Assad's regime will continue to barely survive, severely weakened but propped up by Iranian and Russian patrons. It is also possible that the opposition, perhaps enabled by more assertive Western and Arab support, will defeat Assad's forces. Results from such a victory are hard to predict, however. Perhaps a rebel victory would usher in a more inclusive state, but it could also lead to a failed state consumed by battling warlords harboring al-Qaeda linked extremists. Alternatively, the current stalemate may persist,

producing escalating civil strife and a deepening regional proxy conflict pitting Iran, Hezbollah, and Russia against Qatar, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and the United States, with profoundly destabilizing consequences for all of Syria's neighbors, especially Lebanon, Jordan, and Iraq as well as possibly Israel. Under most plausible scenarios, Syria will be a gaping security and political hole in the heart of the Levant for years to come, unable to establish state authority over its territory or population and open to competitive regional proxy wars.

Regardless of how specific cases turn out, one underlying structural reality seems clear: the apparent stability of dictatorship in the Arab world that guided policy for decades has proven to be an illusion. Given the dramatic rise in popular activism empowered by 21st-century satellite television, modern communications technology, and social media, it is clear that *long-term* stability in the region will require meaningful steps by all governments toward genuine political and economic reform. Even Arab states that have resisted mass uprisings have experienced a dramatic change in the nature and extent of public engagement with politics, from rolling weekly protests in Jordan to the incredibly rapid emergence of political arguments on Twitter in Saudi Arabia.

At the same time, in the *near-term*, the defining feature of the current strategic landscape will be uncertainty: uncertainty about the success of ongoing democratic transitions and the ability of new governments in Egypt, Libya, and Yemen to tackle severe economic and governance challenges; uncertainty about which other regimes will fall and which parties will rise to take their places; uncertainty about the intensity, duration, and regional consequences of violence in places like the Sinai and Syria; and uncertainty about the strategic orientation of emerging governments, including the willingness of newly empowered Islamist parties like the Muslim Brotherhood to cooperate with the United States and other Western countries in pursuit of common objectives.

The ultimate strategic effects of these changes are not obvious. Many fear the emerging power of Islamist movements, elected or violent. The anti-American protests that swept the region in September 2012 in response to a YouTube video defaming the Prophet Mohammed—and the uneven governmental responses to the crisis—were symptomatic of the underlying turbulence which is likely to complicate future U.S. policy in the region. However, when Israel attacked Gaza in November 2012, Egypt's President Morsi also proved remarkably pragmatic and effective in restraining popular mobilization and negotiating a ceasefire.<sup>2</sup> There are, as yet, few signs that elected Islamist leaders across the region will be more likely to cooperate with one another or align with Iran, or that the Egyptian Muslim Brotherhood will risk disrupting Cairo's ties with Israel. But it is also difficult to know with confidence whether pragmatism, ideology, or the demands of domestic politics will ultimately drive the behavior of these new leaders of poorly institutionalized transitional states.

Only meaningful political reforms will ensure long-term stability in this critical region.

Moreover, while most commentators focus on the effects of revolution, the anxiety of the status quo powers in the Gulf have shaped, and will continue to shape, the regional environment just as powerfully as the irrepressible protest movements challenging governments. Indeed, the instability associated with the Arab uprisings provides new opportunities for remaining autocracies to exercise regional power. States such as Qatar and Saudi Arabia, relatively stable and secure at home and flush with cash, have used their financial and media power to support local proxies in elections and civil wars alike.

In short, the emerging regional order combines a complex array of often contradictory new trends. The United States must position itself effectively within a region that will remain turbulent and unpredictable for the foreseeable future.

### **Iran's Nuclear and Regional Ambitions**

Among the region's "pre-Arab Spring" issues, none continues to shape America's view of the Middle East more than Iran's nuclear and hegemonic aspirations. In recent years, Iran has made significant progress in developing its nuclear capabilities, producing widespread concern in Washington, Jerusalem, and numerous Arab capitals. Many fear that a nuclear-armed Tehran would increase its support for militancy, terrorism, and subversion in the Levant, Iraq, and the Gulf, which would further destabilize an already tumultuous region.<sup>3</sup> Neighboring states, especially Saudi Arabia, might seek their own nuclear deterrents, potentially setting off a volatile arms race and increasing the

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prospects that regional crisis could escalate to nuclear war.<sup>4</sup> In the absence of a diplomatic resolution to Iran's nuclear challenge, Israeli or U.S. leaders may decide to launch a preventive military strike to set back the program, potentially triggering widespread Iranian retaliation and, again, the possibility of a wider war. (In an effort to deter Iranian aggression and prepare for any contingency, the United States maintains some 50,000 forces in the Gulf, including robust naval,

air, ground, and ballistic missile defense capabilities.)<sup>5</sup> Iran's nuclear program could thus have a decisive effect on regional politics.

