

# SECURITY AND PUBLIC ORDER

CONVENER

KENNETH M. POLLACK

The Brookings Institution

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February 2016

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## CONVENER

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## FOREWORD

The Middle East is seeing a century-old political order unravel, an unprecedented struggle for power within and between states, and the rise of extremist elements that have already exacted a devastating human and economic toll that the world cannot continue to bear. That is why we, in partnership with the Atlantic Council, have undertaken an effort to seek to advance the public discussion in the direction of a global strategy for addressing these and other, longer-term challenges confronting the region.

To that end, we convened in February 2015 a Middle East Strategy Task Force to examine the underlying issues of state failure and political legitimacy that contribute to extremist violence, and to suggest ways that the international community can work in true partnership with the people of the region to address these challenges. Our emphasis is on developing a positive agenda that focuses not just on the problems of the region, but recognizes and seeks to harness its vast potential and empower its people toward a constructive and solutions-based approach.

Drawing on previous successful bipartisan initiatives, we are pleased to serve as Co-Chairs for this project. We have undertaken this effort together with a diverse and high-level group of senior advisers from the United States, Europe, and the Middle East, underscoring the truly international approach that is necessary to address this global problem and the need, first and foremost, to listen to responsible voices from the region. We all approach this project with great humility, since the challenges facing the region are some of the most challenging and difficult that any of us have even seen.

Engaging some of the brightest minds in the region and beyond, we organized five working groups to examine the broad topical issues that we see as essential to unlocking a more peaceful and prosperous Middle East. These issues include:

- Security and Public Order
- Religion, Identity, and Countering Violent Extremism
- Rebuilding Societies: Refugees, Recovery, and Reconciliation in times of Conflict
- Governance and State-Society Relations
- Economic Recovery and Revitalization

Over the course of 2015, each of these working groups discussed key aspects of the topic as they saw it, culminating in each case in a paper outlining the individual working group convener's conclusions and recommendations based on these discussions. This paper is the outcome of the working group on Security and Public Order, convened by Kenneth M. Pollack of the Brookings Institution. We are extremely grateful to Ken for the time and dedication he offered to this project.

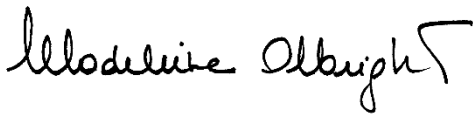
This paper represents his personal views in his capacity as Convener. While the content and conclusions were greatly informed by the debates within the working group, it is not a consensus document and does not necessarily represent the views of each individual group member. Nor does it necessarily represent our views as Co-Chairs, or those of the Senior Advisers to the project. Instead, this paper is intended as a think piece to spur further discussions of these matters.

We have found many of Dr. Pollack's insights to be thought-provoking and fresh, and believe that he drives to the core of many of the region's most difficult problems. We concur with his assessment that the region's multiple civil wars have become "engines of instability" that make every other problem more complex. We especially appreciate his long-term view that a regional forum is necessary to address the Middle East's security challenges, which are made all the worse by mistrust amongst some of the region's most powerful players. And finally, we

wholeheartedly agree that the exploitation of sectarian narratives for political purposes threatens to poison the region and has to yet to be effectively countered.

We have embraced a number of Dr. Pollack's ideas, which will appear in our concluding Co-Chairs' report in 2016. It is our hope that this final report will represent a constructive, considered, and above all, solutions-oriented approach to a region that we see as vital to American interests, global security, and human prosperity. We hope that the broad, collaborative approach we have emphasized throughout this project can serve as a model for future problem-solving on issues of the Middle East. We also hope that our final report will not be an end point, but instead will be the first part of an ongoing conversation amongst the global network of stakeholders that we have assembled for this Task Force.

The situation in the Middle East is difficult but progress is not impossible. It is our desire that this Task Force might serve as the first step toward better international cooperation with the people of the Middle East to set the region on a more positive trajectory, and to realize its incredible potential.



**Madeleine K. Albright**  
Co-Chair



**Stephen J. Hadley**  
Co-Chair

## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The security situation facing the Middle East is grave and appears to be trending toward greater violence and instability. The states of the region have tended to focus on traditional, external threats but the internal threats they face—from domestic unrest, state failure, and civil war—have become both more common and dangerous.

It is highly unlikely that these security problems will solve themselves or that regional states will be able to resolve them on their own. Given the ongoing importance of Middle Eastern energy resources to the international economy, the region's central geographic location, its multiplicity of terrorist groups, and the extent of regional anger at numerous other countries for their predicament, it would be a mistake to assume that these security problems will *not* affect the wider world. Already the problems of terrorism and refugees generated by Middle Eastern upheaval have made many Americans, Europeans, Russians, and Middle Easterners want to take action themselves.

To avoid a catastrophic descent, the Middle East will require considerable external assistance to address its security problems over the short and long terms. Only the United States has the combination of capabilities and potential willingness to lead, develop, and implement these strategies. If the United States is unwilling to do so, it is unlikely that any other state can or will, and the security problems of the Middle East will likely worsen as a result.

Although the United States remains indispensable to such an effort, it should not be expected to shoulder the burden by itself. Moreover, there is reason to believe that other countries—in the Middle East, Europe, Asia, and elsewhere—could be persuaded to do more, including potentially leading a wider campaign in certain areas. This is especially so as refugees, terrorist groups, and other manifestations of spillover from Middle Eastern civil wars increasingly affect other states.

Nevertheless, realizing such support will require the United States to formulate a coherent, feasible strategy; commit itself to leading the effort; and contribute sufficient resources to the effort so that other countries believe the strategy has a reasonable expectation of success.

Ultimately, the only way to eliminate the recurrent, worsening security crises of the Middle East is to help the states of the region address the deep structural problems in their economic, political, and social systems through a process of long-term reform.

In the meantime, important steps need to be taken to address immediate security problems, particularly the civil wars raging across the region, *but these cannot be allowed to supersede the need for sustained reform, as has been the case too often in the past.*

### Very Hard, but Not Impossible

Such a comprehensive effort to address the myriad security problems plaguing the Middle East will be exceptionally large and difficult, akin to that which transformed Europe after the two world wars.

Nevertheless, there are some useful tools available and some dynamics that could prove helpful.

The states of the region are eager—and in some cases, desperate—for external assistance with their short-term security problems. Europe and East Asia are equally concerned about the consequences of worsening instability in the Middle East. Both create leverage for the United States and others willing to lead such an effort.

The external powers, led by the United States, could use that leverage to make an explicit deal with Middle Eastern governments: The United States would lead an international effort to help the states of the region deal with their short-term security problems, and in return the Middle Eastern states would agree to enact a series of gradual reforms to deal with their long-term political, economic, and social problems, as envisioned and described by the reports of the other working groups of the MEST task force.

Similarly, the United States could expect greater contributions from its European and East Asian allies if it is willing to provide the unique American capabilities required to address the Middle East's problems.

Thus, the immediate, dire security problems of the Middle East and the unique ability of the United States to address those problems create the potential for

cooperation that could make possible a longer-term solution to the region's deeper ills, the source of many of its endemic security problems.

In addition, while persistent low oil prices could exacerbate instability in the region, they have also diminished the ability of regional actors to buy off domestic discontent, and have made them want financial assistance from the developed world.

This desire creates more leverage that could be used to convince the states of the region to embrace the long-term reforms needed to escape their immediate security problems, let alone prosper over the long term.

### Shifting Priorities

In the aftermath of the terrorist attacks in Sinai, Paris, California, and elsewhere, it may seem counterintuitive, but it is important that counterterrorism efforts be placed in the proper context, as elements of a wider strategy rather than as an end in themselves.

While an immediate terrorist threat is an issue that no leader can possibly reduce to a secondary priority, the wider threat of terrorism is the symptom of a malady, not the malady itself, and needs to be addressed in that context.

Both external powers and regional states have consistently overemphasized counterterrorism (direct efforts to defeat and destroy terrorist groups) as a *goal* of foreign policy. Trying to extirpate terrorism as a general phenomenon, or even to “defeat and degrade” certain uniquely threatening terrorist groups, without addressing the underlying problems that gave rise to them are bound to prove fruitless. As we have seen in Iraq, Afghanistan, and elsewhere, crippling a terrorist group without addressing the underlying causes simply leads to the emergence of new (often worse) terrorist groups. In the contemporary Middle East, the underlying problems—the actual “maladies” giving rise to the symptom of terrorism—are the combination of the civil wars and the deeper political, economic, and social dysfunctions of the states of the region.

Instead, both regional states and interested external actors need to shift their priority from fighting terrorism *per se* to ending the civil wars currently raging in the Middle East. This does *not* mean abandoning counterterrorism. Nor does it mean that

governments should not continue to make every effort to defeat specific terrorist threats directed at them or their people as such threats emerge. Instead it means making a greater effort to end the civil wars, and privileging that mission over the narrow counterterrorism fight, rather than the other way around.

This shift is critical because the civil wars are now the primary drivers of instability and violence in the region:

- The civil wars are the breeding grounds for new terrorists, drawing in foreign recruits, and creating “fields of jihad” where al-Qaeda, the Islamic State of Iraq and al-Sham (ISIS), and like-minded groups thrive.
  - It is the civil wars that are generating millions of refugees threatening to swamp many regional states, and increasingly more distant lands like Europe. No matter how many refugees other nations take in, the civil wars will continue to generate millions more until they are ended.
  - The civil wars have been one of the most important factors radicalizing the populations of the Middle East and enflaming the Sunni-Shia rift.
  - Spillover from Syria has already helped drag Iraq back into civil war; the fragile states of Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, and Algeria are also threatened. The region's civil wars could possibly even have serious destabilizing implications for Turkey and Saudi Arabia.
- Indeed, by some definitions, Egypt and Turkey are already in states of civil war, in part because of spillover from Libya, Syria, and Iraq.
- The civil wars have frightened the Middle East's citizens to such a degree that leaders have been able to justify slowing, stopping, or even reversing reform efforts in the name of security.

Contrary to common wisdom, it is possible for third parties to end a civil war. It is nevertheless difficult, potentially costly (although not necessarily ruinously so), and requires a commitment of political will harnessed to the right strategy. In particular, three factors are critical to ending a civil war:<sup>1</sup>

<sup>1</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, “Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East,” *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, Summer 2015, pp. 29–46.



- A change in the dynamics on the battlefield to the extent that no group believes that it can win a military victory. This can be accomplished by forcing a military stalemate, or by backing one side to the point where it is in a position to win but then reining it in if all of the others agree to a negotiated settlement.
- A power-sharing arrangement that offers all major factions an equitable distribution of political power and economic resources, coupled with adequate protections for all groups including minorities.
- A degree of confidence among all of the warring parties that the terms of the peace agreement will be enforced over time. This can be achieved either by an effective, long-term peacekeeping presence or by strong, neutral domestic institutions, such as a monarch or charismatic leader, or a strong, independent, and professional military.

The first priority for a new, comprehensive approach to the problems of the Middle East must be to derive specific strategies for Iraq, Syria, Libya, and Yemen based on these principles and find countries willing and able to implement them:

- In Iraq and Syria, the United States must lead—and must do considerably more than it already has, although not anywhere near what it committed during the surge in Iraq in 2007-08. In September 2014, the Barack Obama administration outlined feasible strategies consistent with the steps above. Unfortunately, it has failed to meaningfully pursue or properly resource these strategies.
- Because the United States cannot be expected to lead all of these efforts, Europe must take the lead in Libya, albeit with considerable American backing.
- Yemen is the least important strategically by far, and there the Saudis and their Arab allies need to be helped to limit their intervention so as not to become caught in a quagmire. Indeed, military advances by the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) ground force operating in Yemen in the fall of 2015 have made a positive outcome feasible, but only if the GCC states (and their Yemeni allies) are willing to use those gains to start negotiations in which all sides—including themselves—make significant compromises.

### Enduring Conflicts

In addition, a number of more traditional security problems continue to contribute to the worsening

instability of the Middle East. The most prominent is the confrontation between Iran and Saudi Arabia and their various allies and proxies. This rivalry has been exacerbated by the civil wars by creating new threats, opportunities, and arenas for them to compete.

The Iranian nuclear deal and eventual reintegration of Iran into the international economy should help dampen Tehran's sense of insecurity. However, there is a danger that Iran will attempt to pursue a more aggressive foreign policy now that the deal is being implemented. Thus, it will be important for the United States—not the Saudis or other US allies—to convince the Iranians that the nuclear agreement is not *carte blanche* for them to push their anti-status quo agenda. Convincing the Saudis and their allies to desist from their own provocative behavior toward Iran will require reassurance—again, foremost from the United States—that their security is guaranteed and Iran will not be allowed to make additional gains.

Lying behind the Saudi-Iranian tensions, and bound up with them, is the wider Sunni-Shia fracture emerging across the Middle East. This is largely a product of both the Saudi-Iranian rivalry and the civil wars, not the canard of “ancient hatreds.” Mollifying the Sunni-Shia tensions is best accomplished by dampening the Saudi-Iranian confrontation and ending the civil wars.

The Israeli-Palestinian conflict continues to fester, but has been mostly dormant for several years, recent violence notwithstanding. Unfortunately, there seems to be little likelihood of a near-term Israeli-Palestinian peace, and the conflict is no longer of such priority as to justify the kind of commitment of resources needed to realistically improve the odds of an agreement. The best that may be possible for now is to urge both parties not to take steps that could trigger wider violence, while looking for an opportunity to get the peace process moving again at some point in the future. The recent spate of attacks should be seen as a warning that the status quo is unlikely to persist indefinitely. If it wakes up both sides to this reality, that might create just such an opportunity for other players to restart meaningful negotiations.

### Longer-Term Solutions

It is critical that the strategies employed by regional and external actors working together to address the security problems of the region be crafted so they do not impede long-term political, economic, and social reform. Instead, these strategies should include steps to enable and encourage such reforms.

Eventually, a critical goal for the Middle East should be to establish an inclusive security condominium

along the lines of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which later developed into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE), that can address security concerns via cooperative and collective measures, and enable the reform that is necessary to address the deeper structural problems of the region:

- The organization must include those states that the United States and its allies consider enemies, particularly Iran, so that the security condominium can supplement—and perhaps someday supplant—traditional political-military tools.
- Such an organization should begin in the Gulf, with the GCC states, Iran, and Iraq; the United States;

and potentially China, India, Turkey, and Great Britain. Over time, as the concept develops and works out its initial, inevitable teething pains, it should expand to include the rest of the Middle East, and perhaps the Maghreb as well.

- It should begin as a forum simply to discuss security problems, and then hopefully graduate to include confidence-building measures and eventually arms control agreements.
- Like the CSCE/OSCE, the organization should attempt to address all of the cross-regional problems: security (both internal and external), economic progress, and political development.

## INTRODUCTION

*The following report was prepared based on the discussions of the Middle East Strategy Task Force (MEST) Security and Public Order working group.<sup>2</sup> The concepts it presents are broadly consonant with the majority of views presented in the working group's meetings. However, it does not reflect a consensus position and is substantially at variance with the views of some working group participants on some or all issues. Ultimately, it represents the conclusions of the working group convener Kenneth Pollack, as he reflected upon the conversations of over a dozen meetings of the working group during a three-month period in the spring and summer of 2015.*

*The report should be seen as one part of the larger MEST project. It is intended to address the security questions, both short and long term, confronting the Middle East and describe strategies to address them as part of the principal themes of the wider task force, namely to foster and enable a process of generational reform across the region. The political, economic, and social reforms that would form the primary themes of this effort are described in the reports of the other working groups of the MEST project—those on governance, economics, refugees, and religion. The objective of the Security and Public Order working group, and therefore of this report, was to frame an approach to dealing with the security issues of the region that supported this program of broader and longer-term reforms.*

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The central irony of the contemporary Middle East is that to properly address its myriad, interlocking security problems, we have to think beyond traditional security questions. Since the middle of the last century, the countries of the Middle East and the many external states with critical interests there have obsessed over the security of the region. They have spent billions of dollars, fought dozens of wars, and killed hundreds of thousands of people, all in the name of preserving security and

stability. Yet the region is more unstable, more violent, and more dangerous than it has been at any time since the Mongol invasions of the thirteenth century.

This remarkable state of affairs is largely the product of two misguided approaches. Most of the regional states have defined their foremost problems as security challenges to their country from other states or from other, competing internal actors. External states, for their part, have mostly defined their foremost concerns in the Middle East as immediate challenges to the status quo, which have typically aligned them with the concerns of the local regimes. Together, these approaches have focused on short-term fixes to immediate security concerns, primarily interstate threats.

The problem, of course, is that this approach has overlooked and excused the dysfunctions within the Middle Eastern states themselves, particularly the Arab states. The systems that these countries adopted after World War II and the departure of the colonial powers were never terribly dynamic or even resilient. The political, economic, and social systems of both the secular autocracies and the new monarchies all failed to deliver from the very start, although oil revenues (direct and indirect) and superpower largesse allowed them to clunk along for several decades. But in the last twenty to thirty years, these structural flaws have become acute, hollowing out most of these states, leaving them vulnerable to collapse, while provoking an increasingly unhappy citizenry toward escalating unrest. The Arab Spring of 2011 was the most dramatic manifestation of this trajectory, but it was hardly the only one.

One of the principal themes of this report is that addressing the security problems increasingly unhinging the Middle East means thinking beyond traditional security paradigms, particularly beyond short-term problems and the kinds of quick fixes that, layer upon layer, decade after decade, have rendered the problems of the region so intractable. For the most part, traditional security issues in the Middle East—interstate conflict, terrorism, even arms races—have been overvalued. There are still security problems in the Middle East, the aforementioned included, but they are more often the product rather than the cause of the region's true ills, and the security issues

<sup>2</sup> Specifying the nature of the political, economic, and social reforms needed to ensure the long-term stability, prosperity, and functionality of the Middle East lie beyond the purview of this paper and of the MEST Security Working Group. Those topics are treated in great detail in the reports of the other working groups, on governance, economics, religion, and refugees.

that matter are increasingly *intrastate* conflicts, not *interstate* conflicts. Consequently, long-term security in the Middle East is impossible without fundamental reform of the political, economic, and social sectors of the vast majority of the states of the region. And because the immediate problems are often (in some cases, entirely) symptoms of the deeper issues, it is those longer-term problems that demand the greatest effort and attention.

