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RECALCULATING U.S. POLICY IN THE MIDDLE EAST:

LESS MILITARY, MORE CIVILIAN

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Professor Daniel Serwer, who directs the Conflict Management Program at the Johns Hopkins School of Advanced International Studies, proposes recalibration of U.S. policy in the Middle East away from heavy reliance on military presence to more use of civilian instruments. The Iran nuclear deal, reduced reliance on Middle Eastern energy resources, shifting terrorist challenges, and postponed opportunities for democratic reform in the region, he argues, require the United States to change how it engages the region. Serwer concludes that Washington should expect more from its regional allies in exchange for continued military support.

KEY RECOMMENDATIONS

- ◆ The United States should encourage a regional security architecture to prevent nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, disarm current chemical and biological arsenals and channel Saudi/Iranian competition into peaceful channels.
- ◆ The United States should invite other major oil-consuming powers, especially China and India, to share in the military responsibility of securing uninterrupted oil flow from the Persian Gulf.
- ◆ Washington should continue low-profile, long-term support for democracy through civil society where and when it can.
- ◆ Combating terror should not be confined to military means, but also include the development of improved and inclusive governance.
- ◆ As it shifts its Middle East posture, the United States needs to ensure that it leaves no vacuums for antagonists to fill.

INTRODUCTION

The largely declining challenges to U.S. national security in the Middle East and North Africa are widely known across the domestic political spectrum. There remain, however, sharp political differences about the appropriate means to achieve U.S. objectives. The military option has been over utilized and is becoming less relevant, even if it remains vital to framing the strategic environment. Civilian instruments, such as diplomacy to create a regional security architecture and international assistance in building more inclusive and effective states, are increasingly required.

President Barack Obama laid out in a speech to the U.N. General Assembly in 2013 his version of American core interests in the Middle East and North Africa, which he pledged to protect, if necessary, with military force.¹ He listed the core objectives as preventing the spread of nuclear weapons and other weapons of mass destruction; ensuring the unimpeded flow of energy resources to world markets; countering international terrorism; and supporting American allies. He added a fifth, longer-term interest that the United States should seek to pursue through multilateral cooperation: promoting American values, including democracy, human rights, and open markets.

Americans may differ on the order of priority and their willingness to devote the required resources, but this shortlist is admirably clear and agreed across the American



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political spectrum. As the president leaves office, it behooves us to ask two questions:

1. What is required to meet these interests?
2. Have we deployed the necessary means?

The answers can help shape Middle East policies in the next administration. While the presidential candidates generally share the same goals, they diverge on method. Both Hillary Clinton and Bernie Sanders put emphasis on civilian capabilities; Clinton is perhaps more inclined to deploy military force. On the Republican side of the fence, the candidates, in particular Donald Trump and Ted Cruz, view the military as the only instrument of U.S. foreign policy that really counts. However, the next administration will have to consider the changing dynamics in the Middle East and new approaches, beyond simply military means, to deal with them. The United States requires less military presence and greater civilian effort in meeting future Middle Eastern challenges.

NONPROLIFERATION: RISKS POSTPONED, U.S. ROLE INCREASINGLY DIPLOMATIC

The most threatening nonproliferation issue in the region is the Iranian nuclear program. Were Iran to succeed in building and deploying functional nuclear weapons with the means to deliver them, it would likely trigger an arms race in the region with a high risk of miscalculation by Iran and its antagonists, including both Israel and Sunni-majority states such as Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt.

The Iran nuclear deal, if fully implemented, has at best postponed this risk for 15 years. Vigilance will be required to ensure implementation meets the letter and the spirit of the agreement, but Washington needs now to turn its attention to ensuring that the environment a decade hence continues to discourage Iran's acquisition of nuclear weapons. This will require lowering the level of regional tensions and ending the Sunni-Shiite proxy wars in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen. It will also require a regional security architecture that enables both Iran and its Sunni competitors to be confident all will remain non-nuclear. Today, there is no such architecture and precious little mutual confidence.

