

# THE BIDEN ADMINISTRATION AND THE MIDDLE EAST: POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS FOR A SUSTAINABLE WAY FORWARD

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# **The Biden Administration and the Middle East: Policy Recommendations for a Sustainable Way Forward**

The Middle East Institute

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## ABOUT THIS PUBLICATION

The briefs in this book offer policy insights and recommendations from MEI scholars on key issues in the Middle East. They do not necessarily represent a consensus of all MEI scholars' opinions on any particular issue. Instead, they serve as a contribution to the broader discussion about the challenges and opportunities for U.S. policy in the region.

# FOREWORD: STRATEGIC CONSIDERATIONS FOR MIDDLE EAST POLICY

PAUL SALEM, GERALD FEIERSTEIN & ROSS HARRISON

## Introduction

As Joe Biden enters office his administration faces an overwhelming domestic agenda and myriad foreign policy challenges. Reinforcing relations with our European allies and developing effective strategies for countering China will likely crowd out the Middle East for the attention of the new administration.

Moreover, doubts about U.S. commitment to this vital but turbulent region and the steadiness of U.S. policy have grown among U.S. allies and adversaries alike. The Biden administration will encounter lingering concerns about the reputation of the United States as a reliable partner. Such concerns will be accentuated by Russia and China's expanded presence in the region and their image as steady partners.

The Biden administration will face another important and evolving reality: The Middle East, which for the past century at least was shaped by global powers, is now in the midst of an internal transformation that makes it more resistant to attempts by those outside the region to determine political outcomes. This reality is most evident today with regional powers, caught in the throes of a Middle East in turmoil, having grown more confident and increasingly assertive in pressing their own policy preferences, even when these clash with U.S. interests.

President Biden will confront a Middle East far different than the one he left at the end of the Obama administration. The region is now grappling with the political, economic, and human costs of a global pandemic; the effects of climate change and economic degradation; the needs of a burgeoning youth population; and a tidal wave of refugees and migration — issues that cry out for constructive engagement by the international community. How the region as a whole, both U.S. allies and adversaries alike, responds to these challenges will influence U.S. national security and foreign policy interests for decades to come.

Aside from the challenges, the Middle East has also seen some positive developments that, if deftly managed, can benefit U.S. interests. Chief among these is the normalization agreements between Israel and key Gulf and North African states. These breakthroughs present opportunities for the U.S. to consolidate cooperation among partners in the region, and boost economic and technological synergies. But it is imperative that the agreements not spell the end of Israeli-Palestinian negotiations but rather ultimately become an impetus for reviving them and finding new pathways to move toward a two-state solution. It is also key that the agreements are not used as a platform for stoking further escalation of regional conflict.

There has been much discussion over the past several years that the U.S. intends to step back from the Middle East and re-focus its efforts on strengthening its position in Asia. Yet the reality remains that the United States has enduring interests in the Middle East that will demand the new administration's attention. These interests require that the United States develop an integrated strategy that rebuilds relations with partners, engages with adversaries, and acts within the long-term goal of reducing regional conflict and instability, and putting the region on a more stable and cooperative trajectory for the future.

In the following set of policy briefs, Middle East Institute scholars tackle a large number of country-specific and region-wide issue areas; they lay out both the abiding U.S. interests and specific recommendations for Biden administration policies that can further U.S. interests amid a region in turmoil.

## The U.S. Retains Enduring Interests in the Middle East

U.S. political, economic, diplomatic, and military investments in the region need to reflect the breadth of the interests for the United States represented there:

*Energy Security:* The U.S. is part of the global trade in energy even as it has become a net energy exporter. Moreover, U.S. allies in Europe and Asia remain dependent on the oil and gas flowing out of the Middle East region. Thus, even as the world seeks to transition away from fossil fuels to renewable green energy sources, Middle East energy resources will, nevertheless, remain essential to global economic security for decades to come. The U.S. has an interest in keeping those resources flowing and in preventing adversaries, like Iran or China, from controlling that flow.

*Defending Sea Lanes:* Critical international trade routes linking East to West transit by or through the Middle East region. The Strait of Hormuz, the Bab el-Mandeb, and the Suez Canal are potential chokepoints that can cripple the global economy if free passage of international commerce is blocked. The U.S. has an interest in keeping those lanes open and secure, and in not ceding control of them to regional or global competitors.

*Countering Violent Extremism:* The U.S. security establishment continues to assess the threat to U.S. global interests and the homeland from terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda as real and ongoing. Working with regional and international powers to deter, disrupt, defeat, and destroy these groups will remain a core U.S. security interest into the future.

*Promoting Good Governance and Democracy:* A decade after the Arab Spring, serious questions remain about the viability of state institutions across the Middle East region. There are also concerns about the rise of autocracy and the narrowing of respect for human rights and civil liberties. U.S. relations in the region are best preserved by ensuring that governments there move away from these troubling trends. It will be important for the Biden administration to double down on the U.S. commitment to human rights, the rule of law, gender equality, and democratic values, all of which are critically important to the populations of the region and differentiate the U.S. from global rivals.

*Stability in the Gulf:* The United States has an enduring interest in lowering tensions in the Gulf. Tensions among regional powers there can draw in global powers, further escalating the conflict system in the Middle East. Moreover, tensions will likely fuel proxy competition in the civil war zones, rendering the entire region a conflict trap that draws in global actors and destabilizes the global community.

*Israel and its Neighbors:* Israel's security has been and will continue to be a core U.S. interest. But another is the resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which continues to generate tension throughout the Arab and Muslim worlds.

*Ending the Forever Wars:* Drawing down further major military deployments in the Afghanistan and Iraq/Syria theaters is another U.S. interest, although while doing so the U.S. will need to preserve critical security relationships and maintain smaller deployments of special operations forces (SOF) personnel to retain counterterrorism (CT) capabilities. Efforts to end ongoing civil wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya, and stabilize Iraq, can aid the administration in reducing the U.S. military presence.

*Non-Proliferation of WMD:* Nuclear and chemical/biological weapons proliferation is at the forefront of U.S. concerns. The long-term interest is to negotiate a weapons of mass destruction-free Middle East, but in the short term the U.S. has an interest in preventing further proliferation, including but not limited to Iran.

## The Pathway to Supporting These Interests is Strewn with Obstacles

As the Biden administration seeks to establish its policy direction for the Middle East, it will be confronting a playing field that is substantially less favorable to U.S. interests than was the case previously. Among other challenges the president will confront:

*Great Power Competitors:* Beyond their growing military presence in the region, both China and Russia have strengthened their political ties to major regional powers. China's Belt and Road Initiative includes a maritime link through the Red Sea with ties to Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, as well as a land corridor running through Iran and Turkey en route to Europe. In addition, Beijing is now Abu Dhabi's leading trading partner. For its part, Russia works closely with Saudi Arabia in securing the OPEC+ agreement to stabilize oil prices. Both China and Russia are eager to break into the regional arms market, while 5G networks across the Middle East will be built around China's Huawei technology. Notwithstanding that neither Russia nor China currently have a diplomatic capacity rivaling the United States, Washington will need to work hard to preserve its leadership amid the challenges to its role as a regional powerbroker.

*The Rise of Regional Powers and Competitors:* As concerns grew among U.S. regional friends and partners over its will and capacity to remain engaged in the Middle East, alternative leadership developed within the region to fill the perceived vacuum. Some of the new assertiveness inevitably reflected the rise of a new, more confident generation of leaders in the region, determined to map their own paths to advance national interests, even in instances where their preferences conflicted with U.S. priorities. In many instances this assertiveness remains at the political, economic, and diplomatic levels, but it has also developed into direct and indirect armed interventions beyond borders. Iran has long pursued this path, building Hezbollah in Lebanon in the 1980s, and then expanding that model to proxy militia influence in Iraq, Syria, and Yemen. Recently other countries have followed this model as well, including Turkish interventions in Syria and Libya, Saudi intervention in Yemen, and UAE intervention in Yemen and Libya. The result is an increased complexity for U.S. leadership in dealing with regional partners and adversaries tangled in complex conflict dynamics.

*A Region Facing Critical Challenges:* Like the rest of the world, the Middle East has suffered serious political, economic, and social fallout from the global pandemic. While several of the region's governments have done reasonably well in managing the pandemic, this has come with shrinking fiscal space, higher levels of poverty and unemployment, and increasing levels of repression. Recovery will be prolonged and difficult. And the combination of dire social conditions and renewed mobility when the pandemic ebbs means that many countries in the region might face a new wave of protests and potential instability in the second half of 2021 and beyond.

For the Biden administration, it is important always to be mindful of national, regional, and global elements of the region's instability, and to fashion policy in a way that responds to particular interests or crises, while at the same time nudging the national, regional, and global dynamics in a more positive direction for the region and for U.S. interests in it.

## Outlines of a Strategy

The briefs that follow in this volume detail critical elements of U.S. policy toward the countries and issues of the region. They fall within a broader scope of a U.S. strategy that balances the need to preserve and promote U.S. interests while maintaining a smaller footprint

and not overburdening the administration's political and diplomatic bandwidth. Such a strategy should include the following elements:

*Stay Focused on the Region as a Whole:* The Biden administration will be overwhelmed with urgent policy decisions throughout the region, from Iran to Turkey, Iraq, Syria, Israel-Palestine, Yemen, and other issues. And the briefs that follow advance particular policies to address these myriad challenges. But the administration should also maintain a broader focus on the region as a whole and recognize that U.S. interests are best and most sustainably preserved in the context of a more stable, less conflictual, and more internally cooperative regional order. To advance toward this goal, the United States needs to encourage cooperation between major regional powers, such as the Arab states, Iran, Turkey, and Israel. The United States also needs to reinforce the norm that states remain behind their own borders, and pursue their interests through diplomacy, not proxy warfare. The U.S. needs to make clear its long-term vision for the region — to governments as well as their populations — and it needs to focus on defusing regional tensions and rebuilding respect for a state-based order. It should use its influence both with partners and adversaries to advance this long-term goal, and enlist support from Europe, China, and Russia, all of which would benefit from regional stability and a rules-abiding, state-based order.

Re-engaging Iran, including a potential U.S. return to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and Iran's recommitment to its terms, needs to be a priority in terms of defusing regional tensions. The administration also needs to be sensitive to the threat perceptions and security needs of our allies in the region. A resolution of the conflict in Yemen can potentially open the door to a new regional dialogue between Iran and the GCC states that addresses these issues.

The Biden administration should also be aware that most people in the region are not focused on geopolitical contests but rather have more urgent socio-economic concerns relating to poverty, unemployment, and health care, among other issues. In that vein, the U.S. should use its soft power to help mobilize international efforts aimed at pandemic relief, post-pandemic socio-economic recovery, economic integration, and growth. It should also coordinate with international financial institutions on providing aid and development and financial packages to war-weary communities, as well as restore aid to beleaguered Palestinian communities.



*Work To End Civil Wars and Prevent New Ones:* The wars in Yemen, Syria, and Libya have been black holes that have drawn in regional and international intervention and have exported security threats, violent extremism, and refugees. To protect vital interests and for humanitarian reasons, the U.S. should use its diplomatic and political toolkit to de-escalate these civil/proxy wars across the board and negotiate them to an end where possible. In Yemen and Libya, a negotiated end is possible and should be pursued vigorously. In Syria, a negotiated outcome is hard to envisage with the Assad regime, but the U.S. should de-escalate conflict and find ways to bring socio-economic relief to a suffering population. As an act of prevention, the U.S. should support fragile states, such as Iraq and Lebanon, which risk falling back into state collapse and civil war. In Afghanistan, the Trump administration attempted to negotiate a way out for the U.S. and a way forward for the Afghans. The U.S. should continue efforts at mediation but be clear eyed about the limited policy options ahead.

*Pursue Great Power Rivalry, but Look for Areas of Cooperation as well:* While the U.S. views Chinese and Russian intervention in the region largely in the context of great power conflict, it should also look beyond rivalry. Unbridled competition is likely to cause a worsening of regional divisions and regional conflict, and multiply conditions conducive to failed states, persistent civil wars, and opportunities for armed non-state actors and terrorist groups to thrive. This is not in the U.S. interest; nor, incidentally, is it in the Chinese and Russian interest. In thorny regional crises, cooperation and agreement between the great powers can bring about solutions that otherwise might be hard to imagine locally. The example of the great power cooperation that led to international sanctions, then international agreement, with Iran on its nuclear program should be a model moving forward.

*Look Beyond Geopolitics:* The Middle East has suffered serious political, economic, and social fallout from the global pandemic. The U.S. can reinforce its soft power leadership by helping low-income countries to secure access to vaccines and facilitate their distribution. It should coordinate with international and regional institutions to help these countries recover from the fiscal deficits, economic contractions, and social costs that have been painfully incurred over the life of the pandemic, and help countries in the region build resilience not only for future pandemics but also for the accelerating impacts of climate change.

## Conclusion

The U.S. has enduring interests in the Middle East and needs to maintain a sustainable level of American political, security, and economic engagement in the region to secure and promote them. The administration should also be aware that the general dysfunction and disintegration of the region directly impacts U.S. interests, and that using American leverage to encourage the states in the Middle East to move toward a more cooperative and integrated regional framework — as in other regions of the world — is a long-term American interest. In that vein, the United States must play a role in encouraging de-escalation and cooperation among regional players, making clear that a state-based regional order in which states abide by the basic rules of international relations, like in other regions of the world, is the ultimate goal.



# Policy Briefs



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# US GENERAL MIDDLE EAST INTERESTS & POLICY PRIORITIES

PAUL SALEM

## ISSUES

- The Middle East is going through one of the most unstable periods in its recent history. The instability goes well beyond the current triple crisis of the COVID-19 pandemic, the related economic contraction, and the collapse of energy prices. Looking deeper, part of the instability is due to domestic shocks, such as the Arab uprisings of 2011, and part to external shocks, such as the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq. And many of today's fault lines date back to 1979, when the Islamic revolution in Iran mobilized and weaponized Shiite communities around the region, and when the U.S., Pakistan, and Saudi Arabia mobilized and weaponized radical Sunni groups to fight the Soviet invasion in Afghanistan.
- Today the region includes four fully or partially failed states (Yemen, Libya, Syria, and Afghanistan), several very fragile states (Iraq, Lebanon, and Sudan), dozens of armed non-state actors (Sunni and Shi'a; Arab, Kurdish, Pashtu, etc.), and a number of recognized terrorist groups.
- The Middle East suffers from several conflict axes. First, Iran is embroiled in the largest conflict system: It is in conflict with the U.S. and its regional partners, Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE. The second conflict axis is within the Sunni world, between the Arab Quartet (Saudi Arabia, the UAE, Bahrain, and Egypt) on the one hand, and Turkey (and until recently Qatar) on the other. This exacerbates regional tensions over political Islam and the role of the Muslim Brotherhood, and is partly fueling the civil war in Libya. The third conflict axis is over Israel-Palestine and its repercussions in the wider Arab and Muslim worlds.
- This last dynamic has been transformed by the breakthrough normalization agreements between Israel and each of the UAE, Bahrain, Sudan, and Morocco. Saudi Arabia must be counted among the shadow partners in this new normalization, as it had to approve the direct approaches from Bahrain and, to some degree, the UAE, although Riyadh is not ready to move as openly at this stage. These new alignments should

release pent-up potential in terms of economic, technological, infrastructure, and trade cooperation among these regional economies. The Israel-Gulf partnership will provide additional deterrence vis-à-vis Iran, but could also escalate mistrust and tensions across the Persian Gulf.

## US INTERESTS

- The U.S. has five main interests in the Middle East:
  1. Maintaining the free flow of energy and trade to world markets.
  2. Countering the spread of weapons of mass destruction.
  3. Countering or preempting terrorist groups.
  4. Standing with partners and allies.
  5. Countering the influence of rival great powers.
- These interests must be seen within the context of a general downgrading of interest in the Middle East in favor of an intensified interest, or pivot, to Asia and global issues like fighting the pandemic, rebuilding global institutions, and slowing climate change.
- They must also be seen within the context of U.S. fatigue — at the level of the public, as well as that of military and foreign policy makers — with regard to costly engagements in the Middle East that have shown few positive returns.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Finding a breakthrough in the U.S.-Iran relationship is critical. Conflict involving Iran now fuels several civil wars, directly threatens world energy supplies, threatens U.S. partners and allies, and fuels sectarian radicalization that enables major terrorist groups. The Obama administration approach achieved progress on the nuclear file, but also led to greater Iranian intervention in the region and an expansion of its missile program. Trump administration policy has weakened the Iranian economy, but exacerbated regional and energy risks

without getting closer to a resolution. There is an opportunity to lean on the leverage provided by the Trump administration to pursue wider negotiations with Iran that might include not only revisiting the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) — perhaps with additional, stronger protocols — but also discussions about scaling back its regional interventions and limiting its missile program. None of this will be easy, but it is essential. The open-ended conflict with Iran impacts all five of the U.S.'s core interests in the Middle East.