Reconceptualizing the security of the Middle East in these terms also has profound warnings for those seeking to pull the region out of its seeming descent into chaos. It is unlikely that the states of the region will be able to solve these problems on their own. The historical record suggests that, left to their own devices, regional leaders will make decisions based on short-term considerations and fear of the unknown. They tend to overemphasize the external threats or the external nature of their internal threats; prioritize immediate problems; give preference to repression over reform; and use short-term threats to ignore the longer-term, more dangerous failings.

External assistance will almost certainly be needed to coax them into taking the paths that they perceive as riskier, but in actuality are the only ones that can lead to enduring tranquility, stability, and prosperity for their countries. Some regional governments will embrace such help—and the reforms it is meant to enable—more readily than others, but even the most willing are unlikely to be able to make it on their own.

Yet there are also real limits to what even powerful, well-meaning external powers can do. Ultimately, the most important changes that the region requires for long-term stability and security, let alone prosperity, must happen from within. The international community cannot do it for them. What the international community can do, however, is create incentives for the regional states to do it themselves, and remove disincentives that keep them from embracing the necessary reforms—or that allow rulers to justify inaction.

Even this synergy will be difficult to achieve because none of the external powers are interested in taking on major new challenges in the Middle East. Still, all is not lost. Some have been willing to commit some resources, political capital, and political will. In the wake of the tragic terrorist attacks in Paris in November 2015, for instance, France ratcheted up its military operations against ISIS in Syria. While French air strikes are unlikely to have a meaningful impact on the problem, they represent the willingness of at least one major European nation to commit time, energy,

and power to solving the problems of the Middle East. The growing refugee burden is stoking similar calls for greater action elsewhere.

Thus the challenge is determining how to harness the resources that are available from the external powers to help the internal actors escape the current descent. Where are the problems most severe? Where can external aid act as a “force multiplier” to take advantage of what regional actors might be willing and able to tackle on their own? Where are they needed to supplement what the region cannot provide but still desperately needs?

It has long been a cliché of government to argue that a country must “use all of the tools in its tool kit,” and in this case, even the concept is misleading. The problem with the security challenges in the Middle East today is that the tools in the traditional security tool kit are often inadequate or counterproductive to dealing with its structural flaws. It is the most basic political, economic, and social systems of the Muslim Middle East that need to be reconditioned for the modern world, and they cannot be addressed by deterrence or targeted killings or air campaigns.<sup>3</sup> For most of the Middle East’s postcolonial history, the policies of Middle Eastern states and the Middle East policies of external states were about subjugating politics, economics, and society to the needs of security. Paradoxically, moving forward, the only way to regain eventual security in the region will be largely to subjugate security policies to meet the needs of political, economic, and social change.

Of course, since it is the Middle East, the paradoxes are endless. They start with the reality that getting at the longer-term problems, which are generating the immediate calamities, requires solving or at least quelling a number of those extant troubles, starting with the civil wars raging across the region. These have become engines of instability that make it impossible for either the states of the Middle East or well-meaning external actors to do much of anything to address the deeper fault lines. The spillover from the civil wars in particular has become so threatening that it cannot be relegated to the back burner, not even to deal with the structural dysfunctions of the states of the region. And so we must deal with the immediate problems—particularly the civil wars—to create the space to address the deeper problems that in turn produce those immediate problems.

3 The term “Muslim Middle East” here refers to the Arab states (whose populations are overwhelmingly Muslim despite the presence of many non-Muslim minorities), Iran, and to a lesser extent Turkey.

# I. THE DANGER AND OPPORTUNITY OF LOW OIL PRICES

Because of the region's long-standing dependence on oil exports as the lifeblood of its economy and the lubricant of its political system, developments in the international oil market form a critical context in which a new comprehensive approach toward the Middle East must function. As of this writing, oil prices remain far lower than previously projected, and far less than what many Middle Eastern states require to balance their budgets. That is true in a direct sense for Libya, Algeria, and the oil giants of the Gulf region. However, it is also true to an only slightly lesser extent for many other Arab states. Egypt, Jordan, Morocco, Bahrain, Oman, Lebanon, the Palestinians, and other Middle Eastern countries rely on oil indirectly, in the form of aid, trade, and remittances from the oil-producing states.

Low oil prices create both new dangers and new opportunities for advancing the security strategy presented in this report. That is certainly true right now, in the near term, but potentially to an even greater extent if low oil prices become the norm. Although the oil market is famously difficult to predict, there are a variety of structural factors that suggest low oil prices could persist for years or perhaps even become permanent.

The danger of low oil prices is greater instability. As oil revenues fall, so too will the ability of Middle Eastern states to pay the millions of workers in their vast federal bureaucracies. Government contracts will dry up for those in the private sector, many of whom rely on government largesse just as much as those with official positions. As bad as unemployment is today across the Muslim Middle East, persistent low oil prices could make the situation vastly worse. The Arab states in particular remain largely or wholly rentier-patronage networks, dependent on government spending—including governmental corruption—to function.

Without the oil revenues, the entire system could fail. Iraq today represents an excellent, albeit still

mild, example of this problem: The falling price of oil coupled with the costs of the war against ISIS have virtually bankrupted the Iraqi government (and the Kurdistan Regional Government), provoking massive unrest across the country. Others have noted how climatically induced poor harvests contributed to the 2011 uprising in Syria that led eventually to its civil war.<sup>4</sup> What would happen in Egypt if the \$12 billion or more it is receiving annually from the Gulf states were to vanish? Even Saudi Arabia—whose remarkable

tranquility during the Arab Spring was more a function of late King Abdullah's reforms than Riyadh's profligate spending—may not be immune to these problems, relying as it does on government outlays to subsidize key power bases from the royal family to the clergy to the tribal sheikhs of the Najd to the great merchant families of the Hijaz.<sup>5</sup>

For the rest of the world, the risk is that persistent low oil prices could spur new crises and state collapses à la 2011, long before other countries have developed adequate alternative sources of energy to enable the international

economy to withstand the loss of key developing-world oil producers. As quickly as shale production is expanding in North America, it remains inadequate to compensate for the loss of Saudi production. It also may not be able to compensate for the loss of Iraq or Venezuela, both of which are also threatened by worsening instability, let alone the loss of several major oil producers. The danger is that the developed world may not shed its dependence on fragile oil producers faster than falling oil prices cause instability and crises

Persistent low oil prices could spur new crises and state collapses à la 2011, long before other countries have developed adequate alternative sources of energy.

4 Colin P. Kelley, Shahrzad Mohtadi, Mark A. Cane, Richard Seager, and Yochanan Kushnir, "Climate Change in the Fertile Crescent and Implications of the Recent Syrian Drought," *Proceedings of the National Academy of Sciences of the United States of America*, vol. 112, no. 11, 2015, pp. 3241–3246.

5 Bruce O. Riedel, "Saudi Arabia: The Elephant in the Living Room," in Kenneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, et al. (eds.), *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2011), pp. 159–167.



in those fragile oil-producing states. The end result could be more failed states, more civil wars, more terrorism, more major security problems, and even interstate wars in the region long before sufficient alternative energy sources are available to allow the developed world to turn its back on an imploding Middle East.

The opportunity lies in the very fact that the states of the region are already feeling the pinch of falling oil prices and some of the more farsighted even recognize the potential for protracted soft energy markets to undermine the foundations of their political, economic, and social orders. If the oil bounty suddenly stops flowing from the Gulf to the have-nots of the Arab world, recalcitrant leaders may suddenly need Western financial assistance again. That may make them more amenable to undertaking meaningful reforms as long as they get new economic support packages from the developed world, both to pay for the cost of reform and to placate restive populations until the impact of such reforms kicks in to do so instead.

Some of the great oil producers may eventually face the same pressures. Iraq, Iran, and Saudi Arabia all have populations too large to be placated by government largesse at current price levels. Saudi Arabia has already announced that it will pursue a series of significant economic reforms—including diminishing or removing energy subsidies—to cope with the decline in oil revenues. Internal upheavals in Iran, Iraq, and Libya

over the years have demonstrated that oil production does not inoculate a country against revolution and civil war (or the severe cuts in oil production caused by those convulsions).<sup>6</sup> The Iraqi government has also been forced to announce a wide-ranging series of political and economic reforms in response to widespread public unhappiness with the state of Iraq's public services and economic performance. Kuwait, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) may remain immune because of their tiny populations and massive incomes, but if there is chaos in Iraq, Iran, and/or Saudi Arabia, even they would find it exceptionally difficult to avoid being burned by the fires next door.

Thus, low oil prices are already making it harder for the states of the region to avoid the hard decisions on reform that they should have made long ago. Low oil prices might actually have a silver lining in encouraging the reform that is critical to the long-term stability and prosperity of these states.

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6 Iranian oil production dropped by 80 percent after the Iranian revolution and has only ever recovered to about 50 percent of its pre-revolution level. Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution* (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 230; *1989 CIA World Factbook*, United States Central Intelligence Agency, 1989; Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 224. Iraqi oil production fell by 64 percent between 2003 and 2006, while Libyan oil production has fallen by 92 percent since 2011. Oil production statistics from the US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/>.

## II. REFOCUSING THE COUNTERTERRORISM MISSION

Any reconsideration of the security problems of the Middle East must start by addressing terrorism. It is understandable that the terrorist threats endemic to the Middle East would be a principal concern of people and governments within the region and without. Nevertheless, although it seems counterintuitive in the wake of the latest terrorist attacks in California, Paris, and Sinai, it is crucial to recognize that we have allowed the legitimate demands of counterterrorism to overwhelm the broader security mission in the Middle East, to the detriment of other tasks of equal or greater importance. For too many states from the region and beyond it, counterterrorism has become an obsession—an end in itself rather than a means to an end, or more properly an adjunct to a wider set of policies.

Terrorism is a type of violent political protest. The best definition of terrorism is the conscious killing of civilians to advance a political agenda. It is a well-recognized form of insurgency, which the US Army's counterinsurgency manual defines as an "organized movement aimed at the overthrow of a constituted government through the use of subversion and armed conflict."<sup>7</sup> In that sense, like all insurgents, terrorists are revolutionaries—people seeking to overturn the current political order—who are unable to instigate a popular revolution and so have turned to violence instead, typically under the theory that it will help create the conditions for a general revolution or else morph into a wider insurgency that will topple the government.<sup>8</sup>

7 "Counterinsurgency," FM 3-24, United States Army, Headquarters, Department of the Army, December 2006, p. 1, <http://usacac.army.mil/cac2/Repository/Materials/COIN-FM3-24.pdf>.

8 See for instance Daniel L. Byman, "Al-Qaeda as an Adversary: Do We Understand Our Enemy?" *World Politics*, vol. 56, no. 1, October 2003; Bruce Hoffman, "From the War on Terror to Global Counterinsurgency," *Current History*, December 2006; Brian Jenkins, "The New Age of Terrorism," *The McGraw Hill Homeland Security Handbook* (New York, NY: McGraw

As best as the phenomena are understood, revolution, insurgency, and terrorism are all rooted in grievances derived from unmet expectations related to an individual's or a community's political, economic, and/or social circumstances. Nevertheless, such grievances and unmet expectations are insufficient by themselves to produce revolution, insurgency, and terrorism. How other factors work on endemic grievances to drive people to revolution, insurgency, and terrorism

is a complex phenomenon only crudely understood. In the contemporary Middle East, it was largely the case that economic and social failings focused popular unhappiness on incompetent and corrupt governance. Some of the revolts, insurgencies, and terrorist movements then produced failed states that exploded into civil wars, which in turn exacerbated the terrorist threat and further used the original grievances as self-justification and a recruiting tool.

Although the grievances and unmet expectations are only part of what appears to produce revolution, insurgency, and

For too many states . . . counterterrorism has become an obsession—an end in itself rather than a means to an end, or more properly an adjunct to a wider set of policies.

Hill, 2006); Brian M. Jenkins, *Countering al-Qaeda*, RAND Corporation, 2002, [https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph\\_reports/2005/MR1620.pdf](https://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monograph_reports/2005/MR1620.pdf); David Kilcullen, "Countering Global Insurgency, A Strategy for the War on Terrorism," Canberra & Washington, DC, September–November 2004, <http://smallwarsjournal.com/documents/kilcullen.pdf>; Thomas R. Mockaitis, "Winning Hearts and Minds in the 'War on Terrorism,'" in Thomas R. Mockaitis and Paul B. Rich (eds.), *Grand Strategy in the War against Terrorism* (London: Frank Cass, 2003); Angel Rabasa, Peter Chalk, Kim Cragin, Sara A. Daly, Heather S. Gregg, Theodore W. Karasik, Kevin A. O'Brien, and William Rosenau, *Beyond al-Qaeda, Part 1, The Global Jihadist Movement*, RAND Project Air Force, RAND Corporation, 2006; James Risen, "Evolving Nature of al-Qaeda Is Misunderstood, Critic Says," *New York Times*, November 8, 2004, p. A.18; William Rosenau, *Subversion and Insurgency*, Prepared for the Office of the Secretary of Defense, RAND Corporation, 2007; John P. Sullivan and Robert J. Bunker, "Multilateral Counterinsurgency Networks," in *Low Intensity Conflict and Law Enforcement*, vol. 11, no. 2/3, Winter 2002, pp. 353–368; Michael Vlahos, *Terror's Mask: Insurgency within Islam*, Johns Hopkins University, Applied Physics Laboratory, May 2002.

terrorism, experts have identified them as critical to the instigation of such unrest. Perhaps of greater importance, addressing these grievances and unmet expectations is a necessary part of heading off a revolution or defeating an insurgency. Historically, attempting to fight terrorism and insurgencies without addressing the underlying grievances has routinely failed.<sup>9</sup>

9 For a sample of the voluminous literature on the sources of violent political protest and its relationship to societal grievances, both generally and as it pertains specifically to the Middle East, see for instance Sheri Berman, "Islamism, Revolution, and Civil Society," *Perspectives on Politics*, vol. 1, no. 2, June 2003; Mia Bloom, *Dying to Kill: The Allure of Suicide Terror* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2005); Crane Brinton, *The Anatomy of Revolution* (New York: Vintage Books, 1965), esp. p. 251; Robert P. Cincotta, Robert Engelman, and Daniele Anastasion, *The Security Demographic: Population and Civil Conflict after the Cold War*, Population Action International, 2003; Paul Collier and Anke Hoefler, "Greed and Grievance in Civil War," World Bank, October 21, 2001; Kim Cragin and Peter Chalk, *Terrorism and Development: Using Social and Economic Development to Inhibit a Resurgence of Terrorism*, RAND Corporation, 2003, pp. 5-14; Martha Crenshaw, "'Suicide Terrorism' in Comparative Perspective," *Countering Suicide Terrorism: An International Conference*, The International Policy Institute for Counter-Terrorism at the Interdisciplinary Center, 2001; Audrey Kurth Cronin, "Behind the Curve: Globalization and International Terrorism," *International Security*, vol. 27, no. 3, Winter 2002-03; Joyce M. Davis, *Martyrs: Innocence, Vengeance, and Despair in the Middle East* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2004); John Esposito, "Terrorism and the Rise of Political Islam," in Louise Richardson, ed., *The Roots of Terrorism* (New York: Routledge, 2006), pp. 146-47; James J. F. Forest, ed., *The Making of a Terrorist: Recruitment, Training, and Root Causes, vol. 2: Root Causes* (Westport: Praeger Security International, 2006); Lawrence Z. Freedman and Yonah Alexander (eds.), *Perspectives on Terrorism* (Wilmington: Scholarly Resources Inc., 1983); Gary Fuller, "The Demographic Backdrop to Ethnic Conflict: A Geographic Overview," in *The Challenge of Ethnic Conflict to National and International Order in the 1990s: Geographic Perspectives* (Washington: Central Intelligence Agency, 1995), pp. 151-154; Graham E. Fuller, *The Future of Political Islam* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2003), pp. 15-16; Fawaz A. Gerges, *Journey of the Jihadist: Inside Muslim Militancy* (Orlando: Harcourt, Inc., 2006); Scott Gerwehr and Sara Daly, "Al-Qaeda: Terrorist Selection and Recruitment" in David G. Kamien, ed., *The McGraw-Hill Homeland Security Handbook* (The McGraw-Hill Companies Inc., 2006), pp. 84-86; Jack A. Goldstone, *Revolutions and Rebellions in the Early Modern World* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991); Ted Robert Gurr, "Economic Factors," in Louise Richardson, ed., *The Roots of Terrorism*, (New York: Routledge, 2006); Mohammed M. Hafez, *Why Muslims Rebel: Repression and Resistance in the Islamic World* (Boulder: Lynne Rienner, 2003); Bruce Hoffman, *Inside Terrorism* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1998); Brian M. Jenkins, "Building an Army of Believers: Jihadist Radicalization and Recruitment," testimony presented before the House Homeland Security Committee, Subcommittee on Intelligence, Information Sharing, and Terrorism Risk Assessment, April 5, 2007; Gwenn Okruhlik, "Rentier Wealth, Unruly Law, and the Rise of Opposition: The Political Economy of Oil States," *Comparative Politics*, vol. 31, no. 3, April 1999, pp. 295-315; Jerrold M. Post, Ehud Sprinzak, and Laurita M. Denny, "The Terrorists in Their Own Words: Interviews with 35 Incarcerated Middle Eastern Terrorists," *Terrorism and Political Violence*, vol. 15, no. 1, Spring 2003; Walter Reich, ed., *Origins of Terrorism: Psychologies, Ideologies, Theologies, States of*

Consequently, counterterrorism—direct efforts to kill, capture, and otherwise quell terrorism—cannot be a permanent solution to the problem by itself, even if it may be absolutely necessary to defeat a concrete terrorist threat. Counterterrorism does not entail any means of addressing the underlying grievances which, if sufficiently compelling and pervasive, will generate new terrorist groups and other forms of violent political protest if they are not addressed. Simply put, you cannot defeat terrorism merely by killing terrorists. Terrorism can be subdued for some period of time, but it will recur if counterterrorism is the only tool employed.