Although Iran has not yet acquired nuclear weapons, the Iranian regime is putting all the pieces in place to develop a bomb at some point in the future should Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran's supreme leader, decide to do so. According to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), Iran currently has sufficient quantities of low-enriched uranium that could—if further enriched to weapons-grade level (above 90 percent purity)—produce half a dozen nuclear weapons.<sup>6</sup> At the fastest, credible estimates suggest Iran could enrich the fissile material for a single nuclear device within a few months, and potentially construct a crude weapon within a year of a political decision to do so. Iran would need another couple of years to produce a sophisticated enough warhead for a ballistic missile. However, because Iranian nuclear facilities are under IAEA inspection, any rash move toward the bomb would likely be detected, potentially producing a devastating response by the United States or other countries. Iran is therefore unlikely to weaponize its nuclear capability until it can dramatically reduce the above timeline or construct a bomb in secret—which could be years off.<sup>7</sup>

Iran's nuclear ambitions have produced considerable anxiety, but their nuclear behavior and destabilizing activities have also generated considerable international response. Various UN Security Council Resolutions have left Tehran more diplomatically and economically isolated than at any time since the 1979 revolution. UNSCR 1929, produced in the spring of 2010, provided a framework for follow-on unilateral measures by the U.S. Congress and like-minded states in Europe, Asia, and elsewhere. This has put unprecedented economic pressure on Iran's financial, transportation, and energy sectors. Iran has largely been cut off from the global financial system, its oil revenues have been cut nearly in half, the Iranian currency (the *rial*) has been significantly devalued, and inflation has been rampant.<sup>8</sup>

Iran has also struggled to take advantage of the Arab uprisings.<sup>9</sup> Throughout the Arab Spring, the Iranian regime has tried (unsuccessfully) to cast the

demonstrations sweeping the region as an “Islamic Awakening” inspired by Iran’s own 1979 revolution. For the most part, the Arab world has met this narrative with scorn and ridicule.<sup>10</sup> Iran’s support for Syria’s brutal crackdown, following on the heels of Tehran’s own repressive response to the 2009 Green Movement protests, have been especially damning to the regime’s credibility in the region.<sup>11</sup>

Indeed, the biggest threat to Iran’s regional influence is the potential fall of Assad’s regime. Iran would lose its only Arab-state ally and an essential conduit for supporting militancy in the Levant. The uprising in Syria has produced a major problem for the integrity of the entire “resistance camp” in the region that Iran once claimed to lead. In Lebanon, Hezbollah’s leadership has rhetorically and materially backed Assad, a key patron and major source of the organization’s weapons. This support has exposed Hezbollah as a self-interested, Shiite-sectarian movement, badly damaging its Arab nationalist and anti-Israel resistance credentials at home and abroad.<sup>12</sup> Meanwhile, Hamas, another card-carrying member of the militancy camp, has moved its foreign headquarters from Damascus and is increasingly drifting into the orbit of Egypt, Qatar, and even Turkey.

These difficulties for Tehran are likely to persist. As Arab publics increasingly look to their own governments to represent their interests, Iran’s ability to leverage regional discontent to influence the Arab street will continue to wane. Moreover, emerging political actors vying for influence and votes in an increasingly populist landscape will want to brandish their Arab nationalist credentials—and will hesitate to forge close alliances with Tehran. For example, the Muslim Brotherhood has shown in Egypt that it will not kowtow to Iran.<sup>13</sup> Indeed, a democratic Egypt is likely to emerge as an important counterweight to Iran rather than passively follow the Islamic Republic’s lead.

As the old resistance axis in the Levant weakens, and especially if Assad falls, Iran may attempt to compensate by doubling down in Iraq. But that too will prove difficult: Iraqi nationalism is profound and local distrust of Iran—a country Iraq waged the bloodiest war of the late twentieth-century against (1980–1988)—runs deep, even among the country’s Shiite population. Iraqi leaders across the ethno-sectarian spectrum also desire a long-term strategic partnership with the United States as well as improved relations with Turkey and Iraq’s Arab neighbors—objectives that are ultimately incompatible with Iranian domination. As Iraq’s oil wealth and military strength grow over time, we can expect the country to chart its own course. Even if American hopes for Iraq emerging as a reliable regional partner have dimmed, Tehran should not take Baghdad’s subservience for granted.