A strong American military posture will continue to be needed in order to provide assurance that any Iranian effort to break out of the nuclear deal and acquire nuclear weapons can be stopped. The weapons required for that purpose need not all be stationed in the region, however. There is little military utility, and a good deal of risk, in basing American troops and sailors in the Middle East. If destruction of Iran's nuclear facilities may someday be required, it can be done just as effectively, while putting fewer Americans at risk, from far off with cruise missiles, drones, cyberattacks, and other stand-off weapons.

There are other proliferation issues in the region. Israel's unacknowledged, but all too real, nuclear weapons are an irritant to other countries in the region, but the United States has shown no objection to them, and presumably views them tacitly, as a necessary insurance policy. Syria's chemical

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weapons have been largely but not entirely removed and destroyed. Israel, Egypt, Syria, and perhaps other countries may still maintain stockpiles of chemical and biolog-

ical weapons. Convincing them to give up chemicals and biologicals, as with nuclear weapons, requires some sort of regional security architecture.

While American capacity to strike in the Middle East remains important to shaping the environment in which nonproliferation issues will be decided, the main thrust of American policy now should be diplomatic, aiming to build regional security arrangements that channel competition into peaceful avenues.

ENERGY RESOURCES: DIPLOMACY TRUMPS MILITARY MEANS AS U.S. IMPORT DEPENDENCE DECLINES

In 2014, the United States imported 27 percent of its oil supplies, the lowest percentage since 1985.² The sharp price decline since 2014 has bumped up this percentage, but not by much. U.S. oil production has increased dramatically with the deployment of unconventional methods, including horizontal drilling, fracking, and other advanced techniques.

Only 20 percent of the reduced U.S. imports came from the Persian Gulf in 2014, primarily Saudi Arabia and Iraq.³ Oil transiting the Strait of Hormuz, the critical ‘choke point’ for oil from the Gulf, goes mainly to

China, Japan, and India. Oil is traded in a global market, however. A disruption anywhere causes the price to rise everywhere, so even if the United States imports nothing through Hormuz, it would remain vulnerable to the price increase and consequent economic damage from any supply disruption there.

The United States has two main tools with which to respond to an oil supply disruption in the Middle East: one military and one civilian.

The Navy’s Fifth Fleet, headquartered in Bahrain, can deploy mine sweepers or other vessels to protect the Strait of Hormuz, with support from air assets also stationed in the Middle East. This has a perverse effect, especially under tight market conditions that often prevail in a crisis, of raising the price of oil, which is precisely what we want to avoid. The military instrument is also expensive. According to RAND, “the most likely outcome of the removal of the mission to defend oil supplies and sea lines of communication from the Persian Gulf would be a reduction over time of between 12 and 15 percent of the current U.S. defense budget.”⁴

The Department of Energy’s Strategic Petroleum Reserve (S.P.R.), located mainly in Texas and Louisiana, holds more than 90 days of stocks that can be drawn down in response to supply disruption. Its use by presidential order moderates price increases worldwide, protecting not only the U.S.

economy but also that of our allies while decreasing the flow of financial resources to oil-exporting adversaries like Russia, Iran, and Venezuela.

The S.P.R. is a best first resort and military action a less than perfect last resort. There are also many other means to protect our-

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selves from the economic shock of an oil supply disruption, if we look beyond our own capabilities to international cooperation in preventing an oil price shock.

The United States is not alone in building up and drawing down its oil stocks. Members of the Paris-based International Energy Agency have agreed to hold 90 days of oil imports as stocks and to coordinate their stock drawdown in a crisis. But non-members like China and India do not. The United States needs to ensure that other major oil importers both hold adequate stocks and use them early in a supply disruption. If they fail to join in early stock draw, oil importers become free riders on the U.S. Strategic Petroleum Reserve, gaining the benefits that derive from its moder-

ation of price increases without paying any of the costs.

The United States should also convince the Arab Gulf states to export oil through pipelines that circumvent Hormuz. This can be done both by their building new pipelines and using the friction reducing technology that can increase the capacity of existing pipelines. Such a diplomatic effort would be far cheaper and more effective than the current heavy reliance on military instruments.