Without question, the states of the Middle East have enjoyed some important successes in the counterterrorism field in recent years. Saudi Arabia has repeatedly crushed indigenous terrorist groups. Of course, it is the word "repeatedly" that belies the statement. Any problem that must be solved repeatedly is not being solved at all. It is merely being suppressed for a time.

Likewise, regular campaigns to suppress or crush a terrorist movement entail heavy costs, economic and political. Riyadh devotes a considerable portion of its budget to internal security. It is a heavy burden on Saudi domestic politics and finances. The fear of terrorism and the need to regularly suppress it also affects Saudi foreign policy. Throughout the 1980s and 90s, the Saudi regime exported its most extreme Salafi militants, diminishing the number of potential terrorists at home by turning them loose on other countries. In a similar vein, one of the most important reasons Riyadh has—repeatedly—intervened in Yemen is its fear that militant actors in Yemen (from Nasserists in the 1960s to Houthi Shia today) would inspire like-minded Saudis to go after their own regime in a similar fashion.

*Mind* (Washington: The Woodrow Wilson Center Press, 1998); Paul Rivlin and Shmuel Even, *Political Stability in Arab States: Economic Causes and Consequences*, Memorandum 74 (Tel Aviv: The Jaffee Center for Strategic Studies, 2004), p. 28; Theda Skocpol, *States and Social Revolutions: A Comparative Analysis of France, Russia, and China* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979); Theda Skocpol, *Social Revolutions in the Modern World* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1994); Robert S. Snyder, "Hating America: Bin Laden as a Civilizational Revolutionary," *The Review of Politics*, vol. 65, no. 4, Autumn 2003, p. 337; Jessica Stern, *Terror in the Name of God: Why Religious Militants Kill* (New York: HarperCollins Publishers, 2003); Mark Tessler and Michael D. H. Robbins, "What Leads Some Ordinary Arab Men and Women to Approve of Terrorist Attacks against the United States?" *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, vol. 51, no. 2, April 2007; Caroline Ziemke, "Perceived Oppression and Relative Deprivation: Social Factors Contributing to Terrorism," in Joseph McMillan, ed., *In the Same Light as Slavery: Building a Global Antiterrorist Consensus* (Washington: National Defense University Press, 2006), pp. 110-111.



Moreover, real as their terrorist threats are, it is also the case that nearly all of the states of the region have used terrorism as an excuse to avoid reform and stamp out political opposition. Across the Middle East, groups that regional governments dislike are branded as terrorists, and the violence and repression the regimes then employ against them are justified by use of the term. All of which makes the problem only worse over the long term.<sup>10</sup> The repression, violence, and injustice feed popular grievances, convincing others that the government has no interest in solving the underlying problems, which can in turn generate still more support for violent opposition in a vicious cycle. Even when a government employs so much force that it is able to snuff out groups employing terrorism (or insurgency) altogether, if the underlying grievances are left to fester, they will eventually produce new forms of instability. This is ultimately the story of the 2011 Arab Spring, which was preceded by decades of reliance on repression rather than reform (seemingly successfully to many observers) only to have it all explode in uncontrollable and unpredictable ways.<sup>11</sup>

A great many extreme and potentially counter-productive gambits have been justified in the name of “terrorism,” and by a wide range of states, including liberal Western democracies. Without suggesting any degree of moral equivalency, it is still worth noting how different states have taken extreme actions *by their own standards*, all in the name of

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fighting terrorism. Most of the Arab states and Iran routinely imprison, torture, and kill dissidents and oppositionists in the name of fighting terrorism. Hafiz al-Assad slaughtered tens of thousands at Hama in 1982 claiming that he was fighting terrorism. Israel has launched a dozen conventional military campaigns into Lebanon and Gaza over the years in the name of fighting terrorism.

And the states of the region are not alone in doing so. Russia razed the Chechen capital of Grozny twice in the name of fighting terrorism. The United States invaded Afghanistan and engaged in “enhanced interrogation techniques” that many consider torture in the name of fighting terrorism. Turkey, Iran, and Iraq

have all waged brutal wars against their Kurdish populations in the name of fighting terrorism. This is not to say that some, perhaps even many, of these measures were not justified. It is not to suggest that the US invasion of Afghanistan in 2001 was somehow equivalent to Assad the elder’s razing of Hama in 1982—it was not. It is simply to illustrate how both liberal democracies and autocracies of all kinds can take actions they otherwise would consider extreme when an adversary is branded a terrorist.

The predominance of the counterterrorism mission has become particularly problematic for the United States since September 11, 2001. There are a significant number of people, both foreign and domestic, determined to conduct terrorist attacks against the United States and its

citizens. The US government has a legitimate need to prevent such attacks and bring those who perpetrate them to justice. Nevertheless, it is also true that since 2001, American policy toward many countries of the region has been subsumed by counterterrorism policy. Washington has consistently overlooked human and civil rights abuses, reliance on violence and repression, and avoidance of genuine reform by the regional governments because it desires the assistance of those same governments in identifying and eliminating terrorists.

As Daniel Byman, Director of Research and a Senior Fellow in the Center for Middle East Studies at Brookings, remarked in a recent *Foreign Affairs* article,

<sup>10</sup> As general evidence of this connection, numerous studies have found a strong correlation between government restrictions on religious practice and internal unrest. See, “The Rising Tide of Restrictions on Religion,” Pew Forum on Religion and Public Life, Pew Research Center, September 2012, <http://www.pewforum.org/files/2012/09/RisingTideofRestrictions-fullreport.pdf>, pp. 46–48; Peter Henne, Sarabrynn Hudgins, and Timothy Samuel Shah, *Religious Freedom and Violent Religious Extremism: A Sourcebook of Modern Cases and Analysis*, Berkley Center for Religion, Peace and World Affairs, Georgetown University, December 2012; Nilay Saiya and Anthony Scime, “Explaining Religious Terrorism: A Data-Mined Analysis,” *Journal of Conflict Management and Peace Science*, December 2014.

<sup>11</sup> On the roots and causes of the Arab Spring, see Kenneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, et al., *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2011).

“When the Obama administration looks at the Middle East, it does so through the lens of counterterrorism. A systematic emphasis on the subject has underscored not just the administration’s relentless pursuit of al Qaeda and its new focus on the self-proclaimed Islamic State (or ISIS) but also a wider swath of its foreign policy. . . . Counterterrorism is not the only U.S. priority in the Middle East, but it ranks as the most important, explaining most interventions and non-interventions.” Byman goes on to note that “despite some notable successes, an overwhelming focus on counterterrorism has led the United States to miss the broader regional trends undermining U.S. interests in the Middle East. . . . By fixating on counterterrorism, the United States overlooks opportunities to prevent or mitigate civil wars and regional conflicts—steps that would address the problem at its core. And it antagonizes allies and distorts the public perception of U.S. strengths and vulnerabilities.”<sup>12</sup>

A more specific example can be found in recent US policy toward Yemen. Before 2014, US policy toward Yemen under both George W. Bush and Barack Obama was heavily skewed to counterterrorism priorities like drone strikes and training Yemeni counterterrorism units to hunt down al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula (AQAP). While it would be inaccurate to say that Washington’s policy *caused* the collapse of the Yemeni state and its descent into civil war, American policy certainly did nothing to prevent that calamity (despite warnings) and did contribute to it by giving the Mansour Hadi government a false sense of its own strength, which in turn helped marginalize those voices arguing for compromise with former President Ali Abdullah Saleh and the Houthis.<sup>13</sup> There is no question that AQAP is a dangerous terrorist group actively seeking to attack the United States; it should also be beyond question that it was a mistake to have made them the focal point of Washington’s Yemen policy under two administrations.

Although expert analysis is increasingly finding that American drone strikes are not driving large numbers of people to support or join terrorist groups as was once widely feared, it is nonetheless true that America’s seeming obsession with counterterrorism to

the neglect of other issues in the Middle East does help sustain pervasive animosity toward the United States.<sup>14</sup> For many Middle Easterners, the United States appears to care about nothing but killing terrorists, and will trample or ignore anything unrelated. Moreover, there is widespread resentment of American intrusions into the internal affairs of Middle Eastern countries to kill terrorists, rather than dealing with the underlying political, economic, and social issues that the locals (rightly) see as lying at the root of the terrorism problem. As Christopher Swift, an Adjunct Professor of National Security Studies at Georgetown University, has written of his conversations with Yemenis about US drone strikes, “Despite deeper engagement and closer coordination, Americans and Yemenis are fighting the same war from different premises. The United States emphasizes radical ideology. Yemen emphasizes endemic poverty. Washington wants immediate results. Sana’a needs long-term development. Americans fear foreign attacks on their national security. Yemenis resent foreign affronts to their national pride. Washington’s drone dramas are just one example of this self-defeating disconnect.”<sup>15</sup>

Finally, there is a larger problem in conceiving or even portraying many key Middle Eastern strategies of the United States as being targeted at “terrorism,” and that is failing to recognize that terrorism is only a symptom of the problem, not the problem itself. Many of the United States’ worst mistakes in Iraq between 2003 and 2006 were driven by Washington’s misunderstanding of the dynamics there. The United States came a hair’s breadth from losing everything in Iraq because for too long it insisted that Iraq was a counterterrorism problem rather than an insurgency, let alone a full-blown civil war. The surge ultimately saved the situation because it was premised on an honest appraisal of the conditions and employed the right strategy, tactics, and resources to address the Iraqi civil war. And, of course, only by ending the civil war (unfortunately only temporarily) did the United States finally address the problem of terrorism and insurgency.

12 Daniel Byman, “Beyond Counterterrorism,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 6, November/December 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/2015-10-20/beyond-counterterrorism>.

13 For one insightful analysis that warned that US policy needed to shift “to approach Yemen from a development, rather than merely security perspective,” see Ibrahim Sharqieh, “Yemen: The Search for Stability and Development,” in Kenneth M. Pollack, Daniel L. Byman, et al., *The Arab Awakening: America and the Transformation of the Middle East* (Washington: The Brookings Institution, 2011), pp. 221–229.

14 On the impact of drone strikes, see for instance Peter Bergen and Katherine Tiedemann, “Washington’s Phantom War: The Effects of the US Drone Program in Pakistan,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 90, no. 4, July/August 2011; C. Christine Fair, “Drones over Pakistan—Menace or Best Viable Option?” *Huffington Post*, May 5, 2011, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-christine-fair/drones-over-pakistan---m\\_b\\_666721.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/c-christine-fair/drones-over-pakistan---m_b_666721.html); C. Christine Fair, “Drone Wars,” *Foreign Policy*, May 28, 2010, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/05/28/drone-wars-2/>; Christopher Swift, “The Drone Blowback Fallacy: Strikes in Yemen Aren’t Pushing People to al-Qaeda,” *Foreign Affairs*, July 1, 2015, <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2012-07-01/drone-blowback-fallacy>.

15 Swift, “The Drone Blowback Fallacy,” *op. cit.*

The approach toward ISIS is another example of this overemphasis on terrorism. Leading experts question whether it can be properly understood as a terrorist group at all.<sup>16</sup> It employs terrorism, but terrorism is neither its principal weapon nor the greatest threat it poses. It has inspired about a dozen terrorist attacks in a number of places, including the United States, and has conducted about a dozen others, mostly in Libya, Tunisia, Egypt, and Yemen. Security services have prevented at least a dozen more.<sup>17</sup> If ISIS were judged solely by its role in regional or international terrorism, it would be a relatively small problem. ISIS *is* a very big problem for the Middle East, however, just not as a terrorist group. It is better understood as a proto-state fired by an abhorrent ideology, seeking to control as much territory as it possibly can, willing to employ the most gruesome methods, determined to slaughter potentially millions of people it deems impure, and posing a significant conventional military threat to many of the Arab states. Treating it as a terrorist group would not begin to address the actual threat it poses. Calling it a terrorist group may be useful to galvanize support to fight it—and the civil wars that gave rise to it and now enable it to thrive—but treating it as merely a terrorist group, even a formidable one, is already creating severe strategic problems as in pre-surge Iraq.

In particular, Washington's insistence that its goal is only to "degrade and destroy" ISIS—as if that is something that can be accomplished without addressing the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars that spawned it—is quickly proving self-defeating. It assumes that ISIS is an independent actor able to cause vast problems and therefore that it *can be* independently targeted, *must be* to address the problems it is creating, and *should be* to avoid getting caught up in the civil wars themselves. Unfortunately, this is entirely misguided. Although there may be an ISIS that exists beyond the civil wars, it is hard to find, and ultimately insignificant.

The aspects of ISIS that matter, that are threatening, are those that have grown in the civil wars and are using the civil wars to grow bigger and stronger. ISIS, and to a great extent al-Qaeda before it, has only been able to find purchase in the failed and failing states, particularly those in civil war: Iraq, Syria, Libya, Yemen, Egypt, Mali, Somalia, etc. As Colonel Joel Rayburn has put it, "It is not the case that Iraq and Syria are unstable

because Daesh is there; Daesh is there because Iraq and Syria are unstable."<sup>18</sup>

In a similar vein, Jessica Stern, Research Professor at Boston University's Pardee School of Global Studies, has observed that the American preoccupation with a consistent approach to ISIS has left it with a wholly inconsistent policy toward everything else going on in the region: Washington supports the Shia-dominated government in Iraq, the Sunni-dominated opposition in Syria, the Sunni-dominated government in Yemen, both the Sunni-dominated government and the Shia opposition in Bahrain, and a would-be secular autocrat in Libya. Unsurprisingly, the regional states are less willing to follow the United States' lead and are more determined to act unilaterally, and often in ways that exacerbate rather than ameliorate regional problems. Witness the Saudi intervention in Yemen. Likewise, as of this writing, the American programs to train Syrian oppositionists and Iraqi Sunni tribesmen are both floundering because Washington insists that the groups be employed only to fight ISIS. Particularly in Syria, that prerequisite has convinced virtually any Syrian willing to fight that the United States is either oblivious to the realities of their civil war or cynically uninterested in stabilizing the country.<sup>19</sup>

## Counterterrorism in Context

None of this should be misconstrued as a claim that counterterrorism can be discarded altogether: neither by Middle Eastern governments, nor by external powers with interests and influence in the Middle East. We all may have overemphasized terrorism as a freestanding threat, as well as direct counterterrorism actions as a means of combatting terrorism, but that does not mean that there is no terrorism problem or that there is no need for counterterrorism programs and strategies. Quite the contrary.

At the very least, addressing the underlying problems of the region that give rise to terrorism—and all of the other frightening symptoms—will take a long time even if efforts were to begin immediately. And there seems to be little likelihood that they will begin immediately. Until then, it will be important to continue to eradicate terrorist movements, kill and capture terrorists, deter and defeat terrorist attacks, and diminish the flow of recruits to terrorist groups. Until the malady can be

16 See for instance, Audrey Kurth Cronin, "ISIS Is Not a Terrorist Group," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 94, no. 2, March/April 2015.

17 Statistics from Karen Yourish, Derek Watkins, and Tom Kratikanon, "Where ISIS Has Directed and Inspired Attacks around the World," *New York Times*, accessed July 13, 2015, [http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html?\\_r=0](http://www.nytimes.com/interactive/2015/06/17/world/middleeast/map-isis-attacks-around-the-world.html?_r=0).

18 Colonel Joel Rayburn, statement to the author, October 5, 2015, Baghdad, Iraq. Quoted with permission of the speaker. Daesh is another name for ISIS.

19 Tim Arango and Anne Barnard, "Using Violence and Persuasion, ISIS Makes Political Gains," *New York Times*, June 3, 2015; Tim Arango and Eric Schmitt, "Turkey Uneasy as US Support of Syrian Kurds Grows," *New York Times*, June 29, 2015.

cured, it is important to suppress the symptoms. But terrorism cannot continue to be the polestar of Middle East security strategy. As MEST Executive Director Stephen Grand has put it, we have been looking at the counterterrorism problem through the wrong end of the telescope. We need to focus more on creating conditions that enable viable, peaceful alternatives to ISIS, al-Qaeda, and the other terrorist groups to emerge, rather than engage in an endless game of whack-a-mole just trying to kill terrorists, necessary though that may be in many circumstances.

### From Principle to Practice

What would this mean in practice? It is often said that the first step in recovering from any addiction is acknowledging the problem. We must all begin by acknowledging an excessive preference for—and deference to—counterterrorism. The overemphasis on counterterrorism, and on terrorist threats in general, has warped a number of other considerations and has aggravated the deeper problems of the region. This, in turn, has exacerbated the many threats engulfing and emanating from the Middle East, including, paradoxically, terrorism itself.

Even while both regional states and external actors continue to combat terrorist threats directly, the needs of counterterrorism cannot trump every other consideration for resources and strategy. The excessive focus on terrorism of the past fourteen years has not eliminated the problem of terrorism and has contributed to the wider destabilization of the Middle East, if only by monopolizing scarce resources. Other issues, particularly the need to end the civil wars and prevent the outbreak of new ones (see below), must take precedence instead. Similarly, the states of the region need to recognize that flouting the rule of law in the name of terrorism will erode their security and legitimacy, and ultimately threaten their grip on power, not enhance it. Of course that is all easier said than done.

To start, it is not as if the external powers have struck the right balance between legitimate counterterrorism requirements and the danger of making counterterrorism the alpha and omega of their approach to the Middle East, or of more broadly balancing short-term security considerations, including terrorism, with longer-term needs, like reform. Thus, part of what needs to happen

is for the external actors to have a more honest internal conversation about what is truly necessary to address the terrorism threat and what is excessive. That should include a greater willingness on the part of external actors to raise the priority of other issues either to match, or at times even exceed, that of counterterrorism. Even symbolic gestures—like easing visa requirements—could send important signals. What would ultimately be most useful, however, would be for the United States and other key external actors to demonstrate that other causes have at least an equal priority as terrorism by finally putting the resources, time, and energy into them that have been monopolized by counterterrorism in the past.