Lastly, concerns over Iran’s nuclear and subversive activities have also produced classic “balancing” behavior by Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

states. The Gulf states have significantly increased their arms purchases from the United States and other countries, while deepening intra-GCC security cooperation. Led by Saudi Arabia, Iran's principal rival for regional and ideological influence, the GCC has also sought to actively counter presumed Iranian support for opposition groups in Bahrain and Yemen, while backing anti-Assad fighters in Syria. In this context, fears that the Iran-phobic states of the Gulf would choose to bandwagon with Tehran if its power rises or the American commitment is seen to falter should not be taken seriously. Rather, in the face of Iran's continued nuclear and hegemonic ambitions, we can expect Saudi Arabia and other GCC states to keep circling the wagons. Although this more confrontational stance toward Tehran may keep Iran somewhat in check, it will likely come at the expense of deepening Sunni–Shiite polarization across the region.<sup>14</sup>

### **Al-Qaeda**

A decade after 9/11, al-Qaeda affiliates operate in the Levant, Iraq, and the Arabian Peninsula, as well as the Maghreb and Horn of Africa, while al-Qaeda “central” remains active in Pakistan. Yet, as a consequence of counterterrorism activities that began under President George W. Bush and were expanded by President Barack Obama, Osama bin Laden is dead and scores of leaders and operatives in Afghanistan, Pakistan, Iraq, Somalia, and Yemen have been taken off the battlefield. As a result, the capability of al-Qaeda to carry out large-scale attacks against the United States homeland has been sharply degraded.<sup>15</sup> And while the use of drone strikes has become increasingly controversial, and likely requires a substantial new legal infrastructure, they will almost certainly continue to be a major part of America's campaign against al-Qaeda.

More broadly, al-Qaeda has seen its standing in the Middle East greatly diminished in recent years. Even before the Arab Spring, polling across the Arab world suggested that al-Qaeda's appeal had plummeted. As a result of the political change sweeping the region, the group's ideology and prospects for long-term viability have suffered a major blow. Despite pushing for violent revolution against regional despots for decades, the Arab uprisings were not in any meaningful sense inspired by al-Qaeda or its core philosophy. To be sure, elections have empowered Islamists in Tunisia and Egypt, but few share al-Qaeda's violent vision for the future or seek to align with the terrorist organization.<sup>16</sup> Indeed, the participation in government by more moderate Islamists challenges rather than empowers al-Qaeda.

Al-Qaeda's very real setbacks have not ended the challenge posed by violent salafi-jihadist movements, however. The fall of authoritarian regimes focused on al-Qaeda has reduced the pressure of radical Islamists in some cases, while in others the opening of prisons has released important jihadists back into the field.

And while al-Qaeda “central” has been decimated, dangerous local organizations have emerged, including the Ansar al-Sharia organizations in Tunisia and Libya as well as Jubhat al-Nusra in Syria. Al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula has established control over significant swaths of territory in Yemen, while radical movements have advanced in the Sahel (North Africa), particularly in Mali. Syria in particular holds out the prospect of reviving the appeal of transnational jihad which served al-Qaeda so well in Iraq in the 2000s. In short, al-Qaeda is down but not out. The organization’s evolution toward a more diffuse, localized network will continue to pose challenges to U.S. security interests.

### **Israeli–Palestinian Impasse**

Arab–Israeli tensions no longer represent the central cleavage of events in the Middle East, but the conflict retains its power to suddenly recapture the regional agenda, as the recent Gaza war demonstrates. The failure to reach an Israeli–Palestinian accord continues to pose a fundamental challenge to both Israel’s security and regional stability. In the absence of a two-state solution, the geographic reality of expanding Israeli settlements and continued occupation in the West Bank will inevitably collide with the demographic reality of an expanding Palestinian population to make it difficult for Israel to maintain its identity as both a Jewish and democratic state.<sup>17</sup> Meanwhile, Palestinian disenchantment with both the peace process and their own leadership could produce a third intifada, a “Palestinian Spring,” or both.<sup>18</sup> And, in the context of rising populism across the Arab world, either of these outcomes would risk deepening Israel’s isolation and exacerbating regional conflict.