If military means are to be used to keep Hormuz open, they need not be exclusively American. The British, French, and others already contribute. Washington should be inviting the Chinese and Indians to participate as well, as they are Iran's major oil customers. It is highly unlikely that Tehran would seek to harm Chinese or Indian naval ships or do anything to block Beijing and New Delhi from access to oil coming through the Strait of Hormuz. Both China and India already patrol for pirates in the Arabian Sea. They should be invited to join a multilateral effort to patrol, as well, in the Gulf.

U.S. dependence on imported oil is likely to remain well below its peak levels of 50 percent or more. Any rise of prices to \$60 or \$70 will bring on production both in the United States and elsewhere from unconventional drilling techniques, which we should be encouraging to spread around

the world. In addition, the U.S. economy is less dependent on energy resources than it once was. It is reasonable to expect that a future Middle East oil supply disruption will cause far less damage than supply disruptions did in the 1970s, when domestic price controls greatly amplified the negative economic impact.

COUNTERING INTERNATIONAL TERRORISM: MILITARY MEANS HAVEN'T WORKED

Predicting the course of international terrorism is a fool's errand. No one has managed that trick from its emergence in the post-World War II period through to al-Qaeda and ISIS. We do, however, know that the military means we have deployed since 9/11 have been unsuccessful in limiting or reducing the threat. International terrorism with an Islamic bent has since then spread from a handful of countries to more than a dozen, and from a couple of thousand adherents to many tens of thousands. There are now active terrorist insurgencies from Mali and Nigeria to Afghanistan and Pakistan. We are facing an epidemic of people willing to murder and wreak havoc in the name of Islam.

There is little reason to expect this will not continue. Al-Qaeda and the Islamic State are growing in Afghanistan and Yemen. The Islamic State has lost territory and population centers in Iraq (Tikrit, Baiji, Ramadi,

and Sinjar) and Syria (especially along the northern border with Turkey and Palmyra), but continues to hold its own in Mosul, Raqqa, and Deir Ezzor. At the same time, ISIS and its supporters have begun to strike outside the caliphate's immediate neighborhood: in Sinai, Paris, Istanbul, Brussels, Beirut, and California. Islamic linked terrorism has proven protean and the infection adapts like a virus to whatever conditions it finds itself in.

Military means may be necessary to retake population centers in Iraq and Syria, but there is no reason to believe they will be sufficient to reduce significantly the capabilities and attractiveness of extremists to the Middle Easterners as well as the Europeans and Americans who have joined them. U.S. strategy against ISIS requires many nonmilitary capabilities: blocking its financing; discouraging travel to the territory it controls; reshaping the narratives its mostly youthful adherents hear; eavesdropping on their conversations; and arresting, charging, and trying ISIS militants.

The most important, and sorely lacking, weapon against ISIS is improved and more inclusive governance. We are witnessing throughout much of the Middle East a rebellion against corrupt, autocratic regimes that failed to deliver services, humiliated their populations, and blocked their citizens from any serious participation in deciding how they are governed. Success in the war against ISIS will not be determined on the battlefield. You can take back Baiji,

Tikrit, and Ramadi, but if you fail to re-establish a modicum of good governance, the longer-term results will be disappointing. Warlords and criminal gangs will dominate the population until the next extremist movement sweeps them away.

The creation of security forces that treat Middle Eastern populations properly, and help thereby to restore legitimacy to the governments they serve, is certainly part of what is needed to prevent the worst case from happening. However, security forces needed are not mainly military. Respectful police and fair judicial systems have been most lacking and are still most needed. Radicalization of Muslim youth in prisons is one of the known mainstays of ISIS and al-Qaeda. Ending that process and establishing legitimate professional police forces, as well as independent judiciaries, are not military tasks, but rather a civilian ones.

SUPPORTING AMERICAN ALLIES: PROVIDING MILITARY ASSISTANCE, GETTING LITTLE IN RETURN

The United States has a varied assortment of friends and allies in the Middle East, each with its own peculiarities. The one constant among them is their desire for military hardware, which the United States has been

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shipping in prodigious volumes to Saudi Arabia, Israel, Turkey, Qatar, Egypt, and others. Some of them view each other with suspicion, though increasingly the Sunni states are lining up with Israel to counter the re-emergence of Iran as a regional power, now that the nuclear deal is done. Regional military capabilities mean our allies can do more and the United States less in the event of a crisis. Interoperability with U.S. forces adds additional value, but U.S. presence is less vital.