It will be even harder for the regional governments, all of whom believe that they are under constant terrorist attack, with some justification even if much of it has been self-generated. It is because the states

of the region are so loath to de-emphasize the immediate requirements of counterterrorism for anything—even that which could undermine terrorism over the longer term—that the external states are almost certainly going to have to play an active role in moving the governments of the Middle East toward reform. Doing so will require a combination of positive and negative incentives to reward and enable taking risks for reform, while making clear that the international community will no longer countenance repression in the name of counterterrorism, because doing so simply breeds worse terrorist threats against

both the nations of the Middle East and their external partners and allies.

In theory, external states might condition all forms of aid and trade to regional countries on their adherence to human and civil rights, the rule of law, and universal standards of proper conduct. In practice, that is exceptionally difficult to do. External actors often have a range of other, more pressing interests and are unwilling to risk those concerns. Likewise, the regional states often have access to other sources of assistance, investment, and commerce. Although the West disapproved of the Bahraini and Egyptian crackdowns that followed the Arab Spring uprisings, the GCC states stepped in with billions of dollars that would have rendered Western actions practically meaningless if the West had actually tried to help those governments move in a different direction.

The excessive focus on terrorism of the past fourteen years has not eliminated the problem of terrorism and has contributed to the wider destabilization of the Middle East.



But that does not mean there is nothing to be done. Low oil prices may make it difficult to sustain the largesse flowing from the Gulf in coming years. Better still, external actors might convince the GCC states that their opposition to reform and funding of repression elsewhere in the region is self-defeating over the long term, and convince them to back gradual reform in places like Egypt and Bahrain rather than oppose it. At the very least, external powers could use their voices, publicly criticizing crackdowns on political oppositionists and journalists in Egypt, Turkey, and Iran, all justified in the name of fighting “terrorism.”

Over time, we might develop new methods of creating more positive incentives to make it easier for regional governments to embrace reform as a means

of undermining terrorism in the long term. As noted above, the convulsions of the region and the threats they have produced for both internal and external states have created an important commonality of interests. The goal should be to create a common interest in addressing the broad regional dysfunctions that have fed into all of the region’s problems, including terrorism. Thus, external actors are better placed than ever to make the case that the states of the Middle East and the rest of the international community should partner to address both the long- and short-term problems facing the region, but that external support for the latter can be commensurate only with internal pursuit of the former.

### III. CIVIL WARS

If the threat from Middle Eastern terrorism has been the most overemphasized, it is the threat from the region's proliferating civil wars that has been the most underappreciated. It is the biggest exception to the general preoccupation with traditional, immediate security issues in the Middle East. The region's civil wars represent both a near- and a long-term problem, and if they are not addressed, it will be nearly impossible to deal with any of the area's other issues.

Over the past three years, the civil wars in Syria, Iraq, Libya, and Yemen have become the Pandora's boxes of the Middle East, endlessly releasing all manner of furies into an already tumultuous region. The civil wars are the principal drivers behind the enormous number of refugees crisscrossing the region and increasingly fleeing it altogether to places like Europe and North America. The civil wars are generating throngs of new terrorists, drawing in foreign fighters, and creating the "fields of jihad" where al-Qaeda, ISIS, and like-minded groups thrive. The civil wars have been one of the most important factors radicalizing the populations of the Middle East, enflaming the Sunni-Shia divide.

Spillover from Syria has already helped drag Iraq back into civil war; the fragile states of Lebanon, Jordan, Tunisia, Egypt, Bahrain, and Algeria are also threatened. The region's civil wars could possibly even have serious destabilizing implications for Turkey and Saudi Arabia.<sup>20</sup> (Indeed, the situations in both Egypt and Turkey already meet many academic definitions of civil war.) Moreover, the civil wars have frightened the Middle East's citizens to such a degree that leaders have been able to justify slowing, stopping, or even reversing important reform efforts—the only way to address the underlying societal problems that are the real bane of the modern Middle East.

It would be self-defeating to focus exclusively on any of these symptoms while neglecting the civil wars themselves. Regardless of how much the international community might be able to ease the suffering of the refugees overwhelming the Middle East, it will

be unsustainable until the civil wars end; ongoing conflicts will continue to displace greater and greater numbers of people. Similarly, even if a large global effort somehow were able to destroy ISIS militarily, unless that effort also addressed the civil wars themselves, new extremist organizations would simply pop up to take its place. This was precisely the case with al-Qaeda in Iraq. ISIS's predecessor was virtually obliterated in Iraq by 2011, until the war in Syria furnished its fighters with a new safe haven. Settle the civil wars, however, and a vital basis of ISIS's power and draw would vanish.

In yet another of the region's maddening paradoxes, the civil wars are largely a product of the underlying political, economic, and social dysfunctions of the states of the region. In Syria, Libya, and Yemen (and partly in Iraq, especially after the surge ended—albeit temporarily—the first Iraqi civil war), Arab Spring revolts sparked by these grievances succeeded in toppling or crippling the regimes. But rather than producing better governance, they led to failed states instead. These security vacuums inevitably gave rise to a struggle among a variety of sub-national identity groups in the quintessential manner of intercommunal civil wars over the past century. Thus afflictions that began as the products of the underlying problems of the region have become causes of security problems in their own right; and merely solving the root causes is no longer enough.

#### All Is Not Lost

If the negative impact of the civil wars makes it imperative that they take priority as we struggle to forge a comprehensive approach to the problems of the Middle East, there are three important positive factors to consider as well.

The first and most important is that while it is considered common wisdom that an external power can do nothing to end a civil war—let alone resolve the domestic grievances that gave rise to it—history indicates otherwise.<sup>21</sup> Ending someone else's civil war is never easy, but it is entirely feasible. It also does

<sup>20</sup> For an insightful analysis of the threats to Jordan's stability, including a range derived from spillover from the Iraqi and Syrian civil wars, see Oded Eran and Eddie Grove, "Threats to Stability in Jordan," *Strategic Assessment*, vol. 18, no. 2, July 2015, pp. 59–71.

<sup>21</sup> Kenneth M. Pollack and Barbara F. Walter, "Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East," *Washington Quarterly*, vol. 38, no. 2, Summer 2015, pp. 29–46.

not have not be prohibitively expensive, even though it is typically not cheap. The historical record provides evidence that outside actors can significantly impact everything from averting outbreaks of civil war, to shortening them, to influencing the circumstances of their conclusions. International actors have helped end civil wars on many occasions, and without the genocidal violence that often correlates with civil conflicts that are allowed to “fight themselves out.” Furthermore, they have also helped avert civil wars from metastasizing and spreading to neighboring states. Recent experience in Bosnia, El Salvador, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mozambique, East Timor, Cambodia, and even Iraq bear witness to this reality.<sup>22</sup> That is a bit of good news given what needs to be accomplished in the Middle East today.

Second, there is a considerable body of research on civil wars that provides a great deal of insight about what factors cause civil wars to break out, what drives their spread, and what contributes to their resolution. Although there is not a consensus on every issue, this historically grounded research provides much practical insight regarding what the international community might do (or not do) to end the fighting.

Third, this is one area where the external powers have demonstrated some willingness to commit resources to address the problems of the Middle East. The most important example here is the United States, which has significantly—if grudgingly—made a substantial reinvestment in Iraq and much lesser commitments to Syria and Yemen. What the United States is providing even in Iraq still falls short of what would probably be required to end the civil war there successfully (see on p. 21), and American efforts in Syria have been meager to say the least. Nevertheless, taken together and combined with US support to the Saudi-led intervention in Yemen (intelligence, targeting, and an undeclared blockade) it is far more than any other external power has been willing to provide and far more than the Obama administration ever intended to recommit to the Middle East. Moreover, numerous polls of US public opinion show a strong majority in favor of doing more and committing more resources—including even American combat troops in certain circumstances—to deal with the problems of the Middle East.<sup>23</sup> It is not to suggest that the United

States is chomping at the bit to take on the Middle East’s civil wars, only that there is a basic cognizance of the extent of the problem, and a parallel willingness to provide resources to deal with it.

Nor is the United States alone. Saudi Arabia’s intervention in the civil war in Yemen, even if it ultimately proves misguided, also represents a similar level of effort. The UAE has likewise made an exceptional commitment in Yemen, by furnishing most of the GCC ground force that has driven Houthi fighters out of much of the south, along with lesser but still notable contributions in Iraq, Syria, and Libya. In their own way, Turkey and Jordan have made considerable commitments of military units, arms, money, intelligence assets, and diplomatic muscle to the Syrian and Iraqi civil wars. Meanwhile, other regional actors like Egypt, Qatar, and even Bahrain, as well as external players like Britain, France, Australia, and Italy have made lesser contributions directed against all four civil wars. Egypt, Australia, and others have expressed a desire to do still more.

In short, the civil wars are so obviously dangerous that there is at least some willingness to commit national resources to try to deal with them. Although the resources committed so far are less than what is needed, and none are yet being used to implement a strategy with a high likelihood of success, they are a sign that in this area there are many countries that have demonstrated a willingness to put their money where their mouths are, and perhaps even at greater levels than has been forthcoming so far.

## How Civil Wars End

Historically, civil wars, such as those burning in the Middle East, end in one of three ways. Most of the time (roughly 75 percent, depending on the study), they end with an outright victory by one side or the other. Unfortunately, such victories are often accompanied by mass slaughter, even genocide, and can bring to power violence-prone regimes with aggressive agendas—as in Vietnam in 1975, Eritrea in 1991, and Afghanistan in 1994—that create greater regional instability, rather than less. Only very rarely, no more than 5 percent of

22 Andrew Mack and the Human Security Report Project, *Human Security Report 2009/2010: The Causes of Peace and the Shrinking Costs of War: Part 1, The Causes of Peace* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2011) esp. pp. 61-75; Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

23 “Do Americans Want to Send Ground Troops to Fight ISIS?” CBS News, February 19, 2015, <http://www.cbsnews.com/news/do-americans-want-to-send-ground-troops-to-fight-isis/>;

“US Voters Back 2-1 Sending Troops to Fight ISIS,” Quinnipiac University Poll, March 4, 2015, <http://www.quinnipiac.edu/news-and-events/quinnipiac-university-poll/national/release-detail?ReleaseID=2171>; “Solid Majority Support Sending Ground Troops to Defeat ISIS; Other Signs of More Forceful Presence Abroad May Also Be Emerging,” in “Executive Summary: Survey of Young Americans’ Attitudes Toward Politics and Public Service,” Harvard University Institute of Politics, April 29, 2015, p. 9, [http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files\\_new/150424\\_Harvard%20IOP%20Spring%202015%20Report\\_FINAL\\_WEB.pdf](http://www.iop.harvard.edu/sites/default/files_new/150424_Harvard%20IOP%20Spring%202015%20Report_FINAL_WEB.pdf).

the time, will the various factions in a civil war fight themselves out and agree to a negotiated settlement on their own. Even then, such wars typically take a decade or more to reach that “ideal” solution, by which point hundreds of thousands or millions will have died, the country will be a wasteland, and spillover from the fighting may have trashed the neighborhood as well. Angola, Ethiopia, and Somalia serve as examples of this unhappy category. (In some ways, Congo also fits in this category, but entering its third decade, the civil war there shows no sign of ending on its own.) In the remaining roughly 20 percent of cases, a negotiated settlement is brought about by a third party, often long before the civil war would have “burnt out” on its own.<sup>24</sup> Bosnia, Nicaragua, Guatemala, Mozambique, Cambodia, East Timor, and Iraq (in 2007-09) fall into this category.<sup>25</sup>

It is this third category that serves as the appropriate model for the current civil wars of the Middle East. The history of these cases, both those that succeeded and those that failed, demonstrates that there are three critical conditions for success when a third party intervenes in an intercommunal civil war to try to end the war with a negotiated settlement.<sup>26</sup>

1. All of the parties must conclude that they cannot win a military victory and can safely lay down their arms without fear of being butchered by their adversaries. As long as one group believes it can win outright, it is likely to keep fighting, forcing its opponents to do the same. Likewise, as long as any group fears that signing a ceasefire could mean signing its own death warrant, it will keep fighting, also forcing its opponents to do the same. For the third party seeking to end a civil war, solving this

In . . . roughly 20 percent of cases, a negotiated settlement is brought about by a third party, often long before the civil war would have “burnt out” on its own.

conundrum typically means one of two options. The first and more effective, but far more costly, tactic is to occupy the country and suppress all violence across the board, thereby precluding a military victory or slaughter by any of the warring parties, as the United States (finally) did in Iraq in 2007 and the Australians did in East Timor in 1999. (There are other, more ambiguous and partial examples of this approach, such as NATO in Bosnia after the Dayton Accords and the British in Northern Ireland by 1972.) The alternative is for the third party to back one group to the point where it is unquestionably strong enough to defeat all of its rivals, but then rein it in and prevent its proxy from achieving such a victory in return for all of the groups agreeing to a negotiated resolution. This was how NATO got to the Dayton Accords, building up and backing the Croats till they were

the most powerful force in Bosnia and could threaten to turn the table on the Serbs. Only then was NATO able to force all of them to agree to compromise at Dayton. Other examples include Syria’s role in Lebanon from 1989 to 1991 and, to a lesser extent, the United States’ role in Nicaragua in the 1980s.

2. Second, the proposed settlement must equitably distribute political power amongst all major factions. Numerous studies have shown that these types of power-sharing guarantees are key to convincing the warring parties to sign onto agreements.<sup>27</sup> The reason for this,

once again, has to do with incentives. Warring parties have little reason to stop fighting unless they are offered a meaningful stake in any new system. This means that there needs to be an effective power-sharing arrangement between all of the parties that includes clear protections for all groups, including minorities.

3. Finally, all of the combatant groups must be confident that the terms of the settlement will

24 As a matter of clarification, it is not the case that a third-party intervention succeeded in ending a civil war only 20 percent of the time historically. In many of the other cases no third party ever attempted to intervene. Moreover, the success rate for third-party interventions—and numbers of civil wars successfully ended by them—has climbed significantly since the 1990s as a result of lessons learned from previous, failed efforts. See in particular, Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

25 Barbara F. Walter, presentation to MEST Security Working Group, May 22, 2015.

26 Pollack and Walter, “Escaping the Civil War Trap in the Middle East,” pp. 29-46, op. cit.

27 Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars*, op. cit.; Caroline Hartzell and Matthew Hoddie, “Institutionalizing Peace: Power Sharing and Post-Civil War Conflict Management,” *American Journal of Political Science*, vol. 47, no. 2, April 2003; Michael W. Doyle and Nicholas Sambanis, “International Peacebuilding: A Theoretical and Quantitative Analysis,” *American Political Science Review*, vol. 94, no. 4, December 2000.



be enforced over time.<sup>28</sup> This is the most difficult aspect of a negotiated settlement but also the most critical. If the warring parties do not believe that they will continue to have a stake in the new government and be protected as the terms are implemented, they have no incentive to accept an agreement. They will either keep fighting or revert to war as soon as they fear that they might be double crossed. The trick is to determine how to protect factions physically and economically even though they do not enjoy equal strength in numbers, military power, or access to resources.

It is important to note here that the vast and remarkably prescient scholarship on civil wars does not suggest that nation-building is a necessary component of ending a civil war. That said, there is always a difficult transition from ending a civil war to enabling the society to build itself into a stable, prosperous new state that will not relapse into anarchy and violence.<sup>29</sup> Bosnia represents a poignant example, where a successful third-party intervention ended the civil war prematurely, but then failed to establish a viable transition to a political system sustainable over time. What is critical to end the civil war is not necessarily what is functional for the country over the long term. With regard to what is needed to secure peace and enable such a transition, the evidence again suggests that good governance by the new political system is the most important factor by far.<sup>30</sup> However, such states generally do benefit from large-scale humanitarian and economic assistance so that the new government is able to provide some level of goods and services to the citizenry and offer its people a hopeful path toward development and prosperity.

When it comes to civil wars, intervention is never cheap or easy, and it can be helpful or harmful. To be blunt, the only kind of external intervention that is helpful is that by a nation or coalition that has both the intent and the capability to help the state in civil war achieve the three criteria outlined above. Scholarly research has also demonstrated that interventions by actors without that intent and/or capability typically

make the conflict only longer and bloodier, especially if the aid is directed toward a relatively weak proxy.<sup>31</sup> Russia's intervention in Syria falls squarely into this category. Indeed, across the Middle East there are few, if any, states—or even coalitions of states—that could mount the right kind of intervention, one that would have even a reasonable chance of bringing about a near-term, negotiated settlement in a full-blown civil war. As hard as such an intervention would be (and has been) for the United States and NATO, regional interventions in these civil wars are likely to make them worse, not better, and risk overstraining the political, economic, and military systems of the intervening states.<sup>32</sup>

Having outlined the historical patterns by which third parties have brought about the peaceful end to civil wars, the question then is what this means for the civil wars of the current Middle East.

## Iraq

The *declared* policies of both the Haider al-Abadi government and the Obama administration mesh well with what the historical record demonstrates can work in ending a civil war such as Iraq's. Prime Minister Abadi has stated repeatedly that he wants to reform the Iraqi government and armed forces to make the latter apolitical enforcers of a new Iraqi political contract; field Sunni military formations that can help liberate the Sunni areas of Iraq under ISIS control; decentralize power to give both the Kurds and Sunnis more resources and authority to order their own communities; root out corruption and enshrine the rule of law; and limit the powers of the central government to ensure the rights of all Iraqis, including its many minorities. President Obama has stated that the United States wants to help Iraq rebuild professional, apolitical security forces in which all of Iraq's communities are represented, help the Iraqis reach a new power-sharing agreement, "defeat and degrade" ISIS forces, and help the Iraqis drive ISIS out of Iraq. Rhetorically, that is just what the doctor ordered, the American overemphasis on ISIS notwithstanding.