Despite the high priority President Obama gave the Israeli–Palestinian issue immediately upon taking office, the administration’s early efforts to push both sides back into meaningful and sustained negotiations failed to overcome the powerful forces pushing against peace.<sup>19</sup> The rightward drift in Israeli politics—including the adoption by many religious Israelis and right-leaning immigrants of the settler community’s view that the entirety of the West Bank is Israeli land—has lessened the political appetite and urgency for achieving a deal with the Palestinians.<sup>20</sup> The better-than-expected success of centrist parties in Israel’s January 2013 elections may offer a partial corrective to this trend, but it is unlikely to prove sufficient to produce a major Israeli push toward a two-state solution. And even though the Arab Spring arguably makes achieving a Palestinian accord more important than ever for Israel’s long-term security, Israeli leaders have shown a clear preference for “hunkering down” in the face of upheaval in Egypt and Syria, the possibility of instability in Jordan, and the growing threat from Iran, rather than taking risks for peace.<sup>21</sup>

For their part, Palestinian leaders remain deeply divided between the Fatah-led leadership in the West Bank and the Hamas-dominated Gaza Strip. Riven by

a fiscal crisis and the absence of any clear political horizon to justify its cooperation with Israel, the Palestinian Authority (PA) lacks the popular legitimacy and political control to take the risks necessary to move the peace process forward. Recent attempts by the PA to reconcile with Hamas and seek observer status in the United Nations reflect a growing sense among Palestinians that the Israeli government is unwilling to stop settlement activity, and a belief that the United States is unwilling to put sufficient pressure on Israel to do so.<sup>22</sup> Meanwhile, many Israelis criticize the Palestinians for failing to take advantage of the 2009–2010 settlement freeze, and blame the current impasse on Palestinian “rejectionism,” especially the refusal of the PA to recognize Israel as a Jewish state.<sup>23</sup> Recent efforts by the Obama administration to re-energize the peace process are laudable, but the barriers to progress remain substantial.

### **U.S. National Interests, Old and New**

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The confluence of these events and trends represents a significant challenge to vital U.S. national interests. But it also calls for revising Washington’s understanding of those interests, and reassessing U.S. strategic priorities. There is no avoiding the reality of painful tradeoffs between valued objectives.

For decades, there has been considerable bipartisan agreement on three core American national interests at stake in the Middle East: protecting the U.S. homeland from the twin threats posed by international terrorism and weapons of mass destruction (WMD), especially nuclear weapons; ensuring the free flow of oil; and ensuring the security of Israel. (Although the promotion of democracy and political reform has sometimes been given lip service as a fourth core U.S. interest, sustained efforts in support of this goal have historically taken a back seat to other concerns.) These interests, in turn, have produced a number of associated U.S. policy objectives: advancing Arab–Israeli peace; protecting key oil-producing states; preventing or limiting the spread of regional conflicts; keeping vital sea lanes such as the Strait of Hormuz open; and ensuring U.S. military access and freedom of action within the region. To ensure these objectives, the United States has traditionally behaved as a quintessential status quo power in the Middle East, prioritizing the regional balance of power and a modicum of order over backing political change.

The Bush administration’s response to the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, however, overturned this longstanding preference for the status quo. The invasion of Iraq, a revisionist move, created a power vacuum in the heart of the Gulf that Iran moved rapidly to fill. The war drained and exhausted the U.S. military, spread sectarianism and refugees throughout the region, and unleashed a brutal communal civil war. The “Global War on Terror” also brought the United States into far more intimate collaboration with Arab security services,

and put Washington on a collision course with the Islamic world writ large. A last ditch effort to jumpstart the Israeli–Palestinian peace process at the Annapolis Conference in 2007 proved too little, too late. And the Bush administration failed to match its bold words on democracy with meaningful support for democratic change, retreating as soon as Hamas won the January 2006 Palestinian elections to a more traditional embrace of friendly Arab dictators.

During President Obama’s first term, the United States moved to restore some equilibrium to U.S. investments in the Middle East. In an historic speech in Cairo in June 2009, Obama announced his desire for a fresh start with the Muslim world. The administration withdrew the U.S. military presence from Iraq without producing catastrophic state collapse. Obama scaled down the worst excesses of the War on Terror, while maintaining an effective but lower-key counter-terrorism campaign. While the administration has thus far failed to resolve the Iranian nuclear challenge, it has successfully assembled an impressive international consensus and rigorous sanctions to isolate and pressure Tehran. Obama also made the peace process a top priority, though his efforts proved no more successful than his predecessor’s in pushing it forward. Then the Arab Spring erupted, radically reshaping the regional agenda.

