

# **U.S. Foreign Policy in the Middle East Amidst Regional Disorder and Entangled Alliances**

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## **Introduction**

Since the end of the Cold War and especially since 9/11, a cascade of crises in the Middle East has challenged a number of core U.S. national security interests including: protecting the homeland, preventing the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), ensuring the secure and stable supply of oil, and advancing democratic reform. Most recently, the Arab uprisings have reset a regional order and produced intractable, internationalized civil wars. Meanwhile, Iran's regional ambitions and the future of ISIS (Islamic State in Iraq and Syria) present serious challenges to the state system and to U.S. regional allies.

The Trump administration has highlighted two foreign policy objectives related to U.S. national security interests in the Middle East: first, defeating ISIS as part of a goal to eradicate “radical Islamic terrorism” and, second, containing Iran, including preventing it from acquiring nuclear weapon capability. The Trump administration's mixed statements about the Israeli-Palestinian conflict do not provide us with much of an indication as to where this issue fits into his vision for the Middle East.

This essay examines some of the threats and opportunities the United States will face in the region to pursue these objectives. It suggests that the region's disorder and divergent threat perceptions among allies and across issues will present challenges for the United States to achieve its objectives. Furthermore, Russia's involvement in the region will play a crucial role.

## **U.S. interests in the Middle East**

The United States has a number of national security interests in the Middle East that range from important to vital. These interests include preventing the spread of Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD), protecting allies and partners, ensuring the secure flow of oil, countering terrorism, and promoting democratic reform and human rights. The fundamental aim of these interests is to protect the homeland and ensure the prosperity of the nation.

The hybrid nature of ISIS exemplifies the different types of threat it poses to the United States. As a terrorist group, ISIS represents a non-existential threat to U.S. citizens through its direct and indirect assistance to terrorist actors. As an insurgent group and quasi-state, ISIS threatens the domestic political stability of regional allies as well as the Middle East state system. The Islamic State's capacity to destabilize neighboring regimes through its ideological appeal presents both a current and future challenge. ISIS can mobilize individuals for violent action and challenge the legitimacy and political stability of local regimes through its messaging.

Iran poses a serious threat to the United States and its allies in the Middle East through its revisionist foreign policies. Iran's asymmetric activities, its ideological projection, and the development of its nuclear program continue to challenge U.S. foreign policy objectives of maintaining stability throughout the Gulf and the Levant. The United States' Sunni Arab allies and Israel perceive an ascendant Iran as one of the most serious national security threats.

The Trump administration has taken a hard line against Iran publicly. During the U.S. presidential campaign, candidate Trump threatened to tear up the Iran deal. Secretary of Defense Mattis called Iran, "the single biggest sponsor of terrorism in the world."<sup>1</sup> While the Trump administration seems willing to maintain the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) even as Iran has conducted a number of ballistic missile tests that certainly fall outside the spirit of the agreement, additional sanctions have been levied.<sup>1</sup>

### **U.S. Foreign Policy Amidst Regional Disorder and Entangled Alliances**

There are two significant challenges to the Trump administration's realization of its objectives. The first is the region's social and political environment. After leading a relatively stable regional order of "moderate" Arab Sunni states against an Iranian led axis during the 2000s, the United States faces a region in political disorder where state alignments are shifting and the issues that caused the Arab uprisings remain unresolved. To provide some context, it has only been five years since the Arab uprisings swept the region and overturned a number of authoritarian regimes. Three of the states that faced massive protests - Yemen, Libya, and Syria - are still in the midst of brutal civil wars in which regional states and great powers are involved. War-torn Iraq is battling the Islamic State and will continue to face significant civil and political strife even after Iraq liberates its territory from the Islamic State. One of the biggest region-wide challenges is that many of the factors that facilitated the social uprisings - youth unemployment, corruption, and lack of hope - remain and will continue to fester. The counter-revolutionary forces may have subdued the revolutionary impulses for the time being and made some leaders more amenable to cooperation with the United States but the political, social, and economic grievances that led to the uprisings remain unresolved. This is one issue area to watch.

The second key challenge is that the United States must coordinate policy among allies that have divergent threat perceptions across issue areas. The core problem is that regional actors' threat perceptions often diverge from each other and the United States. For example, U.S., Saudi Arabia, and Turkey may align over their desire to defeat ISIS but these U.S. allies do not prioritize threats the same way. While both Saudi Arabia and Turkey oppose ISIS, Saudi Arabia perceives Iran as a greater threat than Turkey does. Meanwhile, Ankara is more concerned about empowered Kurdish populations inside Turkey and on its borders than it is about ISIS. To further complicate this picture, Saudi Arabia's arch rival, Iran, plays an important role supporting anti-ISIS, Shi'a militias in Iraq and is crucial to President Assad's survival in Syria.