- As civil wars are driving large-scale refugee flows, exacerbating human suffering, and enabling terrorist groups, ending them should be a high U.S. priority. Ending the wars in Yemen and Libya is not out of reach, but requires more concerted diplomatic and political will. Ending the wars in Syria and Afghanistan will be much harder. In Syria, the best that can be hoped for is to stabilize an inconclusive situation without generating more human suffering or allowing a resurgence of ISIS. In Afghanistan, the best alternative is probably a continued commitment to the Afghan state, despite the inability to defeat the Taliban.
- The U.S. should build on the normalization agreements between Israel and several Arab states by working to revive Israel-Palestine talks toward a two-state solution in the context of a more friendly Arab environment.
- The last-minute rapprochement between Saudi Arabia and Qatar is a welcome development. The U.S. should work with partners to reduce tensions between Turkey and other major Sunni players and encourage confidence-building measures and increasing cooperation.
- In the throes of the pandemic, the U.S. should display a leadership role in helping coordinate vaccine provision to lower-income countries in the region, encourage the IMF and other financial players to help low-income countries manage the fiscal and economic pressures caused by the pandemic, and help the health sector in the region recover and rebuild resilience to be prepared for future pandemics.

- The Biden administration itself passed through an attempted authoritarian coup in Washington. It should be true to itself and to core American values by bringing back an insistence on human rights, civil liberties, rule of law, and accountable government as part of America's stance in the region.
- Overall, the U.S. should continue to maintain its presence and partnerships in the region, while providing humanitarian assistance; encouraging economic reform, development, and investment; and pressing for civic and political reform.

# AFGHANISTAN

## MARVIN G. WEINBAUM

### ISSUES

- The future of intra-Afghan peace talks looks very much in doubt. Following months of wrestling over procedural issues, the delegations in Doha have still to address the difficult substantive issues that divide them. In the negotiations, the Afghan Taliban has shown little interest in the compromises necessary to create a power-sharing agreement. Even as new efforts may be made to recast the peace process, overcoming the starkly contrasting visions of a preferred Afghan end-state will remain the principle challenge.
- The Taliban continues to increase its grip on much of the Afghan country outside of the population centers. In the absence of a comprehensive, sustained cease-fire, the ability of the Afghan security forces to withstand the Taliban and Islamic State-Khorasan Province insurgencies will continue to be severely tested, especially if U.S. and coalition forces are fully withdrawn.
- Disunity among Afghanistan's political elites continues and is likely to grow as the prospects of a peace agreement fade. The danger exists that in the face of a mounting insurgency, powerful politicians will increase their efforts to unseat the Ashraf Ghani government and may explore striking separate deals with the Taliban. With increased violence across the country and feeling deserted by the international community, the current flow of Afghan refugees could turn into a flood.

### US INTERESTS

- Although determined to have a small footprint in Afghanistan, the U.S. has to feel reasonably confident that Afghanistan will not once again become a launching ground for globally focused terrorist groups to attack the U.S. or our Western allies. It is of paramount importance that conflict in Afghanistan does not contribute to regional instability and radicalization that would increase the danger of nuclear proliferation.

Disengagement could also undermine U.S. geostrategic interests in a region that encompasses Iran, Russia, and China.

- The U.S. has a stake in seeing a strengthened Afghan government, one that can restore the confidence of the Afghan people in their elected leadership. It has a 19-year investment in the survival of a popularly elected, liberal constitutional government, and an obligation to continue to provide generous nonmilitary assistance.
- It remains in the American interest that there be a political solution to the Afghan conflict, one that does not sacrifice those social and economic gains that have been achieved in nearly two decades in Afghanistan.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Any further reduction of U.S. forces should be conditioned on the Taliban's adherence to the commitments it made in the Doha agreement last February. In the absence of a verifiable cease-fire and progress in intra-Afghan talks, it is imperative that a small counterterrorism force remain in the country.
- The U.S. government along with other donors should live up to its commitments to support the Kabul government, but should insist on greater accountability and provide evidence of progress in curbing corruption. The U.S. should strengthen its partnership with the Kabul government, but also be careful not to become embroiled in Afghanistan's divisive politics.
- The U.S. should always be open to all opportunities to further political reconciliation between an inclusively representative Afghan government and the Taliban. It must also continue to work with regional powers to encourage a peaceful resolution of the conflict. But the U.S. has to recognize that however great the leverage of external actors, the determination of peace in Afghanistan ultimately rests with the Afghans themselves. In the same vein, the U.S. should avoid trying to commandeer the peace process.

# ALGERIA

ROBERT S. FORD

## ISSUES

- Algeria will press for the old plan of a U.N.-organized referendum in the Western Sahara and the reversal of the Trump administration's recognition of Moroccan sovereignty over the territory that was part of the deal to normalize relations between Morocco and Israel.
- Bilateral cooperation with Algeria has increased greatly in the past 15 years because of Algerian concerns about extremist groups operating in the neighboring states of Libya, Mali, and Niger.
- Domestically, Algeria's leaders are old and President Abdelmadjid Tebboune, strongly backed by the army, is ailing; he was abroad for medical treatment for three months earlier this winter. The political system is ossified but the aging leaders reject any genuine opening. As the pandemic recedes, massive street protests are resuming.
- Algeria's economy is stagnant and the young population is frustrated. Higher world oil prices will ease some immediate pressure, but the government has no vision or desire to undertake deep reforms.

## US INTERESTS

- Continued cooperation with the Algerian government on regional counter-terrorism, especially in Libya and Mali.
- Helping avoid domestic political instability stirring up violence and extremist recruitment.
- American firms should have fair access to Algerian markets. U.S. firms, mostly energy companies, have about \$3 billion in direct investment in Algeria, which is a major regional trading partner with the U.S.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Avoid sharp public criticism of the Algerian government's domestic program and its handling of political unrest. The government would use American criticism as an excuse to crack down harder against "foreign-instigated" opposition. Moreover, we should not prescribe a detailed plan to resolve the impasse between the government and opposition. Instead, encourage a purely Algerian approach that wins wide public support.
- Support the protesters' rights to freedom of speech, association, and peaceful assembly, as enumerated in the U.N. Covenant on Political Rights.
- Maintain discrete counter-terrorism cooperation with Algerian intelligence and the military. Behind closed doors with these Algerian security contacts we should counsel restraint and dialogue with the opposition and protest movement.
- Boost working-level bilateral talks on regional security and continue the American assistance program on rule of law through the FBI and the State Department's counter-terrorism office.
- Expand our low-cost bilateral cooperation in education reform to boost longer-term Algerian economic prospects, helping undermine extremist recruitment.

# EGYPT

MIRETTE F. MABROUK

## ISSUES

- The Arab world's most populous state, Egypt, attempting to recover economically and politically from an uprising and a coup within a few years of each other, had made huge macroeconomic gains under an IMF-backed reform plan. However, the austerity measures the reforms required significantly increased economic pressure on many of its citizens, and there has been a major and unrelenting crackdown on freedom of expression or political dissent. Despite laudable attempts to mitigate the economic fallout from the COVID-19 epidemic, the strain is evident. Although it was the only country in the region with a positive growth rate in 2020, the fallout has deeply affected Egypt's three largest revenue earners — tourism, remittances, and the Suez Canal — and the economy is vulnerable. While COVID-19 triggered economic recalculations, a new U.S. administration and rapidly shifting regional alliances and relationships have triggered political and foreign policy recalibrations, and Egypt is now trying to cement or hone its regional relevance and value as an ally and partner. To that end, it is stepping up its foreign diplomacy efforts and expanding its footprint in the immediate region and Africa.
- The security situation has stabilized in the majority of the country, but the military is still fighting ISIS-affiliated extremists in the Sinai Peninsula. The Egypt-Libya border is long, porous, and a source of extreme concern for Egypt due to relations between militants in Libya and those in Sinai. The entry of Turkey onto the Libya stage, with thousands of Syrian mercenaries, put Egypt on high alert and it announced that any incursions past the town of Sirte will trigger an Egyptian mobilization if the Libyan tribes request it. Egypt has many interests in Libya: security, influence, and economic partnerships, but the presence of thousands of mercenaries, most of whom are ISIS-affiliated, is a red line. In line with its efforts to cement its regional position, Egypt has pivoted pragmatically to support the newly elected government in Libya.
- By 2028, Egypt's labor force will increase to a staggering 80 million. Another looming challenge is Ethiopia's unilateral position on filling the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD), which holds the Nile's entire annual rainfall, built without any environmental impact studies. A decade of negotiations, including U.S.-brokered talks, have failed and Ethiopia began unilaterally filling the dam's reservoir, without an agreement with Egypt and Sudan, in July 2020, leading to a loss of water at Sudanese water stations within 24 hours. The danger of this cannot be overestimated. In the worst-case scenario, Egypt, a water-scarce country that relies on the Nile for 96% of its water, is looking at the loss of over a quarter of its arable land — and only 4% of Egypt is arable. This would also lead to a corresponding loss of 5 million jobs (not including farmers' families), as well as water for development and even drinking. Ethiopia's right to development is unquestioned, but its unilateral approach, with little apparent regard for the welfare of its neighbors, has Egypt and Sudan on high alert, particularly in light of Ethiopia's similar transgressions in Djibouti, Kenya, and Somalia, all of which are suffering drastic water loss due to Ethiopian dams. Coupled with the current civil war in Ethiopia, which threatens to spill over its borders to a Sudan in the midst of an extremely fragile transition, if unchecked, the situation is a very real source of regional conflict.

## US INTERESTS

- Egypt has historically been important to the U.S. due to its demography, geographic location, and diplomatic heft. Currently, though, the association is being left to simmer safely on a back burner. While at times it can appear to be more trouble than it's worth, the relationship remains relevant and in a pinch, you wouldn't want to be without it. Although Egypt's internal challenges since 2011 have chipped away at its regional political clout, it still retains a position of importance. There are few regional issues in which it is not involved and it is impossible to view any resolution in either the Libyan conflict or Arab-Israeli issues without its involvement.



- It hosts the Arab League and Al-Azhar University, the world's oldest university and the seat of moderate Sunni Islam.
- It controls the vital Suez Canal, one of the world's most important waterways, to which the U.S. is uniquely granted expedited passage (other ships could wait weeks).
- Its peace with Israel is the most significant, and lasting, Arab-Israeli diplomatic achievement. The Abraham Accords do not so much guarantee peace — Egypt's peace with Israel guaranteed that no Arab army would ever attack it again — but they do redraw the lines of regional cooperation. Egypt's relationship with Israel, however, is of vital and lasting importance to both countries for myriad economic and security reasons.
- It is a powerful and dedicated ally against regional Islamist extremism.

Additionally, there is currently no bilateral treaty governing the detention of U.S. citizens in Egypt. One should be pursued immediately. For various reasons, the Egyptian government would very likely be amenable to one rather than leaving the issue to the vagaries of the Egyptian judicial system.

- Egypt would very much like to reaffirm its strategic alliance with the U.S. (along the lines of those with Israel or Jordan), and in light of the U.S.'s role in trying to solve the GERD impasse, Egypt is likely to be more receptive to U.S. priorities. It will also be keen to reaffirm its value as a regional partner. Ultimately, it is in U.S. interest to reaffirm this relationship; the opportunity cost is relinquishing trade (and soft power) to Europe, Russia, and China.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Despite an often contentious relationship, the stability and economic growth of Egypt will continue to be in the U.S. interest. Work with the Egyptian government, business, and civil society to encourage sustained and inclusive growth. Every effort to prevent conflict over the GERD must be made if the U.S. wishes to avoid conflict in the region.
- Egypt and the U.S. have differed starkly over human rights and political freedoms and this is likely to be exacerbated under the new administration. Egypt is a major recipient of U.S. military aid and there have been attempts to link this aid to human rights reform. The carrot and stick approach has traditionally not worked with Egypt. However, economic investment development is vital to Egypt and the U.S. is under no obligation to extend economic aid or, more importantly, preferential trade terms or investment. Those are areas that could and should be pegged to reforms. Economic fallout from the pandemic has left Egypt's economy vulnerable and this would be an excellent time to peg FDI to domestic reform.

### ISSUES

- Although the al-Ula Agreement papered over intra-GCC disputes, fundamental differences haven't been resolved and will continue to weaken cooperation with the U.S. on issues of shared concern.
- Recovery from the global pandemic, uncertainty in global energy markets, and demographic and climate change within the GCC will challenge regional economies and threaten internal stability.
- GCC governments will increasingly look to Russia and China for political, economic, and security partnership amid doubts about U.S. commitment.

### US INTERESTS

- Success in achieving administration goals in the region is contingent on cooperation from the GCC states, including reducing tension and the threat of conflict with Iran, ending conflict in Yemen, and supporting a transition from a defense and security emphasis to one that highlights commitments to diplomatic problem-solving.
- The GCC states anchor the broader Sunni Arab world and assist the U.S. in achieving the shared objectives of political and economic stability and the peaceful resolution of regional conflicts, including the Israel-Palestinian conflict.
- Cooperation with the GCC is essential for defending freedom of navigation in the Persian Gulf and ensuring the security of global energy markets.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Launch a serious dialogue with GCC states to coordinate policies on regional issues, including Iranian malign behavior, and conflicts in Yemen, Syria, and Libya. Agree on a strategy to ensure GCC buy-in for re-engaging Iran.
- Emphasize the U.S. commitment to a strong political, economic, and security relationship with GCC states, addressing concerns about declining U.S. interest in the region, while re-defining the nature of regional threats and the shared U.S.-GCC responsibility for addressing them.
- Expand the agenda with GCC states to develop shared strategies to address critical regional issues, i.e., climate change, demographic growth, diversification, demands for greater citizen participation in decision-making, and adjusting for global changes in energy demand and the economy.

# HORN OF AFRICA & RED SEA BASIN

DAVID SHINN

## ISSUES

- The strategic maritime importance of the Suez Canal, Red Sea, Bab el-Mandeb chokepoint, and Gulf of Aden are attracting military bases at ports in the region and security engagement by a growing number of regional and major powers.
- Political conflicts and internal disagreements in the Gulf states and Iran are increasingly impacting countries in northeast Africa, resulting in greater regional instability.
- A delicate political transition in Sudan, ethnic conflict in Ethiopia, disagreement over the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam, and continuing al-Shabab extremist activity in Somalia threaten political stability in the Horn of Africa.
- The Red Sea is rich in recoverable oil, gas, and minerals that have the potential to cause additional conflict if not governed by international agreement and/or agreements among the littoral states.

jurisdictional lines in the departments of State and Defense, send a team from the regional bureaus of both departments at the deputy assistant secretary level or higher to key capitals in the Gulf states and northeast Africa.

- Include in that team a representative from AFRICOM, CENTCOM, and the Indo-Pacific Command, all of which have an interest in the Red Sea Basin.
- Encourage and support the creation of a Red Sea Basin forum, either free standing or led by the U.N., that brings together the littoral and regional countries that have a direct interest in the Red Sea to discuss these issues.
- Support those programs and policies that promote political stability and economic development in the region.

## US INTERESTS

- Political stability and economic development throughout the region.
- Free passage through the Red Sea Basin for U.S. and allied nations' naval vessels and commercial shipping.
- Preventing or at least minimizing the activities of countries or organizations that are hostile to the U.S. in the Red Sea Basin.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- To emphasize the importance the U.S. attaches to the region and obtain a better understanding of the issues on both sides of the Red Sea, where geographical responsibility crosses

# IRAN

## ALEX VATANKA

### ISSUES

- Iran represents a set of challenges, if not direct threats, to American interests in the Middle East. From its ongoing nuclear and ballistic missile program to its expansionist and ideologically-driven anti-American regional policies to its growing military and intelligence partnerships with Russia and China, Iranian actions can greatly undermine American interests in the broader Middle East.
- The Islamic Republic is at an important juncture. Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei is nearly 82 years old and the question of succession is already heating up. The outcome of this process can greatly shape the Islamic Republic's political trajectory depending on which faction — be it the so-called moderates or the hardliners — secures the top seat.