28 Barbara F. Walter, "The Critical Barrier to Civil War Settlement," *International Organization*, vol. 51, no. 3, Summer 1997.

29 Roland Paris, *At War's End: Building Peace after Civil Conflict* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

30 T. Clark Durant and Michael Weintraub, "How to Make Democracy Self-Enforcing after Civil War: Enabling Credible Yet Adaptable Elite Pacts," *Conflict Management and Peace Science*, vol. 31, no. 5, 2014, pp. 521–540; James D. Fearon, "Governance and Civil War Onset," Background Paper, *World Development Report 2011*; Walter, *Committing to Peace*, p. 168, op. cit.; Barbara F. Walter, "Why Bad Governance Leads to Repeat Civil War," *Journal of Conflict Resolution*, March 31, 2014.

31 Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

32 On a related note, scholarship on third-party interventions and peacekeeping has found that there is no advantage to having local forces serve as peacekeepers—or even to having a wholly unbiased actor serve as mediator and/or peacekeeper. Effective peacekeeping forces simply need to be committed to the mission, disciplined and professional, and able to prevent any party from employing violence. They do not have to be seen as neutral, nor do they need to have local knowledge. Barbara F. Walter, verbal comments to MEST Security and Public Order working group, August 7, 2015.

The problem is the vast gap between rhetoric and practice. Prime Minister Abadi has little political support and almost no bureaucratic capacity to advance his agenda. His reforms could be a terrific step in the right direction, but they face huge hurdles, have achieved little so far, and even then represent only part of what will be needed. Abadi is boxed in by Shia rivals looking to unseat him, Iranian-backed militias that do not recognize his authority and seek to carve out independent spheres of influence, and a hugely corrupt governing class that jealously guards its graft and prerogatives. Iraq's Sunni community is ambivalent about its relationship with ISIS, loathing their extremism but welcoming their martial skills in pushing back on the Shia they have learned to distrust all over again. Yet the Sunni leadership is badly fragmented, unable on their own to move their community either for or against Abadi, and Abadi has been able to do little to help them unify around one or more leaders willing and able to do the right thing. For their part, the Kurds have been stymied in their bid for independence by American and Turkish opposition, but they too have pressing economic and military needs that they do not believe can or will ever be satisfied by Baghdad. Meanwhile drastically diminished oil revenues have exposed the need for political reform across the board within the Kurdistan Regional Government (KRG).

For its part, the United States made a reasonable start, but then stumbled on the follow-through. Washington committed significant air assets to Iraq and Syria that have largely halted ISIS's expansion and have played a crucial role in ISIS's defeats at Kobani, Tikrit, Jabal Sinjar, Kisk Crossing, Erbil and Ramadi in December 2015. Yet this air campaign has not prevented various local ISIS victories, most notably at Palmyra and Ramadi in May 2015. Nor has it shut down ISIS's ability to employ its interior lines of communication to shift fighters to reinforce threatened positions or exploit sectors weakly held by its enemies. Similarly, the United States has deployed roughly 3,300 hundred advisers and trainers to help rebuild and guide the Iraqi Security Forces. While that is not meaningless, it is still well short of what is desirable—and probably necessary. In particular, other than the elite Golden Division, which has always performed well, Iraqi army formations continue to evince uneven combat performance. Far too few Sunni tribesmen have been trained or equipped as promised,

undermining Sunni confidence in the United States and the government of Iraq.

Although the United States has arguably done best in helping Iraq militarily, even here there is still more that could usefully be done. Contributing additional American personnel to expand training programs, advising and accompanying Iraqi formations down to the battalion-level in the field, and calling in air strikes and other fire support would likely engender significant improvements in Iraqi army performance, as was the case in 2007-11. Additional combat aircraft with more permissive rules of engagement would also help. Moreover, Washington has been unnecessarily stingy with its military support for the Kurds, who have been given only forty Mine Resistant Ambush-Protected Vehicles and fifty MILAN anti-tank guided missile launchers to hold a front of over one thousand kilometers.<sup>33</sup>

As useful as additional US military assistance would be, the truly vital missing piece is a wider and more active American role in helping Iraqi leaders craft a new power-sharing structure.

As useful as additional US military assistance would be, the truly vital missing piece is a wider and more active American role in helping Iraqi leaders craft a new power-sharing structure, as US diplomats did from 2007 to 2008. That will very likely demand additional American military, political, economic, and technical assistance—both to pressure the Iraqis to come to such an outcome and to mollify the compromises that each faction will need to concede to its rivals. The Sunnis are highly likely to demand a greater degree of local autonomy to avoid the deficiencies of the previous arrangement. This would

also require giving provincial and community leaders a significant degree of devolved authority over a new Sunni-Shia-Kurd military configuration. An Iraqi federation buttressed by a more flexible but more integrated federal military, and augmented by locally recruited national guard units would assuage Sunni fears of a repeat of former Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki's exclusionary rule.<sup>34</sup> These adjustments would

<sup>33</sup> By comparison, a single US light infantry division with about one-eighth the personnel of the Peshmerga would typically field three to four times the number of comparable anti-tank missile launchers, while holding a front anywhere from one-tenth to one-one hundredth the size.

<sup>34</sup> For instance, see Zalmay Khalilzad and Kenneth M. Pollack, "How to Save Iraq," *New Republic*, July 22, 2014, <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/118794/federalism-could-save-iraq-falling-apart-due-civil-war>.

probably hold the Sunni minority to the power-sharing agreement over time. Greater military and economic assistance to the Kurds could be tied to concrete KRG political reforms.

## Syria

As bad as Iraq is, it is light years ahead of Syria. All of Syria's major factions believe that victory is still possible—and are terrified that if they lay down their arms they will be quickly overpowered and massacred by their rivals. That is a recipe for protracted slaughter, which is far and away the most likely scenario for the country absent categorically different external involvement than has been the case so far. Indeed, a variety of outside actors, from Iran to Russia, the United States to Saudi Arabia, and Turkey to Qatar, have all intervened in Syria, backing their favored proxies. However, since none of them has committed enough power to produce a military victory—and none has shown the intent to engineer the kind of equitable settlement that could serve as the basis for a political resolution—their involvement has made the bloodshed only worse and has fed the beliefs of their Syrian clients that they can prevail militarily.

The recent Russian intervention in Syria is a case in point. So far the Russians (and their Iranian, Iraqi, and Hezbollah allies) have committed only enough force to shore up the crumbling defenses of the Alawite heartland. They have not committed the kind of combat power that would be needed to enable the Bashar al-Assad regime to reconquer all of pre-2011 Syria. Moreover, they are unlikely to do so, lest they repeat the painful experience of Afghanistan in 1979-89 when they tried and failed to do effectively the same thing with another minority regime facing another, more popular (and financially well-supported) opposition. It seems most likely that Moscow and Tehran hope that by demonstrating that they will not allow the Alawite heartland to fall, and perhaps by threatening the territorial gains of some of the opposition groups, they will force the opposition's external backers to convince their Syrian clients to agree to a negotiated settlement more to Assad's liking. While that could be acceptable to some, it is probably not acceptable to the GCC, Turkey, Jordan, and other regional opponents of Iran and the Assad regime. More than that, the most important Syrian opposition groups, particularly ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and probably Ahrar al-Sham, will never agree to it regardless of what the Saudis, Turks, or Jordanians may do.

Consequently, the Russian intervention is unlikely to transform the war; it will make it worse. It has added new complexities to the conflict, but has not changed

its fundamental nature, or what needs to be done to end it. It is just another typical escalation in a very typical civil war.

The first and most important shift that needs to occur in Syria to promptly and durably conclude its civil war is for a constructive third party to transform the military situation. Until then, no negotiated agreement is likely. Since the Sunni states of the Middle East, with limited American and European support, have thus far been unable to achieve this, and the Russian-Iranian intervention is equally unlikely to do so, the only plausible way forward is for the United States—assisted by its regional and European allies—to lead a far more determined effort to do so instead.

That will mean dedicating far more Western energy and resources toward forming a more robust opposition army capable of dominating the Syrian battlefields. Obviously, ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra are inappropriate for that role. Some, including some of the most able American diplomats, have suggested that the United States back the Assad regime instead, since it is secular and has kept the country stable in the past. Unfortunately, this overlooks the points that the Assad regime is an odious dictatorship and its actions have frequently destabilized the region and threatened US allies. Moreover, the fact that it lost control over most of the country in 2011 demonstrates that it is *not* a stable alternative. Finally, the regime's slaughter of tens (probably hundreds) of thousands of Syrians over the past four years makes it highly unlikely that the Syrian people would accept its restoration.

Unless the United States suddenly becomes willing to deploy tens of thousands of its own ground troops, the only plausible course of action to create the kind of military situation that will enable a negotiated settlement is to turn the sow's ear of Syria's more nationalist, less Islamist opposition into a silk purse. The fact that the nationalist (or "moderate") opposition is currently weak, divided, corrupt, and infiltrated by both the regime and the Islamists represents a major challenge, but not necessarily a showstopper. So too was the Libyan opposition to Muammar al-Qaddafi weak, divided, corrupt, and infiltrated by both the regime and the Islamists in 2011. So were the Iraqi Security Forces in 2006. So were the Afghan mujahadeen in 1980. So was the Army of the Republic of Vietnam in 1968 (substituting communists for Islamists, of course). To a lesser extent, so too were Afghanistan's Northern Alliance in 2001 and the Croatian armed forces in 1993. History is replete with militaries written off as useless, only to see them reformed and victorious in a matter of years.

The plan outlined by General Martin Dempsey, then Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff, in September 2014 was always a sensible approach to building the right kind of force for the Syrian opposition, which—with American arms, advisers, intelligence support, and sustained air support—would stand a reasonable chance of overcoming the Assad regime’s forces as well as those of ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra. That is probably the only thing that will convince them all that outright military victory is impossible, and persuade all of the parties to opt for a power-sharing agreement instead.<sup>35</sup>

Here as well, the United States—and its allies, regional and global—needs to make a determined effort to actually implement and appropriately resource the strategy, recognizing that it would be costly, but weighed against the reality that the consequences of inaction would likely be even costlier. That is what has been most lacking. However, it is equally vital for the United States to abandon its strategically misguided focus on ISIS alone as the target of such a force. The single greatest reason that the United States has been unable to recruit Syrian opposition fighters has been its insistence that they fight only ISIS and not the Assad regime. Ultimately, if the United States is going to back such a force to bring about a negotiated resolution of the Syrian civil war, it requires that army to be able to defeat both ISIS and the regime, as well as any other group that attempts to oppose such a settlement with violence.

If the United States and its partners are prepared to thoroughly commit to building and supporting such a force, there are many reasons to expect that it could accomplish in Syria what the restructured Croat forces did in Bosnia in the 1990s: credibly threaten its enemies with certain defeat, thus priming them for compromise at Dayton. The United States and its partners should pursue a similar outcome in Syria, with a power-sharing agreement that distributes authority to provincial and local communities; reforms, right-sizes, and professionalizes the military and security services so that they are representative of Syria’s diversity; and establishes consistent rule of law and equal protections for all of Syria’s diverse citizenry. And, although it is essential to point out that while Bashar al-Assad and his close associates should, and very probably *would*, go in this setting, Syria’s Alawites must get a seat at the negotiating table, as well as a share of political and economic power commensurate

with their demographic weight, along with security arrangements sufficient to ensure their safety.

If the United States and its allies are willing to pursue such an approach, there is no reason to believe that Russia or even Iran would be showstoppers. First, American interests and capabilities greatly outweigh Russia’s in the region. It is Russia that should want to avoid a fight with the United States in Syria, and probably will. Iran does have significant interests in Syria, but these appear increasingly to be about Hezbollah’s control of Lebanon, not Syria per se. While Iran has used Syria as a supply conduit to Lebanon, Hezbollah has demonstrated that it can control both Beirut International Airport and a variety of Lebanese ports—plus there are ways to airlift supplies directly to the Hezbollah-controlled Bekaa Valley should Tehran feel the need to do so. Instead, Iran’s greatest fear appears to be that an opposition victory in Syria would put one or another radical Sunni jihadist group in control of Syrian territory and resources, which it could and likely *would* use to invade Lebanon to massacre its Shia community. It is not a far-fetched threat given the ideology and actions of ISIS, Jabhat al-Nusra, and other Syrian extremist militias.

Given this set of Iranian and Russian interests, the best way to assure that Iran and Russia would ultimately concede to the course of action described above would be to make clear at the outset that the goal is to end the fighting and forge a new power-sharing arrangement in which the Alawite community and all of Syria’s other minorities would be protected, and the extremist militias would be disarmed or defeated and therefore no longer a threat to Iranian and Russian interests. The key is for the United States and its allies to make clear to Moscow and Tehran that the US-backed opposition will prevail because the United States and its allies will provide it with everything it needs to do so—including American advisers and fire support—and will defeat anyone who gets in their way. In both Bosnia and Kosovo, Russia backed their Serbian allies to the hilt, right up until the moment when Moscow realized that NATO was determined to win and would use whatever force was necessary to do so, at which point Russia immediately flipped and demanded to be part of the negotiations and the peacekeeping forces that followed. Indeed, whenever it has appeared that the United States would pursue this approach in Syria, the Iranians have quickly telegraphed that they would gladly discard Assad so long as Alawite interests were duly represented in any future political settlement.

35 For a longer explication of this approach and the historical evidence supporting it, see Kenneth M. Pollack, “An Army to Defeat Assad: How to Turn Syria’s Opposition into a Real Fighting Force,” *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 93, no. 5, September/October 2014, pp. 110–124.



## Libya

Libya will require a strategy much like Syria. It too needs a new, apolitical, and professional military force capable of defeating all of the country's militias and then serving as a strong, unifying institution capable of supporting a new political system. The situation in Libya also calls for the same kind of power-sharing arrangement as Syria, to equitably distribute power and resources among its warring factions, which are primarily geographic—Cyrenaica versus Tripolitania and Misrata versus Zintan—although a secular-Islamist divide increasingly overlays these more established divisions. Both a power-sharing arrangement and a competent, professional military will be necessary to demonstrate to the warring parties that their prospects are better at the negotiating table than on the battlefield. Both efforts would necessitate significant external support to succeed.

Part of the Libyan challenge is that its strategic importance far outstrips the attention it has so far received. Not only does the country possess rich oil resources that are important to key European economies, but its location bordering Egypt, the most populous Arab country, and Tunisia, the Arab Spring's only budding democracy, makes spillover a special concern. However, given the extent of the current American efforts in Iraq and Syria, let alone the expansion of those roles envisioned here, it seems *highly* unlikely that the United States would make a similar effort in Libya.

That means that Libya has to be Europe's project. Europe is far more directly affected by Libya because of the country's location and its historic role as an energy supplier to the continent, not to mention Europe's new fear of a flood of Libyan refugees. It was not coincidental that Europe provided the majority of the combat aircraft that helped topple Qaddafi in 2011. Although Libya matters far more to Europe than it does to the United States, convincing the European Union to act will not be easy.

Over the past two decades, Europe has lost the will and dismantled the capability to take on such a project unilaterally. The Europeans have allowed their militaries to atrophy to virtual impotence, and they have shown little willingness or ability to harness their economic and diplomatic resources for difficult, protracted missions like stabilizing and rebuilding Libya. Moreover, after their painful experiences with poorly executed American campaigns in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya (in 2011 and again in 2013), many Europeans are wary

of following Washington into another Middle Eastern military adventure.<sup>36</sup>

Again, difficult as this may seem, the United States needs to see European reluctance and limitations as a challenge, not an immovable impediment. As Janine Davidson, Senior Fellow for Defense Policy at the Council on Foreign Relations, has consistently and convincingly argued, moving Europe to act will require the United States to articulate a coherent strategy towards the region, clearly explaining the importance of quelling its civil wars and fully developing the approach to be employed. The United States is also going to have to demonstrate that it is willing both to coordinate the effort and commit significant resources of its own in support of European combat formations. That will inevitably include considerable American logistical assistance, military command and control, intelligence support, and possibly combat advisers as well.

None of that will break the bank, and in return, the United States should expect its allies to provide the combat aircraft, trainers and advisers, headquarters personnel, weapons and other equipment, economic assistance, and diplomatic capital that would comprise the main effort of a new approach to Libya. As in Syria, the aim should be to build a moderate Libyan force capable of securing the country and defeating the extremists on both sides to create the conditions for a new power-sharing arrangement to politically resolve the conflict. As the Europeans demonstrated in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, they do still retain those limited capacities, and they are critically important for burden-sharing and international legitimacy, even if the United States has to provide a good deal of the muscle behind the scenes. Moreover, some allies, like Australia, seem eager to contribute to such a strategy, and have demonstrated a capacity in Afghanistan, East Timor, and Iraq to provide highly capable trainers, advisers, and even combat formations that could become important building blocks of a larger coalition effort.

## Yemen

From a humanitarian standpoint, Yemen is just as important as Iraq, Syria, and Libya, but is unfortunately far less strategically important than those countries. As Barbara Walter, the great scholar of civil wars, has warned, given the commitments required to successfully bring civil wars to an end, a "triage" is necessary to determine which conflicts get that

<sup>36</sup> On the disastrous American effort to build a moderate Libyan opposition on the cheap, see Missy Ryan, "Libyan Force Was Lesson in Limits of US Power," *Washington Post*, August 5, 2015.

resource-heavy treatment and which are contained instead to try to minimize the damage.<sup>37</sup> Yemen is the obvious candidate for containment, despite the difficulty of suppressing the spillover from civil wars.<sup>38</sup> Nevertheless, containing the Yemeni civil war does not mean ignoring it.