The coalition to defeat ISIS does not carry over to other areas such as combatting Iranian regional influence. Iran's support for Assad wrangles Arab Sunnis (and Israel) who want to see Iranian regional influence reduced. The important point is that U.S. regional allies and adversaries assess threats differently and will prioritize their own efforts according to their local threat environments. This will continue to be one of the biggest challenges for the United States.

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<sup>1</sup> Louis Nelson and Nahal Toosi, "Trump slaps new sanctions on Iran after missile test," *Politico*, February 3, 2017, <http://www.politico.com/story/2017/02/iran-sanctions-234604>

There are a number of issues that complicate the Trump administration's hard-line policy toward Iran and its effort to defeat ISIS. First, while Iran plays an important role in defeating ISIS in Iraq and Syria, the defeat of ISIS will likely translate to greater Iranian influence. Iran supports Shi'a militias in Iraq fighting the Islamic state and Iran supports the Assad government in Syria. Second, the JCPOA provides the United States with a relatively stable way to assess Iranian nuclear behavior, but it does not completely assuage the lingering suspicions of Iran's intentions as well as its capabilities. Moreover, the most important flashpoint might actually turn on domestic politics. For example, U.S. actions, either in the form of military responses to Iranian naval maneuvers or Iranian ballistic missile tests, may affect Iranian domestic political attitudes toward the agreement. These actions may in turn precipitate further U.S. action. Any of these moves run the risk of increasing domestic pressure in both Iran and the United States that may exacerbate a crisis.

Yet one opportunity for the Trump administration is to reset relationships with some U.S. partners. In contrast to previous administrations, the Trump administration is not interested in promoting political reform in the Middle East. This will provide the United States with greater flexibility in its regional relations. By not involving itself in the domestic affairs of other countries, the Trump administration may remove a sticking point of bilateral relations with Arab authoritarian regimes that can sometime cause tensions. Lastly, the Trump administration's public stance on Iran may reduce allies' Obama era fears that Iran's influence might grow unchecked. However, Iran is important both for the defeat of ISIS and the future of any political agreement in Iraq and particularly in Syria.

Russia presents both an opportunity and threat. There is an opportunity to coordinate counter-ISIS efforts in Syria and to act as a vital player in any political settlement that might follow. Russian support of the JCPOA benefits the United States to the extent that maintaining the agreement remains in U.S. interests. However, these opportunities could easily become challenges if Russia intends to expand its footprint in the Middle East beyond Syria and if it continues to strengthen its relationship with Iran. If this alignment strengthens, it would certainly threaten Arab Sunni states, Israel, and U.S. interests.

## **The Future: Rethinking Success**

There are no perfect solutions to containing Iran or physically defeating the Islamic State, especially in Syria. Indeed, there seems to be an assumption that once these goals are achieved, the region will become more stable and it is also unclear what success actually means in either of these cases. In fact, in the event that Islamic State is physically defeated in Iraq and Syria, it is unlikely that this defeat will remove the ideas and environment which make ISIS attractive. Radical Islamic terrorism and terrorism more generally will likely remain. An Iraq without ISIS will continue to face some of the same internal political struggles that contributed to ISIS' rise while regional actors jockey for power. A post-ISIS situation is even more complicated for Syria itself and its neighbors given the number of foreign actors that have become stakeholders in the conflict. Moreover, if the JCPOA remains in place, U.S. regional allies such as the Gulf States and Israel may not feel more secure if Iran continues to project power throughout the region. But if the JCPOA comes under threat, the absence of replacement may trigger regional threat perceptions.

Lastly, many of these uncertainties will be affected by the role Russia is willing to play in the region, particularly its evolving relationship with Iran and Syria. Russia is a strong backer of the JCPOA and together with Iran, Moscow supports the Assad regime's efforts to defeat ISIS. The important question is what are the costs and risks Russia is willing to bear to maintain or extend its influence in the Middle East.

In sum, these open questions highlight that the United States should think very seriously about how these issues may be connected to each other and to broader regional political trends. The unresolved societal tensions that caused the Arab uprisings will continue to be a liability for returning to a stable regional order. Furthermore, the divergent threat perceptions among regional actors and between regional partners and the United States will prove a change to the most pressing issue: How will the region look in the future?

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<sup>1</sup> “Iran is world's biggest state sponsor of terrorism, US says,” <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-38868039>, February 4, 2017