In response to the Arab uprisings, the administration has taken a largely reactive approach, attempting to rapidly adjust U.S. regional policies while coping with multiple ongoing crises. The administration quickly, and in our view correctly, recognized the importance of embracing and seeking to shape change in Egypt and across the region—but pulled up at the prospect of confrontation with Saudi Arabia over political transformation in Bahrain. It eventually brokered a transition agreement in Yemen with the assistance of Saudi Arabia and the GCC, but seemed to prioritize its ongoing counterterrorism cooperation over other critical issues. In stark contrast to previous administrations, it proved willing to allow the democratic process to play out even when elections produced Islamist victors (as in Tunisia and Egypt). It intervened to prevent an imminent massacre in Libya, but has resisted calls for a much more costly and risky intervention in Syria. Obama outlined a set of core principles guiding U.S. policy that rightly recognized the need for democratic change in the region while acknowledging that newly empowered Arab voices had little interest or appetite for dictates from Washington.

These steps seemed to represent the best course of action at the time, but it is less clear where they leave U.S. policy today. President Obama’s May 19, 2011, speech at the State Department remains the only major attempt to articulate an overarching regional vision.<sup>24</sup> While that speech forcefully embraced democratic reform and public engagement, a workable strategy to implement these principles has yet to be put in place. Even where policies made sense and

were effectively pursued, they have too often not been communicated in a strategic fashion, leaving many in the region uncertain about American priorities. And despite significant changes since Obama outlined his vision—from the Syrian catastrophe and the rise of Islamists across the region to the troubles besetting key transitional states such as Egypt—there is more drift than clear strategic direction in U.S. policy.

**Any attempt to craft a more coherent approach must come to terms with five strategic dilemmas.**

Given the current environment in the Middle East, any attempt to craft a more coherent approach must come to terms with five strategic dilemmas. First, containing Iran's ambitions and maintaining the free flow of oil may require a sizable forward U.S. military presence in the Persian Gulf and robust security ties with Gulf regimes. Yet, this increases U.S. strategic dependence on the least democratic governments in a democratizing region. This dependence, in turn, makes it difficult to prioritize political reform in Gulf states, undermines U.S. soft power with

the Arab public by continuing to align U.S. policy with autocratic governments, and may inadvertently contribute to the emerging Sunni–Shiite Cold War in the region.

Second, a forward U.S. operational presence throughout the region and close ties with partner governments' security services may be essential for combating terrorism. But this very American military presence in the Arab world continues to provide al-Qaeda and other extremists with valuable propaganda and recruitment opportunities. It also reduces U.S. leverage over authoritarian regimes on issues of reform.

Third, tilting toward Israel's position in its conflict with the Palestinians may be essential to reassure Israeli leaders of Washington's commitment to their security and encourage them to take risks for peace. However, the perception that we lack a balanced approach to the peace process complicates our credibility with Arab partners and undermines our ability to engage new Islamist governments and the newly empowered Arab street.

Fourth, more forceful U.S. intervention in Syria, including the use of military force, could hasten the demise of Assad's regime, cauterize the destabilizing consequences of the conflict, reduce humanitarian suffering, demonstrate leadership, and strike Iran a significant blow. But it could also require a major investment of military resources, potentially returning the United States to the sort of protracted and bloody commitment that it just escaped in Iraq, and consuming resources necessary to deal with Iran and other global contingencies.

Finally, in light of the Arab uprisings, it is more important than ever to prioritize political and economic reform. Yet, assertively pushing reform complicates ties with key autocratic partners, may provoke accusations of interference and produce a nationalist backlash in some democratizing states, could worsen short-term instability in some countries, and risks empowering Islamist groups less inclined to cooperate with Washington.

Although it is impossible to maximize the pursuit of all U.S. interests and objectives simultaneously, highlighting these key dilemmas clarifies the hard choices confronting Washington policymakers. An internally coherent strategy, in turn, would address these tensions by placing big bets on achieving some objectives, while accepting risks elsewhere.

### **A Return to Realpolitik?**

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For some, the choice is clear: traditional realpolitik concerns continue to trump the U.S. interest in assertively promoting political reform. Such arguments take two distinct forms: “Primacists” favor a muscular and militant approach which prioritizes the goals of enhancing American power and hard security interests in the Middle East over efforts to support democratic change. They believe Washington has abdicated its regional leadership role in recent years (by withdrawing from Iraq and Afghanistan, engaging in diplomacy with Tehran, creating “daylight” between the United States and Israel, refusing to intervene in Syria). As a result, friends and enemies alike doubt Washington’s commitment to defending vital U.S. interests in the region. To fix this, a primacist strategy would re-assert military dominance (broadly for counterterrorism, but also in the Persian Gulf for oil access and in Syria to counter Iran)<sup>25</sup> and maintain good relations with key partners. This approach would therefore tilt heavily toward Israel in the peace process, and more broadly, would not involve significant U.S. political pressure on friendly autocratic states.<sup>26</sup> Remaining Arab dictators tend to agree with this ordering of priorities, which minimizes pressure upon them for domestic change while emphasizing their own fears of Iran and relative disinterest in the Palestinian issue.