The most important issue regarding Yemen is Saudi Arabia's heavy interest in it, which in turn triggered the unprecedented Saudi-led Arab intervention in 2015. Yemen has experienced frequent periods of instability since 1961, and on every one of these occasions, the Saudis have feared that the problems would spread to the Kingdom—an entirely understandable concern based on the historic pattern of spillover. However, Yemen has repeatedly proven to be an exception to the rule in that it has never caused serious instability in Saudi Arabia. Yet the Saudis continue to fear that it will. Today, the Saudis and many other Arab states see Iran taking an active interest in Yemen, supporting the Houthis from the Zaydi subset of Shiism in a bid to expand Tehran's influence and probably to create problems for Riyadh.

However, unlike the United States hypothetically in Iraq (or Syria), or the Europeans conceivably in Libya, it will be difficult for the Saudis and their Arab allies to engineer an early, negotiated settlement of the Yemeni civil war. Although the small, Emirati-led GCC ground force operating there has scored some notable victories in pushing the Houthis out of southern Yemen, they lack the numbers to secure the country and so end the fighting. It would be far more difficult for them to roll back Houthi gains more broadly without a much larger ground invasion, and GCC forces almost certainly lack the capacity to secure such a victory. Moreover, the GCC and their Yemeni allies have consistently rejected offers to negotiate on a basis acceptable to the Houthis, suggesting that they hope to crush the Houthis, or at least negotiate from a position of strength. That is exactly the kind of thinking that causes civil wars to drag on, as participants typically miscalculate their moment of maximum leverage and then refuse to negotiate from what they perceive to be a position of weakness. So they escalate again instead, seeking to get back to their former

position of strength. Since their adversaries inevitably do the same, the cycle typically repeats over and over.

Thus the recent gains in southern Yemen by the GCC ground force seem to be convincing Riyadh and its allies that they can win outright in Yemen, and do so on the cheap. That is probably a dangerous mirage, one that the Kingdom's friends ought to try to steer it away from. It would be far better to use these gains in a political gambit to convince the Houthis and Saleh to come to the negotiating table and hammer out a new plan for federalism that would serve as a surrogate power-sharing arrangement. However, doing so will be possible only if the GCC and its Yemeni allies are willing to accept significant compromises to bring the Houthis, Saleh, and other factions on board.

If not, the GCC intervention is unlikely to make the situation better in Yemen and could easily make it worse. The historical record shows that it is counterproductive to provide military and economic assistance to the weaker side in a lopsided conflict, and that continuing to fund combatants that lack the capacity to win outright merely prolongs the war, inflating its body count and spillover onto neighboring states.<sup>39</sup>

The great risk is that the Gulf states will redouble their efforts in Yemen and overstretch themselves. For all its accumulated riches, Saudi Arabia cannot afford a quagmire in Yemen. This is especially true given the challenges the country faces as a result of historically low oil prices and exorbitant new financial commitments made both domestically and to regional allies like Egypt. To that must be added new uncertainty over succession and Al Saud solidarity that the Kingdom has never really faced before.<sup>40</sup> Neighboring states, even regional powers, often have great difficulty ending a civil war, and can cause problems for themselves if they try. The Pakistani state has been practically ripped to pieces by its perpetual involvement in Afghanistan's protracted civil war. To a lesser degree, even the relatively strong states of Israel and Syria both endured serious economic consequences and political strains owing to their long immersion in Lebanon, both during the war and even after the Taif Accord.

37 Barbara F. Walter, *Committing to Peace: The Successful Settlement of Civil Wars* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2002).

38 On the difficulty of containing the spillover from civil wars, see Daniel Byman and Kenneth Pollack, *Things Fall Apart: Containing Spillover from an Iraqi Civil War*, Brookings Institution Press, no. 11, 2007, [http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/analysis/jan2007iraq\\_civilwar.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/fp/saban/analysis/jan2007iraq_civilwar.pdf).

39 Patrick M. Regan, *Civil Wars and Foreign Powers: Outside Intervention in Intrastate Conflict* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2001).

40 Bruce Riedel, "Power Transitions in Saudi Arabia Spell Changes in the Middle East," *Yale Global*, July 6, 2015, <http://yaleglobal.yale.edu/m/content/power-transitions-saudi-arabia-spell-changes-middle-east/9963>.

## IV. IRAN AND THE SUNNI-SHIA DIVIDE

One aspect of the spillover from the region's civil wars has been the spread of sectarianism that threatens to tear the Muslim *umma* into militant Sunni and Shia factions. Left unchecked, the escalating sectarian confrontation could eventually provoke interstate wars—even a region-wide conflagration. Some Westerners, analogizing the situation to medieval Christendom, have suggested that Islam needs to have a vast war to “sort out” the Sunni-Shia conflict, the way that the Thirty Years' War “sorted out” Protestant-Catholic rivalries in Europe. This idea is both inaccurate in its description and dangerous in its prescription.

The history of the Sunni-Shia divide in the Middle East has always been far more tolerant and peaceful than the Catholic-Protestant rift in Europe. While the split between Sunni and Shia is as old as the death of the Prophet Muhammad, it has rarely been bloody. Islam never experienced anything like the religious wars of the Reformation and many Muslim societies saw little but harmony between the sects. Especially during the twentieth century, intermarriage was common among Sunni and Shia, and many prayed in the other's mosques. Famously, before the failures of the US occupation of Iraq created a security vacuum and a civil war, 40 percent of the population of Baghdad was believed to have been in a mixed marriage or the product of one, and Baghdad represents one-quarter of the population of the country. Many forget that even former Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's revolution was meant for the entire Islamic world, not merely the Shia, and Khomeini's ideology of *velayat-e faqih* had little to do with classic Shia thought and was considered deviant by most mainstream ayatollahs.

Peaceful history or not, many are slowly gearing up for just such a region-wide war. While this conflict may occur regardless of whether we want it to, there are several problems with embracing it as policy. The first is that such a war is likely to prove horrific. The real Thirty Years' War killed off roughly 25-40 percent of the population of seventeenth-century Germany. That's one of the highest death rates in modern history, and given the carnage in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and Libya, and Lebanon and Algeria before them, there is no reason to expect that an intra-faith civil war across the Middle East would be any less bloody.

Beyond the potential humanitarian toll, it is highly unlikely that the rest of the world would remain untouched by a Middle East-wide religious conflict. The region still accounts for 30 percent of global oil exports, and the US Energy Information Administration projects that it will account for the same share out to 2040, even with the expected increases in North American shale production.<sup>41</sup> Yet internal conflict often takes a dramatic toll on oil production, cutting it by 60 or even 90 percent.<sup>42</sup> Finally, given the advance of globalization, the integration of the Middle East with the rest of the world, the region's eponymous location at the nexus of three continents, and the longstanding role of so many non-Middle Eastern countries in the region, it would be naive to assume that horrific mass violence in the Middle East would somehow stay contained to the region and not affect other areas, if only via terrorism, refugees, and transportation disruptions.

### The Civil Wars and the Sunni-Shia Rift

Rather than the canard of “ancient hatreds” that gets trotted out as an explanation for every civil war—usually as an excuse for outside powers to do nothing—the region-wide Sunni-Shia conflict brewing today is mostly another product of the Middle East's civil wars. Although there have always been tensions between Shia Iran and the Sunni Arab states, not until the Iran-Iraq war of 1980-88 did meaningful Sunni-Shia antagonisms emerge across the region, and it took the Iraqi civil war of 2005-08 to push them from tension to conflict. The vicious sectarian fighting in Iraq

41 “World Petroleum and Other Liquids Production by Region and Country, Reference case, 2009-40,” *International Energy Outlook 2014*, US Energy Information Agency, 2014, p. 31.

42 Recent history furnishes numerous examples of the impact of internal conflict on oil exports. Despite the presence of 150,000 American troops, Iraqi oil production still fell by 64 percent (from 2.8 million barrels per day (bpd) to just 1 million bpd) during the 2006-08 civil war. The 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran caused oil production to fall by 78 percent. As a result of the current civil war in Libya, that country's oil production has dropped 92 percent, to 235,000 bpd, down from 1.6 million bpd. [Shaul Bakhash, *The Reign of the Ayatollahs: Iran and the Islamic Revolution*, Revised Edition (New York: Basic Books, 1990), p. 230; CIA, *World Factbook* (Washington: GPO, 1989); Michael M. J. Fischer, *Iran: From Religious Dispute to Revolution* (Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1980), p. 224; Oil production statistics from the US Energy Information Administration, <http://www.eia.gov/countries/>, accessed December 2, 2014.]

galvanized Muslims, and particularly Arabs, across the Middle East to press their governments to intervene in the Iraqi conflict on behalf of their co-religionists. The Iraqi civil war also produced greater advocacy and even militancy and some riots among the Shia of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia who demanded greater political rights—as their Iraqi brethren had achieved in gaining control of the Iraqi state. This in turn triggered a backlash among Sunnis throughout the Gulf. But it took the Iraqi civil war to engage these problems, and once the surge had quelled the fighting, the animosities seemed to recede too.

Until the Syrian civil war broke out in 2011 and reignited the embers, that is. This time, however, there was no surge to subdue the violence, which spiraled out of control, and swept up the intra-faith antagonisms with it. The Arab Spring also breathed new life into the protests in Bahrain, which began as a secular movement seeking more political and social inclusion for marginalized Shia, but quickly devolved into a largely sectarian revolt against the Sunni royal family. That triggered a military intervention by the armed forces of the other, Sunni-dominated states of the GCC. Syria then helped rekindle the Iraqi civil war, and Yemen's secular revolt against the Saleh dictatorship was hijacked by the Shia Houthis (later joined by Saleh himself). By then, the Sunni-Shia conflict had become an inescapable fracture in the Middle Eastern landscape.

The civil wars feed the Sunni-Shia conflict in another way as well. Since the 1979 Iranian revolution, Tehran has found it hard to resist a failed state, a weak state, or a civil war. Iran has backed terrorists, insurgents, and militias in Iraq, Lebanon, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Bahrain, Israel-Palestine, Sudan, and now Syria and Yemen. The Iranians have been more ecumenical than they are given credit for, backing Sunni groups like Hamas and Marxists like the PKK, but they have had the greatest success in backing Shia groups who often feel they have nowhere else to turn other than to Iran. Yet Iranian involvement in these civil wars—especially when it appears that their allies are winning, like in Lebanon, Iraq, and recently Yemen—is frightening to many Sunnis, particularly the Sunni-dominated governments of the Gulf. In other words, the civil wars attract the Iranians, usually on the side of the Shia if the war is being waged along a sectarian divide, which provokes the Sunni states to bolster the opposite side. Invariably, that starts a cycle of escalating intervention and counter-intervention, which worsens the civil war and aggravates Sunni and Shia tensions across the region.

Since the civil wars have done so much to stoke the current sectarian problems, it is reasonable to assume that shutting them down would go a long way toward alleviating the problems. If Iraq, Syria, and Yemen were all at peace, with power-sharing agreements and guarantees for minorities, much of the passion would abate. There would no longer be daily stories of Sunnis beheading Shia or Shia massacring Sunnis. Successfully ending the civil wars would also axiomatically mean evicting vicious groups like ISIS and Jabhat al-Nusra, who are so frightening to the Shia, and limiting Iranian involvement since their allies would not need their help to fight an active war, thereby mollifying the fears of the Sunnis.

### The Iranian-Saudi Conflict

Of course, as important as the civil wars were in stoking the Sunni-Shia conflict, they were not its only cause, and now that it is rolling, it has taken on a life of its own. Another important element of Sunni-Shia conflict, in both cause and effect, has been the geostrategic competition between Saudi Arabia and Iran.

In addition to the power vacuums that opened up in Iraq, Syria, Yemen, and Libya, the disengagement of the United States from the region since 2009, coupled with the decline and fall of the Hosni Mubarak regime in Egypt, and the recent inward turn of Turkish policy under President Recep Tayyip Erdogan, has left a wider vacuum across the region. For several decades, Saudi Arabia has been emerging as a successor to Egypt as leader of the Arab world, and the Kingdom has moved aggressively to fill that vacuum. So too has Iran, in its own inimitable fashion. However, the Saudis believe that the Iranians are winning much more than they actually are. That perception of a ubiquitous, nefarious, and largely victorious Iranian threat has energized the Saudis to be ever more combative and interventionist themselves—all of which only further enrages the Iranians, who are often oblivious to their own role in fueling Saudi and Sunni fears. Thus, although both sides do mean each other harm, their interaction is also something of a security dilemma.

Moreover, the Saudis recognize that in a Saudi-Iranian war they would be at a disadvantage, whereas in a Sunni-Shia fight they have the advantage. Head-to-head, Iran has a larger and more industrious population than that of Saudi Arabia, coupled with a military that is lower tech but of greater ability. In the wider context, however, Shia represent only about 15 percent of the global Muslim population. So casting the Saudi-Iranian competition in terms of a larger Sunni-Shia conflict puts the Saudis on the right side of the balance sheet. (And, of course, there is also an



Arab vs. Persian narrative that predates the religious schism, and also puts the Saudis on the advantaged side, at least demographically).

For these reasons, it is not enough just to shut down the civil wars, challenging as that will be. It is also necessary to allay the fears of both Saudis and Iranians (and their allies) of one another. In the case of the Iranians, that should be helped by the recently concluded nuclear deal, which should begin to diminish Tehran's sense of isolation and encirclement. It would be further ameliorated by a new security architecture for the region (discussed below) that would allow the Iranians to address their legitimate security concerns through dialogue, diplomacy, and arms control treaties. For the Saudis and their allies, however, it may be even trickier.

### The Iranian Nuclear Deal

With the nuclear deal between Iran and the international community accepted, adopted, and being implemented, the focus of the United States and its allies needs to shift to the question of how to ensure that the deal adds to the stability and security of the region, rather than undermining it.

Kori Schake, a Research Fellow at the Hoover Institution, once asked an important question about Iran: whether fundamentally it was a predator or a scavenger. By that, she meant whether Iran created the problems, broke the states, and manufactured the civil wars that it then attempted to benefit from, or whether those events were the result of other causes and Iran simply stepped in and tried to take advantage of them as best it could. At various times, Iran has certainly aspired to the role of predator—counter-invading Iraq in 1982, creating Hezbollah after the Israeli invasion of Lebanon, trying to overthrow the government of Bahrain in 1996—but it has mostly been a scavenger. Most of Iran's efforts to overturn the regional status quo have been opportunistic attempts to exploit existing state weakness and chaos, situations that it had no role in fomenting but was eager to exacerbate. Its involvement in Yemen today as well as in Saudi Arabia, Kuwait, Egypt, Sudan, and Turkey at earlier times fall into that category. Still others were more “defensive” interventions, intended primarily to shield

Iran or Iranian interests from harm in places like Iraq after 2005 and Syria since 2011.

The nuclear deal with Tehran creates two potential threats to regional security. The first of these is that Iran will become more aggressive. The reaction of Iran's hard-liners to the deal seems to range from deeply suspicious to outright furious, and for months Ayatollah Ali Khamenei has been trying to placate them by signaling that it will not mean a rapprochement with the United States or any other change in Iranian behavior. More than that, if the United States were to use the agreement as an excuse to further disengage from the Middle East, this could embolden the Iranians to ratchet up their involvement in the region's civil wars and try to undermine the regimes of American allies.

There is a real risk that the fear of American abandonment and increased Iranian expansionism will cause the GCC states (and perhaps Turkey) to overextend themselves with potentially dangerous repercussions for their internal stability.

The second danger is that, whatever Iran does or does not do, the Israelis, Turks, and Sunni Arab states may assume that the United States will further disengage from the Middle East after the nuclear deal, and they will react preemptively against Iran in expectation that such further US disengagement will embolden Iran. Historically, the Saudis have never tried to accommodate Iran when they have felt threatened. Instead, they have typically become much more aggressive. The Saudi intervention in Yemen is the latest evidence of this tendency, and it is important to recognize that—again, like the intervention in Yemen—the Saudis and other Sunni Arab states lack the capacity to take on this challenge fully and

constructively on their own. Thus, there is a real risk that the fear of American abandonment and increased Iranian expansionism will cause the GCC states (and perhaps Turkey) to overextend themselves with potentially dangerous repercussions for their internal stability. The January 2016 fracas between Iran and Saudi Arabia over Riyadh's execution of the Saudi Shia religious leader, Nimr al-Nimr, was in part borne from the Kingdom's sense that Iran was using the nuclear deal to increase its support of subversive elements in the Arab Shia community while the United States had begun to “tilt” toward Iran.

### **The Importance of Syria**

The problem is that it may prove difficult to convince the Sunni Arab states not to become more confrontational and interventionist toward Iran in the wake of the nuclear deal. The reassurances that the United States has so far offered, particularly those made at the US-GCC summit at Camp David in May 2015, appear to have had little effect. Senior Gulf officials deride them in private.

In truth, there may be only one way to reassure the Sunni Arab states, meaning that there may be only one way for the United States to demonstrate to them that it is not going to tolerate Iranian encroachment in the Arab world. It may also be the only way to demonstrate to the Iranians that the United States is not walking away from the Middle East—or is too worried about imperiling the nuclear agreement to block hostile Iranian activities around the region. That is for the United States and its Western allies to pick a place and take on the Iranians there.

If the United States and the West are going to demonstrate their resolve to Iran in the aftermath of a nuclear deal that leaves many questions about American regional commitment unanswered, Syria is the place to do it. Yemen is the wrong place for anyone to confront Iran because, while important from humanitarian and counterterrorism standpoints, it is not strategically consequential enough to the West to

justify making a major American investment there. Iraq is also an unwise choice. Iraq is too significant to the Iranians and their presence and influence there are too strong. Moreover, the Iraqis stand a fighting chance to resolve their issues and regain stability, but their fragile polity likely could not survive an all-out struggle between the United States and Iran for the soul of Iraq. Both the West and Iran need the Iraqis to sort out their problems, and Iraq will likely need the help of both countries to do so. Thus, Iraq too is the wrong place at the wrong time.