The concern about Iran is not only about conventional military attack, but also subversion, cyberattacks, and other efforts to weaken its neighbors by supporting Iranian proxies like Hezbollah, the Iraqi Shiite militias, and the Houthi insurgency in Yemen. Countering these threats may require American military support, but not boots on the ground.

Other varieties of American support are far less important and far less welcome. The Gulf states neither need nor want economic assistance, though low oil prices are pressuring them to cut their budgets and reform their overly oil-dependent economies in directions the United States can welcome. Egypt, since Field Marshal Ab-

del Fattah el-Sisi came to power, has gotten tens of billions in aid from Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. The piddling few hundred million dollars in economic assistance from the United States is largely irrelevant. Washington has tried hard to provide Israel and the Palestinians with the diplomatic support needed to reach an agreement. The current Israeli government is more interested in expanding settlements and postponing a final status agreement while the Palestinians are split between the autocratic rule of Hamas in Gaza and a Palestinian Authority on the West Bank, which lacks legitimacy. The Americans have supported Turkey's European ambitions and its efforts to negotiate peace with its Kurdish insurgents, but President Recep Tayyip Erdogan has turned his back on the negotiations with the Kurds and is using the refugee flow into Europe as his main leverage on the Europeans.

What do you do when your friends don't need or want the diplomatic and economic support you are offering? There is little to do but swallow hard and back off, leaving them to pursue goals that Washington either can't support or will actively oppose. American military instruments may buy some credit with the Turks when they ask for Patriot missiles or with the Israelis when they want the latest and greatest aircraft or bunker buster bombs, but those credits never seem to be spendable beyond the military realm. Politicians don't readily bend on how they deal with a local insur-

gency or protection of human rights in response to American military assistance.

The sad fact is that America's relationships with its Middle Eastern allies seem increasingly unbalanced. The Americans provide military support and get little in return, unless you value military overflight rights and quick passage through the Suez Canal, where the recent expansion has already reduced queues. While Middle Easterners often complain about American withdrawal from their region, they are doing precious little to cement the kind of relationship that would make it morally imperative for the Americans to stay. Instead, they encourage the United States to reconsider its current engagement and commitments.

PROMOTING DEMOCRATIC VALUES: OPPORTUNITIES ARE FEW AND SHOULD BE EXPLOITED

This is especially true in the fraught area of democratic values. Tunisia, Kuwait, and possibly Afghanistan and Iraq are the only countries in the greater Middle East today which appear to appreciate American support for a more open society, clearer rule of law, and more inclusive governance. Yemen, Libya, and Syria are enmeshed in civil war, leaving little room for democratic values. Egypt prefers a draconian crackdown on both its Islamist and secular opposition. King Abdullah of Jordan is enjoying his

population's distaste for the surrounding chaos, which provides a welcome respite from reform pressures. Saudi Arabia has toyed with municipal elections and women's political participation, but isn't prepared to go much further. Iraq's reform push, which the United States strongly supported, has stalled under pressure from Shiite militias. Israel is proving itself an illiberal democracy by restricting foreign contributions to civil society organizations, cracking down ever more forcefully on Palestinian protests, and allowing settlements to expand in the West Bank.

“We need to be supporting those who share democratic aspirations”

It is hard to avoid the question of whether the Middle East is a bridge too far for democracy. Certainly current conditions do not favor it. Many people throughout the region are craving peace, prosperity, and stability—not reform, freedom, or change. The United States has already reshaped its assistance to Egypt, emphasizing education, technology, and entrepreneurship instead of democratic reform. Washington seems to be drifting in the direction of accepting at least a temporary continuation of President Bashar al-Assad's rule in Syria, for fear that the alternative could be an even more brutal Islamic State. Democratization and the process of open governance

are not being pushed for in Saudi Arabia, Qatar, Oman, or the Emirates. The Bush administration's invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq created a negative impression of democracy promotion. Democratization proved expensive, and difficult at the point of a gun. Five years on, the Arab uprisings of 2011 have largely failed to generate more open societies. Washington has to cooperate with the regimes that exist, not the ones it might prefer.