Neoconservative proponents of primacy would disagree, arguing that a primacist strategy can and should include robust American democracy promotion efforts.<sup>27</sup> But this is inconsistent: a coherent primacist strategy would require a strategic relationship with friendly autocratic regimes, especially the Gulf monarchies. How does the United States maintain that relationship while also promoting political reform in those same states? Decades of empty promises to cultivate civil society or reform from above cast doubt on the commitment of remaining autocrats to meaningful political change. Primacists also have no answer for how to reconcile their avowed support for democracy

with their suspicion about the electoral success of Islamist movements which may prove hostile to U.S. policy. Finally, favoring a decisive tilt toward Israeli positions on the Palestinian issue and a “shoot-first-ask-questions-later” approach to the region’s challenges only complicates Washington’s ability to engage with many emerging populist democratic and Islamist actors in the Arab world.

Perhaps the fatal flaw in a primacist strategy, however, is the fact that it simply cannot be executed. The combination of U.S. fiscal constraints and public exhaustion after a decade of war make a renewed effort to impose an American imperium in the Middle East untenable.<sup>28</sup> Indeed, the attempt to overcome a “declinist” foreign policy by reasserting dominance would contribute to the very military and fiscal overstretch threatening the long-term sustainability of American power. Moreover, even if Washington had the resources and public stamina for a more assertive and militarized policy, the Iraq war demonstrated the inherent limitations of U.S. hard power to shape regional events—and that was *before* the added complexity introduced by the Arab Spring. Few Arabs yearn for the sort of leadership that primacists offer.

This critique is the starting point for an alternative *realpolitik* approach: “offshore balancing.” Offshore balancers have a narrower definition of U.S. interests and favor retrenchment to address the military and economic causes of American decline. Instead of maintaining a robust military presence in the region, this approach would reduce U.S. strategic commitments and conserve resources for the rare instances when vital national interests were at stake (like the threatening of regional oil supplies). The United States would not seek to dominate the region, but rather work indirectly by, with, and through U.S. allies and partners to maintain a balance of power favorable to American interests. Moreover, by pulling back, offshore balancing would aim to prevent regional states from free-riding on the United States, forcing them to take on more of the regional security burden.<sup>29</sup>

Needless to say, this strategy would avoid ambitious efforts to transform the nature of regimes in the region or an active role in new military interventions in places such as Syria. Because this approach requires working through partner states to advance hard U.S. security interests in the region, it would also by necessity take a much lighter touch in pushing controversial reforms which could alienate partners and complicate security cooperation. As such, even if political reform was a priority, Washington would have difficulty promoting it. Moreover, while some advocates of offshore balancing are highly critical of America’s special relationship with Israel,<sup>30</sup> it is worth noting that, in practice, the approach would have to rely on—and work indirectly through—allies such as Israel to help uphold a regional balance of power favorable to U.S. interests.

This would make it more difficult for Washington to press Israel to accommodate Palestinian concerns.

Given current constraints, the emphasis on the inherent limitations of U.S. power is laudable. But the offshore balancing perspective takes matters too far. Although downsizing the U.S. military presence in the Middle East over time makes sense, a deep and precipitous pullback would undermine U.S. influence and create a vacuum filled by reckless policies pursued by foe and friend alike. Arab allies, always fearful of abandonment, may pursue reckless strategies in pursuit of alternative security guarantees. The prospects for conflict would increase, potentially escalating to the point where the United States would be drawn back in, especially if the flow of oil was jeopardized. The absence of a meaningful residual military presence would leave U.S. influence sharply diminished without a clear political benefit.

### **Progressive Engagement**

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U.S. strategy in the region should avoid both the excesses of the primacists and the reduced ambition of the offshore balancers in favor of a strategy of “progressive engagement.” Two primary pillars define this approach: first, encouraging the emergence of strong, democratic partners, and second, “right sizing” the U.S. military footprint.<sup>31</sup> Both are vital. Washington should clearly and forcefully advocate for political reform as an essential component of its strategic agenda of encouraging the emergence of strong, influential, and internally democratic allies. It should continue to draw down its military presence in the region, while maintaining its deep and robust military-to-military relationships to ensure that it stays at the center of all regional security networks. And while Washington should have no illusions in believing such a policy would instantaneously win over a hostile and skeptical Arab public, the United States can still benefit by better articulating U.S. policies and broadly engaging with all movements and leaders who respect basic shared values and interests.