That leaves Syria, where the Assad regime has already lost control of most of the country and increasingly relies on support from Iran, Iraqi militias, Hezbollah, and now Russia to survive. Turkey and the Sunni Arab states are all eager to have the United States and Europe take the lead in building a more capable opposition military to oust Assad and neutralize other various Salafi militias as well. Conveniently, President Obama has committed the United States to just such a course, even if his actions have fallen far short of his words. Thus, the regional security dimensions of a new Iranian nuclear deal also lend weight to the idea of building a more capable Syrian opposition army to defeat the Assad regime and the Salafi extremist groups and make possible the kind of power-sharing agreement that is the only chance to end the fighting without further—and potentially even worse—bloodshed.

## V. THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN CONFLICT

Throughout the latter half of the twentieth century, the Arab-Israeli conflict was the touchstone of Middle East security. Today, it has slipped from that position. It is no longer the foremost issue on the region's security agenda, even while it remains a matter of poignant importance for many across the region because of its history and symbolism. Moreover, that symbolic value still holds strategic impact, just not in the same ways and to the same extent that it once did.

In truth, it has become difficult to accurately gauge the importance of the Arab-Israeli conflict to current Middle Eastern security. That ambiguity is itself of considerable importance because the Israeli-Palestinian peace process, which lies at the core of the wider Arab-Israeli conflict, has become badly stuck. Getting it moving again would require very significant commitments of resources and political capital, as well as some difficult decisions. Yet knowing whether it is worth undertaking those efforts depends on the importance of resolving the dispute.

Certainly there are persistent rationales for ending the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation. First and foremost, the vast majority of Arabs, and many others in the wider Muslim community, continue to demand an end to the conflict and a state for the Palestinians.<sup>43</sup> More pointedly, as long as there is no final peace between Israel and the Arabs, there is always the certainty of violence and the potential for war. Egyptian scholar Abdel Moniem Said Ali has pointed out that since 2006, Israel has waged one war in Lebanon and three in Gaza. Many fear a third intifada if there is no breakthrough that addresses the most salient Palestinian concerns—and many fear that recent attacks in and around Jerusalem may be the start of just such an outbreak. Jordan and Egypt are both strategically important and politically fragile, and escalating problems between Israel and the Palestinians would pose yet another challenge to their stability. For Israel's friends in North America, Europe, and Asia, the deadlock creates diplomatic problems requiring the

expenditure of energy and political capital. In Europe in particular, the political winds appear to be turning: grassroots boycotts and divestment movements are gathering strength and European leaders appear less willing to defend the Israeli government no matter what it does. All across the Middle East, autocrats and demagogues still claim that an Israeli threat justifies repression and the avoidance of real reform. Ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict would remove an important scapegoat for recalcitrant regimes.

Moreover, the absence of peace between Israel and the Palestinians prevents either side from enjoying its potential benefits. Economically, Israel could expect expanded trade, tourism, and investment from elsewhere in the region and around the world.<sup>44</sup> The current Arab/Muslim boycotts, as well as the threat of further boycotts and divestment by other countries, would abate if not evaporate.

It is difficult to know just how much cooperation Israel might enjoy with its Arab neighbors in the security sector. Certainly Israel shares many threats with the Arab states, from Iran to ISIS to other Islamist organizations. Israel has extensive overt and covert programs with both Jordan and Egypt, the only two Arab states to have signed peace accords with Israel. With these examples in mind, a peace deal with the Palestinians could open up extensive counterterrorism collaboration, intelligence sharing, and possibly even overt assistance in areas like ballistic missile defense between Israel and the GCC states.

There also remain strong humanitarian motives to seek peace between Israelis and Arabs. Millions of Palestinians live unpleasant lives as refugees in neighboring states or as denizens of a nonstate in Gaza and the West Bank. The Syrian conflict has, in fact, turned many Palestinians into refugees twice over. Peace would not magically alleviate their problems, but it would clarify their status, eliminate many of the excuses for failing to allow them to live better lives, and—if an actual Palestinian state were established—enable the Palestinian collectivity to

<sup>43</sup> Shibley Telhami, *The World through Arab Eyes: Arab Public Opinion and the Reshaping of the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2013); Shibley Telhami, "2011 Arab Public Opinion Poll," presentation delivered at the Brookings Institution, November 21, 2011, [http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/reports/2011/11/21-arab-public-opinion-telhami/1121\\_arab\\_public\\_opinion.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/-/media/research/files/reports/2011/11/21-arab-public-opinion-telhami/1121_arab_public_opinion.pdf).

<sup>44</sup> See for instance Anthony C. Ross, et al., *The Costs of the Israeli-Palestinian Conflict*, RAND Corporation, 2015, [http://www.rand.org/pubs/research\\_reports/RR740](http://www.rand.org/pubs/research_reports/RR740).

engage in trade and international agreements that could be economically, socially, and political helpful.

Finally, an argument can be made that now is a propitious, strategic moment to seal a peace deal between Israel and the Palestinians (and the rest of the Arab world). The other states of the Middle East are badly distracted by the myriad other regional problems. Former spoilers like Hamas and Hezbollah have both been weakened by the events of the Arab Spring, the civil war in Syria, and the looming Sunni-Shia conflict. The Assad regime in Syria, which once forced the Palestinians to take an ever harder line against Israel, has been effectively removed from the Arab-Israeli equation. Israel and the Sunni Arab states now see a common enemy in Iran and its allies and proxies. The price of oil is low. In some ways, the stars seem well-aligned for peace between Israel and the Palestinians.

Yet it does not feel like peace is in the offing. Renewed violence is brewing and there is also evidence that peacemaking is no longer the urgent priority it once was. Gone is the specter of a superpower clash arising from an Arab-Israeli war, which haunted the Cold War and drove much of the early interest in peace between Israel and the Arabs. The rhetoric of the Arab states continues to carp on the Israeli-Palestinian divide, but their actions often seem to speak otherwise. It is a far cry from August 2001, when then-King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia sent then-President George W. Bush a letter insisting that he make peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Indeed, when Secretary of State John Kerry embarked on the latest American effort to broker such a peace, he could get the GCC states to deliver only \$150 million (out of \$600 million pledged) for the Palestinians, whereas those same countries have been perfectly willing to provide Egypt \$12-14 billion per year since Abdel Fattah el-Sisi ousted Mohamed Morsi. In private, Israeli and GCC officials readily volunteer that they have never cooperated as closely as they do today. Most stunning of all, in June 2015, Israel and Saudi Arabia publicly revealed the existence of their backchannel cooperation against Iran and other mutual threats.<sup>45</sup> In short, Arab-Israeli cooperation appears to be moving quickly down the

In some ways, the stars seem well-aligned for peace between Israel and the Palestinians. Yet it does not feel like peace is in the offing.

track despite the lack of any movement on Israeli-Palestinian peace.

From a more pragmatic perspective, politics in both Israel and the Palestinian territories all but preclude the possibility of peace, or even meaningful negotiations, in the near term. Many Israelis are understandably fearful of the current regional environment, and prefer to lean right, believing that their conservative leaders are best equipped to steer the Israeli state through the current rapids. Israel's convoluted political system adds to the problem by returning fragmented Knessets where minority parties are able to hold more constructive agendas hostage and effectively paralyze the state on key issues.

Palestinian problems are different but no better at this point. The current leadership of the Palestinian Authority has grown stale in power and lacks the political will to make peace. But the division between

Hamas's rule in Gaza and the Palestinian Authority's rule in the West Bank eliminates any possibility of compromise with Israel as surely as the recurrent fragmentation of the Knesset precludes compromise with the Palestinians. Since the Kerry initiative foundered on these mutually exacerbating conundrums, there are few people who seem even interested in trying again, and fewer ideas about how to do so.

These realities seem to argue for an unavoidable, albeit unpleasant, course of action. First, the Arab-Israeli (or even Israeli-Palestinian) conflict is no longer the most urgent priority; the region's civil wars have superseded it as a driver of international and intrastate threats. Second, until there are significant political and leadership changes in both parties, there is little rationale for investing heavily in new peace negotiations. Certainly, if an opportunity presents itself, internal and external actors should jump on it to try to push the ball forward—and should be willing to invest time, energy, and resources to do so. However, they should not make it a priority to create such opportunities. Not because it would not be strategically beneficial or morally right to do so, but only because the Middle East is beset by troubles and there are severe limitations on both the willingness and ability of well-meaning actors to address those troubles. As righteous and desirable as peace between Arabs and Israelis may be, at this time, it must give

<sup>45</sup> David E. Sanger, "Saudi Arabia and Israel Share a Common Opposition," *New York Times*, June 4, 2015.

way to higher priorities for both practical and strategic reasons.<sup>46</sup>

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46 Many members of the MEST Security and Public Order working group favored greater international, and particularly American, pressure on Israel. Their intended goal was both the humanitarian one of improving conditions for the Palestinians and the political one of potentially creating an opening that then might make it possible to resume peace negotiations. These members of the group argued for making much or all of US aid to Israel conditional on Jerusalem allowing greater aid and trade with Gaza, reducing checkpoints and other constraints on activity in the West Bank, and generally treating Palestinians with greater respect and dignity in their day-to-day affairs. Some who favored this approach saw it as a quid pro quo with Europe and the GCC to provide more aid to Gaza, in the hope of weakening Hamas' rule there and expanding the PA's role, and backing off on calls for divestment and other forms of pressure on Israel. Nevertheless, even those who favored this approach conceded that it would require a not-insignificant expenditure of effort and political capital on a gambit that had a low priority of producing a breakthrough, and was overall a low priority on Walter's grand "triage list" of the problems of the contemporary Middle East.

This does not mean that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict should be ignored, however. For instance, until someone can devise a realistic alternative that would not disenfranchise or threaten the security of both, it is critically important to maintain the possibility of a two-state solution for Israelis and Palestinians. It is equally important to recognize and condemn the worst actions by both sides, the kind that could lead to greater violence or make an eventual peace more difficult. Finally, there is a continuing need for international and regional support to both sides, to reassure Israelis that others care about their safety and to help strengthen the Palestinian Authority so that it can actually deliver goods, services, and justice to the Palestinian people. In some ways, this basic set of approaches to the Israeli-Palestinian confrontation may sound like a lower threshold than in the past, but it represents the bare minimum needed to prevent a new conflict and preserve the possibility of future peace. It will be hard enough accomplishing just that.



## VI. ENABLING REFORM

It may be that the most we can ask in the realm of security is that benevolent internal and external players act to alleviate the current security problems roiling the region and do so in ways less likely to exacerbate the deep-seated, underlying problems of the region in the name of suppressing immediate crises. Such steps alone would count as a huge improvement over the present, let alone the past. But the problems of the Middle East are so deep and so persistent that we must be audacious if we are ever to move beyond the region's habitual state of misery punctuated by regular catastrophes.

That means going beyond the negative goals of quelling the current problems and avoiding the siren song of short-term suppression, to aspire to contribute in more positive ways toward advancing the overarching cause of reform across the region. Making the promotion of reform a core element of a new approach to security in the Middle East is necessary at the most obvious level because reform will be so difficult to promote. It will need all of the help it can get.

Beyond that, there is an important causal relationship between security on the one hand and political, economic, and social development on the other. For instance, Barbara Walter notes that the scholarly literature on civil wars shows a strong correlation between poor governance and the outbreak or recurrence of civil war (and good governance does *not necessarily* mean democracy, although functional liberal democracies do feature good governance). In contrast, that same scholarly work has found no correlation between reform and increased risk of violence.

That is a critical revelation because across the Arab world, people have drawn the wrong inference, believing that reform opens the door to revolution, state failure, and civil war. They mistakenly conflate the unwillingness of Tunisian President Zine El Abidine Ben Ali and Egyptian President Hosni Mubarak to employ massive

force against the revolts that broke out against them in 2011 as somehow being part of a reform agenda. Of course they were nothing of the kind. They were either signs of a deeper humanitarian impulse or losses of will, depending on how charitable one wants to be toward the deposed dictators. But reform is something else entirely; it is a long-term, gradual process of change to improve legitimacy and efficiency so as to preclude the kind of revolts that broke out in 2011. Reform was not what Ben Ali did in 2011; it is what former King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia began doing in 2005 and was the most important reason that there was no revolt against the Al Saud in 2011.<sup>47</sup> In short, the interests of security demand the promotion of reform because a failure to reform is a key element in the revolts and concomitant state failure and civil wars that today are the most important of the many security problems bedeviling the Middle East.

Reform was not what Ben Ali did in 2011; it is what former King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia began doing in 2005.

### Security Sector Reform

The process of reform needs to be applied to the security providers of the Middle East as well. Part of the problems affecting governance across the region has been the corruption and politicization of the security sectors throughout the Arab world. The armed forces are often subverted by their own governments to ensure that they are subservient to the leader or the ruling class. Police forces are often corrupt and incompetent, terrorizing the citizenry rather than protecting it. Many Middle Eastern states have interior ministry forces whose sole job is to keep the government in power by employing more force than the police are able or the army is willing to use. Their judiciaries are too often capricious, corrupt, and willing to absolve the elites of even the most egregious crimes while inflicting harsh penalties on average citizens for small offenses. Far from serving and protecting, let alone administering justice or upholding the rule of law, many of the security sectors of the region are the principal villains. And it is the resultant,

<sup>47</sup> Riedel, "Saudi Arabia: The Elephant in the Living Room," pp. 159-167, op. cit.

pervasive sense of injustice that is one of the greatest sources of grievance across the Muslim Middle East.

Thus, still another goal must be to create professional, apolitical security services that protect all of society, not just the government. Institutions that are loyal to a constitution and a body of laws, not to specific individuals treated as above the law. Moreover, as part of a process of broad reform, the eventual professionalism and commitment to the nation *over the regime* needs to be solid enough to prevent a regime from subverting its own laws and arrogating to itself autocratic powers. It is something that needs to be part of the resolution of all of the region's civil wars, but it also must be applied broadly to virtually every state in the region. It is the ideal that the Turkish military always claimed in theory but never achieved in practice.

Moreover, security sector reform must go hand-in-hand with general political reform and development of the rule of law. As Economist Paul Collier has argued in an insightful study of security sector reform in Africa, the critical aspect is to change how people think—their incentives, their culture.<sup>48</sup> If you cannot do so, you get Iraq in 2010-14, where the United States had succeeded in building a largely integrated and apolitical military, only to have it thoroughly politicized and turned into a sectarian instrument by Prime Minister Maliki the moment the United States began pulling back.

Here as well, only a long, hard road leads to that destination, and the states of the region will need

considerable help from the outside world. Security sector reform will require external powers placing greater emphasis on foreign training of regular security providers—police, gendarmerie, interior ministry paramilitaries, and line military units, not just elite and counterterrorism formations. Intelligence cooperation needs to shift from mere intelligence sharing to the training of intelligence agency personnel, particularly with regard to the role of an intelligence agency within a constitutional framework. It will also mean teaching the culture of law enforcement rather than regime protection. And it will require considerable assistance to the justice system, including the cultural training of judges, and the establishment of processes to guard against judicial abuse.

Difficult as this will be—and it will be very difficult—there are some reasons for guarded optimism. Western nations have had some success with such efforts in past decades. Iraq in 2006-09 was briefly one such success story. The Palestinian Authority is another that has so far proven somewhat more durable. The United States and Europe took on the creation of a professional Palestinian security service after the Oslo Accords and by all accounts has done a pretty good job. While there certainly have been instances of Palestinian Authority security personnel joining in attacks on the Israelis during the second intifada, it is the government of Israel that has been the loudest and most effective advocate for continued assistance to the Palestinian Authority's security arm. The fact that the Israelis do not want Western participation in Palestinian security sector reform to stop is probably the best evidence of its accomplishments.

<sup>48</sup> Paul Collier, "Security Threats Facing Africa and Its Capacity to Respond," *Prism*, vol. 5, no. 2, 2015, pp. 30-41.

## VII. A NEW SECURITY ARCHITECTURE FOR THE MIDDLE EAST

For many centuries, Europe was the most unstable, violent continent in the world. Today, Europe—at least Europe west of the Dnieper River—is so tranquil and secure as to be geostrategically boring. Its transformation since 1945 was the product of a wide range of factors, including long and painful economic, political, and social reforms like those envisioned herein for the Middle East. However, another important aspect of these changes was the development of new security architectures for Europe and the superpowers that helped bound their strategic competition and avoid the kind of great power wars that had plagued the continent since the Reformation. These arrangements reduced misperceptions, reined in arms races, and bolstered deterrence through dialogue, confidence-building measures, and arms control agreements. Some of the most important also helped to usher in the wider societal transformations that finally ended the Cold War. Although the Middle East is different from Europe (and East Asia, where other security architectures have proven similarly helpful), given the extent of its problems, there is no doubt that it too could benefit from similar kinds of structures.

Formal alliances, like NATO in Europe and the Southeast Asia Treaty Organization (SEATO) in Asia, were critical elements of that successful security architecture during the Cold War and even beyond. Of course, its parallel for the Middle East, the Central Treaty Organization (CENTO), failed. It failed, however, largely because it was built around the old colonial master, the United Kingdom, which neither Iraqis nor Iranians would long abide, and because the United States never made the same kind of commitment to CENTO or to the states of the Middle East that it made to its NATO and SEATO partners.

A new alliance system between the United States and its regional allies could prove useful, but it would probably only modestly alleviate the tensions of the region (if at all) and could prove difficult to build in practice. The key role of NATO and SEATO was to deter a Soviet attack—conventional or nuclear—on Western Europe or Southeast Asia, respectively. Today, there is no conventional or nuclear threat to the United States' Middle Eastern allies. Iran is the only candidate and its conventional forces are weak. They are unquestionably

too weak to challenge even the modest American military presence already in the region, and they are probably too weak to do much more than annoy the GCC states even in the highly unlikely event that the United States was to abandon the Gulf altogether.