### US INTERESTS

- As soon as possible, the U.S. has to come up with a strategic vision on how to tackle the various challenges posed by Tehran. On the nuclear issue, Washington has to decide if it wants to return to the 2015 nuclear deal as it was signed. Alternatively, it has sufficient leverage to convince the Europeans in particular that modifications need to be made, such as the “sunset” years and securing Tehran's acceptance to impose restrictions on its ballistic missile program as a way of alleviating the concerns of U.S. allies in the Middle East.
- At the same time, to prevent a war with Iran, Washington needs to deliberate carefully about how to provide opportunities to Tehran for it to de-escalate and agree to make the kind of concessions the U.S. seeks. For this to happen Washington and Tehran both need to work toward a regional détente process that involves the U.S., Iran, and other key stakeholders. The list of U.S.-Iran differences is long and compartmentalization of files is essential, but a step-by-step process can help generate the missing confidence in each other's goodwill.

- The U.S. has to convince Iran to start direct negotiations about its regional actions, especially rolling back its proxy model. But for this to succeed, Washington has to be ready to offer some reciprocity in the face of what Tehran judges to be its security vulnerabilities and national interest. Diplomatic outreach can advance this aim, but so can limited kinetic action that will shape Iran's regional agenda. Rolling back anti-U.S. Iranian efforts will also require alliance building in countries like Iraq and Lebanon and re-engaging Palestinian groups.
- It is in the U.S. interest that the Islamic Republic seizes the succession process to push the country in the direction of reform. Regardless of whether or not the Islamic Republic is able to change course, Washington should, in any diplomatic process, remain dedicated to standing up for the human rights of the Iranian people. The Iranian people remain overwhelmingly in favor of normalization of relations with the U.S. and offer a major opportunity for American diplomacy.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain close cooperation with European allies on preventing Iran from becoming a nuclear-armed state.
- Pursue a dialogue with Iran about the scope and range of its ballistic missile arsenal and regional activities, and be ready with a credible carrot-and-stick strategy.
- Be ready to demonstrate that the U.S. will roll back non-state militant actors with full force if necessary to shape Tehran's cost-benefit calculations.
- The U.S. should look for ways to convince Iran that substituting an ideological foreign policy for the pursuit of tangible Iranian national interests will benefit a restless Iranian population.
- The Iranian people are ultimately pro-American and it should be Washington's priority not to lose Iran to Russia and China for another generation.

# IRAQ

## RANDA SLIM

### ISSUES

- The demands of the 2019 protest movement of fighting corruption, seeking accountability for the perpetrators of crimes against fellow activists, holding early elections, and minimizing Iranian influence in Iraq still attract the sympathy of large swaths of Iraqis. Armed actors continue to target civil society activists.
- Since the killing of the commander of Iran's Quds Force, Gen. Qassem Soleimani, and the deputy leader of the Iran-linked Iraqi Popular Mobilization Forces (PMF), Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, on Iraqi territory in January 2020, Iraqi leaders and citizens remain split over the withdrawal of U.S. forces.
- Iran-aligned Iraqi militias remain committed to the objective of expelling U.S. forces from the country using any means at their disposal, including violent ones. In the absence of a denouement of the U.S.-Iran standoff, we should expect rocket/mortar attacks on U.S. forces and facilities in Iraq to continue.
- The government led by Prime Minister Mustafa al-Kadhimi has shown a willingness to gradually clip the wings of militias that are responsible for rocket attacks on U.S. facilities in Iraq and Iraqi bases hosting U.S. and coalition soldiers. However, he is reluctant to enter into a major confrontation with them for fear of igniting fighting between the government and the militias.
- While relations between Baghdad and Erbil have improved, outstanding issues remain between the two parties concerning oil revenue sharing, center-periphery power sharing, and the status of the disputed territories (Article 140).
- ISIS attacks have increased in Iraq, showing both a capacity and willingness on its part to terrorize people. While ISIS no longer enjoys support in the Sunni-majority communities it controlled in 2013-17, the group's modus operandi is to instill fear and showcase the failure of the government to provide security to its citizens.
- Political interference in anti-corruption bodies, politicization of corruption cases, insecurity, and the growing role of militias in the political and economic spheres have severely limited the government's ability to curb soaring corruption. This state of affairs is unlikely to change in the near term.

### US INTERESTS

- Help the Iraqi government defeat ISIS and its affiliates and deal with internal threats emerging from Shiite militias operating outside the government's purview.
- Ensure the durable stability of Iraq, which lies at the center of the Middle East.
- Help the Iraqi government manage the twin economic and COVID-19 crises.
- Ensure that Iraq does not become a proxy for Iran in regional conflicts.
- Promote durable solutions to internal displacement in Iraq.
- Support the protesters' demands for an end to corruption, free and fair elections, and accountability of the security forces, including the PMFs.
- Promote partnerships between the Iraqi government and U.S. companies to develop Iraq's oil, gas, and water industries, thus breaking its dependence on Iranian gas and electricity imports.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- As the NATO mission in Iraq increases from 500 personnel to around 4,000, the U.S. and Iraq should discuss, within the context of the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue, a new framework for their bilateral cooperation on counter-terrorism operations and training, advising, and equipping Iraqi security forces, as well as intelligence sharing.

- Disentangle bilateral discussions about U.S. security assistance from other aspects of the U.S.-Iraqi relationship, including diplomatic, economic, and cultural relations and development and humanitarian assistance.
- Assist Iraq with accessing funding from international donors to manage the economic challenges conditional on the Iraqi executive and legislative authorities enacting fundamental economic reforms.
- Invest in the education of future Iraqi leaders by providing study-abroad scholarships to undergraduate and graduate students.
- Identify areas where U.S. civil society organizations can assist in protesters' efforts to fight corruption and promote accountability and good governance.
- Ensure upcoming Iraqi elections are secure, free, and fair. Working with the U.N. Assistance Mission for Iraq, provide technical assistance to the Independent High Electoral Commission (IHEC) to ensure its work is effective and transparent.
- Identify Iraqi armed groups that are involved in human rights violations, ensure they are denied access to U.S. aid per U.S. law, and work with European allies to deny these groups' leaders entry to EU capitals and access to EU resources.
- Identify areas where Iraq needs help and the U.S. has a comparative advantage over Iran, such as banking reforms and assistance in the education and technology sectors.
- Discuss in the U.S.-Iraq Strategic Dialogue commercial investment reforms the Iraqi government must engage in, with the U.S. providing technical assistance when asked.
- Sustain funding to help Iraq address internal displacement issues in coordination with international organizations.
- Facilitate a dialogue between Baghdad and Erbil to promote constructive engagement to achieve win-win solutions on many conflicting issues between the two sides.

# ISRAEL

## ERAN ETZION

### ISSUES

- The longstanding strategic relationship between the U.S. and Israel includes deep intelligence and operational cooperation on core national security issues, such as Iran, ISIS, Syria, Lebanon, etc.
- Israel is the largest recipient of U.S. foreign military aid, totaling \$3.8 billion annually, under a 10-year MOU signed in 2016. Beyond procurement of major combat platforms such as the F-35, defense cooperation extends into joint R&D on missile defense, counter-terrorism, and more.
- Israel's thriving high-tech industry, known as "Silicon Wadi," is practically on par with Silicon Valley in certain areas of cutting-edge civilian and quasi-military technologies. There are growing concerns, however, over Israeli exports of cyber weapons and surveillance technologies, including to nondemocratic and semi-democratic regimes.
- Under the Trump and Netanyahu administrations, the level of policy coordination and cooperation rose, notably on the two core issues of bilateral interest: Iran-nuclear (and overall Iran policy) and the Israeli-Palestinian/Israeli-Arab conflict.
- Controversial actions by the Trump administration, such as the December 2017 decision to recognize Jerusalem as Israel's capital and the November 2019 declaration that settlements are not illegal, both of which overturned decades of U.S. policy and defied longstanding international consensus, endeared the administration to the Netanyahu government while alienating the Palestinians, parts of the Arab world, and most of the international community. The release of the Trump plan in January 2020 deepened some of these rifts. Nevertheless, the Abraham Accords created some new and more positive momentum in the region toward the end of 2020.
- While previous U.S. administrations had identified the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state

living alongside the state of Israel — or a two-state solution — as a "vital national security interest," the Trump administration moved away from that vision. The Trump plan paid lip service to the concept, but effectively ruled it out, offering the Palestinians a quasi-autonomy on 70% of the West Bank, and conditioning "statehood" on multiple unrealistic tests. The administration went so far as to convene a joint U.S.-Israeli mapping committee to identify parts of the West Bank for possible annexation by Israel. The Palestinians, who were not involved in its development, rejected the plan in its entirety. On the multilateral level organizations like the Arab League, Organization of Islamic Cooperation, and the European Union also rejected the notion that the plan could serve as a basis for future negotiations. Bilateral reactions, however, were more nuanced and some were positive.

- Most notably, the UAE moved to negotiate a normalization agreement with Israel and upgrade its strategic partnership with the U.S., including through a previously vetoed multibillion-dollar strategic arms deal (F-35s and top-of-the-line armed drones). Other Arab League members Sudan, Bahrain, and later Morocco signed similar normalization agreements, breaking with the age-old U.N. Security Council and Arab Peace Initiative sequence of "territories first, normalization after." Significantly, Israel was forced by the U.S. to shelve its unilateral annexation plan as part of the trilateral UAE deal. However, if this decoupling of Israeli-Arab normalization from Israeli-Palestinian negotiations continues, it will further erode the Palestinians' negotiating position and empower hardliners on all sides.
- Closer Israel-China and to a lesser extent Israel-Russia relations have become an issue of concern for the U.S.

### US INTERESTS

- Continuing strategic, intelligence, and defense cooperation, focusing on two issues:
  1. Iran: Constraining its nuclear program and long-range

missile projects and countering its regional hegemony strategy in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen.

2. Counter-terrorism: Countering ISIS, al-Qaeda, Hezbollah, and other terrorist organizations throughout the region and the globe.

- Leveraging Israeli-Arab normalization — in the Gulf and beyond — toward these two goals, as well as toward renewed, realistic Israeli-Palestinian negotiations.
- Supporting a feasible Israeli-Palestinian long-term agreement, including both the West Bank and Gaza, under a wide regional and international umbrella that is consistent with U.N. resolutions and results in an end to Israel's 53-year-old occupation.
- Upholding international law, especially the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, a central pillar of the post-World War II international order.
- Preventing Israel-China relations from becoming strategic and leveraging Israel-Russia relations where advantageous.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Lessen the identification of the U.S. government with Netanyahu and the Israeli right wing. Netanyahu is already the longest-serving Israeli prime minister, faces lengthy criminal proceedings, and has become a highly controversial figure in Israel and beyond. The tumultuous Israeli political scene — with its fourth (March 23rd) consecutive round of general elections within two years, a world record — is an opportunity for the U.S. to engage broader parts of the Israeli political spectrum and advance its various long-term interests, as was already demonstrated by the cancellation of the unilateral annexation plan.
- On the U.S. side, bipartisanship must be restored as the solid, longstanding basis for U.S.-Israel relations. On the Israeli side,

where the political map is much more volatile and fluid, the widest possible multi-party consensus should be the ongoing goal.

- As Israel's democracy is being rapidly eroded by right-wing populist forces led by PM Netanyahu, and given the similarities between the two countries' internal threats in that domain, the U.S. can offer Israeli democratic forces new avenues of cooperation, knowledge sharing, etc. As part of the new administration's global democratic strategy, Israel can no longer be simply treated as "a vibrant democracy." Rather, it is a flawed democracy by most international standards. The U.S. strategy should therefore aim at strengthening Israeli democracy and clearly differentiating between the democratic and anti-democratic elements in the country, not shying away from using various instruments of U.S. policy.
- A U.S.-Israel defense pact should only be considered within the context of a broader quid pro quo on the Palestinian issue and/or on Iran, and linked to a renewed specific commitment to democratic values and norms.
- Press Israel to exercise caution when permitting private companies to export cyber tools that can be used maliciously by authoritarian regimes for surveillance or cyber attacks.
- Develop new avenues for economic cooperation on infrastructure projects, including regional cross-border ones.
- Push for broader opening of the Israeli market to U.S. goods and services.
- Examine new avenues for bilateral cooperation on COVID-19-related issues, e.g. medical R&D.
- On Iran, U.S. and Israeli interest are more aligned than not. However, the legacy of toxic relations between Netanyahu and the Obama administration will not allow for the necessary level of trust in the context of the Iran nuclear negotiations and other policies. There should be a separation between politics



and policies on this sensitive issue as much as possible. The U.S. should renew its commitment to the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) as soon as possible and negotiate further agreements and amendments down the road. A Netanyahu government must not be allowed to foil this strategy.

- Communication with opposition, non-governmental actors and the Israeli media and public opinion will be important in that context.
- The intricate relations between the Gulf countries, Israel, Iran, and the U.S. should be managed in order to build mini-coalitions on specific issues.
  
- On Israel-Palestine:
  - Continue to prevent any unilateral Israeli steps toward annexation in the West Bank designed to foreclose the prospect of a two-state option.
  - Cultivate new pro-democracy and pro-U.S. leaderships in both Israel and Palestine.

# JORDAN

## DIMA TOUKAN & PAUL SALEM

### ISSUES

- Jordan is a long-time strategic partner of the U.S. but is going through a period of intense strain exacerbated by the socio-economic impact of the coronavirus crisis. As a result of the pandemic, the economy is expected to shrink by up to 5.5%. Jordan's growth is projected to remain low considering a prolonged decline in economic activity because of precautionary lockdowns and curfew measures. This will leave Jordan heavily reliant on foreign aid in 2021-22.
- Jordan did not support the Trump administration's so-called peace plan and warned Israel against going ahead with annexations on the West Bank. It had a muted response to the UAE-Israel normalization deal, as a wide cross-section of Jordanian public opinion — particularly those of Palestinian origin — regarded it as a dangerous betrayal. As the temperature goes down, a more level-headed assessment will consider whether the agreement can be used to revive talks toward a two-state solution.
- Jordan also hosts over 660,000 registered Syrian refugees, although according to the government the total number, including those not registered, is almost 1.2m. Only 20% of them are housed in dedicated camps. Access to food and resources has become more challenging as international aid declines. The impact of the pandemic has pushed both refugees and their host communities into poverty. Poverty rates have increased by 38% among host communities and 18% among Syrian refugees, requiring a quick response by international organizations.
- Jordan has a significant radicalization and jihadist challenge, precipitated by perceived economic and political marginalization and linked to developments in Syria, Iraq, and elsewhere. Opaque decision-making contributes to perceptions of widespread corruption and public disillusionment. The security apparatus is active and effective, and the government provides closely managed political space tolerating more

moderate Islamists who are willing to play by the state's rules. High internet penetration creates significant potential for communications technology to be used as a mobilization instrument.

- Unemployment is estimated to be over 20%. Unemployment is especially high among youth, reaching about 40%, which is a cause of concern and potential unrest. Jordan has one of the lowest female labor participation rates in the world.

### US INTERESTS

- Jordan is a primary security partner in the war on terror and the goals of regional security and stability.
- Jordan is a main partner in finding a way forward in the Israel-Palestine conflict and working toward a broader Arab-Israeli peace.
- The U.S. has a keen interest in the continued survival and stability of the Jordanian state, as the alternative would create a host of threats and challenges for the U.S. and its partners in the region, both in terms of radicalization and terrorist groups, as well as refugees and humanitarian crises.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain close and supportive relations with Jordan, including continued military and security cooperation, support for refugees, and encouragement of investment and trade relations between the two countries.
- Leverage economic assistance to enunciate for the government incremental and meaningful reforms to relieve political discontentment and preempt potentially destabilizing socio-economic conditions. In this regard, ensure that USAID, the largest in country official development assistance player, delivers holistic programming that addresses the systemic

nature of current challenges and helps to measurably move Jordan toward more effective institutions that are accountable to the people.

- Recognize that Jordan is one of the countries most affected by regional tensions and conflict, especially those in Israel-Palestine, Syria, and Iraq.
  - Dissuade the Israeli government from reviving the move toward annexation and forging a way back toward Israeli-Palestinian talks and a semblance of a process that could lead to the only viable long-term option: a two-state solution.
  - The country also pays a heavy price for the ongoing conflict in Syria. The faster that Syrian refugees can return to Syria, and the sooner that Jordan can restore secure borders and revive bilateral economic relations, the better it will be for Jordan.
  - The situation in Iraq is another major issue. An unstable Iraq fuels domestic security concerns and means that the Jordanian economy foregoes the benefits that would accrue to it from a stable and prosperous neighbor.