For decades the United States has more successfully conducted low-profile civilian efforts to support civil society, free media, and human rights in the Middle East and elsewhere. What America needs to do is return to that modality and play a long game. The Arab street has had a taste of freedom and wants less corrupt and more inclusive governance.

Its bulging millennial generation is tech savvy, dissatisfied with its economic prospects, and anxious for a voice. We need to be supporting those who share democratic aspirations: independent media, human rights lawyers, civil society and union activists, professional associations committed to meritocracy, and imams who advocate tolerance and peaceful coexistence. Autocrats in Turkey, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia will try to restrict and even counter those efforts. If conducted wisely through civilian channels, those efforts could help to seed a new generation of indigenous, grassroots democrats ready to mobilize their publics and steer the region's autocracies and illib-

eral democracies in a more open direction. Ironically, the United States needs more countries like Iran, where the population is pro-American despite the regime's continuing belligerence.

American relations with the Middle East is quite unlike those it has with Europe, where we have built with the Europeans a trans-Atlantic enterprise in favor of liberal democracy. In the Middle East, we are reduced to transactional relationships with little basis in common values or joint enterprise.

DECLINING AND CHANGING AMERICAN INTERESTS

Transactional relationships are naturally dependent on the value derived by both sides. American interests in the Middle East are declining. Our major nonproliferation concern is postponed; we are decreasing our dependence on Middle East oil imports; and our friends are interested mainly in military and security assistance, and very little in American values. Only counterterrorism still keeps us involved to the degree we are, despite the likelihood that our involvement is at least part of the cause rather than the solution. The technological process is also changing that paradigm.

Our interests are shifting largely in ways that reduce the significance of military

means and increase the importance of diplomacy and state-building. The big challenge for the next American administration will be constructing, through diplomacy, a regional security architecture that reduces reliance on military instruments and enables the region to avoid a nuclear arms race as well as future proxy wars. Preventing future generations of Muslims from resorting to terrorism will require a far more active civilian effort to counter extremism and build inclusive good governance than we have mounted so far.

People in the Middle East are convinced that the United States is withdrawing from the region. They view America as smarting from less than successful, but colossally expensive interventions in Iraq and Afghanistan. They also think the United States has shifted away from countering the rise of Iran, and know that Washington needs Middle East energy resources less than once it did.

They are correct. The United States needs to reduce its military presence in the Middle East to correspond to its reduced and shifting interests. Some small portion of the savings should be devoted to building up civilian diplomatic efforts. The next administration should end the practice of reassuring our regional allies without extracting a price. If they want the United States to remain committed to their region, they need to begin to behave in a way that makes Americans think it worthwhile.

Withdrawal creates the serious risk of a vacuum that American enemies will try to fill. Iran took advantage of American withdrawal from Iraq to expand its influence there. Russia took advantage of American reluctance to develop an alternative to the Assad regime to intervene on his behalf. The Islamic State took advantage of American unwillingness to intercede in Syria. The Middle East has a way of forcing itself back onto the agenda: energy, proliferation, human rights violations, extremism, and refugees. We need not allow a draw-down of military assets to signal American indifference or retreat. We need instead to get our civilian capacities—for diplomacy, state-building, and international assistance and cooperation—to fill the gap. Less military should mean more civilian.

ENDNOTES

1. Remarks by President Obama in Address to the United Nations General Assembly, September 24, 2013, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/09/24/remarks-president-obama-address-united-nations-general-assembly>, accessed February 19, 2016.
2. “How much petroleum does the United States import and from where?” United States Energy Information Administration, September 14, 2015, accessed March 31, 2016, <http://www.eia.gov/tools/faqs/faq.cfm?id=727&t=6>.
3. Ibid.
4. Keith Crane, Andreas Goldthau, Michael Toman, Thomas Light, Stuart E. Johnson, Alireza Nader, Angel Rabasa, and Harun Dogo, *Imported Oil and U.S. National Security* (Santa Monica: RAND, 2009), 74, accessed February 19, 2016 http://www.rand.org/content/dam/rand/pubs/monographs/2009/RAND_MG838.pdf.