#### **Supporting Strong, Democratic Partners**

Siding with the forces of political change and pushing for political reform should not be seen as a distraction from a “real” strategic agenda. On the contrary, the Arab uprisings should have conclusively demonstrated the urgency of such concerns. Egypt under Hosni Mubarak may have been a reliable ally, frequently willing to do what Washington asked on the Israeli–Palestinian front or to support the containment of Iran, but his subordination to the American agenda left him increasingly unpopular and even despised across most of the region. Meanwhile, his growing domestic political

challenges consumed his regime's attention and left Egypt an enfeebled presence in regional affairs. A more democratic Egypt may produce less cooperative leaders, but they could well prove more effective and useful. Turkey under Prime Minister Recep Tayyip Erdogan provides an example: he is democratically-elected, Islamically-oriented, and pugnacious on many issues, but fundamentally aligned with the United States on most core issues and influential with regional audiences.

The United States should use, and adjust, its economic and security relationships in the region to promote reform. In Egypt, technical and economic assistance (including U.S. support for aid and loans from international financial institutions) should be pegged to clear, internationally agreed-upon benchmarks for political and economic reform. Meanwhile, security assistance should continue to be conditioned on Egyptian adherence to the peace treaty with Israel.

Elsewhere, the U.S. should make arms sales—including both advanced weaponry and technology that governments could use for internal repression—to GCC states, Jordan, and Iraq conditional on moves toward more representative and accountable government as well as commitments to restraint in the face of domestic opponents. Quiet conversations should outline expectations and the broad contours of a reform agenda. Security sector reform should receive more emphasis, with the aim of improving respect for human rights, civilian control, and the rule of law. Bahrain offers a particularly crucial test case, given the intensity of its highly public crackdown on a largely peaceful protest movement.

The form of conditionality advocated here does not imply endless public threats to slash aid in order to force cooperation. Such public threats should be reserved only for the most extreme circumstances, such as regime forces killing their own people, military coups, or serious violations of treaty obligations. The goal should rather be to constantly engage with partners at all levels to show the value the United States places on human rights and accountable governance, as well as the administration's commitment to work together to avoid the sort of crises that inevitably galvanize Congressional pressure to cut aid.

A strategy of progressive engagement would also emphasize expanding connections with civil society and emerging political actors, including moderate Islamists. The primary goal is not to cure all forms of anti-Americanism or magically improve Washington's favorability ratings, but rather to engage broadly across multiple networks in order to establish avenues for ongoing, productive dialogue and exchange.<sup>32</sup> Islamists who have committed to the political process, non-violence, and respect for basic democratic values cannot be excluded from such engagement, even if such

contacts incense their liberal or secularist political adversaries. In friendly autocratic states, the strategy would also seek to cultivate societal connections, building indigenous support and capacity to push reform from the bottom up. In adversarial states, the approach would support indigenous democratic regime change through consistent human rights pressure and by forging connections with opposition networks.

Increasing focus on supporting political reform and civil society engagement does not mean that Washington should attempt to micromanage political outcomes in Arab countries or try to tilt the field toward favored groups. Instead, the United States should clearly and forcefully articulate broad principles—such as transparency, accountability, an expectation of respect for human rights and the protection of women and minorities, and adherence to democratic principles and processes—but otherwise refrain from backing particular political trends or leaders. U.S. pressure should target institutions and the political process, not the daily turmoil of contentious politics. We cannot, and should not, pick winners.

**U.S. pressure should target institutions and the political process, not pick winners.**

Progressive engagement would also require a balanced approach to the Middle East peace process, both as a means of promoting an Israeli–Palestinian accord and to enhance U.S. credibility and soft power with the newly empowered Arab public, while recognizing that a short-term breakthrough is unlikely. This would not entail “throwing Israel under the bus” or imposing any particular solution. Washington’s strong commitment to Israel’s security should remain. At the same time, however, U.S. policy should recognize that both Israel and the Palestinians have legitimate claims and aspirations, and that the absence of a meaningful peace process serves neither side’s true interests. Washington should therefore actively serve as an honest broker, seeking to bridge differences and locate areas for compromise which preserve Israeli identity and security while fulfilling Palestinian aspirations for dignity and sovereignty. And the United States should press both sides, as well as other regional states, to make difficult choices and support those actors who take risks for peace.