# LEBANON

## CHRISTOPHE ABI-NASSIF

### ISSUES

- Lebanon is in a condition of dangerous freefall. At the economic level, 30 years of deficit financing, debt accumulation, and systemic corruption have come home to roost, leading to a collapse of the national currency, rampant inflation, the virtual bankruptcy of private banks and the state, and a very sharp contraction of the economy. This has been exacerbated by political paralysis, the COVID-19 pandemic and then by the horrific blast in Beirut on Aug. 4 that killed hundreds, wounded thousands, and devastated large parts of the capital.
- At the social level, these cascading conditions have led to poverty rates passing 55%, unemployment moving past 40%, and the specter of hunger or famine threatening nearly a quarter of the population.
- At the political level, a popular uprising erupted in October 2019 and is still ongoing. The political class has been maneuvering to cling to power and resist calls for fundamental change. Two governments have already resigned since the start of the protests, and a third is still in the process of being formed, nearly six months after the fall of the last one, but all from within the traditional deck of cards of the ruling oligarchy. Mired in internal political feuds and conflicts of interest, successive governments have been unable or unwilling to implement real reforms or initiate meaningful negotiations with the IMF.
- At the security level, as the population gets more desperate and impoverished, more people may resort to violent protest, or even forming armed gangs; and as salaries of the Lebanese Armed Forces (LAF) and the internal security forces dwindle to insignificance, the state risks losing its backbone.
- Lebanon is at risk of tipping into full failed state status. This would destroy its social and human capital, send both Syrian and Lebanese refugees streaming west through Cyprus

to Europe, create a fresh haven for the return of violent extremist and terrorist groups like ISIS and al-Qaeda, further strengthen Hezbollah, and give rise to a threat to regional and international security that would take years, or even decades, to repair.

### US INTERESTS

- The U.S. has longstanding cultural, political, economic, and security ties with Lebanon, bolstered by the large American-Lebanese community in the U.S.
- The U.S. has an interest that Lebanon recovers and survives economically and politically, and an acute interest that the country does not fall into full state failure. That would create myriad humanitarian and security emergencies for the U.S. and its partners and allies in the region and in Europe.
- Lebanon has been an effective ally in the war on terror: Robust U.S. support to the LAF helps maintain stability and security in the country, preserves the army's autonomy from Hezbollah, keeps the Lebanon-Israel border calm, and sustains U.S.-Lebanese cooperation against ISIS and al-Qaeda.
- Lebanon hosts a large population of Syrian and Palestinian refugees. The U.S. has an interest in the country not fully collapsing, otherwise many of those, joined by many Lebanese, will find their way overseas to Europe.
- The U.S. has an interest in countering the potential growth of Russian and Chinese interests and influence in Lebanon and the eastern Mediterranean.
- Lebanon is a rare example of Christians and Muslims, Sunnis and Shi'a, living peacefully together, and sharing power in an inclusive and largely democratic political system. These are shared values with the U.S., and this is an important example for other countries in the region.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Marshall America's regional and international diplomatic leverage to press for a capable and reform-committed government in Lebanon. On the basis of clear conditionality, press a new government for immediate and meaningful reforms such as reforming the electricity sector, strengthening Lebanon's social safety net, restructuring the banking sector, recalibrating the subsidies program to slow down the rapid depletion of the central bank's currency reserves, and immediately engaging in negotiations with the IMF.
- In exchange for such enacted reforms, extend a hand of assistance along with other international friends of Lebanon in Europe and the region, and encourage the IMF and the World Bank to engage positively if and when a reform-implementing government is in place.
- Maintain and strengthen support for poverty and hunger-reduction programs targeting the most vulnerable in the country, and maintain support for recovery and reconstruction assistance to those affected by the Aug. 4 blast.
- Express and extend encouragement to the Lebanese protest and civil society movement and their demands for fundamental positive reform.
- Insist on holding fair, transparent, and timely elections in the spring of 2022 and support election-monitoring efforts in collaboration with international partners and NGOs.
- In coordination with European partners, increase financial and logistical support for educational and medical institutions, absent which longer-term human capital rebuilding efforts will prove difficult.
- Maintain U.S. support and cooperation with the LAF.
- Sustain mediation efforts to delineate the Lebanese-Israeli maritime border and work with the Lebanese army and government to maintain security on the Lebanon-Israel border and secure the country's porous borders with Syria.
- Maintain support for Syrian refugees and their host communities in Lebanon and encourage their right of return when and where it is safe to do so.

# LIBYA

## JONATHAN M. WINER

### ISSUES

- Since Moammar Gadhafi was overthrown in 2011, Libya has been unable to achieve political stability. By 2014, Libya faced a mini-civil war between a Tripoli-based government backed by Turkey and Qatar and a Tobruk-based government in the east backed by Egypt, the UAE, and Saudi Arabia. A December 2015 U.N.-brokered political agreement for a Tripoli-based Government of National Accord (GNA) was supposed to provide a transition to a new constitution and elections. Instead, it led to a continued east-west split, efforts by Libyan strongman Khalifa Hifter to impose one-person military rule throughout the country, and a resumption of a renewed and continuing proxy war.
- The recent civil war was ignited by Hifter on April 4, 2019, when he decided, with the military support of Egypt, Russia, and the UAE, to besiege Tripoli in an effort to conquer Libya's capital and its western region by force. This effort prompted the introduction of Turkish-backed military forces and mercenaries on the side of the internationally recognized GNA, which resulted in the defeat of Hifter's forces 14 months later, and their withdrawal south to Jufra and east to Sirte. In addition to its civil war, Libya still faces some risk of proxy war, due to the continued presence in Libya of the foreign military forces supporting each side.
- Since January 2020, Hifter's forces and a range of other extortionists have recurrently prevented the export of Libya's oil. Libya's economy is entirely dependent on its oil revenues, which are sufficient in principle to take care of the basic needs of all 6.5 million Libyans. Ending oil extortionism and creating an equitable sharing of those revenues remains a central element of any further political deal that would allow Libya to move forward.
- The unresolved conflict has led to the displacement of hundreds of thousands of people by the war and continuing casualties from placements of explosive ordnance. It also

continues to impede progress in countering the use of Libya to smuggle migrants into Europe. Finally, it is creating renewed opportunities for terrorists, including for ISIS to reconquer Libyan territory it lost to joint U.S.-Libyan counter-terrorism efforts in 2016.

### US INTERESTS

- Prevent Libya from becoming a terrorist safe haven. Renewed terrorist control of territory would threaten the stability and safety of Libya, the Maghreb as a whole, the Sahel, and Europe.
- Prevent Libya from fragmenting into multiple states. The risk of eastern secession, aided and abetted by Egypt, Russia, and the UAE, is real. Efforts to divide the country risk creating long-term political, security, economic, and humanitarian catastrophes.
- Maintain Libyan oil production. As a producer of up to 1.6 million bpd, Libya plays an important role in international oil markets, and a collapse in its production could have a negative impact on global oil prices, in addition to putting Libyans at risk.
- Counter smuggling and criminality. The spread of criminal activity risks destabilizing Libya, its African neighbors, and its European ones, especially from migrant smuggling. Promoting rule of law and justice in addition to policing will be important for building support for the Libyan government on the part of the Libyan people.
- Promote Libyan political stability as a critical step to creating an environment for broadened economic activity and cooperation throughout North Africa.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Actively support the U.N.-sponsored Libyan Political Dialogue Forum and its plan for a transition to elections scheduled

for December 24, 2021, the 70th anniversary of Libyan independence. Active U.S. support for this process is especially important now, with the appointment of former Slovakian Foreign Minister Jan Kubis as the new head of the U.N. Support Mission in Libya on Jan. 15, amid continuing efforts by domestic and foreign spoilers to circumvent or undermine it.

- Press foreign intervenors to remove their military forces and mercenaries, with concrete consequences if they do not.
- Support Libya's development of a unified security system in which a civilian-led national institution maintains a monopoly on the use of force, supplemented by local police. Taking on militias will be hard. Libya will need help from the U.S. and other benign actors to get it done.
- Send a Treasury team to help Libya float its currency, phase out subsidies, and reform its economy, and as needed to provide other U.S. technical assistance on public financial administration to counter corruption.
- Promote rule of law and anti-corruption initiatives to encourage accountability and discourage human rights violations.
- Reopen the U.S. Embassy in Tripoli, closed since July 2014. Seeing the U.S. flag flying again in Libya would signal renewed American commitment to the Libyan people and let other countries know the U.S. is again a force to be reckoned with for Libya's future.

# MOROCCO

## WILLIAM LAWRENCE

### ISSUES

- Prior to the pandemic, Morocco's economy was improving due to poverty reduction, job creation, and the development of the world's largest solar plant and Africa's largest port. In 2019, Morocco welcomed 13 million tourists, the most in Africa, and it now ranks third after the UAE and Bahrain in the Arab world on the World Bank's Doing Business Index.
- In 2020 the economy faced stiff headwinds, with the government pointing to the "triple threat" of two years of drought in combination with local and global economic contractions. GDP declined by an estimated 6.9% and unemployment rose from 9.2% at end-2019 to 11.9% at end-2020. Agricultural exports, overseas remittances, and tourism were all hard hit. Morocco had risen to 121st internationally in human development but remained in the bottom 40% of countries. The economy is expected to grow by around 4% in 2021 as tourism and exports recover and the impact of the drought wanes.
- Morocco had a strong initial response to the COVID-19 pandemic, imposing lockdowns and closing its borders, but cases spiked over the summer and into the fall, peaking in mid-November. As of March 2021, it had roughly 480,000 cases and more than 8,600 deaths, comparable to Tunisia (one-third its size). So far Morocco has received 7 million doses of the AstraZeneca and Sinopharm vaccines and is vaccinating 50% faster than Germany and most large European countries, with one of the most efficient SMS-based sign-up systems in the world.
- Economic inequality and youth unemployment remain high, especially among university graduates, and are an ongoing source of unrest. Strong majorities of Moroccan youth believe in the ideals of the Arab Spring and would prefer to emigrate. Morocco typically has over 10,000 socioeconomic micro-protests annually. In 2018, an unprecedented boycott targeted companies tied to the king, who controls 8% of the economy.
- King Mohammed VI's political reforms and decentralization program are stalled and remain unfinished. Parliament and opposition parties remain relatively weak, with civil liberties seriously curtailed. Continued crackdowns on activists and journalists, including invasive "Pegasus" surveillance and detentions for "fake news," have grabbed international headlines. Morocco's human rights record in Western Sahara remains exceedingly poor.
- Hundreds of Moroccan foreign fighters have returned from Syria and Iraq. Some have been reintegrated, but more needs to be done. Morocco is encouraging African migrants to remain as lawful residents.
- In Western Sahara the Polisario Front, which controls 20% of the territory and contests Morocco's control of the rest, announced the end of a 29-year-old cease-fire in mid-November following a Moroccan attack on peaceful Saharan protesters. In a reversal of long-standing policy, the lame-duck Trump administration became the first country in the world to recognize Morocco's claims to the entire territory of Western Sahara, including the Saharan-controlled zone (under U.N. auspices), in conjunction with an agreement normalizing relations between Morocco and Israel.

### US INTERESTS

- Enhance the security and viability of America's second oldest ally by assisting with pandemic response and recovery, institutional reform, socioeconomic resilience, and overall human security.
- Continue to foster improvements to civil liberties, human rights, and justice, as well as educational training and entrepreneurial job creation for youth and university graduates.
- Expand upon the U.S.-Morocco free trade deal, which benefits the U.S. twice as much as Morocco, supports more than 12,000 American jobs, and can support more.



- Assist Morocco in reducing flows of foreign fighters and African migrants from Morocco to Europe and ensure their (re)integration in Morocco.
- Support Morocco's exemplary religious education and counter-terrorism efforts in Africa, especially the training of female religious leaders known as *mourshidat*.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to support Morocco through USAID, the second Millennium Challenge Corporation compact, other assistance, and intelligence cooperation. USAID has maintained focus on implementing Morocco's reformist constitution and on human development index indicators.
- Invest in Morocco's private sector through the creation of an investment fund, by assisting with entrepreneurship and by helping scale to U.S. demand exports of popular products like textiles, citrus, "Moroccan Oil" (for haircare) and essential oils, and telecommunications and internet-based services, given skyrocketing Moroccan command of American English.
- Assist Morocco with scaling production to reap the rewards of bilateral free trade and stimulate the economy.
- Support U.N.-led Western Saharan final status talks between Morocco and Polisario in a way that respects human rights, democratic self-determination, and the principle of non-annexation of territory by force (in line with the U.S. position on Crimea and eastern Ukraine and on the South China Sea).

# PAKISTAN

MARVIN G. WEINBAUM

## ISSUES

- Kashmir's disputed status will not fade as an issue for Pakistan. The Indian government's decision to remove the territory's special autonomous status has largely closed the door on a political solution and further embittered bilateral relations. Continuing cross-border violence could escalate into major armed conflict between these two nuclear-armed powers.
- The government of Pakistan is burdened by a gap between fiscal revenue and expenditures leading to an unsupportable debt. The austerity program intended to stabilize the economy has led to high inflation and greater unemployment and could bring on political instability. Coping with the COVID-19 health crisis has put further pressure on the struggling economy.
- Pakistan faces continued international scrutiny and criticism for its inconsistent efforts in dealing with domestic militant groups. Failure to take action to curb terrorist group financial transactions could lead to the multinational Financial Action Task Force blacklisting Pakistan for lax enforcement, a move that would be a severe blow to Pakistan's already struggling economy. Although there have been some positive signs, there are remaining concerns over whether the government of Imran Khan has the political will to clamp down on the country's violent extremists.

## US INTERESTS

- The Pakistani government's cooperation remains critical to any chances of achieving a comprehensive Afghan peace agreement. An earnest crackdown on the country's militant extremist groups is necessary to prevent the Pakistan-Afghanistan border area from again emerging as a base of operations for regional and global terrorist groups. U.S. troop withdrawals from Afghanistan give this action greater urgency.
- The risk of nuclear proliferation from Pakistan's growing arsenal would increase were it to experience serious political and

economic instability that would impact the internal cohesion of the military, the caretaker of Pakistan's nuclear program. The U.S. is concerned that there be sufficient vigilance to ensure that militant groups do not penetrate nuclear facilities.

- Even low-level cross-border attacks in Pakistan's dispute with India over Kashmir can always escalate, increasing the possibility of a resort to nuclear weapons that would produce a massive humanitarian, economic, and environmental crisis. The U.S. finds encouraging the recent cease-fire agreement but has no illusions about its sustainability.
- The Chinese government's Belt and Road Initiative has brought Pakistan more closely into China's economic orbit, resulting in concerns that Islamabad could make concessions to Beijing that have strategic security consequences for the U.S. This possibility increases if tense India-China relations push Pakistan still closer to China and away from the U.S.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. cannot afford to disengage from Pakistan and its region as it has in the past. Security and economic interests dictate that the U.S. not create a vacuum that China and others will fill. At a minimum the U.S. should strive to retain serious intelligence assets and the capacity to mount counter-terrorist operations. It must also retain sufficient diplomatic leverage with India and Pakistan for a mediating role in a future crisis.
- In lieu of many of its traditional economic aid and development programs, the U.S. government should prioritize increased trade and investment as a means of cementing a cooperative relationship with Pakistan.
- The U.S. must strive for a more consistent and reliable relationship that avoids the rollercoaster relationship it has experienced with Pakistan for decades. This will require a better understanding of shared and divergent national interests, and the avoidance of unrealistic expectations.

# PALESTINE & THE ISRAELI-PALESTINIAN PEACE PROCESS

NATHAN STOCK & KHALED ELGINDY

## ISSUES

- There are nearly 13 million Palestinians worldwide, including some 5 million Palestinians in the West Bank and Gaza who have been living under Israeli military rule for over 53 years. Another 1.5 million Palestinians are citizens of Israel, while over 6 million more remain displaced as refugees, outside of Israel/Palestine.
- Since 2001, there has been broad international consensus on resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict on the basis of ending Israel's occupation of the West Bank and Gaza Strip and the establishment of an independent and viable Palestinian state living alongside the state of Israel — also known as a two-state solution. However, no serious peace negotiations have occurred in years, even as the number of Israeli settlers in the occupied West Bank (including East Jerusalem), which now stands at more than 650,000, continues to grow.
- Whereas the Obama and Bush administrations had called for ending Israel's occupation and identified a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict based on a two-state solution as a "vital national security interest" of the United States, the Trump administration moved away from that vision. Instead, the now defunct "Peace to Prosperity" plan called for a nominal Palestinian "state" made up of numerous disconnected territorial islands surrounded and controlled by Israel, which would be allowed to annex some 30% of the West Bank. The Trump plan was firmly rejected by the Palestinians and failed to garner support in the international community. At the same time, the prospect of formal Israeli annexation of West Bank land, which would have constituted a serious breach of international law and likely spelled the end of a genuine two-state solution, triggered widespread international condemnations and warnings from Europe, Arab states, and even congressional Democrats.
- The U.S.-brokered normalization deal signed between Israel and the UAE on Aug. 13 and hailed by the Trump administration as a "historic diplomatic breakthrough" was roundly condemned by Palestinians across the political spectrum as a blow to the goal of Palestinian statehood and to the Saudi-sponsored Arab Peace Initiative, by which Arab states had agreed to normalize relations with Israel only in return for Israel ending its occupation and allowing the establishment of an independent Palestinian state. Although broadly welcomed by leaders of both political parties as well as much of the international community, Israel-UAE normalization, in the absence of a final status agreement, further disincentivizes Israel from seeking compromise or granting concessions to the Palestinians, making a peace agreement based on a two-state solution even more difficult to achieve.
- Under an Israeli blockade, the humanitarian situation in Gaza remains dire, and the risk of an armed conflict between Gaza and Israel remains high.
- The Palestinian Authority (PA), created by the Oslo process in the 1990s and widely viewed as the nucleus of a future Palestinian state, remains bitterly divided between the Fatah-dominated West Bank and the Hamas-ruled Gaza Strip. The ongoing schism has effectively suspended institutional politics in Palestine, including the Palestinian Legislative Council, the PA's parliament. After years of stagnation and faced with an acute crisis of legitimacy, in January 2021, Palestinian President Mahmoud Abbas announced that long-delayed elections would be held for the Palestinian Legislative Council in May, for president in July, and for the Palestine National Council, the PLO's ostensible parliament-in-exile, in August.