Conceivably, if Iran had a nuclear arsenal, this would alarm many of the United States' regional allies, and a formal alliance could be important to reassure them under those circumstances. However, there is no such Iranian nuclear threat today and there probably will not be an Iranian nuclear arsenal for at least ten to fifteen years, if ever. Only if that changes would there seem to be a real utility in ratcheting up the current level of American commitment to regional security to the status of a formal treaty.<sup>49</sup>

What the Middle East needs most are confidence-building measures, agreements to diminish the likelihood of inadvertent clashes, mechanisms to resolve conflict short of violence, and (eventually) arms control agreements. The region has none of these things, and they are the steps that would have the greatest impact on its overall security and stability. Here, Europe and the Cold War offer another model that, broadly speaking, could be of great value in helping the Middle East deal with both its security problems and its deeper societal cleavages. That is the model of the Conference on Security and Co-operation in Europe (CSCE), which later developed into the Organization for Security and Co-operation in Europe (OSCE).<sup>50</sup> The CSCE/OSCE is a security condominium that allowed two hostile

49 It is also worth noting that getting such a new treaty could be politically difficult. Few in Congress evince much love for the GCC states. Their culture and values are far removed from those of the United States and there is little to suggest that Congress would be willing to formally commit the United States to defend them in a treaty.

50 For a fuller discussion of this topic, see Joseph McMillan, "The United States and a Gulf Security Architecture: Policy Considerations," *Strategic Insights*, vol. 3, no. 3, March 2004; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Securing the Gulf," *Foreign Affairs*, vol. 82, no. 4, July/August 2003, pp. 2-16; Kenneth M. Pollack, "Security in the Persian Gulf: New Frameworks for the Twenty-First Century," The Saban Center for Middle East Policy at the Brookings Institution, Middle East Memo no. 24, June 2012, [http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/6/middle-east-pollack/middle\\_east\\_pollack.pdf](http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2012/6/middle-east-pollack/middle_east_pollack.pdf); James A. Russell, "Searching for a Post-Saddam Regional Security Architecture," *Middle East Review of International Affairs (MERIA)*, vol. 7, no. 1, March 2003.



blocs to work out arrangements to promote a more stable military balance in Europe and reduce the risk of surprise attack.

A corresponding approach for the Middle East could begin as a series of regular meetings at which the members would discuss various security issues. All sides would be allowed to lay out their fears, the threats they see, and how they would like to see those threats reduced. For particularly complex issues, subcommittees could try to negotiate solutions whenever possible. Hopefully, over time the process would move on to devise confidence-building measures that could be taken by one or all sides, symmetrically or asymmetrically. Later, states could use the meetings/organization to resolve disputes, allay fears, and manage conflicts and crises. Once sufficient trust has been established among the members, the mechanism could be used to devise arms control agreements that would substantively contribute to the security and stability of the region.

Another important, analogous aspect of this model for the Middle East is that the CSCE/OSCE incorporated a much broader spectrum of societal issues. Famously, security constituted one “basket” of issues, but there were two other baskets: economics and human rights. And the conversations on human rights often branched out into the rule of law and other governance matters. Given the importance of changes in economics and governance to the long-term security and stability of the Middle East, it would be extremely helpful to employ this model for the very same reasons.

Nevertheless, the Middle East is not Europe during the Cold War, and there are innumerable differences that would make it imperative to build a distinctive security architecture for the Middle East. It might be inspired by the CSCE/OSCE, but it would have to be very different in many of its particulars. The difference in the origins of the threats is one of the most important reasons why. In Europe, especially the West’s half of Europe, the threats to security were entirely external and the CSCE/OSCE was designed to address the traditional security concerns of interstate war, revanchism, expansionism, and the security dilemma. Such threats still lurk in the Middle East and prey on the minds of regional rulers far more than is warranted, but they are neither the only set of security problems, nor even the most important. Consequently, a separate basket of internal security problems would have to be added to the basket of state-to-state security matters, ranging from terrorism to civil war.

Inevitably, this second security basket will be far harder to tackle because it would challenge the sovereignty

of the member states. However, it is these threats that drive the problems of the Middle East. They must be addressed if such a new security architecture is to have any value. Moreover, the external powers can make this part of the explicit bargain that has been discussed throughout this report. If the states of the region want help with their internal security problems and the threat from the internal security problems of their neighbors—and the vast majority do—they should be encouraged to incorporate them into the discussions of the proposed security forum in order to secure the support they need. Indeed, the United States, Europe, China, Japan, South Korea, and other developed states with heavy interests in the Middle East would be well-advised to be generous with their assistance to reward regional states who use the new security forum to find collective solutions to their internal security problems as a way of encouraging others to do the same.

### Start in the Gulf

In the 1990s, the United States tried to establish something like the mechanism envisioned here, at least among those Middle Eastern states involved in the Arab-Israeli confrontation: Israel, Egypt, Jordan, Saudi Arabia, the GCC, and most of the North African states. Notably absent from this gambit were the worst regional troublemakers: Syria, Iran, Iraq, Libya, and Sudan. The effort, called the Arms Control and Regional Security (ACRS) initiative, was part of the Madrid peace process and, after stumbling along for several years, died altogether in the latter half of the decade. Its bane was a disagreement between Egypt and Israel over whether ACRS should include discussions of nuclear weapons.

The ACRS experience suggests that the Arab-Israeli confrontation may not be the best place to start. The Gulf seems much better suited to such an effort, and would likely benefit from it more. Delving a bit deeper into the failure of ACRS is useful to understand this. Another critical problem with that earlier effort was that the states involved in it did not have enough security issues in common. Most of the Arab participants in the ACRS process, especially the states of North Africa and the Gulf, did not feel especially threatened by Israel, and their primary security challenge was not the Arab-Israeli conflict. For them, the absence of those regional troublemakers—their principal threats at the time—made the process irrelevant. In the jargon of political scientists, the states involved in the process did not constitute a discrete “security system” where all of the members viewed the others as their principal security threats and/or partners. The Gulf, on the other hand, is a discrete security system. Iraq, Iran, and the GCC states all do see one another as their principal

security problems and all will admit as much, at least in private, and especially when the United States is included in the mix.

If the process works with the Gulf states, then at some later point, it could be expanded to include the Levant and the Maghreb. But it will be hard enough to get such a framework going without immediately larding it down with the numerous, intractable, and largely unrelated problems of these different sections of the Middle East. Like a juggler who starts with one bowling ball before adding the next (and then the next), taking things one impossible challenge at a time seems best.

### Membership

A CSCE/OSCE-type security framework would ideally start with all of the states of the Gulf littoral and a select number of others for whom the security of the Gulf is a primary concern—and who would not try to hijack the forum to deal with other security matters unrelated to the Gulf. Because the United States remains the dominant power in the Gulf, and the principal security backer of the GCC, it too would have to be included.

Beyond the GCC core, Iran and Iraq would have to be invited to participate. Only by their participation would it be possible to address the Gulf's main security problems through cooperative threat reduction and conflict resolution measures. For their part, the Iranians might see the new security condominium as an American trap, but over time would hopefully come to realize that it is their best (indeed, their only) way to have any influence on the deployment and behavior of American forces in the Gulf—which is Iran's greatest external threat. In particular, the Iranians might come to recognize the value of a Treaty on Conventional Armed Forces in Europe-style arms control treaty that would place parameters around American military moves and limit the size of American forces in and around the Gulf, something that would be possible only within the context of a CSCE-like process for the region. Indeed, more moderate Iranian officials have already indicated their willingness to participate in such a forum, with Iran's Foreign Minister Javad Zarif having advocated for it in the pages of the *New York Times* back when he was Ambassador to the United Nations.<sup>51</sup>

<sup>51</sup> M. Javad Zarif, "A Neighbor's Vision of a New Iraq," *New York Times*, May 10, 2003.

Because China and India both have great and growing interests in the Gulf, as well as the potential to play roles similar to that of the United States, they too would be good candidates for inclusion.<sup>52</sup> In fact, attempting to exclude China or India could compromise such an organization because they have the economic and political clout, and will eventually have the military strength, to create real problems if their views are not taken into account. Russia's return to the region in force suggests that all five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council might need to be included, not just despite but because of Moscow's ability to play the spoiler. Again, a key aspect of such a security condominium is to bring all of the key actors into the process to try to address their concerns and defuse their ability to destabilize the region, so excluding Russia because it is viewed as a troublemaker by the West would be counterproductive. Finally, the Turks have an important role to play in Gulf security issues and have expressed an interest in a CSCE/OSCE-like structure for the Middle East, although their security concerns are not limited to the Gulf.

It would be critical to keep in mind that even a new security condominium for the Gulf will not solve all of the region's problems by itself. Such a new architecture is merely a mechanism to facilitate actions that would be harder to accomplish without it. Ultimately, however, it will still require all of the member states to be willing to accept compromises on their own security-related behavior in return for their adversaries doing the same. A CSCE-like security system for the Gulf, and eventually the region, will not be a panacea, but if there is a willingness on all sides to try, it could reduce the risk of war by miscalculation and lay the foundation for real arms control that would make deliberate war more difficult as well. Even if it failed in those goals, it would clearly identify the troublemakers, making it easier to organize collective action against them—to contain, sanction, or even confront them. It will not be simple, and certain problems will call for creativity and finesse, but like everything related to future security reforms in the Middle East, there is no reason not to try, and every reason to do so.

<sup>52</sup> On potential Sino-American cooperation in the Middle East, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *A Path Out of the Desert: A Grand Strategy for America in the Middle East* (New York: Random House, 2008), pp. 419–430.

## VIII. THE PERSISTENT SALIENCE OF THE AMERICAN ROLE

Righting the imbalances of the Middle East; extinguishing the fires currently raging there; ending its perpetual crises; fixing its dysfunctions; and setting it on a path toward sustained, gradual, but adequate progress is a vast undertaking. As the papers of all of the working groups involved in the MEST project, and the chapeau report of the task force, make clear, doing so properly will be uniquely important, complex, and difficult. It is likely to prove akin to the rebuilding, stabilizing, and securing of Europe after the two world wars. Inevitably, some parts of this massive burden need to be borne more by one nation or group of countries, and other aspects by other countries or coalitions.

Just as inevitably, in the realm of security, it is the United States' role that looms largest, overshadowing all other actors. Many Americans wish it were otherwise, and some have made reasonable arguments that the United States need not take on this burden at all or as much as it has in the past. Many others contend that American interests require stability in the Middle East. It would not be appropriate to use this report to argue for one position or the other. However, a central conclusion of this report is that an active and assertive American role is critical to address the security challenges of the Middle East. While the United States need not make a military, diplomatic, and financial investment in the region on the same scale as that of 2001-11, developing credible answers to the region's current security problems will require a greater commitment than that which the United States has made since 2011, even greater than the renewed American effort that followed the fall of Mosul in June 2014.

Especially in the realm of security in the Middle East, the United States remains the "indispensable nation," using former US Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's famous phrase. There is no other nation or coalition with either the capacity or the potential willingness to advance the strategies proposed in this report. If the United States will not lead, no other nation can or will do so in its place. The security

problems of the region will proliferate and feed off one another, threatening to consume the region entirely for a generation or more. Thus, throughout this report, the role of the United States has figured prominently—often predominantly—because of its unique capability to realize, and its potential willingness to embrace, the strategy proposed herein.

Nevertheless, it is not the case that the United States needs to act alone, nor should it do so. It remains true that if the United States leads, others will follow. Many can make useful contributions—even vital contributions—that in some areas may surpass the importance or extent of the American commitment.

This too must be a key adjunct goal of any new security strategy for the Middle East, because the willingness of the American public to pay costs to address the security problems of the Middle East has declined since the heat from September 11 has cooled and then been tempered by the shortcomings of intervention in Iraq, Afghanistan, and Libya. The

role of the United States remains crucial in reshaping the security of the Middle East. But maintaining the American commitment requires a constant effort to secure the maximum contributions possible from other countries to protect US public support and ensure those tools that only the United States can bring to bear are employed only where and when they are most needed. Consequently, to the extent possible, the United States should aim to galvanize the efforts of a wide range of other countries and actors.

Doing so, however, will require Washington to articulate a coherent, comprehensive, and feasible strategy to address the security threats facing the Middle East and emanating from it. More than that, Washington will have to lay out specific, practical sub-strategies derived from the overarching regional approach that have a reasonable expectation to be able to deal with the many discrete, but intertwined, security issues roiling this part of the world: Syria, Iraq, Libya, Yemen, the Saudi-Iranian confrontation, ISIS, al-Qaeda, the Sunni-Shia rift, etc. Such a strategy must

If the United States  
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place.

be devised in cooperation with the regional states to address their needs and concerns as much as possible. They need to feel listened to, rather than dictated to, if the United States is going to have their cooperation. Finally, the United States will have to demonstrate a willingness to commit sufficient resources to the entire strategy, and to key sub-strategies that only it can realistically tackle, such that others will have a reasonable expectation that the strategy can succeed. If the United States is willing to do this, there is an equally reasonable likelihood that others will be willing to contribute more, allowing for a useful and necessary division of labor among the various security challenges of the Middle East.

Although bringing security and stability to the Middle East benefits American interests in its own right, it also benefits a great many other countries, and in some cases arguably more than it benefits the United States. For that reason, the United States should see its willingness to take up the burden of leading a new effort to secure and stabilize the region as part of an explicit trade-off. In laying out its regional strategy, local sub-strategies, implementation plans, and the resources it will allocate to implement the new strategy, Washington should insist that its allies in the Middle East, Europe, and Asia do more as well. For its allies outside the region, the quid pro quo should be similar commitments of military, economic, and

diplomatic resources—from combat forces to financial assistance—sometimes as adjuncts to an American campaign, in other areas as stand-alone efforts, but all within the context of the overarching strategy. For the states of the Middle East, most of whom are eager, if not desperate, for the United States to take on just such a role (and apoplectic that it has not already), the explicit bargain should be for them to implement the kinds of reforms outlined both in this report and those of the working groups on governance, economics, religion, and refugees.

Ultimately, the central organizing principal, the goal, of a new comprehensive security strategy for the Middle East must be to enable reform. The only way to mitigate and eventually end the region's chronic and ever-worsening security problems is for the nations of the region to address the structural dysfunctions of their political, economic, and social systems. Consequently, if the United States and the wider international community are going to accept the difficult and costly commitment to take on the region's security problems—particularly immediate problems such as the civil wars and deterring Iran—exactly as the states of the region want, it must come with a reciprocal agreement by those states to take on the equally painful task of pursuing meaningful reform to transform the region so that someday it will evolve beyond its current state of endless crisis and conflict.

## CONCLUSION - THE CHALLENGE OF ACTION, THE DANGER OF INACTION

The courses of action proposed in this report are certainly daunting at first glance. Each individual element faces multiple challenges to overcome. All of them interact and intertwine in ways that would make it difficult to address them sequentially, adding still another layer of complexity and difficulty. None of them is impossible, and some are more plausible than commonly recognized. But none of them is easy. All of them require a degree of political will, resources, and strategic acuity that few have been willing or able to muster in recent years.

Nevertheless, they reflect the reality that pulling the Middle East out of its death spiral is not going to be easy either. The trajectory that the region is on points toward worsening conflict and misery that is likely to slowly overtake more and more of the countries of the region. Already, even strong states like Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt are facing vexing new problems. If the Middle East descends into its own “thirty years’ war” as many now fear, it is an open question whether even the Saudi and Egyptian regimes can survive; it is much more so for the many weak states of the region: Jordan, Kuwait, Lebanon, Morocco, Bahrain, etc.

From the perspective of ruthless realpolitik, it might be ideal for the rest of the world to steer a wide berth from the region while it sorts itself out in a bloodbath and hopefully emerges several decades from now stronger and more stable. Unfortunately, however, even if we ignore the humanitarian nightmares such a scenario would entail, there is considerable evidence indicating that protracted violence and instability in the Middle East will affect other countries across our globalized world. The Middle East is not Las Vegas: What happens there does not stay there. A more volatile oil market that causes new recessions in the developed economies; millions of refugees spilling out of the region; swarms of new, ever more vicious terrorists attacking whomever they blame for the Middle East’s woes; and perhaps the emergence of brutal new regimes intent on acquiring by conquest what the region has failed to build for itself. These,

among other things, are the kinds of problems the rest of the world would have to contend with while the Middle East “sorts itself out.”

The one reality we should accept is that the approach outlined in this report, or something close to it, reflects the broad contours and the level of effort required to address the security problems of the Middle East with any reasonable expectation of success. A great many people in the developed world would like to believe that there are easier steps and lesser levels of effort that we might take that would still have a plausible chance of fixing, or merely saving, the Middle East. The historical record of both the Middle East and other states/regions that have endured similar kinds of problems strongly suggests that they are wrong.

There are no quick fixes to the problems of the Middle East, no partial solutions.

Similarly, many in the region would like to believe that not all of the measures discussed in this report are necessary. That we need only put the Iranians (or the Saudis) in their place, defeat ISIS (or Assad), and back counterterror campaigns to their hilt, and everything will be

fine. That too is equally misguided. There are no quick fixes to the problems of the Middle East, no partial solutions.

William Shakespeare’s Hamlet famously asked whether “’tis nobler in the mind to suffer the slings and arrows of outrageous fortune, or to take arms against a sea of troubles, and by opposing end them?” That is the question that we face too as we confront the problems of the Middle East. The problems that the region faces today will be hard and costly to solve. Doing so will take time, and a willingness to see them through for the duration. But failing to address those problems today runs the risk of having them metastasize. There is good reason to fear that ignoring the problems of today will not make them go away, but will make them worse—forcing us to pay far more to deal with them later, or even running the risk that they become so great that they cannot be defeated at all, and we are all swept under.



The answer to that conundrum is unknowable in this case as it is in every case. As mere human beings, we can neither know what the future holds, nor how our actions or lack thereof may change the course of future history. We can act, but if that is the path we choose, we must do so with both the resolution and the material tools to succeed. Or we can choose to not act, at least not in the Middle East. But if we follow that path, we must follow it to its end too, preparing just as

energetically to mitigate the spillover the region will inevitably emit. As is so often the case with the Middle East, these are the two unpalatable choices we have. But the worst move of all would be to not choose, as we have so often done in the past. As we should have learned long ago, that is always the worst choice of all and always leaves us—all of us, within the region and without—worse off than we otherwise would have been had we made the hard choice at the start.

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