### **“Right-Sizing” the U.S. Military Presence**

Progressive engagement capitalizes on the fact that dependence of partner nations on U.S. economic assistance and security cooperation provides Washington with a certain degree of political influence, as well as potential

sources of leverage. But when the United States is itself *over*-dependent on the security relationship with regional states, it reduces Washington's ability and inclination to use this influence. The current U.S. force posture, especially in the Persian Gulf, contributes to this dependence. It also creates "strategic exposure": the risk that rapid political changes could undermine vital U.S. interests.

Bahrain is perhaps the clearest example. Security ties with Bahrain provide a degree of U.S. influence. Yet, America's overreliance on naval facilities in Manama to house the U.S. Fifth Fleet, check Iranian adventurism, and keep the Strait of Hormuz open puts fundamental limits on Washington's ability to press the al-Khalifa monarchy to accommodate the concerns of the country's Shiite majority. At the same time, U.S. interests are supremely vulnerable to a potential revolution in Bahrain—a revolution made all the more likely by the failure to reform. As Washington revises its plans to downsize its military footprint in the region, it should make clear that Manama needs serious steps towards reform for American forces to remain stationed there.

Progressive engagement would therefore aim to both reduce and diversify the American military presence in the Middle East. This would prevent the United States from relying on any one partner. Reducing military dependence on Gulf states, in particular, would enable Washington to push remaining autocracies toward reform by making more credible the threat to remove remaining assistance. This approach obviously runs some risk of gutting valuable security cooperation. But, if handled carefully, the persistence of shared interests between the United States and GCC states in countering Iran, combating terrorism, and ensuring the free flow of oil from the region should reduce the odds of a complete rupture.

The reduction should maintain sufficient operational access and the ability to rapidly scale up military capabilities in the event of a major armed conflict. The U.S. military should sustain and grow its role as the critical integrating node in regional air and ballistic missile defense systems, shared early warning, maritime task forces, and counterterrorism activities, but do so with the smallest possible military footprint.<sup>33</sup> Doing so would ensure some level of operational access for contingencies while maintaining a number of partner dependencies on critical niche U.S. military capabilities—dependencies that will preserve Washington's leverage to encourage further cooperation and reform. Over time, though, the goal should be to shrink the U.S. military presence to the bare minimum required to assist partner nations with external defense.

The ability to substantially draw down the forward U.S. military presence in the region, however, depends in part on whether the American military becomes

deeply involved in another Middle Eastern conflict (potentially in Syria or Iran). Such contingencies would require not only fighting forces, but a troop presence in the region to police the post-conflict aftermath. After Iraq and Afghanistan, another major U.S. military incursion in the Middle East is the last thing the United States needs or the American public wants. But the U.S. military could nevertheless find itself dragged into such conflicts by the actions of others—the use of WMD in Syria, a Syria–Turkey war, or an Israeli preventive strike on Iran’s nuclear program, for example. At the same time, the failure to limit the spillover effects from the Syrian civil war or to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons could similarly bog down U.S. forces in the region in a decades-long containment posture. In short, much depends on resolving these issues without resorting to large-scale U.S. military intervention.

### **A New Strategy for a New Middle East**

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The strategic shift proposed here will provoke anxiety among allied regimes and—given Washington’s historical track record—skepticism among Arab publics. Autocratic rulers in the Gulf will bristle at any pressure on reform and fear that a reduced U.S. military presence means they are being abandoned. But this should not deter us. The United States should be willing to criticize the authoritarian excesses of allied regimes and push for greater respect for human rights and democratic participation. The tolerance of unrepentant authoritarian regimes does little for the United States in the long term if it carries the seeds of an even greater regime-threatening crisis down the road. The United States should also do more to assist transitional regimes in order to consolidate functioning, representative democracies. And it must communicate more effectively with elites and mass publics alike to effectively manage turbulent new Arab politics.

Given changing regional dynamics and constraints on American resources, a strategy of progressive engagement offers the best way to advance U.S. interests in the Middle East. But it is not a magic bullet. It would not solve every one of the exceedingly difficult regional challenges facing the United States. Indeed, any realistic strategy moving forward requires Washington to scale back its

expectations about what it can and should accomplish in the new Middle East. The United States must work to empower new democratic actors and work with them to advance shared interests, while acknowledging that we will not always get our way. The ultimate goal should be a new regional order along the lines

**Any realistic regional strategy requires Washington to scale back its expectations.**

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The ultimate goal should be stronger, more stable, and more democratic partners[CAI].

that has proven successful for the United States in other regions of the world—one rooted in stronger, more stable, and more democratic partners.

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