## US INTERESTS

- Work toward a resolution of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict that is consistent with America's foundational values of freedom, dignity, and respect for human rights for all peoples.
- Prevent an escalation of violence between Israelis and Palestinians.

- Ensure that the Israeli-Palestinian conflict is not an obstacle to the fight against transnational Salafi-jihadists or to improved relations between Israel and Arab states, as part of efforts to address Iran.
- Uphold the principle of the inadmissibility of the acquisition of territory by war, a central pillar of the post-World War II international order, by working to end Israel's 53-year-old occupation and by preventing Israeli annexation of any portion of the West Bank.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Reset and reorient U.S. relations with the Palestinians through:
  - Clearly and unequivocally calling for an end to Israel's military occupation, as the Obama, Bush, Clinton, and other past administrations have done.
  - Reaffirming the internationally accepted terms of reference for an Israeli-Palestinian peace settlement, most notably UNSCR 242, which enshrines the "land for peace" formula that has undergirded the peace process for more than half a century.
  - Issuing a follow up to U.S. recognition of Jerusalem as Israel's capital stipulating that the declaration applies to West Jerusalem and announcing support for the establishment of a Palestinian capital in East Jerusalem. To demonstrate its seriousness, the Biden administration should call on Israel to reopen Palestinian civic, political, and cultural institutions in East Jerusalem, as required by the Quartet Roadmap, and secure guarantees that Israel will allow Palestinians in Jerusalem to participate in planned upcoming elections, as per previous arrangement in 2006 and 2005.
  - Reopening the PLO mission in Washington and reestablishing the U.S. consulate in East Jerusalem as a dedicated mission to Palestinians.
  - Reinstating U.S. foreign assistance to the Palestinians and to UNRWA.
  - Supporting efforts aimed at Palestinian internal

reconciliation in order to allow for the PA's return to Gaza and for lifting the Israeli blockade.

- Affirming U.S. support for holding Palestinian legislative and presidential elections in a timely manner and a commitment to respect the outcome of those elections if they are conducted in accordance with international standards.
- Support efforts in Congress to ensure that U.S. military assistance to Israel is not used to support settlement activity, annexation, or human rights abuses in the occupied territories and that such assistance is consistent with existing U.S. law, including the Leahy Law.
- Press Israel to lift the Gaza blockade with the goals of aligning Israeli import controls for Gaza with those of the West Bank and normalizing the movement of people and goods in and out of the Gaza Strip.
- Acknowledge that while American involvement and leadership remain crucial to the success of any diplomatic process, the United States cannot and should not seek to achieve comprehensive peace on its own and should instead work with its international partners (e.g., including both major powers and regional stakeholders such as Germany, France, Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and others) to establish a genuinely multilateral mechanism for diplomatic engagement with the parties.

# SAUDI ARABIA

## GERALD FEIERSTEIN

### ISSUES

- Managing relations with Saudi Arabia will be one of the administration's most complex challenges. While many aspects of Saudi policy are problematic, the success of regional policy initiatives is dependent on continued U.S.-Saudi cooperation.
- Internally, Saudi Arabia is at a critical juncture, attempting a radical economic overhaul through Vision 2030, and a radical socio-cultural transformation away from rigid Islamist hardline strictures toward a more open social and cultural space. At the same time, there has been a concentration of political power in the person of the crown prince and a harsh crackdown on rival political and business leaders, as well as a constriction of public space for political or civic expression both at home and abroad.
- Externally, there are signs that the Saudi leadership is trying to correct foreign policy missteps. The al-Ula Agreement to at least set aside differences with Qatar will help enhance U.S.-GCC cooperation. Clearly, the Saudis are looking for ways to end their intervention in Yemen's civil war. But progress is uncertain and the Saudis still face significant challenges from Iran and an increasingly unstable regional environment.
- Yemen, internal repression, and the murder of Saudi dissident and U.S. resident Jamal Khashoggi have created the most acute crisis in U.S.-Saudi relations since September 2001.
- It is nearly certain that there will be a transition in Saudi leadership within the coming four years and a strong probability that Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman (MbS), the author of many of the Saudi domestic and foreign policy initiatives of concern, will succeed King Salman. Managing the relationship with MbS personally will be critically important.

### US INTERESTS

- A strong Saudi Arabia is a critical partner for the U.S. in

promoting regional security and stability, challenging Iranian bad behavior, and advancing shared objectives, including resolving the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

- While pressing Saudi Arabia to support efforts to end the conflict in Yemen, ensuring that a resolution addresses legitimate Saudi security concerns is essential to securing Saudi support for post-conflict stabilization and reconstruction.
- Despite the growth of U.S. domestic energy production, Saudi Arabia remains the linchpin of global oil production and is, therefore, essential for maintaining stability in world energy markets and the global economy.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain vital cooperation on critical energy infrastructure protection and promote stability in energy/financial markets.
- An increasingly self-confident and assertive Saudi Arabia will identify and pursue its own policy objectives. To ensure that the Saudis coordinate on policy decisions essential to U.S. goals and objectives, maintain a robust bilateral dialogue on regional issues of concern to promote agreement on shared concerns, including resolving the Yemen and intra-GCC conflicts.
- Help and encourage the kingdom to achieve the goals of Vision 2030 and open up social and cultural space, but the U.S. should also be firm and clear in insisting on respect for human rights, the rule of law, and civil liberties in Saudi Arabia. Make clear to MbS that the U.S. will not tolerate further human rights abuses, including threats against dissidents and their families.
- Engage the Saudi leadership in a review and re-definition of the scope of U.S.-Saudi security cooperation, including an understanding on U.S. arms sales. Secure Saudi agreement that they will not pursue advanced Russian or Chinese weapons systems that will undermine or threaten U.S. security arrangements in the region.

# SUDAN

## MOHAMMED SOLIMAN

### ISSUES

- Sudan is an extremely fragile state that has experienced state failure and internal conflict and breakup. Decades of conflict with the South ended with the secession of South Sudan in 2011. Years of conflict in Darfur between government and local groups devastated that province and its inhabitants, and led then President Omar al-Bashir to be indicted in the International Criminal Court.
- A popular uprising in 2019 resulted in the ouster of President Bashir by the military, and a tentative agreement — between the military and civilian protest groups — on a 39-month transition process to include power sharing between the military and civilians, and ending with a full return to democracy and the establishment of functioning and accountable executive, legislative, and judicial institutions. Alongside Tunisia, it is one of the rare — but very precarious — cases of attempted democratic transition in the region.
- The population of over 40 million is among the poorest in the world, heavily dependent on agriculture, and suffering from poor wealth distribution, poor infrastructure, and poor governance. Sudan is particularly vulnerable to the impacts of the Grand Ethiopian Renaissance Dam (GERD) project.
- The country has been hit hard by the socio-economic consequences of the COVID-19 pandemic. It has registered a fairly limited number of cases and deaths — around 30,000 and 1,900 respectively — but the economy is in deep crisis. Over 80% of the population has been included in a direct cash transfer program supported by the international community, and a full fourth of the population faces extreme hunger, if further urgent humanitarian measures are not put in place.
- China is the main player in Sudan's energy sector, and national energy income has contributed to some infrastructure and capital development, but is also impacted by high levels of corruption and poor governance.
- In addition to Sudan's objections and concerns over the GERD project and the thousands of Ethiopian refugees escaping the Tigray region into Sudan since November 2020, Khartoum and Addis Ababa are engaged in clashes over the disputed triangle of al-Fashqa, ultimately putting the two nations on a collision course.
- In a U.S.-sponsored deal, Sudan agreed to normalize relations with Israel in return for its removal from the U.S. state sponsors of terrorism list. Despite the removal of Sudan from the list, Sudan and Israel have not yet signed an official normalization agreement because of Khartoum's desire to do so at the White House.
- The UAE, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia have become Sudan's closest regional allies. The UAE has brokered meetings between the Sudanese military and Israel. Egypt conducted a historic military exercise with Sudan in 2020 to show solid support for Khartoum on the issue of ongoing border tensions with Ethiopia.
- Last December, Russia signed a 25-year agreement with Sudan that allows Moscow to station four ships and up to 300 personnel on the Red Sea at Port Sudan. Port Sudan is the second Russian naval base outside of the former Soviet Union and gives Moscow a strategic niche in the Red Sea.

### US INTERESTS

- After many years of an adversarial relationship, relations with the U.S. have improved in recent years. In 2017 the two countries embarked on a five-track reengagement process that has shown improvements in military, intelligence, political, and economic relations. To lay the groundwork for the Sudan-Israel normalization agreement, the U.S. removed Sudan from the list of state sponsors of terrorism, ushering a new era in U.S.-Sudan relations.

- The U.S. has a particular interest today in helping Sudan's democratic transition process succeed. This is important for Sudan's own stability and future, but it will also have a positive demonstration effect for other countries in the region that are doubling down on autocracy, showing them that democratic transition is both possible and necessary.
- Historically the U.S. does have major national interests in Sudan, but the agreement between Khartoum and Moscow could impact the strategic balance in the Red Sea. Thus, the U.S. does have a significant interest in keeping the country away from alignment with adversaries like Russia, Iran, or China, and helping to ensure that the precarious Sudanese state does not disintegrate further, or fail altogether. The consequences of such a failure would reverberate throughout the region.
- Continue to play a proactive role in engaging with Ethiopia, Sudan, and Egypt in shepherding the GERD project in ways that enhance win-win outcomes for all riparian countries and reduce the risk of extreme negative fallout for Sudan.
- Intervene diplomatically to de-escalate the border tensions between Sudan and Ethiopia, and isolate the border dispute from other issues, such as the Tigray war and the GERD project.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Continue to use gradual reengagement with Sudan as leverage to encourage the democratic transition process. The U.S. should also use what leverage and influence it has to strengthen state institutions and the rule of law.
- Finalize the Sudan-Israel normalization deal by inviting the two countries' leaders to the White House.
- Dissuade Sudan from aligning with Russia through economic, diplomatic, and strategic means, and ultimately putting the Khartoum-Moscow agreement on pause.
- Maintain leadership within the international donor community to help Sudan attend to its urgent humanitarian needs during the COVID-19 pandemic and economic contraction.
- Encourage reform and effective development and economic policies to support economic resilience and a rapid and inclusive post-COVID recovery, while working to increase U.S.-Sudan investment and trade relations.

# SYRIA: TWO VIEWPOINTS

ROBERT S. FORD

## ISSUES

- U.N.-sponsored talks about the Syrian constitution are deadlocked and, in any case, do not address the underlying issues that sparked the 2011 uprising and subsequent escalation to civil war. The U.N. talks are a fig leaf hiding a stalemate on reaching a political solution.
- Russia has expanded its logistical hub and military penetration of the Syrian army in the past four years. However, Russia intervened to save the Assad regime, and it will not seek to force destabilizing concessions on Assad and his clique. Instead, Moscow wants to see Damascus reassert control across Syria with its help.
- The Russians are not comfortable with increased Iranian influence in Syria, and they green-light sustained Israeli airstrikes against Iranian targets. The Russians do not want, however, Israeli airstrikes to undermine the Syrian government's fragile stability.
- Russia and Turkey coordinate to a limited degree around embattled northwestern Syria, but they are far from reaching any kind of enduring settlement for opposition-controlled Idlib Province.
- Turkish antagonism toward the American-backed Syrian Kurdish People's Protection Units (YPG) militia is not based on security concerns. Rather, Ankara worries about its long-term territorial integrity because of sympathies among Turkish Kurdish communities toward their Syrian Kurdish cousins, as seen in 2014 pro-YPG demonstrations. Ankara will try to block the YPG and its political front from joining any major political negotiation track.
- Over four years the American military deployment and control of the small oilfields in eastern Syria has never translated into useful leverage. The Russians, Iranians, and Assad government will wait out the Americans. Over time, the growth of the YPG

statelet in eastern Syria under an American military umbrella will drive Ankara and Damascus to cooperate against it with Russian encouragement.

## US INTERESTS

- Syria has never been vital to America's standing in the Middle East. For 40 years Damascus has been aligned with Moscow and Tehran.
- Hope is not analysis. The reality is that American control of eastern Syria and complementary financial pressure will not extract reform from a weakened but unrepentant Assad government whose allies will not accept its collapse.
- Israel can contain the Iranian missile program in Syria unilaterally and Russia is implicitly helping. A U.S. military presence in Syria is not needed to help Israel.
- Remaining ISIS bands in eastern Syria do not pose an immediate threat to homeland security. However, U.S. forces in Syria risk attack from militias aligned with Damascus, Tehran, and Ankara and those governments, not the U.S., will determine any future escalation.
- It is marginally beneficial to the U.S. to see Russia compelled to commit more of its limited resources to contain ISIS in Syria and prevent ISIS from gaining ground there.
- Syria refugee flows into Europe in 2015 boosted anti-democratic populist movements in European allied states, and another surge would cause new political problems.
- Cessation of Russian and Syrian attacks in northwest Syria would help international stability.



## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Military forces will never totally destroy ISIS because they cannot address the political, economic, and social grievances that spawned it. Thus, the U.S. should seek to have ISIS adequately contained in Syria by other actors whose greater interests in Syria will drive them to deploy more forces to contain ISIS.
- Work with Ankara and Moscow to finalize a security arrangement whereby the Russian government assumes control of eastern Syria and its oilfields in coordination with the Syrian Kurdish YPG faction and the allied Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Russia will need to send more forces. Then withdraw all U.S. forces.
- In return for ending support to the Syrian Kurdish YPG-led autonomous region, secure Ankara's acceptance to verifiably block movement of extremists from Syria to the West.
- Provide political and indirect military support for Turkish efforts to deter Syrian and Russian government attacks on the large displaced civilian populations in northwestern Syria.
- If Moscow blocks U.N.-directed cross-border aid into northwestern Syria, suspend U.S. assistance for U.N. humanitarian operations out of Damascus, leave Russia to take full responsibility with its Syrian government ally for feeding the populations under their control while the U.S. and its allies assume the U.N. management role for cross-border aid into northwestern Syria. Assuming this role will be a major challenge for USAID and the State Department.
- Boost spending on refugee assistance in Lebanon (priority), Jordan, and Turkey to forestall another refugee movement surge.

# SYRIA: TWO VIEWPOINTS

CHARLES LISTER

## ISSUES

- After a decade of intense conflict, Syria is now a failed state divided roughly into four competing geographic zones of control:
  1. Regime areas in the west, center, and south (~63%)
  2. The “Eastern Security Zone” controlled by the Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF), backed by U.S. troops (~28%)
  3. Rural northern Aleppo, governed by the Syrian National Army, backed by Turkey (~6%)
  4. Territory administered largely by former al-Qaeda affiliate Hayat Tahrir al-Sham (HTS) in the northwest (~3%).
- While in control of nearly two-thirds of the country, Assad faces a series of security challenges that continue to worsen as his regime’s inability to secure, stabilize, govern, or provide for communities under his rule becomes ever clearer. In fact, the most unstable zones of Syria in 2020 were areas violently recaptured by the regime in 2018, which underlines clearly that regime “victories” won through siege, starvation, and carpet bombing, and followed up by claims of Russian-mediated “reconciliation,” are not being met.
  - In the regime-controlled central desert, ISIS continues a slow resurgence, launching increasingly significant attacks on Syrian, Russian, and Iranian positions and demonstrating a desire *and* ability to temporarily capture populated territory. ISIS attacks have increased in frequency and scale for consecutive months dating to mid-2020. In SDF-controlled eastern Syria, ISIS has not achieved similar results.
  - In southern Syria, Russia’s 2018 “reconciliation” deal with surrendered opposition factions is crumbling, as former rebels now under Russian tutelage continue to launch attacks on regime and Iranian positions with increasing frequency. Multiple days-long battles have occurred in recent months, involving tanks and heavy artillery. More than 500 attacks have been recorded in the past 18 months.
- Covert insurgent activity continues to target regime positions and personnel in the capital Damascus and other urban centers throughout regime territories.
- The Druze-majority governorate of al-Suwaida remains restive, with large and vocal components of urban communities frequently protesting en masse against the regime, its corruption, brutality, intimidation, and incompetence.
- The Israeli Air Force continues to launch night-time strikes against Iran-linked targets across western, central, and eastern Syria, and there remains no prospect for any cessation of such unilateral actions.
- Syria’s economy has been crippled after 10 years of conflict and paralyzed by financial collapse next-door in Lebanon. Spiraling inflation has devalued the Syrian pound and severely curtailed access to foreign currency — damaging trade, hampering access to oil and key staple products like wheat and flour, and limiting the availability of electricity. Damascus’s decision to print money and produce larger cash notes has only exacerbated the economic crisis and effectively eliminated Syria’s middle class altogether.
- With 50% of Syria’s basic infrastructure destroyed and with the regime sustaining its status as an international pariah, there is no prospect of any meaningful reconstruction. For ordinary Syrians, there is no light at the end of the tunnel and today’s “post-war” reality brings far greater challenges than the height of military conflict in earlier years.
- Economic collapse, government corruption and incompetence as well as the regime’s continued hostility to “reconciled” areas leaves Syria in a humanitarian crisis. This is particularly acute in the north and east — regions controlled by the regime’s adversaries. In July 2021, Russia is expected to veto any further cross-border aid into the north, an action that would leave nearly 5 million civilians without urgently needed aid.
- 5.7 million Syrian refugees remain outside of the country and 6.2 million are displaced inside Syria. With displaced people

now representing a majority of Syrians, it is very concerning that recent, extensive polling has indicated that few, if any, are willing to consider returning without substantial political changes *and* reforms in Damascus.

- Syria remains one of the world's most significant state sponsors of terrorism, with ongoing strategic alliances with Iran's Quds Force, Hezbollah, and an array of designated Shi'a militant groups. In addition to vital alliances with Russia and Iran, Syria's regime maintains close ties to North Korea, while Syrian intelligence also has a documented history of cooperation with al-Qaeda and ISIS, dating to the early 2000s.
- Syria has recently emerged as a major producer and exporter of narcotics to markets in the Middle East and Europe, highlighting the increasing influence of the regime's involvement in transnational organized crime, and indeed its financial dependence on it.
- The Syrian regime has committed an extensive list of war crimes and crimes against humanity. To date, it has faced no accountability, beyond U.S. and EU sanctions.

## US INTERESTS

- Syria looks set to be mired in civil conflict for many years, providing an environment ripe for terrorist organizations whose existence is defined by an ambition to attack America and Americans. If there is one rule that has remained true over the past decade of Syria's conflict, it is this: "What happens in Syria does not stay in Syria." By disengaging and ceding leverage for little if anything in return, the U.S. cannot and will not be capable of isolating itself or its allies and interests from the effects of Syria's instability and the threats that will inevitably spill from it. Worse still, when Syria's crises once again challenge global stability, a withdrawn U.S. will have no relationships or tools to return.

- The U.S. has an immediate interest in continuing to combat ISIS in Syria and to prevent the group's resurgence. In sustaining this effort, the U.S. contributes toward sustaining a meaningful region of relative stability, in which the survival of a credible SDF entity offers us discernible leverage to address broader Syria policy questions.
- In an era in which great power competition looks set to play a defining role in determining U.S. foreign policy, the U.S. cannot afford to fall by the wayside in demanding accountability and meaningful reforms in Syria. More broadly, given the inevitable surge in instability that would follow a premature U.S. disengagement from Syria, America's credibility and alliance convening power are at stake.
- Given its position in the heart of the Middle East, the U.S. has a clear interest in — at a minimum — limiting instability in Syria and its capacity to destabilize its neighbors and foster threats to U.S. security at home and abroad. So long as Syria remains the same or worse, the presence of nearly 6 million Syrian refugees within Jordan, Lebanon, Turkey, and Iraq places an unsustainable strain on vital American allies that risks catalyzing serious, secondary consequences that could change the region forever.
- The U.S. has an interest in re-asserting the norm against the use of chemical weapons — something eroded by nearly 350 such attacks in Syria since 2011. Syria's violation of the 2013 deal to eradicate its stockpiles is a serious concern, including at the Organization for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons, which continues to accuse Damascus of concealing information from its inspectors, including surrounding discoveries of Sarin components at a previously undisclosed site.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. must acknowledge that (1) an effective Syria policy that protects U.S. interests and allows the U.S. to continue to influence and/or contain developments in Syria requires a

sustained, measured, and consistent U.S. presence and policy engagement; (2) this is possible with a low-cost, light-footprint approach that is financially, militarily, and diplomatically sustainable and incomparable to parallel campaigns in Iraq or Afghanistan; and (3) that disengagement guarantees deeper instability and would remove any U.S. ability to manage, contain or neutralize the threats that would result.

- Maintain a military presence — approximately 1,000 personnel — in the eastern security zone to continue training, equipping, and partnering with the SDF in combating ISIS and preventing its resurgence.
  - Exploit this presence to contain and deter hostile actors from attacking the SDF, undermining the fight against ISIS and exacerbating drivers of instability.
- Complement counterterrorism activities with increased stabilization aid — buttressed by coalition pledges — to ameliorate root causes of violence and radicalization.
- Enhance intelligence, surveillance, and reconnaissance over northwestern Syria to identify and neutralize al-Qaeda operatives engaged in planning external attacks.
- Enforce the Caesar Syria Civilian Protection Act to prevent economic assistance to the Syrian regime and to deter continued war crimes and crimes against humanity.
- Utilize all aspects of U.S. influence and leverage to enhance international pressure on the regime, Russia, and Iran to engage meaningfully with a political process defined by UNSCR 2254.
- Ensure allies remain committed to a policy of non-re-engagement with the regime, absent substantial progress in the above.

# TUNISIA

## WILLIAM LAWRENCE

### ISSUES

- Tunisia's fragile political transition remains on track after 10 years, thanks in large part to agreement between prior regime, "secular," and Islamist constituencies to respect each other's participation in politics. Tunisia boasts one of the Arab and Muslim world's most progressive constitutions and a relatively high degree of press freedom, but suffers from considerable political and economic unrest.
- Tunisia successfully managed its response to the first wave of the COVID-19 pandemic with only 4,000 cases and 80 deaths by September 2020. It then eased up restrictions largely due to the severe economic downturn and was hit with an enormous second wave. As of March 2021, there were around 240,000 cases and over 8,200 deaths, double that of Algeria and with a death rate soon to pass that of Morocco, two countries with populations triple the size of Tunisia.
- Tunisia is set to receive 4 million vaccines through the COVAX program and the Geneva-based GAVI vaccine alliance and hopes to vaccinate 50% of its population by next summer. Tunisia received its first major vaccine delivery just as Morocco completed 4 million vaccinations. COVID fatigue and popular backlash against public health measures are increasingly merging with existing political and economic grievances into one simmering cauldron that can boil over at any time.
- Due to COVID-19, the economy is in free fall. It contracted by 8.2% in 2020 and the fiscal deficit reached an estimated 11.5% of GDP. The IMF forecasts the budget deficit could reach 9% of GDP in 2021 without reform, and Tunisia expects to borrow around \$7.2 billion this year, including \$5 billion in foreign loans. The economic slump and rising unemployment, which topped 16% in third-quarter 2020, have increased popular discontent with the government. The former prime minister announced in June 2020 that the next battle is to "save the state." Youth have taken to the streets in protest, resulting in increasingly severe government crackdowns.
- A strongly anti-establishment vote in 2019 increased political fragmentation and polarization. The populist president lacks both a party and political experience. National unity governments have been replaced by competing parliamentary blocs, aggravating legislative paralysis. Parliament is deeply divided, beset with partisan vitriol, boycotts, investigations, physical aggression, and even a recent case of breaking and entering. In September 2020 it voted to approve Tunisia's third government in less than a year. The latest political crisis had the president refusing to allow the swearing in of new ministers and forcing out five of them following the cabinet reshuffle approved by Parliament in late January.
- Nearly a dozen consecutive governments under seven prime ministers since the revolution have failed to revitalize the faltering economy or address rising unemployment and inflation. Youth unemployment is climbing above 30% and among university graduates is surpassing 40%. Perceptions of corruption have increased. Tunisia is counting on bailouts, new investment, and increased European, Algerian, and Russian tourism to save the economy.
- Threats emanating from Libya — including Tunisian jihadists based there — have triggered a successful security response. Following ISIS's defeat, foreign fighters have returned home to weak social reintegration. The security sector has not been truly reformed since the 2011 revolution, however, and excessive use of force, arbitrary arrests, and harassment of journalists remain common.

### US INTERESTS

- If Tunisia does not weather the current political and economic crises, social and political tension could destabilize the country and end its democratic transition, with significant negative repercussions for Europe, the Mediterranean, Middle East, and Africa.

- The demonstration effect of a democratic, secure, and increasingly prosperous Tunisia had had enormously positive regional impact — including on Algeria and Sudan and to a lesser degree on Lebanon and Iraq — and can encourage Libya stabilization and future reform efforts in Egypt and among regional autocracies.
  - The entire Muslim world is closely watching Tunisia and rising and falling U.S. support for the Arab world’s only democracy. A failed transition in Tunisia will have negative reputational effects for the U.S., for democracy, and for an open democratic “mixed” economic model.
  - Supporting Tunisia reduces foreign fighter and migrant flows and their destabilizing effects on Africa and Europe, including political fragmentation and the rise of right-wing supremacist nationalism and terrorism.
  - Tunisia plays a critical support role in Libya peacemaking efforts, as well as in supporting hundreds of thousands of increasingly impoverished Libyan refugees. A negotiated solution in Libya will help Tunisia, one of America’s oldest regional allies since 1797.
- for human rights and press freedom; transitional justice, justice reform, and creation of the constitutional court; and reintegration of foreign fighters.
  - Expand Libya-related engagements in Tunisia, including engagements with Libyan leaders and civilians living in or visiting Tunisia.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Help support Tunisia’s COVID-19 response and vaccination campaign to provide relief and continue economic reform measures that share burdens between major political actors and constituencies.
- The worsening economic situation has resulted in growing unrest and sustained international investment will be vital to increasing stability in the country, especially private sector job creation. Work to boost contributions to the Tunisian-American enterprise fund.
- Increase political and security support for Tunisia, especially democratic consolidation; security improvements; respect

# TURKEY

## GÖNÜL TOL

### ISSUES

- The armed conflict between Turkey and its Kurds resumed in 2015, leading to thousands of deaths and hundreds of thousands displaced in a few years. Kurdish cities have been destroyed and elected Kurdish officials, including mayors and members of parliament, have been removed from office or sent to jail on bogus terrorism charges. President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's nationalist ally Devlet Bahçeli has been calling for the closure of the pro-Kurdish party.
- Turkey has become increasingly authoritarian under President Erdoğan. He has hollowed out democratic institutions in an authoritarian power grab, human rights violations are widespread, the government crackdown on dissenters has intensified, the judiciary has become politicized, and the rule of law has been systematically dismantled.
- There are around 4 million Syrian refugees living in Turkey. The nationalist backlash against the Syrians has increased recently due to the country's growing economic problems.
- Turkey has cultivated close relations with Russia in the last few years. It is already dependent on Russia for energy and trade, and it has to work with Moscow in Syria. It has deepened defense ties as well. It purchased the Russian S-400 missile defense system and recently tested the system. Erdoğan said Turkey would hold talks with Russia about purchasing a second S-400 missile battery and has expressed interest in buying Russian stealth fighter jets.
- In October 2020, Erdoğan threatened a new military operation against the Kurdish-led Syrian Democratic Forces (SDF). Turkey-backed groups shelled Ayn Issa and other small villages in northeastern Syria in a sign that Turkey might be planning a military operation to capture Ayn Issa from the Kurds.
- Turkey militarily intervened in the Libyan war in support of the Tripoli government. Turkey has several thousand military

personnel as well as two permanent bases in the country and transferred thousands of Syrian opposition fighters there.

- Turkey is at loggerheads with Greece and Cyprus in the eastern Mediterranean over several issues including the divided island of Cyprus, energy drilling rights, and maritime boundaries. Turkey has legitimate concerns in the region, but its use of gunboat diplomacy increased tensions, raising the specter of confrontation between NATO allies. Several countries including France and the UAE have thrown their military support behind Greece and Cyprus, while Turkey's signing of a maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli government overlapping with the area Greece considers part of its continental shelf made the situation worse.

### US INTERESTS

- Turkey's failure to find a peaceful solution to its decades-old "Kurdish problem" is causing problems for Turkey-U.S. ties as well as U.S. policy in Syria due to America's ongoing cooperation with the Syrian Kurdish militia known as the People's Protection Units (YPG), which Ankara considers a terrorist organization, in the fight against ISIS.
- Another Turkish military incursion against the SDF would jeopardize the U.S.-brokered cease-fire with the group, which has already been violated many times, and would threaten the gains made in the campaign against ISIS and lead to further instability and bloodshed in the region.
- Increasing authoritarianism in Turkey leads to a more ideology-driven foreign policy. Turkey has been pursuing an Islamist and nationalist Middle East policy since the beginning of the Arab uprisings, which has undermined U.S. goals in the region and driven Turkey away from the Western alliance.
- Turkey's military intervention in Libya has not only complicated the war there but also increased tensions in the eastern Mediterranean. The prospects of a long-term Turkish military

presence in the country have led to other outside actors, including Russia, France, Egypt, and the UAE, doubling down on their involvement in the conflict in support of the eastern forces led by Khalifa Hifter. Turkey's military presence threatens the U.N.-led political discussions in the country and its maritime delimitation agreement with the Tripoli-based government has also raised tensions between Turkey and its NATO allies in the Mediterranean.

- Turkey is a NATO country. Its close defense ties with Russia and hard power tactics in the eastern Mediterranean weaken the NATO alliance and endanger Turkey's participation in future operations.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Erdoğan's foreign policy actions are mostly driven by his domestic calculations, making a U-turn in foreign policy due to outside pressure difficult. Both sides must accept the transactional nature of the relationship. The U.S. must set clear redlines and communicate to the Turkish side the consequences if Ankara crosses them.
- Push Turkey and the Kurdistan Workers' Party (PKK) to the negotiating table no matter how improbable a peace process seems given Erdoğan's alliance with the nationalists. Encourage third parties such as Norway to mediate.
- Continue to speak publicly and privately at senior U.S. government levels about concerns with the decline of freedom of expression and association in Turkey, call out human rights violations, provide more support for local organizations working on democracy and human rights issues, and increase overall assistance for civil society and outside NGOs working in areas like women's rights, youth empowerment, economic development, combatting corruption, and inclusion of minorities in the national discourse.
- Expand support for programs that are designed to improve Syrian refugees' livelihood opportunities, including programs that increase women's participation in the workforce. Also increase resettlement places for refugees from Turkey.
- Outline the consequences of another military incursion into northeastern Syria clearly.
- Communicate to Ankara clearly that the U.S. administration will impose harsher sanctions that would have a significant impact on the country's military readiness if Ankara buys further Russian systems. If Turkey agrees not to operationalize the S-400s or buy additional Russian systems, Turkey can be reintroduced into the F-35 program.
- Turkey has legitimate concerns in the eastern Mediterranean and Aegean. The U.S. should play the honest mediator between the parties and work to create further mechanisms to avoid military escalation and build the coherence of NATO. Offering Turkey a seat at the table in the East Med Gas Forum, launched by several Mediterranean allies of the U.S., could set a positive agenda for further talks between parties.
- The U.S. should continue to call on Turkey to halt its military intervention in Libya.



# YEMEN

## GERALD FEIERSTEIN

### ISSUES

- The civil conflict, with external intervention, is in its fifth year with no sign of ending. The global pandemic has accentuated the massive humanitarian crisis. Together, the deteriorating security and humanitarian conditions threaten the long-term unity, viability, and territorial integrity of the country.
- The failure of state institutions, lack of resources, and massive unemployment have made Yemen a breeding ground for violent extremist groups, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS.
- Conversely, ending the Yemen civil war can be an important step forward in reducing regional tensions and opening the door to GCC-Iran dialogue.

preserving Yemen's territorial integrity and enhancing regional stability.

- Promote the conclusion of the final elements of the GCC Transition plan, including the election of a new, legitimate government to partner with the U.S. in eliminating violent extremists threats in Yemen.
- Construct a broad framework for economic development and reconstruction based on GCC-led assistance and the integration of Yemen's economy with its Gulf neighbors.
- Lead the international community's sustained commitment to develop Yemen's social, political, and economic institutions and eliminate the root causes of violent extremism.

### US INTERESTS

- Ensure that Yemen is not a safe haven for violent extremist organizations, including al-Qaeda in the Arabian Peninsula and ISIS.
- Ensure freedom of navigation through the Gulf of Aden and Bab el-Mandeb.
- Promote Yemen's integration into the GCC to enhance regional security and stability.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Take steps to ensure that critical humanitarian supplies reach Yemen through both international humanitarian organizations and private sector entities.
- Expand engagement with the U.N. special envoy, the P-5, Yemen parties, and regional partners to promote a negotiated resolution to the conflict on the basis of UNSCR 2216,

# CLIMATE CHANGE & WATER SECURITY

## AMAL KANDEEL

### ISSUES

- MENA is one of the most vulnerable regions in the world to climate change impacts. Climate change is a threat multiplier in MENA's semiarid/arid environment due to delayed adaptation and extremely high exposure to the harmful impacts of global warming.
- MENA's freshwater resources are facing serious risks to their sustainability due to overexploitation and interstate competition over transboundary resources. These risks threaten to undermine public health, erode past Millennium Development Goals achievements, and jeopardize the already weakened prospects for realizing the most critical Sustainable Development Goals (SDG), including SDG 1 (no poverty), SDG 2 (zero hunger), SDG 6 (clean water), and SDG 8 (decent work).
- Five MENA countries — Yemen, Syria, Iraq, Sudan, and Libya — face the additional dangerous consequences of protracted warfare for their environments, water resources, infrastructure, and public health, with potential further destabilizing repercussions for their societies.
- Many of the region's economies remain highly dependent on fossil fuels and several, including Saudi Arabia and Iran, are major greenhouse gas emitters, including through widespread flaring of natural gas. There is a pressing need to diversify regional economies away from fossil fuels.
- Safeguard against the collapse of other MENA countries due to unmitigated environmental stress that is closely linked to socioeconomic stress in many areas of the region.
- Mitigate conditions that drive population displacement, and avoid the spread of conflict contagion from MENA's conflict zones, where water resources are becoming acutely scarce and degraded and livelihoods dependent on them severely compromised, to more stable areas of the region.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Ensure that universally accepted legal principles applicable to the protection of freshwater resources and infrastructure in times of war, as well as related plans and measures, are explicitly incorporated into all negotiation tracks and peace talks concerning MENA's hot-conflict countries.
- Establish a program of financial support for MENA's agriculture-based countries whose purpose is to strengthen farming communities' capacity to adapt to rising water scarcity and climate change impacts.
- Support and fund the development of an assessment framework and protocol for freshwater resource risks, and their extensive and varied implications throughout MENA countries, to regularly inform the U.S. Department of State of pre-crisis level emergent situations and allow for timely constructive engagement and proactive responses.
- Assist regional economies as they work to diversify away from reliance on fossil fuels and transition toward green energy. The U.S. is well positioned to help in these areas.

### US INTERESTS

- Ensure that a durable peace in war-torn MENA countries can be restored and safeguard against the risk of renewed instability, which requires the preservation of the freshwater resource base essential for viable, stable postconflict states.

# COUNTER-TERRORISM

## CHARLES LISTER

### ISSUES

- The threat posed by jihadist terrorism and ideology has never been more diverse, globally distributed, better experienced, or present in so many conflict theaters. Far from defeating terrorism, the U.S. and allies have won many battles, but we are losing the war.
  - ISIS's territorial defeat in Syria and Iraq and the killing of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi may have been significant accomplishments, but there are already signs that it is in the initial stages of a slow, but methodical recovery, while it also remains an underappreciated and expanding challenge elsewhere across the Middle East, North Africa, South Asia, and beyond.
  - The proliferation of local conflict and the re-assertion of dictatorial governance across much of the region have empowered al-Qaeda affiliates, whose existence has become increasingly entrenched and driven by local dynamics. Some, like Tanzim Huras al-Din in Syria or al-Shabab in Somalia, are also focusing anew on external attacks in 2021.
  - While the apparent disconnect between al-Qaeda's global leadership and these fluid theaters might appear to be a counter-terrorism success, it has encouraged affiliates to make their own decisions and become smarter, more flexible, and thus more challenging and enduring adversaries.
- Within an environment in which fatigue with foreign conflict is an inescapable reality, the U.S. has a clear interest in continuing to support its regional allies to withstand ongoing and future terrorism challenges.
  - As instability looks set to endure and potentially worsen in multiple areas, the U.S. must work to prevent any form of terrorist ideology from gaining widespread traction.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Acknowledge the crucial policy importance of terrorism's root causes and drivers, few if any of which have anything to do with ideology, but are instead defined by local issues relating to politics, governance, corruption, the economy, the family, and society.
- Focus on capacity building, good governance, stabilization, and development, and when operating kinetically, operate by-with-and-through representative and credible local partners.
- Maintain an effective and sustainable counter-terrorism mission against ISIS in Syria and Iraq, preventing the group's resurgence or any renewal of external attack plotting.
- Sustain pressure on al-Qaeda leadership wherever it is present, while ensuring through multilateral action that al-Qaeda affiliates are at minimum contained and preferably uprooted from their expansive areas of operation.
- Where the U.S. is militarily active in countering terrorism, we should avoid premature withdrawals or drawdowns that risk crippling local partners and/or leaving behind vacuums into which terrorists will step.

### US INTERESTS

- Nearly two decades on from the attacks of 9/11, the U.S. remains a principal target of jihadist groups, whether in regions like the Middle East or in the U.S. homeland.
- The U.S. has a clear interest in preventing terrorist groups from acquiring safe havens and/or territorial entities from which to plot and conduct attacks and sow instability.

# CYBER

## MICHAEL SEXTON

### ISSUES

- Iran, Syria, Israel, and the UAE have demonstrated the capability and willingness to carry out destabilizing cyber attacks in the region. Hezbollah and Hamas are also developing their own offensive cyber capabilities.
- Private corporations in the U.S. and Israel have exported offensive cyber tools and surveillance technologies both in the region and around the world, including to nondemocratic and semi-democratic regimes in Saudi Arabia, Syria, Ecuador, and elsewhere.
- Entities in Iran, the UAE, Saudi Arabia, and Egypt have been identified as engaging in influence operations, including misinformation campaigns, akin to Russia's campaign to influence the 2016 presidential election in the U.S.
- Governments throughout the Middle East are increasingly justifying use of potentially invasive contact tracing technology as part of the national response to the COVID-19 pandemic, which could lead to more incursions into privacy and civil liberties for the region's citizens, activists, and journalists.

### US INTERESTS

- Strengthen cybersecurity capabilities of regional allies to limit risks of cyber conflict.
- Limit and control the proliferation of offensive cyber capabilities.
- Maintain capacity to carry out offensive cyber operations when absolutely necessary.
- Combat or prevent misinformation and influence campaigns that may destabilize allies in the region or the U.S. itself.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Maintain dialogue with allies and adversaries to communicate priorities and red lines with respect to cyber conflict to reduce the risk of escalation.
  - Support defensive cyber cooperation and information-sharing among American allies and partners, in particular the Abraham Accords countries.
- Discourage regional states from using Huawei's 5G technology.
- Regulate and closely monitor American cyber technology companies that work to export offensive cyber tools, including penetration testing tools.
- Pressure allies, most notably Israel, to similarly exercise caution when permitting private companies to export cyber tools that can be used maliciously for surveillance or cyber attacks.
- Encourage U.S. cybersecurity firms to do business abroad and export defensive technologies, in particular with U.S. allies.
- Streamline regulatory processes for exporting defensive cyber technology.
- Strategically promote American cybersecurity companies in trade missions.
- Establish and maintain high-level dialogue between the intelligence community, law enforcement, and social media companies (Facebook, Twitter, and Google) to share information on malicious foreign influence operations, bots, and misinformation campaigns both in the U.S. and abroad.
- Discourage widespread sharing of contact tracing data with law enforcement and national security agencies, while encouraging governments to keep such data under strict control of public health and related ministries, and to purge data after it becomes irrelevant.

# DEMOCRACY & HUMAN RIGHTS

## CHARLES DUNNE

### ISSUES

- The conditions that gave rise to the Arab Spring protests continue to simmer: corruption, repression, human rights abuses, youth unemployment, and economic mismanagement.
- The Middle East, according to Freedom House, remains the least free region in the world, and the situation is worse now than it was 10 years ago. Authoritarian rulers are cracking down on human rights; political imprisonment, torture, forced disappearances, and destruction of online freedoms are increasingly the norm. Some governments have used the pandemic as a cover to impose stronger political restrictions.
- With the fall in oil prices, the so-called “authoritarian bargain” — governments’ ability to purchase political acquiescence through generous social and economic benefits — is failing.
- Recent upheavals in Sudan, Algeria, Iraq, Lebanon, Iran, and elsewhere highlight the persistence of discontent throughout the region and hint at more to come.
- Adopt a whole-of-government approach. State, Defense, and intelligence agencies must speak with one voice on civic, political, and human rights, and their direct connection with U.S. policy and domestic political considerations and values.
- Speak out publicly on human rights abuses, as governments in the region are vulnerable to public pressure.
- Engage with political opposition movements and activists; robustly support human rights defenders, especially those facing unjust imprisonment, torture, and lack of due process.
- Conduct zero-based reviews of U.S. political-military relationships in the region, starting with Egypt and Saudi Arabia, and work with Congress to curb out-of-control arms sales to these countries pending human rights improvements.
- Develop a new arms sales policy that recognizes human rights as a priority. Enforce the Leahy Law, which prohibits the State and Defense Departments from providing assistance to foreign military units credibly accused of gross human rights violations.

### US INTERESTS

- Getting ahead of the curve of instability through proactive diplomacy and economic/defense policy.
- Preventing hostile foreign actors from taking advantage by political and economic underwriting of authoritarian models.
- Aiming friends and allies toward political and economic arrangements that emphasize freedom and rule of law in a U.S.-led international order.
- Re-energize multilateral diplomacy to implement a human rights agenda and rational arms sales policies in the region.
- Expand democracy and governance programming for the region, as well as the role and funding of Millennium Challenge Corporation programs to encourage good governance.
- Utilize the Global Magnitsky Act to penalize the region’s most egregious human rights abusers.
- Identify issues where U.S. economic interests and human rights converge and emphasize those in diplomatic engagement.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Anticipate drastic political change in U.S. contingency planning and strategy development.
- Energize U.S. efforts to rebuild its international reputation on human rights, including normalizing its relationship with the International Criminal Court and seizing a leadership role in the United Nations Human Rights Council.

# ECONOMY, TRADE & INVESTMENT

## SHAHROKH FARDOUST

### ISSUES

- Middle Eastern governments are currently grappling with the devastating impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on their economies and a massive external economic shock as a result of a deep global recession. This has severely affected trade and financial flows and caused a major decline in oil prices, leading to a sharp deterioration in the macroeconomic situation.
- According to the IMF's latest estimates, real GDP in the region declined by about 3.2% in 2020. The job-rich manufacturing, tourism, and hospitality sectors, as well as the informal sector, have been particularly hard hit.
- Poor performance, however, is nothing new as the region has been suffering from low growth and rising extreme poverty and youth unemployment for a decade. Around two-thirds of citizens are considered either poor or vulnerable, and as of 2019, youth unemployment rates, which averaged around 20% for males and more than 40% for females, were already among the highest in the world.
- The region is in dire need of a new economic growth engine; it needs more sustainable and inclusive growth that can create jobs for the youth and take full advantage of the skills and talents of women, who continue to suffer from the lowest labor force participation rate in the world.
- The region also faces a potentially huge impact from climate change as recent research predicts increased temperatures and severe droughts as the century progresses; it already has the largest water deficit and the least food self-sufficiency. Protracted crises in urban areas present a growing challenge for water supply and sanitation service providers, governments, and the international organizations that support them.
- As climate change begins to have significant negative effects on global wellbeing, the likelihood of an accelerated shift from fossil fuels to renewable energy and taxation of carbon will rise, leading to a substantial decline in the real price of oil over the coming years. This is likely to have devastating economic and financial impacts on the region's oil exporters unless they diversify their economies.
- Before the region can start on a new growth path that is both sustainable and more inclusive, it must make an all-out effort to demilitarize, through diplomacy and common security pacts, opening the way for meaningful regional economic cooperation. The saved resources could be used to finance the necessary investments (particularly reconstruction, human capital, and the digital economy) to accelerate economic growth, increase intra-regional connectivity, boost trade in goods and services, and make progress toward achieving the Sustainable Development Goals.
- More immediately, further resurgence of COVID-19 or delayed vaccination rollouts are significant risks. The outbreak's socio-economic consequences, including increases in inequality, joblessness, food insecurity, and poverty, as well as their potential impact on political instability, constitute a major downside risk.

### US INTERESTS

- The U.S.'s long-term interest is to ensure political and economic stability in the region as its economies need to adapt to an era of relatively low oil prices and a steady decline in the global demand for fossil fuels over the next three decades.
- During this transition period, the U.S. interest will be to strengthen its trading and financial links with the region, focusing on the needs of its new growth engine as well as the challenges of water shortages and food insecurity, through the transfer of new technologies, green infrastructure, and digitalization investments, as well as by building intra-regional trading links and connectivity, with a focus on job creation for youth and women. It will also need to strongly discourage further militarization.

- The U.S. has an interest in maintaining stable energy prices and preventing energy supply disruptions, thus keeping inflationary pressures in check.
- The U.S. has an interest in encouraging U.S. businesses that lead globally in sustainable energy, green infrastructure, IT projects and digital technologies, electric cars, and mass transit to focus on the needs of the region by de-risking their investments as they face growing competition from industrial giants in East Asia and Europe.
- The U.S. has an interest in maintaining the value of the U.S. dollar vis-à-vis other key currencies and build confidence for investing public and private funds in the U.S. financial markets, as the dollar is likely to continue to be the currency in which internationally traded goods and commodities are priced.
- Economic confidence-building measures
  - Urgently assisting MENA countries with an effective COVID-19 vaccination rollout.
  - Restoring aid to the Palestinian territories and helping reverse the rising trend of poverty.
  - Removing restrictions on trade and finance, including multilateral and bilateral aid and lending, related to health/pandemic, education, social safety net, clean energy, and promotion of gender equality in affected countries, including Iran and Yemen.
  - Working with international financial institutions and the G20 to provide financial assistance, debt service suspension, and relief to highly indebted countries.
  - Assisting countries in preparing to deal with climate change and taking advantage of digitalization and other new technologies as they work to diversify and modernize their economies, including improving the quality and quantity of human capital.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

The Biden administration is well placed to take the lead in assisting MENA countries to improve their economic prospects. Dealing with the following issues is likely to reduce tensions, mitigate downside risks, and result in positive spillovers:

- Peace-building initiatives — quick win confidence-building measures
  - Helping to bring an end to the war in Yemen and pivot toward recovery and economic revival.
  - Encouraging resumption of political and economic dialogue between the Palestinian Authority and Israel.
  - Helping to ease tensions between Qatar, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE and encourage economic synergies.
  - Opening up pathways to ease tensions with Iran and revive the nuclear deal, and encouraging less regional investment in the military sector and more investment in economic and development sectors.
- Humanitarian confidence building measures
  - Encouraging freedom of the press.
  - Advocating for human rights and gender equality.
  - Discouraging corruption.

# ENERGY

## RUBA HUSARI

### ISSUES

- The global coronavirus pandemic serves as a reminder that oil is a global commodity that is influenced by declining demand, oversupply, and price wars between producers, making interdependences even more pronounced than ever before.
- Middle East producers play a strategic role in ensuring a balanced oil market across the globe, but are even more effective when cooperating with major non-OPEC producers, including the U.S.
- Oil dependence in times of a pandemic crisis serves as a reminder of the importance of transitioning to renewable-sourced and clean energy resources.
- Oil sanctions as a tool of foreign policy in the era of a pandemic can only prolong its global impact by reducing the ability of sanctioned economies to fight it.

### US INTERESTS

- The prosperity of the U.S. oil sector, especially its unconventional oil, is dependent on a balanced global market, adding more responsibility on the U.S. as a major producer to act for the benefit of all, as opposed to for America first.
- An oil price that is good for the American consumer at the pump and for the shale oil investor requires more cooperation and coordination with major producers, in particular members of OPEC, to ensure a balanced price.
- The U.S. energy sector is deeply tied to other countries and choice of policies can impact the role and status of the U.S. in the global supply chains serving the conventional, non-conventional, and renewable energy sectors.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Pursue an energy diplomacy that is anchored on partnerships with major regional producers and others to maintain market stability, ensure security of supply for oil and gas, and protect the oil price from detrimental fluctuations.
- Maintain consistency in defining U.S. policy priorities and interests to lessen friction and conflicts that could destabilize energy markets.
- Review and reassess the failures and successes of energy sanctions policy on Iran, especially in terms of the humanitarian cost versus other policies and in light of the global pandemic and the need to eradicate it worldwide.
- Include climate change and the transition to clean energy and carbon-free economies as a fundamental part of cooperation with Middle East energy producers on technologies, investments, and regulations.



# GENDER EQUALITY

## HAFSA HALAWA

### ISSUES

- The MENA region has been challenged by slow development on the gender equality agenda that has thus far failed to support women seeking full and open access to work, education, and protection under the law. While the region's populations suffer from economic deprivation and curbs on civil liberties writ large, women in the region are the most physically, economically, and socially insecure of any demographic.
- Sexual gender-based violence and state-sponsored sexual assault remains a potent problem, and women are marginalized from accessing employment across a number of sectors. Challenges have only increased of late, compounded by the COVID-19 pandemic, making women even more vulnerable.
- Women refugees and displaced persons remain the most vulnerable to economic and sexual exploitation, making up the largest demographic as victims of conflict.
- Women remain exposed to risk of physical attacks, poverty, and social stigma in traditionally patriarchal societies that continue to impose conditions on women.

### US INTERESTS

- The U.S. seeks to promote democracy in the region and the full protection of human rights and fundamental freedoms.
- The U.S. is committed to a gender equality agenda that seeks to promote protection and extend opportunity to women.
- U.S. security interests seek to protect refugees and displaced persons and reduce the potency of security threats by creating safe environments or safe return.

- The U.S. seeks to promote stable and secure countries in the region, creating opportunities for economic prosperity for citizens.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The U.S. should make gender equality central to its forthcoming foreign policy agenda in its bilateral relations with countries in the MENA region, seeking a policy that prioritizes the inclusive engagement of women.
- U.S. aid and economic support should be conditional on equal opportunity and transparency in: i) promoting gender priorities, ii) requiring gender and sex disaggregated data in reporting, iii) promoting gender parity in employment across institutions, and iv) development cooperation investment that prioritizes inclusivity and gender-led/focused civil society organizations.
- The U.S. should mandate gender issues as part of its reporting within its human rights report.
- Bilateral diplomatic relations and human rights conditionality should include gender issues as a new priority. This can include gender-based violence, personal status legislation and guardianship principles, labor law legislation, and family courts providing protection mechanisms for women and children.

# NUCLEAR NONPROLIFERATION

## NILSU GOREN

### ISSUES

- The impact of the COVID-19 pandemic and subsequent disruption of nonproliferation diplomacy, mainly the postponement of the Treaty on the Nonproliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT) Review Conference from April 2020 to August 2021, have stalled discussions on establishing a weapons of mass destruction (WMD) free zone in the Middle East.
- The normalization process that began among Israel, the UAE, and Bahrain et al. through the 2020 Abraham Accords provides a non-NPT opening and venue for regional security and nonproliferation conversations. However, the emerging security dynamics as a response to the Accords remain to be seen.
- With the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Iran steadily decreased its nonproliferation commitments as a response to the U.S.-led “maximum pressure” campaign and sanctions regime crippling the Iranian economy. Beyond rhetoric, Iran escalated its nuclear program, passing legislation and announcing plans to install additional, advanced centrifuges to enrich uranium beyond 20% and stall IAEA inspections.
- The UAE became the first Arab nation to launch its civilian nuclear energy program at the Barakah plant, and other nations in the region, including Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, and Turkey, continue to make progress in their nuclear energy plans, raising concerns about the regional security implications of this sudden expansion in the number of critical facilities.
- The U.S. has 123 agreements for peaceful cooperation, named after the Section 123 of the U.S. Atomic Energy Act, with Egypt, Morocco, Turkey, and the UAE. The agreement with Morocco is set to expire in May 2021 with rolling 5-year extensions, while that with Egypt is set to expire in December 2021 and would need to be renegotiated. While considered in 2018, official negotiations with Saudi Arabia on a 123 agreement were never launched due to their reluctance to forego enrichment.

### US INTERESTS

- Restore U.S. leadership through multilateralism and promotion of the global arms control and nonproliferation regime.
- Restore credibility with the Iranian leadership and P5+1 partners that if Iran comes back into full compliance with its nonproliferation commitments, the U.S. will provide full sanctions relief.
- Address Iran’s escalatory nuclear rhetoric, paths toward highly enriched uranium, and further progress toward a potential nuclear weapons program. Were Iran to develop a nuclear weapon, it could alter the regional balance of power and potentially lead to a cascade of nuclear proliferation.
- Restore the credibility of U.S. leadership in the civilian nuclear energy market and promotion of best practices in nuclear safety, security, and safeguards, as well as proliferation-resistant designs for newcomer nations.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Restore bilateral and multilateral diplomatic dialogue with Iran to identify verifiable milestones toward nonproliferation compliance in return for waiver of sanctions and easing of access to international energy and financial markets, while also maintaining pressure on Iran’s ballistic missile program and use of proxies to destabilize the region as essential concerns.
- Reignite arms control and regional security conversations through technical and policy channels to build confidence.
- Revive the WMD free zone conversation not just through the NPT Review Conference process, but also the Abraham Accords.
- Lead bilateral engagements with regional nuclear newcomers to promote U.S. best practices.

# PUBLIC HEALTH & COVID-19 RESPONSE

## AMIRA ROESS

### ISSUES

- Over the past several decades, the MENA region has made significant progress in improving health outcomes, expanding access to health care, strengthening service delivery, and enhancing public health programs. Substantial disparities between countries remain, however. Rates of noncommunicable diseases are increasing across the region and some countries also face the added burden of dealing with prevalent, if declining, rates of communicable diseases.
- In the short term the most pressing public health challenge facing the region, as elsewhere, is the COVID-19 pandemic. According to official numbers from the World Health Organization (WHO), as of the beginning of March, there were a total of nearly 10 million cases and 170,000 deaths across the MENA region. The impact of the pandemic and the resulting economic fallout hit countries hard, exacerbating existing public health issues, especially in states with active conflicts or humanitarian crises. Vaccination efforts remain in a relatively early stage with significant disparities in access and rollout between wealthy countries like Israel and the Gulf states and poorer or conflict-affected ones like Syria and Yemen.
- The region also faces a host of other long-term public health challenges, including increasing rates of numerous types of cancers, elevated antibiotic resistance, and a growing opioid crisis. The HIV/AIDS epidemic in the region is understudied, HIV surveillance systems are limited or ineffective, and access to antiretroviral treatment falls far short of demand. Many public health problems are being exacerbated by COVID-19, due to both capacity issues among health care providers and a reticence on the part of patients to seek treatment.

### US INTERESTS

- Infectious diseases do not respect borders. As COVID-19 has made abundantly clear, in an increasingly interconnected and

globalizing world, a virus can easily spread from one country or region to another. Similarly, the spread of antibiotic-resistant organisms is a problem for all countries. Improving health in the MENA region also improves health in the U.S.

- Public health problems overlap with a host of other political, social, and economic challenges in the MENA region, exacerbating conflicts and instability and hampering economic growth. Addressing these issues can help make the region safer, more stable, and more prosperous, furthering important U.S. foreign policy goals.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Make global public health a key item on the U.S. foreign policy agenda and allocate appropriate resources to support it.
- Help low-income MENA countries secure access to vaccines through programs like COVAX and facilitate their distribution. Existing disease monitoring programs in place in the region should also be adapted and used to track COVID-19.
- Efforts to fund, screen for, and develop infrastructure to address other public health issues in the region should be continued or expanded. Despite the understandable current focus on COVID-19, this should not come at the expense of addressing other long-standing issues.
- Restore funding for key programs cut by the Trump administration, like those carried out by the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees and the U.N. Relief and Works Agency.
- Following the decision to rejoin the WHO, continue to revive U.S. partnerships with public health organizations around the world and efforts to build relationships with epidemiologists and other public health specialists who will be vital for identifying the next pandemic and fostering the global cooperation needed to contain it.

- In a similar vein, continue to support and expand exchange programs for scientists and researchers run by organizations like the U.S. State Department, U.S. Department of Agriculture, the National Institutes of Health, the Department of Defense, and the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention, among others.
- Make it easier for students, scientists, and researchers to obtain visas to study and work in the U.S. and reduce the associated bureaucratic burden on colleges and universities. The country benefits from attracting the best and brightest.

# REFUGEES & MIGRATION

## DALAL YASSINE

### ISSUES

- Since entering office, President Joe Biden has signed a series of executive orders that reversed the policies of the Trump administration on immigration and refugees. Overturning the travel ban, raising the ceiling for refugee resettlement, and reforming the asylum system are important steps forward, but there is still more that Biden can accomplish over the next four years.
- In the midst of the COVID-19 pandemic, 2020 witnessed a significant decline in the number of refugees that could be resettled in other countries. According to the U.N. High Commissioner for Refugees (UNHCR), only 22,770 refugees were resettled out of 1.44 million refugees worldwide that submitted requests. Of the total eligible for resettlement, approximately 250,000 refugees are from the Middle East and North Africa and more than 18,000 resettlement applications were submitted by Syrian refugees registered in Jordan, Turkey, Egypt, and Lebanon.
- Lebanon, Turkey, and Jordan are currently sheltering 6.6 million Syrian refugees. Both Lebanon and Jordan host Palestinian, Iraqi, and Syrian refugees. In addition, there are 2.7 million Afghan refugees and roughly half are sheltered in neighboring Pakistan.

### US INTERESTS

- After four years of antagonism toward refugees and asylum seekers, Biden has promised a return to normalcy. But the Global War on Terror is nearly two decades old and more than simply managing the refugee problem is needed.
- Washington must step up to help resolve a problem it has had a hand in creating. It is seen as contributing to the refugee crisis with the wars in Afghanistan, Iraq, and Libya, and it has also participated directly in the Yemeni and Syrian conflicts.

Meanwhile, Lebanon is experiencing an unprecedented financial and political crisis that is exacerbated by U.S. sanctions against Beirut and Damascus.

- In addition to reflecting American values, refugee resettlement also advances U.S. national security interests, providing an example of U.S. leadership to allies abroad, and benefits the U.S. economy.

### POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- The Biden administration should prioritize resettlement of refugees from Syria and Yemen. Refugees from these countries were targeted by the Trump administration as an extension of U.S. policy toward the civil wars in both countries.
- Increasing the refugee ceiling must be accompanied by structural improvements to streamline and improve the resettlement process. Under the Trump administration, the resettlement program was starved for funding and personnel. Rebuilding this capacity will not be quick or easy. In addition, greater coordination with and funding for non-governmental organizations that work with refugees in the U.S. and Middle East and North Africa will be needed.
- As the COVID-19 pandemic continues, increased funding to UNHCR and restored funding to the United Nations Relief and Works Agency is essential.
- Ameliorating the situation of refugees in the Middle East and North Africa requires a more engaged diplomatic effort whose goal is conflict resolution and not conflict management. Where possible, political solutions should be sought and military interventions avoided.

# US MILITARY FORCES IN THE MIDDLE EAST

JOSEPH VOTEL

## ISSUES

- The Middle East is home to deep underlying issues that directly threaten U.S. security interests: poor governance, disenfranchisement, humanitarian strife, endemic corruption, toxic sectarian narratives, and now, the uncertainty of the COVID-19 pandemic. Proliferating terrorist organizations are present and continue to harbor designs to attack Americans. Weapons of mass destruction (actual and desired) provide the opportunity for further proliferation.
- Freedom of navigation and commerce (30-40% of daily global trade; 50% of proven oil and gas reserves) is threatened by Iran and its proxies and surrogates. Critical land routes through the region are used to facilitate movement of weapons and fighters that threaten Israel, Saudi Arabia, and the UAE.
- U.S. influence is challenged by the increasing Russian and Chinese military, diplomatic, and economic presence. China uses the “One Belt, One Road” initiative to secure basing, increase military presence, and create economic leverage on regional partners. Russia is focused on securing access and supplanting U.S. influence. Both are filling the void created by decreased and delayed U.S. equipment sales. NATO partner Turkey is increasingly at odds with U.S. Middle East policy, as well as its European partners, and is moving away from constructive cooperation to pursue unilateral objectives.
- Recent tensions with Iran as a result of the “maximum pressure” campaign and our strike on Qassem Soleimani and its subsequent response have highlighted the need for a reliable diplomatic channel that will allow for de-escalation and discussion of the pertinent issues. It has also brought a realization by Gulf Arab countries of the impact of a war with Iran and the devastating effects it would have on the region.
- Counter proliferation of weapons of mass destruction.
- Prevent instability in this region from affecting our interests in other areas.
- Maintain freedom of navigation and commerce.
- Maintain a balance of power in the region that is favorable to U.S. interests and objectives.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- Nest regional strategy for the Middle East into a broader U.S. national strategy for maintaining our competitive advantage. This is an area where we must compete. We should be careful to ensure that the military element of power does not eclipse the other elements of U.S. power. We must also prioritize restoring and building relationships with partners and allies as a cornerstone to this strategy.
- Focus on security cooperation as the long-term military effort in this region. Long-term relationships and partner self-reliance are the best way to protect our interests and maintain a favorable balance of power in the region. Foreign military financing/foreign military sales should be aimed at contributing to deterrence; encouraging self-reliance and mutual support; protecting sovereignty; prevailing in the commons; and shutting down illicit lines of communication.
- Maintain a sustainable counter-terrorism capability in the region to disrupt terror organizations with external ambitions and support regional partners to address local terror threats.
- Retain a sustainable level of other military capabilities in the region that directly support our interests.
- Establish diplomatic and military communication channels with Iran to reduce chances of miscalculation and increased tensions.

## US INTERESTS

- Prevent the region from being a platform for terrorist attacks on our country and our allies.

# US SECURITY COOPERATION IN THE MIDDLE EAST

BILAL Y. SAAB

## ISSUES

- A sustainable and reliable U.S. system for security cooperation that can more effectively leverage America's extensive web of alliances and partnerships in the Middle East and around the globe does not yet exist.
- Unspecified U.S. objectives and a confused process represent the two main problems of U.S. security cooperation. Often, the U.S. pursues security cooperation with no coherent policy toward the partner or a clear end-state. It also practically approaches security cooperation as an exercise in supplying hardware to its partners, failing to invest in defense institution building, which is crucial for the partner's ability to optimize and sustain the defense of its people and territory, and ultimately graduate from U.S. help.

## US INTERESTS

- U.S. partners in the Middle East with more developed defense institutional capacities — not just military capabilities — are able to responsibly share security burdens and sustain U.S. security investments in the region during challenging fiscal times in Washington.
- Defense institutional reform is inextricably linked to political reform, which is a key ingredient of long-term regional stability, and thus a core U.S. interest.
- Effective U.S. security cooperation in the Middle East affords the United States greater strategic flexibility to pursue its new priority of great power competition.

cooperation. It would have budget authority and organize, employ, train, equip, and sustain a joint security cooperation force. It would provide a coherent global framework for action and synthesize the perspectives and inputs of the GCCs into a single comprehensive assessment of the Pentagon's security cooperation efforts worldwide.

- If a global security cooperation command were to be established and headed by a four-star general, it would automatically have to be overseen by senior civilian leadership in the Pentagon to uphold the core principle of civilian control of the armed forces. A new position of an undersecretary of defense for security cooperation ought to be formed to enable the most effective kind of civilian oversight.
- U.S. Secretary of Defense Lloyd Austin should communicate his strong endorsement of Congress's security cooperation reforms in the Fiscal Year 2017 National Defense Authorization Act (FY17 NDAA) and press all stakeholders, including his own immediate subordinates, the Defense Security Cooperation Agency (DSCA), and CENTCOM, to fully implement the reforms.
- Congress should perform consistent oversight of security cooperation and insist on accountability by more frequently holding public and closed hearings.

## POLICY RECOMMENDATIONS

- U.S. executive and legislative leadership should form a global security cooperation command. Such a command would essentially seek to solve the problems of competition and lack of effective communication and integration among the geographic combatant commands (GCCs) on security



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